

Oscillating between disciplines. Reflexivity in interdisciplinary (social) science communication on harmful behavior in creative higher education

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Abstract: This article examines an interdisciplinary (social) science communication collaboration between two information designers and a researcher in an inter-institutional project on harmful behavior in German creative higher education. Using information design, the project aimed to make findings accessible and to foster dialog beyond academic publishing. A central challenge was the project's close connection to the creative higher-education context, which generated both valuable insights and tensions. We analyze this process through the lens of reflexivity in interdisciplinary work and (social) science communication. Throughout our collaboration, we encountered three key dimensions of reflexive engagement: (a) reflecting on (inter-) disciplinary understanding, (b) reflecting on topic sensitivity and appropriate communication formats, and (c) reflecting on language and visual representation. We argue that reflexive practice is essential for ethical and critically engaged (social) science communication and that sufficient resources for such reflexivity must be ensured, particularly in interdisciplinary projects addressing gender and diversity-related issues.

Keywords: Communication; Higher Education Institutions; Interdisciplinarity; Science; Sexualised Violence

Submitted: 11 August 2025

Accepted: 17 February 2026

Published: 29. Oktober 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17169/ogj.2026.395>

This article is part of Special Issue "Institutionalizing gender and diversity: Interdisciplinary perspectives", edited by Sarah Bellows-Blakely, Pichit Buspavanich, Mirjam Fischer, Aline Oloff, and Celine Vallender. It was edited by Sarah Bellows-Blakely and Kathrin Ganz.

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Introduction

Speaking about, conducting research on, and addressing discrimination and gender-based violence in academic contexts is challenging, particularly in these highly hierarchical environments that are often considered “enlightened organizations” (Pantelmann/Wälty 2022). For early-career researchers, these challenges are compounded by individual proximity to the topic, positions on the academic ladder, and a potential emotional toll. Additional complexity arises from the need to make research findings accessible and understandable to both public audiences and the respective “researched” communities. Communicating research findings on gender, power, and (sexualized) violence poses specific challenges that extend well beyond conventional (social) science-communication concerns. Placing power-critical and power-sensitive processes at the center of both research and public outreach is essential to making (social) science communication more socially just (Dawson/Lock 2025; Lewenstein 2024), particularly when engaging with issues of structural inequality, gender-based harm, and violence. A core aim of such communication is to support the transfer between empirical findings and practice, ultimately strengthening support structures for victim-survivors and contributing to the prevention of violence (McCauley et al. 2019).

This aim requires a considerate dissemination of research findings that accounts for the intersectional dimensions of violence and trauma and actively engages with the communities under research (Campbell/Goodman-Williams/Javorka 2019; McCauley et al. 2019). Responsible communication of research findings must further carefully balance potential benefits against risks for particular groups attending to constructive framing, avoiding stigmatization, and guarding against sensationalism in the treatment of sensitive subject matters (Elliott et al. 2024). A “do no harm approach” (Peterman et al. 2023) thus optimally runs through all stages of the communication process. Equally important is a turn inward: self-reflexivity is indispensable in this context (Lewenstein 2024; Elliott et al. 2024), encompassing attention to the protection of researchers and communicators themselves (Redmond et al. 2026) as well as broader questions

of who produces academic and science communication – including gendered distributions of this labor, – under what conditions it is created, what resources and pressures shape it, and, crucially, whom it reaches (Dawson/Lock 2025; Lewenstein 2024).

By centering power-critical reflexivity across both research dissemination and design practice, this article contributes to gender-studies scholarship on how knowledge about violence and inequality is produced, communicated, and made actionable beyond academic contexts. Accordingly, we describe our shared process in dealing with these questions as an interdisciplinary social science communication team from both research and information design. The research we sought to communicate in sensitive and ethically sound ways addresses the prevalent issues of (sexualized) violence and harassment and abuse of power across academia (Bondestam/Lundqvist 2020; Miquel et al. 2025; Pantelmann/Blackmore 2023), including creative higher-education environments (Heiss 2025; Kirschning 2023). These issues have increasingly gained both public and scholarly attention in recent years. With the principles of ethical research dissemination in mind, institutionalizing discourse on such sensitive subject matters, including research findings and their subsequent policy implications, requires emotionally accessible communication, achieved through careful, deliberate choices of language and visualization. Such choices are not neutral. Visual communication and design are inherently political: the processes of designing implicate the designer's own positionalities, perspectives, and foundational assumptions (Fezer 2019). As critical designer Anna Unterstab argues, design as a discipline is powerful precisely because it can either reproduce dynamics of oppression or, alternatively, act as a form of active complicity in change, one characterized by intersectional sensitivity, reflexivity, and a power-critical orientation toward its own processes and products (Unterstab 2023). In the context of communicating research on sexualized violence and structural inequality, this political dimension of design is constitutive: how findings are visualized shapes what audiences are able to feel, think, and do with them. For an interdisciplinary team working at the intersection of research and design, this insight does not remain abstract but rather translates directly into a set of concrete, uncomfortable questions about our own position(s) and practice(s).

These considerations raised key issues for our specific social science communication endeavor: How can findings about inherently power-imbalanced structures in academia and the arts be discussed and visualized responsibly – while we are ourselves part of academic structures? How can collaborating designers and researchers reach both those affected and those responsible for institutional change? And how can interdisciplinary teams such as ours reflect

on their own perspectives while maintaining professional rigor and disciplinary integrity?

In what follows, we, as a team of three early-career academics – two designers (Laura Quade and Yulia Ostheimer) and a doctoral researcher (Marina Fischer) in the social sciences with a background in psychology – address these questions through our collaborative process within a social science-communication project. Initiated through a partnership between our academic and artistic institutions, a social-science research institute and an arts university, the project transformed our individual thesis work into a concrete product designed to communicate research findings and provide support information for potential victims of sexualized violence in creative higher-education contexts.

