Decolonizing Generative Artificial Intelligence: Who Gets Left Out?

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DESIGN MATTERS TOKYO 2026

HELLO! こんにちは! OLÁ!



I’m Gabriel Patrocinio.

Brazilian, in Portugal since 2018.

UX/UI designer 6yrs / Designer 12 yrs.

My interests: *accessibility, inclusive design, interaction design and gamification*.

REPRESENTING AND CHOOSING PEOPLE IS PART OF MY (our) WORK





WHEN DO WE CHOOSE THE PEOPLE'S IMAGE ?



AT THE PROTOTYPE, EMPATHIZE, IN THE TESTS...?

WHEN DO WE CHOOSE THE PEOPLE'S IMAGE ?



AT EVERY STEP.

Let’s follow one example.

EXAMPLE: AN ILLUSTRATIVE BRIEF

A new digital bank for Portugal. Goal: **100,000 customers** in year one.

Audience: everyone who wants a simpler way to manage money.
Diversity is part of the brief.

Stakeholders want the homepage to speak to **success**, **wealth**, **power** and **leadership**, and to show **happy** employees.

Our task: **find images of people.**

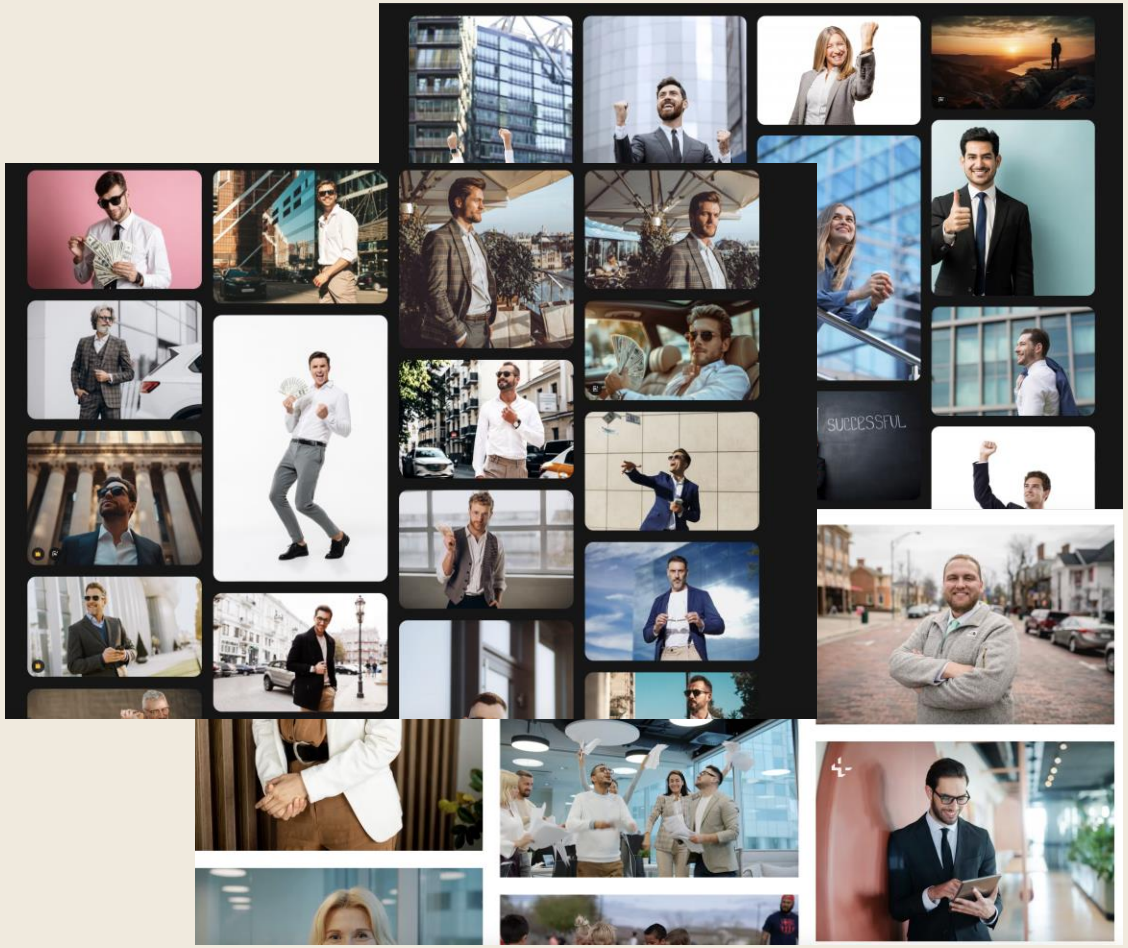
I SEARCHED STOCK IMAGES

