

REPORT ON UNMET NEEDS, CONCERNS AND STRATEGIES USED BY DESIGN RESEARCHERS WORKING ON TABOO TOPICS

Deliverable 1

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1 Summary

This report is part of Task 1 in project Taboo and seeks to answer three research questions:

- RQ1: What are current unmet needs of design researchers working with taboo topics?
- RQ2: Which strategies do design researchers currently employ to address taboo topics in their research with participants?
- RQ3: What are design researchers' major concerns in working with taboo topics?

To answer these questions, we have launched an online questionnaire, and we have conducted a series of interviews to a sub-sample of questionnaire respondents. In this report, we present the methods, materials, procedures and results of this work.

2 Questionnaire

2.1 Methods

For the identification of unmet needs and strategies used by design researchers, we designed a questionnaire with questions related to understanding participants' research processes, learning about struggles and unmet needs, and learning about best practices (Appendix I – Questionnaire).

The questionnaire had 14 items and was created in four languages: English, Portuguese, Spanish, and Italian. Although English is the standard language for international questionnaires, we decided to provide language choice in an attempt to reach researchers who might be otherwise left out of data collection if they were not comfortable reading or expressing themselves in English. The alternative languages were the ones that the research team was proficient in.

We analysed the data quantitatively through descriptive statistics and qualitatively using Affinity Mapping via MURAL.

2.2 Procedures

The questionnaire was disseminated through online mailing lists (PhD-Design, CHI-announcements, CSCW-ALL), through social media (LinkedIn), and by directly approaching researchers who the research team knew were working or had worked in sensitive/taboo topics. The data were collected between February 25 and March 07.

Participants' responses in Portuguese, Spanish and Italian were translated into English. Qualitative data were then analysed by one researcher.

2.3 Participants

The questionnaire initially received responses from 46 individuals. However, 12 respondents were excluded as they did not meet the eligibility criteria of having conducted research on taboo, sensitive, or stigmatized topics. Consequently, the final sample consisted of 34 participants. We decided to not characterise participants based on gender. Analysis of the responses revealed that the majority of design researchers (n=23, 67.6%) usually conduct their research within academic institutions. Additionally, 17.6% are engaged in corporate settings, while the remainder work in non-profit organizations, PhD research, or freelance roles.

Regarding professional experience, more than half of the respondents (n=21, 61.8%) have over seven years of experience. A further 26.5% (n=9) have between four and six years of experience, while 11.8% (n=4) have between one and three years of experience.

2.4 Results

When asked about the types of taboo topics respondents had researched, the most selected options were Sexuality and Gender, followed by Disability, Mental Health, and Politics. Regarding the populations studied, respondents most frequently reported working with People with Disabilities and Older Adults, along with Migrants and the LGBTQ+ community.

In terms of research methods, interviews were the most widely used approach, followed by co-design workshops and field observations. The results also showed how most of these research methods are not used as is, but they are often tailored by researchers to make sure that they better address the sensitivity of taboo topics. In fact, almost all respondents adapted at least once a research method to better serve the purpose. When researchers were asked more information on how they adapted a research method they cited how often they carry out discussions with experts before the start of study or, during research sessions, share personal information or adapt the language to better facilitate discussions on taboo topics.

The questionnaire also highlighted key challenges faced when researching taboo topics, including ethical concerns, participant discomfort, and recruitment difficulties. When asked to elaborate, respondents shared personal experiences, highlighting the mental toll of researchers, challenges in making participants feel comfortable, and events of opposition from external stakeholder. To address some these challenges, researchers often allow participants to guide discussions at their own comfort level or use co-design methods as a means of facilitating conversations. During activities with participants, researchers mentioned how they mainly use art materials (e.g. art supplies, collage) or other physical tools (e.g. props) to ease the conversation and help participants in feeling more relaxed.

3 Interviews

3.1 Methods

We designed an interview script to collect deeper insight on patterns that emerged in the questionnaire, explore design researchers' lived experience, and capture their processes of meaning-making with relation to the topic (**Error! Reference source not found.**).

From survey respondents, 27 indicated their willingness to be contacted for further activities. We had aimed at doing a minimum of 16 interviews. To select a sub-sample for the interviews, one of the researchers analysed participants' answers to open-ended questions and selected a list of 10 participants that he found to be more interesting for interviews because of particular methods they used, particular populations they had experience with, or particular challenges that they had faced. The team analysed the suggestions, which also factored in a balance between researchers in inside and outside academia, and each researcher selected another participant based on what they found to be more interesting for the project (e.g., experience in corporate research, knowledge of prior publications). We added two participants with experience doing design research around taboo topics who had not filled in the questionnaire, but who had gotten in touch with the research team showing their interest about the project. Finally, we added one participant who had filled in the questionnaire and with whom the research team had met previously because this participant was launching an interest group on design + stigma.

