

What Makes Queer Choirs So Gay?

Exploring the Unique Characteristics of LGBTQ+ Choirs and Their Role in Fostering Belonging

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Theoretical Background

A. Sense of Belonging, Music and LGBTQ+

- Feeling of belonging is **shared to all human beings** and is often characterised as a protective factor to accumulate resilience, improve mental health, and gain higher levels of well-being (Rofey, 2013).
- **Lack of consensus** on how a sense of belonging can be conceptualized and measured (Allen et al., 2021).
- Participating in **any** music-making ensemble **fosters a feeling of belonging** (Harley, 2017).

- Members of marginalized groups including the LGBTQ+ community are even more likely to view belonging as a protective factor (Sanders & Munford, 2016).
- They are also the one who are **more prone to having their sense of belonging compromised** (Pendergast, Allen, McGregor, & Ronksley-Pavia, 2018).
- Taylor & Herring (2014): New members of Gay choir rated their **sense of belonging within the choir higher than any other LGBTQ+ community-based activities** in which they were involved.

B. The LGBTQ+ Choral Movement

- Emerged in North America in the mid-1970s, subsequent to the gay liberation movement.
- A music intervention that addresses **social, artistic, and political needs**.
- Approx. 500 choirs and music ensembles worldwide spread over 6 continents (Balén, 2017; Taylor & Herring, 2014).
- Dedicated choral associations, repertoire databases, international festivals, and seminars within the broader choral movement (**LEGATO** in Europe, **GALA** in North America)

Gaps in Research and Training for LGBTQ+ Choirs

- **Insufficient research regarding the distinctive characteristics** that differentiate LGBTQ+ choirs from heteronormative choirs.
- No training programs for music practitioners who want to work in this field.
- No reference for this intervention in the Oxford Handbook of Community Music (Bartlett and Higgins, 2018).
- Panetta: **Music teacher education programs Lack LGBTQ-oriented topics in their curriculum**

Charles Beale: “**Directing an LGBTQ group definitely involves a specific and different set of skills and understandings, both of the inclusive and activist values** that motivate and underpin the musical processes, and of **how those values impact musical and educational decisions in practice**” (The Oxford handbook of choral pedagogy, 2017, p. 367).

(...It’s an) “**unexplored research area** that has the potential to reveal new questions, both for LGBTQ choral singing and for choral pedagogy as a whole” (p. 363).



Academic Problem Statement

1. While 'sense of belonging' is recognized as a significant need, particularly among marginalized populations it remains a vague and poorly theorized concept, with limited intellectual understanding of its contributing components and parameters.
2. There has been almost **no credible research** conducted on the positive socio-mental outcomes of participating in LGBTQ+ choirs.
3. **Distinctive characteristics of LGBTQ+** choirs which could later be translated into pedagogical guidelines to enhance the sense of belonging among its members, **have yet to be identified.**
4. There is high demand for professional training and curricular resources for practitioners in this field.

Research Objectives

Main study purpose: to explore how the distinctive characteristics of LGBTQ+ choirs contribute to fostering a greater sense of belonging among their members.

1. What are the shared **distinctive characteristics** of LGBTQ+ choirs?
2. What is the **practitioners' perception** of the significance of these characteristics in fostering a sense of belonging?"
3. To what extent do **choir members** see these characteristics as enhancing their sense of belonging?
4. What kind of **distinctive pedagogy** can be formulated for the professional training of facilitators in the field?

Research Methodology and Work Packages

WP1

Extended **ethnographic observations period**, followed by **semi-structured interviews** with leadership members of **4 choirs** in Amsterdam & Brussels.

WP2

Document analysis of the repertoire performed by the choirs to further explore the unique traits of LGBTQ+ choirs.

WP3

Distributing a **survey** to members of all choirs:

- Demographic Data.
- Investigate distinctive characteristics.

WP4

Semi-structured interviews with a selection of choir participants

Shared Characteristics Linked to Enhanced Sense of Belonging After Preliminary Observations and Conversations with Leadership Teams

- **Musical directors** infuse rehearsals with **humor** and demonstrate **flexibility** in dividing singers into different vocal sections.
- **Auditions:** candidates struggling with mental or social challenges related to their sexual or gender identity are given priority for acceptance into the choir, regardless of their musical proficiency.
- **Repertoire selection:** ensuring that songs align with the choirs' values and mission statement. Equal authority for members and the artistic team.

Shared Characteristics...

- **Lyrics and Music are frequently adjusted** to fit the singers' gender identity.
- **A safe space** to explore masculinity and femininity through voice, appearance, and choreography.
- **Campy stage performance** (dress-free policy).
- **Strong social component in and between rehearsals** (“On my second day in Amsterdam I bought myself a bike, and joined the [gay] choir. I knew that way I’d be set.”)

THANK YOU!

Should you have any questions or suggestions about my research, please feel free to contact me: yonatan.volfin@ugent.be

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