

SOCIAL MEDIA INSIGHTS FROM SEXUALITY AND GENDER DIVERSE YOUNG PEOPLE DURING COVID-19



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Young and Resilient Research Centre

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Key partner

Facebook

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The following reports on one of the largest qualitative studies of sexuality and gender diverse young people and their use of social media platforms in Australia. This study had two broad aims: firstly, to better understand the ways sexuality and gender diverse young people are engaging with social media platforms, and secondly, using a rapid prototyping methodological design, to reimagine with LGBTQIA+ young people the ways platforms can respond to their needs. This included exploring how platforms can better support queer young people's experiences through design features, policy, moderation, and organisational measures.

We undertook 10 focus groups and 21 interviews with 65 LGBTQIA+ (queer) young people, sampling a broad and diverse range of individuals across Australia. We spoke to a variety of people with different sexual and gender identities¹, which included sexualities such as bisexual, queer, lesbian, gay, asexual, demiromantic, and pansexual, and gender identities such as male, female, non-binary, and questioning. The study had substantial trans representation, with 57% (n=37) of the sample having been assigned a different gender at birth. Respondents were selected to ensure an ethnically diverse sample, which included people with Anglo, South Asian, East Asian, Indigenous, Middle Eastern and varied European backgrounds.

KEY FINDINGS

The findings in this study complicate the dominant narratives that circulated at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, which suggested LGBTQIA+ young people would be worse off because individuals would be back in homes that were trans/bi/homophobic. **One of the main findings of this study is that whilst homes were, at times, difficult spaces, young people used this time to explore their identities, gain a deeper and more complex understanding of gender and sexuality, and continue to engage with queer communities. Social media was and remains a critical component of LGBTQIA+ young people's lives.**

During COVID-19 queer young people were actively understanding, exploring, and developing who they are. They were able to do this online by finding relatable others, and engaging with the broader LGBTQIA+ community. They were able to curate 'happy' spaces for themselves, which felt comfortable and safe. This included blocking certain people and social media content as required. Often families of origin and other offline relationships, such as school peers, were important considerations for young people when curating social media accounts.

Queer young people found content on social media platforms that resonated with their queerness, as well as their shared interests (e.g. baking, gaming, and art). In most cases these overlapped, providing them with opportunities to share these common interests with relatable queer others. However, young LGBTQIA+ people often get frustrated by the lack of diverse content on all social media platforms they used. They see aspects of their identity and/or others being made invisible, including their race/ethnicity, dis/ability, neurodiversity, as well as more generally a lack of diverse LGBTQIA+ people, which includes intersex and asexual individuals.

¹ Please refer to the following website for definitions of genders and sexualities (<https://www.queerundefined.com/>). The definitions are crowd sourced, which means community members post how they relate to and define the terms used. We believe this captures the way queer people relate to terminology, as different people identify with terms in similar, yet individually distinct ways.

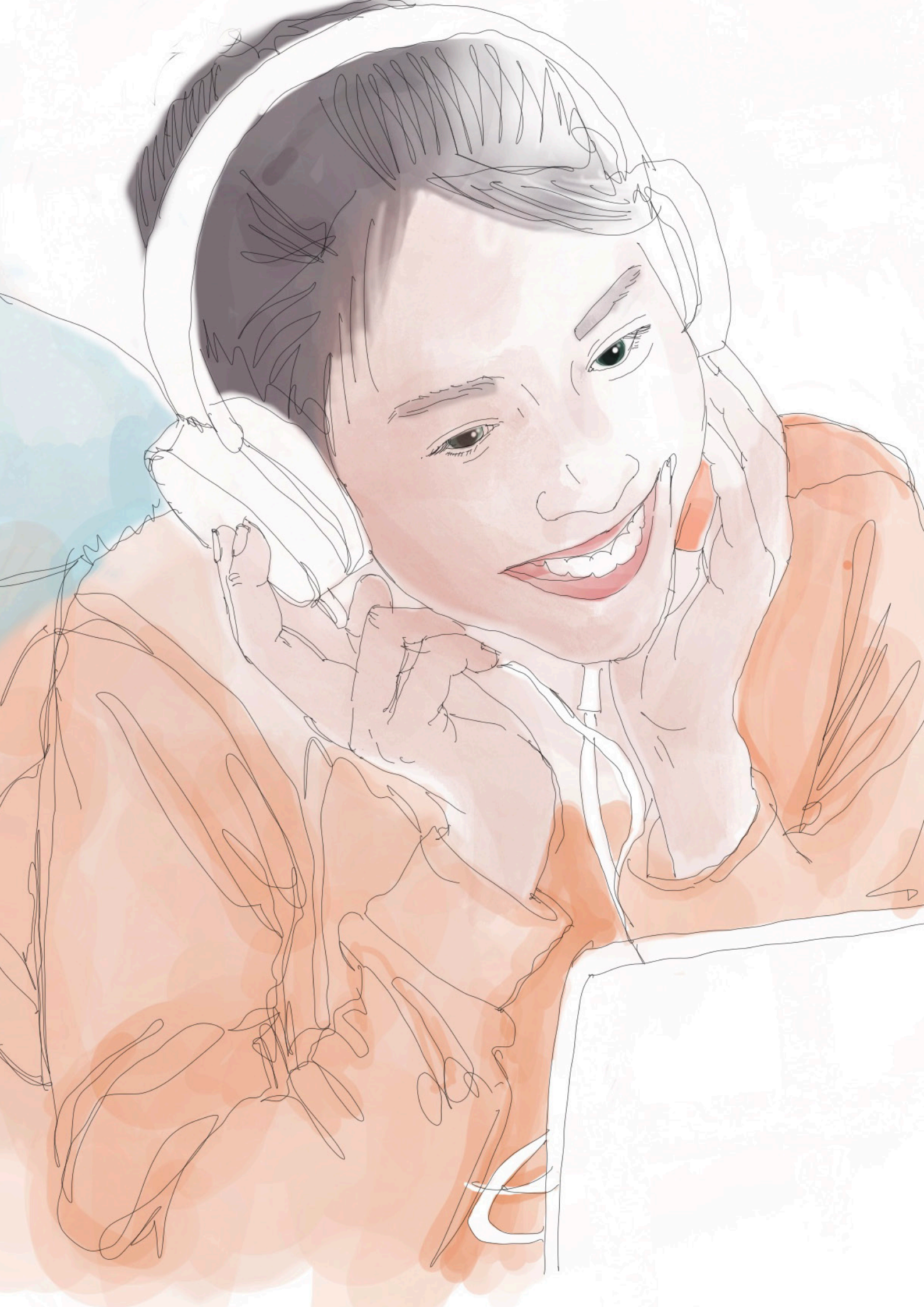
While lack of content was one issue, the unexpected removal of LGBTQIA+ content by platforms was another key concern for young people. They worried about the removal and censorship of queer content and how this fits within the scope of existing moderation guidelines, which they feel lack transparency across all platforms. To better understand the removal of any content, the moderation guidelines across platforms must be clearer.

The LGBTQIA+ young people in this study also reported concerns about the persistent trans/homo/bi-phobic content - hate speech – they encounter across platforms. Whilst they acknowledge more needs to be done about hate speech, they are reluctant to censor content, unless it crosses a ‘line’. This ‘line’ however is not clear, and needs to be further defined and elaborated with young people in the future. However, the young people in our study advocated for new approaches that can sit alongside censorship mechanisms. Specifically, they advocated for educative approaches to counter hate speech, where people – perpetrators of hate speech and bystanders - are taught about sexual and gender diversity. The young people themselves are already participating in educative processes, as part of their own social media use. More broadly, queer young people’s participation in debates about content moderation and censorship is critical, as platforms design effective processes and mechanisms to counter and respond to hate speech.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

LGBTQIA+ voices and content must be promoted and elevated by social media platforms, and there is a greater need for more diverse queer voices in the content and decision-making processes of all platforms. This requires:

- 1.** Better policies in place so that queer content does not get shutdown, shadow-banned, banned, or de-monetised without proper justification.
- 2.** Supporting LGBTQIA+ content producers so they do not have to face trans/bi/homophobia when their content is promoted and ensuring they are connected to support organisations and services if they are targeted in some way. Platforms should also consider paid collaboration(s) with creators to ensure their labour is recognised.
- 3.** Clear moderation policies that explain what is acceptable and not acceptable on platforms. These should be developed with young people, and specifically include LGBTQIA+ young individuals.
- 4.** Greater investment in responses to hate speech. This should work to counter prejudicial and discriminatory content against LGBTQIA+ young people. Platforms should pursue and test educative approaches, such as educational material in comments, on posts and awareness campaigns, which aim to teach about gender and sexual diversity.
- 5.** Responding to the fluidity of queer identities and expansive terms used by LGBTQIA+ people. This means making it easier to express multiple gender and sexual identities, and the shifting nature of these, in platform design, community engagement, and business-to-business (B2B) engagements.
- 6.** A genuine commitment to supporting LGBTQIA+ people. This means taking a supportive public position on queer issues at all times and ensuring this is clearly embedded on social media platforms. It also requires working closely with community organisations to support LGBTQIA+ people.



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1. INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Australian government set up national restrictions, limiting the physical movement of people to contain the spread of the virus. The resulting restrictions, which were heightened for some areas more than others², meant that for young people their everyday activities were expected to take place from home, including schooling and work.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, asexual, queer and questioning (LGBTQIA+³) young people were, like other young people in Australia and globally, expected to stay at home. LGBTQIA+ communities, mental health professionals and academics were concerned that young queer people may suffer from being stuck in transphobic, bi-phobic or homophobic households. As articulated by the report to the UN General Assembly, there were particular concerns related to physical and psychological violence:

Stay-at-home directives, isolation, increased stress and exposure to disrespectful family members exacerbate the risk of violence, with particular impact on older persons and youths (2020, p. 1).

