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Koray Gelmez
Istanbul Technical University, Department of Industrial Product Design

Humanur Bagli
Istanbul Technical University, Department of Industrial Product Design

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Social Network as a Tool to Develop Personas for User Research: An Exercise from Design Education

Koray GELMEZ[*] and Humanur BAGLI

Istanbul Technical University, Department of Industrial Product Design

Abstract: This study focuses on a brand new type of user research as a part of a design project conducted in 2012 Summer School Project Studio in the Department of Industrial Product Design at Istanbul Technical University (ITU), Turkey. Students are required to get information from an open Facebook profile by concentrating on its demographics (age, gender, and nationality), descriptive attributes, mottos, likes, dislikes, hates, beliefs, activities, work attitudes, holiday attitudes, socializations and favourite objects etc. They are expected to propose some keywords and concepts to describe the persona after learning from the Facebook profile. By depending on these keywords, they are required to develop mood boards to summarize, abstract the data to generalize the persona to represent a real user group. This is supported by an exercise in which students fill a fictitious shopping cart of the persona according to the so-called buying habits of him/her. Finally, they are expected to act as the persona they developed in a role playing session in couples to enliven the persona and enhance the degree of empathy. This paper benefits from persona forms, mood boards and video recordings and aims to question whether new sources of social network such as Facebook is helpful as new and progressive tools for design research and education.

Keywords: Social network, User research, Persona, Design education.

[*] Corresponding author: Department of Industrial Product Design | Istanbul Technical University | Turkey | e-mail: koraygelmez@gmail.com

Background

Facebook

In today's world, Facebook influences almost every single person's life. According to the recent statistics, there were 901 million monthly active users at the end of March 2012 (Facebook 2012a). Approximately more than 300 million photos uploaded to Facebook per day in the three months ended March 31, 2012.

According to the key facts on Facebook, "people use Facebook to stay connected with friends and family, to discover what's going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them" (Facebook 2012a).

Socialbakers.com declares that in Turkey there are 30.771.500 Facebook users, which makes it 6th in the ranking of all over the world (Socialbakers 2012). About 9 users of 10 internet users in Turkey have active Facebook account, which means that Facebook is fairly popular in Turkey.

Facebook offers a personal web page for the users, which includes a considerable amount of personal information such as birth date, e-mail address, hometown, demographics, hobbies, relationship status, favourite movies, music, books, online, activities etc. In addition to the profile pages, all users have a ''wall'', where they and their friends can leave messages or declarations. Therefore, Facebook can be considered as a platform where people try to reflect and emphasize their identities (Zhao et al. 2008, Smock 2010).

The issue of identity

A self-identity is formed in a public interaction, including "identity announcement" and the "identity placement". While the former one refers to asserting an identity by the individual, the latter one is related to approving the individual's identity by others. The identity is founded when "coincidence of placements and announcements" is formed (Stone 1990, p. 143). It is "the process by which people convey to others that they are a certain kind of person or possess certain characteristics" (Leary 1996, p. 17).

Whereas people use their clothes, hair, language, belongings etc. in physical world as they are reflecting their identities, they are identified by their writings, and preferences in virtual world. Even though the virtual and physical worlds have similarities in the sense of social interaction, "the virtual world is much more self-controlled and self-constructed" (Estoisia et al. 2009). Moreover, self-presentation on social networking sites differs from physical interaction since people may "inspect, edit and revise" (Walther, Slovacek and Tidwell 2001, p. 109) themselves in virtual world.

Ethical issues

In the context of this study, the use of personal data in Facebook is considered from the privacy and ethical points of view. According to legal terms in Facebook:

When you publish content or information using the Public setting, it means that you are allowing everyone, including people off of Facebook, to access and use that information, and to associate it with you (i.e., your name and profile picture) (Facebook 2012b).

