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My Undiagnosed Autistic Life: Sequential Art Storytelling and Empathetic
Connections from an Autism Perspective.

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Leeds Beckett University for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy.

Abstract

The aim of this study was to explore the comic design preferences of the autistic community and to better understand the reasons behind those choices. With this, the researcher hoped to gain a clearer view of how comics could be used to share information in an engaging, creative, and reader-centred way. These techniques were utilised to create an exemplar comic, through an Aut-ethnographic memoir of the researcher's experiences of being an undiagnosed autistic woman. Yergeau (2013) described Aut-ethnography as an autie-ethnographic narrative in her paper regarding Theory of Mind. As an autistic researcher, she felt this term would be appropriate to describe research which has been studied from the *inside out*.

A mixed-methods approach combining Aut-ethnography and Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) - combining surveys, an online art exhibit and interviews - allowed for a thorough collection of data and analysis. Surveys provided a view of the autistic community's tastes in comic books and why they chose comics to engage with. As well as giving an in-depth outline of specific likes and dislikes regarding design features, while interviews allowed a thorough understanding of those tastes and provided important conversations about educational diversity.

Initial and focused coding was used to develop the final categories which suggested that (1) The Impact of the Comic Community, (2) Comic Accessibility, (3) Influence of Media, (4) Aesthetics that Induce Escapism, (5) Positive use of Comics in Pedagogy, and (6) Diverse Learning Options were key themes that reflected the importance of the ever-present theme of empathy. Not all participants had access to comic book shops, some feared what people thought about the genre of comics they enjoyed, and the aesthetics of comics allowed them to escape out of a difficult world. The central theme of empathy reflects the importance of having a diverse and accepting society. This also indicates that autistic people seek out empathetic content with a focus on the history of the characters, immersive world building and relatable story writing. This helps the individual connect with an immersive

world which is important for their physical and mental wellbeing. This research contributes to knowledge by suggesting that the empathetic connection between graphic texts and reader, with their combination of imagery and information, could improve neurodiverse people's understanding and knowledge, grip their attention, and motivate people to have conversations between each other and institutions.

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List of Accompanying Material

- Comic book website: www.comicproject.co.uk
- My Un-Diagnosed Life Comic Book/Graphic Memoir
(Amazon: <https://amzn.eu/d/cP9wEPb>)

1. Introduction

After my autism diagnosis in 2019, I took a long look at the life of my younger self and realised just how different I had felt, and still do. The constant anxiety around people and my discomfort when socialising, birthday parties that my parents tried to throw which left me sensorily exhausted and socially tired, the headaches, as well as my love of solace in the form of the English building where I would hide with a book to try and recharge.

Unfortunately, when you're different not everyone will accept you as you are, and for years during my time at secondary school I was bullied by the same *five* boys. This bullying caused a lot of distress, so much so that in 2005 at the age of fifteen I had a mental breakdown and had to have counselling. However, now I realise that it wasn't just my mental health that caused me to fall deep into a black void, it was a meltdown. I'd had multiple over the course of my school years but hadn't recognised them. I hadn't truly known myself until now. With the knowledge I have now, and a diagnosis at the earlier stages of development, perhaps life would have been different and maybe I would've been able to know and understand myself sooner to avoid the negative experiences that I have had, or develop the strategies needed to cope. Despite having a younger brother who is also autistic I fell through my parents' fingers, because people see me as being able to function somewhat neurotypically. Although, since my diagnosis I have decided to remove the *mask* that most autistic women wear and develop from a young age to fit into the norms of societal life (Baldwin and Costley, 2016).

To cope with the struggles of being an undiagnosed child, I escaped into the world of the X-men comics. Wolverine and the Phoenix were my favourite characters, due to them having the most trouble with fitting in, not only with the "normal" population but also within the X-men community. They have so much power that they're seen as dangerous, and throughout the comics I've read and the movies I've watched those two characters are pursued relentlessly to either be destroyed or used for other people's misdeeds. On a personal level I empathise with them the most, and find the books and films they're in to be a

good metaphor for the past experiences I've had. My passion for comics continued into adulthood, although my taste in comics has expanded a little since my youth.

My journey at Leeds Beckett began in 2016 when I joined the BSc (hons) Digital Journalism degree. Here, I expanded my knowledge of writing (academically and creatively) and explored my special interest in feminism in the form of a dissertation around the feminist issues in the BDSM community. My tutors were supportive of my other interests, one being stop motion animation where I created a short film giving my peers a glimpse into my world using scrunched up notes I'd handwritten, and photo images taken with a DSLR camera. This was an anxious time for me, as I am often observed to be anti-social, withdrawn, and shy. Happily, the video was a success, and everyone seemed to enjoy it. On seeing this new interest, my tutor suggested to me Jacky Flemming, an artist who creates comic strips and graphic novels. Towards the end of my degree, I was tasked with three objectives: help to curate and organise the end of the year exhibit, create content for that exhibit, and finish making my Autistt Magazine, which was created with the purpose of providing comfort and supporting newly diagnosed autistic adults (like myself). For this, I travelled to two of Leeds autism charities to conduct interviews, take portraits, and observe the sessions to complete the first, and only, publication for submission. Besides the magazine, I included social media accounts and a website where online only content was provided. Throughout the process my mind was buzzing with ideas, creativity, and possibilities. I had found something I was happy doing. I learned everything I could about autism, thus I was learning everything I could about myself and completing assignment work simultaneously, and that, to me, was exciting. I watched Ted Talks, read books and blogs, and got involved in online forums where people like me felt confident enough to speak out. I wanted to do something that could help my people, my community, and that is why I pursued a MSc in Psychology. Even though by the end of the degree I couldn't picture myself talking to people about their problems due to my own emotional burnout, I knew I wanted to pursue something creative and with a strong aspect of it being around the spectrum of autism. I knew I wasn't the best of artists. I couldn't draw realistically or draw a landscape with perfect clarity and perspective. What I could do,

however, was draw like me and I love drawing comic strips. So, after putting together a few images into a digital portfolio I talked to Professor Rob Shail about my idea.

By creating a graphic memoir about my life *before* my diagnosis it is my hope it will challenge what is known about autism in women and girls, the stigma around seeking a diagnosis, and showcase the importance of empathy and diversity. Through the analysis of research data, I used the feedback from autistic participants to develop and create the design of the comic book, including characters, style, panels, and everything in between. As well as identifying empathetic characteristics of design used by artists within the comic genre that was applied to my artwork to explore autistic participants understanding of comics. I also reflected upon my own past trauma as an undiagnosed autistic woman to explore the potential of comic books as an educational tool.

2. Project Statement

Within the current study the terminology used shall be autistic woman rather than woman on the autism spectrum and will avoid terms such as high/low functioning due to their divisive nature (Burns, 2019).

According to the National Autistic Society in 2020, 1 in 100 people are on the Autistic Spectrum in the UK and the gender ratio (male to female) is 3:1. There are numerous reasons debated online for this large ratio, including that women are being diagnosed later in life due to being missed at a young age. Atwood (2007) suggests that diagnosing girls and women is more difficult because of their mimicking, or camouflaging, techniques which are developed from an early age. Being able to hold a conversation and maintain social expectations, such as eye contact, leads clinicians to believe that they are not in need of a diagnosis at all, causing them to fall through the cracks of the system. However, this ability causes meltdowns, shutdowns, and other mental health issues alongside it because of the toll it takes on the women mentally, physically, and emotionally.

Furthermore, other potential reasons for undiagnosed girls could be parental bias due to culture or background as suggested by Happe (2015): *“it seems likely that there is also a contribution from poor recognition of female manifestations of autism — perhaps a ‘female masking effect’.”* With the lack of knowledge of traits within female autistics it is likely that the current criteria for diagnosing autism in both genders is outdated and could lead to inaccuracies, such as misdiagnosis (Hefferon, 2020), which suggests that autistic women are under-researched and under-represented.

Using Autoethnography (Bochner and Ellis, 2016) and the semiotic theories of Saussure and Barthes (Crow, 2018), comic studies by McCloud (2006) and Cohn (2013) this study shall examine the potential of comic books and the possible expansion of their use in educating about autism in women in an entertaining, and less clinical, way.

In his book *A Mismatch of Salience*, Milton (2017) describes a speech he gave to a room full of psychologists about his experiences of being an autistic man. He christened this exchange as an *“Aut-ethnography”* (p.139), and developed a fresh way of approaching the method by exploring the shifts throughout his life (past, diagnosis, present).

This research therefore provided valuable insight into comic design, as well as extended upon existing literature around autism representations in literature, comic studies and possible new knowledge of autism in women through the lens of an autistic woman.

3. Themes to Explore

Throughout the process of this study, I kept focus by concentrating on a set of themes to guide the research. I wanted to explore the design features of comic books and whether the autistic community interacted with this type of material and, if so, why. Additionally, I wanted to explore how comics could present information which was traumatic in nature and how techniques are used to connect author to reader.

4. Research Aim

- To create a graphic memoir from the perspective of an autistic woman to help demonstrate the challenges they can face throughout the period of their lives.

5. Research Objectives

- To research the sequential art likes and dislikes of autistic adults.
- To adapt an art style for the graphic memoir using the gathered research from the autistic comic book community.
- To examine, and reflect upon, past personal experiences to form an accessible educational comic.
- To examine the potential of comic books as a pedagogical tool.

6. Research Structure

The structure of this thesis includes, first, a literature review examining the various research papers of comic book design, autism in women, autism representation in various forms of media, the relationship between autistic women and trauma, narrative empathy, and empathetic processes, as well as empathetic features in comics. Second, the thesis moves into a thorough description of the methodology process, choices and why those choices were made, as well as touching upon ethical considerations and consent. The thesis then shifts into describing and exploring the results and the category development, before finishing with an analytical commentary of the creative process of the graphic memoir.

7. Methodology

This section provides a brief explanation of the methods chosen for this study, the research process, and the clarification of my decisions for this approach. For this study I conducted a mixed method approach using both Aut-ethnography and Constructivist Grounded Theory (Chang, 2016; Charmaz, 2020) as these seemed to reflect the way in which I wanted to conduct my research. While quantitative methods explore the numeral impact of that which is being researched through variable comparison of broad data, qualitative methodologies explore the human experience through words gathered from a hands-on approach (e.g. interviews) and makes room for more than one version of reality:

“Other elements of a qualitative paradigm include...the use of more ‘naturally’ occurring data collection methods that more closely resemble real life (compared to other possibilities, such as experiments)” (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 06).

Aut-ethnography provide an inside-out account appropriate for the creation of the graphic memoir. Combining this with CGT would allow me to dive deeper and think more analytically about my findings using practical systems, such as sticky notes and mind maps. As well as this, both of these methods allowed me to bring my art practice and creativity into the mix. Aut-ethnography shone light on pieces of data that could not be seen originally, and provided a deeper connection between myself and the artwork (Crowley, 2022). Due to the research question and aims that I proposed, I believe that qualitative methodology was the best option to gain a wider understanding that was needed to complete this study and the art piece. Through the use of these as an interdisciplinary approach, I was also able to better understand and analyse a rich data set gathered from a diverse participant group. Other methodologies may not have been as effective. For example, combining CGT with Thematic Analysis would have not provided the thorough analysis of my thoughts and

behaviours as an autistic woman who enjoys comics throughout the study, and art practice, if Aut-ethnography had not been included. Without this I would not have discovered an issue with bias and my own perceptions of what an autistic person is or is not, or why I create art the way I do. Additionally, the methodologies were chosen not just because they were the best approach for the study, but they also suited the way I work as an autistic person. I needed a list of steps to work from and a routine to keep myself focused and calm. The cork board was perfect to bring my ideas and thoughts out of my head and into reality in a practical way. Here, I could form ideas, change ideas, and move them around easily rather than being anxious about pressing a button, or clicking a button, which may corrupt my work. Although I love technology and learning new software, because of the creative base of the study I wanted to keep my hands busy as much as possible, and away from my desk.

7.1 Autoethnography

O'Reilly (2011) suggests Ethnography is used to explore the world around us through observations and experiences, without interfering in the process of that which is being studied. However, this approach is based solely on the observations of the researched which can have complications, as to be the observer is to be left on the sidelines. This determines the researcher's position within that community as an outsider which may also influence the researched, and in turn the data gathered (Emerson et al, 2011).

Alternatively, Autoethnography (Ellis and Brochner, 2016; Chang, 2016) is a sub-method of Ethnography. The principles of the method are the same, (fieldnotes, observations, interviews) however unlike Ethnography (Brochner and Ellis, 2002) where the researcher is separate from those they are observing, Autoethnography involves the self and allows for growth and development creatively, personally, and academically. The researcher removes the objective belief and adapts an engaged subjective relationship with the researched as they are a member of that world (Poulos, 2021).

An Autoethnographer keeps a research question in mind, still, it acts as more of a general interest than an official question which assists in helping to keep an open mind during the research process (Thornberg and Charmaz, 2013).

In her book *Autoethnography as Method* (2016) Chang describes the many benefits of Autoethnography. A self-narrative, as she describes it, is an asset when trying to understand the self and connections to that self. She implies that friends, family, and even strangers, are beings interconnected which provide important data about the world that the self-narrator lives. Therefore, brings forth the reader to identify with the writer and explore their own sense of self.

Emersions et al's (2011) book *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* extends upon this by suggesting that taking fieldnotes preserves the experience of an event for later reflection and to create an understanding of what it means and what happened.

Similarly, *Critical Autoethnography* (Boylorn et al, 2020), explains that in their experience of doing Autoethnographic research they found collaboration useful to learn from one another and produce work which highlights the importance of interconnected human experiences. A self-narrative, they explain, can also analyse, and produce theory through the examination of experiences which challenges cultural and social beliefs. Therefore, the authors propose Autoethnography to be a great method for topics such as disability, diversity, and identity. In addition, with Autoethnography being an interdisciplinary method, a more beneficial range of data is produced (Poulos, 2021).

The approach has been mostly used in the social sciences (Chang, 2016), although there are examples of Autoethnographies that have been published from other fields, such as a study by Laurie Eldridge (2012) called *A Collaged Reflection on My Art Teaching: A Visual Autoethnography*, explores and reflects upon her art teaching using a collaged piece of artwork that she created to help the reflection process. She describes the reasons for this research was to defend the need for art within the school curriculum, and to express the importance of teaching students more than just the 'nuts and bolts' of artwork. She describes

her feelings on using social justice art and visual culture theory to inform and inspire students to think outside the box. However, she reflects upon the abilities of elementary students to comprehend the new curriculum and how she could adapt her current teaching methodology to suit their needs. In her conclusion she explains that she had more questions than answers due to the issue of the curriculum development being out of her hands, and how this has caused her anxiety, tension, and anger. As an example of autoethnography practice I found the journal to be a great piece of writing to demonstrate what to include in my own autoethnography writing. The books I have read so far state how to conduct Autoethnography research, however, a demonstration of its use has been useful to clarify my understanding of the approach even though the area of the study is in the field of teaching.

Another example of an Autoethnography is the work of Tamas (2011) who wrote about her experience sharing her dissertation with her children. The dissertation was written as an Autoethnography, about her experience with domestic abuse, and caused one of her daughters to cry. This she reflects as an ethical dilemma in her current study, exploring others ethical perspective on Autoethnography work, and whether she should have revealed more, or less, about her personal life, *"If you want to play a villain well, you have to find the humanity in them; this is what makes the performance compelling. And if I want to tell my stories well, perhaps I need to do the same. My dissertation may have been stronger if, in addition to the banal sad stories, I told the riskier, complex tale of love. But this, arguably, would only increase its trespass, exposing more of my life with my ex for public consumption without his knowledge or consent"* (p. 262). Despite this, she argues that there are always variables in research. Autoethnography researchers provide a perspective, and an understanding, which can benefit society as can be seen in Tamas's paper above. By reflecting, analysing, and writing about her experiences she provides a complex, emotional, and informative piece which brings up issues needed to be discussed within the community,

not just the academic community, about something which usually remains behind closed doors, especially during the Covid-19 outbreak (Hsu and Henke, 2020).

Atkinson (2020) conducted an autoethnographic study examining intellectually disabled artists participation in contemporary and relational art at a studio in Manchester (UK). As well as reflecting upon her time with the studio, her concerns about being a new researcher, and whether her artwork would be judged negatively, she wrote about her connections with the people who used, and worked for, the service, *“Despite these strange inversions, I found generosity permeating the fabric of the studio. There were wispy moments where the human warmth between us felt almost unburdened, often in giggling about something non-art related while we each worked on our art. The process of making had an effect of taking some of the pressure off, giving us each something to focus on, freeing the rest of our senses up to being and becoming alongside each other in the assemblage of the studio culture, the materials, the subject-positions, and the relationalities”* (p. 860). Seeing from her perspective but also witnessing her sharing a moment with a participant is an important factor in understanding the meaning of that experience and the overall conclusion of her research. The results of the research determined that contemporary and relational art conceptions (which she describes as zones) blur into non-existence at the studio. Attendees may be in one zone for a while but then switch to another, or even be in both zones at once, which she describes as a *“convergence”* into *“something new”* (p. 867). In the conclusion, she wrote that Covid-19 had had an impact on her research, however she had made relationships with new people which had positively impacted her mental wellbeing during that time.

Lastly, the final example is a PhD thesis by Cook (2017) who used arts-based autoethnography to study the enhancement of education in art classrooms. Taking on the role of co-teacher and researcher, Cook studied 77 students and used information from online forums, art journals then used a Grounded Theory approach for the data analysis.

The results were positive, with Cook suggesting that risk-taking could improve the outcome of student's education as well as using more of the 'self' in their artwork. As well as being a good example of using a mixed approach to Autoethnography and Grounded Theory during an arts-based study, the thesis explains in detail the data collection process. Cook used several methods for this: an online art blog, an art journal, online forum discussion board – all techniques that I hadn't considered previously.

7.2 Aut-Ethnography

In 2021 Bolt put together a collection of essays focusing on the metanarratives of disability using Autocritical Disability Study methods. Within this volume, a piece by Loftis used autocritical discourse analysis and cripistemology to form the analysis approach. Cripistemology is defined as disability studies, activism, and arts and culture led and conducted by and for the disabled community (Chandler et al, 2021), and extending upon this view of the importance of disability perspective is Milton (2017). Milton (2017) argues that a subjective lived experience approach is an important aspect in learning/teaching what it is to be autistic. Therefore, he has christened his version of autoethnography as Aut-ethnography.

Milton suggests that an inclusive method to academic study is an important one to bridge the double-empathy gap, build relationships between academics both autistic and non-autistic, and for autistic academics to share their valuable expertise.

