

Researching an LGBTQ+ inclusive onboarding experience for dating apps

I was having a respectful debate with one of my friends over using “they” to refer to a single person. What settled the argument was looking up the definition on Merriam-Webster dictionary, which had stated that it can be “used to refer to a single person whose gender identity is nonbinary.” That’s when my friend politely reconsidered his stance.

The nonbinary definition for “they” wasn’t added until September, 2019. The editors agreed that it belonged in the dictionary as it became a more common definition. Subsequently, the decision supported my stance in the debate. As designers, we have the authority to shape our digital experiences. It’s our responsibility to establish more inclusive institutions, ones that reflect the diverse identities that exist today.

This is particularly important in dating apps, in which an accurate representation of gender and sexual identity play a significant role in the experience. The onboarding experience of a dating app is where representation is formed. An inclusive process supports individuals to fully communicate who they are to potential matches. It’s one of the reasons that Tinder decided to include more gender options when the people in the trans community were being reported or harassed on the app.

The goal of this article is to highlight interface patterns that help people fully showcase themselves and establish inclusive institutions that represent the broad spectrums of gender and sexuality.

My research should serve as a starting point for making a dating app more inclusive. I took 4 weeks to research what was established in dating apps and what improvement could be made. My process looked like:

- Literature review into the larger conversation of how gender and sexuality is represented in other websites, online forms, apps, and products. It gave me an idea of how other areas have innovated to be more inclusive
- Competitive analysis that investigated 20 dating apps. Some products were designed to serve the LGBTQ+ community while

others were for a more cis heterosexual population. Comparing and contrasting the two approaches helped me think of ways that all apps could be considerate of different gender and sexual identities.

- Six interviews with people from the LGBTQ+ . Each conversation explored a participant’s general experiences with dating apps and how they approach the onboarding experience.
- Two interviews with industry professionals who have created dating apps for the LGBTQ+ community. Each had their own insights and stories about their approach to inclusive design.

Include more gender and sexuality options within the onboarding experience

One strong theme from the user interviews was that the more options that were in the onboarding experience, the more inclusive the process felt. I asked participants to compare the following two prototypes:

I identify as:
Select as many that apply

Cis Man

Cis Woman

Trans Man

Trans Woman

Nonbinary

Nonbinary Identity (optional)

I am interested in:
Can select multiple

Cis Men

Nonconforming

Cis Women

Others

Agender

Pangenders

Androgyne

Transfeminines

Bigender

Transgenders

Genderfluids

Transmasculines

Genderqueers

Transsexuals

Hijras

Trans Men

Intersex

Trans Women

Non-binary

Two-spirited

The prototype on the right felt more inclusive. There were more options for people to identify with

“[There are] a lot more communities that are a minority in the LGBTQ space in the community itself. Gay and Lesbian are a top two ... and so this [second] option gives more freedom in terms of choosing the options because you have that many options to choose from and to identify with”—Alex

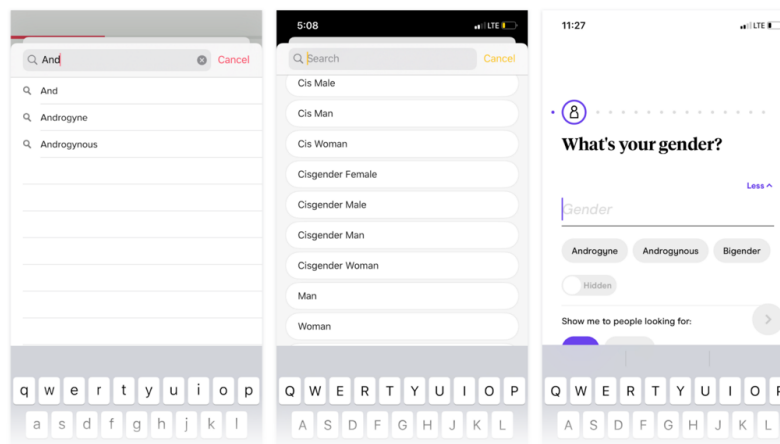
The LGBTQ+ community is diverse, with many different identities. It's important to help each individual state who they are. Having more options for gender and sexuality allows everyone to better describe who they are and what they are looking for.

UI practices when there are too many options

A potential shortcoming of including multiple options is having an overwhelming amount to select from. Hick's law suggests that the more options there are, the longer it will take for someone to make a decision. A couple comments on the prototype with more gender options centered on this information overload.

