“It's such a wonderful space and I just love being part of it so much."

LGBTQIA+ Student experiences of attending a psychology department led online Pride group during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Abstract

It is crucial that academic institutions offer support to their increasingly diverse student bodies. LGBTQIA+ students often report negative experiences in relation to campus climate and treatment. The aim of this qualitative research was to explore the experiences of LGBTQIA+ students who attend(ed) a collaborative (staff and student), departmentally located (psychology) virtual (synchronous and asynchronous online) Pride group. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four LGBTQIA+ students who had attended one or more virtual group meetings. Interviews were transcribed and analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2019; 2022) reflexive thematic analysis. Four themes were constructed: being and becoming authentic; safe and restorative spaces; community, and connections. Together these four themes relate to an overarching theme of belonging. Although the cohort was small, the emphatic and consistent findings point to the importance of visible representation of LGBTQIA+ academic staff and the need to provide joint Pride group spaces in academic settings.

Key Words

LGBTQIA+ ; Pride; Psychology ; Online ; Diverse ; Students; Belonging

Introduction

Universities are made of up of diverse groups of people and as discussed by Morgan (2013: p.3), 'the demise of a homogenous student body… means we can no longer take a 'one size fits all' approach in the effective delivery of academic and non-academic support to our students'. Whilst diversity has multiple and often interconnecting strands this project specifically investigates the support for students from the queer community. This community encompasses multiple identities, including (but not limited to) lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual (LGBTQIA+). The plus symbol added to the common LGBTQIA acronym marks additional identities, including but not limited to fluid, genderless, gender neutral, non-binary, panromantic or pansexual (Formby, 2017). It should be noted that there are alternative acronyms adopted by other researchers e.g., LGBT for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans(gender) (Ellis, 2009), but we consider LGBTQIA+ to be the most inclusive.

Research collated by Stonewall (2016) indicates that LGBTQIA+ communities are marginalised and othered, and face discrimination in areas such as healthcare, family life, the workplace, school, and sports. For example, 13% of LGBT[1] people have experienced unequal treatment from health care settings, with 23% witnessing derogatory remarks and 14% avoiding treatment for fear of discrimination; only 46% of LGB[2] and 47% of transgender people feel able to come out to their families; 18% of LGBT staff have experienced negative comments or treatment in workplaces; 42% of LGBT+ school pupils have been bullied in the last year (compared to 21% of non-LGBT pupils); and 17% of LGBT have experienced and 49% have witnessed queerphobia in sport (Stonewall, 2016). PinkNews reported that homophobic hate crime more than doubled and transphobic hate crime increased by 240% between 2016-2017 and 2021-2022 (Milton, 2022), and Maine (2022) reported that despite increased legal protections LGBTQIA+ people anticipate harm due to their sexuality. The Rainbow Map is an annual benchmarking index of LGBTQIA+ rights in European countries. It has recorded a fall in LGBTQIA+ rights in the UK for four consecutive years, with the UK currently ranked 17th in Europe (ILGA Europe, 2023). When focusing on student experiences in higher education (HE), research indicates LGBTQIA+ students perceiving negative climates and experiencing negative treatment, (Ellis, 2009; Valentine et al., 2009; Taulke-Johnson, 2010; NUS, 2014; Grimwood, 2017; Waling and Roffee, 2017). For example, homophobic and transphobic hate crime was reported to be at a three year high in 2021 (Chao-Fong, 2021). This is compounded by claims that LGBTQIA+ students may not recognise, or may minimize or try to justify, perceived negative treatment (Allen et al., 2020; Taulke-Johnson, 2010).

[1] Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans(gender). Language mirrors that used by authors of citation
[2] Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual. Language mirrors that used by authors of citation

Meyer's (2003) meta-analysis suggests a relevant conceptual framework termed 'minority stress'. The minority stress framework posits that the higher levels of mental ill health reported within the LQBGTIA+ community make sense when viewed under the lens of the increased stressor burden that people from these communities experience in their daily lives. Listed amongst these stress processes is a category of "hiding and concealing". It therefore makes sense that the existence of environments where people are "out of hiding" and "visible" could be a protective of mental ill-health. Meyer points to the importance of social support groups for providing a beneficial environment for affirming a person's identity, and therefore it certainly seems logical to suggest that the Pride group environment would be aligned with this theory.

