

Comics as a tool for managing discomfort and trauma

Veronica Orazi
Università degli Studi di Torino

When we decide to take care of our health and well-being, we have to be aware that we are deciding to protect our body, mind and soul. To achieve this goal, we should focus on seeking to control what is potentially under our control. Nevertheless, sometimes, despite our best efforts, we face with a *health* crisis and we must try to react and reestablish some kind of control over our life, boosting our resilience. Since we cannot be guaranteed a life free of disease, illness, injury and people as well as situations that have a negative impact on us, we should pay special attention to safeguard certain aspects of our lives. What we mean by *control* starts with taking care of our mental health and well-being, because both are a priority for health care, and to preserve them we need to know that this is worth fighting for and worth striving for. And, as we have to fight internal enemies (microbes, viruses, out-of-control cells, genetic factors, etc.) and external ones (bad choices, unhealthy habits, negative people and contexts, etc.), no matter who or what motivates us to fight, because, in any case, we have to do it for our sake.

Since many years, also comics, graphic novels and fanzines have been dealing with such topics and have proven to be an excellent tool for implementing good health and well-being as well as strengthening resilience. Some of these works express an autobiographical perspective, while others are fictional, but what the latter lose in individual experience they gain by anonymizing and universalizing the topic. In both trends, the authors use the powerful combination of images and text to narrate their experience or a fictional one, treating these situations according to different approaches, from a naturalistic unadorned style to a highly expressionistic or symbolic one, to evoke feelings and sensations. These materials face personal, family and social issues, mental illness, disabilities or impaired physical conditions; others focus on a problematic everyday life which lead to discomfort, stress and also trauma, in the present or as a legacy from the past (individual or collective) that causes distress. Some of these works were created during a personal as well as social crisis (for example, the recent COVID-19 pandemic), as a way of express the problem and coping it. Others, instead, narrate the experience of caring of loved ones suffering such situations. Since wellness is also addressed, some works deal with the discomfort and stress one can experience in daily life or as a result of a traumatic inheritance from the past.

Therefore, comics, graphic novels and fanzines demonstrate to be a very effective tool for expressing and elaborating a problem related with good health and well-being and for tackling it, managing the resulting stress, discomfort and trauma. This happens thanks to their potential to represent subjective and collective experience through images and consequently transmit the feelings and emotions arising from them. That is why they are sometimes conceived to help people to express, communicate and share their feelings when they are unable to do it verbally or otherwise, using high-impact visual metaphors or even ellipsis to communicate their experience.

TEbeoRAPIA contains the results of a groundbreaking research on the Comic and the Graphic Novel and its applications to strengthen adaptability and self-management in the face of social, physical and emotional challenges (World Health Organization 2011), according to the role of the arts in welfare (World Health Organization 2019) and in view of Sustainable Development Goal 3 Good Health and Well-Being. The Project aimed to innovate applied research on the experimental use of the Comic and the

Graphic Novel to create and/or consolidate the ability to manage personal as well as collective experience, in order to achieve and/or maintain the state of well-being and reinforce resilience, according to the perspective and using the methodologies and the tools of the humanistic, socio-cultural and health fields, with the application of the results in scalable workshops –also intended for BA, MA and PhD students– and at the same time aiming to the professional upskilling (Lifelong Learning). The objective of the project, i.e., the recovery, maintenance and improvement of the state of well-being and the building and consolidation of resilience by the use of the Comic and the Graphic Novel on the topic, has been achieved through a collaborative research with international partners and the definition and testing of original applications of the outputs to the described fields. To this end, an organizational prototype with a dedicated interactive online open-access database on the project website, research and application methodologies and flexible, repeatable activities have been designed and implemented, enabling innovative uses of the outputs.

