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Paper

Can We Measure Gender Preference Instead of Anatomical Sex?

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We live in an age where great attention is (rightly) being paid to diversity, notably race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. As the predominant sector in the global economy that studies human opinion and behavior, the market research/consumer insights industry has an obligation to offer thoughtful solutions to ensure this diversity is adequately represented and accurately measured.

At Cint, we are increasingly receiving questions from clients related to the measurement of what, for the purposes of this article, I will call "gender preference". Our industry has, since time immemorial, standardized on the measurement of what we call "gender", but what, in truth, is actually the respondent's anatomical sex[1]. There is growing interest not just from various concerned communities and their allies, but also brands and retailers of all stripes to be able to measure gender differently. Different measurement in this case means allowing people to express being transgender (gender different from their assigned sex), non-binary (a collection of other perspectives on gender, ranging from gender neutral to multi-gender to gender-fluid) or any other preference.

Setting aside the importance of ensuring representation, there are some clear challenges to measuring gender preference accurately and consistently. In setting these out, I hope to provide a roadmap by which our industry can tackle this issue.

Context

As stated above, the current "gender" variable which we use in the industry essentially reflects discerned anatomical sex at birth. There is increasing interest in studying gender preferences—namely those which differ from a person's anatomical sex—to better understand opinions and behaviors. Equally, it is in our interest as researchers to allow respondents to express the gender preferences, both because they are a central element to their identity and because these preferences may impact their behavior and opinions.

Defining gender preference

We cannot hope to accurately measure gender preferences without first defining terms. Ideally the definition would be so widely accepted that it becomes a currency, which would be helpful given the ubiquity and simplicity of the variable it would potentially be replacing. This could prove to be difficult. As an advocate for diversity in our industry, even I have not always understood the evolution of terms and have seen them fluctuate over time. We may also find that definitions vary by geography.

Perhaps our measurement of gender preference could become something like education and socioeconomic status, where the broad principles are understood, but there are slight

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1 - While most definitions of gender explain the term as a social construct (whereas sex is biological), the terms are often conflated. David Haig, in his interesting review study of the evolution of the terms "sex" and "gender", concludes that the recent (mid-20th century) rise in the use of the term gender as a replacement for anatomical sex stems from "desires to signal sympathy with feminist goals, to use a more academic term, or to avoid the connotation of copulation." See "The Inexorable Rise of Gender and the Decline of Sex: Social Change in Academic Titles, 1945–2001", Archives of Sexual Behavior, Vol. 33, No. 2, April 2004, pp. 87–96.

variations by country. The challenge here is certainly not insurmountable, but more information is needed to provide direction. Moreover, it is essential for reasons noted below that our definitions mirror the work of national statistical offices.

Methodological Complexity

The objective of most research—especially survey research—is to infer the behavior of a population by studying a sample of that population. To do this, we must appropriately select the people in our sample. Concretely, this means we must know the probability that a person with our desired traits would be selected at random in the broader population. We would typically obtain this information from official data sources, like national statistics bureaus that conduct regular censuses using known scientific methods. This information is then used to define the conduct of fieldwork and, often, construct quotas and/or weighting systems by which imbalances in the responding sample can be rectified so as not to bias results. Yet while interest in understanding gender preferences is growing, it is clear that this issue resonates more strongly in some countries than others.

The bottom line is that, without an authoritative "gold standard" source of information on gender preferences in the population, any attempt to use the data for quotas or weighting will be suspect. Again, while this is not an insurmountable issue, it is a significant challenge.

Finally, we will need to consider the matter of sample size. In the United States, a recent Gallup poll indicates that less than one-half of one percent of the population is transgender. While this statistic does not include other possible types of gender identification (and only represents one country), it does seem likely that those expressing a gender different from their anatomical sex will be very small in proportion. For market researchers, this means that, unless a study is targeting people who are expressing a gender preference different from their anatomical sex, the data may be unreadable and may present challenges in terms of quota fulfilment and weighting. Furthermore, as with many characteristics that have a low incidence in the population, we will need to address likely overclaiming, that is the possibility that respondents may lie about their gender preference thinking they are more likely to qualify to take a survey.

Practical considerations

Whether filling out forms and applications in our everyday lives or checking a box to enter a survey, we are regularly asked to indicate our anatomical sex. This profile question, along with age, is the basis for the **_vast_** majority of quota-based systems and is almost certainly hard-coded into every process and platform in the industry. Were we to replace the current standard—binary anatomical sex—with new non-binary response, we would encounter a problem equivalent in magnitude to the Year 2000 (Y2K) dilemma that plagued computer systems some two decades ago. The impact would be massive and require review of APIs, databases, survey scripts, data processing and coding rules, reporting and more. No element of our work would be untouched.

