

Rainbow inclusion as the ongoing work of queering: rainbow employees' positive perceptions of workplace climate in New Zealand

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to explore Rainbow employees' positive perceptions of workplace climate in New Zealand organisations to understand how Rainbow inclusion is conceptualised and enacted in practice, addressing the gap in existing scholarship that predominantly focuses on negative workplace experiences.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing on qualitative data from an employee perspective survey conducted across 19 Rainbow Tick-accredited organisations representing diverse sectors in New Zealand, this study uses reflexive thematic analysis informed by queer theory to examine positive survey comments from Rainbow employees. The analysis focuses on the practices that create and sustain Rainbow-inclusive workplaces.

Findings – Four interconnected themes are identified as central to Rainbow employees' positive perceptions: institutionalising support through policy and management; facilitating queer visibility through organisational practices; enacting Rainbow-inclusive interpersonal relations; and sustaining commitment to queering the organisation. These themes, expressed as ongoing actions rather than static states, demonstrate that Rainbow inclusion requires continuous, intentional effort rather than representing a fixed achievement.

Practical implications – Findings demonstrate that a Rainbow inclusive workplace climate operates across structural, cultural and interpersonal levels. Organisations must show sustained commitment by maintaining continuous visibility and reaffirming their support, especially amid political backlash.

Originality/value – This study deliberately shifts focus towards affirmative workplace experiences, contributing balance to existing literature. It reconceptualises Rainbow inclusion not as a static organisational attribute but as an ongoing process of queering – a continual normalisation of queerness and disruption of dominant *cis* heteronormativity. This reframing emphasises Rainbow inclusion as dynamic practice requiring sustained commitment.

Keywords Workplace, Rainbow, Inclusion, New Zealand, Employee, Organisation

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Definitely inclusive. There has never been a moment I have ever needed to hide my rainbow at work. I am a proud and confident takataapui tane[1] in my professional life (survey comment from a Rainbow[2] employee).

This comment was provided by a Rainbow employee in an employee perspective survey on Rainbow inclusion within a New Zealand organisation. The positivity of the workplace climate conveyed in this comment, along with its affirming impact on Rainbow employees' identity expression, stands in contrast to most existing scholarship on Rainbow employees, which has primarily explored and revealed negative workplace experiences (Colgan and Rumens, 2015; Köllen, 2016; Maji *et al.*, 2024). Global scholars have examined the manifestations of *cis*-heteronormativity and queerphobia in the workplace, which normalise and privilege heterosexual and cisgender identities while excluding and marginalising non-



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normative genders and sexualities, occurring at both organisational and interpersonal levels (Corlett *et al.*, 2023; Cui, 2025; Cui and Burford, 2025). Various negative workplace experiences of Rainbow employees have been documented, including psychological stress (Meinhold and Frohn, 2016; Singh and O'Brien, 2020), careful identity management (Cui, 2022, 2023c), concerns and self-censorship in addressing queer issues (Cui, 2023a, 2023b, 2023d, 2024), experiences of microaggressions (Galupo and Resnick, 2016) and earnings penalties associated with their Rainbow identity (Laurent and Mihoubi, 2016; Drydak, 2022). Transgender and non-binary employees, as subgroups of Rainbow employees, have been found to face unique challenges arising from cisnormative binary gender norms, encounter backlash against gender diversity and experience a lack of organisational support (Özbilgin and Erbil, 2025; Ozturk and Tatli, 2016). In addition, the negative consequences encountered by Rainbow employees may be compounded by the intersectionality of multiple marginalised identities, as illustrated in studies of Rainbow transnational migrant workers (Calang and Sunanta, 2025) and ageing Rainbow employees (Epper-Hattab and Steindórsdóttir, 2025). In recent years, many Western countries have witnessed a troubling surge in both proposed and enacted legislation designed to erode DEI initiatives within organisations (Follmer *et al.*, 2024; Ng *et al.*, 2025; Sands and Ferraro, 2025). Consequently, Rainbow employees have faced intensifying pressures fuelled by increasingly conservative political discourses on gender and sexuality (Butler, 2025; Cui, 2026).

Scholarship highlighting Rainbow employees' negative experiences carries important implications for organisational practices and broader social justice. Yet, an exclusive emphasis on these experiences – ones I have myself highlighted in previous studies – not only fails to capture the full complexity of Rainbow employees' diverse realities, but also risks inadvertently reducing them to mere victims, thereby overlooking their capacity to experience joy and express pride in the workplace. Existing empirical studies that qualitatively examine the positive experiences of Rainbow employees are scarce (Salter and Sasso, 2022; Trotter and Yates, 2025), while much of the research exploring the relationship between organisational supports and positive employee outcomes relies on quantitative approaches (Bozani *et al.*, 2020; Hur, 2020; Lathabhavan and Mishra, 2024; Webster *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, this article represents a deliberate shift towards qualitatively exploring the affirmative experiences of Rainbow employees, highlighting their positive perceptions of the workplace climate. It investigates how Rainbow employees conceptualise a supportive workplace environment and identifies the conditions that foster Rainbow-inclusive organisations. Importantly, this study does not seek to challenge the value of prior research that foregrounds negative experiences, nor does it aim to generalise its findings or imply that workplace climates are already inclusive. Rather, by highlighting positive workplace experiences and qualitatively unpacking the dynamics that shape Rainbow employees' perceptions, the study contributes greater balance to existing literature and narratives, while offering practical insights to inform organisational policy and practice.