7.2.1 Data Collection Techniques

7.2.1.1 *Fieldnotes and Memos*

Autoethnography fieldnotes were conducted throughout the process, from the start of planning the research to the end of the analysis. This provided a range of data for analysis, from the development of the comic strips and the interactions with participants to the use of Constructivist Grounded Theory in a creative study, and my experiences as an autistic researcher conducting the study (*see examples of memos and art memos appendix, figure 10 and 11*). Fieldnotes have been taken traditionally with a pen and notebook before being transferred into more detailed accounts electronically and kept in an organised (by date) folder ready for analysis (Chang, 2016).

7.2.1.2 *Participants*

For the survey, the criteria of participants were all genders, aged 18 and above, from any location, and either had a diagnosis of autism or were self-diagnosed. The criteria shall only focus on these points to provide anonymity, equality, and comparisons between genders, age, and location when it comes to comic design. For example, comic books that are created in American may be completely different from those in Africa, or those who are older may enjoy a certain style of comics while a younger age group may not. The survey was shared online over social media channels to reach a broad sample of people.

The more intimate methods of data collection (semi-structured interviews) considered participants who: were all genders, 18 and above, non-verbal or verbal, and either diagnosed or self-diagnosed and were recruited using contacts, social media, and through the university (students). There were 29 survey and 8 exhibit participants. All data gathered, such as personal details (name, contact details) were kept private on a secure USB, and within the write-up these details were altered (initials), or unused, depending on the preference of the participant.

7.2.1.3 Surveys

According to Yauch and Steudel (2003) the distinguishing features of qualitative and quantitative methodologies are their difference. A quantitative method focuses on the measurement of numbers, meanwhile a qualitative method focuses on collecting words through interviews, focus groups, and observations. Despite their differences, a mixed method approach is often used depending on the appropriateness of the study. Due to their differences they both have their own strengths and weaknesses. For instance, qualitative research is time consuming, however it provides an insight into the human-centred topic, such as experiences of inequality. Quantitative research is said to be a reliable critical analysis, however there is no depth to the measurements or rich data involving human experience or perceptions (Choy, 2014).

As a qualitative method, online surveys provide protection of participants' privacy, are easily distributed through links, there is no transcription required, and they can be used with images and audio recordings. However, this method requires a computer, internet access, and the skills to take part in an online survey leaving a demographic of participants out of the loop which could mean losing valuable data.

In contrast, hard copies of a survey also create a positive distribution system and could build a large sample size depending on the location they are provided. They give participants a simpler way of expressing themselves through drawings and notes, although, costs such as printing and postal are a potential issue when deciding on using this method of data collection (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

Online Surveys provide a broad set of data from various locations and participants can take part at their own pace, and in their own environment, without having an interviewer present which provides a supportive and inclusive research environment for those who are verbal and non-verbal (Cascio et al, 2020). Surveys also benefit autistic participants as it allows for a more comfortable experience and causes less distress. A document stating what

the survey is about and a list of questions beforehand can also be supplied to minimise the anxiety of uncertainty (Rodgers, 2018).

Similarly, Nicholaidis et al (2020) found that by adapting surveys to the needs of their autistic participants through explaining the context of questions, adding images, altering confusing language into something more direct, and offering examples they managed to ease the participants distress and feelings of anger. With this they wanted to demonstrate the importance of diversifying research tools, so they are more accessible, as well as including autistic people in research.

7.2.1.4 Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews were conducted throughout the data collection and analysis phases of the study. Semi-structured interviews were discussed with participants beforehand, and a document supplied outlining the questions, and topics, discussed. This, potentially, eased stress and anxiety for autistic participants (Rodgers, 2018). The interviews, for the participants' convenience and comfort, were conducted by video call (where it can be recorded with permission, then transcribed) or by email if they felt more comfortable. Follow up interviews were conducted similarly and with a clear outline for the session in advance of the agreed appointment. Through the use of a flexible approach to modification of the research gathering methods, Courchesne et al (2022) believe that richer data can be achieved as they witnessed in their study. Due to their modification of semi-structured interviews, using picture cards to support non-verbal participants for example, they gathered data which may have been inaccessible using the usual method.

7.2.1.5 Digital Feedback

In case a participant did not feel able to participate in a semi-structured interview, digital entries were encouraged. A participant was given the comic and asked to provide a detailed, honest, reflection of the image. This was in place to lessen the discomfort or

anxiety for the autistic participant, as they can take their time in their own home without having an observer. Once completed, the participant was able to email the diary to the researcher to proceed with the analysis.

7.2.1.6 Art Journal

The researcher kept an art journal throughout the process of the research. This was to improve skills, experiment with techniques, and to express themselves in ways that they are unable to with words. This journal was analysed alongside other collected data to examine progress over time, reflect upon difficulties or limitations, and other events that may have occurred during the study (see Appendix Figure 14).

7.2.1.7 Mind Maps and Mind Boards

Mind Maps are a visual way of presenting information using images, text, and other means to encourage note recall (Jimenez, 2017). Due to being a visual learner, and thinker, I added all codes, categories, and themes onto a board to create a database. This allowed me to better visualise my ideas and put all thoughts into an organised display which I could return to when needed (see Appendix Figure 12).

7.3 Constructivist Grounded Theory

Grounded Theory is a research method that is “*systematic, inductive, and comparative*” (Bryant and Charmaz, 2010, p. 01) with the purpose of developing a substantive theory which is a “*theoretical interpretation or explanation of a studied phenomenon*” (Chun Tie et al, 2019, p. 07). The method requires a constant back and forth interaction between the analysis of data, and the data collection procedure, to establish a theory. The Grounded Theory method was developed by Strauss and Glaser who used the technique in their study *Awareness of Dying* in 1965, in which they studied death and dying in hospitals, leading them to write further publications specialising in qualitative data methods (Bryant and Charmaz, 2010).

Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) is a subjectivist method developed by Kathy Charmaz, who was a student of Strauss and Glaser, who believed that *“Data do not provide a window on reality. Rather, the ‘discovered’ reality arises from the interactive process and its temporal, cultural, and structural contexts”* (Mills et al, 2006, p. 6).

Relinquishing its mechanical features originally formed by her tutors, Charmaz suggests the approach *“shreds notions of neutral observer and value-free expert”* (Charmaz, 2014, p. 13), meaning that the researcher must consider their own perspectives, beliefs, and values which may affect the data that emerges rather than considering themselves a separate piece of the puzzle: *“CGT calls for ‘an obdurate, yet ever-changing world but recognises diverse local worlds and multiple realities, and addresses how people’s actions affect their local and larger social worlds’* (Bryant and Charmaz, 2010, p. 557).

The CGT approach has been applied in many subject areas, below are a limited number of the examples that were identified. In a study by Andrews et al (2019), over the period of a year semi-structured interviews were conducted as part of CGT methodology. Using constant comparison and memo writing, the researchers flowed from initial coding to focused coding then ended with theoretical coding to develop key concepts and final categories, finishing with the theory development. The results concluded with three key concepts: hardwired to be caregivers – vacation vs role, needing a stable base, and managing the emotions of caring, which led them to link all three of these concepts to a developed theory: *“needing permission to self-care and be -self compassionate”* (p. 09) which appears to be seen as an importance only when the nurses are close to breaking point.

Similarly, Edwards et al (2021) explored the early motherhood experiences of older first-time mothers using CGT. Interviews were conducted, as well as a voluntary demographic questionnaire while analysis included a constant comparison, eventually moving into initial and focused coding to develop categories and theory.

By using CGT, data emerged that signified negative feelings from the sample about what they thought contributed to being a good mother. Also, they found that some of the mothers were turning to other methods of feeding their child to return to professional obligations, and some still had feelings of inferiority in comparison to others in the sample who could, or had chosen, to breastfeed. Despite CGT being a positive method for this study they found that due to their professional experiences in nursing, the researchers had to be aware, and reflect upon, their biases throughout.

Another field of research which uses CGT is diversity. Sergeant (2019) used CGT to study the concerns and experiences of Chinese gay men in Britain. They used theoretical sampling to determine who to sample next and better articulate potential questions for the interviews. The interviews were the main data gathering strategy, and by using line-by-line coding of the transcripts this helped to slow down the process giving the researcher time to see the data more clearly. The most significant codes were picked out using focused coding, with theoretical sampling being used to refine categories.

Sergeant found two main issues emerged from the data: disclosing their sexuality to their families and colleagues, and rejection from other gay men because of racism or sexual objectification. This study not only addresses the importance of homophobia and racism awareness, but also the benefits of a research method that brought important data to the surface, highlighting the need for more assistance for the researched group.

Finally, Rodriguez-Labajos et al (2021) who explored using CGT in construction management as an approach to evaluate the benefits of CGT as a co-production research method, promoting researchers and practitioners to work alongside each other for the benefit of future studies, and, or projects. According to the conclusion the results were promising, and they encouraged further exploration of this type within other areas of study.

The data collection process consisted of interviews and field notes, with memo writing being the main area where the researcher compared codes with codes and within codes as well as analysing what was happening within the data.

Each of these studies demonstrate the fluidity of CGT and the vast areas in which this method can be used in. From the literature, CGT is a versatile method which explores analytically the experiences and views of participants to develop an overall theory through the interpretation of the data collected using specific tools. Charmaz explained during an interview *“these practices help the researcher to take a fresh look at the data and to move it forward analytically. They are simply strategies that help researchers begin to see processes in their data. These strategies foster taking an active stance towards the data, which ultimately expedites analytic work”* (Reiner and Charmaz, 2016, p. 15). The studies above all use a back-and-forth approach to the use of CGT; developing themes and building upon them to adapt an interpretation of the data, thus developing a final, overall theory. The difference between each study is the area in which the method is being used but also the same techniques used in differing ways, which shows the adaptiveness of the CGT methodology. With CGT being an interpretative-analytical method, exploring its use in a creative study would be an interesting concept.

7.3.1 CGT techniques/methods

7.3.1.1 Purposive Sampling

Purposive sampling is used to reduce the pool of participants for the study through the researcher’s judgement. This method was chosen for its flexibility, and its ability to be customisable (Thomas, 2022). For this study, the participants were selected due to their similarities with the researcher’s characteristics, such as Autism. This technique assisted with engagement between the two parties (the researcher and the participant), and developing data enrichment. Due to the anxious nature of some autistic individuals, the study was conducted online, and mostly anonymously.

7.3.1.2 Theoretical Sampling

According to Charmaz (2014), Theoretical Sampling is the back and forth between a collection of data, developing ideas about that data, and then examining these ideas through

further research. The current study used a cork board to visually stimulate ideas and interpretations when examining data and developing categories.

7.3.1.3 Coding

The coding technique chosen for this study was Initial Coding. Initial Coding assists in defining the very first categories, helping to give a clearer view of what the participants felt about certain aspects of comic design and the comic community. This type of coding can be used line-by-line, incident with incident, or word by word (Charmaz, 2014). Each of these techniques can be used to delve deeper into the data, make comparisons between data sets, and develop a deeper understanding. For this study, incident-with-incident was used to compare and explore the relationships between the experiences, feelings, and views of the participants.

7.3.1.4 Memoing

Memo-writing begins from the very start of research preparation, and is the backbone of the study. Memoing helps to develop comparisons, ideas, makes you stop and think about the data, and links data gathering with analysis and report-writing (Charmaz, 2014). With this study being a creative one, I decided to keep an art journal and memo notebooks (which later evolved into being typed up onto a computer for deeper comparison). The art journal consisted of ideas, thoughts, and notes, similar to that of a memo, however I was able to explore creatively with art materials, etc.

7.4 Combining Autoethnography and Constructivist Grounded Theory

By combining Autoethnography and Constructivist Grounded Theory, I shall be extending upon the work of Pace (2012) who examined research which adapted these two methodologies into their creative practice, as well as presenting an example of using them. Pace describes the analytic process of Grounded Theory as “*four stages*”. Stage one is Open Coding, a process in which he says “*might entail taking the written stories of the*

researcher or other study participants and breaking these stories down into discrete incidents – objects, events, actions, ideas, and so on – which are then compared for similarities and differences. Significant incidents are assigned labels known as codes” (p.12).

Secondly, Theoretical Coding which examines if there are any relationships between each code, *“concepts that emerged during open coding are reassembled with propositions about the relationships between those concepts. For example, one concept may appear to have a causal influence on another concept, or one concept may be a necessary condition for a particular relationship” (Pace, 2012, p. 12).*

Thirdly, Selective Coding thins down the data to only those related to the theme of the study, and Pace describes the data from this point on acting a guide to collect further data and analysis. The last stage is Sorting of Memos and Writing Theory, where the researcher examines the fieldnotes for similarities in relation to the core concept, *“The resulting structure provides an outline for writing, with the discussions in the memos becoming the major themes of the theory” (Pace, 2012, p. 13).* The current study will be extending upon Pace’s use of this methodology, and his paper will provide a guide to conducting the mixed method approach that has been chosen.

Charmaz’s CGT	Pace’s CGT and Autoethnography Mix
<i>Initial Coding</i> - compares events in data for patterns.	<i>Open Coding</i> - breaking down the data and compared for similarities and differences.
<i>Theoretical Sampling</i> - returns to participants to gather new data to develop current categories. Researcher goes back and forth between collection and analysis until saturation is met.	<i>Theoretical Coding</i> - examining relationships between each code.

<i>Sorting of Memos and Writing Theory</i>	<i>Selective Coding</i> - thins down data to those only related to the theme of study.
	<i>Sorting of Memos and Writing Theory</i> - examines fieldnotes for similarities in relation to core concept.

(Table 1: representing a comparison between the two methodologies created by me)

Although CGT may use different terms for the coding process it has a similar coding procedure: initial, focused, and theoretical coding. The initial coding process compares events in the data searching for patterns, closely related to Pace's first stage: Open Coding. Words and phrases are identified and coded to assist to identify any meanings within the data, and to establish answers to important questions, such as: *"what is this data a study of? What does the data assume, 'suggest' or 'pronounce' and 'from whose point of view' does this data come, whom does it represent or whose thoughts are they? What collectively might it represent?"* directing the researcher to gather further data (Chun Tie et al, 2019, p. 05). The next stage is Theoretical Sampling, in which the researcher returns to new participants to gather new data to develop the emerged categories. The researcher goes back and forth between data analysis and data collection until saturation has been met. At this stage *"The analysis identifies relationships, highlights gaps in the existing data set and may reveal insight into what is not yet known"* (Chun Tie et al, 2019, p. 05). Throughout the process memoing is an essential step as these provide the building blocks of the final theory. Giles et al (2016) describe memoing as a way *"to actively interact with the data, speed analytic momentum, question and clarify what was emerging from the data, see data and codes in new ways, and increase the level of abstraction"* (p. E37), as well as focusing and directing further data collection. When examining these two strategies side by side there appears to be no difference between them besides the mindset (objectivist or subjectivist) of the researcher, and the naming of each stage of the research process. Both procedures are

similar, with both having a structure that requires an iterative process of data collection, memoing, and analysing codes and categories.

According to Charmaz and Thornberg (2020) memoing plays an important role within CGT, *“Memo writing is the intermediate step between coding and writing the first draft of the paper, including the provisional analysis. Early memos may include discussions of grounded theorists’ codes, analytic and methodological questions as well as comparisons between fragments of data. Other memos are more analytic because grounded theorists take codes apart”* (p. 03).

For both methods primary (interviews, surveys) and secondary data (autobiographies, blogs, journals) shall be used. Semi-structured interviews (video calls, email) will be conducted to gather data, and observational data, using open questions to reflect upon the creative process of the comic samples readily made beforehand, and the final design at the follow up interviews. Before the interviews begin, a generalised survey shall be created and distributed to online social channels, such as Facebook and Twitter, to gain insight into the current reading material, preferences of comic design, colours, and a general enquiry into the likes and dislikes of autistic adults which will be formed into the first comic sample for the interviews. Self-observational data shall be collected as fieldnotes to explore personal creative development for future reflection over the study period, connections with participants which lead to interesting findings, and to assist in gathering rich data for Constructivist Grounded Theory analysis.

Morrison and Hamp-Lyons (2007) present an example of using Grounded Theory, which will provide a good starting point to help guide the process of using this technique. Using graphics from their own research such as transcripts, mind maps and tables of collected data and codes. Kathy Charmaz (2014) was an expert in her field and practised Grounded Theory for many years, while Morrison and Hamp-Lyons (2007) were researchers using the technique in the field. Both Morrison and Hamp-Lyons and Charmaz techniques can be seen in various areas of research which demonstrates the popularity of the method,

and how the techniques of these researchers have been used throughout academia in the field and out.

First, in a study by Railey et al (2019) called *An Exploration of Law Enforcement Officers' Training Needs and Interactions with Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder*. Using a Constructivist approach to Grounded Theory, they conducted an exploration of the knowledge of autism in police officers, possible training opportunities, and issues due to a lack of knowledge of ASD. Firstly, they distributed a survey to examine the current knowledge of their police participants and found that only 20% could describe characteristics of ASD, and 35% explained that they thought of Dustin Hoffman's character in the film *Rain Man*. This demonstrates the misrepresentation of the ASD community and the need for a more varied representation in the media, and further training (which Railey et al highlight within the conclusion of their study) to assist people in authority to be able to communicate effectively with ASD individuals to prevent stressful incidents, thus signposting that ASD education is an important area to consider in my creative work.

Moreover, the study by Pace (2012) is a perfect example of strategies implemented by Morrison and Hamp-Lyons (2007), as he has imported diagrams into his paper as a way to explain his ideas in a visual way. In his paper, Pace's aim is to evaluate the autoethnography and GT combination in practice, he says "*this article takes some steps toward answering those questions by exploring how autoethnographers in the creative arts can employ analytic strategies from the grounded theory tradition in their work*" (p.01). Step by step, he examines how the combination between the two may work and to see the two methods as a flexible approach rather than the rules being set in stone, "*this flexibility does not imply a lack of rigor or diligence. Rather it represents the freedom to modify research designs as required*" (p. 13). Suggesting that current methods should be adapted as they evolve rather than creating something new.

This modification can be seen in Ellingson's (2003) study *Interdisciplinary Health Care Teamwork in the Clinic Backstage*, where she adapts the use of ethnography fieldnotes and CGT data analysis to form her theory from the data she collected of team

communications. By combining these methods, she could immerse herself within her observations then take a step back when analysing her fieldnotes and transcripts, *“I compared interactions in the fieldnotes and transcripts, noting similarities and differences in content and structure of interactions among team members as they communicated in the clinic backstage. I developed preliminary categories based on similarities I observed across interactions and continually refined the typology as I reread notes and transcripts, using constant comparative analysis”* (p. 98). As well as keeping in mind her own position within the study (Charmaz, 2020).

