

Beyond “Not My Type:” A Quantitative Examination of Intraminority Stigma among Gay Men  
who use Dating Apps

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### **Abstract**

Gay men with intersecting diverse identities are at increased risk for experiencing intraminority stigma (i.e., negative attitudes or discrimination from the gay community based on a socially undervalued identity or trait). The use of dating apps is pervasive among gay men and becoming more common during the ongoing, global COVID-19 pandemic, representing a potential site for intraminority stigma. In this study, the association between online dating and experiences of stigma within the gay community was examined utilizing an international sample of 2,159 gay men through the lens of intraminority gay community stress theory. Participants reported how frequently they experienced stigma from other gay men based on age, socioeconomic status, non-conformity to popular gay culture (i.e., hobbies, beliefs, or ideologies perceived as typical of gay men), race/ethnicity, gender expression, and body size and shape. Approximately 60% of the sample used dating apps/websites every month or more frequently. More frequent dating app use was associated with more frequent experiences of intraminority stress across the constructs of age stigma, socioeconomic stigma, racial/ethnic stigma, and body stigma, but not gay non-conformity stigma or gender expression stigma. More frequent dating app use was associated with more intraminority racial/ethnic stigma among gay men of color relative to White gay men, and more intraminority age stigma among older gay men relative to younger gay men. Findings provide empirical and contextual evidence for multiple forms of intraminority stigma, paving the way for future intersectional research focused on the social, psychological, and physical well-being of multiply marginalized gay men.

*Keywords:* intraminority stigma, online dating, gay men, discrimination, intraminority gay community stress theory

**Public Significance Statement**

This study shows that the use of dating apps and websites is common among gay men of varying backgrounds, especially younger and less wealthy gay men, and that gay men who used these services more frequently were more likely to experience stigma from other gay men based on age, socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and body size and shape. Further, findings suggest older gay men and gay men of color are especially likely to experience identity-based stigma from other gay men while using dating apps/websites.

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Men with minoritized sexual identities (e.g., gay men) face unique barriers to dating and relationships, as well as mental health, as a result of stigmatizing social structures (Cao et al., 2017; Meyer, 1995, 2003). The gay community can serve as an important source of belonging, support, and resilience in a variety of ways. For example, online networking platforms geared toward gay men (e.g., dating apps) provide opportunities for coping and connection, granting users of these services identifiable and anonymous access to their community, which may be particularly useful for men who fear exploring or disclosing their sexual identity publicly. However, a growing body of studies with diverse methodologies indicates that “gay spaces”—though intended for sexual minoritized persons to safely socialize (Holloway et al., 2014; Rice et al., 2012)—may not actually be safe for all gay men and may perpetuate hierarchies of power and stigma that extend beyond the gay community and across the globe when its users uncritically internalize stigmatizing ideologies (Hammack et al., 2022; Le & Kler, 2022; Shepherd, Maki, et al., 2023). Among gay men who utilize dating apps to satisfy social and sexual needs, stigma perpetuated by other gay men based on intersecting, socially undervalued identities or traits (i.e., intracommunity or intraminority stigma) might interfere with their resilience against the adverse social and psychological consequences of stigma (Hammack et al., 2022; Meyer, 2015). Intraminority stigma can manifest in various forms across various contexts, ranging from blatant rejection or aggression to microaggressions (e.g., expressing “preferences” directly on user profiles, blocking or filtering users based on their identities; Miller & Behm-Morawitz, 2016; Filice et al., 2019; Wade & Pear, 2022; Winder & Lea, 2019). The current study aims to elucidate which groups of gay men are at highest risk for which experiences of

intraminority stigma as a function of dating app/website use. Specifically, this study sought to quantitatively characterize who is using dating apps and the environment in which they are seeking romantic or sexual partners, with the ultimate goal of increasing awareness and understanding of how multiple forms of intraminority stigma can impact this space and create stigmatizing, stressful experiences for gay men with intersecting diverse identities.

### **Online Dating Among Gay Men**

The anecdotal knowledge that mobile dating application (app) and website usage is high among non-heterosexual men is empirically substantiated. In one study of men who have sex with men, 56% of participants reported using dating apps/websites as frequently as 2-5 times a week to daily (Badal et al., 2018). Moreover, in the span of six years (between 2014 and 2020) the dating app popular with gay men, Grindr, saw an increase from 5 million to 13 million monthly users (Elizondo, 2021; Grindr, 2014).

The heightened use of dating apps/websites among gay men is attributed to several reasons. These explanations include the advantage of presentational control afforded by the creation of a curated profile (Lawson & Leck, 2006), the fact that apps/websites represent an outlet for entertainment and socializing with other members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ+) community (Halloway et al., 2014; Rice et al., 2012), and ease with which to find sexual partners (Ahlm, 2017). Recent literature also suggests that these services represent a space for sexual and gender performativity among gay men and others (Cardoso, 2019; García-Gómez, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of these services has heightened in response to the widespread social distancing measures and feelings of isolation (Gibson, 2021), especially among people with minoritized sexual identities (Henry et al., 2022),

who may face more difficulty finding acceptance, belonging, and safety across a variety of settings (Bauermeister et al., 2014; Skidmore et al., 2022; Wilson & Liss, 2022).

### **Social and Emotional Benefits and Risks of Online Dating Among Gay Men**

Dating apps/websites can provide a platform for connection among gay men and other men who have sex with men and serve as a tool for coping in a predominantly heteronormative society where sexual orientation-based prejudice, stigma, and discrimination is commonplace (Cargnino & Lemke, 2022). Through gay-specific dating apps, men who have sex with men are granted identifiable and anonymous access to their community, which may be particularly useful for men who fear exploring or disclosing their sexual orientation publicly (Zervoulis et al., 2019). However, the use of these online services may be associated with a variety of negative interpersonal experiences rooted in stigma (i.e., negative attitudes or discrimination based on undervalued traits or identities). These experiences range from issues related to weight stigma and body image (Filice et al., 2019), preferential treatment shown to men who display more heteronormative and masculine physical and emotional qualities (Saraiva et al., 2019), and racialized sexual discrimination (i.e., racial/ethnic prejudice enacted in the context of dating, sex, or romance; Wade & Pear, 2022; Wade & Harper, 2020).

