

# Undefinable and Uncontainable: Irish Modern Zines and their Embodiment of Queer Theory

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## Abstract

This article examines the queer potential of zines, arguing that they actively enact queer theory through their form, process, and modes of production, regardless of content. Drawing on a thematic analysis of seven contemporary Irish zines alongside practice-based research, the study explores how zines embody key principles of queer theory, including non-conformity, anti-mainstream, accessibility and untraditional structures. The research engaged in practice-based research (PBR) through the creation of an original zine, *What the F\*ck Is Queer Theory*. Reflecting on the process of making reveals how zine-making functions as a form of queering in action, prioritising experimentation through play, and process over product. By foregrounding practice as a site of knowledge production, this article contributes to creative media research by articulating zine-making as a rigorous, practice-led methodology and expands existing scholarship on zines by focusing on contemporary Irish contexts.

**Keywords:** Zines; Queer theory; Practice-based research; Creative media; DIY publishing

## Introduction

In simple terms, a zine is a self-published magazine. Often associated with punk subcultures, zines are quickly made pieces of art found at concerts, markets, and online spaces. However, there is more to zines than this surface understanding suggests. Zines have long played an important role within queer communities, with many theorists recognising them as integral to “constructing cultural-political networks and providing space for personal empowerment” (Subcultures Network, 2018, p 24). Despite this, there is limited academic work that explicitly connects zines to queer theory, particularly when compared to other media forms frequently discussed within queer and feminist scholarship, such as fan fiction.

This article argues that zines are not only a medium that can hold queer content, but that they actively embody queer theory through their form, process, and modes of production. Zines are a compelling medium to analyse as they have evolved alongside technology and culture, continuing to exist in both digital and physical formats while retaining a strong do-it-yourself ethos. While existing literature often focuses on punk zines or zines centred on feminism, there is comparatively little research that examines contemporary zines through the lens of queer theory, and even less that attends to the act of queering as it occurs through the process of zine-making itself.

Drawing on a thematic analysis of seven contemporary zines created in Ireland, alongside questionnaire responses from zine creators, this research explores how zines embody key principles of queer theory. These principles include anti-mainstream values, non-conformity, accessibility, and untraditional structures. In addition, the study reflects on the creation of an original zine, *What the F\*ck Is Queer Theory*, developed as a form of practice-based research. This created a primary site generating new knowledge, through the act of creation (Skains, 2024, p 18). Engaging directly with the medium allows for a deeper understanding of how zine-making functions as an act of queering, where process is prioritised over polish and experimentation is valued over conformity (Bolt, 2007).

By foregrounding both analysis and practice, this article addresses a gap in existing scholarship on zines and queer theory, with a specific focus on contemporary Irish zine culture. In doing so, it positions zines as a medium that not only communicates queer ideas but enacts them, offering valuable insights for creative media research and practice-led methodologies.

## Literature Review

### *Historical Context of Zines*

Regarding the definition of zines, theorists who have researched the medium cannot agree. Subcultures Network (2018, p 58) describes the issue as “Zines are either too diverse or too inclusive to easily draw boundaries around as a genre”. Liming (2010, p 131) provides a thorough list of the different methods through which zines can be identified; by their homemade production, how they are shared, and how many are printed. Yet this extensive list does not consider the zine's digital forms and concludes that there are truly no easy-to-follow rules to decide what is or is not a zine. Zines as a medium are always changing in style and creative process, beginning with black and white only print and evolving to the digital zines today but all still fall under the category of a zine. Therefore, even the accepted loose definitions for them are constantly in flux.

Zines (derived from magazines and originally referred to as fanzines) have been around for a long time. It is difficult to track exactly where they began and to summarise their use. Since their beginning, zines were simply a way for people to create the media they wanted to consume. Often about the media they already consumed, with very little skill or budget necessary. Multiple theorists on the topic agree that the 1930s is the earliest the medium can be confidently tracked to when

science fiction fans in America and England created them to share with other enthusiasts (Atton, 2002; Subcultures Network, 2018; Watson and Bennett, 2021). Comet is cited by some theorists as being one of the first zines, published in the 1930s by a science correspondence club in the US (Atton, 2002, p 56; Subcultures Network, 2018, p 22). However, others refer to FIRE!!, a small periodical that began in 1926 (Brown et al., 2021; Johnson & Johnson, 1974). FIRE!! included art, poetry and writing about topics such as queerness and feminism, whilst celebrating black creativity (Brown et al., 2021; Johnson & Johnson, 1974). If FIRE!! is truly the first zine, the medium had a much more radical and queerer beginning than sci-fi fanzines.

There are zines from the 50s that were focused on music as a topic of interest, and the punk movement continued this tradition (Subcultures Network, 2018, p 4). It was 1976/77 when the medium truly took off due to the Punk movement, they became “the literary and visual embodiment of do it yourself” (Atton, 2002, p 57; Subcultures Network, 2018, p 22). Although, it was not until the 1980s that the term “zine” was actually in common use, as the medium had evolved beyond what could fall under the category of ‘fanzine’ (Atton, 2002, p 54). It was during this time frame that the do-it-yourself aesthetic of zines known today became popular. They embodied the anti-conformity, anti-mass production ideals behind punk culture (Subcultures Network, 2018). Inspired by zines such as Sniffin’ Glue, punk zines were filled with “fervid text with cut ’n’ paste imagery that was Roneo-stencilled or Xeroxed” (Subcultures Network, 2018, p 2). This style has remained popular and was reinforced by the anti-patriarchy Riot Grrrl and queer zines of the 1990s (Ramdarshan Bold, 2017).

