

Breaking the Stigma

Sharing perspectives & creating dialogue on drug use

*A CROSS-TIC research proposal by
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Concept

This document is a Cross-TIC research proposal for the broedplaats WARP and deals with the theme of the GOGBOT 2023 festival, Drugs and AI. Specifically, the research is about challenging the stigma of drug use in order to stimulate a more open discussion and encourage empathy, understanding, and open-mindedness.

What is the stigma

There is a multitude of stigmas that surround the topic of drug use. If you take drugs, people think that you don't have your life under control, that you are unable to manage your impulses, that you are an unreliable person. You break rules and you don't abide by the law, you are an immoral criminal, you are not trustworthy.

You are an outsider, a deviant and all your other "friends" are probably also drug addicts.

You are destroying your body with substances you need to get through the day, you are a weak, reckless person that cannot face reality.

Why to challenge the stigma

Such stigmas lead to various undesired consequences.

They discourage individuals from seeking help or accessing appropriate support and treatment. When people fear judgment and discrimination, they are less likely to reach out for assistance, which can perpetuate the cycle of addiction and hinder their path to recovery.

Furthermore, these stigmas create social barriers that prevent individuals who use drugs from fully participating in society. These barriers can manifest in employment discrimination, housing challenges, strained family relationships, and limited access to educational opportunities.

Moreover, they dehumanize and marginalize people who use drugs, preventing them from being seen as complex human beings with their own stories, struggles, and aspirations.

Stigma often stems from misinformation, fear, and societal biases. By challenging stigma, we can foster open dialogue and promote empathy and understanding, recognizing that drug use can be influenced by a range of factors, including social, economic, and personal circumstances. This approach enables a more comprehensive understanding of drug use and allows for addressing the root causes rather than simply focusing on punitive measures.

How to challenge the stigma

The stigma of drug use is challenged in this research project by portraying the stigmas and the personal journeys of people who use drugs by means of an immersive, audio-visual installation. To create a fully immersive experience, it is proposed to use the 360LAB of WARP.

Goal of this project is that through audio-visual storytelling visitors can empathize with the personal stories of drug users and reflect on questions such as:

- What stereotypes and misconceptions do I hold about drug use and those who use drugs?

- How does societal stigma contribute to the challenges faced by individuals who use drugs?
- What are the underlying factors that lead to drug use, and how can we address them?

To work towards such a prototype, we will be following the first three phases of the five step design thinking process by Dam and Siang [1].

In the first phase, *Empathise*, we will be getting a better understanding for people who use drugs by interviewing stakeholders from drug use and harm reduction communities. This will prepare us for the second phase, *Define*, in which we will be interviewing people who use drugs about their personal lives. What made them start using drugs, what stigmas they experience, what kind of emotions they evoke in them and how they affect their daily lives? In the third phase, *Ideate*, we will select one of the personal journeys from the interview and use it to explore the design space of audio-visual storytelling. Here we will be creating various sound and visual sketches from scratch, that are meant to portray the emotions felt by the protagonist of the narrative.

These three phases lay the foundation for the last two phases in which a full prototype would be created and evaluated. A full production would correspond to an immersive, audio-visual experience in the 360LAB that portrays the personal story of a person grappling with drug use and the profound challenges they face, including the pervasive stigma that surrounds their journey.

Goal of the experience is to unveil the human behind the stigma, shining a light on the struggles and triumphs of an individual navigating the world of drug use. It is meant to invite the audience to walk in their shoes, delving deep into the complex emotions and experiences that shape their path. Ultimately, it should foster understanding, challenge stereotypes, and contribute to a more empathetic and informed dialogue about drug use.

Approach

In this section we will discuss the research process as well as what expertise (technical, artistic etc.) is missing and which external experts from the region can be consulted.

Research Process

The central research question of this project is:

“How can one portray personal journey of a person who uses drugs and the challenges of stigmatization they face in an immersive and engaging way with the 360LAB?”

To answer these questions, an extensive list of sub-questions has been devised on

- Drug use and stigmatization
- Audio visual storytelling
- Best practices for audio visual projects
- 360LAB

The list can be found in the appendix. The sub-questions will be answered by means of self-study and consultation of external experts.

The overall research process will be guided by the five step design thinking process [1] as shown in figure 1. This process serves to understand the human needs involved, reframe the problem in human-centric ways, create numerous ideas in brainstorming sessions and adopt a hands-on approach to prototyping and testing.