Depending on this term, in the process of the project, personal data is used educational purposes only and it does not violate the agreement given by the rules of Facebook. Also, in the selection of the profiles, only the open profiles were selected to share in the class and in the paper. In addition, names and identifiers of the Facebook

profiles are not shared and the faces in the mood board examples are blurred in this study.

The method of persona development

'Personas' are fictional characters first appeared as a tool in marketing, extensively examined in Alan Cooper's book "The Inmates are Running the Asylum" (Cooper 1999). It is defined as "hypothetical archetypes of actual users" (Cooper 1999, p. 158). Even though they are unreal, they have to be determined thoroughly and precisely. Cooper (1999) posits that designing a product for general users is problematic. Instead, designing for a single person has to be used while designing a product. In short, "the more specific we make our personas, the more effective they are as design tools" (Cooper 1999, p.163).

Personas are not only powerful tools for assisting designer to better understand the needs of the users, but they also make designers not to design selfishly and enhance communication between design and marketing processes.

Considering methods in creating persona, "photographs and considerable supporting information is provided for each of a handful of Personas used in a project." (Pruitt and Grudin, 2003, p.313). Likewise, Long (2009) suggests to use photographs instead of sketches and illustrated storyboards and scenarios. Another important issue in creating persona is to give the persona a name. According to Cooper (1999), a persona without a name is useless since a nameless persona will never be a concrete individual in anyone's mind. Moreover, Cooper (1999) gives clues on developing personas and making them more realistic by proposing:

To make each persona more real to everyone involved in the product creation, I like to put faces to the names and give each persona an image. I usually purchase, for a small fee, faces from stock photo libraries on the Web. Occasionally, I've used sketched caricatures. You can cut them out of magazines if you want. (p. 163).

Finally, as a design tool, "it is more important that a persona be precise than accurate" (Cooper 1999, p. 166). In other words, it is more crucial to describe the persona in a detailed way than in a correct way. According to Goodwin (2002), personas are depended mainly on ethnographic user data, where focusing on what users do is used rather than asking users what they want.

Goodwin (2008) suggests some keys as guidelines to enhance personas in his article titled "Perfecting your Personas":

1. A good persona description is not a list of tasks or duties; it's a narrative that describes the flow of someone's day, as well as their skills, attitudes, environment, and goals.

2. You should have only the minimum number of personas required to illustrate key goals and behavior patterns.

3. Your marketing and sales targets may not be your design targets

4. ... it's easy to focus too much on a persona's biography. Personal details can be the fun part, but if there are too many of them they just get in the way. To avoid this problem, focus first on the workflow and behavior patterns, goals, environment, and attitudes of the persona—the information that's critical for design—without adding any personality.

5. Each persona should have three or four important goals that help focus the design.

6. Personas must be specific to the design problem

The use of persona does not mean eliminating scenarios or any other methods related to product development. Instead, it is a basis on which to generate scenarios and data collection (Grudin and Pruitt 2002).

As opposed to the idea of using persona, Portigal (2008) asserts that the use of persona is dehumanizing. The personas he defines have senseless names, unrealistic photographs from photography sites, and characteristics based more on the product and sales goals of the development team than the reality of real users' lives. Therefore, according to him, the use of persona is artificial and superficial.

All these characteristics that determine the creation and life-cycle of persona have great parallels with the quality of the data presented in Facebook profiles. These can be summarized as:

- Both have a certain name
- Both show a "flow of someone's day, as well as their skills, attitudes, environment, and goals" (Goodwin 2008).
- It is easy to focus too much on a persona's biography. Personal details can be the fun part, but if there are too many of them they just get in the way. To avoid this problem, focus first on the workflow and behavior patterns, goals, environment, and attitudes of the persona—the information that's critical for design—without adding any personality (Goodwin 2008).

