

HOW CAN WE REDUCE CONFERENCE VENUES' USE OF SINGLE-USE PLASTICS?

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Society-level discourse on single-use plastics (SUPs) increases awareness of their negative environmental impacts and reduces their usage by environmentally aware individuals, firms, and governments. This article makes a unique and timely contribution to the literature by exploring why conference venues have not been proactive in reducing their usage of SUPs. Application of a questionnaire approach to collect primary data about venues' attitudes and practices towards their level and reduction in usage of SUPs reveals that although venues claim to be motivated to reduce delegates' use of SUPs, they state that excessive costs inhibit their ability to do so, and that legal and government regulations have the strongest influence on their use of SUPs. Our findings provide a frame of reference and an order of policy priority to ensure SUPs reduction by venues.

Key words: Single-use plastics (SUPs); Convention centers; Environmental awareness; Legislation

Introduction

Plastics pollute waterways, endanger marine life, and compromise human health (Jagger, 2018; Jambeck, 2015; Muralisrinivasan, 2016; Xanthos & Walker, 2017). Ninety-nine percent of single-use plastics (SUPs), which are plastic items that are used only once before they are thrown away or recycled, are manufactured from fossil fuels, making it a significant component of fossil fuels emissions (Royer, 2018). Public awareness of the risks

of using SUPs is increasing due to the expanding profiles of environmental campaigns, government actions, and industry measures to eliminate SUPs.

Grounded on the wide, contested, and burgeoning literature on sustainable development, interest in sustainable production practices is increasing in many industries, including the conference sector (Mair, 2013), but thus far research has focused mainly on the methods of recycling and the usage and recovery of water and power (Ayuso, 2006; Tzschentke et al., 2008; Whitfield & Dioko,

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2011). Conference venues continue to supply delegates with beverages, food, decorations, and stationery that contain significant amounts of SUPs (TUI Group Sustainable Development, 2019) and the reason(s) for this behavioral continuation is unknown. Introduction of environmental strategies is often due to pressures from stakeholders and not necessarily associated with hotel performance (Abdel-Maksoud et al., 2016), with barriers inhibiting the greening of venues typically being associated with a lack of time and additional costs (Tzschentke et al., 2008). Several studies aimed to explore methods of greening, greenwashing (Rahman et al., 2015), motivations of venues, and the power of corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Story & Neves, 2015), but no study has thus far identified how convention centers can reduce their use of SUPs. This is in spite of the observation by Liu and Lei (2021) that their event planner interviewees were well aware of the current environmental impact caused by their events.

This article assesses venues' perceptions of and practices in using SUPs in order to comprehend the motives for and constraints to behavioral change. Advances in this area of knowledge is crucial if convention venues are going to adopt plastic-free production practices. This article makes four contributions to the literature. After critically reviewing the literature on SUPs and the path to reducing their usage, we collected primary data across convention centers within the UK in order to comprehend the motivators for and barriers to behavioral change. This is the first study to investigate venues' use of SUPs. Our first contribution is to reveal venues' attitudes towards both sustainability and the reduction in usage of SUPs. Second, we identified the motivators to and inhibitors of reducing SUPs. Third, we categorize changes in the use of SUPs and identify the order of these changes. Fourth, this categorization enabled the formation of an order of policy actions that can be implemented to reduce venues' use of SUPs.

This article adopts the following structure. The next section contextualizes the importance and urgency in reducing the use of SUPs and highlights that the venue sector is generally slow to adopt this behavioral change. We review the literature on corporate action to reduce plastic usage, government action, and the current state of greening

in convention centers. From this literature, we develop hypotheses that are subsequently tested using primary data that we collected using a survey of convention centers across the UK. The results enable the creation of sequential policy recommendations to reduce the use of SUPs.

Literature Review

Plastics endanger the world's oceans and marine life. Between 60% and 90% of marine litter is plastic (Jambeck, 2015) of which around 50% is single use (Xanthos & Walker, 2017). Plastic items found in the marine environment vary in size from large bottles and containers to small plastic pieces less than 5 mm long, called "microplastics" (NOAA, 2018). Most microplastics are the remnants of larger items that have broken apart, although some have been manufactured for health, beauty, and cleaning applications, known as microbeads, and these include items contained within toothpaste, shower gel, and cleaning products.

A principal reason why microplastics are so dangerous in the marine environment is that they pollute waters, contaminate food sources for sea creatures, harm animals' health, and enter human bodies through the consumption of seafood (Jagger, 2018). According to the Marine Conservation Society (2019), a European seafood consumer ingests on average 11,000 plastic particles a year. Microplastics arising from municipal wastewater treatment plants also harm human health (Lv et al., 2019). The case against the use of plastic waste is strengthened further by concerns regarding the longevity of common plastic waste in seawater, with estimates suggesting that microplastics take 450 years to break down (Muralisrinivasan, 2016). Awareness of these issues has been increasing and the attitude towards SUPs is gradually changing.

