

# Design Respecting Difference Checklist

Feng(Jiafeng) Zhu | Politics of Design | Fall 2023

# Who is this checklist for?



Design student / learner / enthusiast



Interested in working with potentially marginalized groups or communities, such as people with disability



Assuming an app or other forms of emerging technology can be the main part of the design output

**Welcome!**



**My design aims at addressing the barriers of**

---

---

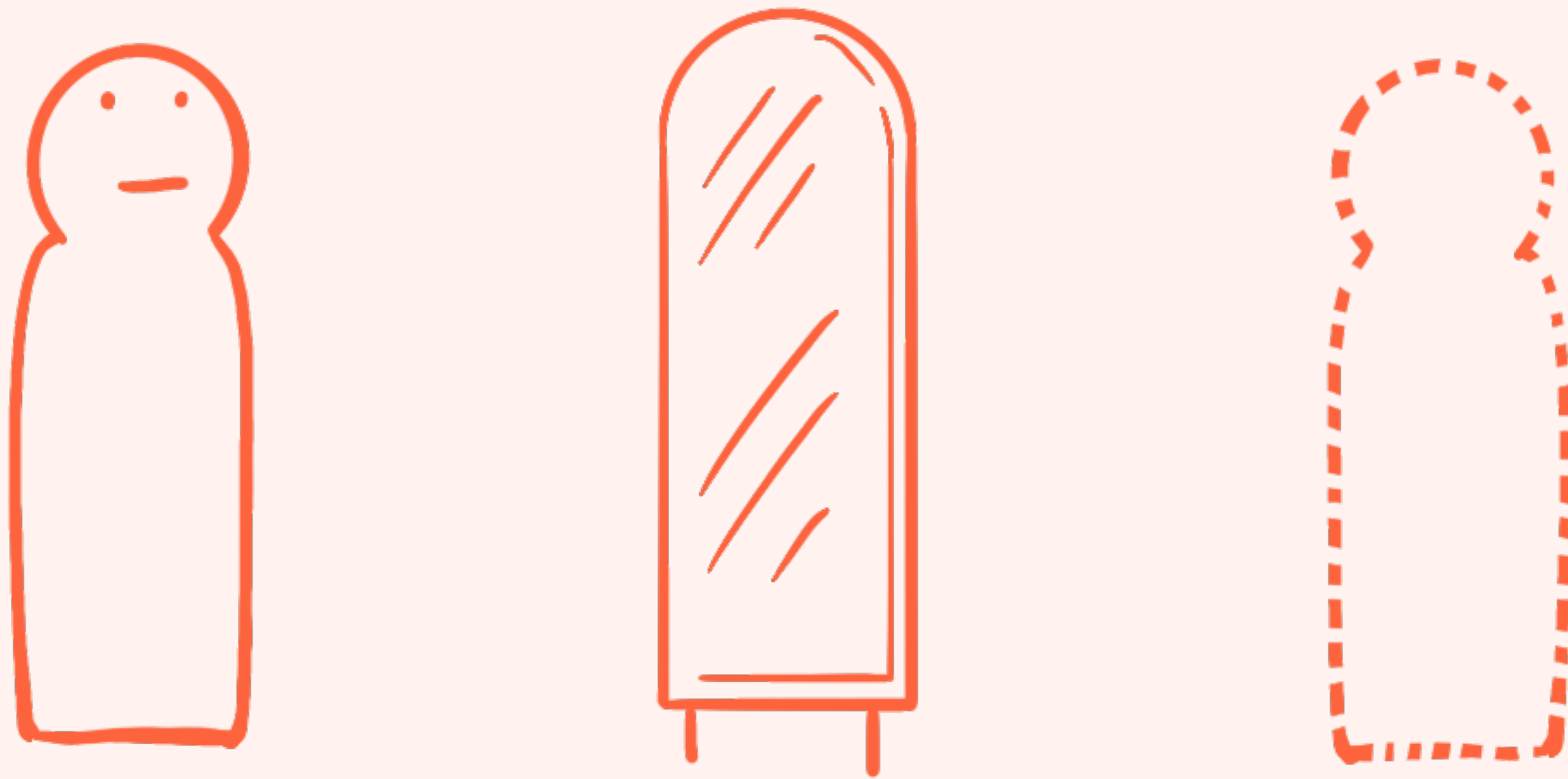
**Who is my target group?** - The people with lived experience of the barriers that your design addresses.



