

# EDITORIAL: DESIGN PERSONAS – NEW WAYS, NEW CONTEXTS

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Design personas have, since their origins in the late 1990s, been recognised as a design tool to foster ideation and empathy with different user groups. The method originates from software development and has since its instigation become a widespread method adopted in many design disciplines and processes, such as innovation and ideation of IT products, User Experience design, agile systems developing, communication, and marketing (Nielsen 2012; Pruitt & Grudin 2003). To get product design closer to the everyday lives of the users, design personas are a means to capture the everyday experiences and needs of users and customers. Focusing on the user or customer in the design process is in opposition to an artistic understanding of the designer as someone who, by experimentation with materials and form, gets inspiration to create unique products.

To develop personas that aid in design decision-making is not a trivial task, yet despite this there are few resources on persona generation (see Cooper et.al. 2007; Mulder & Yaar 2006; Nielsen 2014; Pruitt & Adlin 2006 as key texts in the field). All these books include thoughts on data gathering, data analysis, persona descriptions and implementation, but there is no common definition of what a persona *is*, except that it is a description of a fictitious user.

The scientific foundation upon which the method was built is in its essence qualitative, and has a holistic perspective on humans as being specific and dependent on the context in which they participate. The qualitative core has changed over the years: with the access to big data, experiments to use quantitative data as foundation for persona descriptions are developing as can be seen in the article 'Are Personas Done? Evaluating the Usefulness of Personas in the Age of Online Analytics' (Salminen et al, this issue).

As noted above, the common understanding of the persona method is that a design persona is a description of a fictitious person (Pruitt & Adlin 2006; Cooper 1999) based on data. The main way to represent a persona is as textual description of a fictional user, and this textual description is accompanied by a photograph depicting the persona. The relationship between data and fiction is contested in writing on the method, and varies from a one to one relation, where every part of the description relates to data (Pruitt & Adlin 2006), to the use of certain fictitious elements to promote empathy (Cooper et al. 2007; Nielsen 2012) to the use of pure fiction with no relation to data (Blythe and Wright 2006).

The perceived benefits of the design method are that personas help product designers to remember that they differ from the end-users and that personas enable designers to envision end user's needs and wants, which increases a design focus on users. Furthermore, the persona descriptions provide direct design influence and lead to better design decisions and definition of the product's feature set. Finally, the method is perceived as an effective communication tool (Cooper 1999; Cooper, et.al. 2007; Grudin & Pruitt 2002; Long 2009; Ma & LeRouge 2007; Miaskiewicz & Kozar 2011; Pruitt & Adlin 2006).

The method has been criticised for empiricism, especially the relationship between data and fiction (Chapman & Milham 2006; Chapman et al. 2008). In line with this, more specific

criticisms include the method being too founded on qualitative data and therefore ‘unscientific’; it is difficult to implement; it does not describe actual people as it only portrays characteristics; and finally, it prevents designers from meeting actual users (Bak 2008). Moreover, the unsolved question about how many users one persona can represent is perceived as problematic (Chapman 2006).

Since their introduction, design personas have developed from being a method for IT systems development to being applied in many other contexts, including development of products, marketing, communication strategy, and service design (Nielsen 2012). The persona method has also developed into many forms from ad hoc personas built more or less on assumptions (Norman 2004) to fully fleshed out, empirically researched personas.

The three papers presented in this themed section of this issue of *Persona Studies* represent novel areas of application, novel ways of getting data to overcome the critique of personas as can be seen in the papers, and introduce a novel theoretical approach towards data gathering and representation to a design persona context.

The article ‘Getting under the(ir) skin: Applying personas and scenarios with body-environment research for improved understanding of users’ perspective in architectural design’ (Tvedebrink & Jelić) discusses the introduction of design personas to architectural students. Traditionally, architects have been more occupied with the scale and proportions of man as guidance for design, and understand the human subject as a mind-body dichotomy. The authors argue for a need to develop a more research-informed user perspective. This can be done by teaching students a ‘design empathic’ understanding and how to get an immersion in user perspectives through the use of personas. A way to create change is to introduce personas in the teaching of students of architecture, thus transforming the mindsets of architects to be.

As the persona method spreads to new areas it is worth considering if we shall use traditional research methods. The article ‘Creating Personas for Political and Social Consciousness in HCI Design’ (Wilson et al.) discusses whether we should apply a phenomenographic approach to data gathering and analysis when the context of design is software for areas associated with social and political goals, such as political aspirations, social values, and the will or capacity of the different personas to take action. It also challenges the traditional purpose of personas of bringing a product to market, and the focus on needs and goals adapted from Human Computer Interaction.

The final paper in this issue, ‘Are Personas Done? Evaluating the Usefulness of Personas in the Age of Online Analytics’ (Salminen et al.), examines whether online analytical data are useful for persona generation. The use of online analytics benefits from powerful computational techniques and novel data sources. Thus, the authors develop a method to overcome the long development time of personas. The authors take a point of departure in the criticisms mentioned above that personas are not thoroughly grounded in data analysis, and engage with arguments for and against the use of personas using real-time online analytics data about customers.

## CONTRIBUTIONS

Together, the contribution of the three papers lies within the domains of application, data gathering, and persona description. These three important areas encompass persona generation and utility. The novelty in domain is covered by the first two papers ‘Getting under the(ir) skin: Applying personas and scenarios with body-environment research for improved understanding of users’ and ‘Creating Personas for Political and Social Consciousness in HCI design’. In the first

contribution the novelty lies in the domain it describes—using personas as a vehicle for architects to understand the people occupying buildings, but also in the transformation of people versus buildings in architecture as such—from the standardised conceptions of the human body to enabling an understanding of the relationship between people, atmosphere, and emotions. Addressing political and social goals is an area we have not encountered before with persona research, thus the paper ‘Creating Personas for Political and Social Consciousness in HCI design’ moves the method into new territories.

The contribution on data gathering found in the article ‘Are Personas Done? Evaluating the Usefulness of Personas in the Age of Online Analytics’, and lies in the presentation of critical arguments against personas in the context of online analytics, while tying these developments to existing persona criticism. Moreover, the authors introduce the importance of conceptually differentiating between traditional and digital data-driven personas as they each have their area of usefulness: individual data is optimal for automated decision making, whereas aggregated data such as personas are best for decisions at the strategic level.

Finally, the analysis of users’ beliefs and values, found in ‘Creating Personas for Political and Social Consciousness in HCI design’, moves the persona descriptions away from a focus on consumer needs and problems, and ties this to the necessary avoidance of stereotyping. The focus on variations and commonalities moves beyond typical impact of local cultural contexts, and instead shows differences across and within local contexts.

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