

Is Vampirism Right for You?
A study in self-expression and zines

by

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May, 2024

Table of Contents

Is Vampirism Right for You?	
A study in self-expression and zines	1
Introduction	3
1. Literature Review	4
2. Methodology	6
3. The Creative Work	7
4. Discussion and Conclusions	9
Reference List	10

Introduction

Gender identity can be ever-changing and ever-evolving, both in a cultural and personal context. Over time, gender identity can be defined not just through heteronormative identities but also through abstract ideals that can be explored through art and literature. This is important to my micro project because of my recent exploration into my gender identity and how it informs my artmaking practice.

A common way identity and, by extension, queerness are explored through art is the use of zines. Zines are 'cheaply made printed forms of expression on any subject' (Todd & Esther Pearl Watson, 2006); they are self-published and homemade 'mini magazines'. The University of Texas notes that they have a root in 'the informal, underground publication that focused on social and political activism.' (Parker, 2022). There is a large community for queer zines with established organizations such as the Queer Zine Archive Project (N.D) that aims to keep a record of queer-created zines and highlight the different ways people express themselves and their identities which they express with their mission statement: "In curating such a unique aspect of culture, we value a collectivist approach that respects the diversity of experiences that fall under the heading "queer.".

By using the medium of zine, I can explore the question of how I represent myself and my gender identity in my art. My gender identity journey has only recently felt like it's reached a point where I feel comfortable enough in my exploration to define it in more clear terms and to resonate with labels. I am comfortable identifying myself as nonbinary and referring to myself as such, but this has come after years of self-discovery, personal exploration, and expression through my art. So, I will utilize my artistic skill to create a metaphorical representation of my gender identity journey through the medium of zine and apply my knowledge of semiotics to curate an almost 'scrapbook' of my identity. An identity that I happen to correlate with vampirism and vampire media, utilizing symbols and metaphors of vampirism to relate my identity within the world.

It is for this reason that I am engaging in action research for this project. Action research is best described in 'Action Based Modes of Inquiry and the Host-Researcher Relationship' as;

"Action research...aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to further the goals of social science simultaneously. Thus, there is a dual commitment in action research to study a system and concurrently to collaborate with members of the system in changing it in what is together regarded as a desirable direction."

The process of action research is commonly defined as: plan, act, observe, and reflect. (O'Brien, R. 2001)

As a process developed by Stephen Kemmis, action research refers to how an initial question is identified and then expanded upon by creating, researching, and returning to reflect on it. Action research emerged as the most useful methodology for this project, as the process will inherently require my own reflection on my identity as well as my artmaking, allowing for a closer inquiry into how queer identities can be expressed through physical art such as zines.

1. Literature Review

The main focus of my question was on gender identity and how that can inform art-making through the medium of zine, and how I represent my own identity.

When looking at gender identity, I referred to queer theory to expand upon the idea of gender identity and what it can mean in a modern context. Looking at works such as “*Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*,” where Legacy Russell correlates how identity is impacted by a digital era that informs how we can express ourselves. By correlating identity, specifically gender identity, with digital spaces and showing how the two intersect fluidity of expression, it demonstrates a new way of examining and defining identity that purposefully chooses to express itself in personal, nonconventional means.

Similarly, Judith Butler's work also discusses how we as a society define gender and how we are limited by doing so. Their book “*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*” challenges our current understanding of gender as something that is a fixed concept rather than something fluid and variable. Suggesting that gender is not determined by biology but rather by performance, more a representation of what a person does rather than what they are. This is where Butler coined the term ‘gender performativity’ to refer to this theory.

With the works I referred to on gender identity and presentation, I looked at how these ideas could inform art-making, such as how gender can influence an artist's representation of themselves. If gender is a performance, how does that performance represent itself within a person's artwork? Valerie Fournier’s article ‘Fleshing out Gender: Crafting Gender Identity on Women’s Bodies’ has a similar idea of how gender is performative, but draws from the correlation of pain and womanhood, how a common culture often shapes identity, and how it is restricted using evocative imagery drawing from flesh and pain to emphasize the ideas she is presenting.

Further from that, I looked into the representation of identity within, specifically, the medium of zines. Lonsdale, C. (2015) discusses how they were able to encourage and engage students through the curation of a zine, so students who felt ‘othered’, mainly identifying those who are LGBTQ, can find a medium in which they can navigate and explore their interests and identities through writing. By focusing on the ‘Do it yourself’ (DIY) nature of zines, it becomes an accessible medium in which anyone can curate their artwork and practice. It was through this source that I was able to find the Queer Zine Archive Project (GZAP), which allowed me access to a database

of archived queer zines, providing me with examples of how other queer artists explore or discuss their own identity through this format. However, not many of the zines archived touched on transgender, specifically nonbinary, identities, and as such explored non-conventional ways of expressing said identity.