Theoretically, this study is informed by queer theory (McCann and Monaghan, 2020), which seeks to interrogate and unsettle normative identities, categories and discourses. Critically examining the disciplinary mechanisms through which sexuality and gender are regulated, queer scholars have given sustained attention to the regulatory regimes of heteronormativity and cisnormativity. Heteronormativity is conceptualised as the normative structures and relations that construct and reproduce heterosexuality as normal, desirable and necessary, while casting non-normative sexualities as abnormal (Corlett *et al.*, 2023; Cui, 2025). Cisnormativity, as Öztürk (2024, p. 44) defines it, refers to “the wholesale normalisation of essentialist assumptions and binary expectations about sex and gender and the consequent development of policies, practices, and institutional arrangements throughout

society to impede gender identity diversity”. Aligned with queer theory’s orientation towards resistance and disruption, *queer* is often mobilised as a verb to signify a mode of doing rather than being (Burford and Allen, 2018). As McCann and Monaghan (2020, p. 3) explain, “to undertake ‘queering’ is to deploy queer as a verb, to challenge and resist expectations or norms”. One of the most cited examples of queering is prominent queer theorist Judith Butler’s argument that gender is a *doing*, not a *being*. Their work deconstructs the foundations of identity by demonstrating that gender, conventionally understood as inherent, is produced through the stylised repetition of acts shaped by gender norms (Butler, 1990). Within the organisational context, a queer lens inspires this study in two key ways. Firstly, this study aims to queer the conventional narratives through which queer experiences are represented in workplace research, thereby unsettling and expanding the dominant discourse surrounding queer employees. Secondly, this study seeks to reconceptualise Rainbow inclusion not as a static status or inherent organisational attribute, nor merely as the outcome of specific initiatives, but as an ongoing process of normalisation, deconstruction and interruption – one that must be continuously enacted, performed and sustained. Put differently, Rainbow inclusion in organisations is not a state of being but a process of doing and becoming. Following this line, this article reframes Rainbow inclusion as a continual practice of queering, attending to the practices through which positive perceptions of workplace climate are reproduced and sustained.

This study is situated within the New Zealand context, a complex national landscape defined by Rainbow-supportive policies and legislation, yet simultaneously shaped by entrenched cis-heteronormativity and the growing influence of conservative forces (Cui, 2026). On one hand, in New Zealand, the Human Rights Act legally protects the rights of Rainbow communities by making it unlawful to discriminate on the grounds of sex, gender or sexuality (New Zealand Human Rights Commission, 2026). The government has issued a national standard that specifies organisational practices designed to foster Rainbow inclusion in the workplace (Standards New Zealand, 2015). Many high-profile organisations across sectors publicly promote Rainbow inclusion by engaging with Rainbow Tick, an accreditation service that evaluates workplace culture and grants certification to organisations that demonstrate Rainbow-inclusive practices (see <https://toitutakatapu.co.nz/>). On the other hand, recent research has highlighted the entrenched cis-heteronormativity operating at both organisational and interpersonal levels in New Zealand workplaces (Cui, 2025), as well as the persistent inequalities faced by Rainbow employees (Stats NZ, 2025; Yee *et al.*, 2025). For example, Rainbow people experience higher rates of unemployment across all age and ethnic groups, and they consistently earn less than the non-Rainbow population across age groups and within occupations (Stats NZ, 2025). In addition, the global backlash against DEI and gender diversity has significantly influenced New Zealand’s political dynamics, with the government restricting transgender people’s access to sports (Human Rights Commission, 2025) and healthcare (Corlett, 2025) and proposing legislation aimed at ending what it characterises as “woke left-wing social engineering” (Ensor, 2025), thereby situating Rainbow employees within a more conservative political climate (Cui, 2026). However, limited empirical evidence exists regarding the positive experiences of Rainbow employees within this complex sociopolitical climate (Yee *et al.*, 2025). Such experiences are just as important as negative ones for understanding what works, what is needed and what fosters a Rainbow-inclusive workplace. This article seeks to address that gap.

Drawing on qualitative data from an employee perspective survey conducted by the Rainbow Tick accreditation service across 19 client organisations in New Zealand, this study explores the positive workplace experiences of Rainbow employees. Positive survey

comments from Rainbow employees are analysed to address the following interrelated research questions:

- RQ1. How do Rainbow employees perceive a supportive workplace climate?
- RQ2. What practices underpin the creation and maintenance of Rainbow-inclusive workplaces?
- RQ3. How can Rainbow employees' positive experiences inform the conceptualisation of Rainbow inclusion in the workplace?

