TECHNICAL DOCUMENT

Use of smartphone application advertising for HIV prevention among men who have sex with men in the European Union/European Economic Area

An ECDC guide to effective use of digial platforms for HIV prevention

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ECDC TECHNICAL DOCUMENT

Use of smartphone application advertising for HIV prevention among men who have sex with men in the European Union/European Economic Area

An ECDC guide to the effective use of digital platforms for HIV prevention

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6. Smartphone application advertising

Smartphones have revolutionised many aspects of our lives, and the way men who have sex with men (MSM) arrange sexual encounters has drastically changed. MSM have been early adopters of location-based dating apps and MSM applications such as Grindr, Hornet and Planetromeo predate most dating applications by years. The increasing popularity of smartphone apps among MSM provides an enormous opportunity for HIV prevention. This this module will explore:

- **Getting started**: how to decide which app and promotion method to use.
- **Creating content**: how to create and optimise content for maximum impact.
- **Targeting**: how to effectively target key MSM populations.
- **Budgeting**: what costs are associated with a campaign and how to distribute budget.
- **Reporting**: measuring the success of a campaign and applying this experience to future work.
- **Summary:** a brief checklist to consider before making your campaign live.

6a. Getting started

Before starting your first campaign, it is important to choose the best platform for your outreach. In order to do this you should assess the following:

- Which platforms are most popular in your region?
- Does the platform's user base match your target demographic?
- What are the opportunities, benefits and limitations of the platform?

In order to find out which platform is most frequently used in your area you can either conduct a local community assessment or contact the platform and ask for user data for your region. Platforms may vary in size but that does not mean smaller localised platforms should be dismissed. They may have quite a strong user base in your country, even though their brand may be less well known worldwide.

Table 1. **A breakdown of three popular MSM smartphone apps within Europe**

Dating App	Grindr	Hornet	Planetromeo
Active users	10 million+	10 million+	1.8 million
Daily users	1.8 million	No data	950 000
Filtering options	Age, lifestyle	Age	Age, ethnicity, sexual behaviour, location
Advertising options	Mobile banner ads and broadcast messages[1]	Mobile banner ads and broadcast messages[2]	Mobile and web banner ads[3]
Additional services	Testing location finder on website	Know your status	Health support
Corporate responsibility programmes	Grindr for Equality[4]	Broadcast campaigns and discount for non-profit organisations	Planetromeo Care[5]

Whatever your message, the way you deliver it to your target audience will make a significant difference to the way they respond. Although the advertising options on smartphone apps may be limited, working directly with the platforms will help ensure you receive the best possible results.

Local or niche dating platforms have different options and limitations when it comes to advertising. Everybody sells banners but they are not always the most effective means of campaigning. Contact your local or niche platform to discuss what options they have and which options would suit your campaign plans best.

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[1] https://s3.amazonaws.com/grindr_marketing/US+Media+Kit+05.2014.pdf
[2] https://s3.amazonaws.com/grindr_marketing/US+Media+Kit+05.2014.pdf
[3] https://www.planetromeo.com/en/advertise/
[4] https://www.grindr.com/g4e/
[5] https://www.planetromeo.com/en/care/

Advertising options currently available:

1. Text-based broadcast messages. These messages are presented to the user when they first open the app. These messages can be extremely effective but they can also be easily dismissed. It is important to ensure that your message is direct and to the point and includes a strong call to action so that it cannot easily be ignored.
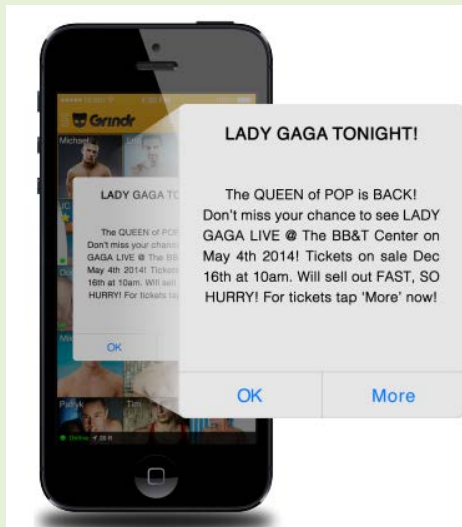
2. Traditional and rich banner adverts. These adverts can contain animations or still images and can appear when launching the app or during an active session.

