

Chapter 26

“That’s What Google Is For”: How Lesbian, Bisexual, and Gay Young Adults Use Technology to Navigate Family Relationships

Tyler Ross Flockhart
Viterbo University, USA

Sinikka Elliott
University of British Columbia, Canada

ABSTRACT

Through in-depth interviews, this chapter examines the ways 25 LGB young adults (18-35 years old) used digital technologies as they do emotion work to preserve relationships with heterosexual parents. Findings demonstrate that, with the aid of technology (especially texting, Skyping, social media, YouTube, television, and various informational websites), LGB young adults engaged in personal and interpersonal forms of “preventive” and “palliative” emotion work. The former’s aim was to prevent noxious feelings and the latter to preserve familial relationships despite emotional pain. These forms of emotion work allowed LGBs to maintain relationships with their parents, but by privileging the emotional wellbeing of heterosexual parents above those of LGBs. The authors conclude by suggesting that digital technology can be a dual-edged sword. Access to these technologies may allow LGBs to connect with queer communities and to obtain information about queerness, yet utilizing these technologies as a way to preserve familial relationships was an adaptation to--rather than disruption of--heterosexism and homophobia.

INTRODUCTION

American young adults today come of age in an era of widespread use of digital technology and greater—but not complete—acceptance of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people (Gallup, 2019). In this chapter, we analyze what these cultural trends mean for LGBs aged 18 to 35 as they come out as lesbian, gay, or bisexual and navigate ongoing relationships with their heterosexual parents. We demonstrate that

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LGB young adults used technology to preserve family relationships in the face of persistent yet subtle forms of heterosexism and homophobia. Heterosexism is the societal and institutional reinforcement of heterosexuality as the privileged and normative form of sexuality (Burn, Kadlec, & Rexter, 2005). Homophobia is an expression of heterosexism and involves negative attitudes or feelings towards non-heterosexual people (Dean, 2014). We find that, with the aid of technology (especially texting, Skyping, social media, YouTube, television, and various informational websites), LGBs engaged in personal and interpersonal forms of “preventive” and “palliative” emotion work to maintain their parent-child relationships. Managing and sustaining these familial relationships often required putting the emotional wellbeing of heterosexual family members above those of LGBs. We conclude by arguing that digital technology can facilitate the ongoing maintenance of queer-straight family relationships while simultaneously bolstering existing sexual hierarchies. Maintaining parent-child relationships may require adaptation to—rather than disruption of—heterosexism and homophobia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) young adults in the United States come of age in an era that some scholars describe as “beyond the closet” (Seidman, 2002). In this era, queer people have gained a number of legal rights and protections (Kimport, 2014; Mezey, 2015) and more Americans express acceptance and positive views of LGB people (Gallup, 2019). Additionally, there is increased visibility and representation of queer people in mainstream media (Poole, 2014) and politics. A recent *New York Times* article called the greater presence of queer people in political positions the “Rainbow Wave” (Caron, 2018). There have also been many technological advances that have meaningfully impacted LGB people. Robertson (2019) highlights the benefit of advances in digital technology for queer young people growing up in the United States, such as coming of age in an era of greater access to online queer communities. These communities, and the widespread availability of online information, provide LGB youth with spaces to connect with other queer people and learn about sexuality—something that was not as readily available to previous generations. Given these cultural, legal, and technological changes, LGBs may no longer feel the need to hide their sexual identity or separate themselves from straight communities as a form of self-protection (e.g., by residing in gay enclaves [Ghaziani, 2014]).

Living “beyond the closet” does not mean that discrimination against LGBs is a thing of the past, however. Others suggest that the acceptance of queer people in U.S. society today is “incomplete” (Fields, 2001; Martin et al., 2009; Myers, Forest, & Miller, 2004; Walters, 2014). For example, Doan, Loehr, and Miller (2014) find that many heterosexuals continue to express qualms about LGBs showing public displays of affection while simultaneously supporting more formal rights for queer people (e.g., the right to marry). The incompleteness of queer acceptance has been noted in the workplace (Denissen & Saguy, 2013), schools (Connell, 2014), the media (Richardson, 2005), and, as we discuss in this chapter, family.

As recently as the 1990s, it was still common for U.S. parents to dissolve parent-child relationships when their child came out as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Seidman, 2002). While this type of rejection still occurs (Meyer, 2015), today LGBs are more likely to maintain relationships with their parents after coming out (Mezey, 2015). But these parent-child relationships, as we will show, are not free of discrimination. Instead of blatant discrimination from parents, LGBs today often experience subtle heterosexism and subtle homophobia (Burn, Kadlec, & Rexter, 2005; Solebello & Elliott, 2011) from their family. For example, Fields (2001) argues that parents “accept” their LGB children to the extent that they are gen-

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