

Attending live music events with a visual impairment: experiences, accessibility and recommendations for the future

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Abstract

Purpose – The current article focuses on the experiences of live music event attendees with visual impairment (VI). It outlines the factors which impact on the accessibility of events and considers how accessibility might be improved for these individuals.

Design/methodology/approach – The article reports on findings from a mixed-methods project utilising a structured interview study ($N = 20$) and an online survey ($N = 94$). Interview data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, providing in-depth insight into participants' experiences before and during events. Quantitative survey data were analysed descriptively and statistically, and Thematic Analysis of open-ended responses was carried out.

Findings – Attendance at live events varied amongst participants, and so too did the factors impacting on their attendance. Challenges were identified in relation to several key areas: accessing information and tickets, experiences with staff, navigation and orientation, and the use and availability of disabled facilities and specialist services.

Originality/value – This article is the first to offer in-depth exploration of music event accessibility for individuals with VI. It builds on existing research which has considered the experiences of deaf and disabled attendees but has not yet offered adequate representation of individuals with VI. The article offers practical recommendations for venues and organisers seeking to ensure accessible events for all and contributes to the wider discourse surrounding inclusivity at music, arts and cultural events.

Keywords Live music, Venue, Accessibility, Inclusivity, Visual impairment, VI

Paper type Research paper

1. Background

It is estimated that in 2017, 29.1 million people attended a live music event in the UK ([UK Music, 2018](#)). Research demonstrates the positive psychological and social outcomes

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associated with attendance (Ballantyne *et al.*, 2014; Weinberg and Joseph, 2017), including opportunities to learn and meet new people (Pitts and Gross, 2017) and experience a unique musical environment (Brown and Knox, 2017; Burland and Pitts, 2012). Despite this, there is concern regarding the future of UK live music due to the uneven distribution of access, the ongoing need for the development of sustainable and diverse audiences for music and cultural events (Webster *et al.*, 2018; Pyle, 2019) and uncertainty within the creative industries following the COVID-19 pandemic (Khlystova *et al.*, 2022).

Multiple factors have been highlighted as barriers to attendance at musical events, including practical considerations such as cost of travel, time limitations and “value for money” (Brown and Knox, 2017; Pegg and Patterson, 2010). Socio-economic factors, such as lower socio-economic status, lower household income and fewer educational qualifications, are also associated with lower levels of arts engagement (Pyle, 2019; Mak *et al.*, 2020). Amongst those who face some of the greatest barriers to cultural participation are individuals with disability (*Attitude is Everything*, 2016, 2018), who tend to engage less in arts and cultural events, including music concerts, than those with no disability (Hull, 2013; Pyle, 2019). UK charity *Attitude is Everything* highlights several barriers to accessibility experienced by attendees who are deaf and disabled, including a lack of accessible online information and variability in the availability of accessible parking (*Attitude is Everything*, 2016). Their 2018 report (*Attitude is Everything*, 2018) showed an improvement in booking experiences since 2014 (*Attitude is Everything*, 2014), but still, 80% of respondents felt discriminated against when booking accessibility provisions.

Research suggests that there has been progress toward improving accessibility of arts and cultural events. The UK’s most recent Taking Part Survey (Pyle, 2019) found no significant differences in arts engagement between those with (76%) or without (77%) a long-term disability; however, having a long-term health problem or disability was the third most common reason for not engaging with the arts, after not being interested and not having enough time. Webster *et al.* (2018) suggest that whilst venues and organisers may be increasingly aware of challenges experienced by attendees with disability, addressing their needs requires greater action than is being taken.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on engagement with large-scale cultural events and, even now, activities such as going to a concert remain high-risk for some; in this context, the vulnerability of all individuals, not only those who are disabled, has been brought to the fore (Scott-Pollock, 2022). However, the accessibility of events increased for many during the pandemic, with a shift to online performances making it easier for disabled or chronically ill people to attend, and captions, Audio Description (AD) and British Sign Language offered as standard (Webster, 2021; *Live Streaming Music UK*, 2021). However, there are concerns regarding a return to pre-pandemic levels of accessibility; many online performances were cut after the easing of social restrictions (Webster, 2021), despite their role in making events more affordable and accessible (*Live Streaming Music UK*, 2021). In addition to longstanding issues such as inadequate disabled viewing platforms (Eve, 2021), there are new concerns relating to social distancing and health, particularly amongst individuals with a disability (*Attitude is Everything*, 2021).

