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# Results

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Created by  
**BUILDING HEALTHY  
ONLINE COMMUNITIES**

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# Executive Summary

## 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 (p. 13).

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 (p. 15).**

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 (p. 19).**

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 (p. 20).**

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 (p. 22).

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.

## 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 one another can also cause harm. Too often, people within the queer community hurt others because of their race, gender identity, age, body size, disability, or because they're living with HIV. This was true long before the internet, social networks, and apps provided the means to fuel harmful behavior. People take advantage of the anonymity the internet provides to say things they would never say in person. Too often, dating app and site users do the same. “No fats,” “No femmes,” “Clean only” – these words and their derogatory implications are all too prevalent on sites.

This kind of hate speech can cause not only psychological harm but can also facilitate HIV risk. Yale Researchers, John Pachankis and Charles Burton, found that for some gay and bi men, being repeatedly rejected by other gay and bi men online, and having a lower ‘status’ in the sexual marketplace—like not having a gym-toned body or masculine gender expression—is associated with greater risk taking 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 app owners to support their users’ sexual health, decided to take action to reduce stigma for gay, bi, and trans app and site users.

BHOC reached out to app and site owners and found that there was widespread support among them to look for ways to make the experience better for everyone. Adam4Adam, Daddyhunt, dudesnude, Grindr, GROWLr, Jack’d, Manhunt, POZ Personals, and SCRUFF all joined in, and through advertising and messaging recruited more than 5,500 users to share ideas on what apps and sites could do to help reduce online stigma. This was the first time that apps and sites have come together to address an industry-wide issue.

BHOC also wanted to go beyond asking individual users to take all responsibility for being more respectful and kinder to each other; rather, we wanted to hear their ideas for ways to harness technology’s power to help create an environment to support more respectful behavior. Such strategies have a long history in promoting health. For example, while educating people to use seatbelts is important, making sure that cars began to be manufactured with seatbelts was key to reducing injury. Through NiceAF, BHOC sought to find the equivalent to seatbelts to reduce stigma online, and by doing so, support the mental and physical health of all users, especially those who face stigma due to their race or ethnicity, gender identity, HIV status, body size, or age.

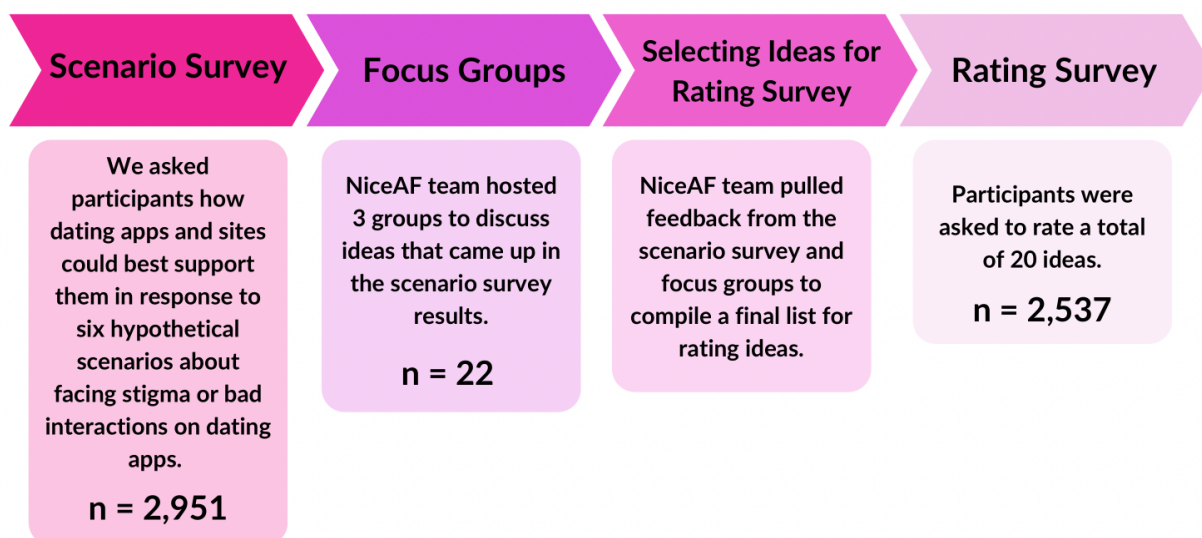
We are sharing these findings with our dating app and site partners and holding discussions with them about how to implement users’ suggestions.



**Note on language:** The findings from NiceAF can be relevant to a variety of partners, including public health professionals and advocates, dating app and site owners, activists, policymakers, tech experts, and more. The language we use to describe race and ethnicity, gender identity, HIV status and vulnerability to HIV was selected as the most commonly understood across these diverse fields. When we quote respondents, we use the terms they chose to identify themselves.

## Methodology

From April 25th to June 17th, 2021, NiceAF conducted both quantitative and qualitative research to gather insights from app and site users about which anti-stigma features the platforms they use could implement to make their experience safer, better, and more affirming.





## Scenario Survey

Advertisements on apps and sites directed users to an online survey, where they were given open-ended scenarios describing common situations that users face. They were prompted to give their ideas on what apps and sites could do to help users address three out of six scenarios. These scenarios included issues of: experiencing discrimination based on body size, race, or gender identity; being sober and approached 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. One such scenario reads:

*Bob lives in a town with very few gay guys nearby, so when he starts chatting with Trent, they're both quickly into the idea of hooking up. Trent aggressively wants to hookup bareback only, so Bob declines. Trent won't take no for an answer. Aside from the block button, one way apps can make users who experience harassment feel more support is \_\_\_\_\_.*

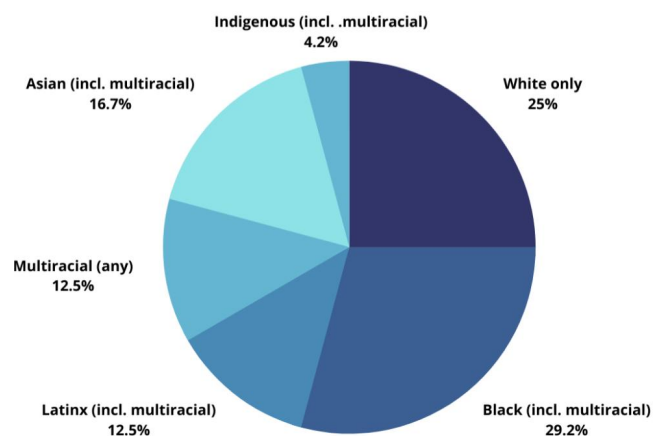
The complete set of scenarios can be seen [here](#).

## Focus Groups

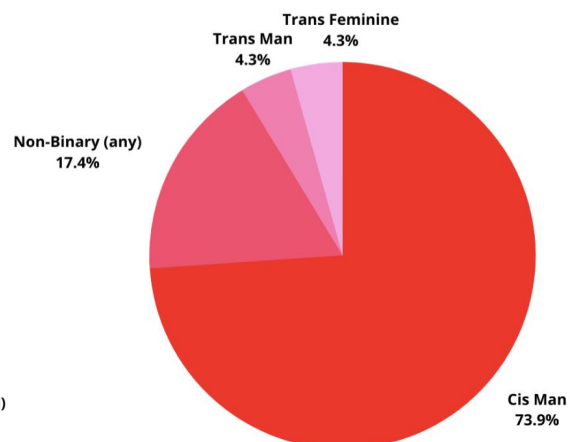
Following the scenario survey, we held three online focus groups to obtain more in-depth feedback from users about some of the proposed solutions. We deliberately focused our recruitment efforts on people of color (POC) and trans and non-binary users to participate in these groups, knowing these two groups experience particularly high levels of stigma within queer communities. Users who experienced discrimination offline often faced it online as well.

## Focus Group Demographics (n=22)

### Race + Ethnicity



### Gender Identity



This was particularly true for focus group participants who shared negative experiences related to their race or ethnicity, gender identity and expression, disability, body size, or HIV status.

The majority of focus group participants (75.1%) identified as POC, and 26.0% as non-binary or trans. Participants were from 13 different states, in addition to Washington, DC: California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Texas, Washington.

## Rating Survey

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. We asked users to rate these ideas on a scale of 1-10. The categories were randomized in order to ensure even distribution of responses. Proposed features included the following:

<b>Profile Options</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Profile Options Match: Only see a field on another user's profile if you have filled that field out</li> <li>• Profile Highlights: Choose the profile options you want people to see first</li> <li>• Completed Profile Perk: See more users if you fill out more profile options</li> <li>• Unlock private profile fields for specific users</li> </ul>
<b>Filtering Options</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Filtering and Visibility Opt-Ins: Choose profile options that others can see on your profile or use to filter</li> <li>• Contact settings: Specify who can message you (i.e. only users ages 22-35)</li> <li>• Keyword Filters: Use keyword searches from profile fields to exclude users in your grid</li> <li>• Profile Icons: Put an icon on your profile that shows what's important to you (i.e. being sober)</li> </ul>
<b>Dealing with Negative Experiences</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Get Unlimited Blocks</li> <li>• Mute a Conversation</li> <li>• Temporary Block</li> <li>• Block with Resources: Block a user and give related resources (i.e. HIV status, gender identity, etc.)</li> <li>• Hide User</li> <li>• Message Reacts: Use pre-set emojis to react to a message (i.e. 'thumbs down' to a negative message)</li> </ul>
<b>Reporting</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reason for Reporting: Choose a reason that you are reporting someone</li> </ul>

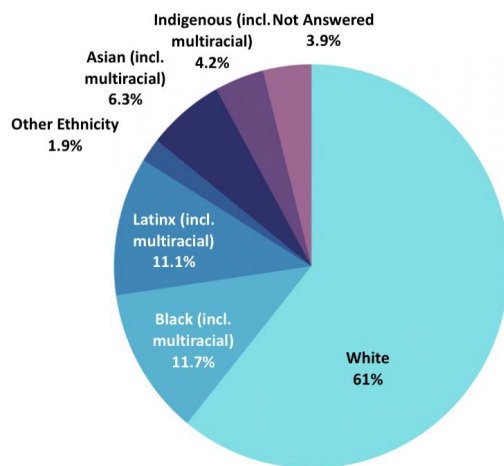
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reported Users Notification: Reported users receive a message with the reason they were reported</li> <li>• Review Sensitive Phrases: Get an alert if you put keywords in messages or profiles that violate community guidelines</li> </ul>
<b>Additional Features</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opt-in to a Code of Ethics</li> <li>• Verification Process for New Users</li> <li>• Saved Phrases: Pre-set messages to send to other users when you aren't interested</li> </ul>

The survey also included questions related to:

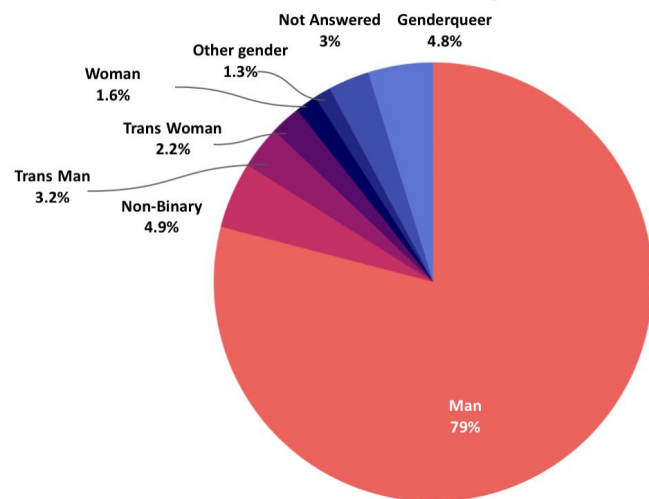
- Current dating apps or sites used
- Demographic details
- Whether the participant anticipated they might use the listed features
- Attributes about users that they would want to use to filter *others*
- Attributes they didn't want other users to filter *them* by

## Rating Survey Demographics (n=2,951)

### Race + Ethnicity



### Gender Identity



Notably, the racial and ethnic demographics of the respondents to the second survey were different than those in the focus group. Whereas the majority of focus group respondents were POC, POC survey respondents made up 35.2% of users. While 1 in 4 people identified as trans, non-binary and/or genderqueer in the focus group, 16.4% identified as such in this survey.


