

DESIGN RESEARCH ARTEFACTS AND GUIDELINES

Deliverable 3

19 of May, 2026

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1 Summary

This Deliverable is part of Task 3 of project Taboo, within the experimental phase of the project, responding to the following research question:

- RQ5: Which characteristics do artifacts for design research need to have in order to successfully mediate researcher-participant communication around taboo topics?

In order to do so, we followed the following procedure:

- We first carried out a series of interviews with design researchers with previous experience in working with taboo and sensitive topics, living in different continents (Europe, Americas, Asia, and Africa).
- We analysed artefacts created by such experts and identified common characteristics that these artefacts embedded.
- We developed and tested concepts for design research artifacts based on the knowledge gathered so far in collaboration with Psychology and Human Sexuality researchers and PhD students, whose work related with topics such as sexuality, disability and gender affirmation.

2 Results

2.1 Artefacts Characterisation

The desk research, questionnaire responses, and interview analysis led us to focus on the characteristics of the artefacts examined to better learn about defining common design principles that could be adapted to create artefacts for discussing taboo topics. This analysis revealed several common characteristics across all artefacts, particularly in terms of:

- Colour
- Material
- Configuration (portability, use, interaction, role)
- Sensorial modalities
- Meaning (tone and concept)

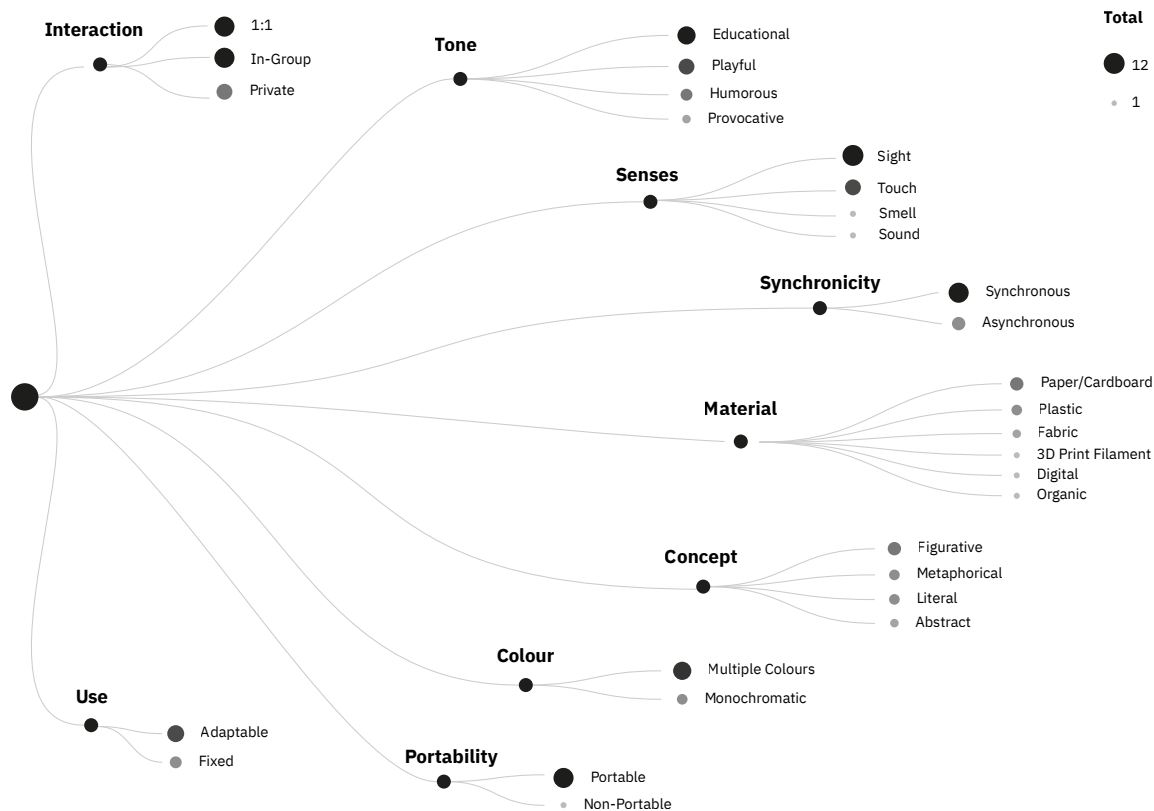


Figure 1 - Groups of characteristics found among the artefacts used by or created by interviewees.

All artefacts were then categorised according to their individual characteristics and numbered. This part of the work allowed us to identify several characteristics commonly present in most of the artefacts reviewed, such as the use of multiple colours or designs intended to encourage a live approach, along with less common features like the involvement of smell and taste or the use of artefacts in a more abstract way.

Interaction	1:1	8
	In-group	9
	Private	7

Tone	Educational	9
	Playful	7
	Humorous	4
	Provocative	2

Synchronicity	Synchronous	10
	Asynchronous	8

Color	Multiple colors	9
	Monochromatic	3
	B/W	0

Material	Paper/Cardboard	5
	Plastic	3

Senses	Sight	12
	Touch	7
	Sound	1
	Smell	1
	Taste	0

	Fabric	2
	3D Print Filament	1
	Digital	1
	Organic	1

Concept	Figurative	5
	Metaphorical	3
	Literal	3
	Abstract	2

The results of this work provided an overview of the characteristics present in most artefacts, along with insights into what could be explored to create new artefacts that draw on less commonly used features and to assess how these might influence the different sessions in which they are used.

2.2 Design and test of Artefacts

The initial survey allowed us to list the taboo topics researchers mostly worked with, as well as the user groups they mostly worked with (Figure 2). These combinations were intended to indicate directions for the types of topics and user groups we would be working with in the experimental phase. As foreseen in the proposal and in our submission to the ethics committee of the University of Porto, we anticipated that working on these topics, particularly with certain user groups might be problematic. Therefore, we asked to meet with a specialist in Research Ethics in order to help steer our work and help us identify strategies to mitigate any risks. After the meeting, we agreed that we should not, as designers and by ourselves, work on the topic of mental health. We were also discouraged from working with migrants due to potential risks for participants. In any case, the ethics specialist said, we should have the assistance of psychologists who could be called in case we identify any risk to participants' wellbeing. This led us to consider the possibility of working with psychologists directly and to see how our design skills and the knowledge we had gained so far could be of value to their ongoing research projects that dealt with taboo topics.

	Older adults	LGBTQ+	PwD	Migrants
Sexuality	6	5	6	3
Gender	5	4	4	3
Mental health	2	3	4	2
Disability	5	2	9	2

Figure 2 - Matrix of taboo topics and user groups that most frequently appeared in the survey.

Since we had a prior contact with researchers in the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of University of Porto, we contacted them presenting our project and asked if they would like to form partnerships. This contact spread the call among other researchers. Those who were interested in collaborating with project Taboo got in touch with us.

Each collaboration began with general meetings to understand the topics, target populations, and contextual constraints. Following these meetings, we held internal debrief sessions to discuss and define the direction and intended characteristics of each artefact (based on the prior list we had elaborated, cf. Figure 1). This was followed by three structured brainstorming sessions in which initial concepts were collaboratively designed (Figure 3). These concepts were then shared with stakeholders to gather feedback and refine the artefacts based on how collaborators intended to use them in their own research.

Once concepts were refined, we moved into the design phase, developing artefacts and testing them with collaborators and their participants to ensure usability, relevance, and effectiveness of each solution. In the following sections we describe the

entities/persons we collaborated with, followed by a description of the artefacts that were created for each.



Figure 3 – Drawings from brainstorming session showing which characteristics were selected for each artefact.