Plastic waste and pollution became a conscious societal problem in the UK after the broadcast of a 2017 BBC nature documentary series on marine life, called *Blue Planet II* (O'Donoghue, 2019). The series depicted the issue of plastics in a raw and clear way and, as a result, 88% of people who watched the program subsequently changed their lifestyle with many of them starting to make more ethical purchases, especially regarding plastics (Calderwood, 2018). Further documentaries

inspired by Blue Planet II, such as *Drowning in Plastic* and *Scotland's Plastic Coasts* (BBC News, 2019) continue to educate people about the impacts of plastic waste on the marine environment.

There are several environmental groups that seek to educate people about sustainability and the urgent need for action. For instance, Greenpeace has created a Plastic Pledge online petition (Greenpeace, 2019a) that advises how to reduce the use of everyday plastics. It captures public interests and then brings this to the attention of governments and large corporations. The UK has witnessed several major public demonstrations including events in 2018 associated with Greta Thunberg's Youth Strike for Climate movement. In April 2019, over 1,000 protestors were arrested for civil disobedience in London during rallies led by a sociopolitical movement called Extinction Rebellion (Perraudin, 2019), where the purposes of those protests were to force the government to acknowledge the scale of the climate crisis and to initiate the changes that the protestors considered necessary to save the planet. Even though these and other protests have been relatively peaceful (Perraudin, 2019), social pressures aimed at protecting the environment and encouraging people to make ethical choices are growing significantly. Nevertheless, the UK does not have enough recycling capacity and has hitherto sent a substantial amount of its plastic waste overseas to China and Malaysia, both of which have clamped down on plastic imports, and Turkey, which was revealed by the BBC as not recycling as promised but instead burning and fly-tipping the plastic and has now changed its national policy to ban almost all imports of plastic waste (Crawford, 2021). The UK must pay more attention to recover and recycle its waste plastic.

Consumers have been active in demanding sustainable strategies and requiring environmentally friendly alternatives to products, businesses, and policies. The Ethical Consumer Markets Report (2018) revealed a 65% increase in the number of people stating that they had avoided buying a product or using a service due to its negative environmental impact between 2016 and 2018. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated heightening global discussions about health and well-being, consumers have been increasingly seeking out sustainable products and brands (Mintel, 2020).

Corporate Action to Reduce Plastic Usage

Businesses that have understood the changing consumer perception towards SUPs have started changing their sustainable operation and production strategies. Some hotel chains have introduced measures to eliminate SUPs. Marriott International removed plastic straws across all its hotels in July 2019 ("Plastic Straws," 2019) and the Hilton hotel chain has been removing plastic straws and water bottles from its meeting spaces (Hilton, 2018). InterContinental Hotels Group (2019) is banning minitoiletries in its hotels and is installing refillable containers in guest bathrooms.

Despite these corporate announcements, the true intention of businesses is questioned in some studies which contend that companies might use "green washing" to appear more environmentally responsible than they really are (Polonsky et al., 2010; Rahman et al., 2015), and that greening affects consumers' intentions to visit hotels (Wang et al., 2018). There is evidence of corporate ambiguity due to a gap between customers' attitudes and behaviors, with surveys showing an increase in ethical consumption at the same time as an unwillingness to accept inconvenience when making ethical purchases (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001). This consumer attitude-behavior gap (Blake, 1999) may be due to a number of factors, such as differences between implicit and explicit attitudes, or differences between what they say and what they do (Govind et al., 2019). Eckhardt et al. (2010) argued that consumers may believe in ethical consumption but often construct a justification for their lack of ethical consumption and behaviors by reasoning away unethical choices. Gregory-Smith et al. (2013) believe the behavioral gap is related to the purchase decision, which tends to be emotion driven and thus difficult to analyze and understand. This attitude-behavior gap led Barnett et al. (2010) to claim that alternative political measures need to be implemented to reduce unethical consumption.

In 2015, members of the United Nations adopted its 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and agreed to work towards achieving 17 Sustainable Development Goals. These goals addressed global issues, including SUP waste and water pollution (United Nations, 2019). The European Parliament approved a new law banning certain SUPs, including

plastic forks, knives, spoons, chopsticks, plates, straws, cotton bud sticks, plastic balloon sticks, oxo-degradable plastics, food containers, and expanded polystyrene cups (European Parliament, 2019). Estimates suggest these items constitute 70% of all marine litter (European Commission, 2019). The UK Government started banning some of these items, including microbeads, plastic straws, cotton buds, and stirrers (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, 2018a, 2018b), and the UK's 25-year plan establishes deadlines for actionable plans by 2050 (HM Government, 2018a, 2018b). These targets are, for example, to eliminate avoidable plastic waste, to reduce and prevent all kinds of marine pollution, and to encourage producers to become more environmentally responsible when using plastics by the end of 2042 (HM Government, 2018a).