Despite this, I was able to find more sources discussing non-binary identity within zines and the creation of a space for these identities to be explored. Mahar, J. (2018) discussed how zines create a new space for 'othered' identities by being self-published works that fall outside the mainstream media's normative ideas on identities. A zine isn't only a way for an individual to express themselves but also to create a space for others to relate to these experiences or representations.

This points to the general power of zines as explored in 'The felt value of reading zines' which identifies the power of zine creation in four forms: DIY aesthetic, anti-mainstream positioning, intimacy, and intensity. The creation of a zine inherently draws upon the curator's identity in all forms and creates a unique relationship between the author and the reader. The meaning is created in both the content of the zine and the medium, allowing for an honest and personal creation to exist.

The ideas I have been able to gather and read all curate a connection between identity and the medium of zine in ways that I was not expecting. Zine as a medium allows for DIY self-expression and values a personal creation and exploration of identity in all forms. The connection between identity and art also draws upon the idea of gender performativity that Judith Butler has created, that gender is less a predisposed identity and more created in the ways we present ourselves to the world. The ever-changing landscape of even digital spaces has allowed a new way to explore and present gender.

2. Methodology

This micro-research project employs a Creative Practice Research methodology in which knowledge is produced “in and through the acts of creating and performing” (Berdorff, 2010). The work itself constitutes a kind of knowledge, and reflective practice is used to reveal tacit knowledge involved in its creation.

Leavy notes that arts-based research practices are a “set of methodological tools” rather than a prescription, and that those tools include “data generation, analysis, interpretation, and representation” (Leavy, 2015). Experimentation in creative practice can be used to drive innovation in practice and as a way of revealing tacit knowledge about practice itself (Borgdorff, 2006). In my project, I experiment with how to represent gender identity through the medium of zine to analyze how identity can inform one's art-making practices.

I employ Reflective Practice (Schon, 1983) to examine “the relational self embedded in time and place” (Griffiths, 2010). By doing so, I aim to reveal the implicit knowledge in my creative practice and the ideas that have emerged throughout the process.

I also support this methodology by using the process set out by Stephen Kemmis for action research through a cycle of planning, creating action, observing, and reflection. It's best used alongside other research tools as it's more of a ‘holistic approach to problem-solving, rather than a single method of collecting and analyzing data.’ (O'Brien, R. 2001).

The overall mythology also draws upon autoethnography, which is ‘an autobiographical genre of academic writing that draws on and analyzes or interprets the lived experience of the author and connects researcher insights to self-identity, cultural rules, and resources...’ (Poulos, 2021).

So much of this project is informed by my interpretation and analysis of my identity and how I ‘perform’ my gender. It is impossible to divorce my experiences from my creative work, and instead, the work encourages the connection between the research and the piece to be reflective of my understanding and journey of self-discovery.

3. The Creative Work

The final creative piece is the ‘first volume’ in a prospective series of zines entitled ‘Is Vampirism Right for You?’. This reflects my connection between vampires and my gender identity. I find the best representation or ‘performance’ of my gender is through vampires and find a genuine connection with them. Vampires themselves are a metaphorical ‘other’, author of *The Vampire Chronicles* Anne Rice once said in an interview with *The Daily Beast*:

“The vampire is an outsider. He’s the perfect metaphor for those things. He’s someone who looks human and sounds human but is not human, so he’s always on the margins.”

Vampires are also commonly associated with queer identity; the first and most famous vampires within literature, *Carmilla* and *Dracula*, can be easily read as queer. *Carmilla* (Le Fanu, 1862) is the story of a relationship between a young woman and the titular vampire, while *Dracula* (Stoker, 1897) is often thought of as Bram Stoker’s response to the Oscar Wilde trials, whom Stoker knew personally. (Schaffer, 1994).

By drawing upon common symbols of vampires, fangs, bats, and blood, as well as using images of vampire characters such as Lestat de Lioncourt or Alucard in a bricolage, I can create a visual metaphorical representation of my gender journey from the start (questioning) to the end (acceptance). The ending of the zine is even meant to mirror this, bookending the question of whether vampirism (nonconforming identity) is right for me to end with an evolved understanding that it is.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

My research and creative practice were an exploration of how gender identity, mainly my own, can be reflected through artistic work. Through the creation and reflection on zine-making practices as well as the historical context surrounding them, as well as looking through the GZAP, I was able to discover a medium that encourages and allows for an introspection into one's own identity through visual language and symbols.

This process has allowed me to find a connection between modern gender theory and zine-making practices. The exploration of gender expression can be done within this DIY space and is actively encouraged as a medium that focuses on unconventional means of expression and storytelling.

On a personal level, it has allowed me to recontextualize my gender journey and draw connections between my 'performance' of gender to the symbology that informs it, namely vampires.

This has not only encouraged me to continue using zines as an outlet for creative expression but also should encourage others to take up the practice. Zines offer a level of freedom of expression that can be hard to replicate in other media, and their nature and community encourage a more modern exploration of identity and the self.

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