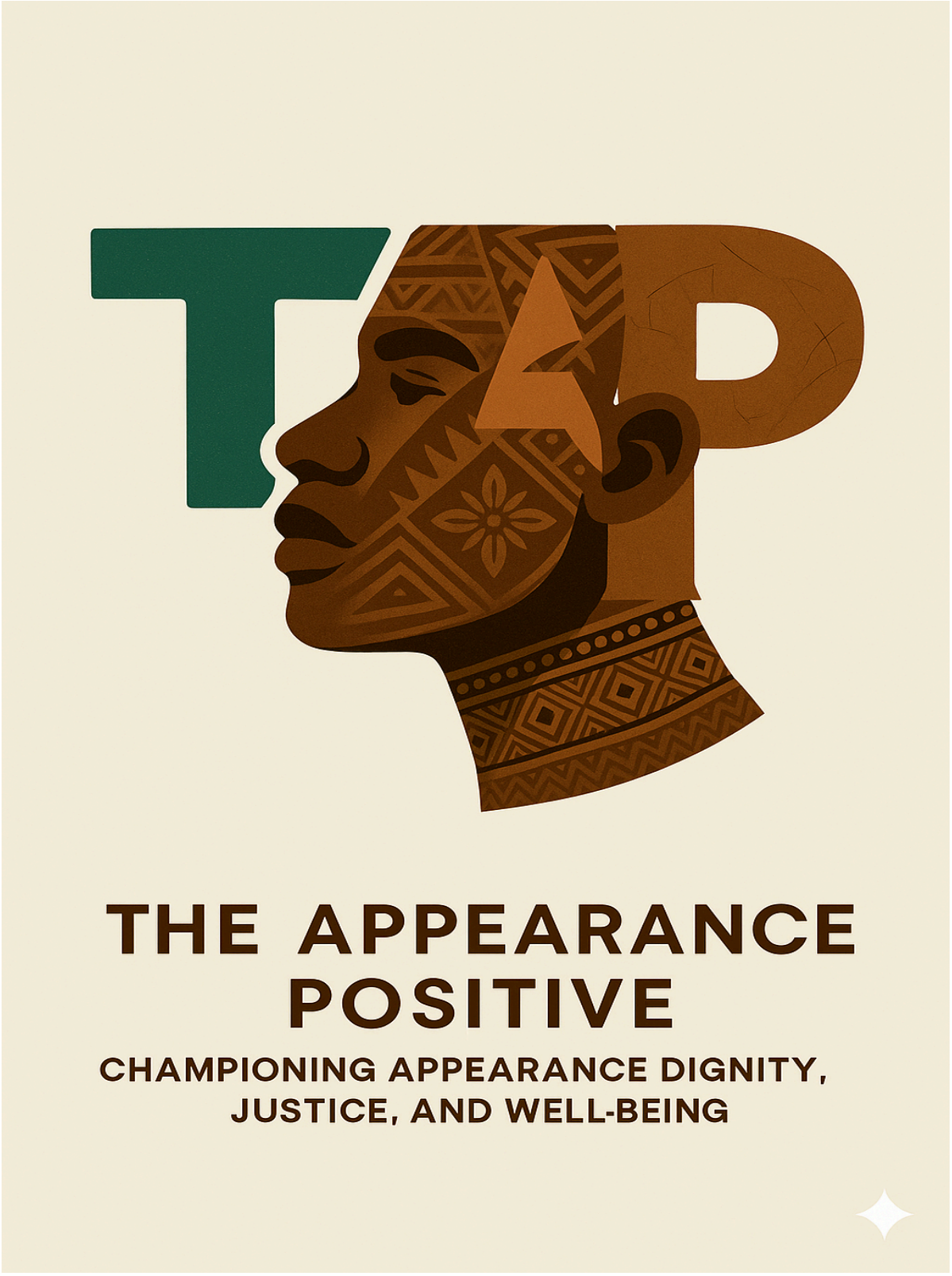
The Appearance Positive (TAP)



AI Position Statement

Executive Summary

AI does not know or understand what most skin conditions and other Appearance Differences look like on dark skin. Ask it to generate them and it gets them wrong, or leaves them out. That is the problem this statement answers.

