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## Fanzine as an artifact of expression and authorship: feminine sexuality and self-discovery

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Fanzine, Expression,  
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Feminine.

### Abstract

Fanzines are artifacts with a D.I.Y (do it yourself) nature created by an individual or a group of creators with unlimited freedom during the process of its making and for this reason, it is possible unveil the authors due to their formal expression and chosen thematic. Since fanzines permit unlimited liberty to the authors they serve as an instrument of self-discovery to explore how they want to express themselves, be it through comics, illustration, photography, clipping, writing, poetry, or a mix between media.

This paper, connected with a master's work project, aims to explore and understand the contribution of fanzines to the exploration of the author within the context of feminine sexuality and self-discovery. For that, the paper will start with historical contextualization to understand the birth of this medium in the context of feminine sexuality and self-discovery, followed by fanzines case studies that show what kind of formal expression the fanzine can take. Afterward, fanzines will also be presented and explained, to show how they are approached by the author and how the zine format may help with the storytelling. To better consolidate this, a comparative analysis of two case studies from two Portuguese-speaking authors, Joana Estrela and Gabriella Masson, will also be made to clarify how both approaches the thematic within their fanzines.

### 1. Introduction

This paper explores fanzines as a tool for the author to explore their formal expression to communicate what they wish within the thematic of feminine sexuality and self-discovery, a final project from Master's Degree of the Illustration and Animation course on IPCA (Polytechnic Institute of Cávado and Ave). The project won't be fully shown but only a part, starting with a historical contextualization on how women and girls started to have their voice on the zine scene, followed by examples of various formal expressions a fanzine can take, as well as others examples, within the thematic of feminine sexuality and self-discovery, with a proper explanation on how the thematic is presented by the author and how the format may help.

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Being a flexible medium, fanzines are completely dependent on their authors, who are not constrained by outside rules to create what they wish and how to take part in every aspect of its creation. The way they communicate their idea, from a vast number of forms and formats, is their formal expression choice. The comparison between two case studies of two zine authors from Portuguese-speaking countries, Joana Estrela and Gabriella Masson, from Portugal and Brazil respectively, will support the idea that the formal expression varies between authors, despite having the same theme.

## 2. Fanzine and the author

The term fanzine was born from the combination of the words fan and magazine [1]. They are small editions made manually by one or more authors [2], and, contrary to conventional publications of books or magazines, fanzines are independent editions where the authors are free to do what they wish with their project [3]. Such is the case because the author does not only the creative job, but is also the editor, designer, and publisher [3]. The outcome of this process is in the creation of their identity through their writing since they do not have exterior rules from other designers, publishers, or writers, to follow [3]. They are mostly recognized by the aesthetic of punk fanzines that emerged with the rising of the punk scene. These artifacts were homemade, stapled together, utilizing cutouts from magazines, photocopied, and harmonized, sometimes, chaotically [2].

Inspired by the medium, fanzines nowadays address multiple thematics [21] with authors exploring their formal expression. Inevitably, fanzines became a tool of self-discovery to the authors, where they try to discover their authentic self by assembling various elements of who they are [1]. When the fanzine is shared, authors might attract people with common interests or even others that feel somehow connected to what is depicted [3]. This may even encourage their readers to create fanzines, building a sense of community.

## 3. Female representation on fanzines

Before female authors found a place on fanzines other artifacts were used with the same objective: sharing their interests, thoughts, life, or what they saw fit; namely scrapbooks and mimeographed pamphlets [22]. During the nineteenth century, women would be scrapbooking by assembling clippings from paper objects, such as newspapers, letters, or photographs for instance [22]. However, these scrapbooks were only one piece and could not be reproduced at the time, nevertheless, they were still shared within a community, inspiring others to do the same [22]. Later, during the mid-twentieth century, this changed with the mimeograph machine as the technology-enabled women to spread their messages with mimeograph pamphlets that were inexpensively reproduced even if the final result would turn out messy or imperfect [22]. Both scrapbooks and mimeograph helped women and girls having a voice they couldn't have anywhere else since it would be, as stated by Piepmeier, "too trivial, too personal or too controversial" [22]. Zines would too give this opportunity and even share

some technical aspects from its “ancestors” as is the usage of clipping and the unperfect and sometimes quite messy result.

