

Narrowing the diversity gap

LGBTQ+ zines, metadata and discovery at the University for the Creative Arts

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ABSTRACT

The Zine Collections at the University for the Creative Arts are experiencing significant growth, particularly in the areas of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion. Given that many of these zines are handmade and independently published, they are seldom purchased as “shelf-ready” items. Consequently, new acquisitions have presented a valuable opportunity to assess metadata requirements and subject categorisation as they are catalogued in-house. This article will outline our cataloguing and metadata initiatives, with a particular focus on the description of our LGBTQ+ zine collection, addressing subject headings, summary provision, challenges faced, and the overall impact of our efforts.

KEYWORDS zines; metadata enhancement; discovery; subject analysis; Library of Congress Subject Headings; Homosaurus

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Introduction

At the University for the Creative Arts, I am part of the Collections team, consisting of five members. In my role as both the metadata lead and the primary cataloguer, I recognise that large projects may extend beyond our staffing capabilities. Nevertheless, we are actively engaging in efforts to incorporate Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) principles into our cataloguing and metadata practices in a manageable, day-to-day manner. By incorporating EDI considerations into our workflows, we aim to create a more inclusive and representative framework for organising and accessing our resources and to reflect the rich diversity of UCA’s community.

Why zines are significant in this context

In alignment with our ongoing commitment to enhancing the diversity and inclusivity of our library collections, we are proactively seeking resources that broaden these areas. Notably, our Liaison Librarians have increased zine purchases. These come from various sources, including publishers and presses such as the Common

Threads Press¹, online marketplaces like Etsy, direct from artists' websites, and from our own students. Zines support academic courses, aid librarians in educational initiatives and, importantly in an EDI context, help users see themselves reflected in library resources whilst exploring diverse experiences. They are often then used directly with students through initiatives such as zine-making workshops, and by featuring them on theme-specific reading lists.



Figure 1: A selection of zines at UCA

However, as well as narrowing a gap in terms of EDI, zines represent one of the few resources we manage that require manual cataloguing and in-house processing. This presents a valuable opportunity to closely examine the items, in contrast to our shelf-ready materials. They offered therefore an obvious opportunity to explore metadata provision and discoverability.

Familiarity with the Cataloguing Code of Ethics ([Cataloguing Ethics Steering Committee, 2021](#)), the [Zine Librarians Code of Ethics, 2015](#) and the Queer Zine Library Cataloguing manual ([Queer Zine Library, no date](#)) fed into what we ideally wished to address in the cataloguing of these materials, with the knowledge that time and staffing would curtail any in-depth analysis of the tools available to us. The objective was to achieve immediate outcomes that enable EDI to be integrated into our workflows efficiently, without introducing significant complexity or expanding into a larger project than originally planned.

Subject headings for enhanced discoverability

We began with looking at the availability and usefulness of relevant subject headings. Like many university libraries in the UK, we use Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) to describe our resources, due to various budgetary considerations

¹ <https://www.commonthreadspress.co.uk/>

and workflow requirements. However, this reliance on established terminology can necessitate the acceptance of outdated terms that are slow to evolve.

We encounter many examples of LCSH terms in supplied records that are now seen as reductive and outdated in terms of EDI. Some of these subjects have been updated, such as the terms “Blacks” and “Whites”, which were updated to “Black people” and “White people” respectively in 2022. Additionally, the term “Gays” was updated in 2023 to “Gay people” within the context of LGBTQ+ terminology.

While these updates are a significant improvement, it has been important to remain aware of the authority work required to retroactively reflect these changes. We performed bulk updates to these headings at the time of changing but downloading ebook updates or accepting older print book records can reintroduce outdated terms. We manage this by manually analysing authority update reports to identify and update unauthorised headings to current terminology.

In terms of our LGBTQ+ zines, it quickly became obvious that LCSH alone was not serving us in terms of description and full and transparent discoverability. We decided to invest some time in exploring alternative thesauri that more comprehensively reflect the themes involved, as well as the language used by both our users and the zine creators.

