Five Ways Gay Dating Apps Can Reduce Stigma and Racism

Do you want to filter or be filtered by race or HIV status? The results of a survey of app users explore this and other NiceAF topics.

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We all know that online dating and hooking up can be frustrating AF. But the way some queer and minority folks treat one another on apps and websites can get beyond cruel. Digital platforms must be able to make the user experience less stigmatizing, right? Turns out, there are several ways—and they're spelled out in a new report by the folks behind the "NiceAF" campaign.

The report is based on feedback from over 5,500 survey participants—gay, bisexual, transgender and HIV-positive people who use dating and hookup apps and websites, including Adam4Adam, Daddyhunt, dudesnude, Grindr, GROWLr, Jack'd, Manhunt, POZ Personals and Scruff. The survey was spearheaded by Building Health Online Communities (BHOC), a collaboration of national and local agencies working to prevent HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and to promote sexual health. BHOC collaborates with the dating apps and sites on the "NiceAF" campaign, an effort to make online communities kinder and safer. For background, see the BHOC post "'I'm Clean. U B 2'—How Dating App Chats Can Go From RudeAF to NiceAF" and the article "Get Tested for HIV and STIs at Home, for Free."

"Our goal [with the survey and report] was to do more than simply ask users to be nicer," said Jen Hecht, BHOC cofounder and director, in a press release about the report. "We wanted to hear from them how apps could support their users' mental health—and by doing so also address their sexual health and well-being."

After combing through the survey responses and conducting online focus groups, the report's authors focused on five key findings, which are listed in the executive summary of the 2021 NiceAF Results:

Give Users More Options for Customization.

For example, instead of making all profile fields visible, let users choose which profile fields (such as HIV status) can be seen—and which users can see those fields.

Expand Filtering Functionality.

Do you want the ability to filter others by specific qualities or by words that appear in their profile? As one survey participant explained in the full NiceAF report: “If I can filter out people who wrote ‘no fats, no femmes, no Black people’ [in their profiles, then] I don’t even have to deal with seeing it.” Similarly, do you want others to filter you by specific qualities? It’s a nuanced and complicated subject. Here’s the executive summary’s complete write-up regarding the topic:

> 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.
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> 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.
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> 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.
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> 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.

Help users develop healthy options for dealing with rejections or hate speech. For example, include pre-written statements users can send.

Support Emotional and Physical Safety.

Users complained that many apps limit the number of people they can block—unless they pay for the ability to block more—and that the only way to distance themselves from other users is to block them. Why not develop other options?

Prioritize the Needs of Users Who Experience Stigma in Feature Development and Implementation.

“We heard from many users that they experienced high rates of rejection and stigma based on [race/ethnicity, transgender identity, body size, weight, HIV status, disabilities and age],” wrote the authors. “Many anti-stigma features will be useful to them…and should be adapted to meet their needs.”

The executive summary also includes a list of recommendations from the Nice AF team for dating and hookup apps:

- Prioritize the most vulnerable populations;
- Educate users about features;
- Reconsider benefits packages for paying users;
- Incentivize profile completion;
- Make a plan for implementing changes and publicize them;
- Demonstrate a unified commitment.

Improving the online experience for LGBTQ users isn’t just a matter of having more fun while hooking up and dating. As John Pachankis, a Yale University researcher, explains in the report’s press release: “Our research shows that targeted exclusion and discrimination among those who use apps—whether it’s based on race, HIV status, body type or gender presentation—is associated with queer men’s anxiety, depression, poor body image and greater risk-taking.”

“We asked app users for their ideas for how apps can help—and we got tons,” added Dan Wohlfeiler, BHOC’s cofounder. “Our campaign’s next step is to work with the apps to take those ideas and turn them into action.”

Until then, remember: Whether online or IRL, always be nice AF.

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