

User Response to Facebook's Custom Gender Options

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Abstract

Facebook's recent implementation of "custom" gender options and gender-neutral pronouns provided transgender and gender-non-conforming users with new ways to represent gender identity online. We analyze user response to and use of these affordances. We found that while many transgender and gender non-conforming Facebook users used and appreciated the new options for gender representation, the system still constrained self-presentation for some. Additionally, use of custom gender options complicated gender identity disclosure for many participants. Results highlight tensions around the ability of classification systems to categorize identities.

Keywords: Online identity; social networking sites; information classification; Facebook; transgender

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1 Introduction

In February 2014, Facebook made headlines and gained approval from many in the LGBT community when they enabled users to choose one of 58 gender options to represent themselves rather than only two (Ferraro, 2014). However, to date, no work has examined how users have responded to and used these gender options. Though most users had no need for gender options other than "male" or "female," Facebook's new custom gender options may substantially affect online self-presentation for those in the transgender community, especially those whose identities lie outside of the male/female binary. In this work, we examine transgender and gender non-conforming users' use of and response to Facebook's custom gender options. For the remainder of this paper, we use "trans" to refer to the broad population of transgender and gender-nonconforming people.

The new expanded gender options allow individuals to further delineate how they are represented on Facebook, but in a limited manner. Facebook allows individuals to select both a gender, which is included in the profile, and a gendered pronoun (he/she/they) that is used in a variety of messages throughout the platform (e.g., "Wish him a happy birthday!"). Inputting a custom gender is problematic for some trans users, because the system imposes constraints on gender representation. While the interface includes what appears to be a freeform text box, the user is limited to a pre-set list of options that become visible as the user attempts to type in their preferred gender term. Further, while Facebook allows the user to control the privacy settings of their chosen gender options (e.g., public, only viewable to friends, or only viewable to certain subsets of friends), many users struggle to understand and to use such privacy features (Haimson, Brubaker, Dombrowski, & Hayes, 2015).

Social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook are often problematic for trans people due to complexities around self-presentation and disclosure, both of which are bound up with gender and pronoun options. We present results of a survey of trans people who experienced gender transition on Facebook. We found that Facebook's custom gender options and pronouns both helped participants to represent themselves as they preferred, yet in many cases constrained self-presentation. Further, issues of disclosure intermingled with self-presentation enabled by custom gender options and pronouns, as evidenced by participants' struggles to maneuver complex disclosure decisions and privacy features.

2 Methods

The findings presented here are part of a larger survey research effort, the full details of which have been documented elsewhere (Haimson *et al.*, 2015).

We developed an online survey aimed at trans people who experienced gender transition on SNSs. Due to the nature of the research questions, the survey excluded people who had transitioned

prior to establishing a profile on a SNS, because they would not have experienced gender transition on a SNS. Participants were recruited and asked to complete the survey via several methods, including announcements on LGBTQ and transgender-focused email lists and groups or forums on Facebook and other SNSs, announcements shared within the authors' online social networks, and materials distributed at several health centers specializing in trans healthcare. The survey was active April 15 – May 31, 2014, roughly two months after Facebook's custom gender options were implemented.

Our sample included 371 participants who completed the online survey. 615 participants started the survey but some did not finish, either being disqualified due to not meeting the study's criteria, or opting not to finish for other reasons. All of these participants had experienced a gender transition of some sort on Facebook, whether from male to female, female to male, or from a binary gender to a non-binary gender such as genderqueer, agender, or gender non-conforming. Respondents were asked about their thoughts and practices regarding Facebook's new custom gender options and gender-neutral pronoun options. Those who were not aware of the new custom gender options or gender-neutral pronoun options skipped that respective section of the survey.

It is not currently possible to obtain a random sample of trans people (Grant, 2011); however, the most comprehensive and representative survey of trans people to date is Grant *et al.*'s National Transgender Discrimination Survey (2011). Our sample is comparable to Grant *et al.*'s (2011) in terms of gender identity when categorizing participants as male, female, or other, $\chi^2(2, N = 371) = 3.39, p = .18$. However, significant racial differences exist between our sample and Grant *et al.*'s (2011), $\chi^2(4, N = 371) = 20.41, p < .001$. Specifically, our sample includes significantly fewer blacks/African-Americans (standardized residual = -3.32), fewer American Indians/Native Americans (standardized residual = -2.24), and more Whites/Caucasians (standardized residual = 2.71) than Grant *et al.*'s (2011), a limitation of our study.