The data were analysed using Thematic Analysis and Affinity Mapping.

3.2 Procedures

Participants were invited to an interview via e-mail to the address they had shared on the questionnaire. The e-mail also contained the preliminary results of the questionnaire. The interviews were scheduled to be held online. Each interview was led by one researcher with another one also present in the interview taking notes.

Interviews were recorded (video and audio) and transcribed.

3.3 Participants

Eleven design researchers were interviewed. Each interview took circa 1h. Participants had experience with different taboo topics, with various user groups, and in various countries. Most participants have over seven years' experience in design research and the vast majority were academics.

3.4 Results

We ran the analysis to the interview data via two lenses: one looking at the artefacts, including the purposes they served and their properties, and another looking at the entire experience, including challenges and strategies, of being a design researcher working on taboo topics.

The analysis of the artefacts revealed that they tend to serve three purposes: scaffolding, reflecting and showing care/inviting participants in. We have also analysed the concrete examples of nine artefacts that our interviewees crafted or used. This analysis showed that are certain artefact properties that are more common among them, such as appealing primarily to sight, being portable, using multiple colours and being designed for direct interactions between researchers and participants.

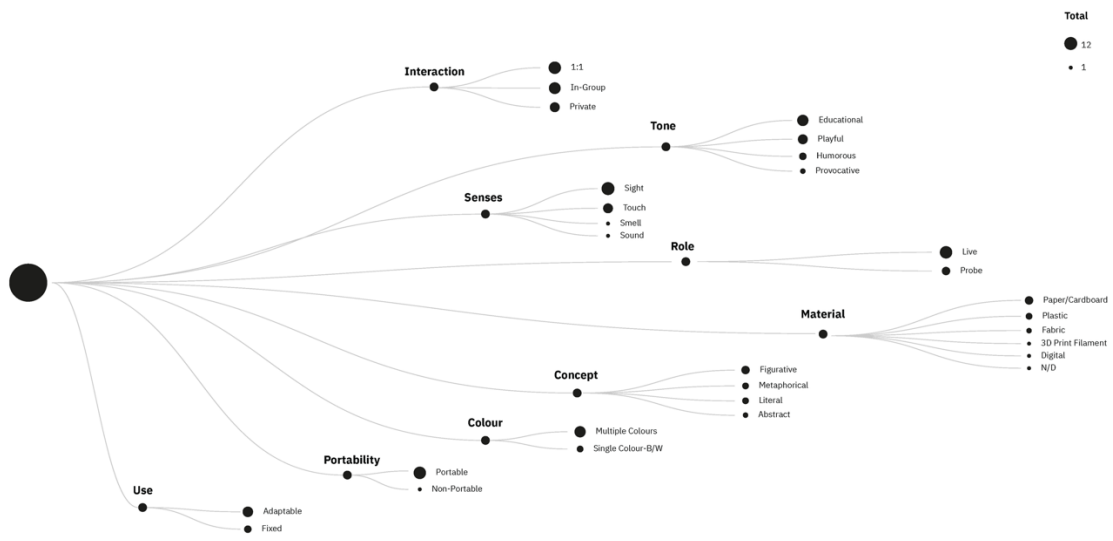


Figure 1 Properties of the nine artefacts mentioned/used by interviewees.

4 Community of practice

In this section we report on the work we did in order to build a community of practice that would support and guide the research team during the project, and which could possibly remain active beyond the project.

At the time of writing the proposal, we received the support from Petra Salarić, a design researcher specialising in Taboo and who had formed the Design for Taboo Interest Group (D4TIG) years back. This interest group was one of the groups among which we disseminated the questionnaire.

The dissemination of the questionnaire led to further interactions with researchers exploring taboo topics, who contacted us to share experiences. Examples were Meghan Lazier, who created a DRS group on design and stigma, Francesco Mazzarella, who works with vulnerable populations (e.g., refugees, people in prisons), Louise Kiernan, who is exploring frameworks for ethics in design research practice, or Sofie Kinch, who researches the use of games in interactions about taboo topics, such as death. We scheduled appointments with Meghan and Sofie in view of finding opportunities for collaboration. Through our dissemination efforts, we also got in touch with [The Young Agency](#), who have been doing research and publications on taboo topics, as well as with [The Care Lab](#).

In October 2025, we held a workshop at the event Why the World Needs Anthropologists, in Bologna, Italy, to share some of the artefacts/prototypes we had developed in the Taboo project and request feedback from researchers who were not from the field of design, but use similar user research techniques.