3. Video adverts: a user can be rewarded with extra features within the app in exchange for watching a video placement ad.
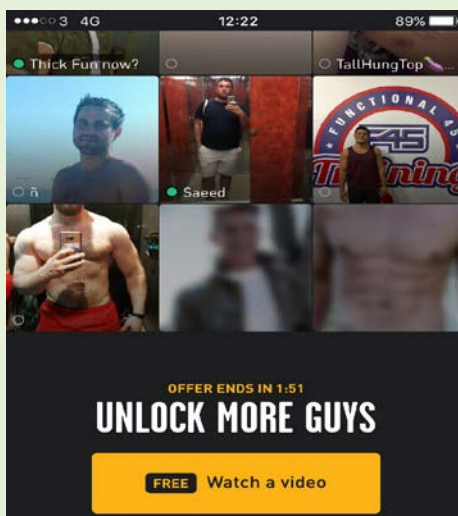
4. Inbox messages, email blasts and newsletters: the platform will include your adverts within their correspondence with the user or they will send your advert directly to the user.

These options vary significantly according to the platform so it is worth researching each platform to find out which is the best option for you.

6b. Creating content

No matter what your message is, it could be considered intrusive for the user. For this reason it is important to consider the user's motivation for using the app and understand that their priority is probably not to read about their sexual health. However, the sense of intrusion can be minimised by improving the effectiveness of the intervention.

Optimising your message

Not everyone will click on your advert so it is important to ensure that there is a take-away health message for those who do not click. Try to be clear in your message and be careful that any jokes are not susceptible to harmful misinterpretation. Any creative wordplay should be understandable by everyone.

Testing your message

Try different approaches for the same goal and experiment with A/B testing. This means making multiple similar but different messages and comparing the results. The message that works best is usually the one you should continue working with. If both approaches obtain lacklustre results, you should consider a different approach. In this way you can optimise your campaign to get the best results.

Optimising your landing page and links

Make sure your landing page is always up-to-date and that it fits the message of your ad. Your audience expects to get what it is promised in the ad and will probably leave if they do not get this immediately. For example, if you are advertising free condoms, you should link directly to the webpage where the free condoms can be ordered, not to the homepage of your website. In some cases it will be best to create a temporary landing page just for this campaign. This will also come in handy for measuring your results. To measure your results as accurately as possible, you can make your own traceable links which will make it easier to view results in Google Analytics[6]. You can easily do this with the Google Analytics URL Builder extension in the Google Chrome browser. Companies will provide a report with the click-through statistics, but you can analyse more thoroughly if you have your own traceable links.

Surveys

Surveys can work both as a research tool and a marketing mechanism or even just to make respondents think about certain issues. If you want to use gay dating apps to promote your survey make sure that the app company allows direct links to sites such as SurveyMonkey[7] or other websites that are not your own – in many cases they will not allow this. In order to counter this, you can host the survey on a page on your own website and link directly to that page instead.

How to make a great banner

Banners on gay dating apps are usually small, so using the available space as effectively as possible is paramount to the success of your campaign. However, the banner space limitations can help you by forcing you to make radical choices:

- Choose a simple message: the limited space demands a simplification of your message. Usually, you want to end up with a smart slogan to brand your message and a call to action that will make people click on your banner. An example of a good call to action would be 'get free condoms here.'
- Simplicity is also the key to a good design: your message or call to action should be the focus in your banner. Use a supporting image for branding purposes or to help with overall recognition of the campaign. The logo of your organisation can create trust with your audience and make them feel safe and secure when clicking on your banner.
- Choose colours that fit your brand and contrast with their surroundings, and choose a modern, clear and easily readable font.
- Create hierarchy between different text elements by varying font sizes.
- You have the option to use animation in your banner by creating a .gif-file. This will draw more attention because of the movement, but may irritate the user. Only use animation if it really adds to your message. For example: if you have a 'before and after' effect, it might be interesting to present this in an animated .gif.