One of the biggest turning points for the popularization of fanzines was the rise of the punk scene in the United States and the United Kingdom [3]. However, the world of fanzines was male-dominated, with little to no representation or recognition for female authors, whose voices were often ignored even if they did the same work as their male colleagues [4]. This discontent led to the birth of the riot grrrl movement during the early ‘90s, that aimed to create a network for girls and women where they could express themselves through fanzines [4] since it has no restrictions. Fanzines gave both the liberty and the tools needed for girls and women to share their thoughts and feelings, making their voices heard [4]. They were and still are an important tool for self-discovery, within sexuality, intimacy, and formal expression, making it possible to explore them exhaustively.

Like this, a new wave of feminists (individuals that defend women rights and believe in gender equality [11]) was born and approached several different thematics like gender identity, sexuality, queer (gender identity or sexual orientation that differ from the normative social standard [9]), multiculturalism and gender equality [3]. As examples of these kinds of zines, were released works such as “Fat! So?” by Marilyn Wann (Fig.1) which tackled themes like body image and overweight, as well as

“Adventures in Menstruating” by Chella Quint (Fig.2) with menstruation as its thematic, both talking about issues that wouldn’t be approached by mainstream media at the time in the same manner as fanzines would [4].

The rise of these types of fanzines kept growing in the following years, for instance, in Portugal, during the year of 2000 to 2016 it’s possible to see a growth of feminist fanzines, becoming the fifth thematic, out of twenty-five, more approached [6].

This does not include thematics such as personal fanzines, the most popular, or sex fanzines, that occupies the 13th place, and may still include the thematic of feminine sexuality and intimacy [6].



**Fig. 1.** “Fat! So?” #5, Marilyn Wann, 1996.



**Fig. 2.** “Adventures in Menstruating” #1, Chella Quint, 2005.

#### 4. Formal expression on fanzines

The formal expression of the fanzine depends entirely on the author, as they are the only one who knows how their idea is better represented to convey the message they want. This expression can take different approaches like comics, as shown in the example “MUAHAHAHA” by Jenn Liv (Fig. 3), illustration as observed in “SWIM” by Jeannie Phan (Fig. 4), photography as in “Home Video Diary” by Attilio Solzi (Fig. 5) as well as collage, like in “Fanzine feminismos collage”, a fanzine by a group of authors (Fig.6) made during the workshop “Fanzine, Feminismos y Collage” in La Casa de la Mujer, Zaragoza.

However, the formal expression of a fanzine does not have to be only visual once writing can also be a method of self-expression as shown in “Abused & Overused Words (How to Not Be Racist or Contrived) by



Jennifer Wu (Fig. 7) or, poetry as in “Love Letters I Never Sent” by Oslo Jemmeson (Fig. 8). This medium provides several formats or dimensions for the author to choose from, which can also help strengthen their intended message.

Therefore, it is possible to understand the diversity of approaches a fanzine may have. The authors do not have to limit themselves to only one kind of expression, they can mix them up and create their own. This medium provides several formats or dimensions for the author to choose from, which can also help strengthen their intended message as well, and, even though magazine is still the most popular format, but, posters, leaflets, or other kinds of formats are all good options because they have no constraints [6].

The author may also share a fanzine digital file via the internet, making it reach a larger amount of readers which will transform the work not as ephemeral as the physical format [5]. Nonetheless, the physical format is still the favorite, as it is more personal, palpable, building proximity between the object and the reader, which cannot be achieved by digital media.

## 5. Examples of Fanzines within feminine sexuality and intimacy

The fanzine’s freedom allows authors to express the same thematic in different ways. That, of course, also includes feminine sexuality and intimacy. For a better understanding, take the following examples into consideration.

“Como Dizer...” is a leaflet poster made by Joana Estrela (Fig. 9) where it is shown through comics the steps on how to confess your feelings to a girl. However, the main character is also a girl, making the queer thematic being represented in a very natural way, which usually does not happen in conventional media such as television. The leaflet format lets the viewer unfold each step at the time, making all the path visible when you reach the final step.