This quickly led us to the [Homosaurus](#), a data vocabulary of LGBTQ+ terms intending to function as a companion to LCSH and other broader thesauri, and which aims to advance the discoverability of LGBTQ+ resources and information. This seemed an excellent place to start, if not rather overwhelming at its sheer breadth of terms.

An example of a subject heading that immediately became important for us was the term “Queer”² or “Queer identity”. Throughout the LGBTQ+ zine collection, this term seemed to be the most used in terms of the communities and people they represented. LCSH do not adequately address this topic; some terms exist, such as “Queer comic books,” “Queer fiction,” and “Queer studies”, but there is inconsistency in the application; often preferring instead the terms “LGBT”, “LGBTQ+”, and “Sexual minority” interchangeably. For example:

- “Queer activism” is an unauthorised *See from* term, under “LGBT activism”
- “Queer culture” is an unauthorised *See from* term, under “Sexual minority culture”
- “Queer people” is an unauthorised *See from* term, under “LGBTQ+ people”

While LGBT and LGBTQ+ are acceptable (though it would be preferable if LCSH stuck to one form of acronym), “Sexual minority” is an option we would prefer to avoid using (though there are currently many examples of this in our legacy metadata).

² There is a very interesting post, ‘*Queer*’ history: A history of *Queer* by Mollie Clarke on the National Archives blog, posted Tuesday 9 February 2021. Available at: <https://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/queer-history-a-history-of-queer>. [Accessed: 4 March 2025]

Conversely, Homosaurus has a significant number of options, including “Queer”, “Queer identity”, “Genderqueer identity”, and “Queer culture”. It also incorporates various identifying terms, such as “Indigenous queer people”, and “Asian queer people”. While identifying terms are served by LCSH with the heading of “Gay people”, for example, “Jewish gay people”, and “Indian gay people”, we felt this language did not accurately represent the tone and themes of our zines collection, or its users.

For example, *Mixd Azn queers* by [Jess Wu-O](#) (see [Figure 1](#)), a zine about Asian queer and trans identity. Here, the use of the Homosaurus vocabulary was exceptionally effective in accurately describing the zine in question, with its headings of “Asian queer people”, “Asian transgender people” and, more generally, “Queer identity”, selected from an extensive list of terms including “Asian LGBTQ+ people”, “Asian bisexual people”, “Asian gay men”, “Asian intersex people”, “Asian asexual people” and “Asian non-binary people” among others.

This diversification of terms is crucial, and although we cannot dedicate as much time as we would like to exploring and applying them in depth, we believe this has been an important start to the work of cataloguing LGBTQ+ zines and in making them more discoverable, more inclusive, and more representative of the communities they represent.

Adding detailed MARC 520 tags (summaries)

To further enhance discoverability, we have incorporated extended summaries in MARC tag 520 whenever feasible. These summaries aim to include additional keywords and provide a more comprehensive representation of the zine's contents. This process involves either a brief analysis of the zine itself, utilising publisher descriptions, or referencing descriptions provided by the creator within the zine, on personal websites, or on platforms such as Etsy, from which we acquire many of our zines.

While this can be quite time-consuming, it has proven to be worthwhile. Although subject headings play a significant role in discoverability, our summaries—often written in the same voice as the creator—offer a more detailed representation of what readers can anticipate in the zine, particularly for those with unspecific titles or no title at all.

For example, for the title *Archiving Joy*, we included subject headings which represented the work, but also an added summary by the artist:

Abstract

A story of my Great Aunt Joy b.1924, a transgender woman, a veteran, a musician, a civil servant, an aunt, a sister, and a partner. Archiving Joy is the story of Rosemary Joy Erskine, local artist Lu Williams' Great Aunt Joy. The tale of Joy (b. 1924 d.1995) starts from family oral history and delves into the archive, pulling together fragments of a colourful life, weaved in with contributions from local artists, writers, and historians. This retelling of Joy's life is joined by artist, writer and researcher contributions, reimagining and reflecting on our current archival process in the UK. -- Artists website.