## Results

We found a range of opinions on how apps and sites could help prevent negative experiences and help users respond to them when they happen. Some users preferred to ignore rejection and stigmatizing behavior with no additional intervention. ***“I don’t see the issue! [The user in the scenario] received a very honest answer, even when very direct. So he has to accept it,”*** one respondent commented in the scenario survey. Other users felt that they should be allowed to have ‘preferences’ and that users who said they experienced stigma should accept that it’s just part of being on these platforms.

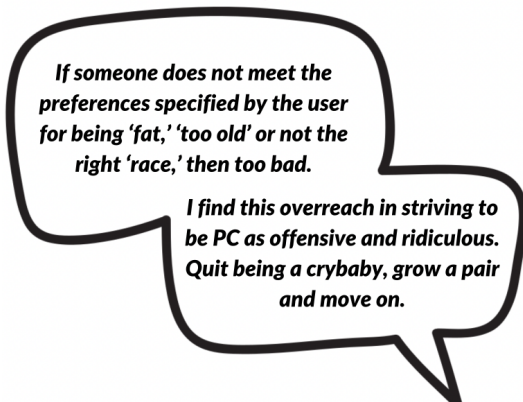
However, many users opposed such attitudes. When asked why they had ever deleted an app, users shared they encountered the ***“same jerky guys”*** or were ***“tired of the toxicity”*** they experienced when trying to connect with other users. Others noted that rude behavior had a negative impact on their mental health: ***“Frustrations and depression and other negative emotions from interactions and users and lack of interactions,”*** were reason enough for one user to delete the apps for good.

Additionally, some users who experienced negative interactions had already developed strategies for dealing with stigma but wanted app and site owners to prioritize reducing abusive behavior so they wouldn’t have to.

Most users wanted apps and sites to take action to create a more affirming experience. Overall, a vast majority of users supported most of the interventions. We frequently found that some ideas were rated more highly than others, and while statistically significant, these differences were often quite small. When looking at differences between different groups of users, we found some differences that were statistically different, but those differences were also generally small. Therefore, we advise that those differences are not the sole basis for deciding which interventions to prioritize, nor which, if any, should be excluded. Balancing the potential impact of a given feature for reducing negative experiences with implementation challenges will likely be more important in deciding which features to implement.

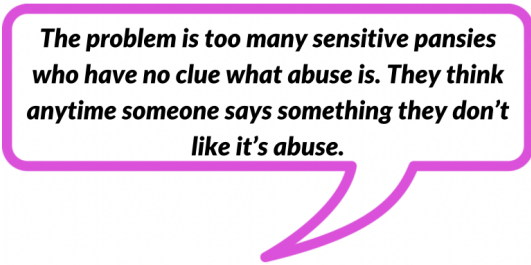


***Quit being so damned sensitive. Some people are fat. Or ugly. Or just not that interesting. Get over it.***



***If someone does not meet the preferences specified by the user for being ‘fat,’ ‘too old’ or not the right ‘race,’ then too bad.***

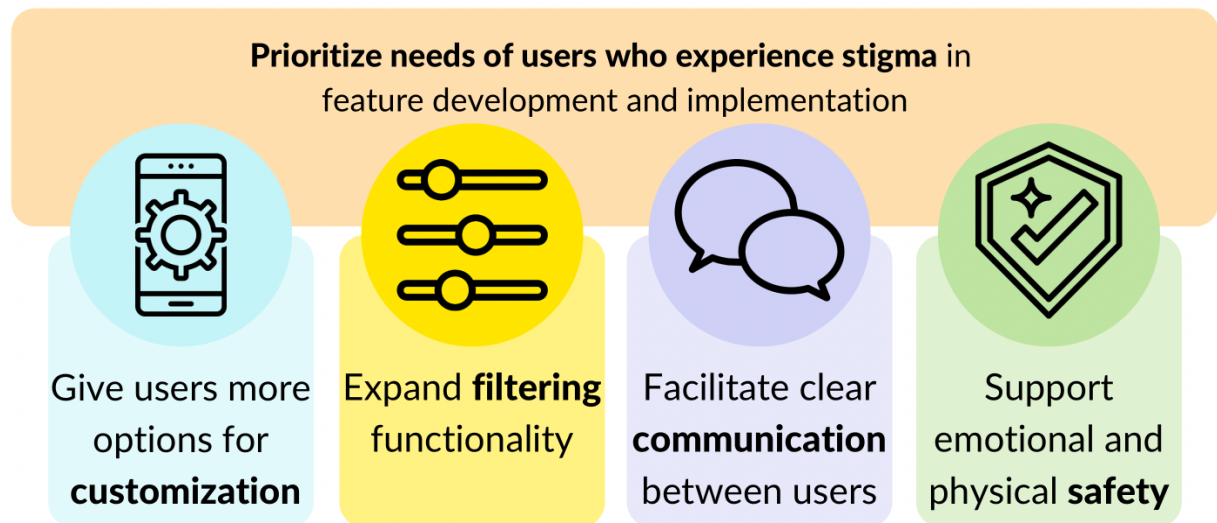
***I find this overreach in striving to be PC as offensive and ridiculous. Quit being a crybaby, grow a pair and move on.***



***The problem is too many sensitive pansies who have no clue what abuse is. They think anytime someone says something they don’t like it’s abuse.***

## By Theme

In analyzing the results across the project, five themes emerged from dating app and site users. We placed features into the thematic category in which they best fit; however these themes are meant to organize the feedback we received for purposes of this report.

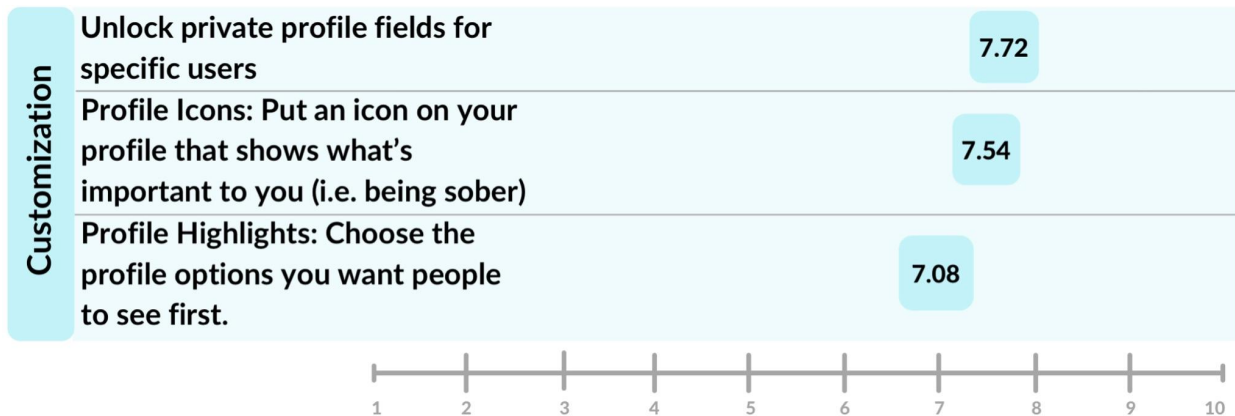


### Give users more options for customization

Many users expressed their desires for strategies that would expand options and tools which would put them more in control of their experience, especially their profiles.

Some of the major themes that we discovered were:

- Users want more tailoring and control of their experience by being able to opt in or out of features.
- Users want more control over profiles, especially to choose whether or not to include which to show (i.e. relationship status, other POC, top/bottom/vers, etc.).
- Some users endorsed an “exchange” approach, especially for photos and some profile fields (i.e. HIV status and weight).



The highest ranked customization option was **Unlock Profile Fields**. For example, this feature could make it possible for a user living with HIV to only show their HIV status to people they choose. One focus group participant living with HIV said, “*Maybe I don’t want to put [my HIV status] on my profile;*” rather, he would prefer to show his status to select users rather than have it be visible to all.

