

The Girls Guide: The Online Support Group Breaking Down International Barriers

It was an unusually cold January morning, and Alison Pool was feeling relaxed as she strolled through the aisles of Target. Usually at this time, she would be glued to her phone, responding to the hundreds of notifications from girls worldwide, but today had been a strangely uneventful day. Pool didn't mind; after all, it was always nice to have a break.

As she paused to peruse a vanilla-scented candle, however, her phone began pinging with panicked messages. Her fingers numb from the cold, Pool fumbled with her phone, her heart sinking as she read the dreaded words: "The Girls Guide has been disabled."

As many are forced to self-isolate in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, Facebook has become a hotspot for those seeking a sense of community. But the social media platform's strict new rules have put the future of many communities at stake as groups are shut down over guideline violations. One such group is The Girls Guide, a female-led self-help group where girls can get advice, make friends, and find support.

Founded by Pool and facilitated by a small international team, TGG offers the emotional support and human connection that many are lacking at a time of isolation, proving that there is no hurdle the internet can't leap over in its mission to connect people – whether it be geographical proximity, religious beliefs or cultural differences. "We don't care where you came from or what your background is; we're here for you," says Bonnie Chapman, a TGG administrator. "[The Girls Guide] is a place where girls can feel heard and validated."

The sentiment is shared by the many members who rely on the group to forge emotional connections. 21-year-old Tori Newcomer, who has been an active part of TGG since July, sees the group as her second home. "I honestly don't know what I would do without these girls," she says. "They've helped me get through breakups, moving away from all of my family and everything I knew; they've supported me in achieving my biggest dreams. They're my family."

TGG sees hundreds of posts daily—from light-hearted topics like makeup tips and selfie threads to more serious issues like toxic relationships and abusive households, the group offers support to anyone who needs an outsider's perspective. But in a group of over 32,000 members, anything can be a catalyst for conflict. When arguments break out, the team is quick to intervene, but even then, it is difficult to monitor the group at all times. Under Facebook's rigid new rules, it became impossible. "[The admins] are a group of 12 girls from all over the world with independent lives," says Chapman. "We're not always available, and unfortunately, that's usually when the chaos happens."

TGG is among millions of other groups that have been affected by the recent crackdown, which is part of a larger movement to combat global unrest as founder Mark Zuckerberg promises to "discourage divisive conversations and communities" within its user base. Facebook's updated guidelines address what it deems to a threat to safety, including violent behaviour, adult content, hate speech and the spread of disinformation. Any violation of these rules could get a group

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swiftly shut down with no prior notice, which helps keep the platform safe — but it also means that those running the groups are unable to prevent it from happening.

And so, it was on that January morning that TGG was unceremoniously disabled, though the exact reason is unclear as Facebook has offered no real explanation for the action. “There was no warning at all,” Pool says, recalling that she “cried the whole way home” upon learning that the group had been taken down. “The Girls Guide means everything to me. It’s a part of who I am.”

At present, the future of The Girls Guide remains unknown; for now, the girls have submitted an appeal to reinstate the group. However, Pool is determined to continue providing a safe space to girls in need, even if it means building a new group from the ground up. “If TGG is shut down, over 32,000 girls will lose their safe space,” she says. “They would have to fight their battles alone — and no one deserves to be alone.” Still, her biggest hope is that TGG will be back up and running as soon as possible. “The Girls Guide is a platform for all women to find a safe space, a home away from home, friendships and honestly, a huge support base,” says Pool. “To take our group away is to belittle the huge positive impact that TGG has had on so many young women’s lives.”

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