COVID-19 COMICS AS GRAPHIC NETWORKS OF NON-EMERGENT HEALTHCARE: A MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF PANDEMIC COMICS

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Abstract: *COVID-19 comic discourses articulating lived experiences during lockdown, isolation, and quarantine constructed a creative space of self and collective care. This research article explores how the multimodality within COVID-19 comic discourses aids in constructing a 'networked public of graphic care'. Resorting to Dannah Boyd's (2008; 2011) methodological framework of 'networks of graphic care,' comics on the themes of self-care, coping mechanisms, and mental well-being from the work COVID Chronicles: A Comics Anthology (Boileau & Johnson, 2021) is analysed. A Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) is performed to decipher the visual and verbal comic devices employed in constructing this graphic network of care using Thierry Groensteen (2007) and Scott McCloud's (2008) comic theories. The analysis highlights the various visual and linguistic techniques that enhance the communicative effectiveness of COVID-19 comics as self-care tools. By intervening in the visuality of COVID-19 comics as a tool of mental healthcare on individual and collective levels, this study illustrates the potential of comic narratives as a sustainable mode of sustenance and care in times of adversity and uncertainty. Furthermore, drawing from the results, the article also proposes the potentiality of comic discourses as non-emergent healthcare tools and a pedagogical tool for the successive policy implementation of mental healthcare measures.*

Keywords: *COVID-19 Comics, Graphic care, Mental health, Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), Self and collective care*

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Introduction[1]

The COVID-19 outbreak invoked a worldwide health emergency and was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organisation on March 11, 2020. The sudden disruption of physical and mental health was one of the most visible implications that led to a severe collapse of several global public health achievements (Holst, 2020, pp. 1396-1403; Mejia et al., 2020, pp. 99-103). Deemed as a global traumatic stressor, the visible mental health implications of the pandemic ranged from depression, stress, anxiety, fear, and stigma, caused by various sociocultural stressors like prolonged quarantine, deprivation of social interaction, information overload and further (Beam & Kim, 2020, p. 58; Menzies & Menzies, 2020, p. 3; Marshall, 2020, p. 340; Brooks et al., 2020, pp. 912-930). The COVID-19 pandemic led to a significant lack of non-emergent health care. It demanded alternative sources and mediums of care, and this study explores the potentiality of comic discourses as mental healthcare tools. COVID-19 comics, via empathy-driven relatable narratives, served as the most cost-effective advocates for healthcare access, facilitators of emotional support, and educational mediums for reducing and coping with the physical and mental pressure of the pandemic.

The paper's primary agenda springs from the same, i.e. to examine the utilisation of COVID-19 comic discourses as mental health care tools, specifically by decoding the interactive semiotic activity that unfolds within the act of comic creation and consumption. It explores the effective visual and verbal strategies used to construct a communicative act within COVID-19 comics discourses in static multimodal print mediums. The study's scope attempts to contribute to the existing scholarship on graphic medicine, an interdisciplinary field that explores the intersection of comics and healthcare discourses (Czerwiec et al., 2015, p. 1). The data is taken from the 2021 published work, *COVID Chronicles: A Comic Anthology*, edited by Kendra Boileau and Rich Johnson, a collection of around sixty-five comics from artists worldwide. Ranging through various narrative styles, the anthology consists of comic discourses depicting characters battling the emotional toll of pandemic-curbing measures, fear and anxiety of catching the virus, the stigma suffered by patients, the grief of losing loved ones, and more. These discourses served as a platform for collective storytelling, enabling comic creators to voice their struggles and, through the same, helping the readers navigate their own mental health struggles. Therefore, the selected anthology offers an avenue to look further into the scope of COVID-19 comic discourses and explore the plausibilities of using these as mental health care tools.

