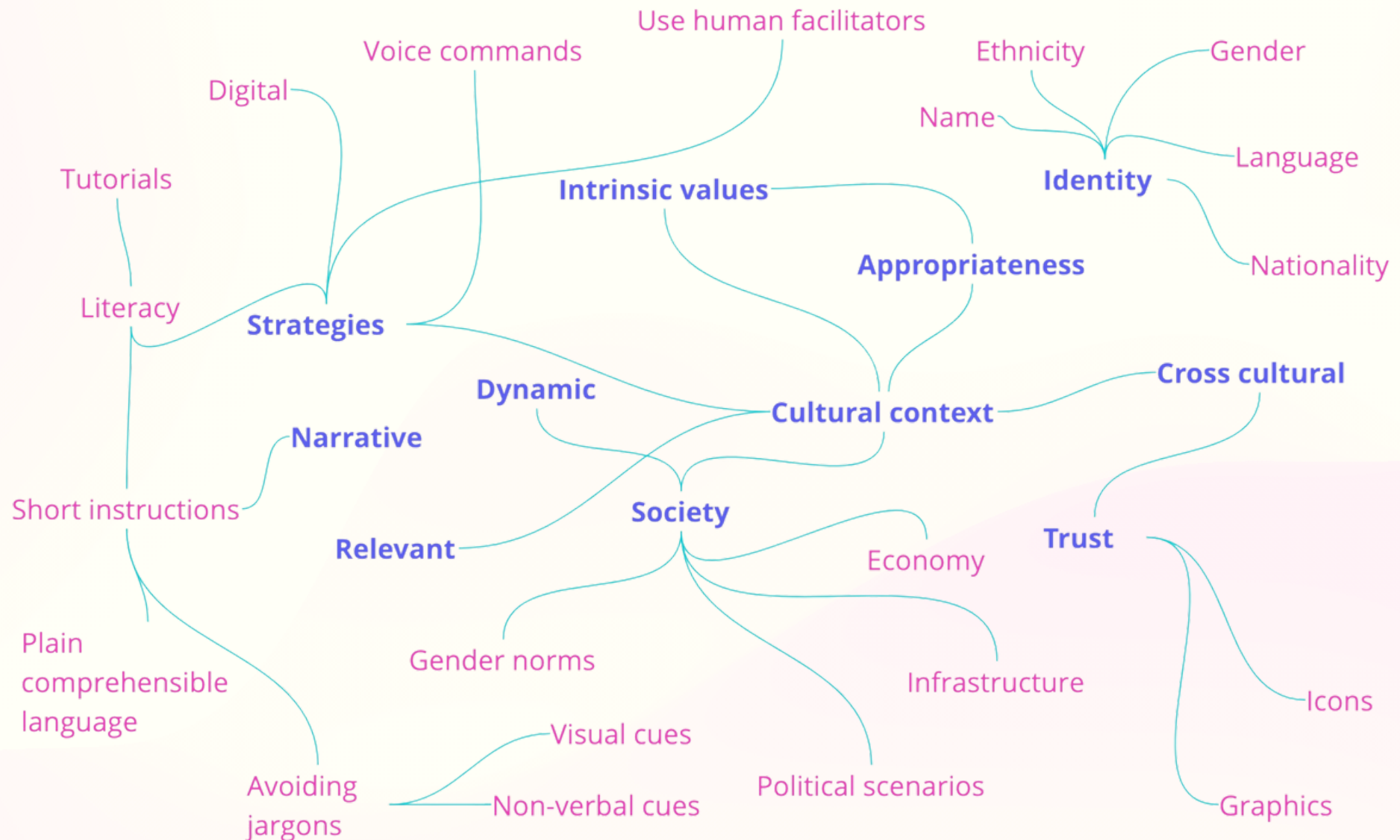


05 Culturally Responsible Design

Concept mapping



Designing for a global world

As more people gain access to the internet and come online for the first time, they bring with them their own cultural defaults, behaviours and expectations to the products they interact with. What may be easy to use, trustworthy or even great design for one culture, may not be so in another cultural context. These could lead to unintended deception.

The previous section on re-thinking the user allowed us to expand both the idea and the methods which we use to create personas, define attributes and understand our users. This section focuses on building on top of those ideas to substantiate the ways in which we can do so, and design for different contexts.

Don't be WEIRD

In his book Cross-Cultural Design, [Senongo Akpem](#) states that despite a globalised reality of technology, culture is left out. He argues that one of the biggest mistakes seen in design today is the assumption that users all come from WEIRD (Westernised, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, Developed) cultures. “We use imagery, typography, and taxonomies familiar to us, without

researching their impact in other cultures and languages. Those of us in WEIRD countries treat the web as an extension of our own lived experiences” Akpem says. This makes it important to use a design methodology that is culturally responsive and attuned to what diverse audiences need and want.

Technology interacts with society, across cultures

Akpem states that while design interfaces may feel neutral, technological artefacts”, they are in fact “cultural products” which customers interact with. Culture, gender norms, political scenarios, economy and infrastructure play a significant role in the user’s ability to access or use the product or service. These factors are dynamic in nature, and investing time and resources to analyse them is necessary to keep the assumptions in check. If not, digital products can feed into the assumptions and widen the disparity. Keeping these factors in mind can help us enhance products, and make them available to wider audiences.