In 2016, Bamkin et al conducted a mixed-method study exploring the influence of mobile libraries on children. They found the combination to be a *“powerful research tool that allows children to be active participants in research”* (p. 01). Although this study does not outline the results or research in a visual way like previous studies, it outlines the results using numbers for convenience of the reader. They also note that a weakness of the study was not being able to study the children in their own environment, implying that the children may have acted differently to how they would on a day-to-day basis. Despite this they observed over 700 children and suggested that they found patterns within the data which trumped these limitations. With the study using both ethnography and GT methods they implied that they *“enabled data gathering across settings to gain knowledge of the processes that stimulated reading skills, the perceptions of children from diverse geographic and demographic backgrounds, and the impact of CMLs on a variety of communities. The constant comparison of data from each CML showed patterns emerging which allowed the establishment of five mid-range theories”* (p. 229). This they consider something which would have unlikely happened if they had chosen a different route when choosing the best research method for the study, and that each method outweighed the limits of the other.

7.5 Secondary Sources

In addition, secondary data was collected from various sources such as journals, blogs, media (TV and Film), and autobiographies to explore the negatives and positives of being an autistic woman, and autism representations. This helped to develop ideas, plots, and styles when writing, creating, developing, and storyboarding the comic book.

A written piece has been completed alongside the comic book as a write up of the results, and reflection, of the research and creative process using Aut-ethnography and Constructivist Grounded Theory. This provides an autistic researcher's, and artist's, experience of conducting research, creating a piece of art, and interacting with other autistic individuals as participants as well as building, and expanding on, theory and documenting an interdisciplinary study within the arts.

7.6. Ethical Considerations

7.6.1 Data Protection

All data was USB password protected and no names were used in creative works. Participants were given an agreement to sign which was simple to read and understand, which they were able to back out of if they wished to later. If this had occurred all data would have been removed from the project and database.

Surveys were confidential, nameless and only asked age, gender, location, general questions about comic book design preferences and current reading material. This was to help identify any differences between preferences between genders and location. Any personal issues (emotional or otherwise) of the researcher during the research process was to be discussed with the supervisors, and no research was conducted until given permission by the University.

7.6.2 Consent and Inclusion

Ethics focuses on the right and wrongs of research etiquette when working with participants, there are many forms of ethics, but researchers take views from each to form their own ethical understanding. However, even though researchers can be prepared, they're not aware of everything that may occur during their research study (Kara, 2020).

Casio et al, (2020) reviewed literature on the topic of consent, making Autism research more inclusive, and person-centred, identifying 'communication modes' which looks at the importance of using different communication methods to include autistic individuals instead of putting them to one side during recruitment, *"intersectionality is an important concept that draws attention to the exclusion of marginalized subgroups of people with autism (e.g., by sex, gender, language, ethnicity, level of support needs, SES, and age) as a major ethical concern"* (p. 33). During this study all measures shall be taken to allow participants to take part. For example, a non-verbal individual may be more comfortable conducting an interview over email or the Microsoft Teams chat option, or a participant may

have anxiety talking over the phone and prefer to text message. Many Autistic individuals have other needs as well as, which need to be considered during data collection. Information shall be provided to the participants (and on the surveys) in a manner suitable for them to read through and consent to as well as continuous asking for consent throughout the study.

Table 2 below demonstrates possible risks and the possible management of those risks (cf. Thomas, 2017).

Risk	Management of Risk
Sensory issues (<i>environmental: lights, smells, sounds, etc</i>)	Person/s shall be in their own environment completing the survey/interview/diary; therefore, they will be able to relax as they will have an environment already tailored to their needs.
Anxiety (<i>phone calls, eye contact, in person communication</i>)	Needs shall be discussed beforehand, so anxieties related to communication shall be covered with emails, text messages, expectations of no eye contact. Or anything else that they would prefer to communicate over. Adaptations shall be met.
Information overload (<i>overwhelmed by oral/written information</i>)	All documents (written and oral) shall be written in simple language and presented in an easily read format, such as bullet points or numbered. If they prefer to give verbal consent after a discussion about the information instead this shall be either recorded for my records (video/text/email)

	so that they understood, and accepted, the information.
Other personal needs (<i>non-verbal, dyslexia, etc</i>)	Other needs shall be adhered to with either technology (email/text) or recording of video calls for those who have difficulties with dyslexia. All participants will be given extra time to process questions/information.

(Table 2: to show the ethical considerations I had in mind throughout the study)

7.6.3 Copyright

All creative works are based on original research and is intended for ages 15 and over due to graphic memoir content. Any similarities are completely coincidental, and all names will be changed to protect participants. At this time only one original character will be used in the comic book, however this may change as the plot, or storyboard, develops.

8. Literature Review

In the first section of this literature review I will be starting with books on comic book design and research that showcases how sequential art has been used. Then it shall move forward to discuss comic books that will be used as a reference point for the development of an original comic book, and traits these books possess that will be used as inspiration during the creative process. In addition, I shall discuss semiotics in sequential art and discuss useful books which will assist in the development of the design of the prototypes for the research questionnaires to explore the design preferences of autistic adults. I will then finish the literature review contemplating the representation of autistic women in sequential art.

8.1 Comic Structure and Design

In this section, the literature review shall touch upon the development of visual style, the relationship between stereotypes and reader comprehension, and the use of panels and gutters. All these areas are used to develop the connection between the artist and reader to create a meaningful and comprehensible experience.

8.1.1 Art Styles

Centeno (2020) describes certain periods of development in their article which are key to the art style evolution of comics. The Golden Age of comics consists of vintage superhero comics which became popular in the 1930s. The Silver Age brought forth a complexity to comics by introducing shading and detail, but this style was influenced mainly by the art of its time. The Bronze Age focused more on storytelling, and including important issues which gave the genre a greater connection to their readers. The Dark Age takes a deeper look into humanity using dark settings and shading, but also choosing to focus on more mature themes. As time went on comics began to evolve further with genres branching out into various streams of styles and topics. From the variety of comics this study has

researched, visual styles of comics are as vast as the ocean and the artists are just as adventurous, so this section will discuss the development of art styles and their *potential* use. The word potential is used to highlight the ever-changing genres of comics, and the diversity of artists who create them.

McCloud (1993) discusses visual styles by categorising artists' work in a triangle. The three categories represented are, what McCloud calls, the picture plane, language, and reality, and all these categories represent the whole of the pictorial vocabulary. At the very tip of the triangle is the picture plane, which holds basic shapes and colours which are simply what they are without meaning. Further down the triangle one goes the more detailed the shapes become; however, one side of the triangle is more detailed (reality) than the other (language) depending on an artist's style. The more relaxed and basic a style of character is the more the viewers must perceive, or interpret, what they are seeing as well as determining the meaning from the abstract style. However, the triangle of visual styles can be explored in many ways and each point of the triangle does not have to be stuck to. For example, by starting in one corner an artist could branch out in any direction to experiment with shapes, unrealistic colour combinations, realistic styles but with a twist with bright colours or unusual lines, or completely abstract with no colour at all.

In comparison, Will Eisner's book *Comics and Sequential Art: principles and practices from the legendary cartoonist* (2008) produces similar principles when discussing the visual style of comics. Eisner states that the leaving out of detail creates an easier comprehension of the image and adds humour, describing this style of cartooning as impressionism. When discussing the anatomy of characters, Eisner (2008) describes postures and gestures as a learnt survival skill humans develop and use from birth, therefore, artists replicate these memories within their drawings which are then interpreted by the reader. Due to the enormity of the memories, Eisner suggests that one posture can be adapted, or interpreted, to mean different things which is important to understand when considering region, culture, and background of potential readers.

Similarly, Cohn (2013) views this type of visual vocabulary as a “*transmission of culture-specific schemas*” (p.28), which combine within the memory to create an image on paper and, eventually, develop into the artist’s style. He continues by saying that simplifying, and experimenting, with the different shapes of a character’s features can change their personality, therefore can change the meaning of an entire image. Additionally, if an individual is unsure of what an object looks like they can develop and create their own schema by researching the subject, by using another artist’s design, or through their own limited knowledge of the object.

8.1.2 Stereotypes and Reader Comprehension

According to McCloud (2006), clarity is defined as reader comprehension and should be the goal of the storyteller. He describes five points which are important in forming clarity: choice of moment, choice of frame, choice of image, choice of word and the choice of flow. Each of these points have certain goals and tools to assist in their mission. For instance, choice of moment is choosing the moments in time which will strengthen your story and removing that don't. The tools of this principle would be the transitions of the panels, which McCloud discusses earlier in his book *Making Comics* (2006): moment to moment, action to action, subject to subject, scene to scene, aspect to aspect and non sequitur. Using these tools can change the dynamic of the scene and even the mood of the setting or character.

This is discussed more in McCloud's book *Understanding Comics* (1993), where he examines the use of panels and the space between them. He suggests that the space between panels is a moment in time that is interpreted by the reader and that the space in question is an "*indicator that time or space is being divided*" (McCloud, 1993, p. 99). Therefore, while the panels are creating a moment-by-moment scene, per se, between them is a moment in time where the reader must use their imagination to fill in the gaps which immerses them deeper into the story. However brief, McCloud touches upon the importance of body language, facial expressions and creating an inner life for your characters to develop their personalities and traits. Three key areas are required for good character design suggests McCloud (2006): inner life, visual distinction, and expressive traits. All these things create a relatable and unique character which readers can relate to no matter how detailed or simplistic. By using clothing, features, postures, and expressions the personality of the character can shine through to the reader, gripping them and pulling them further into the story. The use of stereotypes within these creations, according to McCloud (2006), assists the reader to recognise and associate a feeling with the character and yet these stereotypes can be explored and played with. Eisner (2008) builds upon this by suggesting stereotypes can vary depending on the social, cultural, and personal experiences

of the creator which influences the style and design of a comic increasing the emotional experience of the reader. Even though Cohn (2014) explored stereotypes from a language point of view, he suggests they are a diverse visual language which provide information about the creator's status and social group. These theories suggest that, perhaps, reader comprehension is achieved not just through an emotional connection, but a symbolic one to keep the attention of the reader. This "*Reader-Storyteller Contract*" (Eisner, 2008, p.49) is similar to Keen's (2007) theory on reader's empathy, where readers themselves take part in the process of connecting with the material being viewed. Additionally, he suggests by having an artist combine storytelling and artwork this closes the gap between the two job types and helps the intent of the creator shine through to the reader. Therefore, clarity (McCloud, 2006) is an important creative device when considering making something for public consumption and wanting to connect with a certain readership.

8.1.3 Frames, Panels, and Gutters

In his book series, McCloud (2006) explores how panels, transitions and how the space between them (the gutters) can be manipulated in different ways to form different effects, draw out emotions, and sensations from the reader. He suggests that elongating a panel, adding more of the same panel, or by creating a silenced (lack of text) panel which is stretched out into a rectangle shows a longer perception of time. Manga is a good example of the use of panels as different features are explored and experimented with, for example, bleeds are commonly used in Japanese comics, and he suggests that their use can create a sense of timelessness and sets a certain mood. In *Making Comics* (McCloud, 2006), he takes this further by explaining the use of environments and how a sense of place can be used in various forms such as long-shot panels, medium-shot panels, the ever-popular close-up and the amount of detail, depth, and angles. A diagram is used to indicate the different ways depth can be achieved in a comic: overlap, size, fading and position can all create depth.

Eisner (2008) has similar reflections regarding time and space, highlighting the importance of creating a connection between gaps in events on the page so that the reader can fill in those gaps and have a smooth reading experience to improve immersion. When discussing his concept on reading rhythm, which is the influential experience of other media being used to read comics, he draws similarities between comics and films due to their use of panels to simulate a visual medium on paper. Yet, the differences between the two he implies rests upon film having the advantage of fluid motion, while comics need to use a static image to the best of the creator's ability to tell the story. By using panels, he suggests this ability can be experimented with as the shape of panels can contribute to telling the story, engaging the reader emotionally, and showing new perspectives. Cohn (2014) adds that these frames can be of the traditional comic style or artists may create new ones to assist in storytelling and evoking a response from the reader.

Polak (2017) takes perspectives in panels a step further by describing that the position of the frames adds to the narrative by allowing the reader to see what is missed. Where a narrative excludes details which could be unimportant a comic displays frames which act as a window which can change the opinions of the reader regarding characters and events. For example, a character which the reader viewed as a villain a few pages ago may be viewed differently as the story and scene unfolds. Thus, giving the reader a glance into the character's personality, attitude and how others react to them.

8.2 Comics as a Reference

In this section of the literature review I shall describe a collection of comic books which I have found to use as inspiration for the development of my art practice.

During the search for books to use as reference and inspiration for my own comics, I found several interesting female artists. Mostly these works belong to the memoir, or slice of life, genre with depictions of their lives using the comic style. However, I did discover a male artist which I found intriguing in the manga genre: Junji Ito.

The first artist I discovered was Emily Carroll on finding her book *Speak* (2018) which she collaborated on with the original writer L. H. Anderson. Throughout the book Carroll only uses black and white, which fluctuates in intensity depending on the circumstances and emotional state of the character. For example, during a scene with the antagonist these bold uses of shadow are heightened. By creating a shadow figure with barely visible features this gives the reader a sense of intensity, mystery, and horror. When the protagonist is alone, the use of shadow is dark but not as thickly placed allowing for some sense of freedom even though the dark tones simulate her feelings of withdrawal, depression, and outlook on life since her rape. This *thickness* of black lightens towards the end after the final scene with the connection of the main characters, showing that a weight has been lifted and personal growth has been achieved. The use of sharp edges, shadows and textures throughout the book is intriguing as it looks, to me, that she completed the artwork traditionally. However, there are a lot of good digital brushes that can simulate traditional textures.

Similarly, Erin William's work on her memoir *Commute* (2019) is similar in content. Williams talks about her alcoholism, her rapes and sexism she has experienced in her lifetime throughout one commute from and to work. She describes these details explicitly, exposing her story using words, illustrations, and diagrams in a style which I would deem as messy. Although, this messy style has a certain charm as it highlights that art can be perfectly imperfect; art is subjective. The imperfections are also limited to herself, her belongings, people in her life and her pet as everything else she draws, which is related to

others, is drawn with greater care, or so it seems. To me this shows her opinion of herself and her life. She sees her life as chaotic, unorganised and without much purpose which when you have read through her experiences in her book is not surprising that she feels this way. Her lack of panels also shows her love of messy chaos and freedom as the images that are without any panels appear across the page in an uneven pattern. Her use of colour is also kept to a minimum and to objects she finds important such as her daughter and her skin care products. The random bursts of colour I find really appealing especially when it is not often you see a bright yellow or bright blue in similar works.

Debbie Tung's (2017) use of panels, full pages and bleeds are all used in conjunction with each other to highlight her emotions during a scene. For example, one full page shows her alter ego sat in a library surrounded by piles of books from a perspective which visually describes her feelings of being small within the world she's in – in this case a library – which also shows the magnitude of love for solitude that she has.

I find using perspective and panels (or no panels) to describe your emotional state interesting and may be something I would like to dabble in in my own work. Tung's use of colour is as simplistic as her art style; however, I have found neither less effective when reading her books. I find the simple colouring easy on the eye and her style easy to relate to which is something that McCloud in his book *Understanding Comics* (1993) states is important when creating comics. By creating a simple character for your comics this provides a more immersive experience for your reader.

This statement can be frequently seen in modern web comics like Sarah Andersen's (2016) work. Her style is very simple and in black and white with some added grey tones here and there. Andersen's work tackles everyday issues of being a woman, from periods to having a male friend with a man bun. She also uses text as well as handwriting to produce a story which describes herself stealing her partner's hooded jumpers with a comedic finale. I found this an interesting take in using text in comics books as it is quite different from other forms which have a text box in the corner of the panel or below it. Instead, Andersen uses

text above the entirety of the panels like a children's picture book. This idea I might experiment with in my own work to see what effects it may have when paired with other ingredients of comic books.

Gemma Correll is a British cartoonist and illustrator who creates cartoons that revolve around pop-culture and her life. Her work is simplistic and is the most colourful that I have probably seen so far. Instead of keeping colours to just one, Correll branches out to lots of oranges, blues, and reds and this seems to be her go to colour palette throughout a lot of her work. In her book *The Worrier's Guide to Life* (2015), she chooses to use chapters to give context to her work that would otherwise lack any clarity. The text that she uses is her handwriting, which appears to be a popular alternative to the classic comic text, and she removes the panels to have a free-flowing style which works in her favour. I did notice that she uses minimal shading, almost none, except on occasion when there is some on the ground around the subject she had drawn. All of these are a satisfying mix when witnessed on the page as it creates a unique style which is personally hers and hers alone. Even though she has used colour it is strictly kept to three hues which I rather like as too much colour can be too stimulating for me, personally. This use of colour I would like to experiment further with in my own work to see what works and what does not for my own colour knowledge. Although, colour will be a topic I will need to think about later during the development process.

Junji Ito's (2018) artwork is exceptional, and the stories are bizarre and unique in a horrifying way. In his book *Uzumaki*, I fell upon a meaning behind each chapter which signified a human desire. Whether this is true or not I do not know, but I took from each chapter something that resonated with me. In one chapter called Medusa, the main character's hair grows up into the air, curls into a spiral and attracts and hypnotises everyone who sees it. The character's friend becomes jealous and becomes a competitor as the same curse takes over her creating an envious monster (Ito, 2018). To me, this symbolises the human emotion: envy, and many other chapters appear to take the form of

one of the seven deadly sins somewhere within it. For example, in one scene the villagers are so hungry they murder and eat the cursed snail people which is very apt for the sin of gluttony. However, gluttony can take many forms - it doesn't have to strictly be about food (Ito, 2018). The artwork itself is unique with its use of strong linework for evil characters, the use of longer panels to simulate a longer period of time (McCloud, 2006) and the rare use of colour to portray the details of important characters and environments to engage the reader and to inform them of important physical traits of the characters. This is useful as an example of McCloud's (2006) techniques described within his books, and as an example of exploring possible ways of attracting the reader's attention through style, colour and story. Each of these comics has a trait which I found could benefit the research, and creative, process and will be explored and experimented with artistically during the process of this study to create the final comic book in conjunction with the guidance of McCloud's books.

Lastly, the comic book by Nick Sousanis (2015), which is a dissertation in the format of a graphic novel about the use of art as language and the potential of visual thinking, shall be experimented with as a possible layout template for my aut-ethnographical comic memoir. How he has used sections to separate his work, the use of the bibliography at the end, and the adding of notes and sketches is an interesting concept which I feel would be beneficial when organising my own work.

