

# Agony of Choice? Webforms for Selecting Titles

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## ABSTRACT

Eliciting information to formally address a user on a family-name basis is an aspect of user interface design that is inevitably connected to the issue of gender. In most cases an appropriate salutation includes information about the addressee's sex, i.e. it requires the designer to make decisions about how to present this information. Results from a survey of how webforms for selecting titles are designed are presented, showing a binary approach to gender, a tendency for the male title ("Herr") to be the given default, and offering several starting points for discussion on user experience of webforms, sex and gender.

## Author Keywords

Gender; male default; input options; webforms; menus.

## ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.2 User Interfaces. H.1.2 User/Machine Systems. I.3.6 Methodology and Techniques. J.4 Social and Behavioral Science. K.4 Computers and Society.

## INTRODUCTION

Taking gender into consideration in human-computer interaction (HCI) has implications for HCI research on different levels. Recently, feminist HCI has brought new perspectives regarding gender to what Ben Shneiderman [1] calls the macro-level of HCI [2]. On the micro-level of HCI gender has been one of the user distinctions that is to be considered when designing and building interfaces and delivering guidelines.

Yet one situation when gender itself is the content of the interface has received little attention: Entering their personal information in web forms users often have to choose how they would like to be addressed. In formal settings and/or in cultures where salutations are on a last name basis, this typically includes giving information about the user's gender. In the absence of guidelines or research guiding the options presented to the user in these forms,

designers make their own decisions about how to ask for this information and which options to present. So webforms are manifestations of assumption about how males and females would like to be addressed.

By presenting the titles a person can choose for her or his salutation, ideas of appropriate and inappropriate titles are defined by designers and accepted or rejected by users. An order of titles that could be considered hierarchical, alphabetical or following some other logic is presented. And assumptions about the necessity to add a gender to an academic title are inscribed in the interface.

To find out how webforms present the choices regarding input options when asking for a title or a salutation involving information on the user's sex, I surveyed several samples of webforms targeting a German audience.

## SURVEY OF WEBFORMS FOR NEWSLETTERS

To categorize the options to choose a title in webforms to subscribe to newsletters the following presentation modes were differentiated:

- menu type: drop-down menu vs. radio buttons vs. text box vs. no title menu
- preselection: title preselected vs. no preselected title
- order: male title ("Herr") first vs. female title ("Frau") first vs. other option (e.g. "Firma", i.e. "Company", first)
- options: only "Herr" and "Frau" vs. additional options included

The survey was conducted sampling the search results yielded by a Google search for "subscribe to newsletter" in German ("Newsletter abonnieren"). The presentations modes mentioned above were exhaustive for the sample, i.e. they covered all the options given and there were no other menu types (e.g. text boxes, which were included as a possible menu type, could not be found in this sample).

## RESULTS

Of the 896 websites sampled, 452 did not ask for any title if you wanted to sign up for the newsletter, the others gave you the chance to select, usually from "Herr", i.e. "Mr.", and "Frau", which is equivalent to both "Ms." or "Mrs." – the German version of signifying whether someone was married applied only to unmarried women by calling them "Fräulein", which has become almost extinct (found in one of the webforms surveyed).

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For the 444 webforms that asked for the title, the input options offered were radio buttons or drop-down menus. Looking at the order in which "Frau" and "Herr" were presented, 39.9 % had the female title, 57.4 % had the male title and 2.7 % had other options in first place.

In presenting these options, one of the titles was preselected in 32.3 % of the cases (one radio button was already activated or the drop-down menu had an option preselected), while 65.1 % of the menus did not have a title preselected (the radio buttons were not activated or the drop-down menu had something like "please select" at the top of the drop-down list).

title preselected	female first "Frau"	drop-down	8.1 %	9.9 %
		radio buttons	1.8 %	
	male first "Herr"	drop-down	19.1 %	22.3 %
		radio buttons	3.2 %	
no title preselected	female first "Frau"	drop-down	16.7 %	30.0 %
		radio buttons	13.3 %	
	male first "Herr"	drop-down	22.1 %	35.1 %
		radio buttons	13.1 %	
other				2.7 %

**Table 1. Menu option in the sample of 896 websites yielded by the Google search for "subscribe to newsletter" (in percentage of the 444 that had an option to select title).**

As shown in table 1, in both the menus offering a preselected title as a default and the ones not offering a preselected title, the male title was in first place more often than the female title. In the menus that had no default set, the male title was only slightly more often with 30 vs. 35.1 %. If there was a default, however, it was more than twice as often the male title that was set as a default than the female title (9.9 vs. 23.3 %).

## DISCUSSION

The results of the survey of how webforms for selecting titles are designed show how options for selecting titles were presented and revealed a tendency for the male title ("Herr") to be the given default. This can serve a starting point for discussion from both a user experience and a gender perspective:

These figures show that there is a bias towards presenting the male as the default and the female as the "other" in designing webforms. The results shed a light on the decisions designers of webforms have to make between trying to include all the aspects of considering their audiences and balancing the different interests: Setting a default option in a webform is a way of improving the usability, since you are making sure the user gets to where they want to be with as few clicks as possible. But setting a

default regarding sex is in itself problematic and all the more so if it is set with a male default in an IT context [3]. And setting a default for a gendered title leaves out those users who would rather not reveal their sex or do not feel represented in the binary of male and female, thus reifying the notion of gender as something that falls into two disjoint categories.

The choices of input options used also show something about how sex and gender are conceptualized: From a usability perspective one could argue that for presenting two options, a switch would be the more adequate input device – the fact that this design option was not used arguably has to do with a conceptualization of sex as something you cannot "switch" back and forth.

Regarding conclusion from these findings in terms of developing appropriate patterns for presenting titles, several other factors have to be taken into consideration: While it is obvious that setting a default on "Herr" means that every female will have to make an extra click, the question of order and its implication is more complicated: With drop-down menus there is a discussion about where to place to most frequently used item – since users typically scan through all the options in a drop-down before selecting one, the last option could also be considered the most prominent one.

So looking at menus for selecting titles opens up the Pandora's box of gender issues both on the micro and the macro level of human-computer interaction. It seems interesting, that this part of the user interface where sex and gender are so obviously being addressed has not taken more room in the discussion of gender and IT. In further studies, it would be interesting to learn more about the user's perception, the relationship between the content of the site and the menu options used, and the process of designing webforms and the decision-making regarding the different options involved. And eventually, interaction patterns could be developed as recommendations for adequate input forms for titles.

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