WHEN CULTURE DOESN'T 'FIT'

How class, race and ethnicity shape professional progression - and what the market research industry can do better

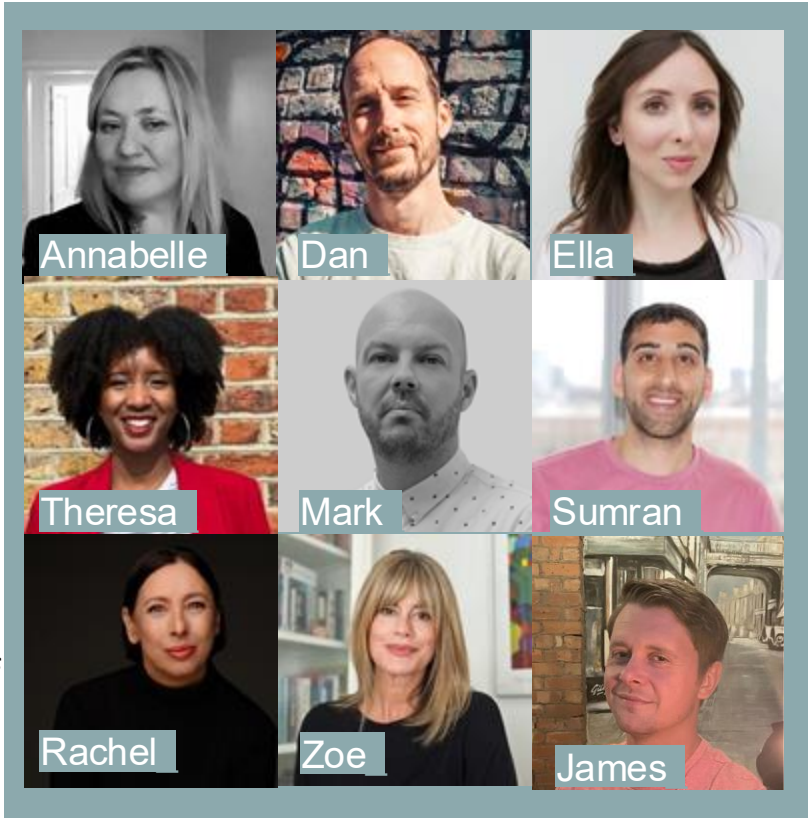
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BACKGROUND

Who we are and why we’re doing this study

Who are we?

- MRS Social Equity Group (SEG)
- A collective of researchers across class backgrounds with a passion for social equity
- Mission: create inclusive workplaces and improve research practices to enable working class and diverse professionals to enter the industry and thrive
- Partnered with CORe in 2025 on a quant study on race x working class identity in the workplace.
- This deck is the results of the accompanying qual phase of the project



…and counting!

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Why this study?

We wanted to understand:

- How people define class today
- Workplace experiences
- The intersection of class with ethnicity and race
- How these dynamics shape opportunity, belonging, and professional progression

This is about how bias and reinforcement determine who is seen as ‘professional’, ‘educated’ and ‘ready’ for progression opportunities. It’s also about the personal cost of fitting in, and the cost on the industry when diverse talent is lost.

Representation ≠ inclusion.



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Methodology

Quantitative survey

- UK working adults across industries (n=2,091, June 2025)
- Overrecruit of people of colour and working class participants
- Underpins qualitative findings

Qualitative deep dive

- 10 interviews across research, insight, UX, analytics, and client-side roles
- Junior to senior professionals; employees and independent
- Self-elected recruitment process (some specific skews, but many correlations with quantitative patterns)

We explored lived experiences of:

- Working class people of colour (POC)
- Working class white respondents
- and intersectional experiences across ethnicity, migration, and class mobility



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Language matters

Language evolves over time and identities are nuanced and context-dependent. We are mindful of the limitations of grouping people. Therefore, we use these insights to surface structural patterns more clearly. We use terms such as (but not limited to):

- **Working class** (to describe low-income/struggling backgrounds)
- **Ethnicity** (to denote cultural identity)
- **POC** (People of colour, when we are specifically talking about race)
- **Code-switching** (changing words, accent, behaviour to blend in)
- **Cultural wealth** (systems of knowledge & experience from non-dominant identities)
- **Micro and macro aggressions** (subtle or overt bias/discrimination)



These terms are tools to help us identify patterns of lived experience. This is to better understand barriers and opportunities within the market research industry and what can be done to strengthen and improve it.