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The research article is formulated as an analytical essay. It provides a comprehensive, in-depth, and objective multimodal discourse analysis of select comics from the anthology to demonstrate how the interactive affordances of visual and verbal elements help in the effective construction of a communicative act. The multimodality within the communicative ability of static comics can be bifurcated into visual and verbal elements, each having a specific task and function in the meaning-making process. Consumers of comics are major partakers in this communicative process, and their interpretation of the various multimodal cues leads to the completion of the discursive process. As Pinar (2014) argues, the repertoire of means of expression in comics includes verbal, pictorial, and typographic signs, which combine in a monosensory medium, and the comic relies on only one of the senses – the eyes – to convey a world of experience to transmit multimodal meaning (ibid., p. 360). An amalgamation of visual elements like spatio-topia, panels, colour palettes, icons, and further along with verbal or linguistic aspects like grammar, sentence construction, usage of pronouns, font size, shape and spacing and further engages the reader in a communicative act and, through that, facilitates the co-construction of comic discourses. This visual-verbal synergy within COVID-19 comics creates an immersive, cathartic, and economic narrative construction process. Thereby, the analysis section of this study illustrates the interactive affordance of the multimodality of comic discourses that facilitates the same. However, neither the research article nor the researchers involved are posing to make any medical, psychiatric, or psychological claims that comics can replace medicalised support. Instead, this research is a modest attempt to build on existing scientific, psychological, and graphic medicine works that propose comics as a plausible alternative for mental health support. Furthermore, since it is a work done by literary and cultural studies researchers, the study strictly focuses on the visual language of comics.

Review of previous literature

The heightened production of discourses on the COVID-19 pandemic reveals its significant media presence, unlike other pandemics (Klein & DeTora, 2023, p. 2). Li (2024) writes about a shift from purely linguistic forms to the domination of images, audio, videos, and other modalities, demonstrating a significant multimodal characteristic, a visible trend observed within COVID-19 pandemic discourses (Li, 2024, p. 1). The affordances embedded within visual discourses offer a communicative effectiveness in conveying complex emotions. Thereby, visual discourses provide effective strategies for producing, organising, and distributing messages that can potentially engage audiences on a visually enunciating level (Glowka, 2023, p. 89). Therefore, examining these discourses reveals how the pandemic was conceived, communicated, and represented in the initial phase. Tan and Marissa's (2023) edited collection of essays cumulates

an analysis of the various multimodal discourses from the early stages of the pandemic, circulated via various mediums and reveals how these discourses helped shape the wider communicative meanings of uncertain situations and their impact on daily lives (ibid., p. 3). In the larger context of mental health narratives, it can be argued that visual pandemic discourses furthered the evolution of visual health literacy/care discourses as they aided in informing about the virus and, through that, shaping the perception and understanding of the viral containment (Ternullo, 2022, pp. 1096-1109; Gabore, 2020, p. 299; Nickl et al., 2024, p. 2). Henceforth, to quote Callender et al., "In our increasingly visual society, images are a vital component of the outbreak narrative and … contribute to the visual culture of contagion" (2020, p. 1061).

Within the various modalities of visual pandemic discourses, several studies revealed the heightened production of comics, cartoons, and infographics that offered pandemic protective and stress-coping measures (Callender et al., 2020, pp. 1061-1063; Saji et al., 2021, pp. 136-157; Peter et al., 2023, p. 102; Murray, 2022, pp. 1-40; Mustafa, 2021, p. 23; Venkatesan & Joshi, 2022, p. 698). Digital technological interventions made it easier for comic creators, illustrators, and publishers to reach a larger audience in real-time and engage in discursive communication on the mental health implications of the various pandemic preventive measures. Most COVID-19 comic discourses attempted to address the mental health challenges experienced due to the stringent measures of isolation, lockdown, and quarantine. Peter and colleagues (2023) state that healthcare comics economically and effectively convey vital information to a massive audience through simple verbal-visual narrative elements, and this adds to the social commitment of affordable healthcare that the field of graphic medicine inhibits (ibid., p. 103). This further highlights the utility value of COVID-19 comic discourses for crisis communication and coping mechanisms as they offer an "alternate way of presenting data" (Al-Jawad & Czerwiec, 2019, p. 90). To substantiate the same, several works highlight how the contribution of comic discourses has strengthened the healthcare discourses within the context of AIDS (McAllister, 1992, p. 22; Czerwiec, 2018, p. 200), disability studies (Squier, 2008, p. 72), infertility (Venkatesan & Murali 2018, pp. 609-621; Venkatesan & Murali, 2020, pp. 576–595) and further.