This checklist provides a series of questions and resources for you to reflect on your design process and check if your design is practical, equitable, fully including your target group and respecting the difference.

# Designing as if we are looking through an invisible mirror...

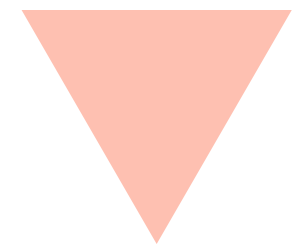
We as designers tend to unconsciously assume our users are the ones whose experiences are similar to our own.



# How can we see through the mirror to observe, understand and truly respect the difference?

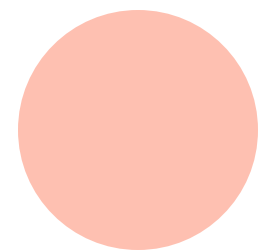


# This checklist can help you...



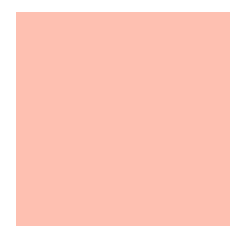
## Interrogate the “Big Word” Concepts

Understanding the context



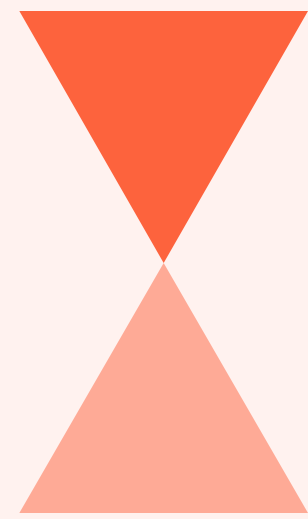
## Bring Your Target Group to the Table

Inclusive research approach



## Reflect on Your Design

Equitable design decisions and activities



# Interrogate the “Big Word” Concepts

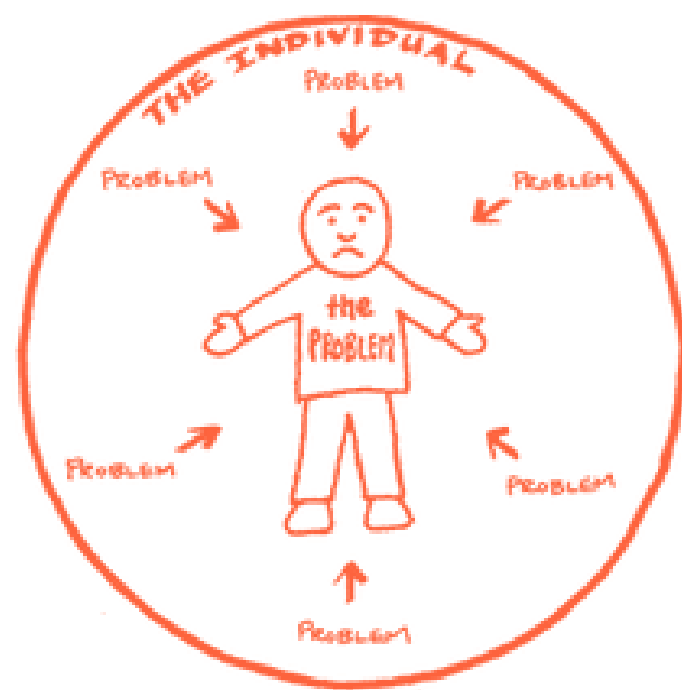
This part of the checklist encourages you to think critically about the “big word” concepts by reviewing the dominant and unmarked interpretation from the perspectives of disability study, disability justice and equity in design.

## What we (think we) know

# Disability is the state of impairment

The medical model looks at a person's physical or mental impairment as the reason that substantially limits their major life activity, causing the problem that needs fixing.

Medical staff, experts and researchers (as “non-disabled”) hold the knowledge about disability and the decision power over its cure. The knowledge and experience of the person with a disability are often disregarded.