Four themes are identified:

- (1) institutionalising support through policy and management;
- (2) facilitating queer visibility through organisational practices;
- (3) enacting Rainbow-inclusive interpersonal relations; and
- (4) sustaining commitment to queering the organisation.

These themes, expressed as modes of *doing* rather than *being*, underscore the dynamic nature of Rainbow inclusion, which demands ongoing, intentional effort rather than representing a fixed or static state. Moreover, despite their generally positive perceptions of organisational culture, Rainbow employees also identified limitations in current initiatives and articulated expectations for sustained commitment. Their reflections highlight that Rainbow inclusion is an evolving process rather than a one-off achievement. By foregrounding underexplored positive experiences of Rainbow employees and examining the *doing* of Rainbow inclusion, this study advances a more nuanced understanding of both Rainbow employees' workplace experiences and the dynamics of Rainbow inclusion. In doing so, it offers empirical insights that enrich existing scholarship and provide guidance for organisational practice.

2. Methodology

This article draws on qualitative data from an employee perspective survey conducted within Rainbow Tick-accredited organisations. Rainbow Tick is a certification programme that has been active in New Zealand for more than ten years. Its purpose is to foster Rainbow inclusion in workplaces by assessing, guiding and accrediting organisations committed to this goal (see the official website: <https://toitukatapui.co.nz/>). Organisational culture is assessed through an annual recurring process that uses several methods, including an online survey. Organisations that meet the required standards receive accreditation, while those that fall short lose certification but are given time to implement improvements based on tailored recommendations. One of the key tools for evaluation is a survey that uses an agreement scale to capture employee views on different aspects of workplace climate, illustrated by statements 2–7 in Table 1. Each statement is paired with a comment box, allowing respondents to provide written feedback, which forms the qualitative data for this study. A demographic question about identity (Question 1) enables the isolation of responses from employees who identify as part of the Rainbow communities.

To centre the voices of Rainbow employees and highlight their perspectives on workplace climate, this study relies solely on data from Rainbow respondents, excluding responses from non-Rainbow respondents. This data set contains qualitative comments from the employee perspective survey conducted across 19 organisations in 2025, representing a total of 329 Rainbow employees. In total, the data set includes 573 comments from Rainbow employees, offering diverse sentiments on workplace culture. To examine how Rainbow inclusion is reflected in Rainbow employees' positive perceptions of workplace culture, the

Table 1. Survey questions

Demographic question	• Do you identify as part of the Rainbow communities?
Agreement statements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My workplace is inclusive for Rainbow employees • My workplace organises or celebrates events that promote Rainbow awareness • I have noticed discriminatory behaviour towards rainbow communities in my workplace • I trust management and HR to effectively handle rainbow-related issues • My workplace provides gender-neutral single-stall toilets with appropriate signage • I am aware of the Rainbow-inclusive policies and guidelines in my workplace

Source(s): Authors' own work

analysis focuses specifically on their positive comments. This targeted selection of data serves the research aim and does not imply that Rainbow employees' workplace experiences in New Zealand are predominantly or consistently positive (Cui, 2026). Participants came from organisations spanning diverse sectors, including insurance, retail, education, energy, healthcare, engineering, law, telecommunications and transportation. In terms of size, five organisations were large (1,000+ employees), seven were medium (100–999 employees) and seven were small (fewer than 100 employees). This diversity ensures that the findings reflect the patterns and complexities of workplace climates across New Zealand's organisational landscape.

The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022), an approach that conceptualises themes as the product of the researcher's subjective and sustained engagement with the data. An inductive, "bottom-up", data-driven approach was used, generating themes largely at a semantic and explicit level. At the same time, the data analysis was theoretically informed by queer theory (McCann and Monaghan, 2020), which seeks to disrupt and interrogate normative identities and notions – particularly the cis-heteronormativity that dominates and regulates understandings of gender and sexuality (Öztürk, 2024). By deploying the concept of cis-heteronormativity, queer scholars have been concerned with denaturalising and destabilising heterosexual and cisgender identities and norms, understanding them as socially normalised and privileged through structures and relations, and therefore as continually vulnerable to disruption, failure and interruption (Cui, 2025; Öztürk, 2024). Beyond functioning as an identity category, queer is frequently mobilised by scholars as a verb to emphasise resistance, disruption and practice. To *queer* something is to deconstruct it and to approach it through alternative, often subversive, modes of thinking (Burford and Allen, 2018). In line with this action-oriented understanding of the queer concept, the data analysis concentrates on what organisations actively *do* to foster positive perceptions among Rainbow employees – in other words, on how Rainbow inclusion is enacted in practice. Consequently, the development and naming of themes adopt verbal rather than nominal forms, reflecting this emphasis on practice – the ongoing process of "queering".