Question your assumptions -Cross Cultural Design, Senongo Akpem

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Activity :

Examine the constant, unconscious biases and assumptions about technology, its audiences and ourselves that constantly creep into our work using this framework proposed by Senongo Akpem

1

Document your assumptions:

Document individually (and then with your team) the assumptions about the client and the project. An easier way would be to list all the statements starting with 'We know who/ what/ when/ where/ why/ how

2

Share your assumptions with stakeholders

It might be humbling to share your assumptions with subject matter experts. You can also ask them for confirmation, discussion or focus area for research

3

Turn any assumptions into a list of questions to guide your upcoming research

The assumptions listed can be reframed as questions for potential areas or concepts of exploration. For eg. An assumption like 'We know users do....' can be translated into the question 'Why do users do.....?'

Note: Speaking to people who disagree with your hypothesis is more important in this activity.

Consider “the next billion” users

The global internet has rapidly expanded over the last decade with hundreds of millions of mobile internet users from Global South countries coming online for the first time. India, for instance, currently has more internet users than the entire population of the United States

However, smartphone usage in the Global South is influenced by various atypical factors and users differ widely from internet users in the Global North. This has been one of the key impetus for digital designers to evolve new tools for design, and adopt more participatory and community-centred design methodologies.

Designing for “the next billion users” offers exciting new opportunities for designers and companies. Google’s [Design Sprint Kit](#) offers a way to connect more deeply with potential users, while making problem-solving for the right issues a key part of the creative process.

In his article on what needs to change to design for the next billion, UX researcher Dharmesh Ba [shares](#) the following probes:

- What does the real world teach us? Can we tap design familiarity?
- Can we allow discoverability across all levels and stages
- Can we suggest autofills to enable choice and support for new users?

Designing for next billion users

Activity :

Choose a feature of your product (or any product). If you were to redesign this product for the next billion users emerging from the global south, how would you go about it? Adopt a set of methodologies using the 6 phase Design Sprint by Google to cater to this specific goal. What are some of the principles or key tenets you can narrow down to which can help in this challenging process?

For eg. Principles suggested by [Dharmesh](#) in designing for Indians :

- Keep the technology smart and design dumb
- Aligning with mental models
- Provide users with appropriate nudges to make a choice
- Guides, helper texts, support numbers should be an integral part of products

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Designerly ways of knowing meets cross-cultural design

In his influential [article](#) titled Designerly ways of Knowing, Nigel Cross states that 'appropriateness' of products is crucial for designers, and can stem only from understanding the 'intrinsic values' of people they design for. Adequate user research at the early stages of product development can help in understanding and fixating on a problem statement which the user needs.

This understanding can help us design for cross-cultural contexts too. In her [article](#), Sabrina Weschler talks about how colour, language, text direction, and text expansion are all culturally informed. While stock market trading apps may use red in the United States to signify a stock performing badly, Chinese apps use the same colour for good performance since red is considered a highly auspicious colour in Chinese culture. She also uses culture to explain why super-apps like WeChat work in China, a highly digitalised society, while Japan relies heavily on cash-exchange still due to attitudes towards money.

The SARAL Framework for low-literacy users

Research in the field of HCI is currently exploring intersections between different user groups and design languages which work for them. A [study](#) we picked focuses on creating Actionable UI Design Guidelines for Smartphone Applications Inclusive of Low-Literate Users. In their paper, the authors suggest the following ways to design for low-literacy users in India.

- Utilize multiple modes of interaction
- Keep a minimalist, clean interface
- Incorporate visual cues
- Avoid jargon, use colloquial language
- Break down information within and across screens
- Simplify navigation structure
- Provide assistance in using the application
- Include short, simple instructions in Help menu
- Adopt audio and video help tutorials
- Adopt culturally responsive design
- Leverage human facilitators
- Enable customization

Leveraging such empirical and theoretical research into the design process can enrich our products and make experiences delightful for users.

Culturally responsive design creates trust among the users. Usage of culturally-driven UI elements like icons, graphics, etc, shapes the user's perception towards the products they use.

Allow fluidity for cultural identities

User identities, cultures and attitudes change over time. Giving users the space to choose and alter their identification helps create a better cross-cultural design. These could be username requirements, gender, language, ethnicity, nationality etc.

Design strategies for different contexts: A Case Study

Here are some case studies from the ['UNESCO-Pearson Initiative for Literacy: Improved Livelihoods in a Digital World'](#) is used to illustrate the different design strategies employed for different contexts.

Hello Hope/ Merhaba Umut

Support Syrian refugees living in Turkey through language learning and general living information

The app provides basic language training and provision of key information in the Arabic and Turkish languages to help the refugees improve their livelihoods.

It is easily accessible to refugees of all levels of literacy and digital skills. This is primarily because of two key features. One, the app has an instant voice translation feature which works with voice commands and icons as well as written script. Two, the app uses Turkish language-learning flashcards with photos and audio recordings of words and expressions.