Stigma perpetuated from within the gay community threatens basic human needs such as social safety (i.e., reliable social connection, belonging, inclusion, recognition, and protection; Diamond & Alley, 2022), limits access to important community coping resources in the face of sexual orientation-based stigma from the heterosexual community, and may contribute to persistent mental and physical health disparities faced by gay men across the lifespan (Choi & Meyer, 2016; Shepherd, Maki, et al., 2023; Wilson & Liss, 2022). In fact, research demonstrates that identity-based pressures (e.g., discrimination) from ingroup members is associated with

poorer mental health even after controlling for the impact of discrimination experienced from outgroup members (Mata-Grave, 2016; Pachankis et al., 2020). Surprisingly, recent studies of sexual minoritized men show that greater use of gay dating apps was associated with a lower sense of community, higher levels of loneliness, and lower levels of satisfaction with life (Zervoulis et al., 2019), as well as poorer mental health (Robinson, 2017). Intraminority stress may provide theoretical support for these seemingly counterintuitive associations.

### **Intraminority Gay Community Stress Theory**

Among gay men, intraminority stress refers to the unique status-based, competitive pressures that influence interactions between gay men and other men who rely on other men to satisfy social and sexual needs (Pachankis et al., 2020). These within-group pressures are often discriminatory in nature, rooted in stigmatizing social structures and stereotypes that actively exclude diversity based on race/ethnicity, body size and shape, gender expression, socioeconomic status (SES), and other status-relevant social attributes (Antebi-Gruszka et al., 2022; Shepherd et al., 2023). According to intraminority gay community stress theory (Pachankis et al., 2020), intraminority stress increases gay men's susceptibility to mental health concerns, such as depression and anxiety (Mahon et al., 2021; Pachankis et al., 2020). Furthermore, research suggests that gay men, particularly those with lower status (i.e., level of respect and importance attributed to a person in society or a particular group), tend to experience more intraminority stress within "sexual fields," which refer to any social space or gathering where individuals with potential romantic or sexual attraction are expected to gravitate towards those with higher status (e.g., gay-specific bars, nightclubs, online networking platforms; Green, 2008, 2014; Pachankis et al., 2020).



Within the context of dating and relationships among sexual minoritized men (e.g., gay and bisexual men), masculinity, job/income (i.e., SES), weight, and Whiteness are pretested elements of status that influence sexual capital or currency (i.e., social power a person acquires as a result of their sexual attractiveness to the majority of their social group) and, in turn, sexual decision-making (Le & Kler, 2022; Pachankis et al., 2020; Shepherd, Denning, et al., 2023). In addition, emerging evidence suggests intraminority gay community stress is associated with sexual risk-taking (Burton et al., 2021). Because status and sexual capital are unevenly distributed throughout the gay community, varying potential for intraminority stress and related barriers to health and well-being (e.g., depression, anxiety, body dissatisfaction, sexual risk-taking; Burton et al., 2020; Mahon et al., 2021; Pachankis et al., 2020; Soulliard et al., 2023) exists across a number of sociodemographic characteristics (e.g., race, ethnicity, class, age, weight; Green, 2008, 2014; Shepherd, Denning, et al., 2023). Yet researchers usually examine gay men or men who have sex with men as a homogenous group. More investigation using an intersectionality approach that concomitantly considers multiple aspects of gay men's identity and social systems in the context of online dating is needed to create a comprehensive understanding of potential benefits and risks of dating app/website use within this diverse population (Crenshaw, 1989; Chisom, 2021; Shepherd, Maki, et al., 2023).

### **Present Study**

Multiple forms of stigma are prevalent and pervasive within the gay community, including but are not limited to age stigma, socioeconomic stigma, gay non-conformity stigma, racial/ethnic stigma, gender expression stigma, and body stigma—all of which influence gay men's access to status and sexual capital and, in turn, the frequency and valence of their interactions (Hammack et al., 2022; Shepherd, Maki, et al., 2023; Shepherd, Denning, et al.,

2023). The current study examined gay men's experiences with these forms of intraminority stigma in relation to their use of dating apps to meet potential romantic or sexual partners. Based on the reviewed literature, it was hypothesized that dating app use would be common among gay men and that higher frequency of dating app use would be associated with more frequent experiences of intraminority stigma, regardless of stigma type. Further, it was hypothesized that intraminority age stigma will be more commonly experienced by older gay men who use dating apps more frequently relative to younger gay men (Wight et al., 2015), intraminority socioeconomic stigma will be more commonly experienced by gay men with lower SES who use dating apps more frequently relative to gay men with higher SES (Pachankis et al., 2020), intraminority racial/ethnic stigma will be more commonly experienced by gay men of color who use dating apps more frequently relative to White gay men (Han & Choi, 2018), intraminority gender expression stigma will be more commonly experienced by feminine-presenting gay men who use dating apps more frequently relative to masculine-presenting gay men (Miller & Behm-Morawitz, 2016), and intraminority body stigma will be more commonly experienced by higher-weight gay men who use dating apps more frequently relative to lower-weight gay men (Filice et al., 2019; Foster-Gimbel & Engel, 2016). In light of recent evidence suggesting that Republican gay men are fewer in number and less likely than their Democratic peers to feel a sense of connectedness to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community (Meyer & Choi, 2020; Worthen, 2020), it was also hypothesized that intraminority gay non-conformity stigma (i.e., the practicing of hobbies, beliefs, or ideologies perceived as atypical of gay men) will be more commonly experienced by more politically conservative (i.e., non-Democratic) gay men relative to more politically liberal (i.e., Democratic) gay men.

## **Method**

## Participants and Procedure

Participants who self-identified as gay men were recruited via social media advertisements (e.g., Facebook pages geared toward gay men) in the United States. Inclusion criteria were 1) identify as a man, 2) identify as gay, and 3) aged 19 years or older. The minimum age to participate in the study was 19 years to account for states (e.g., Alabama) where the age of majority was 19 for participation in research. A total of 2,159 gay men<sup>1</sup> consented to participate and completed the study anonymously, which consisted of a Qualtrics survey containing a series of measures and a comprehensive demographic questionnaire. Participants reported how frequently they used dating apps/websites and how often they experienced various forms of stigma specifically from other gay men.