In terms of positionality, the researcher identifies as a cisgender gay man and brings professional experience as an accreditation specialist with Rainbow Tick. This intersection of personal identity and professional role created opportunities for conducting the research

and accessing relevant data, enabling the researcher to secure organisational support and to examine the workplace experiences of Rainbow employees in New Zealand as an insider. The study also builds on the researcher's previous work on workplace climate and the experiences of Rainbow employees in New Zealand (Cui, 2025, 2026), extending this research area in new directions. The use of data complied with the agreements established between Rainbow Tick and participating organisations, which permit research provided that identifying information is not disclosed. For this article, all organisation names were masked, and identifying details were removed or obscured to protect organisational and respondent anonymity.

3. Findings

This section explores the manifestations of Rainbow inclusion reflected in Rainbow employees' positive comments about their workplace climate. Key themes include:

- institutionalising support through policy and management;
- facilitating queer visibility through organisational practices;
- enacting Rainbow-inclusive interpersonal relations; and
- sustaining commitment to queering the organisation.

Despite their generally positive perceptions, participants identified limitations and inconsistencies in existing initiatives and emphasised their expectation for sustained efforts and ongoing commitment.

3.1 Institutionalising support through policy and management

Rainbow-inclusive organisational policies provide the institutional foundation for addressing Rainbow issues within the workplace. Rainbow employees in organisations with Rainbow-supportive policies in place tend to perceive the workplace climate as inclusive. These policies demonstrate organisational support for Rainbow employees and outline how Rainbow issues are addressed across various contexts, including discrimination prevention and gender affirmation for transgender employees. Some organisations also implement strategies that set explicit goals for advancing their Rainbow inclusion efforts.

We have all our Rainbow-related policies on our system: Diversity and Inclusion Policy and Procedure, Gender Affirming Policy, and the Bullying Harassment and Discrimination Prevention Policy. (a law firm).

We have policies and strategies which speak to the rainbow community and set rainbow objectives. (an insurance company).

The existence of a policy alone is not sufficient to promote Rainbow inclusion. As Rainbow employees noted in their survey comments, developing and communicating the policy are also important. Participants reported positively that they are actively involved in shaping organisational policy and that the policy is communicated clearly. This indicates that their perspectives are valued and that all staff are made aware of the policy's content and purpose. It also demonstrates that policy development is not a one-off exercise but instead involves sustained effort both before and after a policy's formal release.

I have helped to create some of the rainbow-inclusive policies that our workplace is using. (an education institution).

I am aware of the rainbow-inclusive policies. Communication of policies is exceptional. (an insurance company).

In addition to policies, organisational support can be demonstrated through HR management, a crucial area where Rainbow employees perceive and value the organisation's commitment. Rainbow employees reported feeling safe and reassured when they observe HR's genuine commitment, supported by established systems and dedicated personnel, to address concerns related to Rainbow issues.

I feel confident in management and HR's ability to support Rainbow employees and address related issues. From what I've seen, there's a genuine commitment to inclusion. I trust that if any concerns were raised whether around discrimination or support needs they would be taken seriously and handled appropriately. It's reassuring to know that there are systems in place and people who care. (an energy company).

100%, the management and reps are just a step away to help with kind of support needed. They ensure they are available for any matters. (a transportation company).

Existing literature in global contexts has challenged the misconception of workplaces as gender- and sexuality-neutral spaces by demonstrating that workplaces are often structured by *cis*-heteronormative norms, with organisations actively involved in maintaining and reinforcing these norms through policies, organisational documents, the configuration of space and the censorship of Rainbow visibility (Corlett *et al.*, 2023; Cui, 2025, 2026; Cui and Burford, 2025). In this context, normalising Rainbow identities and promoting Rainbow inclusion through organisational policies and HR practices signals a clear institutional commitment and actively disrupts – or *queers* – the *cis*-heteronormative norms embedded in organisational practices. This work of queering is not a one-off exercise but requires sustained effort, including ongoing policy development and communication, the establishment of dedicated systems and support personnel and managerial responsiveness to potential discrimination and support needs. Such institutionalisation of Rainbow support creates the conditions for organisation-led initiatives and inclusive interpersonal interactions – dimensions that the following themes further illuminate.

3.2 *Facilitating queer visibility through organisational practices*

When participants describe their positive perception of organisational culture, they often highlight, or justify, their views by referring to Rainbow visibility in their workplace. The organisation can enhance Rainbow visibility through small, everyday workplace items such as lanyards and uniforms, as noted by participants. These items not only convey organisational support for Rainbow employees but also provide opportunities for non-Rainbow employees to demonstrate their allyship by wearing them.

I feel free and welcomed to be who I am. We have the option to have a work t-shirt with a rainbow flag on it. (a healthcare organisation).

Love the effort taken to introduce an official rainbow lanyard. (a telecommunications company).