Along the way, we faced multiple challenges: fostering interdisciplinary dialog and mutual understanding, navigating our own proximities to the topic, and developing sensitive visual-communication strategies with due care. In the following sections, we reflect on the insights that emerged from these challenges. These insights are organized around three aspects of reflexivity: first, *(inter-) disciplinary understanding*; second, *topic sensitivity and appropriate communication formats*; and third, *language and visual representation* – all crucial reflexive processes that shaped our collaboration as we oscillated between research and design. We first introduce the project setting, its theoretical foundations regarding design and socialscience communication, and the research underlying the interdisciplinary collaboration. We then guide readers through our collaboration process, weaving in more in-depth presentation of each aspect as it emerged. We conclude with lessons learned and insights for future interdisciplinary projects engaged in (social) science communication around pressing social issues in the field of gender and diversity studies and beyond.

Setting the scene for the project: framework, common goals, individual missions

Methodological background

Our project was situated within a long-term collaborative initiative between the Berlin University of the Arts (Universität der Künste Berlin) and the Berlin Social Science Center (Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung, WZB), which aims to present research on pressing social issues in ways that are both visually compelling and scientifically rigorous. A central objective of this cooperation is to foster interdisciplinarity and mutual understanding between designers and researchers. The theoretical foundation of the cooperation draws on the con-

cept of ISOTYPE (International System Of Typographic Picture Education) – originally known as the Vienna Method of Pictorial Statistics – developed by scholar Otto Neurath and artist Gerd Arntz (Jansen 2009) and crucially mediated and put into practice by social scientist and technical illustrator Marie Neurath, a key interdisciplinary figure and “pioneer of information design” (Burke/Sandner 2023, 223). Emerging in 1920s Vienna, ISOTYPE sought to make complex social relations accessible through visual representation, thereby democratizing knowledge and transforming data into inclusive visual designs spanning sociology, economics, medicine, natural phenomena, geography, and pedagogy – all crafted to appeal to a broad audience (Neurath/Kinross 2017). It was Neurath who bridged data, visual representation, and the audience’s perspective, translating complex information into a coherent and accessible visual language. At the core of ISOTYPE’s design were easily comprehensible pictograms representing social entities and conveying quantitative relations through evenly structured rows, enabling immediate recognition across topics as varied as birth and mortality rates, agricultural land use, unemployment statistics, and strategies to combat tuberculosis. This principle has since exerted a lasting influence on graphic design, urban planning, and architecture (Jansen 2009).

In line with this understanding of design as a socially and politically relevant practice of knowledge communication, the Visual Society Program (ViSoP) pairs social scientists with designers (Scopec 2025). The program creates a framework for reflexive engagement in which both sides work toward mutual intelligibility and the communication of their research outcomes to a broader public. This approach is particularly significant in the context of increasingly complex issues within a rapidly evolving knowledge society. ViSoP projects have a minimum duration of one year, thereby allowing participants sufficient time to engage deeply with both the relevant substantive issues and the respective disciplinary practices.

Underlying research and aims

The research project underlying our cooperation had been designed as a mixed-methods doctoral study that investigated the learning conditions and experiences of young artists at German arts and music universities with particular attention to various forms of harmful behavior and interpersonal-boundary violations toward arts and music students. The issues of, among others, gender-based and racist discrimination, (sexualized) violence, and the negotiation of power and boundaries within the cultural sector have been the subject of increasing debate in recent years, both within the industry itself as well as in media and

scholarly discourse (Brüstle et al. 2024; Schmidt 2019; Buscatto/Karttunen/Provansal 2025). These discussions have centered on the specific characteristics of the sector, on enabling conditions, and on potential protection strategies. The domain of arts and music universities has likewise drawn growing attention; yet, there remain empirical gaps in understanding the problem (Kirschning 2023). Furthermore, the institutional anchoring of (preventive) measures in gender- and diversity-sensitive protection frameworks at these institutions has significant room for improvement (Fischer et al. 2026).

The article that served as the foundation for the design project primarily presented quantitative findings on the relationships between experiences of different forms of boundary violations and abuse of power toward students at arts universities – such as micro aggressions, various aspects of discrimination, sexual harassment, digital and analog forms of sexualized violence – alongside an analysis of the representation of various socially marginalized perspectives at creative-higher-education institutions, and the mental health of (especially marginalized) students at these institutions across Germany (Fischer et al. 2025 – the research material used in this study is available in the OSF repository accompanying the article). Results indicated that experiences of various forms of boundary violations were widespread in the underlying sample, which was diverse in terms of discipline and sociodemographic background. Such experiences were associated with poorer mental health and reduced well-being among students. Moreover, marginalized groups, particularly in regard to gender, care responsibilities, and mental health, were found to be disproportionately affected, and their poorer mental health was in part the result of experiences such as microaggressions and abuse of power.

These findings provide relevant insights into the urgent need to strengthen protective measures – particularly those aimed at vulnerable groups – within arts and music universities. At the start of our collaboration, the article was still under peer review, and its results had not yet been published. A central aim of the research author was to ensure that the findings would be circulated back to the institutions where the data had been generated. In this way, the results were intended not only to contribute to academic discourse but also to support meaningful reflection and potential change within the field of creative higher education. One key concern of our team was to approach the study's findings through an interdisciplinary lens, translating complex connections into clear and engaging forms for audiences beyond the field, very much in the sense of the ISOTYPE philosophy. The designers' interest was shaped by their own lived perspectives on studies in art-school settings, making the researcher's work on these contexts particularly resonant. By highlighting these findings, they sought

to raise awareness that such institutions are not free from discrimination and to contribute to conversations that might encourage change.

Matching, sharing perspectives, establishing tools

In March 2024, we met to exchange perspectives on our respective work contexts, methods, expectations, and hopes for the partnership. From the outset, we recognized that working with data on art- and music-education institutions offered both a special opportunity and a distinct responsibility, as the results we planned to visualize brought a close, lived connection to the topic, especially for the two designers in our team. This required an added layer of reflexivity and care throughout the process regarding individual boundaries and, possibly, emotional resonance with the data at hand. Equally important to our team were dialog and critical reflection as well as the opportunity to engage with and mutually learn about design and research methods and to gain insight into our different approaches and discipline logics.

