Designing forms for gender diversity and inclusion

A little question is a big deal when it comes to shaping people's experience with your product. How do we ask people for their gender in a thoughtful and respectful way?

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This post is part of the journey of the team at uxdesign.cc on learning more about Diversity and Design — and sharing what they learn along the way.

mul·ti·di·men·sion·al: of or involving several dimensions or aspects; exhibiting many diverse characteristics.
I started thinking about writing about gender diversity in design when I noticed how Facebook, Google+, OkCupid, Tinder and a few others have adapted their registration forms to be more inclusive of trans and gender non-conforming (GNC) people. Why isn’t everyone doing this, I thought? Asking for a person’s gender is a loaded question and there can be many answers to it.

**Gender**

- Male
- Female

It’s easy for us designers to just slap a gender question that says Male/Female in there — and make it mandatory — because our marketing department needs that data to sell stuff. There are indications that this not only risks losing engagement but also leads to false conclusions based on bad data. The J. Walter Thompson Innovation Group discovered that:

- 80% of 13–20-year-olds, or “Gen Z”, believe that gender did not define a person as much as it used to;

- 56% of Gen Z said they knew someone who went by gender neutral pronouns such as “they,” or “ze,” compared to 43% of millennials;

- 54% of millennials always bought clothes designed for their own gender, while that’s true for only 44% of teens;

- 70% of Gen Zs felt strongly that public spaces should provide access to gender neutral bathrooms, compared to 57 percent of 21–34-year-olds.

They see gender, sexuality and their own general identity as fluid or different from what was assigned at birth, while the world they interact with often forces them to “make a decision”.
It’s possible that they will identify with one of the options. But when they don’t, it may be a hurtful reminder of how their journey is not reflected in the world.

As a cis woman — someone whose gender was assigned as such at birth and hardly shifted, I didn’t have enough information to write about this. So I did what designers do: I read and read and asked around. I got 5 generous trans and GNC people of various gender identities to anonymously share their experiences and opinions. Their stories revealed that I knew even less than what I thought.

So unfortunately I have neither the silver-bullet solution to the form field problem nor a straightforward answer on how to design one. But I could identify a few best practices based on people’s common attitudes and reactions to some existing interfaces. I hope to open a discussion that helps build towards a better experience for all genders.

Attitudes
Cisgender people, by definition, will not think twice before answering the gender question. They’re a woman or a man, that’s it. It’s easy, it has always been the same, it was never questioned and they don’t think it will change. They socialize it through style and attitudes. They expect others to be able to tell their gender just by looking at them, without asking.

Conversely, trans and GNC people have experienced a gender identity shift. Some feel like they’re a different gender from the sex that was assigned to them at birth. They might be intersex and not know it, because the sex assignment process is usually based upon a visual inspection of their sexual organs, and nothing else. Maybe their attitudes, clothes, makeup, hair, nails and other elements of presentation don’t fit the conventions of either traditional gender distinction. They may have changed their bodies, the gender designation in their various forms of ID, their name. Their state of mind on any given day may affect their sense of gender. Maybe it’s a combination of some of the above, or something else. Their trans & GNC status might be a secret, or only some people know, or everyone knows.

They may have identified with several different gender labels as they discovered them. They may also think about pronouns they want other people to use while referring to them. This may not be a journey to a destination, but a path that defines itself as they walk it. They are the ones shaping the path, creating, adopting and combining labels to feel comfort while they explore their feelings, and discarding old ones that may imply unchecked biases. The meaning they give to these labels can also vary.

The sex that was assigned to them at birth is none of your business. It’s not what defines them. What matters is what they are now. And even still, they are so much more than just their gender identity. Everything else about them might be the same as you or anybody else.

So what might they think when they see that super simple gender male/female question? It’s possible that they will identify with one of the options. But when they don’t, it may be a hurtful reminder of how their journey is not reflected in the world.

They will wonder why you need to know. What specific information you are asking about — their gender identity, the gender on their ID, their preferred pronouns to use in
communications?

Can they change it later, or will they have to awkwardly talk to someone on the phone to make that change?

Are you monitoring diversity so you can create policies to improve lives of trans & GNC people? Or will they get in trouble if they answer incorrectly because they didn’t find a good label on your form?

Will they be outed somehow? Discriminated against? Threatened?

They may leave the form, the site, or the service. They may have to call customer service to ask exactly what they are supposed to do. They may tell their friends about their bad experience.

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**Gender Question Recommendations**

1. **Give people a really good reason for asking**

Are you monitoring diversity? Creating policies that will benefit them and other trans and GNC folks? Figuring out if they are eligible for benefits? Or is it for marketing and communication purposes? Is it for their doctor, or for their health insurance? Be transparent, explain what exactly you are asking about, and how it will benefit them. Reassure that your organization strives to be inclusive of everyone so they can feel welcome and protected while disclosing their information. As with any form field, if there isn’t a clear benefit to the user, you probably shouldn’t ask about it.
Callen-Lorde patient registration print form provides an explanation to their demographic questions (grey box).