There also remains a lack of disaggregated data within the cultural sector relating to specific cohorts of persons with disabilities (Leahy and Ferri, 2022). Within the context of live music event attendance, for example, the experiences of individuals with visual impairment (VI) have largely been overlooked. This is despite evidence that individuals with VI face barriers to accessibility and inclusion in various aspects of their lives, including employment (Coffey *et al.*, 2014), travel (Deville and Kastenholz, 2018) and leisure (Vučićić *et al.*, 2020). Research suggests that these barriers may persist in the context of arts and cultural engagement. McManus and Lord (2012) found that cultural events were attended less frequently by people with VI than those without VI, or with a different type of disability, and

that just 19% of those who had VI were attending arts activities as much as they would like, compared to 31% of participants with no impairment. Addressing the paucity of existing knowledge regarding live music event experiences of individuals with VI, the current article seeks to answer the following questions:

- (1) What factors impact on the accessibility of live music events for attendees with VI?
- (2) What access provisions are available to attendees with VI at live music events?
- (3) How can the needs of attendees with VI be better addressed by venues and event organisers?

2. Methods

This paper reports a mixed-methods project which explored the musical experiences of individuals with VI. Ethical approval was granted in January 2016 by the University of Leeds Faculty.

Ethical approval was granted in January 2016 by the University of Leeds Faculty Research Ethics Committee (Arts and PVAC, reference PVAR 15–042). The project consisted of three phases: a focus-group study, semi-structured interviews and a survey. During an exploratory phase, focus groups were employed to identify salient topics to explore during the interviews, and findings from the interview study helped to inform survey development. The current paper draws on quantitative and qualitative data gathered in the interview and survey studies. An in-depth discussion of findings relating to the broader musical experiences of interview participants is provided in [Castle et al. \(2022\)](#).

2.1 Study 1: interviews

2.1.1 Recruitment and interviewees. A convenience sample was recruited through charitable organisations and their social media pages. Staff at organisations shared information about the studies through personal contacts and e-mailing lists. Participation was voluntary and no financial incentive was given. Recruitment materials emphasised the aim of recruiting participants with a range of musical backgrounds.

20 interviewees (10 male and 10 female) aged 20–84 years ($M = 51.15$ years, $SD = 15.82$) took part. All were based in the UK, except for one, who was interviewed by Skype from Australia. All interviewees were registered as severely sight impaired (SSI, legally blind). The majority had lived with VI for most of their life: five had a degenerative condition which had developed during childhood and one experienced sight loss at 17 months due to illness; 13 had been sight impaired since birth; and one participant had experienced late-onset sight loss at the age of 22.

2.1.2 Procedure and interview schedule. Interviews were organised by email or phone. Nine interviews took place at a participant's home, one face-to-face at a workplace, and the remaining 10 over the phone/Skype. Before the interview, verbal consent was sought; the consent process was audio recorded and a consent form was signed and dated by the researcher for their records. A copy of the consent form was sent to the participant. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

An interview schedule was developed to guide discussion. Key topics included past attendance at events, factors impacting attendance, and challenges experienced. Participants were asked to recall their most recent live music experiences, to reflect on any memorable live music experiences or occasions when an event had been inaccessible, and to consider how accessibility might be improved.

2.1.3 Analysis. Interview data were analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), allowing detailed exploration of the individuals' lived experiences ([Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014](#)). Analysis proceeded according to phases set out by [Smith and Osborn \(2008\)](#): reading, annotation, grouping of emergent themes and naming of

superordinate themes. Each transcript was analysed in turn, after which a final list of themes and superordinate themes was constructed. NVivo software was used to collate phrases that supported themes. A sample of the dataset (four transcripts) was cross-examined by an independent researcher, with experience of qualitative data analysis, to explore any possible divergences; none were identified.

2.2 Study 2: survey

2.2.1 Recruitment and respondents. The survey was disseminated via the researcher's personal social media accounts, as well as via those of charitable organisations. Staff at organisations shared information about the survey, including a hyperlink to complete the survey, through e-mailing lists.

Ninety-four respondents aged 16–83 years ($M = 44.56$, $SD = 16.39$) completed the survey (44 male, 48 female; one respondent described themselves as “gender fluid” and another as “male to female trans”). Seventy-nine respondents identified as SSI and 15 as sight impaired (SI). The majority had been born with VI or developed VI before the age of 4 years ($n = 57$, 60.6%), 5 had an early-onset impairment with changes in sight over time, 3 had developed VI aged 4–12 years and 29 (30.9%) had developed an impairment after the age of 12 years. Thirty-four respondents (36.2%) had an additional disability: 19 had a physical impairment or condition impacting on mobility; 10 reported multiple/chronic health conditions; 7 had a hearing impairment/auditory processing disorder; and 5 reported a mental health condition (some participants' responses related to multiple categories, and a small number were not categorised within these groups).