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Class definitions are static

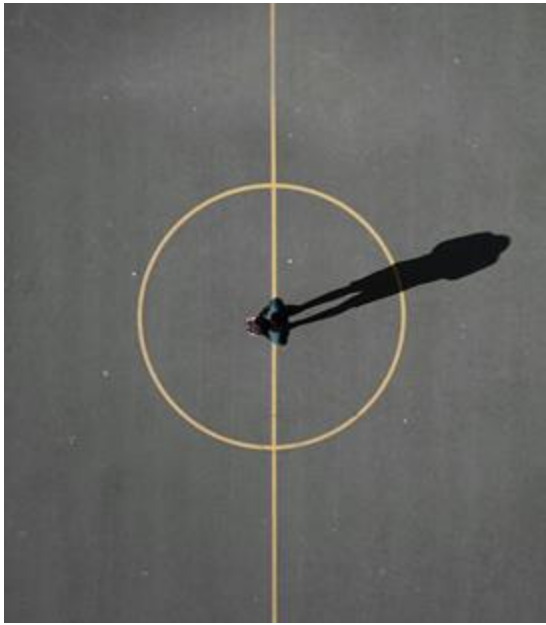
The MRS and British Market Research Bureau (BMRB) developed the first standardised Social Grade Classification system in the 1950s, and it became embedded in surveys by the 1960s.

Today, class isn't as linear as it was back then, and it's also:

- Interpreted differently across ethnic groups
- Signalled through different cues, in different contexts
- Judged through inconsistent and fuzzy standards

We saw a recurring theme across both qual and quant data:

- People define themselves by what they *have*, but feel they are judged by the cultural *signals* they send out.



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HOW IS CLASS DEFINED?

In our study, participants described their own class identity as being shaped by a cluster of factors. Race and ethnicity added further layers of nuance.

Class influences differ

People who identified as working class POC often defined their class identity through tangible factors such as:

- Household income
- Economic pressure
- Limited resources

In contrast, people who identified as working class white often saw their class identity as being shaped by:

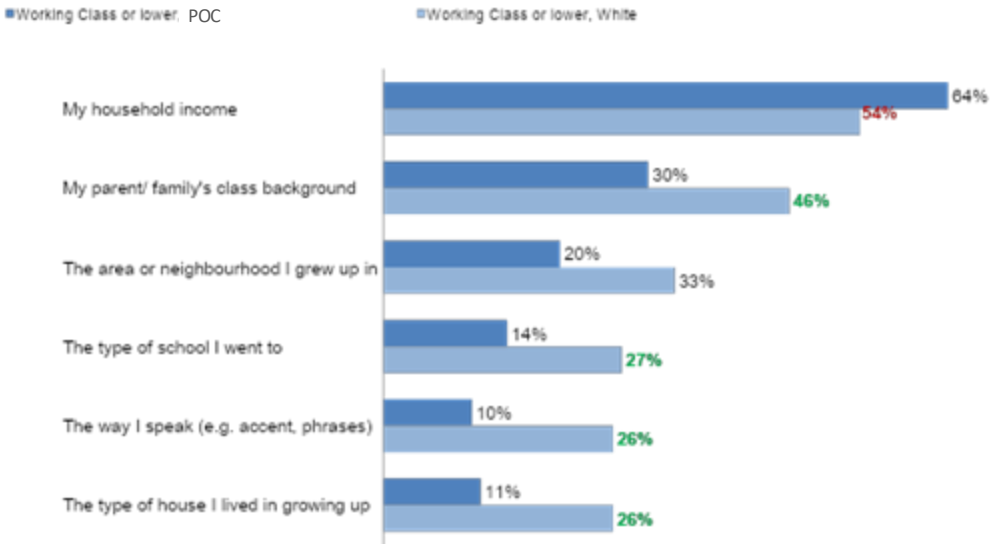
- Family background
- Neighbourhood, schooling and housing
- An inheritance of cultural identity

White working class participants highlighted a wider range of influences in shaping class identity, upbringing being a major factor.