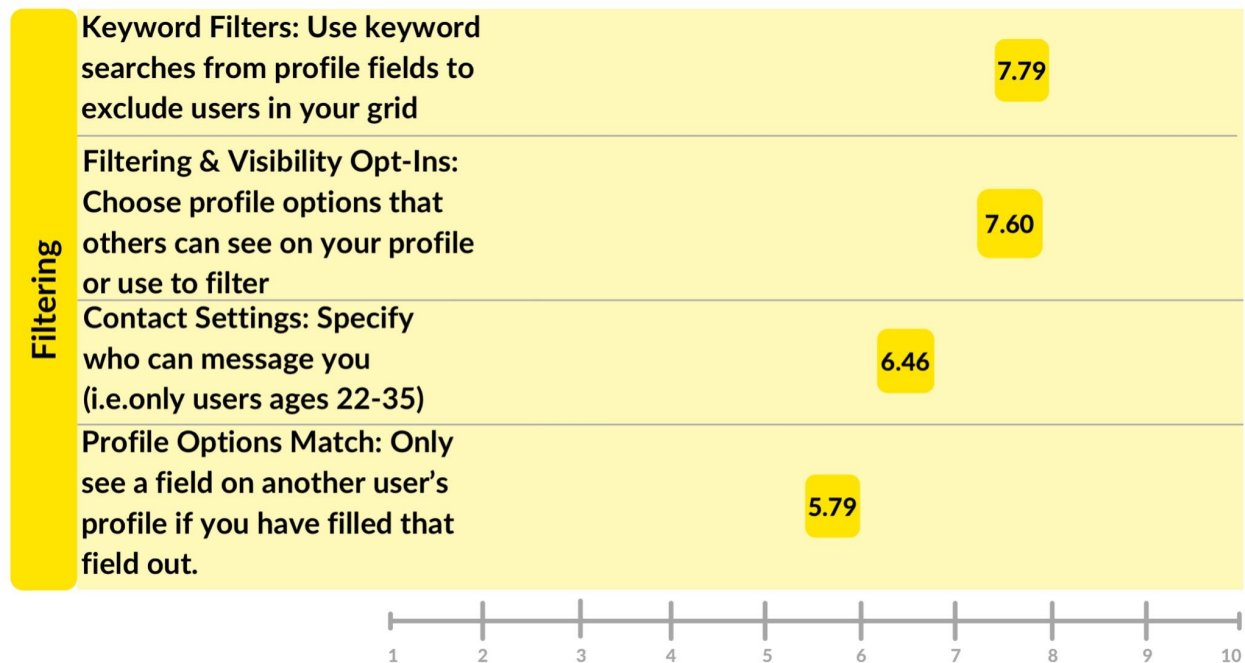
Adding **Profile Icons** was also a highly-rated response. For example, users talked about putting icons that showed they were sober, or their body type, so that other users could see these without having to open and read their entire profile before messaging.

***I ALWAYS look at position first. If we aren’t compatible there, I won’t even attempt to chat.***

Some users suggested that **Profile Highlights** could allow them to put their most relevant information on the top, such as their HIV status, position or what they were looking for. In that way, users who read their profiles would be more likely to see these profile fields and decide if it made sense to interact with them.



## Expand filtering functionality



***If I can filter out people who wrote 'no fats, no femmes, no black people' [in their profiles] I don't even have to deal with seeing it.***

**Keyword Filters** were the highest rated option in this category, which would allow users to search other users' profiles for offensive language and exclude those users from their grid. Users also wanted the ability to **opt-in or opt-out of filtering features and wanted to know what profile fields were visible to other users**. If users were being filtered according to information and attributes they listed on their profiles, they wanted to know and have the option to not be filtered according to certain fields. Rather

than removing their information from the profile field to avoid being filtered, users wanted to be able to keep what was important to them on their profiles.

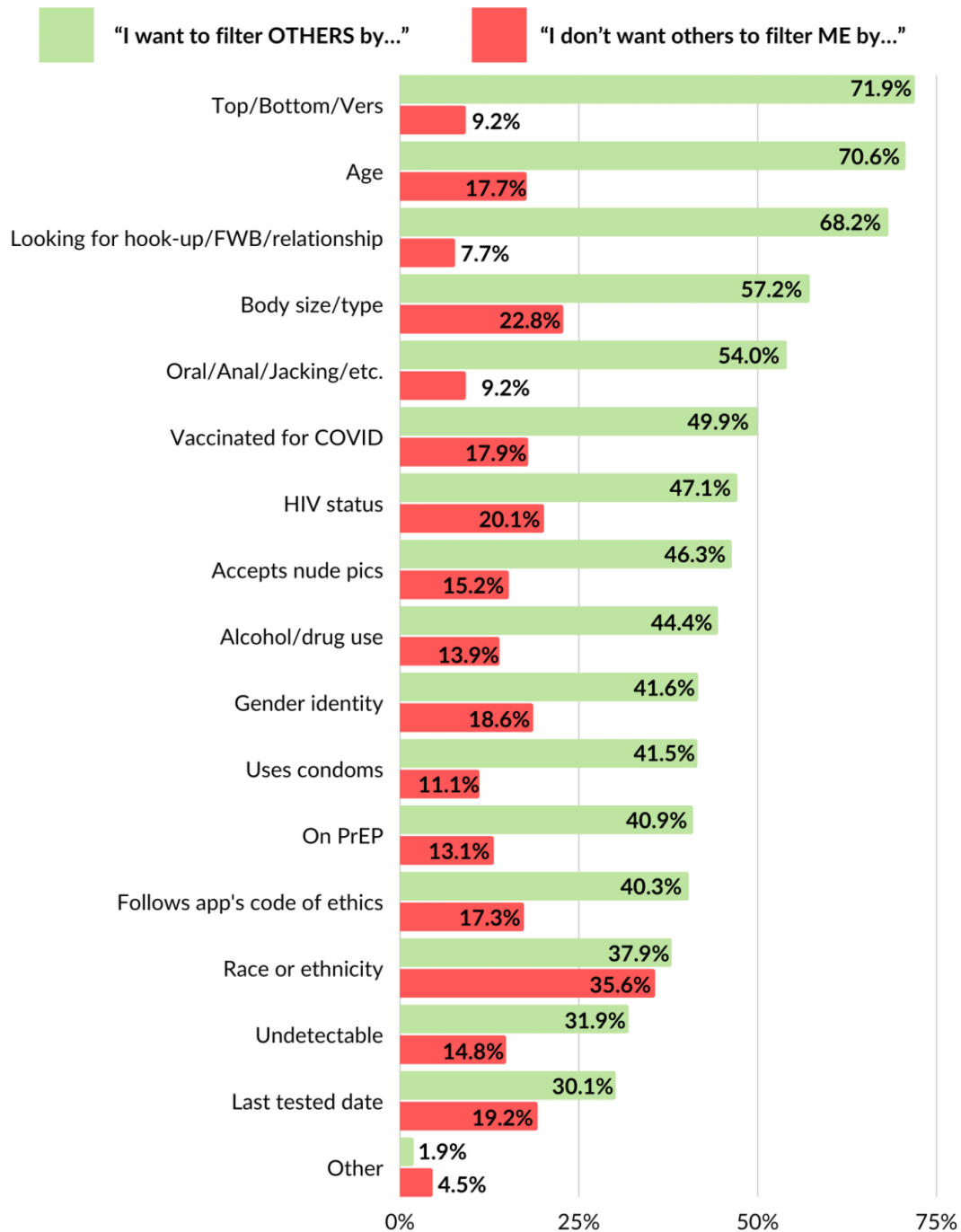
### Filtering In or Filtering Out?

There are two ways that filtering features function on apps and sites:

- **Filtering in:** Users can choose to select which users they may be interested in by specific attributes. For example, some users may want to only see or receive messages from people between 22 and 35 years-old. All apps and sites provide this feature, although they may vary in which categories users can choose. Some permit filtering by race or ethnicity, while others don't.
- **Filtering out:** Users can indicate which users they do NOT want to receive messages.

For example, some users may not want to receive messages from people between 22 and 35. This feature is much less common among apps and sites.

We asked users which attributes they would like to filter *others* by and which they would not like others to filter *them* by.



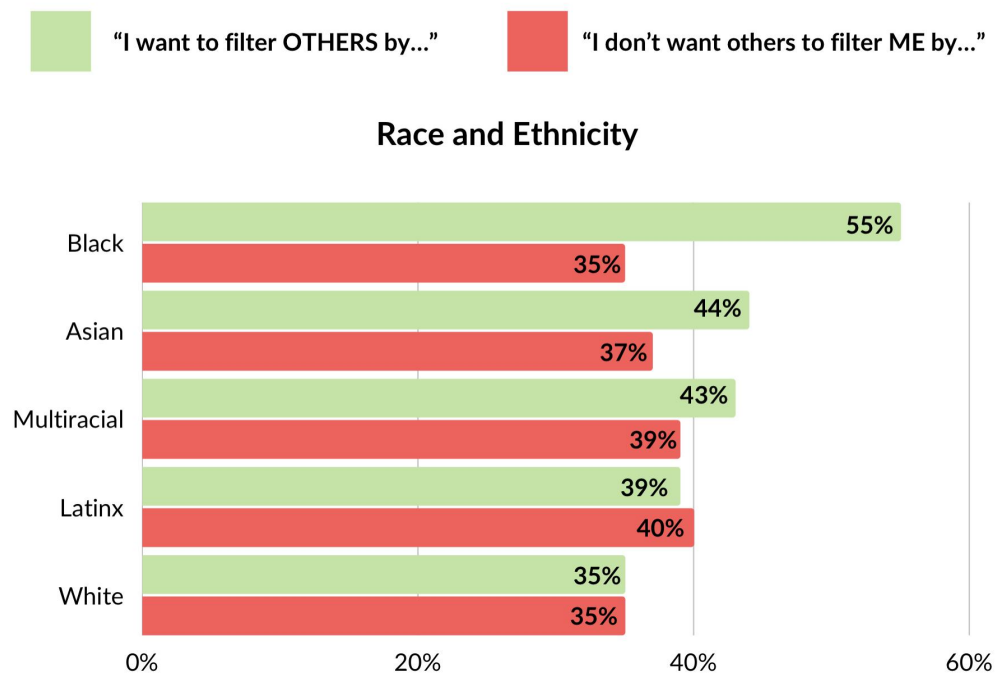
Users wanted to be able to filter other users by a range of different attributes, and most users didn't mind other users filtering them by those same attributes. A user may want to be able to



filter other users by lots of attributes, and may not object if others filter them.

However, this was very different when looking at race and ethnicity. Of all the attributes or characteristics that could be filtered, race and ethnicity was the one that users most did not want others to filter them by.

### Filtering by Race and Ethnicity



When we analyzed questions of filtering by race and ethnicity, the story became more layered and complex. A significant percentage of people of nearly all races wanted to filter others by race or ethnicity. Many POC users voiced their disappointment that filtering by race was removed by some apps and wanted the option to only see users of specific races or ethnicities. As one focus group participant noted, ***“When I’m searching for someone, I want to talk with people who know my culture. Where I live, there are no Asians. I’m looking for people who are interested in my culture. It’s not always about sex.”*** The majority of Black respondents (55%) wanted to be able to filter others by race and ethnicity. In our focus groups, some Black participants wanted to only meet other Black people to avoid racism, particularly being fetishized or rejected based on their race.

