

# “THE VIBE IS BETTER:” AN INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF LGBTQ+ STUDENTS’ SENSE OF BELONGING IN FIRST YEAR PHYSICS

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## BACKGROUND

The discrimination that LGBTQ+ physicists and physics students face has been documented in reports (Atherton et al, 2016) and more focused research studies (Barthelemy et al, 2022). These patterns of discrimination can lead to lower participation within physics and STEM more broadly (Atherton et al, 2016). Prior work has highlighted that understanding the experiences of LGBTQ+ and queer scientists requires taking an intersectional approach (Cochran et al., 2020), with a focus on qualitative work to understand the complexity of individual experiences (Barthelemy et al., 2023). Nearly all of this work to date has been undertaken within the United States. Our present study adds to this work by presenting themes from interviews of LGBTQ+/queer students in a first-year physics sequence in an Australian University.

## CURRENT WORK

As a part of a broader study on students’ experience in physics major classes, a group of students from underrepresented groups was recruited to participate in interviews. Of these students, 12 identified as queer or another label within the LGBTQ+ umbrella on a survey. All of the LGBTQ+ women and non-binary people who participated either identified as white or described being white passing, compared to half of the men. The interviews took place during the first and second semesters of their first year, as students were undertaking the first two classes of the physics major sequence. Most LGBTQ+ non-binary people interviewed explicitly discussed their experiences of being queer, compared to a minority of LGBTQ+ women and men. A majority of both queer women and non-binary people described finding groups of fellow students with similar identities and that these groups supported their sense of belonging in the classroom. In contrast, queer men either described feeling othered along multiple intersectional identities among peers and/or did not discuss close bonds with peers in their first year. This work highlights the ways in which the experiences of LGBTQ+ students are gendered and racialized, sometimes along unexpected lines. We conclude with suggestions for fostering classroom environments inclusive of students of these identities.

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