2.3 Collaborations

2.3.1 SexLab – Ana Quinta Gomes and Mariana Carrito

The Research Group in Human Sexuality at the University of Porto focuses on advancing scientific knowledge in human sexuality and promoting its social and academic dissemination. It supports the training of students, professionals, and researchers across clinical, social, and sexual rights fields. The group established the Research Laboratory on Human Sexuality (SexLab) in 2008 through a partnership with the Universities of Coimbra and Aveiro, relocating its headquarters to the University of Porto in 2012. SexLab is the only laboratory in Portugal dedicated exclusively to studying cognitive, affective, and psychophysiological aspects of sexual response and functioning. Its facilities support multiple laboratory methods and the lab is part of the international SEXLAB network coordinated by Professor Erick Jansen at the University of Leuven.

2.3.2 Liliana Rodrigues and Students (Ana Marques, Rita Torres e Hélia Rocha)

The Centre for Psychology at the University of Porto (CPUP) is a research and development unit founded in 1980, dedicated to producing high-quality fundamental and applied research in Psychology and to developing evidence-based clinical, educational and social interventions. CPUP aims to promote individual and collective well-being while contributing to a diverse and socially just society. The centre operates according to the highest international scientific standards and receives continuous funding from the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT). CPUP is organized into five major research groups: Culture, Normativity and Diversity; Development and Education; Mind, Body and Brain; Relationships, Change Processes and Well-Being; and Sexuality and Gender.

2.3.3 APCC – Ana Quinta Gomes and Catarina Martins

The Northern Regional Centre of the Portuguese Association of Cerebral Palsy was created in Porto in 1974. In 2005, it became an independent organization named the Porto Association of Cerebral Palsy with the same core mission: supporting people's life goals and promoting rights, self-determination, and inclusion, respecting each person's diversity. Today, The Porto Association of Cerebral Palsy is a Private Social Solidarity Institution with 40 years of activity, operating in Porto and Gondomar. It offers occupational, residential, educational, community, and rehabilitation services, including the only rehabilitation centre in the Porto metropolitan area specializing in cerebral palsy and related neurological conditions from childhood to adulthood.

2.4 Artefacts

We describe all the artefacts below. The materials we created have also been made openly accessible on the project website, including instructions on how to use each artefact. These materials may be found on this link:

<https://taboo.projects.fraunhofer.pt/en/collaborations/>

2.4.1 FullSense

Introduction

Sexual difficulties significantly impact the lives of many people worldwide. A recent study by SexLab at FPCEUP found that over half of the Portuguese population is dissatisfied with their sexual life. A substantial part of this dissatisfaction is linked to sexual difficulties. The study revealed that 20% of Portuguese adults experience frequent sexual problems that cause moderate to severe emotional distress. Common issues include low sexual desire (affecting both sexes), erectile and lubrication difficulties, orgasmic problems, sexual pain in women, and premature or delayed ejaculation in men. Additionally, around half of those reporting sexual difficulties experience multiple issues simultaneously, which further increases the impact on their well-being.

The aim of this artefact is to support individuals experiencing sexual difficulties in deciding whether to participate in the study conducted by SexLab, while emphasizing the importance of research in this area.

How it was created

The concept emerged from internal brainstorming sessions in which several proposals were explored. During these sessions, we discussed the need for an icebreaker that would introduce the research study. We identified that the artefact should be used privately and needed to be educational. We designed with multiple senses in mind: it had to be visually appealing and professional, but we also wanted to experiment with other senses such as taste.

	1 Concept	→	2 Artefact	→	3 Feedback
Colour	None		• Multiple Colors		Multiple Colors
Material	Paper/Cardboard		• Digital+Paper		Digital+Paper
Portability	Portable		Portable		Portable
Senses	Sight		• Smell+Sight+Taste		• Smell+Sight+Taste+Touch
Use	Fixed		Adaptable		Adaptable
Tone	Educational		Educational		• Playful
Interaction	Private		Private		Private
Concept	Literal		Literal		Literal
Synchronicity	None		• Probe		Probe

• Changed property

Fullsense

Figure 4 - Evolution of characteristics of FullSense

During the sessions, we decided to include a teabag that participants could ideally use while browsing through the materials. The concept was then presented to the FullSense team, which stressed the need to find a different way to deliver the welcoming kit without collecting personal data from participants (i.e., emails, addresses). This feedback guided us towards creating a virtual version of the artefact that could be easily shared when staff were unable to meet participants before the start of the study.

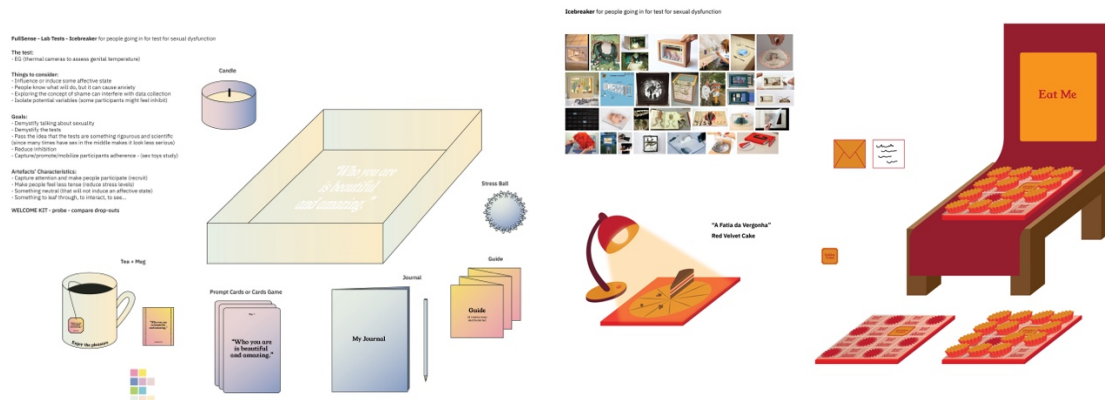


Figure 5 - Early concepts from brainstorming

Artefact Description

FullSense project aimed to develop an online psychological intervention program to promote the sexual health and well-being of people with sexual difficulties or who are dissatisfied with their sex life. Participants in the program are asked to undergo a procedure involving the placement of EEG sensors on their heads and removal of clothing below the waist. During the procedure, a thermal camera records genital temperature while various images are presented to assess sexual arousal. Although researchers are not present in the same room, participants often experience discomfort or anxiety due to the nature of the exam.

To better prepare participants, demystify the research process, and educate them about human sexuality research and experimental procedures, we designed a welcoming kit. This kit provides clear, accessible information about the study, explains what participation entails, and aims to make the experience more comfortable and transparent for participants.