As a result, multiple recommendations have been made to support LGBTQIA+ students. Examples include working with LGBTQIA+ students to identify their needs, and harnessing student activism with the LGBTQIA+ community to drive progress for LGBTQIA+ students (Waling and Roffee, 2017; Marzetti 2018). The importance of people has been emphasised, including visible allies and role models, and representation in the classroom and curriculum (Garvey and Rankin, 2015a; Garvey and Rankin, 2015b; Waling and Roffee, 2017). In addition, the requirement for staff training on LGBTQIA+ issues, including how to challenge queerphobia as well as promote and support LGBTQIA+ identities, has been documented (NUS, 2014; Garvey and Rankin, 2015b; Grimwood 2017; Marzetti, 2018). The concept of space has also been highlighted, such as the need to establish LGBTQIA+ groups and organisations (Valentine et al. 2009; NUS, 2014; Formby, 2015; Waling and Roffee, 2017), and inclusive facilities, services, and spaces including safe spaces (Beemyn et al., 2005; Garvey and Rankin, 2015a; Formby, 2015).

However, some of these recommendations may be too vague, or oversimplistic. For example, LGBTQIA+ also students experience what Waling and Roffee (2018: p. 670) term 'contemporary forms of exclusion', including feeling excluded from both non-queer and queer spaces and not fitting in, not feeling safe enough to be come out to peers and staff, lack of support from peers and staff, lack of visibility and lack of inclusive facilities and services. Just providing 'a space', may not be sufficient. Student groups often focus on socialising, or the 'scene', rather than support (NUS, 2014), and LGBTQIA+ students may experience further exclusion if they do not feel that their specific identity fits with the dominant/established identities (e.g. gay, lesbian) in the group. This relates to internal diversity and identity construction (Ghaziani, 2011) and how what was once a binary category (heterosexual or homosexual) developed and broadened into a tripartite model of sexuality (with the inclusion of bisexuality), and later more of a continuum with non-gender focused labels

such as pansexual (Magrath and McCormack, 2023). Unfortunately, some groups also exclude specific identities as well as excluding allies. This can be particularly problematic for students who are still in the process of questioning their identity, preventing them from accessing those supportive spaces whilst they are still in a questioning state (Valentine et al. 2009; NUS 2014; Evans et al., 2017; Formby, 2017; Waling and Roffee 2017).

In the consideration of providing a space for LQBTQIA+ students, Pryor (2018) warned that the concept of certain students (minority/marginalised) needing separate spaces (from mainstream) may in fact continue to exclude them, by perpetuating the idea that they do not belong everywhere, and therefore leading to further 'othering' of LGBTQIA+ students.

An alternative consideration is a space that is also open to allies so that it is not a space away from other people but a space where all are welcome. It should also be noted that merely providing a space does not mean it will be used or engaged with by LGBTQIA+ students, and the reasons underlying this may vary (NUS research 2014, Allen et al., 2020, Taulke-Johnson, 2010).

As outlined, much of the literature indicates that LGBTQIA+ students perceive negative campus climates and are subject to negative treatment. However, LGBTQIA+ students can and do have positive university experiences as sites of identity exploration and affirmation (Formby, 2015; Glazzard et al., 2020). In response to literature calling for LGBTQIA+ safe spaces, and in spite of some of the limitations of these spaces outlined above, Marzetti (2018, p.709) found that these can be 'transformative', 'allowing [students] to explore their LGBT+ identities, gain support, and develop pride'.

In the face of the negative tone of the literature we sought to explore a more positive aspect of LGBTQIA+ student experiences. Manchester Metropolitan University accepted the highest number of LGBT+ applicants in 2020, with over 700 UCAS applicants declaring this in their application (UCAS, 2021:19), providing a good opportunity to engage with LGBTQIA+ students about their experiences. Furthermore, the psychology department at Manchester Metropolitan University had established an on-campus 'Pride' group in 2018 as an attempt to provide a safe space, to ensure visibility and representation, to provide role models and support, and to celebrate queer students proudly and proactively in the psychology department. Seemingly unique to contexts in existing literature, this group is a departmentally located, shared space for LGBTQIA+ students and staff members. The group space moved to a virtual one in September 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, with

an MS Teams 'group' that exchanged asynchronous messages and weekly synchronous (live) virtual meetings using the MS Teams video/audio function. At the time this research was conducted, there was no existing literature, to our knowledge, around supporting LGBTQIA+ University students in a collaborative (staff and student), department-based, online group.