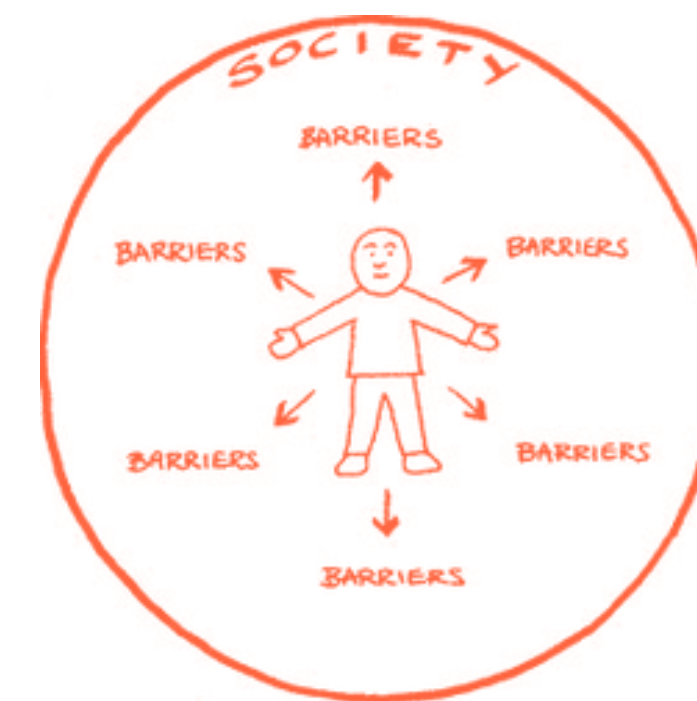


## What we might not know

# Disability is “designed”

The social model sees disability as a social construct - people are disabled by the contextual consequences of a given environment, impairments and/or internal personal factors.

Barriers in society can be physical products, facilities, space, environment and/or ideology. When barriers are removed, disabled people can be independent and equal in society.





## What we (think we) know

# Accessibility is accommodating special needs

Accessibility refers to the characteristic that products, services, and/or facilities can be independently used by people with a variety of disabilities.

Accessible design is the practice of following certain standards, principles or rules set by authorities in which the needs of people with disabilities are specifically considered.



## What we might not know

# Accessibility is a civil right

Accessibility is a civil right in the first place.

The state of being disabled could be considered as a spectrum, the level of impairment is influenced by constraints in the surroundings. From this perspective, access available to individuals with disabilities must be comparable to access available to everyone.



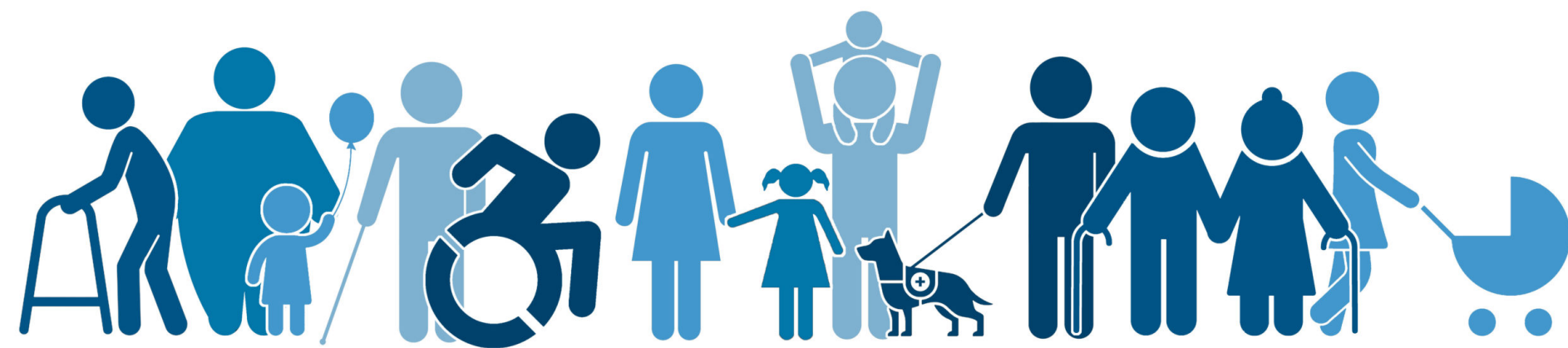
Source: [Microsoft Inclusive Design](#)

## *What we (think we) know*

# Universal design is able to fit everyone's needs

Universal design is the process of creating products that are accessible to people with a wide range of abilities, disabilities, and other characteristics.

Universally designed products accommodate individual preferences and abilities, communicate necessary information effectively, and can be approached, reached, manipulated, and used regardless of the individual's body size, posture, or mobility.



## *What we might not know*

# Universal design is not always the most suitable solution

Universal design often assumes a neutral, objective stance, but the neutral stance is inherently shaped by the dominant able-bodied perspectives. It might risk creating a lowest common denominator approach, implicitly defining “normal” functionality as the benchmark.

