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## Social media and LGBTQ+ youth

The Community Health Series Partnership (CHSP) is turning its spotlight on how social media affects Black youth in the LGBTQ+ community — including how to help teens who've been victimized online. **Carlos T. Carter**, President and CEO of the Urban League of Pittsburgh, joins us with his thoughts, including strategies for navigating social media safely.

**Q: Thanks for joining us again, Carlos. Many teens today use social media to build relationships and communities, which can be positive. But there's also potential harm, especially for groups like LGBTQ+ youth. What should**

**younger teens and parents focus on online?**

**Carlos:** Online harassment is a real concern. Some people target minorities, so it's crucial for youth to manage privacy settings, use blocking features, and know how to report issues on apps. They should feel comfortable reaching out to trusted adults or friends if something troubling happens.

Black LGBTQ+ youth face compounded risks due to both their sexual and racial identities, making them targets for bullying. It's vital for them to find supportive communities online and offline where they feel safe and understood. Access to mental health resources like coun-

seling is also essential.

Building online relationships requires caution. Not everyone online has good intentions, so youth should verify who they interact with and be wary of those seeking personal information or making them uncomfortable. Open communication between parents and teens about their online experiences can help address concerns without judgment.

By being proactive and cautious, LGBTQ+ youth and their parents can navigate social media more safely and positively.

**Q: You mentioned the double risk Black LGBTQ+ youth face with online bullying. Can you elaborate?**

**Carlos:** Homophobia remains an issue in America and the Black community. While progress is being made, we need to support Black LGBTQ+ youth in embracing their identities proudly. They often turn to social media for acceptance and support, so ensuring their online interactions are positive and safe is crucial.

Growing up Black and LGBTQ+ can be isolating, and social media can provide a lifeline. Parents, educators, and community leaders must monitor and intervene in negative online interactions.

Creating supportive environments, both online and offline, helps Black LGBTQ+ youth navigate



CARLOS T. CARTER

their identities confidently. Open dialogue, mental health support, and access to inclusive communities are essential for their well-being.

**Q: What strategies can Black LGBTQ+ youth use to cope with the emotional toll of online hate?**

**Carlos:** Seek out online

spaces with like-minded individuals, such as group chats and moderated groups on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. These communities offer crucial support and connection.

Finding spaces that align with their identities as minorities is beneficial. Limiting social media time and balancing it with offline activities like school, hobbies, and physical health promotes overall well-being.

Encouraging mindfulness and setting boundaries around social media use can turn it into a positive tool rather than a source of stress.

By promoting these strategies, we can help Black LGBTQ+ youth protect themselves online and foster a more inclusive society.

## Effects of social media on LGBTQ+ health

Numerous studies have focused on the effects of social media on adolescent health and well-being during their formative years, highlighting both positive and adverse outcomes faced by adolescents. Yet, the effects on minority groups, especially stigmatized communities like queer youth, remain less acknowledged. The term LGBTQ+ refers to people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning. Due to limited acceptance in many parts of our society, along with lack of family and community support, LGBTQ+ youth often seek community and support in online environments such as social media.

Dr. César Escobar-Viera, Assistant Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral and Community Health Sciences at the University of Pittsburgh, works to improve the mental health and well-being of LGBTQ+ youth as they navigate the complexities of social media. Through his research group called the PRIDE iM lab, he develops and implements digital interventions for and with young people, often with a focus on educating and providing online resources to LGBTQ+ youth so they have more positive experiences on social media. The PRIDE iM lab focuses on better understanding the

bidirectional relationships between social media use and mental health, while recognizing and leveraging the critical role of supportive online environments in their well-being.

Challenges for LGBTQ+ Youth Online

Marginalized groups, such as LGBTQ+ youth, endure stress from violence, stigma, and discrimination—factors exacerbated online by anonymity. Minority stress theory helps explain how these stressors that are unique to LGBTQ+ youth can contribute to self-discrimination and self-hate, which then contributes to health problems like depression, anxiety, substance use problems, eating disorders, and self-harm. Dr. Escobar-Viera explains, "When the minority stress theory was developed social media was barely a thing. So, the question that not just we, but also other researchers, are trying to answer is whether there is a difference on how this theory applies online versus in person." Dr. Escobar-Viera is curious about how to adapt minority stress theory to online settings and to increase protective factors for youth, emphasizing the importance of safe online spaces for a healthy adolescent development.

Impact of Race in Online Interactions

LGBTQ+ youth of all

racess face both opportunities and risks online, and experiences vary. Black LGBTQ+ youth prefer spaces with peers who share their experiences as Black and LGBTQ+, while their Latin American peers often opt for anonymity. "Interestingly our White LGBTQ+ youth had neither of these preferences, which was very illuminating in showing the differences in how different races and ethnicities interact with social media within the LGBTQ+ community," he notes. Understanding these nuances is crucial for tailoring support effectively, a focus of ongoing research at the PRIDE iM Lab.

