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The case for describing race in alternative text attributes

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Why it's important in 3 examples

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Designers and developers have huge power in shaping societal norms (when was the last time you met a couple in their 20s who didn't meet on a dating app?). We also have a huge impact in creating a story and crafting a sort of reality for people that consume the content we put out into the world. Alt text forms part of that storytelling of a designed reality.

What is alt text?

An alternative text (alt text) attribute is a label programmatically associated with an image that allows screen-reader users (and users who aren't able to load the image on their machine) know what is in an image without seeing it.

This is what a broken image with an alternative text attribute looks like:

Alt text allows screen reader users (who may be blind or have low vision) to know what's in an image and gather context about why the image is being used. Without alt text attributes, screen-reader users may not be able to tell what's in an image.

Without accurate alternative text, screen-reader users receive wrong information about an image, which can shape their perception of content.

Writers of alt text hold power in shaping the experience and perception of screen-reader users. I'm Tolu, a product designer and accessibility advocate, and, in this article, I'm going to discuss the wider implications of alt text and the way we describe the people we feature in our work.

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If you are white, you may not think about or talk about race often.

If you are a person of color, and especially if you are Black (like myself), you probably think and talk about race all the time.

Our assumptions about race impact our world view so much that it can be easy to overlook unless we are confronted by it .I have to think about race often because it affects me often, and I have to grapple with the fact that the way I am perceived, my career success, my safety, and many of the interactions I have with other people, are impacted by my race.

When I was little, I was constantly reading. But, in most books available at my school library, the characters were either described as white ("Flowing blonde hair, pale skin, wide blue eyes") or described in a way that didn't make their race explicit, but hinted at a white character ("Mousy, brown hair").

I didn't read a book with a Black main character in it until I was in middle school. When I did, I was gobsmacked. I had no idea there were books about Black people. White was so often pushed as the default, it never occurred to me that books could be written about, or could revolve around, Black people.

This is the kind of world we create when we use white as the default: a world where people of color don't see themselves reflected, as outsiders, not standard, but strange, and where children think that there are no stories about people who look like them.

Stock imagery and alt-text

As designers, developers, writers (and makers in many different fields), we hold the power to create a picture of what "normal" is. By only using stock images of white people, we push a narrative that white is normal. That anything else is abnormal.

When you use only images of white people, create personas that center around only white people, use fake usernames that are always traditional European names, or use only white models, you contribute to that narrative.

The same concept applies to alt text attributes. When we don't describe the race of someone in an image, we push the narrative that what our society deems as the default (usually a white person), is the default. We exclude other people and make them invisible.

Haben Girma, a human rights lawyer, speaker and author of the book "Haben: The Deafblind Woman Who Conquered Harvard Law" posted on Twitter that:

"I'm so used to blind people saying they thought I was white, it doesn't surprise me now. When you do image descriptions, don't skip race. Don't leave room for harmful assumptions."

Screenshot from a tweet by Haben Girma: "I'm so used to blind people saying they thought I was white, it doesn't surprise me now. When you do image descriptions, don't skip race. Don't leave room for harmful assumptions.

This is #intersectionality. I made a video on inclusive descriptions
https://youtube.com/watch?v=gCcsp7BUsCk #a11y"
Haben's experience perfectly illustrates why it is important to discuss race, and not let white be the default.

Let's make our alt text attributes more accessible and intersectional, and reflect what our society actually looks like in our work.

We need to:

Describe the race (and gender, if possible) of the subject of your image. It is important context. Avoid defaulting to making examples white or European
Consider the impact our choice has on people's perception: a popular application using images of only white subjects contributes heavily to people's perception of what normal is

Describing race in alt-text

An alternative text attribute is usually brief and highly context specific. Here are some examples of what an alt text attribute might look like:

Elizabeth Eckford, one of the Little Rock Nine. (Credit: U.S. Embassy The Hague. CC BY-ND 2.0.)

Alt text without reference to race: "Woman walking ahead of crowd, with woman screaming behind her"

Alt text with reference to race: "Elizabeth Eckford, a Black woman, and one of the Little Rock Nine, walking ahead of a white crowd, with a white woman screaming behind her."

Elizabeth Eckford was one of 9 Black students (commonly referred to as the Little Rock Nine) who enrolled at an all-white school in Little Rock, Arkansas, after segregation in American public schools was declared unconstitutional. The iconic image of her walking stoically towards her school while a crowd of white students and adults heckle and jeer at her loses a lot of its context and nuance when we leave out the race of the people in the picture.

Leaving out the race of the subjects in this instance would create an inaccurate narrative that leaves out the most important piece of context from this civil rights era struggle.

Ruby Bridges, first Black child to attend an all-white elementary school. (Credit: U.S. Embassy The Hague CC BY-ND 2.0.)

Alt text without reference to race: "Ruby Bridges walking down school steps flanked by three men in suits."

Alt text with reference to race: "Ruby Bridges (a young Black girl) walking down steps of school flanked by three white US Marshals."

Ruby Bridges, was the first Black child to attend an all-white elementary school in New Orleans, Louisiana. Leaving out her race and that of the US Marshalls assigned to protect her from angry protestors, creates a misleading narrative surrounding the image. Including the race of the people in the image gives non-sighted readers access to a more nuanced understanding of the image, and its historical context, the same context sighted readers readily have access to.

Black man drinking at a "colored" water fountain. (Credit: Russell Lee via Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-DIG-fsa-8a26761, used under public domain.)

Alt text without reference to race: "Man drinking from a water fountain."

Alt text with reference to race: "Black man drinking from a water fountain labeled 'Coloured' in between signs for "White women, colored women' and "White men, colored men'"

Describing the race of the man in this image, as well as the labels on the water fountain gives an entirely different meaning to the image, and a more historically accurate one.

Not including the details of the race of the person in the image detaches it from the important details of its historical context.

In these examples, leaving out details about race is not specific enough at best, but at worst, is inaccurate, misleading and tells non-sighted users a story that's different from the story told to sighted users.

Alt text is part of user experience

If you are a designer (content design, UX design, visual design), you should let the developer team know what kind of alternative text attribute to use for the images you select (are the images decorative or not?). You should also provide alt text based on the specific context the image is being used in and its purpose. Designers need to have an active part in writing alternative text because it's part of the user's experience and shapes their understanding of the content.

Describing race in alternative text attributes is an important example of how technology impacts users and can shape their worldview. Giving users as much relevant information as possible gives them the context to fully understand the story around images.

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It's important to be intentional about the impact we have on our society as designers, and to minimize the harm we cause. Being more intentional about the way we use alternative text attributes is a great place to start. Giving users as much relevant information as possible gives them the context to fully understand the story around images.