The people with disability, who have the most expertise in navigating access barriers, are often marginalized in universal design decisions. This leads to solutions that may not address their actual needs or preferences.



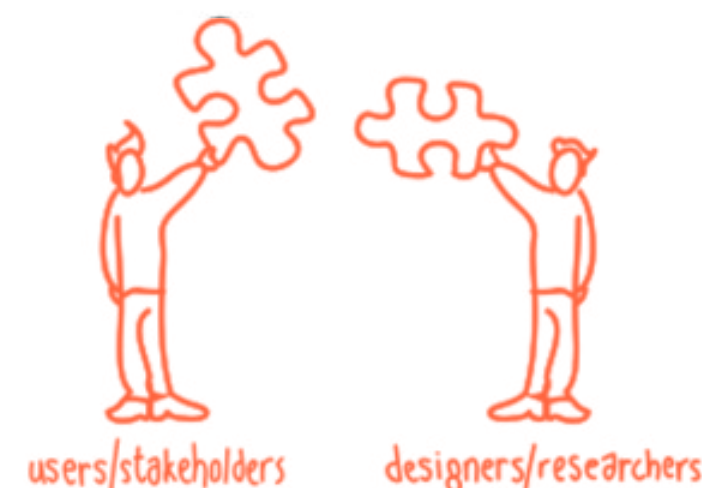
## What we might not know

# Co-design cannot guarantee equitable participation

Co-design refers to the participatory approach to designing solutions, in which the community members as recipients of the design are treated as equal collaborators in the design process.

The power dynamics in co-design approaches can be imbalanced - designers and institutions usually get to decide when, where and how they bring in and design with the people with disability or marginalized communities, etc.

Thus, the co-design process itself may not be accessible. Aspects like physical space, communication format and time commitments might exclude the participants with disability.



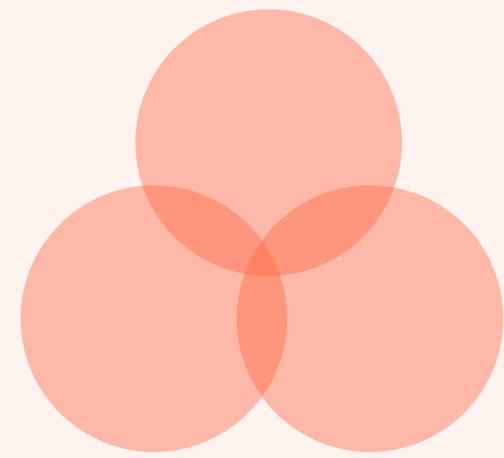
# Disability culture design: innovation driven by disability communities

Disability culture design refers to the forms of cultural production led by communities of disabled people to make life meaningful and accessible on their own terms, celebrating difference rather than encouraging people to conform to ableist norms.

Disability culture design advocates disabled people inserting themselves into the design process. Numerous cases have proven that technology developed by and/or for people with disabilities can benefit greater population.



Source: [Engineering at home](#)



# **Bring Your Target Group to the Table**

This part of the checklist contains a series of questions to help you make sure your research approach is equitable, that you are collaborating with your target group throughout your research and design process, centering their lived experiences and valuing diverse abilities as strengths.

# Secondary Research

## Identify the need

- How many people with lived experience have identified a need for your design?
- What efforts have been made by far to address the barriers your design focuses on?

## Beware of biases

- Have you collected information from diverse channels and perspectives with proven sources from the actual people from your target group?
- Have you observed BOTH the motivation and the pain points your target group have currently experienced?

## Talking to your target group

- Through what channels can you reach out to your target group?
- Have you identified possible conflicts you might unintentionally provoke with significant segments of the disability communities?

### NOTE:

Internet word search results should not be the only source of your research, as the majority of the Internet content are tailored by “non-disabled” authors. **Look for voices from people directly from disability communities.**

### NOTE:

“**Disability simulation**” does no help to understand the life experience of your target group. You should always reach out to the actual people rather than making assumptions yourself.