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[6] https://analytics.google.com/analytics/web/provision/?authuser=0#provision/SignUp/
[7] https://sv.surveymonkey.com/

Tips on how to make a great text message

Without any visual aids, it can be challenging to spark the interest of your target audience. However, text messages as advertisements have the advantage of providing more information in your message. Therefore, in a text message, it is possible to reach your target audience with your message even if they do not click on the 'read more' button. However, you cannot really measure this effect so it is best to write something that will push traffic to your website.

Keeping your text short and succinct will increase the chance that your audience will click to read more:

- Write a catchy headline: your headline does not have to be factual, it is mainly there to grab people's attention. You can use a joke or perhaps ask a daring question.
- Keep your main text short and simple: short messages lead to a higher click-through rate.
- Be clear on what you are offering: if you are unclear about what your audience will find after they have clicked, they may leave your website immediately. If you are clear on what you are offering, those that click through are more likely to be interested, so this type of traffic has more value.

Example of a headline: 'Want better sex?'

Main text: 'Then try a better condom. Take our quiz to find the best condom for you'.

Choosing the right timing and frequency

Every platform has its peak hours for different reasons, and app-using MSM appear to be most active in the late evenings and on Fridays and Saturdays. The weekend is usually a busy time, however, it might not get the best results as people are more likely to be preoccupied. On a more boring week day, MSM may be more easily tempted into reading messages from health organisations.

It is best to discuss planning your messages with the sales advisor of the dating platform. Based on their advice, you can plan your first campaign. Evaluating your campaign results can help you optimise further.

Feasibility of online intervention on sexual networking platforms

Case study: Croatia

'During European HIV Testing Week we paid for advertising. We reached all users in our capital, Zagreb. It was rather expensive for our budget but 12% of all people who tested during European HIV Testing Week heard about it on an app.

Other channels were more effective, such as a local dating website where we have much more space to publish articles and communicate with people on forums. Advertising on apps gives reasonable results but is expensive. Invest in a good budget for promotion and creative materials (banners, images and text in ads) that will have impact. But more free advertising or discounts would help. If budget is limited, be creative and think outside the box.'

Source: *ECDC (2015). 'Understanding the impact of smartphone applications on STI/HIV prevention among men who have sex with men in the EU/EEA'.*

6c. Targeting

When targeting a specific community, it is worth considering that bigger is not necessarily always better. Some platforms have their own niche focus that may help you to target MSM subgroups (age, ethnicity, lifestyle etc.) Growl[8], for example, focuses on the 'bear' community, and Squirt[9] focuses on casual sex rather than romance or friendship.

Some apps allow specific demographic based targeting whereas others do not. Some apps allow you to target based on age, geographical location, tribe, platform, or device. Speak with your account manager to find out what is available on the app you are working with.

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[8] http://growl.info/
[9] https://www.squirt.org/

Examples of specific communities you may wish to target:

Grindr[10] - Grindr has a demographic of 'gay, affluent, tech-savvy men.' According to their sales kit 75% have a university degree or higher. Grindr currently has a few options to target a specific niche audience, such as age or ethnicity, and you can target a specific region (e.g. all users in the capital city of your country, or areas densely populated with MSM).

Planetromeo[11] - Planetromeo has been around since 2002 and a large segment of their audience consists of men who are slightly older and may be slightly less tech-savvy. Planetromeo currently offers its members both the old web version of the platform and the new mobile version as well. This allows both new and old users to choose the platform that works best for them. On average, Planetromeo has a broad demographic: 80% of its users call themselves gay, 19% identify as bi and the remaining 1% identify as trans. Planetromeo is available in multiple languages (English, French, German, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish), so users do not have to understand English to be able to use the app/website. Advertisements can be targeted to regions and age groups.

