

# Understanding Online Serophobia: How Hate Speech Against People Living with HIV and AIDS is Evolving



**DITCH  
THE LABEL**

A social media data study analyzing millions of data points to understand how hate speech targeting people living with HIV and AIDS has evolved online between 2019 and 2021

REPORT

To mark World AIDS Day, Brandwatch and Ditch the Label teamed up to analyze 239 thousand conversations globally to understand how serophobia has evolved online between 2019 and 2021.

## **We found that:**

- **Instances of and discussions around serophobia online have decreased 21% since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020.**

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- **While violent threats and slurs or tropes make up a large part of the discussion around serophobia online, they have decreased by 35% and 22% respectively over the last 2.5 years.**

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- **Use of the hashtags #EndHIVStigma and #ScienceNotStigma has increased by 64% and 473% respectively in the last 2.5 years as awareness is raised around the stigma attached to people living with HIV and AIDS.**

**There were an average of 245 online posts expressing or discussing serophobia every day over the last 2.5 years.**

**“Throughout the pandemic, Ditch the Label has been at the helm of helping young people navigate a range of unique challenges. Anecdotally, we found that increasing amounts of our service users were reporting online hate speech and trolling, so we had suspected an uplift in cases, however we lacked the data to objectively define the relationship between the pandemic and the rate of online hate. This report shines a vital and sobering light on the very real and devastating experiences of millions worldwide, as they battle not only their own personal struggles, but navigate through alarming rates of online toxicity and abuse.**

**It is clear from this report that online hate speech has reached an all-time high and, to some communities, is at an unbearable extreme. It is my hope that this vital piece of research will illuminate the true extent of online hate to positively influence societal behaviors and policy to better protect people online.”**



**Dr. Liam Hackett,**  
CEO of Ditch the Label

## Notes on the methodology

For the purposes of this report we have focused on discussions around and including online hate relating to people living with HIV or AIDS.

This report analyzes English-language global discussions from forums, blogs, and several social media sites from the beginning of 2019 to mid-2021. To protect victims of online hate, we have paraphrased any examples to ensure they're not searchable.

On gender breakdowns found in the data, Brandwatch uses a curated database of almost 45k names to estimate the gender of an author. This is not a perfect methodology, but has proven accurate enough to help analysts model broad trends.

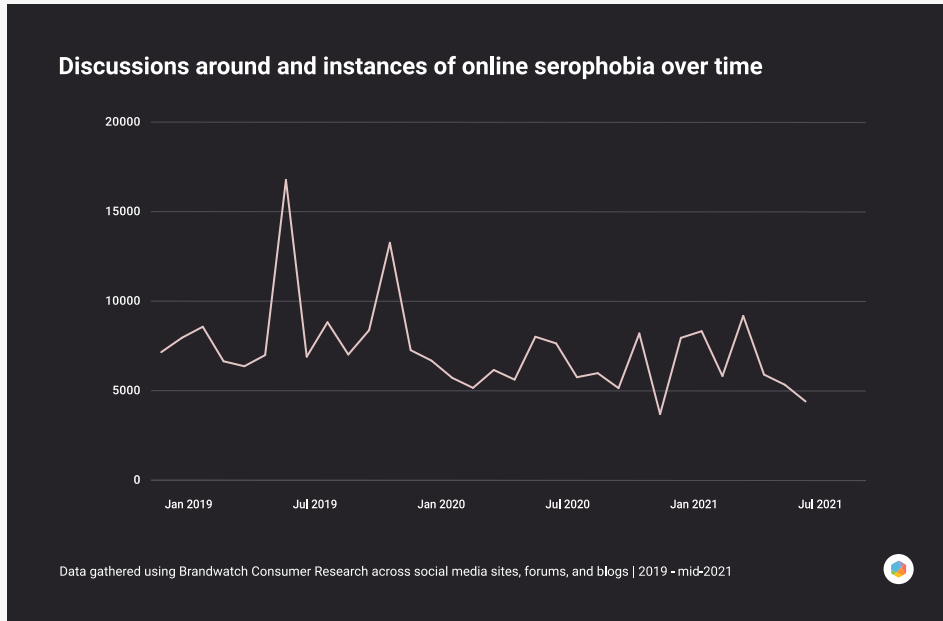
## Trigger warning and content warning

This report contains content that some audiences may find upsetting and triggering. Please be aware that some of the data presented in this report is uncensored in places. We recommend that anybody below the age of 16 has parental consent before exploring this report.

## How has online serophobia trended?

Since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, global discussions about or examples of hate speech targeted towards people living with HIV or AIDS has decreased by 21%.

Spikes in conversation were often driven by viral tweets from people living with HIV or AIDS discussing instances in which they had been targeted by others because of their status.



