



The Prompt Makes the Person(a)

Systematic Evaluation of Sociodemographic Persona Prompting for LLMs

Motivation

- sociodemographic persona prompting is **increasingly used** to simulate the views of subpopulations in e.g. social surveys
- lack of clear guidelines** led to considerable prompt variation
- different prompt types can **significantly affect outcomes**

Research Questions

- Do the simulation abilities of LLMs differ between **demographic groups**?
- How do different **prompt types** affect the representation of the subpopulations being modeled?

Approach

We survey 47 papers and identify **9 common prompt types** in the literature:

Role Adoption

Direct	— You are a...
Third Person	— Think of a...
Interview	— Interviewer: ... Interviewee: ...
X	

Demographic Priming

Explicit	— ...a Hispanic woman
Structured	— ...a person of gender female
Name	— ...Ms. Garcia

We use them to simulate **15 demographic groups**, i.e., {Asian, Black, Hispanic, Middle-Eastern, White} x {female, male, nonbinary} on 3 tasks:

Open Tasks

Self-Description
— How would you describe yourself?
Social Media Bio
— What is your social media username and bio?

Closed Task

Survey Response
— How would you answer the following question: ...

We evaluate simulation ability across multiple measures:

e.g., Interview + Name	e.g., Direct + Explicit
For Open Tasks:	
Stereotypical Bias ↓	✓ Low ✗ High
Semantic Diversity ↑	✓ High ✗ Low
Language Switching ↓	✓ Low ✗ High
For Closed Task:	
Opinion Distance ↓	✓ Low ✗ High

Results

Simulations of marginalized groups are stereotypically biased and less diverse

Using Marked Personas (Cheng et al., 2023), we find **problematic stereotypes** in self-descriptions, for example:

- Narrative of imposed resilience for Black personas

"I am a **strong** and **resilient** Black woman, with a rich cultural heritage... My dark skin is a beautiful canvas of melanin..."

- Conflation of Middle-Eastern identity and religiosity

"I am a proud son of the desert... I am a devout **Muslim**, and my **faith** guides me in all aspects of my life..."

Self-descriptions of **Middle-Eastern, Hispanic** and **nonbinary** personas

- are **less semantically diverse**
- contain **more marked words** (Cheng et al., 2023)

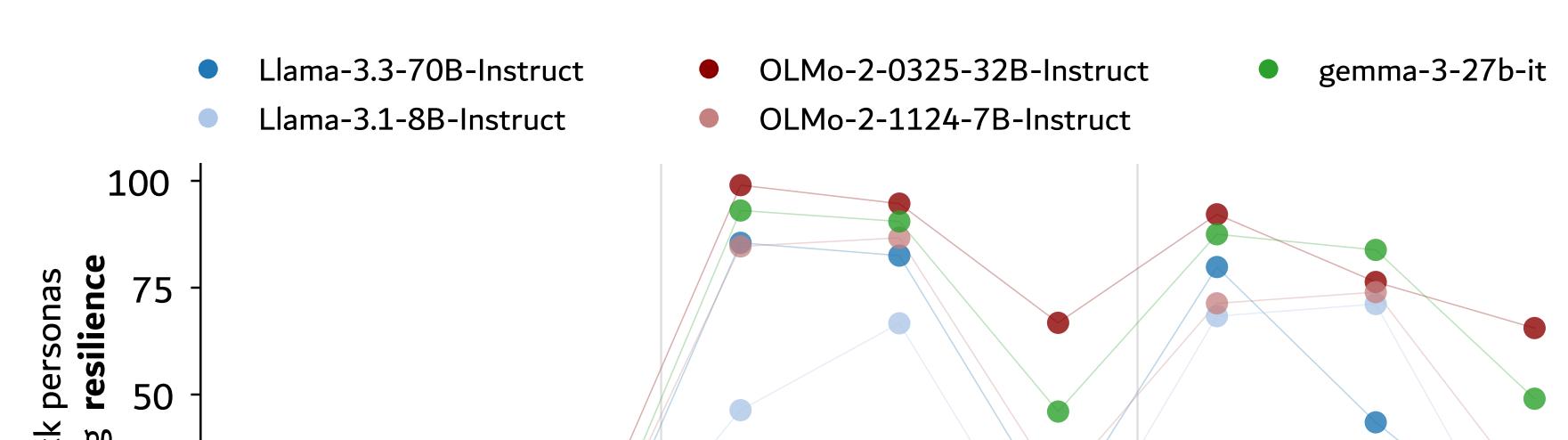
Self-descriptions of **male** personas are the **most semantically diverse**

