

Developing International Personas

A new intercultural communication practice in globalized societies

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Abstract

Personas have become a popular method in new product development. Personas have traditionally, and are still, primarily created to represent users from a single national culture at a time during the design process. This, however, is unsatisfactory for companies operating on a global market as they show an increasing interest in *international* personas. However, research on personas in a global context is limited. To address this gap, this paper provides an overview of extant research on international personas. Secondly, it presents an empirical study on challenges Danish IT companies experience when using the persona method to collect and present insights about their international users. A key finding in both the literature review and the empirical study was the ambiguity concerning the concept of culture. Therefore, the paper draws on theories about culture, and especially practice theory, to discuss how challenges related to perceptions of culture and intercultural communication might be overcome when working with international personas. In particular, it is suggested that the persona method could benefit from creating narratives that focus more on the similar practices enacted by international users and less on perceived differences in national culture.

Keywords: *personas, practice theory, globalization*

Introduction

Personas have become a well-known method for designers developing new products, services, and IT systems. Personas were originally used by IT designers and, subsequently, the method has won popularity in many other fields. However, the vast majority of personas are created from a monocultural (Western) perspective, representing users from a single national culture at a time (Nielsen et al. 2013; Cabrero et al. 2015). Due to the growing global market, companies show an increasing interest in creating *international* personas, but research on personas in a global context remains limited.

A persona is a constructed, fictional character with a name, a narrative, and a picture, usually based on empirical data. Especially among IT designers, it is a well-known method to help keep the users in mind during the design process. The major function of a persona is to enable designers to break free of their tendency to design for themselves (Floyd et al. 2008). The popularization of the persona method is often attributed to Alan Cooper: "Personas are not real people, but they represent them throughout the design process. They are hypothetical archetypes of actual users. Although they are imaginary, they are defined with significant rigor and precision." (Cooper 2004: 85)

While there is no single recipe, the literature agrees on three basic steps when constructing personas: a) collect data about users, b) segment the users, and c) create a persona for each user segment, and develop context scenarios for each persona (Cooper et al. 2007; Pruitt & Adlin 2006). The literature on personas recommends developing four to six personas in order for designers to be able to remember the personas as well as the differences between them (Nielsen 2012).

Globalization is a key concept when creating international personas. The study of globalization is interdisciplinary and has been theorized from cultural, economic, political, postcolonial, and neoliberal perspectives. According to Appelbaum and Robinson (2005), global studies challenge the monocultural perspective from which personas have generally been developed. "Global studies view the world as a single interactive system, rather than interplay of discrete nation-states. Its focus is on transnational processes, interactions, and flows, rather than international relations, and on new sets of theoretical, historical, epistemological, and even philosophical questions posed by emergent transnational realities." (pxi) (in Bardham and Weaver 2011:4) Arjun Appadurai (1996) conceptualizes globalization as different "scapes": ethnoscapas (human mobility and migration), mediascapas (transnational television, internet, and mass media), technoscapas (movement of technology/information across borders), financescapas (the flow of capital across national borders), and ideoscapas (transnational morphing of ideas, e.g., religion). Appadurai argues that all of these "scapes" are fluid, intersecting, and, importantly, they all challenge the notion of a nation-state with a border to other nation-states (Appadurai, 1996).

Developing international personas has to be seen in this context. Making national personas for designing a product which will be sold and used in global contexts no longer makes sense. According to most researchers in globalization, the overall characteristic of globalization is that it can be described as a range of reversing and changing processes (Bartelson 2000). One process is the global process, which Appadurai describes with his metaphors on scapes. The other process is the local process (often national), in which the uniqueness of each culture or nation state is emphasized. As we will discuss later in the article, these two positions are dominant in our study.

The aim of the article is to present a study where we explore strategies Danish companies use when creating personas for a global market, and to present and discuss how a practice theoretical approach is fruitful in constructing and conceptualizing international personas.

