

## PUBLISHED VERSION

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### User personas and social media profiles

Persona Studies, 2017; 3(2):13-20

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Published version <http://dx.doi.org/10.21153/ps2017vol3no2art708>

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13 February 2020

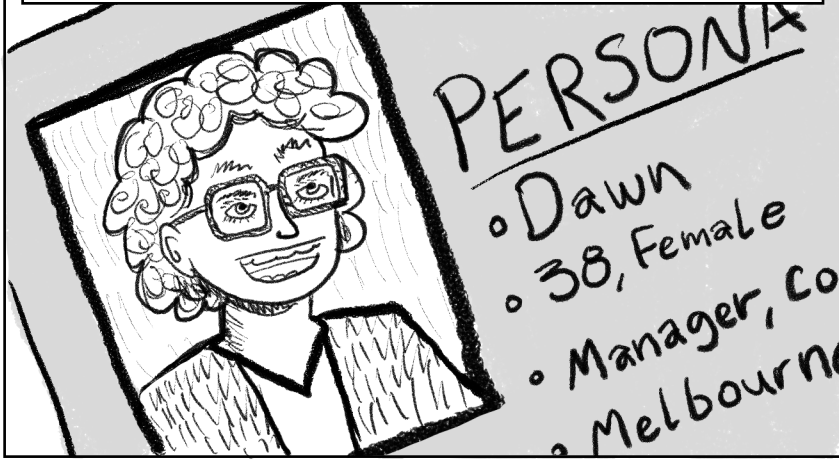
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# USER PERSONAS AND SOCIAL MEDIA PROFILES

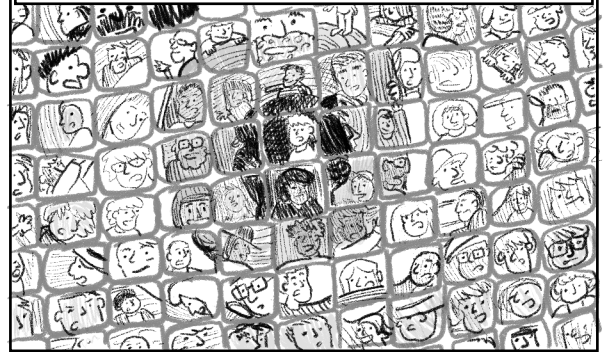
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Persona Studies Vol 3, No 2 (2017)

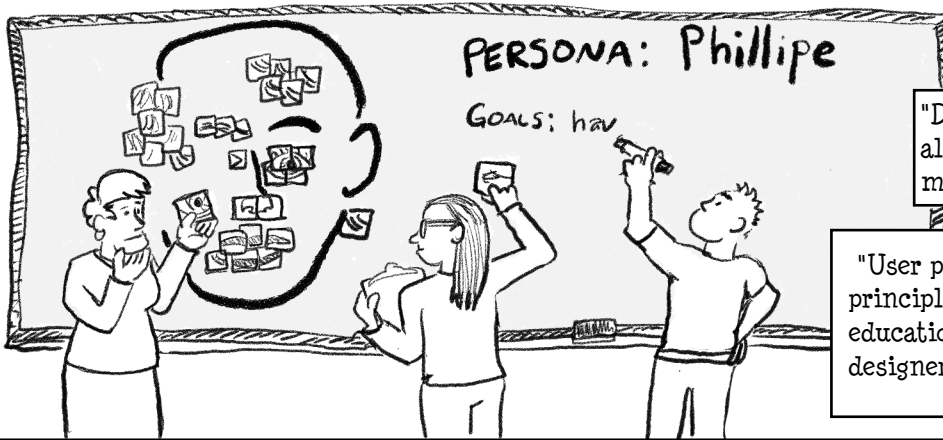
In the world of User Experience Design, a persona isn't something that belongs to a person. Instead, personas are created by designers to act as "fictitious, specific and concrete representations of target users" (Pruitt & Adlin 2010 p. 5).



Alan Cooper, who developed this conception of personas, explained that "personas are not real people, but they are based on the behaviors and motivations of real people we have observed and represent them throughout the design process" (Cooper, Riemann & Cronin 2007 pg. 75).



Although Cooper initially popularized personas as a tool for software developers, the technique has since been adopted in other fields, including marketing, business and design.