The project materializes the cross-fertilization of research and related applications of three Departments of the University of Turin (Italy) from different scientific areas: the Department of Foreign languages and literatures and modern cultures, the Department of Cultures politics and society and the Department of Clinical and biological sciences. At the same time, it was conceived and designed with a strong international projection, together with public and private stakeholders: the UNITA Alliance, a European University made up of twelve partners (<https://www.unito.it/internazionalita/unita-universitas-montium>), particularly, UPPA - Université de Pau et des Pays de l'Adours in France, UBI - Universidade da Beira Interior in Portugal, University of Zaragoza in Spain, as well as the University of Valencia (Spain), scientific associations such as Graphic Medicine Italia, whose founding members include dr. Alice Scavarda (University of Turin), involved in the research team of the project, and the Graphic Medicine International Collective, with the collaboration of prof. E. Ustundag (Brock University, Toronto).

Compared to the State-of-the-art, one of the main strengths of the project is the close synergy between different fields, in the composition of the research group, in international collaborations and the development of the topics studied. This led to groundbreaking results, implemented and tested through original applications, with a view to the advancement of knowledge and the definition and implementation of effective solutions to the problem to which the project intended to offer a consistent response. Through the activities that have been designed and carried out, an innovative organizational model, stakeholder-oriented research and application methodologies has been defined, to produce socio-cultural impact through advanced, flexible and adaptable responses and replicable models for future initiatives. This has been achieved through the planning and organization of:

- the census and collection of innovative materials (comics, graphic novels and fanzines) on which to base research and scale up applications
- the creation and feeding of a constantly updated corpus of the research materials
- the designing, implementation and management of an interactive online and open-access database on the website of the project, containing the corpus of identified research materials
- the research on corpus materials and preparation of applications of the results (a scalable multilingual workshop offered at the University of Turin, in Italian, English, French, Spanish and Catalan to BA, MA and PhD students, also in the perspective of Lifelong Learning)

- the application of research outputs through the workshop

The timeline of the research and the application activities were developed in three phases: during the first one (M1-4) a census and the identification of the most innovative and significant materials for the definition of the corpus were carried out; during the second one (M5-8) the creation of the project database and website of the project, the constant feeding and updating of the corpus collected in it and the planning and implementation of the workshop materials in Spanish, Italian, English and Catalan were realized; finally, during the third and last phase (M9-12), the organization of the workshop in blended mode (in presence and virtual) at the University of Turin was implemented.

The scalability of the results of the research applied in the workshop has been enhanced by the blended (in presence and virtual) fruition mode. The flexibility of the organizational model, the new methodologies developed, the materials used and the dedicated platform have been and in the future will be strengthened by the possibility of blended delivery of the workshop and will ensure the adaptation of the outputs to the different areas and contexts of implementation and replication.

The PI of the project, prof. Veronica Orazi, Full Professor of Spanish Literature and Catalan Language and Literature of the Department of Foreign languages and literatures and modern cultures of the University of Turin, preliminary started the research phase, establishing collaborations with international experts and universities, which consisted of:

the planning and development of the international research project *COVID-19 LiTraPan – Literary Training via ICT for Higher Education Improvement, Behavioral Coaching and Discomfort Management during the Coronavirus Pandemic*, since March 2020, in collaboration with the Universidad de Alicante (Spain) and the University of California Santa Barbara (USA), whose first results were presented at international conferences, published in high impact scientific journals and collected in two miscellaneous books:

International Conferences and Workshops:

- *Coneixement en temps de pandèmia*, Universitat d'Alacant, Seu Universitària de La Nucia, online, 22.V.2020;
- II International *Symposium Forbidden Delights: Sex, Eroticism, Beauty, Aesthetics, Pleasure, Law, Sin and Prohibition*, Universitat d'Alacant, online, 19-20.VI.2020;
- I International Congress *Teaching with Comics: Cómic, Literatura y objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible*, Universidad de Valencia, 19-21.X.2022, in the framework of the European Project ICON-MICS (CA19119 i-COn-MICs) *Investigation on Comics and Graphic Novels from the Iberian Cultural Area*, COST Action – European Cooperation in Science and Technology.
- *Cómic & ODS3 Salud y Bienestar – Investigación sobre Cómic y Novela Gráfica al servicio de la salud y el bienestar*, Grant for Internationalization, Università di Torino, 4-6.XII.2023.

