Visualizing the independent printed books: an analytical approach at the intersection of material culture and information design

Visualizando os livros impressos independentes: uma abordagem analítica na interseção entre cultura material e design da informação

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material culture, information design, pictograms, visual graphic language, independent publishing

This article introduces an analytical framework situated at the intersection of material culture and information design, developed to examine the graphic, technical, and editorial features of publications from Brazil's independent publishing field. Grounded in Berta Ribeiro's material culture methodology and informed by ethnographic participation in book fairs, the research analyzes a corpus of fifty printed books using a descriptive sheet organized into technical variables. Drawing from Michael Twyman's theory of visual graphic language, the framework incorporates a visual layer composed of pictograms that function as analytical icons, designed to encode visual logic production attributes such as binding, printing processes, paper types, and finishing techniques. These icons enable comparative reading of editorial solutions and reveal material patterns across the corpus. The result is a research-oriented, design-driven instrument that expands traditional bibliographic analysis by integrating visual logic and descriptive rigor. This approach contributes methodologically to the study of editorial artifacts and demonstrates the value of schematic representation in analyzing the cultural, aesthetic, and production dimensions of printed matter.

cultura material, design da informação, pictogramas, linguagem gráfica visual, publicação independente

Este artigo apresenta um framework analítico situado na interseção entre cultura material e design da informação, desenvolvido para examinar os aspectos gráficos, técnicos e editoriais de publicações do campo da edição independente no Brasil. A investigação se apoia na metodologia de cultura material proposta por Berta Ribeiro e em uma imersão etnográfica em feiras de livros, analisando um corpus de cinquenta obras impressas a partir de uma ficha descritiva composta por variáveis técnicas. Inspirado na teoria da linguagem gráfica visual de Michael Twyman, o framework incorpora uma camada visual formada por pictogramas que codificam atributos como tipo de encadernação, processos de impressão, papéis e acabamentos. Essa visualização permite leituras comparativas das soluções editoriais, revelando padrões materiais no corpus. O resultado é um instrumento de pesquisa orientado pelo design, que amplia a análise bibliográfica tradicional ao integrar lógica visual e rigor descritivo. A proposta contribui metodologicamente para o estudo de artefatos editoriais e demonstra o potencial das representações esquemáticas na análise da dimensão cultural, estética e produtiva do impresso.

1 Introduction

This article examines how information design operated as a methodological instrument in the analysis of material artifacts. It derives from a doctoral dissertation on independent publishing in Brazil (Martins Filho, 2024), but does not present the empirical findings of that study. Instead, it reflects on the construction of a visual analytical system developed during the research. This study investigates the use of pictograms and schematic graphic elements as instruments for categorizing, organizing, and interpreting material data.

The study draws on fieldwork conducted at independent book fairs in Brazil, particularly at the Feira Miolo(s). The initial objective was to document graphic and production variables observed in independent books. Once the textual description proved insufficient to maintain consistency across records and to support comparison between artifacts, the research required a structured system capable of stabilizing categories and reducing descriptive ambiguity.

To address this need, the study developed a customized analytical sheet. Its structure draws on print production budgeting forms and on methodological principles derived from material culture studies. The framework incorporated pictograms representing variables such as binding systems, printing processes, paper types, and finishing techniques. These visual elements were integral to the analytical procedure. They defined categories, constrained interpretation, and established equivalences across cases.

The understanding of the book's materiality as a constitutive element of meaning has been discussed in book studies, material culture, and editorial design. Bremer (2020) argues that the materiality of literature encompasses the physical and editorial conditions through which texts are produced and received, highlighting the role of format, typography, and design in shaping meaning. In the context of independent publishing, Zugliani and Moura (2019) emphasize the strategic role of materiality in constructing editorial identities and reader experiences, while Braga and Mattar (2019) associate the continued relevance of printed books with material attributes that function as expressive and communicative components of editorial projects. Together, these studies support the view of the book as a semantic artifact in which materiality, form, and content are inseparable dimensions of meaning-making.