In November 2025, we held an event at Fraunhofer Portugal AICOS, in Porto, entitled “Awkwardness in design Research”. For this event, we invited members of the community of practice for keynotes speeches and workshops, as well as another speaker, who albeit not with the community of practice, is a well-known designer and scholar in speculative design. Co-

located with this event, we held an exhibition of the artefacts/prototypes developed during the Taboo project, with which the members of the community of practice and the audience were invited to interact.

To disseminate our work further and increase this community, we submitted a theme track proposal to the DRS2026 conference – the largest conference in design research – entitled “Designing for and with Taboo”. This submission was made together with members of the community of practice and was accepted at the conference.

5 Appendixes

5.1 Appendix I – Questionnaire

Project description

Taboo is a research project of Fraunhofer Portugal AICOS and funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT). It aims at investigating how design research can contribute to the study of taboo topics by developing design artifacts as tools for inquiry. By creating and experimenting with design artifacts, we seek to explore their potential to address sensitive issues while fostering dialogue and understanding. The project will focus on three key outcomes:

- 1. Identifying challenges that design researchers face when addressing taboo subjects (the purpose of this questionnaire).**
2. Developing a set of design principles to guide the creation of effective research artifacts.
3. Producing a collection of experimental artifacts that exemplify these principles in action.

Through these efforts, we aim at building a community of practice, encouraging collaboration, critique, and refinement of approaches.

How we will use your data

All responses will be anonymized and no personal information will be shared or published. The data from this survey will be used solely for research purposes and analyzed in aggregate to inform our study.

Before continuing with the survey, we ask you to take the time to read the Informed Consent Form, which you can access in this link: https://fraunhoferportugal.github.io/taboo-website/documents/ICF_Taboo_DesignResearchers_EN.pdf

Demographics

- 1. What is your primary role as a design researcher?**

UX researcher

Academic researcher

Designer

Design researcher

Other: _____

2. How many years of experience do you have in design research?

Less than 1 year

1–3 years

4–6 years

7+ years

3. In what type of setting do you conduct research? (e.g., corporate, academic, freelance, non-profit, etc.)

4. Have you ever conducted research on topics considered taboo, sensitive, or stigmatized?

A taboo topic is a social group's avoidance, prohibition, or ban of something (usually an utterance or behavior) based on the group's sense that it is excessively repulsive, offensive, sacred, or allowed only for certain people. Taboos may be prohibited explicitly, for example within a legal system or religion, or implicitly, for example by social norms or conventions followed by a particular culture or organization. (Wikipedia)

Yes

No (If no, we can terminate the survey here.)

5. If yes, on which taboo topics have you worked?

Religion

Politics

Sexuality

Gender

Death

Addiction

Disability

Infertility

Mental health

Other: _____

6. During your research about taboo topics, with which populations have you worked?

Migrants

LGBTQ+ community

Refugees

People with disabilities

Older adults

Homeless individuals

Survivors of violence

Indigenous communities

Other: _____

About your research process

7. Which research methods do you usually implement when exploring taboo topics?

(Check all that apply)

Interviews

Focus groups

Field observations

Diary studies

Co-design workshops

Surveys

Other: _____

8. Have you/or one of your colleagues ever tailored any research method to better address the sensitivity of taboo topics? If yes, how and why?

Struggles and unmet needs in research about taboo topics

9. What challenges have you faced when researching taboo topics? (Select all that apply)

Difficulties in recruiting participants

Personal discomfort as a researcher

Participant discomfort

Funding issues

Disapproval of management

Ethical concerns

Cultural barriers

Other: _____

10. Can you share a specific instance where researching taboo topics was particularly challenging?

Best practices

11. How do you facilitate the communication with participants when addressing taboo topics?

I use visual artifacts (e.g. leaflets, card, pictures) to foster a conversation with participants

I frame the topic as if discussing someone else's experience (third-person perspective).

I use humor to overcome the awkwardness in the conversation

I use co-design as a form of conversation

I use anonymous scenarios or case studies to prompt participant responses.

I allow participants to guide the conversation at their own comfort level.

I use asynchronous methods (e.g., diary studies or cultural probes) to document experiences, behaviors, or feelings over a period of time.

Other: _____

12. Have you ever used any physical object/tool during your research on taboo topics? If yes, what did you use?

Cultural probes (e.g., journals, postcards, cameras)

Physical tools (e.g., objects or props)

Games and toys (e.g., board games, cards, or puzzles)

Art materials (e.g., art supplies, collages, or craft items)

Fidgeting objects (e.g., stress balls, fidget spinners)

Other: _____

Further contacts

13. Would you be available to be contacted by one member of our team for future activities related to TABOO project and our goals?

Yes

No

14. Please provide a contact, so that we can remain in touch (e.g., mobile phone, email address, etc.)