2.2.2 Survey content and procedure. The survey opened with a participant information sheet which included prerequisites of participation (having a SI or SSI, and being at least 16 years of age), a series of consent statements and contact details for the researcher. For those completing the survey over the phone, the researcher filled in the responses on behalf of the respondent and verbal consent was obtained. Eighty-five participants completed the survey online and nine over the phone/Skype.

The survey explored themes identified during the interviews, including factors influencing attendance at live music events, the accessibility provisions available to attendees with VI, and their experiences of navigating at venues (outlined in [Castle et al., 2022](#)). The survey was available to complete online, in large-print, and by telephone, to meet various access needs.

The opening section of the survey gathered demographic information before progressing through questions about musical engagement, including live event attendance. Respondents were asked to reflect on any challenges, and their use of specialist services. Most questions required respondents to rate the importance of, or their agreement with, a list of items on a 5-point Likert-type scale. The survey concluded with three open-ended response questions which asked respondents to reflect on their most recent live music experience, the impact of venue size on accessibility, and how issues of accessibility might be addressed in the future.

2.2.3 Analysis. Quantitative data were analysed descriptively and statistically. Mean scores and frequencies were calculated for Likert-type scale responses, and differences between groups were explored using correlations, t -tests and ANOVA. Open-ended survey responses were thematically analysed using guidance from [Braun and Clark \(2006\)](#) to progress through a process of data familiarisation and initial coding, followed by searching for, reviewing, and naming themes, to produce a final list of overarching themes and subthemes.

3. Results

In the following discussion of the results, insights from the interview study and survey are presented simultaneously. “Interviewees” refers to those involved in the interviews, and “respondents” refers to survey participants. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

3.1 Accessibility of live events for attendees with VI

Participants reflected on their enjoyment of attending live music events, and the contribution of accessibility provisions to their ability to attend. However, in line with the Social Model of Disability, which highlights the disabling impact of physical, sociocultural, political and economic barriers on the lives of individuals with a disability (Oliver, 2013), participants also reported barriers which impeded attendance or enjoyment. Four key factors were found to impact on accessibility: information and ticket purchases; interactions with staff; navigation and orientation; and disabled and specialist services for attendees with VI.

3.1.1 *Information and tickets.* Access to information was highlighted as a significant barrier to accessibility, as summarised below:

- (1) Inaccessible information
 - Posters and print brochures are unsuitable promotional materials for individuals with VI
 - Non-VI friendly websites and hard-to-find accessibility information
 - Printed and visual materials (e.g. brochures or opera surtitles) are rarely provided in an alternative format
- (2) Additional time needed to engage with written materials
 - Converting materials to Braille
 - Sighted assistance needed
 - Individuals with VI may miss out on events
- (3) Inadequate online information and booking systems
 - Difficulties booking access provisions online
 - Reliance on phone calls to gather information about venues/events
 - Difficulty accessing online information through third-party ticket sellers

The visual nature of some advertising (e.g. posters) made it difficult to identify upcoming events and source up-to-date information. For Braille readers, the time-consuming process of converting print materials such as brochures to Braille (with assistance from a sight loss charity), and a reliance on others to read through information on their behalf, were barriers to timely access to information. A common preference was phoning venues for information, rather than using websites. Zoe, for example, lacked confidence when organising attendance online.

I'm pretty good at ringing things up myself . . . finding the phone numbers and researching and making calls whilst I'm booking things . . . I had to phone that one [venue] up myself, cause I'm not as confident at ordering tickets and stuff online as I am talking to people (Zoe)

Print materials may be completely unreadable for many with VI, and online information searching can take a long time, and be cognitively taxing, for individuals utilising assistive technologies (Sahib *et al.*, 2014). Previous research by Attitude is Everything (2018) found that the websites of many venues remain inaccessible to those using screen reading equipment. Survey responses reflected this, showing high levels of agreement with the statement “*It is easier to phone up a venue to find out about accessibility than to search for information online*” ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 1.02$). Most agreed that greater effort was needed to ensure websites met the needs of users with VI, including adequate provision of information.

Do they have disabled areas, do they have disabled toilets . . . If they can have centralised information then that would make life easier for people (Mike)

Interviewees also reported difficulties purchasing tickets online, including companion tickets, which allow a guest to attend with a companion for free. Companion tickets may play an important part in reducing barriers to cultural and social participation experienced by individuals with a disability, including a lack of accessible public transport, perceived risk to personal safety, particularly at night, and a reliance on taxis (Hill *et al.*, 2018; Wong, 2018). Victoria noted that: “my experience has always been that you can’t book it [a companion ticket] online”. Forty out of 85 respondents disagreed to some extent with the statement, “*I find the process of purchasing tickets for music events easy*” ($M = 2.78, SD = 1.29$). Open-ended responses identified challenges such as a limited availability of disabled tickets, fees on third-party sites and inadequate information about accessibility schemes. For example, Victoria suggested that companion tickets are not sufficiently promoted.