Such concerns are perhaps not surprising – we know that existing stigmas and discrimination disproportionality affect sexuality and gender diverse young people (Hill et al. 2021). From data reported prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, we know that LGBTQIA+ young people face persistent stigma and discrimination from family, peers and the institutions they participate in, particularly gender diverse young people, and those living outside major metropolitan centres (National LGBTI Health Alliance, 2020). This impacts their mental health, with gender diverse young people reporting on average lower mental health outcomes (Robinson et al. 2014; Hill et al. 2021). For these reasons concerns circulated about the COVID-19 stay-at-home directives, and their impact on LGBTQIA+ young people who were suddenly stuck at home, without the physical spaces where they may normally have found support, connection to LGBTQIA+ others, and/or important friendships.

At this time when young people were suddenly at home and also expected to be on digital technologies, we wanted to know what LGBTQIA+ young people were doing, and the role digital technologies were playing in their lives. The past decade has shown how access to the internet is crucial for LGBTQIA+ young people, as online platforms can provide important protective spaces that support wellbeing (Hillier et al. 2012; Ybarra et al. 2015). These spaces afford access to information about sexuality and gender, opportunities to explore and form identities, and the ability to make and sustain connections with similar others (Hillier et al. 2012; Robinson et al. 2014; Hanckel and Morris 2014; Robards et al. 2018; Hanckel et al. 2019). In doing so, LGBTQIA+ young people use social media in innovative and unimagined ways, using platform features and functions to participate in the LGBTQIA+ community, as well as manage boundaries, mitigate risk, and avoid stigma (Byron 2019; Hanckel et al. 2019).

This qualitative study, the largest of its kind to date, examines young people's use of social media platforms during COVID-19 restrictions. It documents the experiences of 65 young people throughout Australia, aged 16–30, of diverse genders and sexualities. The study set out to better understand the role social media platforms played during lockdown and how they were being used by queer young people. The findings provide critical insights into how further support can be provided to LGBTQIA+ young people. Such work, as others have indicated (DeVito et al. 2020), is additionally important as it surfaces issues that affect all users, and taps into the often unanticipated ways that platform design can be enhanced for the future.

² The state of Victoria, for instance, experienced greater restrictions in comparison to other Australian states and territories in 2020 due to a second major outbreak from August to October 2020, which resulted in an additional 112 day lockdown (Tsirtsakis 2020).

³ We use LGBTQIA+ as a recognisable acronym to refer to trans, gender diverse, intersex, queer, gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, asexual and other sexuality and gender diverse people, and represents the people who participated in this study. When referring to individual studies we use the acronym that the authors have adopted when reporting findings.

2. COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS: HOW ARE LGBTQIA+ PEOPLE FARING?

Surveys of LGBTQIA+ people have shown that COVID-19 and resulting restrictions have had a negative impact on the mental health of queer young people, particularly transgender individuals (Kneale and Bécares 2020), bisexual people (Fish et al. 2021) and those with existing mental health concerns (Byron et al. 2021). In one recent study, an American survey of LGBT college students, Gonzales et al. (2020) found that 60% had experienced psychological distress during the pandemic. Another study found that for sexual minority men 'physical distancing adversely impacted participants mental health by reducing their sense of social connectedness', with respondents indicating increased 'feelings of loneliness and isolation' (Nelson et al. 2020, p. 760).

However, at the same time positive health and wellbeing benefits associated with 'LGBTQ social networks' have been reported (Kneale and Bécares 2020) through participation in support groups online (Grant et al. 2021). Technology use increased during the pandemic amongst both sexual minority and heterosexual groups (Baumel et al. 2021), as people replaced face-to-face communication when it was not possible to engage in it (Gerrard 2020). Emerging research conducted since COVID-19 has shown that for LGBTQIA+ people technologies have been used to stay connected with similar others online (Grant et al. 2021; Baumel et al. 2021; Cerezo et al. 2021; Holloway et al. 2021). Rodriguez-Seijas et al. (2020) found that during quarantine gender and sexual minority individuals showed reduced depression when they spent time socialising online. Services have also adapted to COVID-19 restrictions, with Twenty10, a Sydney-based queer service provider, using Discord to conduct social drop-in sessions, which provided queer young people with a sense of online community during the pandemic (Byron et al. 2021).

Taken together, this emerging research points to how LGBTQIA+ people were able to develop resilience, and cope with pressing social circumstances by connecting to community even during pandemic restrictions (Chen and Bonanno 2020). However, further empirical work is required to understand the role of these social networks online, and the importance of these in LGBTQIA+ young people's everyday lives during COVID-19, and its impact on their health and wellbeing.



3. LGBTQIA+ YOUNG PEOPLE AND SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Research over the past decade has shown how access to the internet is crucial for LGBTQIA+ young people: online spaces provide important protective and support factors for wellbeing (Ybarra et al. 2015). They afford access to information about sexuality and gender, opportunities to explore and form identities, and to make and sustain connections with the queer community (Gray 2009; Hillier et al. 2012; Robinson et al. 2014; Hanckel and Morris 2014; Paradis 2016; Robards et al. 2018; Hanckel et al. 2019).

For queer young people, this support may not always be available in immediate offline settings, such as the school and home. For example, Formby (2012, p. 52) highlights that online interactions are particularly important forms of support to queer young people who are experiencing isolation. Research has also demonstrated that social media platforms provide important opportunities to explore identity through engagement with the queer community (Duguay 2016; Fox and Ralston 2016; Robards et al. 2018; Byron 2019; Hanckel 2019; Hanckel et al. 2019). These platforms enable the development and sharing of online content by users, allowing LGBTQIA+ young people to create queer representations online, such as YouTube videos on trans experiences (O'Neill 2014; Vivienne 2016). The production and dissemination of this content has the potential to 'offer alternative ways of understanding sex, sexuality and gender' (Alexander and Losh 2010, p. 24).

Similar to other young people, LGBTQIA+ young people often move between multiple social media platforms at any one time (Robards et al. 2018; Haimson 2018). Using multiple platforms is referred to as 'polymedia practice' (Madianou and Miller 2013). As stated, by engaging in polymedia practice, LGBTQIA+ young people use social media platforms to find others like themselves and to access resources (Fox and Ralston 2016). However, these social media platforms are often visible spaces, connecting young people to family, friends, peers, and others, which means different parts of their lives intersect with one another. This phenomenon is known as 'context collapse', where different aspects of one's life intersect online (Marwick and boyd, 2011).

Existing research shows that LGBTQIA+ young people navigate context collapse on social media platforms in ways appropriate to their life circumstances. Queer young people's social media use often involves the innovative use of platform features and functions to participate in the LGBTQIA+ community. This means they manage visibility, mitigate risk and avoid stigma, while feeling safe in their use of social media (Hanckel et al. 2019). Orne (2011) describes 'strategic outness' as one way that queer people manage information about their sexuality, arguing they choose to reveal their sexuality depending on context by being explicit about it in some spaces and not others (Orne 2011). Talbot (2020) notes this similarly occurs for gender diverse and trans users online. Strategies include blocking certain people and managing multiple profiles so young people can safely engage with queer community and find others like them, without disclosing their sexual/gender identity to people whom they may not want to (Hanckel et al. 2019).

Exploring these concerns in social science research, Lupton and Southerton (2021) have spoken about the importance of understanding social media as being located within the broader context of people's everyday lives. They suggest that the experience of Facebook (and by extension all social media platforms) is not 'monolithic' but rather:

The always-emergent Facebook assemblage incorporates people's feelings, bodies, histories, sedimented habits and inclinations, as well as the material conditions in which these encounters take place (Lupton and Southerton 2021, p. 14).

In light of this, there is a need to better understand how young queer people are using social media platforms in the context of their lives more broadly, so we can better support their wellbeing. The 'material conditions' that Lupton and Southerton (2021) refer to for this report is in part the changing context of COVID-19.

There is a critical need to better understand what COVID-19 and the changing context means for the online practices of LGBTQIA+ young people.

This study responds to these concerns, by examining the changes in social media practices of LGBTQIA+ young people during the pandemic, to generate insights and actionable recommendations for social media platforms. Specifically, we explored:

- 1) how young people were using social media platforms during the pandemic
- 2) what this meant for their day-to-day lives, wellbeing, identity and relationships
- 3) how their experiences can be improved across platforms to improve safety and wellbeing.

In the context of this study, wellbeing refers to the ability to lead meaningful lives (Sen 1999). This includes queer people's ability to negotiate their sexuality and gender with comfort and ease, to develop their identities, and to forge meaningful connections.



4. METHODS

The study sought to recruit young people between 16 - 35 years old who identified as LGBTQIA+. Recruitment took place from Dec 2020 to Jan 2021. Advertisements were placed on Facebook and Instagram (see images below), which linked people to a screening survey. To express interest in participating, they were asked to voluntarily fill out details, including their sexuality, gender, ethnicity, location (urban, regional, rural), and which social media platforms they use⁵.



Figure 1: Advertisement image and main text.



Figure 2: Advertisement as it appeared on Facebook (Dec 2020 – Jan 2021).

⁵ Ethics approval for this project was provided by Western Sydney University (Approval Number H14193).

Over 1100 young people indicated an interest in participating in the study. In determining the number of respondents we decided to limit the age range to 16 – 30. We purposefully ensured a diverse sample of young people by age, cultural background, location, and gender and sexual identity.

In total we undertook 10 focus groups and 21 interviews. A table of the participants can be seen in Appendix One. All young people who participated were given an AUD\$50 gift voucher as an honorarium for their time.

After consenting to participate in the study, each respondent was asked to draw two ‘social media cities’ reflecting their use of online platforms. One city had to reflect their use of social media before the pandemic restrictions, while the other city was to reflect their use of social media during the pandemic restrictions (see example from one participant on the following page⁶, Figure 3). Platforms were often represented as buildings, or estates. They got bigger if people used them more, or new buildings were added if people started using platforms they had not done so previously. This activity provided a critical impetus and visual tool through which to talk about social media use, the changes that took place, and how respondents thought and felt about these changes, and social media platforms more broadly.

During the interviews and focus groups we also explored with participants the design of social media platforms and how they can be improved. To do this we drew on an iterative rapid prototyping methodology, where participants collectively came up with ideas to address social media platform design limitations and challenges. Suggestions were then presented to the following focus group/interviewee, who discussed/generated ideas based on previous suggestions.

