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Supporting design research on taboo topics

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Abstract: Design research and practice deal with many new and underexplored topics that may not have previously been discussed. Yet, many of these topics are still somewhat taboo, meaning they can miss out on attention and critical exploration and may not be adequately addressed. This DRS2022 Conversation explored the range of barriers faced by design researchers interested in or currently working on taboo topics and how these barriers might be addressed. The report summarizes the discussions during the session, which focused primarily on respectful boundaries and dialogue between researchers and participants. It also highlights key questions and dilemmas facing researchers in this area, which remained unanswered during the Conversation. As an example, the report asks: how might design researchers safely conduct projects on especially sensitive topics, such as those with legal restrictions?

Keywords: taboo; design research; research methods; social responsibility

1. Introduction

Design research and practice deal with many new and underexplored topics that may not have been considered or discussed in the past. This is seen in DRS2022 topics like aging and bodily materials and an increasing amount of new work addressing critical issues like mental health and design for sexuality and sexual health. Yet, many of these topics are still somewhat taboo, meaning they can miss out on attention and critical exploration and may not be adequately addressed in research or practice.

Design researchers and practitioners may not be aware of the issues because of a lack of exposure, might feel uncomfortable tackling such a charged topic, or may not have the knowledge or expertise to address it. This can mean that relevant research or practice is unavailable or that poor work or projects based on bad information are perpetuated. Taboos can also impact the uptake and visibility of new and innovative research and practice. The public and other stakeholders may feel uncomfortable or unprepared to engage with these topics.

Several academic and popular sources explore the topic of taboos in design research and practice. However, much more exploration is needed to ensure that critical but taboo topics



receive the attention they need and researchers working in this area are supported. The risks of inaction are too severe to ignore. As Liza Chong, CEO of a social design foundation, explained: a culture of silence on “topics, ranging from women's sexual pleasure to the long-term implications of childbirth, [can] sideline vital conversations and deny people access to helpful and even life-saving resources” (Chong cited in Palumbo, 2021, para. 3).

This DRS2022 Conversation explored the range of barriers faced by design researchers interested in or currently working on taboo topics and how these barriers might be addressed at research planning, fieldwork, and knowledge mobilization stages. The online session was open to all design researchers interested in or working on taboo topics. They were invited to discuss their work, sharing the challenges they experienced, the resources or approaches that have helped them, and their thoughts on the support that is still needed. The hope was that the Conversation would inform each participant’s work and be the beginning of a more extensive discussion on this critical issue.

2. Conversation overview

The 90-minute session included 25-30 participants who moved in and out of the virtual space. The discussion started with introductions where participants were invited to share the taboos they were working on. This was followed by a problem-setting and problem-solving exercise to identify the barriers or challenges that participants face in their work and various strategies to address these issues in design research. Participants contributed verbally, through written comments on the video platform, and through a Miro board, where participants collaborated on note-taking and mapped out emerging discussions.

Petra Salarić is one of the few researchers actively exploring taboos in design. In a talk on gender and taboo, Salarić and menstrual health educator Vasundhara Pandey (2022) explain that taboos are restricted or prohibited activities (e.g. breastfeeding), objects (e.g. guns), people (e.g. LGBTQ+ folks), places (e.g. strip clubs) or situations (e.g. military conflicts). They also add that taboos depend on the context where, for example, breastfeeding is acceptable in certain public spaces and not in others (Salarić and Pandey, 2022).

The Conversation participants worked on many of these areas of taboo with topics including menstruation, abortion, mental health, loneliness, unhappiness, homelessness, sex trafficking, domestic abuse, sex and the sexuality of older adults and people living with chronic illnesses. There was a shared desire to talk about taboos explicitly, where the concept of taboo is often implicit and not directly addressed in the group’s work. The group was eager to meet other researchers working in the area and to identify shared experiences across research topics and contexts. Participants hoped this would be the beginning of further discussions and a growing and organized body of work on taboos in design research.

The text that follows summarizes the main discussions that took place during the session. This section is followed by a conclusion that suggests directions for future work on taboos and highlights key questions and dilemmas facing researchers in this area.

