

# The Persona User Journey: Exploring Stakeholder Use and Critical Questions in Marketing

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# **The Persona User Journey: Exploring Stakeholder Use and Critical Questions in Marketing**

## **Abstract**

The conceptual foundations of user personas in the marketing domain remain underexplored, leaving a significant gap in theoretical understanding. This research seeks to bridge that gap by proposing the Persona User Journey (PUJ) framework, a novel theoretical model that synthesizes the arc of persona use for customer-centric decision-making in marketing. Drawing on insights from 22 key sources, including academic publications and seminal works, the study examines the full trajectory of personas: from their creation and application to their increasing influence and progression over time.

Our research identifies seven critical stages within the PUJ framework, including key aspects such as understanding the context of persona usage, addressing stakeholder needs, and evaluating their actual impact. We highlight the role of feedback loops, which ensure that personas remain relevant, and aligned with evolving customer behaviors and market conditions. By connecting theoretical insights with practical application, the PUJ framework delivers actionable guidance for marketers aiming to integrate personas into their approaches, while simultaneously establishing a foundation for future studies to integrate personas into the marketing domain.

*Keywords: marketing, persona user journey, customer centricity*

*Consumer Behavior track*

## 1. Introduction

Personas are fictitious persons that represent *real groups of people*, such as target users or customers (Cooper, 2004). In marketing, personas contain and communicate information about customer needs, behaviors, goals, and pain points. Personas enable stakeholders, such as marketing decision-makers, to understand and empathize with their customers (Bødker et al., 2012; Hsu et al., 2024). This empathy fosters several benefits, such as enhanced customer orientation within organizations, improved team communication, and more customer-focused decision-making (Grudin, 2006). Also, personas aim at reducing self-centered biases in marketing decision-making, align team goals by promoting empathy, and building shared mental models of customers among team members (Jenkinson, 1994; Pruitt & Adlin, 2006).

Despite these postulated benefits, marketing literature lacks investigation into how stakeholders engage with personas—the process which we term the *persona user journey (PUJ)*. In PUJ, ‘user’ refers broadly to individuals and groups within an organization who interact with personas to inform decision-making and strategy. *PUJ framework*, a conceptual model designed to capture the iterative process through which stakeholders engage with personas over time. The PUJ framework highlights the interactive dynamics among three essential components: the *persona* itself, the *users* of the persona, and the *customers* represented by the persona. By organizing this relationship, the framework offers a perspective to systematically analyze how personas impact marketing decisions and organizational coherence. This research seeks to create a structured comprehension of the PUJ by formulating a theoretical model that outlines its crucial stages in aligning marketing strategies with customer demands, laying a foundation for future empirical investigations to confirm and broaden the role of personas in marketing.

## 2. Literature Review

Previous research explores various dimensions of personas, including why they are effective (Grudin, 2006), the processes of how they are created and evaluated (B. Jansen et al., 2021), and practices for their application (Salminen et al., 2020), among other pertinent questions. Building on this prior research, we explore *three conceptual areas* and discuss their relation to personas: (1) customer-centricity, (2) persona typologies, (3) customer identification (specifically, empathy, mental modeling, and perspective taking).

First, the customer-centric framework of thinking emphasizes the iterative process of designing products and services based on customer needs and feedback (Homburg et al., 2011). Based on such a theoretical assumption, the incorporation of personas within the customer-centric framework can enable organizations to develop more customer-centered solutions that meet real customer needs. This idea of customer-centricity (*literally, putting the customer as the starting point for design*) is a core principle of many central concepts in marketing, including customer orientation and market orientation (Jenkinson, 1994). Within customer-centric thinking, personas are a specific tool used to represent and address the needs, behaviors, and goals of target customer groups, thereby guiding the decision-making process. Importantly, *personas do not function in isolation but operate within a tripartite relationship: persona ↔ persona users ↔ the customers that the persona represents*. This relationship is integral to understanding how personas are used in practice, as it highlights the dynamic interplay between the representation (persona), those leveraging it (persona users), and the real-world individuals or groups it reflects (customers).

