
Themself: Critical Analysis of Gender in Facebook

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Abstract

There is a pronounced silence about non-binary genders inside the field of HCI. This paper is an attempt to address this gap through a case study and it aligns itself with the goals of Feminist HCI – agency, identity, equity, empowerment and social justice. By critically analyzing the interactions of non-binary gendered subjectivities in Facebook, this work uncovers some of the system level design choices that render non-binary gendered users invisible for all intents and purposes. This work then proceeds to highlight why it is important to pay attention to non-binary gendered subjectivities and concludes with a set of recommendations for future work.

Keywords

Gender, feminist HCI, queer theory, transgender, Foucault.

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Introduction

It is not uncommon to hear phrases such as 'Facebook me' or 'Google it' these days. Looking past the ubiquitous and utilitarian aspects of such technologies, these simple phrases bear witness to the fact that these technologies heavily influence our language, thoughts, and actions – in essence, our culture. HCI, as [2] succinctly puts it, "is a major cultural force in its own right." From this perspective, designers then have a responsibility of not just creating designs that get the job done but "inevitably also must engage in the increasing moral and intellectual complexity of our professional activities" [4]. Particularly, topics such as gender, sexuality, and identity whose relationship with our designs is complex, hard to directly observe, and harder to establish a simple causal pattern; yet have profound influence on each other. In talking about gender and design, [6] shows us that our designs "embody messages about who we can be" and reminds us that "[d]esigners are not passive bystanders in the production, reproduction, reinforcing, or challenging of cultural values."

Situating this work

The literature on gender inside HCI is strikingly silent about non-binary genders. Other than a handful of works, there is a pronounced silence about the existence of non-binary genders. Non-binary gendered subjects such as transgendered, gender queer, gender non-conformant, gender-neutral individuals are systematically left out of the equation on all levels. Research questions regarding gender, the design,

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CHI 2011, May 7–12, 2011, Vancouver, BC, Canada.

ACM 978-1-4503-0268-5/11/05.

recruitment and execution of user studies, the actual language used to describe the project (e.g., s/he), the resulting design concepts that get created are all framed with respect to the binary genders. For example [1] frames the phenomenon of 'gender bending' as a "misrepresentation of gender identities." This work is aimed to be a step in the addressing non-binary genders on their own terms.

Epistemologically, this work aligns itself with the philosophical underpinnings of third wave feminism and queer theory by focusing on the performative aspects of gender. In particular, this work strongly uses the quality of 'advocacy' listed in [4] in order to empower a highly marginalized group – non-binary gendered users. It presents a critical account of how gender is understood and operationalized and the implications of the various design choices by looking at a case study – gender in Facebook. The various interactions and options available in Facebook for a non-binary gendered user such as a transgendered person are critically analyzed.

Profile as a performative

Facebook is one of the world's largest social networking site and its users connect, contact, communicate and network with other users through their personal profile. The users' self is constituted in the cyberspace through their profile and they interact with and through their profile. The profile is not just a webpage with information about the user but is an active construction of the self in the digital world [9]. In other words, the profile is not static bio-data but rather an organic and evolving identity to which and through which the users interact. This conception is congruent to [3] which urges us to view avatars/profiles as subjectivities and

not as representations of the user – "a happening rather than a thing".

Let us take a simple example. The user may have used a picture of their favorite rock star as their profile picture. When we view the profile as a subjectivity, "a living force, an agent that both acts... and is constituted... through action" [3], then we can infer that the user is an avid fan of that particular rock star. The profile picture then becomes an expression of the admiration and letting other users know about it. It is important to note that subjectivity is not constituted merely by a static signifier – the photograph of the rock star – but rather by the performance of an act – the user using the photograph as a profile picture. In other words, this subjectivity is not just a simple amalgamation of attribute representation and agency but is a performative – the emergence and constitution of the very subject that does the action. It is in the very act of creating, modifying and interacting with/through the profile the subjectivity comes into existence. Thus the primary purpose of the profile is to facilitate the constitution of the user's digital self.