There is a lot less literature on zines after the 90s and until now. Many believed the medium would die out in the early 2000s with the evolution of digital technology and the rise of internet cultures (Watson & Bennett, 2021, p 127). However, this was not the case. In fact, digital technology provided new ways to create zines. The internet provides ways to find and share zines (Watson & Bennett, 2021, p 127). New styles incorporating digital technology have risen, yet the do-it-yourself ethos remains. Ramdarshan (2017, p 217), highlights how technological advances have “increased the possibilities for affordable cultural production” making zines more accessible than ever. On the other hand, when zine readers and creators have been interviewed by scholars, there appears to be a common preference for the tangible nature of physical zines. This is due to how they maintain anonymity, go against the trend of everything being online and digital, and many simply enjoy the “pull of the handmade, holdable, shareable objects” (Subcultures Network, 2018, p 40; Watson & Bennett, 2021, pp 142– 3).

### *Zines and Technology*

In addition to the historical context of zines, it is worth recognising how the development of technology has affected their evolution. Before photocopy machines became widely accessible, zine creators used duplicator machines, such as Banda copiers (Subcultures Network, 2018, pp 40–41).

These zines were popular with science fiction fans and were often hand drawn and time-consuming to create (Subcultures Network, 2018, p 4). Copy machines became accessible in the late 1960s and early 1970s, aiding the influx of zines as part of the punk movement. This rise of the copy machines “helped to establish the scene and define its unique aesthetic” (Eichhorn, 2015, p 364). These zines were created physically with; drawings, writing on paper, or collages stuck on and then photocopied, making it possible to make hundreds of copies of the same zine. Many zines were black and white until the late 1980s as using colour copy machines was “costly and high maintenance” (Eichhorn, 2015, p 369). By the late 1980s and early 1990s, personal computers and laser printers were common to own (McLeod & Kuenzli, 2011, p 60). Furthermore, creators began experimenting with digital software, creating new opportunities for designing zines (McLeod & Kuenzli, 2011, p 60). Eventually, the evolution of digital editing software and the capacity to print directly from computers provided more freedom with zines. The internet enabled creators to find almost any image they wished to add to their collages and edit them together digitally. Nonetheless, many creators still choose to incorporate non-digital elements into their creation process as they enjoy the hand-held materiality of zines (Liming, 2010, p 139). The intense involvement in zine-making is important to emphasise, as, whether the ‘handling’ is with actual hands or a computer mouse there is a form of ‘material thinking’ that occurs (Bolt, 2007, p 30).

### *Appropriation*

Appropriation is a vital part of creative expression, it has played a large part in many artistic movements. Many theorists, such as Hetcher (2009), Dunn, McLeod and Kuenzli (2011) recognise works created through appropriation, or “remix” as transformative. From surrealism to pop art, artists highlight the central role appropriation plays in their work (McLeod & Kuenzli, 2011, p 1). Zines are the same, especially as many are created by literally cutting up other creators’ work and rearranging it (McLeod & Kuenzli, 2011). Zines, (including the zine created alongside this article) often contain “varying amounts of unauthorized copyright-protected material” (Hetcher, 2009, p 1872). Despite this, legally these are (often) considered fair use. As Hetcher (2009, p 1884) explains, as long as artists are using unauthorized material to create something new and not simply sharing copies of other works, they are considered remixed works. *Détournement* is another example of an artistic technique using appropriation to transform pre-existing works.

*Détournement* aims to “subvert spectacular (commodified) representations and practices” (Trier, 2007, p 274). The Situationists International, an international group of social revolutionaries popularised this technique (Plant, 1992). They believed it to be one of the only productive forms of “revolutionary criticism” (Plant, 1992, p 86). Zine creators (often unconsciously) utilise this technique as they plagiarise others' work. They rip, cut and stick to create something new, changing the meaning and perspective of the original creations (Plant, 1992; Trier, 2007, p 277). As a practice, using appropriation in artistic creations is transformative. It takes images and words from one context and puts them in another, making readers question everything, including but not limited

to “mass media, consumer culture, copyright regimes, and everyday life” (McLeod & Kuenzli, 2011, p 2; Trier, 2007).

### Queer Theory

Queer theory is at the core of this research. Yet, as it consists of a sprawling body of theories it would be impossible to cover even the highlights of queer theory within the scope of this article. Hence, this section is dedicated to a brief description of the elements of queer theory that are relevant to zines. In the discussion section, a description is given on how zines embody these characteristics. Queer theory is described as indefinable, and some consider that to define it is to reduce its meaning (Barker & Scheele, 2016). Since the term was coined by De Lauretis in 1990, theorists have been purposely ambiguous about its definition (McCann & Monaghan, 2020, p 1). Spargo (1999, p 9) provides an alternative description, stating that “queer theory is not a singular or systematic conceptual or methodological framework, but a collection of intellectual engagements with the relations between sex, gender and sexual desire”.

Queering reimagines queer as an act. One way to explain ‘queering’ a media is as “rendering a text queerer by reading it in a certain way” (Barker & Scheele, 2016, p 102). A well-researched example of this is slash fiction, when fans take two characters that are not romantic or sexual together in a text and read into details to build a relationship between the pair. Moreover, queering can refer to how the structure of a media “disrupt[s] the narrative and destabilize[s] heteronormativity” (Barker & Scheele, 2016, p 103). Many theorists emphasise the importance of recognising queer as a verb as it draws attention to the act of resisting norms and the idea that queer is something we *do* rather than *are* (McCann & Monaghan, 2020, p 1). This study argues that zines, as a medium, reflect this when emphasising the process rather than the output. Reimagining queer as a verb rather than an adjective furthers the connection between queerness and zines. This stems from the fact that the process of creating a zine is just as significant to the medium as the result. Therefore, it was necessary to create my own zine to fully engage with the medium, and for the methodology to engage with practice-based research.

A central theme of queer theory is the benefit of challenging binaries. Barker and Scheele (2016, p 170) explain, queer theory can be extended to think about almost anything. Often people and ideas are not easy to explain as ‘this *or* that’, rather “whatever you are considering is probably plural, rather than singular, and in process, rather than fixed and immutable”. Therefore queer theory can be used to discuss gender or sexuality but also extended to include media and day-to-day issues. Furthermore, queer theory is always encouraging people to resist social norms and demands “a questioning of the conventional” (Hall, 2017, p 7). To describe someone or something as queer, or to be “queering” something, there must be some resistance and challenge of societal expectations or normativity (McCann & Monaghan, 2020, p 2). This can be normativity such as heteronormativity, the gender

binary or even the way media portrays ideas. Ruberg (2019, p 7) argues that for a subject to be queer it must resist what is considered valued and acceptable.

