



ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ | RESEARCH ARTICLE

NEW SUPERHEROES: THE REPRESENTATIONS OF THE HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS IN GRAPHIC MEDICINE DURING THE TIME OF COVID-19

Kenan KOÇAK

Dr. Öğr Üyesi, Erciyes Üniv., Edebiyat Fakültesi,
kenankocak@erciyes.edu.tr

0000-0002-6422-2329

Ebru Türk ÖZTOPAL

Doktora Öğrencisi, Erciyes Üniv., SBE,
ebruturkoztopal@gmail.com

0000-0002-4181-9114

Atf / Citation: Koçak, K. & Öztopal, E. T. (2022). New superheroes: The representations of the healthcare professionals in graphic medicine during the time of COVID-19. *İnönü Üniversitesi Uluslararası Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, (İNİJOSS), 11(1), 165-181. <https://doi.org/10.54282/inijoss.1017037>

<https://doi.org/10.54282/inijoss.1017037>

Abstract

Covid-19, opening a new page in world history by spreading all over the world, was announced as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020. The Covid-19 outbreak has caused more than five million deaths and lasting health problems and affected economy and society. Wearing masks, physically distancing and even lockdowns have become our new normal. Not only scientists who worked on the prevention of this contagious disease but also scholars from other fields such as philosophy, sociology, arts, and literature, contributed to studies focusing on the reflection of Covid-19 in our lives.

Comics has always been used as a medium to illustrate the catastrophes in human history, to raise awareness, and educate society. Graphic medicine, a field that blends medical humanities and comics, offers a broad space for all segments of society to express their feelings or experiences in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. On the Graphic Medicine website, co-managers MK Czerwicz, and Alice Jagers categorized comics produced in this period under the title of "Covid-19 Comics" by grouping them according to their themes and creators such as educational, vaccine-specific comics, ethics/social justice, by/about caregivers, by patients, coping and humour, and historic. This study will focus on the portrayal of caregivers as superheroes in selected Covid-19 comics both in print and on social media posts. The superhero metaphor in comics will be discussed in the context of graphic medicine.

Keywords: Covid-19, Comics, Graphic medicine, Superhero, Healthcare professionals

YENİ SÜPER KAHRAMANLAR: COVID-19 SÜRECİNDE GRAFİK TIPTA SAĞLIK ÇALIŞANLARININ TASVİRLERİ

Öz

Tüm dünyaya yayılarak dünya tarihinde yeni bir sayfa açan Covid-19, 11 Mart 2020 tarihinde Dünya Sağlık Örgütü (WHO) tarafından pandemi olarak ilan edilmiştir Covid-19 salgını beş milyondan fazla ölüme ve kalıcı sağlık sorunlarına sebep olmuş ve ekonomiyi ve toplumu etkilemiştir. Maske takmak, fiziksel mesafeyi korumak ve hatta sokağa çıkma yasağı yeni normal haline gelmiştir. Bu bulaşıcı hastalığın önlenmesi için çalışan bilim insanlarının yanı sıra felsefe, sosyoloji, sanat, edebiyat gibi diğer alanlardan akademisyenler de Covid-19'un hayatımızdaki yansımalarına odaklanan çalışmalara katkı sağlamıştır.

Çizgi roman, insanlık tarihindeki felaketleri anlatmak, farkındalık yaratmak ve toplumu eğitmek için her zaman bir araç olarak kullanılmıştır. Tıbbi beşeri bilimleri ve çizgi romanı harmanlayan bir alan olan grafik tıp, Covid-19 pandemisi döneminde toplumun tüm kesimlerine duygularını veya deneyimlerini ifade etmeleri için geniş bir alan sunmuştur. *Graphic Medicine* internet sitesinde, ortak yöneticiler MK Czerwicz ve Alice Jagers, bu dönemde üretilen çizgi romanları "Covid-19 Çizgi romanları" başlığı altında sınıflandırmıştır. Temalarına ve yaratıcılarına göre eğitici, aşırıya özel çizgi romanlar, etik/sosyal adalet ile ilgili çizgi romanlar, sağlık çalışanları tarafından/onlar hakkında veya hastalar tarafından üretilen çizgi romanlar, başa çıkma ve mizah son olarak da tarihsel çizgi romanlar olarak adlandırılmışlardır. Bu çalışma, hem yayınlanmış hem de sosyal medya paylaşımlarından seçilen Covid-19 çizgi romanlarında sağlık çalışanlarının süper kahramanlar olarak tasvir edilmesine odaklanacaktır. Çizgi romanlardaki süper kahraman metaforu grafik tıp bağlamında ele alınacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Covid-19, Çizgi roman, Grafik tıp, Süper kahraman, Sağlık çalışanları

INTRODUCTION

In this study, the portrayal of the healthcare workers as superheroes in Covid-19 comics will be analysed. In the first part of the article the function of comics in times of disasters or destructions will be discussed together with distinctive examples, as coronavirus is one of the most devastating disasters the world has faced in recent years. It also covers the definition of Covid-19 and its psychological effects, as well as the social changes caused by coronavirus because, during the Covid-19 pandemic, comics is used as a medium for coping with stress caused by preventive measures, or honouring the healthcare workers struggling with the pressures of difficult working conditions or expressing the changes in daily routines. In the following part, the relationship between comics and medical humanities, in other words, graphic medicine, will be analysed. In the last part, the characteristics of the superhero archetype in comics will be explained by associating it with health care professionals' illustrations in selected comics.