The transcripts were double-coded thematically by the research team, using NVivo software. This involved discussing key emergent themes after focus groups and interviews, which the researchers then used to code the data to answer the research questions.

4.1. PARTICIPANTS

In this study we had respondents from all states and territories in Australia. Of our 65 respondents, 47 lived in urban areas and 18 lived in regional/rural locations. The study recruited an ethnically diverse sample, which included people with Anglo, South Asian, East Asian, Indigenous, Middle Eastern and varied European backgrounds.

People identified their sexuality as ‘bisexual’ (16), ‘queer’ (10), ‘lesbian’ (7), ‘gay’ (5), ‘pansexual’ (5), while others used a combination of identifiers to describe their sexuality such as ‘biromantic and asexual’ (4), ‘bisexual, demisexual, demiromantic’ or ‘homoromantic asexual’. Some people further specified or commented on their sexuality such as ‘bisexual (strong lean towards men)’ and ‘pansexual I guess (not a label fan)’.

In total, 37 young people were assigned a different gender at birth, and 28 were not, representing 57% of the total sample. Respondents identified as female/woman (19), male/man (12), non-binary (12), questioning (3), along with a diversity of other gender identifiers such as ‘genderfae’ and ‘demiboy’, which sometimes included more than one gender identifier such as ‘transmasc/non-binary’ and ‘non-binary transwoman’ (for a full breakdown of all respondent identities see Appendix One).

⁶ Used with permission from the respondent.

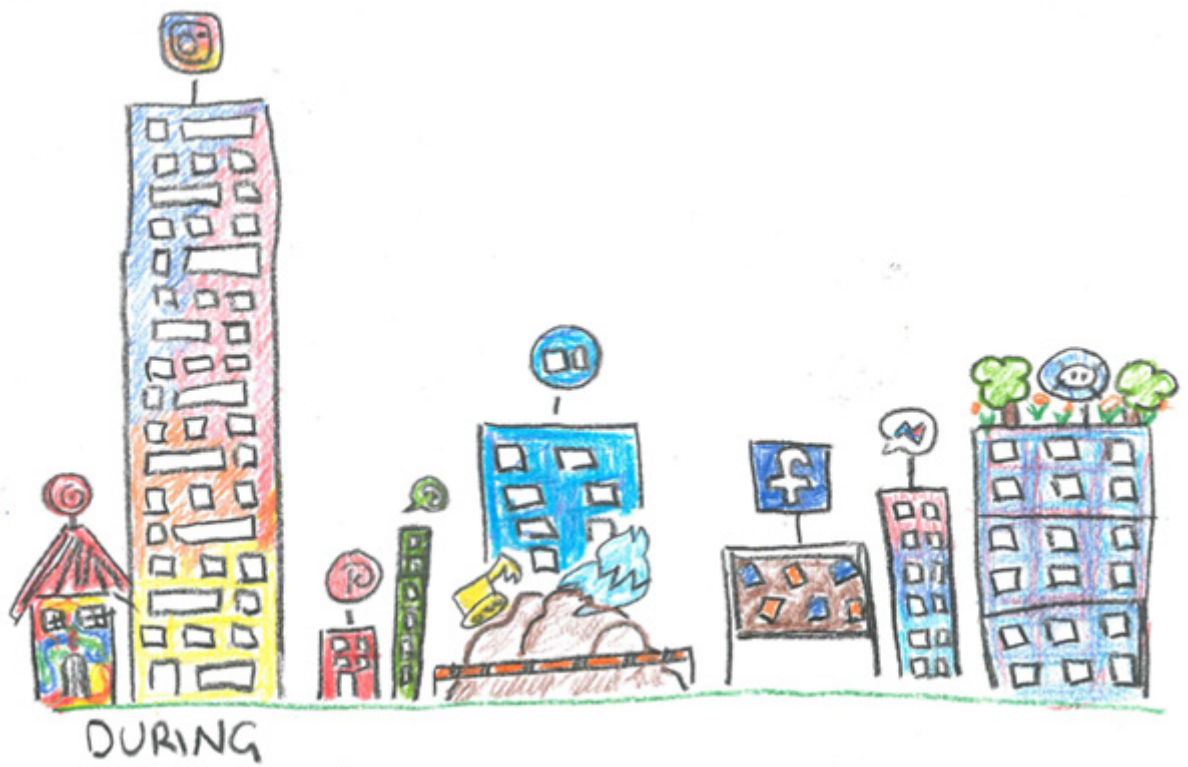


Figure 3: Example of respondent-created 'social media city'.



The participants reported engaging across various social media platforms. While these were, as we discuss below, used in various ways, the most commonly used platforms were: Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok and Snapchat. This is illustrated in the word-cloud below (see Figure 4).

The participants included at least eight neurodiverse young people, who self-disclosed during interviews and focus groups, though because this data was not formally collected we cannot be certain how many people were neurodiverse, and we did not ask specifically about dis/ability either, so we cannot make general claims about queer young people living with dis/ability. One person also disclosed intersex status. We note caution in interpreting the results for applicability across these groups, with whom greater research is required to validate these findings.



Figure 4: Social media platforms used by respondents.

5. NAVIGATING SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS: FINDINGS FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS AND INTERVIEWS

In the following section, we examine how young LGBTQIA+ people navigated social media platforms during COVID-19 restrictions to connect to community and find relatable others. We show how young people used social media platforms to work on their identities, engage with “queerness”, and learn about alternate genders and sexualities, while also managing profiles, family and friendships. Our findings also point to the importance of seeing diverse content across all platforms, as well as the ongoing issues of hate speech and the need to respond to hate speech in ways that build on current censorship approaches.

5.1. FINDING AND CONNECTING TO LGBTQIA+ SPACE(S)

The young people in this study reported their overall use of social media increased during COVID-19 pandemic lockdown(s). Lockdowns and restrictions meant young LGBTQIA+ people were spending greater periods of time in their homes with their devices, which saw their social media use increase. Respondents used a number of different platforms (see Figure 4) for a variety of reasons, which included: keeping in touch with friends and family, socialising, making new friends, entertainment, sharing artwork, gaming, watching videos, laughing at memes, finding community, learning about gender and sexuality, and connecting with ‘relatable’ others.

It is perhaps not surprising that the internet provided entertainment and connection for many young people at this time. However, the LGBTQIA+ young people we spoke to reported that **COVID-19 was an important period, where they could explore ‘queerness’ and what it meant to them**. Specifically, this meant finding platforms, content and similar others, which allowed young people to reflect on their own genders and sexualities. For example, Bay explained:

“...actually during lockdown was when I started to question my gender, so social media – messaging platforms especially – was really helpful for me. Cos I’m in like a Discord group for a local queer group, and via the people there and one of my friends who I actually was messaging via Facebook Messenger [...] all really helped me out to kind of like figure-out my identity and everything.”

Young people like Bay were exploring and working out their identities in careful and safe ways, by using various social media platforms to connect to others, while learning about sexual and gender diversity. In a society where queer individuals remain stigmatised, these platforms provide an important source of support, learning and identification for people like Bay. As Bay suggests, this involved a process of ‘finding’ queer people and content. Indiana indicated similarly, ‘I started looking more online and social media and finding people that were like me. It kind of helped me understand who I was and...could be...’.

This process of finding involved locating people and content that individuals thought were ‘relatable’. It involved activities such as watching queer YouTube videos, joining queer groups on platforms such as Discord and Facebook, viewing queer related Instagram posts, or discovering the vast array of queer content on TikTok. For example, Serenity explained that finding ‘queer TikTok’ - where people are shown and recommended



short queer videos – was an ‘amazing’ experience for her. She also mentioned that, like others, she had become friends with people in her local area because of the platform. According to Corey, TikTok is “like incredibly tailored and it’s like, ‘oh, wow, there are people who really experience, like, the same exact things that I do’”. Finding people with relatable experiences meant that young people like Corey were validated in their identities and experiences, when they saw others like them.

Finding relatable content is especially important to queer young people given the stigmatisation⁷ they already face in broader society. Validation of their identities in online spaces is especially important, given they may be ridiculed and marginalised in other social spheres. Callum explained that watching queer people on YouTube allowed him to ‘feel more secure in my identity’ and Tony stated:

“I think at the end of the day, no-one wants to feel alone [...] you know, the thing about social media, a fantastic thing is that you know, you get to meet people from all around the world and you know, you meet people with lives and experiences that I guess...sort of enrich yours in the sense that they, you know, their lives are so different, but you know when you have these things in common, these big things in common, like being queer or being like black or brown then [...] I guess it helps universalise your experience in a way that comforts.”

⁷ In saying this we understand and acknowledge that different types of queer people face greater stigma for their identities. For example, trans individuals, especially of colour, do not enjoy the level of acceptance many gay men do in Western societies.

In a similar way, Kamal explained:

“...I guess the primary sort of purpose across any of those [platforms] is finding community and finding sort of places where you feel seen and you feel heard and you feel like there’s people around you that, you know are in the same space as you and feel the same things as you and um, that you can really connect and relate with, and that’s the main thing.”

In these quotes we get a sense of the comfort young people feel when they find similar others and online spaces that are welcoming of their identities. As a result, we argue that these online spaces provide important forms of support and validation for sexuality and gender diverse young people. For example, they allow queer young people to imagine positive lives they want to lead in the immediate, as well as distant future. Knox explained that as he began to explore more queer content during COVID-19 he wanted to emulate a life where he could be happy, healthy and open about his gender and sexuality:

“...I saw how they [others] got to live like, you know, really authentically and it was like, it was the envy of it. It was the whole, ‘I really should come out soon so that I can start being like this’ and I don’t have that ‘oh I’ll put it off and, you know, put off who I want to be in time’”.

In a similar manner, Acer explained:

“Um, well yeah, I’ve always been a bit uncertain about who [...] I also thought that it wouldn’t really be possible for me to feel like myself, but then seeing other people and their experiences and seeing that they are happy with themselves and doing well, that’s been really good and helpful.”

This illustrates why positive representations of queer identity are critical to young LGBTQIA+ people, as they allow them to consider ‘happy’ possibilities for themselves, which they may not have otherwise.