If you’re registered severely sight impaired you can have a free carer to take you to the theatre, or the gig venue, as long as you fight for it, so nobody will advertise (Victoria)

These results reflect calls for adjustments to booking processes, such as pre-registration of disabilities, greater staff training, and integration of online, email, and telephone preferences to ensure easy booking of accessibility provisions (Attitude is Everything, 2018; STAR, 2017).

Respondents suggested that there may also be limited numbers of accessible seats and companion tickets: “Large venues only provide a limited number of ‘access’ tickets including for a companion”. The latter is a concern given that there is no legitimate reason to limit the numbers of companion tickets available. Robert reflected that due to limited accessible seating, those with VI could miss out: “They have a quota of access seats, and last year I was too late in booking to get many of these”. Whilst anyone can be impacted by tickets selling out, this issue may be greater for people with VI, who might need additional time to access information and tickets. As Laura highlighted: “It can be a bit difficult when you’re using the [accessibility] software, to be at the head of the queue”.

3.1.2 Interactions with staff. Many participants reported positive experiences with staff. Eleanor commented that she, and others with VI, continued to attend a particular venue because of the staff, stating that: “nothing’s too much trouble”. Survey respondents indicated mixed responses to the statement, “*Staff at live music events understand my accessibility requirements*” ($M = 3.00, SD = 1.20$). Fourteen out of 85 respondents (16.5%) “strongly disagreed”, and interviewees reported incidences of insufficient support and a perceived lack of disability training (see Figure 2). As Webster *et al.* (2018) report, whilst 90% of event promoters consider accessibility essential or desirable, 47% of venues and 86% of promoters surveyed have not received Disability Awareness training. Some participants believed that size of venue impacted on staff support. Lily felt that when visiting an unfamiliar venue: “It might be difficult to find the initial assistance . . . at a smaller venue like the jazz thing they know me so they’ll give me assistance” and 58 out of 89 respondents (65.2%) agreed to some extent that they felt more comfortable at smaller rather than larger venues (e.g. arenas or festivals). Respondents reported easier navigation, the ability to attend alone and less crowding, as key benefits. This is notable given Attitude is Everything’s (2018) finding that smaller venues typically fall short in terms of online information and the availability/signposting of disabled parking.

Expressing needs to staff during the booking process was also problematic. Victoria was concerned about attending an upcoming event due to her VI being categorised as a mobility issue; the booking system had no option to record VI.

I dread to think what I’m going find, a cushion or something when I get there . . . I’ve had all the conversations about, can you make sure this is a proper seat, I don’t need a space, I don’t need to be wheeled in I can walk in, I use a cane but, and I’ll have a problem with the crowds, I’ll need your disabled access but for a different reason (Victoria)

On another occasion, Victoria had informed a venue of her VI but had been placed on a fold-up chair in a disabled area, some distance from the stage. As she observed: “you’d rather be reasonably stable if you don’t see very well”, and she was unable to use her residual sight to enjoy the visual spectacle. Others observed that staff sometimes made inaccurate assumptions about attendees with VI, typically assuming mobility problems. Challenges identified in relation to staff are summarised below.

- (1) The booking process
 - Difficulty expressing needs to staff
 - Assumptions made regarding the needs of attendees with VI
- (2) Inside the venue
 - Lack of staff support at some venues
 - Difficulty identifying sources of help and support
 - Perceived lack of disability (and VI specific) training
 - Contrasting views regarding the impact of size of venue on staff support

3.1.3 Navigation and orientation. Live music venues vary in capacity and layout, and various navigation challenges were identified, as listed below.

- (1) Outside the venue
 - Lack of disabled parking
 - Identifying entrances
 - Navigating the space between arrival destination and the venue
- (2) Barriers in the physical environment
 - Steps
 - Lighting
 - Poorly lit signs, stairs and toilets
 - Contrast from light to dark when entering venues
 - Difficulties at outdoor events at night
 - Strobe lighting
 - Inadequate maintenance of facilities
 - Crowds and maintenance of personal space
- (3) Additional challenges
 - Identifying key facilities such as services desks, toilets and bars
 - Personal safety, use of mobility aids and VI as an invisible disability
 - Deteriorating sight increasing difficulty over time
 - Additional disabilities resulting in greater barriers to accessibility
 - Volume of noise leading to feelings of disorientation

A lack of disabled parking and difficulties locating the right entrance at larger venues were reported. Robert had an arrangement with staff at one of his favourite venues to circumvent difficulties moving from taxi to venue, but even this arrangement did not guarantee assistance.