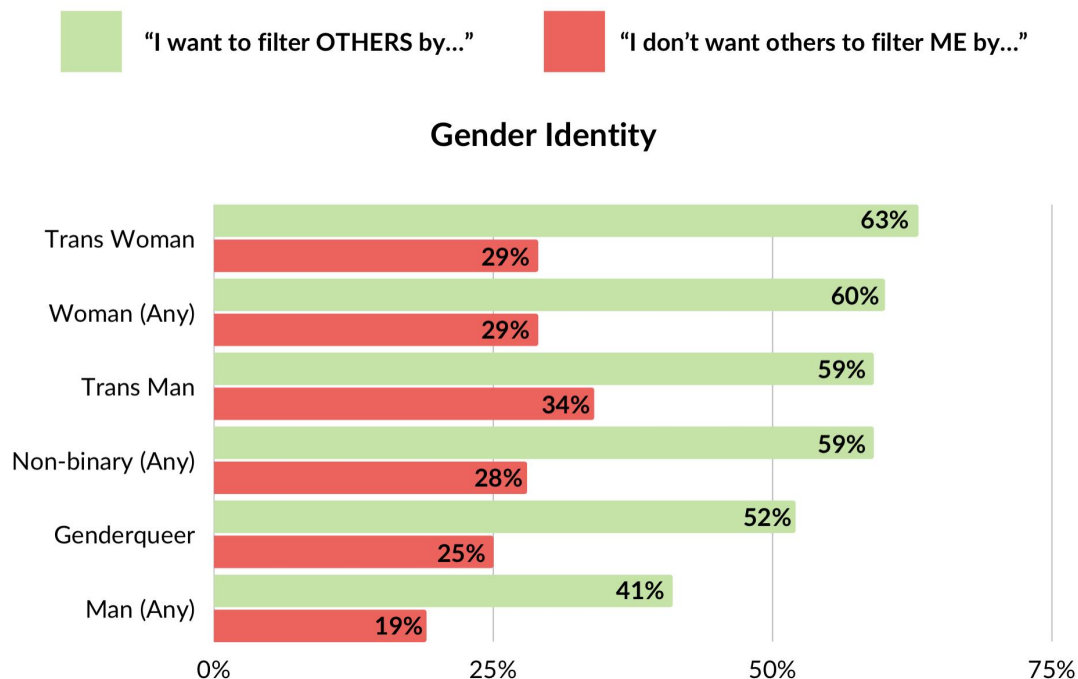
***“Removing the race filter didn’t stop sexual racism; it just increased the amount of hostile interactions between sexual racists and people of color.”***

However, not all POC users felt the same. Some brought up how filtering by race created uncomfortable dynamics. One focus group participant summarized it by saying, ***“I don’t want to***

**be found by my race. I don't want to educate anyone on the Black experience."** Other POC users objected being 'filtered out of the grid,' believing it encouraged sexual racism and discrimination. However, a few POC users in our focus groups expressed not minding being 'filtered out' by White users; for them, filtering out people based on their race or ethnicity was a red flag indicating racist attitudes which could lead to mistreatment.

***You would be surprised how many white dudes hit me up as a black top because they're so enticed by the idea...but the moment I politely decline then I become the 'n-word' because they can't handle rejection. Then, they automatically block you so they can go on to the next black person and act like they're not secretly racist...***

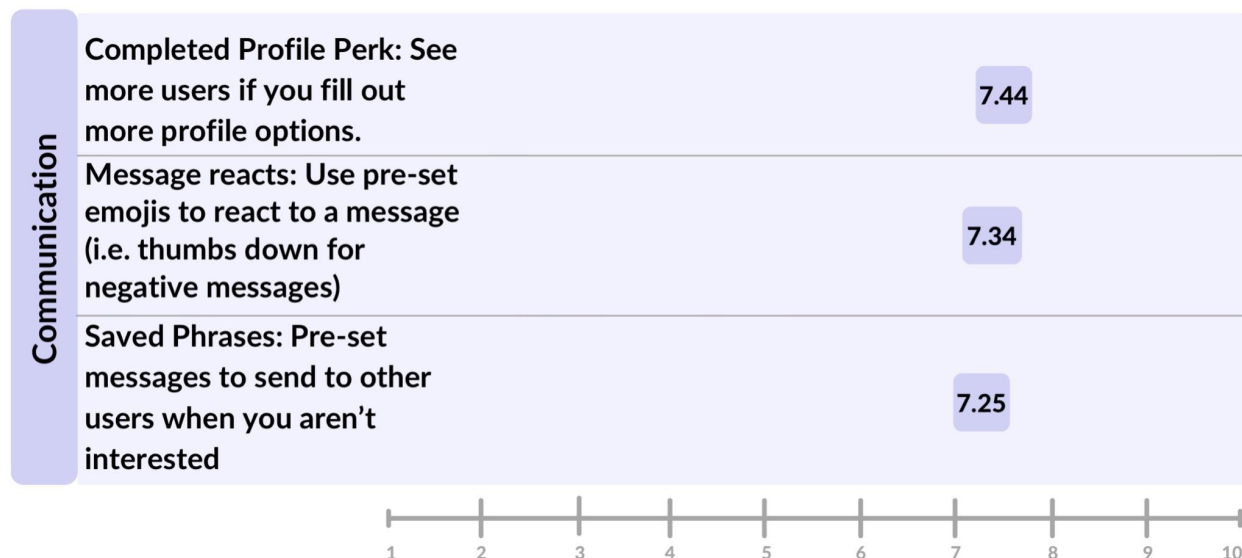
### Filtering by Gender Identity



When we asked participants about filtering by gender identity, we found that the distinction of wanting to filter others' rather than not wanting to be filtered by others was also relevant to trans and non-binary people. Survey respondents who identified as cisgender or trans women, trans men, and non-binary were more likely to want to filter by gender identity than users who identified themselves as cisgender men. Some trans and non-binary users wanted to filter in for people like them. As one focus group participant said,, ***"I want to filter in for more trans people, for more people with different bodies, and I like filtering in for whoever I'm interested in."***

On the other hand, some trans and non-binary users saw that being filtered could make them invisible. Of all respondents, trans men were the most likely to not want to be filtered by their gender identity (34%), a rate twice as high as cisgender men. Others saw that filtering could promote fetishizing and put them at risk of greater abuse and violence. As one transfeminine focus group participant said, ***“Many of us who are trans see slurs in people’s profiles. Many of us are in vulnerable positions. People will attack you. We should have protection.”***

### Facilitate clear communication between users



Users rated communication features similarly. A vast majority of them endorsed the idea of **Completed Profile Perks**, by which apps and sites could reward users who completed profiles with being able to see more users on their screens.

***“Two years ago, an older white man said, ‘Hi, you’re not really my type, you’re a bit too heavy.’ My response was not nice.”***

Some focus group participants felt that the limited number of profiles had a negative impact on their ability to find users with their shared racial or gender identities. Meanwhile, **Message Reacts** would allow users to react to negative messages with an emoji, like ‘thumbs down.’ **Saved Phrases**, which could be created by apps and sites, would allow users to turn someone down respectfully rather than “ghosting” or ignoring someone. One user shared that they keep a

note on their phone with an “it’s not a match” message they can copy and paste. Phrases could be as simple as “Thanks for your interest, but it’s not quite a match for me. Good luck.” Some users suggested that if apps implement tools allowing them to let other users know they aren’t interested, they should also provide some education on why and how to use it.

### Support emotional and physical safety

Many users wanted apps and sites to create tools to help them deal with negative experiences, and to increase transparency in the reporting process. These features are mostly related to how users react to negative experiences and how to increase transparency in the reporting process with the app and the user being reported.

Some of the major themes that we discovered were:

- Some features that users want to utilize to prevent threats to their emotional or physical safety may have an unintended consequence for other users. For example, some users block others to remove people from their grid without considering the sense of rejection that some blocked users may feel. An alternate solution is having the option to 'mute' or 'hide' profiles instead.
- Many users reported not knowing what happened after they reported someone to an app.
- Many users wanted apps and sites to connect users who violate community guidelines to resources or warnings rather than immediately banning them from the platform.
- Some shared that artificial intelligence (AI) bots automatically flagged photos of them as inappropriate, especially people of size and trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming people. This seemed to be in conflict with the apps' photo guidelines.



From this data, we determined that users wanted tools to deal with negative interactions. The first is how to respond when someone says or does something harmful. Of the 20 features, users rated **Unlimited Blocks** was the highest. At the moment, some apps restrict the number of users someone can block for users who access the site for free but offer unlimited blocks as a paid feature. Some POC users said that having limited blocks meant they had to be subjected to racist messages and threats. This posed not only a threat to their emotional wellbeing but to their physical safety.

***You should not have to pay more money to put up with less abuse.***

Focus group and survey participants overwhelmingly described apps and sites' reporting process as ineffective and wanted transparent follow up on their cases. Users supported the

idea of being to give an abusive or insulting user a **Reason for Reporting** (for example, hate speech, discrimination, or threats related to their identities).

Users also wanted to know how to prevent negative interactions. By implementing a **Review Sensitive Phrases** protocol, apps and sites could leverage artificial intelligence (AI) to detect stigmatizing or threatening language and stop a user from sending it in a message or including it in their profile.

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

The majority of our focus group participants reported having negative experiences on apps and sites. They recounted how being disabled, Black, trans—among other characteristics—subjected them to stigma. We repeatedly heard from participants that those who experience discrimination in their offline lives are more likely to have negative experiences on apps and sites and would benefit from features that could minimize these experiences. This theme intersects with the other four major themes, as POC users and trans users advocated for nearly all features more than other respondents.

POC users supported most of the anti-stigma features at a higher rate than White users. Overall, POC users rated 17 of the 20 feature ideas higher than White users. Black respondents rated 15 features higher than all other respondents. The largest difference between POC and White users was how they rated the **Block with Resources** feature, which sends a notification to a blocked user for the reason they were blocked and a link to a trusted resource (i.e. information about sexual racism).

You can find more detail in the appendix sections on [POC users](#).