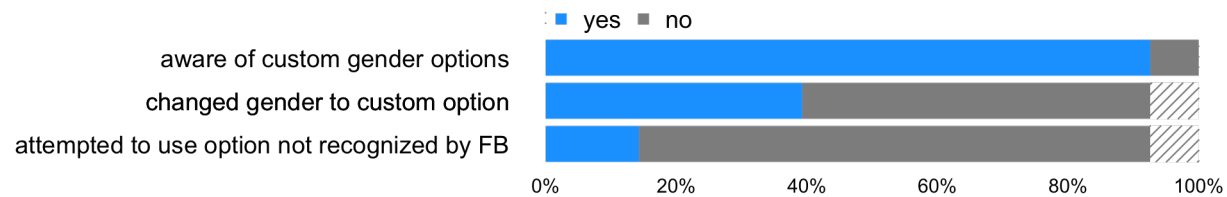


Figure 1. Use of custom gender options as reported by survey respondents.

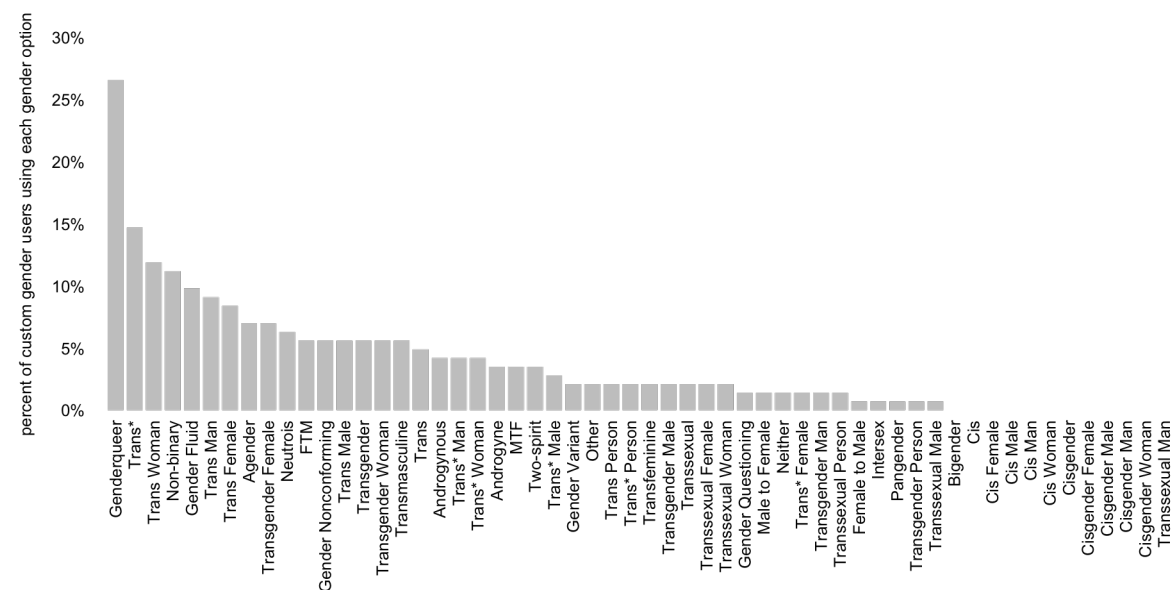


Figure 2. Frequency of custom gender options usage as reported by survey respondents.

3 Results

3.1 Custom Gender Options

The majority of survey participants (92.58%) were aware of Facebook’s custom gender options. Of those who were aware of the custom options, 42.43% had changed their gender to one or more of the custom options, though 15.43% attempted to enter a gender option that was not recognized by Facebook (see Figure 1). When prompted, many of those whose preferred gender option was not recognized by Facebook described their wish to represent their gender using terms that were not in Facebook’s list of custom gender options, including “genderless,” “woman,” or a particular tribal term more specific than just “two spirit.” Others commented on the difficulty of representing a fluid gender identity on Facebook, or requested the ability to change the order of the genders listed on their profile.

Although several options, such as Genderqueer and Trans*, were used by many, over half (57.14%) of the custom gender options were used by less than 3% of participants (see Figure 2). Clearly, gender presentation varies greatly among the trans community, demonstrated by the fact that so many gender identities were represented among participants. Many of Facebook’s custom gender options were underused while many participants’ preferred gender terms were not among the list of options, highlighting the fact that this list is not an adequate classification scheme for the complexities of gender.