Monographs in Scientific Journals:

- *Literature, Language, Art in/and Higher Education in Times of Covid-19 in the Paniberian Context*, eHumanista/IVITRA, 21, 2022.

Miscellaneous books:

- *Handbook of Research on Historical Pandemic Analysis and the Social Implications of COVID-19*, A. Cortijo & V. Martines eds., Hershey (PE, USA), IGI Global, [2021] 2022;
- *Managing Pandemic Isolation with Literature as Therapy*, “Advances in Psychology, Mental Health and Behavioral Studies” Collection, A. Cortijo, V. Martines & V. Orazi eds., Hershey (PE, USA), IGI GLOBAL, [2022] 2023.

As mentioned above, one of the research objectives was the creation of a project website to host an open-access database (<http://www.comic-goodhealth-wellbeing.unito.it/it>), conceived and realized as a search engine allowing users to carry out research and recognition on the corpus identified during the development phase of the investigation and progressively updated, also in a future perspective, after the formal conclusion of the project. The corpus, which currently contains some 90 items, has been organized in such a way as to facilitate consultation. The materials in the database have been ordered using specific tags, such as publisher, theme, year of publication, format (comic, graphic novel, fanzine), language, genre and name of the artist/author:

SDG 3: Cómic, good health and well-being



The screenshot shows the main page of the project website. At the top, there is a red circular logo of the University of Turin (UNIVERSITÀ DI TORINO) with the text 'STUDIUM TAURINENSIS' and '1404'. Below the logo, the text 'UNIVERSITÀ DI TORINO' is displayed in large, bold letters. The main content area features a search filter interface with several categories: EDITORIAL, TEMA, AÑO PUBLICACIÓN, FORMATO, IDIOMA, and GÉNERO. Each category has a list of options, and there are input fields for ARTISTA and RESUMEN. An 'Apply' button is located at the bottom of the filter section.

EDITORIAL	TEMA	AÑO PUBLICACIÓN	FORMATO	IDIOMA	GÉNERO
Aristas Martínez Asliberti Astronave Autoedición (self-publishing) Camacuc Dibbuks Disset Dolmen	abandono aborto accidente acoso escolar acoso psicológico acoso sexual adicción ansiedad	2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 2015 2016	Cómic Novela gráfica Fanzine	Castellano Catalán	AAV Hombre Mujer

ARTISTA:

RESUMEN:

Apply

Fig. 1. Main page of the project website

Starting from this basic research, one arrives at the single sheet dedicated to each item, in which the key data mentioned and, in addition, the summary of the work appear:





Título	ARTISTA	AÑO PUBLICACIÓN	EDITORIAL	FORMATO	GÉNERO	IDIOMA	PORTADA	RESUMEN	TEMA
La deuda	ROMERO Martín	2017	La cúpula	Cómic Novela gráfica	Hombre	Castellano		El protagonista de este cómic es Castaño, un cómic estafado por su agente que se encuentra sentimental y económicamente al borde del abismo. Además, el protagonista tiene que enfrentarse a la muerte de su madre.	duelo, desempleo
Manicomio: una historia real	BATALLA Montse; XEVIDOM	2020	La cúpula	Cómic Novela gráfica	AAVV	Castellano		La autora habla de la enfermedad mental y analiza el trato nefasto que a veces tienen que sufrir los pacientes. La protagonista sufre violencia psicológica en el centro donde tendría que ser atendida.	trastornos mentales
María cumple 20 años	GALLARDO María; GALLARDO Miguel	2015	Astiberri	Cómic Novela gráfica	AAVV	Castellano		La protagonista de este cómic se llama María y es una persona con trastorno del espectro autista. El padre narra anécdotas que nos ayudan a conocerla.	autismo
Mens sana in corpore ni tan mal	RIVERO Ana Belén	2016	Autoedición (self-publishing)	Cómic Novela gráfica	Mujer	Castellano		Este cómic se centra en concepto de cuerpo y de imagen, reflexiona sobre lo que ha influido en la imagen de hombres y mujeres y sobre lo que es considerado "belleza normativa", criticando la obsesión social de alcanzar el cuerpo perfecto o sea el que es aceptado socialmente.	cuerpo