The vivid functionality of COVID-19 comics as effective medical discourses emanates from the semiotic potential embedded within the co-deployment of verbal and visual elements, facilitating the understanding of complex and abstract concepts (Lim et al., 2021, pp. 45-55; Saji et al., 2021, pp. 136-154). This strategy aids in constructing a visual narrative, enabling active reader participation by invoking an understanding of the message, influencing the attitude towards the message, and the intent to act after reading the message (Tan & Marissa, 2023, pp. 44-46). An advantage of pandemic discourses via the comic medium is their ability to cushion the negative impacts of the

pandemic stress (Alabi, 2021, p. 1) as it creates an "emotionally engaging but safe environment" (Tan & Marissa, 2023, p. 46). Mazowita uses Boyd's (2008, 2011) concept of networked publics to analyse Instagram-based mental health comics. She expands the phrase "networked publics" to "networks of graphic care", where she defines these Instagram comics on COVID-19 as "mental health communities which form on social networking platforms" (Mazowita, 2022a, n.p). Her research focuses on the comment thread responses to the comics rather than the visuality within comic discourses. However, her work is far from performing an intricate visual discourse analysis of these comics (Mazowita, 2022a; Mazowita, 2022b, pp. 99-114); the analysis section of this study attempts to fill that gap by venturing into the discursive structure within COVID-19 comics that facilitates care and catharsis in times of care. Hence, the core objectives of this paper are: (a) Defining and establishing COVID-19 comic discourses within the anthology as "networked publics of graphic care". (b) Deciphering the potential of COVID-19 comic discourses as a sustainable tool of care in times of crisis. (c) Analysing select comic discourses within the anthology to decipher the utilisation of multimodality to create narratives that function as sites of self and collective care.

Methodology and Method

The research borrows Dannah Boyd's (2008, 2011) concept of "networks of graphic care" as the methodological framework to decipher the comic devices employed in constructing this graphic network of care. The analysis section performs a Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) of select comics on themes of self-care, coping mechanisms, and mental well-being from the anthology using Thierry Groensteen's (2007) and Scott McCloud's (2008) comic theories. Bateman and Wildfeuer (2014) criticise linguistically inspired analysis methods for the visual medium of comics and propose a method based on models of discourse that facilitates the understanding of comics as a social practice of visual communication – this adherence to discourse coherence plays an important role in interpretation (2014, pp. 384-400). Further, they argue that this method "offers a suitable basis for a new round of more detailed empirical investigations of the nature of comics and visual meaning-making – one which lets us move beyond the application of metaphors of grammaticality" (Bateman & Wildfeuer, 2014, p. 401). They build further on the structurality of this analysis method based on the comic theories of Groensteen (2007; 2013) and McCloud (2008). The analysis method this research adopts is juxtaposed with the same scholarship, and this discursive analysis method is applied to COVID-19 comics within the anthology. This further strengthens the standpoint of positioning COVID-19 comics as "visual discourses" and offers an avenue for exploring the role of the meaning-making process in the construction of a network of graphic care.

Boyd formulates the idea of "social network sites as a genre of networked publics" (Boyd, 2011, p. 39), defining "networked publics" as spaces reconstructed by networked technologies that form an imagined collective through the intersection of people, technologies, and practices, facilitating social, cultural, and civic engagement by enabling people to connect beyond their immediate personal networks (Boyd, 2011, pp. 38-39). She emphasises that the dynamics of networked publics transcend the digital realm, integrating into everyday life. Building on this framework, the article conceptualises the COVID-19 comics within the anthology as a creative space that engenders a "networked public of graphic care". The comic discourses within the anthology serve as both creative expressions and catalysts for forming a networked public through the heightened reader engagement of the form. Within this framework, comic discourses emerge as a potent medium that fosters deeper audience interaction with the sign systems constructed by creators. The construction of COVID-19 comic discourses offered the comic creators a therapeutic opportunity to voice the hinged psychological turmoils, thus making visible their experiences. It also provided a comforting sense of solidarity for the individuals within the reading public, inhibiting the same uncertain reality. The consumers of these discourses could make sense of their pandemic experiences by suiting the sign system to fit their needs. Hence, these comics also functioned as a site of self and communal care. The visual system within comic discourses makes the whole process more evocative and engaging than any other medium, thereby forging a deeper reader-creator connection. Livingstone (2005) offers an additional lens to understand the public, defining them as groups with a shared understanding of the world, a collective identity, and a claim to inclusiveness based on a consensus of shared values and interests (ibid., p. 9). Within this definition, the comic discourses within the anthology function as a public sphere, amalgamating creators and consumers into a community, and the relatability in terms of the themes within the comic discourses further asserts the same. Through narrativising their experiences of quarantine and lockdown for an imagined audience, the comic creators not only locate and define their own experiences but also contribute to a broader public dialogue. The public constituting this networked public is largely unknown, comprising strangers who witness the comic creators' work. As Boyd (2011) argues, networked publics are not confined by geographic or temporal boundaries (ibid., p. 50), and the anthology exemplifies this by making the experiences of pandemic-induced psychological distress widely accessible. Two key factors reinforce this idea of a mediated public: firstly, the functioning of the anthology as a shared archive of pandemic experiences, and secondly, the replicability of these comics fostered a sense of collective suffering.

