

INTER(FACING) PERSONAS

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ABSTRACT

In this introductory essay to the special issue on “Persona and Inter(face)”, the problem of collapsing or imploding inter(faces) is explored. The basic argument is that the inter(face) needs to remain in-between or mediating between face and persona on the one hand, and digital technology on the other hand, for inter(facing) as an encounter to exist. The dilemma of the imploding inter(face) is discussed through the examples of the outdoor mirror selfie and the data-driven persona. By doing so, the politics involved in the dissipation of the mediating gap is exposed. In short: it is proposed that inter(face), as unpacked here, may contribute to future debates and concerns in persona studies.

KEY WORDS

Interface; Face; Screen; Mirror; Data-Driven Personas; Outdoor Mirror Selfie;

INTRODUCTION

This special issue explores the intersection between persona, face, and interface as an encounter that is labelled *inter(face)*.¹ In short, *inter(face)* assumes that the face and persona cluster on the one hand, and the technological device(s) on the other hand, together constitute the encounter. The phenomenon of *inter(face)* is tackled from an interdisciplinary stance as the submissions drawn together in the issue span across the fields of film, game studies, image studies, visual culture, digital culture and media, art history, as well as philosophy. Themes included in the issue view persona and *inter(face)* from empathetic encounters in video games and art installation, to deceptive masks worn in film. The notion of *inter(face)* is also transposed to non-human personas to include our interfacing with dogs, as well as the performances of Victorian gentlemanly personas via casebook photographs. Evidently the concept of *inter(face)* is decoded and approached from a variety of perspectives with fascinating implications and conclusions.

What is explored in this introductory essay is the problem of collapsing *inter(faces)* - in other words - when the distance between face, persona and interface implodes. The central argument is that *inter(face)* creates a necessary in-between or mediating layer between face and persona on the one hand, and digital technology on the other hand. It is already well-established that persona is an interface between inside and outside, the private and public. However, persona cannot be reduced to one or the other, as previously noted by Marshall et al. (2019), “[...] persona is not simply the subject, the self or an identity, but *instead is the interface*, the connection, the medium between the individual and the social” (p. 27, my emphasis). If the mediated nature of the persona is collapsed to either the inside or the outside, the persona recedes by its very nature.

Although the mediated nature of persona may seem self-evident, it is indeed worthy of philosophical and phenomenological consideration for the drive to implosion seems to recycle

tenets of the “metaphysics of presence” as expounded by Heidegger and Derrida.² It also signals a shifting in the ontological ground of human subjectivity where “large-scale databases and adaptive algorithms are calling forth a new ontologic of sociality or the social itself” (Clough 2018, p. 95). This shift is termed the “datalogical turn” by Patricia Clough (2018), which basically implies that our ontology is merging with data, or data has become our ontology. Consequently, human subjectivity, and by extension persona, requires rethinking.

I will explore the dilemma of the imploding distance of inter(faces) through discussions of outdoor mirror selfies and data-driven personas by focussing on the politics involved in the dissipation of the mediating gap. In short: it is proposed that inter(face) as unpacked here may contribute to future debates and concerns in persona studies.

INTER(FACE)

The three pillars of the discussion, namely face, persona and interface are first explored to provide a context for fleshing out inter(face). The first component of the triad, the human face, acts as a threshold between inner worlds and outer spheres, and accordingly, it is often associated with a mask, a surface, an image, and sometimes even viewed as an apparition. Historically, the face has been mediated through the portrait, photography, the cinematic moving image and, lately, by the selfie (to mention only the obvious examples). The face is a complex and dense phenomenon whether interpreted as a sign, symbol, icon, or data. It is not reducible to biology or identity but is, in fact, highly mutable and unstable (Black 2011; Barker & Munster 2016; Belting 2017). Even though we may universally understand faces, they are uniquely and culturally embodied and therefore irreducible to a mere depth or surface phenomenon; neither are they simple sites of truth or illusion. Inherent in the encounter of the face is thus a paradox and a tension, for although it creates an interface for revealing, it simultaneously retreats “behind a mask” (Edkins 2015; Maurice 2022).

Closer refined to the issue explored here, the face and persona share a complicated history, as Hans Belting explains in *Face and mask. A double history* (2017). For the sake of brevity but risking simplification, whereas the ancient theatrical positioning of the actor performing through the mask represented a persona, the mask has been replaced by the actor’s face in modern developments. The inter-relatedness of face and mask is accordingly manifested as “the actor [embodies] the character or the role to be played with the expressions and speaking style of his own face, which he employs like a mask” (Belting 2017, p. 49). However, the dropping or dislodging of the external mask (so to speak), can only be understood in the context of the Enlightenment, because it is during this period that a distinction was made between face and mask (analogous to the distinction made between subject and object). In other words, during modernity, the face and mask are split into an antithesis, and as a result, “the face [is understood] as *image of the self* and the mask as *counterfeit self*” (Belting 2017, p. 19, original emphasis). Where the persona once projected through the mask on stage in modern times the actor’s face embodies the drama or persona. The face becomes the enactment and, in fact, the mask or persona. But the persona enacted through the living face on stage also moved into everyday life, where “The self, however much it was praised, could only be lived socially through the mask” (Belting 2017, p. 55). Our faces thus enact our personas in modern times.