A more recent development in queer theory is an attempt to make it more practical and accessible to more people. Halberstam (2011, p 2) uses “low theory” or pop culture to explain aspects of queer theory, such as using children's cartoons to think about ways of existing outside of “conventional understandings of success”. Barker and Scheele (2016) use illustrations and accessible language to challenge the incomprehensible work associated with queer theory.

Finally, queer theory can be utilised to analyse narratives and how they are structured. Chess (2016) explains how a queer narrative is any narrative that does not follow the traditional structure (rise in tension, climax, productive ending). Chess (2016, p 86) argues that queer narratives “do not rely on heteronormative concepts of what a narrative is in the first place”.

### *The Queer Affordances of Zines*

This research explores the queer affordance of zines and their ability to be a site of queer knowledge creation. Zines are an under-researched medium, albeit, there is existing scholarship in this area, including work that focuses on specific analyses of primary sources. “The Felt Value of Reading Zines” thematically analyses seventy-three zines, sourced from a 2019 zine fair in Australia (Watson & Bennett, 2021). Watson and Bennett investigate how contemporary zines are made meaningful through four properties; their Do-It-Yourself ethos/aesthetics, anti-mainstream ideals, intimacy and intensity. In “Flux Zine: Black Queer Storytelling”, Boatwright (2019) reflects on the creation process of a collaborative zine, *Flux*, created by himself and two young queer people of colour, highlights the importance of the researcher participating in the creative process. Ramdarshan’s (2017) “Why Diverse Zines Matter: A Case Study of the People of Color Zines Project” analyses fifty-nine zines from the People of Color Zine Project. They discuss how zines connect communities and what mainstream media can learn from them, illustrating the potential to queer other forms of media. Each of these articles examines the anti-mainstream ethos of zines and how they disrupt normative expectations (Boatwright, 2019; Ramdarshan Bold, 2017; Watson & Bennett, 2021). Boatwright (2019) agrees with Ramdarshan (2017, p 226) emphasising the importance of zines as an accessible medium since they allow anyone to create “their own narratives, which subvert and challenge mainstream viewpoints and realities”.

“Queering the Form: Zine Making as Disruptive Practice” by Damon, Kicono, Atukunda and Pahl (2022) does not analyse individual zines. It consists of a creative analysis of two zine workshops held over five days with two separate groups in Kampala Uganda. Damon et al. (2022, p 418) explore the potentially endless queering of form experienced within group zine-making. Their work overlaps with Boatwright's (2019) as both stress the importance of the creation process of zines. Hay, K., et al. (2024) expands on this in *Zineography*, a contemporary study in the field. They highlight the

importance of research through design and how zine-making (especially within a community) becomes a tool of unique sense making.

These approaches align with the broader framework of practice-based research (PBR). As Skains (2024, p 28) defines, in PBR the creative artefact itself is the basis of the contribution to knowledge, transferring 'tacit knowledge' gained through experience into explicit knowledge in a medium others can engage with (Skains, 2024, p 34). Consequently, analyzing zines solely as finished texts ignores the 'material thinking' (Bolt, 2007) and tacit knowledge produced during their creation. Damon et al. (2022), Hay et al. (2024) and Boatwright (2019) emphasise the challenges associated with analysing a medium that has not been practised by the researcher, reinforcing the necessity of the practice-based approach taken in this study.

### *Identified Gaps*

In "The Queer Case of Video Games," Chess (2016) argues that video games are fundamentally queer because their narrative forms refuse heteronormative structures. This comparison is vital for zines, which similarly disrupt mainstream narrative flows. However, Chess's focus remains on narrative theory rather than the material practice of the medium. Furthermore, while recent scholarship has begun to address the process of zine-making, significant limitations remain. "Queering the Form" (Damon et al., 2022) and "The Felt Value of Reading Zines" (Watson & Bennett, 2021) prioritize social function and community building over the potential queerness the medium holds. Similarly, while Boatwright (2019) and Ramdarshan Bold (2017) offer critical race perspectives, they only briefly touch upon queer theory, and their methodological engagement with the *act* of making varies. Crucially, a divide persists between digital and analogue analyses: Ramdarshan Bold (2017) includes both, whereas Boatwright (2019), Damon et al. (2022), and Watson and Bennett (2021) focus exclusively on one or the other.

These gaps suggest that analyzing zines solely as finished texts (or as the means to a community) is insufficient to fully articulate their queer potential. To understand zine-making as a queer act, rather than simply a popular container of queer content, one must engage with 'material thinking' (Bolt, 2007). The hands (or cursor) on, ripping, tearing, sticking, gluing, is a vital part of the research. As Skains (2024, p 33) notes, practice-based research allows "tacit knowledge" to be made accessible through explicit academic understanding.

Therefore, this study addresses the identified gap by combining the textual analysis and practice-based research methodology. By creating a zine alongside this textual analysis of a sample of contemporary Irish zines, the research enacts the very "queering of form" it theorizes. Aligning with the methodological precedents set by Boatwright (2019) and Hay et al. (2024), this approach argues that the understanding gained through handling the medium is essential to the overall research (Bolt, 2007). The following section details this creative process, positioning the zine artefact not merely as an illustration, but as a primary site of knowledge production.

## Methodology

This methodology integrates a thematic analysis of primary sources with practice-based research (PBR), specifically the creation of an original zine. The full creative artefact is archived and accessible via Zenodo at: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19411135>. Adopting Skains' (2024, p 18) definition of PBR, this approach positions creative practice as the primary site for generating new knowledge. Central to this is a reflexive engagement with my own positionality; as a non-binary artist-researcher actively embedded within the Dublin creative community, I occupied a dual role as both a participant in and an observer of the ecosystem under study. This proximity allowed for organic access to the community and a nuanced understanding of the social context in which these zines were produced, while the use of formal research tools ensured the analysis remained grounded in material affordances rather than personal affinity.