1. COMICS AND CATASTROPHES

The combination of word and image, two effective modes of communication are one of the significant features of comics "as a verbal-visual art form". According to Chute "It makes readers aware of limits, and also possibilities for expression in which disaster, or trauma, breaks the boundaries of communication, finding shape in a hybrid medium" (2017: 18). By using word and image together, comics makes it possible to express extreme circumstances and actions that are not represented only by words (Chute, 2017: 19). Through images accompanied by words, difficult situations or struggles arouse strong emotions which cannot be achieved by using words

alone. In her book *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form*, Hillary L. Chute states that:

The spatial features of comics, such as its activation of the space between word and image and its erection of literally drawn frames alongside its breaking and violation of them, presents a grammar that can inscribe trauma not just thematically (as in Adorno's "helpless poems to victims of our time") but also powerfully at the level of textualization in words and images. (2016: 35)

Comics has been used as a medium to represent catastrophes, disasters and pandemics as well as their consequences "in bold and provocative ways" especially due to its nature of being a verbal-visual art form (Saji, Ventakesan and Callender, 2021: 138). In such cases, comics functions as a tool for documenting, raising awareness, or teaching and learning. For example, in *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, serialized from 1980 to 1991, the cartoonist Art Spiegelman depicts his father's memories as a Polish Jew and Holocaust survivor by depicting Jews as mice and Nazis as cats. He talentedly reflects Nazi violence, genocides, and the survival stories of his parent's generation in Europe. Joe Sacco, who is a cartoonist and journalist, deals with conflicts in his comics including *Palestine*, *Safe Area Goražde*, *The Fixer*, and *Footnotes in Gaza*. According to him when compared to photographs and films that show "brutality so starkly", drawing is a more efficient way to illustrate a violent scene in that it allows us to look (Skidmore, 2015). Therefore, "his comics neither romanticize suffering nor legitimate violence" (Worden, 2015: 11). Similar to Sacco, Emmanuel Guibert is another cartoonist who mirrors the realities of war in the form of comics. In *Alan's War*, he pictures the traumatic experiences of a soldier during World War II. Japanese manga artist Keiji Nakazawa is another figure who draws his memories of destruction caused by the atomic bombing of Hiroshima in his comic book *I Saw It*. "Violence so extreme it appears abstract became Nakazawa's instant perceptual reality" as a Hiroshima survivor (Chute, 2016: 113).

In order to create awareness and educate the public, various comics are produced in times of disease outbreaks. For example, *1+1*, a featured work by Hine, Corinne Pearlman, Woodrow Phoenix, and Myra Hancock talks about a young heterosexual couple, Al and Gabi who have AIDS. Firstly, Al contracts HIV due to drug use and he unwittingly transmits it to Gabi. The reason why a heterosexual couple is chosen is to raise awareness about the point that HIV is not a gay disease (Williams, 2013: 72). The autobiographical work *Blue Pills: A Positive Love Story* by Swiss cartoonist Frederik Peeters tells the story of a couple one of whom is HIV positive. (Czerwiec, 2018: 202). These works touch on one of the important global problems, the AIDS crisis. *The 1918 Flu Pandemic* by Katherine Krohn illustrates the 1918 outbreak of the influenza virus that kills millions of people. *No Ordinary Flu* by Merideth Li-Volmer, Matthew French, and David Lasky tells the story of a family who suffers from the 1918 influenza pandemic. It is a vivid example of comics' usage for public health purposes. Li-Volmer explains that they try to help readers to show how such a disaster could be and to make them ready for a future disaster. Over ten years later humanity experiences a global pandemic that is similar to what they picture (Li-Vollmer, n.d.). There are also comics that highlight such current global issues as climate change, environmental problems, and their consequences. One of them is *Science Comics: Wild Weather: Storms*,

Meteorology, and Climate by MK Reed and Jonathan Hill which represents meteorology and climate change together with a few suggestions to reduce upcoming disasters (Wolf, 2021).

As Li-Volmer predicts, humanity encounters with another devastating pandemic called Covid-19 in 2019. The Novel Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) is defined as “mild to severe respiratory illness that is caused by a coronavirus” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). It is the current representative of the family Coronaviridae (Lalchhandama, 2020). Covid-19, first detected in the city of Wuhan, China, in December 2019 spread all over the world in a short time (World Health Organization, 2020). This outbreak was officially declared as a pandemic in a press conference by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on March 11, 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020). Since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, people from all over the world have experienced many changes in their lifestyles. This highly infectious and lethal disease has caused the deaths of more than five million people across the world. It is possible to evaluate the psychological effects of the epidemic and the deaths related to the epidemic in terms of social relations and future anxiety.