Gender in Facebook

When a user creates a new Facebook profile, they are asked to provide certain 'Basic information'. Under this, 'Sex' is the only field that refers to the user's physical attribute while all the other variables refer to socio-cultural aspects of the user such as political views, relationship status, etc. Considering the fact that Facebook is a social networking medium and all other variables in the profile information are socio-cultural, it strikes one as odd that sex, a physical attribute, is chosen instead of gender, a socio-cultural attribute. There are at least two problems with this. First, only

binary sexes are provided as options (I will deal with the option of not selecting any value later in this paper). But more importantly, Facebook operates under assumed sex-gender pairing i.e. all males are masculine gendered and all females are feminine gendered. This assumption comes to surface when Facebook assigns gendered pronouns to describe the user's actions based on the sex selected by the user. This stereotypical pairing not only restricts the user from selecting their choice of gender within the binary gender but also forces them to be cisgendered i.e. the individual's gender identity has to align with the behavior or role considered normative for their sex. Any other form of gender-sex pairing is denied existence. This failure to represent non-binary genders has at least two problems as discussed below.

Judith Butler, a post-structuralist philosopher, in her book 'Gender Trouble' argues that gender is quintessentially performative in nature. What she means by this is that the acts that are usually considered as expressions of one's gender identity are actually the one's that constitute a stable gender identity in the first place. "The act becomes part of the stylistic device that produces the substance: performance is identity" [8 in 3]. Thus the failure to accommodate non-binary genders within the system is not a mere lack of representation but is also the denial of existence of these subjectivities since they come into being through the very act of representation. The second problem concerns itself with how this framing and the political underpinnings of such users. Harvey Sacks, a sociologist and a pioneer in the study of everyday language, argues that labels carry with them a set of assumptions about behavior, social conduct, moral worth, etc. which he calls as membership

inference-rich representative (MIR) [7]. Any member who has been labeled using a particular MIR is then assumed to possess and behave according to the representative characteristics. When failed to do so, the member then is someone who has transgressed norms and is cast as a deviant [5]. By assigning an *apriori* gender, Facebook imposes a particular MIR on the user and when the user behaves otherwise, they are then cast as deviant by implication, in this case the 'few users with gender issues.' From this perspective, assigning apriori genders to users based on their sex is not a mere utilitarian inconvenience but a deeper political framing of a particular user. In such a framing, the subjectivity must justify its needs, actions, and its very existence through arguments of legitimacy, strength in numbers and even on moral grounds. Since the terms of this perpetual discussion is set by the existing hegemonic binary gendered structures, non-binary gendered subjectivities are always produced and understood as that which transgresses. The validity of being male or female subjectivity is never questioned whereas the validity of being a non-binary gendered subjectivity is under perpetual inquiry. When one considers a system like national online census or voting system, the urgency and gravity of the situation becomes much more evident.

The invisible gender

When a user chooses not to select any value for the 'Sex', Facebook repeatedly prompts the user to select an appropriate way to address the user as shown in Figure 1. When the user chooses to ignore these prompts, then Facebook uses the third-person plural pronouns 'their', 'them' and 'themselves' as possessive, objective and reflexive pronouns respectively. The key point to note here is that this option of choosing a



Figure 1: System prompt to choose a specific gendered pronoun when no value is provided for 'Sex' [Screenshot of system on August 10, 2009]

pronoun outside the binary gender norm is not available to the user as it is evident from Figure 1. All the non-binary gendered users then do not have a choice to select the way Facebook should refer them. Furthermore, all these non-binary genders are bundled up into one category that the user does not have access to choose in the first place. In other words, even though the system internally has a third gender there is no way for the user to explicitly choose this option.

The implications of this can be explicated by analyzing the field 'Interested in'. Users have an option of expressing their interest in users of a specific gender. Currently, the system provides only two options – male and female. All the users who have not chosen a value for 'Sex' are by default then excluded from this. The system then makes it impossible for someone to express their interest in people whose sex is unknown. In other words, a user cannot be visible in the scope of interest of any Facebook user unless they confirm to one of the two binary genders provided by Facebook. The important thing to note here is not whether users actually use these fields to find someone but to note how Facebook systematically denies visibility to any non-binary gendered user in the interests of any other users. So far, I have presented a critical account of the various system structures that Facebook uses to handle the gender of its users. In the next section, I will demonstrate the deeper political stakes involved through post-modern concept of discursive power and subjectification.

Discursive power

Power is usually understood as that which is used to control, regulate, punish, and/or oppress. This sort of power is repressive in nature. Michel Foucault, a

historian and philosopher, draws our attention to a different kind of power, namely, discursive power. Discourse, in Foucault's oeuvre, refers to a set of meaning making practices. Discursive power when compared to repressive power is not about repression but about production and is not held by a central authority or institution but has no single source and is exercised by almost everyone. In short, discursive power produces that which it talks about rather than merely regulating or oppressing it. Foucault names this as subjectification – the process, through which the subject is constituted, understood and maintained as a result of the various power relations and discursive structures within a particular system.