### *Data Selection and Context*

The primary sources for this study consist of seven contemporary Irish zines and subsequent qualitative data from the artists. The selection was facilitated through active engagement with The Rainbow Umbrella Market, a monthly queer craft market at the Dublin Pride Hub. This community-led initiative served as a central node for contemporary Irish queer creative practice, providing the physical and social infrastructure necessary for this study. Access to creators was established through this network, ensuring that the sampled zines were embedded within a self-identified queer ecosystem in Ireland. To be included in the study, zines had to meet three criteria:

- The creator(s) resided in the Republic of Ireland during production;
- The work was self-published;
- The work was created post-2015.

The final sample includes one collaborative digital zine and six physical zines. While these artists mainly produce physical works, many utilise hybrid processes involving digital tools.

### *Analysis and Practice*

A deductive thematic analysis was employed to code the zines through the lens of four pre-established principles of queer theory: non-conformity, anti-mainstream ethos, accessibility, and non-traditional structure. To add a mixed-methods dimension and prioritize process over product, I reached out to the creators with a short questionnaire regarding their individual practices. Three creators responded, and their insights were used to cross-reference my own interpretations with the artists' intended methods.

This emphasis on the *act* of making is supported by the Subculture Network (2018, p 9), which highlights that the practice of creating zines provides a "perfect medium for criticism, self-examination, self-expression and communication." By integrating these questionnaire responses with my own reflections as a practitioner-researcher, the methodology ensures that the zines are not merely analyzed as static objects, but as embodiments of "queering in action."

### *Ethical Considerations*

The participants' identities are linked to their zines, making anonymity impossible. However, the creators who participated in the study were made aware of this and their ability to withdraw consent at any stage up until the submission of the article. In the case of the digital zine CC:, direct consent was not obtained; however, because the publication is freely and publicly accessible online, its inclusion and analysis are conducted under the provisions of fair use and fair dealing for academic research. Furthermore, following the Data Protection Act 2018, the personal data of individuals from the questionnaire results will only be retained for as long as is necessary and for the purposes for which they were collected.

### **Zine Analysis**

Throughout the analysis of the seven zines, four themes consistently present themselves. These four themes reveal a link between the principles of queer theory and the characteristics of zines. After a brief introduction of each artist and their zines follows the analysis of the seven zines in relation to how they embody queer theory, in both their form and content. The themes discussed are non-conforming, anti-mainstream, accessibility and untraditionally structured.

### *Introducing Artists and their Zines*

CC: Zine is an online collection of literary and visual art, created by Irish friends, Maitiú Charleton and Ann Waters (Salmon, 2022). The zine is 8.27 x 11.70 inches (though digital) and twenty-three pages long. This zine is longer than the other examples therefore, a sample of the works collected in its pages is chosen. Examples of different art forms in the issue are included.

The zine is purely digital, although some of the art may have been originally physical and scanned to fit the digital format. An online interview and the introduction page of CC: is utilised to understand their process due to no response from the authors.

Justine LePage, a French artist living in Ireland has been creating zines for over a year. In the questionnaire, she reports her process takes three to six hours. *Mushroom Harvest (MH)* and *Dream Diorama (DD)* are the titles of the two zines analysed. They are physical A7-size folding zines printed

on printer paper with coloured ink. Both are eight pages long. LePage mixes traditional and digital art to create both her zines. She distributes her zines at zine fairs through trading and sells them at art markets and zine festivals.

Ruairí Barrett is an artist from Dublin. They also contributed two zines to the analysis. The titles are *The Truth is Out There (TOT)* and *Choreomania*. Both are in the form of eight paged, A7 folding zines. Barrett has been creating zines for over four years and reported in the questionnaire that each zine takes between one and two hours. Barrett has created approximately twenty zines. *TOT* is unique amongst the zines analysed in this article for being printed in black and white. Barrett mixes collage art, poetry and hand-drawn details. They distribute their zines by posting them to friends, trading in person and uploading them online.

Marta Iwanowska is an artist living in Ireland. She contributed *Rainbow Girls (RG)* and *Just Kid Things (JKT)*. Iwanowska has been creating zines for two to three years. Her zines are created physically with some digital editing. *RG* is made up of watercolour images and line art. The zine is A6 in size, has 13 pages, is a stapled booklet and is printed on high-quality gloss paper. *JKT* is a folding zine, A7 size with eight pages. It is drawn with pencil and marker, printed on printer paper, with coloured ink. Iwanowska reports in the questionnaire that she sells the zines at art markets, conventions and other events.

### *Non-Conforming*

All the zines analysed challenge, subvert and imitate other media by mixing them to create something new (McLeod & Kuenzli, 2011; Trier, 2007). *CC:* is made up of many different forms of art. On page fifteen there is a work of art titled “Peony Pussy” by Caitlin Smith (Figure 1). She describes herself in *CC:* as a “multidisciplinary surrealist”. Smith mixes traditional painting with digital editing to add an image of female genitalia to her floral painting. Smith's non conforming media piece in *CC:* highlights how images of women's bodies are often merely suggested in art, such as Georgia O’Keefe’s famous floral paintings that hint at the shape of female genital. Smith uses an appropriated image of an anatomically correct vulva directly in the middle of the piece, challenging the idea that female bodies need to be hidden or referred to discreetly, therefore refusing to abide by mainstream censorship.