This article describes the development of that system and reflects on its implications. Translating material features into standardized graphic signs altered the research process. Visual encoding reorganized observation, exposed recurring patterns, and supported comparison across the corpus. In this context, information design functioned as an analytical device embedded in the production of knowledge, not as a subsequent mode of presentation. It details the design of the analytical framework and its application to the corpus, highlighting how categorizing – when informed by material culture approaches – can reveal embedded meanings in graphic choices. The visual dimension of the framework, including the development of pictograms for technical variables, also establishes a point of contact with information design practices. The theoretical foundations of this study

are built upon an interdisciplinary dialogue. The analytical framework integrates Michael Twyman's (1982) theory of visual graphic language with the material culture methodologies proposed by Berta Ribeiro (1985) and Marcelo Rede (1996). Furthermore, the work of Helena de Barros (2018) informs the use of visual coding, while the discussion on the independent publishing field is grounded in authors such as Pierre Bourdieu (2018) and Gilles Colleu (2007).

Structurally, this article first contextualizes independent publishing and the fieldwork conducted at book fairs. It then describes the methodological shift toward documentary analysis and the study of artifacts as sources of knowledge. Subsequently, the text details the development of the analytical sheet and the creation of a pictographic system for technical variables. Finally, it reflects on the implications of using information design as an analytical device in knowledge production.

2 Context: from fieldwork to documentary analysis

The context of independent publishing is more complex than it may initially appear. The term "independent" itself has been debated within the field, since it encompasses heterogeneous actors, distinct economic arrangements, and varied editorial positions (Bourdieu, 2018; Muniz Júnior, 2016). Despite this conceptual instability, there is a shared understanding that small and micro-publishers occupy a singular position in the experimentation with the book as a material object. Operating outside large-scale industrial constraints, these publishers frequently explore alternative formats, binding systems, printing techniques, and graphic configurations, treating the book not only as a vehicle for content but as a site of formal and material inquiry.

Grounded in fieldwork conducted at Feira Miolo(s), one of Brazil's largest independent publishing fairs, this research approaches books as visual-material constructs whose graphic and material features contribute to meaning-making. Between 2022 and 2023, fieldwork was carried out across three editions of the fair, combining participant observation, informal conversations with publishers, and exploratory analysis of printed artifacts. The experience of participating in the fair reveals the vibrancy of a field characterized by creativity and experimental approaches to bookmaking. Gilles Colleu (2007) describes the field of micro and small publishers as a fertile ground for editorial experimentation, where intellectual effervescence gives rise to literary gems, poetic outbursts, overlooked ideas, and necessary political engagements. He argues that micro-publishing serves as a laboratory, sometimes yielding unique forms of professional publishing.

The fieldwork process directly informed the construction of the analytical corpus, which comprises 50 books selected from ten independent publishers located across different Brazilian macro-regions, intentionally countering the Southeast-centered bias often found in the literature. The books were acquired through direct purchase and assembled into a curated collection to ensure physical access and analytical autonomy. Publisher selection followed three criteria: participation in at least one edition of Feira Miolo(s),



Figure 1 Illustrative example of the application of different substrates in the analyzed sample (*Muito pelo Contrário*, by Walacy Neto, Ed. negalilu, 2017). The image shows a detail of Capa AG paper, typically used for low-cost packaging, here employed for editorial interior pages. The details of the image show the effect of the paper fiber texture on the black ink. Source: Image produced by the researchers.

a primary focus on book production, and the development of works demonstrating editorial rationalization through the articulation of content and graphic experimentation. Although many publishers operated with limited or on-demand production, reflecting the handcrafted and small-scale nature of the field, the resulting corpus encompasses a diverse range of editorial approaches, visual languages, and material configurations.

The transition from field immersion to documentary analysis was not a break but a methodological shift. The study of artifacts requires engagement with the social and material contexts that produce them. However, once removed from their original context, these artifacts demand an interpretative effort grounded in systematic observation, technical description, and comparative categorization. In this transition – from encounters at the fair to analytical inspection on the researcher's table – the approach adopted here draws on a methodological foundation detailed in Martins Filho and Barros (2022). That prior work establishes the articulation between material culture and print culture as the basis for comparative research in printed book collections. These principles reinforce the importance of descriptive rigor, attention to physical attributes, and the analytical potential embedded in graphic materialities.



Figure 2 Details of different forms of handcrafted bookbinding included in the corpus of analysis (Martins Filho, 2024). The image shows examples of pamphlet stitch with yellow thread, pamphlet stitch with purple thread, Singer stitch, and Coptic binding. Source: Image produced by the researchers.