It is not only the pictures. In our experience, when someone living with an Appearance Difference asks AI generally for help, AI and people alike file it under body positivity or disability inclusion and offer the wrong support. The daily psychosocial challenges are never the same.

Artificial intelligence is becoming a system that shapes how people are seen, understood and represented. When it comes to human appearance, AI is not neutral. It reflects the data it has been given, and where Appearance Differences on dark skin are missing from that data, it does not simply fail. It guesses, and the guess is usually wrong.

This statement sets out the position of The Appearance Positive (TAP) on the ethical and psychosocial cost of AI-driven visual representation, from our base in Sub-Saharan African lived experience, and the infrastructure we are building in response. Dark skin belongs to people on every continent, so the gap reaches well beyond Africa. Africa is TAP's home.

1. The Challenge: Erasure and Distortion

AI systems carry the gaps of their training data. Where representation is thin, the failure takes three forms, and they are one problem.

Erasure. Whole conditions, identities and lived realities are absent or wrongly rendered. People who are missing from the data are missing from the visual future being built.

Distortion. AI generates synthetic identities, aestheticised differences and misleading approximations. These detach appearance from lived experience and build a visual culture rooted in fiction rather than reality.

Algorithmic Homogenization. The tendency of AI systems to converge diverse human appearance differences toward a narrow statistical or aesthetic norm, treating visible difference as deviation to be corrected rather than valid human variation. (APi Lexicon)

These are expressions of the same gap: a lack of lived data, lived context and lived experience inside the systems shaping our world.

We have seen it first-hand. TAP's founder gave the same prompt to Gemini, ChatGPT and Sora: "An extreme close-up portrait of an African individual with visible scleroderma skin texture." Scleroderma did not appear. What came back was weathered skin in a polished, fashion-style portrait. Asked for a wider range of visible differences, the systems kept returning vitiligo and alopecia, even when she asked for scleroderma, ichthyosis or lupus. She documented the tests in An Open Letter to the Architects of AI, in Working Paper No. 3, and wrote about them in The Glitch in the Mirror (March 2026).

This is already happening in public. In April 2026, a user on X asked Grok to "fix his face and show the normal version" of a film-festival photograph of a man with a visible facial difference. Grok replied, "Sure! Here's the normal version with the center guy's face fixed to look natural and realistic." It did not question the request. It treated a human face as an error to correct. The original post has since been deleted. APi documents the case

in Working Paper No. 2, and TAP's founder responded at the time in a public post. The pattern is not isolated: in July 2026, Katie Piper publicly called out a near-identical request to make her "look normal" after an acid attack.

It is not only about pictures. In our experience, ask AI for help with an Appearance Difference and it tends to file you under body positivity or disability inclusion, and hand you the support meant for those. People often do the same. But living with a body size issue is not living with a scar, a skin condition or a facial difference, and neither is the same as living with a disability. The daily psychosocial challenges are never the same, though they can overlap, and neither are the responses people meet. Help built for the wrong problem misses the person.

2. The Psychosocial Reality

Appearance is not cosmetic. It is psychosocial. In the APi Lexicon, Appearance Differences are "visibly perceptible human appearance differences that may influence psychosocial experience, social perception, identity, representation, or inclusion." Appearance shapes:

- Identity and self-confidence
- Social participation and belonging
- Access to opportunity and institutional equity
- Psychosocial (social, emotional and mental) well-being and life outcomes

When AI fails to represent appearance truthfully, it does more than produce a poor image. It risks reinforcing existing inequalities and creating new forms of digital exclusion.

The health system has begun to recognise this. In May 2025 the World Health Assembly adopted resolution WHA78.15, recognising skin diseases as a global public health priority. It names stigmatization, discrimination and mental health problems such as depression and anxiety among their consequences, and calls for stronger data collection and surveillance. It does not yet address how AI represents people living with skin conditions. That is the gap TAP works in.

3. The TAP Position

TAP holds four pillars for Ethical AI that serves Appearance Equality.