The artefact can be given to participants either in its physical or digital form, based on their preference. The welcoming kit consists of:

- A bag of tea for participants to enjoy while reading (physical form only)
- A timeline with important landmarks of the research group
- A presentation of the research group team with their photos
- A set of photos of the instruments and data that is collected
- A list of precautions to consider before taking the study
- A map with instructions to access the laboratory

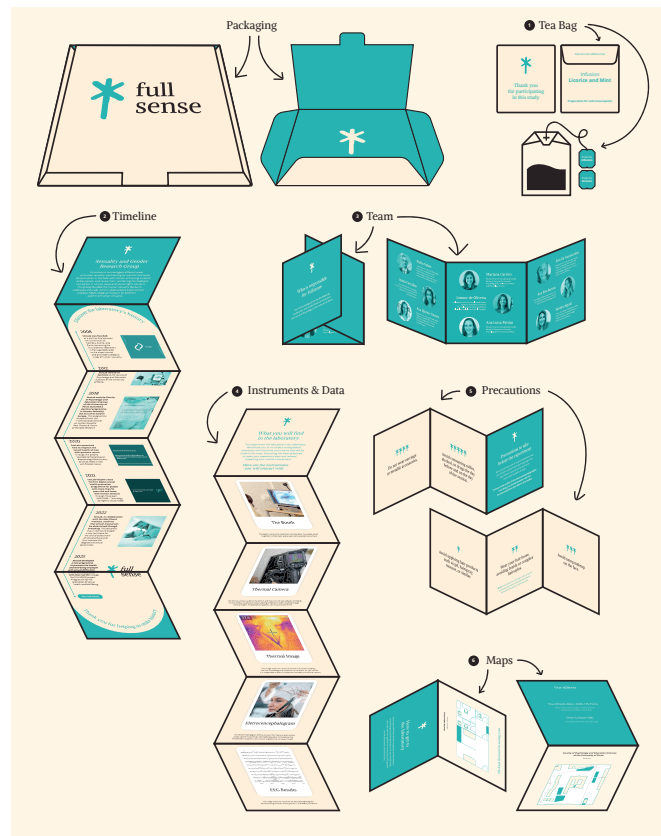


Figure 6 – Illustration of the kit



Figure 7 – Photograph of the kit

Feedback

Feedback was collected in two different moments of the research: i) after the initial release of the kit, through a three-questions survey that was issued by SexLab to participants before their involvement in the study; ii) at the approaching of the end of the project, through an interview with one of SexLab's professionals (P48). During the first part of the evaluation, participants were asked to rate with a scale from 1 to 5 the following aspects of the FullSense welcome kit: how visually appealing were the materials given to participants, how comfortable participants were when interacting with them and how useful or informative they were. The survey was shared to participants via a QR code which redirected them to the link of the online form, printed inside the kit. The feedback received highlighted how the materials were perceived as highly appealing and comfortable to interact with. The printed information was considered as informative and useful, however, it was perceived as not very useful in terms of helping with the decision of participating in the study.

The interview helped clarifying some aspects of the artefacts related to the impact of the kit in SexLab's study, difficulties from participants and how the kit could be further improved. The physical kit was given at the end of sessions alongside a participation token, while a digital version was sent at the time of scheduling. The kit was received positively by participants however those who engaged with the digital kit noted that the content only reinforced information they had already received. Some participants even decided not to use the kit, either because the information was difficult to engage with or due to lack of motivation. One participant raised concerns about a thermography image, unsure whether it depicted a real person or not. P48 highlighted how the presence of a tea bag in the physical kit prompted small but warm reactions (smiles, mild amusement), suggesting it was appreciated as a thoughtful, humanising touch. During the interview several ideas were proposed, such as using the kit as a recruitment tool for future studies, incorporating more sensory elements (smell, touch, sound), replacing static text with short animations, and adopting a slightly more playful (though not humorous) tone to make content feel lighter without undermining scientific credibility.

2.4.2 Friends With Benefits

Introduction

Friends-with-benefits relationships are often linked to emotional complexity and diverse dynamics, for example to the influence of gender norms and sexual prejudice. These dynamics often shape how individuals interpret and manage these arrangements, especially given the persistence of the sexual double standard, in which women's sexual behaviour is judged more negatively than identical behaviour by men. Understanding these social pressures is essential for assessing how expectations, communication, and emotional experiences develop within friends-with-benefits relationships.

Artefact Design Process

The artefact was developed through dedicated internal brainstorming sessions with the team to better discuss the different needs of the PhD student involved in the collaboration. The first iteration consisted of two cards that could be used to create characters and spark a conversation around friends-with-benefits relationships. After receiving feedback from the PhD student, who requested a version that would also work in virtual sessions, we refined the concept and proposed a website presenting two sets of sliders to characterise the couple.

	1 Concept	→	2 Artefact	→	3 Feedback
Colour	None		• Multiple Colors		Multiple Colors
Material	Paper/Cardboard		Paper/Cardboard		• Digital+Paper+Fabric
Portability	Portable		Portable		Portable
Senses	Sight		Sight		• Sight+Touch
Use	Adaptable		Adaptable		Adaptable
Tone	Educational		• Playful		• Educational+Humorous
Interaction	In-Group		• 1:1		• In-Group+1:1
Concept	Literal		• Figurative		• Literal+Abstract+Figurative
Synchronicity	Live		Live		• Live+Probe

• Changed property

Friends with Benefits

Figure 8 - Evolution of characteristics of Friends With Benefits

The system would then generate a gradient illustrating the uniqueness of the relationship. In the third iteration, we shifted away from characterising the relationship and focused instead on providing support for the conversation between participant and researcher, which led to the final version of the artefact.

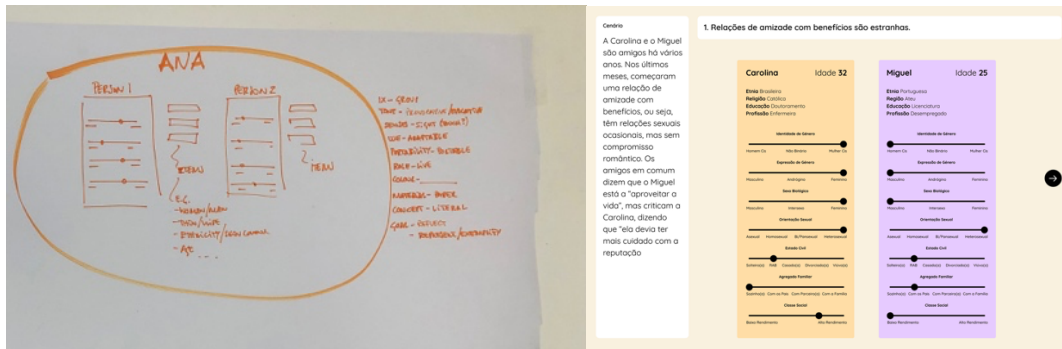


Figure 9 – First and second concepts of the Friends With Benefits artefact

Artefact Description

This artefact aims to address the dynamics and explore the emotional complexity by using a dual visual mapping tool that combines a quadrant map (which categorizes experiences by intensity and polarity) with a chronological timeline, allowing participants to reflect on key moments, track emotional shifts, and identify patterns and turning points throughout the relationship.

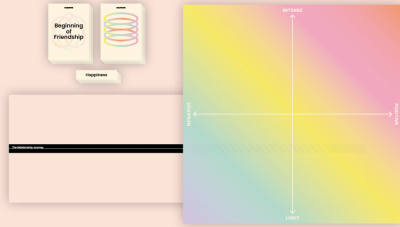
The artefact consists of:

- 2 Boards, Matrix and Timeline
- 2 Cards Decks, Moments and Emotions
- Labels to place on the Emotions cards

HOW TO USE THE ARTEFACT

STEP 1

Position the boards and the cards in a way that both researcher and participant can interact with them.



STEP 2

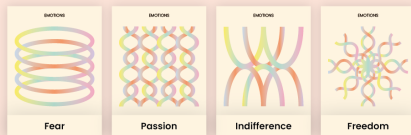
Ask participants to look and pick *Moments* cards, and place those in one or both boards. Let participants choose which board they want to start with. There are horizontal cards to place on the *Timeline* board and vertical cards to place on the *Matrix* board.



Note: there are blank cards that participants can use to write down the moments, if they feel that the ones available are not enough.

STEP 3

While mapping out the moments, ask participants what emotions they felt during those situations. Then, ask them to pick a shape (*Emotions* cards) that better represent the emotion felt and place a label on top of the card, or simply write it down.



Note: there are blank labels that participants can use to write down the emotions, if they feel that the terms available are not enough.

STEP 4

In the end, you will have two visual maps depicting the relationship moments and the emotions felt during those situations. Yet, this artefact was built to be flexible, and both participants and researchers can use and adapt it to their own needs/objectives.