Figure 1

Barrett's zine, *TOT* is similarly non-conforming, as it is compiled of ripped images pasted over each other, with details handwritten in pen. It is separated into three internal spreads, each focusing on a different unexplained phenomena. The first is a collage of UFO sightings, and the second is dedicated to the Loch Ness Monster, with the creature being digitally edited into the water (*Figure 2*). The final page consists of a mountain scene overlapped by rolling clouds, and a shadowy figure circled in the trees. This zine uses the media of collage and handwritten notes together to create the feel of an 'evidence board' commonly seen in detective shows. It appears as though Barrett is playing with doctored images, the pieces not fitting together. Smith and Barrett's total disregard for consistency of media and style embodies queer theories' refusal to conform to binaries. LePage captured this in her questionnaire responses, explaining that "zines and queerness are both elements of counter culture" that both making zines and identifying as queer are ways of "standing against the status quo". This can be seen in the rough, confusing method of displaying art and telling stories seen in many zines, including the images in *figure 1 and 2*.

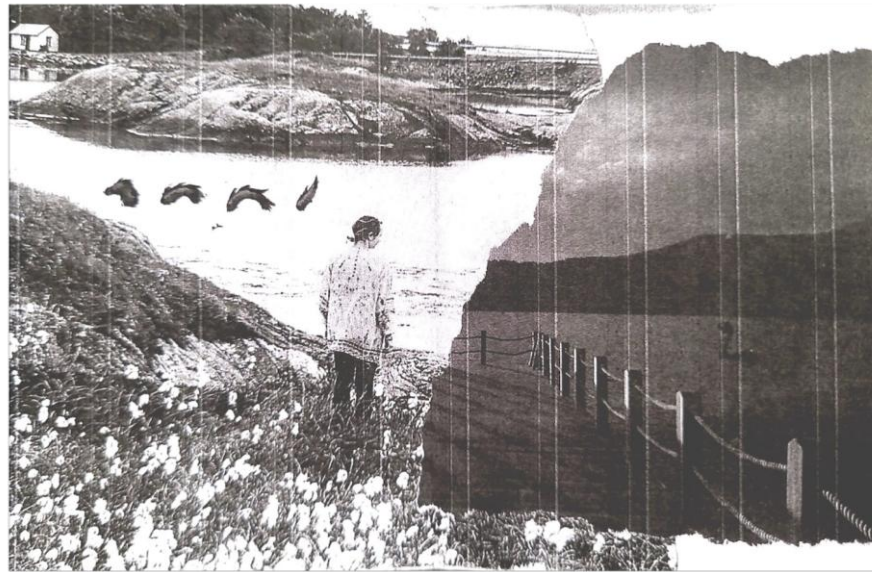


Figure 2

### *Anti-mainstream*

Each zine, its contents and form, are anti-mainstream. A powerful example is *CC*: on page 8, “Knot in My Stomach, Gummy Worm Round My Neck” (KSGWRN) by Milly Aburrow (*Figure 3*). The person in the photograph is brightly dressed, their bucket hat matching their jumpsuit with a pattern of what appears to be tongues over pink, yellow and blue swirls. They are wearing pink Crocs with yellow striped socks and a giant gummy worm is edited around their neck. This edited image is a parody of a photograph in a mainstream fashion magazine, with added whimsy. The huge scale of the gummy worm adds a playful level of absurdity to the image. Contrasting what is accepted in mainstream media versus alternative media.

*JKT* by Iwanowska provides a further example of zines being anti-mainstream. In this deeply personal zine, Iwanowska focuses on day-to-day experiences that mainstream media tend to ignore (Atton, 2002; Subcultures Network, 2018). Zines often have personal undertones, as creators “turn to themselves, to their own lives, their own experiences, and turn these into the subjects of their writing” (Atton, 2002, p 54). Iwanowska describes how she enjoys creating zines “without having to go through traditional routes such as publishing” and “It’s the easiest way for expression without any type of filter”. Iwanowska has created a character of her childhood self, the zine is filled with illustrations of childhood memories. This includes the character climbing trees, a close up of their knees with plasters, reading books and making flower crowns (*Figure 4*). The zine is not in any chronological order, the only passing in time we can see is the change of the character’s hair length. The zine is entirely made up of simple, nostalgic moments in the creator’s childhood. *JKT* and KSGWRN populate either end of the spectrum “too regular or too far outside what is regular” therefore they are strong examples of ideas often regarded as valueless in dominant society (Atton, 2002, p 63).



Figures 3 &amp; 4

### *Accessibility*

Zines are accessible in three main ways; how they are shared, how they are made and how they portray their information. Digital zines such as *CC:* are considered accessible as anyone with an internet connection can access them. This was one of the motivations behind its creation because the zine is described by the creators as “Intangible, immaterial, free, post barrier and totally shareable and accessible”. The creators discuss in the introduction that *CC:* is a space to share art without discrimination, therefore submission is free. Physical zines can also be accessible in how they are distributed. Zines may be bartered and traded for other zines, a cigarette at a concert or even just “swigs from bottles” (O’Brien, 2012, p 93). Otherwise they are often sold for a very low price, some publications would only ask for the price of a stamp to send the zine (Atton, 2002). When referring to accessibility for this analysis, all of the zines analysed cost €3 or less, and were found by participating in queer markets and networking with other creators.



Figure 5

Additionally, zines display accessibility in the simplicity of how they are created. Few supplies are needed to do so, moreover, the content can include anything. Many zines are created using free digital art software such as Canva, or simple stationary such as glue, paper and scissors, or sometimes just paper and pen. In Iwanowska's zine *RG*, she compiles a collection of still-life images. In the questionnaire, she mentions they were drawn whilst "participating in life drawing classes" (Figure 5). The still lives do not tell a clear story, the women's faces are simple and drawn to convey a wide range of emotions. This is a perfect example of a zine that began as something else (sketches from a class) and made into a zine.

Zines have been making complex ideas accessible for a long time, from squatters guides, *Riot Grrrls* feminism zines, zines on at-home abortions and more (Subcultures Network, 2018). Zines can be accessible in how they share information. For example, *MH* by LePage shows accurate illustrations of mushrooms alongside their common names, i.e. the Fly Agaric and Morel (Figure 6). LePage presents a topic she is interested in a bright, fun way for others to enjoy. Therefore *MH* is an excellent introduction to fungus for curious readers. LePage emphasizes the reasons she chooses to create zines is simple; they are "easy to put together and share". Zines are a medium born and evolved from and for accessibility.

