

The Role of Music in Enhancing LGBT+ Students' School Belonging: A Literature Review

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Abstract: This study aims to investigate how music interventions can enhance school belonging among LGBT+ students. The study assesses the challenges faced by these students as documented in existing research, the potential benefits of music in fostering a sense of belonging, and the current status and limitations of research at the intersection of “Music and LGBT+.” To this end, a systematic search and evaluation of relevant literature was conducted, and an adapted version of Meyer’s Minority Stress Model was employed to account for the dual contributions of proximal and distal factors to the psychological stress experienced by LGBT+ students. In doing so, the cyclical relationships among incidents of prejudice, expectations of social exclusion, internalized homophobia, and the concealment of sexual orientation were mapped, along with their negative impacts on well-being and belonging. The results indicate that social stigma, structural exclusion, and cultural bias remain significant obstacles. Furthermore, analysis of the current “Music and LGBT+” research, which yielded only four peer-reviewed articles, reveals that although music can effectively regulate emotions, support identity construction, and promote social interaction, most studies still rely on qualitative or context-specific explorations and lack comprehensive quantitative data. To bridge these gaps and enhance inclusive education, this paper suggests that future research should adopt interdisciplinary approaches to design structured music intervention programs, expand empirical investigations, and inform the development of inclusive policies.

Keywords: Music, LGBT+ Students, School Belonging, Minority Stress Model, Inclusive Education

1. Introduction

School belonging holds a significant position in educational research, as it is closely linked to students' mental health, academic performance, and long-term development. Studies have shown that school belonging among students worldwide is generally declining, with marginalized groups being particularly vulnerable to negative effects. In an increasingly inclusive educational environment, in which diverse gender identities and sexual orientations are gaining societal attention, enhancing students' school belonging has become a critical topic in educational research. Notably, LGBT+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) students often face more severe social stigma and discrimination, including structural exclusion and cultural bias within educational settings. These external pressures, along with internal conflicts, can lead to significant declines in their mental health and academic engagement [1][2].

In recent years, research on the role of music in supporting the LGBT+ community has primarily focused on music education and music therapy, emphasizing classroom inclusivity, gender equality, and the visibility of LGBT+ students [3][4][5]. Although these studies have increased the participation of LGBT+ students in music learning, they have mainly concentrated on diversifying the educational environment rather than on how music, as an intervention, can directly improve the psychological and physical health as well as the school belonging of LGBT+ students. Moreover, research specifically examining how music can enhance school belonging among LGBT+ students is extremely limited. A search of the ERIC database (as of January 19, 2025) yielded only four relevant articles [3][4][5]. Therefore, leveraging music's capacity for emotion regulation, group identity, and social interaction [6][7] to help LGBT+ students alleviate psychological stress and enhance their sense of school belonging remains an open research question. Future studies should further explore how structured music programs can provide integrated emotional support, identity reinforcement, and opportunities for social interaction for LGBT+ students. By delving deeply into these mechanisms, educators and policymakers can develop more inclusive educational policies, utilize music to create friendlier and safer campus environments, and ultimately promote the mental health, academic success, and social integration of LGBT+ students.

This study is organized into three sections. First, it examines the challenges faced by LGBT+ students. Second, it evaluates the role of music in emotion regulation, identity formation, and social interaction. Third, it summarizes the main findings and limitations of research at the intersection of music and LGBT+ issues, and offers recommendations for future studies, thereby providing feasible pathways for using music to enhance school belonging among LGBT+ students.

2. Challenges in Establishing School Belonging for LGBT+ Students

Recent research highlights a global decline in school belonging, with marginalized groups such as LGBT+ students being disproportionately affected [8][9]. Recent studies indicate that students worldwide are experiencing a general decline in their sense of school belonging, with marginalized groups such as LGBT+ students being particularly affected. LGBT+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) refers to individuals whose gender identity and sexual orientation differ from mainstream norms [10]. This phenomenon reflects that LGBT+ students are more likely to face challenges such as social stigma and discrimination, which heightens their risk of social exclusion, mental health issues, and disengagement from academic life [9][11][12]. For example, Miranda Mendizábal et al. [1] found that the suicide risk among sexual minority adolescents is two to three times higher than that of other groups. Meanwhile, Lucassen et al. [13] reported that the likelihood of depression among LGBT+ adolescents is three times that of their heterosexual peers. A 2020 study further revealed that 34% of LGBT+ adolescents in the United States have experienced school bullying [14], and 40% of LGBT+ adolescents in Scotland have been diagnosed with mental health disorders, with these proportions approaching twice those observed in heterosexual adolescents.