Research question(s) and objectives

The aim of our research was to explore the experiences of some of the LGBTQIA+ students who attend(ed) the psychology online Pride group.

The research question was: 'What are the experiences of some of the LGBTQIA+ students who attend(ed) the psychology online Pride group?

Methodology

Design

This was a qualitative research project where data was collected through semi-structured interviews, one interview per participant. The research design was underpinned by our interpretivist ontological positioning (Crotty, 1999). This means that as researchers we view reality as socially constructed, subjective, and subject to change. In line with interpretivist research, knowledge is 'situated in relations between people' and 'the researcher is assumed to have a position, and this position affects the nature of the observations and interpretations that they make' (Bukamal, 2022; 327). As such, a researcher positionality statement is included.

Researcher Positionality

Positionality in research arguably permeates the whole process, from conception to analysis, to interpretation, to outcomes (Holmes, 2020). Positionality is commonly referred to in relation to three core areas: subject matter, research participants, and research context/process. Two of the researchers were senior lecturers in the department of psychology, who co-facilitated the Pride group and taught the research participants. Two other authors were wider faculty colleagues, so indirectly related to the research participants. All four researchers had a personal connection to the subject (with some identifying as members of the LGBTQIA+ community) and research context – delivering Higher Education experiences to LGBTQIA+ students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, the researchers considered themselves within a 'dialectical relationship' of both 'insider' and 'outsider' research perspectives (Mercer, 2007; Dwyer and Buckle, 2009); and the

intersection of identity, pedagogy, research, community and inclusive practice. If in qualitative research it is accepted that researchers will unavoidably affect the research process, there must be a commitment to transparency, reflexivity, and an openness to share (Malterud, 2001).

Participants

In qualitative research, the aim is to produce rich and in-depth data, not to be statistically representative (Hinton & Ryan, 2020). Therefore, a judgement about sample size should not be based in statistical calculation or generalisability, but instead grounded in iterative and rigorous sampling (ibid). Purposive sampling was used to draw from a specific group, mindful of representational practice (The Critical Methodologies Collective, 2021) whereby the participants represent a snapshot of the specific experience, and not representative of 'every aspect of people or communities we conduct research with' (ibid, 2).

There were four participants in this study, who were members of the psychology department Pride group (total membership circa 30). All were current psychology students (any programme from the department of psychology, from foundation year through to postgraduate study) at Manchester Metropolitan University. As per our inclusion criteria all students identified as LGBTQIA+ at the point of data collection but were eligible to participate if they had joined the Pride group initially as an ally (exclusion criteria was applied to those who attended the Pride group as an ally, and who still defined as an ally at the point of data collection). All had attended a minimum of one of the synchronous (live online) Pride group sessions.

Procedure

Following ethical approval granted by the Manchester Metropolitan University Ethics committee, students were invited to participate via a recruitment invitation posted in the MS Teams Pride group chat box, via e-mail and/or messenger as appropriate.

Following the initial expression of interest students were e-mailed the participant information sheet (PIS) and consent form. Once these had been returned, interviews were conducted on Microsoft Teams, which was deemed the most appropriate platform as the Pride group was run online, and caution was still being taken in the post-pandemic phase. Interviews were conducted by one researcher at a time but were conducted by two different researchers across the four interviews.

The interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview schedule that comprised of five open-ended questions (Appendix 1). Interviewers asked the participant to select their own pseudonym and recorded verbal consent prior to the interview starting. Participants were able to choose if they wished to have their cameras on or off during the interviews. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed by the interviewer, anonymised, and then disseminated to the rest of the group for analysis.

Ethical considerations

Full and extensive discussion and consideration was given with respect to ethics, with the research being guided by the British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2021).

A key ethical consideration for this study was valid consent and involvement, free from coercion. This study required student participation in research, which is associated with 'individuals in a dependent or unequal relationship' (BPS, 2021; Section 8). This relates back to the concept of the insider-outsider positionality, whereby two of the researchers were both senior lecturers and co-facilitators in the Pride group that the sample was drawn from. To mitigate this, the two researchers that were directly involved in the Pride group did not conduct any interviews with participants. This was essential to attempt to minimise role duality, shared assumptions of meaning, social desirability bias; and to ensure the trustworthiness of the data (Unluer, 2012).