One Medical Group patient registration form. It explains the purpose of the sex field, and offers more gender information as necessary. Since trans & GNC people may wish to use a different name from the one in their health insurance profile, it asks for that as well. 4 out of the 5 people I interviewed used a name different from the one given when they were born.

NYU application form with information overlay. They are clear about what information they need, but not why they need it, and what they ask for is a very sensitive piece of information. I'm sure this is the kind of
2. Make it private, safe, and anonymous

Let users know that information will not be shared with anyone, or allow users to manually control who sees it. Be mindful of who will see any identifying information. Check the privacy policy for your website or service for more information. Anonymise the data as much as you can, to make sure you don’t out them by accident. For example, if the results of a small survey show there’s a trans woman in the tech department, and there’s only one woman there, she has been outed.

3. Always make it optional

Make that field optional as much as you can. This is part of the previous recommendation — the user may know better than you if it’s safe or appropriate to disclose the information based on the context. It may even warm them up to answer the question accurately rather than skipping it.

Coursera Profile. “Prefer not to say” is always good to have. On a side note, the word “Other” may make people feel like an after-thought, particularly when the form doesn’t ask for more detail on what “Other” means.

4. Ask for pronouns instead, if that’s all you need to know

Instead of gender, consider asking for people’s preferred pronouns, and including the gender-neutral “They/their/theirs” as a singular pronoun. While some perceive this to be bad grammar, it was actually used this way until the Victorian era. “They” was even the word of the year in 2016 and was also adopted in 2015 by the Washington Post style guide and more recently by the AP styleguide. If you’re worried this will confuse your cis audience, explain the question as an attempt at inclusiveness, and include a sample sentence.

If you want to go the extra mile with your audience, particularly if they’re largely trans & GNC, consider adding more gender-neutral options from this list of pronouns.
Facebook also allows people to choose their own pronouns. It includes examples to make the question and the intended use bit clearer. Additionally, it prominently warns users that, unlike gender, this information will be public.

Free-form, optional gender pronoun field on Vox Media job application, including examples. (Spotted by @antimytheme)

5. Be ready for a complex answer

Depending on the context, there are several solutions with more or fewer labels. You want to make it as simple as you can, so you don’t overwhelm users with options. Too many options can feel a bit creepy, and people may feel like they will be easily identified/outed to malicious actors if they’re honest.

Short Lists: A simple set of gender options makes it easier to pick something. It may compromise proper segmentation, but it’s the least that should be done if you must ask about gender and want to make it inclusive.

Etsy profile. The free-form text field appears when the Custom option is clicked. This is a good approach because it shows curiosity about users who are trans & gender non-conforming.
Scratch sign up form, for kids to create and share interactive stories. Offering a simple open-ended field allows for self-expression, and users can hover over the ? icon to know how this information will be used. This would only be better if it included a “Prefer not to state” option — even if users don’t want to disclose, they might not feel like lying or writing out “It’s none of your business”. (Spotted by Chad Gowler)

ITV application form has a title field instead of gender. It includes the gender-neutral honorific Mx (pronounced Mix), which is great, but unfortunately it’s mandatory. This approach is a bit outdated, as it differentiates married from single women, but doesn’t do the same for men and non-binary genders.
United Airlines registration form, with no gender-neutral options. One gender non-conforming person I interviewed sometimes chooses Dr. as an honorific, even though they’re not a doctor, because it’s gender-neutral. This approach also implies a dark hierarchy between men, women, married women and people with a professional achievement.

**Limited Lists:** These lists are more inclusive than a simple Other, and good for the purpose of monitoring diversity. The specific general groupings can be tricky to achieve though. Here’s some feedback I heard from the 5 people I interviewed, which matched what I read in my research:

- Trans Man/Trans Woman: Separating Trans options like this may make Trans Men/Women feel less like the Men/Women they regard themselves to be. It’s demeaning. It may also exclude non-binary transgender people.

- Man/Woman: Trans people will often choose these instead of Trans Man/Women.

- Transgender: This is a good option if the list is multi-select, but a little weird if it isn’t, as it might be considered more of a process than a gender.

- Genderqueer/Gender Non-Conforming: Seems to be straightforward to include the many non-binary definitions, which may or may not be paired up with transgender, depending on the person.

- Other: Good if it allows for entering a label in a free form field. Without that, it sounds like you’re not that interested.

- Questioning: Desirable, particularly in situations where the user needs to express themselves about gender but can’t define it at the moment.

- Prefer not to say: It should always be an option for this question, just as it usually is when asking users about ethnicity (also a contentious question). Over and over, my interviewees said they will decide whether to answer this question depending on the context, so it’s better to allow them not to answer if they feel it might make their lives difficult.
Trevor Project, an LGBTQ crisis hotline service, asks for gender information before talking to young people in crisis. It asks for gender, transgender status and preferred pronouns separately. This form was criticized by some of my interview subjects for asking questions that might be difficult to answer in a time of crisis, and not offering a “Prefer not to answer” option on gender.