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Upbringing plays a bigger role in white working class backgrounds

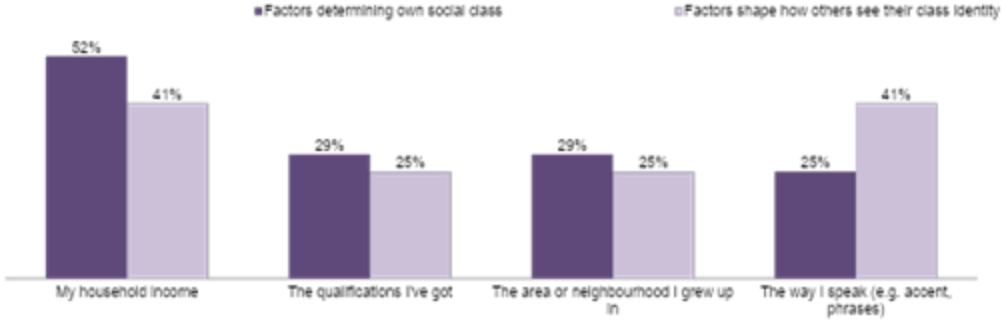


Source: Yonder Data Solutions nationally representative sample of adults living in England aged 18 and over (conducted via omnibus in June 2025)
Questions: Q3. Which of the following do you think are the main factors that determine your own social class?
Base: All respondents (2091), Working class or lower, white (979), Working class or lower, POC (125)
Green / Red indicates significance compared to the other group at 95% confidence

People don’t feel judged by the same factors they use for themselves

Self-definition is often different to how they feel seen by others.

While income is central to how participants defined themselves, it was their accent and speech that they largely felt judged on by others.



“The way they speak, dress and the area they live in would indicate their social class.” Survey respondent

“Accent and ability with language is the easiest way to tell.” Survey respondent

Source: Yonder Data Solutions nationally representative sample of adults living in England aged 18 and over (conducted via omnibus in June 2025)
Questions: Q3. Which of the following do you think are the main factors that determine your own social class?;
Q4. What are the main factors that you think shape how others see your class identity? By 'class identity', we mean the things about you that might influence how others:
Base: All respondents (2091) *compare with caution as the lists were slightly different

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“Class is a river: those who are more affluent can float by, and allow themselves to go with the current, but if you're working class, you face a struggle.”

- *Interview #4*

Sounding the part requires effort

We frequently heard that accent and speech act as shorthand for intelligence, professionalism, confidence and belonging.

Our qualitative data revealed experiences of:

- Actively modifying speech in meetings
- Rehearsing vocabulary to appear more “eloquent”
- Anxiety around regional or non-standard accents

These were described as conscious and subconscious responses to both workplac
‘norms’ and experiences of being othered.



“My accent can be the butt of jokes at work” Survey respondent

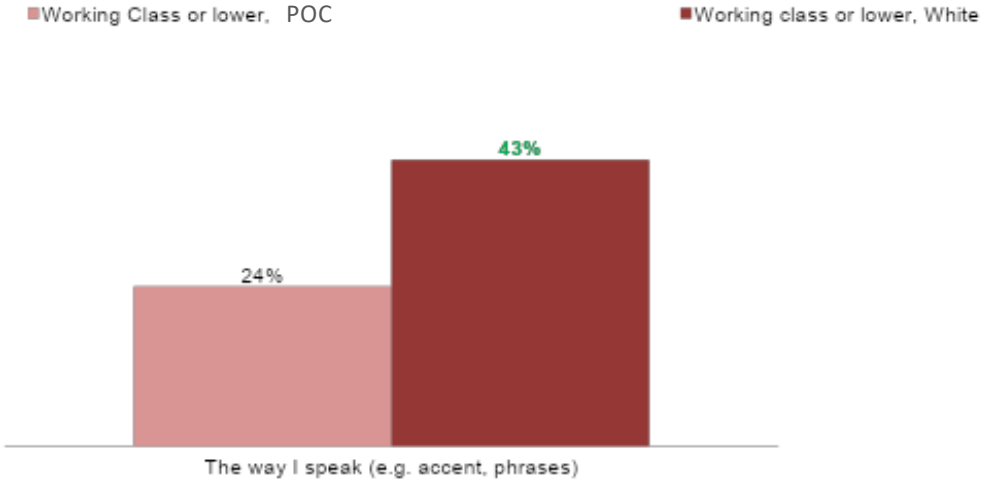
“I often practise my presentations myself and think about the words and language that I’m using… just to ensure that I can drop a big word in there.” Interview #2

“If I spoke with my natural accent,, I would be regarded as inferior. Due to my job, people assume that I am a lot wealthier than I am. My family was poor when I was growing up” Survey respondent

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Accent & speech as gatekeeping tools

White working class professionals were more likely than POC to report feeling judged by their accent. Non-native English speakers experienced frustration from colleagues over not being able to 'keep up' with banter.



