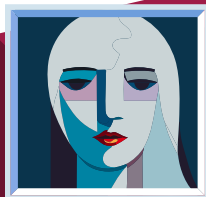


**Pink
Papers**

Using GBA+ to Get Beyond the Margins



*What We
Make it*TM

Using GBA+ to Get Beyond the Margins

Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) is a mental model and analytical framework which challenges service designers to expand their methods and thinking beyond what is considered the mainstream. GBA+ goes beyond exploring the impacts that gender has on a user experience; the “Plus” is for the variety of ways in which one can be marginalized from public policy and services.

GBA+ is being more frequently adopted by all levels of government as the standard Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) research and design framework for policy development, as well as for service delivery. At What We Make It, we believe that GBA+ should also be the standard for digital policy development and digital service delivery.

In this Pink Paper, you will learn about what GBA+ is and how it can be integrated into methods, design, and thinking.



The GBA+ Framework

The goal of the GBA+ framework is to promote gender and intersectional equity, ensuring that policies and programs don't inadvertently reinforce systemic inequalities. It can also be used to gain a better understanding of the diverse needs, experiences, and impacts that different groups may face as they are engaging with digital services.

As a mental model, GBA+ can be thought of as a way to gain understanding of various user experiences. The framework necessitates that you consider how factors such as gender, race, and age influence and shape one's engagement with digital services.

People's identities and experiences are shaped by many different interconnecting and intersecting factors that can overlap and influence their social, political, and economic realities. These factors are diverse, and can include gender, race, age, neurodiversity, disability, and social location. The combination of these things create complex and unique experiences for individuals.

For example, a White cisgender woman may have a different experience using a particular platform than a Black transgender woman, who may have additional privacy and safety concerns, or prefer to see diverse representation in a design. One way to account for these different lived experiences is to consider intersectionality. Intersectionality challenges you to think of individuals holistically, understanding that they may face many different

unique challenges, risks, or advantages depending on their intersecting identities.

Inclusivity is another foundational principle of GBA+ that underpins the effort to design programs, policies, and services that are responsive to the needs of all users. This principle entails being intentional about actively involving users and stakeholders from diverse backgrounds in user experience (UX) research and co-design activities. There are several ways to promote inclusivity in service design, most notably through diverse participant representation, creating safe spaces that encourage and ensure equal participation, and being flexible in the tools and methods used. In doing so, your research practices will be able to cater to different learning and communication styles.

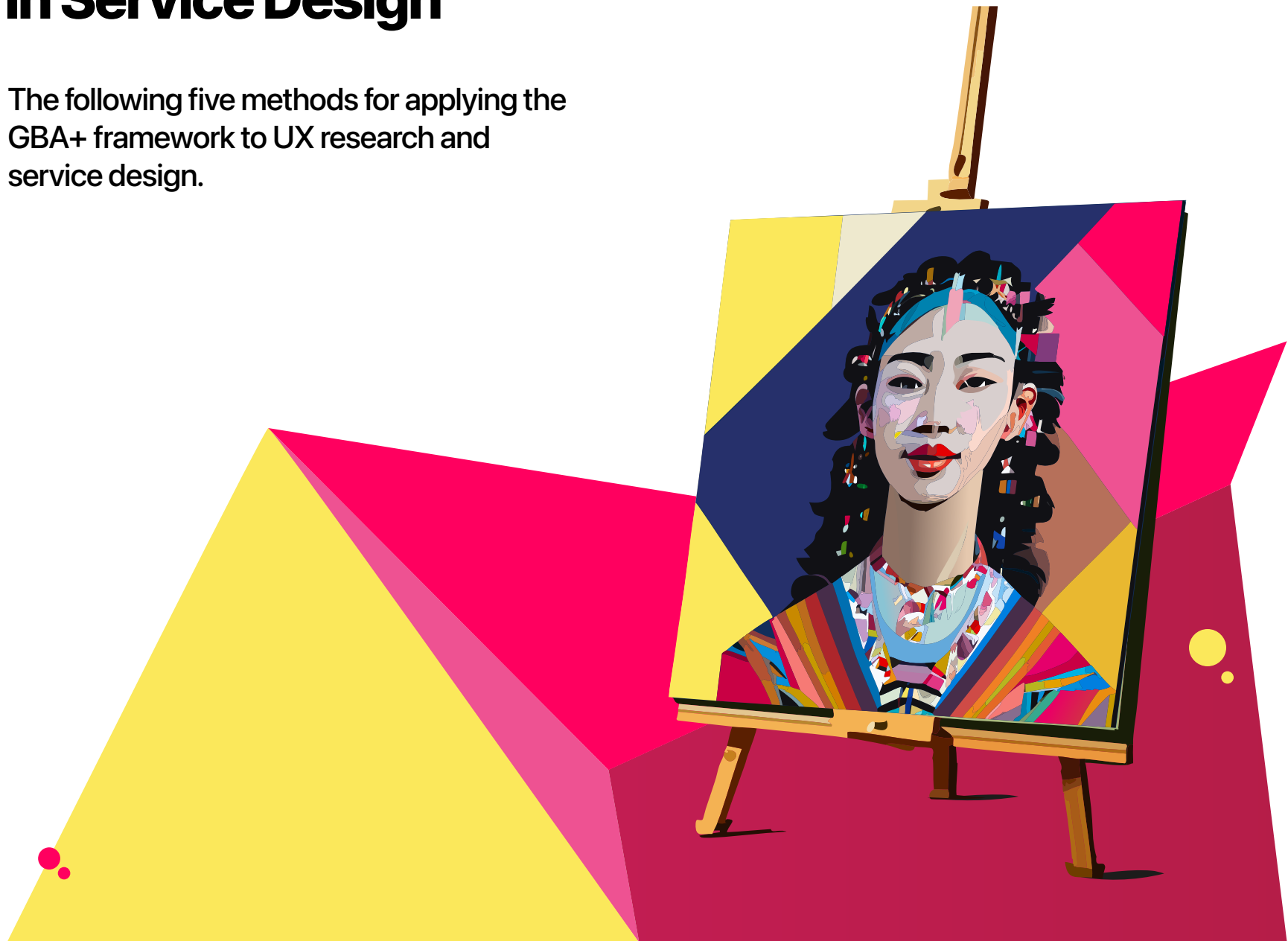
Further, applying GBA+ to service design can promote equity. It does this by identifying and removing barriers and biases that may hinder certain individuals or groups from accessing a platform or digital service. However, this approach hinges on critical thinking—analyzing, evaluating and synthesizing information to make reasoned and well-informed decisions. When we apply critical thinking in the context of GBA+, we question our assumptions and recognize our biases about users, and are challenged to identify solutions based on a deeper understanding of the pain points and concerns users may have due to their identities and experiences with digital platforms.