Although measures such as mandatory isolation, quarantine, and temporary closure, taken by the governments and health institutions are necessary to prevent the epidemic and reduce its impact on health systems, it also feeds this fear and anxiety arising from the epidemic. It was observed that the epidemic caused fear, helplessness, and anxiety in people, and these emotions negatively affected people's behaviour and can "lead to erratic behaviour in them" (Ho, Chee, Ho, 2020: 155).

Healthcare professionals, who take part in the diagnosis and treatment team with great devotion during the epidemic, are in the risk group for both Covid-19 disease and experiencing mental problems due to the nature of their position. In a study of the SARS epidemic, it was observed that the healthcare professionals were the ones who intensively suffer from the fear of contagion, the fear of transmitting the disease to family members, friends, and colleagues (Ho, Kwong-Lo, Mak, Wong, 2005: 344). Healthcare workers were faced with the burden of fighting on the front line in this struggle, as well as experiencing the risk of deadly diseases and the negative consequences of the measures taken in this process for every human being. The negative effects of epidemics on healthcare workers are the symptoms of post-traumatic stress, anxiety, burnout, and depression, especially during and after the epidemic (Ho et al., 2020: 156).

As it can be seen in the previous examples, in such conditions the versatility and effectiveness of comics as a response to catastrophes gains importance. During the coronavirus crisis, one of the most serious destructions that humanity have experienced, comics have been used as a vehicle to express individual experiences and the social conditions of people or to educate society about the virus or to arouse hope and happiness for the future. In a sense comics function as a drug or healer for reducing the hash effects of such conditions by providing catharsis.

2. GRAPHIC MEDICINE

Graphic medicine is coined by Ian William, who is a physician and comics artist, for his website created in 2007. According to him, graphic medicine is “the intersection between the medium of comics and the discourse of healthcare” (Czerwicz, Williams, Squier, Green, Myers, &

Smith, 2015: 1). Although the term flourished in 2007, comics have long been used as a tool in public health for informing about illnesses in the form of posters or leaflets or as a way of explaining personal stories of patients about diseases or experiences of healthcare providers or as a means for medical education for healthcare professionals. As a nurse, cartoonist, educator, and co-founder of the field of Graphic Medicine, Czerwiec points out another feature of comics as follows:

Comics can make us laugh. They can help us connect, and they can help us learn. Most of all, they can help us see things in a new light. This is exactly what patients and caregivers need when facing the big challenges of life (Czerwiec, 2018).

The multi-layered language of comics, which includes visual metaphor, symbols, and humour, transforms the negative feelings of the patients, caregivers, or healthcare workers into positive emotions by creating a space for relief. Drawing their experiences as a patient or health carer enables them to understand their psychologies so, they feel empathy for each other.

3. THE DEPICTION OF HEALTHCARE WORKERS AS SUPERHEROES BEFORE COVID-19

The depiction of healthcare professionals as superheroes in comics can be seen in American comic books of the 1940s. Especially the years 1940 and 1941 are accepted as the explosion in superhero comics such as DC's Flash, Hawkman, the Spectre, Hourman, Dr Fate, Green Lantern, the Atom, Starman, Green Arrow, and Aquaman; Fawcett Publications' Spy Smasher, Bulletman, Ibis the Invincible, and the "World's Mightiest Mortal," Captain Marvel; plus Cat-Man, Blue Bolt, the Black Terror, Hydroman, the Ray, Plastic Man, Midnight, the Human Bomb, Magno (the Magnetic Man), Daredevil, the Black Hood, the Comet, and Will Eisner's The Spirit (Misiroglu, 2012: 25). In those years, another "segment of the industry", which included the real adventures of true characters in contrast to the fantastic stories of imaginary heroes of the time appeared (Hansen, 2004: 148). In this kind of comics, real figures from medical history are represented as heroes with their achievements.

It is no coincidence that in those years medical history became a fertile land for the creators of superhero comics, as "from the 1920s through the 1940s, popular medical history blossomed in a remarkable number of books, films, and other media" (Hansen, 2004: 152). Such medical figures of the past as Louis Pasteur (**Fig. 1**), Theobald Smith, Florence Nightingale or Joseph Goldberger transformed into superheroes in comics and "they helped to reinforce the rising status of the American medical profession during the war and in the postwar era" (Hansen, 2004: 150). Along with these figures "books like *True Comics, Real Heroes, and Real Life Comics* were on the newsstand competing for young readers with *Superman, Batman*, and many other titles" (Hansen, 2004: 150). The imaginative stories of superheroes were so popular that the publishers attempted to put true adventure stories in the same huge market. "These books shifted attention from supermen to humans, from fantasy heroes to real people, but without abandoning heroism or the biographical narrative" (Hansen, 2004: 159).



Fig. 1: “Louis Pasteur and the Unseen Enemy” (*Real Heroes*, no. 7, 1942).