Throughout this discussion there have been a variety of comics associated with autobiography genres which provide an insight into unsettling, and traumatic, events in the author's life. The style is often simple and uses a dark colour pallet, which accentuates the impact these events have had on the creator. Even the fictitious work of Junji Ito creates a feeling of trauma using metaphor and dark character design, which gives the reader room for speculation about the authors history or link to the content as creativity is shown to be a therapeutic endeavour when wanting to ease mental health symptoms (Morison et al, 2021).

8.3 Comics and Semiotics

This section of the literature review discusses semiotics in comic books. After a brief description of what semiotics is the study of, research is explored and critiqued before books are identified that will constitute as a guide throughout the study. Throughout this section, suggestions shall be made for further research which would benefit the area of comics and semiotics.

Semiotics is the study of meaning and representation of signs. Signs can be more than those we are familiar with when we are driving or logos of favourite video games. Semiotics can study language, imagery, or objects and even artwork (Curtin, 2009). According to Curtin (2009), semiotic analysis explores the relationship between the viewer and the representation. Thus, showing that these relationships are not a one-way path but inter-connected with a person's background (culture, religion, society, etc). Roland Barthes (2009) had a similar theory, implying that the knowledge used to interpret the meaning behind a sign (Denotative) is gained from past experiences (Connotation) or the meaning created by society (mythologies). Relevant to the work of Piaget (Gillibrand, 2016), Barthes insinuates and leans upon the research of schemas by suggesting that society lives by learned implicit rules depending on a civilisation's culture. This can also be seen within Saussure's Saussurean Model (Chandler, 2017), which discusses the meaning of signs using a system which consists of a sound (signifier) and a concept (signified), and the sign being a mix of the two. Saussure believes that both the signifier and the signified are independent, however the sign can't exist without the two. For example, you see a fluffy animal with a tail and ears being walked in the park on a lead (physical object) and psychologically you gather the information from your schema to interpret this signifier as being a dog. Therefore, the sign is an animal we, as a society, recognise as a dog. Cohn (2013) describes this process in terms of creating imagery by implying that "*drawing involves the transmission of culture-specific schemas, not drawing from perception*" (p.28) which links to the culturally arbitrary ideas of Saussure's model. Cohn continues by suggesting that

people combine these schemas from thousands of mental models to create a whole picture, “these schemas can range in size from the small scale (fingers and hands) to the large scale (whole bodies and whole images), and these components end up creating a person’s drawing “style” (p.28).

Comics are one of the many areas of semiotic studies which have grown in popularity. An example is Rothewelle’s (2019) study on *Comics and Medical Narrative: A Visual Semiotic Dissection of Graphic Medicine*, which analysed the patient – practitioner relationship in the medical sector through the exploration of graphic medicine. Using visual semiotic analysis, the researcher viewed numerous comics that had been made by participants and formed two theories: 1) the use of detached concern and 2) the importance of empathy. Fourth year medical students drew comics showing that empathy is an important part of patient care. Representing that intimacy and human contact is valued in medical education. Key themes were formed into a table with each comic title and most of them revolved around empathy, human experience, and remembrance. The study concluded that graphic narratives allow self-reflection, which gives the medical students knowledge and understanding of their own emotions leading to better care in medical practices. Therefore, using comic books for educational purposes could benefit those who read them. Allowing them to reflect upon their own experiences and emotions as well as how they treat those who are different from themselves.

Another example of comics being used for educational studies is the research by Pantaleo (2019). By conducting a case study of 13 girls and 10 boys with various degrees of behaviour issues, they wanted to develop visual meaning-making skills in students. Comics were chosen as the medium because of their flexibility and creative, and narrative, aspects. The participants, over a period of weeks, were taught about panelling, language, writing, perspective, and colour before being asked to read graphic novels and picture books ready for a discussion. At the end of the study, they discovered that other semantic qualities were appreciated as well as the original focus of panelling. Also, they found that the

empowerment of creating their own comics impacted the participants not just with confidence, but by improving their critical thinking skills and interpretation.

Although these studies involve women, they focus on the educational purposes of comics in students rather than focusing on autistic adult women only. These studies are both strong in their semantic theory development and extending upon graphic narrative, however, they do not look at the use of comics from an autistic adult perspective. Instead, they focus on young, non-autistic participants for their research samples. In relation to their sample sizes, they are small compared to the rest of the student population. In addition, Rothewelle's study does not state clearly how many participants they have for their sample which causes confusion and leads to an assumption of the sample size being authors of the number of comics used for analysis.

Moving on from research papers to vital books in semiotics, the book *The Visual Language of Comics* by Neil Cohn (2013) will be used as a guide during the study when developing prototypes and the final artwork. The books in depth descriptions of semiotic features in comics will extend upon the works by McCloud from a cognitive psychology perspective. As well as broadening knowledge of semiotic theory this book shall be used to explore visual language of different cultures which will lead to the development of new insight into works such as manga. Cohn's work also discusses cognition which is kept in mind while he describes developing comics, thus theorising that the structure of comics is like that of language. Cohn goes on to explore, and explain, his theory on visual narratives which he suggests uses a lexicon of systematic patterns stored in the brain which are then used to create meaning and a type of grammar that comics form into expressions.

This book will be crucial to the creative process and to the improvement of subject knowledge. Although there have been numerous research papers found to be appropriate for the study topic, I will be focusing on the book by Cohn (2013) as it is the most direct informational source regarding comics.

8.4 Comics and Heuristics

This section of the literature review explores the research of heuristics in association with sequential art and how it has been used to assist in the gaining of knowledge in the influence of judgement, and decision making. The section shall then finish with a brief recommendation for future studies.

Hertwig and Todd (2002) identify heuristics as the study of decision-making in situations which are uncertain. Instead of working out thoroughly all the information given by the senses, or otherwise, heuristics are used to help form quick, and reasonable, decision making in a short time frame.

The main types of heuristics include availability, recognition, and representativeness (Gilovich et al, 2002). Availability Heuristic allows an individual to draw on what they remember, and what they see, to form a conclusion or decision. Recognition Heuristic allows customers to compare products, for example. If the product is recognised and the other not, then the customer will decide to purchase the well-known item due to it appearing to be of higher value. Finally, Representativeness Heuristics is the decision one makes about what someone/something is from a set of information.

During research around heuristics, I found a lack of information regarding the use of heuristics within a comic book, or graphic novel, on Google Scholar. However, on returning to the Leeds Beckett Library I discovered a few articles to browse. The journals I read appeared to focus mainly on the psychological implications and biases of decision making. Despite this, as I searched deeper, I found several articles exploring the use of comics to help decision making alongside the Gestalt Theory which implies that a viewer will look at the whole rather than the parts on seeing an item/object (Hampton-Smith, S, 2018). By using the principles of Gestalt Theory, Lee and Choo (2019) discovered, during their study on presentation on a retail online store and customer behaviour, that their choices regarding presentation effected the stores perceived variety which in turn influenced the customer's

shopping behaviour. Thus, supporting that presentation, online or not, is important to influence and encourage customers to make a purchase.

Returning to comics, Sridhar (2019) conducted a study using comics as a contraception education decision aid using different theories to develop the comics (see Appendix figure 4). Working alongside an illustrator they created four comics (22 panels each) and tested each with 120 participants (patients) which they divided into four groups of 30 for each comic with an overall knowledge increase of 71.6%. This result suggests that comics used for the purposes of making decisions could be a research area worthy of further development in correlation with influencing decision making, judgements and beliefs around autistic individuals, their behaviour and creating awareness of how others can help in negative, and positive, situations (e.g., meltdowns).

Unfortunately, heuristics, comics and autism are very rare criteria when searching for research on the subject. The studies mentioned above are the most relevant, to my knowledge, that could be found at this time. This appears to be an area where more research could be done that may assist in highlighting the broad possibilities that comic books provide. Heuristics in comics could be an interesting area to explore in relation to the design process. As well as an experimental way of gathering new insight into how heuristics in comics can, or cannot, influence the viewer on multiple aspects such as their beliefs on what autism is and is not. This could be linked back to Barthes' (2009) theories on Mythologies which also would be an appropriate addition to this area. Even though the current study shall touch upon this during the process of creating the comic, this area of interest may be more enlightening when studied more thoroughly alone due to the complexity of heuristics.

8.5 Autistic Women, Representation, and Comics

This section of the literature review shall explore the representation of autistic women in comics. Firstly, autism shall be briefly defined before moving forward into relevant research papers exploring autism in comics and the social construction of autism. Finally, it shall discuss prospects for research in autism in comics and the limitations current research has had on the female autistic community.

Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) is a neurological condition which affects an individual's ability to communicate, express non-verbal communication, to develop and maintain relationships, and restricted or repetitive behaviours (Legg and Cherney, 2019). The autistic individual may be hypersensitive or hyposensitive to certain stimuli, such as light, sounds, motion, and pain. They may have obsessive interests and a love for routines. However, symptoms can vary which is why ASC is known, nowadays, as a spectrum (National Autistic Society, 2023).

ASC is commonly diagnosed in male children at the age of three (NICHD, 2005), however more and more adult women are being diagnosed later in life. This implies that there is a lack of knowledge around the topic of autism in women and their differences from their male counterparts (Baron-Cohen, 2014).

Baron-Cohen theorises that there are three types of brains: type E (empathising), type S (systemising) and type B (balanced). Women, he states, have a type E brain while men have a type S. This could be determined as stereotypical categorising as women are seen as more emotional and nurturing and men are seen to be logical. This led Baron-Cohen to his theory of the extreme male brain, which refers to the autistic nature of the systemising brain. He then made a connection between testosterone levels and empathy and therefore by reducing its level could lower the chances of autism spectrum disorder (McClure, 2003).

McGrath (2017) discusses this phenomenon and speculates by saying: “*if male and female brains are as different as the UK’s most prominent autism diagnostician theorizes, then is it not likely that autism could therefore express itself differently between men and women?*” (p.139). He continues by examining the tone of Baron-Cohen’s writing when discussing autistic women and explains that women appear to be written about solely in a sense of servitude. Additionally, they appear to be bound to social expectations of female etiquette and encouraged to conform to these expectations which can be damaging to their mental health (Hendrickx, 2015). However, toxic masculinity is a popular feature within Baron-Cohen’s book, as McGrath (2017) implies. He suggests that leadership, being one of the main male traits, reinforces the stereotypical maleness of being competitive and high achieving. This theory implied by Baron-Cohen is beneficial to my study as a demonstration of the current and past scientific thinking around autism which tends to re-enforce the stereotypical media representations of autism.

Due to the lack of knowledge regarding autistic traits and characteristics in girls and women, they are losing out and living a life without the necessary support. This may lead to other issues such as poor mental health, which is demonstrated in the study of Baldwin and Costley (2016), who supplied a self-selecting sample of 82 adult females with a diagnosis of Autism with a questionnaire to collect their feelings, experiences, needs and aspirations. Using thematic analysis, they determined that a lack of diagnosis from an early age assisted in the development of their mental health issues later in life, which left them with no support throughout their education, work, and social life. This indicates that more knowledge about autism in female adults is an important research and educational focus.

This lack of knowledge can also be seen within academia, as Birge (2010) found in a study on autism representations in Comics. Only a small number of comics mentioned autism, and only two were considered in her analysis: *Circling Normal* and *The Ride Together*. Both of these books communicate experiences of autism through a family dynamic. In *The Ride Together* (2004), brother and sister worked together to form a memoir

not just with words, but with comics as well. This mix provides an interesting combination in the form of a window into the lives of two siblings growing up alongside their elder brother who is autistic. The pages of *Circling Normal* (2007) depict a family supporting a young autistic boy. Unfortunately, there is not a lot of information about the book, but Birge (2010) describes it as a loose representation of multi-racial family's experiences of autism through their autistic son, Seth. She goes on to describe the experience of reading the book which *"resist[s] traditional depictions, representing disability neither as a blessing to inspire them nor as a medical condition to be cured."* [no pagination]. The family simply sees Seth for who he is and accepts him, the good and the bad. Speculating, Birge adds *"because of features such as the ability to depict both temporal and spatial relationships simultaneously, comics can powerfully convey the experience of disability in a lived context."* [no pagination]. In addition, she suggests that traditional texts exclude those that see, and experience, the world differently and comics provide a more diverse way of communicating *"studies of comics, in contrast, emphasize the importance of multiple embodied and cognitive styles of living, by portraying, for example, the powerful communicativeness of silence and other nonverbal forms of expression"* [no pagination].

Similarly, Germaine (2016) found that issues of the Thor comics stigmatised disability through the depiction of the (male) protagonist having his amputated arm replaced with a robotic arm. This representation, Germaine argues, shows disability hinders the power of the character and is something to be corrected, and instead comics could be used to spark important conversations about topics of disability. She continues by suggesting disability is seen through the eyes of the able-bodied the same way women are seen sexually through the eyes of men, and that the power of the observer can invoke feelings of inadequacy that can have an impact on the subject of observation.

An essay by Rozema (2020) examined the period of the first autistic superhero from the comic *Psi Force* (Perry, et al, 1986). They concluded that with more implicit representations of autism rather than *Psi Force*'s more explicit dramatisation this makes the

character more authentic, as a statement of ASC brings stigma and stereotypes to the forefront with creates negative interpretations. Also, by autistic writers and artists entering the industry this will improve these implicit explorations of representation, creating thoroughly authentic characters and stories.



Rozema (2020) Psi-Force

It appears that the lack of knowledge within academia specifically is a gender issue, as representation of autistic characters seems to be those of stereotypical autistic males, which creates a distorted view of autistic people and supports the myths constructed by

society (Alfansi, 2020). However, within the world of comic books created by individuals, autistic traits are seen more frequently, for instance, traits of autism can be seen within the pages of Debbie Tung's *Quiet Girl in a Noisy World: An Introverts Story* (2017). The story reflects Tung's struggle with coming to terms with her introverted personality. Though introversion can be a symptom of autism, this comic does not state whether autism is a cause. Despite this, the content of the book shows scenes of a lack of social motivation, auditory distress, exhaustion, and masking which reflects experiences of autistic women relevant to the study of Baldwin and Costley from 2016.

Although the questionnaire was delivered world-wide through electronic methods (social media, email, etc) and resulted in viable results through qualitative means, this is a small sample compared to the rest of the adult, autistic female population. In addition, they stated that a limitation of their study was that they had no way of validating the diagnosis that the participants claimed to have before taking part which could make their results unreliable. However, self-diagnosis is determined to be a valid diagnosis as a professional diagnosis is a long, and stressful process (Lewis, 2016).

In the comic book genre autism has been represented mostly in young men and showcases the stereotypical traits of autism (Alfansi, 2020) rather than a realistic representation which can lead to a generalised view of the autistic community.

8.6 Autism Representation in Popular Culture

In this section of the literature review I shall discuss the representations of ASD in popular culture. Beginning with literature, I shall explore the portrayals of autism within fiction, moving fluidly into research focusing on societal ideals of autism in film and popular TV dramas which include main characters with ASD. To finish, the section will determine the usefulness of these portrayals, and its employment within the study.

8.6.1 Autism in Fictional Literature

The portrayals of autism in literature and screen show a boy, or man, who loves mathematics and science but suffers when it comes to relationships, romantic or not. They struggle to determine the best output for the chaos of environmental input, but they can complete a mathematical problem in a blink of an eye. They are usually white, introverted, single, heterosexual, childless and comically rude, lack an understanding of empathy and lack want of a wife or sexual intercourse. McGrath (2017) describes these portrayals of autism as ableist and a comforting fiction to neurotypical viewers.

By studying literature such as *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (Hadden, 2004) we can see the young boy is as McGrath describes. After finding his neighbour's dog murdered the book follows his journey in his attempt to track down the perpetrator with some twists and turns along the way. The boy acts young for his age, loves facts and mathematics, and expresses his enthusiasm to people he knows. He is also very honest, to the point of socially inappropriate, and has violent meltdowns. The book itself is written in the first person, in the tone of a child and uses illustrations to illustrate the magnitude of the narrator's love of all things maths and science.

A similar portrayal of autism in literature is *The Rosie Project* (Simision, 2013), where the main character creates a questionnaire to determine the perfect life companion. Don, the main character, is the narrator and uses his autistic gifts in genetics to create what he likes to call, the Wife Project. Despite its vibrant reviews the characteristics of Don are the same

premiss as the former book: a male scientist who struggles with noticing social cues, sarcasm, and negative relationships (particularly his relationship with his friend Gene), as well as other traits of the condition. When he becomes infatuated with a young woman called Rosie, who fails the Wife Project compatibility questionnaire, she becomes his special interest as they embark on a difficult and emotional journey to discover her biological father. The storyline itself is charming and touches on subjects such as polyamory, autism, mental health, and the miracle of a love that finds you and not you it.

These representations, according to McGrath (2017) are a caricature of ASC, supplying comfort to a neurotypical world: *“the most popular autism depictions are idealistic – or at least, idealistic within the bounds of capitalist ideologies”* (p. 143). This statement is evidenced by the discussed fiction above, as with each book there appears to be a touch of comedic value to the character’s personality to create a sense of comfort.

In 2019, Brian Cronin wrote an article examining the portrayal of the Aquaman supervillain Black Manta’s autism. His article focuses on Aquaman comic eight where the reader is taken back into the childhood of the character where it is shown that Black Manta was detained in Arkham Asylum because of his autism. As well as finding it unusual that Arkham Asylum accepts child patients, as it is meant to be a hospital for the criminally insane, Cronin highlights that after scientists experiment on Black Manta he is essentially *cured*. However, the character still shows autistic traits throughout the events of the comic which can be seen during a fight with Aquaman. Once Black Manta is unconscious, realising there is more going on than meets the eye, Aquaman uses his abilities to watch a playback of his memories. Sympathising with Black Manta, Aquaman *cures* his autism by rewiring his brain with his powers and, suddenly, Black Manta is no longer a supervillain, *“He becomes Aquaman’s buddy in the next issue now that he has been “fixed” ... Autism really isn’t something that you CURE. It’s just the guy’s BRAIN. It’s how he is wired. Someone who was “cured” would totally miss his own identity, which is what was erased here. Instead, it is shown as a heroic act.”* (Cronin, 2019).