Second, there are conceptualizations related to the persona typologies (Mulder & Yaar, 2006): e.g., by context based on what populations they describe (e.g., customer personas, buyer personas, patient personas) or by method-based on what techniques are used for the persona creation (e.g., qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method personas) (B. Jansen et al., 2021). Nonetheless, it has been observed that most personas are served as profiles adhering to templated designs (Nielsen et al., 2015; Salminen et al., 2020). So, *the main takeaway is that though there are many persona types, their use follows a general pattern. Personas, despite their diversity in creation and context, share commonalities in their use and purpose, which are driven by their underlying goal of representing user needs effectively*.

Third, the conceptual antecedents of personas in marketing include empathy, perspective-taking, and mental modeling, which are tied to customer identification (Torma & Aschemann-Witzel, 2023). Empathy refers to the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, which is crucial in creating realistic and relatable personas (Pruitt & Adlin, 2006).

Perspective-taking involves adopting another person's (or persona's) viewpoint to comprehend their experiences and needs better (Jenkinson, 1994). Mental modeling refers to the cognitive process by which users construct and manipulate mental representations of their surroundings and interactions (Johnson-Laird, 1983). *The main takeaway for PUJ is that persona usage is predominantly personal and unobservable though-process*.

Existing research largely focuses on persona creation, evaluation, and application guidelines across contexts like marketing and healthcare, often neglecting the ongoing interaction between persona users and the personas—the *PUJ and its framework* (Salminen et al., 2020). So, there is value in highlighting the persona user’s perspective, as it closely relates to the reality of using personas in organizations (Salminen et al., 2022).

### 3. Approach

To establish a structured understanding of the theoretical foundations and practical implications of the PUJ framework, we systematically align each stage with relevant marketing concepts and key empirical questions (see Table 1). This mapping delivers a concise overview of how the PUJ framework connects to established marketing theories, and how it serves to highlight areas for future research. PUJ stages and associated concepts are drawn from existing literature and theoretical underpinnings discussed in earlier sections.

Table 1: Systematic Mapping of PUJ Stages to Marketing Concepts and Research Questions.

PUJ stage	Key theoretical concepts	Key empirical questions for marketing
<b>01: Usage Context</b>	Personas must be contextually relevant and aligned with customer-centric marketing practices (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990, Jenkinson, 1994).	How does context-specific persona relevance influence marketing outcomes? What frameworks ensure personas remain adaptive to changing market needs?
<b>02: Stakeholder Information Needs</b>	Customer-oriented, empathy driven personas depend on comprehensive and accurate data (Homburg et al., 2011, Salminen, 2020).	What types of persona data are most useful for marketing decision-making?
<b>03: Engagement Behavior</b>	Frequent and structured engagement with personas ensures they are actively used in marketing decision-making (Salminen et al., 2018).	What methods enhance persona engagement within team-based marketing contexts?
<b>04: Persona Perceptions</b>	Stakeholders’ trust in personas influences their adoption and integration into marketing strategies (Homburg et al., 2017, B. Jansen et al., 2021).	What factors enhance persona credibility among marketing stakeholders?
<b>05: Persona Focus</b>	Prioritization of certain personas directly determines the strategic direction and effectiveness of their marketing initiatives	How do marketers decide which personas to prioritize for campaigns? What decision frameworks mitigate bias in persona prioritization?

PUJ stage	Key theoretical concepts	Key empirical questions for marketing
	(Homburg et al., 2011, Salminen, 2020, Matthews et al., 2012).	
<b>06: Decision Making</b>	Personas serve as tools to align decisions with customer needs, develop persona-aided marketing strategies (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990, Salminen, 2020).	How do personas influence strategic marketing decisions, such as segmentation and targeting?
<b>07: Impact Measurement</b>	Measuring the impact of personas ensures accountability and continuous improvement (Matthews et al., 2012).	What metrics best capture the impact of persona use on marketing performance? How do feedback loops ensure personas remain relevant over time?

#### 4. Persona User Journey: A Conceptual Model Backed by Research

The PUJ model outlines the key stages involved, including persona usage context, customer information needs, viewing behavior, persona perceptions, persona choice, decision-making, and impact measurement. The PUJ concept is inspired by Adlin and Pruitt's (Grudin, 2006) five phases of the persona cycle, Javahery et al. (2009) UCD framework, Matthews et al. (2012) study on collaboration using persona, persona-driven processes presented in Jansen et al. (2021, 2024), plus the authors own work and experience. The following subsections examine each stage, summarizing key research contributions, analyzing the perspective of individual versus team use of personas, and highlighting central challenges.

