

# IDENTIFICATION AND COMPARISON OF TECHNIQUES AND GUIDELINES ABOUT WORKING WITH TABOO TOPICS

## Deliverable 2

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## 1 Summary

This Deliverable is part of Task 2 of project Taboo, within the observational phase of the project, the goal of which is to answer the following research question:

- RQ4: Which tools or techniques are used by professionals in the social and healthcare sciences to address taboo topics and how can they inform design research methods?

To do so, we used two complementary methods: first we conducted desk research to collect examples of artefacts used in research on taboo topics and afterwards, we held a session with researchers to share our findings and seek to collaboratively understand how the principles/techniques could be applied.

## 2 Methods

The desk research was conducted via word search in general search engines, as well as in databases of scientific publications, such as the DRS Digital Library and Google Scholar. This also led to snowballing via references or link that were found in the publications we analysed.

The search terms combined topics related to taboo (e.g., “sensitive topics”, “shame”), specific taboos (e.g., “sexuality”, “death”) and keywords about design research practice (e.g., “artefact”, “probe”, “stimuli”).

Each example was placed on a table with the following fields: taboo topic, purpose of the artefact, context in which it was used, field of activity, strategy used to address taboo, medium, author, year, project name, company/institution, target population, geography, and assessment method. Whenever doubts arose about the characterisation of an artefact or whether it was eligible to be in the table, the research team decided by discussing together, and in one occasion, by testing the artefact.

We then used affinity mapping in various iterations to try to identify clusters within our dataset and a framework in which we could fit the examples.

### 3 Dataset

Our search led to a collection of 54 examples. Below we present an overview of the Figure 1 - Evolution of characteristics of Affirmaset's characteristics:

- **Fields.** Examples were found in the field of Health (n=27), Community & Society (n=19), and Body & Identify (n=8).
- **Geography.** From Europe came 32 examples, while 11 came from North America, seven from Asia, and two from South America.
- **Population.** There were 28 examples looking at older adults and respective caregivers, educators, and individual facing personal health or social taboos. There were 11 examples related to children and teens, and there were 15 examples engaging groups, such as families.
- **Topics.** There were 15 projects about female anatomy, intimacy and body fluids, 11 exploring chronic diseases or conditions, such as dementia, 11 about expression of emotions in taboo, and the remaining were distributed across topics ranging from suicide to drug use.
- **Artefacts.** There was a wide variety of artefacts being used, such as photographs, cards, design fictions, or toys. Toolkits and were found in 17 examples, and games in 16. The other examples used other techniques, from data visualisations to performance.

## 4 Results

Our results revealed that artefacts used in research around sensitive or taboo topics often have shared purposes, approaches, and techniques. We describe each of them in the following three sections. In the fourth section, we discuss another layer connecting the artefacts, which is related to lenses and intentions

### 4.1 Purposes

We identified four prominent purposes in our analysis, namely **(i) therapeutic, (ii) education, (iii) research and research through design, and (iv) artistic.**

#### 4.1.1 Therapeutic purpose

We noticed that several artefacts addressed health and the body, though especially focusing on therapeutic or healing aims. Most of these artefacts were created by therapists or designed to support therapeutic practices, like employing strategies focused on emotional expression and well-being. Some artefacts such as **tactile tools** (i.e., *Tangible Pain Scales* (Janwadkar, 2018) or *Sexual Healing* (Helder, 2017)), **toys** (i.e., *Alma Therapy Dolls* (Nusboim, n.d.)), **toolkits** (i.e., *Therapy Toolkit* (Martinsen, 2021) or *Moving Memories* (Brard, 2017)) or **games**, were used to allow participants (i.e., children, individuals within the autism spectrum, sexual dysfunction, dementia or who suffered trauma) **enhance self-expression and to process, visualise, and communicate complex emotions and/or pain.** We also noticed the use of **music and dance as methods** to enhance emotional and social well-being in dementia patients (i.e., *Dit-Dit project* (López et al., 2022)) and the use of games and ludic tools to support children talking about death (Verhalen & Rodrigues, 2024) or facilitating interactions with patients dealing with drug use dependency (i.e., *Step by Step* (Peçaibes et al., 2020)) or suffering from anorexia nervosa (i.e., *Armour Game* (Giesteira et al., 2024)).