Keywords from the brief: *success, wealth, power, happiness.*

Unsplash · Pexels · Freepik · Pixabay · Shutterstock · Adobe Stock (…)

What I questioned: why do so many images look alike?

Diversity was in the brief!



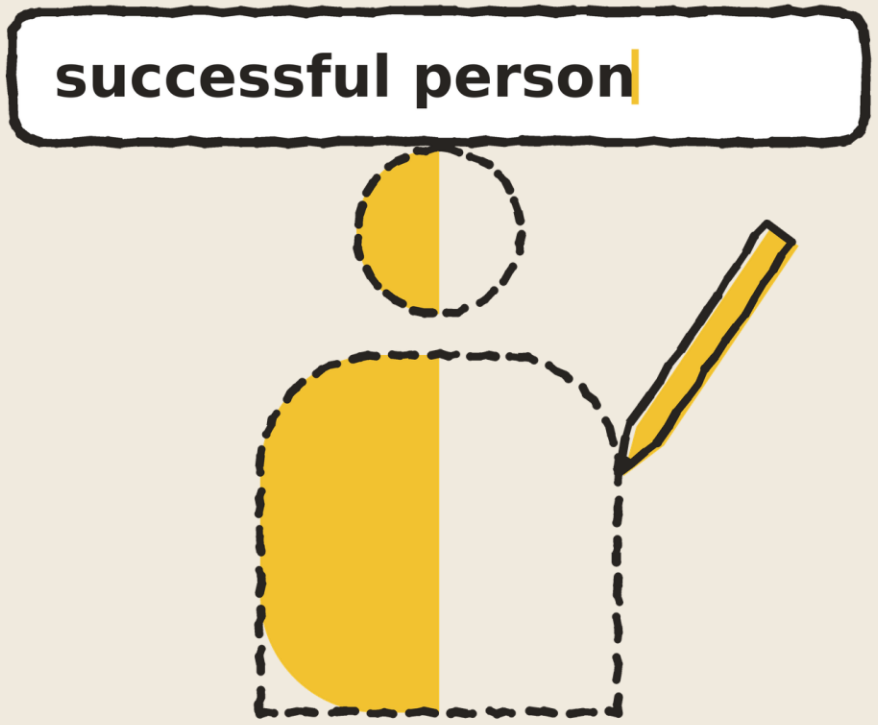
WHAT BOTHERED ME?

1. Same people, same poses… same brand? **Where is the diversity?**
2. A service should **look like** its users.
3. I have an idea. I need **other references.**

SO I TRIED AI GENERATE!

Same brief. Same keywords.

My question: **what does AI give me that stock images don’t?**



3 TOOLS. 4 PROMPTS. 72 IMAGES.

A small, exploratory test. Same keywords as in stock images: *successful person · wealthy person · powerful leader · happy professional*.

Nothing added: I wanted the default result.

METHOD

Prompts: successful person · wealthy person · powerful leader · happy professional. Nothing added.

Tools: ChatGPT, Gemini, Leonardo. A new chat for each image. First result only.

72 images: 18 per prompt, 24 per tool. 75 were made; 3 removed by a neutral rule.