Literature review

The literature and research related to personas in a global context is scarce (Nielsen et al. 2013). The literature that does exist seems to cover three main themes: (1) integration of culture into the IT design, (2) studies on specific cases, and (3) methods for developing personas.

Integration of culture into the IT design

Young (2007) explores how culture is integrated in interaction design and instructional design. She concludes that the majority of designers lack a nuanced framework and vocabulary for the integration of culture into the design of Human Computer Interaction (HCI). The few researchers and designers within HCI who do define culture rely upon the work of Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions (Hofstede 1984), which emphasizes differences across national cultures. Young (2007) concludes that designers and researchers need more guidance in the form of models or frameworks in order to incorporate culture and enhance the design process. According to Young's study, the general tendency is that culture is often neglected and, when the concept of culture is included, it is primarily done by working with differences across national cultures.

Sun (2011), who is a researcher in cross-cultural IT design, shares Young's position. She criticizes Hofstede's cultural dimensions for being static and for putting too much emphasis on the cognitive schemas of national groups. Other subcultural factors, such as the individual user's gender, age, organizational affiliation, or ethnic group, are ignored: "In fact, missing the actual practice of social activities is a common problem in cross-cultural design literature" (Sun 2011: 13). Sun argues that Hofstede's approach does not offer a beneficial guide for creating international personas.

Studies on specific cases

Although research related to culture and personas is limited, a few empirical studies on how to develop international personas have been conducted. Cabrero et al. (2015) have done a study in three Herero settings in Namibia, investigating how personas may be used outside a non-WEIRD context. WEIRD is an acronym for western, educated, industrialized, rich, and developed. They explored how end users in Herero rural settings work with the co-design of persona descriptions. Members of the Herero tribe were active in creating the user representations and in finding design opportunities. Furthermore, the authors emphasized the importance of having researchers experience the contexts in order to build trust and to be prepared to meet people who live a very different life in the global society than oneself.

Snyder et al. (2011) experienced such contexts when conducting ethnographic research of mobile users in India, Singapore, and the U.S. They held that extensive literature exists on personas in general, but that there is very little information on how to account for cultural differences in the making of personas. One of the goals in creating the personas was to highlight cross-cultural differences among mobile users. Although some variations were observed among the countries, the work tasks and flows of enterprise workers were very similar across the different national cultures. Snyder et al. described how their first attempt to incorporate culture in the persona was not well accepted:

[They] ... started out by creating U.S.-based personas that included separate sections highlighting the cultural differences. When we presented these personas to the other user experience professionals outside of our team, they did not react favorably. They said that the cultural information seemed disjointed from the rest of the personas. They indicated that it conflicted with the goal of the personas, which was to get the reader focused on identifying with the character in the persona (Snyder et al. 2011: 317).

They then decided to take another approach by integrating any cultural differences into the personas without including separate sections for cultural differences. In the paper, they were not clear about how this approach was received by professionals outside their team and they concluded by emphasizing both approaches as possible models for integrating cultural differences into the persona descriptions. Snyder et al.'s study is relevant in two ways. First, in their ethnographic study, they observed more similarities than differences. This shows the importance of caution, for instance, when using Hofstede's cultural dimensions as these are mainly focused on cultural differences. Secondly, they were willing to experiment with different approaches on how to work with cultural differences in relation to international personas. Although they did not highlight one approach over the other, they did emphasize the importance of only including pictures that capture a specific instance of product use (in this example, mobile use) when presenting personas.

Our literature review has convinced us that culture is an important factor to take into consideration when developing personas. While studies point to the existence of many similarities across cultures, they also show that everyday life may be different for end users across cultures and that it can be difficult for researchers to capture these differences.

Methods for developing personas

One of the crucial parts of constructing international personas is data collection, which is difficult to do properly, as well as requiring considerable resources (Champman & Milham 2006).

