UX design will be Intersectional, or it will be bullsh*t

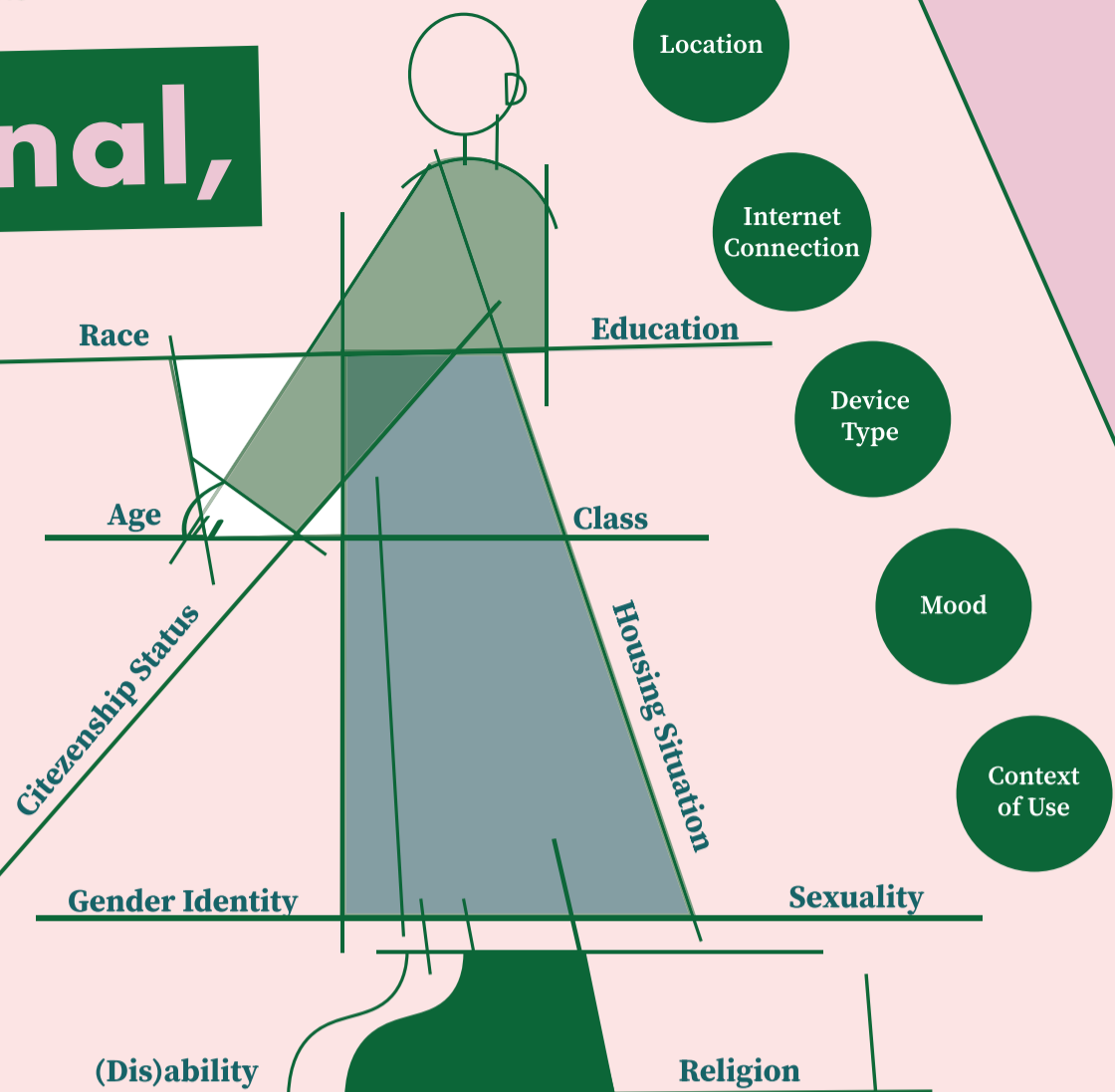A manifesto by Daisy O'Neill and Sam van der Horst

In UX Design, there is a tendency to narrow down problems to come to solutions. Through stripping-away the context and thoughtlessly reducing the complexity of the beings we're designing for, we end up denying the lived reality of people and perpetuating systems of oppression. We must take an intersectional approach to UX design, through which we acknowledge that beings do not use our designs as a singular identity that exists in a vacuum, but that they come as package deals.

Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a Black, Feminist scholar in 1989, the concept of intersectionality highlights "the multiple social forces, social identities, and ideological instruments through which power and disadvantage are expressed and legitimized" [3].

The following five tenets can be considered rules to live and design by.

Location

Internet Connection

Race

Education

Device Type

Age

Class

Mood

Citezenship Status

Housing Situation

Context of Use

Gender Identity

Sexuality

(Dis)ability

Religion

1. Identify, understand and acknowledge (designerly) privilege

We begin every design process by putting in the work to understand our privilege. We reflect on the benefits that society affords certain groups over others, and examine the ways these benefits manifest in our own lives. We acknowledge the position of power inherent to being a designer. We commit to doing the personal work necessary to protect our participants and our design research from our biases. We acknowledge this privilege, out loud, in front of our fellow designers and users, we do not leave those around us wondering where we stand. We show up with our whole selves, are honest about not knowing, and we create a safe space to engage with tough conversations. We hold each other accountable. When the uncomfortable feeling of accountability takes hold, we lean in, we listen, we critically reflect on our own work, we work to do better right away.

2. Question fundamental assumptions

We question the fundamental assumptions which affect our designs. Since we "interpret what is happening around us with reference to our past experiences" [8], we must dedicate time to understanding the historical perspective of the context we are working on, drawing from social science tools such as historical contextualization [5]. We ask who wrote the pervasive narrative? What was its purpose? As designers, we ask whether the values that are portrayed as truth actually contribute to achieving the core needs and desires of the entity we attach them to, or whether they have been assigned as socially desirable values which ultimately perpetuate systems of oppression.

3. Conciously (do not) include technology

We are critical of using (digital) technology in our design process and final designs. When designing with technology, we consider technology literacy, device access and the community's ability to sustain use. When we design with artificial intelligence, we are careful what we feed the beast, consciously evaluating our algorithmic fairness frameworks [4] and acting to negate algorithmic bias. We believe that everyone can benefit from accessible and inclusive technologies, taking them as starting points rather than afterthoughts. We acknowledge that many existing technologies are not created with intersectionality in mind and by using them we automatically exclude intersectional bodies from the process [10]. We avoid one-size-fits-all, and work to leverage the possibilities of technology to provide truly personalized experiences and services.

4. Design with, not for

Empathizing with the user cannot be done without integrating your own experiences [6, 9]. To counter this personal bias we need to design together with the user and not for the user [2]. We do not decide for them what is the right problem, direction or solution. We figure out together what is needed, understanding that this *will* take more time, but that it *will* also be more valuable. We honour and respect the lived experience of our co-creators, giving credit where it is due, and paying those we work with for their (emotional) labour. We actively recruit representative and intersectionally diverse users to test with. We take a radically human-centred design approach and celebrate the messy reality of what it means to be human [1]. We know the human experience is too varied to be captured within the concept of universalism [7]. This means we challenge the notion of the "average" user and design for people, not personas.

5. Stay critical of yourself and your creations

We always remain critical of ourselves, our beliefs and our creations. We do not assume to know. We carve out time in our design cycles for frequent and continuous reflection. We work to stay current; in our language, in our design approaches and in our beliefs. In this way, we can integrate new knowledge and respond to developments in the field of UX, as well as the world. We do not hold on to outdated ideas when they no longer serve a purpose for the intersectional beings we design for, no matter how convenient. Ultimately, we keep working to *get it* right, not to *be* right.

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