"During the past decade the term has almost become a marketing mantra" (Revella 2015 pg. xx)

"User personas and Cooper's design principles are a critical part of educational curriculum for product designers" (Revella 2015 pg.23)

The theory is that designers should think about personas as if they were real people, referring to their names, imagining conversations with them and advocating for their interests (Ward 2010 pg 478).

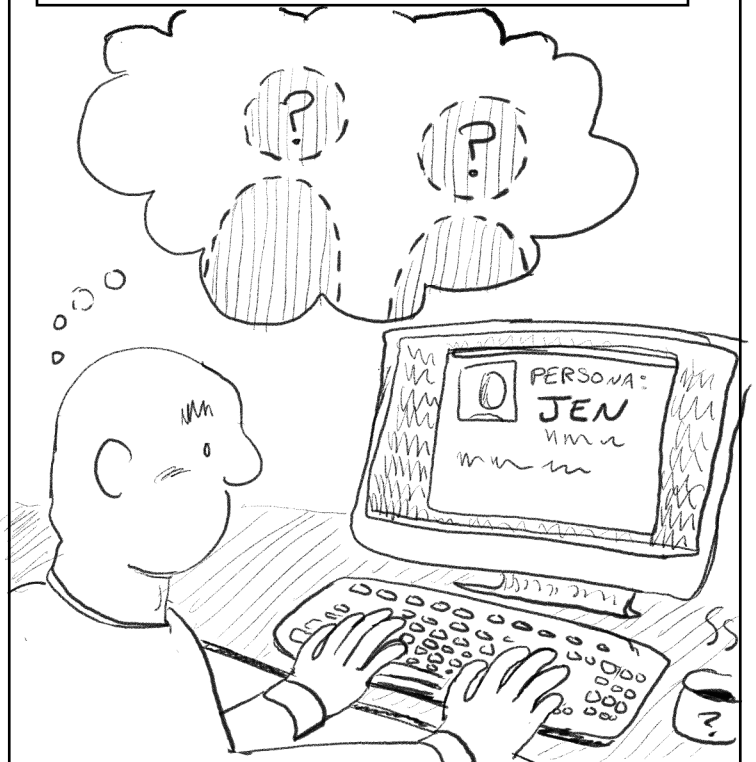
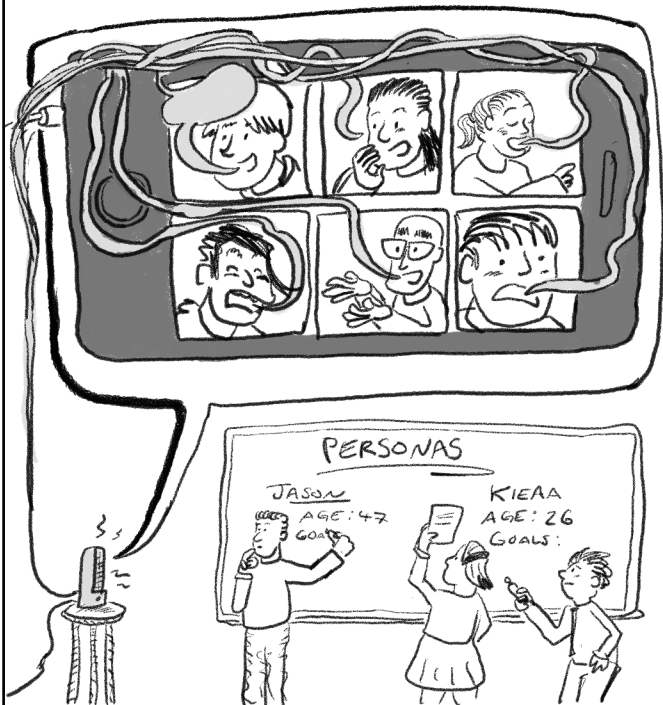


Cooper enthusiastically explained WHY designers should use personas (Cooper 2002), but did not describe HOW to create them until years later (Cooper, Reinmann & Cronin 2007). The kinds of information that are included in a persona, the methods used to collect that data, and the way it is used can vary significantly between projects.



Researchers tend to argue that personas should be based on qualitative interviews with actual users, and updated regularly to keep them current.

In practice personas are often based on readily available data, demographics or informal observations.