Interdisciplinarity and reflexivity as shaping approaches

In this sense, the collaboration represented an opportunity to move closer to the goal of interdisciplinary understanding and engagement through a process of reflection that also opened up new perspectives on the underlying research itself. Central to this was a commitment to reaching audiences that would rarely encounter findings published in academic psychology journals – among them arts and music students, educators, and equality practitioners, who might draw on empirical insights to inform their work. To do so, we wanted to actively bring graphic visualization to the center of our communication strategy and weave our aims and impact-orientation into the visual language to most appealingly convey the research findings to audiences embedded both in creative-higher-education contexts and professional practice, and to point to the urgency of the issue (Rodríguez Estrada/Davis 2015).

A distinctive feature and ethical consideration was the triple role of creative higher education: as research object to be visualized, as target audience, and as context for the designers' own academic work. On the one hand, this was an advantage in terms of the latter's strong familiarity with the audience and an accordingly appropriate visual language (Rodríguez Estrada/Davis 2015), granting an important level of closeness and active connection to the topics and people under research (see McCauley et al. 2019). On the other hand, this particular

constellation required careful attention to emotional and professional boundaries (see Redmond et al. 2026). In addition to the sensitive nature of the topic, which entailed emotional effort and could evoke related personal experiences, differences in academic positions were also important. All three of us were early-career researchers; however, for the designers, the project was directly linked to the completion of their degrees, whereas for the researcher, it was not. Equally important for the project process and outcomes were our different positionalities as three white cis women from the academic context with different levels of precarious access to funding (due to affiliation and scholarship grants). These differentials created an asymmetry that required careful attention for establishing eye-level communication within the team, while recognizing that the success of the results depended on balancing out ideas with resource restrictions and individual timelines following the logics of academia. We carefully tried to meet this need with transparent communication around time resources (for example: How much time investment is realistic on all sides without risking overload and burning out? How and using what tools do we communicate to maintain healthy work flows?) Over time, three levels of reflexivity emerged, shaping our collaborative process. In the following sections, we reflect on these dimensions and synthesize insights for future projects.

Reflecting on (inter-)disciplinary understanding

From the outset, the conceptual design of our project required that we approach one another from our respective disciplinary standpoints with both respect and curiosity. Alongside the substantive work, one ongoing layer of our collaboration involved mutual understanding, navigating moments of irritation or confusion, and working toward shared clarity. The careful matching at the start ensured that we pursued similar goals, providing an important foundation for granting one another insight into our respective practices and inviting reciprocal understanding when uncertainties arose. Throughout, it was repeatedly necessary to translate the different languages, traditions, and expectations of our academic “home” disciplines, to take the time this required, and, ultimately, to develop a shared language of our own. Following feminist understandings of reflexivity in research (Clarke/Braun 2019; Wilkinson 1988), we understood in-depth mutual reflection on both our disciplinary backgrounds and methodological assumptions as necessary steps. An important aspect of this process, particularly for the researcher, who had limited experience in visualization, was the development of visual literacy: understanding what particular design choices communicate, who is reached and who might be left out by certain choices, and why conventional

methods of presenting quantitative or qualitative data in academia often fail to engage emotional dimensions and include vulnerable positions (Unterstab 2023; Rodríguez Estrada/Davis 2015).

Conversely, there was much to discuss and explain in regard to the specific workings of academic research, publishing, and open science. This included the timelines and access restrictions of peer-review processes and what these mean for (social) science communication projects: for example, how they affect the ability to plan public launches or share visualizations before the underlying data are formally published. Although the underlying paper was preregistered and intended for open-access publication, we chose not to circulate it as a preprint – a decision that, in hindsight, may warrant reconsideration – meaning that the social science communication booklet we planned to create could only reference the work once it had passed through formal peer review. A central challenge was aligning the timelines of the academic publication process with those of the design project and the intended completion of the designers' theses. Another difficulty lay in limited time resources, as the project had to be managed alongside thesis writing, graduation requirements, and paid employment. This experience underscored that (social) science communication should not be treated as an "add-on": when a research project aims to publish visually accessible materials, both the design phase and the preceding negotiation of shared understanding must be factored in generously from the outset. At one point, we deliberately paused to sort through the underlying disciplinary differences in processes and methodologies, taking a "step back" to address issues such as visualizing sensitive data and the intertwined workflows that ultimately shaped the project concept.

We explored questions such as: How does the process of generating design ideas work? How are data collected and processed? How does open research function? How is sensitive data, such as data on discrimination or intersectional perspectives on violence, handled in academic contexts, and what do review processes entail? These aspects were discussed and brought together to create a diagram mapping our collaboration, explicitly including reflexivity phases, which, while cross-cutting, were highlighted at certain points. It was eye-opening for us to reflect on how the disciplinary and methodological logics specific to each field influenced our work not only in terms of content but also in process. For instance, it proved challenging to plan the project alongside the often unpredictable and sometimes frustrating publication timelines, requiring us to tolerate a degree of uncertainty. At the same time, the process of oscillating between different design decisions – developing ideas and prototypes, testing and then discarding them – reflected a dynamic that connects social scientific inqui-