**01: Usage Context.** Personas are context-dependent tools whose effectiveness varies across different marketing scenarios, with their utility determined by the specific strategic tasks they are designed to address. The usage context reflects a fundamental principle of customer orientation by ensuring that personas are designed and applied with a deep understanding of the customer environment (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990). Maintaining persona relevance across actions is critical, as outdated personas can hinder a brand's ability to adapt to shifting consumer dynamics (Matthews et al., 2012; Torma & Aschemann-Witzel, 2023). The Usage Context ensures that personas are adjusted to customer environments and market conditions, enhancing their relevance, aligning marketing strategies with customer needs, and improving decision-making accuracy. Feedback loops ensure that changes in market conditions and customer behavior identified during later stages, such as decision-making and impact measurement, can refine the initial assumptions and relevance of personas within their usage context.

**02: Stakeholder Information Needs.** This stage emphasizes the collection of customer data, including demographic and psychographic details, behaviors, and preferences. Market orientation theory highlights the importance of generating, disseminating, and responding to market intelligence (Homburg et al., 2011). It is critical that stakeholders have access to comprehensive and up-to-date customer data, enabling data-driven marketing strategies that align with market realities. However, creating detailed personas often requires time-intensive efforts, such as interviews, surveys, and analytics, making data collection challenging, especially for undeployed products (Salminen et al., 2022). Feedback loops from impact measurement provide critical insights into which data gaps exist, ensuring that stakeholder information needs remain aligned with real-world persona application outcomes.

**03: Engagement Behavior.** Engagement behavior deals with the frequency and depth of stakeholder interaction with personas. Strategic marketing relies on iterative improvement and testing of ideas based on customer feedback (Homburg et al., 2017). So, frequent engagement with personas enables marketers to refine their understanding of target audiences, ensuring strategies are tailored and adaptive (B. Jansen et al., 2021). Persona engagement acts as a bridge between strategic planning and actionable customer insights, improving the alignment and success of marketing initiatives. Frequent engagement with personas not only informs immediate decision-making but also generates valuable feedback that refines persona perceptions and updates stakeholder information needs.

**04: Persona Perceptions.** Persona users involve the attitudes and beliefs stakeholders hold about the personas they use (Salminen et al., 2018). Persona perceptions matter in marketing because they influence stakeholders' trust, adoption, and integration of personas into decision-making, ensuring these tools are viewed as credible, relevant, and aligned with customer-centric strategies (Homburg et al., 2017). Positive perceptions foster empathy, enhance collaboration, and drive sustained use of personas, ultimately improving marketing alignment with real customer needs, while skepticism often leads to underuse. Measurement tools like the *Persona Perception Scale* measure stakeholder perceptions like credibility, consistency, completeness, and empathy within persona profiles (Salminen et al., 2020).

**05: Persona Focus.** Choosing one or more personas for a more detailed scrutiny is essential because stakeholders can only focus on a limited number of personas at a time, but a set might contain many more. Stakeholders' attention is therefore selective, which can lead to misguided decisions, emphasizing the importance of aligning personas with marketers' goals

and project contexts (Homburg et al., 2011). The choice of which personas to focus on from a set of possible options is critically important for marketers because it directly determines the strategic direction and effectiveness of their marketing initiatives.

**06: Decision-Making.** Customer-oriented marketing processes use personas to guide strategies and prioritize actions, ensuring alignment with customer needs. This approach spans marketing campaign design, customer segmentation, and support strategies, utilizing either a persona-based approach or a persona-aided methodology that integrates personas with complementary market research technique (Homburg et al., 2017; Kohli & Jaworski, 1990). However, embedding personas into marketing decision-making challenges organizations. Over time, enthusiasm for personas often fades, creating a gap between their creation and practical use, especially in long-term projects (Salminen et al., 2018, p. 201).

**07: Impact Measurement.** In marketing contexts, persona effectiveness is measured through key performance indicators that demonstrate their strategic value, including customer acquisition rates, campaign conversion metrics, and market segmentation precision (Homburg et al., 2011). Impact measurement facilitates continuous persona refinement by gathering insights on decision outcomes, viewing behavior, and stakeholder perceptions, ensuring personas remain relevant. The feedback generated at this stage closes the loop by informing adjustments to usage context, stakeholder information needs, and persona focus, ensuring that personas remain relevant and effective over time.