Practitioners use personas in many innovative ways. Pruitt and Adlin (2005) for example suggest creating life-size standees, or candy packages with the persona's details on them to encourage developer buy-in. Coorveits, et al (2016) describes recruiting research participants similar to their persona models in order to test a product.





A google search tends to turn up a more static way of conceiving personas: through a wide variety of templates.

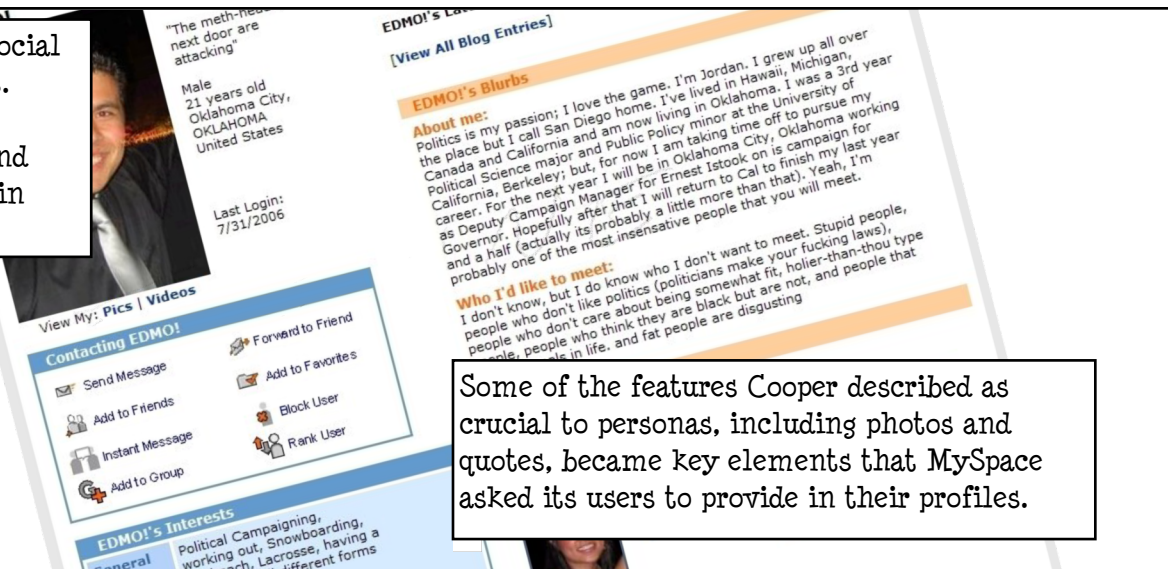
They look a lot like most social media profiles from the past decade.

These persona templates also represent many of the same data as social media profiles.

The difference is that a social media profile is meant to be a representation of an individual, while an audience persona uses an fictional individual to represent a much larger group of people.



Personas pre-date social networking profiles. Cooper's book was published in 1999, and MySpace launched in 2004.



Some of the features Cooper described as crucial to personas, including photos and quotes, became key elements that MySpace asked its users to provide in their profiles.

Personas and social media profiles developed in parallel and influenced each other. The personas that Cooper and others used in the late '90s and early '00s are visually distinct from social media profiles. However, Wodtke and Govella (2009) show a template that looks very similar to a MySpace profile. More recent templates seem to draw from the designs of Facebook and Linked in.

**Brenda Buckner — Primary Shopping Persona**

When Brenda Buckner's 29th birthday arrived, she celebrated by going shopping for herself in the morning. Then, she celebrated in the evening by opening presents from her husband, several of which she had suggested to him. In fact, she told him when she saw that great Ann Taylor sweater for 30% off.

Brenda isn't a selfish shopper, though; she is always on the lookout for that perfect item for a friend or for her husband. Brenda keeps track of birthdays in her day planner, where she also jots down gift ideas and clothing sizes for friends and family. She's been known to buy a birthday gift two months in advance of the actual day. When it's the right item, she knows it and won't pass up the opportunity to grab it. She never especially cares when she finds things on sale, though. In fact, she won't stop her from buying. Of course, she always has her eyes open for personal purchases and has no qualms about making an impulse buy.