Analysis & Discussion

The structure of themes within the COVID-19 comics within the select anthology aligns with McNicol's (2016) argument on the various purposes of healthcare comics, ranging from raising awareness, preparing patients on what to expect from medical procedures, assisting with decision-making, promoting self-management, or simply increasing understanding and acceptance of a condition (ibid., pp. 21-22). The size of the comics within the anthology, spanning just a few pages, is another critical aspect that makes them suitable for healthcare comics because they can reach a larger audience. Further, by binding over these visual comic discourses, this networked public gets entwined over an "affective sense of belonging" evoked by the visual sign system of comics (Mazowita, 2022a, n.p; Hendry, 2020, p. 8). This sense of belongingness is not detrimental by medical diagnostic tools and symptoms; instead, it is the socio-cultural self-identification that the constituents of this public make with the visual sign system. This self-identification emanated from an element of relatability inhibited within mutual lived experiences. This relatability experienced by the consumers can be within the creator's entire narrative perspective within the comics, or probably just a couple of panels, a single panel or characters, or even, for that matter, just a minute visual element within the entire comic narrative. Divided into four major thematic divisions, the multimodal discourse analysis is structured using broader visual and verbal techniques within the text. The attempt is to draw on comics that fit under such techniques and then perform an in-depth analysis of one sample each from the text.

Spatio-topia, mirroring techniques, and semantic load

Sara Firth's 'State of Emergency' is a seven-page comic narrating the emotional crisis experienced by the protagonist narrator from the anthology. The structuring of the narrative can be analysed along Freytag's (1900) pyramid of dramatic action in five stages. The comic begins with an exposition, laying out the setting and context of the first wave of the pandemic and the sudden mood of uncertainty. Juxtaposing the scene with the devastating Australian bushfires, the orange-yellow colour pallets on the first page and the masked narrator add to the exposition. The second page underlies the rising action by depicting the building tension of the impacts of pandemic uncertainty, such as information overload, screen saturation, and mental health strains resulting from the same. Most panels on this page consist of close-up shots of the character, heightening the impact of this building emotional tension. The third page depicts the climax, the turning point that transforms the protagonist's situation in resolving a positive angle.

Figure 1. *Fourth page from 'State of Emergency' by Sarah Firth. Reproduced with permission from the artist.*

The critical emphasis of the storyline, drawing as a mental health tool, comes within this climax stage, where the narrator testifies that "I've been drawing and writing. A way to think and feel on the page. To try and make sense of all this". This caption is placed on a panel that shows her creating a dotted concentric circle icon on a page. This icon inversely reflects the concentric spiral icon, where the narrator, etched to an aeroplane, is stuck within the second panel at the top right corner. As Groensteen (2007) elaborates on the concepts of spatio-topia within the system of comics, the reflexive technique mirrors an inversion. This inversion reflects an emotional transformation from emotional entanglement to emotional liberation. Groensteen highlights that the site of a panel within a page layout determines its significance within the reading protocol (2007, p. 34). The most pivotal panels within the climax stage are situated perpendicularly at the bottom right corner of the third page. This positioning enhances the narrative significance of the panels and hence heightens the impact of the message conveyed. The lower right-hand corner comes right before turning the page, bringing forth the dramatic effect of a transition and closure. This site emphasises the idea of closure because this panel serves as the narrative endpoint for the sequence of panels on the page. This added weight makes it an apt site to incorporate this powerful resolving