#### 4.1.2 Educational purpose

Many of the artefacts identified also addressed health-related taboo issues though with an education goal, as several were dedicated to the topic of Menstrual Health education (i.e., *Menstrual Maze* (Tran & Choi, 2018)). These commonly take form of **toys and games** (i.e., *The Period Game* (Gilsanz & Murphy, 2014)), which provide **hands-on, collaborative playful experiences** (i.e., *Menstrual Monster* (Liang et al., 2022)), and **enjoyment in a non-stigmatising way**. Usually aim at exploring and addressing early body literacy, and to educate and facilitate conversations between parents, children, adolescents, and health educators. Besides promoting learning, these artefacts **foster discussion and influence attitudes and behaviours**. Beyond health-related topics, we also found games to support understanding often taboo topics such as suicide among university students (Bjørner et al., 2024) and support health professionals discussing grief with children through grief therapy (Verhalen & Rodrigues, 2024).

#### 4.1.3 Research and Research through Design purpose

Besides therapy and education, we noticed that many artefacts were also created as research tools or as outcomes of Research through Design approaches. These aimed at **facilitating discussions with participants** around taboo topics and **inform the design of digital product solutions**, employing these design research methods through a co-design approach (Correia de Barros et al., 2022); **playfully exploring social interactions using tangible prototypes** to encourage touch between strangers (i.e., *The Undertable* (Hendriks et al., 2024)); and **explore alternative ways of visualising** self-tracking data for individuals with bipolar disorder (Snyder et al., 2019).

#### 4.1.4 Artistic purpose

Furthermore, we have identified artefacts to address taboo-related topics, such as menstruation, female reproductive diseases, and female sexual pleasure, through artistic expression, serving as **mediums for personal reflection, foster awareness and dialogue, challenging social norms and stigmas, or evoking emotional responses on viewers/participants**. These take form of **provocative and serendipitous art installation** (i.e., *The Transformation of the World* (Aura & Aurora, 2022)); **photography exhibition**

depicting a dystopian speculative world that serve as **catalysts for deeper reflection** (i.e., *What Not to Wear* (Arora et al., 2023)); **music video and speculative wearable device to simulate sensorial sensations** (i.e., *Menstrual Machine* (Sputniko!, 2010)); **immersive installation and VR experiences** combined with **storytelling, haptic feedback** and **embodied strategies** (i.e., *INTER/her* (Baker et al., 2019)); **interactive experiences** such as an experimental game that involves players in **sensory and playful explorations to learn** about the clitoris (i.e., *CLTRS* (Chiapello et al., 2023)).

## 4.2 Approaches

We identified two major design approaches used by the authors of the artefacts we analysed, namely **(i) participatory and co-design** and **(ii) speculative design and design fictions**.

### 4.2.1 Participatory and Co-Design approaches

Regarding participatory and co-design approaches many artefacts relied on such methodologies to create solutions with various stakeholders. For example, involving students, in **workshops** to explore the intersection of shame and sustainable design practices (i.e., *Pee Poo Period* (Kyong Trondsen et al., 2023)), or also involving students, healthcare professionals and individuals living with endometriosis (i.e., *Making Invisible, Visible* (Hearn et al., 2024)). We also saw **artefacts being co-created with different communities**, such as a **digital toy to encourage people** with vulvas to **communicate more openly** their sexual desires (i.e., *Pussy Palette* (Várhidi & Rauhut, 2024)), a **customizable keyboard** to mediate intimacy (i.e., *DearBoard* (Griggio et al., 2021)), a **matching game** to enable people in India to discuss menstruation (i.e., *Mix-A-Body-Match* (Diehl & Salarić, 2020)), a **cookery kit to facilitate social connections** among isolated elderly women (i.e., *Social Oven* (Sabatowska, 2018)), and a **generative tool to facilitate the involvement in the design process**, of children who use prosthetic legs (i.e., *Paper-Doll Toolkit* (Hussain & Sanders, 2012)).