"Sometimes I feel like my Manchester accent comes out very, very strongly." Interview #2

"I didn't understand their puns, their inside jokes…People got annoyed because I didn't understand what they were saying." Interview #7

"If people say 'free' instead of 'three' and never pronounce their T's that instantly gives away poor education" Survey respondent

Source: Yonder Data Solutions nationally representative sample of adults living in England aged 18 and over (conducted via omnibus in June 2025)
Questions: Q4. What are the main factors that you think shape how others see your class identity? By 'class identity', we mean the things about you that might influence how others.
Base: All respondents (2091), Working class or lower, white (979), Working class or lower, POC (125)

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INTERSECTIONAL EXPERIENCES

The nuances of a layered working class identity at work

Code-switching as a strategic shield

In our qualitative interviews, code-switching was often described as:

- Managing perception
- Reducing misunderstanding
- Avoiding exclusion
- Navigating cultural mismatch
- Dealing with external expectations of being an on-demand cultural ‘expert’ or ‘translator’

These weren’t highlighted as skills, but additional labour.

However, being the only one can create pressure to take on an advocacy role, as unaddressed bias skews internal perceptions as well as research.

> “If I’m not there, who’s going to be the voice of the Black queer working class people?” Interview #6

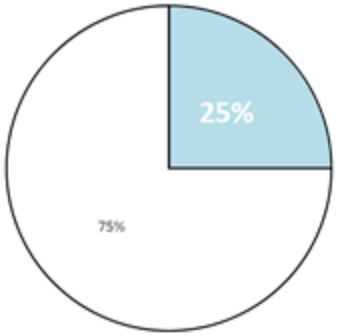
> “[it becomes] a second unpaid job.” Interview #6

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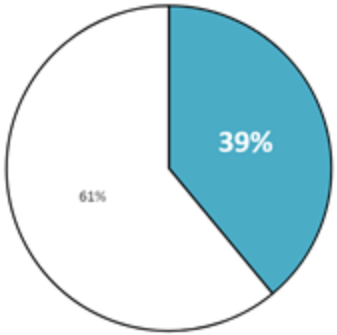
The hidden tax of code-switching

Code-switching is more prevalent among working class POC (39%) than working class white professionals (25%)

White, Working Class or lower



People of Colour, Working Class or lower



"When you're outside the system... you learn to adjust your style depending on the rooms you're in."
Interview #11

Source: Yonder Data Solutions nationally representative sample of adults living in England aged 18 and over (conducted via omnibus in June 2025)
Questions: Q13. How often, if at all, have you changed the way you behave or speak in your main workplace?
Base: Working Class or lower, Ethnic Minority Groups (85*), Working Class or lower, White (575) *caution low base size
***Green** / **Red** indicates significance compared to the other group at 95% confidence*

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The effect of code-switching

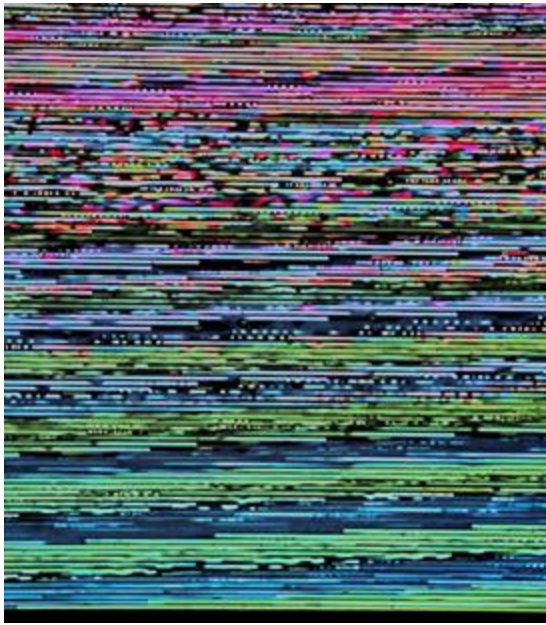
At the intersection of class and ethnicity, participants describe:

- Being the “only one” repeatedly
- Heightened scrutiny of behaviour and tone
- Emotional labour of explanation
- Responsibility for representation work
- Feelings of ‘imposter syndrome’

We frequently heard about burnout and slowed progression. In some cases, it can also lead to an exit from the industry. A loss of diverse perspectives in the industry directly impacts innovation and revenue.