Fig. 2. The individual item sheets in the database

Moreover, from 4th to 6th of December 2023, an international workshop was organized in Turin, to present the results of the first phase of the project and to focus on its future development and new international collaborations in sight of the planning of its second phase:

Cómic & ODS 3 Salud y Bienestar
Investigación sobre Cómic y Novela Gráfica
al servicio de la Salud y el Bienestar
GFI – Grant For Internationalization – Call 2022
Università di Torino 4-6 Dicembre 2023
COMBO Torino, corso Regina Margherita n. 128



Fig. 3. Poster for the final seminar of the first phase of the project

During the international workshop, the project website was presented to the public (researchers, BA, MA and PhD students), and its open-access database that can be interrogated by users both within the university and externally was shown by Dr. Claudia De Medio, the research fellow who created it. On the same occasion, some of the members of the research team presented the results of their personal research.

Moreover, part of the project funds was allocated to the purchase of bibliographic material on the comic, graphic novel and fanzine (texts and critical essays). Thanks to this investment, the library of the Department of Foreign languages and literatures and modern cultures of the University of Turin has opened a new section devoted precisely to this kind of production, for the benefit of lecturers, researchers and students of the University of Turin as well as external users.

At the end of the project (February 2024), the PI, professor Veronica Orazi, carried out intensive dissemination activities at international level. In these circumstances, she presented the research results (website, open-access database, replicable and scalable workshop model, individual research contributions, publications in print or already appeared) to various interlocutors, in order to expand the network of international collaborations. Among the actors met and with whom it will be possible to establish direct collaboration in the future, aimed at the development of the second phase of the project, are:

- Prof. Jordi Marrugat Domènech, Professor of Contemporary Catalan Literature of the Facultat de Filologia i Comunicació de la Universitat de Barcelona, co-PI of the project *Usos i transformacions dels gèneres paraliteraris en la literatura catalana de la postmodernitat (1968-2021)*, funded by the Spanish Ministry;
- Prof. Francesc Vilanova i Vila-Abadal, Professor of Història contemporània of the Departament d'Història moderna i contemporània de la Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, PI of the Research group on Dictatorships and Democracies of the same institution (UAB) and Director of the Fundació Carles Pi i Suny de Barcelona;
- Dr. Lourdes Prades Artigas, Director of the Centre de Recursos per a l'Aprenentatge i la Investigació, the Archive-Library of the Pavelló de la República, of the Departament d'Història contemporània de la Universitat de Barcelona.

In addition to the international interlocutors mentioned, with whom specific possible lines of research have already been defined for future collaborative development, other potential national interlocutors have been identified. Among them are:

- the International School of Comic - Academy of Visual Arts and New Media in Florence;
- the SnIF Research Group - Studying 'n' Investigating Comics;
- the BLIFF - Library of Illustrated Books and Comics, Florence.

Finally, as for the papers collected in this publication, they are some of the contributions illustrated during the international workshop held in Turin. They offer a synthesis of the individual research activities of the group members, present innovative insights into various aspects and highlight the results achieved in developing the project, as shown below.

Veronica Orazi studies Gatt's self-produced fanzine *Una història tòxica* (2019). The work focuses on psychological violence against women, according to the autobiographical story of the author, a 24-year-old PhD student, who experienced a

toxic relationship at the age of 20, when she came to Spain as an Erasmus student. The fanzine reflects the mechanisms of violence against women identified by psychiatrists, psychologists and sociologists who are devoted to its scientific study and is extremely useful to instruct other young women.