Reducing SUPs in Conference Venues

As plastic-related environmental concerns and current trends in ethical consumption both influence the way all kinds of industries operate, the use of SUPs must be an important concern for venues as well. Mair (2013) claimed that a conference has positive and negative impacts on the environmental, where the positives effects include the opportunity to promote behavior change, to demonstrate best practice, and to act as a catalyst for communities to take pride in the local environment. However, conferences tend to be very resource demanding, contribute to pollution, overuse water and energy, and create waste disposal problems (Mair, 2013). As the size and frequency of conferences were increasing prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the environmental aspects of conferences started to be discussed more frequently with venue providers realizing the need to be environmentally responsible along with a growing need to adopt principles of "greening" their business. The motivation to introduce environmental strategies for venues is often due to pressures from stakeholders (Ayuso, 2006; Saha & Darnton, 2005), financial benefits (Mair & Jago, 2010), or personal values and beliefs (Tzschentke et al., 2008). On the other hand, the barriers inhibiting venues from "greening" are a lack of time and additional cost (Tzschentke et al., 2008).

The current state of greening in venues in the UK was examined by Whitfield and Dioko (2011).

They showed that 36% of venues act in a proactive manner towards environmental issues and a further 30% acknowledge corporate/environment interactions, and then adapt their internal attitudes/behaviors to achieve the minimum required to maintain a positive image. Guidelines are available for "greening" a venue and support venues' attempts to improve their environmental performance. For instance, Environment Canada's Green Meeting Guide (2007) or Eventbrite's Four Simple Steps to a Sustainable Conference (2018) both contain lists of steps necessary to organize a green meeting or conference. However, these guidelines make negligible reference to minimizing and recycling plastic waste and do not provide enough detail about better alternatives to SUPs.

Sustainability goals change frequently. As Getz (2017) claimed, sustainability is a constant process in which goals frequently change, and as targets become higher, the industry should react on the new challenges. As targets become more demanding, the plastics industry needs to react to new challenges. The current challenge for the conference industry is to reduce SUP waste and the industry needs to develop guidelines towards this aim. Nevertheless, it is a venue's responsibility to be environmentally sustainable and they need to offer delegates practicable alternatives to SUPs. In part due to the attitude-behavior gap, delegates cannot be relied upon to make environmentally responsible choices (Prillwitz & Barr, 2011) and there is a significant difference between people's environmental behavior at and away from home (Prillwitz & Barr, 2011).

Given the above literature review, it seems that British venues are aware of the increasing interest in greening but few of them are proactive towards environmental issues (Whitfield & Dioko, 2011). Moreover, despite consumers claiming to be more environmentally conscious than ever before, there is an attitude-behavior gap (Blake, 1999; Carrigan & Attalla, 2001; Govind et al., 2019; Gregory-Smith et al., 2013) that prevents them from reflecting on their beliefs and causing them to act. This behavioral gap phenomenon applies to both conference delegates and venues.

To encourage venues to engender more sustainable SUP usage, we need to augment understanding of three SUP-related issues. First, there is the

need to ascertain venues' practices towards the use of SUPs. Second, there is the need to enhance understanding of venues' attitudes towards sustainability and then study what deters and motivates them to reduce their use of SUPs. And third, there is the need to identify the most suitable and effective way(s) to reduce venues' use of SUPs. The remainder of this article seeks to fill these gaps in knowledge.

Methodology

There has been no in-depth analysis of the level and potential change in use of SUPs by venues. What we do know, however, is that conference venues are not adopting sustainable practices with respect to their use of SUPs as fast as in other industries. It is therefore pertinent to proceed to identify why this is the case and what underpins their decisions on the use of SUPs.

We collected primary data using a questionnaire that was distributed to venues across the UK in the summer of 2019. Postal surveys were rejected as a methodological approach because they seem to be outdated (Dillman et al., 2014) and require cost-increasing printing, packaging, and postage (Denscombe, 2017), whereas Internet surveys only require an Internet connection and therefore incur lower costs, as well as being more environmentally friendly. The questionnaire was embedded in an email by a uniform resource locator (URL) linked to a web-based survey (Denscombe, 2017) that enabled collection and storage of data online with downloadable functionality into a format ready for analysis (Dillman et al., 2014). Following Hair et al. (2011), we chose to use the online survey software called SurveyMonkey, as it enables the creation of a variety of questions and layouts that are user-friendly and guarantees secure storage and encryption of the data (SurveyMonkey, 2021). We also enabled SurveyMonkey's tracking of responses, automated reminders, and emails thanking participant for completing the survey.