### 4.2.2 Speculative Design and Design Fictions approaches

We also noticed that many artefacts used speculative design approaches, which are widely **used to challenge norms and taboos, imagine alternative futures and provoke reflection, discussion, or discomfort**. Many artefacts take different forms such as an **interactive website to invite people to openly discuss** death and end-of-life (i.e., *Death Over Dinner* (Hebb & Macklin, 2013)), **design provocations to speculate on technology** to support individuals managing urinary practices (i.e., *Technologies of Human Waste* (Helms, 2020)), **speculative prototypes to provoke discussions** on hand hygiene (Kinch et al., 2023), and **fictional jewellery to speculate** on negative body-related self-disclosure to promote intimacy over distance (i.e., *DisClose* (Aljuneidi et al., 2024)).

### 4.3 Techniques

Regarding the techniques, we identified three main techniques employed by these authors when using design artefacts to address sensitive and/or taboo topics. These were **(i) visual methods, (ii) gamification and playfulness** and **(iii) artistic and embodied practices**.

#### 4.3.1 Visual methods

Almost all artefacts we analysed use visual methods or stimuli, to **support represent complex concepts to engage a broader range of people** in discussions, as a way to **externalise and reflect** on personal data, using **data visualisations** (Snyder et al., 2019), examine the relationship between gut health and shame, using **photographic records** (i.e., *Shit!* (Wilde, 2022)) and **reflect** on linguistic (i.e., *Ephemera* (Huang et al., 2024)) or menstrual (i.e., *Period Drama* (Nair & Anthony, 2023)) taboos, by **connecting visual with storytelling and humour**. Also, the use of visual tools, such as **toys** to support survivors of childhood sexual abuse **visualise their healing process** (i.e., *Balisa* (Sala, 2020)), **memes** as an effective tool for **destigmatising taboo** in social media (Weckend & Chandra, 2024), **body mapping** to analyse somaesthetic interaction design for women's sexual pleasure (i.e., *Embodied Embroidery* (Hua et al., 2023)) or to allow people with anorexia nervosa to externalise and examine their self-perception of body image (i.e., *Armour Game* (Giesteira et al., 2024)), and **visual symbols to support talking** about death (i.e., *Symbols of Death* (Moth, 2024)).

### 4.3.2 Gamification and playfulness

Gamified and playful techniques enable to **transform difficult and awkward conversations into joyful, hands-on and engaging experiences**, as we noticed that menstruation has been widely explored through gamification (i.e., *Menstrual Monster* (Liang et al., 2022), *The Period Game* (Gilsanz & Murphy, 2014), *Sang Tabou* (La Coulotte Rouge & Sisters Republic, 2022) and *Menstrual Maze* (Tran & Choi, 2018)). These **encourage open conversations and breaking the silence** around such topic. They also have been used to **foster empathy and interpersonal connections** (i.e., *We'Re Not Really Strangers* (Odiney, 2018) and *Get Closer Conversation Game* (Intelligent Change, n.d.)). These commonly take form of **prompt cards as conversation-starters or activity cards**, as a **toolkit design** to support youth through grief (i.e., *Death of a Loved One* (The Healing Library, n.d.)). Additionally, we also noticed some **video game artefacts** that have the potential to invite players to **engage in playful explorations** of sexuality and female pleasure (i.e., *CLTRS* (Chiapello et al., 2023)), **mediate dyadic intimacy, digital relationships and emotional bonding** through technology (i.e., *Audition* (Freeman et al., 2016)), and **promoting awareness and understanding** of suicidal thoughts among students (Bjørner et al., 2024), by engaging in this **interactive and immersive experience** that fosters **empathy and critical knowledge**.