Brenda generally begins shopping with only a vague sense of purpose; she seldom has a specific item in mind. She may go to a store that has items appropriate to someone's taste, but she will look for inspiration once she gets there. She knows what stores or departments are definitely not interesting, so she has little patience for stores that force her to walk past a lot of uninteresting merchandise. She will often pick up a few possible items as she browses. Then, she makes a decision among them. She likes to make notes about the items she doesn't buy, though, since they may be useful ideas for another occasion.

Brenda's favorite stores are Nordstrom and Neiman Marcus, which carry a good selection of the best designers and brands. She has high expectations when it comes to service; she expects to find a helpful salesperson nearby whenever she has product questions but prefers to have the staff remain unobtrusive until she needs them.

Brenda lives and works in Minneapolis, which gives her access to numerous shops and malls. Sometimes, though, the weather just doesn't allow for a Saturday shopping excursion with her friends. To get a shopping fix on a sunny day, Brenda has learned that browsing online can be even more satisfying than browsing and ordering from the stack of clip-arted catalogs on her mail table. Brenda is reasonably comfortable with a computer—she uses basic Microsoft Office functions at work—but she's nervous about configuration or other complex tasks.

**Brenda's Goals**

- Be entertained. Brenda enjoys shopping for the sake of shopping. She expects a good selection and great service.
- Find the perfect item. Whether shopping for herself or for someone else, Brenda enjoys the challenge of finding exactly the right thing.
- Be a shopping expert. Although she would never admit it, Brenda enjoys her reputation as an expert shopper. Knowing what's available helps her find just what she's looking for, too.

**Quote:** "I want something cool and really on the edge. Something you can't get at the mall/plex."

**Profession:** Full-time student

**Personal Background:** Youngest kid in family of five. Likes to be seen as a little rebellious. Loves movies, and has always gone to as many as possible. He eats Top Ramen so he can spend his money on movies instead. He's a huge film noir fan and spent 12 hours in a noir marathon last year. He is majoring in film studies, but is uncertain if he actually wants to make films.

**Goals:** Scott wants to know if film is really where he wants to spend the rest of his life. He wants to know not only what new film noir movies are being made and what's good, but also what it takes to make a truly good film. He's always seeking behind-the-scenes stories to understand how film crewmembers work together, how directors fund their films, how to write for the movies, and so on. He's hungry to take apart the magic and figure out how to put it together again.

**Production-Side Agro-Entrepreneur**

**A Day in the Life**

Hadley lives outside a small town with her mother, sister, husband, 2 nephews, and 2 children. After a small meal in the morning she walks to her 4-acre plot of land where she manages a farming operation. The operation 4 containers (manure, 2 water and 1 tank), and green, precision, green beans, yams, and cornmeal. She recently installed a small irrigation system on her land and already knows how to use it whenever they are available at nearby community centers or churches. She hopes to expand her farm, increase crop variety, and eliminate the need for pesticides.

**Personality**

**Strengths:** Hard working, future oriented, which friends and community. Wants to send her children to secondary school and to financially help her sister and nephew.

**Goals:** Expand her farming operation so that she can live more actively. Wants to send her children to secondary school and to financially help her sister and nephew.

**Methods:** Religion, judgment, her husband, family, having new things, the success of her business, knowing employment opportunities in her community, friends and recognition.

**Purchasing Habits**

**Consumption Model:** Hadley travels often to a regional market about an hour away from her small village to sell the produce. She has learned to prefer to make calls herself and make some personal calls while in the bigger town.

**Process & Decision Making:** Although Hadley's farm is doing well, she does not feel the equity needed to get her own line of credit. She typically looks for selling because for market, stable and had to have seen over purchasing decisions. Hadley's mother and sister make the majority of household

**Purchasing Patterns:** Many of Hadley's purchases are goods according to the agricultural inputs she needs. She is often difficult using her money, but normally has enough left over to invest in her farm post harvest.

**Education, Skills, & Training**

Hadley went to a local school through the 4<sup>th</sup> grade and originally learned farming from her uncle. She has attended some occasional training programs sponsored by the state and NGOs to learn more and to share her services to other producers. She is curious and is open to new things.