The challenges faced by LGBT+ students are closely linked to structural exclusion and cultural bias within educational environments. On the one hand, structural exclusion in higher education manifests as the systematic neglect of LGBT+ students' needs, such as discrimination related to gender-specific resources and spaces. Nicolazzo [15] emphasized that transgender individuals frequently encounter exclusion when using gender-designated spaces and Lopez-Saez et al. [16] similarly found that 58% of transgender and non-binary adolescents experienced rejection and discrimination when using restrooms corresponding to their gender identity. At the same time, some institutions lack specific support policies for LGBT+ students (e.g., inclusive counseling services, diverse student organizations), leaving these students without adequate protection and making it difficult for them to establish a sense of school belonging [17][18]. On the other hand, cultural bias refers to the implicit or explicit prejudices supported by societal cultures and customs, typically

manifested through cultural norms, values, behavioral patterns, or language. For instance, the use of homophobic and transphobic language causes LGBT+ students to feel offended and marginalized [17], while verbal threats and microaggressions in interpersonal interactions further undermine their sense of psychological security [19]. In summary, violence and prejudice are fundamental causes of psychological issues among LGBT+ adolescents [20].

Delozier et al. [21] identified three primary minority stressors and their negative impacts on the psychological health and school belonging of LGBT+ students, namely Societal Exclusion Expectancies, Internalized Homophobia, and Concealment of One's Sexual Identity. These three factors form a mutually reinforcing vicious cycle: societal exclusion expectancies arise from external environmental influences, internalized homophobia represents the internalization of social prejudice, and concealing one's sexual identity is an individual coping response. Accordingly, based on the minority stress model [22], minority stress processes have been further refined, ultimately leading to the model depicted in Figure 1. Due to these stressors, LGBT+ students tend to experience a more detrimental effect on their physical, psychological, and educational wellbeing [2][23][24][25].

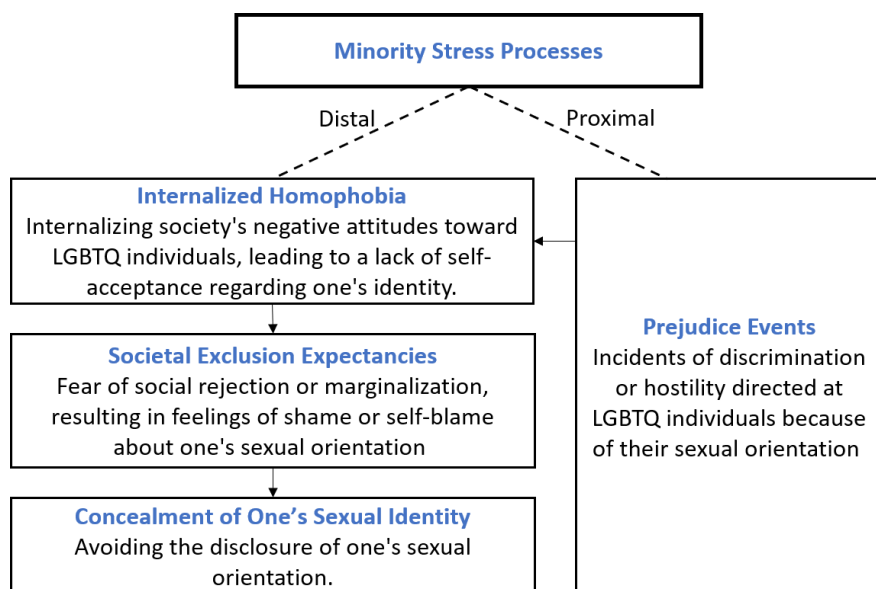


Figure 1: Adapted from the Minority Stress Model [22].

3. The Role of Music in Enhancing Belonging

Music plays a distinct and multifaceted role in fostering students' sense of belonging, primarily through emotion regulation, identity construction, and social interaction, all of which have a particularly profound impact on marginalized groups.

First, music not only helps individuals express and regulate complex emotions but also plays a vital role in shaping identity by fostering self-awareness and strengthening their sense of belonging within communities. For example, Granot et al. [26] conducted a large-scale survey of 5,619 participants from 11 countries and found that music ranked second only to direct social interactions (i.e., face-to-face, direct interpersonal activities) in creating a sense of belonging. Lonsdale and North [27] examined music listening motives using a 48-item scale with 181 volunteers (118 females, 63 males) aged 18–82 ($M = 35.43$, $SD = 19.64$) and found that the positive mood management subscale received the highest ratings, confirming music's significant role in emotional regulation. Moreover, Scrine [6] further demonstrated music's supportive role in adolescent identity formation. In the "Hear Girls" project, eighth-grade students from diverse backgrounds collaboratively created music playlists and co-composed songs to explore issues such as gender, sexual orientation, and violence,

thereby enhancing their agency in terms of gender awareness and self-identity. Ter Bogt et al. [28] also emphasized that the degree to which music is valued in daily life is positively correlated with both resilience and self-identity. In particular, during live music events, audiences who move and sway together with the music experience a heightened sense of immersion and group identity, which in turn reinforces collective belonging and emotional resonance [29]. North and Hargreaves [30] systematically discussed from the perspective of social and applied psychology how music, as a cultural symbol, reinforces both individual and group identity.

