

ART

THE ZINE AS AN ARTIFACT OF CULTURAL DIPLOMACY: VISUALIZING QUEER IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY UKRAINIAN GRAPHIC DESIGN

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Annotation: The paper explores the art-zine as a method of visual communication and a tool of cultural diplomacy in contemporary Ukrainian graphic design. It examines how independent printed publications can articulate complex social meanings, serving as platforms for visibility, inclusion, and artistic expression. The study focuses on the visualization of queer identity in post-2022 Ukraine, highlighting how design aesthetics shape public perception and contribute to the democratization of culture. Through analytical and comparative methods, the research identifies the potential of the zine as a socially engaged design artifact that combines visual poetics with civil narrative.

Keywords: graphic design, art-zine, queer identity, social communication, cultural diplomacy, visual culture, independent publishing.

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, graphic design has evolved beyond its commercial purpose to become a vital part of social communication and cultural reflection. The design process increasingly functions as a mechanism for meaning-making, especially in societies undergoing transformation. Ukraine's ongoing sociopolitical changes since

2022 have amplified the importance of visual media as a means of documenting new social realities and constructing narratives of inclusivity and resilience.

The visibility of the LGBTQ+ community has grown in this period, as its members contribute to national defense and civic life. Initiatives such as the Unicorn Battalion project by photographer Sasha Maslov and the NGO LGBT Military use visual storytelling to humanize and normalize queer presence within Ukrainian society [1]. According to the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 70.4% of Ukrainians support equal rights for LGBTQ+ individuals [2]. This shift calls for new forms of visual representation, particularly in print, that reflect this social maturity and diversity.

However, the Ukrainian print landscape still lacks design-centered publications that explore queer identity through an artistic and reflective lens. Existing magazines such as “Gayd!” and “One of us” historically played crucial activist roles but rarely achieved the level of visual and editorial sophistication seen in global independent zines [3]. Therefore, the art-zine format presents a relevant case for studying how design can serve as a bridge between social activism and cultural aesthetics.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The study is based on the methodological combination of analytical, comparative, and semiotic approaches. Theoretically, it draws from Ellen Lupton’s concept of “thinking with type,” which situates typography and composition as forms of social language [4, p. 8]. Additionally, the Design Council’s framework on Design for Social Change underscores the designer’s responsibility in fostering inclusive communication through ethical visual practices [5].

Independent zines have long been associated with grassroots communication and creative resistance. Global examples such as “Butt Magazine” and “Gayletter” demonstrate how bold editorial design can transform marginalized narratives into highly rated cultural statements [6].

In this context, the Ukrainian art-zine becomes not only an artistic object but also a form of cultural diplomacy – a medium that communicates democratic values through design. The dual-language approach (Ukrainian and English) typical for

independent publishing enhances cross-cultural understanding and positions Ukrainian design within the global discourse of visual inclusivity.

3. Visual and Aesthetic Strategies

The aesthetic framework of the contemporary art-zine operates within what can be described as an Archive / Future duality. This model allows designers to balance documentation with aspiration:

The Archive represents historical narratives, data visualization, and photographic documentation, typically employing serif typography, structured grid layouts, and restrained color schemes.

The Future embodies personal stories, creative essays, and expressive imagery, characterized by sans-serif typography, asymmetrical layouts, and vibrant color accents (e.g., electric blue or neon yellow) [7, p. 17].

This dialogue between restraint and expressiveness produces a poetics of visibility. The design choices evoke both tactility and conceptual clarity, allowing the printed object to function as an aesthetic artifact and as a communicative instrument.

By focusing on material quality, modular composition, and typographic hierarchy, the zine format invites active reader engagement. Each visual decision thus becomes an ethical one: how to represent without sensationalizing, how to visualize without objectifying. This principle aligns with contemporary art practices that view design as a socially conscious and culturally responsive process [8].

4. Conclusions

The art-zine as a design artifact represents a convergence of visual aesthetics and social responsibility. Within the Ukrainian context, it functions as both a tool of cultural diplomacy and an archive of lived experience, articulating the values of diversity, agency, and creative freedom. Through design thinking, the zine medium bridges personal narrative and collective identity, transforming print into a vehicle for empathy and international dialogue.

The study reaffirms that graphic design can act as a form of visual diplomacy by shaping perception, building understanding, and making visible those who have historically remained unseen.

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