Rainbow-specific education and training, such as intranet resources and training sessions facilitated by external Rainbow organisations, are also a key form of Rainbow visibility in participants' workplaces. These education and training initiatives contribute to enhancing Rainbow visibility and staff awareness, and encourage allyship among non-Rainbow staff.

Through the Rainbow Channel, the team ensures resources are available when needed and the channel is consistently updated with resources. (a transportation company).

The ongoing Rainbow Tick training sessions are fantastic, especially Rainbow 101 and Active Allyship. (a law firm).

Internal events and celebrations during Pride Month or other Rainbow-related significant days are also a key manifestation of Rainbow inclusion in participants' organisations. The supportive messages conveyed through these events are particularly significant in male-dominated industries, such as engineering, where Rainbow employees may face greater pressure, as the following comments demonstrate.

We celebrated NZ Pride Month and Global Pride Month with more initiative lined up which is very welcoming especially when the NZ office is leading Rainbow Visibility Initiative at a global office level. (a transportation company).

Pride and other days during the year. We have arranged shared lunches to celebrate Pride. We also promote Pink Shirt Day. We are active allies on social media, posting on our platforms our support for days of Rainbow importance. (a retail company).

Despite pressures within the engineering industry, has committed to hosting events in the main centres. (an engineering company).

In addition to internal events and celebrations, Rainbow employees also highlight their organisations' external engagement as a source of their positive perception of organisational culture. These external engagements include fundraising for Rainbow organisations, participation in Pride Parades and other Pride Month activities hosted by Rainbow organisations.

many social events on site to raise funds for rainbow organisations such as BBQ, drag bingo etc, and participate externally in Rainbow Auckland events including hosting some in our offices. (an energy company).

I love the annual pride parade - and sweat with pride activities we have. (an insurance company).

We are very involved and supportive. We attend important Rainbow events, such as Big Gay Out and DragVine. (a healthcare organisation).

Rainbow visibility initiatives – such as lanyards, uniforms, education and training programmes and events and celebrations – demonstrate how support for Rainbow communities becomes both institutionalised and made visibly manifest through every day and intentional organisational practices. These practices contribute to the normalisation of Rainbow identities and actively disrupt cis-heteronormativity in the workplace. Facilitating such visibility requires a diverse range of organisational efforts, including designing uniforms and lanyards, allocating dedicated budgets, planning and delivering education and training, organising events and coordinating with external Rainbow organisations. The duration of these various forms of Rainbow visibility also varies, ranging from short-term initiatives tied to Pride Month or specific commemorative days to practices embedded in everyday organisational life. For example, although the visibility afforded by Rainbow lanyards may appear minor, its effects can be enduring, generating ongoing forms of queering within organisational spaces.

3.3 Enacting Rainbow-Inclusive interpersonal relations

In a Rainbow-inclusive workplace, queerphobia – the opposite of Rainbow inclusion – should not exist or be tolerated. Rainbow employees who perceive their organisation as an inclusive space confirm that they have not experienced or witnessed discrimination against Rainbow communities in the workplace.

I haven't personally observed or experienced any discriminatory behaviour toward Rainbow communities in my workplace. From what I've seen so far, the environment has been respectful and inclusive. (an energy company).

I always feel comfortable showing up as myself. I believe that if anyone ever did act in a discriminatory way towards me that this would be swiftly dealt with. (a healthcare organisation).

Zero discrimination itself does not guarantee Rainbow inclusion. Rainbow inclusion in interpersonal interactions is demonstrated by recognising non-heterosexual relationships as normal and by using inclusive language – such as “partner” or “significant other” – that does not assume people are heterosexual, thereby interrupting heteronormativity.

It doesn't feel like heteronormativity is pervasive anymore. People don't ask female-presenting staff about 'husbands' or 'boyfriends' and male-presenting staff about 'wives' and 'girlfriends'. Everyone seems comfortable using 'partner' or 'significant other'. Nobody seems to bat an eye when non-hetero relationships come up. (a law firm).

For transgender and gender-diverse employees, a key component of inclusive language is the consistent use of the pronouns they have chosen. The following survey comments highlight the significant role pronouns play in Rainbow employees' perception of workplace climate. One participant experimented with changing pronouns as a way to assess the inclusivity of the workplace environment. They reported feeling reassured and respected when colleagues did not question the use of gender-diverse pronouns and demonstrated mindfulness in their pronoun use.

I changed my email sign off pronouns from she/her to she/they to see how it feels and fits as I figure myself out. NO ONE has said ANYTHING which I guess is a good thing. seems the office is too chill to start asking probing questions about my gender and sexuality. Love that. (an engineering company).

I feel that my workplace is inclusive. I've noticed that people are generally mindful of pronouns and respectful of diverse identities, which makes a big difference in day-to-day interactions. (an energy company).

Working within the company in a retail front, it's surprising how inclusive the workplace feels. There is acceptance and inclusion of pronoun usage for staff outside of he/him and she/her. (a telecommunications company).