Approaching printed works as objects foregrounds their condition as artifacts of material culture, expressing historical forms of production, technology, and social organization. For Rede (1996), objects possess immanent qualities that must be understood through their material configurations and social trajectories, without separating material and symbolic dimensions. Following this perspective, the research assumes that the physical characteristics of printed artifacts carry culturally meaningful information. Drawing on Ribeiro (1985), books are treated as sources of knowledge in their own right, making the description of their material attributes a necessary step for interpretation rather than a merely formal exercise.

3 Methodological procedures employed: developing the analytical sheet

The initial task of the study was to develop an observation method capable of naming and organizing the formal and technical attributes of the books under analysis. The study structured this tool as a customized analytical sheet. This tool, grounded in principles drawn from print production budgeting forms (Villas-Boas, 2010), enabled the systematic recording of variables. The aim was not merely to describe but to produce a structured comparative lens through which patterns, variations, and editorial intentions could emerge. From its initial design, the sheet incorporated visual strategies to support data recognition and capture. Layout organization, sectional hierarchies, and graphic markers guided the identification of technical features during observation. These elements reduced ambiguity in the recording process and established consistent parameters for subsequent comparison.

The first step involved identifying a set of broad dimensions that could serve as containers for more specific observations. These were: (1) General Information, referring to basic bibliographic and editorial data; (2) Cover and (3) Interior (or Body), focusing on external finishing, printing, substrate type, printing techniques, and color system. These dimensions draw on the logic of commercial print production but deliberately reconfigure it to accommodate non-standard editorial practices. They were adapted and stretched to accommodate the corpus's idiosyncrasies, including hand-bound books, hybrid print methods, and unconventional page structures.

Each analytical dimension includes specific variables selected according to two criteria: their recurrence across the corpus and their capacity to illuminate decisions that intertwine material, aesthetic, and editorial intentions. As noted earlier, this framework drew inspiration from production budget templates and print specification forms commonly used in the graphic industry (Villas-Boas, 2010), adapting them into a research-oriented instrument that bridges technical discourse and cultural analysis. As David Bann (2012) suggests, specification is more than a procedural detail: it is a critical tool for anyone involved in graphic production. It defines the physical characteristics of the printed object and