5.1.1. Community

This online engagement with queer people and LGBTQIA+ content was framed by young people as participation in a broader ‘community’. Respondents used a range of ideas and feelings to describe what community meant to them, which included: like-mindedness, understanding, acceptance, friendship, relatability, comfort, empathy, support, safety and feeling protected. Brooke articulated this sense of community in the following way:

“...it comes back to just feeling like instantly comfortable with everyone and you don’t even know them and it’s like...I don’t know, it’s, sometimes it’s just the way they act or the things they talk about, I’m like, ‘oh yeah, I’m into those things too’. Or it’s like, ‘yeah’, you know. Kind of that like, I don’t know, just feels very comforting to watch people who like the same things I like.”

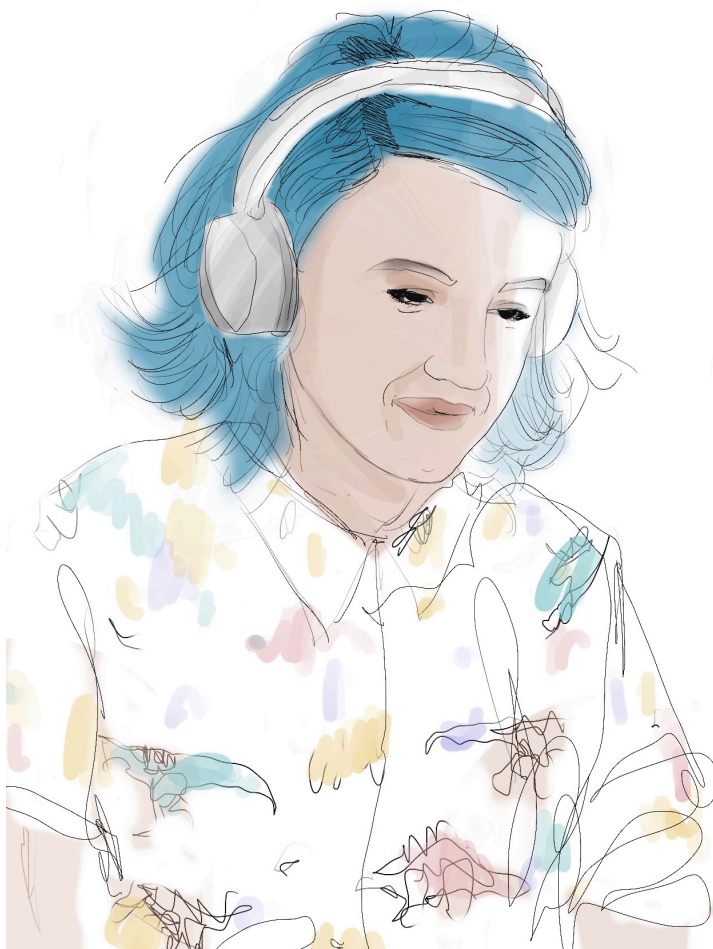
In practice this meant talking and building relationships with others on platforms, moderating Discord servers, contributing to Facebook groups, and/or creating content on TikTok and Instagram. Some participants did not directly engage with others and talk online, rather they reported liking posts and videos, or simply lurking, which they found meaning in doing. Lurking and the mere act of watching other queer people and community provided young people with a sense of engagement and connection to others like them. This again, validated and supported their identities. Connections to other queer people were formed not only in Australia, but across

the globe, as respondents spoke about reaching out to people from all over the world with varied experiences. For trans people this engagement with the community can be especially significant. It not only provides them with stories about similar others, but also about social and medical transitions, which includes knowledge about surgery and what other trans people's experiences have been (Haimson et al. 2020; Shepherd and Hanckel 2021). Engagement with community also meant that pre-existing and new friendships formed through these online activities (Byron 2020). This allowed young LGBTQIA+ people to explore their identity with others who they felt safe and comfortable with.

We did not find major differences in the way online spaces provided connection and exploration of identity across urban, regional and rural Australia. However, our findings did indicate that for some people in regional and rural settings this may be the only way they can connect to similar others. For example, Evie, who lives in rural Australia, explained the limitations of accessing queer spaces in her hometown:

“...the city has so many more, I guess, resources and um, places to go. [...] I don't know if we even have [...] like a group or a community, like an established community for queer people to go, um, we don't have any of that at all. [...] my thoughts on the city would be like 'oh if I go move to the city and I go to [...] uni and I hang around and, you know, meet people, I'll you know, find people who know people who know places, and stuff like that [which] are for queer people'. And I feel like they'd be much more opportunity for people there.”

For people in urban Australian cities, the internet exists alongside other possibilities of engagement with queer community, however, for people like Evie, it may be the only option available to her. In contrast, Knox, living in a major Australian city, explained how he enjoyed visiting a queer identified neighbourhood in his city, and how this was an experience that made him feel comfortable living with a non-normative gender and sexuality. The ability to access such spaces, and gain from being in them, has also been identified by Gorman-Murray and Waitt (2009).



During COVID-19 queer young people were actively understanding, exploring and developing who they are, in ways that questioned and challenged normative expectations of gender and sexuality. They were able to do this online by finding relatable others, and engaging with the broader queer community. This involved viewing queer content, engaging with other queer people, and developing friendships in these spaces. Despite the pervasive narrative that COVID-19 was a time for queer struggle, our findings demonstrate how queer people and queerness more broadly, was able to flourish in online spaces during the pandemic.

5.2. CURATING SAFE(R) AND HAPPIER SPACES: PRIVACY, COMFORT AND SUPPORTIVE SPACES

As social media usage increased during COVID-19 restrictions our respondents created online spaces that were comfortable and contributed to their well-being. This meant blocking content (or people) who were deemed to be problematic, and/or creating multiple social media accounts where respondents were free(r) to explore gender and sexuality. It also meant limiting the amount of information they provided about themselves, sometimes minimising their visibility on certain platforms. As highlighted, researchers call this process ‘curation’, which involves using platform features that enable and constrain, in order to create profiles and find content according to one’s desires (Hanckel et al. 2019). For instance, Afet curates their online profiles by limiting their social media interactions to people who are queer:

“I’m really good at filtering out things that I don’t like. So, if, if literally anything on Instagram that like brings down my mood, I’ll get rid of it. So it was to the point I forgot straight people existed. [...] I make sure that I only have queer friends [...] like I don’t live in a comfortable - like environment, so online is the only place where I can and I’m not gonna let anyone ruin that experience. So and especially in COVID, since you know we had a lot of time. You know I filtered out as many straight people as I could [laughs].”

The “riskiness” of being open or out about one’s gender and/or sexuality was contextual and dependent on the person. As a result, young queer people curated social media spaces in ways that fit within their life circumstances and personal desires: some people reported concerns about being out in their communities, others feared backlash from peers, some were concerned about their parents and what extended family will say, while some feared being stigmatised and not wanting to make others, like peers, “uncomfortable”. For example, a 17-year-old bi-sexual respondent named Antonio, explained that he is straight presenting on Facebook as there are many people on the platform who do not know about his sexuality. However, on Snapchat he sends videos of him and his boyfriend together to his contacts, as these individuals know about his sexuality. His openness, like many of our respondents, was strategic depending on the particular platform and the people on them. As stated, this is ‘strategic outness’ (Orne 2011, Talbot, 2020) where people carefully navigate the disclosure of their sexuality and gender based on context.

Engaging in ‘strategic outness’ across social media platforms was particularly evident when people were not open about their sexuality or gender to certain family members or peers. Evie, for example, was careful not to be too out on social media about her bisexuality, explaining ‘I’m kind of worried that you know people [school peers] won’t talk to me or they won’t help me if I need it, or like especially um, teachers as well’. Significantly, such strategies were often employed to maintain relations with families of origin⁸ or protect them from stigmas from extended family members or local community. Recent research has shown the desire to maintain connections with family and to protect them are important considerations for LGBTQIA+ people (see for example: Chandra, 2020). As Vanni explained:

“Well I’m out to my parents but like I’m talking about like all their siblings and stuff so my aunts and uncles. But because of like how tight knit like our family is it’s pretty much, it would be like a point of major contention [...] if I explicitly stated that I was queer, because right now sometimes I post like infographics about queer issues on my Insta, um like once every in a blue moon, cos I’m scared if I do it frequently, they’ll catch on. But um, yeah if I explicitly stated it, it’s very likely that you know shit would go south.”

⁸ One’s biological family, or the adoptive family they have grown up with.



Vanni, like other participants, described an often complex situation where they blocked certain family members from seeing parts on their Instagram profile, and were careful about the amount of queer content they posted on aspects still visible to family members. Often such actions were about maintaining strong relationships with family that people did not want to rupture or strain, or protecting parents from repercussions if others came to know about one's sexuality and/or gender identity. Joel, for example, explained that his mother was struggling with him being trans, and that if he were more open about his sexuality online, then this would make it more difficult for her to cope. In this case it is care for a loved one that informs Joel's use of social media. Notably the study did not find a difference between cultural/ethnic groups regarding concerns about family members, and desires to maintain relationships with them.

Overall, if young people were out about their diverse sexuality and gender in most spheres of their lives, it was common to find they were out on all the platforms they use. However, if someone had individuals they did not wish to reveal their sexuality or gender identity to, and risked exposure on particular platform(s), they curated these environments with more care.

5.2.1. Curation with algorithms

Another interesting aspect of curation was that all respondents were conscious that social media platforms used algorithms and they incorporated this knowledge into their curation strategies. They understood that the algorithm was playing a role in creating safe(r) spaces and at times, spoke about purposefully leveraging this to suit their own needs and desires.

For example, Gabbie explained the work that is put into making the algorithm curate spaces that they are happy with:

“I think I actively seek [...] content creators that are...you know, LGBTQ-friendly and actively play a part in the LGBTQ community. So I actively search that out for myself so that I will be shown more of that. I’m like, ‘OK, this is the content I want to see. Let’s fast track that’. I’ll just go and be like, ‘OK, I know I follow this person on Instagram. Let’s see if they have a TikTok’ [...] that way the algorithm will feed me more of that. So I don’t have to, sort of, sort of end up anywhere else. I’m like, ‘oh, this is the place I want to be. Let’s just follow these people’. And then eventually, once I do enough of that, I will sort of end up in a place where the algorithm will feed me more of that [content].”