The 5 stages are:

- **Empathize:** research your users' needs.
- **Define:** state your users' needs and problems.
- **Ideate:** challenge assumptions and create ideas.
- **Prototype:** start to create solutions.
- **Test:** try your solutions out

In this research project we will only work on the first three phases due to the limited amount of time, however this proposal also outlines what would be done in the last two phases in case of a full production. This way we already have a project plan if there is an opportunity to continue the project afterwards.

The remainder of this section will discuss each of the five phases. In addition, we also discuss the outcome and timeline of this research project.

DESIGN THINKING: A NON-LINEAR PROCESS

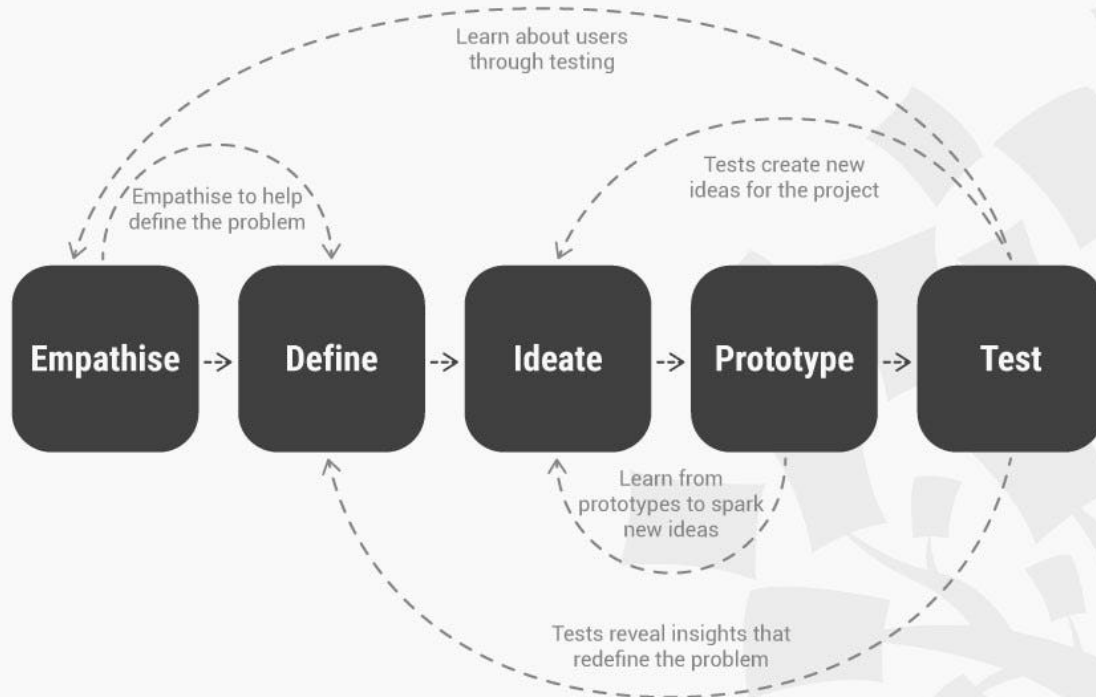


Figure 1: Five step design thinking process [1].

Empathise

When interviewing someone about a sensitive topic, it's important to approach the conversation with empathy, sensitivity, and respect. The aim of this phase is to prepare and educate us on the topic of drug use, before we move on to interviewing people who use drugs.

To do so, we will interview stakeholders from drug use and harm reduction organizations (e.g. GGD Twente, Tactus). The interview may include questions such as:

- How willing would people who use drugs to share their personal stories?
- How to talk with them about this sensitive topic?
- What questions should be avoided?
- What kind of language should be used to gain rapport and be respectful?
- Can you provide or recommend a safe and comfortable environment for the interview?
- How should the information gathered from the interview be used and shared?

Drug use can be emotionally challenging for the interviewee, especially if it involves traumatic experiences. If a contact has been arranged, we will ask the respective organization whether the person had any traumatic experiences and if there any potential triggers that should be avoided.

Define

Next, we will interview drug users about their personal story. The plan is to interview two or three people. Questions that may guide the interview are:

- Can you tell me about your earliest memories or experiences related to drug use? How did those experiences shape your perception of drugs?
- What factors or circumstances led you to start using drugs? How did your drug use progress over time?
- What were the challenges or difficulties you faced while using drugs? How did your drug use impact your relationships, work, or other areas of your life?
- What kind of stigmas come to your mind when you think about drug use? What kind of feelings and emotions does it evoke in you? How do these stigma affect you in your daily life?
- What would you hope for in your life?