Participants ranged in age from 19 to 79 years ( $M = 40.49$ ,  $SD = 13.43$ ). Most participants resided in the United States ( $n = 1723$ ; 80%). Most participants outside the United States resided in England (8%;  $n = 123$ ), Canada 4%;  $n = 76$ ), Australia (2%;  $n = 45$ ), South Africa (1%;  $n = 22$ ), Philippines (1%;  $n = 21$ ), and Mexico (1%;  $n = 17$ ); all other countries were represented by less than 0.4% of the total sample. In terms of race/ethnicity, most participants identified as White (72%); 9% of participants identified as Hispanic, 6% as Black, 5% as biracial, 4% as Asian, 2% as American Indian, and 4% identified as another race/ethnicity. More than half of participants rated themselves as masculine in their gender expression (67%), perceived themselves as above average weight (55%), and were single (53%). For more information regarding the demographic characteristics of the sample, see Table 1. Data collection

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<sup>1</sup> Due to a protocol error, data from participants who did not finish the survey in its entirety were not retained.

was completed in 2018; all study procedures received ethical approval for human subjects research.

## **Measures**

### ***Gay-Specific Intraminority Stigma***

The Gay-Specific Intraminority Stigma Inventory (G-SISI; Shepherd, Maki, et al., 2023) was utilized to comprehensively, but not exhaustively, assess what forms of intraminority stigma participants have experienced in their lifetime. Participants were asked to “respond to statements based on their experience/s with another gay man or group of gay men” using this 20-item measure, which contains six subscales based on constructs identified from the literature as forms of stigma experienced by gay men from other gay men. The subscales assessed intraminority age stigma ( $\alpha = .78$ ; e.g., “I have been excluded from being asked to participate in activities based on my age”), racial/ethnic stigma ( $\alpha = .81$ ; e.g., “I have been desired by someone of another race or ethnicity as a means to fulfill a fetish”), socioeconomic stigma ( $\alpha = .79$ ; e.g., “I have been judged on my employment status and perceived level of income”), gay non-conformity stigma ( $\alpha = .64$ ; e.g., “I have been teased for having interests and hobbies that are not typical of other gay men”), gender expression stigma ( $\alpha = .85$ ; e.g., “I have been told I need to behave more masculine or feminine”), and body stigma ( $\alpha = .74$ ; e.g., “I have been told I should gain or lose weight”). Participants responded to each item on a scale from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very frequently*). Higher scores indicate more frequent experiences of intraminority stigma.

### ***Dating App/Website Usage***

Consistent with previous research (Roberts & Christens, 2021), a single item was developed for the purpose of this study to assess the frequency with which participants used dating apps/websites to meet and/or hook up with other gay men (i.e., “How often do you visit

gay dating and/or hook-up apps/sites?). An 8-point scale was used. Possible responses included: “never” (1), “less than once a year” (2), “every six months” (3), “every 2-3 months” (4), “monthly” (5), “weekly” (6), “more than a few times a week” (7), and “daily” (8). Higher scores indicate more frequent dating apps/website usage.

### ***Sociodemographic Characteristics***

Participants self-reported their perceived weight, age, race/ethnicity, gender expression, political affiliation, and SES. Perceived weight was measured on 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*underweight*) to 5 (*overweight*). Gender expression was measured on 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*very feminine*) to 5 (*very masculine*). SES was measured on 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*lower class*) to 5 (*upper class*). For race/ethnicity, response options included “African American/Black,” “Hispanic/Latino,” “White,” “Asian,” “American Indian,” “Hawaiian/Pacific Islander,” and “Multiracial/biracial.” Participants also had the option of specifying another race/ethnicity. For political affiliation, the response options included “Democrat,” “Republican,” “Libertarian, and “Independent.” Participants also had the option of specifying another political affiliation. Due to sample size restrictions and for ease of interpretation, race/ethnicity was analyzed as a binary variable, coding participants as White or another race/ethnicity (i.e., Person of Color). Likewise, political affiliation (i.e., Democrat, non-Democrat) was analyzed as a binary variable.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Data were analyzed in four stages using IBM SPSS 28.0 (IBM Corp, 2021). All  $p$  values  $< .05$  were considered statistically significant, and two-tailed  $p$ -values are reported. First, data were checked for missing values and normality before running further analyses; across the variables of interest, no missing values were found, and skewness and kurtosis values fell within

an acceptable range (-2 to 2; George & Mallery, 2010). Second, descriptive statistics were used to examine the frequency of endorsing gay dating app/website usage among gay men and bivariate correlations were conducted to investigate whether reports of experienced intraminority stigma varied across constructs of age stigma, socioeconomic stigma, gay non-conformity stigma, racial/ethnic stigma, gender expression stigma, and body stigma as a function of dating app/website usage. Third, *t*-tests were conducted to investigate differences in dating app/website usage as a function of sociodemographic characteristics, namely age, SES, political affiliation, race/ethnicity, self-perceived level of masculinity/femininity, and self-perceived weight. Fourth, interactions between participant dating app/website usage and sociodemographic characteristics associated with different forms of intraminority stigma were tested in a series of multiple linear regression moderation models using the PROCESS macro (model 1; Hayes & Montoya, 2017) to better understand the scope of the potential influence of dating app and website use on the prevalence of intraminority stigma experienced by gay men with marginalized social positionality within the gay community.

## Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations between the measures are provided in Table 2. Dating app usage was common in the sample ( $M = 5.10$ ,  $SD = 2.55$ , Range = 1-8). Specifically, 60% of the sample used dating apps or websites monthly or more frequently, and only 8% of participants reported never having used a gay dating and/or hook-up app/website (see Table 1). Among participants who reported using dating apps/websites at least once, 57% used dating apps/websites on a weekly basis or more frequently.