Interestingly, as Gabbie explains, young people may look for the same person across multiple platforms.

This is an important point: different platforms can influence one another, as people try to curate safe(r) spaces by feeding information from one platform into another. This observation also highlights that young queer people do not use social media platforms in isolation to one another, and work to curate several social media spaces to create positive experiences for themselves. As Mia said, discussing her use of TikTok, it ‘takes a little bit [of labour] to like, make it that sort of happy place.’ In other words, these young people were actively creating their own positive spaces, and producing positive emotional experiences for themselves.

5.2.2. Curation: Dealing with discrimination

However, while young LGBTQIA+ people curated spaces where they could have positive experiences, they still experienced negativity online. Our respondents spoke about seeing content or comments that were discriminatory towards queer people, which they found upsetting at times. As Brooke indicated, when participating in Facebook groups online:

“...one person will post something that’s like kind of like homophobic or transphobic and I’m like, ‘I don’t like this’, and then no-one does anything about it. So then I’ll leave the group. So I’m like, ‘nevermind that was fun for a second, but not anymore’”.

Like Brooke, many respondents took active decisions to “leave” groups, block content and/or people, and curated space(s) where they felt more comfortable. As Eva indicated when asked if she had seen trans/bi/homophobic content on social media platforms:

“So I’ve just started blocking them and just, like I’ve just made a space where I am happy and surrounded by, you know, people that do value me.”

One participant, Callum, discussed having strategies in place, such as alerting others in his online network about queer-phobic accounts, so they could unfollow or block them. Another young person indicated that if someone was trans-phobic on his Discord server, then he would not hesitate to remove them. This labour by participants created spaces that felt good and safe.

Respondents also mentioned that there were some instances in which queer spaces themselves were experienced as negative. Participants mentioned experiences of witnessing transphobia and biphobia by other queer people. Sadie explained:

“...I’m not trans, but like witnessing transphobia within the [LGBTQIA+] community. Like it breaks my heart [...] one of my really good friends is trans and like it just breaks my heart that that exists in like sort of this community that praises itself for being so inclusive...”



This means that creating more positive experiences for LGBTQIA+ people is **also** about educating queer people on differences within the community. **Through blocking people and content, young people created spaces that were comfortable and safe for them. Families of origin and other offline relationships, such as school peers, were important considerations for young people when they curated their social media accounts. They were curating spaces that were ‘happy’, even if that did not always completely remove the negativity.**

5.3. ‘...LIKE A VENN DIAGRAM’: IDENTITY AND SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

The queer young people in this study spoke about their ‘queerness’ as being important to who they are, however this also overlapped and intersected with other interests and identifiers. Avery put it this way:

“...I think if you think of like a Venn diagram but with lots and lots of circles, so you have like one interest but it’ll overlap with another interest and they then like that creates a sub-community and then you have like, you are your own community and then it’s like depending on which little or big community you’re in at the time...”

The Venn diagram – a useful model that other respondents agreed with – spoke to how a person may be queer but also have interests and hobbies such as gaming, anime, baking, cosplay and art. Although these interest groups were communities of their own, respondents explained that whilst participating in them they found other people like themselves: queer gamers, queer artists, or baking lesbians, as Brooke highlights:

“I’ve noticed as well that a lot of like baking TikTok tends to be very queer, like there’s a lot of lesbians that do lots of baking and it’s very nice. Very nice to watch. [...] Yeah for sure [it’s relatable]. It’s like you’re comfortable without even knowing them. So it’s just very comforting to watch, yeah.”

Brooke's reference to baking lesbians is particularly insightful. It shows us that finding people like oneself engaged in mundane activities normalises queerness and makes it a part of the everyday. As Skyler put it, it is 'queerness-plus things' when the communities of interest and queerness intersected and/or collided. For example, Corey explained that he found queer people in non-queer spaces such as fandoms, stating 'I have a really strange mix of fandom and queer. I tend to find the queer community within the fandom [community], um, really, really quickly'. While young queer people often began by engaging in interests online, where it did not matter if people were queer or not, what was interesting was how they found other queer people. This made them feel comfortable at the intersecting points of the Venn diagram (see Figure 5). This means that while queer youth were able to bond over certain interests, finding other queer people provided a greater sense of comfort and relatability in doing so.

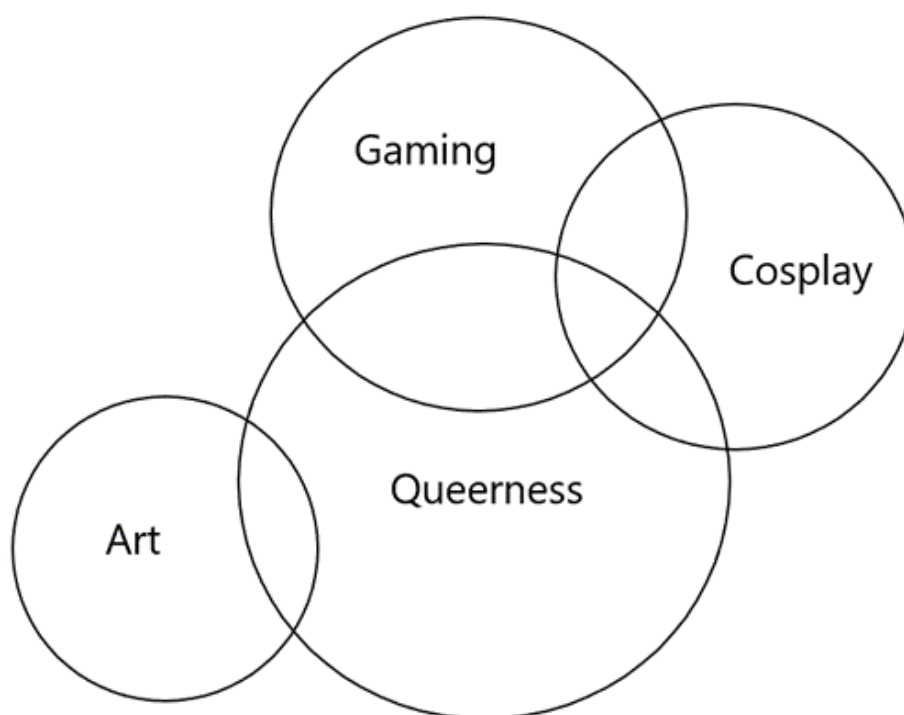


Figure 5: Venn diagram representing the overlapping interests and identities of respondents.

LGBTQIA+ young people found content on social media platforms that resonated with their queerness, as well as other interests. In most cases these often overlap, which provided them with space to share common interests with relatable queer others. This created comfort, and worked to normalise queerness as a part of everyday life, where individuals are engaged in varied interests as LGBTQIA+ people.

5.4. DIVERSE REPRESENTATIONS AND RELATABILITY

One of the threads throughout all discussions with young people was the importance of seeing diverse and intersectional identities, which raised concerns about representation on platforms. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) writes that identities are intersectional, meaning they are made up of different facets, which influence who a person is. These multiple intersecting aspects of identity is evident, for example, in our interview with Jamie who is of Somali descent. Jamie explained that while queer people understood them in relation to their

queerness, there were other things that queer people often did not understand, which were not related to queerness. They explained that they often felt too queer for Somali spaces, but too 'Black' for queer spaces. Jamie stated that 'White' queer people could not relate to the experience of being racially profiled, which affected a queer person like them. Another respondent, Breanna, similarly explained that she finds it difficult to locate queer Indigenous representation/spaces online, which is important to her because she is Aboriginal, an important point found in O'Sullivan's (2021) recent work. As suggested from the discussion above, the presence of racially diverse queer people and experiences is important for relatability, which people found were lacking on platforms.

When reflecting on LGBTQIA+ representation, young people explained that certain kinds of queer people have a greater presence on social media platforms compared to others. These were people who fit certain stereotypes, are 'White' and largely gender-normative. For example, Jameel explained that he finds representations of trans men do not capture the experiences of someone like him, as it is mostly about "like skinny 'White', like curly hair that's just sort of flopping over the forehead". Another person explained that they felt ideas of what it means to be non-binary do not include someone like them, as "you have to have kind of [be] like that short, like fluffy hair and like a certain kind of way of dressing". Others indicated that people with neurodiversity and dis/abilities also often get left out of LGBTQIA+ representations. For example, Indiana, who has a physical dis/ability, explained that:

"...I feel like on a lot of social media platforms, people like me are unrepresented [...] and so I've had to more actively seek-out disabled creators and things like that to be able to start following them, and even then social media kind of suppresses the amount of content I think, from them, which I think is a bit frustrating and like annoying because it's like the world already doesn't want me to see these people and then, like, the place where I can actively go out and see these people, is like being monitored and like kind of suppressing the videos that these people put out."

Others felt that not all of the identities found within the LGBTQIA+ acronym are represented equally in queer online spaces. For example, two respondents explained that intersex and asexual people were often not visible in discussions about queer community. Storm, who is an intersex person, explained that:

"I would say my experience online has differed in the sense that intersex representation is severely lacking. Generally speaking, being intersex can be a very isolating experience. Most of my (conservative and religious) family is unaware of my intersex status and I am selective of who I tell because of stigma. Online spaces create the same isolating environment, unfortunately."

"It's taken me a lot of work to find community and there aren't many online spaces to reach out to other intersex folx. However, I recently downloaded Reddit [...] and have already noticed a big difference! I am part of an intersex subreddit and it's been very refreshing and affirming to hear discourse within the community related to our experiences."
(Email response post focus group)

This means that while most respondents found people who were like them and they could relate to, it was not easy for all queer people, and some needed to do extra work to find others like them. Lance, who is asexual, explained:

"...I haven't found anything particularly for asexual people [...] I have a person that I follow that's trans [...] Um, not so much asexuality, I don't think it really shows up much in conversation..."