Another key aspect of gender inclusion involves toilet access, a persistent issue highlighted in existing literature that documents transgender employees' struggles to use facilities aligned with their gender (Cui, 2026; Doan, 2010; Johnston, 2018). In recent years, legal developments in the US and UK – particularly those emphasising biological definitions of “women” and “sex” and restricting transgender people's access to gender-specific toilets that align with their gender (Brooks and Walker, 2025; Yurcaba, 2025) – have significantly increased the vulnerability and risk experienced by transgender individuals when attempting to use public toilets that correspond with their gender. New Zealand politicians have also been influenced by global conservative political rhetoric and have proposed bills to restrict transgender individuals' use of public toilets (Cui, 2026; The Guardian, 2025). Understanding this broader context is essential for explaining why staff acceptance of transgender women employees' use of women's toilets carries such profound significance for their positive perception of organisational culture.

I'm a transgender woman and I use the female toilets. There are nil issues with other staff here. (a supermarket company).

Testimonies from Rainbow employees who are open about their identity within the organisation are particularly compelling in demonstrating Rainbow inclusion in interpersonal interactions. This sense of inclusion, experienced in everyday interactions,

plays an instrumental role in their experiences of disclosing their Rainbow identity or undergoing a gender transition.

People in the organisation have been instrumental in my journey to come out. (an engineering company).

I started working here a few years ago and transitioned while working here. The team has been incredibly supportive and welcoming of my identity. (a retail company).

Definitely inclusive. There has never been a moment I have ever needed to hide my rainbow at work. I am a proud and confident takataapui tane in my professional life. (a healthcare organisation).

Participants' comments about interpersonal interactions – such as language choices, pronoun use and attitudes towards transgender employees' access to toilets – demonstrate how Rainbow inclusion manifests in everyday exchanges. These interactions, though often minor or even silent, can significantly influence Rainbow employees' perceptions of workplace climate and their opportunities for authentic identity expression. Importantly, such a workplace relation is not static or fixed; rather, it is continually produced through the repeated enactment of Rainbow inclusion – choosing inclusive language and pronouns, affirming non-normative identities and relations, respecting gender-diverse employees' toilet choices and actively interrupting *cis*-heteronormative assumptions in everyday interactions. Rainbow inclusion at the interpersonal level thus should not be viewed as automatic or guaranteed, nor as something determined solely by organisational policy or management. Instead, it remains continually at risk of being undermined if *cis*-heteronormativity is not consciously and consistently challenged, or if staff awareness cannot be sustained in the absence of ongoing education and training (Cui, 2025). Therefore, Rainbow-inclusive interpersonal interaction involves continual effort to enact inclusion and to disrupt normative assumptions – a form of ongoing queering.

3.4 Sustaining commitment to queering the organisation

Despite the various manifestations of Rainbow inclusion reflected in Rainbow employees' positive perceptions of the workplace climate, participants did not view the climate as perfect or static. Instead, they identified limitations or inconsistencies in current initiatives. For example, some participants suggested that Rainbow-related events should not be confined to Pride Month but extended throughout the year.

Definitely inclusive, but I hope to see more active promotion of days and weeks that celebrate rainbow diversity beyond Pride Month. (a retail company)

I feel there could be more awareness spread out during the course of the year. This way it can be a regular reminder and ensure that our Rainbow Whānau are recognised throughout the year (an energy company).

In addition to limitations around the timing of Rainbow initiatives, existing work is also constrained by its geographic reach. Participants emphasised that current initiatives should extend beyond major cities – particularly Auckland – and be implemented nationwide. Expanding their reach will help foster a consistent workplace culture across the organisation.

The organisation has done some excellent work. But don't just keep everything in Auckland, spread it round NZ, help NZ grow WITH the bigger cities not APART from them. (a telecommunications company).

It would be good to actively engage with staff in centres other than Auckland. Stop just focusing on activities in Auckland and excluding the rest of the country. (an engineering company).

Participants also expressed concerns about the current political backlash – both globally and domestically – against Rainbow communities, noting that this context presents an important opportunity for organisations to reaffirm their support and reassure their Rainbow employees. In this climate, characterised by the global spread of conservative political discourses surrounding gender and sexuality (Butler, 2025), some New Zealand organisations, particularly New Zealand offices of international firms headquartered in the USA, as well as departments within the New Zealand government, have withdrawn or scaled back their DEI policies and public support for Rainbow employees (Cui, 2026). Given these shifting political dynamics, organisational commitment to Rainbow inclusion is not perceived by Rainbow employees as assured; rather, they expect ongoing reaffirmation and reinforcement to address their concerns and sustain their positive perceptions of the workplace climate.

I do agree the organisation is inclusive, but there is a lot of politic commentary at present which is negative[...]It would be good if managers were trained/encouraged to reach out to Rainbow employees to check on them. (a recreation company).

