

Another Comment on Gendered Emoji

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1. Introduction

I have previously written to the Unicode Consortium about why introducing gender into emoji is a very bad idea^[1]. At that time gendered emoji professions were just a mere suggestion and I thought that I could convince the Unicode Technical Committee to not follow that proposal at the next UTC conference in August. Now however I have come to the realization that there is a quite high chance that the proposal in question will be accepted regardless of what I have written, seeing how much support it has already gathered inside and outside of Unicode. We will probably have to live with the fact that from now on emoji will have genders and I want to offer my advice on how to properly define that.

Please note that my original opinion is still unchanged. I firmly believe that Unicode should refrain from adding any more emoji with explicit gender and I'm not the only person to do so. I would be very glad if my first comment on this topic were to be utilized rather than this one. Should the proposal for gendered emoji be accepted I want to make sure that the Consortium implements these emoji in what I consider to be the best possible way. This document may seem redundant because a lot of the points I have made in my previous comment still apply here, but nevertheless I want to make it very clear that there are still fundamental flaws in documents L2/16-181^[2] and L2/16-182^[3] affecting men, women and people with non-binary genders alike.

2. Missing Elements

Let me begin this section by stating the obvious: The whole point of the original proposal is to allow all people regardless of their gender to express and represent themselves in emoji form. It is therefore utterly disgraceful that some emoji have been deliberately excluded from the list of modifiable characters. This affects:

- U+1F930 PREGNANT WOMAN
- U+1F472 MAN WITH GUA PI MAO
- U+1F470 BRIDE WITH VEIL
- U+1F935 MAN IN TUXEDO
- U+1F574 MAN IN BUSINESS SUIT LEVITATING

With all due respect, and I don't want to accuse any Emoji Subcommittee members of being unfairly biased or bigoted, but I cannot come up with any vaguely sensible reason as to why only these five characters should be available in just one single gender variant, while all the others get full gender customization options.

Before the release of Unicode 9.0 several people offered feedback on PRI #312 and #321 concerning transgender pregnancy, including this helpful link:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transgender_pregnancy

Let me make this very clear: **If the Unicode Consortium wants proper gender representation in emoji, it needs to be able to represent pregnant people who aren't female.**

Pregnant men exist. Pregnant non-binary people exist. They will be using emoji to communicate. By not offering pregnant emoji that aren't female you are denying these people the same rights that you put so much effort into to provide for everyone else.

The exclusion of MAN WITH GUA PI MAO, BRIDE WITH VEIL and MAN IN TUXEDO seems even more absurd because their only defining characteristics are their clothing. Please someone explain to me why men are the only kind of people able to wear a certain type of hat, or why only women are seemingly capable of possessing veils. This just smells of prejudice. I cannot think of any other reason for these exclusions. Someone on the Emoji Subcommittee must have been under the ludicrous impression that people of certain genders only wear certain clothes, which is an affront to the whole idea of gender equality. I know that MAN IN TUXEDO was conceived as a gender counterpart to BRIDE WITH VEIL, but again: There needs to be a way to represent women in tuxedos and men with veils if proper gender representation is desired. Everything and everyone must be treated equally.

I can understand the exclusion of MAN IN BUSINESS SUIT LEVITATING to some extent because Unicode generally doesn't group it together with other human emoji and rather considers it an abstract symbol or logo. However, on pretty much all platforms the levitating business man is just as much a person as the rest, with a recognizable face and human skin. Unicode needs to follow the lead of specific implementations and treat MAN IN BUSINESS SUIT LEVITATING as a human-like emoji with variable gender. After all this whole gender debate only exists because of implementations and not through Unicode's own fault.

The following characters are not included in the original proposal even though they depict humans. The UTC should review whether or not it is necessary to form gender ZWJ sequences with them.

- U+1F6C0 BATH
- U+1F3C7 HORSE RACING
- U+1F64C PERSON RAISING BOTH HANDS IN CELEBRATION
- U+1F64F PERSON WITH FOLDED HANDS
- U+26F7 SKIER
- U+1F3C2 SNOWBOARDER

Just one last point and I cannot stress this enough: **Do not include U+1F476 BABY in the list of emoji with gender variants.** Keep it off the list as is currently the case. Unconsensual assignment of gender to children is an enormous source of pain and suffering for many transgender people. There is no need to promote this practice through emoji.

3. Missing Options

For already existing emoji proposal L2/16-181 intends a gender-neutral appearance should no gender modifier be applied. This is a very good idea and I fully support it. However, this raises a problem because the eleven newly proposed emoji professions don't come in neutral variants. While for example a construction worker can be displayed in three different ways (male, female and neutral/other), a farmer can only be male or female with no neutral option available.

Not only is this a massive inconsistency, it also makes it effectively impossible for people who aren't male or female to properly use this new set of emoji. As I have written in my previous comment, the Unicode Consortium should be aware of the fact that gender is not binary and that male and female aren't the only two possibilities. The current draft of the proposal actively excludes

people based on their gender while its stated goal is the exact opposite. You simply cannot have full gender representation by only considering the two most common genders. To put this in emoji terms: All regions defined by ISO 3166-1 alpha-2 have their own emoji flags, even the tiny Pitcairn Islands with only 56 inhabitants. Nobody is arguing that the Pitcairn Islands are not important enough to deserve an emoji just because very few people live there or because “nobody really cares” what is happening there anyways. Gender should get the same treatment.