1. **Human-Led Representation.** Systems must be guided by human truth, not algorithmically approximated.
2. **Lived Experience as Core Data.** Personal narratives and lived contexts are primary data, not secondary inputs.
3. **Psychosocial Recognition.** Appearance must be recognised as a fundamental psychosocial determinant of well-being and life outcomes.
4. **Experiential Truth.** AI must move beyond aesthetic accuracy toward contextual and experiential truth.

In practice, TAP advocates **Ethical Friction**: a deliberate design intervention in AI systems that introduces a reflective pause before executing requests that alter, normalise or "correct" human appearance, offering an alternative response that preserves or celebrates the original appearance difference rather than defaulting to statistical normalisation. A reply that simply "fixes" a face is precisely the default that Ethical Friction is designed to interrupt. (APi Lexicon)

4. What We Ask

Naming the problem is not enough. TAP asks:

AI developers

- Put Appearance Differences on dark skin into your training and testing data, collected with the consent of the people who live with them, on their terms.
- Make Ethical Friction the default. When someone asks AI to “fix” or “normalise” a face, pause, and offer a version that keeps the face as it is.
- Test before you ship. Check how your system draws and describes scars, skin conditions and facial differences on dark skin, and publish what you find.

Anyone building support, care or AI companions

- Stop filing Appearance Differences under body positivity or disability inclusion. They are their own experience, with their own psychosocial needs.

Governments and health bodies

- As countries act on WHA78.15, include how AI represents and responds to people living with skin conditions.

Funders and researchers

- Fund community-governed data and measurement on Appearance Differences, led by the people they describe, including in Africa.

5. Our Response: Building Corrective Infrastructure

TAP is an ecosystem built to close the data and representation gap. Each part can stand alone, and together they answer one question: how does appearance shape a human life?

Part of TAP	What it does about the gap	Status
Appearance Positive Institute (APi)	Independent research on Appearance Differences, including Appearance Epidemiology, how AI misreads the human face, and the developing Appearance Intelligence (AQ) framework	Active
Appear+	Africa-rooted digital care for appearance psychosocial well-being, and the home of Appearance Psychosocial AI, TAP’s domain of Human Psychosocial AI. ỌdịdịM, its AI companion, is in live pilot, and the Lookism Tracker records appearance-based discrimination	Live
ASWALK Festival	A physical gathering that affirms real human presence and visibility. Working dates 3–10 April 2027, Enugu and Lagos. Its pillars include a planned Human Data Strike, a collective action through which communities living with appearance differences assert sovereignty over their own appearance data	Planned
TAP Care Network	Connects people to appearance-informed care professionals and organisations across Sub-Saharan Africa	Soft launch
ACE Woman	A psychosocial support community for women navigating appearance differences including visible differences, scars, skin conditions, postpartum changes and identity shifts, built on belonging and identity rebuilding	Active

6. The Evidence So Far

This position rests on published APi research, not assertion.

- *Appearance Epidemiology: A Conceptual Framework*, APi Working Paper No. 1, March 2026
- *When AI Misreads the Human Face*, APi Working Paper No. 2, April 2026
- *Algorithmic Appearance: Data Gaps, Representation Inequality, and the Future of Appearance Difference in AI Systems*, APi Working Paper No. 3, September 2026
- *Visible Difference Beyond Disability*, APi Positioning Paper No. 2, 2026
- *The Body as Data, The Patient as Absent*, APi Position Paper No. 3, 2026
- *The TAP Lexicon: Working Language of The Appearance Positive (TAP)*, APi Working Paper No. 4, Version 1.1, October 2026 (DOI)

Read them on the APi publications page or the SSRN author profile. Human Psychosocial AI, the emerging field that APi's research led to, is set out on its own page. Appearance Psychosocial AI is TAP's domain within it.

Cite the source. Build with us. The field is open.

7. Closing Position

AI will not define humanity, but it will increasingly define how humanity is seen.

The question is no longer whether AI can generate images. It is whether it can represent human beings truthfully.

And if it cannot, then we must build the systems that can.

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