### **Associations Between Dating App Use and Intraminority Stigma**

Bivariate correlations were estimated to determine whether an association existed between dating app/website usage and experiences of intraminority stigma among gay men (see Table 2). As expected, dating app/website usage was positively correlated with intraminority age stigma ( $r = .06, p = .008$ ), socioeconomic stigma ( $r = .05, p = .026$ ), racial/ethnic stigma ( $r = .08, p < .001$ ), and body stigma ( $r = .08, p < .001$ ). Unexpectedly, dating app/website usage was not significantly correlated with intraminority gender expression stigma ( $r = .03, p = .189$ ) or gay non-conformity stigma ( $r = .02, p = .450$ ). All forms of intraminority stigma were positively correlated with each other, highlighting the interconnected nature of the overall construct (all  $ps < .001$ ).

Of note,  $t$ -tests showed that U.S. participants were significantly more likely to endorse experiences of intraminority socioeconomic stigma,  $t(2157) = 2.26, p = .024$ , Cohen's  $d = .12$ , and intraminority gay non-conformity stigma,  $t(2157) = 2.14, p = .032$ , Cohen's  $d = .12$ , and significantly less likely to endorse experiences of intraminority gender expression stigma,  $t(2157) = -3.45, p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d = -.19$ , relative to international participants. By contrast, experiences of intraminority age stigma, racial/ethnic stigma, and body stigma did not differ significantly by nationality,  $ps = .372-.800$ . Correlations between dating app/website usage and all forms of intraminority stigma remained the same in significance and strength when controlling for nationality (i.e., USA or international).

### **Sociodemographic Differences in Dating App Use**

A series of bivariate correlations and  $t$ -tests were conducted to test differences in dating app use among specific subgroups of gay men. Bivariate correlations revealed that dating app use was negatively associated with age,  $r(2157) = -.12, p < .001$ , and SES,  $r(2157) = -.12, p < .001$ . By contrast, dating app usage was not significantly associated with perceived weight,

$r(1257) = .01, p = .663$ , or level of masculinity,  $r(2157) = -.01, p = .571$ . Furthermore,  $t$ -tests revealed that dating app usage did not differ significantly by race/ethnicity (i.e., White or Person of Color),  $t(2157) = 0.85, p = .394$ , or political affiliation (i.e., Democrat or another political affiliation),  $t(2157) = 0.12, p = .905$ . These results remained the same when controlling for nationality. In addition, participants who resided in the US reported similar levels of dating app use as international participants,  $t(2157) = 0.11, p = .913$ .

### **Moderation Analyses by Individual Characteristics**

A total of six moderation analyses were conducted to test whether and which sociodemographic characteristics influenced the association between dating app use and intraminority stigma; the main and interaction effects of each analysis are provided in Table 3.

In the model that simultaneously accounted for the effects of dating app use, age, and the interaction between the two variables, the effect of dating app use on intraminority age stigma was not significant,  $b = -.02, SE = .03, p = .437, 95\% CI [-.0673, .0291]$ . By contrast, the effect of age on intraminority age stigma was significant,  $b = .01, SE = .003, p = .002, 95\% CI [.0039, .0164]$ . However, this main effect was qualified by a significant interaction between dating app usage and age,  $b = .001, SE = .001, p = .032, 95\% CI [.0001, .0023]$ . As shown in Figure 1, the effect of dating app use frequency on level of exposure to intraminority age stigma increased with participant age, such that the effect was strongest for older men,  $bs = .03-.05, SEs = .01, ps < .001, 95\% CIs [0152-.0259, 0455-.0676]$ , and weakest for younger men,  $b = .01, SE = .01, p = .209, 95\% CI [-.0078, .0357]$ .

In the model that simultaneously accounted for the effects of dating app use, race/ethnicity (i.e., White or Person of Color), and the interaction between the two variables on intraminority racial/ethnic stigma, the effect of dating app use on intraminority racial/ethnic



stigma was small but significant,  $b = .02$ ,  $SE = .01$ ,  $p = .045$ , 95% CI [.0004, .0325]. The effect of race/ethnicity was also significant, but larger,  $b = .92$ ,  $SE = .09$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [.7405, 1.0914]. Furthermore, a significant interaction between dating app use and race/ethnicity was observed,  $b = .04$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $p = .01$ , 95% CI [.0076, .0688]. As shown in Figure 2, the association between dating app use and intraminority racial/ethnic stigma was strongest among gay men of color,  $b = .05$ ,  $SE = .01$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [.0286, .0807], and weakest among White gay men,  $b = .02$ ,  $SE = .01$ ,  $p = .045$ , 95% CI [.0004, .0325].

By contrast, no significant interactions were observed between dating app usage and self-perceived weight on intraminority body stigma,  $b = .01$ ,  $SE = .01$ ,  $p = .418$ , 95% CI [-.0092, .0223]; between participant dating app usage and masculinity on intraminority gender expression stigma,  $b = -.003$ ,  $SE = .01$ ,  $p = .741$ , 95% CI [-.0217, .0155]; between dating app usage and political affiliation on intraminority gay non-conformity stigma,  $b = -.004$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $p = .810$ , 95% CI [-.0335, .0261]; and between dating app usage and SES on intraminority socioeconomic stigma,  $b = -.01$ ,  $SE = .01$ ,  $p = .245$ , 95% CI [-.0263, .0067]. Adjustment for nationality had no effect on the moderation results.

## Discussion

Complementing prior research that examined the use and interpersonal consequences of mobile dating applications among gay men (e.g., lower community belonging, higher loneliness; Zervoulis et al., 2019), the current study analyzed recent trends in dating app use and their connection to experiences of intraminority stigma among a large, international sample of gay men, most of whom lived in the United States at the time of their participation. Overall, few participants reported never having used dating apps/websites; among participants who reported ever using dating apps, the majority reported using dating apps/websites at least weekly.

Consistent with the hypothesis that intraminority stigma is perpetuated by gay men through dating apps, dating app use was positively correlated with various experiences of intraminority stigma, specifically based on age, race/ethnicity, body size, and socioeconomic status, but not on the basis of gay non-conformity (i.e., the practicing of hobbies, beliefs, or ideologies perceived as atypical of gay men) or gender expression. Furthermore, this study detected two synergistic interaction effects, which occur when a change in the level of a moderating variable amplifies the bivariate association between the predictor and outcome variables (Cohen et al., 2014). In this case, older gay men and gay men of color who used dating apps more frequently showed a significantly higher risk of experiencing intraminority age stigma and intraminority racial/ethnic stigma, respectively, whereas other status-relevant social attributes (e.g., body size, SES) did not moderate the association between dating app use and corresponding forms of intraminority stigma.