**Design Criteria**

**Must:**

- Low-cost user (or credit assistance)
- Be regionally accessible
- Include a training element
- Beneficial for small business/community
- Status appeal (cannot detract from social status)
- New products must come from trusted sources
- Large projects need approval of local, national, and international
- Culturally benign

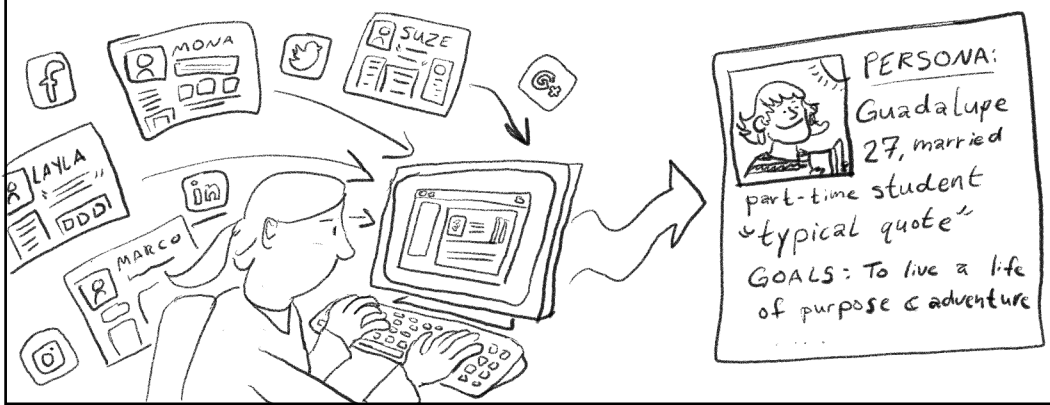
**Must Not:**

- Reference to counter culture/integrated activities
- Interfere with household demands (she doesn't make demands about)
- Require purchases in bulk
- Require purchase immediately before planting

Cooper 2002

Ortbal, Frazzette & Mehta 2016

Due to these similar structures, data from social media profiles can very easily be used to inform and build these kinds of personas without the costly (but crucial) work of interviews.



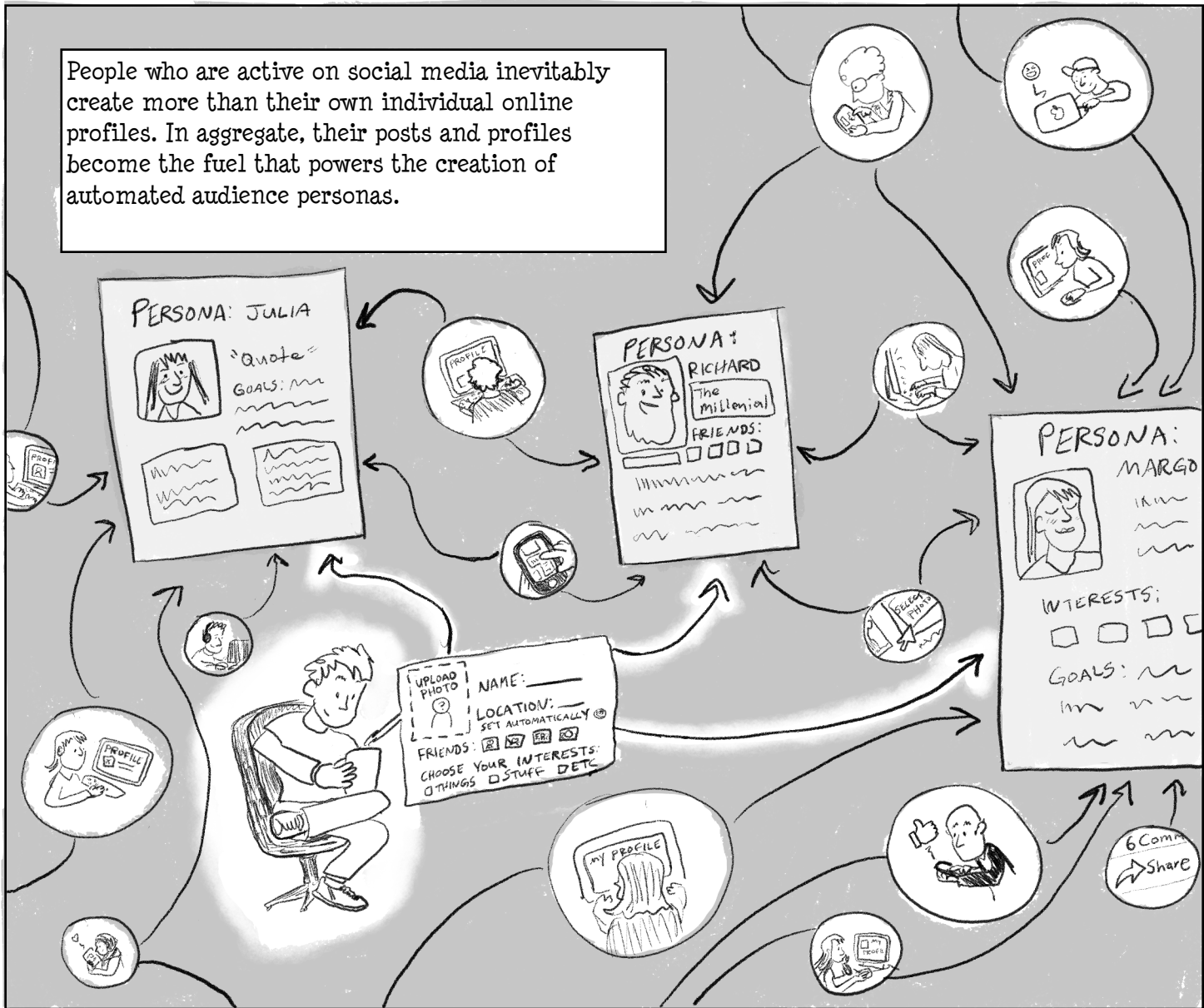
When combined with other data social media sites have about actions that users take on their sites, this tool can become even more powerful.