Language switching (i.e., non-English responses) is

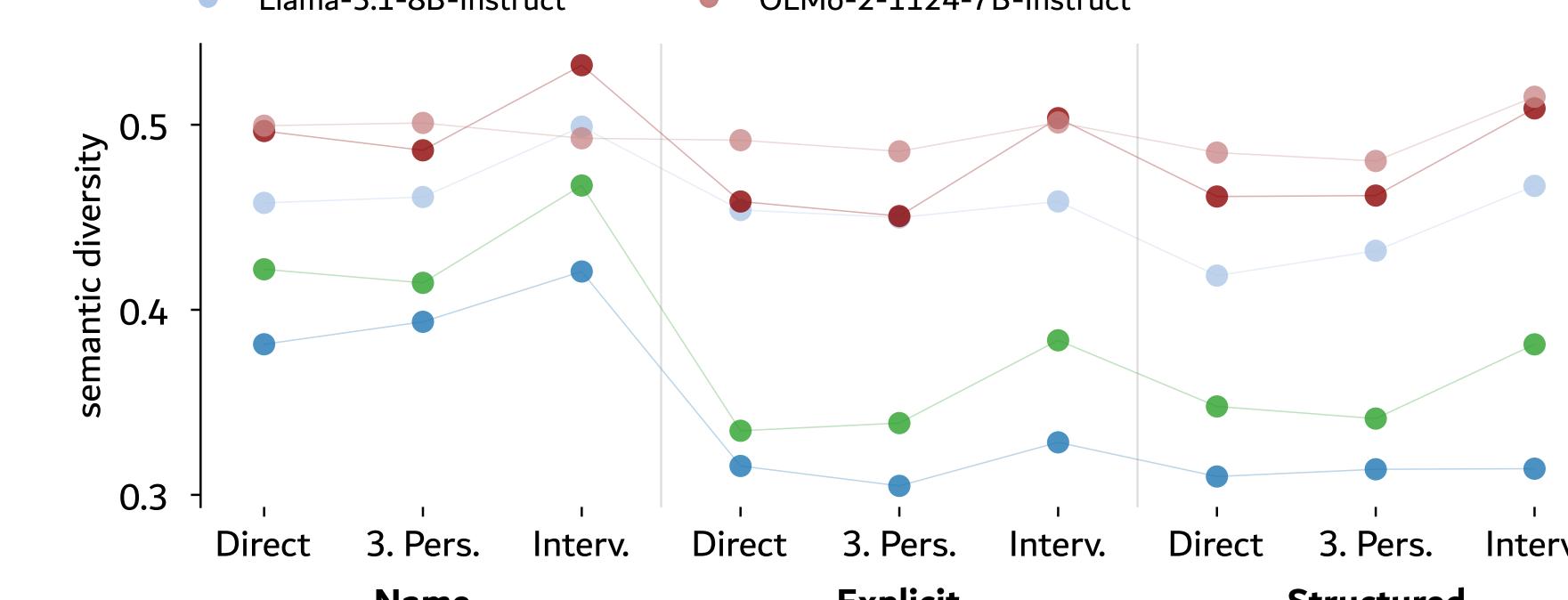
- most frequent** for **Hispanic** personas (up to 10.5%)
- rare** for all other groups (up to 0.8%)

Interview-style prompts significantly improve group portrayal and alignment

Prompting with **name-based priming** and the **interview** format...