Second, music enhances social interaction and a sense of belonging through shared experiences and collective activities, a factor that is especially significant for marginalized groups who often feel ignored or isolated. Research indicates that collective musical activities, such as choral singing and instrumental performances, can rapidly establish strong bonds through nonverbal communication and synchronous interaction. Pearce [31] found that choral activities foster stable connections on both emotional and physical levels, while Weinstein et al. [7] demonstrated that collective singing can quickly build a sense of belonging even in large groups. Regarding marginalized populations, Beagan and Etowa [32] discovered that African Canadian minority women gained emotional support to counteract racial discrimination through participation in choral groups; Perkins et al. [33] reported that postpartum depression patients reconstituted their sense of self-worth within the inclusive atmosphere of singing groups. In the same year, Lamont et al. [34] provided evidence that music positively influences social interaction and belonging among older adults.

4. Current Intersectional Research on “Music and LGBT+”

Research on music and LGBT+ students remains extremely limited. A search of the ERIC database using the keywords “Music” and “LGBT+” yielded only four peer-reviewed articles (as of 19 January 2025). These four articles explore the intersection of music and LGBT+ themes from different perspectives. Eralp [3] focuses on LGBT+ venues (such as bars and clubs), and by analyzing the music and cultural activities in these physical spaces, reveals how music constructs “safe spaces” and plays a dual role in identity formation. Mettner and DeBoer [4] examine the application of diversified content design in classical music promotion, finding that highlighting LGBT+ artists and their works can evoke emotional resonance among Generation Z and enhance emotional connections among marginalized groups through “identity visibility.” Regader Merín [5] uses popular singers, such as Madonna, Lady Gaga, and Toddrick Hall, as cases to explore through both analysis and practice, including the creation of the pop song “Freaks” specifically targeted at LGBT+ audiences, how popular musicians utilize music to promote social acceptance and reinforce identity formation. Kopaniecki [35] investigates the role of music in the struggle for equal rights among sexual minorities from a social movement perspective, particularly as observed during the Wrocław Equality Parade; this study emphasizes the significance of collective musical experiences in enhancing group cohesion and challenging social norms.

A common thread among these studies is their recognition of music’s positive role in providing emotional support, facilitating identity expression, and fostering a sense of community belonging. Whether in physical spaces, social movements, or popular culture, music is regarded as a powerful medium. The limitations of current studies are evident in both their sample sizes and research methods. First, the samples and contexts are notably constrained. For example, Mettner and DeBoer [4] focused solely on audiences with expertise in classical music. Meanwhile, Regader Merín [5] centered on case studies of popular singers such as Madonna, Lady Gaga, and Toddrick Hall, thereby neglecting other music genres or cultural backgrounds and making it difficult to comprehensively represent the diverse needs and practices of the LGBT+ community in broader social contexts. Eralp [3] examined only 13 homosexual males residing in Istanbul and Athens, while Kopaniecki [35] focused on a single event (the Wrocław Equality Parade). Secondly, all four articles primarily relied on qualitative research

methods (e.g., interviews and observations) and lacked quantitative data support, which may undermine the generalizability of their conclusions. Therefore, future research should build on these findings to further explore how the inherent qualities of music can help LGBT+ students establish emotional connections, facilitate identity formation, and foster a stronger sense of belonging on campus.

5. Conclusion

Overall, this study provides a systematic review of the potential role of music intervention in enhancing school belonging among LGBT+ students. Firstly, from the perspective of the minority stress model, it examines the challenges faced by LGBT+ students, such as social stigma, structural exclusion and cultural bias, and explains how these stressors may undermine their sense of school belonging. In addition, drawing on research findings from music psychology, the study demonstrates the positive effects of music in emotional regulation, identity formation and social interaction, thereby highlighting its unique value in strengthening the school belonging of marginalized groups. Moreover, a critical analysis of the existing literature reveals that although previous studies have confirmed the potential of music to support the LGBT+ community, most of these studies are limited to qualitative research or specific cultural contexts, lacking quantitative evidence and universally applicable intervention approaches. As a result, the ways in which music can effectively improve the psychological and physiological health of LGBT+ students and enhance their school belonging remain insufficiently explored.

In view of the aforementioned research gaps, future investigations should delve more deeply into the following areas. First, systematic empirical studies should be designed using interdisciplinary approaches from fields such as education, sociology, psychology and music to examine the specific impacts and mechanisms of music intervention on school belonging among LGBT+ students. Second, the diversity and scale of research samples should be expanded to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings. Third, in response to the practical needs of schools, feasible music intervention programs should be developed and evaluated to provide scientific evidence for educators and policymakers. By advancing both theoretical and practical aspects, music has the potential to become an important means of helping LGBT+ students alleviate minority stress, enhance identity formation and foster emotional connection, thereby creating a more inclusive and supportive campus environment and ultimately promoting their mental and physical health as well as social integration.

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