In this regard, Belting’s analysis of the interrelatedness of face and mask confirms the notion of the persona as “a public projection” into the social world that “presents a mask to the world” (Marshall & Barbour, 2015, p. 6). Persona is also described as strategic, personalised, performative, negotiated, empowering, creative, “openly fictive”, but importantly, it is also a “recognition of the complexity of agency” (Marshall & Barbour, 2015, p. 8). This is a significant

aspect to highlight here, because it means the distinction between individual and mask, individual and persona, is kept intact. Not only is the mediatisation of persona creation accentuated, but Marshall and Barbour identify “an exacting position or *zone* of persona that is *between* the social world and the individual” (2015, p. 7). Linking with Goffman, it is proposed that “there is something *behind* the mask” (2015, p. 6). This means that the persona is not flattened to a mask or interface, but the distinction between individual and interface is kept alive. In other words, the inter(face) is acknowledged and, I would propose, that is precisely what provides the encounter with energy and potency.

This brings the discussion to the third pillar, namely interfaces as mediating encounters. It is easy to reduce interfaces to human-computer engagements, but theorists of interfaces also alert us to the complexity of the term. In other words, like the face and persona, interface is not reducible to a thing. Interface is more akin to a process, an effect (Galloway 2012), an in-between border space (Drucker 2013), and “the point at which the exteriors of two or more entities meet” (Black 2014, p. 47). Daniel Black explains how interface is misused when it is merely applied to a digital device’s interface, “A machine logically cannot ‘have’ an interface, any more than a human being can. A human-machine interface can only exist when human and machine are interacting with one another” (2014, p. 47). Black also distinguishes between “the interface” and “to interface” (2019, p. 19, my emphasis), preferring the latter, which emphasises the process and interactional aspects of interfacing rather than studying the interface as an object in a particular place or location. For Black, interfacing is a bodily experience, an embodied encounter, because “interfacing [...] is a phenomenon unique to living bodies” (2019, p. 17). This means “to interface” cannot be reduced to a flat surface but is only possible in the meeting between face and interface, as considered here.

As has become evident from the discussion above, face, persona and interface constitute a workable triad to understand and unlock the concept of inter(face). Given their shared intricate history and conceptual interwovenness, face and persona will often be used interchangeably in the discussion. The context for the nexus of inter(facing) is contemporary screen culture. Therefore, in what follows, the screen as technological device and as interface form the focus of the discussion.

HOW DOES THE SCREEN INTER(FACE)?

Inter (facing) highlights the ontological and phenomenological encounters between the face and the screen. If we explore the phenomenology of the screen, it is clear that the screen is also located; it has a material manifestation. But even though we may encounter the screen as an object amidst others, we rarely look at the screen as a “screen” but rather, we “tend to look at screens by attending to that which appears on them [...] the content presented on that screen – the text, images, colours, graphics, and so on – not the screening of the screen” (Introna & Ilharco 2011, p. 16). Encountering the screen as an object amidst others, form part of what Vivian Sobchack (2016) terms the screen-scapes, indicating a distinct relationship with screens as something outside ourselves or an extension of ourselves, in other words, still experiencing a distinction between being inside and outside the screen-scape. However, according to Vivian Sobchack (2016) the nature of screens and our relationship with them have changed drastically in the contemporary moment. This means that screen-scapes, which used to form part of the landscape or urbanscape, have now become *screen-spheres* (Sobchack 2016, p. 171-4, my emphasis). If we currently ask where we are and even what we are, Sobchack suggests that there is no exterior reality outside the screen-sphere anymore: “the screen-sphere seems all-encompassing: it is the world, our world” (2016, p.171). It is, therefore, no longer the case that one enters the screen-sphere, for one is always already t/here; one is always already

immersed in the screen-sphere. The screen-sphere forms a Mobius strip enfolding both inside and outside spheres:

The screens bounding the screen-sphere no longer face 'inward' toward us or 'outward' away from us, but face us wherever we are, their chiasmatic function both connecting and separating the 3-D 'here' wherever we physically are and the n-D 'there' where we virtually are, but physically are not (Sobchack 2016, p. 172).

Linking with Sobchack's notion of the screen-sphere, Mark Featherstone similarly identifies the phenomenon of the *total screen* where

the screen [...] is no longer in the living room, the space of the family, but rather possesses the technoself in privacy. Under these conditions the individual or disindividual is absolutely exposed to the abyss of the screen outside embodied social mediation, which is blanked out or transformed into background noise or interference (2015, p. 214).