Indeed, in 2015 Twitter automated this process for its advertising partners, offering the ability to create personas to target (Braydon 2015). Twitter will serve "sponsored posts" to the accounts that match the characteristics of the targeted persona.

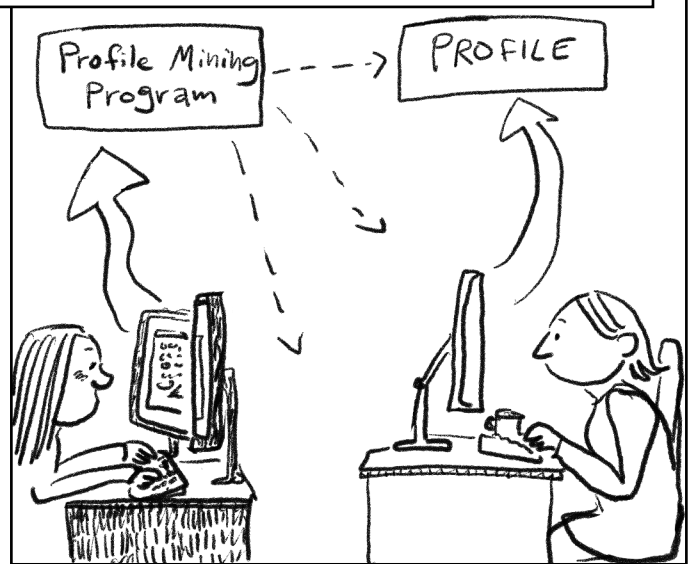
**Introducing Twitter personas**

- College grads
- Professionals
- >\$100K income
- Millennials
- Small businesses
- Seniors
- Generation X
- Adults 18-54
- Business decision-makers

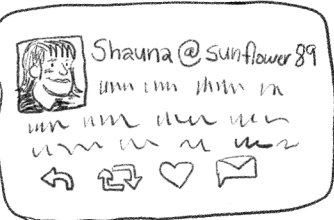
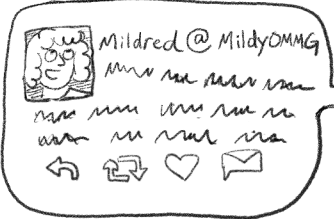
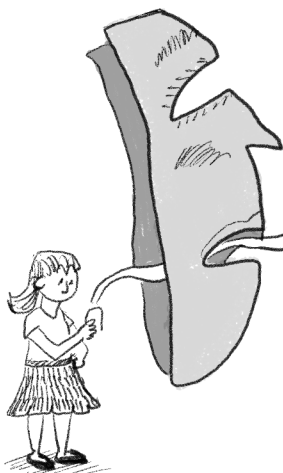
People who are active on social media inevitably create more than their own individual online profiles. In aggregate, their posts and profiles become the fuel that powers the creation of automated audience personas.