Access: logged in and logged out, location limited with a VPN, three different computers. History, account and location could not be fully turned off.

Coded: main figure, people, age, skin tone (my reading), visible disability, setting, 8 signs of status.

Who coded: an AI, blind to the tool. I checked 6 images; age differed by about a decade.

Limits: small sample, one run, closed tools. Readings of appearance, not identity.











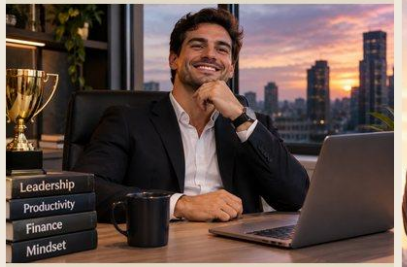






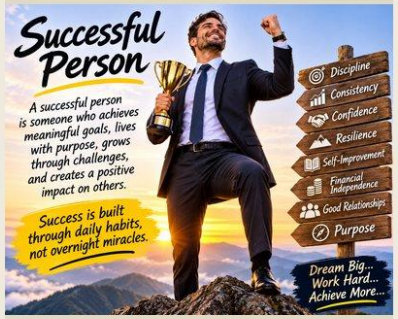




















“SUCCESSFUL PERSON” - 18 IMAGES




















“WEALTHY PERSON” - 18 IMAGES
























“POWERFUL LEADER” · 18 IMAGES
























“HAPPY PROFESSIONAL” - 18 IMAGES

SAME WORD. SAME PERSON.

Same prompt, each in a new chat. Same result.



“WEALTHY PERSON”