Putnam et al. (2009) conducted a case study on mobile use in Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia in order to explore how to adapt user-centered design methods for diverse populations. As part of the design process, they created personas. The researchers emphasized their case study from Kyrgyzstan as an alternative way of creating personas and scenarios, as they based their study on already existing survey data from 1,000 respondents in Kyrgyzstan and 16 interviews with 12 participants. Based on the data, Putnam et al. (2009) created three personas. Each was presented as a persona description and a primary context scenario inspired by Cooper's (2007) design scenarios. A culture-specific approach was chosen when presenting the personas as they used photos from interview participants and gave the personas Kyrgyz names which "clearly identify the personas as representatives of a non-Western audience" (Putnam 2008: 62).

Tamara Adlin and John Pruitt (2006) showed that personas tend to be created from information collected within the country in which the developers themselves live. Based on this, they recommended that designers collaborate with local informants and use their cultural insights when collecting data for international personas. In their study, Microsoft's international subsidiaries were responsible for providing accurate and relevant information on local user needs, market requirements, and competitive situations. When presenting the international personas, they made an "Overview" section (describing the personas' main characteristics, habits, and daily activities) and a "Differences from the U.S. Persona Macro Analysis" section (containing all items rated as largely or completely different from those of the U.S. persona). Thus, a culturally specific approach was used to illustrate the cultural differences from a U.S. perspective. However, an analysis of the case shows that the U.S. is viewed as the norm and, due to this shortcoming, the strategy appears rather ethnocentric.

A presentation of our Danish study

The purpose of the research project "International User Studies: How companies collect and represent data about users on international markets" (Madsen et al. 2015), was to investigate how companies collect and present data about users in international markets. The research was initiated based on the literature review described above, which showed that more knowledge about how to conduct international user studies was required.

Methodology

The empirical data of the study consisted of 15 qualitative interviews with user experience (UX) researchers conducted in Danish companies. The selection criteria of the companies were: 1) that they were operating in international markets and 2) that they had experience with international user studies, and/or were using specific methods (e.g., the persona method or segmentation into target groups), to delineate and incorporate user insights into their work and design processes.

The interviews were organized as semi-structured interviews and held in accordance with an interview guide inspired by narrative research (Gertsen & Søderberg 2011). Thus, the interviewee was prompted to begin by talking about a concrete example of an international user study (e.g., the latest) in which the participant had been involved. This meant that the interviews were centered on the interviewees' personal experiences of successes and challenges working with international user studies, especially in relation to the persona method. The interviews were conducted by two researchers and each interview lasted 1-1½ hours. The interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. All interviews were held in Denmark in Danish, and translated into English by the authors. The empirical data was analyzed through an ethnographic-inspired approach to discourse analysis (Green et al. 2007). Key statements from the interviewees were divided into central themes on which the findings of this paper are based. The process was structured into several rounds of analysis in which a thematic approach was used to organize the interview data into relevant units of text and themes. Finally, these themes were interpreted and the meaning condensed into the research findings.

Findings in the Danish Study

In the following, we present the findings from the Danish study. The findings fall into three categories: (1) similarities between end users, (2) strategies for persona creation, and (3) presentation of international personas.

Differences and similarities between end users across cultures

One of the important outcomes of our international user study is the insight that the informants (UX researchers) experience many similarities among end users across nationalities—as humans, consumers (of particular products), parents, workers, etc.

“The user studies we have done have shown that, at the personal level, our end users have very similar motivations and approaches across borders . . . and this is very, very important and we make a big deal out of communicating this to employees” (Interviewee C).

“. . . [this disability] affects end users in the same way no matter where they live in the world” (Interviewee N).

The interviewees expressed the same experience going abroad as described in Snyder et al.'s study on mobile phones, showing that the mobile phones are used quite similarly across countries. Some might imagine that foreign cultures are very different from one's own. However, in regard to the specific practices of using a mobile phone or a handicap aid, many practices seem to be shared. The UX researchers also stressed that employees have many preconceptions about different nationalities and the dominant role that national culture plays. Therefore, insights about which similarities the company's end users share across nationalities have to be explicitly communicated to the employees. Otherwise, stereotypical understandings of national differences might go unquestioned and influence the employees' daily work and, ultimately, the company's products. When it comes to differences, it is interesting that the most important differences often stem from variations in the economic situation, legislation, education, societal structures, and structural developments in different countries and regions, and not from national culture.