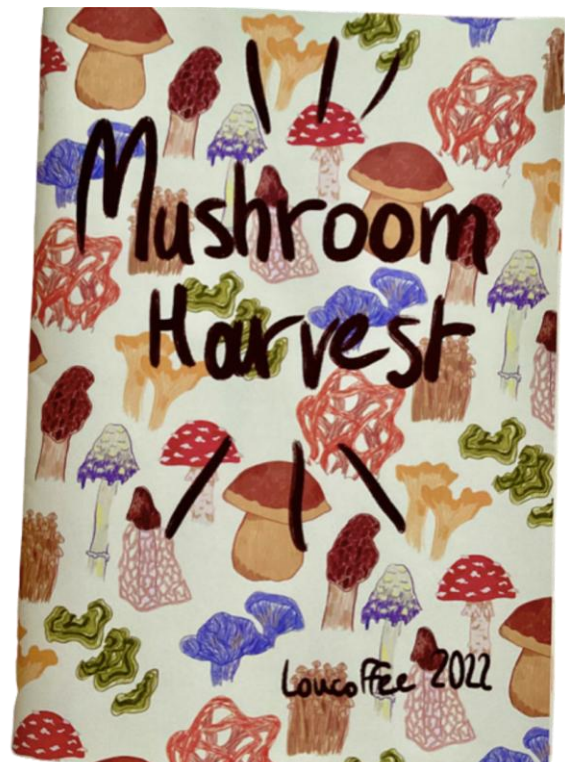


Figure 6

*Untraditionally structured*

Diverging from mainstream formats, zines convey a complete disregard for adhering to traditional media structures. One submission in *CC*: parodies traditional structures to tell its story. Page two contains a written piece in the form of a letter by Jenny Maguire. The author writes to their mother from a mental health camp but hides their true thoughts between brackets “Once I pass the [don't commit suicide for five days] swimming test, I'll get to learn how to [have visitors] water ski”. An interesting detail the authors sign off is; “Yours truly, [Jenny Maguire.] Stanley Yelnats.” This may suggest the author is transgender or has another reason for changing their name. that their mother does not know. Maguire takes the traditional structure of a letter and plays with it to create a new meaning, telling a story of hiding one's struggles and true self from loved ones.

In *Choreomania*, a story is told of death, music and temptation. This zine by Barrett is made up of collages with pre-existing images, typed words, and poetry. Images of the singer Florence from *Florence and The Machines* are seen throughout, alongside images taken from historical books. Each collage is made of clippings with poetry pasted over it, images of skeletons, demons and dancing are repeated throughout (Figure 7). Thoughts and concepts are presented through deconstructing others' work and remixing them. Barrett follows no predefined structure but creates their own.

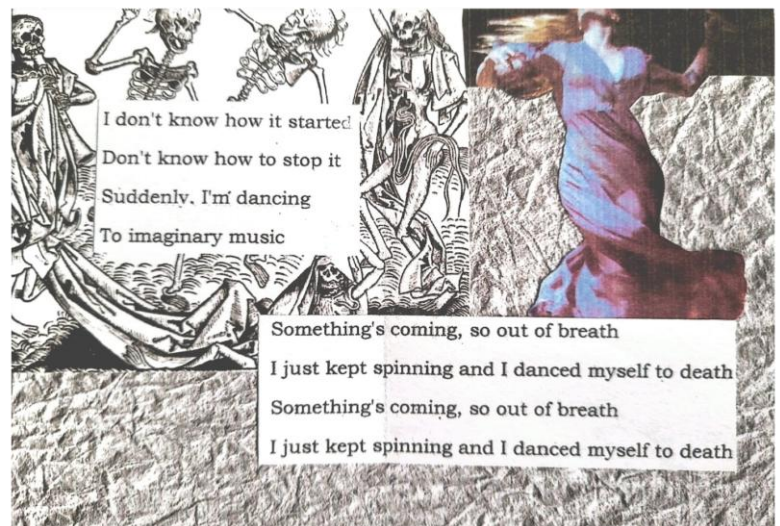


Figure 7

*DD* by LePage has a similarly spontaneous and non-chronological style, self-described as a “bizarre illustrated dream journal” (Figure 8). The zine fluidly goes from one dream to the next with no context or explanation. The dreams are described alongside unusual line art images of bizarre scenes, such as disembodied hands holding dead paper doll cutouts. All the text and images are on top of bright-coloured swirls reminiscent of psychedelic 70’s art. LePage describes being inspired to create zines full of ideas that “would not be contained in the bounds of single pictures or social media

posts”. This emphasises how the message and feelings conveyed by this zine, and the others previously discussed would likely be lost if recreated in another media form.

### Practice as Research: *What the F\*ck Is Queer Theory*

#### *Theoretical Framework*

The practice-based portion of this study is the creation of the zine *What the F\*ck is Queer Theory*. Loveless (2019, p 5) defines PBR as generating “new knowledge through or by means of artistic practice itself,” a definition bolstered by Skains (2024), who notes that

“the creative artefact is the basis of the contribution to knowledge.” Taking this into consideration, it was imperative to include the act of making as a core part of this study. It was essential to experience the disruptive process of zine creation first-hand (Damon et al., 2022).

In reflecting on this process, I position myself as a ‘practitioner-researcher’ whose knowledge is produced through the act of doing (Skains, 2024). While my process utilised a hybrid of digital and physical methods, Bolt’s (2007) concept of ‘the magic in handling’ remains a vital framework. For the practitioner-researcher, ‘handling’ refers to the iterative, tactile engagement with the medium, whether that involves the physical manipulation of paper or the digital ‘handling’ of layouts and pixels. This material thinking suggests that the theoretical insights of this paper did not precede the zine but emerged through the labor of its construction. By navigating the tension between digital



Figure 8



Figures 9 &amp; 10

precision and the intentional 'lo-fi' aesthetics of zine-making, the process became a site of inquiry where queer theory was not just applied, but actively 'felt' and practiced.

