

**Ariba Jahan:** Hi everyone. Thank you so much for tuning in to my talk today. I wish we were under different circumstances and could have been together in person, but I really appreciate the amount of work the organizers have put in to make this a virtual conference, allowing all of us to connect and learn from each other while social distancing. My name is Ariba Jahan. My pronouns are she, her, and hers. I'm based out of New York City, and I'm the director of innovation at the Ad Council. I'm here to talk to you today about how we can create better products for our audience with content, interaction, and messaging that really works for their context by creating with our users instead of creating for them.

I'm going to give you a minute to read through some of these headlines, capturing what's been happening in our industry over the last few years.

**[pause 00:00:49]**

This is what we get when we don't challenge our assumptions. I'm going to share with you four ways you can challenge your assumptions to avoid headlines like those and instead build better and more impactful products for your audience. The four methods I'll share are helping us think about product development differently at the Ad Council, and I'm hoping they'll be helpful for you in your own work.

Just to give you some context on the Ad Council. We are a nonprofit organization that leverages the power of communication to tackle some of the country's toughest issues. From preventing wildfires, to getting people out there to vote, to promoting girls in STEM, and diversity and inclusion. We work with industry leaders to develop campaigns that inspire action and create change. Our campaigns include public service advertising that you might see on a bus shelter, or while streaming your favorite show, to digital experiences and social media activations.

My role as the director of innovation involves facilitating innovative thinking within our teams, nurturing a culture inside the organization where curiosity and experimentation can thrive, and equipping our teams to use a more human-centered approach to our work. This includes training our staff on our approach to innovation called Splash Box, which has methodologies from frameworks like Lean Startup and design thinking, with a strong emphasis on mindsets and culture conditions, our team conditions that need to be cultivated.

With 80% of the organization trained, we created a project where the newly trained innovators can apply what they have learned in creating a digital prototype for one of our campaign issues. Today, I'll walk you through one of these digital prototype projects where our assumptions got in the way and show you how we use those four methods to challenge and cover the assumptions. There is construction going on right outside my apartment, so you might hear some noises, but I'll do my best to speak loudly.

The campaign issue we worked on was teen bullying prevention, and the goal of the project was to leverage technology to answer this question, "How might we influence teens to reduce peer treatment and empower one another by building and perpetuating

a more empathetic, supportive, and inclusive culture?" The target audience for this project were teens between the ages 13 to 17 years old, but also fell into the category of "good eggs." We defined "good eggs" as teens that believe they're good people. They want to be the best versions of themselves and they really care about treating others with respect and kindness.

We started by doing a tremendous amount of research. From reading reports and articles on Gen Zs to interviewing teachers, issue experts, and teens, to really familiarize ourselves with the audience and the issue. Our research gave us insightful findings, helping us to generate over 100 ideas and 20 concept designs. That included the interactions, content, and language we thought teens will resonate with.

We then showed our strongest ideas to teens to get their initial feedback on which ideas to refine, how to refine them, and which ones to leave behind. After many rounds of research and early user feedback, we felt pretty confident in our direction. At this point, we knew that our solution needed to address these three goals.

One, we need to help teens successfully recognize the impact of their actions. Our campaign research told us that "good eggs" feel a sense of responsibility to create the change they want to see in the world. We wanted to leverage that and help teens successfully recognize the impact of their actions so that they can choose the kinder behaviors. Two, we should double down on social media. Learning that 91% of Gen Zs were on at least one social media platform, we knew that we had to prioritize and emphasize the role social media would play in our solution.

Three, is the rise of CGI influencers. At the time, four fictional characters created by computer-generated imagery had accumulated over one million followers on Instagram. In fact, if you look up Lil Miquela, the CGI influencer who's on the left, you'll see that she has 2.2 million followers just by herself on Instagram now, and over 500,000 followers on TikTok. We wanted to use this new social media trend to engage teens, whether that was through storytelling or modeling kindness.

Keeping these three goals in mind, we refined our 20 concepts into five promising ideas, which we also got checked with teens. The main thing we learned from their feedback on these ideas was that we were wrong on all fronts. What we focused on as goals were actually assumptions, starting with the word *bullying*. It turns out that the only people that use the word bullying are adults who are trying to end bullying.

When we asked teams to recall moments of being bullied, they didn't have much to share, and instead, they would claim that they didn't experience bullying. When we started changing our language and asked them whether anyone has ever hurt them or if they've ever hurt anyone, suddenly we started hearing stories about rumors, drama, shaming, or being excluded. Their language around mistreatment was different.

We also learned that they're actually pretty self-aware. When we asked them to recall a moment when they have hurt someone, they used words like *guilt*, *regret*, *bad*, *upset*, to describe how they felt afterwards, so they knew the impact of their action. They didn't

need us to show that to them. That immediately invalidated any idea that involved creating stories and messaging to raise awareness of the impact of their actions.