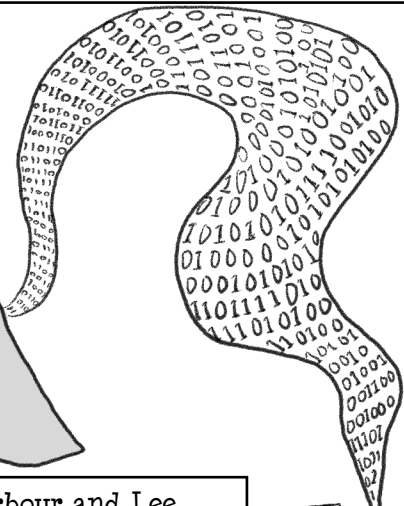
Unlike the interview-based process where persona creation is driven by empathy (Cooper, Reimann & Cronin 2007 pg 81, Goodman, Kuniavsky & Moed 2012 pg 482), deriving personas from profile data is a largely automated process, driven by algorithms developed by programmers who have not met the people that created the profiles their programs are sampling.



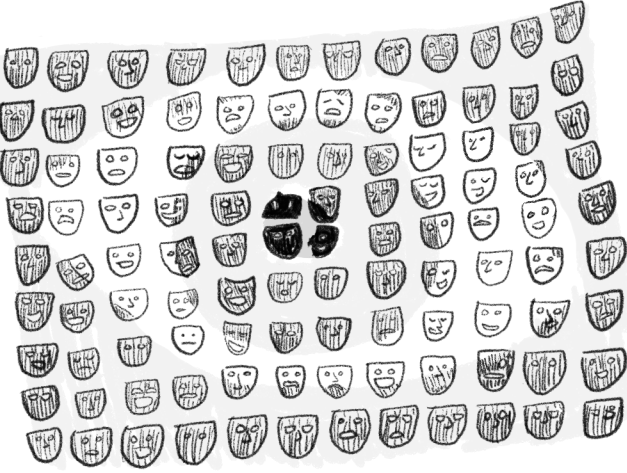
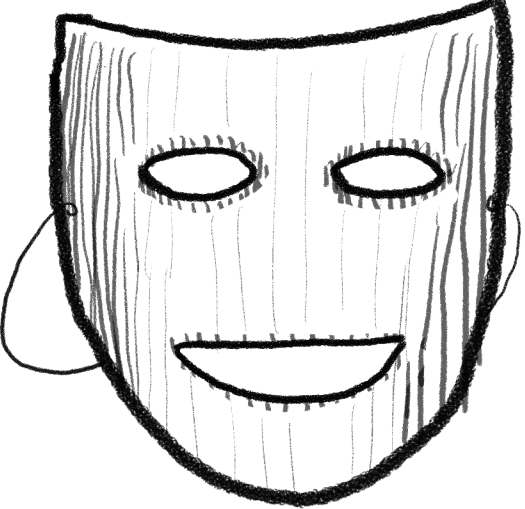
Another way that user profiles and audience personas are similar is that both are constructed representations -- masks designed in the shape of individuals. Both are performances of individuality.



Moore, Barbour and Lee (2017 pg. 4) argue that "the public performance of self" online is "neither entirely 'real' nor entirely 'fictional'", which invites comparison with Cooper's 'fictional' personas that represent 'real' users.

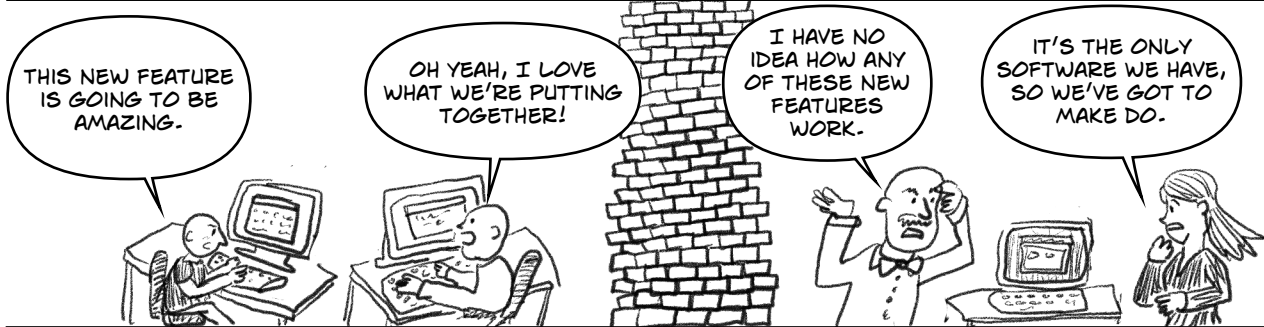


Researchers who draw on user profiles to create personas should keep in mind that profiles, like personas, involve imagination and role-playing, sometimes to a significant degree.

