

User Experience Center



Beware of Persona Bias

Published by Jessica Marriott

While a persona can be advantageous, it has the potential to be interpreted differently than envisioned by the creator. The persona's audience may form varied, unintended connections to prior experience, stereotypes, and other preconceived ideas, resulting in the risk of [bias](#). To identify and prevent bias in a persona, it is critical to consider the persona's primary audience and how this audience may perceive each element and description included in the fictional representation.

Some key areas of bias to be aware of include:

- Naming Convention
- Imagery
- Accessibility

Although it is nearly impossible to completely eliminate bias, it is the duty of persona developers to acknowledge and minimize this risk. It is important to carefully consider how the most important features and characteristics of a persona are depicted. A persona is frequently referenced in design and decision making, so it should be an accurate, robust depiction of the intended target user group.

John Smith



"I want to use the latest technologies to reach my health goals."

Age: 26 years old

Occupation: Software Developer

Location: Albany, New York

Bio: An active young professional trying to maintain a healthy lifestyle of eating well and exercising with his long hours at work.

Goals

- Utilize latest tools and technology for being efficient and saving as much time as possible
- High performance and recognition at work
- Exercise 4 to 5 time per week
- Eat healthy food at the office and at home

Motivations

- Hopes to be promoted at his current company within the next year
- Wants to feel good about himself and live a long life
- Technologically savvy and interested new gadgets

Pain Points

- Spends many, long hours at the office
- Limited time outside of work to go to the gym, prep meals, and shop for food
- Does not want to sacrifice his healthy habits for a successful career

Naming Convention

Personas are typically labeled with a name to help the audience visualize and build empathy with their target user group as they design and strategize. The name aids in making personas feel more human-like and memorable. Whether a persona is given a specific individual name, such as “Hardworking Ethan,” or a more general group name, such as “Athletic Adventurers,” the title chosen can unintentionally influence the audience’s perception of the persona in a variety of ways.

It is best practice to consider the various naming conventions available to label a persona and brainstorm possibilities, predicting potential connections that may be experienced by the audience. Persona names should strive to remain gender neutral, either be deliberately relevant for a specific age range or be timeless, avoid fictional, stereotypical, or famous references, and strike a balance between generic and inspirational.

Example	Possible Bias	Consideration
"Busy Betty"	On its own, this name suggests older females, even though the persona could be meant for a user group consisting of both male and female teenagers.	Choose a name that is close to being gender neutral and either age specific or timeless.
"Vince Vaughn"	People would most likely associate this persona with the actual famous individual rather than a group of realistic users.	Avoid names that are fictional, stereotypical, or famous references.
"John Smith"	Vague, average names could be uninspiring and feel commonplace.	Find a balance between generic and inspirational.

Imagery

The visual selected, usually a headshot, is another important aspect of the persona that is susceptible to bias. The image associated with the fictional representation is meant to enhance the persona's story and help the audience better understand and recall the essence of the core user group.

There are two main decisions regarding the image, including the visual type (such as a photograph, realistic illustration, or cartoon) and the visual coloring (such as black and white or color). While there is no right or wrong combination of visual attributes to use for persona imagery, the visual chosen will ultimately carry extraneous ideas for the audience. These inherent biases can alter viewpoints based on traits displayed including gender, race, culture, age, and more.

To limit potential bias in persona imagery:



Use images with minimal detail to best mitigate unintended connections.

Try an action image over a stationary headshot for stronger, emphasized attributes.

Black and white images can minimize the potential influence of race and culture.

- The more abstraction, the better. An abstract visual can feel more universal and inclusive (just be careful of over-generalizing).

Accessibility

Human beings have the greatest understanding of themselves. Unless a person has an experience or connection to a particular disability, the experience can be forgotten. This biased inclination may occur due to limited time, budget constraints, forgetfulness, or even ignorance about realistic target users. Whatever the reason may be, it is critical to mitigate this bias by raising awareness that can lead to empathy for all users; including those with varied levels of abilities. The [U.S. Census Bureau](#) found that there were nearly 40 million Americans with a disability in 2015. To prevent bias against this large group of users, creators of personas need to consider this disabled population, first seeing them as people and then designing for differences in ability.

Jacob



Blind, a bit of a geek
The right technology lets me do anything.

Snapshot of Jacob

- 32 years old
- College graduate, legal training courses
- Shares an apartment with a friend
- Paralegal, reviews cases and writes case summaries
- Laptop, braille display, iPhone

The A's

- **Ability:** Blind since birth with some light perception
- **Aptitude:** Skilled technology user
- **Attitude:** Digital native, early adopter, persists until he gets it

Assistive Technology

- Screen reader (JAWS on his laptop, [VoiceOver](#) on his phone)
- Audio recorder (to take notes)
- Braille display

The Bigger picture

(Source: World Health Organization, Census)

- People with visual disabilities make up about 2.6% of the world's population (about 0.6% are blind).
- In the U.S., about 1.8 million people can't easily see printed words.
- Only about 10% of people who are blind can read and write braille.

