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How to design for taboos? A design intervention to overcome the taboo of menstruation in India

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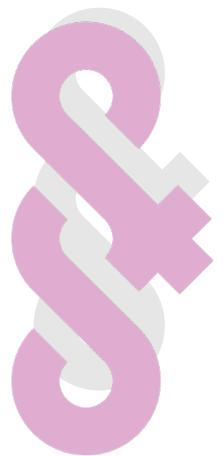
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Abstract

Taboos are like “open public secrets” and often dealing with these topics can be challenging due to the negative societal view. However, taboos can have a strong impact on the well-being of people, therefore, addressing these subjects is of high importance. In this paper seven building blocks to design for taboos are presented. These blocks were identified during our desk and field research project on the taboo of menstruation in India. Menstruation is a taboo that is prevalent worldwide, but in the low and middle income countries such as India, it has an even stronger negative impact on the lives of women. It is a subject that women deal with in secrecy and shame, often without involving men into the subject. However, India is a patriarchal country where men have a direct impact on the lives of women and the way women conduct their periods. Though efforts do exist to deal with the issue of menstruation, none so far have a focus on the stigma and shame that prevent from dealing with the subject openly. This paper presents the approach of gamification and humor in order to create a positive atmosphere for a discussion on the topic of menstruation inside the family house with all family members as a first step towards dealing with the subject.

Keywords:

design for well-being, taboo, menstruation, India, humor, gamification



INTRODUCTION

Discussion about taboos bring strong discomfort as these subjects hold negative views and disapprovals. However, many stigmatized and taboo topics are related to global issues such as homelessness, epidemics, sexuality (Kisch, 2019), therefore addressing these issues is of paramount importance as they influence the quality of life by keeping certain aspects in the dark (Fields, Sinclair & Valdes, 2010).

Design can play an active role in mitigating the taboos. However, it does require a careful approach as taboos are sensitive subjects and if addressed wrong can create a strong opposition and suspicion (Weiss-Wolf, 2017). This paper presents building blocks to design for taboos which have been defined in our research project and illustrates our case on taboo of menstruation in India.

There are 7 building blocks defined: 1. Define the problem, 2. Understand the context, 3. Find the loophole, 4. Set the mood, 5. Bringing everyone on board, 6. Create a culture – fit, 7. Test ,iterate, test, iterate.

BUILDING BLOCK 1: DEFINE THE PROBLEM

In most of the world, menstruation is not an openly discussed topic (Thakur et al., 2014), yet it affects half of the world's population. The focus of our research project was the context of India. Menstruation has numerous negative connotations in India, but the most common one is that it is seen as unclean or dirty (Omidvar & Begum, 2011). The taboo of menstruation has a strong negative impact on the lives of Indian women, such as on their education, employment, health, religion, relationships and overall well-being (figure 1). In India, the situation of menstruation for women depends on the location and the local existing menstrual practices (Kishor

& Gupta, 2009). These practices can vary from a slight change to their daily routine such as usage of different clothing, changes to hygienic routine, to stronger ones, such as avoiding physical contact with others, exclusion from religious prayers or even isolation. According to a 2016 analysis conducted by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), only one in eight girls surveyed faced no restrictions during their periods (Eijk, Sivakami, Thakkar, et al., 2016). Most important finding of our research was the impact of men on the way women conduct and view their menstruation. It has been shown how a positive outlook of men on the nature of menstruation influences women to have a positive view themselves. This relation has been taken as our focus of action.