visual. Also, the ending panel before turning the page affects the natural reading rhythm, allowing the reader to contemplate and absorb the message. These visual techniques deepen the significance of the narrative and the message conveyed by the panel. The panel that proceeds to the next page, i.e. the fourth page, is an extension of the climax. A rectangular bleeding panel, occupying half of the page's area in landscape mode, breaks the existing panel layouts on the previous page. These further garner more reader attention towards the panel content, which is structured as a message for the readers. The panel emphasises, "Start where you are. Do what you can…I remind myself that I've got to separate my well-being from the global news cycle". The bleeding panel furthers the metaphor of emotional liberation from pandemic anxieties through art and self-care. Hence, Firth, highlighting this idea through her comic, constructs a self-reflexive comic and furthers the message of care to the consumers of her comic. Furthermore, the spatial composition of the comic employs a linguistic application of the diagonal mirroring technique creatively to depict the various stimuli and the various emotional consequences within the first and fourth panels on the third page. In both these panels, that is, the various stimuli in panel one and consequences in panel four, are verbally enclosed within word clouds and positioned along path lines emanating from the wry facial expression of the protagonist. The all-caps font, along with these visualisation techniques, highlights the communicative effectiveness of the message, encompassing visual and verbal cues. Also, throughout the entire comic, Firth capitalises all the words with a higher semantic load, which guides the readers further into the core message of the comic.

Repetition of affirmative phrases and usage of second-person pronouns

The three-page comic "Sheltering in Place: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly" from the anthology by Ajuan Mance depicts the transition of the mental state of the character as the lockdown begins and proceeds further in time. The comic visually depicts some of the stressors and the state of distress invoked by the same via manipulating panel size, gutter gap, and colour palette. As we proceed through the tripartite panels from pages one to three, the panel width decreases from 5.5cm to 4.5cm to 4.2cm, the gutter gap increases from 0.5cm to 0.7cm to 0.9cm, and the colour palette transitions from yellow to orange to red. Most countries resorted to a colour coding system of Blue/Yellow/Orange/Red to indicate the intensity and number of COVID-19 cases from high to low. Hence, the colour palette transition from Yellow to Orange to Red within Mance's comic can also be interpreted as depicting the prolonged duration of the lockdown as COVID-19 cases escalated significantly.

Figure 2. *Panels from 'Sheltering in Place: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly' by Ajuan Mance. Reproduced with permission from the artist.*

This is evident from the second panel on the third page, where the character is seen holding a newspaper that reads "virus in 50 states", and the third panel within the same page shows a TV screen that says "COVID-19 pandemic now global". The increased gutter gap can be interpreted as the extended duration of the lockdown that built up a sense of uncertainty and a heightened need for social distancing. It further reflects the separation and loneliness that emanated as the days of lockdown increased. McCloud (2008) depicts how tight and narrow panels are often used within action sequences to create a feeling of tension and suspense. Simultaneously, the decrease in panel width here adds to the sense of confinement, the claustrophobic nature of being quarantined, and the tension built up as a counter-result of extended lockdowns. The comic employs a graphic technique to assert that collective care is visible in the phrasing and

placement of comic captions. The comic technique used here is the repetition of affirming words and phrases. Comic captions on the third page assert the idea of collective care by repeating the phrase "YOU ARE NOT ALONE". From a linguistic angle, looking at the verbal elements used within this comic, the sentence is framed as a declarative sentence. Further, using the second-person pronoun 'you' cultivates the intimate feeling that the narrator directly addresses the reader and positions them more emotionally within the communicative act. These visual and verbal techniques exemplify the discursive attempt to enunciate a feeling of catharsis within the readers, providing a global companionship for the consumers of these comics. The narrative voice asserts that feelings of isolation, fear, and frustration are collective emotions that the networked public feels, which constitute the creation and consumption of the comic. The repetition of affirmative phrases provides a feeling of care by creating a mantra-like effect, thus emanating soothing and visual reassurance.