From A Web for Everyone: Designing Accessible User Experience

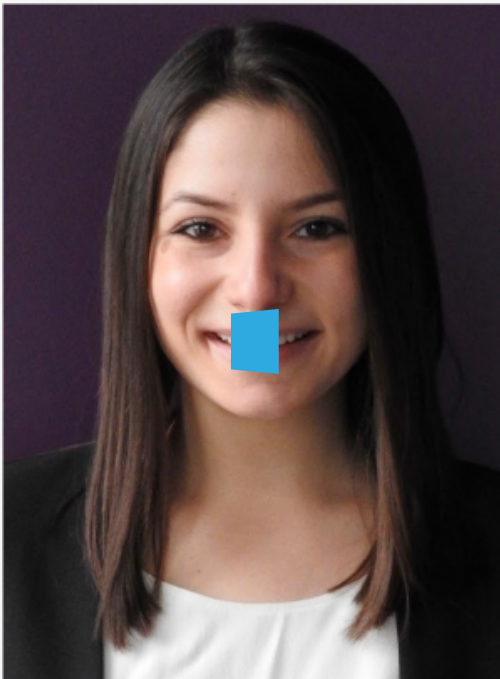
Accessibility Tips:

Include the following attributes when creating personas, based on the recommendations from [A Web for Everyone: Designing Accessible User Experience](#):

Ability - physical and cognitive, as well as any assistive technology used

- Aptitude - knowledge and skill with technology
- Attitude - motivation, emotion, risk tolerance, and persistence
- Integrate individual differences in ability by adding in some disabled attributes to core personas or create separate personas for people with disabilities.
- Keep in mind the range of users' abilities throughout the whole user experience process. It's best to account for this bias in all activities - from early user research to usability testing, not just in persona development.

Creators of personas need to be conscientious of the potential elements discussed that can be subject to bias and minimize this threat as much as possible. Maintaining an awareness of bias risk will enable development of more reliable personas to be utilized in strategizing and decision making.



Jessica Marriott

Jessica is currently a Research Associate at the User Experience Center. Prior to joining the UXC, Jessica worked in various digital and marketing disciplines. Most recently she was a Digital Marketing Associate at a strategy agency, where she created buyer personas and conducted website analyses. She is passionate about accessibility, developing empathy for users, and creative problem solving.

Jessica holds a Bachelor of Science degree from Lehigh University, where she studied Marketing and minored in Psychology and Graphic Design. She is currently pursuing a Masters of Science degree in Human Factors in Information Design at Bentley University.

You can connect with her on [LinkedIn](#).

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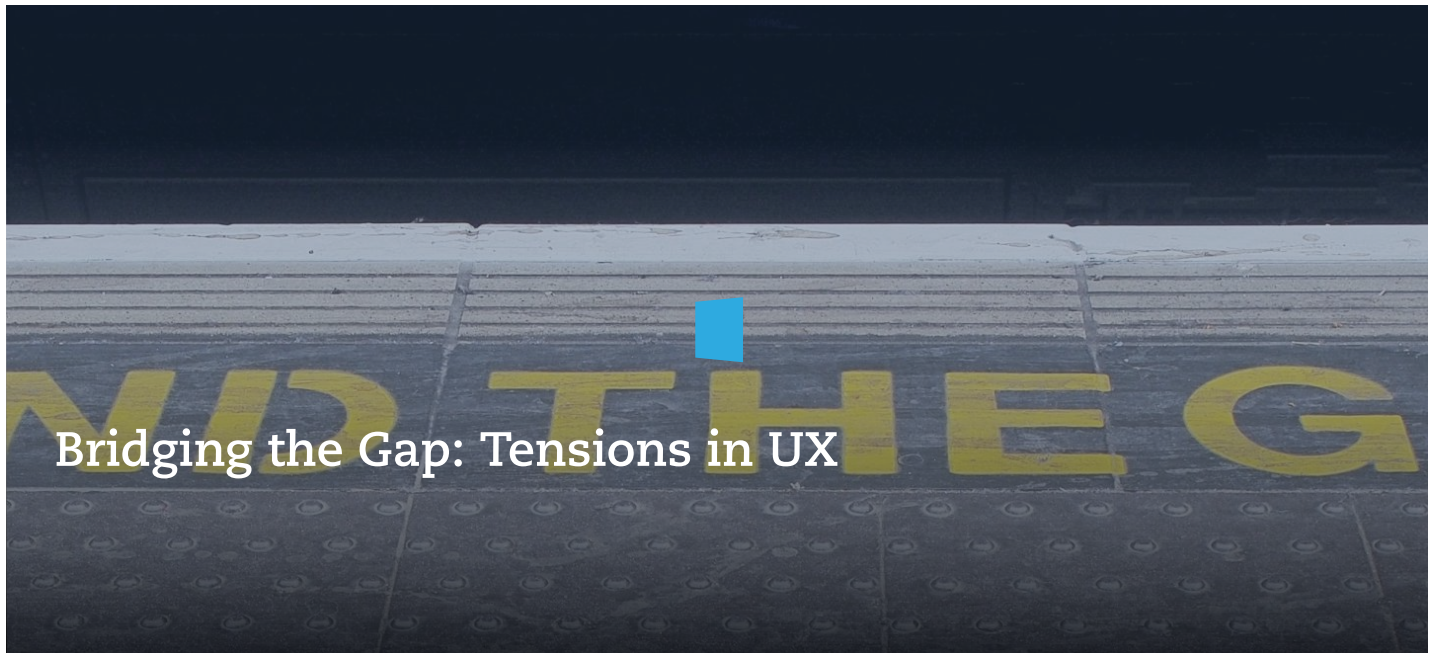
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