So all these kinds of biographical, demographical, personal, social and behavioral data needed for developing a persona are readily visible and readable in Facebook profiles. This reveals an easy-to-reach kind of information; however a deep-dive critical analysis of the profile is crucial to make decision on what kind of information, or -more correctly- "clues" extracted from the profile to be useful in design ideation, also to generalize the specific data peculiar to one person to represent a social group.

So, this is an initial examination or implementation of a process where the outcomes of the analysis of the Facebook profile connected to the creation of persona as a source for design, in the context of design education and design research.

An Exercise from design education

Considerations on the potentials of developing a persona to use in design process connected to the profile information in Facebook resulted in an experimental project based on user research conducted in 2012 Summer School Project Studio in the Department of Industrial Product Design at Istanbul Technical University (ITU), Turkey.[1]

Description of the process

The process of the project has 3 major phases; creating persona from Facebook profile, developing mood boards and role playing. After the implementation of the project, students fill out the course assessment form to get their opinions about the project. They are required to assess the project research phase by stating which part they like most, which part is the most beneficial for their education and the most boring (see Appendix 2).

CREATING PERSONA FROM FACEBOOK

The process starts with developing persona from an open Facebook profile especially, to meet the ethical standards for the research. Students are expected to fill

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[1] The authors of this paper are also the tutors in the project.

persona form (see Appendix 1), depending on the written and visual data on the profile.

In the first section of the persona form, students are required to get information from a Facebook profile by focusing on its demographics (name, age, gender, nationality), descriptive attributes, mottos, likes, dislikes, hates, beliefs, activities, work attitudes, holiday attitudes, socializations and favourite objects etc. They are expected to propose some keywords and concepts to describe the persona after learning from the Facebook profile.

In the second section, students are required to prepare a fictional shopping list for the persona to specify and direct the research into design choices, also as an exercise to generalize the specific person as a part of a social group. This is a session of brain storming about the syntax of the objects he/she uses to start building up the persona. They have to suggest different products/services that will fit the persona's preferences and include product category, price, brand, technical specifications, source and photographs. They also explain why they choose this product for the persona. This is a process where the persona development is started, rather than just reporting what the Facebook profile contains.

Most of the students enjoyed choosing products for their personas. This made them to think on behalf of somebody else, have empathy and compose a conceptual product range for their personas. Their comments on preparing shopping list part support this:

"Shopping list is the most enjoyable part. It is really interesting experience to decide on behalf of different person."(D. Bektaş)

"When I was choosing products for my persona, I considered my persona's potential necessities, similar products that she owns at her home and the brands that she has liked on Facebook."(M. Alioğlu)

"I really enjoyed when I was preparing shopping list. Since my persona's budget was available, it was not difficult to shop for her. I felt like she was real."(Ö. Kenar)

DEVELOPING MOOD BOARDS

Mood board serves as "a powerful tool to communicate users' emotions, experiences, aspirations, and perceptions to designers" (McDonagh et al. 2002, p.236). Moreover, it makes designers to "communicate" and "express" themselves without being limited to words (McDonagh et al. 2002, p.236). In the light of these, by depending on the keywords that students generate during the first part, they are required to develop mood boards to summarize, visualize and abstract the data to specify and differentiate their personas.

It seems challenging for students to generate mood boards since an abstraction of data from Facebook profile is needed. However, most of them think that this part is beneficial in their process. Moreover, Garner and McDonagh-Philp (2001) state that mood boards are especially beneficial for students since their skills are in development phase. Similarly, most of the students agree with the benefits of this phase:

"This part was most beneficial. I think this part includes many details about all the process." (A. Varlık)

"Developing mood boards was very useful because there is a necessity for feeling the mood from a visual."(B. Akın)

"Mood board helped me to understand persona and facilitates to choose products for shopping list."(G. Altınçekiç)