What does this mean for inter(facing)? Perhaps some clarifying pointers are required to explore how screens mediate and interface. In this regard, another interface is introduced in the discussion, one that is often associated with the screen and sometimes confused with the screen: the mirror. When comparing the two interfaces it becomes evident that the mirror as a hyper-reflective surface produces a specular reflection of incidental light rays, while the screen is a source of diffused rays. In other words, light rays do not originate from the mirror, but in the case of the screen, it does indeed act as a source of light rays. More to the point of the face-persona nexus, one does not find your reflection *on* the mirror's surface; the image is reflected *in* the mirror. This differs from the screen's interface, and here, image scholar WJT Mitchell provides guidelines:

The grammar of the difference between screen and mirror is captured in the distinction between reflection *on* and reflection *in*. We do not see things *on* a mirror – or if we do, they are perceived as flaws – dust, scratches, distortions (2015, p. 103).

Mirrors work with the illusion of transparency, but one cannot see through the mirror; one can only see what light is reflected in the mirror. Even though "the mirror is the apotheosis of opacity [and] represents the absolute non-transparency of surfaces" (Bolter & Gromala 2003, p. 34), we often still suspect that some trickery is at work when dealing with mirrors because:

A mirror seems to be transparent and to reveal a world parallel to our own, an idea that has always had a sense of menace as well as fascination. How many authors, like Lewis Carroll, have imagined characters stepping through the looking glass [...] to trouble us in this world? And yet the image offered by a mirror is what optics calls 'virtual,' not 'real.' The rays of lights only appear to come from beyond the glass. We are really looking at the surface of the mirror, and what we are seeing is a reflection of ourselves and the world around us (Biggio 2020, p.103).

The mirror is thus a complicated interface and appears real but is optically virtual and seems to devour all that comes into its field of representation, as Sylvia Plath's (1975) poem testifies: "I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions. Whatever I see I swallow immediately". The mirror merely reflects without any discernment or distinction, yet we are always doubtful that more is at play, for instance in the appearance of the shadow, ghosts and doppelgangers (See Du Preez 2016).

Returning to the intersection between mirror and screen, it is helpful to stress that while images appear *in* the mirror, they can both occur *on* and *through* the screen. Mitchell explains that “the doubleness of the screen” allows us to “see things on and through at the same time, as both wall and window” (2015, p. 233-4). This means that the screen can act as a surface or interface onto which images can be projected, and here, it may be helpful to think of the cinematic screen (wall) as opposed to the televisual screen (window). In other words, whereas images are projected onto the cinema screen, they are broadcasted and “transmitted in real time” through the television screen (Mitchell 2015, p. 234).

If we transpose this analysis to inter(face), it means that the on and through boundaries overlap and even become confused in the screen as interface. For instance, in the case of selfie-taking, the front-facing camera is turned towards the selfie-taker, and the smartphone’s screen shows the image that appears on the surface, while simultaneously the surface acts as a lens through which to look. The selfie-taker can see their faces reflected on the screen as if projected or printed, while the lens also acts as a window to see through. These brief notes on the nature of the screen and its correspondences with the mirror, provide some background to the examples selected for closer analysis to support the necessity and politics of inter(facing).

IMPLoding INTER(FACES)

As already intimated, there is a vital distance or mediation necessary between self and mask, persona and interface, or what Hans Belting refers to as “the pathos of distance” (2017, p. 56). The distance creates an opening for the revealing or encounter to transpire if one phrases the problem in more Heideggerian terms. The issue of imploding inter(faces) can also be transposed to the difference between presentation and representation. The problem can be articulated as: What happens if the persona aspires to solely *present* the self and no longer also *re-present* the self? Belting describes the issue of representation by focussing on the face’s implosion with the interface:

As an image, a digital face is a paradox per se because it rejects the old task of [representation], and by analogy to a real face, loses its historical connection. Cyberfaces exist in fundamental contradiction to the history of portraiture; they no longer represent faces, but only interfaces among an infinite number of potential images, whose closed loop separates them from the outside without the interposition of any physical bodies. (2017, p. 240).

Belting is emphasising the loss of the analogical and relational nature during the interface that has duration over time and space. Naturally, the voices of other theorists can be summoned to explore and support what is at play when inter(faces) implode. One such proponent is Paul Virilio in *Art and fear* (2003) and his distinction between representative and presentative art, which he also likens to the distinction between “demonstration” versus “monstration”.³ These complex ideas require more substantial unpacking, but I merely reference them here to signal the larger debate.

However, one voice that provides an instrumental and contemporary interpretation and warrants some explanation in this context, is Johanna Drucker’s (2020) analysis of the drive towards “pure code” (p.50) in *Visualization and interpretation: Humanistic approaches to display*. For my argument, I associate what Drucker places under pure code with the metaphysics of presence, previously mentioned. I am, therefore, conflating philosophical presuppositions with technical notions.