In light of these observations, one respondent explained how spaces can be consciously and actively curated by users to engage with more diverse representations:

“I made a decision a couple of years ago to like start following really diverse people like that don’t look like me in particular. So I’ve got a, like a really diverse feed and every now and then I’m like [...] ‘diversify your feed Tuesday’ or whatever, and I’ll just share like [the accounts of] twenty people. I’m like, ‘if you want to follow these people, go for it [...] this person has um, you know, a disability. This person has... darker skin than most of my friends do’, you know, all of that kind of stuff [...] just because I wanted to become less internally judgmental as well. So seeing that kind of content consistently on my feed made that very easy. Yeah. And it was like I was never like, overtly judgemental of course, like never mean, never rude, always interested in hearing people, but it’s just that kind of like first thought that you have, um, I wanted to change it. So I did. And that was a few years ago. But I made it more of a conscious effort to make other people change it while I was in lockdown because I was seeing it all the time. So I was like ‘Hmm why not other people as well?’”

Young people like Salem were able to curate social media platforms to gain a more diverse understanding of the world. This demonstrates how young people navigate these spaces to meet their needs and desires, which may include learning about other people who are not like them.

Young LGBTQIA+ people got frustrated by the lack of diverse content on social media platforms, as they see themselves and/or others being made invisible. There needs to be greater diversity pertaining to race/ethnicity, dis/ability, neurodiversity and expressions of queerness. This increase in diverse representation also needs to include parts of the queer community who are often absent in comparison to others, such as intersex and asexual people. Moreover, positive queer representations are important to the development of identity, as it gives people hope and inspiration about their own lives.

5.5. HATE SPEECH, COUNTER-SPEECH AND CENSORSHIP: MAKING SENSE OF IT WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

Discussions of censorship and hate speech came up in each interview and focus group. There were two primary concerns: 1) content moderation and the removal of queer content from platforms, and 2) hate speech and what to do with it on platforms. We discuss each in turn.

5.5.1. Curation: Censoring queer content

One of the major concerns for participants was the removal of queer content by platforms. Respondents highlighted that user accounts had been targeted and videos were taken down, even though no community guidelines had seemingly been broken. Angela discussed their concerns about TikTok taking down content made by dis/abled, queer and Black activists in 2020. Corey similarly indicated:

“...it’s not just TikTok that does it [...] like there was a huge problem for a while, I know with trans-YouTubers, with their content not being able to be seen by a lot of people, and videos being taken down because they were too sexual or like they were crude or something, when in actuality like you know there’s hardly even swearing in the videos. It’s just cos like, ‘oh, it’s not advertiser-friendly’”.



This removal included taking down queer content, along with banning and shadow-banning queer creators. Angela had direct experience with this:

“...I had a video taken down because it was like, ‘oh, this might be inciting something’. And I was literally just saying like, ‘hey don’t be homophobic’. And they [the platform] were saying that they took me down for like saying, ‘hey don’t be homophobic’.”

The concern here was with pro-queer content being removed, even though no guidelines had seemingly been broken. This indicates there needs to be greater clarity about what these guidelines are and how content is moderated. Some young people also expressed concerns about other users using reporting features. Clara, for example, said that sometimes queer people are harassed and there is mass reporting of their content, as a result of prejudice and discrimination, which might get them banned, even though this may not be warranted. These concerns were emphasised as young people also saw platforms failing to remove harmful material that is transphobic, homophobic, sexist and racist. Many spoke about feeling disconcerted when they saw queer content being taken down, while pro-Nazi or anti-Indigenous content remained on platforms. For example, one of our respondents explained:

“...I know on TikTok there’s a lot of - when uh, transgender males or non-binary folk have the top surgery their videos will get taken down in a heartbeat and it’s not sexualised at all. But as soon as it’s a cis-gender male and he’s got the shirt off and he’s probably like re-enacting spanking or something really sexual like that, that stays up and that gets millions of views. So it’s, it’s the like, [a] double-standard probably because it’s almost like TikTok’s also identifying them as a separate type of male, not the all-collective type.”

Such decisions caused respondents to question the priorities of the platforms, and many felt that queer and progressive content is monitored with a harshness not extended to other content. People also felt that complaints about queer-phobia were not taken seriously, and there were no real repercussions for people who had been harmful.

5.5.2. Hate speech: Censorship and educative approaches

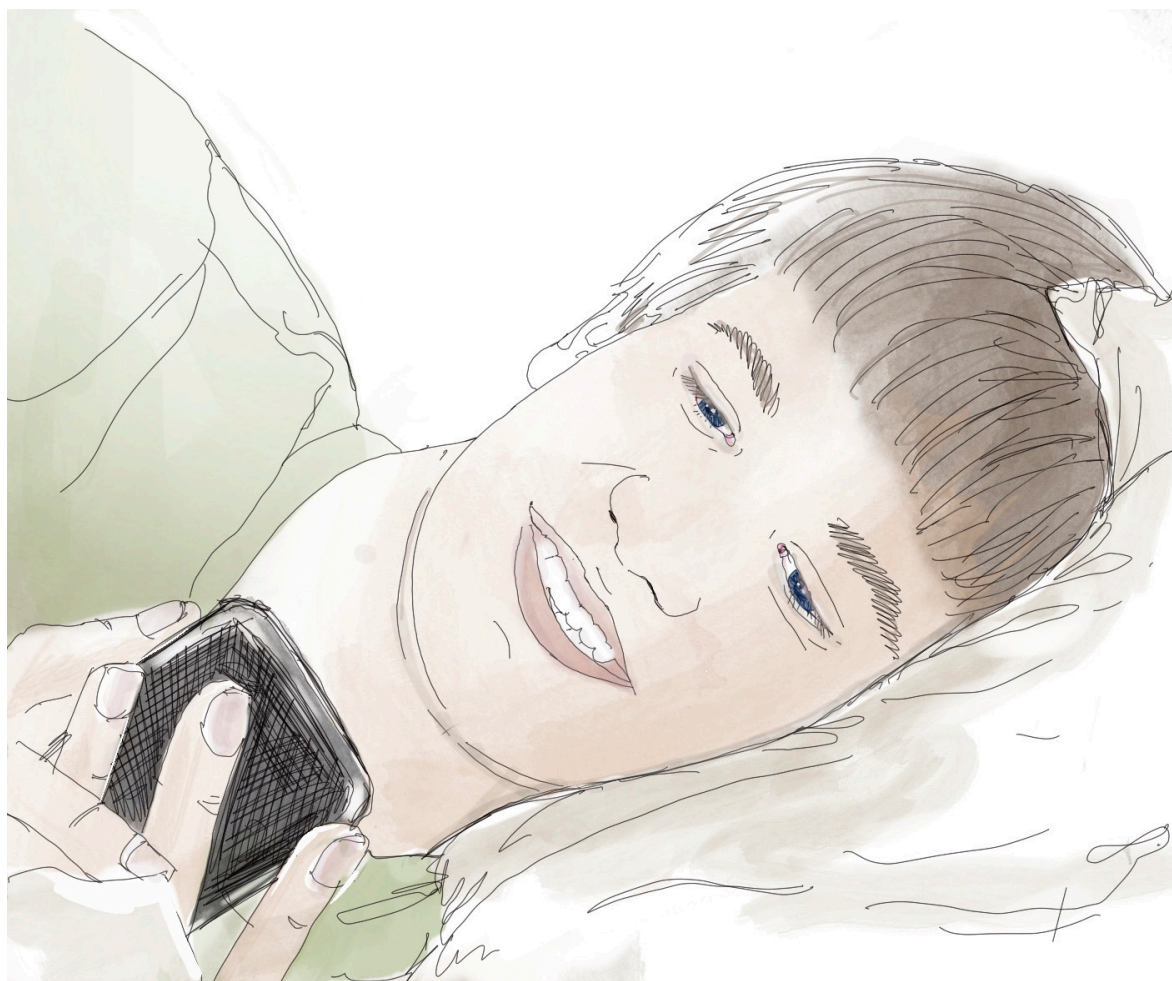
In light of the experiences just highlighted, young LGBTQIA+ people were very hesitant about advocating for censorship as the solution to hate speech. Leona, for instance, explained she did not want to silence others, even if those opinions were ‘negative, belittling and damaging’. However, young people like Clara felt it was particularly important people are not constantly exposed to such problematic views either. This came from a more general concern with the perceived ‘echo chamber(s)’ that are seen to emerge on social media platforms:

“...I think social media...the way it’s built it’s so easy to build like an echo chamber, and you just get filled with these ideas that it’s okay to say homophobic things or racist things or transphobic things...It’s not necessarily the comments themselves that they’re making it’s the way in which social media is kind of built-in an echo chamber, it’s like, ‘look, this could escalate into more than just people...saying some horrible things on the internet’”.

Corey similarly said:

“...there’s a lot of homophobic, transphobic, whatever content [...] on sites like TikTok, or Instagram [...] ‘you will not see it unless you follow like the right path, LIKE the right people, LIKE the right videos, and then you’ll see it’. Um, so for a lot of people, a lot of sites aren’t concerned about it. So like, ‘oh, you know, we take down the videos that start going around, but there’s still a tonne of content that never gets touched’”.

Importantly the young people are concerned about this content: how and where this content gets produced and circulated, and the role of platforms in removing such content. **Where young people advocated for some form of censorship, they felt content that aims to cause harm or violence should be removed. There was a 'line' about what could be said, and content that was hateful was seen to cross it. Sometimes this was referred to as homophobia, transphobia or racism. However, what these terms mean and what constitutes 'hate' exactly for LGBTQIA+ young people needs to be further clarified, and requires greater research.** In sum whilst young people expressed a desire not to see negative content or problematic ideas, many were wary about censoring people and content. Concerns revolved around silencing others' voices, or as one participant explained, there was the danger that you yourself could be censored one day.