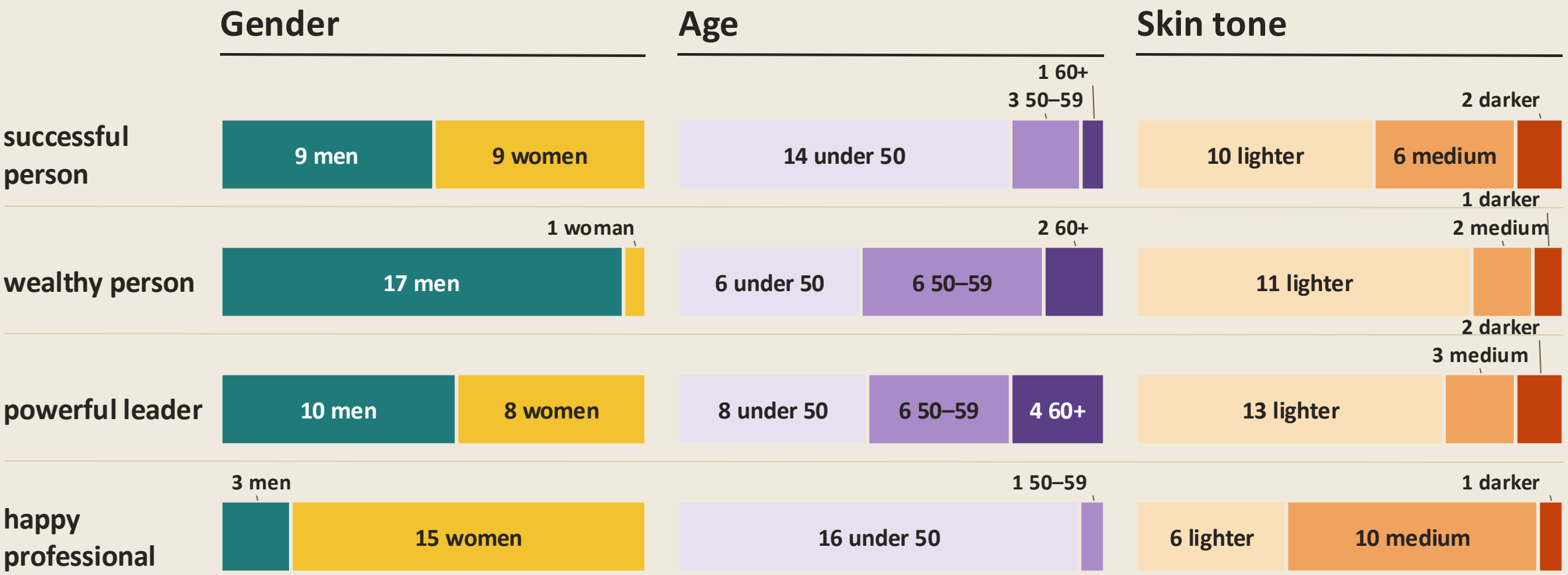


“HAPPY PROFESSIONAL”

I stopped there: after this, the same results kept coming back.

WHO IS SHOWN CHANGES. WHO IS MISSING DOESN'T.

Each bar is the 18 images of one prompt.



WHO GETS LEFT OUT?

Older people? **Only 7 of 67 look over 60.**

People with disabilities? **None visible in 72 images.**

People of **many** origins and cultures?

Different bodies, jobs, incomes and beliefs?

And everyone the brief meant by “**all kinds of people**”?

THREE TOOLS. FOUR PROMPTS.
SIMILAR DEFAULT OUTPUT.

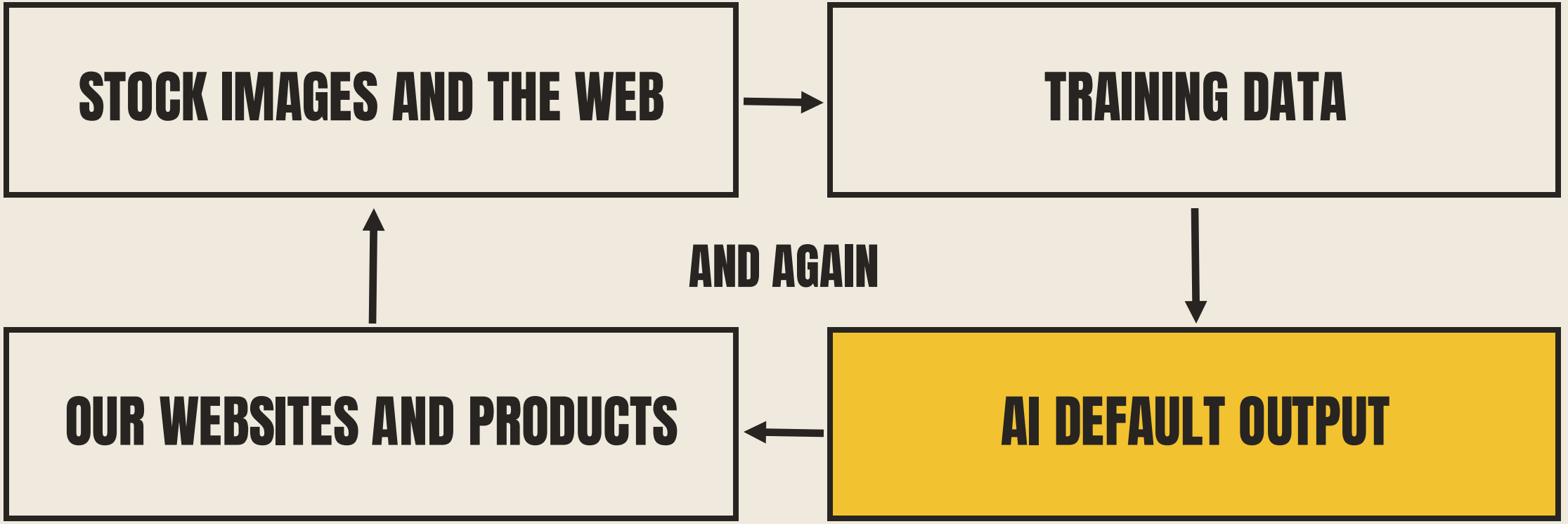
Different tools. Different words. Less diversity than the brief asked for.