Drucker contextualises the current trend to understand data and code as truth that is also immaterial. She observes, “Once produced, data have a cultural authority that masquerades as an inherent (ontological) authority, pretending to an absolute self-identity” (2020, p. 48). She refreshingly argues that code not only has materiality, but it also cannot subsume materiality to code: “[...] materiality cannot be fully absorbed into (or made one with) form as ‘pure code’” (2020, p. 50). In the case of digital images, she emphasises that the data and the image are not the same; even more, “code is also, always, *empathetically material, not pure*” (2020, p. 49, my emphasis). If code and data were pure, it would imply that inter(faces) are imploding, but because the data and the indexical are distinct and cannot be reduced to one another (“None of these are equivalents” (p. 47)), the proposition of inter(facing) as mediating encounter holds. In terms of the argument formulated here, Drucker’s ideas support the ontological distinctness between the indexical and code and, by extension, the distinction between persona and interface that is mediated via the inter(facing) encounter. So, although the persona and the interface are linked, “they are not equal to each other” (2020, p. 48).

Two examples that relate directly to the problem of collapsing inter(faces) will be explored here: the outdoor selfie with a mirror and the data-driven persona. Although the two examples may at first appear vastly different and incompatible in addressing the issue of collapsing inter(faces), as will become apparent in the analysis, both incorporate an act of mirroring, and they aspire towards doing away with the gap between the indexical and the data or technological device. In short: they tend to deny the vital role of inter(facing) in the encounter.

Outdoor Selfie with Mirror

Perhaps one of the most detectable versions of inter(face) in contemporary society is the selfie, which incorporates the face-persona projection onto a screen. Even though selfies have been a “little more than a blip in a larger history of a mediated production of the self” (Guinness 2021, p. 40), their relevance within the bigger context of self-performance and self-representation remains undeniable. Selfies are specific and unique incarnations of self-representation. However, they belong to a particular time that has already passed, as Katherine Guinness remarks (2021, n.1), just as the self-portrait as a notable genre within the arts rose during the Renaissance c. 1400 – 1600 (See Koerner 1993; Hall 2015). Although many excellent examples of self-portraiture were created after this date and are still being created, the culture of the self-portrait peaked more or less during the 1500s.

The relevance of the selfie in a discussion on persona and interface, with a focus on their mediated nature, is epitomised by Katie Warfield’s description of selfies as “always and already intra-acting material–discursive entanglements” (2016, p. 10). This means the body, camera, self, persona, space, and image do not exist separately before the selfie is taken, but they are constituted through the selfie. For Warfield, selfies are “identity work” which acts as inter(face) “in the production of the image” (2016, p.10).

I want to focus on a type of selfie known as the “outdoor mirror selfie” (Figure 1), which trended during the COVID-19 lockdown with influencers on Instagram and TikTok. The influencer who was hailed as “reinventing the mirror selfie” (Pellet 2020), Hannah Warling (@hannahwarling), introduced her outdoor mirror selfie on TikTok in April 2020 with the caption “honestly wasn’t expecting that

As an influencer, Warling is at the forefront of persona creation, and as such, she is under constant strain to update her look and create new ways to entice followers even amidst a global lockdown. The “genius hack” of placing the mirror outside and then taking a selfie is just another way to extend and amplify her persona in an “insistent proliferation of personas” (Marshall & Barbour 2015, p. 1). In the selfie taken outdoors with a mirror, we often cannot see the eyes or who is looking, as the face is covered and masked behind the camera. A blindness is implied – an all-seeing yet non-seeing subject is at the heart of the image. This is not a new phenomenon in mirror selfie-taking, as we are familiar with the bathroom selfie and the gym selfie that similarly often mask the eyes.

What the outdoor selfie with the mirror does introduce is that it attempts to present nature in a mirror as captured through a selfie gesture. To return to the earlier analysis of the difference between mirror and screen as interfaces, it is worthwhile to flag again that although the mirror differs from the screen in terms of the *in* and *on* distinctions explained above, in the act of selfie-taking, the screen also acts as a mirror. In other words, in selfie-taking, not only do the *on* and *through* modes converge, but so do the *in* and *on*. The best way to describe the interface is as mirror-screens. After all, one can take a selfie with the front-facing camera (*on* and *through*) or quite literally use the phone as a mirror by utilising a mirror app (*in*). The selfie-taker does not take selfies merely to see an image *on* and *through* the screen but also to reflect on the image as one would *in* a mirror.



Figure 1: Examples of the outdoor mirror selfies with eyes covered sampled from #outsidemirror on TikTok [<https://www.tiktok.com/tag/outsidemirror>]
Left: rubyodonnell (2020-4-21), “Thought I'd join the trend<3 #outsidemirror #notaphotographer #foryoupage #fyp”; *Middle:* meganpyper_(2020-5-2), “So I took my mirror outside and this is how it went... #fyp #mirrorchallenge #outsidemirror #foryoupage”; *Right:* k.parker00 (2020-4-18), “Decided to hop on the trend and take my mirror outside #mirrorchallenge #foryoupage #foryou #photogallery”.

