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## **RESEARCH BRAVE SPACES AND ZINE-MAKING: DISRUPTIVE TOOLS FOR EXPLORING DIGITAL SEXUAL INTIMACIES**

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### **Introduction**

The study of digital sexual intimacies presents methodological and ethical challenges (Tiidenberg, 2018; 2020), as they related to the intersection of sex, public life, and internet, which generally cause the Trifecta of Anxieties (Tiidenberg & van der Nagel, 2020). Moreover, the sensitive nature of the research topics may trigger various experiences and potential traumas among human research subjects.

Addressing these concerns necessitates a methodological rupture – moving away from extractive, risk-centred, and conventional qualitative methods towards more creative, participatory, and multimodal approaches, even more in digital intimacies research, where it has been seen that the dominant narratives outside of the academic world often frame sexuality as inherently risky or deviant. There is a need to reimagine collective, creative, holistic research spaces and methodologies that acknowledge the subjective multiplicities and celebrates individual needs.

The tradition of creative and participatory methodologies provide specific research opportunities that deconstruct, foster reflexivity, and allow participants to embrace dissonances and discomfort of the studied phenomena and their experiences, destabilising normative research hierarchies (Knowles & Cole, 2007; Mannay, 2016; van der Vaart et al., 2018). Creative methods, particularly art-based methods, offer diverse possibilities which range from data gathering to data analysis, from research reporting to research presentations (Kara, 2020). When focussing on data gathering in the realm of social sciences, comics-based and graphic/multimodal methods (as zines) work across disciplines (Kuttner et al., 2020) and themes. In fact, they have been implemented to generate data about different topics, such as health, environmentalism,

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migration, and gender (Moretti, 2023), education and queer youth (Burkholder, 2021). Such methods serve for working with community groups which might be not easy to access in a more conventional way for several reasons, as for example marginalised and minority identities (McNicol, 2019; Etengoff, 2015).

As unruly self-published and DIY pamphlets, zines serve as multimodal vehicles for personal expression and social transformation (Duncombe, 1997). Lovata (2007) highlight the genre of zines' potential as tools for qualitative researchers, who aim for a transformative approach of individual like-minded people within collective settings. As in the research experiences recollected by Downes et al. (2013), the collaborative approach to data generation and collection in subcultural contexts such zine-making creates a better space for an implementation of a creative and innovative method. In those contexts, participants, guided by facilitators, explore various communicative tools such as textual, visual, intertextual, and interactive elements as in the example of zine-making workshops, namely multiple sessions of zine sessions. The multimodal nature of zines- incorporating textual, visual, intertextual, and interactive elements -disrupts traditional, linear methods of data collection and analysis, instead fostering co-constructed, iterative, and deeply affective knowledge production.

### **Research Brave Spaces: A Conceptual Shift**

Inspired by collaborative data generation (Downes et al., 2013), longitudinal grassroots creative workshops provide a space for research and cultural product creation. In these, zine-making workshops emerge as a suitable method for constructing what we define as Research Brave Space.

The concept of Research Brave Space (RBS) reconfigures research environments by shifting from the notion of 'safe spaces' to 'brave spaces' (Arao & Clemens, 2013). Safe spaces (Hartal, 2017; Lewis et al., 2015; Lohman, 2022; The Roestone Collective, 2014) ,in fact, are recognised as valuable but not universally attainable. Therefore, the concept of brave spaces is proposed, emphasising the need to courageously embrace risks (Vivienne, 2023; Arao & Clemens, 2013).

RBS foregrounds care, adaptability, and collaboration, providing inclusive settings where marginalised subjectivities can assert agency. Rather than avoiding contentious issues, RBS acknowledges the necessity of confronting power imbalances, allowing researchers and participants alike to engage reflexively with research processes. The ethical imperative of care (de La Bellacasa, 2017) underpins RBS, ensuring that research interactions remain ethical, context-sensitive, and participatory.

### **Methodological Development: Implementing RBS through Zine-Making**

The methodological application of RBS was operationalised through a series of zine-making workshops with queer young adults in Italy, examining their sexting practices. These workshops were structured to create a physical, cognitive, and emotional space conducive to bravery and self-expression.

Key methodological strategies included:

- **Physical Dimension:** Ensuring accessibility in workshop locations, offering flexible seating arrangements, and providing necessary creative materials to accommodate neurodivergent and disabled participants.
- **Cognitive Dimension:** Allowing participants to engage at their own pace, integrating multimodal forms of expression (drawing, collage, text), and progressively structuring discussions from general to more personal reflections on sexting.
- **Emotional Dimension:** Emphasizing care practices, facilitating decompression spaces, and encouraging researcher participation to foster collective engagement rather than hierarchical observation.

The workshops served as a platform for participants to critically engage with their digital sexual experiences while maintaining agency over how their narratives were represented. The iterative nature of the workshops allowed participants to build confidence, revisit their perspectives, and contribute to a collectively constructed knowledge base. Additionally, the use of zine-making as a research method provided an avenue for participants to visually and textually narrate their experiences in ways that bypass traditional linguistic and cognitive barriers, supporting neurodivergent and marginalized voices.

## Case Study and Findings

This research critically examines the construction of Research Brave Space through zine-making workshops, drawing on reflections and empirical experiences upon doctoral study that explores sexting practices by queer subjectivities in Italy.

Participants reported that the workshop environment enabled them to explore difficult topics without fear of judgment, often pushing themselves to engage in deeper reflexivity. Meanwhile, they expressed an increased sense of agency, as the process of making a zine provided them with a tangible, self-curated representation of their experiences. Moreover, the multimodal nature of zine-making allowed for nuanced, non-linear expressions of experience, capturing ambivalence and contradictions often difficult to articulate through traditional interviews.

One significant example was a participant who initially hesitated to share their zine entry but later used the space to discuss struggles with body image and sexting. Another participant employed humour in their zine, demonstrating how creative methods allow for complex, layered engagement with personal experiences. These examples illustrate how RBS enables participants to 'lean into fear' (Stubbs, 2019), challenging themselves while feeling supported. Additionally, the iterative nature of the workshops allowed participants to revisit their narratives across different sessions, reinforcing the role of RBS in fostering long-term self-reflection and community engagement.

## **Conclusion: disruptive potential of RBS and zine-making for digital sexual intimacies**

This paper asserts that zine-making workshops function as Research Brave Spaces, disrupting traditional academic methodologies that rely on extractive or rigid data collection methods. By embedding care, adaptability, and multimodal expression into the research design, zine-making allows for a more ethical, participatory, and transformative exploration of digital sexual intimacies. The study contributes to broader discussions in queer methodologies, creative research methods, and ethics of care, advocating for an expansion of brave, reflexive, and participatory approaches in the social sciences.

Through this methodological rupture, the research demonstrates that embracing discomfort and creative non-linearity fosters richer, more inclusive knowledge production. By situating research within spaces of courage rather than certainty, this work challenges scholars to rethink how we engage with vulnerable and non-normative subjectivities, ultimately contributing to a more just and reflective academic practice.

The Research Brave Space provided by zine-making embraces the possibility and the dissonance in the individuals (researchers and subjects), creating space for ongoing negotiation, leading to reflection on needs, resources, and power relationships in research fields. Furthermore, it highlights the transformative potential of methodologies that embrace creative, graphic, and multimodal strategies, urging researchers to consider alternative approaches that align with the ethics of care and co-production of knowledge.

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