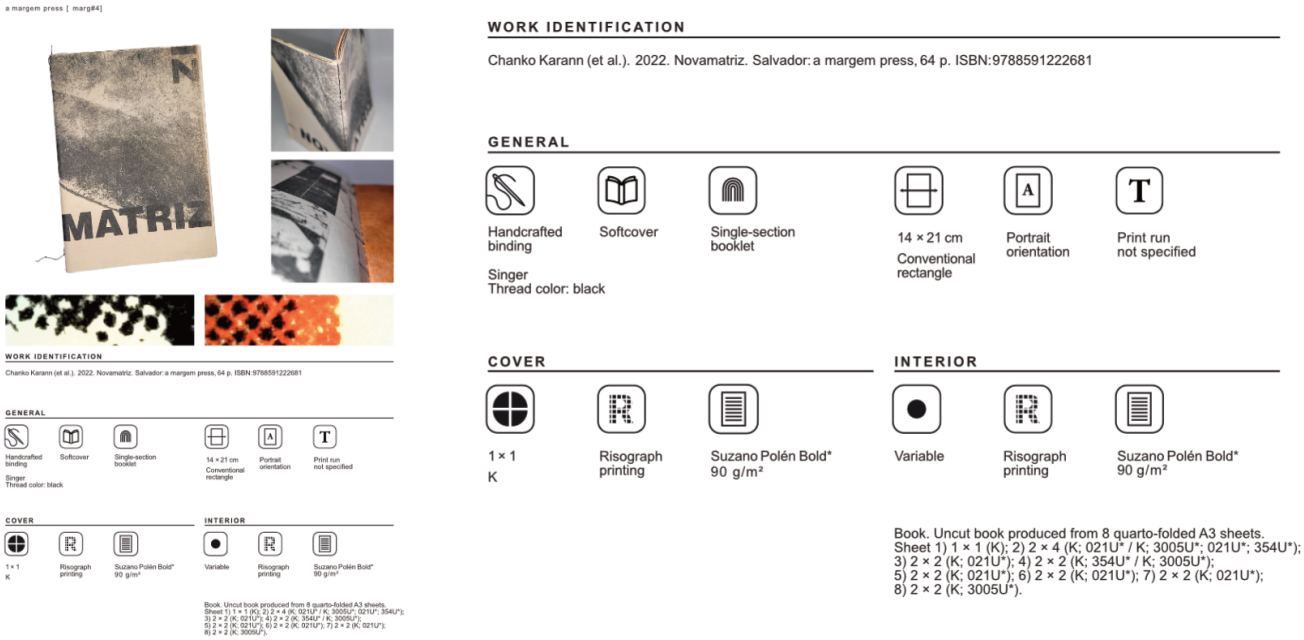


Figure 3 Image of the analytical sheet for one of the evaluated publications showing an example from the analyzed corpus (*Novamatriz*, Chanko Karann et al., a margem press 2022). Details of the general technical specifications, as well as those related to the cover and interior. The framework places particular emphasis on pictograms as tools for categorizing and systematizing analytical variables. The dimensions and variables in the analysis sheet are: General (type of stitching; type of binding; organization of the signatures; size; format; and print run), Cover (four-color process or spot color – specify which inks; type of plate and printing system; and printing substrate), and Body (four-color process or spot color – specify which inks; type of plate and printing system; and printing substrate). Source: Image produced by the researchers.

communicates them clearly to both internal teams and external suppliers. As such, the specification supports both the practical stages of production planning and, within academic inquiry, provides a robust and systematic basis for the analysis and comparison of graphic artifacts. The analysis did not apply the categories as neutral checkboxes. Each variable included open fields for description and annotation, allowing for the registration of ambiguities, deviations, and hybridities. This flexibility proved crucial for maintaining fidelity to the publications' empirical reality, which frequently exceeds binary classifications or standardized labels. For instance, bindings frequently combined adhesive and manual stitching techniques; papers varied within a single book; covers incorporated layers, textures, and interventions that resisted classification.

The framework thus emerged as both a tool for observation and a platform for interpretation. By organizing the act of looking, it facilitated comparative analysis while preserving space for nuance. It makes visible the diversity of material and graphic solutions, highlighting how each book embodies specific negotiations between resources, aesthetics, and editorial politics. In this sense, the analytical framework operates as a cultural device – an interface between the object's materiality and the researcher's gaze.



Figure 4 Illustrative example of a technique used to identify printing technology. The image shows details of electrostatic digital printing (laser printing), as well as the publisher's choice to use a more economical print setting – an option available in printer drivers – which generates a new print file with small unprinted dots in line-image areas. Image captured using a digital microscope. Source: Image produced by the researchers.

The creation of the analytical framework stemmed from an exploratory and inductive process. The development of the tool emerged from close engagement with the corpus, allowing analytical categories to take shape through observation and comparison. As the objects were manipulated, examined, and compared, patterns began to emerge – not in rigid typologies, but in recurring technical solutions, visual strategies, and production choices. These recurrences informed the preliminary dimensions of the framework and suggested a structure capable of accommodating variation without suppressing singularity. It is important to emphasize that Helena de Barros' (2018) work served as a key reference for the development of this methodological orientation, particularly in its integration of schematic visual coding and quantitative sampling as tools for comparative material analysis.

4 Use of schematic language for data cataloging and analysis

As noted in the introduction, the incorporation of schematic configurations into the analytical framework draws on Michael Twyman's theory of graphic language, particularly his classification of schematic forms as a mode of organizing and communicating information through visual structure instead of representational depiction (Twyman, 1979; 1982). Schematic language reduces visual phenomena to their operative elements, privileging relational clarity and comparative legibility over mimetic fidelity.

Within this framework, pictograms function as analytical devices that encode material and production attributes into a standardized visual syntax. Their role resides in classification, enabling comparative readings across the corpus and extending verbal description. Structuring and revealing information through visual logic that privileges relational clarity. Twyman's insight that visual language extends the range and efficiency of written communication proves central here: the pictograms do not replace verbal analysis, but complement it – activating modes of visual reading not achievable through text alone.