They've asked me to let them know when I'm coming . . . I usually ring them up beforehand and say I'm going to arrive at such-and-such a time if you could arrange for somebody to meet me, and this usually gives rise to a hiccup . . . they say oh I don't know anything . . . we're not used to meeting people, et cetera et cetera, but we usually get it together (Robert)

VI made safe navigation and the identification of facilities a challenge. Victoria commented that alongside her deteriorating vision had come an increased concern regarding navigation: "I'd check the layout of the gig as well, and the venue, more than I would have done in the past". Existing research demonstrates that navigating inside, particularly within unfamiliar spaces, can be extremely difficult for individuals with VI, reducing their confidence in independent mobility (Jeamwatthanachai *et al.*, 2019). Mike reflected on the importance of research prior to attending new venues: "I would have to make sure I was comfortable with the toilets, it would be the first thing I'd be thinking of". Adam reported that, "I suppose it doesn't worry me but I do think about it and just make sure I don't drink a lot before I go in". Whilst said in jest, research has found similar use of purposeful dehydration to avoid the need to use public toilets amongst individuals with disabilities (Poria *et al.*, 2010).

At live music events, crowding may further compound navigation difficulties. As Lily observed: "It's just the practicalities of being somewhere that's busy and really crowded". Several respondents suggested that the ability to access seating before other attendees might be useful in avoiding crowds. This service is not typically advertised by venues, although anecdotal evidence from the blog site of one concert attendee with VI suggests that it is sometimes offered (Life of a Blind Girl, 2018). Crowding also created difficulties communicating with companions and staff, and reduced feelings of personal safety. Open-ended survey responses referred to feeling anxious or disorientated when immersed in a noisy environment and 21% of 91 respondents considered the number of attendees and crowds as an "extremely important" factor in decisions regarding attendance.

Inadequate lighting increased navigation difficulties for interviewees with residual vision. This concern directly influenced Adam's attendance at events: "I think if I didn't have the lighting issue I'd probably do a bit more". Respondents agreed that low lighting made navigation more difficult ($n = 72$, $M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.51$) and open-ended responses highlighted this as a safety concern: "due to the low level of lighting in such venues I worry about bumping into people". This may partly explain respondents' disagreement with the statement, "*I find it easy to navigate at live music events*" ($M = 1.94$, $SD = 1.02$).

3.1.4 Disabled facilities and specialist services. Participants had accessed a range of services and facilities available to disabled attendees, including disabled toilets, viewing platforms and accessibility schemes, which often played a role in their enjoyment of events. However, sometimes provisions were not viewed as sufficient, and participants highlighted a range of challenges associated with their use, or non-use, as summarised below:

- (1) Disabled spaces and facilities
 - Mixed feeling on appropriateness of disabled areas
 - May draw unwanted attention to VI
 - Tend to be located some distance from the stage (reducing ability to make use of residual vision)
 - Difficulty locating disabled facilities

- (2) Companion tickets and accessible seating
 - Difficulties booking companion tickets online
 - Misunderstandings regarding accessible/companion ticket schemes
 - Limited availability of accessible seating
 - Longer booking processes for those requiring companion/access tickets, with implications on ticket availability (e.g. tickets selling out)
- (3) Audio description and touch tours
 - Appropriate for some events but not others
 - Limited availability of audio-described performances
 - Inadequate promotion of audio-described performances and touch tours
- (4) Attending events with a guide dog
 - Staff poorly informed of Guide Dog policy
 - Limited space for Guide Dogs next to seating

Designated disabled areas received mixed reviews. Jack highlighted some of the benefits.

Where we were it was alright because we were away from the crowd, you could see all the crowds because we were in a disabled part so that was alright but a lot of the time if you go to these gigs you're standing amongst the people, it's like you're all dancing together (Jack)