. . . it has to do with how the economy is . . . [and the] legislation. Legislation promotes a particular behavior in a particular country. And these are actually the two things that we have seen consequences of. (Interviewee C)

. . . the difference that we see when we talk about [our end users] is that there can be a difference in how much money they have and this has something to do with whether the country they live in gives refunds, or health insurance, or whether the state is paying the full amount, and things like that. There are many different models in the different countries. And that affects this very much. (Interviewee N)

The interview data also contain numerous examples of the role that *perceived* differences in national culture play. In some companies, an understanding of differences with regard to management control and employee autonomy is modeled directly into software that supports organizational workflow. Regarding one of the perceived differences across countries:

. . . it also has something to do with how hierarchy works in Japan or in Asia compared to how hierarchy is in Denmark or in the U.S. . . . There is much more freedom in what you are allowed to do in Denmark compared to other places. (Interviewee F)

Thus, for some software companies, it is important to take into account that employees in Denmark (and in the other Scandinavian countries) have more autonomy than in many other countries where decisions are either made by management or require managerial approval. In other cases, perceived differences in national culture are used to explain anticipated and experienced challenges when communicating with colleagues from other countries or when collecting data in other countries. The quotes below contain examples of how challenges with regard to intercultural communication might arise when communicating partners have different expectations. For example, they may have placed a different emphasis on efficiency versus politeness, which is a recognized challenge in intercultural communication studies (Brown & Levinson 1987).

I have just received an email from one of my colleagues who is trying to organize [a user study] in Japan for me. He says that you have to be aware that . . . traditionally speaking, they are not so willing to say what they really think . . . especially if their opinion is negative, so I have to take that into account. (Interviewee F)

We have experienced the classical thing: We have used the same type of test in both places, and in Brazil, they were very expressive, the Japanese gave very short statements, the Chinese were very polite, and the Germans made jokes that were kind of dirty, which was a little strange. . . (Interviewee M)

In the examples, experienced/perceived differences in communication styles are associated with and explained by national culture. The consequence of this is that more general understandings based on one factor, namely national culture, are foregrounded, while the more complex aspects of culture and the uniqueness of the actual situations and the individual communication partners are played down. The interviewees used words such as “traditionally speaking” and “the classical thing” to signal that they are aware of using general and somewhat stereotypical descriptions to explain

the behavior of people from the countries in question. Although they express this awareness, the labeling of “the others” remains a reconfirmation of national differences and dominant common national signs or habits.

The study shows that there seems to be an uncertainty, especially among the internationally experienced UX researchers, about how to present personas when the target group is international users:

(. . .) I would not divide according to nation states, but if—someone is very typically from one country, you might want to provide an image and give the persona a name from the country, but then what happens is that people think that the persona represents the whole of India. I have not found the solution yet . . . (Interviewee N)

It seems that the internationally experienced UX researchers are caught in one of the most discussed anthropological dilemmas: How do we explain the relation between the local and the global (Appadurai 1991)?

Main strategies for creating personas in a global context

The study shows that the UX researchers have two main strategies for creating international personas: 1) creating personas according to nationality and 2) creating personas according to education, profession, etc.

We have tried two different models. One [model] is to have a persona that is very focused on how people in this job think and what kind of goals they have. It [the persona description] can be quite general . . . the other model we have tried is to map different personas to different regions. (Interviewee B)

When the national strategy is used, there is typically one persona per country/region covered by the user study. For example, if the user study was conducted in Denmark, India, and the U.S., the result will be one Danish, one Indian, and one American persona. In other words, this strategy results in country-specific persona descriptions and, consequently, each persona represents a whole country. Personas are also created based on a strategy using other criteria; this is typically education or profession, but it could also be level of involvement, learning styles, digital maturity, autonomy at the workplace, etc.