### *Conceptual Content*

The topics I chose were strongly impacted by the work of Barker and Scheele (2016), who have summarised a large portion of queer theory concepts. I aimed to distill these further, presenting complex ideas through a collage style and minimal text. The concepts focused on include: breaking binary definitions, queer as a verb, identities as constantly in flux, and sex as something that cannot be categorized as "good" or "bad." Additionally, the zine questions why sexuality is based on gender, the practical use of labels, intersectionality, heteronormativity, gender as performance, and the overarching concept of 'thinking queerly.'

### *The Making Process: Hybrid Materiality*

Although I have always considered myself an artist and worked with collage, this was the first zine I created. The first version took approximately six hours to create, followed by another four hours of editing. My process was inspired by the zines analyzed in this study, most significantly the work of Barrett (Figure 9 and 10). Their messy, collage style fits the classic punk-era aesthetic I wished to display, allowing for media non-conformity throughout.

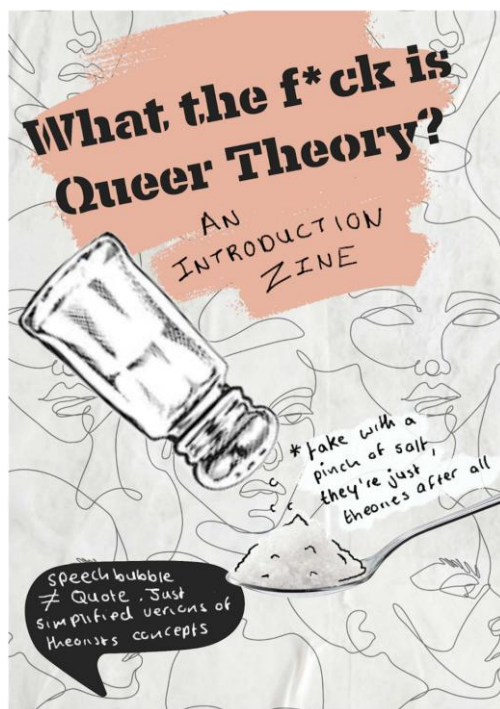
The images used were a mix of digital downloads, images printed in newspapers, and screenshots of films or interviews. I used digital editing software (Adobe Express and Photoshop) to edit the images

together, using digital tools to create physical effects such as tears in the paper. When a chosen image was low quality, I digitally pixelated it even more to highlight that the image was 'stolen' from another's work and repurposed; a transformative process of appropriation. Throughout the process, I printed the zine out to write notes on it by hand. This made the work more tangible and ensured it remained a visual-first medium rather than a written piece with visual aids.

### *Title, Cover, and Accessibility*

The name *What the F\*ck is Queer Theory* was chosen to answer that very question for those new to the topic. The curse word was censored as a reference to censorship in mainstream media. The cover was designed to be light-hearted and non-intimidating for non-academics, featuring a "pinch-of-salt" message to highlight that the reader does not have to agree with everything inside (*Figure 11*). This playful note was inspired by *Sniffin' Glue*, the punk zine that encouraged readers to soak the issue in glue and sniff it (*Figure 12*).

To ensure the zine met the queer principle of accessibility, I sent drafts to friends and family, both



Figures 11 & 12

those familiar with queer theory and those who were not, and reworked complicated parts based on their feedback. The queer affordances of **accessibility** and **non-conformity** are further realized by archiving the zine on Zenodo.org. This move ensures the work is not only citable via a persistent DOI but remains freely available, bypassing traditional gatekeeping and ensuring the practice remains a permanent site of knowledge for the community. Ultimately, the experience of creating the zine was transformative; it allowed me to view the act of creation from a playful perspective and deeply thickened my understanding of queer theory as a lived practice.

## Discussion

This study illustrates that zines do not merely contain queer content; they embody queer theory through their very method of creation. By analyzing contemporary Irish zines through the lenses of non-conformity, anti-mainstream ethos, accessibility, and non-traditional structure, a clear alignment emerges between DIY publishing and queer resistance.

### *Material Disruption and Anti-Mainstream Ethos*

Zines are inherently media non-conforming, as they are made up of a mess of media combinations with very little boundaries. This mirrors how queer theory challenges the binaries in general, but especially those of "high" vs. "low" art (Halberstam, 2011). This is evident in the hybridity of the sampled works, such as Smith's fusion of painting and digital collage or Barrett's mismatch of styles. Because no set of rules establishes what a zine must be (Liming, 2010), the medium remains "undefinable." This fluid identity is a form of "queering" in itself. Furthermore, by existing outside mainstream channels, zines like Iwanowska's JKT or Aburrow's KSGWRN prioritize personal vulnerability and absurdity over commercial potential (Atton, 2002). As Watson and Bennett (2021) suggest, these creators are driven by aesthetic gratification or the need to express themselves, rather than profit, rendering the zine "valueless" by capitalist standards but invaluable as a site of societal disruption.

### *Accessibility and "Low Theory"*

A vital connection between queer theory and zine practice is the rejection of academic gatekeeping. As Barker and Scheele (2016) argue, theory that is too opaque excludes the very people it seeks to liberate. Zines resolve this by translating complex concepts into "low theory" (Halberstam, 2011). Whether through LePage's use of storybook-style illustrations to explore ecology or my own use of repurposed romantic movie covers to question heteronormativity, zines utilise mainstream imagery to convey alternative, subversive ideas. This allows the reader to engage with theory playfully and tactically, rather than purely intellectually.