"[The second one is] really overwhelming. I'm dyslexic. So reading through all this, I probably would look at and be like: alright I'm coming back to this later or is there a skip option?"—Henry

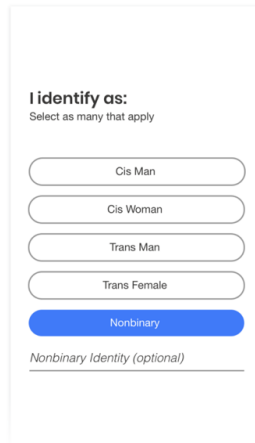
The goal of an onboarding experience is to help the user set up an account quickly, so a plethora of options can seem contradicting. However, there are many interface patterns to support the user while keeping information density low. Consider using autofill, search fields, or typeaheads.



Additional Gender options by Tinder, Bumble, and Hinge

Consider an open form field

Even with as many selections for gender and sexuality, there still may be some identities that are excluded. One consideration is to give people the opportunity to self-identify their gender in an open-form field. This self-description may not affect the matching algorithm, but it can be displayed on a profile to help someone tell their full identity.



I identify as:
Select as many that apply

Cis Man

Cis Woman

Trans Man

Trans Female

Nonbinary

Nonbinary Identity (optional)

The open form field option shown to participants

“That’s why I like the option before—of having a free form section so that if you were to choose an option that wasn’t one of these words. It helps a lot to have that ability to further explain”—Kelly

Have a place for pronouns

Another important component of gender identity is what pronouns a person uses. It might be seen at the end of email signatures, but pronouns can have a place in dating apps too. Having the option to display someone’s pronouns on their profile is an opportunity for better representation.

Lex pronoun options

“My [dating app] experience has actually been pretty supportive because I’ve had things such as HER and then recently Lex. I only like places where I can like, list lots of identity factors and include multiple pronouns.”—Casey

Expect LGBTQ+ users to utilize other parts of the profile to express themselves

One lesson from the user interviews was how people were able to use other parts of the onboarding process to express their identities. Pictures were an important part when expressing gender identity. It’s an opportunity to showcase a person’s best self—with the clothes, makeup, and Snapchat filters that represent who they are.

“Presentation for me is important ... I definitely spend time on my selfies. Okay, probably 630 on my phone, right now. I spend some time just writing out a little bio and I just try to fill out everything honestly I’m comfortable filling out which is everything really.”—Sara

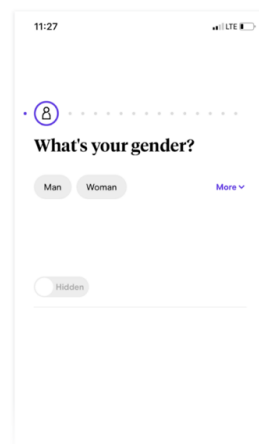
Provide the power to show what appears on a profile

There will be cases where it’s better to talk about an identity in a conversation rather than having it openly displayed on a profile. This

particularly important for those who may not be fully out and do not want their identity displayed for anyone to see.

“I find [my sexuality] is super personal and like to talk to people once I’ve actually made a connection. I’ll mention it. See if the other party maintains interest after that. It’s definitely more personal. It used to be on one of my profiles. I think it was on Bumble a while back. And noticed that I didn’t get a ton of matches because of that. And now that I have taken it off, I get a lot more”—Kelly

However this will depend on each person. The best way is to give each person the option if gender or sexuality is displayed on their profile. An example can be found below



Option to hide gender is clearly given in Hinge

Make gender and sexuality editable after the onboarding process

A final consideration is to make gender and sexuality editable after the onboarding process. This is an important consideration for those who identify as fluid or who are questioning. People who are fluid have varying genders and sexualities over time. It’s important to give them the option to show who they are at the current moment. In addition, people who are questioning might tend to change how they identify as they explore their gender and sexual identities. Dating apps should have clear flows on how people might edit these on their profiles.

Further Research to Explore

Further research should explore supporting individual groups in the LGBTQ+ community. A limitation of my work was that it captured one or two perspectives from a gender and sexual identity. Although it gave me great breadth of understanding, talking to one or two people from a gender or sexual identity may not accurately reflect the problems for everyone of that identity. Future research should take a depth-first approach to understand how to make products more inclusive for different gender and sexual identities.

Final Thoughts

We all deserve to find human connection, and the onboarding experience of a dating app is an initial request: “Here’s who I am and the people I am trying to connect with.” To represent different genders and sexualities, it is important to consider what options we provide to self-identify, how to help people construct profiles, and what power we provide to users in onboarding. Thank you for reading, and I hope you learned a bit more about inclusivity in dating apps.