### KEY MOMENTS

**March 2019** A second patient was reported to be cured of HIV/AIDS

**July 2019** A former TV reporter in the US posted about his experiences being told to die from AIDS

**October 2019** NIH and Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation announce a \$200 million effort to research a cure for HIV

**November 2019** A Kenyan advocate for people living with HIV posted about social stigma and hate speech against the HIV community, specifically citing the idea of "looking like she has HIV"

**October 2020** Comparisons about NBA player Magic Johnson being allowed to play in the NBA with HIV and NBA players being banned for not being vaccinated against COVID

**March 2021** Social media posts supporting Zero Discrimination Day and ending HIV discrimination and stigma

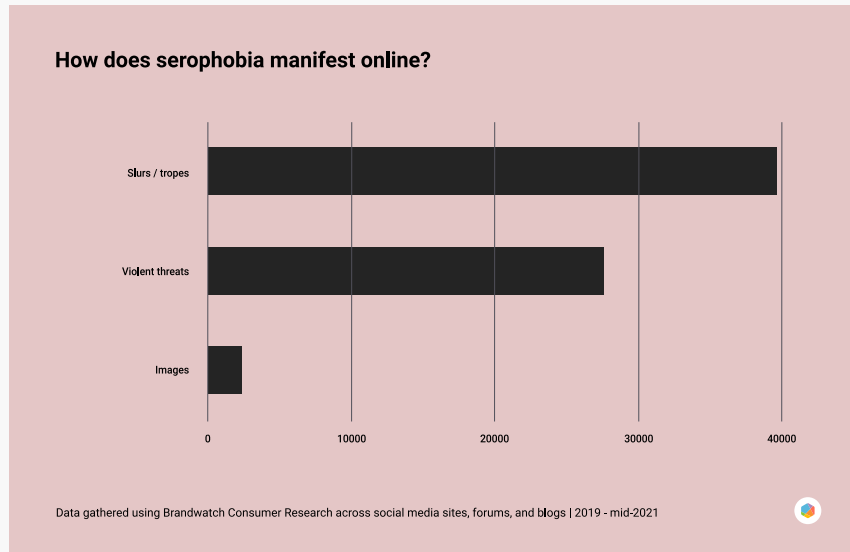
**July 2021** US rapper DaBaby makes inaccurate and hurtful comments at concert about people living HIV and AIDS

**June 2021** The 40th anniversary of the first known cases of AIDS marked with messages by world leaders and worldwide events

## Which types of hate speech are most common?

Hate speech can take many forms: violent threats, references to violent events, slurs, epithets, tropes, and hateful imagery or symbols.

Consistent with the fall in overall serophobia online, violent threats and the use of slurs or tropes against people living with HIV or AIDS fell over the 2.5 year period studied. Online violent threats relating to serophobia fell 35%, while slurs and tropes fell by 22%.



### Slurs / tropes

The most common form of online serophobia was the use of slurs and tropes against those living with AIDS or HIV. Many were attacked with homophobic slurs associating the victims' sexuality with their status. Some were attacked with terms like "slut", "whore", "ho", or "prostitute". And some victims of serophobia openly shared their experiences being referred to as a "bugchaser", a hateful term used to describe someone who eroticizes HIV infection.

### Examples

- "Since I learned I was HIV+ 10 years ago, I've been shamed by so many. Friends and families, love interests. They call me a slut and treat me like I am dirty, tainted, a taboo."
- "You're a dirty bugchaser!"
- "Someone called me a whore when I told them about my HIV status. Since then I've never told anyone without feeling confident they wouldn't immediately judge me."

## Violent threats

Violent threats against people with HIV or AIDS often came in the form of people wishing death upon those living with the virus. There were many posts about people in the LGBTQ+ community coming out to others about their gender identity or sexual orientation and people responding by telling them that they would die of AIDS. Some posts merely cited the hope that another would die of AIDS or catch HIV and die. There were a handful of posts that were violent threats of sexual assault on others that would result in the victim contracting HIV or AIDS. Many victims of these kinds of violent threats online discussed their experiences and reactions or responses to receiving these threats, while many followers, friends, and families reacted to these experiences with messages of support, love, or hope.

## Examples

- “Has anyone ever told YOU to die of AIDS after you came out as being HIV positive? How about being told this thousands of times by randos on the internet? Online bullying and harassment is a HUGE problem and just because you aren’t a victim of it, doesn’t mean it isn’t happening.”
- “I hope you die from AIDS dumb f\*\*\*\*t!”
- “A few years ago I was walking near Union Square when a man started yelling at me. He threatened to rape me and give me AIDS and that I would die in a month.”