As sharing personal stories of drug use can have consequences for the interviewee, such as potential social or legal ramifications, we will discuss with them how their information will be used and shared, and obtain their informed consent for any potential publication or dissemination. Ideally, the interview can be audio-recorded such that we can fully focus on the interview and analyze the interview afterwards. We can use speech-to-text software such as otter.ai to transcribe the interviews.

Ideate

Based on the interviews, we will take one of the personal journeys as the foundation for our ideation phase. Here we are going to work towards a prototype by exploring different elements of visuals and sound.

First, we will learn about audio visual storytelling, best practices for audio visual projects and 360LAB by means of self-study and consultation of external experts. See the appendix for details. Then we are going to apply the knowledge learned from the discussions with the external experts and from the self-study by exploring visual and audio elements.

Below you can find a list of aspects that may be explored.

- **Visuals**
 - Visuals may include real footage, abstract visuals or a blend between the two.
 - Explore a set of different techniques in TouchDesigner and experiment how aspects such as color, shape, or texture can be used to portray the associated feelings and emotions of the personal story. Techniques in TouchDesigner may include

- Data visualization (related to drug use)
 - Fractals
 - Reaction diffusion
 - Particles
 - Instancing of geometric shapes
 - Stable diffusion
 - Ambient color spaces
 - Explore how real footage (stock or recorded) can be used for the same goal, e.g.
 - Lightning,
 - composition,
 - perspectives,
 - lenses,
 - color grading
 - Camera movements (e.g. pans, tilts, and dollies)
 - Cuts and transitions
 - Explore merging abstract art and real footage, e.g. see [this](#) for an example
 - Explore how the 360LAB can be used to support the narrative of the personal story
- **Sound**
 - Explore sound design and sound effects in relation to the to the associated feelings and emotions we want to evoke
 - Explore scales, chord progressions and melodies
 - Explore rhythm, pauses, time signatures, silence
 - Genres
 - Voice acting, singing
 - Text / Lyrics
 - Delivery, pacing, and intonation
 - Experiment with the use of stereo or binaural sound to create a sense of space and perspective
- **Audio-reactive visuals**
 - Create a patch in TouchDesigner to extract relevant information from sound
 - Identify parameters of the visual elements in the project that lead to interesting changes of the visual. These parameters can then be controlled by audio.
 - It could also be interesting to explore how to generate sound from visuals

Exploring such stylistic choices will generate further ideas for the style of the experience.

Prototype

The research project will stop at the previous phase due to the limited time. In case of a full production, the next step will be to create a prototype.

First, we will write a script for the story. Then we will create a storyboard that shows for each scene

- What purpose it has
- What can be seen
- What can be heard

Then, we will realize the contents of the storyboard.

- **Visuals**
 - Dependent on the results from the previous phase we will either create abstract visuals in TouchDesigner, use real footage or a combination of the two
 - In case we are going to shoot scenes ourselves there may be additional work, e.g.
 - Cast actors
 - Scout locations
 - Arrange props, costumes and filming equipment
 - Capture the footage by shooting scenes with the actors and the crew.
 - Select and arrange the best shots and scenes to create the desired story and pacing.
 - Enhance the audio quality, add sound effects (Foley)
 - Edit scenes together, ensure good projection mapping for the 360LAB
 - Adjust post processing (e.g. color grading) based on the available beamers
- **Sound**
 - Write a score with that compliments the narrative of the story
 - Create a sound track using the identified sounds and the score
 - Abstract visuals may be audio-reactive. In this case we may want to add effects to the sounds in the track such that we have a reach spectrum of frequencies that we can use
 - Mix and master with the speakers in the 360LAB

Test

In the final phase we will evaluate the overall experience.

First, we will evaluate with stakeholders from drug use and harm reduction communities if the installation is suitable to be screened to an audience. For instance,

- The story should not contain any information that could potentially lead to the identification of interviewee from the second phase (unless there is explicit permission for this).
- They should ensure the accuracy and reliability of the information presented.
- Ensure there is appropriate context and framing
- The portrayed story is respectful towards the interviewee

Next, we will invite participants to experience the installation. There should not be too many participants during the experience in order to not take away from the immersiveness. Additionally, participants should not suffer from PTSD, nausea, epilepsy or any similar condition that can be triggered by intense audio-visual stimulation

After the experience, participants will be questioned by means of interviews or surveys. These may include questions such as:

- Did it evoke emotions or provoke thought and discussion?
- Does the experience have a well-paced rhythm that keeps you engaged?
- How immersed were you in the experience? Which factors did contribute to this?
- How is the overall visual style of the experience? Does it enhance the storytelling?
- Is the music well-suited to the story and does it evoke the desired emotions?
- Did the experience leave a lasting impression or make you reflect on its themes or messages?