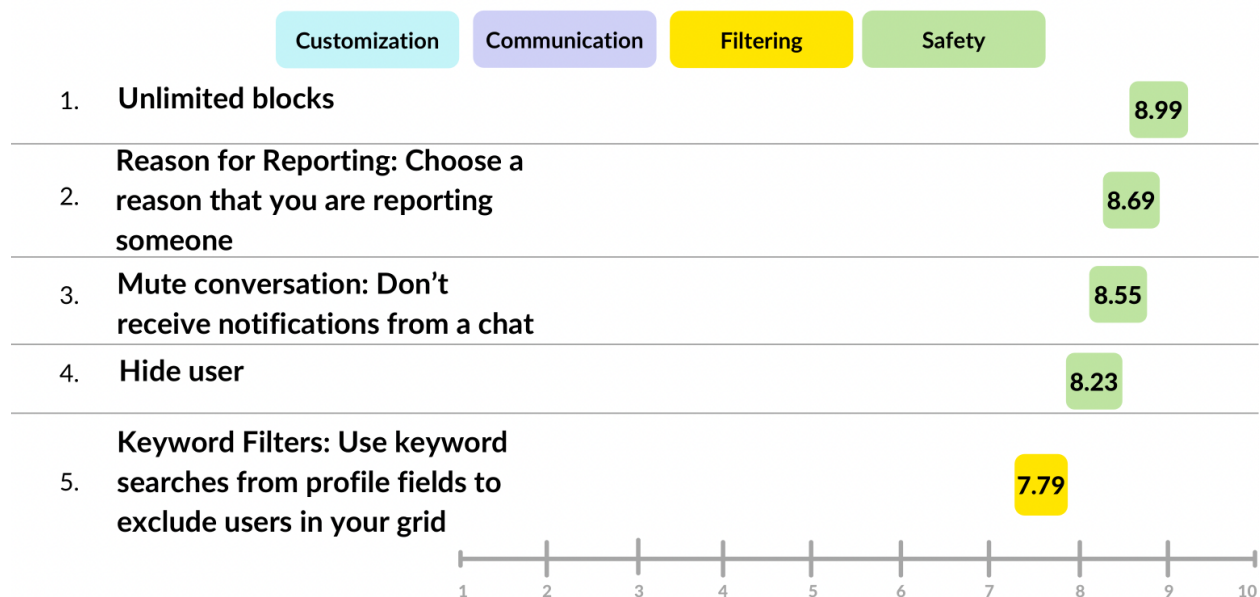
Similarly, trans users rated 14 of the 20 feature ideas higher than users of other genders. Like the majority of respondents, trans women and trans men rated features that dealt with emotional and physical safety the highest. However, trans users wanted some specific features more than users of other genders. **Profile Highlights** was highly rated by trans women and **Block with Resources** was highly rated by trans men. Knowing that trans users in our focus groups and surveys reported threats of physical violence online and offline, it is not surprising that giving users the option to choose when to reveal their gender identity and to connect users who discriminate against them to information resources would find high levels of support among these respondents.

You can find more detail in the appendix sections on [trans users](#).

Many users reported experiencing stigma based on their body size, weight, HIV status, or disabilities. Although we did not ask respondents to reveal information based on these attributes, apps and sites should consider their concerns when developing and implementing new features.



## Top five rated anti-stigma features



Users were supportive of all 20 features. They ranked all 20 features above 5.5, and nearly all above 7. You can find the rank for all features [here](#).

## Recommendations

### 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.

We noticed one disturbing, if not surprising, set of responses among a number of users. While thousands of users were highly committed to discussing how apps and sites could be more respectful, there were many others who thought that users should simply accept rejection and move on. They told us that someone who gets rejected should "just get over it," "stop being pansies," "grow a pair," and stop considering everything they don't like hearing to be abuse. These attitudes are by no means limited to online life.

It is impossible to know whether people who expressed these attitudes were disrespectful themselves or simply considered disrespectful statements on apps as part and parcel of looking for a partner online. We believe that apps and sites can and should be places where app users of all races and ethnicities, gender identities, perceived degree of masculinity and body types should be able to look for partners without being



subjected to harm. Dating apps and sites as well as community leaders can play a leadership role in reducing abuse and prioritize the needs of those users who experience it the most.

One effective way to accomplish this is to gather input from users who experience marginalization, especially when implementing new features.

We encourage apps and sites to continue to investigate and try new filtering strategies that put more control of filtering in the hands of users. There is no one solution for addressing filtering in and/or out. Apps should consider the option of giving users the ability to “filter in” and/or “filter out.” App owners should educate users who may be directly affected by filtering changes to understand the pros and cons of each of these strategies, and how and why other users may want or not want filtering functions. We acknowledge that in some cases filtering can be misused. But filtering can also be protective especially for users who experience discrimination based on race, gender identity and expression, HIV status, body size, and disability. Additionally, apps and sites should consider allowing users to choose when to unlock specific private profile fields, particularly HIV status and gender identity. This may not be appropriate for all profile fields and attributes, but is especially important to consider when it comes to revealing gender identity and HIV status.

## **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 to use those features. Ideally, this should happen when users first join the platform, as well as periodically, with additional information being offered each time a new feature is added or modified.

## **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, doing so can 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 by “ghosting” them. Additionally, a number of users expressed their frustration at having a limited number of blocks: as one user said, ***“You should not have to pay more money to put up with less abuse.”*** By limiting blocks, there is a risk of subjecting those who are most vulnerable to greater harm.

## **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 tools to make being online a more positive experience. Some of these may be more feasible than others, depending on the individual app or site infrastructure. For example, for some apps, providing some simple pre-written, saved phrases that users can utilize to politely turn someone down may be easy to implement and help reduce hurtful rejections. We suggest starting with those interventions that are easiest. 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 to have more respectful and positive experience online.

## **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 highlight the findings and, most importantly, describe any actions that they have taken or are planning to take in order to make the online experience NiceAF.

## **Limitations**

This study has several limitations. Firstly, users who chose to participate in the surveys and focus groups may have a higher level of exposure to, and interest in, the kinds of discrimination and stigmatizing behavior than other users. Secondly, we were not able to recruit participants who might have recently deleted apps due to a negative experience, since we predominantly relied on apps to help us promote the surveys and focus groups. Additionally, since we asked users about features across all apps, in some cases the features they were requesting already exist on some of the apps, which may have confused some participants. Finally, survey respondents had to rely on brief written descriptions of each idea and may not have understood all the nuances of the various ideas.

## **Acknowledgements**

This was an incredible effort on behalf of so many people who came together to support safer, more affirming environments for app users.



This work is based on the research of Yale University's Dr. John Pachankis and Dr. Charles Burton. We are grateful for their rigor and commitment to the wellbeing of app and site users, and by extension, the communities they come from.

We want to thank Tony Taylor and Annabel Mangold for their assistance in designing our website and coordinating our efforts.

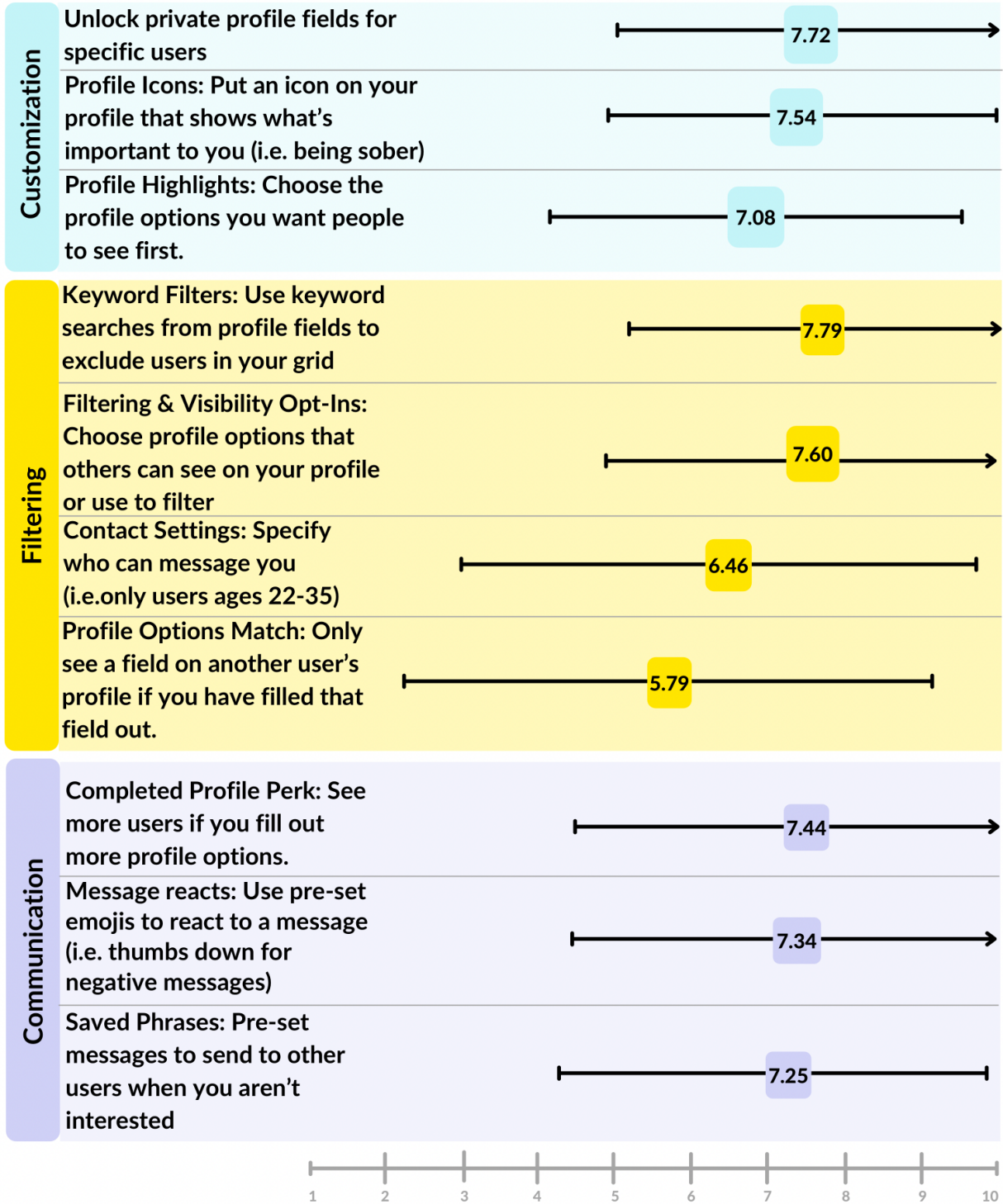
We also want to express our gratitude to our app partners for promoting NiceAF amongst their users: Adam4Adam, Daddyhunt, dudesnude, Grindr, GROWLr, Jack'd, Manhunt, POZ Personals, and SCRUFF. We look forward to working with them to implement many of the features highlighted in this report.