Of course there is no way to distinguish *all* genders in emoji form because the set of all genders is theoretically endless. That is why the gender-neutral display is so important as a catch-all option for people who are neither male nor female, and of course for users who don't want to specify gender at all when they use emoji. The character U+1F464 BUST IN SILHOUETTE should be used as a base for gender-neutral ZWJ sequences. So for example a non-binary farmer would be BUST IN SILHOUETTE + ZWJ + TRACTOR.

One further change that has to occur is the addition of BUST IN SILHOUETTE to the list of emoji modifier bases so that Fitzpatrick modifiers can be applied the same way as for MAN and WOMAN. Obviously a silhouette with skin color doesn't make sense, so vendors should be advised to only apply the skin tone in this fixed set of emoji for professions and not when BUST IN SILHOUETTE appears as a stand-alone glyph. In my personal opinion a designated “PERSON” or “HUMAN” character would be the far better option here but this is not compatible with the planned publication of the professional emoji before the release of Unicode 10.

I am fully aware that gender is not in any way connected to physical appearance or choice of clothing, hairstyle etc. but sadly gender stereotypes are still too deeply ingrained in our society. When everyone agrees that the person with the short hair and flat chest is definitely male and that the person with the long hair and red lips is definitely female, then there must be a third option that is visually distinct to represent everyone who doesn't fit nicely into our ancient, outdated view of the world.

There is also the issue that there is no way to represent a child, an adult or an elderly person without specifying gender. Unfortunately I see no way to solve this other than encoding entirely new characters. It might be possible to use BOY, GIRL, MAN, WOMAN etc. in combination with FEMALE SIGN and MALE SIGN, but this would only create ambiguity because there would be two different ways to write each concept.

4. Conclusion

I propose the following modifications to the suggested additions and changes outlined in documents L2/16-181 and L2/16-182:

- Add the five characters PREGNANT WOMAN, MAN WITH GUA PI MAO, BRIDE WITH VEIL, MAN IN TUXEDO and MAN IN BUSINESS SUIT LEVITATING to the list of emoji that can form a ZWJ sequence with FEMALE SIGN and MALE SIGN respectively to distinguish gender variants. The base characters shall be redefined to represent people without any implication of gender and to represent non-binary people despite their formal names.
- Add eleven new ZWJ sequences to the list of professional emoji that use BUST IN SILHOUETTE as a base character. These shall be used to represent people without any implication of gender and to represent non-binary people.
- Change the Emoji_Modifier_Base property of BUST IN SILHOUETTE from No to Yes.

Code Sequence	Short name
1F470 200D 2640 FE0F	Bride with veil
1F470 200D 2642 FE0F	Groom with veil
1F472 200D 2640 FE0F	Woman with gua pi mao
1F472 200D 2642 FE0F	Man with gua pi mao
1F574 FE0F 200D 2640 FE0F	Woman in business suit levitating
1F574 FE0F 200D 2642 FE0F	Man in business suit levitating
1F930 200D 2640 FE0F	Pregnant woman
1F930 200D 2642 FE0F	Pregnant man
1F935 200D 2640 FE0F	Woman in tuxedo
1F935 200D 2642 FE0F	Man in tuxedo
1F464 200D 1F33E	Farmer (gender irrelevant or non-binary)
1F464 200D 1F373	Cook (gender irrelevant or non-binary)
1F464 200D 1F3ED	Factory worker (gender irrelevant or non-binary)
1F464 200D 2695 FE0F	Health worker (gender irrelevant or non-binary)
1F464 200D 1F527	Mechanic (gender irrelevant or non-binary)
1F464 200D 1F4BC	Office worker (gender irrelevant or non-binary)
1F464 200D 1F52C	Scientist (gender irrelevant or non-binary)
1F464 200D 1F3A4	Singer (gender irrelevant or non-binary)
1F464 200D 1F393	Student (gender irrelevant or non-binary)
1F464 200D 1F3EB	Teacher (gender irrelevant or non-binary)
1F464 200D 1F4BB	Technologist (gender irrelevant or non-binary)

Better gender representation is not achieved by simply adding long hair to a drawing of a police officer. The Unicode Consortium is dealing with a very delicate topic here and it simply cannot afford to botch the execution considering its place in the technical world. Sadly I get the feeling that the members of the Emoji Subcommittee have not informed themselves thoroughly enough about this issue before putting forth the proposal at hand, and that is a dangerous situation. There is much more to gender than is immediately obvious or than is taught in school. Not everything is black and white and stereotypes are generally untrue. I want to be confident that one of the most important organizations in the world of communication is aware of all facets of society and doesn't just choose the path of least resistance to temporarily appease those who currently happen to shout the loudest.

References

- [1] <http://unicode.org/L2/L2016/16169-gendered-prof-cmt.pdf>
- [2] <http://unicode.org/L2/L2016/16181-gender-zwj-sequences.pdf>
- [3] <http://unicode.org/L2/L2016/16182-gender-zwj-sequences-list.pdf>