One way forward advocated across focus groups and interviews was an educative approach, which could sit alongside censorship approaches to respond to hate speech. An educative approach is about teaching people about gender and sexual diversity. Corey explained:

“...it’s very true, like taking down the posts would stop new people from seeing the content and potentially gaining these like problematic and negative viewpoints but I think there needs to be some way to also like spread awareness and education around it on the platform [...]. You know, you can remove the worst content but I think if you just remove everything, then, yeah, quite a few people would probably stop sort of seeing it and everything but [...] I don’t know if it would necessarily...educate anyone who, who’s has already been exposed to this in any sort of positive way.”

An educative approach was considered valuable for emphasising diversity and difference, as one respondent explained:

“...a change in social media to make it more LGBT-friendly [...] needs to be less about censorship and more about education, because if you just kind of block someone, delete someone’s profile, they’re just going to make a new profile and it’s just going to keep going. So I think it needs to be more focused on actually trying to get this person thinking differently about what they’re actually doing, not just - ‘you’re banned now for saying this’, like ‘you’re banned because this is harmful, because this is why’”.

Some of the young people explained that they themselves do the work of educating other people online already, with varying levels of success. This often happens in the comments section of varied content across platforms. Jameel explained how he responded to a person in the comments section of a YouTube video arguing that trans men should act and present themselves in a hyper-masculine way:

“...and there were a number of other trans people trying to correct her, and she just wasn’t really listening, so and my thing when I do in this sort of situations is try to be like overly annoyingly polite and friendly, like all the little smiley faces and exclamation marks you know, if, if they don’t change their mind, I can at least annoy them. But this particular person actually was really receptive when I explained why that was harmful and that you know, just let people be whatever they want to be. And she was – actually it turned-out that the reason she was watching his videos was because she wanted to educate herself on trans men and their experiences. [...] so I did manage to recommend her some other people and some other resources that she could use to read-up and like watch some of their stuff. And she was really nice about it...”

Another respondent explained that when people contacted them about queer issues via direct messaging, they send links to help them learn, explaining that they have a bank of links for this purpose. Young people not only want a society where people understand and respect individuals like them, but they are playing an active role in trying to create some of this change themselves.

Moderation of content and censorship are critical concerns for users and owners of social media platforms. The young people in this study have mixed views about censorship, but are worried by the removal and censorship of queer content and the persistence of hate speech, which they have to negotiate across the platforms they use. There is hesitancy about censoring people, even if they are perceived to be problematic. However, young people acknowledge there is a “line” about what can and cannot be said, which needs to be further defined and elaborated. The lack of transparency in moderation guidelines also concerns young people. Whilst they advocate for educative approaches, their participation in debates about moderation for the future is critical.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS AND KEY CONCERNS

6.1. DIVERSIFYING CONTENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

There is a need for more diverse LGBTQIA+ voices across all platforms. “Explore” and “For You” pages, for instance, need to have a greater variety of queer people featured on them, particularly pertaining to race, dis/ability, culture, religion, neurodiversity, and varied LGBTQIA+ identities such as intersex and asexual individuals. This can have a potential two fold effect. Firstly it will provide a broader range of content that queer young people can relate to (Kirby et al. 2021), and it will provide further education on different queer experiences, which young people want to see. Secondly, it will provide representations of all LGBTQIA+ people, with the potential effect of making queer people more visible in society, addressing exclusion and contributing to broader positive impact on health and wellbeing.

Increasing the visibility of content also means the producers of that content will be adequately supported by platforms. Specifically, our respondents raised concerns that if queer content was elevated and made its way to people who are queer-phobic, then this could result in the bullying of that particular creator and their followers, and hateful comments being left on posts or videos. If diversifying feeds is a viable option, then social media platforms must take responsibility in ensuring the safety of creators. Platforms should consider paid collaboration(s) with creators, who would be interested in pursuing this educational approach.

6.2. CONTENT MODERATION: CRITICAL BUT (ALSO) CONTEXTUAL

Promotion of queer content and people means policies must ensure that queer content does not get shutdown, shadow-banned, banned or de-monetised without proper justification. Respondents spoke about queer content being censored or de-monetised for insufficient reasons, or feared it happening to them. Respondents explained that queer content is sometimes reported by other users due to prejudice and discrimination, which can lead to it being removed. Queer content also gets removed if, for instance, it documents trauma, or if it contains content on trans surgery, or images of bodies during/following transition. Seeing these stories is important to queer young people, as it provides validation, a sense of community, and critical information for identity development. Removal of LGBTQIA+ content hinders queer voices from being heard and leads to the loss of important support material.

Platforms can and should have clear moderation policies, which are developed with young people, and specifically include LGBTQIA+ young individuals. Such policies must be clear and justify the removal of content. Furthermore, moderation must respond to the issues of context, as this is important for understanding how and why certain things are being said, and how they could be interpreted within the communities they are said in. The importance of a more contextualised moderation approach means that a blanket ban on slurs may actually be problematic. For instance, certain words may be considered a slur when used by someone who is homophobic, but a queer person may be using the term to imbue it with new meaning and/or to re-claim it as a source of pride⁹. This means that the context in which things are said and done matters, and social media platforms need to take this into consideration in moderating content.

⁹ The word ‘queer’ is an example of this, which has been ‘reclaimed’ by LGBTQIA+ people. Queer as a term historically denoted deviancy, and is now positioned as a source of pride by LGBTQIA+ people (Zosky and Alberts 2016).

6.3. RESPONSES TO HATE SPEECH: RECOMMENDED WAYS FORWARD

Social media platforms must allocate more time and resources to removing hate speech. For our respondents, this is content that is prejudicial and discriminatory. Our findings show how young people are, to an extent, already involved in addressing queer-phobic content by responding to this content online. These are educative approaches, where users who post such content are educated, in this case by other users, about the harms of such content. The young people in this study also had curation strategies in place to deal with hate speech, such as blocking negative people and content. **However more needs to be done.**

As recommended by our participants, social media platforms should trial and support broader educative approaches to deal with prejudice and discrimination. For example, we suggest trialling educative approaches when slurs are used in a derogatory manner. Platforms could provide a pop-up/notification explaining why such words are problematic and hurtful. Social media platforms can also develop guides on how to use the platforms in safe and ethical ways that build on existing behaviours of queer people and allies. For example, such guides could contain instruction on how individuals can be allies to queer people and other minorities, including information on how to intervene in the comments section if someone is being harmful. It is critical that education be extended to queer people too, as respondents highlighted that instances of transphobia and biphobia also take place in LGBTQIA+ online spaces. It is also important to note that sexism and racism were important issues that queer people would like better moderated as well. Research is required to test the implementation and effectiveness of such resources into the future.

To counter experiences of hate speech, and to create a more positive experience for queer people overall, it is important that platforms continue to enhance young people's ability to curate their own social media experiences. Suggestions from our respondents included¹⁰:

- Proactive approaches to problematic or concerning content: we suggest trigger warnings and the option to include such warnings when posting about traumatic queer experiences, and/or mental health related content. This may involve the blurring of select content, which people can choose to view if they want to.
- The ability to flag misinformation, particularly as it relates to concerns about gender and sexual diversity.
- The enhanced ability to moderate and curate individualised content, specifically: removal of certain hashtags from feeds; letting users filter out certain words if they wish to do so; allowing content producers to verify comments before they are posted; allowing users to select who is allowed to comment on their posts (e.g. only 'friends').
- The ability to have a greater say on the types of 'suggested' content and people whom they could connect to. For example, a person may not want friends from their local area or school to be suggested on an alternate queer account due to fears of being outed about their gender and/or sexuality. This scenario is likely to be heightened for rural and regional young people.
- The ability to more easily locate other LGBTQIA+ individuals, content and resources. For example, queer young people may want to locate queer groups specific to their cultural background, or they may be seeking resources on how to respond to concerns related to their families.

Such measures require adapting functionality to give young people greater control of their content feeds, and requires ongoing testing and evaluation to ensure these changes support young people's existing content curation strategies.

¹⁰ We acknowledge here that some platforms have taken up these measures successfully, and/or they are currently being trialled..

More broadly, however, there remains a question about what content should be censored. For young people there is a metaphorical line at which ‘hate speech’ should be censored, which is often at the point at which it is doing harm to others. Figuring out what constitutes this “line” requires further research and community engagement with LGBTQIA+ people. As highlighted by one of our respondents this should be dynamic and an ongoing conversation between platforms and broader society.



6.4. ACKNOWLEDGING QUEER IDENTITIES

Platforms must also be sensitive to the fluidity of queer identities and the expansive terms used by LGBTQIA+ people, which has expanded alongside social media use, over the last 15 years. This requires strategies and design that can accommodate people who have multiple gender and sexual identities. For instance, one respondent identified their sexuality as “bisexual, demisexual, demiromantic” and their gender as “genderfae (fluid between agender and demigirl)”. Platforms should ask in the first instance if their existing mechanisms adequately represent such diversity. However this must be extended and mechanisms should also account for the often shifting nature of gender and sexual identity for young people as they explore and work through these aspects of who they are. In particular, platforms should make it easier for trans people to change their names, taking into consideration that many trans individuals will experiment with their name. Platforms should avoid “deadnaming”¹¹ (i.e. trans individuals may not wish to see older photos of themselves, or have a name not used anymore embedded in a profile URL, which is still visible to users. In both instances platforms should make it possible for them not to have to do so). People should also be able to change their gender with ease, and features such as bitmojis should be flexible so they do not have to ‘align’ with a specific gender in a profile.

Additionally, a finding in the recruitment of participants in this study is how existing marketing tools used by platforms repurpose individual’s varied genders on existing profiles into binary categories (i.e. male/female). The goal here seems to be to simplify data and illustrate the number of people reached in advertising campaigns. Such measures however make invisible the diverse genders of users. One of the criticisms from our respondents was that gender diversity often remains invisible. Making it visible in all aspects of a platform is a critical part of the response to cisgenderism¹² and transphobia. Diverse categories of gender and sexuality should be employed in data collection, storage and dissemination processes, and platforms must avoid placing data into binary categories (i.e. only ‘male’ and ‘female’), where this is not representative of the users.