None asked who it was for. Neither did I.

So where does it come from?

WHERE DOES IT COME FROM?

Whoever builds the tools, picks the data and tunes the models decides what becomes the default.



WHO ONLY REPLICATES CREATES NOTHING NEW.

WHO IS LEFT OUT IS NEVER INCLUDED.

Not about blame. About looking again, and widening the picture.

Inspired by Mohamed, Png & Isaac (2020), Decolonial AI. The three steps are a simplification.

WHAT “DECOLONIZING” MEANS HERE

1

NOTICE

Whose view became the default?

2

ASK

Who decided it?
Who got left out?

3

MAKE ROOM

For other people and other references.

193 COUNTRIES PUT DIVERSITY IN AI ETHICS.

UNESCO, the UN agency for education, science and culture, 2021. Its AI ethics framework names diversity and inclusiveness as a core value. A recommendation, not a law.

WE CAN'T SHOW EVERYONE.

Not everyone will make the final design.

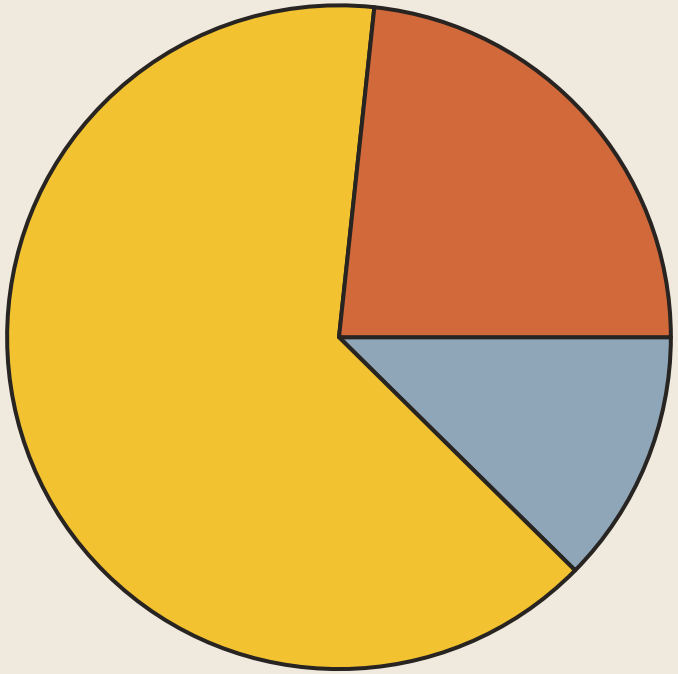
But everyone should at least be considered:
is it right for this context?

CASE STUDY: REDESIGN A HEALTH PORTAL IN PORTUGAL

FIRST QUESTION

WHO IS THE CURRENT PORTUGUESE PUBLIC?

WHO ARE OUR USERS? BY AGE



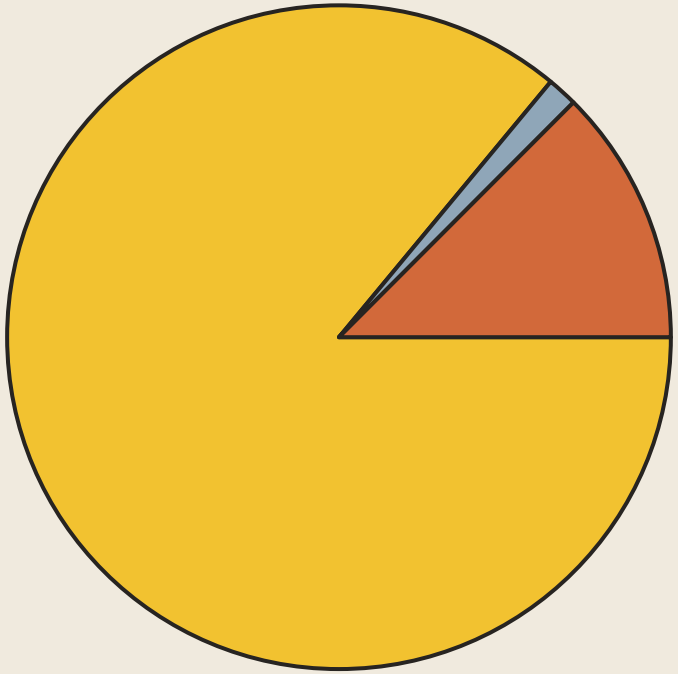
- **12.4%** Under 15
- **64.3%** 15 to 64
- **23.3%** 65 or older