### 4.3.3 Artistic and embodied practices

Regarding artistic and embodied practices, we identified several artefacts that aim at fostering **immersive experiences that engage the body and mind**. Techniques such as using **movement, dance and music** (i.e., *Dit-Dit project* (López et al., 2022)), **theatre** (i.e., *Il Manto – L'Arte Della Cura* (Campostrini et al., 2022)) and **art installations** (i.e., *The Transformation of the World* (Aura & Aurora, 2022)). These artefacts also take many forms such as using **physical objects** to emphasize **sensory engagement and embodied cognition** (i.e., *Moving Memories* (Brard, 2017) and *Taktil* (Lorence, 2018)), **digital objects and wearables**, to **augment looking** on hidden parts of the body such as genitalia (i.e., *Labella* (Almeida et al., 2016)), enabling to **reshape how one looks at and learns about the body**, or **body mapping** representations to emphasize the importance of **bodily awareness in self-exploration** (i.e., *Embodied Embroidery* (Hua et al., 2023)).

## 4.4 Lenses and intentions

In the end, through our analysis of these artefacts we noticed how these purposes, approaches and techniques could be combined under different lenses or intentions, which led us to identify three main goals: **(i) facilitate communication on sensitive topics, (ii) provoke awkwardness to challenge sensitive topics, and (iii) intervene by shaping behaviours, create change and breaking down barriers** (around taboo and stigma).

### 4.4.1 Facilitate communication on sensitive topics

In our analysis, we noticed that most of the artefacts created intend to facilitate communication around sensitive topics, thus aiming at **support effective and/or alternative communication and mediation, encourage active involvement and invite participation, and foster open and shame-free discussions**. This is possible as these artefacts allow to transform awkwardness into comfort, lightening the discussion and gently introduce taboo topics in a non-stigmatising way. These also support to create safe, inclusive and engaging spaces for discussion, make participants feel more comfortable, able and willing to talk candidly about sensitive topics. The strategies to achieve this mainly include **humour and playfulness** (i.e., helping hinder taboos and turn discomfort into engagement), **non-verbal and tactile communication and expression, materiality, and visual stimuli and metaphors** (i.e., supporting people expression thoughts and emotions often hard to express verbally, making abstract concepts tangible, or as an alternative way to observe, materialise or externalise emotions). Reframing stigma, enabling gradual incursion into topics, encouraging participation, or providing alternative ways of expression, makes possible to facilitate and ease-in such conversations.

### 4.4.2 Provoke awkwardness to challenge sensitive topics

The analysis also revealed that many artefacts deliberately provoke awkwardness to challenge individuals to engage with sensitive topics, by **embracing discomfort, supporting shifting perspectives, challenging established attitudes, social norms and the limits of social acceptability, confronting taboos, prompting reflection and discussion, and by using awkwardness as a technique to provoke thoughts and reactions**. The strategies to achieve

this mainly include **speculation, provocation** and **critique** (i.e., challenging social expectations, encouraging critical reflection and unconventional perspectives, and questioning what is deemed inappropriate through an uncomfortable or unfamiliar lens), **embodiment** (i.e., forcing participants to enact awkwardness which provokes them to look at the topics through different lenses, or seeking to foster empathy allowing to experience sensations they never felt before), and **visualisation** (e.g., through photography or speculative provocations). Embracing awkwardness, rather than avoiding it, makes possible to challenge and confront sensitive topics.

#### 4.4.3 Intervene by shaping behaviours, create change and breaking down barriers

Finally, our analysis identified that many authors do not just produce artefacts, but design them to intervene, by shaping behaviours, creating change, and/or breaking down barriers that prevent individuals from addressing sensitive topics. This intention to intervene can be done by **providing information and knowledge about the world, society, or oneself, through desensitising taboos and eliminating myths over repeated exposure, and by encouraging people to interact through a designed artefact**. The strategies of such interventions include **playfulness and/or gamification, collaboration, storytelling, self-reflection** and **materiality**. Despite some artefacts demonstrated the impact of these design interventions to make people communicate about topics that otherwise would be difficult to talk about, we found that not many examples have been tested at scale, as it requires time, resources, and raises ethical dilemmas which are difficult to tackle. Thus, it indicates that the field of design research lacks evidence towards this impact, which leaves open questions to the community.

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