8.6.2 Autism in Film

Gilbert Grape, of the film *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* (1993) is a young man trying to help his family by taking a fathering role to their autistic younger brother Arnie. After the death of their father, who hanged himself in the basement seven years prior, their mother locked herself away inside the house while her four children cared for her and Arnie. Arnie is soon to become eighteen, at the start of the film it was mentioned that Arnie would be dead by the age of ten, and the family is planning to host a birthday party. Arnie has a fascination with heights and likes to climb on buildings such as the family home, a water tower, and trees, much to his brother's dismay.

Arnie projects the stereotypical traits already mentioned: routines, hand flapping (stimming), special interests, however Arnie's behaviour is more consistent with that of a child. He's seventeen but loves to play, squeals with delight, and needs help to bathe. Leonardo DiCaprio's portrayal of autism is almost the opposite of the representations I have come across so far. Even though their traits are similar, the degree in which they have them are very different. Which returns to ASD being known as the spectrum, because ASD characteristics present themselves differently in individuals (Hendrickx, 2015).

Similarly, Dustin Hoffman's portrayal of an autistic adult living within an institution specifically for ASD people in the movie *Rain Man* (1988), highlights similar features of ASD. However, once again, the characteristics are very different to Arnie's and includes a savant attribute which Arnie lacks. Hoffman's character likes to stick to a strict schedule and becomes anxious when 0 of clothing are bought at other locations than that which he is accustomed to. He isn't capable of functioning outside of his comfort zone, so it is appealed throughout the movie by *professionals*, but is a genius with numbers. In one scene his brother, who has kidnapped him from his home at the institute due to him inheriting three million dollars after the death of their father, takes him to Las Vegas to count cards (using Hoffman's savant memory skills) to earn the money he needs to pay off his debts. The film itself is more about the relationship development between the two brothers with autism being

a side topic. Once again this demonstrates what McGrath (2017) calls the caricature of Autism, and this provides a deeper look into the social ideals on autism in the eighties. This insight is still live today, which assists my study in signposting the relevancy of the importance of autism education.

8.6.3 Autism in TV Drama

The Big Bang Theory (2007) is one of the most popular TV sitcoms. Since its release there have been studies on the representation of scientists (Bednarek, 2012), the shows communication of scientific information (Orthia and Li, 2016), and stereotypes on Jewish Masculinity (Rubin, 2021). However, the main contribution to the research is Jim Parson's portrayal of his character Sheldon Cooper. There is no indication of an autism diagnosis during the show, but the characteristics and behaviours of Sheldon provide a clear indicator of such.

The group of friends, which Sheldon is a member of, portrays a group of nerds who work in the sciences at a local University. They are intelligent, socially awkward, sexually inexperienced, love everything science-fiction and are of white ethnic origin (apart from one exception). Bednarek (2012) describes this as the *Double Articulation of Television Discourse* in her paper *Constructing 'nerdiness' Characterisation of The Big Bang Theory*, "Stereotypes or schemas are part of the relevant common ground that scriptwriters aim for. This includes schemas about social identities" (p.203). She continues by suggesting that constructions of 'nerdiness' are created semiotically through a person's physical self-expression, such as their hairstyle and the way they dress, "*Sheldon also accumulates further characteristics in later seasons (e.g., his bazinga catchphrase, which he uses to mark his attempts at jokes/humour). This multiple reinforcement and accumulation may be an effective way of drawing an audience into a series, multiplying the ways in which they can quickly build up an impression of a particular character, thus making them 'care'*" (p.224).

Atypical (2017) is a Netflix original which follows autistic teenager Sam on his journey to find a girlfriend. On the way he encounters changes he never thought he would, including adjusting to a teenage girl in his bedroom who talks too much. His solution to this change is to lock her in his wardrobe and continue with his task which he was fixated on before she (Paige) arrived. In a study by Jones (2021), called *Scripted Realities: Representations of Autism in Hollywood and Their Effect on Public Discourse*, she examines scenes of the show more closely and pinpoints certain situations in which the audience are meant to find amusing, “*This dynamic scene that introduces many of the familial characters that will be present throughout the remainder of the story, not only reiterates to audiences at the very beginning of the show, that it is ok to laugh at autistic people for their differences, but also establishes that the problems and maladjusted personalities of Sam’s family members are a result of him and the stress that his inherent being inflicts*” (p.62). This identifies a similar issue within *Big Bang Theory*, where Sheldon is viewed as an inconvenience and rude by his friends regardless of the many times that he shows his affection in his own way.

The Good Doctor (2017) tells the story of Shaun Murphy, an autistic surgeon who has been offered a place to complete his residency at a popular hospital. In the very first episode the other characters are unsure of Murphy’s competency, but the head of the hospital, being Murphy’s friend and mentor, defines his abilities and explains, with examples, why hiring someone who is different would have a positive impact on the hospital.

Throughout the first series Murphy takes on challenges and overcomes them which, again, is due to his savant autistic attributes. This, Bolt (2021) describes in his book *Metanarratives of Disability: Culture, Assumed Authority, and the Normative Social Order (Autocritical Disability Studies)* as unrealistic, as most autistic individuals don’t have savant abilities. Furthermore, throughout the series curing autism is a regular theme, which Bolt implies: “*in one episode, Shaun tells a man who is experiencing hallucinations that he can be ‘cured’ by having a brain tumour removed: He convinces the patient to undergo surgery by comparing a brain tumour to autism and pointing out that autism (unlike the tumour)*

cannot be removed” [No pagination]. By the way Shaun gives his speech he would happily take the cure if there was one which presents a negative outlook for viewers.

Autistic people can be anyone, anywhere and have a passion for the arts just as much for the sciences. They can be part of the LGBT+ community, have imaginary friends, no friends or have friends, and have other disabilities besides their ASC (Hendrickx, 2015; McGrath 2017). Hendrickx interviewed a participant who loved collecting items, and she found amongst women with autism English and the arts were the subjects that they flourished in, which she suggests tends to be seen as a typical female interest. This is perceived by Hendrickx as one of the reasons female autistics slip through the fingers of the diagnosis system. Autistic women in literature, film and tv are rare and, usually, are for children (Scott and Westcott, 2020). The children in these stories are smart, sometimes non-verbal and have continuous trouble with their environments. Whilst this may be true for some young girls on the spectrum, this appears to be a replica of their male counterpart’s stereotypical portrayal.

These portrayals of autism stem from a stereotypical belief within our society (McGrath 2017) and have been seen to cause harm to the autistic community by ignoring the individualism of that person. As one study, by Chester (2019) states: “*clinicians are less likely to identify RBRIs (repetitive behaviours) in females as they tend not to be the typical repetitive behaviours commonly associated with ASD*” (p. 141). Implying that if one does not meet the stereotypical criteria of autism then they are seen as not autistic. An autistic person must be “*less capable than neurotypical individuals because of their disability, or impressive and inspiring for overcoming their disability*” (Audley, 2020, p.03) to be taken notice of. In Audley’s (2020) study *Autistic Representation in Television: A preliminary survey investigation*, they found autistic participants felt that the traits in autistic characters were not portrayed correctly, and some of those who weren’t autistic felt uncomfortable to identify the characters traits as autistic due to their lack of knowledge on the subject. This suggests that the need for autism education to be broadly available, and in a manner that is accessible, is important to create awareness and a more accurate portrayal of autistic characters.

The literature, TV dramas and films within this section assist my study by identifying the current, and past, knowledge of autism in the media. This will help to develop a new concept of autism within the final comic creation and possibly inform readers of the width of the autism spectrum, not just in characteristics but as the person being an individual, with a background, likes, dislikes, and personality.

8.7 The Theory of Mind and Autistic Women

This section of the literature will identify the Theory of Mind and critique its current research regarding autism and autistic individuals.

The Theory of Mind is described by Lecheler (2020) as: *“the capacity to make attributions of mental states such as thoughts, feelings, and beliefs of others”* (p.01). Lecheler (2020) created a 12- week intervention called the Teaching Theory of Mind curriculum, aimed to improve the social skills and theory of mind of autistic children and adolescents. The curriculum they created sought to teach activities to improve joint attention, imitation, identification of emotions, reading social cues, and cause and effect in social contexts. Even though the results were positive, they were acquired from the parents of the children that participated rather than the participants themselves. However, the participants showed improved early and advanced theory of mind, emotion recognition, and pragmatics. Despite their basic theory of mind not improving, Lecheler speculated that this could be due to the interventions not focusing on this individual skill.

In contrast, the emotion recognition aspect of the theory of mind was studied by using photographs of ten different emotions (Tracy et al, 2011). They found that autistic participants did not show any signs of impaired emotional recognition, which argues the theory of mind claims that autistics lack empathy. They also described that autistic individuals use a different method of analysing emotions: weak central coherence. Meaning that ASC individuals analyse facial features such as the mouth, instead of taking in the entirety of the image. Furthermore, they found that the participants struggled to comprehend the emotions of female images more than male images.

Through this study the author challenges the claim that those with autism take longer to recognise emotions in everyday life, and suggests that questions need to be asked referring to ASC people struggling to recognise non-verbal communication. While Lecheler's work examines new ways of providing skill building through education, Tracy pushes for a

new way to look at Theory of Mind to improve how it is viewed by others to help advance the belief system surrounding it, and autistic individuals.

An example of a piece of research relevant to autistic women regarding empathy is the study by Pohl et al (2020), who compared autistic and non-autistic women's experiences of motherhood. They determined that there was a higher rate of autistic women suffering from other psychiatric conditions than non-autistics, such as pre- or post-partum depression, issues with coping mechanisms and managing daily domestic tasks alongside the other traits which come with autism. Regardless, they always put their child's needs first which could be an interesting research topic when relating this to empathy, as motherhood is a nurturing role. The author suggests that autistic mothers need tailored and additional support, as 58% of autistic mothers have a higher rate of postpartum depression.

Bollen (2023) suggests that empathy is an ambiguous concept as the studies she reviewed had various interpretations. In addition, some authors' beliefs surrounding empathy were contradicted by their findings. Therefore, Pohl's work could demonstrate an area of empathy (empathetic autistic motherhood) which could be an interesting, and important, area to explore in the future.

8.8 Autistic Women, Trauma, and Diagnosis

In her book *Autism in Heels* (2018), Cook O'Toole states: *"The ultimate seduction, for me, was the feeling that someone liked me...this is how the spiral begins. The very one that, later, will lead so many unidentified spectrum girls down darker paths"* (Cooke O'Toole, 2018, p. 144).

In her own experience the feeling of being liked and wanting to fit in with her peers seemed important enough to put herself into the limelight of those who would take advantage of autistic women and girls.

This vulnerability is intensified by the lack of developing the 'masking' skills needed to blend in: *"If we don't camouflage well, we tend to find ourselves ridiculed, shamed, ostracised, or abused. If we do...we can disguise ourselves right out of identification"* (p. 25). Toeps (2020) wrote in her memoir, *but you don't look autistic at all*, about her relationship with her boyfriend. When she realised it was coming to an end, she tried her best to keep it going by taking medication she didn't want to take, sacrificing her creativity and personality in the process: *"only after he was out of my life, did I realise it was okay to be myself. My real self"* (p. 124).

It seems autistic women and girls will push themselves into something they don't want, or don't want to do, to fulfil their need to be liked, loved, and accepted which not only stops them from being their true, authentic selves, but also pushes them to stay in relationships they are not happy with, are being assaulted and abused in, and dangerous situations. *"When we agree to play [mask], we not only hide and cast doubt upon our experiences. We've willingly participated in the invalidation of ourselves. And when you have invalidated yourself, there is no limit to what you will allow others to do"* (Cook O'Toole, 2018, p. 28).

8.9 Autistic Women and Misdiagnosis

As well as autistic women and girls falling between the cracks of the system they could potentially be misdiagnosed as Jessica Taylor, in her book *Sexy but Psycho* (2022), describes about a conversation she had with a mental health professional about autistic women in their facility: *"She often worked with women who had autism but were being pathologized and medicated as EUPD and BPD"* (pp.208-209). According to Taylor, a diagnosis of autism, or a personality disorder, can affect the results of a trial when a report of rape or harassment has been made, with officials suggesting that the victims are not a reliable witness. Resulting in the perpetrator to leave without being sentenced or tried, and the victim to live with trauma, not just of the crime, but of being pathologised and the experience of the trial itself, *"personality disorders are used to discredit and pathologize women and girls in various situations, especially crime and support"* (p.124).

9. Narrative Empathy and Comics

In this chapter I shall be exploring empathy characteristics within comics. First, I shall provide a brief definition of empathy and then flow into the research by Polak (2017), McCloud (2006), and Keen (2010) and discuss their theories around empathy in narratives, meaning making, and the elements of design which has been used to invoke empathy within audiences.

9.1 What is empathy?

Eklund and Meranius (2020) define empathy as when *“the empathiser understands, feels, and shares another person’s world with self-other differentiation.”* In other words, when an individual views, or hears, experiences of another they can resonate with that person, or situation. This is described by Polak (2017) as *“mirroring”*, a concept where the storyteller tries to *“project”* their emotions, and experiences, to the reader to invoke *“recognition”* (the reader’s memories). Scott McCloud, in his book *Making Comics* (2006), mentions that recognition comes from the details and textures that have been used which touch the reader’s senses (sight, sound, smell), and in turn brushes their memories to arouse recognition of similar experiences.

For example, a page depicting a cup of coffee arouses my memories of the crisp smell by the swirl of steam that rises from the cup, the dark colour of the bitter liquid that will stain the porcelain cup once drunk, and the smooth texture of it as it slides down my throat, warming my stomach on a cold day.



Figure 1 Coffee Cup by Aimee Shepherd, 2022

On reflection of the literature, invoking empathy appears to be a factor of the world you create to stimulate relatable memories of environments as well as a way of projecting emotional recognition through the process of emotional contagion (Healey and Grossman, 2018).

9.2 The Psychological Elements of Empathy

Healey and Grossman (2018) define Cognitive Empathy as the “*ability to model another agents’ emotions*” (p.02). Meaning, when we experience an event, such as a children’s birthday party for example, we can replicate the happiness and excitement that child is experiencing at that time to invoke emotional contagion resulting in affective empathy, which is the shared emotional state of another. This is important to create, and develop, and maintain healthy relationships through communication and understanding the other party to avoid disputes (Ioannidou and Konstantikaki, 2008).

According to Spitz (2021) empathy is considered to have three different psychological elements: Cognitive, Compassionate, and Emotional. Each of these elements

play a role in the sharing of and the actions resulting from the experience of these emotions. Cognitive Empathy has been described by Spitz as like perspective-taking. It is more about intellect and understanding how someone is feeling rather than sharing the emotions. Which Spitz suggests can seem impersonal and detached.

Compassionate Empathy is suggested by Spitz (2021) to result in a spontaneous reaction to give an individual aid without becoming attached or absorbing those feelings yourself. This is seen by Spitz as a more balanced approach to empathy using mindfulness as well as compassion to assist those who need it.

Spitz (2021) describes those who are more likely to express emotional empathy as empathes. Empathes not only share the emotions of another but also their mental state due to mirror neurons in the brain. This gives humans, and animals, a way to deeply bond with one another, such as with family members. Batson et al (2015) suggests that feelings of empathy motivate an individual to act in the wellbeing of another, which can lead to altruistic deeds.

9.3 The Process of Empathy as I Understand it

Below I have outlined the process of empathy from my own point of view describing elements from current and past research to assist in a clearer understanding of empathy for my autistic mind. A diagram has also been provided to illustrate the connections between the stages.

9.3.1 Aesthetic Engagement

The first step in the process of empathy is the interaction with an object. Berleant (2013) states that *“aesthetic engagement involves active participation in the appreciative process, sometimes by overt physical action but always by creative perceptual involvement”* [No Pagination]. Meaning a participant may be required to physically become involved, depending on the object being viewed, however the overall objective is an interpretation of

that object. Regarding comics, a reader may pick one up and read the pages, this is the physical act of engagement with the object.

9.3.2 Strategic Empathy

Keen (2020) describes Narrative Empathy as *“the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another’s situation and condition”* (p. 820). A tool that is used within Narrative Empathy by authors to evoke emotional responses in their readers is Strategic Empathy. The three techniques under the Strategic Empathy label are: bounded strategic empathy, ambassadorial strategic empathy, and broadcast strategic empathy (Keen, 2006):

- *Bounded strategic empathy* is roused when the reader has experienced similar situations or events.
- *Ambassadorial strategic empathy* is roused when addressing empathy for in-groups and is often political or leading to something specific.
- *Broadcast strategic empathy* rises feelings of empathy towards a certain group with common vulnerabilities.

Keen (2020) implies that not only can readers identify with the characters but can also *feel* the mood of a setting and *“the in-built affects of narrativity, curiosity, surprise, and suspense”* (p. 821). In contrast, Keen (2006) doesn’t believe that empathy leads to altruistic deeds, *“If indeed such a link could be substantiated (it has not yet been verified), then investigation of the effects of narrative techniques on real readers would have to extend beyond generalizations about character identification and a small subset of narrative situations”* (p. 224). However, since 2006 there may have been further research been conducted which has highlighted this potential.

9.3.3 Emotional Contagion

The emotional contagion process occurs when *“emotions in one agent trigger isomorphic emotions in another agent”* (Healey and Grossman, 2018, p.02) and combines with cognitive empathy to result in affective empathy, which is defined by Wright et al (2021) as *“an emotional response toward another person”* (p.01). Hatfield et al (2011) describes emotional contagion as having three stages: mimicry, feedback, and contagion which work together to form the end consequence, being affective empathy. Expressions, postures, and movements, and even vocal (tempo) changes direct the emotional response between the two parties, going unnoticed, but impacting on their empathic inference (Ickes, 2011) leading to the process of emotional contagion.

1. *Mimicry* – the process of copying the expressions, movements, voices, postures, and behaviour of others (Hatfield et al, 2011)
2. *Feedback* – feedback from the second person in the conversation affects the first person. Feedback being the response they receive from their mimicry (Hatfield et al, 2011)
3. *Contagion* – the outcome of the mimicry and feedback from *“moment-to-moment”* (p.24) interactions between each participant (Hatfield et al, 2011).

In summary, Hatfield et al (2011) suggests that emotional contagion assists individuals to *“track the intentions and feelings of others moment to moment, even when they are not explicitly attending to the information”* (p.26). Allowing themselves to ease into the lives of those they are interacting with to better understand them and their situation.