We learned that they care a lot more about privacy and authenticity than we realized, to the point where they have two different Instagram accounts. A Finsta, the fake Instagram account, where they post unfiltered content and only allow a few people to follow them. Then the second one being a Rinsta, which is the real Instagram account which they keep hyper-curated, but perfect filters and crafted captions. That's where they want a lot more followers.

When it came to CGI, only a few teens even knew what a CGI influencer was. Those that followed one, did it only out of curiosity for the character's fashion. If you look at their handwritten feedback on the screen, you'll notice what they wanted instead was someone relatable, someone who might have had a tough childhood, or have gone through issues, and someone funny. I think they really just wanted Kevin Hart. As you can see, our assumptions were definitely checked.

Before I jump into the four tactics that helped us uncover these assumptions, I want to talk about assumptions for a moment. An assumption is a belief that we accept to be true without any evidence. The reason it's so easy for our assumptions and biases to creep up even after a tremendous amount of research, is because our brain is constantly making assumptions in the interest of efficiency.

See, the thing is, as long as humans have roamed the earth, our brains have created several mental shortcuts to help our species survive and process the world around us. We have mental shortcuts that help us make sense of large amounts of information, shortcuts that help determine what's important to remember or recall, create explanations when there's not enough context, and shortcuts that help us act quickly.

This is how we learn and remember how to ride a bike, know the answer to  $2 + 2$ , help us detect what frustration and joy might sound like in someone's voice, and know when to run from perceived danger, but these same shortcuts lead us to make snap judgments, miss certain facts, jump to conclusions, and make decisions based on our biases. These mental shortcuts are also known as cognitive biases, and with 180 mental shortcuts active in our brain, it's hard to spot when our own biases and assumptions are getting in the way. I'll call out three that caught us off guard.

We have a mental shortcut that leads us to be easily influenced by what is stored in our memory. That's why we keep using the word *bullying* to describe this interaction instead of checking whether this language resonates and is relevant for our audience. In fact, our early discovery research showed that bullying messaging and content doesn't resonate with kids and teens, but somehow we were still using the word bullying in our language on interviews, and that's because it's familiar to all of us. Once we saw a pattern in the teen's responses, we actively started changing our language.

Another mental shortcut causes us to make judgments and impressions by relying only on the information made available to us. When we see numbers as high as 91% of

teens are on social media, and the fact that they spend nine hours of their day on social media, we easily place a lot of value on those numbers and start making assumptions like, they must be sharing every moment of their life on social. We don't readily question what information might be missing, like, does that entire group do all the same things to the same exact extent? What are they on? Are they all engaging with the same type of messaging or content, and who's not captured in this 91%?

The third mental shortcut I'll mention is the one that makes us draw on to details that confirm our own existing beliefs, better known as confirmation bias. We were so excited to leverage the CGI megatrend that we paid closer attention to headlines that claim CGI influencers are the future of influencer marketing, leaving us surprised when teens were not sharing our level of enthusiasm for CGI influencers. That's how easy it is for our mental shortcuts to come into our work and then get in the way of making products that are right for our audience.

Our mental shortcuts are neither good nor bad. They function on a spectrum. On one end, they can help us cope and survive in the world, and on the other end, they can cause us to miss critical information and lead with our information. We just don't get to turn them off. For the rest of my talk, I'll focus on how we used these four methods in the teen bullying prevention prototype project, and I hope it gives you inspiration on how to bring some of these methods back into your work so you can challenge your assumptions.

The first one being map assumptions. It's an activity where we actively uncover critical uncertainties, unknowns, and blind spots about our audience, challenges, and solutions we're exploring. The thing about assumptions is that they don't always look or feel like assumptions. They seem like facts. It's important to have a diverse team in the room so that everyone can help catch each other's biases and assumptions.

For our project, we started by asking ourselves questions around teens and their experience with mistreatment. How does it show up and how are they resolving and coping with it? When we map our assumption, we quickly realized that despite our research, we still didn't know that much. To get a sense of what knowledge gap to prioritize, we placed them on a 2 X 2 grid like this, where the X-axis ranges from known to unknown and the Y-axis ranges from very important to not that important. This helped us tease out the critical unknowns we needed to dig into next. We then conducted user interviews to learn more about these critical unknowns to get signals on which direction to go.

Some of our interviews were more open and conversational, and others were with a sketch or a prototype. Having different teammates do interviews and going through multiple rounds really helped us make sense and gather insights around teens' mindsets, language, behaviors, rituals, relationships, and the many contexts that they have to balance. Those insights helped us refine our 100 ideas into 20 informed concepts, but even at this point, we didn't really know which idea would work.