Profanity and the interplay of visual metaphors

In "Quarantine Week 10" by Comic Nurse, utilises the visual metaphor of angels and devils to represent the duality of emotional experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. This creative interplay between "good" and "bad" figures is a symbolic space for exploring the emotional frustration and ambiguity experienced during prolonged quarantine. Rather than demonising negative emotions, the comic engages these feelings with empathy, presenting them as part of a shared human experience rather than isolating or chastising them. The juxtaposition of angels and devils within the comic allows readers to navigate their emotional landscapes, especially the confusing mix of emotions brought on by pandemic confinement. By visually depicting these emotional polarities, the comic helps readers process their internal conflicts, validating the wide range of positive and negative feelings they may have experienced. The caption tags assigned to these figures further emphasise the emotional bifurcation common to the pandemic experience. For instance, in the third panel, the devil emanates phrases like "WHERE'S YOUR GOD NOW?", "STOP WAITING", "ALL IS LOST", and "YOU LOOK TERRIBLE" which reflect the emotional weight of doubt, despair, and impatience that many felt during quarantine. These negative emotions, however, are not simply left unchecked. The introduction of four angels empathetically counterbalances them, each representing virtues: FAITH, HOPE, PATIENCE, and HUMILITY.

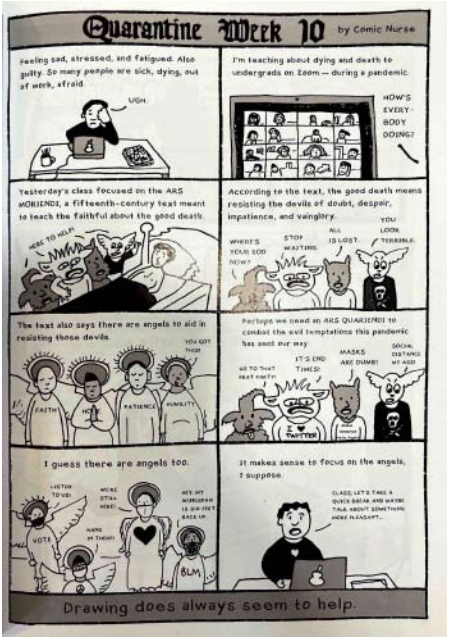

Figure 3. *'Quarantine Week 10' by Comic Nurse. Reproduced with permission from the artist*

This visual metaphor symbolises a conscious effort to counteract the emotional temptations of negativity, demonstrating the internal struggle between despair and resilience. The angels become symbols of emotional regulation, embodying the values needed to resist the pull of negative emotions during such an uncertain time. In this way, the comic visually and narratively constructs a dialogue between emotional fluctuation and moral guidance, inviting readers to reflect on their own experiences of inner conflict. By personifying these emotional struggles through the metaphors of devils and angels, the comic allows the audience to identify and name their feelings, making them more manageable and less overwhelming. This is particularly evident in the devils' second appearance, where they tempt the reader with behaviours contradicting pandemic protocols: "GO TO THAT FRAT PARTY," "IT'S END TIMES!" "MASKS ARE DUMB!" and "SOCIAL DISTANCING MY ASS!" Loaded with profanity, these sentences employ the same language as a linguistic tool. Studies within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic exemplify that using profane language helps handle emotional and physical pain (Hussain et al., 2023, p. 2). Hence, these emanata embody emotional temptations and the frustrations tied to pandemic fatigue and rebellion against public health measures. Again, the comic introduces the counteracting angels, now masked, offering empathetic responses that reinforce emotional resilience: "LISTEN TO US!," "HANG IN THERE!," "WE'RE STILL HERE!," and "HEY, MY WINGSPAN IS SIX