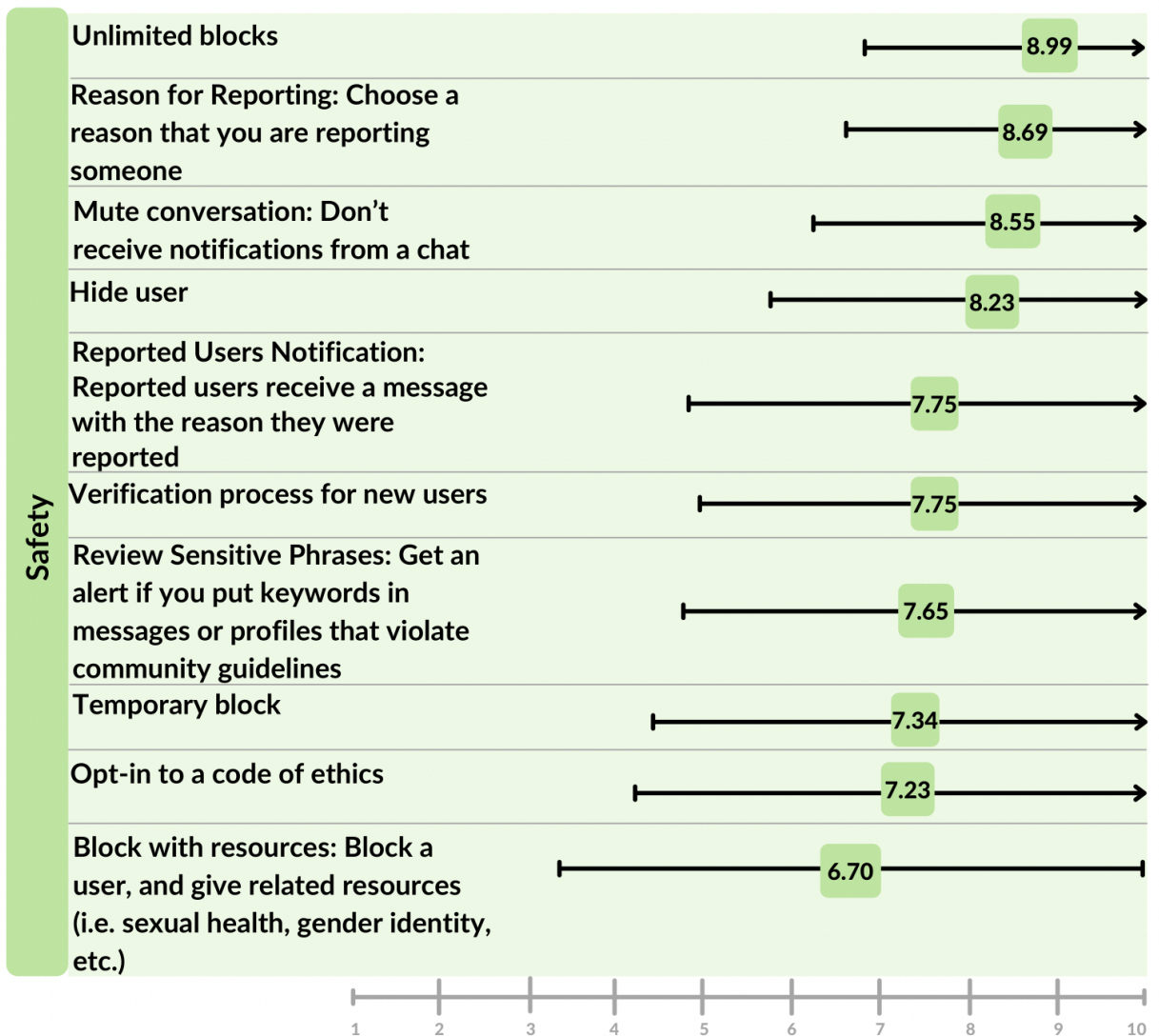
We want to especially thank the more than 5,500 survey respondents and focus group participants for their time and thoughtfulness as they brainstormed and critiqued the many strategies to make the online experience healthier, more respectful, and nicer for all.