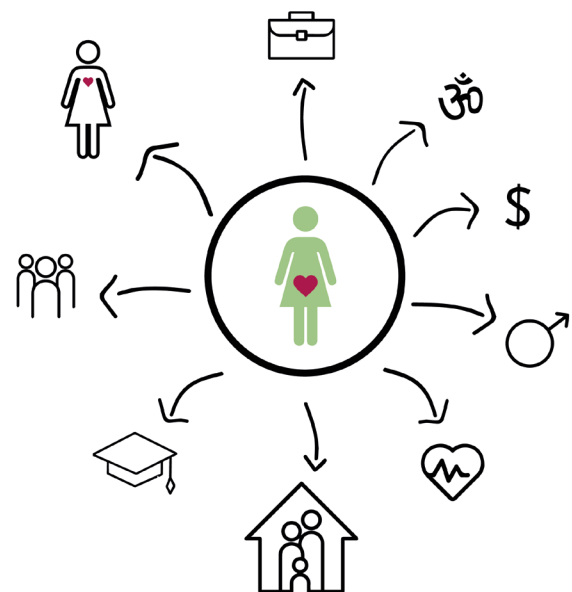


Figure 1. Different aspects in the life of a woman in India affected by menstruation (work, religion, financial issues, relationship with men, health, family, education, society, personal issues); (Own ill., 2018.)

BUILDING BLOCK 2: UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT (AND ALL OF IT)

In order to understand the current position of the taboo one must investigate the origin of it. When working for a context and culture outside of one's own, this also includes understanding the society, its structure, history, values and interpersonal relations as these aspects shape the behaviour towards the subject.

Such a negative image of menstruation in India has been created in the society for centuries through various influences - religions, myths created through the lack of knowledge and fear, as well as rigid traditional upbringing. Based on the insights gathered from the research we conducted in India, 7 constraints were identified that have an impact on the current image of menstruation in India. The constraints also show the impact menstruation has on the lives of women and how the taboo positions women within the Indian society. These constraints are described briefly below.

1. MISCONCEPTIONS OF THE VEDAS

The old Vedic scriptures not only hold essence in protecting women, but they celebrate menstruation as a sacred time. These practices have been distorted through the years by mechanically following without understanding the meaning behind them, and today they hold strong negative connotation (Sridhar, 2016).

2. TABOOS AND MYTHS

There are many practices that women in India follow during their periods that have been passed on from generation to generation. The practices vary through families and regions, and can vary from small iterations to daily routine (such as not entering the kitchen, exclusion from religious practices) to life threatening poor conditions such

as the ones of menstrual huts (FSG, 2016).

3. POOR MENSTRUAL HYGIENE

Women's health in India is exposed to many risks due to various aspects like unsafe usage of menstrual products, lack of facilities, lack of education, bad sanitation, but also due to the beliefs and shame connected to menstruation that prevents women to address the issues in time (Majumdar, 2014).

4. LACK OF EDUCATION

Cultural taboos can restrict youngsters from learning on topics of critical importance (Sorcar, Strauber, Loyalka, Kumar & Goldman, 2017). A range of studies have shown that about 70% of girls have no knowledge of menstruation prior to their menarche (Misra, Upadhyay, Sharma, Krishnan & Gupta, 2013), causing their first experience of a period to often be a traumatic one. A majority of them (62%) were unaware of the reason(s) for menstruation, (Misra et al., 2013), or had wrong information (Juyal, Kandapal, Semwal & Negi, 2012).

5. GENDER INEQUALITY AND PATRIARCHY

India ranks 130th out of 155 countries in the Gender Inequality Index (GII), trailing behind lesser developed Asian countries such as Bangladesh and Pakistan (Kishor & Gupta, 2009). The gender inequality in India affects women's lives from birth with the child mortality being 61% higher for girls than for boys (FSG, 2016). Women are expected to take care of the household, and to accept that they are not supposed to get educated or realize their full potential (FSG 2016).

6. FAMILY TIES AND HIERARCHY

In the patriarchal society of India, the woman is

affected by family ties in which she is positioned at the bottom. (Allendorf, 2013). Even when living in a nuclear family, the importance of kinships can affect the freedom of women (Jacobson, 2004). With menstruation in family, women feel uncomfortable to assert their needs and therefore follow what they are told. Men are not educated on the subject and therefore cannot fully support women (Mahon et al., 2015).

7. SOCIETAL VIEW

The effect of the societal view of a menstruating woman can be connected to the view of purity which influences the position of the person in society. Menstruation being seen as impure therefore leaves women to be forever inferior to men (Jacobson, 2004). The negative societal view of menstruation and the secrecy around the subject forces women to hide their menstruation (Allen et al., 2011).