Questionnaire Design

Good questionnaire design integrates coherency, logical progression, and a smooth flow through the questions in order to encourage respondents to

complete the questionnaire and retain their interest. Our questionnaire proceeds through questions that initially covered facts, then opinions, beliefs, and judgements, and then their behaviors, as suggested by Brace (2018). The questionnaire has six sections, with the first four covering venue' profiles, attitudes towards environmental sustainability, motivators to reduce SUPs, and inhibitors to reduce SUPs, respectively. The final two sections detected practices in their use of SUPs. The focus of the questions reflects the research gaps identified in the literature review above, and we drew on sources to create a matrix of questions relating to SUPs that serve as the indicators of environmental performance. Specifically, we drew on the plastic reduction guidelines sourced from the TUI Group Sustainable Development (2019), Marine Conservation Society (2019), Travel Without Plastic (2019), Environment Canada (2007), Earth Changers (2018), United Nations (2015), Eventbrite (2018), Greenpeace (2019b), and Zero Waste Europe (2019). We piloted out an initial questionnaire and, in response to this feedback, we revised the ordering and wording of some questions, altered some response categories, and ultimately generated a final version of the questionnaire.

The Sample

This is the first study to investigate venues' use of SUPs. A major challenge with investigating the contemporary use of SUPs is that venues need to self-declare their use of SUPs at a time when the media and environmental pressure groups strongly discourage this activity and campaign to encourage public opinion to follow suit. Consequently, the number of responses to our survey is likely to be reduced by the desire of venues not to declare their overuse of SUPs. Similarly, venues that have already significantly reduced their use of SUPs may be proactive to state this achievement. Together, these two biases are likely to generate a more positive depiction of venues' use of SUPs than exists in reality. Moreover, even after we allow for a selection bias concerning the probability of completing the questionnaire, there may be a social desirability bias that causes venues to record underestimates of their use of SUPs and bias upwards their declaration regarding their use of non-SUP alternatives.

Notwithstanding these concerns, we proceeded to approach venue associations to request their support with sending out the questionnaire to their members. This active encouragement by industry associations was deemed beneficial for expanding the sample size and increasing the response rate. Unfortunately, only the Positive Impact Events organization was forthcoming with their support and this too might have biased upwards the response rate of environmentally friendly venues.

Venues were identified using the VenueFinder.com database, which lists 11,123 British conference venues with conference facilities. A subsample of 1,742 venues with email addresses was established to which we distributed the URL link to our SurveyMonkey questionnaire albeit within a polite and encouraging covering letter. When possible, email addresses specifically devoted to conference/events team were chosen. The first page of the online survey provided respondents with information about the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality, privacy, and the option to withdraw from the study during the process (Denscombe, 2017; Hair et al., 2011) and by clicking the “I consent” button they could proceed to the questions.

Despite sending out reminders, the survey response rate was lower than anticipated at only 4.82%, with only 84 fully usable responses. Although there appears to be a general decrease of response rate of online surveys, our low response rate may reflect the respondents’ lack of interest in environmental affairs (Groves et al., 2004) or, and perhaps more likely, a desire not to reveal potentially negative behaviors. Different venues were approached subsequently in order to generate a sample that is representative of the overall structure of UK venues. Although further research needs to explore the generalizability of these findings, it is likely that other researchers will also experience a low response rate because of the lack of willingness to engage with a research project that could make the respondent feel shame that they are not putting in more effort to reduce their use of SUPs.

Of the respondents, 26 (31%) were event managers, 26 (31%) conference managers, 24 (29%) general managers, 4 (5%) event manager assistants, and the remaining 4 (5%) were general manager assistants of venue spaces. Their job positions ensure

that individuals with knowledge of their venue’s current state of practices completed the survey.

Respondents came from across the venue size spectrum, with most respondents (60%) working for venues smaller than 4,000 m². The most represented groups were venues with size of 1,001–2,000 m² (21%). The least represented were venues larger than 31,000 m² (4%). As regards the type of venue, responses were obtained from 32 educational establishments (38%), 14 visitor attractions (17%), 13 hotels (15%), 13 purpose-built venues (15%), and 12 classified as “other” (14%).

Results

This section contains four subsections. The first subsection summarizes venues’ attitudes towards sustainability, the second describes and analyzes data on the motivators and inhibitors to reducing SUP usage, and the third explores venue practices of use and reduction in use of SUPs. The final subsection explores the effectiveness of policy statements to reduce SUPs.

Attitudes Towards Sustainability

Policies and statements typically reflect attitudes. Our data reveal that most venues have a corporate social responsibility (72%) or environmental policy (80%), but less than half (46%) have a formal written statement with targets to reduce SUPs. Out of the venues with no statement, only 10% have a plan to introduce a statement about their use of SUPs. A key reason why a statement on plastic use tends not to appear in venues’ CSR policies or environmental statements might be the level of contemporary understanding of the problem with plastics. Although CSR has been a known concept since the 1970s (Sethi, 1975), and hence these venues have had more than 30 years to introduce one, an awareness that plastics are a considerable threat to the environment was not clearly visible in the UK until 2017 (Calderwood, 2018). As only 28% of our surveyed venues that have no SUP-related statement plan to introduce one, increases the use of such statements by venues is likely to be slow.