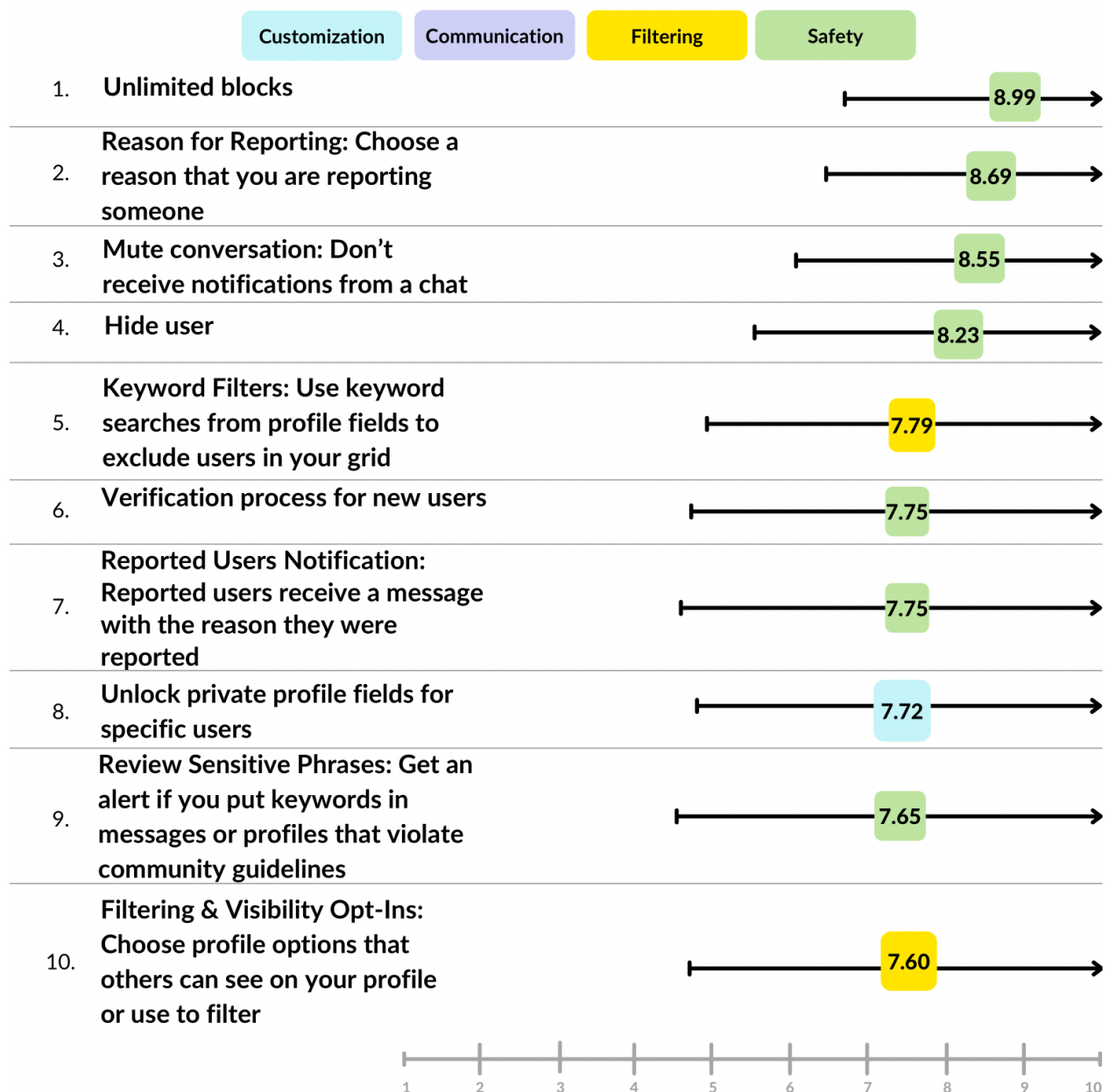
# Appendix

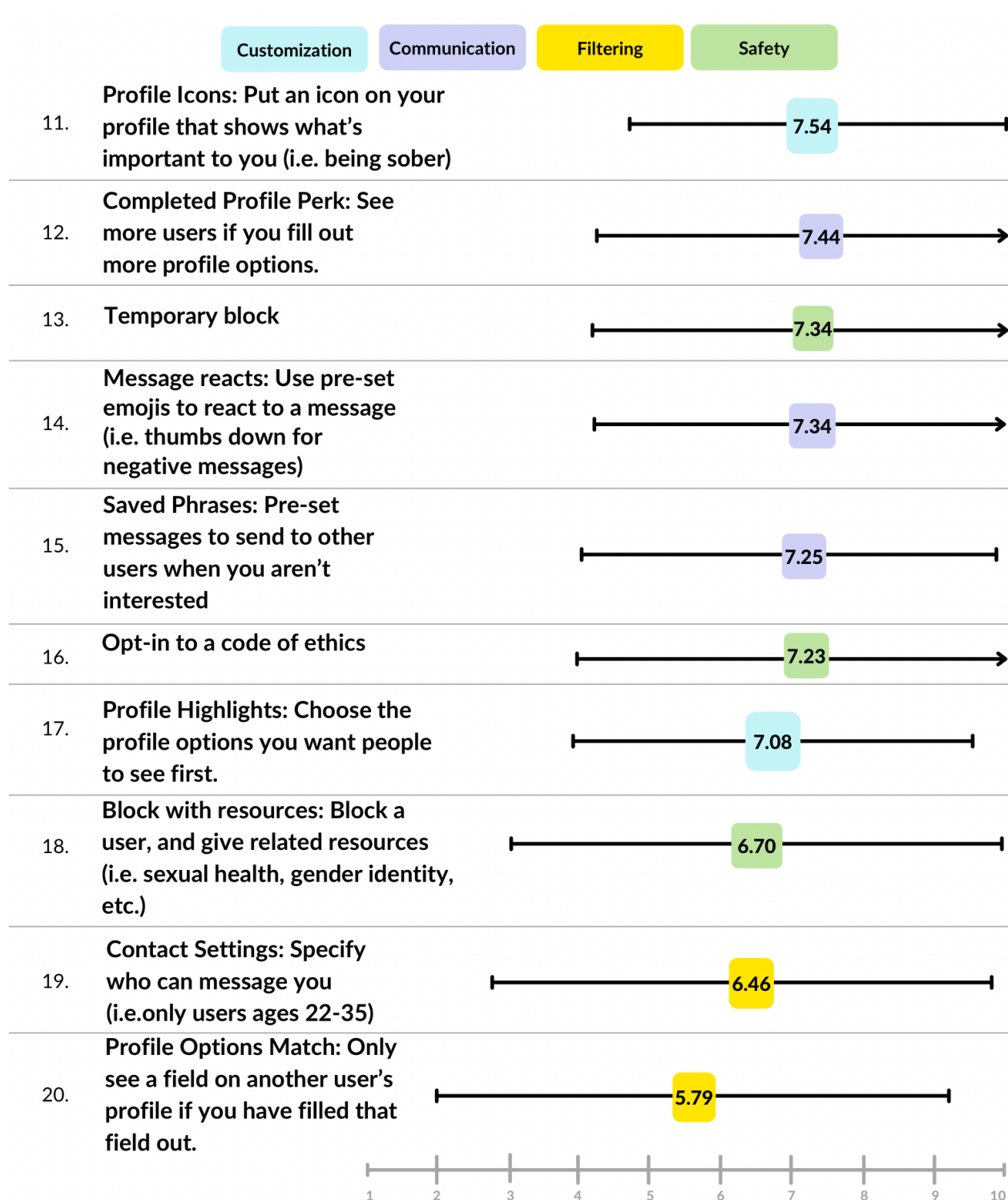
## Results by Theme





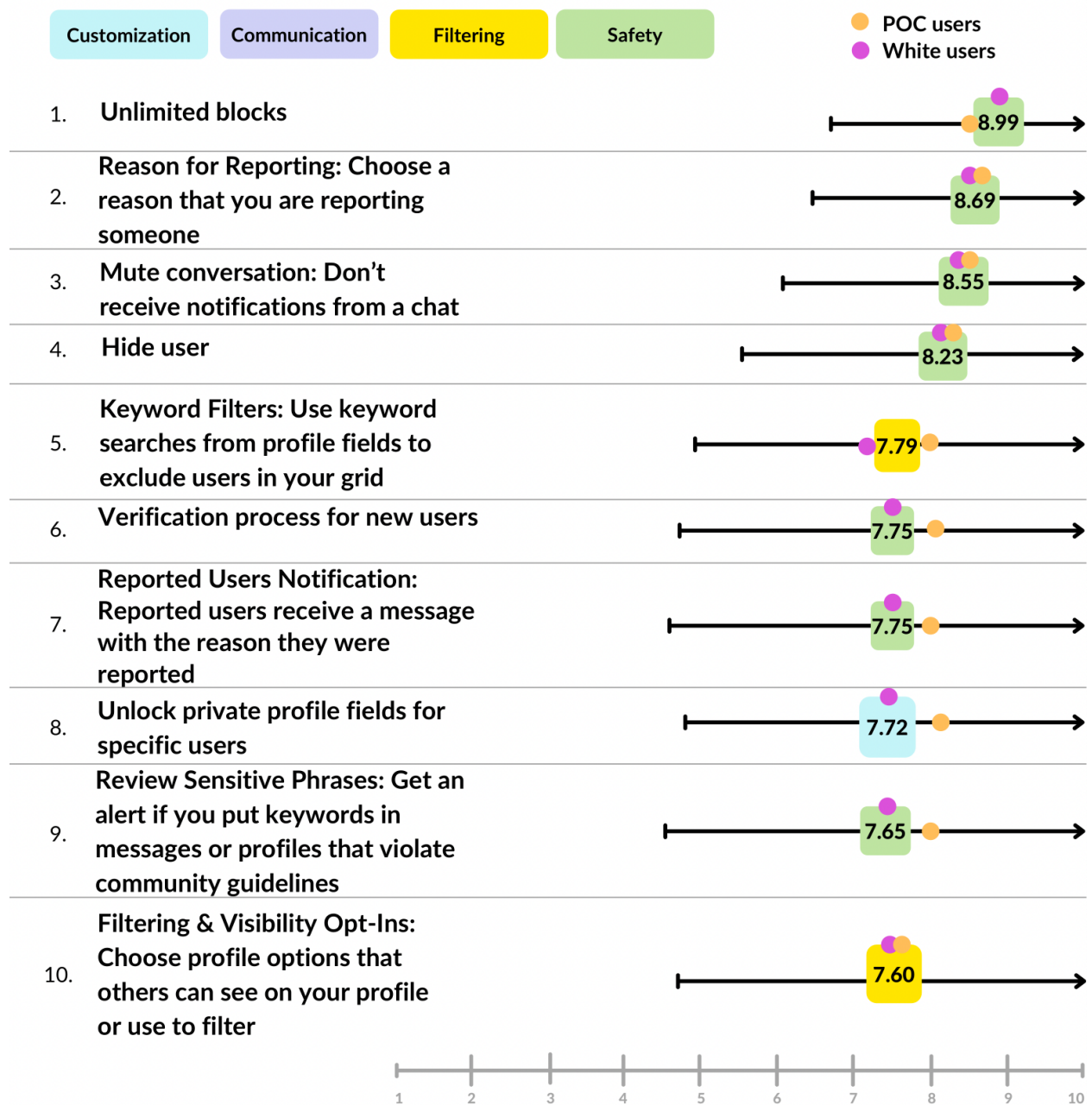
## Results by Rank

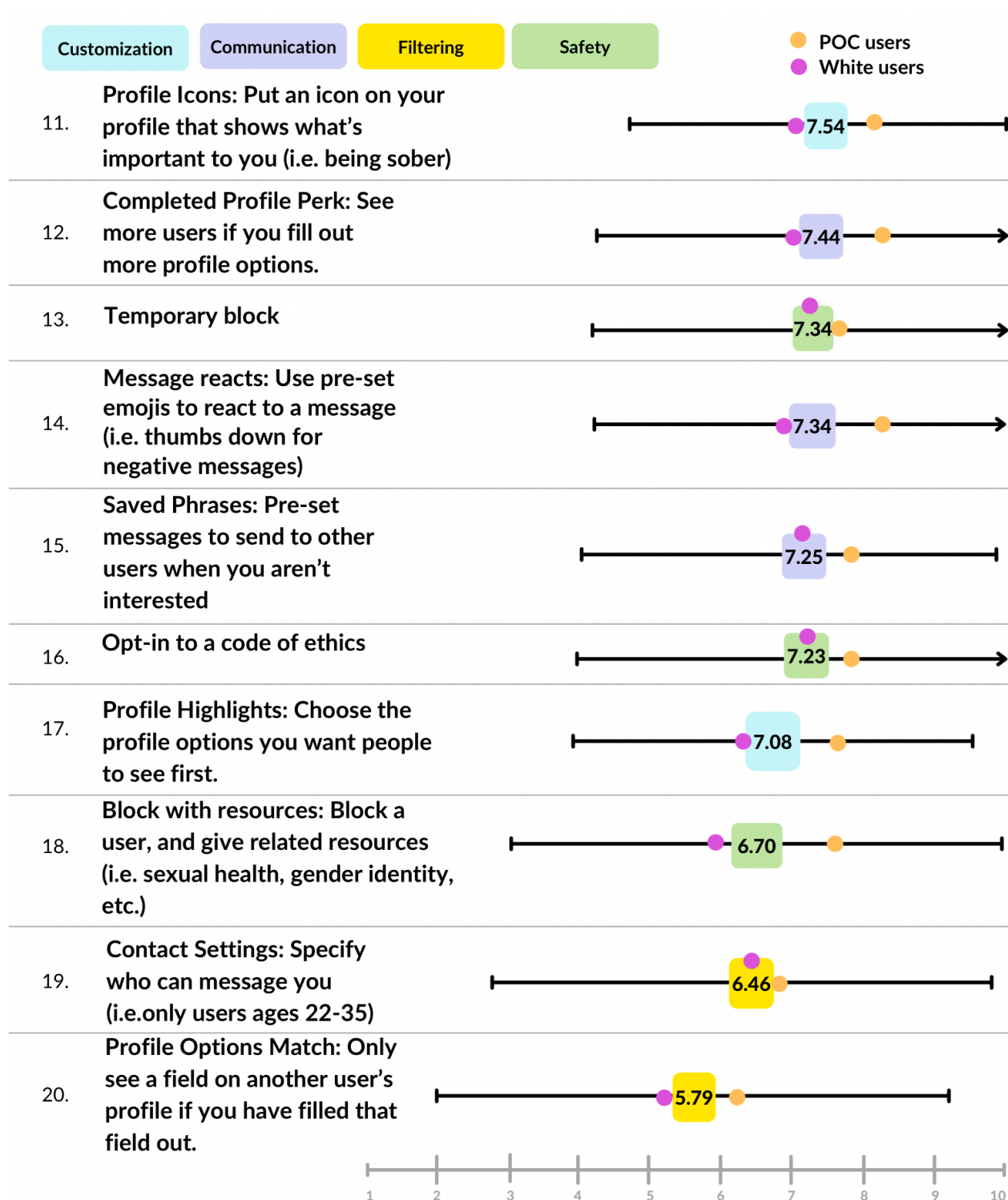






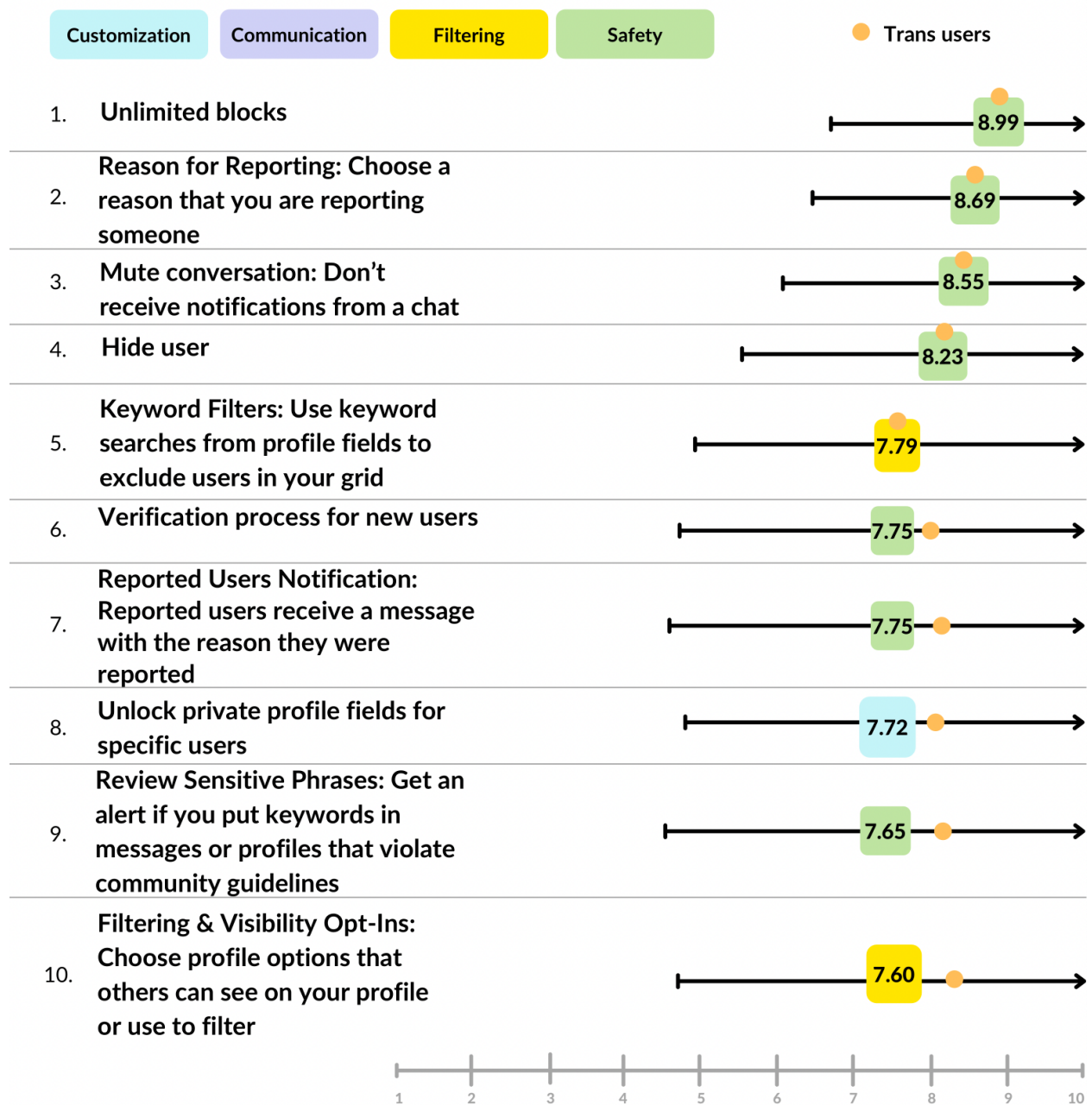
## Results for POC Users

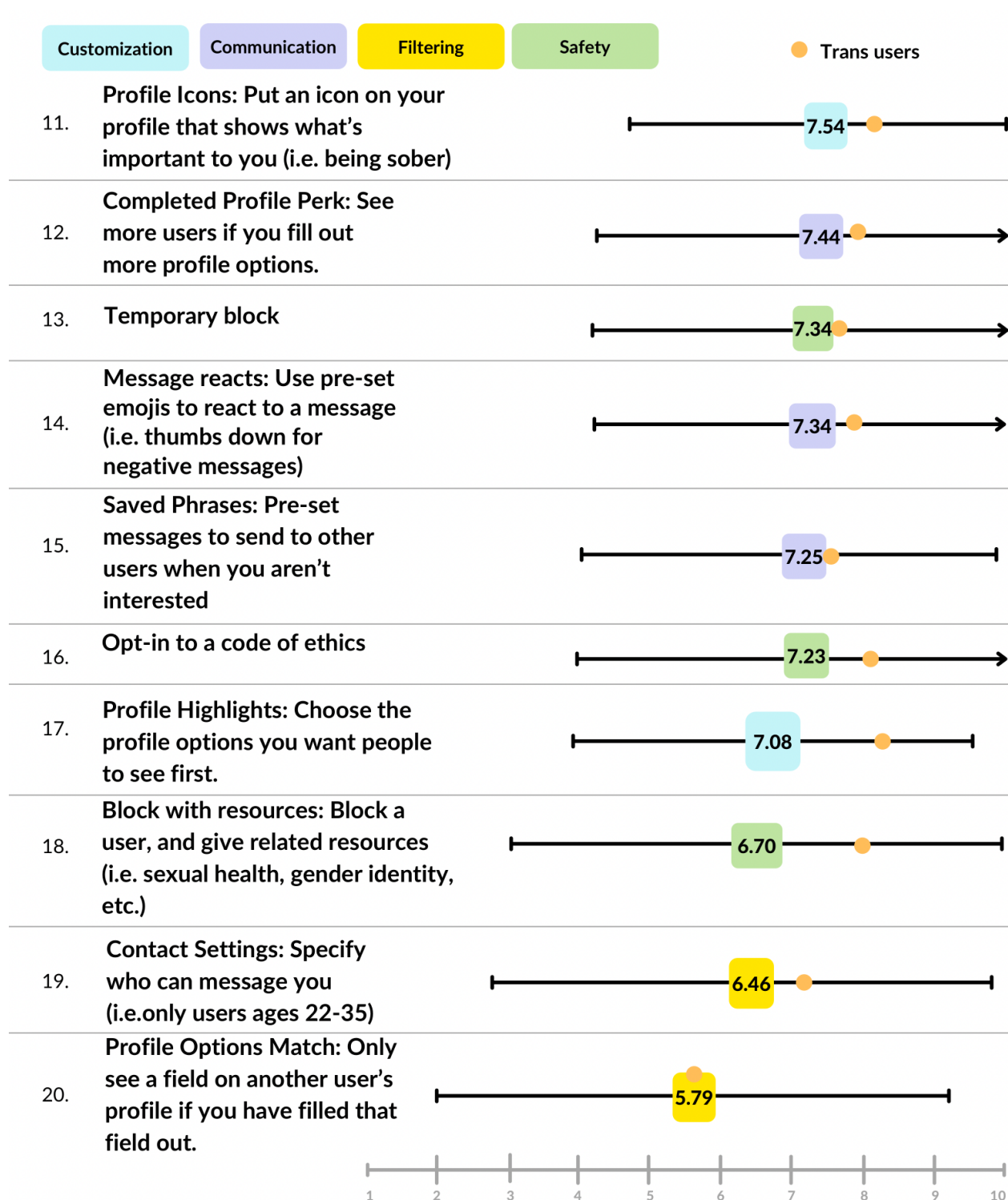






## Results for Trans Users





## Scenario Survey Tool

**Scenario 1:** After a stressful day at work, Harry opens up a dating app to scope the nearby hotties. “Hey bud,” he messages to Judas, a hunk with a witty profile who just might cheer Harry up. After a few minutes, Harry attaches a few pics to reinforce his interest. A moment later, Judas replies, “sry not into fats.” Tell us about a feature the app could have that would support Harry dealing with that situation: \_\_\_\_\_.

**Scenario 2:** Bob lives in a town with very few gay guys nearby, so when he starts chatting with Trent, they’re both quickly into the idea of hooking up. Trent aggressively wants to hookup bareback only, so Bob declines. Trent won’t take no for an answer. Aside from the block button, one way apps can make users who experience harassment feel more support is \_\_\_\_\_.

**Scenario 3:** Oscar’s been enjoying his recent sobriety, and finally feels ready to date again. On dating app profiles, he makes it clear he’s sober, so when Kyle messages asking if he wants to “parTy”, Oscar is obviously frustrated. This was exactly why he deleted the app last month. Kyle is really hot, really close by, and “has the stuff,” but Oscar declines. Oscar really wishes the apps had \_\_\_\_\_ feature, so that he didn’t have to deal with this.

**Scenario 4:** Don is proud of himself for maintaining an undetectable viral load, so he adds “U=U” to his profile. He gets a message saying, “U=U is bullshit!” A feature that the app could have that would help Don deal with this situation would be \_\_\_\_\_.

**Scenario 5:** Lizzie’s trans, and gets a lot of insults on the apps. She can’t figure out how else to meet anyone, so she keeps looking. But it’s hard to put up with it all. Lizzie can block and report the haters, but she wishes there were something more to prevent these messages. What’s your suggestion for what apps could do to help?

**Scenario 6:** When John tells another user “I’m only into other white guys – just a preference” – he gets yelled at by other users and sometimes reported. Something the apps could do about this situation is \_\_\_\_\_.

## Rating Survey Tool

1. Which apps have you used in the past year?
  - a. POZ Personals
  - b. Tinder
  - c. Jack'd
  - d. Adam4Adam
  - e. Grindr
  - f. SCRUFF
  - g. Manhunt
  - h. Dudesnude
  - i. GROWLr
  - j. Daddyhunt
  - k. Other
2. Rate these ideas from 1-10, with 1 being 'really dislike' and 10 being 'really like.'
  - **Profile Options**
    - Profile Options Match: Only see a field on another user's profile if you have filled that field out
    - Profile Highlights: Choose the profile options you want people to see first
    - Completed Profile Perk: See more users if you fill out more profile options
    - Unlock private profile fields for specific users
  - **Filtering Options**
    - Filtering and Visibility Opt-Ins: Choose profile options that others can see on your profile or use to filter
    - Contact settings: Specify who can message you (i.e. only users ages 22-35)
    - Keyword Filters: Use keyword searches from profile fields to exclude users in your grid
    - Profile Icons: Put an icon on your profile that shows what's important to you (i.e. being sober)
  - **Dealing with Negative Experiences**