CURRENT EFFORTS

Before developing interventions, it is important to learn about the existing attempts (Dorst, 2015). In the recent years, the Indian government has addressed the issue around menstruation and has created activities to tackle the issue, mostly under the WASH sector (water, sanitation and hygiene). The entertainment and media have as well tackled this topic in order to bring the subject to a wider public. This demonstrates that a general awareness around clean sanitation for women is on the rise, with attention being paid to supply sanitary products to those in need. However, more efforts should be directed to the underlying issues such as stigma and taboo which have often been disregarded as a point of focus for creating a change (Lieberman, 2018).

CONTEXT OF INTERVENTION: FAMILY FOCUS

The first step needed to create a change is to have open and free of shame discussions around menstruation (Bhattacharjee, 2017) which also involve men and boys for the changes to appear in the entire society. This has been taken as the focus of our RTD (research through design) project.

As mentioned in the constraints, Indian society and culture are largely collectivistic and family values are put on the forefront. Therefore, to address the taboo and create an intervention, the comfort and security of the family home was taken as the context of action. It was essential to include all family members into the discussion, especially the fathers who as heads of the house have a direct impact on the lives of women and the way they conduct their periods. Moreover, creating a more positive view of the taboo inside the family home could lower the impact of the societal negative view. The conversation on menstruation mostly occurs between female family members who are also the ones who often pass the old practices. The education in school is lacking to eradicate these often dangerous practices as there is no proper curricula (taken from interviews). Research showed how the youngest ones, the pre-menstruating girls, are the ones that are the most vulnerable ones. They are often unaware or uninformed of the occurrence of menstruation leaving them with high levels of fear and anxiety once they receive their menarche. For this reason, the target of the project became pre-menstruating girls.

BUILDING BLOCK 3: FIND YOUR LOOPHOLE

When designing for taboos and stigmas, it is important to bring a new way for people to engage with the topic, but at the same time to allow the freedom to decide how close or distant they wish to be from it (Fields, Sinclair & Valdes,

2010). For this project, we used gamification. When working on taboos, it is important to find a subtle and non-intimidating way to infiltrate the topic. The engaging and interactive aspect of the game can distract from the existing taboo and stigma and subtly infiltrate the topic. It can serve as a first step for a discussion, as an ice-breaker. The inclusive part of gameplaying allows for the discussion to occur naturally and therefore non-directly include male members of the family into the discussion on menstruation. Moreover, gamification makes the discussion easier, and the topic lighter- it can turn an uncomfortable and awkward discussion on menstruation into a fun competition.

Sorcar states how gamification has the power to minimize stigmas (Sorcar et al., 2017). Games are interactive and can make people aware of their actions, as well as their behaviour towards the subjects. A new behaviour can be tailored through a repetitive exposure of certain information which can contribute to normalization of the subject. Here, Gamification was seen as a benefit for each family member as well. Male members get a chance to learn about the subject and understand the experiences of their family female members. Female members get to question the old passed on practices, and the daughters are given space for questions and help inside the safety of their family homes.

Four games were designed with different types of interaction and forms of game playing, differently provided information and different openness of the subject (figure 2). The reason for creating four different concepts was to find which design succeeds in creating the best atmosphere in the family home around menstruation. Two educative games were tested - Puberty Flute (board game) and Memory Game. Other two games more focused on the game playing – Giggles, which serves as a conversation-starter, and Mix-A-Body-Match, as an ice-breaker. All of the designs included a booklet, as an educational component

of the design to provide family with information, even after the game playing.

In order for the conversation to occur in the family home, it was important to find a way to include menstruation in the designs without putting a focus on it to attain the involvement of all family members and avoid opposition. That was why none of the games were stated as games on menstruation, but rather as games on puberty, growing up or even as “uncomfortable games”. All of the designs included subjects such as biology and puberty, and portrayed the changes that occur both in boys and girls. Here the intention was to present menstruation as a natural and accompanying part of puberty, along with the others that the girls share with boys.

