

2021

 **Results**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Lead Authors:

Jen Hecht, MPH
Dan Wohlfeiler, MJ, MPH
Emmett Patterson



Created by
**BUILDING HEALTHY
ONLINE COMMUNITIES**

Background

While gay, bi, and trans people have long been subjected to discrimination, stigma and hate speech from outside our communities, the way we treat each another online can also cause harm. Queer dating app and site users can harm others because of their race, gender identity, age, body size, disability, or because they're living with HIV. "No fats," "No femmes," "Clean only" – these words and their derogatory implications are all too prevalent. Yale University researchers, John Packankis and Charles Burton, found that for some gay and bi men, being repeatedly rejected by other gay and bi men online is associated with greater risk for HIV and symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Building Healthy Online Communities (BHOC), a consortium of national and local HIV and STD prevention agencies working with the owners of dating sites and apps to support their users' sexual health, decided to take action. Nine dating apps and sites – Adam4Adam, Daddyhunt, dudesnude, Grindr, GROWLr, Jack'd, Manhunt, POZ Personals, and SCRUFF – joined together in this first-ever cross-industry effort to reduce stigma for their gay, bi, and trans users.

From April 25th to June 17th, 2021, we used both quantitative and qualitative research strategies to gather insights from over 5,500 app and site users.

1. **Scenario Survey (n = 2,951):** We asked participants how dating apps and sites could best support them in response to six hypothetical scenarios: discrimination based on body size, race, or gender identity; being sober and encouraged to use drugs; being pressured to not use condoms; and facing misconceptions about having an undetectable viral load that eliminates the risk of transmitting HIV.
2. **Focus Groups (n = 22):** We invited participants to a 60-minute discussion to give feedback on proposed features from the scenario survey and shared their opinions about them.
3. **Rating Survey (n = 2,537):** Based on the scenario survey and focus groups, BHOC identified 20 different features that apps and sites could provide to support kinder and more respectful behavior online and asked users to rate them.

Overview of Key Findings

We found several areas in which many users want apps to take action:

Give users more options for customization.

Many users want sites and apps to expand options and tools which would put them more in control of their experience. This includes being able to unlock pictures and profile fields—such as HIV status or gender identity—for users they already trust rather than making them visible to all.



Expand filtering functionality.

Most users endorsed filtering but had different opinions about which attributes they could filter by. Most users wanted to filter other users by: position as top/bottom/vers; age; and what users were looking for, such as hook-up, friend with benefits, or a relationship. However, many users didn't want other users to filter them by their race or ethnicity, body size or type, and HIV status.

Users who were the most likely to experience prejudice—people of color and trans users—had different reactions to filtering than White people and cisgender users. There were also differences within each of those two groups.

Approximately one third of all users wanted to be able to filter others by race and ethnicity—almost the same percentage as users who did not. Many people of color (POC) users were disappointed that some platforms removed race filtering, since they only wanted to see people of their own specific races or ethnicities.

Trans men were 1.5 times as likely as those who identified as cisgender men to want to filter others by gender identity, and twice as likely as those cisgender men to not want to be filtered by others by gender identity. Some trans users experienced filtering by gender identity as making them more vulnerable to violence or being fetishized.

Facilitate clear communication between users.

Users wanted built-in tools to prevent and respond to negative interactions. Some users who experienced repeated negative interactions reported that they had already developed their own strategies. But most users wanted features built into the app or site to make it easier to respond to hate speech or to respectfully let others know that they aren't interested with pre-written phrases (i.e., "Thanks for your interest, but it's not a match").

Support emotional and physical safety.

Users wanted tools to remove themselves from emotionally and physically unsafe situations, such as blocking as many users as they want who say or do something harmful.

Many apps currently restrict the number of users someone can block but offer unlimited blocks only as a paid feature, meaning that users who experience stigma may have to pay to avoid being subjected to more. Users felt the solutions they have used to prevent threats to their emotional or physical safety felt too simple for nuanced situations and wanted options to distance themselves from other users beyond just blocking them.

Many users also wanted to hear back from apps what happened after reporting someone.

Prioritize needs of users who experience stigma in feature development and implementation.

People who are experiencing discrimination in their offline lives are more likely to have negative experiences on the apps and to advocate for nearly all features more than the average respondent.

- **POC users rated 17 of the 20 proposed feature ideas higher** than White users, with **Black respondents rating 15 features higher** than all other respondents.
- **Trans users rated 14 of the 20 proposed feature ideas higher** than cisgender respondents.

Many users reported experiencing stigma based on other attributes: **body size, weight, HIV status, disabilities, and age**. While we did not ask NiceAF participants to disclose their body size, weight, HIV status, disabilities, or age in the surveys, we heard from many users that they experienced high rates of rejection and stigma based on these attributes. Many anti-stigma features will be useful to them as well and should be adapted to meet their needs.

Recommendations

Based on the input we have received from more than 5,500 users, we recommend that dating apps and sites do the following in order to provide healthier online communities:

1. Prioritize the most vulnerable populations.

Online prejudice isn't that much different from real life prejudice, particularly when it comes to who it's directed at. Apps and sites can have a tremendous impact on the mental and physical health of our communities. Focusing our efforts on populations who experience the greatest prejudice is urgently needed.

2. Educate users about features.

We found that many respondents were not aware of some of the features that apps and sites already offer. We recommend that the apps expand their educational efforts about how the different features work.



3. Reconsider benefits packages for paying users.

We identified two app features that some apps and sites only offer to paying users: the ability to see more users, and unlimited blocks. While we understand the business reasons for charging more for these strategies, they also may have unintended consequences. Limiting the number of users may incentivize and encourage some users to filter out users of a particular type, and be more likely to reject them in disrespectful ways or “ghost” them. Users were frustrated at having to pay for additional blocks, and saw it as having to “pay more money to put up with less abuse.”

4. Incentivize profile completion.

Generally speaking, the more information shared on a profile, the more likely the user will have success finding what they are looking for. Apps and sites can play a role in profile completion by using tactics like offering perks to users who complete a greater number of profile fields.

5. Make a plan for implementing changes, and publicize them.

Users were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about having more tools to make spending time online a more positive experience. We at BHOC are happy to continue to work with app and site owners to implement them. Taking any of the steps suggested will both improve the user experience, reduce stigma, and improve the mental and physical health of millions of users and their partners. It will also demonstrate a commitment by apps and sites to be responsive to users’ desires.

6. Demonstrate a unified commitment.

We have been very excited at the number of apps and sites who jumped in to participate in NiceAF. We propose a joint online press release and press conference on World AIDS Day, December 1, 2021, to publicize any actions that they have taken or are planning to take in order to make the online experience NiceAF. We at BHOC are happy to continue to work with app and site owners to implement features which can provide healthier, more respectful, and safer online communities.

Read the full report at NiceAF.org.

