

Marisa Lyons Longworth

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## The digital lives of LGBTQIA+ children

*Marisa Lyons Longworth of the LSE-based Digital Futures for Children centre explains why the experiences of LGBTQIA+ children need to be taken into account when discussing social media bans, and the importance of a rights-based approach.*



*I know I'm not the only one, but I'm a little lonely.*



*A quote from 14-year-old Marcus from Ecuador, who turned to online platforms seeking proof that other gay people existed. He is one of many teens in [a 2019 study](#) to do the same.*

The progression of [Australia's social media ban for under 16s](#) has [raised questions](#) on how to manage children's use of social media. However, public discussion has tended to focus on children generally, overlooking the distinct digital experiences of specific groups who are already marginalised. LGBTQIA+ children form one of those groups, and their experiences are not well documented, even less so outside of Europe.

To centre the voices of LGBTQIA+ children across the world into the conversation holistically, a rights-based perspective is required. As stated by the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child \(UNCRC\)](#), children's rights encompass good wellbeing, the right to express themselves, access information and protection from violence. This is explicitly applied to the digital environment through [General comment No. 25](#). Developing [Sonia Livingstone's](#) insights from the [DFC's global](#)

[research database](#), this post highlights digital experiences of LGBTQIA+ children and explores how social media use can impact their rights.

## A case for reducing isolation

A primary issue regarding the well-being of LGBTQIA+ youth is consistent reporting of [high isolation levels](#). [Lauren McInroy's fandom community research](#) evidences that key causes of isolation – lack of community and understanding – can be partly alleviated in online spaces for LGBTQIA+ children. As [McInroy](#) writes: *“two-thirds of participants reported making friends and a similar proportion made acquaintances in online fandom communities”*. Her [research](#) makes the case that online groups can foster support, resilience and comfort, as beautifully illustrated in this quote: *“kinda like a life raft. I need [the online group] to stay afloat.”*

## Opportunities for identity expression

A [2024 case-study](#) with Sabelo, an 18-year-old gay black man from South Africa, supports these findings, highlighting the importance of identity expression. Sabelo describes using Grindr, a gay dating app, as a space to foster intimacy and connection. He felt that he could embody his identity on the app, which was pertinent to him as he felt like he was living a *“double life”*; residing in an environment that was unwelcoming towards LGBTQIA+ people. Having this outlet was important to him; however, given the “hookup” nature of the app, he felt unable to form the connections he sought. Sabelo comments that he had sought out alternatives to Grindr, but none had been made available to him.

## The risks of platform surveillance

Then, this is not to say that social media use amongst LGBTQIA+ youth automatically equates to community, freedom or safety. Not only are platforms not always designed for fostering friendships, but they are also embedded in places that don't accept LGBTQIA+ people. Surveillance from unaccepting communities can have physical consequences, which can be dangerous for LGBTQIA+ children. For example, queer interviewees in [research projects based in the Asia Pacific](#) describe the *“fear [of] being surveilled by institutional actors or targeted in hackings by their detractors”*. Young people then have to balance the freedom of expression with the risk of harm, coined as a ‘paradox’ in Lander Calvelhe Panizo's [work](#).

## Support within the family

This ‘paradox’ occurs locally too, within families of LGBTQIA+ children that might not accept their identities. A 2022 [study](#) of 16-30-year-old Australians, aptly (yet sadly) named *‘I wouldn't want my family to cop anything’*, concludes that LGBTQIA+ youth valued their family and community

relationships, and consequently shape their social media practices to navigate their family's opinions. Either young people ensure a separation between their family and their sexuality (i.e. blocking certain community members or taking care over what they share) or use social media to access information for guiding themselves and the people around them. As Joel (17) **states**: *"seeing how other people have gone through their experience and what they're asking, um like how, how can I do this to help support my family with my transition and stuff like that"*.

## LGBTQIA+ – more than one minority

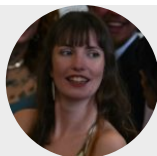
Notably, the available research on LGBTQIA+ experiences, especially across the globe, is very limited. To underscore this: when one breaks down the acronym (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, asexual and other queer identified), LGBTQIA+ covers a wide range of experiences and people. This is without taking intersections (language, disability, socioeconomic status, age, etc) into consideration. When saying that we know very little about LGBTQIA+ children's digital experience, it is important to remember it is not just one group that we are ignoring, but several. Policymakers have a responsibility to invest in research among these populations, so we can support these isolated populations in their digital journeys.

So, the story we know so far: despite risks, LGBTQIA+ children and young people utilise digital environments and navigate risks to seek connections, express themselves and access information. This is balanced with the risk of national and local surveillance, and a consequent risk of harm. Relating to their rights, then, LGBTQIA+ children are trying to use digital spaces to support their rights, but the platforms themselves, or the environment they're embedded in, do not always support this.

In conclusion, while there is a clear deficit of child-centred international research of LGBTQIA+ groups, the available evidence suggests that we need a nuanced approach towards their use of the digital environment. Bans cannot navigate this nuance: there are clear rights-respecting activities within social media use. We owe these youth, who report high levels of isolation, a rights-respecting digital environment, not further restrictions. Creating a safe digital environment, perhaps through embedding **child rights by design**, would be a better investment of resources and policy debates.

*This blog draws from the Digital Futures for Children centre's (DFC) **global research database**, which hosts carefully curated content from across the globe. Each entry is hand-picked, assessed and summarised as DFC notes, providing key insights into the documents. Users can filter by country, methodology and theme to access relevant publications. This post gives the views of the author and not the position of the Media@LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

Featured image: Photo by **Julie Ricard** on **Unsplash**



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