Consent was taken twice, initially electronically (via an e-mailed word document) and again immediately prior to the start of the interview using the 'remote verbal consent' processes. This verbal consent was on a separate recording to the interview. This process was again to ensure that any consent taken at the earlier recruitment stage from researchers involved in the Pride group was valid and free from coercion when confirmed by the separate researchers (not directly involved in the Pride group) that undertook the interviews (BPS, 2021: Section 4.11).

The decision was made not to ask for specific demographic data (such as race, age, gender, sexuality), as this was thematic research rather than phenomenological research. We did not feel that asking directly for this additional data was ethically justified, in line with 'respect for the autonomy, privacy, and dignity of individuals, groups, and communities (BPS, 2021: Section 2.1). Sexuality and gender identity questions for some of our participants (and the wider LGBTQIA+ community) are complex and not always easily answered. These specifics were not required to

answer the research question, and the inclusion criteria referred to self-identification as LGBTQIA+. There was no need for further clarification or interrogation.

A key ethical principle is minimising harm (BPS, 2021: Section 2.4). Given the potentially sensitive nature of the research related to gender identity and sexual orientation, we attempted to mitigate risk of participant distress or discomfort. The interview schedule was constructed of open-ended questions that allowed participants to maintain autonomy over how much they chose to disclose about their personal experiences. It should also be noted that all the participants were active members of the Pride group, as such they were used to discussing sensitive topics in relation to their gender identity and sexual orientation within the Pride group, we did not therefore feel that there was any need to employ specific interviewing practices in relation to sensitive issues as we were already aware that the participants were comfortable discussing these topics. During the interview the researchers were sensitive to the levels of comfort of the interviewee and would have stopped the interview if there had been signs of distress. We also ensured there was a clear debriefing process (including signposting to support services).

Data Analysis Approach

The interviews were transcribed, and the data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2019; 2022) Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). At the heart of this approach is the notion that it is possible to 'search across a qualitative dataset in order to identify repeated patterns of meaning' (Braun and Clarke, 2006: p.15). This is important because although initial coding of the data may reveal various points of interest the final analysis must only include those findings that are actually 'themes'. We recognise that Smith et al's., (2009) Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) would have been a suitable approach for investigating the lived experiences of this Pride group, however, IPA is most suited to research where you are interested in the individual experiences as well as the shared ones, as we were only interested in the shared experiences (themes) within this diverse community we viewed RTA to be the most appropriate method here.

Conducting a thematic analysis involves following a six-stage process, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). For stage one, three of the researchers familarised themselves with the data individually (two of the researchers transcribed two interviews each). For stage two, three of the researchers generated initial codes individually. For stages three and four, three of the researchers searched for themes and reviewed themes individually, and in stage five, three researchers

conducted the ongoing analysis together using Padlet (Padlet.com, 2012) to have a shared platform from which to refine the specifics of the themes and provide clear theme names. Whilst the fourth researcher was not involved with this stage initially, they agreed with the themes and all researchers were involved with the choice of selected extracts for the report in stage six.

Consistent with the research design and our positionality we used a quasi-inductive approach. Although the themes were being interpreted from the data, the data gathering itself was the result of semi-structured interviews, and therefore influenced both by our research aims and our own subjectivities in terms of the way in which we engage and interpret the data.

Analysis and Discussion

The analysis generated four main themes: Being and Becoming Authentic; Safe and Restorative Spaces; Community (with sub-themes of the University Community and the LGBTQIA+ Community and Connections (with sub-themes of Finding your tribe and Forever friends).

Theme One – Being and Becoming Authentic

Theme one centres on authenticity. This is an important concept in relation to belonging and identity (Yngvesson and Mahoney, 2000), with a lack of authenticity being linked to hopelessness, despair, and/or disconnection/disassociation (Menzies and Davidson, 2002). Students emphatically relayed how the Pride group provided them an environment where they could be their full authentic selves. For some students, like Mary and Lizzy who were aware of their sexuality but had previously struggled with their self-acceptance of their identity, and their discomfort in disclosing this to others, the Pride group's "affirming environment" (Mary, line 114) helped them to become their authentic self.

> *When I entered the group [sic] I think that was like the first step of me committing to living my truth* (Mary, line 386-387)
>
> *The Pride group has just helped me so much, like with... fully accepting my identity... and my sexuality and who I am* (Lizzy, lines 518 - 519)

For others, such as Mickey, being part of the Pride group provided an environment where they were able to explore their sexuality and in so doing led to a greater understanding of themselves.