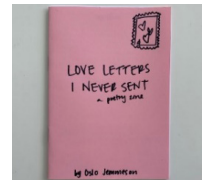
One of the mini leaflet fanzines from Fuli X Banana Fish (Fig. 10), with an unknown author, shows a trip to the public female baths. On the first page, the entrance door is illustrated and while unfolding the fanzine each page shows different types of bodies or interactions between them. It shows what happens there through the eyes of the main character, who leaves the building on the last page.

**Fig. 3.** Zine aberta, “MUAHAHAHA”, Jean Liv, 2014.

**Fig. 4.** Zine aberta, “SWIM”, Jeannie Phan, 2013.

**Fig. 5.** Zine aberta, “Home Video Diary”, Attilio Solzi, 2017.

**Fig. 6.** Zine aberta, “Fanzine feminismos collage”, La Casa de la Mujer, 2017.



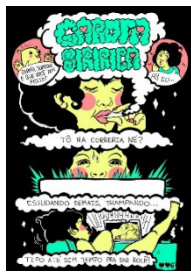
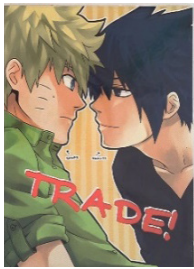
**Fig. 7.** Zine aberta, Abused & Overused Words (How to Not Be Racist or Contrived), 2019.

**Fig. 8.** Capa, “Love Letters I Never Sent”, Oslo Jemmeson, 2020.

**Fig. 9.** Unfolded fanzine, “Como dizes a uma rapariga que gostas dela”, Joana Estrela, 2018.



**Fig. 10.** Unfolded Fanzine, “Fuli X Banana Fish”, unknown author and year.3.



**Fig. 11.** Cover and interior page, “TRADE!”, 10-RANKAI/EMI, 2008.

**Fig. 12.** Páginas independentes, “Garota Siririca”, Gabriela Masson, 201

“TRADE!” by Emi/10-Rankai (Fig.11) it is a doujinshi (a self-publication in manga (Japanese comics [14]) format or novels [7]) from the already existent manga and anime (Japanese animation [14]) Naruto. Focusing on the two main male characters, Naruto and Sasuke, it explores their relationship in a more intimate and romantic way. It is common in fandoms (a group of fans that share content between themselves about certain phenomenon [8]) for same-sex relationships to be explored, as it is usually not normalized on the referred media. Like this, doujinshi authors can imagine the couple’s dynamic and explore it in a way the source material would never do. The manga format helps to resemble an official manga book.

“Garota Siririca” by Gabriela Masson (Fig.12) is a comic fanzine that first had a digital edition, having afterwards a physical compilation. The digital format helped the zine to reach a greater number of readers, even helping them with questions about its thematic. Garota Siririca explores the topic of female masturbation in a very straight forward manner as a critic of the lack of its representation, ending up the representation of different body types, love or sexual relationships.

Thereby, authors find the best way to formally express what they envision, which varies from author to author. It depends on them as individuals but also what aesthetic they want to follow and how they want to convey their content.

## 6. Gabriela Masson

The author of “Garota Siririca”, Gabriela Masson from Brazil, has the thematic of female sexuality, and LBGTQ+ as the main theme of her works [15] including, as seen earlier, on her fanzines. Fanzines are in fact the preferred publishing method; she states that there is no salary gap between female or male workers, unlike in publishing companies [16]. By choosing fanzines, Masson has to be in charge of every step during the process of the fanzine from drawing, writing, publishing, and selling it [16]. Masson has more fanzines besides Garota Siririca such as “A Ética do Tesão na Pós-Modernidade vol.1” and its sequel “A Ética do Tesão na Pós-Modernidade vol.2”, both from 2013. Through the pages of these zines it



is possible to witness a constant self-discovery from the characters with themselves and their sexuality and how they explore it. Within these two zines' it is also possible to consider comics as Masson's expression of choice. Not only it is used throughout the pages but also in some panels and passages. In the first volume (Fig. 13), it reads: "When I was 10 years old, I learned how to draw with Sakura's doujinshis" showing the pornographic part of said doujinshi, between Sakura and her older brother, taking the expression of manga. With this quote, it is possible to not only connect it with the thematic Masson explores most of the time on her works (female sexuality), but also with her interest in comics. On the second volume (Fig. 14) it is shown a reaction to a comic: "Ah, this person is so sensitive and passionate."