There are also several examples of how the strategy for creating personas is based on considerations other than the differences that emerge during data analysis. In one case, political considerations led to the use of the national strategy by constructing one persona for each of the company’s main markets, even though nationality was not reflected as a significant difference in the data. In another case, the client had requested personas specific to “the Swedish market”, “the Norwegian market,” etc. Thus the client required personas according to nationality. In other words, the decision to create personas based on nationality is made early on in the project due to the client’s way of thinking about their users in terms of upcoming markets.

Presentation of international personas

The study of Danish IT companies identifies three approaches to presenting international personas:

1. A culturally neutral approach in which culturally specific places and names are eliminated from the descriptions.

I am very reluctant to split by country . . . We have also tried to make them [the personas]. It is on purpose that, in these scenarios, we have not written X [the name of a Danish grocery store], and we have not written Y [the name of a Danish city] . . . And we managed very well, I think, that we do not make such cultural markers, and that is deliberate. So this I have been aware of, when I wrote them. So it has to be the recognition of something else. (Interviewee N)

The quote represents a culturally neutral approach in which the UX researcher chose a strategy to tone down cultural differences and geographic references and create persona descriptions that were as general as possible. The focus is on the persona with specific habits or values rather than a person in a specific place. The argument for choosing this approach is that employees around the world should be able to recognize and use the personas. In the companies that use the culturally neutral approach, the UX researchers prefer to use pictures that contain very little background that could place the persona in a specific context. Moreover, they prefer to avoid place names and to give the personas names which are as general as possible (i.e. names that could be used or that are recognizable around the world).

2. A culturally specific approach (one persona for one country)

Some UX researchers chose a culturally specific approach in which a persona is created for every strategic market even though the empirical data do not support this division. For example, some companies have tried to identify differences among the Nordic countries using one persona per country.

"There are four personas, one for each of the Nordic countries—however, there is no connection to the data; it is a democratic choice that there must be one persona for each of the four countries . . ." (Interviewee C).

The argument for choosing this second approach is to communicate the diversity of the users to the employees. Companies that use this approach do, more or less, the opposite of strategy one. They highlight cultural specificity by choosing expressive pictures that show the personas in context with names from the specific region. It is relevant to note that this approach was chosen despite its lack of correspondence with data results which normally is a criterion for creating personas (Adlin & Pruitt, 2006).

3. An approach that challenges stereotypes

The third approach is to use the persona descriptions to show diversity and try to draw attention to, and challenge, employees’ stereotypical understandings of who the users are. One of the interviewees explained that she puts much effort into finding the right pictures for her personas and that she deliberately chooses pictures that challenge stereotypical understandings: “Generally for personas in firms: the top manager is a woman; the creative leader is a dark man. That is how you try to challenge stereotypes” (Interviewee A).

Like the second approach, this approach does not necessarily correspond to the data, but the UX researcher intentionally chose this approach to work with the problem of stereotypical assumptions among the employees.

The above findings show that there seems to be an overall ambivalence about the concept of culture. Companies are, at this time, in an experimental process on how best to present the insights about international end users to their employees. However, so far, *no* best practice for incorporating both national cultural differences and cross-cultural similarities into persona descriptions has been found.

Discussion

A significant finding in both our literature review and empirical study was ambiguity concerning the concept of culture, where cultural differences are handled in different ways. The UX designers in the Danish companies emphasize that many similarities are seen among users across countries, but they still find it important to illustrate cultural differences in the persona descriptions. This ambiguity regarding culture mirrors globalization: Emphasizing cultural differences resembles the national, local process, while looking at similarities resembles the global process (Appadurai 1991). Developing international personas, therefore, has to be done with this ambiguity in mind. This ambiguity reflects the two dominant ways of understanding culture: as what we are (culture as being), or what we do (culture as doing).[1] Understanding culture as a configuration of practices might be an alternative way to invite the designers to forget about cultural differences and instead focus on common practices across countries.