Based on the results from the evaluation, we can then further improve the installation before it will be exhibited.

Outcome

The outcome of this research project includes:

- Personal stories derived from interviews from people who use drugs
- Creation of audio and visual demos and sketches that serve as a palette for further continuation of the project
- Next to posts on my socials, there will also be documentation on my portfolio website. This may include:
 - Results of interview sessions (if we have permission)
 - Results of sound design and visuals explorations
 - Lessons learned
- A report, summarizing the main findings, answering research questions and giving directions for further work

On a personal level I want to obtain a deeper understanding on

- People who use drugs
- Storytelling
- Sound design
- The influence and associative power of sound and visuals
- Functional and creative use of audio effects
- Create Immersion through sound and visuals
- Setting up an AV installation for public audiences

Timeline

In total there are 108 paid hours available, which equals about two weeks worth of work. Below you can find a rough timeline of the research process with the estimated required time per task.

Phase	Task	Estimated required time
Preliminary research	Contact stakeholders and external experts, arrange dates for interviews	1 Hour
Empathise	Self-study on drug use	1 Day
	Prepare interviews (consent forms, questions, location, etc.)	2 hours
	Conduct interviews with harm reduction organizations and analyze results	1 Day
	Documentation	2 hours
Define	Prepare interviews (consent forms, questions, location, etc.)	4 hours
	Conduct interviews with people who use drugs and analyze results	2 Days
	Documentation	2 hours
Ideate	Self study on storytelling	1 Day
	Prepare interviews (consent forms, questions, location, etc.)	
	Conduct 2 interviews (AV artists, Storytelling lectures) and analyze results	1 Day
	Explore visual	2 Days
	Explore sound design	2 Days
Work with the 360LAB	1 Day	
Documentation	1 Day	

External Expertise

In this section I am discussing some of the technical, artistic and conceptual skills I lack and how I plan to deal with this.

To begin with, I am not very much familiar with the drug scene. To obtain a deeper understanding of people who use drugs as well as to arrange contacts, I want to consult drug use and harm reduction organizations from the region such as GGD Twente, Tactus and Anonyme Narcotica Hengelo. In addition, I could also consult the organization Mainline and the Trimboos Institute.

Regarding the creation of the audio-visual experience: I already have some knowledge in TouchDesigner and audio production in Ableton. To create an immersive and engaging experience, I want to take my skills to the next level. Experts from the region may include Christos Constantinou and Ilja Kolosovs from the WARP community, who can boost my skills in TouchDesigner, give me tips and tricks for immersive AV experiences and can instruct me on using the 360LAB. For audio production and sound design I am planning on contacting Kelvin Bolink (Pyrodox, Refused) who I have worked with in the past.

Finally, to create a thought provoking and stimulating experience I require more expertise in storytelling. Here I would like to contact two lectures from the University of Twente, A.J.M. Schreuders and Rick Nieuwdorp, who teach Documentary Practice and Storytelling through Sound respectively.

Motivation

In this section I will be explaining why I want to realize this project, that is, what is my reason and urgency, and which step do I want to take as an artist.

Urgency

The motivation in this particular project stems from repressive drug policies and their adverse socio-economic effects on society. The “war on drugs” undermines health and social wellbeing and wastes public resources while failing to eradicate the demand for illegal drugs and the illegal drug market. Worse, this “war” has given rise to narco-economies at the local, national and regional levels in several instances to the detriment of national development [2]. Such policies have far-reaching negative implications on a wide spectrum of human rights, such as right to personal liberty, fair trial rights or the rights to health. These policies, many of which are gender blind, have also had a profoundly negative impact on the world’s most vulnerable people such as indigenous peoples, children, persons with disabilities, homeless or LGBTQI persons.