Guided by this paradigm, the analytical framework incorporates a set of pictographic signs – operating within the pictorial mode of symbolization – organized through a schematic method of configuration. These symbols do not merely replicate the visual appearance of the books; they encode material and production features into a standardized syntax. By situating these elements within a schematic matrix, the framework aligns with Twyman's model to reveal relational patterns and balance individual denotation with systemic classification.

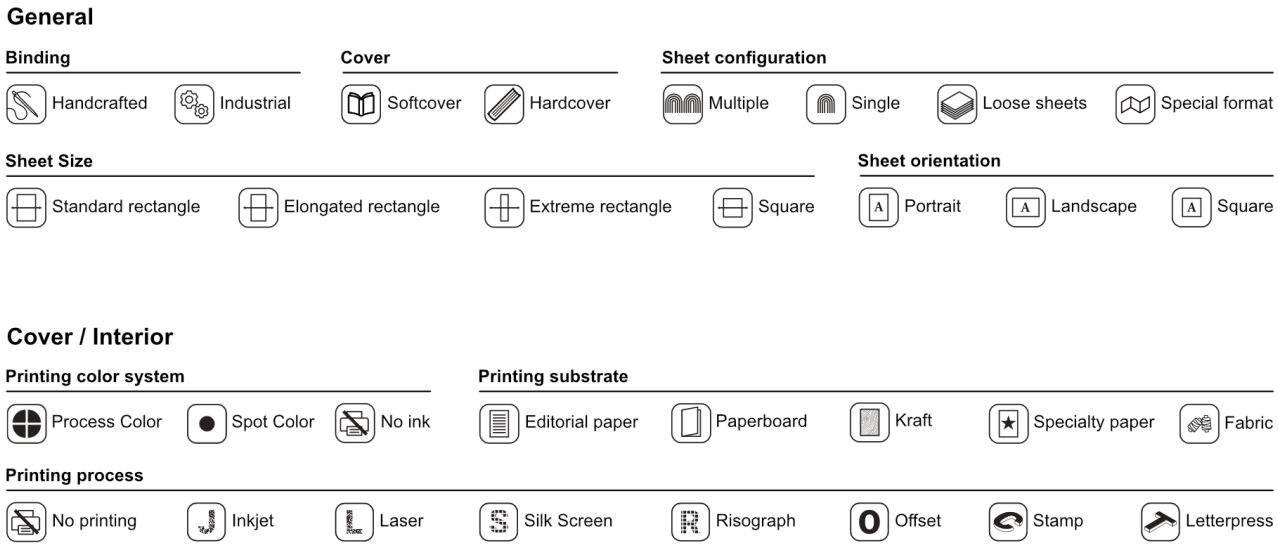


Figure 5 Systematic inventory of the analytical framework's pictographic language. The icons are categorized according to the three primary research dimensions: general variables, cover, and interior. Source: developed by the researchers.

It is important to note that these visual strategies were not limited to the classification process and the completion of the cataloging records. During the writing of the final research text, they also played a significant role in communicating the study's findings, functioning as active instruments for structuring and conveying analytical insights. The research presents this dual role – analytical and communicative – throughout all analytical sections. It involves a deliberate and compositional use of graphic language, in the sense proposed by Michael Twyman, employing schematic configurations to structure and present information beyond purely verbal exposition. These schematic configurations function as integral components of the argument, not as supplementary illustrations.

In this respect, information design operates as a strategy in academic communication. Its application extends to the formative stages of the research – supporting analysis and knowledge construction – as well as to the systematic organization and presentation of results, strengthening clarity, comparability, and conceptual articulation.

Figure 6 illustrates this type of application. The pictograms originally employed in the analytical record sheets – representing digital, permeographic, planographic, and relief printing systems – are reintroduced