“I felt like some of the roles are a bit out of my reach.” Interview #2

“There is a little part of my brain that wonders… [was hiring me] a tick-box exercise?” Interview #9



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“Feeling ethnically and socioeconomically different exacerbated my social anxiety…Meeting with clients felt difficult.”

- *Interview #1*

Power shapes access to opportunity

Across interviews, participants described managers and senior leaders acting (at times unintentionally) as gatekeepers to opportunity, progression and belonging. This was rarely framed as overt discrimination; instead, participants spoke about subtle decisions around who was seen as a “good fit”, who was trusted with clients, and who was included in influential social and professional networks.

> “Difference becomes valuable only until it challenges the status quo.”
> Interview #10

For many participants, progression depended not only on capability, but on proximity to dominant workplace norms around class, communication style, confidence and social familiarity. What this looked like in practice:

- Being excluded from projects or opportunities due to perceived “fit”
- Feeling scrutinised for tone, accent or communication style
- Leadership “inner circles” built around shared educational or class backgrounds
- Self-advocacy being reframed as “being difficult”
- Managers rewarding familiarity and comfort over difference
- Informal sponsorship and protection being unevenly distributed

> “I was excluded from projects…I got good praise from clients but my manager doubted my understanding and capabilities”
> Interview 7

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Case Study: “Pet to threat”

The only Black woman in her team, initially rewarded for fitting in, later labelled with coded racial, gender and class stereotypes once she started using her voice.

Sarah* described a recurring workplace dynamic she later came to understand as going from *“pet to threat”*. Early in her career, she was praised for her potential, given responsibility and valued for her contributions, particularly while she remained accommodating and eager to please. But over time, as she became more confident, began advocating for herself and challenged situations she felt were unfair, the perception of her shifted. She reflected on experiencing racialised microaggressions, career blocking and being labelled *“difficult”* once she stopped *“playing ball”*, leading her to question both her place within the industry and the wider culture of inclusion it claimed to promote. The combination of gatekeeping and misframing led to her exiting the industry.

“Initially, I'm loved and I'm great, and there's so much potential, and I'm given a lot of responsibility, but then someone suddenly is upset.”

“My line manager went to the boss and cried, saying she found it difficult to work with me. At that time, I still didn’t know how to identify what I was experiencing.”

“I was more disappointed with the industry… what difference are we really making in the world?”

*Names have been changed

Masking is complex

We saw and heard how ‘fitting in’ at work isn’t a straightforward process but is more of a strategic one.

In our survey, 30% of upper/middle class POC reported hiding aspects of their heritage at work, compared with 14% of working class POC.

This suggests that identity management requires different levels of effort according to perceived risk and opportunity, dependent on hierarchy and visibility within a team.



“I feel like people at work wouldn’t understand me or where I am from so it’s much easier to hide certain details.” Survey respondent

“I feel some of my colleagues are culturally insensitive… so I prefer ambiguity.” Survey respondent

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Safe to be me at work?

Conversely, we heard that people who are more comfortable being themselves at work were often in environments where they either had diverse teams or a number of people from the same background as them, plus a feeling of ‘safety’.

The aspect of safety - both across the quant and qual - was described as a result of intentional shaping by leadership and reinforced by colleagues. Bias thrives when this is absent.

Psychological safety creates cultures of care and relational trust, where people feel more comfortable to show up authentically at work.

“There was another researcher with similar hair to me… and people just kept getting our names mixed up. When she left I was able to reclaim my name.”Interview #2

“What provision are we making so there is someone to talk to?” Interview #8

“I am comfortable being myself at work. A lot of colleagues are similar to me in class” Survey respondent

“I work in an area with many diverse people and have no reason to hide anything”
Survey respondent

Case Study: “Insider–outsider”

A senior researcher who progressed through elite organisations, but repeatedly found himself excluded from informal networks and leadership circles despite being valued for his expertise.