The finding that more frequent dating app use was associated with more intraminority racial/ethnic stigma among gay men of color than White gay men mirrors prior work showing that many gay men of color report experiencing exclusion from the broader gay community and rejection or fetishization based on their race/ethnicity and sexual stereotypes (Hammack et al. 2022; Han & Choi, 2018). Given recent empirical evidence showing that racism experienced within the supposed safety of the LGBTQ+ community is linked to psychological distress (Balsam et al., 2011; Jackson et al., 2020; Zelaya et al., 2021), special attention to the mental health of gay men of color who use dating apps more frequently is warranted. By contrast, it was surprising that dating app use was not associated with intraminority gender expression stigma considering prior studies that examine experiences of femmophobia within the context of gay-specific dating apps (Miller & Behm-Morawitz, 2016). However, it is possible that the

significance of the association between dating app use and intraminority gender expression stigma, as well as the moderation of this association by gender expression, was impacted by the characteristics of the sample, which was predominantly comprised of gay men who perceived themselves as more masculine than feminine, and the way gender expression was measured. Although higher femininity/lower masculinity was associated with intraminority gender expression stigma, gay men who perceive themselves as more feminine may not necessarily present more femininely in terms of their behaviors and appearances on dating apps for fear of discrimination. Furthermore, it is unclear why the association between dating app use was not significantly associated with intraminority gay non-conformity stigma. Perhaps these less superficial, more concealable sociodemographic characteristics matter less when it comes to partner selection via dating/hookup apps, which may or may not be solely for the purpose of a short-term sexual relationship.

Similar to the association between dating app use and intraminority racial/ethnic stigma, more frequent dating app use was associated with more frequent experiences of intraminority age stigma. This is a novel finding given the lack of prior examination of intraminority stigma experiences of gay male dating app users across the lifespan. Additionally, older age accentuated the association between dating app use and intraminority age stigma, suggesting older gay men who use dating apps/websites face a greater risk of experiencing ageism in their everyday lives and its previously documented psychological consequences, such as internalized gay ageism (i.e., feeling denigrated or depreciated because of aging in the context of a gay male identity) and depressive symptoms (Wight et al., 2015, 2016). Likewise, some possible psychological consequences of intraminority body stigma include internalized weight stigma (i.e., applying negative stereotypes about weight to the self; Austen et al., 2020) and poor body image (Foster-

Gimbel et al., 2016; Soulliard et al., 2023), both of which may contribute to sexual orientation-based disparities in disordered eating and be exacerbated by the frequent use of gay-specific dating/hookup apps, such as Grindr (Filice et al., 2019; Shepherd et al., 2022).

As expected, more frequent dating/hookup app use was associated with more frequent experiences of intraminority body stigma among participants, 55% of whom perceived themselves on the higher end of the weight spectrum, and higher perceived weight was associated with these experiences. Unexpectedly, the association between dating app use and intraminority body stigma was not moderated by perceived weight, possibly due to the mesomorphic (i.e., lean and muscular) body ideal that is widespread and persistent among gay men, an ideal that takes into account not only weight but also adiposity and muscularity, neither of which were measured in this study (Hammack et al., 2022; Nowicki et al., 2022; Tylka & Andorka, 2012). It is also possible this effect was obscured by bias in self-perception, as gay men are more likely to experience body dysmorphic concerns than heterosexual men and therefore more likely to overestimate their own weight (Schmidt et al., 2022). In fact, previous research shows that over one third of 215 gay male participants, 60% of whom were not considered larger-bodied, reported direct experiences of weight stigma, especially from potential romantic partners, and that these experiences were associated with multiple indicators of body image disturbance, including drive for muscularity attitudes, body dissatisfaction, and disordered eating (Foster-Gimbel & Engeln, 2016). In addition to intraminority body stigma, numerous studies suggest other stigma-driven, status-based pressures within the gay community may affect gay men's body image as well (e.g., racial/ethnic stigma, gender expression stigma; Austen et al., 2022; Bhambhani et al., 2019; Bonell et al., 2023; Soulliard et al., 2023). Future research could utilize the G-SISI (Shepherd, Maki, et al., 2023) to explore how multiply marginalized gay male

dating app users' self-perceptions and attitudes regarding the body are impacted by the intersection of these stigmas.

As expected, more frequent dating/hookup app use was also associated with more frequent experiences of intraminority socioeconomic stigma, even though the majority of the sample identified as middle class, further underscoring the status-based pressures gay men experience within the gay community (Pachankis et al., 2020). However, contrary to our hypothesis, perceived SES was not a significant moderator of the association between dating app use and intraminority socioeconomic stigma, possibly because SES is more difficult to ascertain and more readily concealable in an online dating setting, potentially resulting in fewer instances of class-based discrimination. Taken together, these findings suggest forms of gay-specific intraminority stigma that are largely appearance-oriented and materialistic in nature (i.e., racial/ethnic stigma, age stigma, body stigma, socioeconomic stigma) are more likely than other forms of intraminority stigma to be perpetuated through dating apps.

With respect to sociodemographic differences in dating app use among gay men, results showed that dating app usage was significantly more common among younger participants relative to older participants. In general, young adults often use relationships to shape their own identity (Allen, 2008). In this digital age, especially amid a global pandemic, more young people turn to dating apps in search of belonging, intimacy, and love (Isaf, 2020). Online dating was also significantly more common among socioeconomically marginalized participants. Research indicates that the ability to self-disclose and embrace sexual orientation in the gay community is most accessible to those who are affluent (Barrett & Pollack, 2005). This may contribute to the large portion of our sample who indicated they hold middle-class status. Further, gay men from lower SES backgrounds often have fewer opportunities to connect and participate in social

activities with other gay men and frequently face greater financial precarity, making exploration of their sexual identity more difficult (McGarrity & Huebner, 2014). Consequently, these gay men may resort to dating apps, many of which are free, to connect with other gay men and the LGBTQ+ community more broadly, which could lead to positive and negative interpersonal experiences. Depending on the intersection of their identities, socioeconomically marginalized gay men and younger gay men may be at increased risk for exposure to various forms of intraminority stigma compared to their socioeconomically privileged and older counterparts due to increased dating app use.