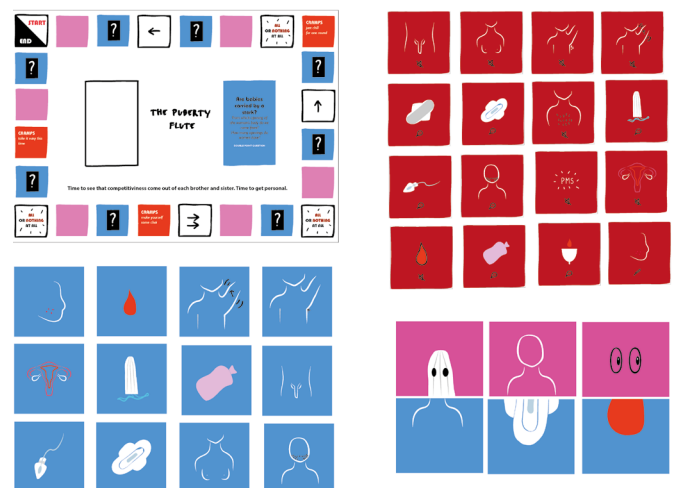


Figure 2. Examples of the 4 designs (described top to bottom) - board game “Puberty Flute”, a combination of pictorial, charades and alias “Giggles”, “Memory game”, pairing game “Mix-A-Body-Match” (Own design, 2019.)

BUILDING BLOCK 4: SET THE MOOD

Humour can be used as an ice-breaker to talk about something that is initially uncomfortable. Furthermore, it can be used as a way to reframe the stigma (Van der Lande & Vegter, 2015). Menstruation, puberty and private parts are subjects that are rarely discussed in families in

India and approaching topics with humor could make the subjects lighter. Humour can also help in normalizing those subjects. Dr Ivan Brown from the University of Toronto, who works on special education and disabilities, states the benefits of using humour when combating stigma: “Humour gives us the opportunity to explore things beyond our usual mindset. Most problems will disappear or become less problematic, when there is something to laugh about (...)” (Van der Lande & Vegter, 2015). In our project, humour was used by forming humorous questions in the board game Puberty flute and in the Mix-A-Body-Match, where the aim was to win the game by forming the funniest combination (figure 2).

BUILDING BLOCK 5: BRING EVERYONE ON BOARD

In order to have a deeper understanding of the issue and of the context, it is beneficial to involve those in the field. Our project consisted of a 3 month field research in India. The first part of the research in India were the interviews with experts in Mumbai from different fields whose work involves menstruation. The interviews helped in the deeper understanding of the context through the existing practices, personal experiences and encounters in the field when working on the taboo. The interviews also consisted of receiving feedback on the design ideas prior to the testing. The second part of the research was collaboration with Sukhibhava, an Indian NGO based in Bangalore that aims to educate women of lower income on proper menstrual hygiene practices. The collaboration helped in tailoring certain aspects of the design to form a careful interaction with each family member. This was done through a detailed attention of the design of the visuals, of the tone of the design (funny or serious), to the analysis of the effect of the design on each family member, especially on the male members. Tailoring these aspects carefully can ensure adoption of the design (Sorcar et al., 2017).

BUILDING BLOCK 6: CREATE A CULTURE – FIT

When designing a product for a specific context, the design should be customized to the culture to increase trust in the user (Sorcar et al., 2017), and when working on a stigmatized topic and in a sensitive context, it should be approached extremely carefully. The intention was to make a product that will make people more comfortable and open to talk about the subject of menstruation. Therefore, it was necessary to create a visual style that will be natural to the family, and not seem as an “imported material”. The explorations were made through the patterns, the colour combinations and the visual characters/content of the cards.