Anthony* (now independent) described a persistent sense of being an “insider-outsider” across his career. Initially recognised for his analytical ability and trusted with complex work, he increasingly became aware that access to influence and progression was shaped by something less visible: shared class background, schooling and social networks. He reflected on a “culture within a culture”, where senior leadership operated as an informal inner circle, and where belonging was as much about friendship and familiarity as it was about capability. This dynamic became visible when he challenged a lack of diversity at leadership level amidst the Black Lives Matter marches, at which point his experience of exclusion became more explicit and confrontational. He described a shift from being a valued contributor to being positioned outside the informal power structure of the organisation.

“There was another culture within the culture… if you’re not part of our club, you don’t get to come in.”

[raising lack of ethnic diversity in leadership in a meeting] “I put my hand up and said, when I look at my screen… what I see is a whole load of white faces… and the MD went absolutely apes**t.”

“I come from a mixed heritage background [white and Southeast Asian] but I’ve always felt a bit on the outside of both worlds.”

*Names have been changed

WORKPLACE FACTORS

How the codes of professionalism shapes internal and external perceptions of individual capability

Professionalism is not neutral

Without active efforts to create psychological safety in the workplace, the default becomes the norm. Across many societies, especially western ones, ‘professionalism’ in corporate settings often feels like:

- A behavioural code
- A cultural filter
- A gatekeeping system



This creates a reinforcing loop:
Dominant groups define professionalism → professionalism defines success → success reinforces dominance. The scarcity of working class and working class POC in leadership across market research is telling.

“It’s not a meritocratic system.”
Interview #11

“I don’t feel like I sound professional enough.”
Interview #2

“My new boss is Asian. And she's the head of research. In my entire career, she will only be the second manager I've had who is a woman of colour.”Interview #3

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“The Oxford business historian Christopher McKenna, who wrote the book on professionalization, said that when elite professional services like management consulting, venture capital, and investment banking began to rise in the 1930s, these firms attuned to social expectations of what "elite" looked like.

In England, it was an Oxford degree and an Etonian accent. In Germany, they learned to spot men with saber wounds on their cheeks, since fencing was a pastime of high-class families.”

- ***Source: Professionalism is a bias-making machine that needs to end. Here's how to dismantle it - Business Insider***

Different worlds inside the same industry

Across interviews, participants consistently described the industry as containing "different worlds" operating side by side, shaped by class, race, education and cultural capital. While people may share the same job titles or organisations, access, comfort and progression often felt fundamentally different depending on which "world" you came from.

These worlds were defined less by formal structures and more by informal norms: how people speak, socialise, build confidence, and understand what "good performance" looks like. One participant noted the difference in leadership-oriented messaging he noticed as a boy on an open day at a private school, compared with his state school, and reflected on how a leadership mindset may be socially conditioned rather than equal from the start.

"There was a different confidence and self-assurance people from those worlds had… you realise they're schooled in how these systems work in a way that I'm not."
Interview #11

"Thinking about my early career it always felt like communication and socialising in agency life seemed easier if you're from the 'same world'." Interview #1

"Not being able to relate to conversations about horse riding or skiing at the weekend."
Interview #5

"Advertising was a big culture shock…everyone talking about skiing holidays." Interview #6

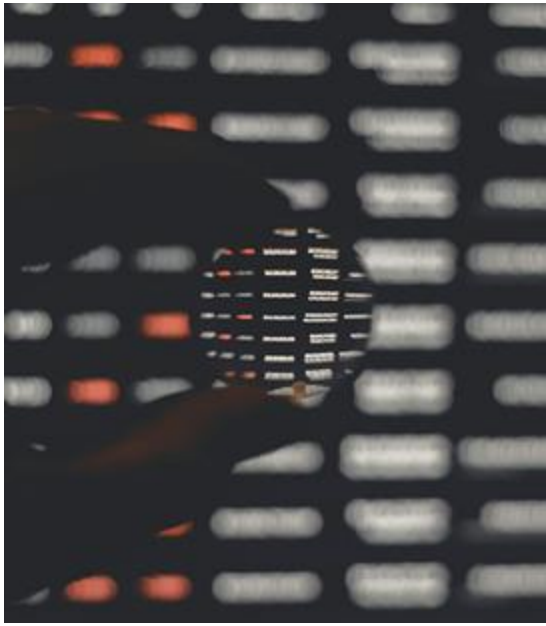
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Familiarity with systems is implicit

What these “worlds” looked like:

- Distinct social and cultural codes (language, humour, accent, interests)
- Uneven access to networks, visibility and sponsorship
- Confidence and belonging shaped by prior exposure to elite environments
- Parallel career tracks within the same organisations (front-facing vs operational, insider vs outsider)

This creates a workplace experience where inequality is not always explicit, but is felt through differing levels of ease, recognition and access, even within the same teams.