Whether based on age, race/ethnicity, SES, or body size and shape, intraminority stigma has important implications for social and emotional well-being (Berking & Wupperman, 2012; Kertzner et al., 2009; Leary, 2015; Stewart-Brown, 1998). Research indicates that human adaptations meant to promote longevity through collaborative social networks has resulted in a tendency to react strongly to people and situations that thwart or threaten feelings of belonging (Bernstein et al., 2010; Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014; Major et al., 2002). Gay men face real, anticipated, remembered, and imagined rejection based on their sexual orientation (Meyer, 1995, 2003; Slimowicz et al., 2020) and have a smaller dating pool than heterosexual men (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). In addition, gay men face social barriers from other gay men within their own community based on other stigmatized identities (Pachankis et al., 2020; Shepherd, Maki, et al., 2023). Findings from the current study suggest that frequent use of dating apps/websites may increase gay men's risk of experiencing intraminority stress along the constructs of age stigma, racial/ethnic stigma, and body stigma. These negative within-group experiences may threaten sense of community, belonging, and satisfaction with life that would otherwise be enhanced through dating app use (Zervoulis et al., 2019), and increase the risk of mental and physical

health problems related to depression, anxiety, body dissatisfaction, and STD/HIV-related sexual risk behaviors (Burton et al., 2020; Mahon et al., 2021; Pachankis et al., 2020; Soulliard et al., 2023). In non-inclusive contexts where heterosexism is more common and interferes with one's ability to form and maintain positive social connections outside and within the gay community, as well as between partners, intraminority stigma may have an even greater impact on their emotions, self-esteem, and overall well-being (Brandt et al., 2023; Diamond & Alley, 2022; Hong et al., 2023; Wilson & Liss, 2022).

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Results of this study should be considered within the context of limitations of the sample and design. The lack of control variables included in the analyses (aside from nationality) limits the robustness of our findings, as associations between dating app use and intraminority stigma could potentially be influenced by other variables (e.g., internalization of muscularity and thinness ideals, hegemonic masculinity ideology/anti-effeminacy attitudes, internalized racism; Calzo et al., 2013; Convertino et al., 2022; Le & Kler, 2022; Taywaditep, 2002). Although various racial/ethnic groups of gay men were represented in the study, the sample consisted of predominantly White gay men living in the United States, limiting generalizability. Because race/ethnicity was treated as a binary variable (i.e., non-Hispanic White or another race/ethnicity) in all analyses to preserve statistical power, this study precludes the analysis of within-group differences among gay men of color and may overshadow anti-Black bias that is prevalent within the US and across the globe (e.g., colorism in Latin America; Cuevas et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2023), thereby limiting the findings and implications for working with gay men from different racial/ethnic groups. Further, not all possible forms of intraminority stigma were measured, such as community-level denigration based on height, sexual position, HIV status,

disability status, and consensual non-monogamy (Abbott, 2013; Hammack et al., 2022; Pachankis et al., 2020; Stewart et al., 2021).

With respect to the sexual and gender diversity of the sample, all participants were self-identified gay men, as assessed by a single question that asked participants if they were a gay man. As such, some participants might be transmasculine or non-binary, a diverse population that faces additional social obstacles outside and within the gay community (e.g., cissexism/transphobia; Puckett et al., 2021), which may or may not have been captured to an extent by the intraminority gender expression stigma subscale. Future studies should use gender-inclusive data-collecting strategies (Beischel et al., 2022; Schrager et al., 2019) that gather information regarding participants' sex assigned at birth, gender identity, and masculine/feminine self-presentation to determine whether participants' gender identity and expression are discernable to other dating app users and influence the association between dating app use and intraminority stigma. Regarding the mixed associations between dating app use and intraminority stigma, it should be noted that the frequency of dating and/or hook-up app use is measured by the number of times a person visits or opens an app rather than the amount of time spent using an app on a typical day, posing another potential limitation in measurement. Information regarding participants' motivations behind their app use as well as the type of app they use most regularly (e.g., for dating or hook-ups) was also not gathered, making it difficult to characterize the exact context in which participants experience intraminority stigma.

Because the examined variables were based on self-report data, the subjective nature of participant responses should also be noted. Different groups of gay men have been subjected to different geopolitical climates and influences that may shape perceptions, reactions, and tolerance to intraminority stigma (Rivas-Koel et al., 2023). This also means the findings may



differ across generations or cultures within the United States and internationally. Relatedly, our examination of the moderating effect of political affiliation on the association between dating app use and gay non-conformity stigma is more relevant to U.S. participants, who are more familiar with the U.S.-centric views of the Democratic political party. It is possible this effect was non-significant because the construct of intraminority gay non-conformity stigma is far more expansive than just political ideology, demonstrated relatively low internal consistency in our sample, and was endorsed significantly less by Democratic participants, who comprised the majority of the sample.

Considering the cross-sectional nature and possible cohort effects of the study, longitudinal research, experimental research, and research using naturalistic observation could aid in understanding the directionality and temporality of the association between dating app use and experiences of intraminority stigma. Rates of intraminority stigma experienced by gay men may also vary by the extent to which gay men identify and interact with gay subcultures (e.g., the Bear community) and other members of the community that value diverse or underrepresented traits (e.g., larger bodies, feminine self-presentation; Maki, 2017; Moskowitz et al., 2013), which might help explain why associations between dating app use and some forms of intraminority stigma (e.g., body stigma, gender expression stigma) were not moderated by corresponding individual characteristics (e.g., perceived weight, level of masculinity). Given prior research examining the potential consequences of intraminority gay community stress (Burton et al., 2020; Pachankis et al., 2020; Shepherd, Denning, et al., 2023; Soulliard et al., 2023), future research is encouraged to explore the unique impact of various forms of intraminority stigma on the health and well-being of specific groups of gay men, particularly multiply marginalized gay

