

Can thinking with personas improve policy discussions?

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SUMMARY

This research addresses the limited empirical evidence about the efficacy of using personas in public sector decision-making. Despite the increasing interest in using personas in policymaking, policymakers frequently express scepticism over the application of this relatively novel tool for complex social challenges. To fill this gap, the study employs a qualitative, scenario-based experiment in the context of transport disruption. The research findings indicate that personas enhance human-centred system thinking and encourage decision-makers to adopt a more inclusive context-sensitive approach.

KEYWORDS

Personas, Decision making, Policy

Introduction

Personas are an established method in Human-Computer Interaction for representing user archetypes and informing design decisions (Salminen et al., 2020). As governments confront growing complexity and diverse citizen needs, design approaches such as personas are gaining attention in the public sector (Velasco et al., 2025). However, despite the growing interest and the multitude of fields employing personas, establishing a definitive understanding of their concrete application in the design process across domains remains a challenge (Salminen et al., 2022). Besides, there is a lack of research on how personas are involved in the decision-making process. While Human Factors and Ergonomics (E/HF) research has focused on the utility of data and methodology to create personas, the benefits of applying personas to design projects (Goh et al., 2017), a persistent critique of personas is the lack of rigorous empirical evidence comparing personas' effectiveness to alternative user research methods (Ronkko, 2005; Salminen et al., 2021). On the other hand, in public sectors, applying personas and other design tools is still relatively new. The uncritical transfer of design methodologies from the traditional design domain to policymaking risks compromising both the integrity of the design process and the legitimacy of policy outcomes (Peters, 2018). Policymakers may remain sceptical about applying a relatively new tool to address high-level and complex social issues. In common with other E/HF methods, the challenges related to accessibility, usability and contextual constraints may impede the widespread application of personas in practice (Shorrocks & Williams, 2016). This gap underscores the need for research that evaluates the role and impact of personas in decision-making within the public sector.

This research addresses the research gap by developing empirical evidence on the impact of personas in decision-making within public sector policy contexts. This research advances E/HF by demonstrating how personas contribute to human-centred system thinking in complex socio-technical environments, thereby extending the influence of E/HF methods to address complex societal challenges.

Research method

This research adopts a qualitative, scenario-based experimental design to explore the impact of personas on decision-making in a complex public sector context. Scenario-based methods are well-suited for navigating uncertainty and complexity in planning and decision-making, as they provide narrative representations of settings, actors (personas), goals, and sequences of actions and events (Blanco et al., 2014; Madsen & Nielsen, 2010). Personas enrich scenarios by introducing detailed user archetypes, enhancing realism and enabling designers to anticipate diverse user interactions with the proposed system (Blanco et al., 2014).

The scenario developed for this study depicts a transport disruption in Nottingham, where a car collides with a tram, causing significant delays and blocking access to the Queen's Medical Centre (QMC). Many elderly citizens need to go to the QMC on that day, highlighting the societal impact of such disruptions. Participants were asked to brainstorm the challenges individuals might face in this scenario. A series of experiments was conducted to compare decision-making processes with and without personas. Observations focused on differences in problem framing, idea generation, and proposed solutions, providing insights into how personas influence collaborative planning and decision-making.

Key findings and discussion

The findings indicate that personas promote human-centred system thinking by expanding participants' perspectives and guiding them toward inclusive, context-sensitive responses. This approach helps participants move beyond individual assumptions and opinions based on their personal opinions to consider diverse actors and objectives within complex scenarios, while encouraging a focus on immediate, actionable solutions for varied user needs rather than abstract long-term strategies. For example, without personas, the discussion about elderly citizens is centred on patients visiting the QMC, while with personas, participants recognised and considered hospital staff and support workers, acknowledging the knock-on effect of transport disruption. This shift demonstrates how personas encourage systemic awareness rather than isolated problem-solving.

When personas were introduced at the beginning of the experiments, participants did not restrict themselves to predefined profiles. Instead, they identified additional actors with varied travel goals and explored how these could be categorised within existing personas. Carefully reading personas' narratives served as a sensitising activity, reducing bias, encouraging empathy, as well as challenging prejudices and assumptions. However, one limitation in the use of personas was that, while they encouraged participants to think more broadly about different types of people affected by policy choices, when the personas aligned with their own demographics, this led to stronger and more detailed advocacy for that group.

Overall, the study demonstrates that personas have a considerable potential to strengthen human-centred system thinking in the policy context and influence decision-makers to adopt more inclusive and context-sensitive approaches. Personas cannot replace genuine public engagement or conscientious participatory design but can improve the diversity of needs discussed in policy discussions.

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