BUILDING BLOCK 7: TEST, ITERATE, TEST, ITERATE

When designing for taboos, it is important for the design to undergo a series of tests to check the acceptability and appropriateness of different elements of the created design. The second part of our research was testing with nuclear urban families with at least one daughter of the age of 11-18 years old. The tests were conducted with interviews and tests of the 4 games with the RtD approach. In RtD, design actions serve as a way to gain knowledge (Stappers & Giaccardi, 2014). The aim was not only to get the response to the designs, but honest reactions to the stigma. The tests have proved how all families, no matter the strata, experience initial discomfort when exposed to the topic of menstruation with all family members due to the tradition and the negative societal view. Despite the taboo, the families were reluctant to stop playing the games. Certain aspects of the game - competitiveness or timing and humour, made the family involved in the game and enjoy it, even though it was on menstruation. Conversations on menstruation usually do not occur in the family. They are uncomfortable,

but with the help of the games “ it was a less awkward way of speaking the same thing, but not going through the cons of having the conversation.”

The concept of the pairing game, Mix-A-Body-Match (figure 3), was taken as a final one as it has created the best atmosphere in every family. Aim of the game is to win by creating the most funny pair out of the given material. Mix-A-Body-Match was different from the rest of the designed games as it included additional content apart from puberty and menstruation, thus making the game playing more entertaining, and even surprising and less serious. Players could get creative and imaginative with the content that is perceived as a taboo, and pair them with daily objects to turn the taboo into a humorous content. By using the additional content, the game has put menstruation on the same level of discussion with the mundane objects, such as flip flops, funny eyes etc.(figure 4) and that way presenting menstruation as something that is not avoided or hidden. The humorous aspects of the game and the laughter eased the topic and allowed for easier conversation.



Figure 3. The outcome design “Mix-A-Body-Match” with a box, cards and booklet (Own design, 2019.)

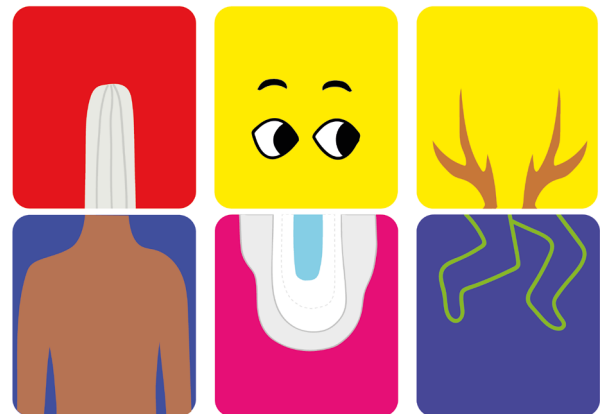


Figure 4. Funny combinations made during the testing with Mix-A-Body-Match (Own design, 2019.)

Mix-A-Body-Match was also shown as the best fitting concept for the youngest generations as it did not require prior knowledge and thus removed discomfort of involvement in such a topic. Moreover, the concept was favoured by most male members as it presented the topic of menstruation as simple, easy and light, and not the usually uncomfortable one.

CONCLUSION

Taboos and correlating stigma around subjects have a strong impact on the well-being of people. It is necessary to tackle these issues since not addressing them leaves the subjects in the dark without allowing for change to occur. This paper presented 7 building blocks on how to design for taboos which have been defined in our RtD project on taboo of menstruation in India and are illustrated in our approach. Women all over the world face many issues during their menstruation, but in the LMI countries such as India, the taboo affects women’s health, education, economic possibilities, relationships and overall well-being. The current situation around menstruation in India has been cultivated through centuries and is hard to change but the

first necessary step is to open up a discussion in order to bring the topic out of the darkness of taboo and stigma. The goal of this project was to enable discussion on menstruation in the family home by creating a positive atmosphere in order to enhance the well-being of pre-menstruating girls. This has been achieved through an engaging and interactive aspect of gamification, and with humorous aspects of the design, the usually the uncomfortable conversation has been turned into an engaging and fun competition.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The presented building blocks can serve as a reference for further work on taboos, but they require adjustment or modification through further work. The paper shows the potential for further addressing to be made on the societal and cultural aspects when interfering with sensitive topics such as taboo. Understanding the intricate aspects of the culture such as gender and interpersonal relations is of high importance as it can give the full comprehension of the issue.

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