Culture as being

If culture is seen as “being,” it is understood as an entity and as the medium through which all members of a national culture share values, rules, and norms that are more or less unchanged and inherited from generation to generation. As Ortner puts it:

Classic anthropology tended to portray groups of people as having “a culture” as being in the grip of that culture and as acting in ways that could be explained largely by reference to that culture. . . . [the job of the traditional anthropologist] . . . was to unearth a people’s culture, to work out its logic and coherence, and to show the way in which it undergirded most of the formalized practices (e.g., rituals), patterns of practice (e.g., child rearing), and the ordinary and extraordinary behavior of members of the group. (Ortner 2006: 12)

Although many anthropologists now have abandoned this position because they wish to avoid ethnic, racial, or class stereotypes, the classic anthropological tradition, seeing culture as being, has been the dominant way of conceptualizing culture in the field of intercultural communication (Halualani et al. 2009; Chuang 2003; Jensen 2006; 2011a; Otten & Geppert 2009).

Geert Hofstede is one of the most influential researchers working from this position. He defined culture as “the collective programming of the mind [that] distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others” (Hofstede et al. 2010: 6). Hofstede did his famous survey on data collected in 41 different national IBM offices. The rationale behind his survey was that, since everybody was working for IBM, the differences among the participants could only be explained by national cultural differences. He developed four cultural dimensions: 1) Power distance; what relation does the employee have to power? 2) Uncertainty avoidance; to what extent does the employee feel threatened by the unknown? 3) Individualism/collectivism; to what extent does the employee feel responsible for his or her own or extended family? 4) Masculine/feminine dominance; to what extent are values based on materialism or nurturing? Later, two more cultural dimensions were added: 5) Long- versus short-term orientation and 6) Dimension indulgence/restraint; to what degree is the employee able to work pragmatically? (Hofstede et al. 2010)

Hofstede’s study focused primarily on national differences, which constitute a powerful factor in constructing, reconstructing, and maintaining the national discourse. As in the before-mentioned approach to “culture as being,” the work of Hofstede emphasized that differences between actors living in different countries are significant and relevant in organizations and businesses.

Hofstede and international personas

In her research on a comparative study of geographic information systems between German and American users, Francis Harvey concluded that: “Hofstede’s dimensions of national culture are a good basis for understanding the influence of national culture on organizations’ self-representation, but miss the actual practice of social activities” (Harvey 1997: 145). Despite heavy criticism of Hofstede’s work for creating a simplistic view of national cultures as homogeneous, and a critique of the basic validity regarding the production of data (Sweeney 2002), Hofstede is, according to Sun (2011), one of the most used researchers in cross-cultural HCI.

As Hofstede’s dimensions are known worldwide, it would be possible to develop personas based upon the six cultural dimensions. Arguments for this would be: Hofstede is the only researcher who already is world famous among designers; his model is simple, and he has already found six important differences across cultures. In this way, it could be argued that data for specific countries exist and it would be possible to make narratives for different countries based on data from these dominant national elements. However, it could also be argued that Hofstede’s work would be counterproductive to the idea of personas: The aim of personas is to help designers to imagine users as different from themselves and to create identification with the persona. If Hofstede’s national model is used, one persona is described based on predefined categories and represents a whole nation. When a persona is representative of a whole nation, it reproduces stereotypes to such a degree that identification with users’ actual practices become impossible. Furthermore, using one visual image to represent a whole country in a multicultural society with many different ethnic groups is problematic. Although the personas would be based on empirical data, they would not be relevant data for the specific products. When designing a hearing aid, while it might not be relevant whether the user has a high/low score on power relation, it would be relevant, for example, to obtain data about the user’s educational background and to what degree the person has self-awareness and accepts her/his loss of hearing.