For me, the interesting element that is incorporated or staged in the outdoor mirror selfie is nature. Here, Vivian Sobchack again contextualises our relationship with nature via the screen-sphere: “Nature’, as we now primarily know it, is perceived as digitized, virtual, and always on screen” (2016, p.173). The screen promises a “luminous window” onto the world

because “the iPad takes me there – it takes me everywhere – but at the same time leaves me nowhere, transfixed before the flat surface of the screen” (Featherstone 2015, p. 215).

Perhaps the mirror selfie in nature is a visual pun, although unknowingly, on the call by Elizabethan theatre “to hold as ‘twere, the mirror up to nature”. The selfie is a theatrical endeavour with a definitive staging of the self. Paul Frosh reads the selfie, particularly, as a gestural act that participates in phatic communion; it causes an affective response that becomes a kinaesthetic image through its embodied gestural nature. Frosh states:

The selfie is a preeminent conductor of embodied social energy because it is a kinaesthetic image: it is a product of kinetic bodily movement; it gives aesthetic, visible form to that movement in images; and it is inscribed in the circulation of kinetic and responsive social energy among users of movement-based digital technologies (2015, p. 1623).

Thus, a summoning of energies and engagement in the selfie act may resemble staging and (persona)fication. Derek Conrad Murray observes that “selfies are mirrors” (2021, p. 15), and although he refers more to the psychological and political factors informing their creation, the act of staging and confrontation is confirmed.

However, I would suggest that the stage set in the mirror selfie’s case encloses and folds back on itself. It is not so much a ritual that we participate in but rather a spectacle. Why? Because what is framed in the mirror selfie is not the ritual of the stage with depth and duration but a flattened mirror image on a screen. It is thus a screen that acts only as a mirror. According to Featherstone, what the screen encompasses in such instances is a paradox because “the screen is the surface that is absolutely self-identical, is absolutely without depth, but at the same time creates the image of endless depth and the bottomless abyss” (2015, p. 211).

The self is staged in front of and appears separate from the background. Nature is merely a beautiful backdrop, but it could just as easily be a preselected wallpaper. The main emphasis is on a flattened persona, for this is not a self immersed in nature but instead the self *in front* of nature. In fact, the background can be substituted by any touristic place or famous landmark. In other words, this is not a persona mediating between self and world but a severed and separated self that has imploded onto itself.

Here, Grant Bollmer and Katherine Guinness’s (2017) analysis of the phenomenological implications of the selfie has significantly contributed to my understanding. By unpacking the aesthetics of the selfie, they show that what is novel about the selfie is the broken relationship between the subject and background. They argue:

Yet, in the selfie, this self-reflexive movement acts to shut down the space, not open it, and it reasserts a distinction between figure (or self) and background. Even if the camera is located in the image, even if the camera appears to be the object of the photographer’s attention, even though the camera inherently serves as the point through which the self is ultimately observed, the background upon which the self emerges recedes from the awareness of the photographer (Bollmer & Guinness 2017, p.164).

By carefully unpacking the role of the mirror in older representations, they estimate that, for instance, in Parmigianino’s *Self-portrait in a convex mirror* (1524) and Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* (1656), the role of the mirror is to “call into question the ability to clearly distinguish between figure and background” (Bollmer & Guinness 2017, p.165). The mirror creates some confusion regarding the grounding of the subject and object, complicating the representation. In the case of the selfie, the opposite logic is at work because the mirror selfie “performatively adjudicates a

distinction that separates the photographer from their environment, an action that creates a self as distinct from the background in which they are located” (Bollmer & Guinness 2017, p.165). The most crucial relationship performed or staged during the mirror selfie is “a technical assemblage in which the photographer and the camera phone converge” (Bollmer & Guinness 2017, p.165). The selfie is absorbed in the mirror-screen between “their own body in the screen of the smart-phone, [...] or, the photographer attends to the camera itself, presenting their body to be captured by the apparatus” (Bollmer & Guinness 2017, p.165). The attention is not on nature or even the interface between the self and nature, but the attention is focused on the camera mirror-screen:

Attention to the camera produces a forgetting of the background, in which photographer and camera engage in a dialogue to create a self that includes both in the final image, a self that is isolated and differentiated from the space in which it exists. The act of taking a selfie is an act of symbolic distinction, in which the background recedes to the experience of the one taking the photograph, even though it is then registered in the image by the photographic apparatus, to be seen by others (Bollmer & Guinness 2017, p.165).