9.3.4 Embodied Cognition

According to Wilson (2002) Embodied Cognition (embodiment) is the result of the body interacting with the world it lives in *“rather than the mind operating to serve the body, we find the body (or its control systems serving the mind”* (p. 635). In other words, emotions are *“physically felt and expressed”* (Rhyn et al, 2021, p. 146) through the experience of

embodiment. Rhyn et al (2021) describes embodiment, in terms of simulation theory, *“human beings are able to “simulate” the mental state, emotions, and experiences of another, thereby viewing things from their viewpoint”* (p.147). When discussing the empathy process in terms of comic readership, embodied cognition (or embodiment) would be the result of the three stages of emotional contagion after interacting with a piece of media (the comic):

“When viewing art, there is a tendency of the observer to attempt to place himself into the artwork. This placement occurs through a process known as embodied cognition in which mirror neurons in the brain turn elements such as action, movement, and energy seen in art into actual emotions which can be felt” (Agius, 2018, p.543).

Therefore, the reader of the comic has experienced an emotional transference from their environment, in which they can place themselves, not just within the comic, but in the characters’ shoes.

9.3.5 Readers’ Empathy

Keen (2020) describes readers’ empathy as referring *“to the phenomenon of readers’, listeners’, or viewers’ catching and sharing feelings with narrated representations”* (p. 821). Further, she suggests that readers’ empathy can be fleeting or last a while afterwards as a way of reflection, and these sensations in the body can result in character identification, or even world immersion. Readers’ Empathy, in the process of empathy which I have come to understand from the research I have read, is the last stage of the empathy process. Readers’ empathy, therefore, is the physical, emotional, and mental result of an individual reading a comic, a work of narrative, or basking in the glow of a piece of artwork as Agius (2018) implied.

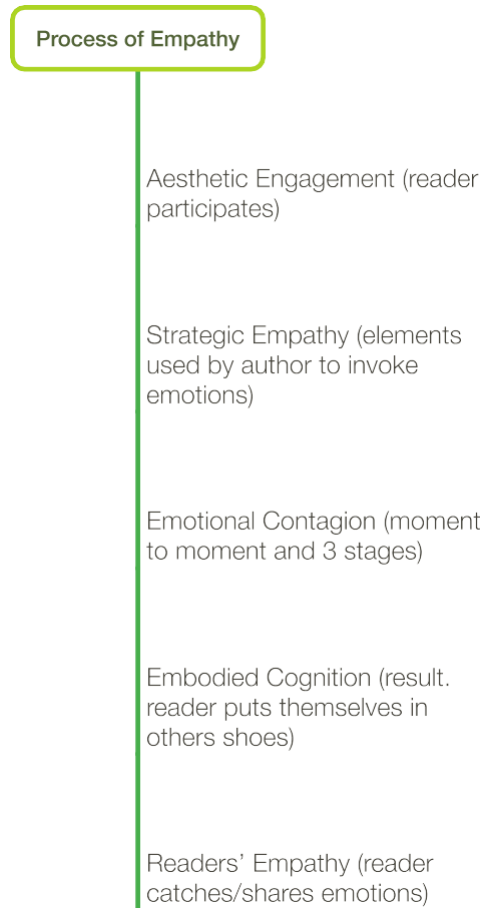


Figure 2 My Understanding of the Empathy Process

9.4 Empathy in comics

In this section of the literature review I will be exploring empathy within the world of comics, and the impact that they can have on the reader.

According to Porter (2021), panels in comics can be restrictive and add limitations to portrayals of images which could dampen the empathetic impact. She suggests comics should slow down the reader to induce deeper thinking and interaction with the content, which could provide a more immersive experience. She also states, *“the more empathy we have in our writing, the more we actually write and live inside our characters and seek to experience the world as much as we possibly can through them, the better our work will be”* (p.13). Meaning, as well as being a piece of artwork, the storytelling itself is just as an

important feature to create empathy in the reader. Therefore, by using empathy to improve character development this enforces the readers' building emotions. This suggests that to create deep, and complex, characters and worlds authors must fully commit to becoming one with their work. Pouring themselves into the pages to fully form the worlds they imagine as well as transferring their emotions into the characters to gain the empathy and resonance they wish to arouse in readers.

Similarly, McCloud (2006) theorises that there are five characteristics used to create immersive, empathetic experiences: the Expansion of Panels, Realistic Detail, No Word Bubbles, Off-Centre Angles, and Sense of Depth. Whether you use some, or all, these details, he suggests, are used to capture, and subsume, a reader into your creative world.

Expansion of Panels, or bleeds, provide the reader with a more relaxed feel to a scene, allowing the viewer to explore the world at their own pace (McCloud, 2006). In addition, realistic details in bleeds also help to gain the reader's attention and engulf them more fully into the comic. McCloud (2006) also suggests that having no word bubbles (also known as silence) throughout a page lets the reader linger and enjoy exploring. Off-centre angles make the reader follow the object you wish for them to take notice of.



Figure 3 Example of Football Comic by Aimee Shepherd

For example, a ball that has been kicked by a footballer travelling through the page to its destination, or a mysterious person travelling through a forest. By using sense of depth, McCloud implies this can surround the reader and help to create a more realistic experience. Techniques of perspective such as overlap, size, fading, and position are all used as a way of creating depth thus capturing the imagination of the reader.



Figure 4 (McCloud, 2006, pp.162-163)

9.5 Narrative empathy

In her book, Keen (2006) discusses in detail, what she calls, *Readers' Empathy* and *Authors' Empathy*. Readers' Empathy, she implies, needs an *emotional hook*, however this hook could be simply naming a character and filling out the world in which they live. This character doesn't necessarily need to be human if it meets certain criteria such as having a name, a recognisable situation, and implicit feelings, "*empathy for fictional characters may require only minimal elements of identity, situation, and feeling, not necessarily complex or realistic characterisation*" (p.69).

Similarly, Authors' Empathy is the connection between author and reader using techniques within the writing process to assist the reader's "*empathetic imagination*" (p.124) and connection with narrative empathy. However, Keen (2020) argues that Empathic Inaccuracy can occur which suggests that readers do not always meet the author's empathic

expectations, resulting in a new perspective on the written piece. Through “*imaginative collaboration*” (p. 820), the reader and author work together to create the final piece, “*Texts may thus be regarded as scripts for narrative empathy, but by themselves they are inert, requiring the meeting of readers’ and authors’ minds to come to imaginative life*” (p.822).

Which could be regarded as an important factor within the world of comic books when returning to the theories of gutters, space, and time and how these elements come together to form a mental image in the mind of the reader, similar to the theories of Cohn (2018) when discussing the important formation of lexical items and how they combine with meaning and are then stored in the long-term memory.

9.6 Strategic empathy

Another empathic phenomenon is Strategic Empathy, which Keen (2010) states is: “*a variety of authors’ empathy by which authors attempt to direct an emotional transaction through a fictional world aimed at a particular audience, not necessarily including every reader who happens upon the text*” (p.142). This implies that some authors write to influence a certain group’s empathic response, whether it is social change, awareness of mental health, or other issues relating to society. An example of this is Fukuhara’s (2019) review of the works of Thomas Hardy. When discussing empathic elements in *Tess of the D’Ubervilles*, Fukuhara states:

“*Tess advocates for social renovation by appealing to the reader’s empathy, and the goal of the renovation is to widen the range of the reader’s compassion. Tess is furnished with elements that are conventionally repellent of sympathies, and the reader is asked to still extend their empathy to Tess as such. In this way, Hardy poses an emotional challenge to the reader regarding who truly deserves sympathy, in the hope that it will lead to the dissemination of loving-kindness*” (p.87)

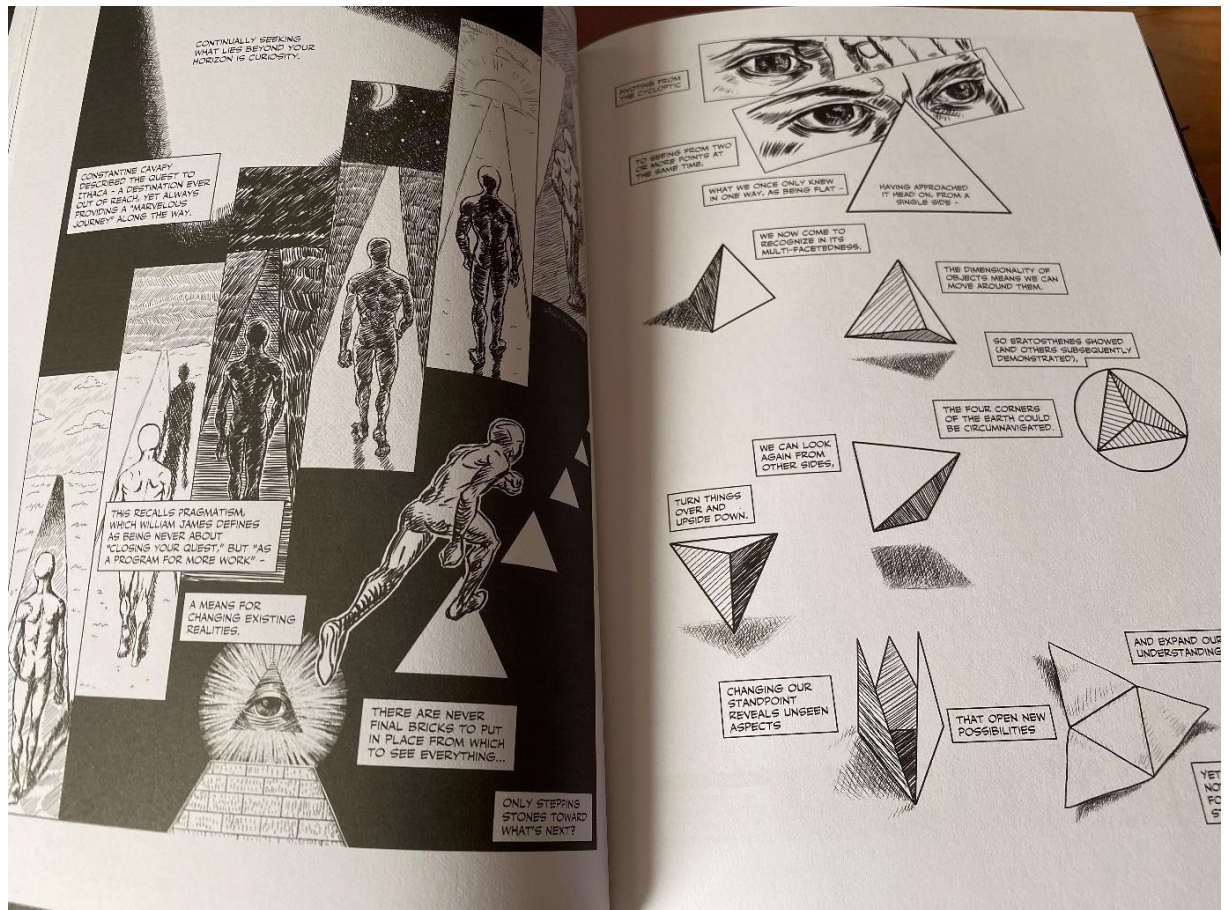
This returns us to empathic inaccuracy and the assumption that the reader will react to a text in a certain way intended by the author. Furthermore, Aesthetic Empathy, according

to Keen (2010), expresses the idea that different generations of people will react to the same text a different way.

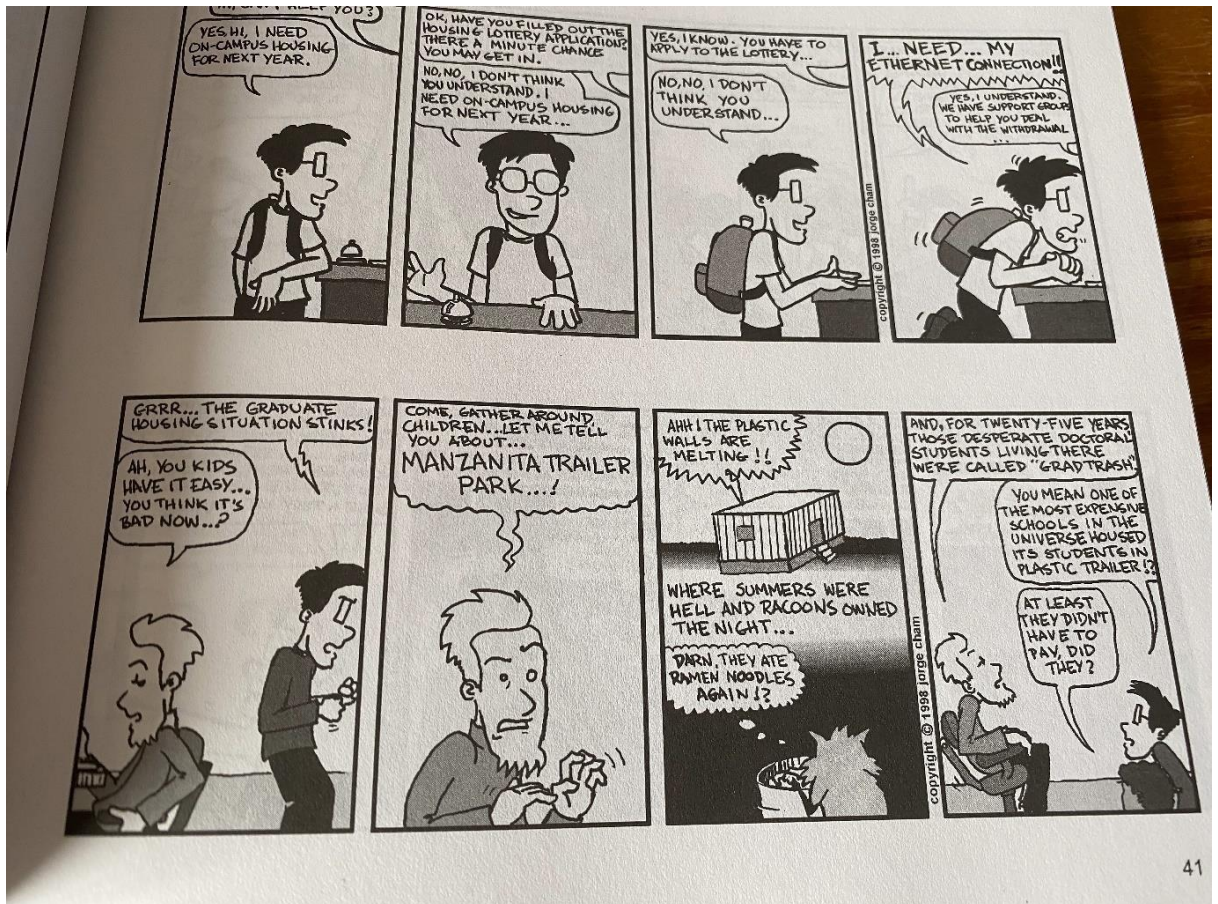
10. The Comic Book

The results of my research includes an academic Aut-Ethnography graphic memoir about my experiences of trauma before my autism diagnosis, and how this has impacted on my life. This format was chosen because of my own experiences of researching information of the topic after my diagnosis in 2019. The information provided was clinical, word orientated and based on autism in men and boys. The finished comic book was created to provide an entertaining, yet knowledgeable resource, which encourages acceptance, creates awareness, and provides a steppingstone to a diagnosis for those who wish to seek one. By providing this resource I hope to inspire, through the traits and experiences within the comic, other women to seek out a diagnosis, but if not, perhaps it will supply comfort.

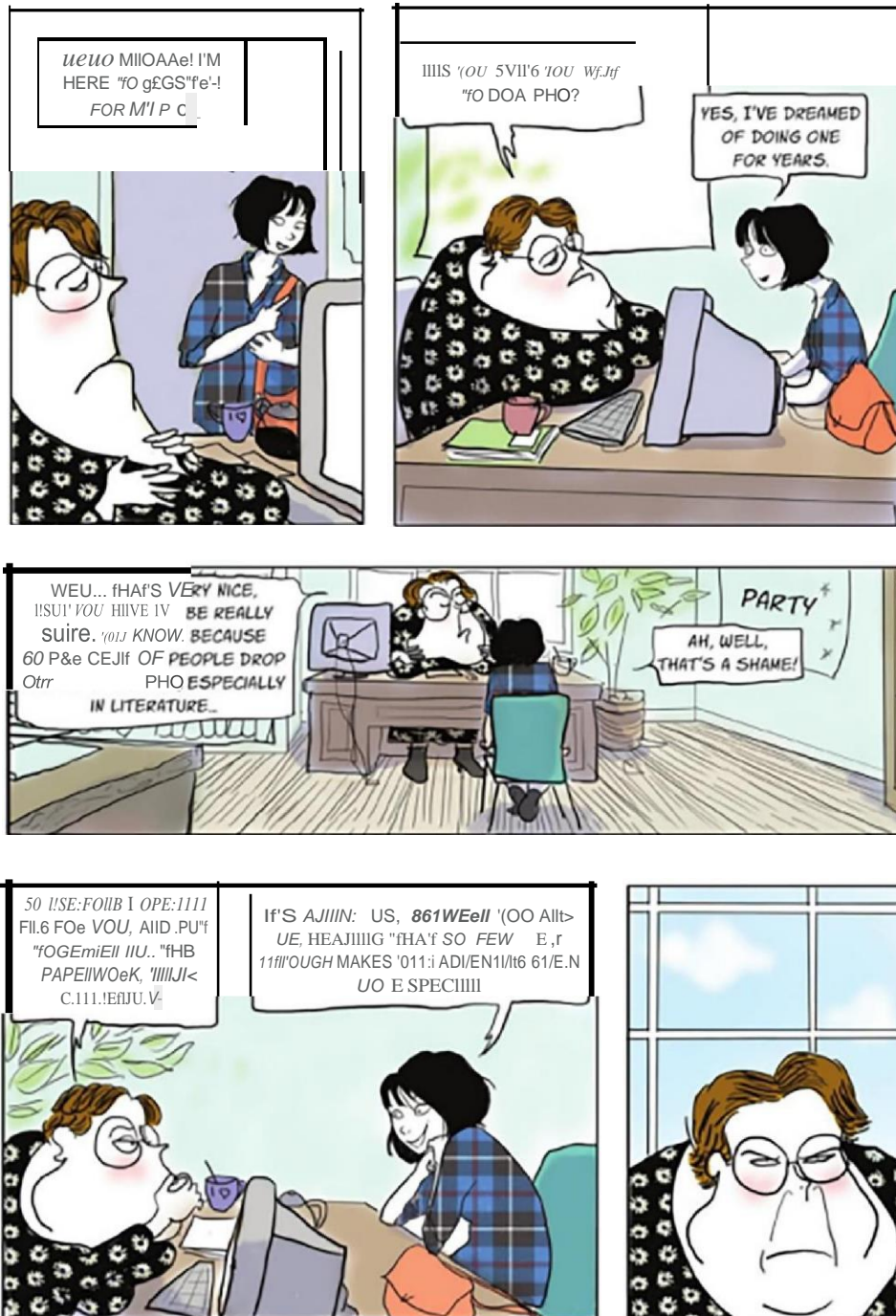
A couple of examples of a similar project is *Notes on a Thesis* by Tiphaine Riviere (2016), who decided to transform her blog posts about her experiences completing her PhD into a fictional comic book, and the work of Cham (2009) who created a series of comic books about his time as a PhD student over a period of five years. In contrast to more comedic comics that were read, one of the most useful, and mind bending, comics that emerged from the literature search was a dissertation piece called *Unflattening* by Nick Sousanis (2015), who explores perceptions through multiple areas of study, such as science, art, mythology, and philosophy to formulate meaning, influence the readers state of mind, and to explore the saying 'more than what meets the eye'. The layout of the comic with its references at the back, well organised chapters, and contents page makes it a potential template for the final comic, as well as an inspirational piece of artwork.