“If you fish in the same pool, you’re going to get the same types of people.” Interview #11

“I wish there was someone who taught me how the systems worked.” Interview #11

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Fit over merit

Across interviews, progression is often shaped by:

- cultural alignment
- informal networks
- shared background markers
- social confidence in dominant norms

These end up reinforcing common barriers to entry and progression. This creates a risk for the market research industry due to the reliance and need to access and interpret a wide range of perspective to understand behaviour, attitudes and experiences.



"Corporate social events where everyone is expected to drink alcohol and you are the only one who doesn't." Interview #7

"You have to do so much to fit in, while dominant identities don't ever have to." Interview #3

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“Imagine, you're building services for people around the country, some with long names, that have barreled names, have accents on their names, some people that have so many consonants in their names that I need a guide to learn how to say them properly, but the team doesn’t reflect that”.

- ***Interview #3***

Opportunity rewards structure and ‘fit’

Our survey shows that perceived access to development opportunities varies across groups, reflecting uneven experiences of inclusion within the workplace.

Reported access to opportunities differs:



However, across the qualitative research, access is not experienced as a fixed state. Instead, participants describe opportunity as something that can feel initially open but becomes conditional on ‘fit’, communication style, and how individuals navigate dominant workplace norms over time.

Source: Yonder Data Solutions nationally representative sample of adults living in England aged 18 and over (conducted via omnibus in June 2025)
Questions: Q14. Do you feel you are given opportunities to grow and develop your skills and experience at your main workplace?
Base: Working Class or lower, Ethnic Minority Groups (85*), Working Class or lower, White (575) *caution low base size
***Green** / **Red** indicates significance compared to the other group at 95% confidence*

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“I started to see, oh actually, these people. They've been working together for years. They all come from private school backgrounds, wealthy families… and I started to feel actually I'm on the outside of this.”

- ***Interview #10***

An uncomfortable reality

This aligns with a broader pattern seen across interviews: progression is shaped not only by entry into opportunity, but by how comfortably individuals can sustain themselves within dominant expectations. For some, moments of early inclusion can shift when self-advocacy or difference in style reframes them within the organisation.

The current structure doesn't exclude people in obvious ways. Instead, exclusion happens through norms, expectations, unspoken rules, and definitions of professionalism and fit. This means that individual contributions can be real, but not always fully seen or understood.

Professionals show up more authentically and thrive when systems actively make space for them, not when belonging is assumed.



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Case Study: Conformity to clarity

A UX researcher who experienced early-career marginalisation and systemic bias describes how navigating exclusion across sectors has shaped her ability to design more inclusive research.

Rebecca* described encountering repeated experiences of not being taken seriously within professional environments, which she links to broader structural dynamics including colonial legacies embedded in workplace norms. Reflecting on her experiences as a British Asian researcher, she described feeling required in early roles to over-adapt and "fit in" to dominant ways of working, while noticing that those dominant identities rarely had to reflect on their own positionality. Over time, this tension sharpened her perspective and informed a more critical, systems-aware approach to research practice. She now frames these experiences as foundational to her strength as a practitioner, enabling her to see across perspectives, question assumptions embedded in design, and deliberately build for a wider range of lived realities.

"I see how norms reflect colonial legacies… and how people are expected to internalise them."

"The learning needs to happen among the dominant majority."

"Because I know what it's like to not be included, I'm such a massive advocate for including people the right way and enabling agency in research."

*Names have been changed

Difference creates advantage

However, people describe clear strengths that come with their lived experience in the industry:

- Cultural fluency and multi-perspective thinking
- Sensitive moderation and design
- Ability to reach groups that are generalised as “hard-to-reach”
- Sharper bias detection
- Analytical translation across audiences



These aren’t ‘nice-to-have’ traits. They directly improve research quality, insight accuracy, and commercial outcomes, and are therefore crucial to sustain and uplift our £18.7 billion industry.