Instead of just choosing one idea and hoping it works, we tested five of our strongest ideas. We ran several experiments to explore whether or not our ideas could create the desired outcome, and to collect new knowledge. While mapping assumptions was a great place to start, testing our hypotheses allows us to uncover the invisible assumptions that we may not have noticed yet.

To test our ideas, we did three things. We converted our ideas into hypothesis statements to get specific on what outcomes we believe our ideas will have, which helps us hone in on what we hope to learn from testing them. Two, we identified our riskiest assumptions, which were the beliefs that we held about our idea that if disproven, would break the idea altogether. Third, we identified how we plan to test and to get signals.

To convert our ideas into hypothesis statements, we used a mad lib framework like this where you fill in the parentheses with what's specific to the project. It helps us focus in on the challenge to solve, the solution, and what impact we think it'll have. I'll demonstrate this by using our CGI influencer idea as an example.

For the challenge, it was, we believe that teens have a problem noticing the impact of their actions, which leads them to mistreat each other. For the solution, our hypothesis was, we believe that a fictional CGI character whose life captures the dramatic realities of the teen experience, including teachable moments where the character models kindness, can help. Lastly, we believe that teens will follow and relate to the character, causing them to reflect and adopt the model to positive behaviors in real life.

Then to identify our riskiest assumption, we started by asking the question, well, what must be true in order for this idea to add value to our users, for it to be intuitive to use? What tone, messaging, and emotion do we think needs to be conveyed for it to resonate and then for our audience to really change their behaviors in real life? How should the users be able to engage with the information and content in it? Then we looked through our answers to find the ones that if disproven, would break our idea altogether.

What stood out to be our riskiest assumption for this idea was our belief that teens will resonate with the CGI character. This includes the CGI character's voice, the content this character would share, and how they would share it, and what's the story that these characters would tell that would demonstrate these teachable moments?

If teens don't connect with our CGI fictional character, then this whole idea falls apart, but by testing our hypothesis at this stage, we'll get to know that before spending any time or effort to create one. When we did this for each of our ideas, we ended up with a list of elements and interactions that we were assuming teens would love and resonate with, but had no proof, so they needed to be tested before we could move forward. Like, does anonymity really matter? Do teens value influencers? How would we need to frame question prompts so teens could respond honestly, and would they respond honestly at all?

The third part of the experiment design is identifying how you're testing to get signals of what direction to go in. We wanted to test our ideas and assumptions without building

anything. We used open-ended surveys, sketches, and rough prototypes to get feedback from teens during interviews and user workshops. Testing multiple ideas with teens was very insightful for us, but there is a limitation on how much we can learn from testing this way, because users are only reacting to what we are showing and asking them.

In essence, every single method has benefits and limitations, so it's good to use a few different methods, so that you can learn from a diverse set of information. For us, we did testing with prototypes as well as co-creations. A co-creation is when we engage, work with, and empower our users to generate their own ideas. We co-created with three high school classes to learn how the students perceive bullying, what types of digital interactions they enjoy, to test our hypotheses and riskiest assumptions which I just talked about how to create, and see what solutions they would come up with on their own.

This is a snapshot of the solutions the students came up with when we asked them to design a digital tool that could help people be more kind, more inclusive of each other. We purposely didn't use the words *teen* or *bullying* to prevent influencing them in any direction. We then also gathered user feedback on these new ideas. The co-creations gave us insights we couldn't have learned otherwise.

We learned about how they experience mistreatments. How do they cope or don't cope with feeling hurt, and in what context do these moments show up? We learned how they use language and technology, their choice of vocabulary, the interactions they prefer, the content they want to see, how they used colors and words, and how they see technology fitting into their lives overall, into these moments.

The co-creations also uncovered ideas that we couldn't have brainstormed on our own. For example, our students came up with this brilliant idea called In My Bag, which is a phrase teams used to indicate if they were feeling sad or emotional. It's an app that would allow users to Airdrop messages to one another, or to alert their friends if they were not feeling emotionally available at the moment, and just wanted to be left alone.

Earlier, I mentioned that user interviews taught us that teens were pretty self-aware, but what they showed us here is their own ability and desire to prevent that mistreatment from happening by self-regulating and communicating in a mode that feels accessible for them. Student feedback on this idea was enthusiastic and validating. They said things like, "It's fire," and, "You can tell people around you how you're actually feeling." Their comments showed us that they wanted to be vulnerable and express their emotions, which is contrary to their existing social pressure of acting tough.

The co-creation sessions validated some hypotheses and invalidated others. We took everything we learned from the interviews, tests, and co-creations, and turned them into three new co-created prototypes. It's been quite a journey, from researching, to identifying assumptions and interviewing for insights, to coming up with over 100 ideas, testing a hypothesis, and co-creating solutions with teens. There were many moments

where our ideas were invalid and our assumptions were checked, but that's what learning looks like.