We asked venues whether they aim to be perceived as sustainable and whether they marketed themselves as being sustainable or green. Although more

than half of the venues marketed themselves as green (52%), 64% of our sample stated that they were not accredited to or awarded any sustainability certification, which corroborates the findings of Whitfield et al. (2014). Sustainability awards can be considered an indicator of venues' environmental performance (Whitfield & Dioko, 2012) and the results indicate that venues want to appear environmentally responsible, but they are not willing to engage in high-level greening activities that require intensive efforts that are essential for the achievement of a sustainability award (Holden & Fennell, 2012).

Despite the lack of interest in (or the ability to achieve) sustainability awards, 90% of respondents agreed that they have a responsibility to protect the environment. More than two thirds (78%) claimed to agree that the government should influence venues' internal environmental policies, which suggests that venues acknowledge the necessity of protecting the environment but are not motivated to make the change themselves. Such a perspective concurs with the theory that there is an attitude-behavior gap in ethical consumption decisions (Blake, 1999; Carrigan & Attalla, 2001) and that both consumers and venues are inconsistent in ethical and environmentally responsible behaviors (Saha & Darnton, 2005). Therefore, venues need to be incentivized and motivated to make a change in their use of SUPs in order to enhance the environmental sustainability of their working practices.

Motivators and Inhibitors of Reducing SUPs

We asked respondents to rank a range of factors on a Likert scale from *most motivating* to *least motivating* and from *most constraining* to *least constraining*. The order of participants' responses was analyzed using a nonparametric Friedman test in order to determine the differences between distributions. The tests reveal that, on average, venues claimed to be most motivated to reduce SUP usage by delegates' demand (5.46), followed by internal company regulations (4.90), cost reduction (4.30), competition within the industry (3.94), current changes in law (3.90), and financial support (2.76). They were least motivated to reduce SUP usage by sustainability awards (2.74). The statistical analysis of the distribution of motivating factors revealed that differences between most individual responses

were significant at the 5% level of statistical confidence, which suggests that the factors influencing venues' motivations to reduce SUPs differ significantly across SUP categories. Delegates' demand played a consistently important role in venues' decisions towards positive changes in SUP use. The fact that delegates' demand is the most motivating factor reflects studies showing that a large percentage of companies become environmentally responsible due to pressures from stakeholders (Ayuso, 2006; Saha & Darnton, 2005). Moreover, venues are probably aware of current trends in consumers' preferences towards companies that engage in environmental protection (Intel, 2020) and their willingness to pay more for products (Kang et al., 2012; TripAdvisor, 2013). Hence, greening in this case can be seen as a tool for strengthening relationships with stakeholders and gaining more customers.

The identification that venues are most responsive to customers' preferences is not necessarily the best result. Research shows that companies that are not motivated by their intrinsic proenvironmental beliefs have a lower chance of achieving their environmental objectives (Story & Neves, 2015). The establishment of an environmental strategy is perceived to be an inevitable burden with a high risk of it being ineffective, inconsistent, and unclear (Story & Neves, 2015). Our results question venues' real intentions and their prospective thoroughness to reduce SUP usage. Venues claim to be motivated most by delegates' demand and motivated least by sustainability awards, and yet companies with sustainability awards are generally perceived positively. The discrepancy in the degree of motivation towards fulfilling consumer preferences and achieving sustainability awards, which seem to be concordant factors, might be caused by different levels of attainment. Venues can appear plastic free to conference delegates relatively easily because delegates do not have access to all areas of a venue, and can only evaluate the venue on what they see and experience. Delegates will also lack specialized knowledge about a venue's level and possible improvements in the greening process. In contrast, achieving sustainability awards usually requires efforts to convince experts auditing green practices. Therefore, being motivated by delegates' demands rather than sustainability awards might

be less challenging for venues, but not sufficient to improve their environmental performance and reduce their use of SUPs.

Further applications of Friedman's Two-Way Analysis of Variance by Ranks test to the factors that inhibit the reduction in SUPs revealed that the most important factor was excessive cost (5.50), followed by a lack of environmentally friendly alternatives (5.08), lack of time (4.58), lack of knowledge/training (3.98), not required by law (3.28), and not the focus of the venue (3.28). The least important inhibitor to the reduction in SUPs was the lack of delegates' demand (3.18). The ranking of inhibiting factors was similar to the ranking of motivating factors ($p < 0.05$). Excessive costs carried a comparatively significant degree of importance according to the mean value. This indicates that venue managers do not strongly consider reducing SUP (it is not the focus of attention for the venue) while excessive costs (financial, time, and knowledge) prevent them from doing so.

The fact that costs are considered both a positive (third motivating) and a negative (most inhibiting) factor in reducing SUPs indicates that venues believe reducing SUPs might lead to both cost reductions and cost increases. This ambiguity is a focus of discussion in studies that connect CSR with profits. Although CSR is financially beneficial (Flammer, 2015), it is acknowledged as being expensive among practitioners (Ortiz-de-Mandojana & Bansal, 2016). Camilleri (2018) contended that the negative view of CSR is, in most cases, caused by businesses being too focused on short-term profit maximization, an unwillingness to invest into long-term benefits, and, most importantly, inconsistencies in their CSR strategies. Similarly, if there is lack of time to learn about alternative practices and replacements (second, third, and fourth inhibiting factors), then the chances of creating a consistent SUP reduction strategy decrease, and this might eventually compromise financial benefits.

