

Response to The Curse of Representation by Specificity, or: Why There Should Not Be a Transgender Flag Emoji

From: Olli Jones, and the Emoji Subcommittee (ESC)

To: Unicode Technical Committee (UTC)

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Buff's background paper ([L2/19-084](#)) documents their hesitation to accept the ESC's recommended ZWJ sequence for the transflag emoji and includes concerns about the path the ESC is moving towards as it relates to representation.

Buff's primary points can be laid out in two parts:

1. Passing this emoji is a sign that the ESC is an expression of activism and not founded in data
2. Passing the pride flag was a mistake and this will open the floodgates for a number of flags that are not geographical based.

While Buff's document is thoughtful and considered, the ESC disagrees that the points raised should block addition of a transflag emoji.

To the first point: the ESC makes data driven decisions and whilst the inclusion *would* be appreciated by a vocal group of people this is no different than any other emoji. We see the skateboarding community respond in kind to the skateboard emoji and the bagel aficionados rally for cream cheese. As passionate as emoji proposers are around their specific emoji, activism is not a motivating factor in approving emojis. The ESC is not creating a precedent that emoji should be included to amplify a movement and therefore our existing and well documented acceptance criteria continue to be adhered to in order to prevent large and unnecessary growth in the standard.

To the second point, the ESC has invested time in building criteria that prevent an explosion of overly specific emoji. The transgender flag meets the emojiification criteria and the emoji subcommittee is recommending it to the UTC.

Buff also raises the issue of whether the Unicode emoji should have been genderless and skin-tone neutral. That certainly would have been simpler, and in many ways better. However, one of the main goals of incorporating emoji was compatibility with the original emoji with Japan. Those had gender distinctions and distinct skin-tones which were carried over into Unicode representations or continued by vendors. The addition of more uniform gender and skin-tones was to help address the then-existing situation.

On Buff's argument "There is no definitive list of identity flags; the set is ever growing, ever changing, and inherently ill-defined", there is no evidence put forward by Buff to back this claim, however, the original proposal (section J) shows that both the terminology and flag design are internationally recognised, highlighted by the same design flag appearing for Russian, Chinese, English, Portuguese and Japanese Google image search terms. It also has longevity (section B), showing high frequency from when Google Trend data began.

On Buff's argument "What about BDSM culture? That has its own flag – many flags in fact – but it's not really inherently part of queer identity. Still, people will want those. Do furies have a flag, too?". This is clearly reductio ad absurdum, we are only able to encode a finite set of emoji out of infinite possibilities. It would be very difficult to accept and propose emoji if the criteria required proposers to prove why all other related emoji wouldn't need to be encoded because the set of non-proposed emoji will always be orders of magnitude higher than the single emoji proposed. In the same way that the lobster emoji was proposed despite no argument being made against the other 699,988 marine species, the proposers of the transgender flag emoji have focused on why the transgender flag has merit rather than to document the many ways that other emoji might not be appropriate for encoding as emoji. The ESC is always happy to accept well-formed proposals for other emoji where they can be shown to meet the criteria set. We are, however, doubtful that BDSM and furry flags would meet the requirements for frequency of usage, multiple usages, and image distinctiveness (especially when trying to establish any proposed emoji as being internationally recognised).

There are a number of tertiary points in Buff's document worth correcting on the record.

- The author says people don't use emoji to communicate anymore, they're only used to decorate usernames on Twitter
 - This is emphatically untrue as emojis have over six billion shares a day in gboard and another 5 billion emoji shares on Facebook Messenger
- "It will never end"
 - This is true, because the humanity will never end, and Unicode is part of humanity not separate from it.
- "Every day that passes without the UTC announcing the flag of Somaliland for the next emoji update is a political statement; no transgender flag in Unicode means that the Consortium does not care about transgender people."
 - This misrepresents the ESC's motivation, the ESC are not presenting the transgender flag proposal because it placates a group of people, nor because it wants to make a political statement. Indeed the transgender flag emoji can be used to represent many different sentiments, both positive and negative.
- On Buff's argument that the ESC's decisions are not designed to be political nor to shift sentiments in conversations involving the term "transgender";
 - Our decision to recommend to include the transgender flag in the agenda is based on the fact that these conversations are happening at a quantifiably high enough frequency (section B) that we believe the conversations would benefit from having a transgender flag emoji. This is in the same way that

other conversations about sexuality minorities (unlike gender minorities) benefit from a range of emoji representation (section 4).

Lastly, flags are subject to special criteria which prompted the ESC to address concerns with the following guidance:

“... No mechanism currently exists within the Unicode Standard to support flags for regions of the world which do not have a valid Unicode region code (based on ISO/BCP47) or Unicode subdivision code (based on ISO 3166-2) ... Other flags (not representing countries, regions, or geopolitical bodies) may be considered for representation as emoji. These are subject to regular Unicode emoji selection factors, such as expected usage, and so on ...”

<https://unicode.org/draft/emoji/proposals.html#Flags>

In order for the ESC (and proposers) to navigate specificity issues, the ESC have put forward a robust set of public criteria allowing for a clear signal on whether the proposed emoji will perform better than the median emoji. It was based on the evidence presented against this criteria that motivated the ESC to present the case for including the transgender flag as a ZWG sequence.

The original proposal makes a strong case that an emoji to represent transgenderism would perform as well as the median emoji in the categories presented. It also shows strongly that the flag is internationally recognised. Whilst Buff is correct in highlighting that not everything can be represented in a finite standard, the existing criteria prevent this from occurring and give us a framework for making recommendations despite the issue Buff has raised.

Other technologies such as stickers and gifs might provide respite in the future but for now these are infrequently utilised in comparison to emoji so the ESC needs to continue to recommend emoji at an appropriate frequency for the time being.