Library Notes ^**General Note**

Zine. A5 perfect-bound volume with cover featuring gold foiling embossed by hand.
Title and statements of responsibility from titlepage.

Subjects ^

Gender nonconformity.
LGBTQ+ zine.
Queer identity
Transgender women.
Zines.

Figure 2: Section from the "quick look" view on Summon for the title "Archiving Joy"

Physical organisation and presentation of zines on ResourceBank

Zines were formerly arranged simply in alphabetical order within Special Collections, but as numbers increased it was decided they needed further arrangement physically, to optimise discoverability and use.

In collaboration with the University Archivist and staff from the Digitisation Unit it was decided to arrange them thematically, with broad subjects including LGBTQ+ zines, Identity zines, Feminism zines, and Activism zines. Zines were then boxed and shelved within their themes, and the arrangement was duplicated digitally on ResourceBank, our database of digitised archive collections. A select number of fields from the library catalogue record were extracted and uploaded here, alongside digitised covers of each zine.

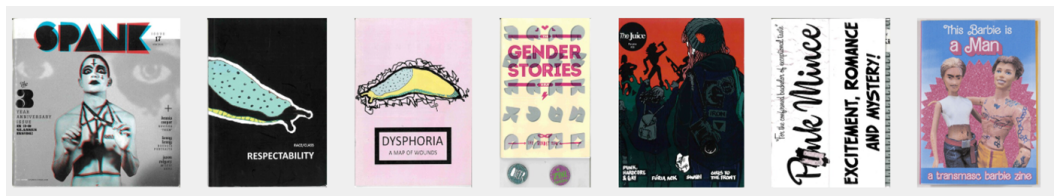


Figure 3: Screenshot from UCA ResourceBank.

We established a connection between the two systems by integrating a link in ResourceBank to the catalogue record and retroactively incorporating ResourceBank's broad subject areas into a local subject field (MARC tag 653) within the main MARC record. The latter was accomplished manually and is now part of the workflow of cataloguing new zines in both systems. This enhancement allows users to search for pertinent subjects, such as "LGBTQ+ zine" across both systems to locate related zines.

Challenges and limitations

We recognised we were not able to conduct a comprehensive survey and analysis of all subject thesauri available. We strategically selected zines as our area of focus, acknowledging that although they are a small sub-section of our collections, any work to enhance our cataloguing efforts would represent a meaningful step forward. It was with these limitations in mind that we commenced the manual integration of Homosaurus headings on an item-by-item basis.

We acknowledged that the potential for unconscious bias should not be ignored and identified that we may not always be best positioned to assign detailed subject headings in areas that do not affect us on a personal level. Moving forward, we would like to engage zine creators, particularly our students, in the description of our zine collections. In the instances where we solicited input from our students, for example when they have donated personal zines made in zine-making workshops, they were enthusiastic and eager to contribute in this respect.

Another consideration was to ensure that the changes we made to records were effectively represented in our discovery layer. We soon realised that Summon required additional customisation to properly display zine summaries, which we were able to implement promptly. Furthermore, we needed to confirm the functionality of the display and search features for the local subject field (MARC tag 653).



Figure 4: Screenshot of how a zine appears on our discovery layer as part of a broad search; it was important that the summary appeared in part, even in a list of full search results.

Impact and thoughts for the future

The impact of these changes is yet to be ascertained fully. The physical arrangement of the zines and discoverability on ResourceBank have made a positive difference to how they are used internally with our staff and students and feedback has been positive.

With any such project, it is beneficial to communicate updates to our colleagues. To this end, we provided a summary of our work to all staff through our Library Connect newsletter.

Going forward, input from our users would be an interesting project to undertake, to explore how they engage with the catalogues and how they perceive the language used in both the resources and how they are described.

Now that we have explored the area of LGBTQ+ zines and their description, the additional work has been integrated into our standard cataloguing workflows. Moving forward, we anticipate that as we gain greater familiarity with Homosaurus, we will be able to develop in-house guidelines for its use to enhance and further streamline our processes.

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