(Sousanis, N (2015), p.43)



(Cham, J (2009), p.41)



(Riviere, T (2016), p.17)

11. Results

The first round of data collection consisted of an online exhibit showcasing the first drafts of comic development, and an online survey shared on social media using Survey Monkey. Both of these links were also shared with potential participants on Facebook Groups which were populated by autistic individuals, and permission was gained from the administrators of these groups before they were shared. The second iteration consisted of video call interviews, however most of the participants decided to fill in the question sheet, with only one participant interviewing face-to-face. Finally, participants were encouraged to complete a questionnaire which expanded on past questions, and included new ones, to help push forward the analysis.

11.1 Survey Results

The online survey and exhibit were developed to gather general information about the preferences of comic reading material of autistic adults, and their style preferences. I chose to use my own drawings to create an online exhibit, with conversation prompts, to explore where my art practice could improve or change. The survey was created to try and grasp a clearer view of what comics the participants read, and why. My thinking was that perhaps there was more to their choices of reading material than simply aesthetic, and I wanted to explore that for the comic I would be developing.

In total there were 29 participants of the survey, and 7 from the online exhibit. Using initial and focused coding I examined each piece of data traditionally using pen and paper to break down each segment into a visually creative form.

After going through each code to examine whether there were any similarities between them, I created a category dedicated to the theme. When exploring categories from the data, I placed everything into individual mind maps to examine it thoroughly. Having something visual to work with assists me in *seeing* the data rather than just reading it, and after a discussion with Dr Darren Wall to review the process of my method I felt more confident going forward.

During the first examination of the data five categories emerged: Benefits of Comics, Comic Aesthetics, Sensory Aspects, Society Standards, and Comic Access. However, after further review and adaptation I found that the codes that were similar in theme could be merged to form a new code which fit better into a category. Eventually, the categories developed into: World Building, Society Standards, Comics Accessibility, and Comic Culture (see figure 13 for link to data).

12.2 Category Development One

12.2.1 World Building

World Building supports the participants' desire to be subsumed in their favourite comic to find themselves a moment of calm in an overstimulating world. Immersion and storytelling appear vital to this so the reader can gain the peace they crave. One participant said they refuse to read comics that are written poorly, suggesting this interferes with their ability to lose themselves in the world:

"Sometimes I give up on them for a while because the standard of writing is so poor"
(Participant #10).

Using lore and background information about the world and characters seems to give the reader a more thorough understanding of the characters' personality and challenges that they must go throughout the story. Some of the participants suggested that simple designs and a diverse range of characters would encourage more engagement, especially when it comes to relatable content.

- *"3-9 panel comics of usually social interactions since I have aphantasia and I enjoy 'seeing' these snippets that encapsulate all my emotions and thoughts in simplistic forms"* (Participant #12).
- *"Archie, Tintin, I like because they have strong character archetypes and surprising endings. They're light-hearted comics, so you know everyone is going to survive and be okay"* (Participant #14).

Another implied that fantasy worlds but realistic situations would be a good way of showcasing important content that may go unheard in the usual form. However, a healthy and balanced composition would be needed to prevent overwhelming, and confusing, the reader especially when it comes to the fundamentals of comic design. In addition, splashes of colour appear to be the most preferred method of colouring a comic book as this is an easy on the eye, subtle, but effective method to enhance certain situations within the storyline.

“The art style and lettering work well together. I also like the use of spot colour”

(Exhibit, Anonymous #1).

12.2.2 Society Standards

Society Standards can be damaging to autistic people, making them fearful and insecure about their choice of reading material and special interests. One participant's choice of horror comics remains hidden from those who would judge them. There is a lot of stigma around horror I've found over the course of this research.

“Battle royale because it is quite graphic and sometimes, I feel like my tastes in comics are too graphic and NSFW (not safe for work) by neurotypical standards. I would scare people away” (Participant #7).

Participants also want more for their money and a good variety of content:

“Webcomics. Constant material to read and a good variety of styles, easy to find something you like” (Participant #19).

Online comics are easy to find and normally cheaper than the mainstream, such as Marvel and DC. One participant suggests that they don't enjoy comics due to the magnitude of mainstream content, nor the smaller comics:

“Mainstream comics = too much to get through to enjoy them. Newspaper comics = not enough lore/plot lines” (Participant #19).

12.2.3 Comic Culture

I can see that most of the participants love the *Comic Culture* because of the safety of the community. It provides them with emotional support in a busy and confusing world where they fear judgement from their neurotypical peers. Fantasy worlds appear the most popular, where characters develop powers that they didn't ask for but are shunned by society. X-Men is a good example of this and has been mentioned many times by the

participants during the survey. Implying that there is a large target audience, and the culture is an influential source.

- *“Superhero, specifically X-Men. Outsiders determined to save the world while also being resonates”* (Participant #23).
- *“I like fantasy comics that explore real life subjects but use different species or world views”* (Participant #28).
- *“For children and adults to be able to understand people’s feelings but as well as a range of issue present in this day and age as well as the past”* (Participant #29).
- *“To show my friends what I struggle with, so I don’t have to justify my existence”* (Participant #7).
- *“Information, humour, self-realisation, sense of “belonging””* (Participant #6).

12.2.4 Comic Accessibility

Being able to gain access to comic books seems to be an issue. A few participants suggested that they lack access to an establishment where they can purchase their comics: *“I don’t read much because no one really sells them near me”* (Participant #2).

I found this particularly interesting due to the fact as a society you assume that most people know how to use computers, purchase online items, and are interested in technology overall. However, obviously this is not the case. Perhaps this could be why access to such purchases is a challenge for some autistic people, their traits may be a barrier. However, another participant suggested that they didn’t know there were other genres of comic books other than superheroes which suggests a lack of advertising, or information.

“Comedy, I guess. I didn’t realise there were various genres” (Participant #22).

12.3 Category Development Two

The second iteration was used to gather data on the current artwork to help the development of the next steps, as well as trying to develop the current categories. A word document was formed for ease of digital delivery over email to participants. This document consisted of three styles of comics, three pages in each, with questions beneath each style for the participants to answer about the design of the comic pages that had been supplied. This questionnaire was emailed to participants as they preferred to take their time, feeling safe in their own environments, to answer the questions and read through the artwork.

12.3.1 *The Impact of the Comic Community*

The codes linking together to create this category all supported the notion that the comic community is a large part of the 'comic culture'. Not only did participants feel safe to be themselves, but they also referred to the comic community as a mentally and emotionally supportive group:

- *"Information, humour, self-realisation, sense of "belonging"* (Participant #6).
- *"Makes me feel amazing and not lonely"* (Participant #7).

This is especially important to those who feel as though they are being judged for their tastes in comics due to stereotypes. Further, if this occurs, they will be isolated and lack the confidence to be involved in their special interests which in turn will impact their mental and physical wellbeing (Jones et al, 2022). The comic community makes what they love *be* seen, and in doing so feel as though they are being seen also.

12.3.2 Comic Accessibility

A couple of the participants supplied data stating that they were unaware of other genres of comics other than superheroes, nor the location of comic shops close to them:

- “*I don’t read much because no one really sells them near me*” (Participant #2).
- “*Comedy, I guess. I didn’t realise there were various genres*” (Participant #22).

Participants also said that they would like more for their money as comics and graphic novels can be an expensive hobby. If an autistic individual is lacking in confidence to engage in the comic community, they may feel unable to pursue other aspects of their life such as employment. Without employment, and money to spend on tickets to conventions and technology which would allow them to explore their special interest, this would isolate them even more. An autistic individual may have other circumstances for not pursuing employment such as sensory issues, none the less digital poverty is an issue within a world where everything, including comic con information and comic shop locations, appears to be online (Chadwick et al, 2022). The assumption everyone has the means to purchase, or knowledge of, a computer, a smart phone or tablet is a topic to explore in the future.

12.3.3 Influence of Stereotypes and Media Representation

The fear of judgement which participants mentioned more than once seems to stem, in their opinion, from the entertainment industry. *The Big Bang Theory* (2007) is a good example of an individual who shows autistic traits, being seen as someone to be laughed at, taunted, or abandoned, who is a cis-white-man with savant abilities in the sciences. When autistic people want to be seen as individuals, stereotypes are being relied on to identify

autistic persons in the media. This type of media also reinforces the myths causing distress within the community of comic lovers – which the participants expressed experiencing:

“I feel like my tastes in comics are too graphic by neurotypical standards. I would scare them away” (Participant #7).

12.3.4 Escapism

Looking through the data, the autistic participants explained that they use comics as an escape system:

- *“Adult/gritty/dark – more interesting. Identify with it more”* (Participant #11).
- *“Absorbed in the story. I’m looking for escapism”* (Participant #10).
- *“I like fantasy comics that explore real life subjects but use different species or world views”* (Participant #28).

This immersion within the imaginary world of comics creates a safe space where they can be completely at peace with themselves. Having a deep backstory of the characters and the world they are inhabiting assists in deepening this experience, improving the immersion. Personal styles of the content also seem to improve the reader experience, as the striking style keeps the reader engaged:

- *“I always tend to favour personal style, and art styles, so personally, this one is my favourite, because I find it striking, I find the imagery to be aesthetically pleasing, and the drawing of the boyfriend to be really funny personally, it’s a very unmistakable style, one that I think is individual to its creator which I always appreciate”* (Participant A).
- *“I like how I can relate on a personal level to how the school is perceived. I viewed school the same way as a deep and dark place in which I couldn’t attend”* (Participant E).

12.3.5 Comics as a Pedagogical Tool

The benefits of using comics in education include being memorable, they improve the experience of visual learners, and can influence people of all ages as well as being a good way of expressing the perspectives of others, improving empathy. They also expressed an excitement regarding comics as an artistic experimentation when it comes to pedagogy, and how comics, with the combination of words and visuals, hold people's attention more easily.

The end of iteration two helped me to identify certain aspects that I hadn't considered before. Comics pedagogy is an interesting topic especially considering the use of it within a SEN environment where students need a diverse range of learning tools.

- *"Yes, because visuals help people understand what I feel on the inside"* (Participant #7).
- *"Sure, pictures say a thousand words lol"* (Participant #8).
- *"Yes, because it is visual, and people pay more attention when they are entertained"* (Participant #11).
- *"I enjoy the balance of both conversation and visual. If it's a simple conversation, then a complex visual is enjoyable"* (Participant #12).
- *"Comics break down important information in a story format that is easier to remember"* (Participant #14).
- *"They might be attractive to people, especially children. They have a large potential audience"* (Participant #15).
- *"Yeah. Visuals are easier to understand and engage with. Blocks of text are overwhelming"* (Participant #17).

12.4 Interpretation of Categories Thus Far

The interpretation of the categories so far suggests autistic individuals who are isolated but wish to attend events within the comic community or simply join in in the reading of comics themselves, may not be able to do so due to the lack of confidence they have because of the fear of judgement, and or stereotypes. Leading the individual to move away from employment, and other aspects of their lives, with the lack of confidence they have. This then can have an impact on their mental wellbeing (Chadwick et al, 2022).

Those who can immerse themselves within the community do so to escape the stereotypes that society has constructed (Burr, 2015). Autistics want to be seen as an individual, to be seen as one single entity, rather than clustered together into a stereotype which depicts them as geeks, mentally ill, loners, and savants (Draaisma, 2009).

12.5 Category Development Three

The third iteration consisted of interviews using the Microsoft Teams system with the questions like that of the surveys but allowing the participants more freedom to express themselves, as I wanted to gather a thorough understanding of the views they held. The participants for this part of the process were fresh due to the difficulty of finding people to engage with me virtually. Although a couple of the participants were happy to discuss the questions face to face, more of them preferred typing up their answers on the answer sheet that was prepared for their inspection beforehand to lessen their anxiety. The data collected was transcribed using Otter.ai software and then coded, before related codes being colour coded. The data was examined multiple times to make sure that all codes had been identified and specified accordingly for future reference. Two new categories emerged as well as new names for current categories based on the relevance of new data and insight gained. At this time, a gap was discovered in the data and I decided to place new questions about what the participants were escaping from as well as asking about their thoughts on comics being used as an educational tool.

12.5.1 The Impact of the Comic Community

The impact of the community is large, so much so that the entertainment industry took notice and began producing the films we have today. The community provides emotional support to those who fear being judged for their tastes, lifestyle, and traits creating a sanctuary of sorts for those who don't feel safe elsewhere to express, and be, themselves.

12.5.2 Comic Accessibility

This category has stayed the same, focusing on the ability to locate, afford, and have knowledge of the comic world. Whether this be from mental, or physical issues, digital poverty, location, and poor self-esteem (Chadwick et al, 2022).

12.5.3 Influence of Media Representation

The influence of the media can be both positive and negative. Even though the spotlight on an imaginary world of flying men in tights saving humanity has allowed those who love the stories to build the confidence to come forward, with the portrayals of the *geek* comes with it a false social construction (Burr, 2015). This leads to a community of people being poorly represented and, therefore, living in fear of being judged for their special interests and delving into comics to escape from a world that is neither understanding nor understandable: *“I think people would escape to it because it's friendly. There's no intimidation, no kind of fear in approaching it”* (Participant R).

12.5.5 Aesthetics that Induces Escapism

According to the participants there are many aspects of comics that help to improve the immersive experience. Relatable content and lore and background are just a couple of the most important ones when world building. The more lore and relatable content there is the more the reader engages and loses themselves inside their imagination. For example, the video game *Skyrim* (2011) is vast when it comes to its lore, historical events, and history of empires allowing the player to immediately leave their world behind and engage in a mystical adventure that has been previously prophesised. A comic example of this type of world building could be *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (2020). Previously a Television show, the story revolves around a young woman who begins her journey as the protagonist at the age of fifteen after the last slayer is killed in combat. There is a history behind the lineage of the slayer, and this is returned to throughout the seven seasons of the show. The comic leads on from the seventh season combining the two deadly worlds of Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997) and *Angel* (1999) keeping the original lore and background intact allowing the reader to indulge and relax into the already built world.

A healthy composition and quality story writing adds to the experience by grabbing and keeping the participant's attention. The participants feel that sometimes composition can

cause them to feel overwhelmed by the amount of wordage, colour, or activity on the page causing them to put down the comic and not attempt to complete a comic that they may have enjoyed:

“If they get too complex or too action focused it’s harder for my mind to understand”

(Participant #12).

12.5.6 Positive Use of Comics in Pedagogy

The participants believe there are numerous advantages to using comics as an educational tool. Some participants believe that comics are more memorable and influential, that the broken-up information and visuals help to alleviate sensory stimulation, less intimidating than the traditional book and find it easier to learn from:

“I think it is beneficial as some people learn better in a more informal way. It can also be overwhelming to read something that is perhaps more scientific or an article for example”

(Participant: R).

Further, they suggest comics are an accessible form of education about diverse communities through visual storytelling, which has been implied through current research, including a paper in which graphic novels were used to break culture and language barriers in the classroom (Maples et al, 2016). When discussing comics being used as academic texts, it was suggested that asterisks could be a cleaner way of using references rather than a direct citation within the small chunks of text on the page, in keeping with the healthy composition which the participants crave (Participant: C).

12.5.7 Diverse Learning Options in Education

Participants feel that comics would provide a more accessible way of developing knowledge and building skills which would consider a diverse classroom. They have also expressed their concerns regarding academia’s move away from their original roots of humanities to STEM, which they feel might dishearten potential future academics enough from pursuing the career path which in turn would lose valuable fresh perspectives and ideas:

“The education system is pulling towards engineering sciences, technology and is going away from stuff in which education was born from, which is literature and people and cultures and society... I find it very funny about COVID because everything pretty much shut down. And everybody's at home, and they turned to podcasts, turned to music, they turned to films, everything like that. The stuff in which the government tried to push down because they don't think it's applicable to our world” (Participant: R).

12.6 Conclusion

This section shall describe the key findings and their impact on the completion of the final comic book, as well as describing possible future research.

As part of the comic development there were six key findings to consider:

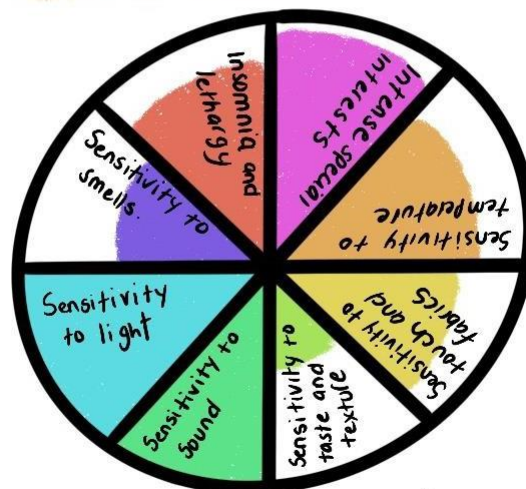
- *The comic community is an important aspect of an autistic person's mental wellbeing, whether that is attending comic con or buying their weekly comic from the shop.*
- *Their access to comics and the comic community can be hard for those without access to technology and income, which could be due to their mental and physical health, digital poverty, location of their homes, and poor self-esteem.*
- *Media representations influence autistic individuals' sense of self. Leading them to use comics to escape biases and stigma surrounding comics and their ASC.*
- *A well written and designed comic world can be a great escape for autistic individuals. Especially if there is relatable content and an empathetic connection between reader and creator.*
- *Participants believe comics to be a potential educational tool due to its diversity, as well as finding them less overwhelming to read and learn from.*

- *Participants believe a diverse educational tool/process would improve potential future academics outlook on pursuing a career in academia, which would provide fresh perspectives and ideas from a range of diverse people.*

Throughout the comic development I wanted to keep the content and the purchase of the comic accessible, therefore I realised that casual storytelling would be the most appropriate for this project. Due to using Autoethnography, I had planned already to sprinkle research throughout the book, but now that I knew that the data suggested comics could be an educational tool, I wanted to experiment with this further by adding fewer casual forms of information. Instead, I provided information alongside an image to demonstrate. For example, the page where I describe the spectrum of autistic traits in a pie chart.