True Comics, first published in 1941 with its motto of “TRUTH is stranger and a thousand times more thrilling than FICTION” was the initiator of this subgenre (Hansen, 2004: 159). *Real Heroes*, *Calling All Girls*, *Real Life Comics*, *It Really Happened* and *Trail Blazers* followed its footsteps. According to Hansen:

A sampling of the stories will allow us to notice the character of the science lessons embedded in the heroic narratives, as well as the social and personal values that the figures exemplified. Not only were the individual doctors and nurses “real heroes,” but the quest for discoveries was portrayed as a form of heroism as valiant as that of the battlefield, and often described in the same terms. Even the most unusual people in these stories were portrayed as potential role models, and ordinary children were helped to identify with them because the stories almost always began with the heroes’ humble origins and recounted how these individuals first became curious about science or medicine during their childhood (Hansen, 2004: 162).

Hansen points out that the depiction of the achievements of significant people as heroic deeds in the form of comics enabled children to identify themselves with these characters. Therefore, such role models increased children's interest in science or medicine. On the other hand, there was another debate about whether superhero comics were harmful to children or not in that their fantasy world and supernatural powers turned American children into “little Nietzsches or Hitlers” (Lopes, 2009: 31). Although they were depicted as advocates of democracy or equality, their ultranationalism and violent actions corresponded to fascist thought. *Parents Magazine’s* aim of publishing such comics as *True Comics*, *Real Heroes*, and *Calling All Girls* is to start a campaign to produce clean comic books that serve to create morally, physically, and mentally well-equipped young generation (Lopes, 2009: 25).

The stories of these “wholesome adventures”, a term used for this subgenre by Roger Sabin, are constructed on heroic achievements of important figures who change the fate of the world as

saviours during the time of destructions (Sabin, 1996: 89). In these comic books, it is possible to read Louis Pasteur's study on spoiled wine and the discovery of fermentation or Walter Reed's success in achieving yellow fever disease (Hansen, 2004: 165). Among these figures, another important character is Robert Koch (**Fig. 2**) who is described as "Death Fighter" in the third issue of *True Comics* because he identifies cholera germ and his Nobel Prize (Hansen, 2004: 166-67). In addition, to represent leading characters of medical history in comics, some figures devote their life to help humanity such as Clara Barton who helped wounded people during the Civil War or Samuel Mudd who fought deadly epidemic in prison or a dog called Balto, one of the sled dogs that brought antitoxin in Alaska during a diphtheria epidemic (Hansen, 2004: 173-74).

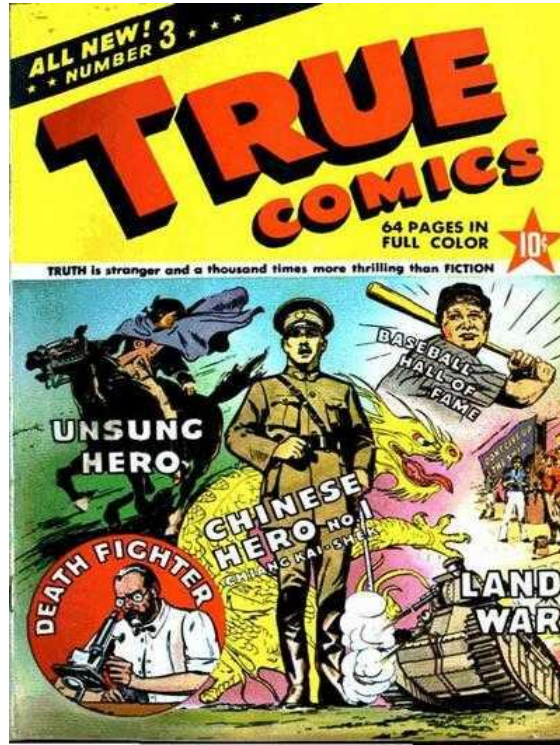


Fig. 2: "Death Fighter: Dr Robert Koch" (*True Comics*, no. 3, 1941).

In the 1930s and 1940s, nurses are portrayed as "independent, adventurous, and, particularly, heroic women" in American comics (Hayton and Hayton, 2012: 130). The fictional images of these heroic nurses transformed into respectful real-life war nurses such as Florence Nightingale, Clara Barton, and Edith Cavell (Hayton and Hayton, 2012: 131). In those years representations of nurses were strongly related to heroic deeds of female characters during World War I and the Cold War. In war contexts, nurses were associated with self-sacrificing, angel-like figures. One of the popular nurse figures in comics was Nurse Esther McElveen who died after saving many people from a fire. It was published in *New Heroic Comics* in 1947 (Hayton and Hayton, 2012: 132). In the late 1950s and early 1960s, DC gave the title of "Battle Nurse" to the cover story of issue #78 of *Our Army at War* (Hayton and Hayton, 2012: 134).

Pat Parker known as War Nurse with her team Girl Commandos was another nurse figure who took part in several issues of *Speed Comics* published in the 1940s (**Fig. 3**). Different from other real characters mentioned above, she was a fictional figure, but her heroic actions as a nurse were celebrated by the readers.