men who use dating apps (e.g., older gay men, gay men of color), to identify pathways of risk and resilience, as well as potential solutions.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, the current findings provide quantitative and international evidence of how spaces intended for gay men to safely socialize (i.e., gay dating apps) may perpetuate social and sexual hierarchies of power and stigma that extend beyond the gay community. As a result, these spaces may be a source of interpersonal rejection and stress for gay men who do not fit the mold. In particular, gay dating apps appear to favor gay men who meet certain sociocultural standards of attractiveness in terms of race (i.e., White), age (i.e., younger), body type (i.e., mesomorphic), or SES (i.e., wealthy), discriminating primarily based on appearances rather than based on other social attributes that are easier to conceal through online or in-person interactions, such as level of masculinity and conformity to popular gay culture. Intraminority stigma incited among gay men on dating apps/websites is a global symptom of a larger societal and cultural issue that gay men are not immune to, but can work together to undo in their community. Whether blatant or subtle, intraminority stigma can be detected and addressed to mitigate divisions rooted in bias and transform the community into a greater source of support and empowerment for all gay men. Increasing awareness and understanding of the association between dating app/website usage and intraminority stigma can help health professionals, policymakers, community advocates, and other agents of change develop culturally-responsive interventions that support gay men who regularly use dating apps/websites in coping with intraminority stigma from other gay men and create more inclusive, safer spaces for gay men with intersecting diverse identities, both in person and online.

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**Table 1***Sample Demographics*

Variable	%	<i>n</i>
Race/Ethnicity <sup>a</sup>		
White	71.5	1544
People of Color	28.5	615
Hispanic or Latino	9.0	194
Black or African American	5.5	118
Biracial or Multiracial	4.9	106
Asian or Asian American	3.6	78
Another race/ethnicity	5.5	119
Educational Background		
Some high school	1.8	14
Graduated high school (or equivalent)	16.8	133
Some college, but no college degree	35.6	282
Associate's degree	8.0	63
Bachelor's degree	26.6	211
Some graduate school, but no graduate degree	3.9	31
Graduate degree	7.3	58
Socioeconomic status		
Lower class	7.0	152
Lower-middle class	26.1	563
Middle class	43.1	930
Upper-middle class	21.5	465
Upper class	2.3	49
Employment status		
Full-time	70.3	1517
Part-time	10.7	231
Unemployed	5.1	110
Retired	6.9	150
Disabled	5.5	118
Student	9.9	214
Gender expression		
Very feminine	0.5	10
Feminine	10.2	220
Neither feminine nor masculine	21.9	473
Masculine	62.2	1342
Very masculine	5.3	114
Self-perceived weight		
Underweight	1.8	39
Slightly below average	9.4	204
Average	34.3	740
Slightly above average	28.6	617

Overweight	25.9	559
Political Party Affiliation		
Democrat	58.0	1252
Non-Democrat	42.0	907
Republican	6.0	129
Libertarian	5.6	120
Independent	19.6	423
Another political affiliation	10.9	235
Dating app/website usage		
Never	8.0	173
Less than once a year	20.7	447
Every 6 months	5.4	116
Every 2-3 months	5.8	126
Monthly	7.7	166
Weekly	10.1	219
More than a few times a week	16.0	345
Daily	26.3	567
Relationship status		
Single	53.3	1150
In a relationship	25.4	549
Married	17.8	385
Divorced	1.9	41
Widowed	1.6	34
Nationality		
United States	79.8	1723
International	20.2	436
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>Range</i>
Age	40.49 (13.43)	19-79
Masculinity	3.62 (.76)	1-5
SES	2.86 (.91)	1-5
Perceived weight	3.67 (1.02)	1-5
Dating app/website usage	5.10 (2.55)	1-8

<sup>a</sup> Individuals who identified as Hispanic/Latino were categorized as such (regardless of race), and non-Hispanic/Latino gay men who selected multiple response options were categorized as “Biracial/Multiracial.” SES = socioeconomic status.



**Table 2***Bivariate Correlations Between Measures*

	<i>M (SD)</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Age Stigma	2.19 (0.94)	--						
2. Socioeconomic Stigma	2.29 (0.93)	.55***	--					
3. Gay Non-Conformity Stigma	2.68 (0.90)	.41***	.47***	--				
4. Racial Stigma	2.10 (0.97)	.27***	.37***	.36***	--			
5. Gender Expression Stigma	2.09 (0.93)	.38***	.45***	.40***	.45***	--		
6. Body Stigma	2.70 (1.01)	.41***	.48***	.42***	.39***	.60***	--	
7. Dating App Use	5.10 (2.55)	.06**	.05*	.02	.08***	.03	.08***	--

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$  \*\*\* $p < .001$ .  $N = 2,159$ .

**Table 3***Main and Interaction Effects of Dating App Use Frequency and Sociocultural Characteristics on Gay-Specific Intraminority**Stigma*

	Point Estimate	SE	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Model 1: Age Stigma ( $R^2 = .06$ )				
Dating App Use	-.02	.02	.437	-.0673, .0291
Age	.01**	.003	.002	.0039, .0164
Dating App Use x Age	.001*	.001	.032	.0001, .0023
Model 2: Racial Stigma ( $R^2 = .28$ )				
Dating App Use	.02*	.01	.045	.0004, .0325
People of Color Identity	.92***	.09	<.001	.7405, 1.0914
Dating App Use x People of Color Identity	.04*	.02	.015	.0076, .0688
Model 3: Socioeconomic Stigma ( $R^2 = .04$ )				
Dating App Use	.04	.03	.117	-.0100, .0895
Socioeconomic Status	-.16**	.05	.001	-.2517, -.0636
Dating App Use x Socioeconomic Status	-.01	.01	.245	-.0263, .0067
Model 4: Gay Non-Conformity Stigma ( $R^2 = .03$ )				
Dating App Use	.01	.01	.487	-.0147, .0308
Democrat Identity	-.32***	.09	<.001	-.4891, -.1493
Dating App Use x Democrat Identity	-.003	.02	.810	-.0335, .0261
Model 5: Gender Expression Stigma ( $R^2 = .15$ )				
Dating App Use	.02	.04	.568	-.0486, .0885
Level of Masculinity	-.45***	.06	<.001	-.5594, -.3461
Dating App Use x Level of Masculinity	-.003	.01	.741	-.0217, .0155
Model 6: Body Stigma ( $R^2 = .07$ )				
Dating App Use	.01	.03	.821	-.0534, .0674

