

Report finds LGBTQIA+ youth curated social media 'happy spaces' online during lockdown

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Researchers from Western Sydney University have published a new report exploring how sexuality and gender diverse young people used social media platforms during COVID-19 resulting in recommendations to ensure LGBTQIA+ people are better supported online.

The report, which is one of the largest qualitative studies in Australia on the topic, found that while homes were at times difficult spaces during lockdown, [young people](#) largely used this time to explore their identities online, particularly through interacting on social media platforms.

The research team interviewed 65 LGBTQIA+ people aged 16–30 from diverse cultural backgrounds across Australia.

Lead author Dr. Benjamin Hanckel from the University's Young and Resilient Research Centre within the Institute for Culture and Society explains the findings contradict, but don't dismiss concerns that sexuality and gender diverse young people would be worse off being back in homes that were trans/bi/homophobic.

"Our research found during the lockdown period, queer young people were actively understanding, exploring and developing who they are in terms of their gender and sexuality," said Dr. Hanckel.

"Engagement on social media platforms played an important role in this development. The findings show many young people curated 'happy' spaces for themselves online by connecting with people from across the broader LGBTQIA+ community."

"This allowed them to carefully and safely explore their identities and interests, in ways that ensured they maintained friendships and family relationships at the same time."

Co-author Dr. Shiva Chandra from the Young and Resilient Research Centre said despite the positive findings, participants of the study noted a lack of diversity in LGBTQIA+ content, concerns about LGBTQIA+ content removal, and the persistence of hate speech against sexuality and gender diverse people.

"Some young people reported difficulties finding others online with similar identities to themselves—this included race, ethnicity, disability, neurodiversity, as well as more generally a lack of diverse LGBTQIA+ representation," said Dr. Chandra.

"Other concerns raised included the unexpected removal of LGBTQIA+ content from platforms themselves, and the persistence of trans/homo/bi-phobic content, which young people in this study reported seeing."

"We believe more can be done to improve the experiences of LGBTQIA+ youths online and to support their wellbeing, and steps should be taken in consultation with the broader LGBTQIA+ community and support organisations."

The report makes the following recommendations to ensure LGBTQIA+ people are better supported. This requires [social media platforms](#) to:

Ensure clear policies are in place so that queer content does not get shutdown, shadow-banned, banned or demonetised without proper justification.

Elevate and promote LGBTQIA+ content, and when doing so support LGBTQIA+ content producers so they do not have to face trans/bi/homophobia when their content is promoted.

Clearer moderation policies are required that

explain what is not acceptable on platforms.

Greater investment is required into responses to hate speech and censorship.

Dr. Hanckel further explained: "The young people in this study discussed a number of issues at length, and advocated for new approaches to addressing hate speech, including educating perpetrators and bystanders."

"All platforms need to show a genuine commitment to supporting LGBTQIA+ people by taking a supportive public position on LGBTQIA+ issues at all times and ensuring that this is clearly embedded on platforms."

Josh Machin, Head of Policy at Facebook Australia, said: "This research demonstrates the power of platforms like Facebook and Instagram to empower the LGBTQIA+ community in times of hardship, and to create safe online spaces for connection and queer expression."

"As proud allies to the LGBTQIA+ community, Facebook takes this report's recommendations seriously. We regularly consult with the community on our policies and products, partner with queer organisations like Mardi Gras and Minus18, and create specific resources to protect LGBTQIA+ people on our platforms. We are committed to continuing this work, and doing all we can to ensure the wellbeing and safety of the LGBTQIA+ community across our platforms," added Josh Machin from Facebook Australia.

More information: Social Media Insights from Sexuality and Gender Diverse Young People During COVID-19.

[www.westernsydney.edu.au/_dat...
QIA_Youth_Report.pdf](http://www.westernsydney.edu.au/_dat...QIA_Youth_Report.pdf)

Provided by Western Sydney University

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