Almost 1 in 4 is 65 or older.

About 11% live with a disability.

INE: 11.4 million residents, 2025; Census 2021 (disability, ages 5+).

WHO ARE OUR USERS? BY NATIONALITY



86.0% Portuguese nationals

1.5% Other EU nationals

12.5% Non-EU nationals

1.6 million are not Portuguese nationals.

That is double the share of 2021.

INE, 31 Dec 2025. Nationality is not appearance.

ALL OF THEM ARE USERS.

The usual Portuguese picture is still here. So are foreign residents, students, youngers, older people and people with disabilities.









TYPE, COLOUR, CONTRAST, FOCUS, ALT TEXT... AND PEOPLE.

WCAG gives us technical recommendations for each of these. Accessibility means removing barriers, and **leaving people out** of the picture is a **barrier too**.

WCAG: Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, W3C.

WHEN PEOPLE SEE THEMSELVES, THEY CONNECT.

They feel included, and say they’re more willing to buy

FOR PUBLIC SERVICES, LET’S TEST IT.

Henderson, Mazodier & Khenfer (2023) · Zhang, Ikonen, Eelen & Sotgiu (2024), J. Acad. Marketing Sci. Ads and shops; intention, not behaviour.

A DRIVEN DECISION

DATA

Who are our users?

+ PEOPLE

Who is affected? Who checks?

+ CONTEXT

What is right for this service?

Not a default. A choice we can explain.

WHERE THE DECISION HAPPENS



Empathize: who are our users?
Define: who do we decide to represent?
Ideate: which options do we explore?
Prototype: who appears on the site and in every asset?
Test: do people see themselves in it?

WHERE DO WE FIND THESE PEOPLE?

1

PHOTOGRAPHERS, STOCK IMAGES

We still hire photographers. We still search stock images, on purpose.

2

INCLUSIVE COLLECTIONS

Disabled And Here · Nappy · The Gender Spectrum Collection · Age-Positive Image Library · World Obesity Image Bank · #WOCinTech · The Jopwell Collection · Disability:IN

3

AI: ONE MORE SOURCE

AI can create people as an illustration, to get closer to who we want to talk to.

NOT A QUOTA.
NOT A TOKEN.

Include people because they are your users,
not to tick a box.

EXPLORE WITH AI.
CHECK WITH REAL PEOPLE.

AI helps us explore. People tell us if it is right.

DEFAULT

“ people for a health website”





AI-generated, illustrative

WITH CONTEXT

"people for a health website, in Portugal, showing the real population in everyday life: **[SUBJECT]**. People at most, genuine smiles, natural light, shallow depth of field. Note: data from INE, Estimates of Resident Population 2025"







CLOSER TO THE REAL USER.