Fig. 3: Pat Parker-War Nurse (*Speed Comics*, no. 15, 1941).

In contrast to the heroic nurse image of War comics, nurses became doctor's helpers as sexy and naughty assistants in the late 1940s and the 1950s Romance comics (Hayton and Hayton, 2012: 131). By the 1970s, because of feminism, the values in Romance comics changed into superheroine who was best exemplified by Wonder Woman (Fig. 4). One of her secret identities was Diana Prince, an army nurse (Clark, 2015). In the early 1970s, a comic book series titled *Night Nurse* was published by Marvel Comics. The stories of the series revolve around three nurses Linda Carter, Georgia Jenkins and Christine Palmer who worked at the Metropolitan General Hospital in New York. Linda Carter was also a nurse who specialized in helping injured superheroes. Like Wonder Woman these characters and stories were fictional.



Fig. 4: Wonder Woman (*Sensation Comics*, no. 1, 1942).

It can be said that the Covid-19 pandemic is the revival of the representations of medical professionals as superheroes in comics. The painting *Game Changer* (Fig. 5) painted by Banksy at the Southampton General Hospital in May 2020 is a significant contribution to SuperNurse's discourse (Einboden, 2020: 343). It shows that nurses and other healthcare providers' portrayals as superheroes have been continuing to remain in the history of comics as well as other art fields. Interestingly, her uniform is similar to that of wartime nurses and The Red Cross on her apron is the symbol of protection for health care workers in wartime (Einboden, 2020: 344). In his nurse figure, Banksy summarizes the history of nurses as a symbol of superheroes and adapts it to today's world.



Fig. 5: *Game Changer*, Banksy, (2020).

4. THE HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS AS SUPERHEROES DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Covid-19 became a crisis for all countries in a short time and “due to its global character, the ongoing coronavirus epidemic often provokes the comment that we are now all in the same boat” (Žižek, 2020: 31). As a global crisis, it has crossed all borders and become a common problem of humanity. Within that period, healthcare workers around the world played a vital role and they suffer from great difficulties psychologically and physically (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6: People walk past paintings of a doctor and a nurse wearing superhero "superman" costumes drawn by physician associate Fatih Ölmez at Adnan Menderes University hospital in Aydin, Turkey on January 9, 2021 (Anatolian Agency).

Graphic medicine, which combines comics studies with health humanities, "has taken up the task of illustrating the COVID-19 pandemic and curating related comics" (Callender, Obuobi, Czerwec, and Williams, 2020: 1061). During the Covid-19 pandemic, in order to deal with the harshness of this situation, people from all over the world including cartoonists, nurses, or doctors share comic strips in blogs, websites, social media accounts, newspapers, or in the form of graphic novels. These works portray either personal experiences or shared struggles.

This study focuses on the illustrations of healthcare professionals who subrogate superheroes, a popular stock character in comics. Hillary L. Chute suggests that superhero comics, one of the most well-known genres of comics, frequently represents disasters compared to the entire art form. Superheroes like Superman or Batman deal with "collective, or at least personal disaster" such as a destroyed city, planet, or universe, or Bruce Wayne's murdered parents. Chute supports her idea by stating that "disaster is foundational to comics" (Chute, 2017: 18). The early 1930s were generally accepted as the golden age of American comic books. It was the birth of such imaginary characters as Superman, Batman, Green Lantern, and Wonder Woman (Klock, 2002: 2). It is no coincidence that it was the era of the Great Depression and World War II. Although most superhero comics at this time were "primitively scripted and crudely drawn", millions of copies were sold because audiences looked for "escapism" instead of artistic or literary quality in those years (Sanderson, Misiroglu, and Eury, 2017).

The unexpected and sudden emergence of Covid-19 as a global outbreak poses a threat for humanity in that when it was first detected, there was not an effective treatment for this disease (Huang et al., 2020: 504). In addition, quarantines and isolations create a society living in a typical dystopian world in which solitary individuals spend all their time and work at their homes, communicate through the internet, turn one of their rooms into a gym, occasionally masturbate in front of a video, order food online and never meets others (Žižek, 2020: 56). In that catastrophic atmosphere, people need a saviour like a superhero. Peter Coogan defines a superhero as follows:

A heroic character with a selfless, pro-social mission; with superpowers—extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical, mental, or mystical skills; who has a superhero identity embodied in a codename and iconic costume, which typically express his biography, character, powers, or origin (transformation from ordinary person to superhero); and who is generically distinct, i.e. can be distinguished from characters of related genres (fantasy, science fiction, detective, etc.) by a preponderance of generic conventions. Often superheroes have dual identities, the ordinary one of which is usually a closely guarded secret (Coogan, 2009: 77).