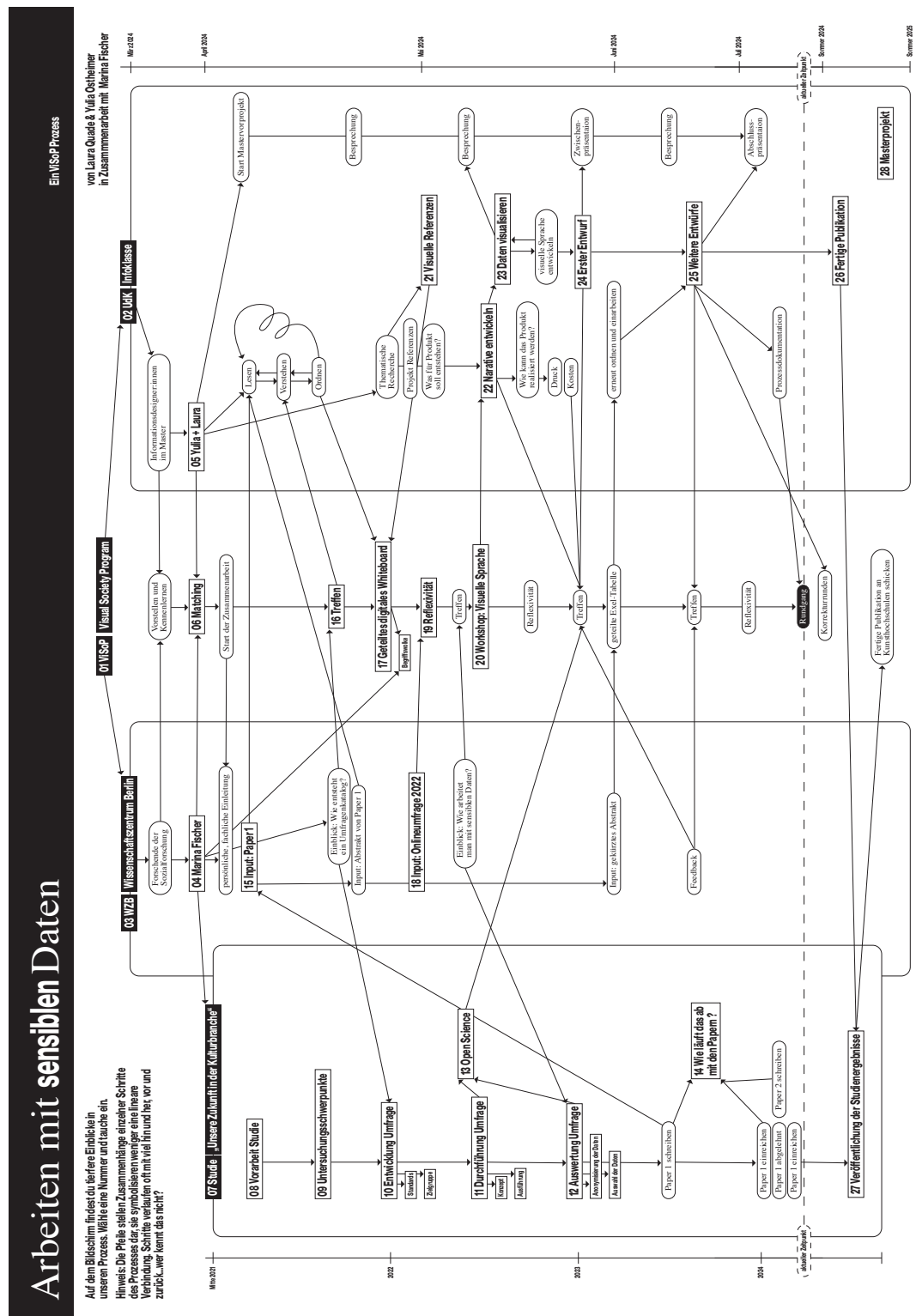
ry and writing with design practice. However, this process introduced another layer of uncertainty in planning the project's outcomes within the constraints of limited time. This occasionally stood in tension with our ambition of producing a tangible outcome. In particular, the research author had to consciously prioritize exploration over production at certain points, which caused some discomfort within the at times highly output-oriented doctoral process – a tension that had to be endured. Mapping our process proved helpful in this respect: it provided both an overview and grounding, supporting our trust in the evolving process. The resulting interdisciplinary digital process map and webpage (both in German; for the process map, see Figure 1), as intermediate project results, were presented and discussed by the designers at a public exhibition by their university, offering a meta-level insight into working with sensitive data from both design and research perspectives. Over the course of the project, our respective positions began to converge, approaching a hybrid state of “designers as researchers” and “researchers as designers” (Barnes 2012; Stappers 2007; Stapleton 2005).

Reflecting on topic sensitivity and appropriate communication formats

Throughout our shared process, the ethical and political dimensions of the research topic and our own entanglements within it required another layer of reflexivity. We had to consider both our emotional responses and the sensitive nature of the topic itself, as both influenced our evolving decisions about the most appropriate forms of (social) science communication.

From the very beginning of the matching process, it was clear that our shared project would also entail engaging with the themes and contexts to be visualized in an unusually close way. We needed to find ways of handling this proximity attentively. Following Wilkinson (1988), we are aware that our identities shape our work – both as researchers and as designers. Our work is “an expression of personal interests and values” as individuals (494), just as it is shaped by the disciplinary fields in which our respective academic backgrounds are situated. This is particularly relevant in a field as strongly permeated by power differentials as academia and arts universities. We discussed this particularity as well as the necessity for space at all times for personal concerns or boundaries in engaging with the topic. Breaks, meta-reflection, and sharing of personal reactions were to be given room. We explicitly incorporated this level of engagement from the start into our meetings and exchanges on the topics addressed, on the underlying research literature, and on reflections on possible output

Figure 1: Process map – “Working with sensitive data”



Source: Ostheimer/Quade, CC BY 4.0

formats. Our physical context added another layer of closeness: we met about half the time in spaces of an arts university where an invitation to participate in the very study underlying the research findings had been circulated earlier. Although anonymity prevented us from knowing whether participants from this university had taken part, the setting created a special physical and emotional proximity to the researched people and phenomena at every stage of our co-operation. For the researcher, this felt motivating and encouraging on the one hand, underlining the tangible meaning and need for the underlying research. On the other, it created a heightened sense of responsibility for research-findings dissemination in a context that had until then existed in a rather abstract form as a research object and now entailed an embodied immersion.

