

# **DESIGNING FOR THE OTHER: HOW USER PERSONA AFFECTS DESIGN THINKING**

## **Abstract:**

The genesis of User Centered Design (UCD) process eventuated to ensure that the gaps in mental models of users and designers are bridged before launch of the products. UCD process has been typically helpful in domains where the users have to interact with the product through frequent and/or critical tasks and differences in designers' mental model and users' mental model may have a significant effect on effectiveness of the product. Design literature suggests various user research methods that allow designers to understand needs and problems faced by the users. Designers during user research are encouraged to observe users deeply to understand their motivations, problems and needs. Among various methods, User Persona is one of the most widely used user information presentation methods in the design industry. This method is popular due to the fact that it is helpful to better understand and empathise with the users and other stakeholders. On the other hand, designers are encouraged to use their creative thinking abilities to come out with novel solutions that could help their users. While understanding users and identifying their problems require structured or analytical thinking, synthesizing for various design solutions for the problem involves creative thinking. Hence, there is a deliberate shift by a designer between the two contrasting thinking processes.

The studies reported in this thesis have aimed to investigate how providing user information in the form of persona affects design thinking processes of a designer. It is posited here that a designer referring to user persona in the design process, might get influenced by information about the users and fixate on certain solutions, or get more cues or prompts from user data to develop creative solutions enhancing their design thinking process. Moreover, this thesis also investigates how designer's empathy plays a role in affecting design thinking process while working with user persona.

This thesis reports findings from experimental studies conducted with designers. A total of seven studies were conducted in this research. The purpose of these experiments was to observe the effect of user persona on design thinking process of a designer. For this, a mixed method research approach was taken. The studies presented in this thesis are reported as observational and experimental studies. The distinction between the two is based on the study approach and depth of analysis. Observational studies are exploratory in nature that helped in understanding the breadth of the phenomena. Experimental studies were mostly conducted to test research hypothesis and validate observations.

It was observed that user persona has an effect on the design thinking process of a designer. In some cases, user persona can lead to undesired behaviour like stereotyping and fixations. While in other cases user persona can aid overall design thinking process and helps a designer think more creatively.