

Handle with Care: Probing Existential Questioning

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Figure 1: Our probe package and respective materials inviting to explore existential questioning in everyday life.

Keywords

Existential HCI, Techno-Spirituality, Religion, Spirituality, Probes, Existential Concerns

1 Introduction

Companion technologies, systems perceived not merely as functional tools but as counterparts with intentions, needs, and social presence [3, 10, 11], have become part of many people's everyday lives. Increasingly, AI-driven applications offer personalized guidance in matters of religion and spirituality (R/S) [e.g., 8, 12]. Even general-purpose AI-systems are frequently turned to for navigating existential concerns around meaning, mortality, and belonging. These developments raise urgent design questions: What might companion technologies look like if intentionally designed to support young adults in navigating existential questions? Within an interdisciplinary project between Protestant theology and HCI, we aim to explore this question.

To ground our inquiry in lived experiences, we iteratively developed a cultural probe aimed at surfacing how existential questions manifest in young adults' everyday lives, and how interactive technologies intersect with these moments of questioning. Our aim was to elicit reflections not only on current practices, but also on participants' hopes and imaginaries for future technologies in this space. Probes, we argue, are especially well-suited for this endeavor: they embrace ambiguity, invite multiple interpretations, and provoke gentle reflection on personal meaning [1, 2, 7, 13]. As prior work has

shown, probes have long supported research in sensitive domains such as health [6], remembrance [9], and religious practice [14]. Yet, their application to existential questioning remains underexplored - despite being suggested for explorations in Existential HCI [4].

Here, we share early learnings from designing probes for this delicate context from our perspective as HCI researchers. We reflect on the challenges of creating materials that accompany participants into deeply personal domains without overwhelming them, and on the potential of probes to foreground the fluidity and everydayness of existential questioning. We seek to contribute to ongoing discussions on how HCI might responsibly design companion technologies for sensitive topics — not as products that provide answers, but as processes that invite reflection, growth, and care.

2 Probes Inviting to Explore Existential Questioning in Everyday Life

To explore existential questioning in the lives of young adults, we iteratively developed a probe package consisting of four sub-packages (to be opened over time), with seven unique materials and a booklet with framing information (see Figure 1). The design process was guided by three research questions:

- What existential concerns and questions play a role in the everyday lives of young adults?
- How do young adults currently deal with existential concerns and questions?
- How would young adults like to engage with such concerns and questions in the future, if everything were possible?

Designing probes for this context proved far from straightforward, and we faced two key challenges at the content and meta levels: (1) breaking down “existential questioning” into something workable yet open-ended, and (2) anticipating the potential emotional impact of the materials and taking appropriate precautions.

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2.1 Challenge 1: Breaking Down Existential Questioning

Existential concerns are immense: they touch on themes such as mortality, freedom, isolation, meaning, and identity [5]. A key challenge was translating this expansiveness into probe materials that were manageable and meaningful without flattening participants' lived experiences. We approached this as a tension between openness and structure. Theoretical frameworks such as the existential inquiry framework [5] offer scaffolding, yet risk forcing participants' experiences into conceptual boxes that do not reflect their lived experiences. We therefore balanced openness and structure, bottom-up and top-down perspectives. The "Packing list for the journey of life" (see Figure 1, bottom left) exemplifies this approach: Inspired by travel checklists, it invites participants to write a packing list for life. We provide ten pre-defined categories derived from the existential inquiry framework (e.g., freedom: "I take this with me to feel free", isolation: "I take this with me when I feel lonely") while also leaving blank spaces for participants to define their own.

Breaking down existential concerns came with more design challenges, such as keeping materials simple and inviting, while avoiding trivialization and disconnection from the gravity of people's concerns. The evolution of the "Key to Happiness" (see Figure 1, top right) illustrates this tension. Initially, we framed it as a "magic key" – but this leaned toward fantasy, appearing disconnected from everyday life. We later shifted to more grounded wording (e.g., "Now imagine anything is possible, and this key unlocks something special for you in life"), enabling broader associations. Beyond re-designing individual materials, we also improved contextual framing. The accompanying booklet introduced the method and how playfulness is used as an entry point to serious reflection.

2.2 Challenge 2: Anticipating Emotional Impact

Reflecting on existential concerns is not a simple task. For some, the probe materials might resonate playfully; for others, they may surface painful memories or ongoing struggles. Thus, a second major challenge was ensuring participants' emotional safety.

We addressed this challenge through several intertwined strategies. First, all probe materials were framed as invitations, not obligations: Participants could choose which materials to engage with and how deeply. Second, we carefully iterated on wording to ensure that prompts were accessible and everyday, yet sensitive enough to avoid sounding trivializing or prescriptive. Third, we provided clear information about where to find spiritual or psychological support if needed, with both personalized and anonymous options.

This challenge underscored that designing probes is not only about crafting engaging materials, but also about designing with care for participants' well-being. In contexts of existential questioning, our role was not just to provoke reflection, but also to anticipate vulnerability and provide pathways for support.

3 Reflections and Outlook

Taken together, these challenges highlight that probes for existential questioning must walk a delicate line: opening space without overwhelming, provoking without prescribing, and inviting without obligating. By the time of the lightning talk, the probe materials will have been deployed with 10+ participants. This allows us to

revisit the challenges and assess the effectiveness of our strategies, as well as the suitability of probes for exploring existential concerns in everyday life.

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