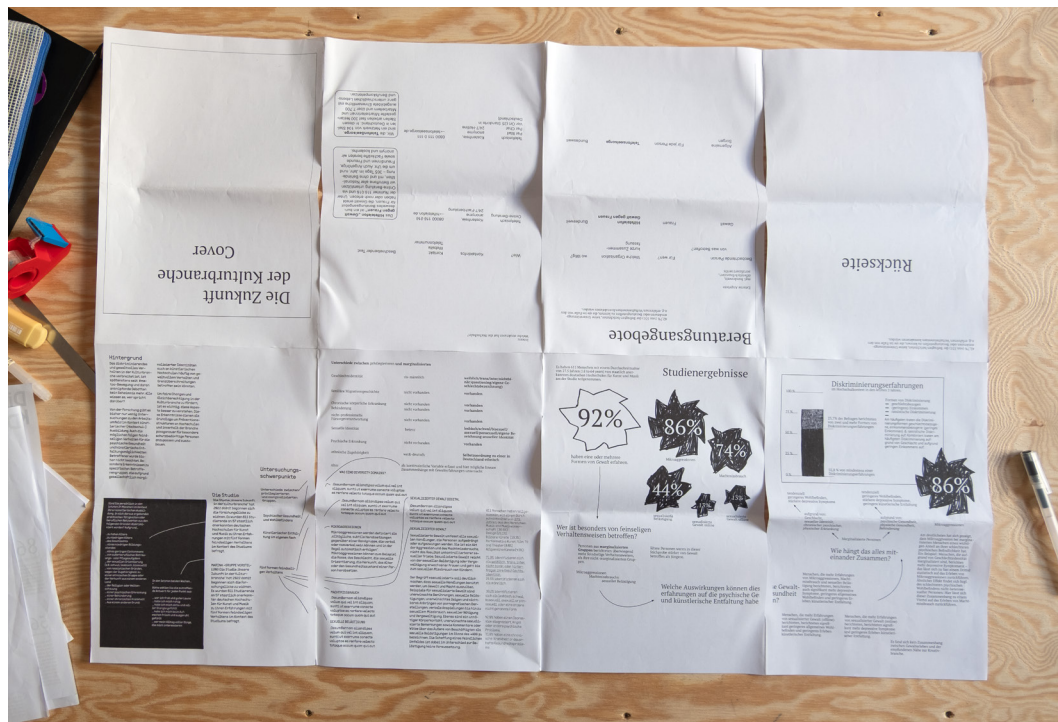
As for the designers' perspective, a pivotal moment in addressing the sensitivity of the topic came with the first reading of the questionnaire used in the survey. Until then, we had only discussed the numerical results, which had stood somewhat abstract and unemotional on their own. Reading the questions clarified the explicit experiences being investigated and underscored the extent of injustice and discrimination faced by marginalized groups in arts universities. It also made plain, in black and white, the deeply personal questions through which participants had worked – their burden was transferred via their engaging with the questionnaire and moved us on a different, personal level. The questions also evoked reflections on our personal experiences and on those of friends of ours, making it evident that such transgressions seem disturbingly "normal".

The challenge was to maintain this level of reflexivity and preserve space for emotional reactions throughout the productive stage of our shared process, especially during the dynamic final quarter of product completion. From the researcher's perspective, it became evident in hindsight that it would have been helpful to pause more frequently during this heated phase and ask, "Wait, what are we working on right now? At what speed and driven by what logics of productivity?" This reflection seems especially important because of the logics that themselves are often part of the critique concerning neoliberal conditions that enable harassment and violence in academia overall (Hodgins et al. 2024) and creative higher education in particular (Brüstle et al. 2024).

Our emotional reactions served as important indicators during our engagement with the sensitive topic of (gender-based) violence and diversity-related exclusions in creative higher education. These experiences of disturbance, warmth, engagement, anxiety, and anger were particularly relevant regarding the question of which format of presentation would be most suitable in this context. Early on, we began a process of joint reflection: Which adjectives, co-

lors, and shapes do we associate with the topic and our joint project? What feelings do each of these aspects evoke? We collected these individual perspectives separately and shared them at one of our early meetings. This revealed both commonalities and contradictory tendencies, which we then integrated into our engagement with theoretical debates and discussions on violence, abuse of power, and harassment. The designer team reflected on the tension between being “loud”, driven by anger and the urge to confront injustice, and remaining “quiet”, deliberately mindful of the deeply personal and often painful experiences shared by participants. These reflections shaped both the evolving visual language in early drafts, including a foldable poster that is loud and present when unfolded, yet quiet and subtle when distributed (see Figure 2), and subsequent stages of product development.

Figure 2: First draft of a publication format during a collaborative session: foldable poster



Source: Ostheimer, CC BY 4.0

Over time, and in light of our own emotionally engaged responses to the project's content, our team's commitment deepened to create a result that would allow audiences to engage carefully and thoughtfully with the findings, thus conveying the gravity of the data without softening or glossing over it. It also became clear that the final work should offer value beyond the mere presentation of results. This led to the decision to include a section in the final product for providing accessible resources and support contacts for individuals affected by abuse and violence. Our experience of personally engaging with the topics of

our shared work particularly highlighted the necessity of supervision when working – also visually – on sensitive, violence-related themes and data. Such support is often lacking in research projects dealing with (gender-based) violence (Kaul et al. 2024) and becomes especially important when team members have a close personal connection to or may be directly affected by the researched topics (Redmond et al. 2026).