Applying GBA+ in Service Design

I · II · III · IV · V

The following five methods for applying the GBA+ framework to UX research and service design.



1 Call Out Your Assumptions

Whether you're aware of them or not, we all have underlying subconscious biases that make their way into our thinking and inform our perspectives. These biases are rooted in our identities, experiences, and social location. If we are asked to close our eyes and picture a person, we are likely going to picture someone who is like us in some way. Researchers and designers must be acutely aware of this when they are asked to consider the users we are designing for.

To help with this, at the beginning of every project, write out a list of your assumptions about who the typical user is. In addition to painting a physical picture of them in your mind, what other assumptions do you have about how they are accessing the service? How do they primarily access the internet—from where and on what device? What are your assumptions about content they typically consume? What about their literacy level? Are you assuming they are comfortable using applications other than their favourite social media platform?

This exercise is important because it reveals the inherent assumptions and biases you have as the designer. Assumptions can lead to inaccurate or incomplete understanding of users and their needs. This can result in designing services that miss the mark and fail to meet user expectations, and that are not widely adopted. Unchecked assumptions end up reinforcing stereotypes about users, or inadvertently overlooking and excluding the needs of marginalized or underrepresented groups.



“Design teaches us not to make assumptions”

— Sylvia Harris

2 What If You're Wrong?



Once you have your list of attributes for your assumptive typical user, change one or more things about them and ask yourself, is this user going to have the same experience as the one I am assuming? Would this new user be left behind from this digital service transformation? What are the risks of exclusion if my assumptions are wrong about who the target user is?

The following statements are designed to help guide you when answering those questions.

- Gender diverse users may have specific needs related to profile or privacy settings
- Culturally diverse users may have different language preferences and require content translation, and have different cultural norms surrounding communication, interaction, and service expectations
- Older users may have needs related to the design, font size, and user instructions
- Users with cognitive disabilities may need a simplified user experience that includes clear navigation to additional support resources, or visual aids and icons to complement content—but without unnecessary distractions or excess choices

In addition to being inefficient, designing based on assumptions can be costly and may lead to revisions and fixes to align with actual user needs and preferences after the service has already been delivered. For some groups, the risks of these assumptions can range from user frustration to heightened privacy and safety concerns. Failing to consider the needs of diverse users can limit the reach and accessibility of the service to a broader audience, resulting in a poor user experience and lack of engagement.

Even if your assumptions are correct about who the typical user is, designing a public service solely for them reproduces systems of marginalization in the digital space, and is counterproductive to any accessibility goals or mandates which may be requirements of the design. Essentially, GBA+ is all about challenging your assumptions about who the users are and how they may be interacting with the service, seeking to prove whether or not they are valid assumptions to hold. In doing so, we intentionally try to avoid leaving any user groups behind.



“Having our fundamental assumptions about life challenged is never a comfortable thing.”