Like a cut-out inserted onto the setting, “the selfie exists only in the act of clearly differentiating a self from a background” (Bollmer & Guinness 2017, p.165-6). The relation between the self and the context is circumstantial and not substantial because today’s trend on Instagram becomes next year’s throwback memory. The mirror selfie in nature does not aim at engaging nature in any sensible or confrontational way, but “The background seems to be both present and absent, inscribed visually in the image and yet seemingly absent from the experience of picture taking” (Bollmer & Guinness 2017, p.166). The persona’s stage has imploded into the background, which exists merely as a diegetic prop, and I would argue that no dramaturgical event or encounter occurs. Thus, phrased in terms of the broader argument of the distance required for inter(facing), the outdoor mirror selfie veers towards implosion.

Data-Driven Personas

Dealing with data-driven personas does not cover new ground in persona studies since Marshall and Barbour (2015) have already discussed how personas operate in developing and customising interfaces. They explain data-driven personas as “fictive, but nonetheless most often built from data about likely users; personas perform forms of interaction and thereby help fine-tune the design and development of a product” (2015, p. 8). Data-driven personas integrate “the *empathy* of personas and the *rationality* of analytics” (Jansen et al. 2022, p. xxv, original emphasis). That means they “leverage the intuitiveness of personas with the workability of analytics” (Jansen et al. 2022, p. xxvi). It makes sense then that data-driven personas are linked with the broader study of personas because they similarly act as connectors between the individual and the social order. The only aspect that these technological interfaces overlook in utilising personas in their designs is the “contested public dimension of persona”, according to Marshall and Barbour (2015, p. 8). I want to add that reducing persona to a question of data or algorithms is similarly problematic. In other words, as Michelle Gibbons explains in a related discussion, the persona *contracts* when the “human-algorithmic contact” zone *converges* (2021, p.66-67). In what follows in my discussion, a qualified criticism is levelled against data-driven personas without human personas.

In their exploration of whether data-driven personas can be considered harmful, Salminen et al. (2021a) aim to address the critique directed against data-driven personas, especially from qualitative and traditional persona scholars. The authors discuss seven

challenges facing the future of data-driven personas but end their excursion rather inconclusively by stating that “the future will reveal” the outcome (2021a, p. 58).

The shadow haunting data-driven personas is obviously its increasing relationship with neoliberalist consumerism and biopolitics (see Clough 2018). This is admitted by the mantra introduced in Jansen et al.’s *Data-driven personas: “Better personas! Better decisions! Better results!”* (2022, p. xxvi). After all, as Jansen et al. propose, “the ideal data-driven persona is verifiable, replicable, and statistically representative” (2022, p. 97). However, the data cannot verify or replicate the person wholly, “The inequivalence between data and body tells us that this subsumption is partial” (Bollmer 2021, p.32). It is partial because there is a distance between the data and the person implied. The interface design must constantly be checked for biases, context and ways to appear more empathetic (see Sheng et al. 2021; Salminen et al. 2021b; Patkar & Seyff, 2023). In other words, the interface must constantly appear more human and humane to extract further valuable data and appease human suspicion about how the data was created (See Salminen et al. 2020). The gap or distance between person and data is perpetually under siege as we become a “living lab” generating big data-driven hybrid personas (see Santonen et al. 2022).

Evidently, human subjectivity requires rethinking and judicious positioning in the datalogical avalanche. In a critical analysis of what is termed “the ideology of dataism”, Couldry and Mejias (2019) observe:

The marketing ideology of personalization makes such tracking and surveillance seem attractive. Who after all would *not* want a service more geared to his or her particular wants and needs? The argument, very simply, is that personally targeted messages require prior information that can come only from ... targeted surveillance! Yet evangelists for data-driven personalization still feel the need to defend this ideology aggressively, as when Acxiom, in a 2015 opinion survey, characterized acceptance of continuous data collection as pragmatist (fair enough) and opposition to it as fundamentalist (itself rather an extremist statement). (2019, p. 16-17)

This indicates that data-driven marketing is increasingly naturalised, and those objecting to the “ideology” are labelled in extremist terms. Therefore, as part of the ongoing extension and growth of data-driven personalisation, issues flagged in the literature are optimisation, customer expectations, and verifications. If one transposes this datafication process onto persona studies as per Marshall *et al.* (2019), where the persona is the medium between individual and society, what is occurring here is that the connection is doubly mediated. Or perhaps differently phrased, the individual is alienated or abstracted. When Jansen *et al.* describe a data-driven persona as “a representation of an actual segment of users presented as an imaginary person” (2022, p. 14), the individual agent is first represented through a segment of users and then becomes an imaginary person or type, a “buyer persona” (See Revella 2015). The difference between utilising “real data derived from actual people”, versus “made up” personas, also known as “assumption-driven-personas” (Jansen et al. 2022, p. 5), is cost. It is cheaper to create assumed personas, particularly because personas date so quickly and become stale (Jansen et al. 2022, p.5). Data-driven personas thus have an expiry date, for if the data is not constantly updated and refreshed, the persona also seems to expire. What is being mediated in the assumption-driven persona is the data and a fictitious person, not the individual and the social order, except if the social order overlaps wholesale with analytics and algorithms.