Hornet[12] - Hornet has a user base that is globally comparable with that of Grindr; most users are younger and tech-savvy. Hornet describe their users as 'sex-positive, opposed to stigma and understanding HIV'. These traits are supposedly due to the user-friendly interface, a commitment to health issues, collaboration with groups of men from within the gay community and an affirming environment. Hornet is available in 17 different languages including Russian, French, Portuguese, Spanish and Turkish. Targeting ads are possible based on area, language, ethnicity and even HIV status. This could work very well in pinpointing an exact audience. However, Alex Garner, Hornet Senior Health Innovation Strategist, warns that 'targeting solely on HIV status is sometimes not very effective'. 'People can opt-in and share their HIV status if they want to. So you will not target all men with HIV by targeting positive HIV status.'

6d. Budgeting and costs

Your biggest concern may be whether you have sufficient funds for an effective campaign. Luckily, many gay dating platforms share a concern for the sexual health of their users. Therefore, they are often willing to work with health organisations for a lower price. Some have even developed a special discount or pro bono programme.

For example: Scruff's Benevolads programme is free and currently available in most western European countries. It gives free, geo-targeted advertising to selected non-profit organisations that work within the gay community. If it is not available in your country, you can contact Scruff directly to request it be added. Other platforms have their own schemes.

When a gay dating platform is very active in your country and has a large user base, it is more likely to offer you discounts or help in order to create a lasting customer relationship. Sexual health organisations are never the biggest customers in terms of money spent, but they do tend to be loyal. For a gay dating platform, advertisements from sexual health organisations are often a relatively small, but steady source of income.

You can find current pricing and options on the websites of the respective app companies. Always contact the individual companies and discuss your needs and budget.

6e. Reporting

Monitoring the success of your campaigns is crucial and experimenting with different platforms may be necessary to find out what works best for you. Liaise with an account manager at each platform and clearly communicate your goals to ensure that you are getting the most out of your campaign.

Some of the elements you should think about when monitoring success include:

- Reach: how many people are your adverts reaching and is this what you expected from your platform of choice? Comparing with other marketing methods (social media, press, outdoor) may help decide the budget you attribute to smartphone applications.
- Engagement: how many people are engaging with your adverts and are people reading them or dismissing them? Consider updating your content if engagement remains consistently low.
- Engagement rate: the percentage of people reached that also engaged with your content. It is worth paying attention to this figure when working with smaller niche platforms.
- Referrals and conversions: the number of people clicking through to your website and the number taking action on site. This is arguably the most important metric - if people are engaging with your adverts but not clicking through, there may be a lack of incentive or the call to action may not be clear enough.
- Conversion rate: the percentage who visited your website and also took action. People may click through but they may not take action on site – this may indicate a problem with your landing page or the consumer journey.

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[10] https://www.grindr.com/
[11] https://www.planetromeo.com/en/app/
[12] http://love.hornetapp.com/

6f. Summary

Before starting your Twitter campaign, you should do the following:

1.   Choose the platform that is best for your campaign objectives.

2.   Select the advert type that will work best for your target audience.

3.   Create a selection of highly engaging adverts that are suited to your goals.

4.   Select the best placements for your adverts.

5.   Weigh up your different targeting options to ensure you are reaching at-risk MSM.

6.   Allocate a budget and liaise directly with apps to ensure the best price.

7.   Set holistic goals to measure the overall success of your campaign and determine a plan to measure and act upon your on-going progress, successes and failures.

Once you have completed these tasks you are ready to start your first campaign. The success of any campaign will always rely on a certain degree of trial and error, so remember to follow your campaign through every stage and be prepared to optimise and make changes as you go.

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