Toward Trans Inclusion in Feminist HCI

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Abstract

Feminist HCI and transgender studies are natural allies, as they share a focus on gender embodiment and advocacy, and both are important arenas for technology research and design. Explicit transgender[1] inclusion in feminist HCI could bring about important future collaborations, theories, and insights. We draw from feminist HCI literature, briefly discuss online identity and intersectionality, and outline approaches for trans inclusion in feminist HCI.

Author Keywords

Feminist HCI; transgender; LGBTQ; gender identity; online identity.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Introduction

In her 2010 agenda for feminist HCI, Shaowen Bardzell suggests an important challenge in HCI that a feminist approach could address: "How do we simultaneously

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[1] Transgender is a term that refers to "people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth, people who cross over (trans-) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender" [8]

serve real-world computing needs *and* avoid perpetuating the marginalization of women and indeed any group in technology?" [1]. Feminist approaches within CSCW, HCI, and social computing are an ideal arena for researching and theorizing identities, online self-presentation, and issues of classification and categorization within social technologies. Thus, it is only natural that feminist HCI include research about and design in consideration of transgender people, for whom issues of self-presentation and classification are especially salient.

The design and norms inherent in social technologies like social networking sites (SNSs) interpellate people's online identities in many ways that they cannot control [11]. SNS design has a large influence on the types of self-presentations that are privileged on such sites; as Van House argues, "SNSs variously support – and valorize – certain activities and ways of categorizing oneself, and not others," thus reducing agency for some users [11]. Additionally, because people do not use SNSs only to represent already-established identities, but also to help construct identities [4, 11], it is particularly important to consider who certain design choices privilege.

SNS design often privileges users with static identities, and necessarily marginalized trans users and others with complex and changing identities [5]. This relates directly to Bardzell's important question of how technology can avoid marginalizing particular groups of users [1]. Designing for a "normal," standard user is no longer enough; feminist and Values in Design critiques have shown us that design is not neutral [2, 3]. Trans inclusion in feminist HCI research and design ensures that this approach considers the needs of trans people

along with women and other marginalized populations. Trans inclusion also allows feminist HCI researchers and designers a possible avenue to understand important self-presentation, classification, and identity issues.

Additionally, taking intersectionality into account, feminist CSCW and social computing work advocating for women's rights cannot actually exist without trans inclusion. Inherent overlap exists between women and trans people: trans women are currently women, trans men lived some portion of their lives as or perceived as girls or women, and non-binary trans people experience gender-based oppression due to embodying an identity and/or appearance outside of traditional gender norms. Nonetheless, feminist movements have often excluded trans people [6, 8]. Trans experiences are important for feminist HCI because they demonstrate how users' intersectionalities require an inclusive approach to design.

Bardzell argues that "by making visible the manifold ways that gender is constructed in everyday life, contemporary feminism seeks to generate opportunities for intervention, making it a natural ally to design" [1]. Similarly, Rode argues that HCI researchers should examine how gender is performed and embodied in real-world, everyday settings [7]. Transgender studies offer a critical interrogation of the ways gender is constructed, performed, embodied, enforced, and disrupted [6, 9], and are thus naturally aligned with feminist HCI. David Valentine describes transgender studies as addressing "first, the capacity for new insights into embodied experience; second, the heterogeneity of theoretical positions, identification, [and] embodiment…; and third, the importance of

transgender-identified scholars in producing these insights" [10]. Explicit trans inclusion in feminist HCI could bring about important future collaborations, theories, and insights.

Approaches to Trans Inclusion in Feminist HCI

Trans-focused or inclusive research can use Bardzell's key methodologies for feminist HCI [2]. We offer several additional approaches that researchers and designers might employ to support trans inclusion in feminist HCI.

First, designers should consider changing and faceted identities and temporal complexities when designing technologies. For example, a trans inclusive approach would ask whether gender categorization is really necessary for a social technology, and if it is, would allow people to describe their gender in their own words. This design approach leads to interesting questions about the nature of systems more generally and the ways that data may be simplified before entry, in this case interrogating the gender normative assumptions built into technology in the name of efficiency. Additionally, user control over disclosure of online content posted in the past can make technologies more usable for those whose past and present identities do not align, an issue highlighted by consideration of the trans experience but potentially central to many experiences.

Next, if taking a trans inclusive approach, researchers should avoid unnecessary assumptions and rigid gender categorization that can alienate users' complex identities and thus serve as barriers to participation or use. For instance, when recruiting women to participate in a study, researchers must understand that not all women have the experience of being raised and socialized as female. A trans-inclusive approach recognizes gender as nuanced and non-binary [7].

Finally, in the arena of service to the community, professionals should emphasize trans inclusion in groups and workshops aimed at women or diversity in computing. Historically, many feminist movements have excluded trans people [6, 8], and trans people who are not visibly "diverse" are often assumed by others to be out of place in settings dedicated to diversity. Thus trans people may be unsure whether they will be welcome in groups focused on women, feminism, or diversity. Making trans inclusion explicit would alleviate these fears and expand the nature of discussions.

Annotated References

Stryker, S. and Whittle, S. *The Transgender Studies Reader.* Taylor & Francis, 2006. This anthology definew transgender studies as an academic field concerned with disrupting or complicating cultural, social, and biological assumptions about gender, selfhood, and bodies. The collection of works in this volume contextualize and theorize transgender studies.

Valentine, D. *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category.* Duke University Press, 2007. In *Imagining Transgender*, Valentine uses ethnographic observation to discover the complexities of transgender as an identity category. He finds that many whom by common definitions would be considered transgender do not identify as such, thus complicating supposed boundaries between gender and sexuality.

Van House, N.A. Feminist HCI meets Facebook: Performativity and social networking sites. *Interacting with Computers 23*, 5 (2011), 422–429. Van House theorizes online presentation via social networking sites using Butler's concepts of performativity, citationality, and interpellation. She finds that social networking sites' affordances and design choices greatly affect people's self-presentation choices and online construction of self.

Author Biography

Oliver L. Haimson is a PhD student in Informatics at UC Irvine. His research focuses on how people represent changing and faceted identities on social media. In particular, he studies transgender people's experiences with self-representation and disclosure as they change gender on social networking sites. Through his research, he hopes to impact technological inclusion of marginalized users.

Gillian R. Hayes is the Robert A. and Barbara L. Kleist Chair in Informatics. Her research focuses on drawing in underrepresented groups into design and research.

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