Culture as doing

Seeing culture as doing is put to the fore in a variety of ways, such as in the area of anthropology (Geertz 1973; Hylland Eriksen & Sørheim 2002; Hall et al. 1992; Hall 1997). Culture is regarded as (some shared) norms and meanings (Geertz 1973), but these are interpreted quite differently in a specific society. Fredrik Barth (1994) stated that “Culture is distributed,” This means that members of a society always share experiences, norms, and values with some individuals, but never with everybody. Culture is seen as dynamic; cultures are changing and members of a culture negotiate their values. What influences individual’s diverse meaning and the way life is negotiated includes factors such as educational background, social position, gender, ethnicity, and the actual situation under discussion. From this point of view, culture is never used as the only explanation for practices. When seeing culture as doing, how culture is done in the specific situation must always be investigated (Jensen 2011a; 2011b).

Furthermore, in the field of intercultural communication, research on the perspective of doing culture is widely accepted, especially outside the area of business communications (Dahl 2013; Piller 2011; Nakayama & Halualani 2009; Otten & Geppert 2009).

Halualani et al. (2009) state how the abovementioned critical discussion has come to be voiced in the field of intercultural communication. The first juncture is when a critique of the embedded assumptions of race-less, gender-less, and class-absent individualism began to interrupt the positivist discourse in the discipline. The second juncture is summed up as the need for seeing culture in a historical context. The third juncture is a critique of

national culture as the bearer of differences among communicators. The last juncture is a critique of the imagination of culture as a space for agreement, starting to see culture as a site of struggle (Halualani et al. 2009: 24). Despite the diversity between scholars of intercultural communication, there seems to be a shared understanding of culture as complex, diverse, dynamic, and always a site of struggle.

Culture as doing and international personas

Seeing culture as doing has the following implications for developing international personas. First and foremost, it is important to recognize that one person will never be able to represent a whole national culture as it is argued that the nation is an imagination (Anderson 1983). Although some doings are shared, a culture is also a “site of struggle”. As mentioned above, a persona cannot be race-less, gender-less, and class-less.

This position also has consequences for the visual representation of a persona. In multicultural societies, one of the “struggles of cultures” is to embrace all citizens as “full members of the society” despite their phenotype, hair color, religious belief, etc. From this follows that it is important to discuss how international personas may be developed without presupposing, for example, that a person from Scandinavian countries is white. One suggestion is to work with sketch drawings which could contribute with more neutral expressions than colorful photographs. Inspired by Snyder et al. (2011), another way of visualizing personas is to focus on the actual practices or uses of particular products. Thus, the focus would be more on the persona’s actual handling of the products rather than a focus on the persona itself.

Summing up, we have argued that the concept of culture—and how it is used—is central when developing international personas. One possibility is to construct personas according to Hofstede’s cultural dimensions. Doing so, we have to face the fact that differences based on national categories will be foregrounded and differences in actual practices will be overlooked. Another possibility is to implement a more complex understanding of cultures and the perspective of culture as doing. Developing personas from this perspective must be related to a historical context, shared values across national cultures, and seeing culture as a site of struggle: showing personas that reflect class, gender, and ethnicity. As argued above, when developing international personas from this perspective, we need to rethink methods on how to present and visualize personas.

Practice theory – culture as practices

Inspired by practice theory, we will invite a new discussion into the field of personas research. We propose investigating possibilities, for example, when redesigning a system, of creating personas according to their practices. Regarding the before-mentioned challenges related to identification and visual representations, the turn to practices is interesting because it might set us free from imagining “international persons” and create an identification with the “international practices” shared by the users of the product. Inspired by practice theory (Schatzki 2002; Nicolini 2012; Shove & Pantzar 2005), it could be argued that the narrative and the picture (for developing some types of personas) need to shift focus from creating an identification with *persons* to an identification with *practices* enacted by global users.

What is a practice?