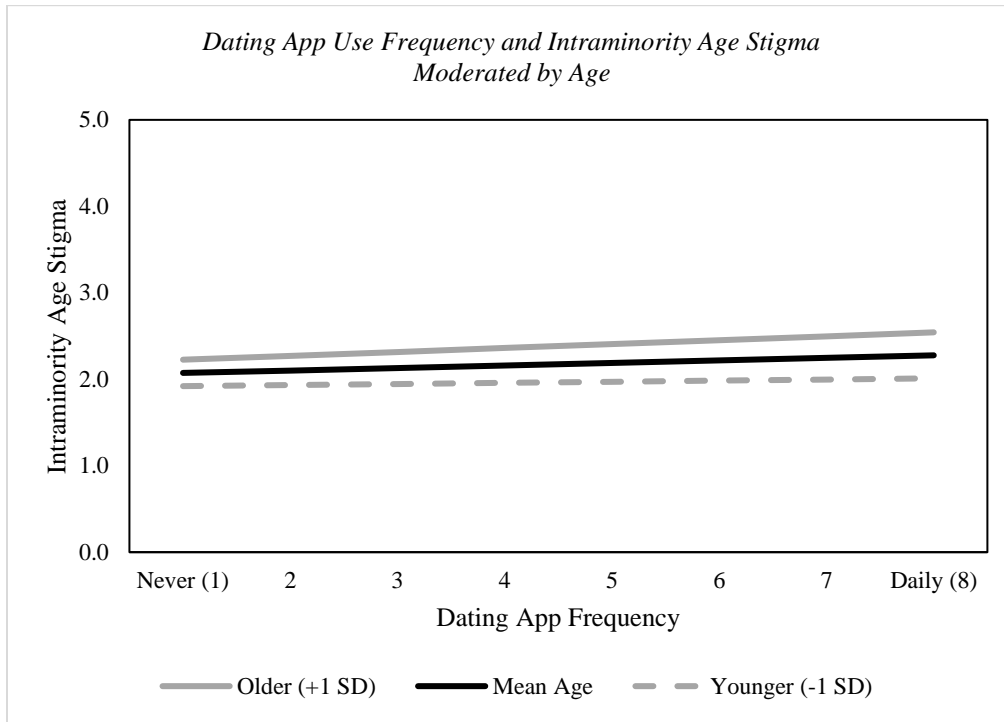
Perceived Weight	.21***	.05	<.001	.1238, .3037
Dating App Use x Perceived Weight	.01	.01	.418	-.0092, .0223

*Notes.* Unstandardized regression coefficients are presented, as well as standard errors (SE) and 95% confidence intervals (CI), for each main and interaction effect. When the 95% confidence interval does not include 0, the effect is significant.  $N = 2159$ .

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$  \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Figure 1**

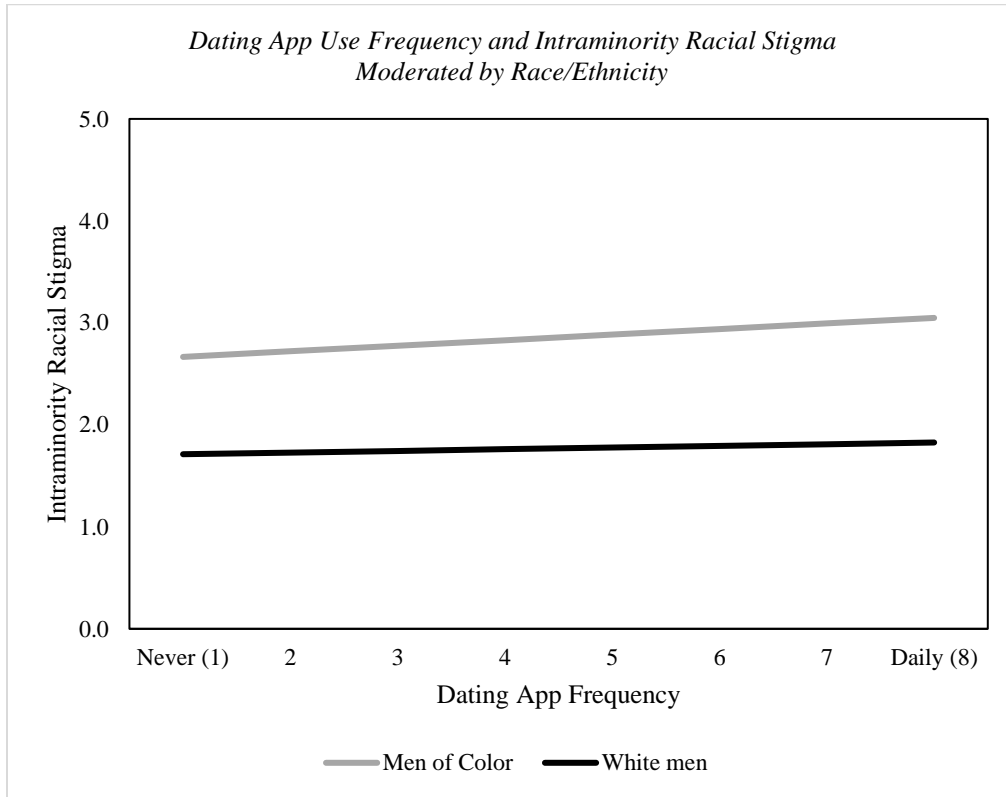
*Dating App Use Frequency and Intraminority Age Stigma Moderated by Age*



*Note.* Frequency of intraminority age stigma experiences by interaction of dating app use frequency and age. For age, “older” ( $M = 53.92$ ) indicates 1 SD above the mean (40.49) and “younger” ( $M = 27.06$ ) indicates 1 SD below the mean (40.49).

**Figure 2**

*Dating App Use Frequency and Intraminority Racial Stigma Moderated by Race/Ethnicity*



*Note.* Frequency of intraminority racial stigma experiences by interaction of dating app use frequency and race/ethnicity.