Practices That Use and Reduce SUPs

Conference venues were given a list of 36 SUP items and asked to state their frequency of use. They were also asked questions about the extent that they used 28 practices to reduce SUP usage. Both sets of questions used a 5-point Likert scale. The purpose

of this part of the questionnaire was to detect which specific SUP items they use and the extent to which they adopt any practices to purposefully reduce their usage of these SUP items. Applications of Cronbach's alpha revealed reliability/consistency coefficients of 0.754 for the SUP items and 0.864 for the alternative practices, which in both cases indicates high internal reliability/consistency.

In order to obtain a more comprehensive depiction of venues' practices, we divided these variables into three categories dependent on the area of use in the venue. The Conference category includes items and alternatives that are present in conference rooms; the Food and Beverage category lists items and alternatives used within a food and beverages department; and the Venue category includes items and alternatives that are part of everyday operations. Overall, the results reveal that the mean for all SUP items is 2.54, which indicates that, on average, most of the items are rarely or never used. When it comes to alternative practices, the mean value is 3.781, which shows that most of the alternative practices are not employed fully either.

Applications of Friedman's Two-Way Analysis of Variance by Ranks test to the SUPs reveal that the items that were reduced the most in the venues were plastic delegate bags, stirrers, coasters, plates, menu covers, and straws ($M > 2.87$). The most employed alternatives to SUPs were ecofriendly cutlery, cups, bottles, milk jars, stirrers, and straws ($M > 4.23$). The majority of these items reflect the imminent EU law banning plastics (see European Parliament, 2019) and indicates that venues have started reducing their use of SUPs that will soon be banned. However, as nearly half (42%) of the venues stated that they had not introduced a strategy to respond to this law, the reason for this change in behavior may lie elsewhere, and the reduction in the use of these SUPs might be associated with delegates' demands, which may in turn be responding to contemporary media exposure (Johnstone & Hooper, 2016).

The most frequently used SUPs ($M < 2.31$), and hence not reduced substantially, included plastic pens, plastic cleaning gloves, soap/lotion plastic bottles, plastic name badges, plastic punched pockets/open top and side files, and plastic single packaged sweets. Reduction in usage of these items does not appear to be problematic due to the abundance

of ecofriendly substitutes (or alternative practices), including wooden/bamboo pens, ecofriendly rubber gloves, refillable soap/lotion dispensers, reusable name badges, paper files, and sweets in bowls (TUI Group Sustainable Development, 2019). Although some SUP alternatives might be more expensive (Song et al., 2009), numerous SUPs relating to wrapping or packaging (such as single wrapped sweets and soap/lotion bottles) can be avoided completely through zero waste solutions. Rather than being too expensive or difficult to substitute, they seem to be overlooked by venue managers, perhaps due to the items not being the focus of legislation and have not been discussed in the media.

We reveal little evidence of the use of alternative practices ($M < 3.11$), such as refillable printer cartridges, ecofriendly cleaning gloves, essential oils, environmental training, and refillable flasks for cleaning products. Although alternative practices could be more complicated when they involve both employees and suppliers, the motivations and qualifications of employees coupled with effective communication of environmental values with employees and other stakeholders is a crucial part of successful environmental strategies (Kim et al., 2020).

Comparison of SUPs and alternative practices' scores within the same venue area reveals an interesting pattern. In both cases, scores are highest in the Food and Beverage category followed by Conference and Venue categories, indicating that, despite the Food and Beverage department usually being the major source of plastic waste (International Tourism Partnership, 2014), our results suggest that SUPs are managed better in the Food and Beverage area. Further, it appears that venues focus primarily on reducing notorious SUPs that will soon be banned by the EU and are often discussed in media, suggesting that the government and the media have a tremendous influence on venues' internal practices, and together with well-planned campaigns could create a more environmentally sustainable conference industry.

Effectiveness of Policy Statements to Reduce SUPs

Most venues in our sample claim to have CSR (72%) and an environmental policy (80%) in place, but less than a half of them (46%) have a statement on how they will reduce their use of SUPs. This

result questions whether venues that employ sustainability policies and put emphasis on reducing SUPs actually manage their use of SUPs better than those with no statement. In this specific case, the dependent variable represents more than two categories (1–5) and so we employed the Kruskal–Wallis test. This test generated a p value of $0.198 > 0.05$ for the use of SUP and $0.084 > 0.05$ for employment of alternative practices, questioning whether venues that employ sustainability policies and put emphasis on reducing SUPs actually manage their use of SUPs better than those with no statement.