I think it is especially important right now, when there is a rising tide of discriminatory rhetoric and action against LGBTQ people, both globally and from our own government. It can be scary to think that this organisation will just go with the flow if the government removes some protections or changes guidelines, so providing some assurance that this won't happen would be appreciated. (a government department).

Rainbow employees, confident in their organisation's inclusivity, share a common expectation: that the commitment to Rainbow inclusion will be sustained and the excellent progress already made will continue. Their expectation for the continuation of existing work, repeatedly underscored by the word "continue", highlights that Rainbow inclusion is not merely a static condition but an ongoing process that requires sustained effort and continual advancement.

Keep doing what we're doing. Continue to provide a safe space through articles, Rainbow Allies programmes, and rainbow lanyards, etc. (an energy company).

Continue staying active in celebrating Rainbow days of importance through conversation, social media, and events. (a healthcare organisation).

Continue current efforts and don't ever stop! Continue to promote an unbiased, inclusive culture within the workplace through education about Rainbow issues. (a law firm).

Participants' comments reveal the nuanced and complex nature of their perceptions of the workplace climate, which – although generally positive – still exhibit notable limitations and missed opportunities (Cui, 2025). Without sustained commitment and progress, as participants have identified, inconsistencies and gaps in existing work remain unaddressed, limiting the temporal and geographic reach of organisational efforts and preventing the full inclusion of Rainbow employees. Furthermore, as scholars have noted (Cui, 2026; Gidage, 2026), Rainbow inclusion work undertaken without genuine commitment and substantive impact – particularly when limited to highly visible but short-term gestures such as Pride Month activities – risks appearing superficial or symbolic. Such practices may prompt Rainbow employees to question the underlying intentions of organisational initiatives and to interpret these efforts as instances of Rainbow tokenism (Cui, 2026) or Rainbow washing (Gidage, 2026), thereby diminishing their sense of inclusion and belonging.

4. Discussion and implications

Drawing on qualitative data from an employee perspective survey conducted across 19 organisations in diverse sectors in New Zealand, this article highlights Rainbow employees'

positive perceptions of workplace climate within their organisations. By focusing exclusively on affirmative survey comments, it explores the key elements that contribute to creating a Rainbow-inclusive workplace. Four overlapping themes are identified as significant in shaping Rainbow employees' positive perceptions of the workplace climate:

- institutionalising support through policy and management;
- facilitating queer visibility through organisational practices;
- enacting Rainbow-inclusive interpersonal relations; and
- sustaining commitment to queering the organisation.

These findings align with international research on Rainbow employees' workplace experiences and organisational culture. For example, studies by [Badgett et al. \(2013\)](#) and [Lloren and Parini \(2017\)](#) demonstrate that Rainbow-supportive policies improve workplace dynamics for Rainbow employees by reducing discrimination, improving relationships with co-workers and enhancing job-satisfaction and overall well-being. Rainbow employees are more likely to disclose their Rainbow identity if they perceive their organisation as supportive ([Badgett et al., 2013](#); [Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2009](#); [Webster et al., 2018](#)). For transgender and gender-diverse employees, the findings of this study echo those of [Huffman et al. \(2021\)](#), underscoring the importance of interpersonal support, inclusive language use – particularly gender-affirming pronouns – alongside training and education, and work policies in shaping a trans-friendly organisational culture that facilitates identity openness at work.

By centring on Rainbow employees' positive perceptions of workplace climate, this study marks a deliberate departure from existing scholarship, which has predominantly examined negative workplace experiences such as discrimination, marginalisation, exclusion, censorship and cautious identity management ([Corlett et al., 2023](#); [Cui, 2022, 2026](#); [Cui and Burford, 2025](#); [Maji et al., 2024](#)). The manifestations of Rainbow inclusion in Rainbow employees' positive perceptions of workplace climate, as highlighted in this study, appear to stand in contrast to existing studies on Rainbow employees' negative experiences, which show that the absence of inclusion initiatives sustains *cis*-heteronormativity and contributes to workplace discrimination ([Corlett et al., 2023](#); [Maji et al., 2024](#)). Yet rather than contradicting prior findings, this study complements them: the presence of Rainbow-inclusive organisational practices fosters positive workplace experiences, just as their absence contributes to negative ones. Rainbow employees' workplace experiences are thus complex and contextual, involving positive, negative and ambivalent perceptions – each of which should be regarded as valid to achieve a full and nuanced understanding of the interplay between organisations and individuals. By examining how Rainbow employees perceive an inclusive workplace climate and what, in their view, constitutes a Rainbow-inclusive workplace, this study contributes to existing scholarship and underscores the need for, and value of, further research into Rainbow employees' positive experiences ([Salter and Sasso, 2022](#); [Trotter and Yates, 2025](#)), rather than disregarding such data or dismissing it as unimportant.