People with VI may feel vulnerable in unfamiliar surroundings, and worried about their personal safety (Yau *et al.*, 2004). Yet, some avoided designated disabled seating. Hayley commented that whilst her sight loss is “not a big deal”, neither did she “want to draw attention to it” by sitting in a disabled area. VI is often an “invisible” disability, with many retaining choice over if, when and how to disclose their VI to others (Norstedt, 2019). Research suggests that many individuals avoid disclosing a VI due to the risk of being viewed primarily as someone in need of additional assistance (Cureton, 2018). Such concerns may pervade the live music event environment, impacting on individuals’ access to support which might benefit their experience. Respondents reported similarly mixed opinions on designated disabled areas. Whilst some had benefited from a clear view of the stage, others felt that they did not always meet the needs of attendees with VI: “Larger venues tend to have worse sightlines for accessibility platforms depending on the set up of the artist”. *Attitude is Everything* (2016) found similar difficulties relating to impeded sightlines from disabled platforms. Again, concerns about inclusion were raised: “I actively avoid these [disabled areas] as I feel this rules them out from being in the mainstream like everyone else is”. Thirty respondents out of 94 (31.9%) considered seating in a disabled area “not at all important” to their decision to attend events, although 35 (37.2%) felt it was “important” or “extremely important”. In contrast, most felt that accessible toilets were important; 30 out of 94 respondents (31.9%) “strongly agreed” with the statement, “*I worry about not being able to find toilets at live music events*” and 26 out of 94 (27.7%) considered easy access to toilets to be “extremely important” to their decision to attend events. Being able to locate toilets was a primary concern for several interviewees (see discussion in Castle *et al.*, 2022).

Respondents highlighted that in some instances, venues may fail to provide disabled toilets or to deliver adequate upkeep of facilities: “Keep regular maintenance up as broken things like locks on toilets cause extra challenges”.

Most concert venues for pop music don't have disabled toilets, though when I go to classical concert venues they usually do have disabled toilets. As a blind person I prefer to sit down to pee so I don't miss the bowl but I do not trust toilet seats at venues.

As [Attitude is Everything \(2016\)](#) write, "An accessible toilet is only an accessible toilet if its size, fixtures and fittings are fit for purpose" (p. 22). In addition to accessible facilities, there was consideration of services provided specifically for attendees with disabilities: Audio Description (AD) and Touch Tours (TT). The majority of 94 respondents used AD ($n = 59, 62.8\%$) and TT ($n = 47, 50\%$) at least sometimes at events. These services ensured attendees with VI had access to as much information about the visual or narrative aspects of a performance as possible. However, AD was not always considered appropriate; whilst Hayley felt that plays might benefit from AD, she felt it reduced enjoyment at musicals due to it "cutting in" and "taking away from the musical atmosphere". The most common concern raised by interviewees in relation to AD and TT was the infrequency with which they were offered; Emily commented that "Generally they have audio described performance on a Thursday afternoon once in a run". Interviewees also felt that these services were not adequately promoted. Even Laura, an opera singer, had little knowledge of AD in opera houses: "I'm not sure whether there's any sort of audio description available in opera houses, I'm sure it's coming".

Overall, respondents felt that these services positively impacted on experiences (see [Figure 1](#)), although just 37 (46.8%) agreed to some extent that AD, and 29 (37.2%) that TT, had contributed to their enjoyment of an event. As with accessible seating, the availability of and information about, these services was considered limited (see [Figure 2](#)). Open-ended responses suggested that more frequent AD performances, better scheduling, and greater promotion of AD and TT online and through third party sites, would be beneficial. Given that AD is typically provided by touring organisations or charities such as [VocalEyes \(2016\)](#), any steps taken to address deficits in provision would require the support of venues and their funding.

Just one interviewee, Eleanor, had attended events with a Guide Dog, "We just went in an ordinary seat and we could just about get [name of Guide Dog] in there, it was a bit of a squeeze". Respondents agreed that the comfort of one's Guide Dog was a contributing factor in decisions to attend events; 21 (47% of 45) considered it "important" or "extremely important", and some commented that live events were unsuitable for Guide Dogs due to noise and crowding. Experiences for those who had attended events with a Guide Dog ranged from attentive staff and offers of dog-minding to, as one respondent reported: "Staff's ignorance about access of guide dogs". Comments indicated both a lack of staff training and inadequate application of legal policy ([Assistance Dogs UK, 2015](#); [Equality Act, 2010](#)).