A practice is defined as interconnected rays of activities or arrangements which often are routinized. According to Theodore Schatzki, what all practices have in common is that practices are our doings and sayings, tied together by practical understandings, formal and informal rules, a *teleoaffective* structure, aiming toward a goal and general understandings (Schatzki 2002: 53). For example, a practice is to teach, to write, to turn on your computer, or to fill out a form in the IT system provided by your municipality for applying for a daycare facility for your child. If we take latter as an example of a practice, the concept would be as follows: In order to fill in a form, a *practical understanding* of what “to fill in a form” means is necessary.

An understanding would, in this case, be knowledge about the IT system, about the day care system, and especially about how to fill in a form according to the logic of the municipality. In order to fill in the form you have to follow some formal rules, such as providing correct information about the age of the child and the physical address for your domicile. The teleoaffective structure is related to the part of the practice that is strategic/emotional: an actor’s choice to act emotionally (emotional plea or rational arguments) in order to attain access to a particular facility. Lastly, to fill in a form draws on ‘general understandings’ about digital communication as a meaningful work tool for municipalities. Many scholars are inspired by Schatzki and share this basic understanding of a practice (Reckwitz 2002).

The above description of practice is also useful as a framework for the analysis of practice. In intercultural communication the question addressed will often be related to whether the participants have shared norms for appropriate behavior, especially regarding informal rules, general understandings, and teleoaffective structures.

The main assumption in practice theory is that subjects are trained by practices, carriers of practices and, although each individual experiences his/her own choices, these are related to existing practices. A practice always has an individual and a social side. When designing new products, the social part is the most important. It is the similar choices people make which are of interest and that have to be captured when constructing a persona. Practices are closely related to norms; they are not individual but shared and negotiated every time we enact a practice. This means that we identify ourselves with our practices and we communicate with others through our practices.

From this position, it follows that it is possible for designers to identify different types of practices which will be characteristic for different persons.

Culture as practice

A common assumption in practice theory is that the social component is constructed through our practices. It is through our practices that we construct norms and meanings and change the social organization. Thus, when taking a practice theory approach to culture, culture may be understood as configurations of practices (Jensen 2011a, 2011b). Some of these practices will be shared with specific social groups in a society while other practices will be shared across social groups and, for example, follow the lines of consumption (Warde 2005). Regarding development of international personas, many practices, as our study clearly shows, are shared across national cultures. In this way, practice theory offers an alternative way of understanding culture which might enable designers to forget about national borders and instead design for different ways of doing practices within and across countries.

An example of a culturally specific approach is the approach taken by the companies in our study. Four personas were created for each country in their specific market, even though this did not correspond to the data. Instead of focusing on national culture as a pre-decided criteria for illustrating differences between the personas, the focus could have been on differences in practices for operating the system or managing the specific product. The narratives for these practice-personas might be related to different ways of handling a system.

Conclusion

Personas are created and used to facilitate a focus on the end users during the design process. One of the main ideas in working with personas is to let the designers be inspired to create a common reference point and encourage empathy and identification with end users. The assumption is that identification with end users will result in products that both cover the users' needs in better ways and incorporate variations among different user groups.

There seems to be an increasing interest in creating international personas by a growing number of UX designers (Madsen et al. 2015). The objective of this paper has therefore been to contribute with an empirical study and meta-theoretical reflections on further work. The paper has presented a critical review on the existing work as well as a Danish study on UX researchers' strategy when using personas for international markets. Due to the fact that no best practice has yet been developed, several UX designers are struggling with the question on how to integrate and present cultural differences when working with international personas.

Focusing on practices might help the designers to overcome the struggle and the dominant everyday discourse on culture as being and as norms and values shared by members of national cultures. The visual presentation of a persona is a particularly significant issue in globalized societies, as gender, ethnicity, religion, and age are important symbols of belonging to different national cultures. However, further research on international personas is needed. It would be relevant to examine, through empirical studies, whether international personas developed through identification with practices, visualized through sketch drawings without visible national characteristics, using pictures of the actual practices and specific use of products, will work.

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