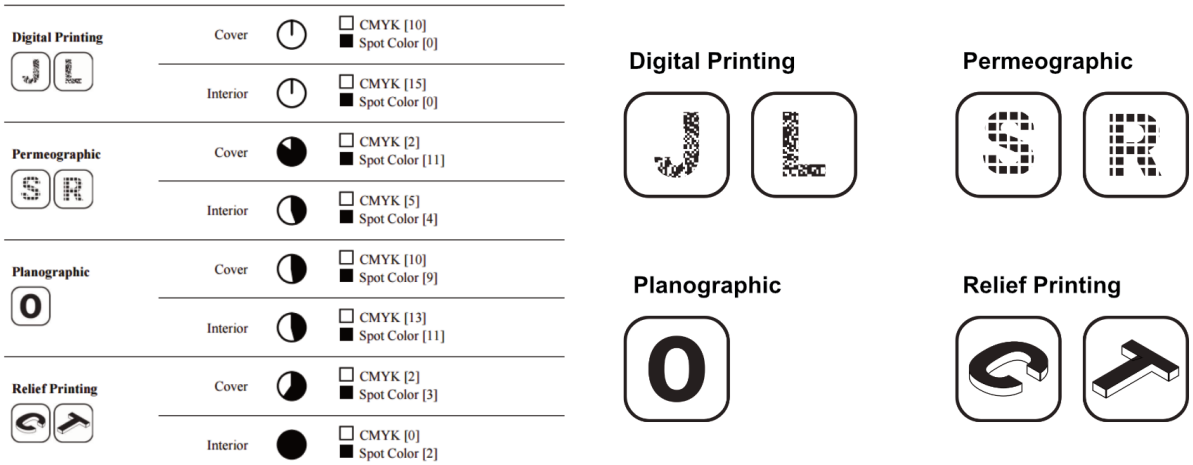


Figure 6 Analytical pictogram system developed to classify printing technologies – digital, permeographic, planographic, and relief – applied to both covers and interiors. The visual coding combines formal variation and texture to distinguish technical processes, while adjacent circular charts provide a quantitative synthesis of ink configuration (CMYK and spot colors) across sampled artifacts. Source: developed by the researchers.

here to systematize the results of their occurrence across the corpus. Initially conceived as classificatory markers, these graphic signs operate as visual synthesis devices.

Several compositional decisions informed their design. First, grayscale tones were adopted to anticipate practical applications beyond color-screen visualization, ensuring legibility and reproducibility in monochromatic contexts. Second, the design incorporates distinct textures to reinforce technological differentiation: digital systems are depicted through dotted patterns that evoke stochastic screening; permeographic processes are rendered with a stencil-mediated impressions; planographic systems employ smooth, continuous forms, alluding to the flat printing surface characteristic of lithographic logic; and relief systems are represented with solid, high-contrast shapes that emphasize the material opposition between printing and non-printing areas. The resulting composition operates as a meta-image. Its structure is not arbitrary, but grounded in a conceptual translation of technical principles, allowing the diagram itself to embody the logic of the printing systems it represents.

This visual strategy reflects a broader epistemological commitment: treating visuality not as mere illustration but as a central mode of inquiry, functioning as a "device for directing thinking" (Twyman, 1979, p. 117). Encoding material choices into pictograms is itself an interpretative gesture – one that transforms observation into structured representation. Twyman emphasized that the strength of schematic graphic language lies in its capacity to "see points of connection between different areas of graphic language that are normally seen as discrete" (Twyman, 1979, p. 119), thereby organizing complexity and supporting reasoning through visual form. It was in this spirit that the pictographic layer of the framework was conceived – as a graphic language of research capable of articulating the editorial and material logics at play in independent publishing practices.

In the Figure 7, we observe another application of the pictographic system, now addressing the size and proportions of the publications in the corpus. The formats were mapped and classified according to the ratio of the larger to the smaller measurable dimensions (width and height).

Square ratios (1:1 and also 1:1.3) were designated as squares, encompassing both geometrically equal proportions and optically adjusted squares – those in which one dimension is slightly longer, without altering the perceptual reading of the format as square. Ratios between 1.3 and 1.7 correspond to what are termed "conventional rectangles," proportions commonly found in industrial book production and aligned with standard graphic sheet formats. These proportions are consistent with historically consolidated book formats and with industrial paper-optimization logic. Ratios between 1.7 and 2 were classified as elongated rectangles, emphasizing either horizontality (oblong formats) or verticality (narrow formats), and appear less frequently in the sample. Values exceeding this range were designated as exaggerated rectangles, representing extreme proportional conditions that depart significantly from conventional publishing standards.

In this visualization, the pictograms are accompanied by additional information displays, notably bar charts. Although these bars lack a detailed legend or numerical scale, they function rhetorically to demonstrate proportional relationships and differences in frequency among categories. Their purpose is not precise measurement, but the visual reinforcement of comparative magnitude, strengthening the schematic articulation of format distribution across the corpus.