Navigating Online Negativity

Effective interventions guide teens in identifying and disengaging from negative online interactions. Dr. Escobar-Viera explains, "It is totally okay to shut down a social media connection that is not behaving as an actual ally. That's one of the best things about social media, it allows us to connect with those who bring positive things into our lives and limit our connections with those who don't." Dr. Escobar-Viera advises vigilance against such false allies and stresses the importance of data privacy, reminding teens to manage their digital footprint cautiously. Specifical-



ly, it is important to teach and remind teens, especially youth in vulnerable communities like the LGBTQ+, that they may not know people they meet online as well as they may think and to be careful about how much of themselves they allow these people online to have access to.

Role of the PRIDE iM Lab and Opportunities for Involvement

The PRIDE iM Lab aims to reduce mental health disparities among LGBTQ+ people through research and interventions on social media. Their work includes observational studies to continue uncovering the relationships between social media use and mental health and developing



DR. CÉSAR ESCOBAR-VIERA

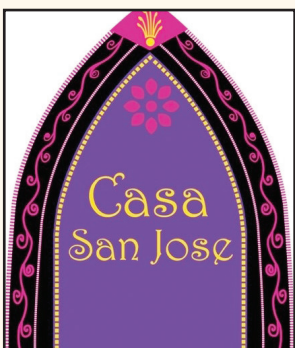
chatbot interventions tailored for various LGBTQ+ groups, including racial minorities and youth in rural areas. They collaborate with community organizations to ensure research benefits LGBTQ+ youth

directly. They partner with community organizations like Casa San José and the Hugh Lane Wellness Foundation to make sure that LGBTQ+ youth are getting opportunities to participate in and learn from this research. The PRIDE iM lab also utilizes a human-centered approach to their research by centering the voices of those most affected by their research in the study design process.

To learn more about the Pride iM Lab's research or get involved, visit [www.prideim.pitt.edu](http://www.prideim.pitt.edu). You can also contact Dr. Escobar-Viera at [escobarvieracg@upmc.edu](mailto:escobarvieracg@upmc.edu) or research coordinator Tylar Schmitt at [schmitttn@upmc.edu](mailto:schmitttn@upmc.edu) for further information.

## Casa San José connects, supports, and advocates for Latino community

A trustworthy, go-to-resource for underserved Latinos, Casa San José (House of Joseph) was founded in 2013 by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden. They were inspired



to open a welcome center that would support the tireless work of Sister Janice Vanderneck, who's cared for Pittsburgh Latinos for more than two decades. Headquartered in Pittsburgh's Brookline neighborhood, Casa San José depends on a dedicated staff of employees, sisters, and volunteers to provide services and programs, including:

- \* Free medical care at locations throughout Pittsburgh, including gynecological, and obstetric services; prenatal, postnatal, and pediatric care; and more

- \* Mental health support — no insurance required

- \* Emergency housing options

- \* An after-school program called Casita

- \* Food pantries and summer camps

- \* Support for individuals with autism

- \* Social and emergency services, including Know Your Rights sessions

- \* Community advocacy for equal access opportunities

- \* English language classes

Equally important as the support it provides to underserved Latinos, Casa San José celebrates Latino immigrants and their culture — and sets an example of how to embrace inclusion, dignity, and respect in a country founded by immigrants.

For a complete list of programs and services, visit the Casa San José website at [casasanjose.org](http://casasanjose.org) or send an email to [info@casasanjose.org](mailto:info@casasanjose.org).

## Hugh Lane Wellness Foundation champions healthy minds, hearts for LGBTQ+ communities

Named in memory of Hugh "Huey" Lane, the Hugh Lane Wellness Foundation was founded in 2017 to improve the health of the LGBTQ+ and HIV communities.

Huey lived during a time where being out and openly talking about HIV were highly stigmatized. In his



honor, the Hugh Lane Wellness Foundation strives to address both LGBTQ+ and HIV bias across the many intersections of our communities. The goal is to create spaces and opportunities for individuals to be their authentic, courageous selves.

The organization focuses on three key areas:

1. Community Health: Hugh Lane Wellness Foundation works to improve health with LGBTQ+ and HIV communities by removing systemic barriers that block LGBTQ+ individuals from attaining health equi-

ty. Services and programs include food, hygiene products and safer sex kits; legal aid; case management and care coordination; wellness events; and senior coffee hours.

2. Youth and Family Services: Hugh Lane offers a full range of services for youth, caregivers, schools, educators and providers.

The Hugh Lane staff notes that if there's a service you're looking for — and you don't find it on their website — reach out to [info@hughlane.org](mailto:info@hughlane.org), and they'll help you find what you need.

3. LGBTQ Training Consultation Pittsburgh: Hugh Lane can tailor trainings or workshops for corporate, medical, social service, small business, school, workplace, or provider setting. Topics include gender diversity; diversity, equity, and inclusion; sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression; and mental health.

Learn more about the Hugh Lane Wellness Foundation by visiting [hughlane.org](http://hughlane.org).