However, the general standard of the mood boards was not so successful because the collage of the images was mostly the compilation of the images in the Facebook profile, rather than a brand new composition to further the analysis. It worked as a tool for summarizing the whole data collected, rather than as a helpful tool for analysis (Figure 1).
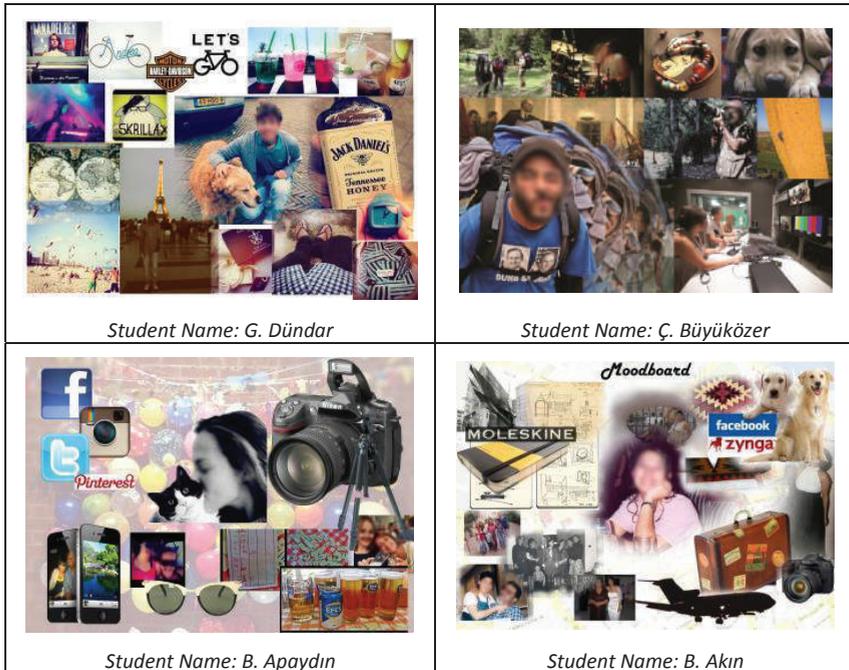

| Student Name: G. Dündar | Student Name: Ç. Büyüközer |
| Student Name: B. Apaydın | Student Name: B. Akın |

Figure 1. Examples from mood boards – faces in the mood boards are blurred by the authors

DEVELOPING SCENARIOS AND ROLE PLAYING

To establish more empathy with the personas and to understand them thoroughly, students are expected to develop scenarios and role play according to their personas. For this part, they worked in pairs, create scenarios together and acted as if they were in their personas' place. They played a short performance together with their partners.

According to Carroll (1999), scenarios are stories, which have a setting, agents or actors and a plot or sequence of actions and events. Likewise, scenarios, which are stories about the personas using the future product or service, highlight additional needs. In the language of product development, these needs are expressed as requirements (Goodwin, 2009).

Scenarios can foster reflection during design process, they are tangible but changeable. They can be examined from multiple perspectives, abstracted and classified (Carroll, 1999).

For this part, it was apparently observed that students enjoyed while they were role playing according to their personas. For instance, one of the students expressed that *"I liked the role playing part most, because it makes me think and act as the persona"* (B. Akın). Moreover, spontaneity of this part increased the motivation of the students for the following parts of the project. In other words, they tried to act like their persona

and play with the persona they have while interacting with the other persona chosen randomly by the tutors.

It was also observed that this part was a positive crack for most of the students who could not integrate and involved into the project. As they associated themselves with the persona, they felt more eager to go on designing for the persona they developed. It was also a process that tutors and students turned back, referenced and acted to personas again and again in the following discussions and critiques (Figure 2).

Two personas coming across in the plane and chatting on their lifestyles

Two friend personas chatting in one's house

Two friend personas chatting in a cafe and taking photos

Two personas knowing each other in the gym

Figure 2. Stills from the role playing

In Figure 3, last stills from the role playing videos are seen to show how students had fun and then motivated from this part of the process.