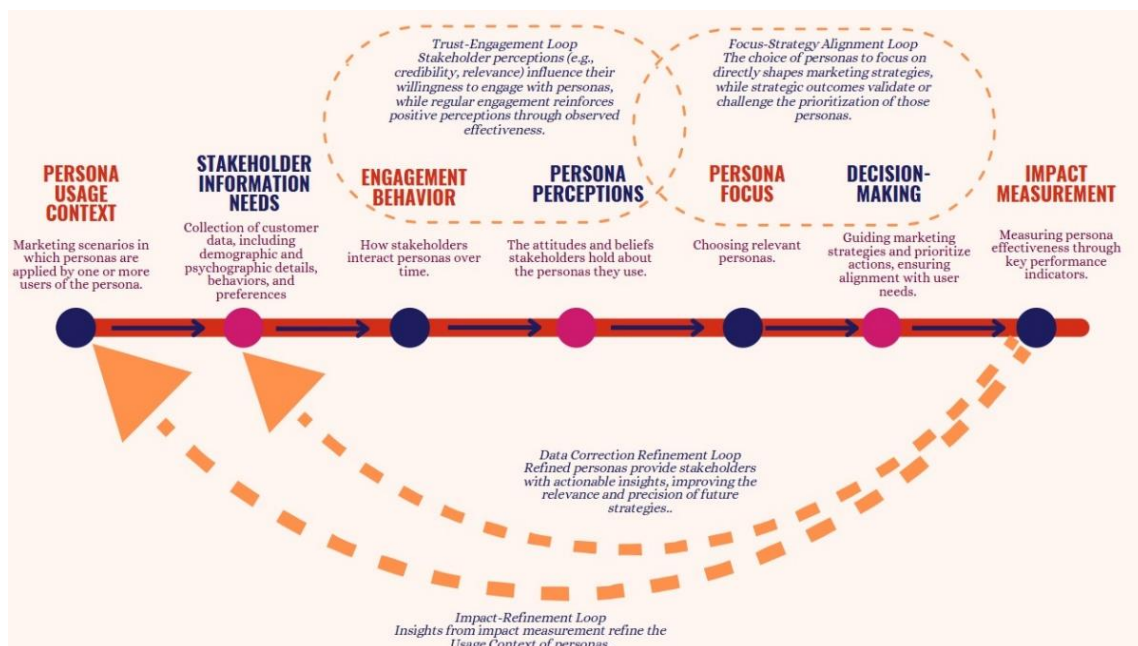


Figure 1: PUJ framework with feedback loops.



## **5. Practical Implications**

The PUJ framework offers a structured approach to understanding and integrating customer personas into marketing workflows, aiming to enhance their relevance and impact on decision-making. It can be used as a training tool to educate marketing teams, at the early stages of product development to ensure customer needs are central to the process, for enhancing marketing personalization of marketing campaigns. Also, PUJ may serve as a framework for aligning marketing with other departments, such as sales, customer service, and product management. Each team can use personas at different PUJ stages to align their efforts with the same customer archetypes.

## **6. Key Limitations and Future Research**

While the PUJ framework provides a structured approach to understanding personas, its conceptual nature means it lacks empirical validation. Future research should further explore key empirical marketing questions provided in Table 1 to validate the PUJ framework, examining its practical utility across different marketing tasks and organizational contexts. Additionally, further studies could investigate how feedback loops between PUJ stages drive continuous persona improvement and impact marketing outcomes over time. Such efforts will not only refine the framework but also provide actionable insights for integrating personas into fast-changing marketing contexts.

## **7. Conclusion**

The PUJ framework offers a structured approach for understanding the use of personas in marketing and their impact on decision-making processes. By combining concepts such as empathy and perspective-taking with marketing principles like customer orientation, it bridges the gap between theoretical understanding and practical application. While it highlights the potential to refine customer-centric strategies, its conceptual nature calls for empirical validation and practical exploration to enhance its applicability and long-term impact. The PUJ framework establishes a foundation for advancing persona research and encourages marketers to adopt strategies dynamically to meet evolving customer needs.

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