# Primary Research

## Pre-work: How to create an inclusive interview experience for your target group?

Language and terms

Physical space and/or remote digital tools accommodation

Compensation and acknowledgement

Other possible conflicts you might unintentionally provoke

# Tools and Resources

## Inclusive research and design practices

[Disability-inclusive Language Guidelines](#) - United Nations Office at Geneva

[Guidelines for Writing About People With Disabilities](#) - The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

[DeafSpace Design Guidelines](#) - Hansel Bauman Architect

[Inclusive 101 Guidebook](#) - Microsoft

[The A11y Project: Digital Accessibility](#)

[Dos and don'ts on designing for accessibility](#) - Home Office Digital, the UK Government

[Ableist attitudes: Take our quiz to understand disability bias](#) - Washington Post

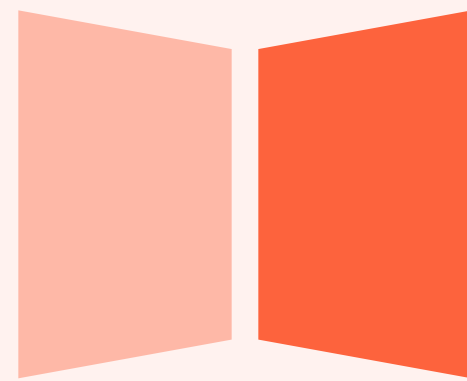
## Disability culture design and disability-driven innovation

[Opinion: Disability](#) - The New York Times

[Engineering at home](#) - Sara Hendren, Caitrin Lynch, Olin College of Engineering

[What Matters in a Name Sign? The origins of name signs in deaf culture](#) - Ilaria Parogni

[#CriticalAxis: A Community Driven Project From The Disabled List](#)



# Reflect on Your Design

This part of the checklist invites you to question your design. By reflecting on your design practice, you can check if your design is falling into the pitfalls of techno-solutionism and avoid making another “disability dongle”.



# Pitfalls of Techno-solutionism

## Masking Root Causes

- Does your design promote an understanding of disability as a social construct rather than a purely individual deficit?
- Could your design be used to justify systemic barriers?

## Disregard for real life experiences

- Is your design created by a team that includes people with lived experience of the barriers that your design addresses?
- Have you tested your prototype with the people who might use your design in REAL scenarios?
- Have people who might use your design said that it's not helpful? Have you iterate your design based on real feedback?
- Are you confident that your design will work in the real world?

## Perpetuation of dependency

- Is your design created by a team that includes people with lived experience of the barriers that your design addresses?
- Does your design create a sense of dependency on technology, reinforcing the notion that the barriers could only be addressed by external interventions?
- Does your design foster self-determination and leadership among disabled communities?

# Pitfalls of Techno-solutionism

## Reinforcement of ableist norms

- Does your design challenge the implicit hierarchy that places non-disabled bodies and minds as the default standard?
- Did you avoid using language and imagery that reinforces stereotypes and negative associations with disability?

## Commodification of disability

- Are the people who will use your design being the central to the messaging associated with your design?
- Is your design likely to be prohibitively expensive?
- Have the disabled people who've contributed to your design received equitable compensation and/or credited for their input?
- Did you use the following words or terms and/or their synonym with cautious or avoid using them?

Cure, Fix, Empower, Eradicate

Inspiration porn, Overcoming adversity

Digital divide and inclusion, Technology as a catalyst, Democratization of technology

# Sources and References

Disability Dongle: Liz Jackson, Alex Haagaard, Rua Williams

<https://blog.castac.org/2022/04/disability-dongle/>

What is the definition of disability under the ADA?: The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

<https://adata.org/faq/what-definition-disability-under-ada>

What is the difference between accessible, usable, and universal design?: The DO-IT (Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology) Center

<https://www.washington.edu/doit/what-difference-between-accessible-usable-and-universal-design>

Models of disability: Unit 26 — Caring for individuals with additional needs

<http://unit26grace.weebly.com/models-of-disability.html>

Designing disability: symbols, space and society: Elizabeth Guffey

<https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/designing-disability-9781350148833/>

Why Be Normal?: Disability & Design Now: Aimi Hamraie

<https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/why-be-normal-disability-design-now-1234643357/>

Microsoft Inclusive 101 Guidebook

<https://inclusive.microsoft.design/tools-and-activities/Inclusive101Guidebook.pdf>

Designing for Disability Full Episode Transcript: CBC Radio

<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/spark/disabled-people-want-disability-design-not-disability-dongles-1.5353131/designing-for-disability-full-episode-transcript-1.5353287>

Honoring the Friction of Disability: Liz Jackson

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cZhiu-jGbdE>

Engaging in Disability as a Creative Practice: Liz Jackson

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-DK4SBCUXXU>

Ask Disabled People What They Want. It's Not Always Technology. : Ashley Shew

<https://www.sciencefriday.com/articles/against-technoableism-excerpt/>