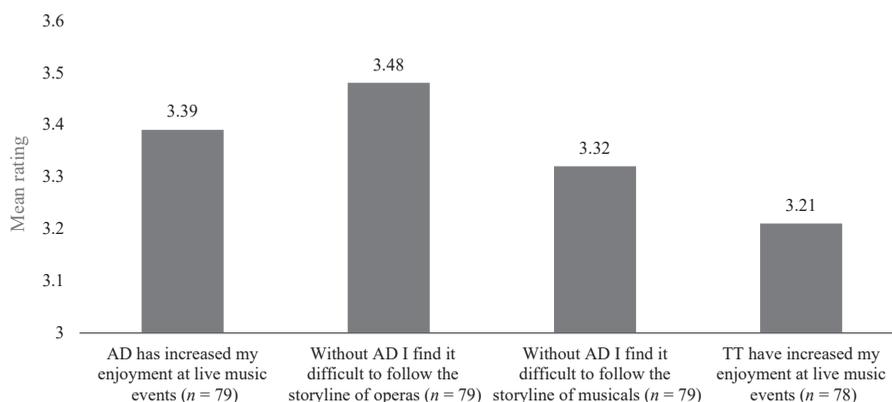
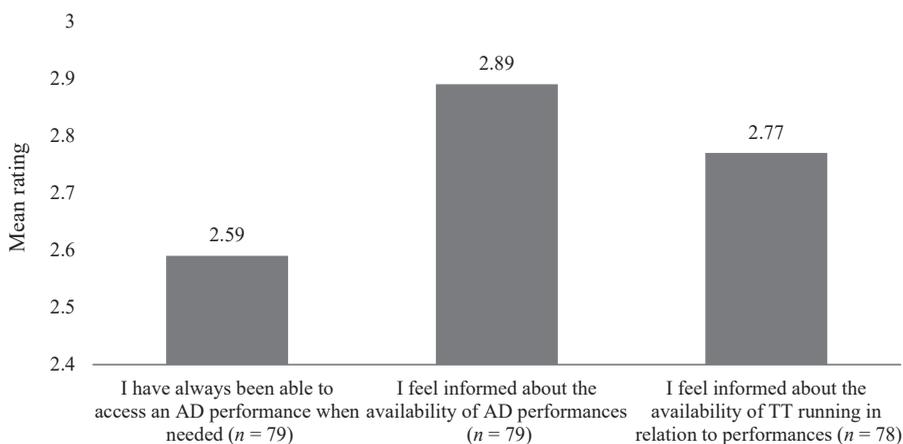


Figure 1.
Mean responses
(agreement) to
statements about the
impact of AD and TT
on live event
experiences

Figure 2.
Mean responses
(agreement) to
statements about AD
and TT access and
information



Interviewees also highlighted difficulties regarding the use of mobility aids at events, serving to demonstrate a continued lack of understanding amongst some members of the public regarding the mobility needs of those with VI (Gallagher *et al.*, 2011; Sanders, 2000). Victoria had used a shorter symbol cane (a small white held in front of the body) whilst attending events, but felt that there was a lack of public awareness; only when using a longer guide cane was she given the space she needed.

If I use the symbol cane which I might use at work more so, my little fold up one . . . if I use that people don't tend to know what it is and don't move out your way, but if you use a long cane and walk fast [laughing] (Victoria)

Additional disability was found to further impact on accessibility. Respondents who reported an additional disability gave lower mean ratings to statements relating to positive experiences of accessibility, and higher ratings to statements about negative experiences. Research evidences the impact of comorbid disabilities on difficulties with tasks relating to independent mobility, including walking and climbing steps, as well as activities such as shopping, socialising and participating in leisure activities for individuals with VI (Crews *et al.*, 2006; Heppel *et al.*, 2020). Those who had a physical impairment ($n = 19$, $Mdn = 5$) or a complex health condition ($n = 9$, $Mdn = 5$) rated the statement “*I feel more comfortable at smaller venues than larger venues, e.g. arenas or festivals*” significantly higher than those who did not have a physical impairment ($n = 70$, $Mdn = 4$; $U = 353.5$, $p = 0.001$) or complex health condition ($n = 80$, $Mdn = 4$; $U = 196$, $p = 0.020$). Open-ended responses from those with a physical disability confirmed the perception of smaller venues as “more accommodating” and “more accessible”, despite Attitude is Everything (2018) identifying multiple accessibility deficits in relation to smaller venues.

4. Summary and recommendations

The current article provides new insight into live music event experiences of attendees with VI, highlighting several barriers relating to information and ticket purchases, interactions with staff, navigation and orientation, and disabled and specialist services. In addition to highlighting those factors which might impact on accessibility, the current article sought to consider how the needs of attendees with VI might be better addressed. Findings have been used to inform the development of a series of recommendations (see Table 1) which seek to

Recommendations for increasing information accessibility

1. *Ensure information is available in accessible formats*
 - Where possible, work to ensure that digital and print brochures are made available at the same time
 - Offer the opportunity to be added to a mailing/text list at point of booking, to receive updates or reminders about events for which attendees have purchased tickets
2. *Ensure website accessibility through consultation of Web Content Accessibility Guidelines. Provide*
 - The option for pages to be viewed without images; provision of image and video descriptions
 - Clear titles and consistent navigational tabs, changeable colour schemes and high-contrast options
 - Clear, large, left-aligned text
3. *Ensure easier access to accessibility information online*
 - An accessibility page which is accessible from the home page would be beneficial
 - Information which may be important to attendees with VI:
 - o The layout of the venue and the location of entrances, exits, and facilities
 - o Clear reporting of services which are/are not available
 - o How to access companion ticket schemes and disabled seating
 - Third party ticket sellers should signpost customers to accessibility information/contact numbers