Herding the cats

For years our industry has acknowledged the value that could be gained from standardizing basic measures and demographic coding. For nearly as many years, it has been equally clear that achieving this vision has been and will almost surely

remain impossible unless a few dominant players who have historically **not** found common ground on these matters for various reasons finally see eye to eye and create a *de facto* standard.

It is highly probable that our industry will remain fragmented in its approach to this issue for various reasons. This is not a deal breaker *per se,* but it does suggest that arriving at a clear definition of gender preference and achieving critical mass for standardization will prove difficult.

Toward a solution

There are clearly some big obstacles in front us when it comes to accurately and consistently measuring gender preferences. I suggest the following structure for discovery and alignment across the industry.

Part 1: Initial discovery

There are three critical discovery steps to consider, and I could easily see market research organisations like the Market Research Society, ESOMAR and Samplecon working with LGBTQ+ organizations like Stonewall contributing to this effort.

1. **Definitions and measurement.** We need clear definitions. This starts with understanding the various ways by which gender preference is currently measured and must include a review of existing "gold standard" measures and high-quality research by which gender preferences have already been measured. By doing this we also can begin to understand the proportion of the population that is affected, which will in turn inform our perspective on matters of weighting and sample sizes.

2. **Client-side/research implications.** Talking to brands and large buyers of research about how they currently use data surrounding anatomical sex can help to provide a foundation for moving the needle on this topic. We would need to particularly understand the implications of changing this question in tracking studies. More fundamentally, it will be helpful to know how clients view the importance of studying gender preferences. Setting aside one's position on the social importance of this issue, practical concerns will inevitably weigh on clients' appetite for change.

3. **Execution implications.** Equally important in assessing appetite for change will be the implications for execution. Here we would need to speak to large providers in the industry to understand how their systems use anatomical sex and to get a sense of the magnitude of the operational changes needed. This would include scripting/programming, data processing and coding, and sampling, including how data are passed through APIs, given the nearly complete integration of the supply side. We need to understand what sort of undertaking it would be to put a new framework in place.

Part 2: Actions

Following discovery, we would need to evaluate the information collected to determine next steps. While I do not want to prejudge the findings from the discovery phase, here is where I suspect we may end up.

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1. **Definition and measurement driven by the United States and United Kingdom.** The largest countries in terms of research spend are also the countries in which, generally speaking, the topic of gender preferences has gathered the most steam with clients. It is helpful that these countries have organizations that can help guide us toward unbiased measurement. I think it is therefore likely that we arrive at a definition that reflects the discourse in these countries. This is not to say that gender preference would not or could not be measured in other countries: just that the U.S. and U.K. will likely lead the way.

2. **Small sample sizes.** Notwithstanding the size of these markets, we will find that the share of population we might measure by allowing for transgender, non-binary and other gender preference responses will be quite small. Even 2% of the population (four times the estimate of the transgender population in the U.S.) would still be very tiny in research terms.

3. **Suppliers will profile for gender preferences, but an expanded gender preference question will not supplant binary anatomical sex.** It may be frustrating for advocates and allies, but it seems likely that the combination of factors mentioned above will vitiate the drive to replace the binary demographic with a more inclusive profiling variable. I do not see this as a failure though. For I think it is equally likely that sample suppliers will see the value in profiling respondents in this variable and will do so in countries where their clients are looking for it. This implies that progress in measuring gender preference will be bootstrapped rather than tackled head-on across the industry. But this will be a faster way to make progress than (what I suspect would be) a "boil the ocean" initiative that is likely to founder on the rocks of practical complexity.

Conclusions

I believe beyond a shadow of a doubt that the market research industry will figure out how to measure gender preference. Our interest as an industry to ensure accurate and adequate representation will be met by interest from clients who want to know more. I am absolutely certain that there will be people in our industry who want to participate to propel us forward. While I don't expect a "big bang", I do fundamentally believe that we will *at minimum* see progress and plant the seeds for a more expansive, richer understanding of human behavior.

About the author

JD serves as COO for Cint, where he leads the global supply, operations, and platform and product support teams. He brings more than 20 years of experience in the market research industry to his role. Most recently he served as P2Sample's Chief Revenue Officer, where he led the company through two years of extraordinary growth and eventual acquisition by Cint. He began his career client-side researcher in financial services, then went on to hold senior global positions at The NPD Group and Ipsos. Deitch has also held executive positions at AYTM and Bakamo.Social. He has a Ph.D. in Political Science with Distinction from The American University and a BA from the University of Pennsylvania. He serves on the Women in Research (WIRe) Advisory Board and recently received WIRe's MRX Diversity Champion Award. Deitch is a frequent speaker and industry thought leader as it evolves to tackle the challenges of the digital age. He lives in France with his wife and two sons and maintains a cheese blog at mfromage.fr

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