We applied the Mann–Whitney test to identify if there is a statistical relationship between CSR and venues' practices. The test generated a p value of $0.324 > 0.05$, which indicates that there is no statistical difference between venues that do and do not have CSR when it comes to their use of SUPs. The same test was applied to detect a difference between CSR and the use of alternative practices, and this again revealed no statistically significant difference ($p = 0.502 > 0.05$) in the use of alternative practices when the venue has or does not have CSR. Another type of internal policy document that was tested with connection to a venue's performance was the environmental statement, which is a self-regulation adopted by 80% of our sample. Again, no statistically significant difference was found when we assessed the association between having an environmental statement and either the use of SUPs ($p = 0.369$) or the employment of alternative practices ($p = 0.097$). Therefore, having an environmental statement in place does not seem to lead to better SUP practices.

These results collectively imply that the presence of an environmental statement detailing a venue's intention to reduce plastics usage does not necessarily imply that it is more conscious about SUPs. This finding is consistent with others results showing that a company's ability to achieve its objectives and improve its performance depends on whether its objectives fit the nature of the company, and whether the strategy is consistent, clear, and effectively communicated to its employees (Jong & Meer, 2017). Since delegate demand seems more important to venues than their internal strategies, it is possible that venues mislead delegates with greenwashing rather than complying with strategies that state their commitment to environmental

protection (Polonsky et al., 2010; Rahman et al., 2015).

Ayuso (2006) and Whitfield et al. (2014) found that the size and type of a venue influenced how green a venue is. We tested this proposition using the Kruskal–Wallis test and generated p values of $0.111 > 0.05$ and $0.914 > 0.05$ for the use of SUPs and for the employment of alternative practices, respectively. The hypothesis that the type of venue does not affect its environmental performance could not be rejected, as there seems to be no statistical difference between different types of venues and their practices regarding SUP.

In order to test for an association between the size of a venue and their use of SUPs, we followed Whitfield and Dioko (2011) by splitting the sample of venues into three size categories: small (less than 1,000 m²), medium (1,001–4,000 m²), and large (greater than 4,001 m²). Applications of the Kruskal–Wallis test show no statistically significant relationship between venue size and the use of SUPs ($p = 0.349 > 0.05$) but do reveal a statistically significant difference between size categories and the use of alternative practices ($p = 0.036 < 0.05$). Details of the Kruskal–Wallis test show that large venues had a lower mean rank (20.19) than middle-sized venues (23.50), and significantly lower than small venues (32.36), suggesting that medium and small venues seem to be more effective than large venues at employing alternative practices. These results tentatively corroborate Walsh and Dodds' (2017) findings, which show that smaller venues are more inclined than large venues to deploy environmental practices in order to differentiate themselves and gain a competitive advantage. Moreover, both Walsh and Dodds (2017) and Tzschentke et al. (2008) suggested that although small venues realize that their contribution to protecting the environment is not substantial in global terms, they do feel strongly about making a difference. Hence, intrinsic motivations may be important in this type of decision-making. The fact that small venues are often sole traders and not part of any hotel chains might give them more opportunities to follow their proenvironmental beliefs, as they are not limited by organizational structure.

Analysis of the differences between the venue's policy and their actual performance revealed that there is no significant difference between a venue

having either CSR, an environmental policy, or a statement on their use of SUPs and their degree to which the venue reduces SUP or employs alternative practices. Similarly, the type of the venue does not seem to have impact on environmental practices. Our results show that small venues do better at reducing SUPs and employing alternative practices than do larger ones, which can be explained by their strong commitment to environmental protection and simpler organizational structures.

Discussion and Recommendations

This article explored the current attitudes and behaviors towards the use of SUPs across conference venues in the UK. Primary data were collected through an online questionnaire that was distributed to venue managers. This required managers to self-declare their use of SUPs at a time when the media and environmental pressure groups strongly discouraged this activity and campaigned to encourage public opinion to follow suit. Our expectation was that the number of usable responses would be low and that venues would prefer not to declare their overuse of SUPs due to social desirability bias, leading to a more positive depiction of venues' use of SUPs than exists in reality. This remains the first in-depth study to explore behavioral change across venues in terms of their use of SUPs.

Analysis of the data corresponding to 84 completed detailed questionnaires showed that attitudes towards environmental responsibility are positive, as most venues already have their own CSR and environmental policies. Ninety percent of the venues surveyed believed that it is their responsibility to protect the environment. However, less than half of these venues introduced a strategy focused on reducing SUPs, which reflects a lack of attention to SUP waste reduction within the conference industry.