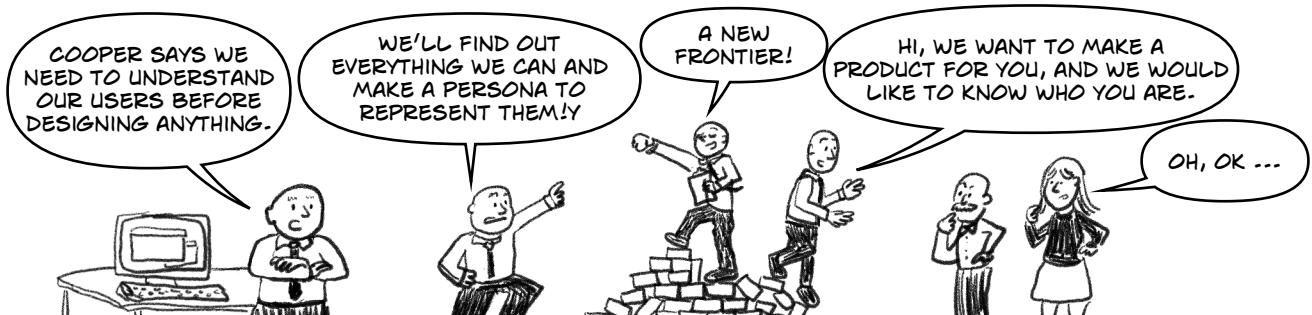


An estimated 48 million accounts on Twitter' (15% of total users) are bots (Valor, et al. (2017), and others are hoaxes or imposters. If personas are automated by algorithms and derived from automated or faked user data, what value do they hold for designers?

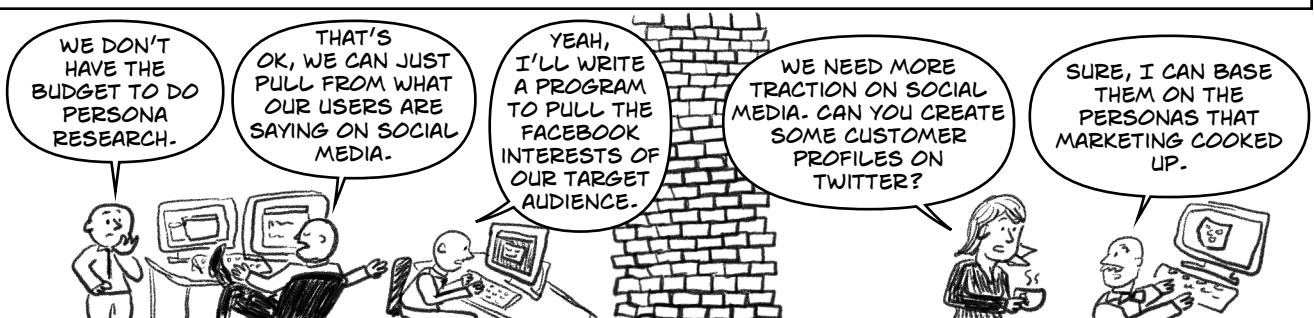
In *The Inmates are Running the Asylum* (1999), Cooper argued that programmers had extraordinary control over the design of new technologies and businesses, but often didn't talk to people they were designing for.



Cooper developed user personas as an antidote to this problem, as a way of encouraging design teams to really understand and empathize with their users.



Today, social media profiles can be mined for persona-like information without having to talk to anyone, which may be seen as an efficient way of gathering data without the empathic work that Cooper considered to be central to persona development.



Automated personas based on automated social media profiles would suggest that Cooper's "inmates" are still firmly in control.



The walls of this asylum look like a house of mirrors.



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