

# Demographic classification in marketing research

 By [mike broom](#)

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There has been a paradigm shift in society in terms of how people want to be classified.



Source: [www.unsplash.com](https://www.unsplash.com)

How people feel about their life and themselves is important in marketing, and therefore important in marketing research. There are at least two demographic variables that are immediately paramount; being specialists in online panel research and being the first on the continent to offer both qualitative and quantitative services in the digital space, InfoQuest has an intense interest and involvement in these issues. We have been working in two main areas; gender and race – although language, education and employment status are also on the agenda.

For classification purposes, marketers and researchers need a system of metrics that should have mutually exclusive categories, as well as a high degree of stability. These two dimensions are necessary, because we require rigidity of analytical structure to understand change over different measurement occasions. Society has changed dramatically in relation to both gender and race.

## Gender

Currently, marketing research classifies people's gender as male or female. Where people prefer not to be forced into a single classification, the option of 'other' or 'none' is not a constructive or useful alternative.

Over time, the concept of gender undergoes a metamorphosis (or not) in each person. These genders are shaped by three main drivers:

Gender identity is how people see themselves. It is their internal sense and personal experience of gender. Some people whose biological sex does not match their gender identity may make physical and social changes to express their identified gender. It may also involve medical changes, such as taking hormones or gender-affirming surgery.



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Gender expression is all the ways a person communicates their gender based on societal factors, such as gender norms and perceptions. Some people have the same gender expression all the time, whereas others may be more fluid, changing their expression over time, or based on circumstances. It can be psychologically distressing for some people who do not feel safe or comfortable expressing their gender identity. This means that, while it can be extremely important in changing behaviour, it is largely internalised and is not exclusive, nor stable as a defining metric.

Sexual orientation refers to a person's emotional and sexual attraction to other people depending on their gender. Sexual orientation is typically divided into four categories which may be volatile as well, and non-exclusive. This could disqualify orientation as a useful metric.

While there would seem to be good reasons on the social level to examine the role and implementation of revising gender classification, there is a further difficulty in practical terms – this is the plethora of terms in the classification, and explanation attached to each, to help achieve a stable and exclusive metric.

## Proposal

That the existing gender definition be changed to 'Given gender at birth'. This can only ever be one choice. Therefore, it satisfies the criteria of stability and mutual exclusiveness.

That the question gender be replaced with two questions.

1a. Given Gender at Birth?

Male

Female

1b. Do you identify as {answer to 'Given gender at Birth'}?

Yes

No

## Race

On the one hand, there are many who argue that measurement leads to discrimination. On the other, for the past 90 years – racial identification has been enforced by legislation.

Not least is the problem of own-race identification, where individuals are generally better at recognising members of their own race, and tend to be highly inaccurate in identifying persons of other races. From a research point of view, this was important in the days of face-to-face interviewing, when the interviewer was briefed to make their own observation of a respondent's race. It is far more important in legal terms as in the case of witness testimony.



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In South Africa, the constitution guarantees us, as South African citizens, the right to freedom of expression. It also entrenches our right to dignity. However, racism on a national scale takes place every day. More importantly, racism continues to manifest in various ways in our society, including its impact in a working environment. The Employment Equity Act (No. 55 of 1998) defines 'designated groups' as meaning 'Black people, women and people with disabilities', meaning that a person legally needs to show 'Race=Black', or 'Gender=Female' or 'Health=Disabilities' in order to appeal for assistance from the Department of Labour.

### Proposal

From a marketing research point of view, I recommend that the race question have an additional category:

Race?

Black

White

Coloured

Asian/Indian

Prefer not to reply

Both of these suggestions would enable people to be recognised as different, while the metrics would be robust and non-threatening. Moreover, respondents will have been afforded the opportunity to express themselves more precisely. Because consumer behaviour correlates to their self-identity, we are working to connect consumers with their self-identities in order to better predict their conscious or unconscious consumer behaviours.

*\*Note that Bizcommunity does not necessarily share the views of its contributors - the opinions and statements expressed herein are solely those of the author.*

### ABOUT MIKE BROOM

I have been involved in marketing research for over 40 years, across all spheres. I started Marketing Science in 1992, Infosense (aka Infotools) in 1995 and Panel Services Africa in 2005. For more information on Ad-Audit, please contact me at infoQuest (formerly PSA) on 083 255 2668 or [click here to send an email](#).

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