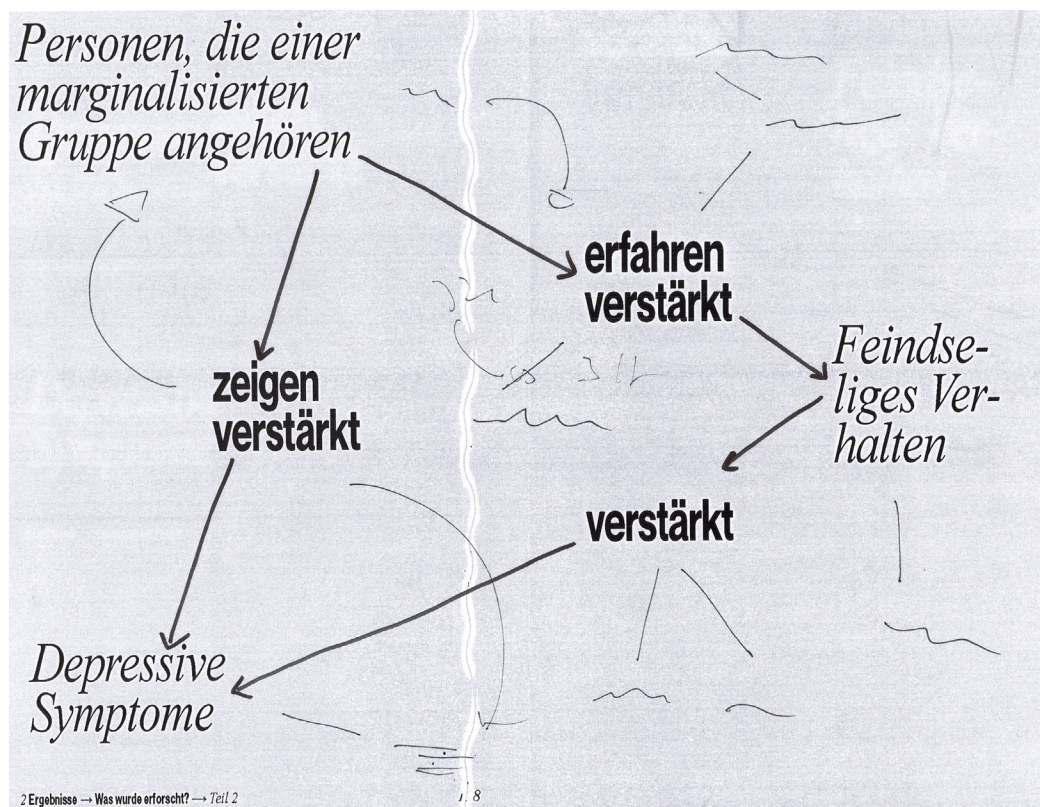
Reflecting on and shaping language and visual representation

The earlier phases of reflection, following our process of establishing a shared framing and engaging with the sensitive nature of the topic, enabled us to engage more deeply with questions of visual language and the intended effect on readers and the communities involved, including arts students; researchers; diversity, equity and inclusion experts; as well as the broader interested public. A third component of our collaboration thus unfolded on the level of our disciplinary languages and modes of expression. We critically reflected on how knowledge gained from research can be conveyed through imagery and text and what specific implications this has in relation to our topic. This was closely linked to questions about which of our habitual linguistic practices and disciplinary standards ought to be critically reconsidered in light of the subject matter, our intended audience(s), and our communicative goals. A pivotal (and partly shameful) moment for the researcher was, for example, the designers' feedback that a draft text for the publication in an academic journal felt strangely detached from the content – as though it were attempting to position itself neutrally above the very topics that we, through our personal and in part professional proximity to the research subject and our intensive engagement with it, had experienced as so urgent and affecting. In our conversations, we took up the challenge of conveying social scientific content with precision but without coldness or clinical distance – and of actively unlearning, in part, an academic habitus that had been learned along the way. It also raised questions about our positionality: What feels appropriate and/or safe enough from our own positions within the academic system? What stance toward power, violence, and boundary transgressions do we want to communicate through the chosen visual elements and accompanying texts? How close or distant do we want to position ourselves as authors and, at the same time, as people involved in the creative-higher-education system, and what should be placed at the center of representation?

As a preparatory and important first step, we engaged with questions of symbolism and violence-sensitive visual language. Searching for examples from existing awareness-raising campaigns and projects that we found compelling

was helpful in this regard. With respect to the informational components of the emerging product, we also examined how support services and organizations present themselves. On a collaborative online board, we collected references and asked ourselves: What do we appreciate about these examples, what do we find problematic, and what do they evoke in us? Some examples conveyed the urgency of sexualized violence but struck us as overly sensationalist – we felt strangely repelled and had the sense that this did not align with our vision of a careful and considered representation of the subject matter. Others, coming from more activist contexts, balanced sensitivity and urgency well, yet, from our perspective, placed less emphasis on specificity in the representation of data, which in turn ran counter to our need for careful rigor, this time in a (social) scientific sense. Still others, particularly those drawing on more conventional (social) scientific visualization formats, appeared – much like the academic text described above – unsettlingly detached and seemingly distant from the actual topic in a way that felt inappropriate and insufficient with regard to the desire for a recognition of individual experiences. Balancing these impressions, we set out in search of ways to visualize frequencies and statistic associations in ways that were both understandable and specific (Figure 3).

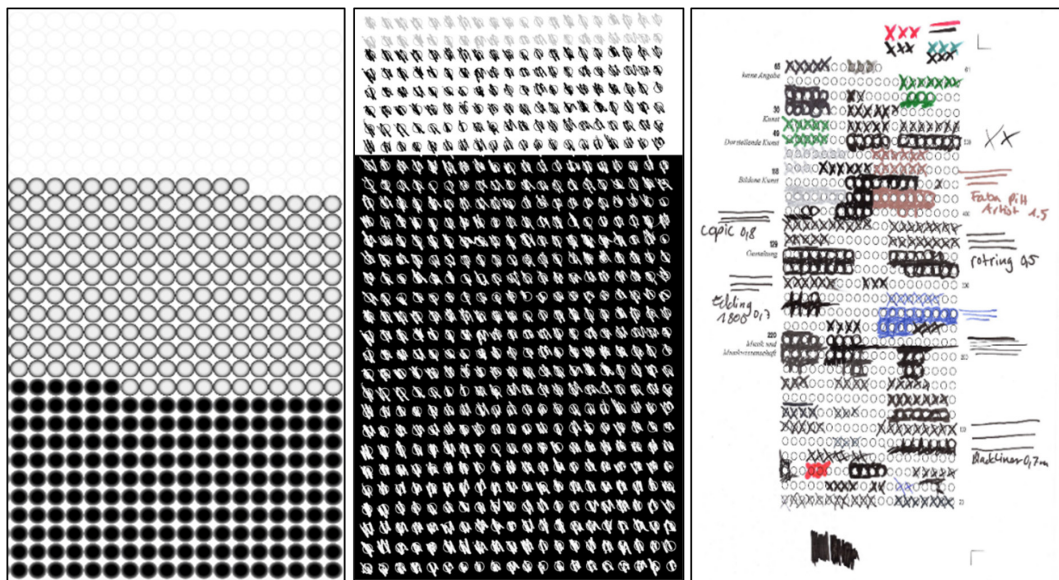
Figure 3: Sketch of considerations for an accessible representation of statistical relationships between the domains under study



Source: Ostheimer,/Quade, CC BY 4.0

In this process, we moved back and forth, oscillating between ideas. Gradually, the levels of disciplinary cultures, the envisioned communication product, and visual-language ideas became increasingly intertwined. Building on our previous considerations regarding the foldable poster and other ideas, we abandoned our initial approach and began searching for formats that would more precisely align with our refined visual language objectives. Here, too, the question of “loud vs. quiet” and “large vs. small” played a central role. An important concern for us was to have every single participant represented, to make each voice visible. This led to the idea of visualizing responses to questions about different experiences of boundary transgressions in relation to the total sample of over 600 participants, with the intention of not excluding any participants (Figure 4a and 4b).