Figure 3. Last stills from the role playing videos

Outcomes

Even if this study seeks to focus on the method rather than the outcomes, some examples from the design ideations are presented in order to draw attention to advantageous parts and some drawbacks of the project, from the perspective of design.

First of all, almost all of the students had problems in design phase since they had difficulties to make analysis and reach derivations from their research outcomes to the end product. They preferred to use explicit design cues in their products, which made the end products immature and not refined. One of the reasons for this also was the limited time left for the ideation and finalization compared to the time for the research and analysis in the time plan.

For instance, one of the students (A. Varlık) used references from his persona's daily life and hobbies. Especially in this case, there was a significant gap between the student and his persona in terms of gender, age, socio-cultural situation and preferences. (The persona was a middle aged woman married with a prosperous husband with two children). Therefore, in the beginning of the project, he had difficulty in establishing empathy with the persona. Throughout the process, he managed to understand his persona thoroughly and reflected this to the product (Figure 4). He developed a pencil and brush box for his persona who is an amateur painter and likes ornamented, floral decoration.
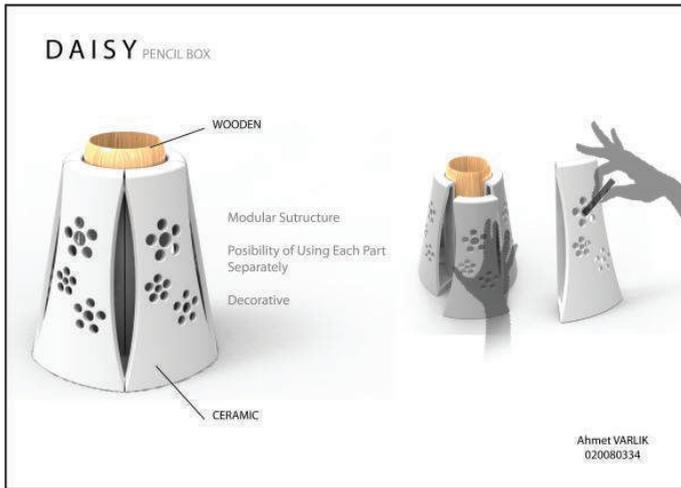
Figure 4. A. Varlık's project – Pencil box

In another project, H. Şişman combined different information that she got from her persona. She used direct references of the character *Sponge Bob –which her persona likes to use its products-* in a functional way. Hence, the hallow parts in the product referring to the material and pattern of the character were used as storing units and the product used as a space separator. Together with the functional benefits, this product had a cosy style which the student thinks that it matched with the persona's lifestyle (Figure 5).
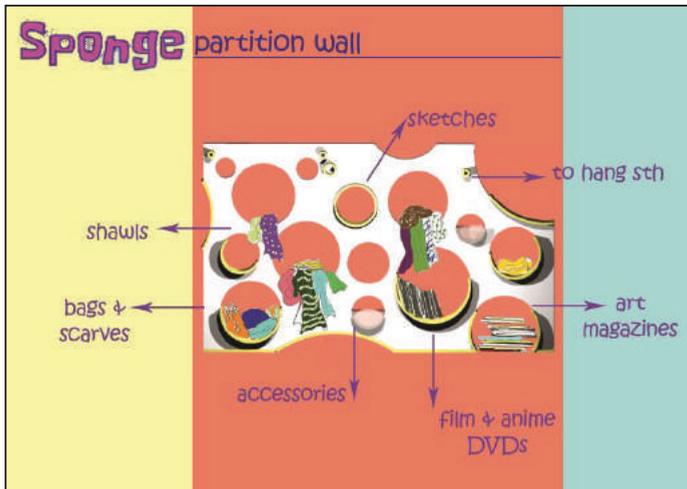

Figure 5. H. Şişman's project – Partition wall

The last project is an example for using direct visual references about the persona. G. Altınçekiç developed a shelf for her persona by a direct resemblance to a soccer ball in her modules, because her persona was a big fan of soccer. It was somewhat similar

to Sponge Bob project, but with less reference to the life style, rather only on the shape itself (Figure 6).