It can be deduced from the quotation above that a heroic person is too perfect to be true with his or her extraordinary powers and supernatural skills. Nevertheless, their ties to real life are not completely cut off in that they live as an ordinary people with their personas. During the coronavirus crisis, this fictional character transforms into a real superhero. The healthcare providers, those who fight with Covid-19 on the frontlines, have almost all the traits of a superhero. However, what differentiates them from a superhero is that they do not have

superpowers. That is why they have to make an extraordinary effort when compared to Superman or Batman. These ordinary people with ordinary powers struggle with this deadly virus, which can be associated with a supervillain. Li Wenliang, who tried to raise awareness of Covid-19 and discovered the ongoing epidemic, was unfortunately censored by the Chinese government (Žižek, 2020: 7) (Fig. 7). Although he could not achieve to survive and died because of Covid-19, he can be accepted as one of the first superheroes of the pandemic. He was at war with both virus and state alone. Despite his death, his heroic deeds can be interpreted as Jesus's sacrifice in that he devoted his life for the sake of humanity.



Fig. 7: China's reaction to the coronavirus outbreak (Martin Rowson, *The Guardian*, 7 February 2020).

Comics has an important role in shaping societies' understanding of what it is like to be a nurse or doctor in this period. In his definition, Coogan asserts that a superhero must be selfless with a pro-social silence which means that he or she should fight against evil for the emancipation of humanity or those in need instead of his/her own benefit (Coogan, 2009: 77). Therefore, it is frequently used by official authorities in the Covid-19 pandemic. Unlike the Chinese government's first attitude towards Li, after confirming coronavirus as a pandemic, World Health Organisation (WHO) treats healthcare professionals as heroes and appreciates their efforts with a cartoon shared in their official Facebook account (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8: World Health Organization thanks healthcare professionals for their efforts (Facebook, 14 July 2020).

The Vitals: True Nurse Stories was published to celebrate healthcare providers on December 30, 2020, by Marvel Comics, one of the pioneer publishers of superhero comics. It talks about the true-life stories of Allegheny Health Network (AHN) nurses, Maria Patino Giraldo, Laura Ditzler, Linda Gordon, and Michele Tenon. Like all other healthcare workers in the world, they work tirelessly and courageously in order to care for patients with a highly contagious illness during this difficult time.

One of the common features of archetypal characters like Superman, Batman, Spider-Man, or Hulk is having extraordinary power. However, Garrett indicates that “power alone doesn’t make a hero; service and sacrifice does” (Garrett, 2008: 12). According to him “power is the ability to influence events, exercise your will, make things happen” and “in life, power comes in many forms” (Garrett, 2008: 30). Despite being lack of superpowers like flight, invisibility, shapeshifting, or telekinesis, one of which almost every superhero has, nurses, doctors, or other healthcare workers prove that their ordinary human skills turn into superpowers like super speed or super strength as a result of enduring long working hours, sleepless days and nights, risking their lives or psychological stress. Iranian cartoonist Bozorgmehr Hosseinpour illustrates the selflessness of health workers in his cartoon (**Fig. 9**). His drawing of the healthcare worker underwater shows their heroic deed. They risk themselves in order to save others' lives like a superhero.



Fig. 9: Self-sacrifice (Bozorgmehr Hosseinpour, *Instagram*, 19 November 2020).

A superhero character usually has dual identities one of which is secret and hidden behind ordinary clothing and codename. The other one is used as a persona known by the public. “The costume” and “the codename” here are the two important identity elements that transform an ordinary individual into a superhero (Coogan, 2009: 79). For example, Superman publicly uses the name Clark Kent to masquerade his identity as a superhuman. When he appears in his

costume, he becomes a different person who devotes his life to making the world a better place and protecting the public (**Fig. 10**).

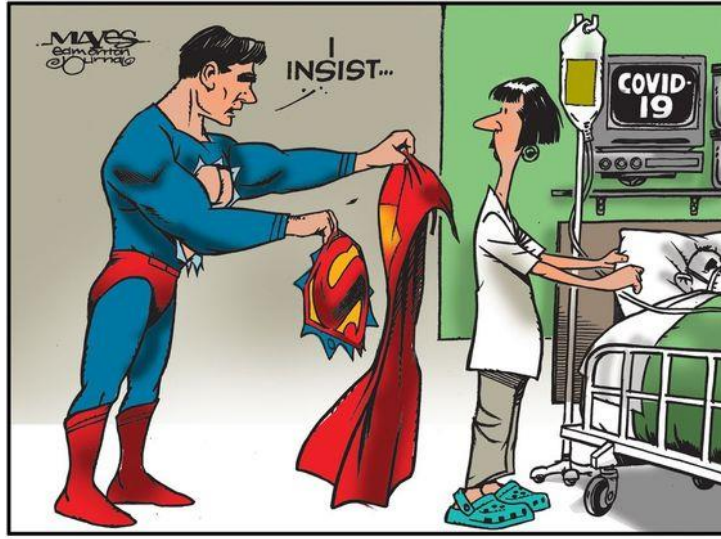


Fig. 10: Superman offers his cape to the Coronavirus nurse (Malcolm Mayes, *Edmonton Journal*, 1 March 2020)

The healthcare professionals create a new identity for themselves in the Covid-19 pandemic. To overcome the difficulties that they face in hospitals and intensive care units, they need to make a ceaseless effort. Their protective clothes and equipment such as goggles, respirator masks, aprons, or coveralls (a one-piece suit) prevent them from coronavirus, becoming their superhero costumes, in that it is not possible to recognize who they are in those clothes. The only thing that makes them identifiable is the name written on the costume. Marshall Ramsey illustrates the double identities of a health worker with protective clothes in his cartoon (**Fig. 11**). He identifies him/her with a superhero, looking like Superman whose remarkable accessory is his cape. The silhouette drawn as a shadow gives the message that health care professionals are perceived as superheroes in society despite being real people.