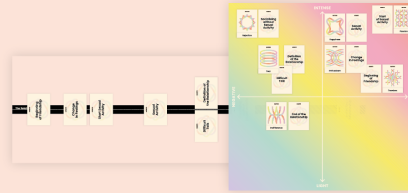


Figure 10 – Instructions on how to use the artefact



Figure 11 – Picture of the artefact in exhibition

Feedback

To evaluate the artefact designed we planned an interview with the PhD student involved in the research to evaluate her experience with the artefact and to seek for extended feedback on possible pain points and improvements.

The artefact had a generally positive impact on both researchers and participants. For the researcher, it supported the interview and reduced cognitive load, promoting more fluid conversations and increased confidence. Participants responded positively overall, with the artefact helping them better articulating thoughts, reflecting on their experiences, and visualising their relationship journeys more concretely. However, some challenges occurred. Researchers experienced time management issues and occasionally struggled to explain how the artefact worked. There were also moments when participants found the artefact difficult to understand, while others who were already comfortable speaking tended to repeat information rather than promoting the collection of new insights.

Interestingly, usage patterns varied. Some participants underused the cards, while others overused them due to perfectionism. The researcher pointed out how predefined cards helped initiate conversations, but unused cards also carried some meaning to her. In summary, the feedback received highlighted that straightforward, easy-to-handle visuals helped people keep track of the conversation and understand ideas as they emerged. Being able to zoom and move images around made the material feel accessible and practical. When the drawings were unclear, though, participants felt uneasy, since they weren't sure how to interpret them or whether they were "doing it right." In general, the tool was useful as long as the visuals stayed simple and didn't get in the way of thinking. Additionally, the researcher positively highlighted how flexible the artefact was, which supported multiple interpretations, uses, and appropriations.

2.4.3 Trans*Parent

Introduction

Transition to parenthood of transgender and gender-diverse people is often faced with prejudice, microaggressions, and healthcare environments that are not supportive of transgender individuals. The aim for this artefact was to help participants map out their own personal gender-affirmation journey and parenthood project and learn about key moments in their journey. This information could then be compiled into several sheets and compared with other participants' journeys.

Artefact Design Process

The first iteration of Trans*Parent was conceived during two brainstorming activities with the team. Since the beginning the artefact was conceived as a playful activity whose goal would be the mapping of the affirmation process of trans* people. The concept of having a transparent layer on top of the sketched map appeared from the first sessions and guided the design process and the identity of the project.

	Concept	Artefact
Color	Multiple Colors	Multiple Colors
Material	Paper/Cardboard+Plastic	Digital+Paper/Cardboard+Plastic
Portability	Portable	Portable
Senses	Sight	Sight
Use	Adaptable	Adaptable
Tone	Playful	Playful+Educational
Interaction	1:1	1:1
Concept	None	Figurative
Role	Live	Live

Figure 12 - Evolution of characteristics of concept and final version of Trans*Parent

After presenting the concept to Hélia Rocha, we slightly adapted the concept of drawing on top of the plastic layer by using it instead as a way to compare different results of sessions together to understand how the different people's processes varied.

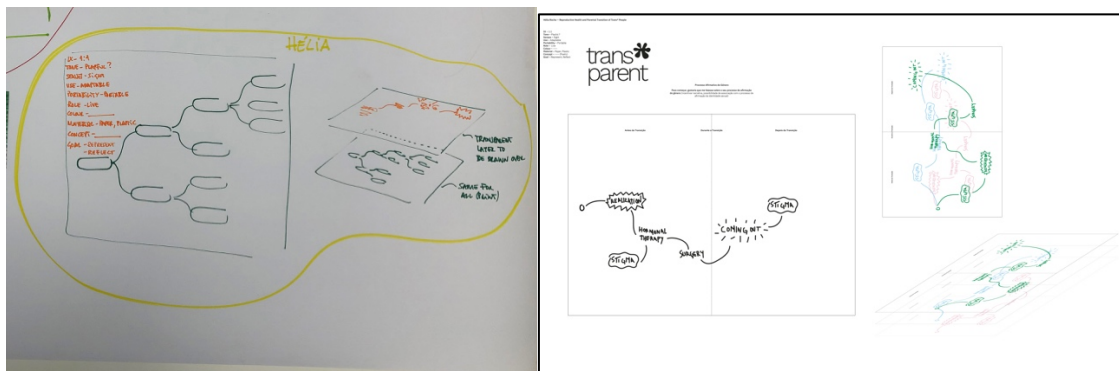


Figure 13 - First concepts of Trans*Parent

Artefact Description

This artefact is a collaborative mapping tool used to co-construct and make transgender and gender-diverse parents reflect on their experiences across personal, social, medical, and institutional domains.

The tool is made of:

- 1 Board
- 28 Sticker Forms
- Tracing paper to put on top of the board

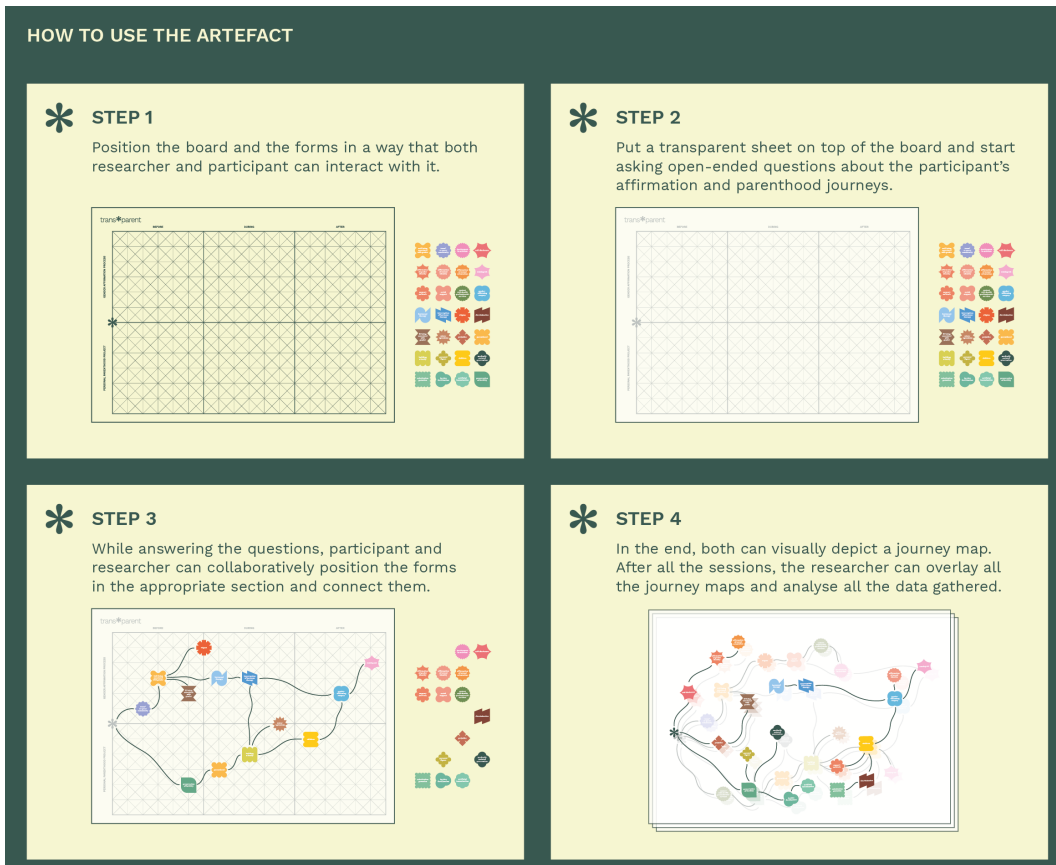


Figure 14 – Instructions on how to use the artefact



Figure 15 – Printed elements of the artefact.