FEET, BACK UP." These comforting sentences counter the profane language by offering hope and support. Therefore, these dialogic exchanges between devils and angels, fashioned as linguistic opposites in terms of the mood of the sentence, are symbolic of emotional fluctuation and are designed to offer therapeutic relief. By presenting these emotional conflicts in a conversational, even humorous manner, the comic establishes a network of care, where readers are invited to actively engage with their emotional responses and find comfort in shared struggles. Through this structured visual metaphor of good versus bad, the comic creates a cathartic and therapeutic environment, transforming the narrative into a space of shared care. This visual technique encourages readers to acknowledge and address their emotional instability without judgment, providing a supportive communal space for emotional processing. The counter-positioning of emotional fluctuations, represented by the devils and angels, highlights the comic's role in fostering emotional balance. Rather than dismissing negative emotions, the comic uses these visual metaphors to explore how resilience, patience, and hope coexist with feelings of despair and frustration, ultimately creating a space of emotional care that engages the networked public in a dialogue between individual experience and collective empathy. The comic depicts the emotional struggle and actively participates in the care process, offering recognition and resolution for the conflicting emotions experienced during the pandemic. Through this creative use of metaphor and visual dialogue, the comic becomes a tool of graphic care, offering readers a pathway to emotional catharsis and community-based resilience.

Panel styling and spatiality

Gerry Chow's comic 'Meditations' from the anthology consists of seven pages, each containing a single panel. Structured as an internal monologue, the comic captures the narrator's perception of the emotional landscape of the pandemic. Notably, all panels within the comic, except the one on the fifth page, are 'bleeding panels,' a panel as McCloud (2008) describes, wherein the artwork extends beyond the panel's borders. This technique disrupts the 'spatiotopia' that Groensteen (2007) describes as a page's spatial/locative layout. It offers an avenue to venture into the notions of confinement and freedom, visually reflecting the emotional and psychological experience of the pandemic. Through the narrator's dialogue on the chaotic and overwhelming nature of pre-pandemic life, the bleeding panels immerse the reader in a chaotic emotional environment characterised by constant hustle and rush. Amidst this visual and emotional intensity, the fifth page introduces a stark contrast: a single "confined panel" depicting a caricature of a character with closed eyes, accompanied by the caption "BREATHE". The preceding panel on the fourth page portrays three stifled figures alongside the captions: "routines like constant movements in circles concentric habits kept us spinning," "in our bodies in our heads,"

and "leaving us so preoccupied that we might just forget to". The transition to the confined panel Chow brings within the fifth page, with the singular word "breathe", emphasises a deliberate shift in tone.

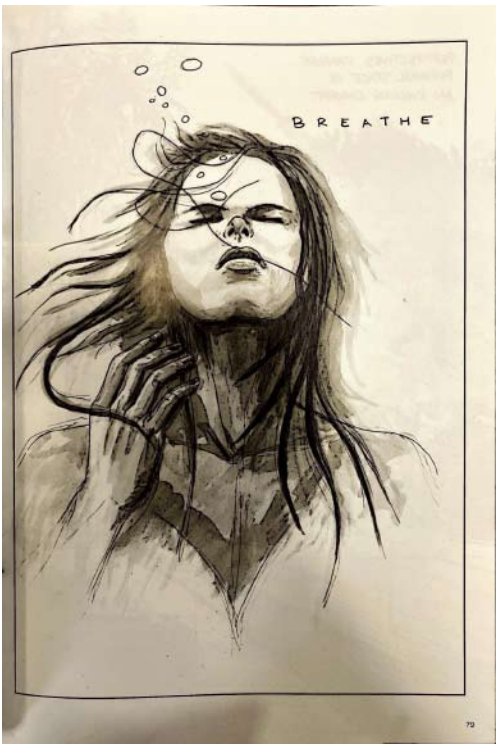

Figure 4. *Fifth page from 'Meditation' by Gerry Chow. Reproduced with permission from the artist.*

Here, the narrator uses the confinement of the pandemic as a symbolic space to pause and reflect, suggesting a reprieve from the relentless pace of daily life. In this way, Chow presents a positive recontextualisation of the pandemic, framing it as an opportunity to slow down, breathe, and regain composure. The consistent use of the first-person plural pronoun 'us' throughout the comic transforms the narrative into a collective internal dialogue, where the reader is invited to partake in the experience. The comic thus offers a psychological message, revamping the negative aspects of the pandemic into an opportunity for collective mental pause and self-care. Hence, the comic's sole "confined panel" has been tactically used to convey the idea of reconsidering the pandemic as a moment of collective pause and care. The manipulation of spatio-topia has been creatively used to define the pandemic as a space of collective care.