“I can walk into any environment now.” Interview #11”

“[Difference is] sort of a superpower in a way.” Interview #11

“When you’re designing inclusive research, you design from the edges and design in.” Interview #4

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“Being different in every setting has become a strength in its own right.”

- *Interview #4*

Going it alone: freelance as escape and agency

A recurring response to exclusion and limited progression was the move into freelancing/setting up independent businesses. For many, “going it alone” was less of a planned career move and more a reaction to feeling blocked, misrecognised, or constrained within organisational politics and cultural expectations. Independence was often described as a way to regain control.

At the same time, participants recognised that independence comes with trade-offs: while it can reduce exposure to internal politics, it does not remove broader structural inequalities around access, networks, and opportunity. Developing resilience was also often seen as a double-edged sword.



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WHAT CAN THE MARKET RESEARCH INDUSTRY DO BETTER?

“You can’t research a diverse population with a homogenous team. There’s a strong business case for it.”

- *Interview #10*

Call to action

Across the qual depths, people called for the following changes in the industry:

1. **Move beyond performative DEI:** Fewer one-way broadcasts, more dialogue and listening
2. **Fix progression systems:** Transparency in promotion pathways; address informal 'club' cultures
3. **Rethink recruitment pipelines:** Widen recruitment channels and criteria; widen and promote entry routes early
4. **Redesign workplace culture:** Offer alternatives alongside alcohol-centred networking, accommodate care responsibilities, empower leaders to proactively address global and local issues that may negatively affect colleagues
5. **Shift responsibility upward:** Reduce burden of education on marginalised staff; build cultural literacy in dominant groups

"Offer more tangible opportunities. Right now EDI efforts feel self-serving and tokenistic." Interview #1

"Corporate webinars talk at you a lot." Interview #9

"We need to find new and creative ways of recruiting respondents and staff." Interview #6

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“If we don’t recognise society is shifting… eventually people will find other sources that deliver better understanding.This ain’t gonna go away. Who better to bring clarity and understanding than the research industry?”

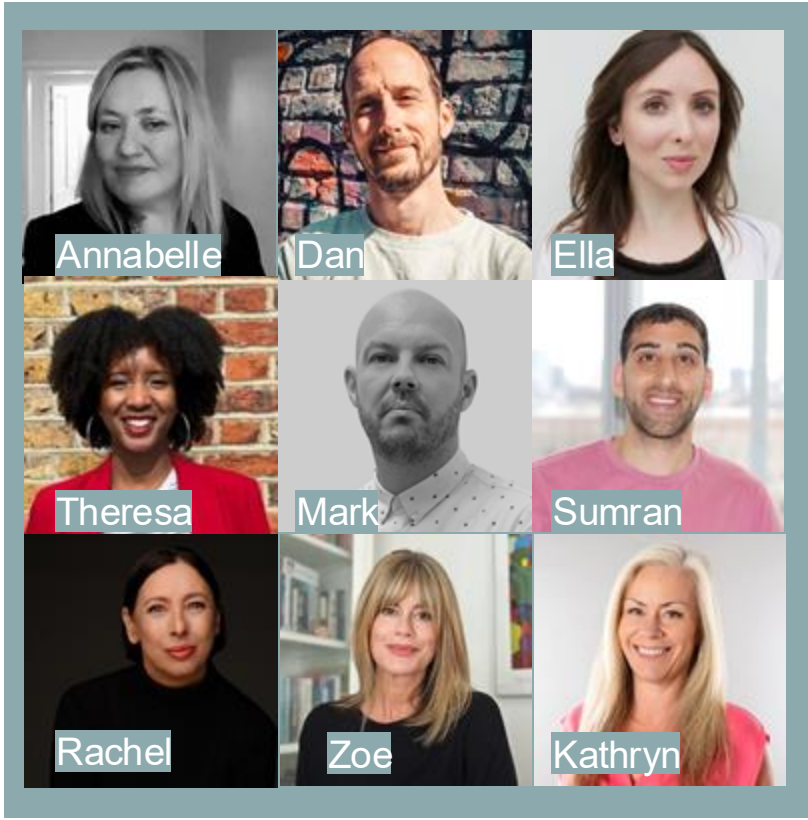
- *Interview #11*

Thank you!

- For more news, events and opportunities, click here
- Join us in improving class inclusion
- Share this report, and let us know what you think!

Questions?

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