> *I kind of discovered myself and realised I am demisexual... so it definitely helped me like discover myself... and get to know parts of myself that I never thought that I would even know... I never thought that there would be asexual, but like after like being part of the Pride group... I kind of realised that "oh I am"* (Mickey, lines 21-26)

The findings here provide support for Marzetti's call for institutions to be 'proudly proactive' (2018, p.712) and celebrate its queer campus community and evidences what Marzetti describes as the 'transformative' ability of supportive spaces which 'allow them to explore their LGBT+ identities, gain support, and develop pride' (Marzetti, 2018: p.709). They also support the ideas presented by Lesnick (2021, p.7) whose thematic analysis paper of six LQBTQIA+ faculty members at an American University concluded that staff LQBTQIA+ groups should 'exist as a space to explicitly support against homophobic and transphobic prejudice'.

Theme Two – Safe and Restorative spaces

Theme two referred to safe and restorative spaces. 'Safe spaces' have typically been conceptualised for the 'emotional and psychological well-being of marginalised persons' (Anderson, 2021: 285). They are characterised by having both protective (against harassment, harm, judgement, discrimination) and developmental (self-expression, exploration, reflection) functions (ibid.).

All students expressed their views that the Pride group provided them with a space where they felt safe, especially when it came to sharing their stories and receiving reassurance and support from the other members of the group.

> *When I arrived there I immediately felt this sense of welcoming and I've really felt from the first moment that it was a safe space where I could talk about anything* (Lizzy, lines 13-15)

> *We can then be there to support each other and, you know, offer empathy... offer that kind of reassurance* (Chris, lines 204 - 206)

> *It's quite empowering I think in some ways to have people sit there and listen to your story and then to support you* (Mary, lines 120-121)

The findings in this theme link extremely well to the aforementioned minority stress theory proposed by Meyer (2003), with clear evidence here provided for the Pride group as being a beneficial environment for being protective of mental ill-health. This is particularly noticeable in Chris's account where he comments on one the perceived restorative power, of the group.

As Chris describes, the group offered an element of protection from homophobic experiences that happened outside of the group.

> *I feel like what the group has probably as well has built a resilience in a lot of people, so that those incidents probably do still happen... either they aren't experiencing those things, or you know, it's not affecting them as much* (Chris, lines 218-222)

With a number of previous studies (e.g. Valentine et al., 2009; Garvey and Rankin, 2015b; Allen et al., 2020) reporting that students do not feel safe enough to disclose their sexual identity to peers and staff, and further literature indicating either indifference towards or not openly supporting LGBTQIA+ students (Garvey, Taylor and Rankin, 2015; Grimwood, 2017), it is pleasing and reassuring that the students who attended the Pride group felt so profoundly safe in the space that was created. Marzetti (2018: p.713) called for institutions to provide 'queer-specific emotional and pastoral support for students' and the data indicates that the Pride group is an example of a space where such support is available. These findings have implications for practice. Anderson (2021) argues that safe spaces are pedagogically important in learning environments to help combat the effects of epistemic oppression, mitigate disadvantages, and to disrupt 'classroom norms and dynamics that tend to privilege the epistemic agency of more dominant social identities at the expense of others' (286-287). Furthermore, Holley and Steiner (2005) reported that being in a safe classroom directly impacted student's learning with respect to both the content of their learning (e.g. in relation to others' perspectives, experiences, ideas, and thoughts)and the amount they were learning.

Theme Three – Community

The third theme was that of community, within this main theme were two sub-themes: One The LGBTQIA+ community and two The University Community.

Sub theme one– The LGBTQIA+ Community

In this theme is evidenced that it was not simply the existence of the Pride space that was important to students, but the actual experience of attending this *specific* Pride space. Students reported both how much they felt connected to the LGBTQIA+ space that had been created within the psychology department Pride group, but also contrasted this to their previous experiences of being in LGBTQIA+ groups that were not so inclusive.

> *It's a really nice, such a safe space to be in.... it's unlike any experience with LGBT groups I've had in previous universities* (Chris, lines, 19-20)
>
> *I think I tend to feel a little excluded from groups like oh, that's not quite for me... some of my other experiences in the LGBTQ+ community have been quite exclusive, like and quite a bit of judgment* (Mary, lines, 437-443)

It was a group of people who I just felt so connected to as a community (Lizzy, lines, 522-523)

These findings therefore not only support the calls in the literature for the establishment of LGBTQIA+ groups and organisations (see: Valentine et al. 2009; NUS, 2014; Formby; 2015; Waling and Roffee, 2017), but importantly it also supports research by NUS (2014) which cautions that merely providing a 'space' is insufficient and it is the quality of the space and community it fosters that is paramount to promoting positive, inclusive experiences for students.