Another contribution of this study is its reframing of Rainbow inclusion not as a static state or inherent attribute of an organisation, but as a process that requires ongoing effort – one that risks becoming ineffective or unsustainable if that effort ceases. It is a deliberate choice that the themes in this study are expressed as verbal phrases – beginning with “institutionalising”, “facilitating”, “enacting” and “sustaining” – rather than as noun phrases, signalling an ongoing state of doing, changing and becoming. This reconfiguration of Rainbow inclusion is informed by the concept of *queering*, which seeks to interrogate

boundaries and unsettle what is taken as given (Burford and Allen, 2018). One such endeavour involves destabilising seemingly fixed and inherent attributes or essences – such as gender and sexuality – by demonstrating how these identities are produced and reproduced, and how their apparent stability is maintained only through continual repetition (Butler, 1990; McCann and Monaghan, 2020). In introducing the tenets of queer theory, Dilley (1999) describes queer as a concept that resists definition through fixed language or boundaries, characterising it as perpetually “under construction,” such that “what is considered queer changes as the abnormal becomes known, understood, and accepted (p. 470).” Informed by this line of thought, this study delineates a spectrum of actions – both overt and subtle – through which organisations and individuals participate in the ongoing (re)production of Rainbow-inclusion in the workplace. This study suggests rethinking Rainbow inclusion in organisations as an ongoing queering of norms – an approach that not only involves the normalisation of queerness and the problematisation of cis-heteronormativity but also, by necessity, rejects certainty and complacency, remaining continually “under construction.” Rainbow inclusion, thus, should not be understood as a destination but as a process that must be repeatedly reimagined and re-examined as the disciplinary mechanisms of normativities propagate and evolve at work (Öztürk, 2024). As such, efforts towards Rainbow inclusion need to be dynamic and reflexive, involving the continual unsettling of taken-for-granted norms rather than the pursuit of fixed organisational achievements.

The empirical findings of this study have significant implications for organisational practice and policy. The voices of Rainbow employees – often not specifically solicited and therefore unheard in organisations’ internal employee engagement surveys – should be valued by HR and leadership to cultivate a workplace environment where they feel supported and included. The themes identified in this study as fostering a positive workplace climate operate across multiple levels: foundational practices at the structural level, such as inclusive policies and supportive management; reinforcing practices at the cultural level, including Rainbow visibility through education and events; and everyday interactions at the interpersonal level that shape daily experiences. Collectively, these manifestations of Rainbow inclusion constitute a workplace climate that not only affirms diverse gender and sexuality but also actively challenges cis-heteronormativity, thereby fostering a sense of belonging and enabling authentic identity expression. Furthermore, aligning with the understanding of Rainbow inclusion as an ongoing pursuit of queering, organisations should demonstrate sustained commitment through actions such as expanding their geographic reach, extending Rainbow initiatives beyond Pride Month, maintaining continuous visibility and reaffirming their commitment in the face of resistance or backlash. This need for ongoing organisational effort has become increasingly urgent amid the current global backlash against DEI initiatives and gender diversity across Western countries (Butler, 2025; Follmer *et al.*, 2024; Ng *et al.*, 2025; Sands and Ferraro, 2025), including within New Zealand (Cui, 2026).

While the findings of this study provide rich information and valuable insights, they have limitations in capturing diverse perspectives from more marginalised and harder-to-reach Rainbow employees. Although this study identifies how, and which, organisational practices contribute to Rainbow employees’ positive perceptions of the workplace climate, it is important to acknowledge that Rainbow employees do not constitute a homogeneous group. Acknowledging this heterogeneity necessitates examining how different groups within the Rainbow community develop positive perceptions of the workplace climate in distinct ways, and how these perceptions are formed. Existing studies have shown uneven inclusion among Rainbow employees, with transgender and gender-diverse employees (Özbilgin and Erbil,

2025; Ozturk and Tatli, 2016), as well as Rainbow employees with multiple disadvantaged identities (Calang and Sunanta, 2025; Epper-Hattab and Steindórsdóttir, 2025), disproportionately experiencing exclusion and marginalisation. As these subgroups of Rainbow employees are often overwhelmingly portrayed negatively in scholarship, it is particularly important to examine whether and how they can experience inclusion, empowerment and joy in the workplace, as well as the conditions that facilitate their positive experiences. Research in this vein can contribute to a more balanced representation that moves beyond framing transgender and gender-diverse employees, as well as Rainbow employees with intersectional identities, solely as victims. More importantly, such inquiry carries significant practical implications for advancing deeper levels of workplace inclusion and for challenging intersectionally entrenched systems of power.

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Notes

- [1.] *Takatāpui* is a traditional Māori term that has been reclaimed to encompass all Māori who identify with diverse genders and sexualities. *Tāne* is a Māori word meaning 'man.'
- [2.] In New Zealand, *Rainbow* is an umbrella term – used both officially and informally – to refer to gender and sexual identities beyond heterosexual and cisgender norms. This article adopts the term to reflect the specific geographical and cultural context in which it is situated. The term *queer* is also used interchangeably throughout the article.

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