To begin, most of the Conversation focused on barriers and opportunities in the research planning and fieldwork stages. The conference attendees were especially concerned about harming their research participants through their projects, so the discussion centred heavily on areas of risk and strategies to support participants.

A conference attendee wrote on the Miro Board that this kind of research has benefits and potential trade-offs where “giving voice to the unheard, highlighting marginalized groups, and contributing much-needed research” might inadvertently harm participants by retraumatizing them, despite the researchers’ best efforts. This could happen, for example, in fieldwork on many of the taboo topics the group addresses, like abortion, mental health, and domestic abuse. Referring to their research project, another attendee wrote, “I was afraid of wasting the time of people in the hospital.” The details of this project are unknown, but it could refer, for example, to the study of people living with chronic illnesses. Is it right to ask people to participate in a research project when they have other critical needs and priorities, such as caring for themselves?

Both of these comments raise a crucial question about the research’s value and the project’s value for participants. Research participants can make their own decisions about whether or not to participate. Still, researchers are also responsible for asking themselves whether their project is worth any risks and deserves participants’ investment. Researchers must also take time to develop and conduct projects that best support their participants. Referring to the two examples from the Conversation, this would involve lowering risks and increasing benefits to participants while also choosing the right time and place for the project.

Conducting participant research on taboo topics requires deep reflection and continual analysis. A conference attendee noted that research protocols can feel “cut and dry” in the planning stages but that researchers need to “feel out” boundaries during fieldwork. For example, it can be a balance between encouraging people to talk about taboos while also respecting their limits. As one conference attendee said, it can be difficult to judge how much to push on a delicate topic, “maybe you need to push a little bit. But at the same time, what’s the stopping point?”

Here, a conference attendee pointed out that the researcher’s personality is an essential factor, influencing their comfort in discussing taboo topics and how they address these issues with participants. Sometimes a blunt and formal discussion could work, while a softer approach might be required for other projects or participants.

The Conversation group agreed that developing research projects on delicate topics takes time. Honouring this process and taking time to build the trust of participants and a group rapport is essential. As a discussant noted on the Miro Board, “research moves at the speed of relationships.” However, this can create tension with time constraints and researchers’ professional pressures. For instance, another conference attendee wrote: “for my design research in a commercial context, research already faces a lot of constraints (usually time,

money) - so trying to advocate for social interaction beforehand, and additional time with participants before moving straight to the more sensitive material is difficult.”

The Conversation group also stressed the importance of thorough research before a project begins to understand the context surrounding taboos, such as their historical, cultural, religious and political associations. “You need to do that homework,” one conference attendee said. This can help researchers approach topics with participants more appropriately and respectfully. That said, each person might feel differently about a taboo topic and react more strongly or less strongly than the researcher expects. Some conference attendees noted that participants could be eager to talk about taboo issues since there are sometimes few other opportunities. One of the attendees wrote “taboo to who?” on the Miro board, which nicely sums up this point.

Regarding the dialogue between researchers and participants, language was another prominent topic in the Conversation. Many worried about offending their research participants by using the wrong terminology or trigger words. Discussants suggested taking “baby steps” when discussing potentially sensitive issues and being gentle in how ideas are phrased. While vocabulary can be a concern for people working in their first language, many conference attendees in the group explained that it’s even more challenging for researchers conducting fieldwork in a second or third language.

The group stressed that researchers need to inform themselves before the start of a project to learn about the topic, the context where participants are coming from, and the right and wrong words to use. Since it’s essential to get keywords right, one conference attendee suggested building a glossary of keywords so the researcher can practice the terminology and its meaning. Another attendee suggested being upfront with participants and explaining any concerns. “Just ask,” she said. She has found that research participants are often kind and will guide her on using the correct language.

Another suggestion applies to all researchers concerned about language. Namely, a conference attendee suggested finding other communication methods such as making, drawing and body language. This can help alleviate some concerns related to vocabulary and provide new avenues of communication that could make participants even more comfortable expressing themselves.