A further powerful outcome of membership of the psychology department Pride group was that the members reported it as inspiring them to become more involved with other LGBTQIA+ groups and community events outside of the group.

> *We're planning for the February whole Pride event... I would just hope or like wish that ace people were a little more like represented... I feel like hopefully because I am involved... I will be able to, you know, bring asexuality to the table* (Mickey, 277-283)
>
> *I didn't think about being able to support LGBT people before I joined the group* (Lizzy, line 144)

This supports research by Waling and Roffee (2017) and Marzetti (2018) that LGBTQIA+ students can take ownership of the need for inclusion and queer spaces in institutions, and use student activism to drive progress within LGBTQIA+ communities. However, in contrast, those studies reported a lack of institutional support for such spaces, which necessitated such student initiative. Institutions facilitating student-led activism in this sense could be an area for further exploration.

<u>Sub Theme two – The University Community</u>

Whilst student union led Pride groups are a common offering in UK HE institutions, the psychology department led Pride group was distinct and innovative in that it was open to all psychology LGBTQIA+ staff as well as all LGBTQIA+ students across the range of psychology programmes offered by the department at the University. The openness of the staff in terms of their own sexuality, experiences and journeys was repeatedly mentioned by students as being extremely positive.

> *Having University staff who are unashamedly themselves... it wasn't hidden away somewhere... it was just out there. You know it was there for you to see, erm, and it was labelled* (Chris, lines, 375 - 383)

> *Made us all feel that we would be able to say anything in front of anybody in the group* (Lizzy, line 36)

Moreover, students reported that being members of the department led Pride group had a positive impact on the experience of attending University overall, therefore the benefit of the group in terms of the wider University community was clear.

> *It made me feel more of a connection to the university... a more meaningful experience in my education* (Chris, lines, 626-632)

> *It's helped quite a lot in making me feel welcome because I am an international student... they made me feel welcome... it kind of eased the whole process of I guess making acquaintances* (Mickey, 39 - 43)

The importance of visible role models and representation in classrooms and curricula for LGBTQIA+ students to feel included is well documented, and there are many calls for this in the literature (see: Ellis, 2009; Garvey and Rankin, 2015a; Garvey and Rankin, 2015b; Formby, 2015; Waling and Roffee, 2017). These findings support that such representation has a multitude of benefits for students. Our findings also support the work of Orlov and Allen (2014) whose study on the experiences of LGBTQIA+ faculty that were open about their sexuality stresses the importance of university staff being role models for their students.

Theme four – Connections

The fourth and final theme was that of connections. There were two sub-themes: Finding your Tribe and Forever Friends. We made the decision to maintain these as sub-themes because a tribe can be transient, and therefore whilst the term ‘tribe’ still conveys powerful feelings of connections formed with the group members, this is still distinct from the intentions to remain friends for life, beyond the group.

Sub-theme one – Finding your Tribe

Group members described the Pride group in a discursive way that went beyond just enjoying the company of the other members, to a real feeling of a having built deep and meaningful connections with the other members. Moreover, the students reported this in a way that suggested that they

had not build these sorts of connections in other groups, as Mary's (line 343) demonstrates with her comment "these are my people".

For Mickey, an international student, the connections built in the Pride group made them feel connections on multiple levels.

> I feel welcome - not only to the country, but also welcome to the whole Pride movement. (Mickey, line 320)

Chris's articulated this sense of finding his "tribe" in shared connections of being a member of the LGBTQIA+ community and that this bonded them despite the different histories and backgrounds.

> *Hearing the different stories of different people has been really comforting to know that obviously whilst we all might come from different places, that experience of, kind of, realising...that you're not heteronormative, that you are and almost kind of finding your tribe so really really comforting to know* (Chris, lines 97-110)

The data here demonstrates that the participants considered the psychology Pride group as a space that is genuinely welcoming and inclusive, and where deep and genuine connections could be made. This is particularly of note because it contrasts with findings in some literature that LGBTQIA+ students may experience or report queer groups or spaces to be exclusionary. This was particularly pertinent for certain sub-groups of queerness (e.g. those that were still questioning or exploring their identity), feeling that they did not meet the group expectations of queerness (Evans et al., 2017; Waling and Roffee, 2017), or perceiving the groups themselves as being exclusionary to wider needs and/or identities (Valentine et al., 2009; NUS, 2014; Formby, 2017). The psychology Pride group was designed to be as inclusive a possible, and by providing a space for allies too, this also allowed for exploration of LGBTQIA+ identities within the ally group.