### *Structure and the Queer Art of Failure*

Finally, the sampled zines reflect Chess's (2016) description of queer narratives by refusing to follow traditional structures. Whether through Maguire's parody of the formal letter or LePage's two-dimensional "diorama," these works disregard "normative logic." Crucially, this disregard for structure is tied to what Halberstam (2011, p 8) identifies as the "queer art of failure." By embracing

the "unpolished" and the "messy," as seen in Iwanowska's RG, zine-makers find a style in failure. In creating *What the F\*ck Is Queer Theory*, I found that the pleasure of the process, the "magic in handling" (Bolt, 2007) was only possible once the pressure of perfection was removed. The resulting visual mess is not a lack of skill, but a deliberate choice to exist outside of mainstream media's polished expectations.

### *Converging Findings & Real World Applications*

The findings of this study align with the "practitioner-researcher" frameworks established by Skains (2024) and Boatwright (2019), confirming that the act of creation is a legitimate site of knowledge production. This reconceptualization matters because it empowers creators to view DIY practice as a form of resistance. By reclaiming the tools of media production, creators can bypass the gatekeeping of mainstream publishing and express identities that are often "uncontainable" within traditional structures. This study serves as a call to action for educators and artists to embrace messy, artistic play as valid ways to teach, learn, and resist.

### *Limitations and Future Research*

While this study offers an in-depth view of the Irish zine scene, it is limited by the lack of racial diversity within the small sample of creators. Future research should prioritize a more intersectional range of voices to explore how different marginalized identities utilise the queer affordances" of the medium.

## **Conclusion**

### *Synthesis of Research*

This study has provided an in-depth investigation into the queerness of the act of zine-making, addressing a critical gap in media research at the intersection of DIY publishing and queer theory, specifically within the contemporary Irish context. By exploring the historical relationship between zines, technology, and appropriation, this research has framed zine-making as a disruptive site of inquiry. Through a methodology that combined a deductive thematic analysis of seven Irish zines with a reflexive, practice-based approach, the study combined theoretical exploration and hands-on-creation, evidenced in the creation of *What the F\*ck Is Queer Theory*.

### *Core Findings*

Based on this dual approach, it can be concluded that zines as a medium actively embody the ideals of queer theory through their form and process. Their inherent non-conformity reflects the way queer theory challenges binaries, while their anti-mainstream ethos mirrors the disruption of societal norms. Furthermore, both zines and queer theory strive for radical accessibility, reflecting queer narratives by intentionally bypassing and disrupting traditional media barriers.

### *Operational Significance and Contribution*

Crucially, this research moves beyond a purely reflective account to offer a transferable framework for enacting queer theory through creative practice. For creative researchers, educators, and zine-makers, this study provides three vital, practical insights:

- **Pedagogical Tool:** For educators, zine-making offers a 'low-stakes' method for students to deconstruct complex, 'high-theory' concepts through a tactile, unpolished medium that removes the pressure of academic perfection.
- **Methodological Rigor:** For researchers, this study validates hands-on-creation as a method for generating knowledge, where the act of 'handling' materials, whether physical or digital, functions as a primary site of inquiry.
- **Strategic Resistance:** For practitioners, zines as a queer act provides a framework for using DIY aesthetics, such as collage and appropriation, to intentionally disrupt mainstream narratives.

In summary, by foregrounding practice as a site of knowledge production, this article contributes to the field of creative media by articulating zine-making not just as a craft, but as a rigorous, practice-led methodology for "queering" in action.

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## Appendix

### *Questionnaire questions*

1. Do you consent to the information you provide in this questionnaire being used for research purposes? You must click Yes in order to take the questionnaire.
2. Introduce yourself.
3. (Include name, age, Sexual and gender identity (you can simply clarify queer or not queer if you are uncomfortable with including details) and how long you have lived in Ireland)
4. How long have you been creating zines?
5. On average how long will a single zine take to complete?
6. What inspires you to create?
7. What kind of zines do you create?
8. What material do you use to create your zines? (Digital, physically, or a mix? Drawing, collage, etc.)
9. If you use digital media, has it influenced your creation process?

10. What motivates you to create zines?
11. How do you share your zines with others?
12. What is your process for creating zines? (Please provide as much detail as possible.)
13. What are zines you have enjoyed yourself? Please include artist names / social media handles if possible.
14. Feel free to add any additional information about the topics here.

#### Appendix B: Figures and Image Credits

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Figure 1. Caitlin Smith, *Peony Pussy*, mixed media artwork reproduced in *CC: Zine*. Used under fair use for purposes of critical analysis.

Figure 2. Ruairí Barrett, from *The Truth is Out There*, A7 folded zine. Reproduced with permission of the creator.

Figure 3. Milly Aburrow, *Knot in My Stomach, Gummy Worm Round My Neck*, digital collage reproduced in *CC: Zine*. Used under fair use for purposes of critical analysis.

Figure 4. Marta Iwanowska, from *Just Kid Things*, A7 folded zine. Reproduced with permission of the creator.

Figure 5. Marta Iwanowska, from *Rainbow Girls*, stapled zine booklet. Reproduced with permission of the creator.

Figure 6. Justine LePage, cover of *Mushroom Harvest*, A7 folded zine. Reproduced with permission of the creator.

Figure 7. Ruairí Barrett, from *Choreomania*, A7 folded zine. Reproduced with permission of the creator.

Figure 8. Justine LePage, from *Dream Diorama*, illustrated zine. Reproduced with permission of the creator.

Figure 9. Caoilfhinn (Finn) Reddy, page from *What the F\*ck Is Queer Theory*, author's original zine. Available at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19411135>

Figure 10. Ruairí Barrett, cover from *The Truth is Out There*, A7 folded zine. Reproduced with permission of the creator.

Figure 11. Caoilfhinn (Finn) Reddy, cover of *What the F\*ck Is Queer Theory*, author's original zine. Available at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19411135>

Figure 12. Mark Perry, cover of *Sniffin' Glue*, punk fanzine. Image sourced from Punk Journey and Wikipedia. Reproduced under fair use for purposes of historical reference and critical commentary. Sources: Punk Journey; Wikipedia.