The survey explored the motivators and inhibitors of venues to reducing their use of SUPs. Venues appeared to be greatly motivated by delegates' demand, which is a result similar to previous studies of greening (e.g., Mair & Jago, 2010; Williamson et al., 2006). In contrast to current changes in law or sustainability awards, venues claimed that their delegates' demands are the most motivating factor driving their reduction in the use of SUPs, and such

results question why venues are not motivated by a more challenging factor. A discrepancy between venues' positive environmental communication and their real environmental performance (Delmas & Burbano, 2011) are visible in the findings. Although more than half of the venues claimed to be marketed as green, nearly two thirds do not have any certification or awards to prove it. Moreover, we found no statistical association between venues' level of their environmental performance and whether they had CSR, an environmental policy, or a statement on reducing plastic use. Even venues with environmental policies did not show better tendencies for SUP management than those without environmental policies.

We find that venues' efforts to eliminate SUPs are inhibited most by excessive costs, and that venues have an ambivalent view on the financial impacts of greening, as costs were both a motivator and an inhibitor towards reducing SUPs.

Government legislation did too little to motivate venues' behavioral change, and venues did state that they would respond to legislation. The same result was identified for alternative practices, where replacement items are being stimulated by legislation. Consistent with the views of Williamson et al. (2006), we found that government legislation is likely to have the most effective impact on reducing SUP usage.

Collectively, these results lead us to conclude that the following recommendations are pertinent. In order to improve a venue's environmental performance and reduce their use of SUPs, venues must embed policies to reduce their use of SUPS into their CSR, environmental policies, and company statements. As Jong and Meer (2017) showed, it is crucial for the success of an environment statement that the policies fit with the company's nature/characteristics rather than attempting to use a universal or another firm's strategy. Further, once the statement is written, the venue must be consistent and follow its targets.

The most inhibiting factor that stopped venues reducing their use of SUPs was their concern that alternatives would be associated with higher production costs. These concerns could be reduced by encouraging venues to learn how to avoid SUPs using zero waste alternatives (TUI Group Sustainable Development, 2019; Zero Waste Europe,

2019). Venues could avoid SUPs and evade eco-replacement by providing, for example, milk jars instead of plastic single milk portions, water jars instead of plastic water bottles, china cups instead of plastic ones, sauce bowls instead of sauce sachets, sweets in bowls instead of single wrapped ones, jams and other food in bowls instead of individual plastic packaging, straws only upon request, and reuse name badges. SUP items that were still used very frequently included easily replaceable plastic pens, and their replacements would significantly lower the amount of plastic used by the venue. These alternative practices can reduce costs, are easy to implement, and should be prioritized.

A second recommendation focuses on long-term cost saving solutions. Examples include replacing plastic straws with reusable metal straws, use refillable printer cartridges, enhance cooperation with green suppliers, provide greater environmental training to employees, and use large soap/lotion dispensers rather than plastic bottles. Although, initial costs can be higher, the investment in long-term solutions should pay off (Camilleri, 2018). Based on our findings of changes in use of SUP items, it appears relatively common, and thus potentially easier, for venues to reduce their use of plastic delegate bags, stirrers, coasters, plates, menu covers, straws, meal boxes, cutlery, clipboards, menu holders, giveaways for delegates, and notebooks with plastic covers. Therefore, we recommend that a second priority should be to draw attention to competitors' behavioral changes to entice a peer pressure effect to encourage these longer term investments to reduce SUPs and to install this behavior as an expected norm.

A third stage is to employ more complex SUP replacement behaviors to reduce the use of plastic cups, coffee capsules, balloons, coat hangers, cleaning products containing microbeads, tea bags wrapped in plastic, air fresheners, decorations, single-use drink cartons/containers, file folders, leaflet holders, toilet fresheners, preportioned milk cups/sachets, water bottles, plastic sachets for sauces, laminated paper materials, preportioned food items (e.g., jams, butter), food packaging, single packaged sweets, plastic punched pockets/open top and side files, name badges, soap/lotion bottles, cleaning gloves, and pens. Our questionnaire gathered information which states that these plastic items


are replaced less frequently. Many of these plastic items are woven into the way venues provide their service and are entrenched into their established supply networks. Changing or even breaking these supply networks is more complex and often dependent on the length of contract agreements. Government either needs to legislate against the supply of these items or to encourage long-term behavioral change.

We found that venues' food and beverage departments were the most likely to have achieved a reduction in their use of SUPs, and venues should ensure that this area of the business continues to make this environmentally beneficial change. Embedding this behavior and attitude change throughout the rest of the business would reduce the attitude-behavior gap and ensure more ethical production (Blake, 1999; Carrigan & Attalla, 2001).

Although there are several limitations with this article, a key one is that the response rate was less than 5% with only 84 fully usable responses. It is likely that the media coverage of SUPs provides venue managers with the knowledge, attitude, and motivation to reduce their use of SUPs, but clearly they are not doing so. Just as clear is that customers are not switching away from using venues that use SUPs. Future research needs to focus on filling this gap in the literature, but data collection is a significant challenge due to a lack of willingness by the venue respondents to engage with a research project that could make the respondent feel shame that they are not putting in more effort to reduce their use of SUPs. This article makes an important first step in this direction. Following the findings embedded in this article, we recommend that government action is needed to create that change and to circumnavigate that market failure.

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