Finally, the group raised the point that language can be political, and researchers need to be intentional about the language used in their fieldwork. For example, speaking with research participants in their first language is sometimes more respectful. One conference attendee told a story about a hospital that required a researcher to interview participants in the patients’ first language. This position supported patients in a potentially vulnerable moment.

In addition to concerns for research participants, conference attendees also pointed out that researchers should be attentive to their own well-being, especially when working on a difficult or potentially upsetting topic. A Conversation attendee wrote on the Miro board that

there could, in fact, be a taboo about the researcher's wellbeing, where their psychological needs might be an afterthought in a project.

Another discussant added that their new research collaborators often seem uncomfortable with their project on the sexuality of older adults and people living with chronic illnesses. They said, "what we see and surprises us time and again is that the researchers aren't comfortable doing the research." They added that this was especially the case for younger research colleagues who weren't always comfortable talking with the older research participants. Researchers may need to train new colleagues and choose new collaborators carefully in a situation like this. Obvious discomfort on the researcher's part can taint the project and negatively impact participants.

Last, many Conversation attendees stressed the importance of planning robust research protocols and working with institutional review boards to develop respectful projects. They pointed to design research methodologies and methods based on respect and concern for participants' well-being. They stressed that these should be applied in design research on taboo topics. Many also suggested processes and project stages that design researchers should include in these projects, such as the following.

- Researchers must be aware of and upfront about their biases that infiltrate the project and must plan to manage this throughout the study.
- Researchers must ensure that participants benefit from the study. This could include building-in education and opportunities for participants to make new connections and learn from the project's outcomes.
- Researchers must take time to anticipate problems and pre-plan potential responses to avoid being "on the spot" in difficult situations. This might involve being prepared to connect participants with a healthcare specialist or a social services organization if necessary.

3. Conclusions

The barriers and opportunities discussed in the conversation revolved around relationships and dynamics between the researcher and the participants, especially during the project planning and fieldwork stages. The focus was primarily on respectful boundaries and dialogue that supported participants while remaining aware of the researchers' needs and well-being. This was a fruitful first conversation highlighting barriers and opportunities related to social, cultural, linguistic and political factors. However, each of the issues discussed during the conversation needs more attention. Future discussions must also further explore the other problems related to the planning, fieldwork and knowledge mobilization of these projects. This might include, for example, finding funding or publication venues, getting the buy-in of new collaborators and stakeholders, or communicating research outcomes with broader design research and practice communities.

While there is little existing work on taboos in design research, some academic and popular sources propose frameworks or strategies for conducting these studies. Salarić offers the process of 1) defining the problem related to the taboo, 2) understanding the context surrounding the taboo, 3) determining how people might be able to engage with the taboo, 4) setting the mood for the conversation, 5) bringing everyone on board and seeking-out expert knowledge, 6) developing a culturally and contextually appropriate design, and 7) engaging in iterative testing to check the appropriateness of the design. As other examples, doctoral researcher Karey Helms engages with taboos in their work through humour and public engagement (2020), a process that relates to stages three to six of Salarić's model. Finally, IDEO offers four tips for designing on taboo topics: understand the taboos, respect and engage with embarrassment, reframe social stigmas, and acknowledge that not everyone will want to break taboos (Fields et al., 2010). Future discussions should build on this work. However, the design research community should also examine whether projects on taboo topics need their own frameworks and strategies or if existing design research methodologies and methods developed out of sensitivity and respect for participants can be adopted or adapted.

Finally, this Conversation raised the question of which topics are still too taboo to address in design research. For instance, the group noticed a marked shortage of design research on religion, which could be a taboo topic to many people. There was also an acknowledgment that some taboo issues could be too difficult or dangerous for researchers to address in specific contexts. This could be the case for some topics related to violence, illegal activities, death or government. Studying particular topics is not always legal, and researchers could be at risk when simply 'Googling' specific words. These situations raise the question of how design researchers might safely conduct projects on these especially sensitive topics.

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Isabel Prochner is an assistant professor of design at Syracuse University. She explores sex and gender equity in industrial design through research into, through, and for design. She is writing her second book, which is under contract with Routledge.