    - Get unlimited blocks
    - Mute a conversation
    - Temporary block
    - Block with resources: Block a user and give related resources (i.e. HIV status, gender identity, etc.)
    - Hide user
    - Message reacts: Use pre-set emojis to react to a message (i.e. 'thumbs down' to a negative message)
  - **Reporting**
    - Reason for Reporting: Choose a reason that you are reporting someone
    - Reported Users Notification: Reported users receive a message with the reason they were reported

- Review Sensitive Phrases: Get an alert if you put keywords in messages or profiles that violate community guidelines
  - **Additional Features**
    - Opt-in to a code of ethics
    - Verification process for new users
    - Saved Phrases: Pre-set messages to send to other users when you aren't interested
3. Which of the following information would you like to be able to filter other users by?
- a. Vaccinated for COVID
  - b. Follows app's code of ethics
  - c. Oral/Anal/Jacking/Etc
  - d. Race or ethnicity
  - e. Last tested date
  - f. HIV status
  - g. On PrEP
  - h. Undetectable
  - i. Alcohol/drug use
  - j. Uses condoms
  - k. Accepts nude pics
  - l. Gender identity
  - m. Body size/type
  - n. Age
  - o. Top/Bottom/Vers
  - p. Looking for hook-up/FWB/relationship
  - q. Other
4. Which of the following options would you **NOT** like other users to filter you by?
- a. Vaccinated for COVID
  - b. Follows app's code of ethics
  - c. Oral/Anal/Jacking/Etc
  - d. Race or ethnicity
  - e. Last tested date
  - f. HIV status
  - g. On PrEP
  - h. Undetectable
  - i. Alcohol/drug use
  - j. Uses condoms
  - k. Accepts nude pics
  - l. Gender identity
  - m. Body size/type
  - n. Age
  - o. Top/Bottom/Vers
  - p. Looking for hook-up/FWB/relationship
  - q. Other

5. From a set of the ideas you've just rated, let us know which ones the apps should add. Check the box for 'Should the app have this?' and 'Would you use this feature?' if you agree with each feature idea.

	Should app have this?	Would you use this feature?
Hide users	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Temporary block	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Block users, and give related resources	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Select a reason that you are reporting someone	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Choose the fields you want users to see first	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Only see a field on another user's profile if you have that field filled out	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
See more users if you fill out more profile fields	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Add in keyword searches to limit which users you see in your grid	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Put an icon on your profile that shows what's important to you	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

6. Which is your favorite idea?
- Hide users
  - See a user's field only if you have it filled out
  - See more users in your grid for completing more profile fields
  - Keyword filters
  - Unlock private profile fields for specific users
7. I identify my gender identity as:
- Trans man
  - Non-binary
  - Trans woman
  - Man
  - Genderqueer
  - Woman
  - Other
8. I identify my race as:

- a. White
  - b. Latinx
  - c. Indigenous
  - d. Asian
  - e. Black
  - f. Other
9. Optional: If you've ever deleted a dating app, what was the reason?
10. Optional: What other ideas should dating apps consider to reduce negative experiences on the apps?
11. Optional: Please enter your ZIP code.