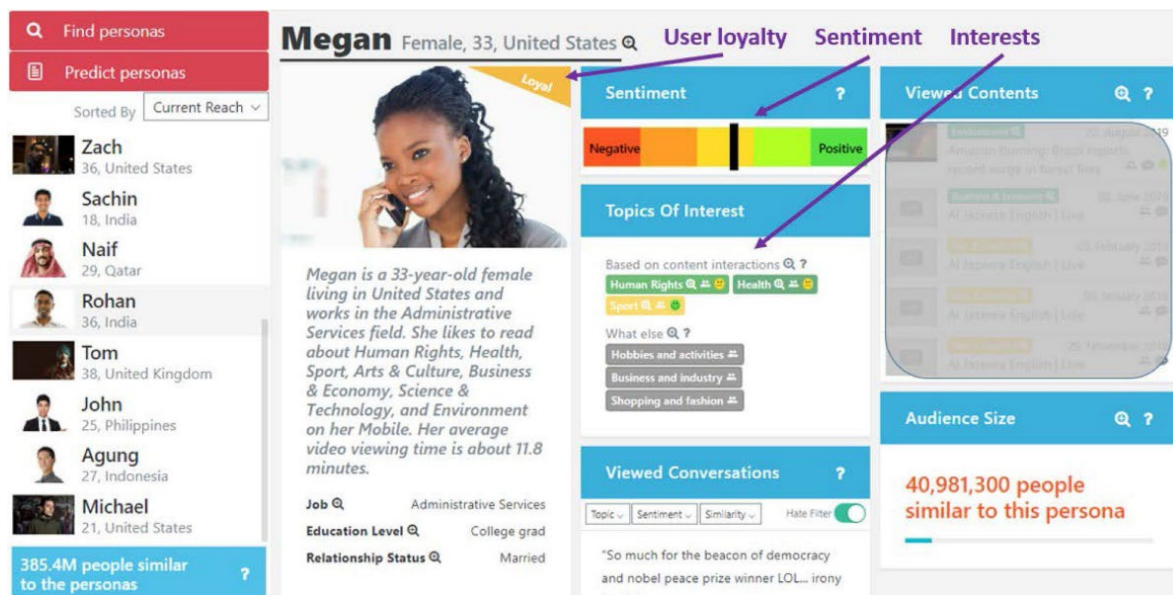


Figure 2: Example of Data-driven persona profile from the Automatic Persona Generation (APG) system. The business-sensitive content is hidden. Source: Jansen et al (2022, p.16)

In Figure 2, an example of a data-driven persona profile named “Megan”, a thirty-three-year-old female from the United States, can be viewed. The example is utilised by Jansen et al. (2022), and the persona claims to have 40,981,300 similar personas, which is naturally a very useful lead for targeted advertising and promotions. Megan’s interests are listed and ranked, with “human rights” at the top, and significantly, she is described as a loyal user and, I assume, a loyal customer-consumer. Her career and education are also mapped on the graph, and the simulated picture or data double shows Megan as an alert, intelligent, attractive young black female (using my descriptors). Megan does not exist, and yet she does. The data constructing the persona acts as a mirror, allowing an unknown or undefined self to be conjured, also known as the data double (Du Preez 2016). Megan is a deepfake on another level. There is no actual Megan that I can meet on the street, but there are many, more or less, virtually similar Megans. In Olga Goriunova’s terms, she is a “digital subject” (2019a; 2019b). Goriunova realises the existence of the digital subject after finding herself datafied and tracked via the marketing technology company MaxPoint. She notes about her data persona: “It is clearly not I, and yet it is no one other than I. What other ‘I’s are out there [...]?” (2019a, p. 126).

The predicament and precarity of corresponding with the data persona and yet not fully being this new self bring the digital subject into existence. Goriunova describes the digital subject as “an abstracted position, a performance, constructed persona from data, profiles, and other records and aggregates [...] [it]comes *after the subject*, requiring new ways to understand how it connects to the subjectivities of living persons” (2019a, p.126, my emphasis). Elsewhere, Goriunova further speculates about the dubious nature of digital subjects. It remains an open question whether they can even be labelled as subjects, as they operate more like “quasi-subjects, mere dolls operated by a puppeteer (such as the principle of value extraction, cognitive capitalism, racism)” (2019b, p. 1). The digital subjects are not grounded in a human being necessarily; in other words, it “is not the human being per se who is the subject of their data” but rather “an abstraction [...] that acts as their data subject, standing in for the person” (Goriunova 2019b, p. 2). Although the nature and substance of this new subjectivity or persona are uncertain, what is evident is that digital subjects have become “a new site for struggle”

(Goriunova 2019a, p127). Data-driven personas, especially in the assumption variation, can be designated as being on the forefront of this struggle.