This shows how the character is moved with the way the author of the comic approached the medium.

It was, however, with "Garota Siririca" that the author understood that comics could be a way to approach issues within female sexuality, stating that this form of the expression is her best communication tool [16], still used by the author nowadays, as shown in "Sheiloca" (Fig. 15), from 2018 and still ongoing. Here it is used differently from her two previous works, as each page is almost one single panel, showing the freedom the author can take within fanzines and explore the visual expression in different ways. Unlike the previously mentioned fanzines, Sheiloca takes part in a fictional world, however, the values are the same as her previous works since in this world female sexuality and feminist values are heavily explored.

## 7. Joana Estrela

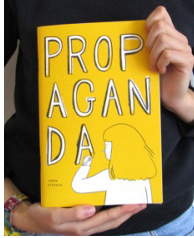
Estrela's fanzines often explore LGBTQ+ thematics [18], as seen before with the fanzine "Como Dizer...". The majority of these fanzines are heavily influenced by the author's life as seen in "Os Vestidos do Tiago" (Fig. 16) and "Propaganda" (Fig. 17) [18].

"Os Vestidos do Tiago" approaches gender issues through the protagonist Tiago, a boy that likes to wear dresses. The inspiration came from childhood thoughts from the author, where she felt sorry for the boys not

**Fig. 13.** Open fanzine, "A Ética do Tesão na Pós-Modernidade vol.1", Gabriella Masson, 2013

**Fig. 14.** Open fanzine, "A Ética do Tesão na Pós-Modernidade vol.2", Gabriella Masson, 2013

**Fig. 15.** Cover and page, "Sheiloca", Gabriella Masson, 2018



**Fig. 16.** Cover and interior, “Os Vestidos de Tiago”, Gabriella Masson, 2013

**Fig. 17.** Cover and interior, “Propaganda”, Joana Estrela, 2014

being able to wear the same clothes as girls [18]. On this fanzine, illustration is followed by text, an expression known to the author, a published children’s book illustrator [18]. This choice of expression helps with the drama-free and positive approach without any negative connotations with the thematic [18].

With the same expression as “Como Dizer...”, comics, “Propaganda” is about the author’s experience with volunteer work at an LGBT association in Lithuania [12]. Almost as if it is a journal, the author tells her experience through comics, from her daily life, to queer events she took part in (like concerts or poetry sessions), showing the country and how the media handles LGBTQ+ matters

[19]. “I can’t believe I’m going to my first lesbian party in the most homophobic country from the European Union.” is an excerpt from the fanzine that precisely shows one of her experiences while disclosing the countries stand on the topic [19].

## 8. Conclusions

Fanzines are an open canvas for artists to explore what they wish without fear or discrimination. They are an unconventional way of communication that connects people who share the same experiences or tastes. Throughout history, female fanzine authors struggled to have the same recognition as their male counterparts and made artistic movements like riot grrrl to make room for it. As a result of this, they found a place where they could voice their opinions, making readers feel motivated to create their fanzines and soon new thematics were approached, such as gender identity, sexuality, queer, multiculturalism, and gender equality.

Following the example of Masson, it is possible to see fanzines being used as a platform to criticize, using comics, the ways the feminine intimacy and sexuality are portrayed on conventional media as a taboo. Fanzines also allowed her a place outside from inequality of gender in salaries from conventional publishers. Being outside of a conventional context, she is free to take part in every step of the process and do as she wishes.

Since fanzines have no rules, they give the opportunity to do works outside of a professional context. Estrela, for example, uses fanzines to explore different thematics outside of her professional work, being thoughts or personal experiences the main source throughout illustration or comics.

Each author has different inspirations, approaches, and goals, their method is different from one another, which results in a variety of fanzines, may it be by their format or preferred expression. Every fanzine has a piece of the author within it, making us, inevitably, learn more about them.

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