<u>Sub-theme two – Forever Friends</u>

What emerged from the interviews was that the students intended to stay friends once they had graduated. This notion of permanence is important because it shows that there is intention to maintain these connections beyond the group. The transient nature of studying at university means that the group will only be attended for a limited about of time, but the students very clearly indicated that the group was the starting point for powerful and enduring friendships.

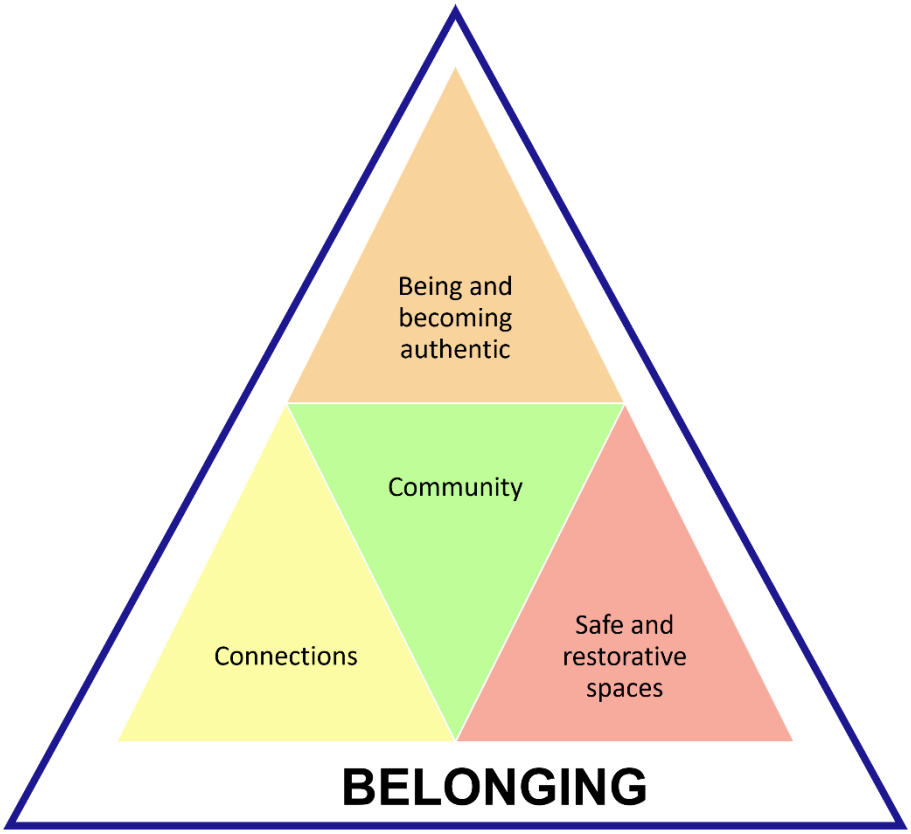
> *It's been facilitated to kind of form friendships [...] two people from the group... we actually have a separate like WhatsApp group where we do games nig*ht (Chris, lines, 71-2: 79-80)

> *It makes me feel happy that I get to have a bunch of friends* (Mickey, line 323)
>
> *I think that I've made some like forever friendships from being in the group... I honestly, you know, feel like these [are] permanent friendships, which I'm really, really happy about* (Lizzy, lines 97 - 108)

Friendship, and the facilitation of friendship, has not been thoroughly explored in the previous literature investigating LGBTQIA+ experiences, but it in contrast to Evans et al. (2017), who found intra-community exclusion and discrimination to be particularly detrimental to LGBTQIA+ students' sense of inclusion and well-being, our findings indicate the opposite, that intra-community acceptance and inclusion can lead to positive interpersonal relationships which support well-being. This indicates that the positive impact of the psychology Pride group goes beyond the group itself and transfers into other aspects of the group member's lives.