Recommendations for improving the booking process for VI attendees

1. *Changes to phone bookings*
 - Adequate training of phone operators to ensure awareness of the range of provisions available to attendees with VI; their needs must be considered at point of booking
 - Adequate manning (and firm policy) of accessibility phone lines to ensure stress-free booking
2. *Changes to online booking systems*
 - Ensure that booking systems allow for accurate recording of attendees' needs (a "tick box" approach to recording disability does not convey the unique needs or requests of an attendee)
 - Improvements to online bookings must be made to ensure that all accessibility provisions and schemes can be booked, independently, by a VI attendee

Recommendations to overcome navigation difficulties and improve staff support

1. *Increased lighting inside venues*
 - Mark the perimeters of steps and pathways; appropriately light signs and access points outside and inside
 - In toilets (ensure that lights and light switches are appropriately maintained)
2. *Ensure disability awareness training needs are met amongst staff*
 - Ensure that Guide Dog policies are communicated clearly and staff queries are addressed
 - Implement VI-specific training. In basic form, this could be an online training module and/or handout. Charitable organisations may be able to provide practical training and support to help staff feel confident understanding the needs of, and assisting, VI attendees
3. *Provide VI attendees with the option for early access to the venue/auditorium*
 - This option could be communicated at point of booking
4. *Ensure adequate promotion of disabled areas*
 - Work to meet the needs of VI attendees in these areas (e.g. stable seating with a clear stage view). It may not be possible to move disabled areas/platforms, but ensuring that VI attendees are informed of what to expect and the support available will allow them to decide if these facilities meet their needs

Recommendations for improving access to Audio Description (AD) and Touch Tours (TT)

1. *Greater promotion of existing AD and TT services*
 - List the availability of these services within online accessibility information
 - Ensure that this information is communicated to VI attendees during the booking process
2. *Vary the days on which AD and TT services are offered (including evening and weekends)*
3. *Endeavour to increase the number of AD performances and TT available to VI attendees*
 - AD service providers, charitable organisations and VI attendees themselves may all play a role in ensuring that venues are aware of the demand for these services

Table 1.
Recommendations
to improve the
accessibility of live
events for attendees
with visual impairment

provide venues and event organisers with the knowledge needed to address the challenges outlined in the current article. These recommendations may also be of interest to those working in marketing and promotion, who hope to increase accessibility of events, and to organisations for whom there is a need to reach new, underrepresented and minority audience members in arts and cultural activities (Arts Council England, 2017). Organisations such as Attitude is Everything, who have already undertaken much work to improve the accessibility of live events for attendees who are deaf and disabled, may find these recommendations particularly useful in addressing the current lack of data relating to the experiences of attendees with VI. The organisation may play an important role in disseminating such knowledge across the sector, and holding venues and organisers accountable to standards of best practice. Thus, implementation of these recommendations requires the effort of stakeholders across the industry and further research which consults with these individuals/organisations, including event managers, venue staff, those working in promotion and marketing, and artists, would be valuable in ensuring the realisation of positive change.

It is noted that many of the challenges identified here are not unique to those living with VI; research evidences the barriers to societal participation, including but not limited to, inaccessible physical environments (Rosenberg *et al.*, 2013) and discriminatory attitudes (Hästbacka *et al.*, 2016), experienced by individuals with various types of disability. However, attendance at cultural events is lower amongst individuals with VI than other types of disability (McManus and Lord, 2012). Implementation of the recommendations in Table 1, many of which would require minimal financial commitment, could increase the opportunities available to individuals with VI to experience the musical, social and emotional benefits associated with live music event attendance (Ballantyne *et al.*, 2014; Brown and Knox, 2017). It is also acknowledged that not all of the challenges identified in the current article are unique to the context of live music. Live music events present just one context in which environmental and attitudinal barriers continue to hinder the participation of individuals with disability (United Nations, 2006). It is through all aspects of life, “daily interactions, mass media artefacts, live performances, sports culture and pedagogical design,” that concepts of disabled and able, and normal and abnormal, are co-created (Scott-Pollock, 2022, p. 47), and it is in all these areas that greater accessibility and inclusion must be sought.

5. Conclusions

COVID-19 has led to increased recognition that the way we participate in culture is vulnerable to change. Now offers an ideal time to work collectively on creating environments of musical, artistic, and cultural relevance, which value and include everyone (Scott-Pollock, 2022). The current article offers practical recommendations to address this in the context of live music events. Implementation of the recommendations set-out would help to increase the accessibility of live music events for attendees with VI, offering progress towards universal accessibility and inclusion in all contexts.

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