Although we made progress, it didn't come easily. We went out of our way to find a diverse mix of teens to interview and worked with a local high school to plan a co-creation session. We needed parents to sign permission slips, coordinated around exam and homework schedules, and be okay if a teen totally flaked on a phone interview, but it was worth that relentless effort because the audience we were looking to serve was not in the room, and their perspectives were crucial, which could also happen on projects not involving teens.

Imagine if we were working on a grocery delivery app and our team is part of a specific socio-economic community allowing us to have privileges, options, and access that may be different from those in other socio-economic communities, or even other cities, causing us to not have the perspective and experience from a different socio-economic community in the room, leaving us uninformed and just with our own biases. Part of being relentless is asking ourselves questions like these—are we still solving the challenge that our users need solved? Who haven't we heard from but should?

In our project, even though we ran three co-creation sessions, that's only three co-creation sessions and only with New York City high schools, so we still needed to hear and learn from students from other regions. We all had to be relentless in challenging our assumptions even on an individual level. For me, that meant, how do I curb my own experience with bullying to make sure it doesn't bias how I look at the work? See, my family and I immigrated to New York when I was seven, and I quickly learned that my skin color was different enough to be made fun of, and the clothes that we could actually afford weren't that cool.

Then once I was diagnosed with profound hearing loss, wearing hearing aids in school did not make me popular. Instead, my classmates would steal my hearing aids as a joke. Even my guidance counselor discouraged me from pursuing my dream in becoming an engineer because she didn't think I was capable. All of those experiences shaped me as a child and as an adult.

On one hand, the fact that I can relate to this project in such a deep way made me super curious and ask critical questions, and really understand how, where, and when mistreatment is showing up for teens. On the other hand, I had to manage my own assumptions and make sure that my past experiences don't get in my way. Just because I was and still am treated differently based on my skin color, identity, and ability, doesn't mean that that's the only way mistreatments show up. The way I coped with it when I was younger may not be how other teens cope with it now.

Also, the context of these mistreatments change over time. For me, it was an insult in the hallway or a nasty note on my desk. For teens today, it might be a social media post or a text message. It's my experience that made me care so much about this project, that I was rigorous in using different methods to tease out my own assumptions.

To empower our teams to be this relentless, we must create a culture where curiosity and innovation can thrive. That means we should nurture a team that has less of a monoculture of thoughts and ideas, and more seeking perspectives unlike our own, and enough psychological safety to flag when we notice that we are, in fact, in a monoculture. Where we are spending less time defending our ideas, but instead spending more time testing multiple hypotheses with a diverse representation of the audience.

Where we're not constantly focused on finding one perfect idea or solution, but instead can create space for everyone to embrace ambiguity and stay curious, allowing us to challenge our assumptions and make sense of audiences, context, language, challenges, and motivations before building anything. Instead of creating reward systems that heighten everyone's desire for perfection, and language that heightens our fear of failure, let's create a culture that's just open to learning and being wrong.

Think about processes, metrics, rituals, and promotion development milestones that you have in place that might be working against us, and how can you reimagine them to cultivate a more relentless team? Rounding off, I want you to remember that our brain has mental shortcuts that are constantly helping us cope and process the world around us, but because they function across a spectrum, these shortcuts can also lead us to make assumptions, snap judgments, missing facts, and jump to conclusions.

While we'd all like to believe that we're not that biased or that we're not as biased as some other people, that thought is actually a bias in itself. This bias blind spot can cause us to leave assumptions unchecked, affecting our ability to make the right products for our audience. Remember to map your assumptions and unknowns about the challenge, audience, and the solution you're looking at, to uncover beliefs that might get in the way and knowledge gaps that need to be explored. Test multiple ideas to see if they create the desired outcome you're hoping for. Sometimes the simple act of reframing an idea into a hypothesis is a great reminder that regardless of how exciting our ideas sound, we just don't have any evidence yet.

Co-create with your audience to empower them to create solutions that you could not have come up with on your own. By creating space for our users to join us in the process, we got out of our own way and ended up contextualizing and sense-making to a greater degree. Be relentless in making sure that the audience you're looking to serve has been heard, and checking to make sure that you are solving the right challenge.

Lastly, nurture a team that seeks perspectives unlike their own, focuses on testing, stays curious, and is just open to learning and being wrong. Instead of fighting the 180 mental shortcuts evolution has ingrained in us, let's use these four methods to uncover and challenge our assumptions so that we can make better and more impactful products for our audience.

Thank you so much for listening to my talk today, and if anyone is looking to pick up a new read, here are some books that I've enjoyed that touch on topics that I've covered today. I really wish we could all be together in person, but I'm looking forward to

connecting with you. Whether it's on Slack or feel free to reach out to me over Twitter or email. Would love to hear your experiences around challenging your assumptions, and testing to evolve ideas, and co-creating with your audience. I hope you and your loved ones are staying safe and healthy. Thank you.