Overarching theme – Belonging

Although we had not set out to construct a grounded theory or an overarching theme, when we analysed the data, we all agreed that four themes could be considered under the umbrella of the overarching theme of belonging. As Pathak (2021) states, this is distinct from inclusion (which arguably was fulfilled by the presence of the Pride space) because it goes beyond merely being 'included': 'It's important to recognise you can be formally included – whatever that means – without feeling that you belong. Inclusion is a technocratic process. Belonging is an emotion and an outcome' (Pathak, 2021). This is visually represented in Figure 1.



General Discussion

Overall, our findings indicate that the psychology Pride group was a very important space for the students that attended it, and this study demonstrates the importance of providing appropriate spaces for LGBTQIA+ students. In the previous literature there is a marked lack of research that shows positive experiences in these spaces. Our research findings are therefore all the more important because someone inspired to set up a department led Pride group may be deterred from doing so if they based their decision making on the current literature. However, this study demonstrates that not only is it possible, but highly beneficial for LGBTQIA+ students and that LGBTQIA+ students can and do have positive university experiences (Formby, 2015; Glazzard et al., 2020).

Our findings demonstrate that a sense of belonging and safe spaces can promote positive HE experiences; that community and connections formed within the group can build individual confidence beyond the group; that collective staff and student experiences and dismantling perceived hierarchies between the roles can have a positive impact on students; and, particularly

relevant for our contemporary society, that meaningful connections can be fostered in online spaces. Spaces and communities that can have such impact should be valued, and cultivated, especially when LGBTQIA+ individuals may experience marginalisation and exclusion elsewhere.

In terms of the limitations of this piece of research, we acknowledge that the low participant numbers are a limitation and that we would have liked to have collected data from more members of the group, however, the timing of the data collection meant that many of the active group members had since graduated, and we did not recruit as well as anticipated for this reason. However, despite there only being four participants, this data produced from this piece of research is meaningful and adds to a limited literature in this area. However, we feel it is important to consider that when using a qualitative methodology, the goal is never to recruit large numbers of participants, it is to recruit sufficiently to meet the aims of your research (Hinton & Ryan, 2020). We set out to capture a snapshot of a specific experience from participants (The Critical Methodologies Collective, 2021), which we believed we achieved in the clear and consistent themes presented. Furthermore, we argue that this study has large information power (e.g. dense sample specificity and strong quality of dialogue), which justifies the smaller sample size (Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora, 2016). We believe we have met the aims of our research which was to explore the experiences of some of the members of the online Pride group and therefore, whilst the sample size may be smaller than some other published RTA research, we are confident that the themes provided in this paper are strongly and consistently evidenced from this data, and therefore we are satisfied that we requited sufficient participants to answer our research question.

In terms of further research, it would be interesting to revisit the students in a few years' time to see if they are still reporting a perceived benefit from attending the psychology department Pride group, and if their “forever friendships” have indeed been maintained. It would be interesting to also conduct a parallel study interviewing the staff that attended the Pride group and see what themes would be generated from their experiences of setting up and attending the group. Finally, it would be prudent to see if similar themes are generated for Pride groups set up in different departments, as there could be something unique about the fact the group was run by psychologists and for psychology students.

In conclusion, despite Pryor’s (2018) warning that the creation of specific spaces for LGBTQIA+ students could lead to further othering by perpetuating the idea that they do not belong everywhere, our data shows that students valued this separate space, constructing it as a site of belonging for them, where they could make connections and openly be their true selves, and that this sense of belonging persisted into spaces outside of the group as well.

Reflexivity

The study was a profoundly positive experience for the researchers, both individually and collectively. Given the different roles that each researcher had, both in their job roles and within the study itself, the multiple lenses through which we approached this study were a source of excitement, each recognising the value of divergent perspectives and areas of expertise. It would be erroneous to claim that this meant there were no disagreements or debate, but a safe space was created where we able to discuss and clarify such differences. Interestingly, the process of conducting this research also created a sense of belonging in us, and this was a nice synchronicity to the themes that we found in the data. Ultimately, this was a very powerful shared experience, in understanding the power of positive collective community both for the students in the Pride group, but also for us as researchers.

Acknowledgement

This study was conducted by three of the members of staff as part of their MA in Higher Education which they undertook as part of their continued professional development (CPD) hours. As such the researchers occupied a dual role in that they were both Staff at the HE institution and also students on the MA in Higher Education. It was under the supervision of Dr Bernard Lisewski.

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Captions for Figures

Figure 1 – Overarching theme of belonging with main themes incorporated.

Appendix 1 interview Schedule