

# More than just risk: LGBTQIA+ young people use social media to sustain and make sense of family relationships

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Much of World Pride has been about the visibility of LGBTQIA+ people. This is [important](#) to affirming who we are, our place in the world, and celebrating ourselves as LGBTQIA+ individuals. Social media offers new opportunities to be visible, and many people have

shared their celebrations of Pride during this time. However, not everyone.

Our new research shows that LGBTQIA+ young people are deciding what to post on [social media](#) sites with their families in mind, to foster and maintain ties with them.

We conducted [focus groups and interviews](#) with 65 LGBTQIA+ people aged 16 to 30, across all state and territories in Australia. These young people identified with a diverse range of sexualities and [gender identities](#), and came from multiple ethnic backgrounds.

## **Family as risk?**

Studies to date on LGBTQIA+ online experiences have often spoken about the family in terms of "risk." LGBTQIA+ people may inadvertently be "outed" to family, and their gender or sexuality accidentally revealed online.

However, our study found that for certain young people, [social media sites](#), like Facebook and Instagram, are actually spaces to maintain ties with family and care for them. This affects how they manage (or curate) their online social media spaces.

New research (by the lead author of this article) suggests considerations about family are [more important](#) than often thought to LGBTQIA+ people. Often, the idea of homophobic families means little consideration has been given to how families can be important to LGBTQIA+ people's lives and identities.

## **'I don't want my family to cop anything'**

One of our respondents, a 17-year-old bisexual cis-gender male, explained he is not open about his sexuality on Facebook. He stated he did not want to strain relationships with family-friends who had known him since he was a child. He explained: "If I was to come out or whatever it wouldn't just affect me [...] I wouldn't want my family to cop anything for that um, either."

A 17-year-old trans man had a similar reason for not being open about his gender on the same platform. He told us: "[...] mum's struggling with it anyway. And if it [my gender identity] was more out, out to the rest of the family and the world, I reckon she'd struggle a lot more. "

For these LGBTQIA+ young people, being invisible and intentionally not sharing information about their gender and/or sexuality means they curate social media spaces that protect their loved ones.

## **Learning about how to navigate family relationships**

Social media sites were also discussed as providing valuable information on how to navigate [family relationships](#) when one has a diverse sexuality and/or [gender identity](#). This information can come from peers who share their experiences.

For instance, a 29-year-old bisexual non-binary respondent explained they are not out to their family but have plans to come out in the next year. Reading people's experiences on Facebook helped them understand other people's coming out experiences, and provided valuable information on what to expect, and "how to navigate it as well."

## **What needs to be done?**

Social media platforms are important to LGBTQIA+ young people.

They are spaces where careful curation is about sustaining family relationships, and exploring and learning about family. They can be harnessed for their potential as support.

Services and practitioners, such as counselors, psychologists and LGBTQIA+ organizations could:

1. Ensure LGBTQIA+ young people have the [digital literacy](#) to carefully navigate social media spaces, so that they can sustain ties and care for families.
2. Suggest online peer spaces and groups, such as Facebook groups, to help individuals find valuable information on navigating complicated family relationships, and to access support from others. This requires ensuring young people understand the risks of joining such groups from their individual accounts.

Social media platforms also need to better understand that privacy and hiding information play an important role in maintaining offline relationships. There are increasing resources to support LGBTQIA+ young people online, but there can be greater focus on family relationships in this context.

The results of this study show us that LGBTQIA+ [young people](#) use social media to sustain and make sense of family relationships. This can be about love, care, and concern for family, and the nurturing of ties.

When viewed this way, online spaces are not simply about danger and risk, from family, but they are complicated sites shaped by feelings and attachments. In [other words](#), the family is "not something that is simply curated against, but rather something that is curated for."

We would do well to remember that being visible and invisible during events like World Pride has a lot to do with this.

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