Abstract
In this position paper, I will briefly introduce myself and my current project Gender-UseIT. I continue by outlining some thoughts on why using personas, a method frequently used in the design process, can be a way to reify the societal status quo regarding gender.

About Me
As a social psychologist in software engineering I have focused on the social process in software engineering for over twelve years. Our approach at Heilbronn University is to see software engineering not only as a technical, but also as a social process. My research focuses on motivation, attitudes, and gender in human computer interaction, communication in face-to-face situations and computer-mediated. I have initiated “Gender-UseIT”, an interdisciplinary network to bring people together with the aim of being gender-sensitive in user experience (UX), usability and human-computer interaction (HCI).

My papers can be found at
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My Current Project: "Gender-UseIT"
Gender-UseIT is an interdisciplinary network to bring people together with the aim of considering gender in UX, usability and HCI. I am the initiator and scientific supervisor of this project, which is funded by the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF). The network Gender-UseIT is dedicated to promoting gender-sensitive, innovative research cooperations in web usability and user experience. The goal is show perspectives, methods, and means to take gender into consideration in HCI. I am chair of the conference „Gender-UseIT 2014“ on April 3rd and 4th 2014 in Berlin, which offers a platform for researchers and professionals from universities, research organizations, and companies interested in approaches, tools, and examples for integrating a gender-sensitive perspective in the usability process and the design of user experience.

The website http://www.gender-useIT.de offers information and postings regarding the project and offers German-speaking experts a chance to network with others interested in gender, usability, and UX.

The basic tenet of Gender-UseIT is that research in and development of user experience and usability should be gender-sensitive: Interacting with computers has become an integral part of our private and professional life - computer programs used for work, social network sites, online shopping, webforms - search engines - our life is full of interactive interfaces waiting to be used. Gender plays a role regarding perception, adoption, and use of software, social media, internet, and mobile devices and there is a sex gap regarding many aspects of computers and internet. Stereotyping can hinder the perception of relevant differences and reify false beliefs about "what women want", therefore it is important to go beyond simplistic dichotomies.

Research in user experience and usability should therefore take gender into consideration in a constructive and reflective manner. Development, design and marketing of interactive technologies and devices can benefit from an interdisciplinary look at the gendered nature of HCI. The result would be beneficial for everybody involved: More usable products and services, higher ability to innovate, higher quality, and more satisfied users.

One outcome of the project „Gender-UseIT“ will be guidelines to integrate a gender perspective in researching usability and user experience, which can be used in research, teaching, and practice. Sex and gender can influence all stages of the research or development process in the context of human-computer interaction. Both the strategic aspects such as setting priorities in a user research project and the more routine tasks of selecting methods, recruiting subjects, and interpreting data need to be focused when bringing a gender perspective into research.

The guidelines will offer methods based on research regarding usability and user experience, feminist HCI [1], and current methods used in the everyday design of user experience and usability. They will show how to bring the experience, knowledge and interests of
women and men to bear on the design and development of human-computer interfaces.

**Personas from the Perspective of Gender-Sensitive Design**

In the following section I will explore some thoughts on a well-established method of user-centered design and the threat it poses to gender-sensitive design: Personas, fictitious user descriptions, are commonly used to inform designers and developers about who their users are. Personas are attractive due to the fact that they offer a clear and easily conceivable image - and therefore they are necessarily gendered (which might become obvious considering that a persona who's gender was ambiguous would probably not be considered very helpful by most designers). Working with personas makes reliance on psychological availability and cognitive economy almost inevitable, since using stereotypes is deeply engrained and hard to circumvent [2]. So personas are rooted in stereotyping – and thus the recreating of gender stereotypes. And the very creation of a picture of the kind of people for whom we are designing implies a lack of engagement with the characteristics of the real users. Going the peripheral route of information processing [3], designers developing personas might not curiously explore the users but rather look for cues of activate their stereotypes and create the illusion of knowledge.

Both creation and employing personas rely on the cognitive processes we use to understand other people and the social world surrounding us: The creation of personas is necessarily biased already, and the distortion can magnify when the persona is being used as a basis for design decisions. One helpful approach to look at these processes of social cognition is social identity theory [4]. This framework shows how personal, situational and social factors are related in the perception of our social environment. And it makes clear that knowledge about concepts such as striving for one’s own positive distinctness and its dangers regarding ingroup favoritism, outgroup homogeneity, social competition, etc. cannot be ignored when working with personas. Developing a persona based on your outgroup, for example, would bring about a need for much more research and user-interaction just to compensate the lack of perceptual accuracy due to the outgroup homogeneity effect. And this could only compensate the knowledge deficit – addressing the emotional side of ingroup-outgroup phenomena is far more complex. Factors like having contact to members of a group for a long time can change the attitude toward them [5]. Yet this would also mean that a persona might be perceived differently by different people, e.g. depending on whether someone has worked with someone similar etc.

In addition, personas cannot be viewed separate from one another: Personas existing in the same context serve as a reference frame for intergroup comparison and thus influence how the persona is perceived [6]. And the social context, in which the persona is being used, has an influence on the perception of a persona: Being embedded within attitudinally
congruent social networks strengthens the individual attitude somebody has [7].

So as useful as personas might be, they bring about a series of problems which there are no easy answers but which need to be addressed in the context of a gender-sensitive approach to design. With the sex imbalance between designers and users of HCI different social identities can be assumed to be the rule rather than the exception.

Social identity filters and focuses perception in a way which might yield in biases or does not let you consider the right variables: For example, certain attributes might not be considered important although they are variables in which men and women differ, like patterns of mobility [8] or leisure [9].

So in making sure that the societal status quo is not unreflectedly reestablished online, personas are a method that is worth taking a closer look at. Also because personas bear the danger of becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy via self-stereotyping: Users might be acting in line with personas, not because it is an expression of their personal identity, but because of we all self-stereotype and act according to our perception of societal expectations. The resulting “stereotype threat” has been shown to be disastrous, e.g. by decreasing math performance in women [10] or letting older people do worse in memory task [11].

References