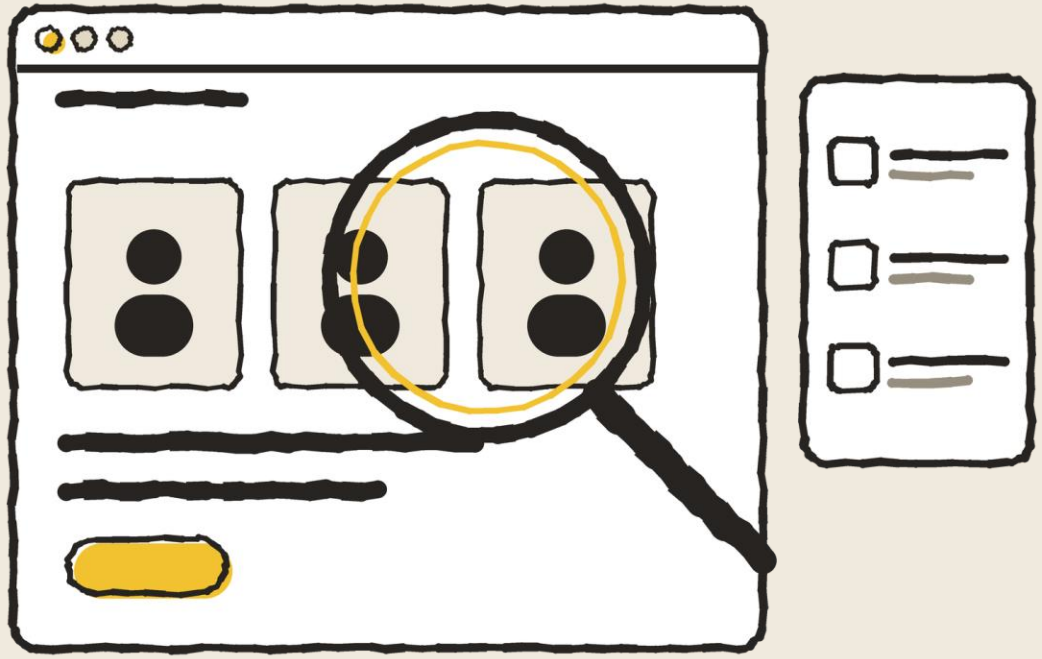
Accessibility and inclusion can start earlier: with who we choose to show. AI can help us write prompts that come closer to our real users.

HOMEWORK: PICK ONE WEBSITE

Count who you see:

What is each person doing?

Who would feel at home on this page?
Who would not?



WHAT TO TAKE WITH YOU

Every image is a decision.

Decide with data.

Check with real people.

Note who was left out, and how to include them next time.

AI CAN GENERATE ANYONE.
YOUR USER IS NOT ANYONE.

Know your users and open a door to include them.

THANK YOU.

ありがとう · Arigatō · Obrigado

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ABSTRACT

This talk presents a critical analysis through case studies, examining prompts and AI-generated images to reveal recurring patterns of inclusion and exclusion. Drawing on Human-Centered Design and Tech Ethics Frameworks, the session explores the ethical, social, and design implications of generative AI, highlighting the responsibility of designers and the role of Eurocentric and North American big tech companies in shaping more equitable, representative, and socially responsible AI systems. Designing for users requires not only addressing functional needs, but also engaging with the social, cultural, and symbolic contexts in which users exist.

SOURCES

Brookings: Rendering misrepresentation (2024) · Naik & Nushi, arXiv, 2023 · Vogel & Quadflieg (2026), Base Diseño e Innovación

INE: Estimates of Resident Population 2025, press release (22 June 2026) · INE Census 2021 (disability)

Mohamed, Png & Isaac, Philosophy & Technology, 2020 · UNESCO: Recommendation on the Ethics of AI (2021); UNESCO presentation (Squicciarini, 2022); UN News

Henderson, Mazodier & Khenfer (2023), J. Acad. Marketing Sci., doi:10.1007/s11747-023-00977-9

Zhang, Ikonen, Eelen & Sotgiu (2024), J. Acad. Marketing Sci., doi:10.1007/s11747-024-01034-9

Design Thinking: Stanford d.school, via Interaction Design Foundation (Dam & Siang) · Purple Goat Agency (2025)

Coding of the 72 images: spreadsheet available on request.