Figure 4: a) and /b) Core concept of the visualization: Each voice is represented by a single dot (black dots: “yes” response, grey dots “no” response, white dots “n/a”). c) Experimenting with different analogue pen thicknesses and types for the visualization.



Source: Ostheimer/Quade, CC BY 4.0

Another central consideration for the designer team in engaging with the data was to visually emphasize individual experiences and, through this process, create a form of personal engagement with each participant within the design itself. This led to the development of a tactile, very personal mode of representing the frequency of experiences: each voice was drawn by hand by the two designers and then scanned for inclusion in the booklet layout. Fine-grained decisions played a significant role here – for instance, the thickness of individual lines and, consequently, the careful choice of an appropriate pen (Figure 4c, Figure 5).

Throughout this iterative design-research process, it was at times challenging to accept that already developed ideas had to be discarded, even after we had invested considerable thought in them and had become attached to particular versions. Nevertheless, we gradually approached the final product step by step. What had initially been conceived as a “loud” folding poster eventually evolved into a small “quiet” booklet. At first glance, the booklet is less conspicuous and can be read discreetly. Its inner section, however, is marked by a strong and resistant typography – it is not comfortable, but neither is the situation of those affected – and thus still allows for a certain “loudness” (Figure 5).

Figure 5: View inside the final printed version of the booklet, results section. Each participant response that represents a “yes/positive response” to at least one incident of hostile behavior within the study context is marked with a hand-drawn X.



Source: Ostheimer, Quade, CC BY 4.0

We continued to discuss the content structure in recurring rounds. Our intention to include a section with resources for support eventually led to the decision to divide the booklet into two parts. In the first half, designed in a monochromatic layout with hand-drawn elements, the research project is introduced, followed by the research questions with example items across all sections of the original online survey and the presentation of the findings. It was important to us to immediately show which questions participants had answered – echoing the moment of discomfort when engaging with the phrasing used in the survey –

and thus to acknowledge the burden participants had taken on in order to make the research results and their publication possible. At the same time, we were careful not to overwhelm readers and therefore provided an early content note regarding the partly explicit language relating to sexualized violence. Beyond descriptive frequencies, statistical associations between experiences of violence, participants' mental health, and their belonging to marginalized groups are presented. It is also noted that a significant portion of participants reported not knowing of any accessible support services that they could contact if they were to experience the situations described. Black double pages and inserts with definitions (for example, on marginalization or sexualized violence) divide the chapters and reflect our collaborative process of clarifying and refining the terminology used in the research project and discussing it together.

The second half of the booklet, visually and tactilely distinct through its use of lighter, soft-pink paper, features the chapter "Outlook", which presents supra-regional support services for experiences of violence and discrimination (Figure 6). Each service is allocated its own double page. From emergency hotlines to counselling services on loneliness and suicide prevention as well as directories of violence-protection centers and target-group-specific services for queer people or professionals in the arts and culture sector, twelve services are listed. At a glance, readers can see the target groups, contact options, and available languages for each service. A QR code provides low-threshold access.

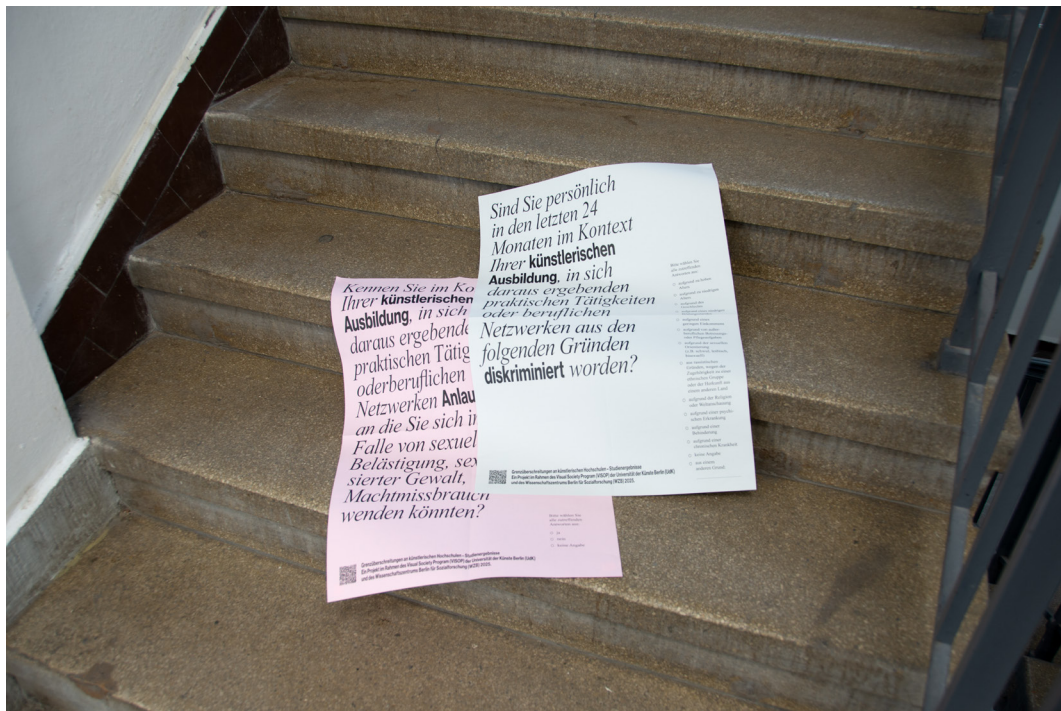
Figure 6: Service chapter of the booklet providing support-service contacts