Feedback

One participant said the artefact looked good and appreciated seeing design and the humanities working together instead of fighting for attention. In their view, that mix tends to make the final product stronger. They described the overall look as positive and was glad it does not have a childish style (presence of a lot of different colours and child-like design). They mentioned that it's surprisingly common for people to rely on cute colours or playful shapes, which can make the topic feel cheap, and they liked that this artefact stayed clear of that.

2.4.4 SEXistimos

Introduction

This project focuses on creating spaces that support thoughtful, open, and respectful conversations about sexuality among people with cerebral palsy. Sexuality is an important part of human wellbeing, yet individuals with cerebral palsy often face communication, social, and barriers that limit their ability to discuss their experiences,

needs, and concerns. By bringing together participants, caregivers, communication specialists, and other relevant stakeholders, the initiative aims to facilitate guided reflective dialogues that acknowledge each person's autonomy, dignity, and diverse ways of expressing themselves.

Artefact Design Process

We were asked by APPC to design an artefact for use in focus groups with different participants. In these sessions, sexuality would be discussed, but initiating the conversation is often challenging. The first version of the artefact was developed during a team brainstorming session. The goal was to design something usable in multiple ways and appealing to different senses, accommodating the needs of people with paralysis. The artefact also needed to be flexible, helping facilitators support each participant effectively.

We first explored an artefact that would depict single attributes related to sexuality (for example, body parts that would become identifiable only when multiple transparent cards were stacked). The concept also played with the metaphor of hiding in plain sight. After presenting the first draft, collaborators noted that it could be difficult to interpret

and might not facilitate discussion, especially since some users would need assistance to speak.

	1 Concept	→	2 Artefact	→	3 Feedback
Colour	Multiple Colors		Multiple Colors		Multiple Colors
Material	Paper/Cardboard		Paper/Cardboard		• Digital+Paper
Portability	Portable		Portable		Portable
Senses	Smell+Sight+Touch+Sound		Smell+Sight+Touch+Sound		Smell+Sight+Touch+Sound
Use	Adaptable		Adaptable		Adaptable
Tone	Provocative		• Educational		• Educational+Humorous
Interaction	In-Group		In-Group		• In-Group+Private
Concept	Metaphorical		• Abstract+Figurative		Abstract+Figurative
Synchronicity	Live		• Live+Probe		Live+Probe

• Changed property

SEXistimos

Figure 16 - Evolution of characteristics of concept and final version of SEXistimos

With this in mind, we shifted direction and created a poster featuring everyday objects, each with its own visual and physical characteristics. These items could be brought into the room so participants could interact with them and use them to build their own definitions of sexuality. After this iteration, the concept was presented to APPC, which

requested a slight modification: adding a grid to help participants select their preferred item and communicate more easily with the assigned healthcare professional.

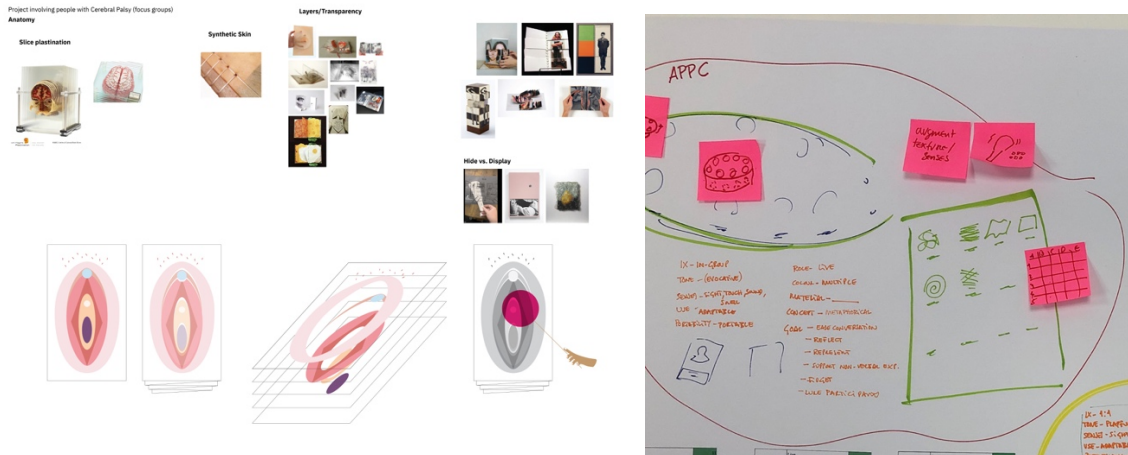


Figure 17 - First and final version of the artefact

Artefact Description

SEXistimos is an artefact built to support these discussions with people with cerebral palsy and caregivers. The artefacts is made of:

- 1 Poster with different objects depicted and placed on a numbered grid
- Individual Boards
- Objects (if participants can interact with them)

STEP 1

Hang the poster on the wall and give a board to each participant in the group (to have a closer look and be able to point at the objects). If it makes sense, you can have the physical version of the objects for participants to feel and touch.

STEP 2

Start by asking participants to observe and reflect on the objects, symbols, and images and think a bit about its association with sexuality and intimacy.

STEP 3

After giving some time to reflect, ask the following question: **For you, what is sexuality?** . Then, encourage participants to use the objects, symbols, and images to explore and articulate feelings, sensations and ideas.

STEP 4

In the end, you will see that participants quickly started exploring the images, exchanging thoughts and opinions among themselves, and feeling encouraged to engage with the activity. This artefact can create and facilitate a positive and complicit environment. Even though there is no direct association between the images and the topic of sexuality and intimacy, this disruptive effect is crucial to foster an initial discussion.

Figure 18 – Instructions on how to use the artefact



Figure 19 – Artefact in exhibition

Feedback

At the end of the experimentation window of the artefact, a follow-up interview was scheduled with the coordinator of the project to gather valuable information about how the artefact helped the discussion around taboo topics between participants. Generally, the artefact prompted positive emotions during sessions, especially with those that already knew each other. Conversations mediated by the artefact started almost immediately, creating a comfortable and collaborative mood thanks to its help in contextualising the topic with the participants. Even in a group where everyone already knew each other, the artefact helped ease the first moments of silence. Several participants mentioned that the images didn't have an obvious link to sexuality, but this lack of clarity helped them to think, compare impressions and start talking, conveying the message that any of the participants' interpretations were deemed as valid creating a moment of sharing of experiences and complicity. Most of the times simple prompts

from the healthcare professionals helped build rapport, especially with a researcher who was new to the group. The artefact worked well during presential sessions, however, during online ones it was difficult to use and did not bring much help to the group of participants. The supervisor stated that this was probably caused by the lack of visual contact between participants (due to being an online setup) rather than the artefact itself. Although participants had mixed views on whether the activity was valuable, the overall sense was that it helped reduce awkwardness and supported a smoother start to the discussion, warming up the participants.

2.4.5 AffirmCare

Introduction

AffirmCare investigates the lived experiences of children and adolescents whose gender expressions do not conform to social norms, across multiple life contexts. The study aims to understand these experiences from the perspective of the youth themselves, as well as to examine how healthcare professionals and educators perceive and respond to non-conforming gender identities, expressions, and performances. The research also considers how the attitudes, beliefs, and practices of adults influence the support and care provided to these young people.

To ease these conversations, that will take place with both healthcare professionals and children/adolescents at different times, we have designed an ad hoc artefact that would ease the conversations around these topics.