—Maajid Nawaz

3 Be Deliberate and Participatory



In order to know whether or not your assumptions are valid, you are going to need to talk to diverse users, and this can often be challenging for a variety of reasons.

Throughout history, marginalized groups have been the subjects of extractive, and often unethical, research methods which have caused real harms to communities. And while we may be able to offer material incentives to engage in UX research activities, we cannot simply expect a stipend to include the cost of trust and safety for authentic sharing. This means we have to be deliberate in building relationships and partnerships with organizations who employ and serve the communities from which we are looking for input. It also means we have to be able to show them how and where their input is going to be used, and prove that this is not simply a checkbox exercise.

Promoting inclusivity means being deliberate in user research and usability testing. Aim for representation across gender, age, race, culture, ability, and other relevant characteristics, and set up engagements that are safe and respectful. Take care to honour cultural norms and practices. Facilitators should be trained in inclusive facilitation techniques, and should have the skills to manage group dynamics and minimize conflict.

¹ Diversity or participation fatigue can be the result of repeated requests and expectations on diverse individuals, communities, or organizations to engage in diversity education, consultation, or research.

Participatory research and co-design methods can vary depending on the nature and complexity of the solution being designed. The key is to involve stakeholders in as much (or as little¹) of the service design process as they determine, and to budget accordingly. By actively promoting inclusivity in co-design, you can create an enriched environment where a wider range of perspectives and experiences are considered, leading to more comprehensive and equitable solutions.



“Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance.”

– Verna Myers

4 Meaningfully Incorporate Diversity Into User Personas

I • II • III • IV • V

The checkbox exercise is unfortunately all too common in a variety of sectors on a variety of issues. It essentially means inclusion for the sake of inclusion. This can manifest in a variety of ways in service design, but perhaps the most impacting is with the user persona. The user persona provides the foundation for all human-centered design solutions, so its accuracy is of the utmost importance.

Service designers need to be asking themselves questions about the user personas they are creating. Has the UX research been inclusive, or is the data lacking diversity? How authentically does that persona represent the lived experiences of diverse users? Does inclusion simply mean changing the gender and skin colour of the representative icon in the profile created? And if so, does the persona reinforce stereotypes about diverse users?

User personas should acknowledge that users have multiple intersecting identities, and these intersections can influence their needs, behaviours and experiences. User personas that articulate the unique needs and pain points of diverse users can highlight the characteristics that will affect their interactions with the service, and result in more inclusive and user-centered services that better serve the entire user base.

If your user personas are authentically representative, then congratulations, you are already implementing a GBA+ lens in design! If they are extrapolated from homogenous samples of user data, you likely still have some work to do.



“Inclusion is not a matter of political correctness. It is the key to growth.”

– Jesse Jackson

5 Accessible Design For All



All too often, we think of accessibility in terms of the physical challenges that we can see. Service designers rely on Web Content Accessibility Guidelines and standards that can be followed and incorporated into any minimum viable product (MVP) being released. Usability testing should include use with screen readers and other assistive technologies to identify and address accessibility issues. The design should also support multi-modal interactions such as voice commands, keyboard inputs, and touch gestures to cater to various user abilities and preferences.

Accessibility for individuals with physical disability is defined, the technology exists to facilitate it, and standards have been developed for evaluation. What is less defined is accessibility standards for the challenges people face that we can't see. That is, neurological differences which change the way people experience, perceive, sense, and read the world around them, and also change their ability to communicate in a mainstream way. Learning differences that impact the way people receive, process, and understand information are not always evident.

Further, people's experiences of trauma are rarely considered in digital service design. Research shows that lived trauma can alter the way our brain perceives and responds to threat or conflict. GBA+ helps researchers acknowledge the potential for digital

interactions to trigger or retraumatize people who have experienced trauma. It also guides researchers toward the understanding of how service design can be trauma-informed, providing safe, supportive, and empowering digital experiences for all users.

Trauma-informed design considerations can include:

- Providing users with choices and a sense of control over their digital interactions, and allowing users to customize their settings, content filters, and notifications
- Being mindful of content and features that might trigger distress by adding content warnings when discussing sensitive topics
- Designing digital services that empower users by allowing them to make decisions about data privacy, and being transparent about data collection, storage, and use.

Users bring a variety of abilities and experiences to the table when they are engaging with public services, digital or otherwise. GBA+ takes empathy-based UX to a whole other level, and challenges us to design with this broader understanding of accessibility in mind.



Worth the Effort

GBA+ is not something that can be done in isolation, or as an afterthought. It requires a genuine desire and ongoing willingness that it becomes embedded into all stages of the service design process. The payoff when digital solutions are designed using the GBA+ model can transcend enhanced and accessible user experiences, and have ripple effects that can result in transformational systemic change, and the evolution of digital public service delivery.



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