Conclusion and future implications

From the select examples of analysis in the previous section, it is evident that comic discourses offer an accessible and comprehensive format for the co-deployment of visual and verbal elements and thus create a widely accessible interpretative space. The artists have creatively used the system of comics to depict the emotional turbulence invoked by the initial phase of the pandemic. These communicative elements within these comics are fashioned engagingly and interactively in terms of verbal and visual cues, which offer the comic consumers an avenue to engage in critical discourse with their own emotional responses towards the pandemic. The analysis affirms the argument that the various artists' communicative techniques have resorted to functioning as a do-it-yourself self-help care site and helping construct a networked public of graphic care. These comic discourses are a shared experience of coping and offer community care and resilience through accessible and cost-effective creativity. The interplay of spatiotopic techniques like mirroring, closure, gutter gap, and panel styling, along with linguistic techniques like thrust on semantic load, usage of pronouns, profane language and irregular grammatical sentences, demands of the comic consumers to be more than just passive readers but rather active partakers in the communicative act.

Compiling around sixty-five short comics with the theme of "living through the pandemic", the anthology affirms that "no one is alone" and that we are all together. Most comics offer a resolution to untangle the psychological and emotional turmoils experienced directly and indirectly by creatively utilising the flexibility and high readerly engagement embedded within the system of comics. These comics offered comfort and sustained the networked public of comic creators and consumers etched to them. Therefore, it can be argued that the anthology and the comics serve as non-emergent sources of self-care and collective mental health care extended during a global crisis. Seeing one's experiences replicated within the work through the lived experiences of the comic characters was the factor that incited the readership of COVID-19 comics. This is how these comic discourses served as alternatives to cope with the absence of non-emergent healthcare sources as society resorted to popular culture for therapeutic and cathartic relief. As a mediated public sphere of graphic care, these comic discourses fostered collective meaning-making and emotional catharsis.

Drawing from the analysis and discussion section, it can be concluded that deploying visual and verbal communicative tools within intentional comic creation could act as therapeutic interventions. This potentiality of the system of comics, thereby, can be resorted to address post-pandemic mental health challenges. Comics offer a unique way to foster resilience and emotional balance by creating a networked public of graphic care. The patterns and results

derived from the discourse analysis can be used as a framework for pitching the pedagogy of comic discourses as an aide and method of imparting non-emergent care during times of crisis, akin to the pandemic in the future. Comics also offer a medium to normalise conversations around mental health. This can reduce the stigma surrounding mental health issues and encourage community-based resilience and self-care. Comics can be resorted to as pedagogical tools for mental health care and education, as the narrative and multimodal flexibilities of the medium serve a therapeutic function by imparting a sense of narrative companionship and support – potentially easing the subjective articulation of fears, emotional distress, and other psychologically challenging experiences. Not akin to conventional objective, fact-based patient interaction, comics provide a more affective, emotionally resonant space of personal engagement – thereby enabling a navigation of emotional experiences, fostering reflective and empathetic engagement. Additionally, comics can be effectively integrated into training programs for mental health care professionals, facilitating a more empathetic, patient-centred, and relational mode of care. The use of comics as a compelling communication medium in public health communication and mental health literacy campaigns could also be explored, as comics offer a more emotionally oriented, culturally responsive, and accessible medium for community outreach. Also, incorporating comics into mental health education and awareness campaigns within school curricula or public health initiatives can support emotional literacy among students and the broader public.

The study's framework can inform post-pandemic strategies for addressing mental health concerns by leveraging comics as an innovative communication tool. This could play a vital role in preventing and managing mental health conditions cost-effectively, and engagingly, in line with the global focus on improving mental health services and psychosocial support. Nevertheless, this study has confined itself to a visual and verbal analysis of how the multimodal semiotic resources within these COVID-19 comic discourses can be utilised to construct healthcare discourses in an accessible and potentially effective manner. Such an approach can be subjective since it utilises researchers' analytical skills and lacks objective measures to examine the audience's reception of comics. However, this offers further scope for exploring the core objective empirically using technological audience reception skills in collaboration with medical practitioners and graphic artists.

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