Artefact Design Process

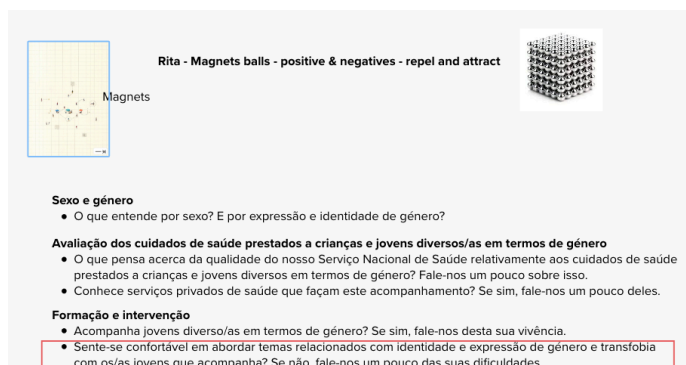
During the first sessions of brainstorming we carefully analysed the script proposed by Rita Torres, which was focused on the mapping of the relationships of each individual in the life of children and adolescents. We started by reflecting on how communication is

made and developed the concepts of repulsion and attraction to clarify the types of relationships between different stakeholders.

	Concept	Artefact
Color	Multiple Colors	Multiple Colors
Material	N/D	Digital
Portability	Portable	Portable
Senses	Sight+Touch	Sight
Use	Fixed	Adaptable
Tone	Playful+Educational	Playful+Educational
Interaction	1:1	1:1
Concept	Abstract+Figurative	Abstract+Figurative
Role	Live	Live+Probe

Figure 20 - Evolution of characteristics of AffirmCare

The initial idea involved using magnetic balls to help visualise different relationship types. During an online meeting, we were asked to design an artefact that could function primarily in a digital context, therefore, we built on the concept of stakeholder maps, where stakeholders are positioned closer to or farther from a specific target. Based on this, we designed a board to better represent proximity and distance in relation to a given stakeholder, along with materials to characterise the type of relationship. Pins were also introduced to allow participants to add additional feedback in both textual and visual form.



Artefact Description

The artefact has been designed for online sessions, therefore it was built using MURAL or Miro platforms in order to be used properly. Inside the virtual board the following materials will be shown:

- 1x Bullseye board
- 6x Characters cards
- 4x Types of relationships (two-way, one-way, intermittent and absent)
- 12x Reaction emojis
- Virtual post-its for additional feedback