MARSHALL
RAMSEY MISSISSAUGA TODAY
@creators.com 2020



Fig. 11: The double identities of a health care worker (Marshall Ramsey, *The Mercury News*, 1 April 2020).

Josef Lee is an artist from Singapore who creates comic series about Covid-19. In the fifth episode of his *I am a healthcare hero*, he draws a child crying whose parents are not with her because she is infected by Covid-19 and she has to stay isolated (Fig. 12 a and b). Seeing healthcare workers in their protective clothes scares her. When they stick her parents' photos on themselves, she calms down. Lee talentedly reflects the power of protective clothes in hiding their identities in his strips. This trick is apparently identical to superheroes' usage of their costumes.



Fig. 12 (a) and (b): I am a healthcare hero (Josef Lee, *WordPress*, 11 April 2020)

Healthcare professionals need to make changes in their appearances which everybody is familiar with to keep up with their intensive work program. For that purpose, a lot of women in nursing get their hair cut to work comfortably since it is usually unbearable to stay in their protective equipment for long hours. On the other hand, it is a sad experience for many of them to cut their own hair unwillingly. The only thing which motivates them is their mission of saving a life. Their self-devotion and transformations of their appearances are illustrated by many cartoonists and *The Vitals: True Nurse Stories* touches this subject as well (Fig. 13 a and b).



Fig. 13 (a) and (b): *The Vitals: True Nurse Stories* (Marvel Comics, 2020)

It can be seen in the second panel (**Fig. 13 b**) that the nurse transforms into a different person by cutting her hair like Clark Kent's changing his identity by taking off his glasses and wearing his costume. The strong posture of the nurse shows her challenge and strength against coronavirus even if she loses her hair.

Josef Lee portrays the nurse's decision of cutting her hair in his comics, episode 11. She responds to her husband as "The wedding can wait. EVERYTHING can wait... Till this war is over...". She accepts that she is in a war with coronavirus, and she is one of the fighters against it (**Fig. 14 a and b**). She devotes everything to this struggle and her decision can be associated with the heroic actions of superheroes.



Fig. 14 (a) and (b): I am a healthcare hero (Josef Lee, *WordPress*, 11 April 2020)

Many superheroes are created without having a family or as an orphan. Lacking parents or family superheroes are accepted as the members of all families. This feature arouses sympathy among society. From this point of view, it can be said that healthcare workers are alone in their combat. Despite having families, they have to stay away from them because of the Covid-19 exposure risk for their families. This tragic situation, experienced by Agnes Boisvert, an ICU nurse at St. Luke's hospital in Idaho, is represented by Isabel Selinger. In her comic strip (**Fig. 15**) Selinger draws only one day in Boisvert's life. After a chaotic day at work, she arrives at home, but she has to stay isolated. This means that throughout this difficult journey they are orphans emotionally and fight against coronavirus alone.



Fig. 15: How One COVID-19 Nurse Navigates Anti-Mask Sentiment (Isabel Salinger, *isabelsalinger.com*, 2021)

CONCLUSION

The depiction of healthcare workers as superheroes in comic books are seen in American comics of the 1940s. Covid-19 pandemic can be accepted as the reviver of the representations of healthcare workers as superheroes in comics. During the Covid-19 pandemic, artists, cartoonists, or healthcare workers have pointed out the seriousness of this illness and the physical and psychological traumas of healthcare professionals because of the harsh conditions of their jobs. In that period comics becomes a way of thanking and honouring. While dealing with this current global disease, comics brings people together from all over the world without any discrimination and create a free place to breathe without "masks".

Conflict of Interest Statement: The authors declared no potential conflict of interest regarding the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

Support Financing Information: The authors have received no financial support for the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

Ethics Committee Decision: For this research, ethical permission (dated-numbered) was not required.

Author Contribution Rate: The contribution rates of all authors are equal.