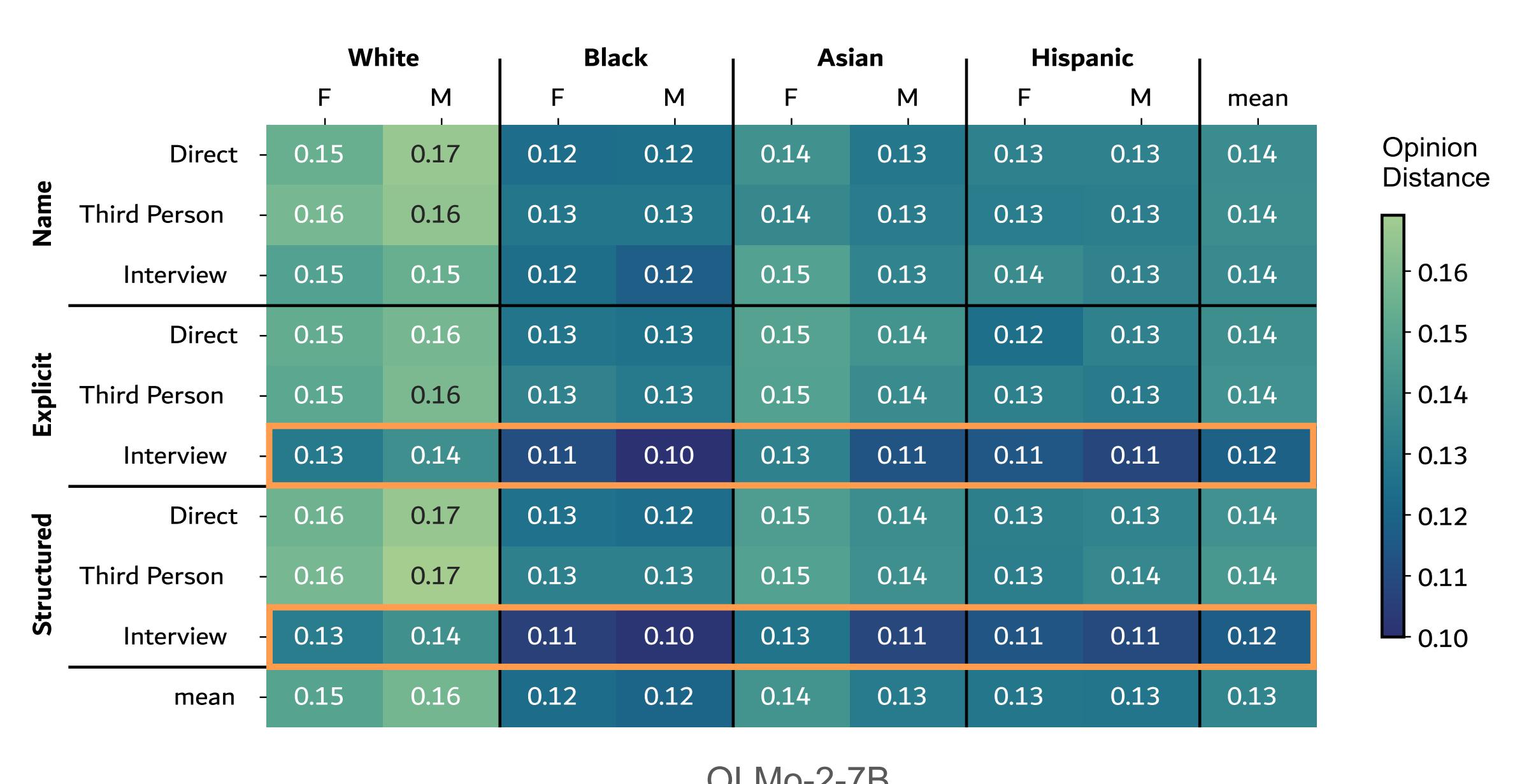
...reduces the share of personas containing **problematic stereotypes** for all models (↓ is better)



...increases semantic diversity for all models (↑ is better)

...and reduces language switching for all models (↓ is better)

Prompting with the **interview** format for role adoption leads to significant **improvement in alignment** by reducing opinion distance (↓ is better)



Takeaways:

- use names + interview format for persona prompting
- justify persona prompting choices
- Future work:** language switching patterns for different personas + languages