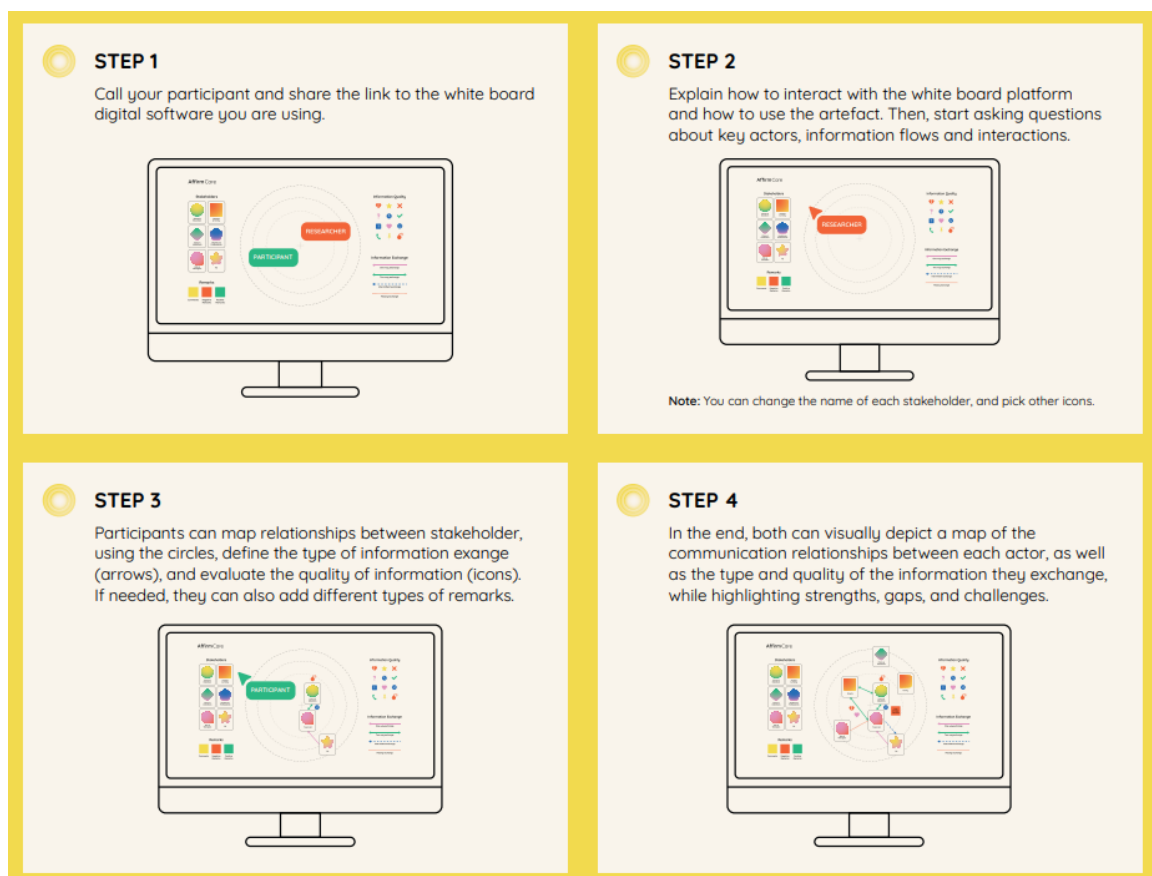


Figure 21 – Instructions on how to use the artefact

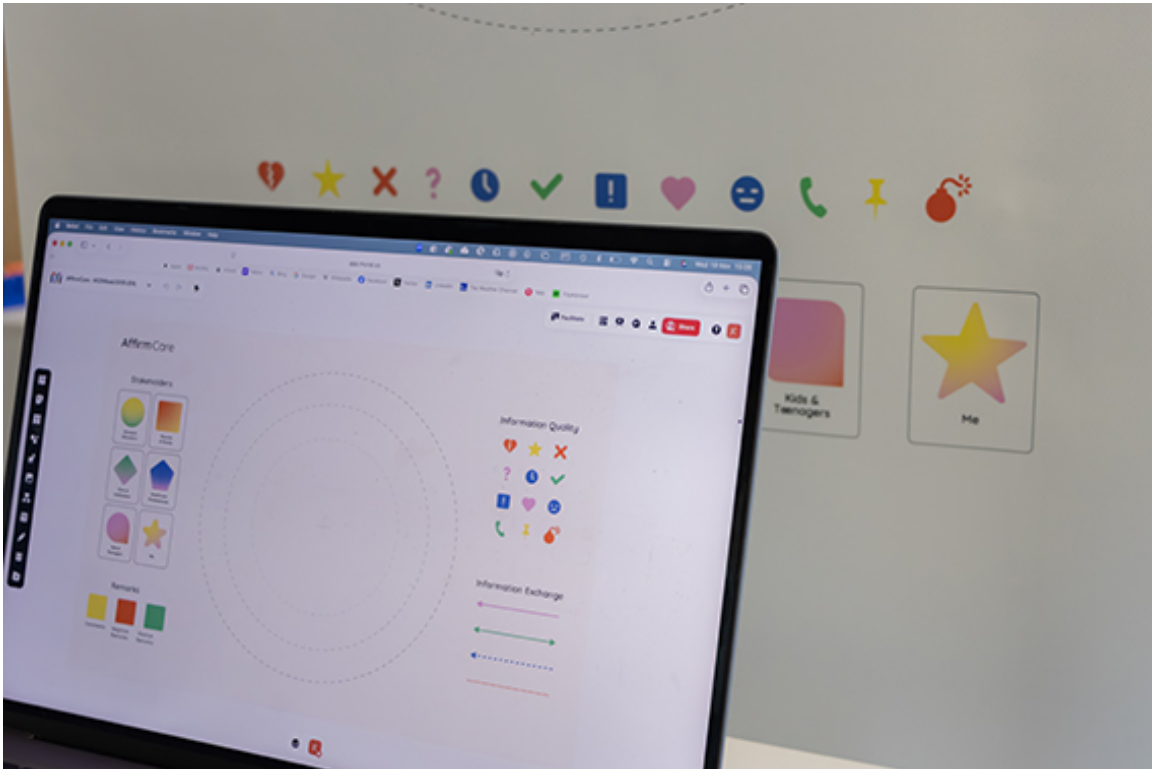


Figure 22 – Digital artefacts on show at exhibition

2.5 Workshop at WWNA 2025

With initial versions of the artefacts ready, we wanted to obtain feedback from the wider community working on taboo topics. Therefore, we applied to run a workshop at the Why the World Needs Anthropologists conference, which we knew from attending a previous edition that was attended by people working on taboo topics as well as by designers working at the intersection of design and anthropology. Therefore, this seemed like a qualified audience to test and critique the artefacts.

2.5.1 Method

16 people with different backgrounds and nationalities participated in the event. Most of the participants had a background in Anthropology. The participants were asked to

fill out a worksheet during the activities proposed in the workshop, however, only 11 people actually carried out all the exercises. The activities proposed were the following:

1. Picking a definition of taboo and choosing an item to represent it as a metaphor.
2. Writing on the worksheet about the taboo topics they have worked on, the populations they have focused on, the strategies they have implemented, and the lessons learned.
3. Evaluating the artefacts presented.
4. Responding to prompts for the final discussion.



Figure 23 – WWNA 2025 Workshop in Bologna

2.5.2 Findings and key takeaways

Participants expressed mixed opinions about the perceived usefulness of using artefacts in design research on taboo topics.

For some participants, artefacts were helpful for starting conversations about taboo subjects and for breaking the ice. Others, however, expressed concerns about the role of the researcher when artefacts are used. Specifically, some worried that artefacts might distance researchers from the research process, reducing their involvement to mere notetaking or to producing artefacts that conveniently support certain results. A few also mentioned that artefacts can sometimes get in the way of natural conversation.

In contrast, some participants were very open to the use of artefacts and even created simple ones themselves to help break the ice and get to know participants better. These participants often prepared more than one artefact, selecting which to use depending on how the participant felt. In these cases, artefacts were seen as useful tools for starting a conversation, after which the discussion could continue naturally without them.

During the discussions, participants highlighted that the best artefacts are those that minimize the researcher's presence and interruptions, allowing the focus to remain on the participant. They also noted that artefacts resembling board games could be particularly effective in facilitating communication.

2.6 Exhibition at HCDWeek 2025

As planned in the proposal, we created an exhibition of the artefacts so that we could not only disseminate the project results, but also collect feedback from the design research community.



Figure 24 – Image of the Taboo exhibition during the HCDWeek

The HCDWeek is a yearly event organised by Fraunhofer AICOS, which focuses on design research and practice. This particular edition was focused on “Awkwardness in design research”. Therefore, we invited keynote speakers who work at the intersection of design and taboo, and the event attracted design researchers and practitioners interested in this topic. To collect feedback about the artefacts, we ran a workshop within the HCDWeek 2025.

2.6.1 Method

Twelve people with different backgrounds and nationalities participated in the workshop. Most of the participants were Portuguese and had a background in Design Research. The participants were invited to fill out a worksheet during the activities proposed in the workshop, however, only 4 people filled in the 1st exercise, from which 1 filled in the 2nd exercise and 1 filled in the 3rd exercise. The activities proposed were the following:

1. Picking a definition of taboo and choosing an item to represent it as a metaphor.
2. Writing on the worksheet about the taboo topics they have worked on, the populations they have focused on, the strategies they have implemented, and the lessons learned.
3. Evaluating the artefacts presented.
4. Responding to prompts for the final discussion.

Since we had very short time to run this workshop, we put less emphasis on filling in the worksheet and used that time for people to share their thoughts and reflections with the whole group. This led us having less information compared to the WWNA workshop.

2.6.2 Findings and key takeaways

Participants were divided into 4 groups (with 3 participants each) and experimented with one artefact. The SEXistimos artefact was used for the first activity which aimed at picking an object from the poster that for them represented a taboo. This exercise worked really well, as we saw the potential of this tool to be used in other contexts and with other questions as prompts.

Then, participants had 45 minutes to experiment the artefacts and share their opinions and feedback, like a design critique exercise.

- **FullSense:** Participants shared that it was a paradox, because the artefact tries to invite people to participate in a research study, while talking and informing about research. This, in a way, can be a barrier to participation. Additionally, they shared that since the study was open to all people above 18 years old (who experience sexual dysfunction), the artefact could be aesthetically different to invite other target groups, as they mentioned that it looked too serious. In reality, the institutional and serious look and feel was purposefully designed into

the artefact, since we were told that many times by colleagues at SexLab that research on sexuality tends to be seen as not serious.

- **Trans*Parent:** Participants started by stating that they perceived the artefact as difficult to use. They shared that the colours and shapes of the elements to put on top of the board should be associated according to clusters and themes; meaning that similar terms should have similar aesthetics to support the researcher and the participant fetching what they need. Additionally, they shared that the terms/concepts should be organised in a specific order, starting with less sensitive and broader terms and moving on to more sensitive ones, throughout the interview. Also, participants felt that having blank stickers for people to add their own terms/words would avoid creating biases and would facilitate a richer involvement as it would take less time searching for the correct terms. Finally, they believed this artefact could be adapted and applied to healthcare professionals.
- **AffirmCare:** Participants that used this artefact were a bit paralysed at first. They mentioned that it should have more guidance for them to understand how they could interact with the artefact. However, another participant, from outside the group, shared that when artefacts are flexible these tend to be easier to appropriate and used as one deems fit. In a way we created this artefact to be open to other uses and interpretations so that different participants and researchers could interact with it as they want.
- **Friends With Benefits:** Participants shared that they would spend even more time doing the activity. It revealed that they were engaged and eager to continue using the artefact. They mentioned that it allowed them to reflect, as they would remember different episodes and stories while interacting with the cards and the boards. Nevertheless, they shared that the abstract graphics illustrating the emotion cards should have representations a bit less movement. They wanted something to represent more calmer and relaxed states and feelings, but all the illustrations had a lot of motion.

3 Discussion

The analysis of artefacts carried out at the beginning of Task 3 highlighted a series of common individual characteristics found from the work of interviewed design researchers. This work resulted in a series of individual properties which were then compiled and refined with the goal of offering a framework to help other design researchers characterising any artefact intended for discussing sensitive topics with participants. As a next step, we applied the same list of properties to guide the design of five new artefacts for discussing taboo topics. These artefacts, which embodied properties defined during brainstorming activities, served as an experiment to test whether such properties could support the design of artefacts for researching taboo topics. Because the properties were initially derived from examples provided by design researchers, they were limited to those cases. As a result, some characteristics were initially excluded and introduced only later, while others were discarded. Certain properties, such as Taste or an organic material category, were added to allow greater variability. The property related to size was also revised to indicate whether an artefact is portable, rather than using multiple size levels, for simplicity. Consequently, some characteristics initially defined during brainstorming were modified to ensure that each collaboration's requirements were met and that the final prototypes aligned with feedback from both participants and researchers.