## Images

There were fewer examples of hate speech online in the form of images or pictures. That said, some victims of serophobia discussed other people sending them images of people living with AIDS from the 1980s and 90s, often trying to incite fear of the disease and the possibility of death from the virus. There were some examples of images that circulated on the internet with captions such as “this photo will give you AIDS” often with sexualized or homophobic imagery.

## Examples

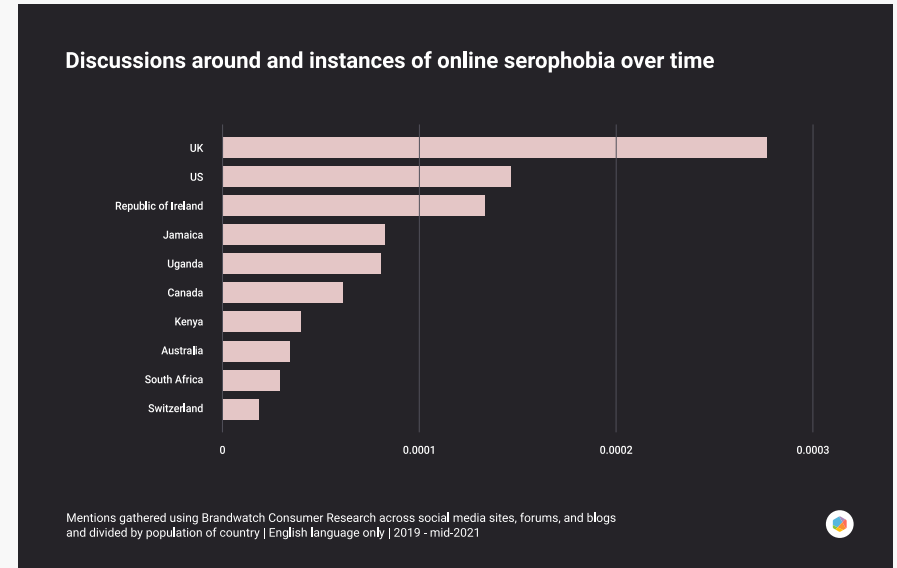
- “BEWARE! This photo will give you AIDS!”
- “This is what you are going to be. Dying alone in misery from AIDS because of sodomy. Look at these images and ask yourself if this is what you want for yourself with the life decisions you are making. Think seriously.”

## Where are discussions around hate speech against people living with HIV or AIDS coming from?

Observing rates of English-language hate speech discussion by country, the United Kingdom saw the highest rate of any country of discussion about hate speech against people living with HIV or AIDS. This was nearly double the next highest rate, which was in the United States. In the United Kingdom, people were much more likely to discuss the LGBTQ+ community and serophobic hate speech than elsewhere.

In the list of the top ten countries for higher rates of discussion about serophobia online were Uganda, Kenya, and South Africa – all countries that are among the top in the world with high rates of adults with HIV / AIDS. In these Sub-Saharan countries, people were discussing the importance of ending the stigma or discrimination that people living with AIDS or HIV face.

Men are more likely to discuss serophobia online than women, with 62% of online discussion about or examples of serophobia authored by men compared to women. While the volume of conversation from both sexes differed online, the overall topics that men and women discussed were very similar.





## How has increased awareness and advocacy for people living with HIV and AIDS helped decrease hate speech?

Awareness of discrimination and stigma against people living with HIV and AIDS has become more prominent the last few years with the launch of different initiatives and programs. Zero Discrimination Day and World AIDS Day have both helped boost education about issues facing those living HIV and AIDS.

**Use of the hashtags #EndHIVStigma and #ScienceNotStigma has increased by 64% and 473% respectively in the last 2.5 years.**

Meanwhile, there have been some poignant moments coming from the entertainment industry that have constructively added to the conversation in recent years.

These efforts to increase awareness and dialogue about social stigmas facing those living with HIV and AIDS help promote better understanding and also provide those living with HIV and AIDS an opportunity to share their experiences online and engage with a wider community.

A unique aspect of the serophobia discussion online compared to other forms of hate speech is the degree to which some people casually create hateful posts in attempts at humor. An example of this type of attempted humor is people casually posting messages such as “Oh, go catch AIDS” in response to an insult they received online or argument they had. Whether intended or not, this is still hate speech and harmful both to those living with HIV and AIDS and to legitimizing hateful language. Increased advocacy for awareness about serophobia can help educate people and inform them on why these messages are hurtful and wrong.

Overall, the tone of the conversation around serophobia is changing for the better, despite plenty of examples of hate speech coming both from regular people and influential voices. There is much work still to be done to fight the stigma around living with HIV and AIDS.

**To get support on any of the issues highlighted in this report or to find out more about and support the vital work of Ditch the Label, please visit [www.ditchthelabel.org](http://www.ditchthelabel.org)**