3.2 Gender-Neutral Pronoun Options

Most participants (83.79%) were aware of Facebook’s gender-neutral pronoun options. Of those who were aware of these options, 12.46% changed their pronoun option to neutral on Facebook, and 12.13% had previously implemented a gender-neutral pronoun option (whether through signing up before choosing a gender option became mandatory, or by “hacking” their gender (Bivens, 2014)) (see Figure 3).

3.3 Gender Representation

Representing complex gender identities online can be difficult. Regardless, the majority of participants (82.41%) agreed or strongly agreed that the gender listed on their Facebook profile represented their gender. However, 8.25% disagreed or strongly disagreed, while 9.34% remained undecided (see Figure 4). Regarding pronoun usage, again, the majority of participants (82.97%) agreed or strongly agreed that the pronoun used on Facebook represented their preferred pronoun. 7.42% disagreed or strongly disagreed, while 9.62% remained undecided (see Figure 4). It was more common for participants to strongly agree that their pronoun of Facebook represented their preferred pronoun than to strongly agree that their gender descriptor on Facebook represented their gender $X^2(4, N = 364) = 17.61, p < .001$, standardized residual = 3.72. Many who had not fully transitioned their profile, or otherwise had trouble with disclosure of their gender identity, discussed desiring to change their gender option but not being able to do so yet due to social constraints.

Those who stated that their pronouns did not represent their preferred pronouns fell into two camps. One group consisted of people who had not yet transitioned their profile, and who planned to eventually use a different pronoun that was available in the system. People in the second group wanted to use an alternate gender pronoun that was not available on Facebook, such as “xem,” “xe,” “ghe/gher,” “hir,” or “ze.”

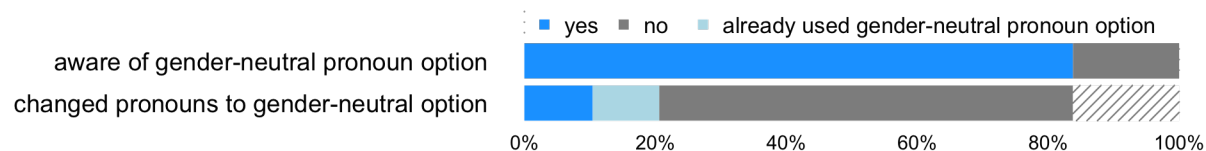


Figure 3. Use of gender-neutral pronoun options as reported by survey respondents.

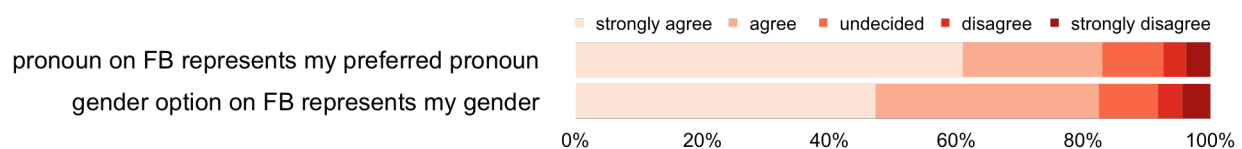


Figure 4. Representativeness of gender and pronoun options as reported by survey respondents.

These results highlight the complexities of gender representation and disclosure for trans people. For some trans people, ability to identify themselves to their online social networks as a particular “custom” gender on Facebook is extremely important. Others are much more comfortable using the terms “male” or “female.” Regardless, giving users the agency to represent themselves in the manner they desire should be a priority for Facebook and other SNSs.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

Because Facebook is a primary site for online identities, the means by which the system allows people to represent themselves to others is important to everyone—but especially to those marginalized by society and by social platforms. The introduction of new gender options was well received and appreciated by many. However, even as people are making use of the newly available custom gender options, there are still large groups of people who reported that these options do not fully represent their gender identity. There are 58 gender options on Facebook, intended to provide flexibility, but still only a few are used extensively, and many gender terms are absent from the list.

This brings forth a classic tension in information studies around classification and categorization: classification provides order and visibility to data, but at the same time it is not possible for a classification system to be able to categorize everything (Bowker and Star, 1999). How to allow people to represent themselves in the manner they choose and manage disclosure of potentially sensitive gender information to their online social networks is an ongoing challenge for Facebook, other SNSs, and databases more broadly.

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