This iterative trial-and-error process helped confirm that, despite the changes in the characteristics from the initial concept to the final prototype, the identified properties seem to be meaningful and useful, showing that the list can characterize different artefacts without omitting important details. Nevertheless, further research is needed to verify its ability to accurately support the design of new artefacts for discussing taboo topics given its high variability in needs and goals.

The testing phase of each artefact was carried out with participants recruited by the partners we collaborated with, namely PhD students from the University of Porto,

researchers from Sexlab, and health professionals from APPC. As a result, the (40) participants involved in the different studies were consistent with the inclusion and exclusion criteria set by each collaborator.

Feedback was collected from these participants, which helped shape and adapt the artefacts to their needs and to the specific research contexts. To gather more in-depth feedback, the artefacts were presented to other researchers to understand their perspectives, identify perceived limitations, and explore how these tools could be applied in their current and future research. In fact, the five artefacts were presented to researchers, mainly ethnographers and psychologists, through a workshop that took place at the WWNA 2025 conference in Bologna, Italy. Although the participants in the workshop were not design researchers, they still had experience using artefacts when conducting research on taboo topics with sensitive populations therefore we proceeded with gathering some of their feedback on this matter.

When discussing the usefulness of artefacts in taboo topics, some feedback from anthropologists suggested that artefacts might not be necessary and could even interfere with the collection of high-quality data. Others, however, highlighted the importance of designing artefacts to support the collection of qualitative data that might not be accessible otherwise. To build on these findings we replicated the same workshop at the HCDWeek 2025 in Porto, Portugal. However, this time it was carried out with designers and design researchers. Again, from this opportunity we were able to gather interesting insights. Some of the participants suggested the inclusion of ramping-up exercises, a well-established and effective technique when addressing sensitive topics. Moreover, they further valued the flexibility of some artefacts in terms of use, which aligns with what emerged from the interviews: design researchers need to approach sessions with research participants prepared with alternative ways to foster engagement and interaction. It is important to notice how presenting the work to different audiences, design researchers and anthropologists tend to have different approaches to critiquing the use of the artefacts presented. Design researchers tended to focus more on the potential activities enabled by the artefacts, followed by design critiques that highlighted participants' interactions with the objects and their reactions

or thoughts. Anthropologists, instead, tended to view artefacts primarily as tools to initiate conversation, after which the artefact could be set aside in favour of a more ethnographical approach.

The designed artefacts are still in the process of being evaluated by participants and by FPCEUP researchers; therefore, some aspects of the analysis may change in the future to incorporate the feedback received.

4 Conclusions

We designed five different artefacts to reflect common characteristics identified through the analysis of materials used by design researchers when discussing taboo topics with users. This work was guided by the need to understand which artefact characteristics are currently implemented by researchers. From our analysis, we identified nine categories shared across all examined artefacts. Although these nine characteristics are a simplification of the full range of characteristics observed in each prototype, they provide a useful framework for categorising common values that artefacts should embody to promote discussion of taboo topics with the general population.

All artefacts were designed to be compatible with the presented collaborations and aligned with the scope and goals proposed by PhD students and project collaborators. However, at the same time, we experimented with how different qualities influence user interaction, considering the observed characteristics while exploring different variations (such as the appealing to different senses at once). Throughout the research process, we found that these qualities alone do not always guarantee success (meaning the artefact effectively facilitates discussion, reduces fear or shyness or encourages openness with the researcher). However, even the simplest uses of an artefact can contribute to improvement compared to its absence, making their use justifiable.

Some researchers from different fields also noted that artefacts can sometimes be intrusive, acting as a tool that performs the researcher's role rather than supporting communication, highlighting how artefacts for researching on taboo topics are not always the best tool.

Future research should continue to analyse the characteristics – perhaps providing it to other design researchers/practitioners to understand how they would use them – and

we should also continue to investigate how these artefacts could be assessed with regards to their influence on facilitating interactions around taboo topics.

5 Appendix

5.1 Researchers' work who attended WWNA

5.1.1 Data Trends

When analysing in detail the relationships within the data gathered from the worksheets, we found the following: the research topics and populations were diverse, and the amount of data gathered was not sufficient to identify strong trends or relationships. Given the high number of possible combinations, the data was not enough to determine the most common populations, strategies, and taboo topics. However, we were able to observe small differences that might or might not be random. It appeared that studies involving women mostly focused on infertility, menstruation, and hygiene, and that the strategy "Allow participants to guide the conversation at their own comfort level" was mostly used when discussing taboo topics related to the body and death

5.1.2 Population involved in researchers' studies

From these activities, we identified a total of 40 research studies addressing various populations and taboo topics, using different strategies. Of these, 9 involved women (22.5%), 4 involved men (10%), and 3 involved immigrants (7.5%). Indigenous populations, prisoners, medical students, the LGBTQ+ community, people with obesity, and any gender were each represented at 5%, while the remaining populations (bereaved, caregivers, children, children with autism, children with disabilities, elderly people, health professionals, people with dementia, and people with disabilities) were each present at 0.4%.

Any Gender	2
Bereaved	1
Caregivers	1
Children	1
Children with Autism	1

Children with Disability	1
Elderly People	1
Health Professionals	1
Immigrants	3
Indigenous Population	2
LGBTQ+ Community	2
Medicine Faculty Student	2
Men	4
People living with obesity	2
People with Dementia	1
People with Disability	1
Prisoners	2
Sex Workers	3
Women	9
Grand Total	40

5.1.3 Taboo topics

From the pool of data, we identified the distribution of taboo topics. The most common topic was Infertility (6 studies, 15%), followed by Sexuality (5 studies, 12.5%).

Menstruation, Health, and Identity each appeared in 3 studies (7.5%). Hygiene, Power, Death, and Body were each represented in 2 studies (5%). Finally, Abortion, Body donation, Depression, Disability, Profits from health problems, Sex trafficking, and Suicide were each represented in 1 study (2.5%).

Abortion	1
Body	2
Body Donation	1
Death	2
Depression	1
Disability	1
Health	3
Hygiene	2
Identity	3
Infertility	6
Making profit from health problems	1
Menstruation	3
Mental Health	5

Power	2
Sex Trafficking	1
Sexuality	5
Suicide	1
Grand Total	40

5.1.4 Strategies

The data analysis showed that specific strategies are often used when discussing taboo topics with users. The most used strategies were “Allow participants to guide the conversation at their own comfort level” and “Use of toys to mediate the conversation”, both with 7 occurrences (17.4%), followed by “Use of asynchronous methods” and “Use of co-design as a form of conversation”, each with 5 cases (12.5%). “Use of humor to overcome awkwardness” appeared in 4 cases (10%). “Framing the topic as if discussing someone else’s experience”, “Use of visual artefacts”, and “Use of proxy users to protect participants from harm” were each used in 2 cases (5%). In the workshop, participants also had the opportunity to suggest additional strategies, which were each used in 1 case (2.5%): “Group discussions on ethical dilemmas”, “Sketching landscapes”, “Use of Alexa for questionnaires”, “Use of scenarios to prompt participant responses”, “Sketching”, and “Walking.”

Allow participants to guide the conversation at their own comfort level	7
Framing the topic as if discussing someone else's experience	2
Group Discussions on ethical dilemmas	1
Landscape	1
Proxy Users to protect users from harm	2
Questionnaires	1
Scenarios to prompt participants responses	1
Sketching	1
Use of asynchronous methods	5
Use of co-design as a form of conversation	5
Use of humor to overcome awkwardness	4

Use of toys to mediate the conversation	7
Use of visual artefacts	2
Walking	1
(blank)	0
Grand Total	40