Source: Ostheimer/Quade, CC BY 4.0

The resulting booklet was published both in print and open-access digital formats (Fischer/Quade/Ostheimer 2025). A companion poster was also created. In two versions, using the same typography as the booklet, it features one of two original survey items: one on discrimination experiences and one on knowledge regarding support services. It also provides a QR code linking to the digital booklet and, by extension, the underlying academic publication (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Posters to spread information about the project and the underlying research paper, displaying exemplary survey items



Source: Ostheimer/Quade, CC BY 4.0

Conclusion: lessons learned

The booklet was produced in a small print run of 130 copies by a local owner-operated print shop. Our primary goal was to bring the product back to the German arts and music universities and thereby include into the whole of the research cycle the very institutions the internal multipliers of which had made data collection possible, thereby potentially achieving a productive as well as practice- and community-oriented dissemination of our work (McCauley et al. 2019). A package containing posters, several copies of the booklet, and a personalized thank-you letter was sent to the multipliers (equality officers and student representatives) at all institutions that had supported the data collection. It was particularly exciting and interesting to see what feedback we received in return. For example, the distribution of materials led to several invitations for

the researcher to give talks at institutions within the creative-higher-education sector, fostering dialog and specific academic-communication opportunities. We also received information on student representatives of several universities across Germany that, based on and with direct reference to the booklet and study results, advocated for concrete further research and prevention measures and had come together to exchange information and gather resources. One arts university contacted the designers to ask whether the poster design could be reproduced in order to further disseminate the information within their own spaces, which they gladly made possible.

These responses reassured us that the project's underlying aim, drawing on the ISOTYPE philosophy of making complex issues accessible and impactful through information design (Jansen 2009) and reaching audiences beyond academic publishing contexts, had been successfully embedded in our implementation. With this experience, we completed a project cycle that confronted us hands-on with the realities and requirements of critical information design, particularly in the context of (sensitive) social science communication following a "do no harm approach" (Peterman et al. 2023). It also provided us with valuable methods and insights regarding our own vulnerabilities and sharpened our awareness on researchers' and designers' care and protection needs, especially when a certain closeness to a sensitive topic is present (Redmond et al. 2026).

Above all, we came to understand (social) science communication as a valuable and integral part of (social) scientific work. This emerged through our engagement with both the similarities and the divergences in the methods and logics of our disciplines, and through integrating visualization and social science communication into the cycle of a concrete academic publication, the key findings of which were also intended to reach audiences beyond academia. A central aspect of our work was reflection and collaboration on equal footing, enabling us to develop final outputs as an interdisciplinary team by approaching each discipline with openness and a willingness to explain, share, and critically reflect on our own positionalities and methods (Lewenstein 2024). In this, we aimed to cultivate a shared "researchers-as-designers-as-researchers" approach (Barnes 2012; Stappers 2007; Stapleton 2005). Finally, we identified three aspects that we consider particularly important for conducting effective social science communication on diversity- and gender-sensitive topics. These draw on established recommendations for responsible academic and science communication (Dawson/Lock 2025; Elliott et al. 2024; Lewenstein 2024) as well as on wellbeing-oriented approaches to research on sensitive issues such as

violence (for example, Redmond et al. 2026). We conclude by highlighting these three aspects.

[1] (Social) science communication intertwined with individual topic proximity: (Social) science communication can extend beyond the mere dissemination of findings, fostering tangible engagement and action in everyday contexts. This is particularly valuable when engaging with specific lived experiences, even within the academic/science communication team, moving this work closer to participatory community approaches and underscoring the role of (information) design as an inherently political and decidedly non-neutral practice (Unterstab 2023). However, such work requires dedicated time and resources to reflect on one's own positionality, boundaries, and emotional reactions throughout the process. Projects involving potentially affected individuals or those closely connected to the system under study should ideally incorporate supervision and structured time to address topic proximity and emerging reactions.

[2] Institutional encouragement of reflection spaces and provision of resources: Institutions should embed and institutionalize participatory spaces for reflection within the design of (social) science communication processes, supported by sensitive facilitation to enable genuine dialog and critique. This is especially necessary within projects that deal with diversity and vulnerability issues. Reflection on hierarchies and, for example, asymmetries in funding and positions should be encouraged, and so should realistic considerations of individual timelines, restrictions, and necessities of all people on the team – in our case, publication pressure and the need to finish theses. This also includes allocating sufficient time for ideas to develop, allowing the possibility to explore alternative approaches or revise previous concepts throughout the project's development. Effective participatory (social) science communication further requires dedicated funding, time, and materials. In this project, we were fortunate to have access to spaces and resources, including low-threshold support for printing and shipping costs. This experience highlighted the importance of planning for such resources and of institutional trust in specific artistic choices and the associated costs.

[3] Irritation as a generative force: We experienced feelings of discomfort arising from engaging with the respective other discipline as highly productive. One example was the designers' irritation with the "cold, distant" language of the academic publication, which in turn sparked debates about the language we wanted to use and our sensitivity to

the project's topic. Productive moments of discomfort or "irritation" can serve as catalysts for critical reflection and creative insight, offering valuable takeaways for both team members and future audiences. This, again, requires time and the possibility to engage with feelings carefully, without rushing or dismissing them. Importantly, exchanges about disciplinary differences should be anticipated and planned from the very beginning of a project. In our case, the project-mapping phase was particularly helpful and is highly recommended for similar interdisciplinary collaborations.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Berlin University of the Arts and the Berlin Social Science Center as institutions for enabling the ViSoP project and, with generous support in terms of resources and framework, facilitating our collaboration. We are also grateful to the Hans Böckler Foundation for funding the research project. Our deepest gratitude goes to the participants, who shared their experiences and laid the ground for the data underlying this work.

Data availability statement

The research material generated and analysed in the study this article is based on (Fischer et al. 2025) is available in the repository OSF under <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/STCED>.

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