However, it was a one further step forward from another project stick to the use of bright colors just for her persona likes this. This kind of approach shows a rather shallow interpretation of the data, since it does not regard the persona as a holistic figure just by picking one aspect of the whole character.

Figure 6. G. Altınçekiç's project – Shelf

This process can be regarded as a contribution to the design education in terms of generating specific and unique solutions for an intended user group. By the help of the unique process of the project, students could develop specifically designed products.

Whether or not there is a perfect match between the persona created and the product developed for that persona, the process was a good test of the combination of new methods. Also, the result of the product ideations was so original that, students state it was not possible to develop such concepts and products in another process.

The effect of drama, among other methods, was so clear and had a great impact on expression of the students as a person and as a designer. It was again seen that, interactive approaches are the best solution to warm up the hard processes.

Conclusion and Discussion

In summary, in this project there were three main phases that was examined in previous sections; creating persona from Facebook profiles, developing mood boards and role playing. Facebook was used for data gathering that is necessary for creating personas. In the process of analysis, mood boards were prepared to abstract and generalize the data and share them with the class. Role playing was the final part where students acted like their personas and had a close association with them.

In the classical process of creating personas, conventional techniques are mostly used; interviews, surveys and other methods taken from ethnography. The use of the

data gained and analysed from Facebook, seems to be an original and fruitful source for designers. Rather than trying to find out data from the scratch, Facebook is a ready-made source, however waiting to be analysed and made use of wisely. So the quality and the nature of the analysis become critical here, because the data gained and distilled should be suitable and well implemented both for the concept creation and ideation of a new product design.

This paper aims to explore the use of social network in the context of design education and design development in general. In this study, the research phase of the project was longer and more dominant; however, it is also possible to conduct a process with a more design focus, also with reflections from the persona him/herself.

The quotations from the students' reflections support the focus of the study as they learned more in terms of method rather than product development itself. One of the students states that:

"…It is both enjoyable and informative to get information from Facebook profile. Analyzing the photos, "likes", comments and "shares" makes me to develop ideas. Continuing with mood boards and developing personas teaches me new ways to get information."(Y. Avcı)

The use of new media as a design research source was also interesting for the students. One of the students declares that:

"This project contributes to my educational improvement, in which I developed a persona that I did not know before by using an online source."(Ö. Kenar)

It is also observed that, using social network for research is exciting and easy to motivate for the students because it became almost natural to perform this kind of research for especially young people, as a daily habit because it is the basic form of interaction in social media.

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Appendix 1.

Summer School 2012 – Studio Class
Date:
Student Name: Student ID:

Demographics (Name, Age, Gender, Nationality etc.):
Descriptive attributes:
Mottos:
Likes:
Dislikes/Hates:
Beliefs:
Activities:
How to spend a day:
Work attitudes:
Holiday attitudes:
Socializations:
Favorite objects:
Fanatisms:
Keywords:

Selected Photographs from his/her Facebook profile

Description	Photograph

Shopping List

Product Description	Photographs of the Product
Product Category: Price: Brand: Technical Specifications: Source: What makes you choose this product?	
Product Category: Price: Brand: Technical Specifications: Source: What makes you choose this product?	
Product Category: Price: Brand: Technical Specifications: Source: What makes you choose this product?	

Appendix 2.
Course Assessment
The first phase of this project consists of 5 parts:
1. Learning from Facebook profile
2. Determining keywords for your persona
3. Developing mood boards
4. Roleplaying
5. Preparing Shopping cart
6. Studio Critics

Considering the first phase of this project;
1. Which part do you like most? Why?
…..
2. Which part is the most beneficial for your education? Why?
…..
3. Which part is the most boring? Why?
….
4. Any suggestions for further parts?
….