INTER(FACING) PERSONAS: A NEW SITE FOR STRUGGLE?

In the analysis put forward here I have argued for taking the distance or gap between persona and interface seriously amidst the datalogical turn. It has become apparent that the implosion of the distance has definite political consequences, also for studying personas. As Olga Goriunova states, the “struggle over the distance is political through and through: to claim and maintain distance is a matter of keeping and developing alternative options of becoming and living with our digital subjects” (2019a, p. 130). Digital subjects or personas have politics, and they are worthy of exposure and investigation. Identity politics have shifted to the frontiers of living with and sometimes against our data personas.

In my explorations of the outdoor mirror selfie where the self has become a cut-out free floating surface phenomenon, the dilemma of losing sight of context and grounding, thus mediation, has been flagged. Similarly, the data-driven persona’s underlying determination towards pure code shows the challenge of inter(face) implosion. The site of the struggle has been identified as the implosion of the inter(face), where the necessary, although complex, mediation between face and persona, on the one hand, and technological interface, on the other, need to remain intact to keep personas vital.

IN THIS ISSUE

Five articles and viewpoints centring around persona and inter(facing) are introduced in this special issue. They all take different angles on the problem and subsequently the themes investigated range from (non)human personas channelled through our dogs to facial empathy animated in the videogames *The Last of Us Parts I – II*. The face-persona nexus is also viewed through installation artwork embodying empathy, filmic renditions of masks in the *Mission Impossible* films, to personas of another kind as embodied in asylums.

In Chris Broodryk’s discussion in “Reflecting on analogue faces and digital masks through *Mission: Impossible* (1996-2023)” the inter(face) between the analogue face and the digital mask is fleshed out. Technology’s deception and scheming role in bringing about the intervention is flagged. One of the most exciting things Broodryk reveals in the analysis is the correspondence between the masking practices utilised in the *Mission: Impossible* films and the death mask. He argues that the digital masks overtake the real face’s physical appearance, analogous to the death mask imprinting a last elegy.

Steve Spence’s “Facial animation and empathy in *The Last of Us Parts I and II*” explores how good facial animation can evoke empathy in players. Spence focusses on Naughty Dog’s 2020 *The Last of Us: Part II* which makes characters’ faces a vital aspect of the game’s interface. Spence proposes that these increasingly sophisticated facial animations encourage players to engage with the characters or personas less like tools or targets and more like autonomous human beings.

In Karli Brittz’s “Animal interfaces and (non)human personas” she explores the (non)human persona as represented by our encounters with animals, or the cydog specifically, as she terms it. Brittz takes the reader through three case studies of human and dog inter(faces): space dogs, dogcams and the quantified dog.

Our tragic and often failed love affairs with screens are explored in Jenni Lauwrens's analysis of the South African-born artist Candice Breitz's installation, *Love Affair* (2016). Lauwrens shows in her contribution "(Inter)facing empathy: interrogating our tragic love affair with screens" how the audience's empathetic responses differs when a tragic message is mediated by two celebrity personas, via cinematic screens, versus the real-life accounts of refugees on digital screens. It seems we prefer celebrity personas in the cinematic sphere when it comes to paying attention to such messages.

Finally, Rory du Plessis opens the reflection on persona as interface by exploring a topic that is probably under-researched in persona studies – mental illness and performance. In "Male patients communicating restored mental health by their facial expressions and gentlemanly persona at the Grahamstown Lunatic Asylum, 1890–1907", Du Plessis traces how three male patients performed Victorian gentlemanliness in their casebook photographs to get a clean bill of health, so to speak.

END NOTES

¹ In order to distinguish between interface as understood in its widespread use as that which works between humans and technology, when reference is made to the particular encounter described and explored here, namely between face and persona, on the one hand, and interface (as technology) on the other hand it will be done as *inter(face)*.

² In his critique of the Western metaphysical tradition, Heidegger identified the concept of the metaphysics of presence (*Metaphysik der Anwesenheit*), which aims to show the drive towards immediacy and being present to the self, or identity or the moment. In other words, to deny that being is situated in time and duration.

³ Virilio, the philosopher of speed and of things speeding up, perceives the problem of imploding interfaces through several avenues, of which art is one example. He notes in his typical hyperbolic rhetoric: "What abstraction once tried to pull off is in fact being accomplished before our very eyes: the end of REPRESENTATIVE art and the substitution of a counter-culture, of a PRESENTATIVE art" (2003, p. 35). The distinction between representative and presentative is also transposed to demonstration and monstration: "To demonstrate or to 'monstrate', that is the question: whether to practise some kind of aesthetic or ethic demonstration or to practise the cleansing of all 'nature', all 'culture', through the technically oriented efficiency of a mere 'monstration', a show, a blatant presentation of horror" (2003, pp. 49-50)

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