Moreover, these policies create stigma around drug use, which may enhance or reinstate drug use, playing a key part in the vicious cycle that drives addicted people to continue using drugs [3]. The study by et al. [4] examined perspectives from people who inject drugs and how their stigmatizing experiences impacted their views of the healthcare system. A total of 25 participants (78.1%) reported at least one instance of stigma related to healthcare system engagement. Twenty-three participants (71.9%) reported some form of enacted stigma with healthcare, 19 participants (59.4%) described anticipated stigma with healthcare. Such stigma may be internalized, leading to feeling shame and refusing to seek treatment as a result. As the UN system Common Position on drug policy [5] has emphasized, drug use and dependency should not be treated as a criminal matter, but rather as a health issue to be addressed through rights-based measures including public health education, the provision of treatment, support, rehabilitation and transition/reintegration programmes [2].

Development as an artist

Since a young age I have been making music, I taught myself various instruments, played in multiple bands, sang in the choir, learned how to produce music and to this day I play on jam sessions whenever I get the chance.

Fascinated by recent developments in technology, I decided to study Creative Technology in Enschede, allowing me to combine my creative drive with the never ending possibilities posed by technology. In my Creative Technology bachelor I created various installations including animated artworks, custom made electronics to trigger 3D visuals and sound samples as well as larger projects such a laser cut cube that is filled with mirrors, smoke and a myriad of lasers to let the viewer immerse in the near infinite reflections.

Through my bachelors I discovered my passion for engineering and continued my academic career with a master in Interaction Technology, in which I focused on immersive applications in the field of human-robot interaction. As such I worked on haptic feedback for various robotic applications, designed within the XPRIZE competition animation of facial expressions for humanoid robots and continued as a research engineer at the University of Twente after my graduation on immersive robotic applications.

Having finished my latest research project at the University of Twente, I find myself wondering what the next phase in my life should look like. While I am fascinated by the technical and conceptual challenges that are posed in robotics, I am missing the ability to express myself creatively and to explore and communicate my thoughts, feelings and ideas to others. I want to use this opportunity to follow my passion for technology and the creative arts, kickstart my career as an independent artist and build a network in Twente such that I can continue this trajectory in my life.

As an artist I want to explore unconventional mediums and new ways of expressing myself to others. I want to challenge assumptions, inspire change and raise awareness for urgent, societal matters and create technology that empowers people in need. In Breaking the Stigma I want to do this by giving people a platform to share past experiences and thoughts on the matter, with the aim to stimulate discussions around regulated drug use and the removal of stigma.

Sources

- [1] R. F. Dam and T. Y. Siang, “What is Design Thinking and Why Is It So Popular?”, 2019, <https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/what-is-design-thinking-and-why-is-it-so-popular>
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- [3] N. Volkow, “Addressing the Stigma that Surrounds Addiction”, 2022, <https://nida.nih.gov/about-nida/noras-blog/2020/04/addressing-stigma-surrounds-addiction>
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- [5] United Nations, “United Nations System Common Position Supporting the Implementation of the International Drug Control Policy Through Effective Inter-agency Collaboration”, 2018, <https://unsceb.org/united-nations-system-common-position-supporting-implementation-international-drug-control-policy>

Appendix

Sub-Research Questions

Below you can find the list of sub-research questions.

- **Storytelling**
 - How to visualize emotions?
 - How to evoke emotions and move the audience?
 - How to use different audio layers (score, ambience, effects, dialogue) to set an emotional atmosphere and increase immersion of the listener
 - What visual elements of a film can be used to create immersion? To evoke emotion?
 - E.g. camera perspective, lightning, composition,
 - How to design and construct a narrative?
 - How to make a story personal and intimate?
- **Best practices on AV projects for**
 - Live installations
 - How to handle hardware limitations?
 - How to make it reliable? Visitor proof?
 - Audio-reactive visuals
 - Projection mapping
 - Post-processing of visuals
- **360LAB**
 - What kind of hardware is available?
 - Beamers, PCs, speakers?
 - Is it possible to project on the ceiling and the ground floor?
 - What concepts in visuals and sound can be used in a 360 environment to create more immersion?
 - What other elements than sound and visuals can be used to create immersion in the 360Lab? E.g.
 - Temperature
 - Smell
 - Wind / air flow
- **Drug use & stigmas**
 - What factors or circumstances may lead to drug use?
 - What are the challenges or difficulties that people who use drugs may face? How does drug use impact relationships, work, or other areas of ones life?
 - What are common stigmas drug users experience?
 - How does it affect their lives?
 - What emotions do they associate with the stigmas?