6.5. GENUINE AND AUTHENTIC COMMITMENT TO QUEER PEOPLE

Our final recommendation of this report attends to the need for platforms to show a broader ongoing commitment to the inclusion of all LGBTQIA+ people. To date, many platforms adopt queer icons and pride themes, particularly during Pride Month, and while such measures are considered important, our respondents want such actions to be accompanied by genuine support for LGBTQIA+ people **all the time**. Platforms should visibly offer a declaration of support for LGBTQIA+ people, so it is clear to all users. The queer young people in this study emphasised the need for support to be genuine and the importance of “authentic” allyship from platforms. This means taking a stance on social issues beyond pride month and making visible the links to queer organisations that platforms have worked with. It also means, as noted earlier, not providing queer-phobia a platform and actively working against homo/trans/bi-phobia by removing and stopping hate speech, and pursuing an educative approach. The respondents suggested that people working for social media platforms would benefit from greater training in diversity, and an understanding of LGBTQIA+ issues across varied contexts, including how they intersect with other forms of diversity, such as race or dis/ability.

¹¹ “Deadnaming” here refers to using a transgender person’s birth name after they have changed it (Stonewall, 2020)

¹² This is ‘the cultural and systemic ideology that denies, denigrates, or pathologizes self-identified gender identities that do not align with assigned gender at birth as well as resulting behavior, expression, and community. This ideology endorses and perpetuates the belief that cisgender identities and expression are to be valued more than transgender identities and expression and creates an inherent system of associated power and privilege’ (Lennon and Mistler 2014, p. 19)..



7. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Overall, young LGBTQIA+ people's social media use increased during COVID-19. They used the increased time spent at home and online to further explore sexual and gender diversity, which many were already doing before the pandemic. This provides a different narrative to one where young people simply faced increased trans/bi/homophobia whilst at home. **Instead, our findings illustrate that for many LGBTQIA+ young people, COVID-19 was a time in which queerness was able to flourish. Young queer people curated social media experiences in a way that enabled them to navigate family, friends and peers, allowing them to continue to find community and develop their identities.**

Existing research (Haimson and Hoffmann 2016; Hanckel et al. 2019; DeVito et al. 2020; Byron et al. 2021; DeVito et al.), including this report, has sought to better understand queer young people's experiences on social media platforms, and how they navigate these spaces whilst developing their identities and engaging in community. Given our findings, it is still critical we continue to build on young queer people's online experiences in order to support their health and wellbeing.

Platforms can empower and work alongside young people to create online experiences where they develop identities and community, in ways that feel comfortable and safe. All platforms should include young people's experiences into the development and design of digital technologies (Third et al. In-press). **That is to say, young LGBTQIA+ people must be a part of these processes so that social media platforms can meet their needs and desires.** This process should be dynamic, and iterative, ensuring that young people with diverse identities across Australia inform social media platforms together with designers, developers, and policy teams.

In light of this project, three key measures should be considered by all platforms, which will better support LGBTQIA+ young people:

1. More diverse representations of LGBTQIA+ people.
2. Better moderation of harmful content.
3. Educating others about queer identities and experiences.

For social media platforms to be authentic and genuine, they need to actively and publicly commit to providing safe platforms for all queer people, and take a positive stance on LGBTQIA+ issues, while also responding to other social inequalities such as racism and sexism. Such measures should extend to the culture of the businesses themselves.

The recommendations we have suggested need to occur in conjunction with broader social and structural change. We cannot see social media as separate from the 'real' or physical world. It is a part of it, as they are one and the same thing. For this reason, social media experiences for queer young people will be improved as society also changes to become more accepting of gender and sexual diversity. For this reason, we suggest that all institutions such as governments, schools and organisations, including those of faith, continue to advocate for queer people. The messages they propagate are part and parcel of social media practices.



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APPENDIX 1: TABLE OF PARTICIPANTS

No.	Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Sexuality	Gender	Gender different from assigned at birth?	Location
1	Aaron	24 yrs	Australian	Panromantic	Demiboy	Yes	Rural
2.	Acer	18 yrs	English	Pansexual	Demigender	Yes	Rural
3.	Adam	24 yrs	Anglo	Gay	Male	No	Urban
4.	Afet	16 yrs	Turkish	Queer	Genderfluid	Yes	Regional
5.	Alia	29 yrs	Anglo	Bisexual	Female	No	Urban
6.	Angela	21 yrs	Anglo	Bisexual	Non-binary	Yes	Urban
7.	Annika	25 yrs	Half Russian and Crimean Tatar, Half Irish	Queer	Non-binary woman (they/she)	Yes	Urban
8.	Anthea	20 yrs	Malaysian Chinese	Lesbian	Cis Female	No	Urban
9.	Antonio	17 yrs	Italian	Bisexual, strong lean towards men	Male	No	Urban
10.	April	17 yrs	Irish/English	Bisexual	Female	Yes	Urban
11.	Avery	16 yrs	Italian	Biromantic and Asexual	Trans man	Yes	Urban
12.	Bay	18 yrs	Scottish/Anglo	Demisexual Lesbian	Non-binary (?)*	Yes	Urban
13.	Bianca	17 yrs	Australian	Lesbian	Female	No	Rural
14.	Blake	17 yrs	Polish	Homosexual	Cisgender	No	Urban
15.	Brandy	19 yrs	White Australian	Bisexual	She/her/questioning	No	Regional

16.	Breanna	21 yrs	Aboriginal and British	Biromantic Asexual	Cis woman	No	Urban
17.	Brooke	22 yrs	Australian Aboriginal and Greek	Bisexual	Female	No	Regional
18.	Callum	16 yrs	British	Queer/Aspec (ace spectrum)	Trans masc/	No	Urban
19.	Christy	23 yrs	Caucasian	Pansexual	Questioning	No	Urban
20.	Chun	25 yrs	Chinese	Queer/	Female	No	Urban
21.	Clara	25 yrs	White Australian	Lesbian	Non-binary lesbian	Yes	Urban
22.	Corey	19 yrs	American	Queer	Male	Yes	Regional
23.	Edith	18 yrs	Celtic	Aromantic Asexual	Woman	No	Urban
24.	Erica	29 yrs	Anglo/Greek	Bisexual	Non-binary/	Yes	Urban
25.	Eva	20 yrs	Anglo	Bisexual	Female	No	Urban
26.	Evan	16 yrs	Australian	Unlabelled	Bigender	Yes	Regional
27.	Evie	17 yrs	Australian	Bi-curious	She/her	No	Rural
28.	Ezra	24 yrs	Anglo	Queer (bisexual?)	Man	No	Urban
29.	Gabbie	25 yrs	Dutch	Bisexual	Non-binary (they/she pronouns)	Yes	Urban
30.	Harley	23 yrs	Australian	Bisexual	Female	No	Urban
31.	Hayat	30 yrs	Middle Eastern	Lesbian	Cis female	Yes	Urban
32.	Indiana	17 yrs	Anglo	Queer	Female	No	Urban
33.	Jameel	17 yrs	Sri Lankan	Bisexual	Male	Yes	Urban
34.	Jamie	17 Yrs	Somali	Bisexual	Questioning	Yes	Urban

35.	Jan	28 yrs	Czech	Demisexual Panromantic	None	Yes	Urban
36.	Jia-Li	28 yrs	Taiwanese	Pansexual	Female	No	Urban
37.	Joel	17 yrs	White Australian	Pansexual	Male	Yes	Rural
38.	Jordan	17 yrs	English	Asexual Sapphic	Non-binary	Yes	Rural
39.	Josie	18 yrs	Anglo	Queer	Non-binary	Yes	Regional
40.	Jules	24 yrs	Vietnamese	Gay	Male	No	Urban
41.	June	20 yrs	Filipino/ Chinese/Anglo	Bisexual	Non-binary/ Agender	Yes	Regional
42.	Kamal	20 yrs	Indian	Queer	Non-binary trans woman	Yes	Urban
43.	Knox	20 yrs	Croatian	Pansexual (not a label fan)	Transmasc/ Non-binary	Yes	Urban
44.	Lance	21 yrs	Malaysian	Asexual	Male	No	Urban
45.	Laura	28 yrs	Anglo	Gay	Agender	Yes	Rural
46.	Leona	17 yrs	South African	Pansexual	‘Female’/ gender fluid	No	Urban
47.	Megan	23 yrs	Vietnamese	Queer	Non-binary	Yes	Urban
48.	Mia	17 yrs	Australian/ Croatian	Bisexual	Female	No	Urban
49.	Nathan	20 yrs	Anglo-Hispanic	Bisexual	Male	No	Regional
50.	Phoenix	17 yrs	Mauritian	Bisexual	Non-binary	Yes	Regional
51.	Rachel	17 yrs	Anglo	Panromantic and Homosexual	Female	No	Rural
52.	Saabir	18 yrs	Indian	Queer	Male	Yes	Urban

53.	Sadie	20 yrs	Anglo-Fijian Indian	Queer	Woman AFAB	No	Urban
54.	Salem	20 yrs	White	Pansexual and/ or anyone who is cute/nice	Non-binary	Yes	Urban
55.	Serenity	16 yrs	Caucasian	Bisexual	Female	No	Regional
56.	Skyler	22 yrs	Lebanese / Australian	Lesbian	Non-binary	Yes	Urban
57.	Sofia	17 yrs	Russian	Homoromantic Asexual	Female	No	Urban
58.	Storm	22 yrs	Cypriot Australian	Queer	Genderfluid and intersex	Yes	Urban
59.	Tara	21 yrs	Indonesian	Asexual (biro- mantic)	Non-binary	Yes	Urban
60.	Tasha	17 yrs	Malay-Chinese/ Australian	Gay	Questioning	Yes	Urban
61.	Tony	22 yrs	Filipino	Gay	Cisgender man	No	Urban
62.	Tori	17 yrs	Burmese/ Chinese	Lesbian	Cis female	No	Urban
63.	Vaani	20 yrs	Indian	Lesbian	Non-binary	Yes	Urban
64.	Ye-Ji	22 yrs	Korean	Asexual Biro- mantic	Gender fluid	Yes	Urban
65.	Zelda	24 yrs	Chinese- Malaysian	Bisexual, Demisexual, Demiromantic	Genderfae (fluid between agender and demigirl)	Yes	Urban

*as reported by the respondent

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