REFERENCES

- Callender, B., Obuobi, S., Czerwiec, M. K., & Williams, I. (2020). COVID-19, comics, and the visual culture of contagion. *The Lancet*, 396(10257), 1061-1063. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)32084-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)32084-5)
- Chute, H. L. (2016). *Disaster drawn: Visual witness, comics, and documentary form*. Harvard University Press.
- Chute, H. L. (2017). *Why comics: From underground to everywhere*. HarperCollins.
- Clark, J. (2015, July 9). *Superheroes in scrubs: Depictions of nurses in comics*, Bates Nursing History Center. <https://batescenterblog.wordpress.com/2015/07/09/nurses-comics/>
- Coogan, P. (2009). The definition of the superhero. In J. Heer & K. Worchester (Eds.), *A Comics Studies Reader* (pp.77-93). University Press of Mississippi.
- Czerwiec, M. K. (2018). Representing AIDS in comics. *AMA Journal of Ethics*, 20(2), 199-205. <https://journalofethics.ama-assn.org/article/representing-aids-comics/2018-02>
- Czerwiec, M.K. (2018, April 26). Opinion: Getting graphic in medicine: Using comics to tell health stories. *Yahoo News*. <https://news.yahoo.com/news/opinion-getting-graphic-medicine-using-084524642.html>
- Czerwiec, M. K., Williams, I., Squier, S. M., Green, M. J., Myers, K. R., & Smith, S. T. (2015). *Graphic medicine manifesto*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Einboden, R. (2020). SuperNurse? Troubling the hero discourse in COVID times. *Health*, 24(4), 343-347. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363459320934280>
- Garrett, G. (2008). *Holy superheroes! Revised and expanded edition: Exploring the sacred in comics, graphic novels and film*. Westminster John Knox Press.
- Hansen, B. (2004). Medical history for the masses: How American comic books celebrated heroes of medicine in the 1940s. *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 79(1), 148-191. <https://doi.org/10.1353/bhm.2004.0018>
- Hayton, C. J., & Hayton, S. (2012). The girls in white: Nurse images in early Cold War era romance and war comics. In C. York & R. York (Eds.), *Comic books and the Cold War, 1946-1962: Essays on graphic treatment of communism, the code and social concerns* (pp. 129-145). McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers.
- Ho, S. M. Y., Kwong-Lo, R. S. Y., Mak, C. W. Y., & Wong, J. S. (2005). Fear of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) among health care workers. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 73(2), 344-349. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-006X.73.2.344>

- Ho, C. S., Chee, C. Y., & Ho, R. C. (2020). Mental health strategies to combat the psychological impact of COVID-19 beyond paranoia and panic. *Annals of the Academy of Medicine*, 49(3), 155-160. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32200399/>
- Huang, C., Wang, Y., Li, X., Ren, L., Zhao, J., Hu, Y., ... Zhang, L. (2020). Clinical features of patients infected with 2019 novel coronavirus in Wuhan, China. *The Lancet*, 395(10223), 497-506. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30183-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30183-5)
- Klock, G. (2002). *How to read superhero comics and why*. Continuum.
- Lalchhandama, K. (2020). The chronicles of coronaviruses: The bronchitis, the hepatitis and the common cold. *Science Vision*, 20(1), 43-53. <https://doi.org/10.33493/scivis.20.01.04>
- Li-Vollmer, M. (nd.). Graphic medicine in public health. *Graphic Medicine*. <https://www.graphicmedicine.org/resources/liaison-program/public-health/>
- Lopes, P. (2009). *Demanding respect, the evolution of the American comic book*. Temple University Press.
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). COVID-19. In Merriam-Webster.com dictionary. Retrieved June 1, 2021, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/COVID-19>
- Misiroglu, G. (2012). *The superhero book, the ultimate encyclopedia of comic-book icons and Hollywood heroes*. Visible Ink Press.
- Sabin, R. (1996). *Comics, comix and graphic novels: History of comic art*. Phaidon.
- Saji, S., Venkatesan, S., & Callender, B. (2021). Comics in the time of a pan(dem)ic: COVID-19, graphic medicine, and metaphors. *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, 64(1), 136-154. <https://doi.org/10.1353/pbm.2021.0010>
- Sanderson, P., Misiroglu, G., & Eury M. (2017). Superhero. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/art/superhero>
- Skidmore, M. (2015, June 4). Drawing war through the eyes of Joe Sacco: The unorthodox illustrator tells us why was is better hand-drawn. *It's nice that*. <https://www.itsnicethat.com/features/drawing-war-through-the-eyes-of-joe-sacco-the-unorthodox-illustrator-tells-us-why-was-is-better-hand-drawn>.
- Maus. (2021, June 09). In Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maus>
- Williams, I. (2013). The portrayal of illness in underground and autobiographical comics. In V. Bates, A. Bleakley & S. Goodman (Eds.), *Medicine, health and the arts: Approaches to the medical humanities* (pp. 65-83). Routledge.
- Worden, D. (2015). Introduction: Drawing conflicts. In D. Worden (Ed.), *The comics of Joe Sacco: Journalism in a visual world* (pp.11-27). University Press of Mississippi.
- World Health Organization. (2020, April 23). *Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) situation report-94*. https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200423-sitrep-94-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=b8304bf0_4
- World Health Organization. (2020, March 11). *WHO director-general's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19*. [Press release]. <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020>.
- Wolf, K. (n.d). Climate change & environmentalists. <https://www.graphicmedicine.org/comic-reviews/climate-change-environmentalists/>
- Žižek, S. (2020). *Pandemic! COVID-19 shakes the world*. OR Books.