Elena Masarah analyses the comic *Rupturas. Los bebés robados del franquismo* (Bang, 2022) by Laure Sirieix and Lauri Fernández, from the perspective of the creation of a certain type of “drawn visual memory”, that allows for the elaboration and management of the trauma derived from the sexual repression of the Civil War and Franco’s dictatorship. In her contribution, the author stresses that what emerged from the study she carried out is based on the historiographical accounts that have led to an increasing knowledge of the violence perpetrated against Republican women.

Laura Pache Carballo highlights the power that culture has as a transformative element in society, by analysing a selection of current female comic authors’ works. Her article presents two sections that discuss precarity, inequality, and illness: the first, on graphic novels that portray the impact of social conditions on well-being, and the second on works of Graphic Medicine on mental health.

Claudia De Medio focuses on the graphic novel *Hecha a sí misma* (2023) by Alicia Martín Santos, which protagonist is a consultant obsessed with obtaining a promotion. For this purpose, she buys an AI doll to whom she plugs the Bible and a self-help book into, so that the doll manages to become a partner of the company she works in. Eventually, Cuca –the protagonist– realises that this is not the life she actually wants. In this way, the work allows the reader to reflect on glass ceiling, sexism and patriarchy widespread in workplaces and on the usefulness of self-help books in the field of Graphic Medicine as far as excess of productivity and obsession with work and success are concerned.

Isabella Mininni shows how in the comic *Diagnósticos*, published in Spain in 2016, the Argentinians cartoonists Diego Agrimbau and Lucas Varela present six comics based on six singular and infrequent sensory disorders. Starring young women, each story narrates the difficult experience that the damage caused by the disorder entails in their social life, offering the reader fictional pathographies that take sequential language to the limits of drawing and narrative discourse, expanding the boundaries of the genre.

Anna Ciotta demonstrates that Keith Haring’s (1958-1990) works in favor of public health and social welfare denote his clearer provenance from cartoons. The iconic character of both cartoons and comic strips, Mickey Mouse, has been used by the artist as a sort of testimonial of his ideas, as his spokesman capable of conveying messages of social and political criticism with greater communicative effectiveness, particularly regarding AIDS, nuclear power, dependence on technology, fundamentalism and homophobia. The analysis stresses how Haring constructed his Mickey Mouse, starting with specific physical characteristics invented by Walt Disney, particularly those assumed in the 1930s, and how they were then progressively modified in an original way, according to the social function entrusted to him by the artist, finally reaching the conclusion that a perfect identification between the author and his character took place.

Blanca Mayor Serrano focuses on perinatal death, one of the most stressful and painful life events for parents. Nonetheless, perinatal death and grief are tabooed, silenced and stigmatized. Based upon the premise that comics enable readers to really comprehend and empathize with the author’s thoughts and feelings, she demonstrates the value of comics on the topic for patients, health professionals as well as society.

Gloria Olaso and Carlos Romá-Mateo study the use of comics related to disease and its circumstances as a way to discuss the relationship between clinicians and their patients, boosting empathy and social awareness among Medicine students, with the

aim of improving their communication skills and contributing to the assessment of the objectives included in SDG3. In their contribution, they explore the subject according to an initiative that they have been developing for years at their Faculty: the *Club de lectura de cómics* as a tool for teaching innovation in medicine, an activity designed as part of the practical teaching of the subject Food and Dietetics, optional subject of the Degree in Medicine of the Faculty of Medicine and Odontology of the University of Valencia (Spain).

Alice Scavarda aims to show the contribution of Graphic Medicine to Disability Studies both to challenge stereotypical and dominant narratives about disability, often present in the medical model, and to contribute to the training of health professionals, equally focused on the clinical-pathological dimensions of illness and disability. To this end, two specific cases of the use of comic strips as a research tool in the field of disability are analyzed: one with health professionals dealing with autism and the other with first-year students of a nursing degree course in Northern Italy.