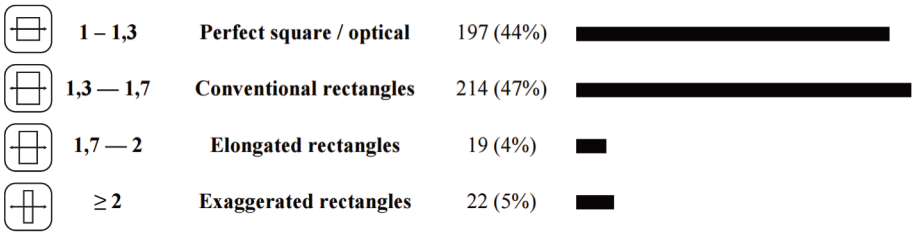


Figure 7 Pictographic visualization of format proportions in the corpus. The diagram employs a consistent set of pictograms to encode aspect-ratio categories and frequencies, demonstrating how schematic graphic language can structure data, reveal relationships, and support comparative reasoning through visual form. The study employed this strategy both in completing the analytical record sheets and in presenting the results, as shown in the figure. Source: developed by the researchers.

Moreover, this approach demonstrates how information design strategies in data presentation enhance selective visual identification. By structuring information through consistent visual cues, these elements guide attention, facilitate pattern recognition, and support rapid differentiation between categories, thereby strengthening analytical clarity and interpretative efficiency.

Those examples represent only one instance of the broader strategy developed throughout the thesis. The complete set of pictograms constitutes a replicable classification system; it is made available as part of the doctoral research underpinning this study (Martins Filho, 2024), thereby positioning the pictographic framework not merely as a methodological proposition but as a transferable and reusable research tool.

Building on Berta Ribeiro's (1985) assertion that processes of naming and visual articulation are fundamental to the intelligibility of analytical categories, those visual signs may be understood as a documentary language in their own right – serving as condensed symbolic formulations of methodological decisions. The assignment of specific symbols to elementary components and operations helps refine the analytical lexicon while enabling the systematic indexing, comparison, and archival organization of material features, particularly those related to formal variation and ornamental differentiation.

5 Conclusion

This article has argued that information design can operate not merely as a mode of presenting research outcomes, but as an analytical instrument embedded within the production of knowledge itself. Drawing on Michael Twyman's (1982) formulation of visual graphic language, particularly his understanding of schematic forms as relational and structural devices, the study demonstrated that visual encoding reorganizes observation. By translating binding systems, printing processes, paper types, and format proportions into standardized pictograms, the research established stable comparative parameters while revealing technological recurrences, hybrid production strategies, and proportional tendencies across the corpus. In this sense, the pictographic layer did not illustrate findings after the fact; it structured what could be analytically perceived.

The articulation between material culture and information design proved central to this process. Material culture theory, as articulated by authors such as Marcelo Rede (1996) and Berta Ribeiro (1985), emphasizes the descriptive rigor required to apprehend the immanent qualities of objects and their cultural embeddedness. Information design, when mobilized as schematic organization rather than surface embellishment, provides the visual infrastructure through which such description can be stabilized, compared, and archived. The convergence of these fields delineates a methodological space in which naming, coding, and schematizing become epistemologically operative acts. The pictograms function as a documentary language – a condensed symbolic system that refines the analytical lexicon while preserving the relational dimension of artifacts within broader editorial circuits.

At the same time, the study recognizes that classification entails abstraction. The translation of heterogeneous material configurations into graphic units inevitably reduces complexity. This reduction, however, is methodological rather than accidental. By maintaining open descriptive

fields and by acknowledging the provisional nature of its categories, the framework sustains a productive tension between typological structure and empirical deviation. The schematic model does not eliminate singularity; it renders its variations legible against a shared analytical ground.

Although developed in relation to Brazilian independent publishing, the framework advances broader methodological implications. It demonstrates that the study of editorial artifacts benefits from integrating the descriptive commitments of material culture with the structural clarity of schematic visual language, as Twyman understands it. Instead of proposing a closed taxonomic system, the research offers a transferable and adaptable analytical tool. In doing so, it positions information design not as a secondary communicative layer but as a critical component of methodological reasoning in material culture studies.

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