Let us analyze how Facebook handles non-binary gendered users through the lens of discursive power and subjectification. Even though the system has an internal state of a 'third gender', it does not allow for the user to explicitly choose this. The key observation here is that these users lack the discursive power to define their non-binary gendered subjectivities. In other words, the existing discursive structures do not afford the conditions of possibility for the constitution of such subjectivities. The actions performed by these users are rendered meaningless within the existing economy of thought within the system. A simple example of this would be the 'Interested in' field that was discussed earlier. The user's intent and the discursive structure of Facebook can be viewed as forces of subjectification that results in the creation of the subjectivity.

In such a view, the lack of affordance for non-binary gendered subjectivity is not merely a problem of representation. It helps us to view the systematic

structures that afford the very constitution of non-binary gendered subjectivities and the absence of such discursive structures. Non-binary gendered subjectivities are denied agency within the system since they lack the appropriate discursive structures that constitute these subjectivities in the first place. In short, non-binary gendered users lack discursive power that prevents them from having meaningful interactions inside the system and by implication their subjectivity.

Moving forward

In the previous sections, I have presented a critical account of how non-binary genders are handled in Facebook and the political implications of doing so. In this section, I will carry forward this conversation by situating this within the feminist HCI agenda and list out some of the challenges that deserve to be addressed in future works.

Designing a multi-lingual system like Facebook that exhibits a complex relationship with aspects like gender and sexuality is by no means an easy feat. The scale of the problem and the ethical responsibility it entails is perplexing. Realizing these ethical responsibilities as designers is to engage with the problem space without reducing its complexity. As an action-oriented field, we also need to avoid the trap of 'analysis paralysis' and move forward to produce feasible designs. While there is no simple way to do this, democratizing the design process and promoting pluralism definitely helps.

The quality of pluralism not only promotes multiple views but also creates an environment where opposing viewpoints can co-exist and are understood in their own terms. Such an environment is more open to critical questioning of the discursive structures themselves

rather than just focusing on the objects of discourse. In other words, a question about transgendered user is also a question about a male user or a female user and is ultimately a question of gender itself.

By now it must be evident that I am a strong advocate for the empowerment of non-binary gendered users. Through this conscious act of self-disclosure, I turn the critical gaze on myself as a researcher and question my own values, biases and prejudices towards this topic. Based on feminist standpoint theory's view that all knowledge is situated, the researcher then willfully subjects his knowledge for critical examination as well. In this viewpoint, the researcher is not a disembodied cognitive voice but a situated agent of knowledge. This begs the question to what extent does our research include us as researchers and what it tells us about us as researchers.

Such critical practices are not only instrumental in developing reflective practice for the researcher, but also provide checkpoints for potential political problems in the research process itself. One such is what Foucault terms as the 'speaker's benefit' and is about the claim of power by someone who chooses to speak about a subject that is largely unspoken of. From this position, everyone else's position can be critiqued except mine. In other words, the critic is beyond criticism. By recognizing this potential pitfall and subjecting it to self-disclosure, no position is insulated beyond critique and my choice of research question and epistemology will be called to question the same way as others. My research does not get a free pass based on its seeming intentions of good will and must defend itself. This criticality is crucial when dealing with an already marginalized user groups.

As feminist HCI commits itself to the empowerment of marginalized groups, it is necessary to pay heed to the following.

- The category of 'marginal' is not a single entity but contains diverse and sometimes contradicting goals within them. One of the ways to observe this is to pay attention to the discursive power within the system.
- In order to avoid the pitfall of essentialist categories and yet be able to create designs for a specific group of users, it is important to base our design choices on the lived experience of the users rather than on generic personas.
- It is not enough to study only the subjects but also crucial to study the process through which these subjects are constituted and understood in the first place. In other words, it is important to pay attention to the internal discursive structures.
- Understanding various power relationships and their operation helps expose hegemonic practices thereby making it amenable to intentional change.
- Such a critical assessment of power relationship must include the researcher as well by analyzing who represents whom, in what way, and who gets left behind.
- While our field has embraced participatory design early on, it is important to be reminded again the necessity of doing so at this critical juncture. We should revisit the levels to which we are willing to democratize the research process and the reasons for doing so.

The challenges that lay ahead of us are complex, exacting and exciting. Moving forward, we as a community must engage with these issues together to create rigorous theoretical frameworks that are critical and responsible.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my professors at Indiana University, Drs. Jeffrey Bardzell, and Colin Johnson for their valuable feedback and Dr. Shaowen Bardzell for her support and encouragement.

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