This form design recommended by Practice Makes Progress allows for multiple choices. Many trans women and men don’t use the Trans label because they are not transitioning anymore and don’t want to feel “less than”, hence why this form doesn’t include terms like Trans Man and Trans Woman. But if someone wants to identify as such, they can pick Transgender + Woman or Man, or any other combination. Two-Spirit is a Native-American non-binary gender identity — consider where the survey will take place, as there are lots of local trans and GNC labels.
National Center for Transgender Equality — Share Your Story form. It allows people to choose more than one label and include custom ones. Non-Transgender men and women have separate options phrased as such in case they want to share a story about a trans family member.

**Complex Interfaces for Self-Expression (Social Media, Dating):** You can allow the inclusion of any combination of options the user wants to input. As in the Facebook interface below, the type-ahead interaction is a good option. It solves for a long list that, if just displayed, might either imply a hierarchy or order or make it harder to fill. Letting users pick as many labels as they want is also desirable. Lists like this need some keeping up, as new labels are created while others fall out of favor, and internationalization needs to be considered.

So how are you going to analyze all this data if people can enter so many options? One solution is to create an all-inclusive list in the front-end, and then group those labels according to however you want to organize your segmentation in the back-end. There’s no need to burden Trans & GNC people with choosing from your marketing segmentation.

Facebook American English form. Lots of labels constantly being updated, a type-ahead search that doesn’t imply a hierarchy of genders, ability to enter more than one label, a free text field, privacy controls, ability to
change the content whenever the user wants, increasingly localized labels — all make this a pretty inclusive design meant for the purpose of self-expression.

6. Consider Internationalization

Gender identity labels often lack direct translations and equivalents across languages and regions. Some places may have labels of their own, like Hijra in India and Pakistan, and Two-Spirit used by Native-American tribes. Additionally, languages have different grammatical structures that may be highly gendered (like Spanish and Portuguese), a little gendered but with non-gendered alternatives (like English and German), or mostly not gendered (like Turkish), which affect how you ask about pronouns.

P.S.: Check out Yonatan Zunger’s experience internationalizing gender-neutral pronoun selection at Google. It’s a fascinating take on how gendered different languages can be, and an essential piece to read if you need to do the same for your product or service.

7. Just don’t ask

If you don’t know why you’re asking, then you probably don’t need to know the answer. If you can only provide users with options that force them to lie, don’t ask. Make your form simpler and faster to fill for everyone, and just skip the question. If you need gender information for marketing segmentation, consider whether your audience’s attitudes are really different based on gender. Consider also if you need to reevaluate your segments to account for more than just the male/female binary.
Snapchat, the king platform for young people’s fluid and non-permanent expression, does not feel a need to ask for gender. Unfortunately, the same is not true about Facebook and Instagram (the latter which only provides male and female as options).

A few final thoughts

Gender diversity inclusion is work. It requires thinking, training, researching, testing, testing, testing, iterating, and keeping up with labels. But it’s worth pursuing it as gender fluidity is likely to become a more and more widely accepted concept in our society. Trans & GNC people and their allies want to see organizations take action rather than just say they’re supportive. Accommodating for people’s different choices is part of that. So making a small change like this can be beneficial to your target audience, they will appreciate your effort and desire to listen, even if the first attempt is not perfect.

You may also discover your audience behavior isn’t what you thought.

*Thanks to Jimmy Wohl for helping me edit this article. Thanks also to the trans & GNC people who shared their experiences with me, some of which provided valuable feedback to this article.*

Learn more

Erin White outlined detailed recommendations for trans-inclusive AI, content, name fields and more on their article Trans-Inclusive Design from A List Apart. *(resource added 12/2019)*

dscout’s Jess Mons and Lindsey Brinkworth developed 4 Key Design Principles for Gender-Identity Inclusion based on design research with almost 70 trans and gender non-conforming humans, done to achieve a more inclusive design for dscout’s forms. I interviewed Jess about this amazing work. *(resource added 12/2019)*

Meera Balarajan, Michelle Gray and Martin Mitchell did extensive research on how to ask the question of gender when monitoring diversity: Equality and Human Rights
Commission — Research report 75 — Monitoring equality: Developing a gender identity question

To learn more about the issue of name changes in data capture, check out Nova Patch’s presentation “Hello, my name is ______”

Here’s an academic study on how to conduct surveys in a gender-diverse manner: Transgender-inclusive measures of sex/gender for population surveys: Mixed-methods evaluation and recommendations (resource added 3/2020)

Max Masure from Argo Collective describes why you should share pronouns in your email signature and other spaces and 5 rules to create an empowering kid experience without gender-bias. (resource added 12/2019)

Broadly/Vice has created a Creative Commons image database picturing tons of trans and gender non-conforming folks. (resource added 12/2019)

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