Autism is:

"Clinically defined by deficits in social communication and interaction, and the presence of restricted and repetitive behaviours" (White and Remington, 2018, pp. 03).



These are my traits 😊

(My Autistic Traits Pie Chart – by me)

The key findings within this study have shown that autistic individuals need comics (safe spaces) to recharge due to the impact of media influences and biases they face on a daily basis. However, these safe spaces can be used positively to include ASC participants in education, academia, and research projects. By modifying comics for the classroom, academic papers, and qualitative methods there is a diversity which can help students, not just with ASC, to learn and take part in these, usually, barriered environments.

Throughout the comic my goal was to help readers understand ASC as a spectrum, and how it can affect people of all walks of life. Not only that, but I wanted to show the challenges that women and girls with ASC also have to go through on top of other challenges, such as sensory and mental health issues.

To keep the reader engaged with the comic I focused mainly on the relatability and immersivity of it, as this was one of the big key findings in the study. Empathy had a key role throughout this study as a connection between reader and writer is paramount to the success of an immersive experience, as can be seen throughout the review of literature. Empathy is seen as an issue for ASC individuals and part of the purpose of the comic I developed was to change this outlook. Although now I have questions that move away from 'what is empathy?' and 'how can I connect empathetically with readers?' to 'if an ASC individual can be immersed into a relatable comic world, is this not an empathetic connection?' and 'if empathy is defined in many ways, would it not be fair to say that empathy can be *shown* in many ways?' These questions, and more, could be considered an interesting point to consider for future research.

12. Commentary

This chapter focuses on the developmental process of the comic book, its creation, and the results. Past chapters have provided the information, techniques, and overview of the results, while the commentary will look at the results, and comic, in more depth. The commentary will also explore the theory developed from the study, and potential future research.

12.1 Part One: The Creative Process

Firstly, I would like to explore the beginnings of my work with comics for this project in detail. Below are a few examples of comics that I sketched as a way of utilising the devices I'd been reading about, and how they could work with my style. Throughout this project my style has changed many times, both in line work and colour, mainly because of



Sketchbook Example 1

the data that was analysed and the adaptations that this data implied would be beneficial. I believe if I hadn't taken this project, then my style would still be very similar to how it was before, and the progress, and growth, that I've achieved would not have occurred so quickly, or at all.

This example shows a comic which I quickly sketched to try and devise the best way of presenting key moments or actions:

"The first thing you need to know about comic book panels is that they are a

storytelling device. They provide the reader with a visual representation of the action taking place in the story. Each panel should advance the story forward and provide new information to the reader” (Storyspread, 2022).

As an experiment, the story I chose for this is a quick representation of how as an autistic person the lecture hall lights hurt my eyes, therefore I carry my sunglasses in my bag to remedy the issue. I thought about the panels for a while, trying to decide the best way to present what I wanted to say and what would go in each box and how much information I wanted to provide:

“Concepts like “a man is walking” don’t require pulling back the frame that much, but if you want your readers to know where that man is walking you may want to invest some space in a wider view” (McCloud, 2006, p.22).

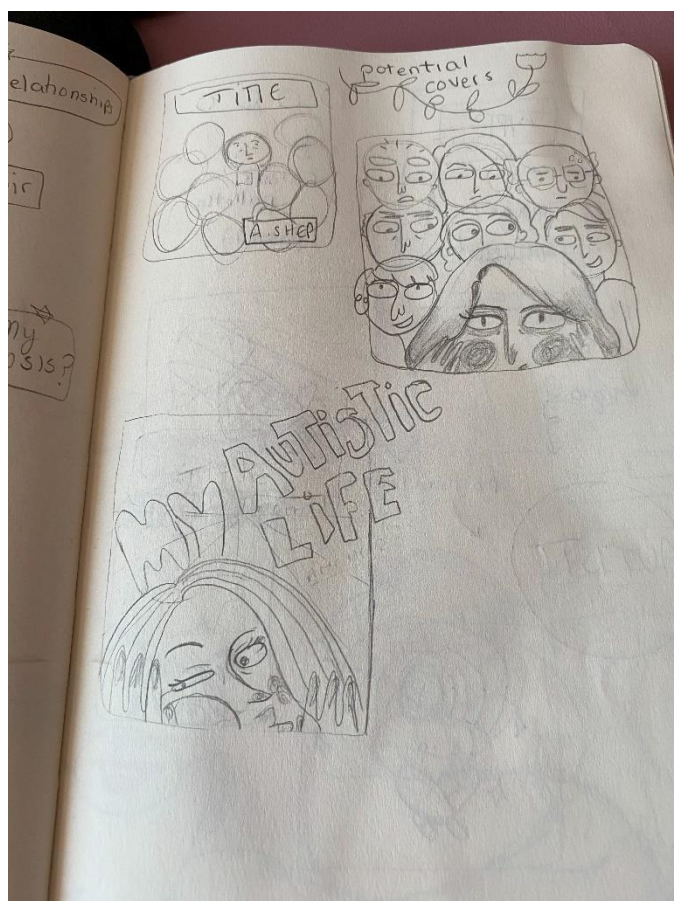
The linework is quick, casual, and everything flows and seems relaxed. My handwriting has never been the best, but I can always tell that my hand is relaxed and happy by the amount of messiness it holds. Previously, at this point in the project, I’d read comics which use box-like panels which is why in my comic I decided to play with the same style here. I’d been reading comics mainly from the Superhero genre, however, as the project moved along, I branched out and found that I connected with genres such as memoir and strips of life (both a form of autobiography storytelling) as well as fiction. For this comic I decided to keep things loose, and by using a sketchbook I felt as though I was giving myself permission to explore and play without the pressure of presentation. Kuschir (2016) argues that having a sketchbook during ethnography fieldwork has eleven benefits, as well as being a low-cost way of gathering visual data. It can help to record and discuss memories, extend fieldwork, and analyse the passage of time.

“Drawing can lead the observer to notice things he and she is not supposed to see or understand. Through drawing, the researchers had the chance to learn about things of which

they were previously unaware, such as tools, objects and even the ability to distinguish certain colours in the same way seen by their interlocutors” (p. 122).

Through this exploration with a sketchbook, I hoped to see things through my art practice that I may have otherwise seen as a simple mistake, or brushed off as unimportant.

I chose this particular topic for a comic because it was quick and simple, and at the time of its creation I was using Instagram ([@autiststarts](https://www.instagram.com/@autiststarts)) to present little comics of being an autistic woman. I thought something similar to play with would make a good practice piece of work, and sharing my art this way, presenting my experiences, would be a positive way of creating awareness.



Sketchbook Example 2

This page of my sketchbook demonstrates the development of the front page. I believe it may have been too early at this point to be considering a cover without knowing the content. However, I felt strongly about this idea and wanted to explore that. I was debating whether to have an uncrowded or crowded image for quite some time. I wanted the image to portray the overwhelming and isolated aspect of being an autistic person. As the authoress Sherrilyn Kenyon stated in her novel *The Guardian* (2011)

“We’re always alone. You can be in a crowded room and still feel the bite of loneliness. Personally, I find that it bites deepest whenever others are around” [no pagination].

So, keeping this in mind, I wanted to experiment with these ingredients to try and create an emotional impact. Again, keeping it a rough sketch, I was given the freedom to go a little crazy and experiment with faces and the number of them which would fill the page.



Sketchbook Example 3

The box I drew represents the size of the cover in its entirety, and this space I wanted to fill. I decided to try and fill the space with words instead of people to see whether focusing on the protagonist would make a difference. In the end I didn't go with this design, due to numerous variables such as style change and data analysis, but it is one of my favourite designs due to the implicit implications of it so I felt it should be noted here.

Example three is a comedy comic strip about my experiences as someone who

does not enjoy mornings. I exaggerated my rage at the insufferable tweeting of the birds that morning. In the moment I thought it was a piece of comedic excellence which led to hyena-like fits of giggling. Now, however, looking at the page from a more experienced and critical perspective I find that the context could be seen as rather hostile, which conflicts with my personality and makes me seem rather fond of guns which is alarming.

I drew this later that morning, from the quick boxes, bold font and lack of scribbling or notes I think I may have still been rather hostile. Everything is down on the page in moments rather than savouring the process, unlike the past examples, almost like a stress release.

Next, I will be describing and analysing the next part of my creative journey. The following examples are from further along the development process of the comic. I had completed my first couple of iterations and had begun creating a style to reflect the results.



Sketchbook Example 4

For example, in the making of this page I was trying to use speech in a more creative way after reading the ideologies of McCloud (1993) and Eisner (2008), but also, I had started thinking about how to present delicate, personal information about myself. In *Maus* (Spiegelman, 2003), animals are used as a metaphor (cat and mouse) but also as a gentle way of presenting a traumatic experience. This idea inspired me to try something new and I decided to add an inner voice to

the experimentation process. This could also be described as a technique adapted from the field of semiotics. Amri and Pratiwi (2023) described a sign as being the basic unit of meaning, suggesting that nothing can be seen as such without being assigned as a sign.

“Signifier is a sign or symbol that can stand for something else. By definition, all words are signifiers since they always stand for something else (e.g., a thought, a feeling, or a thing). A signifier is used by the person wanting to communicate” (Amri and Pratiwi, 2023, p. 22).

By using a small, cute rabbit as a separation between myself and the trauma; I hypothesised that this would allow the trauma to display as a non-threatening object and keep the reader feeling safe enough to carry on reading. However, from my experience the rabbit didn't make it into the final comic because you can't truly separate yourself from your trauma. In my opinion you have to accept the negative so you can flourish in the positive: it

travels with you like an old companion; teaching you, and pushing you in different ways – or I feel it has done with me.

The speech bubbles I had seen in other paper and digital comics covered a partial scene or were boxes consisting of dialogue. As McCloud argues on the topic of mixing words with pictures the skill is an important one:

“In most great comics, that balance is a dynamic one. Sometimes words take the lead, sometimes pictures do but both work together to propel the story forward” (McCloud, 2006, p.128).

I wanted to try and move away from the traditional use of panels, but create something that was in keeping with the tone, and let my personality shine through. For this trial I opted for a swirly scribble effect, linking each bubble together with a sort of umbilical cord, where each bubble is giving birth to the next piece of dialogue or information. At this point I’d begun to move away from the temporary pencil to a permanent pen, trying to trust



Sketchbook Example 5

myself more as I explored, and found that working in pen was more freeing despite the fear of mistakes. If a mistake did occur, I shrugged and moved on with a little mantra in my head telling me that this was my sketchbook and I could do, and be as messy, as I please. I think it was at this period of the study when I began taking the “mistake” and turning it into my “style”. I now see my work as perfectly imperfect, and I no longer make mistakes: I make artistic

expression. This helped to build confidence and allow myself to express everything rather than limiting myself.

I experimented with different box styles and placements (see sketchbook example 5), making them bold and thicker, or thinner and different shapes. I found a bold, scratchy border made the image feel more erratic, gritty, and dark compared to the thin light-hearted atmosphere of a simple line.

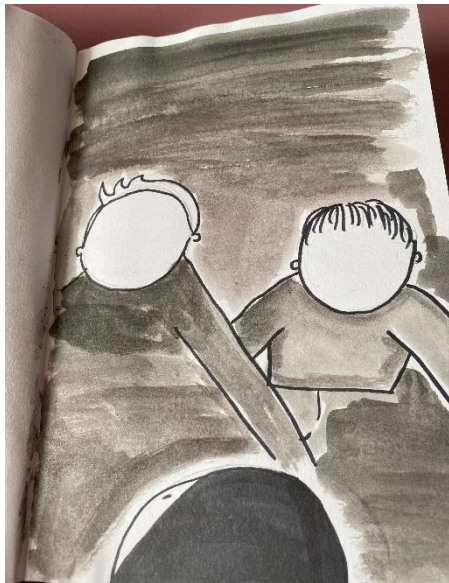
The rabbit being upon my head is the signifier linking the separation between myself and my trauma within this image, to help capture the horrific moment of being stamped like a vegetable and sent off to market with not so much as a counselling session, after my very long diagnosis process.

As Dolar describes in *A Voice and Nothing More* (2006) *"The voice is the element which ties the subject and the Other together, without belonging to either, just as it formed the tie between body and language without being part of them"* (p. 103), with this rabbit linking the other elements together this allowed me to express my feelings of the trauma through the expression of art with a safety net between me and it. Although the rabbit was not kept, I used this technique elsewhere, mainly during my mental and emotional difficulties of using analogue techniques to



Sketchbook Example 6 – paper/digital version

create the comic. Instead of a fluffy rabbit, eventually I chose to step away from the analogue and explore the digital.



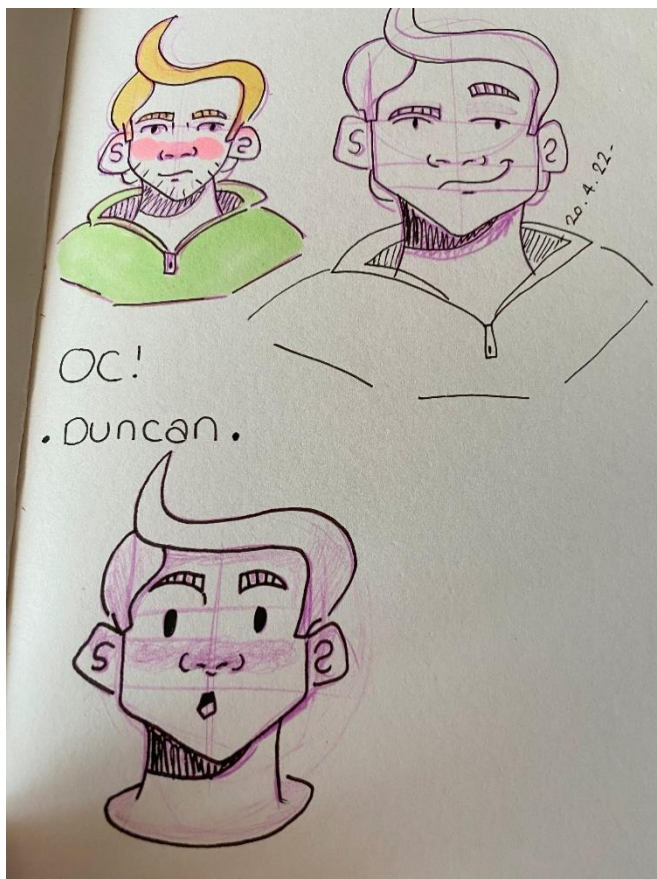
This example is the type of artwork, which is named by Bennett as trauma art (2005), that I was working on with pen, paper, and inks. Even though the incident happened a long time ago it was still overwhelming and uncomfortable for me to put onto the page, and this is where Dolar and the rabbit technique came into play. I was not aware that this was what I was doing at the time, but through the use of an iPad I managed to replicate this image and do it in a way that

was mentally comfortable and felt more confident to dive into the void, which a study exploring artistic visions and trauma suggests:

“By heralding a world of captivating artistic visions unbound by customary constraints, artists who express the appalling torments of severe trauma in their artworks are also inevitably creating tributes to autonomy, defiance, and resilience...” (Abramson and Abrahamson, 2019, p.01).

Meaning, through the continuation of the subject matter and adapting my creative practice, I pushed through to the other side which made me stronger and more resilient. The second image (digital version of example 6) was scanned and tweaked in photoshop rather than replicated using painting software such as Procreate. I chose to keep the feelings intact within this moment, the harsh lines, the blocks of darkness that permeate from the edges like thick smoke. I loved the aesthetic of the paper at the top of the page, its rough texture adds to the moment of horror and despair as the protagonist is set upon by two huge figures which, in reality were not that much bigger than herself. In her head that’s what it seems like, feels like. The villains having no faces was a choice I made to keep their identity a secret, for some reason I felt it was important.

It made me angry and confused why I would choose to protect those who had hurt me, but maybe I was also protecting myself. Keeping faces away made it seem less real and more dream-like which, as a six-year-old, it *did feel* like. I believe that this choice, this disconnection, also helped me to carry on, which could be identified as another example of Dolar's voice theory (2006).



Sketchbook Example 7 Villains

When creating the villains of my tale I gave it a lot of thought. In the end, I chose to draw from the characteristics of my abuser, his blue eyes, the way he always had his black hair spiked with gel, large ears and an odd smugness to his mouth which seemed to be ever present. I tried giving him a different name, simple cartoon eyes, and coloured hair to try and keep a distance between him and I. I'm happy I decided against using features, the resemblance, even minimal, was hard for me to mentally cope with. Drawing him over and over again in the comic would've

been too difficult, and that is another reason why features were taken away.

I began with a simple shape and worked over it with ink, keeping the features sharp and angular. From the comics and cartoons that I had seen sharp features and angular shapes feature a lot when creating villains (Camberos, 2011). Despite my uncomfortable emotions I thought it was a good depiction of a villain that could be used within the comic. I exaggerated his features to make them sharper, fiercer, but his expressions were a little more difficult to decide upon and get correct. I had to reflect upon certain situations in our relationship to when he made them and how his eyes would widen, and why. When he

would look at me with such distain and how his lip would twitch, how his blue eyes turned to black when he was cross with me, and how his face would twist uglily as he'd grip my arms. These were all things I don't think I could achieve through art alone. So, I decided not to use them. I had to find a balance for myself and the reader, for my sanity as well as theirs.

“Adding realistic details and textures, if done well, can help trigger memories, not only of the appearance of objects but also the way they feel, or smell, or sound and help bolster a sense of recognition on the part of the reader” (McCloud, 2006, p.165).

The following examples are images from the complete comic book. I finalised the results, developed the style and moved on to finishing the images and editing them to be inserted into Adobe InDesign for exportation into a PDF file. Now that the graphic memoir is complete, I do feel a certain relief due to its difficult content. Talking about it, examining my experiences under a microscope, and exporting it for public consumption is a terrifying thought, and process. All my shame is there for the world to see, all the fear, all the pain and hardship is up for scrutiny and critique. Will I be believed? What if my family or people from my past see it? What do I do if emails begin to fill my inbox calling me a liar? How would I handle it, could I? That's why I chose a penname, to protect myself and clear away these thoughts so I could focus on the project and the gap which I hope it will begin to fill, so others can help to fill it as well:

“Related to privacy concerns, many authors want the protection of a made-up name, such as when they are writing erotic fiction or something controversial. If that piece of writing doesn't work out or comes under fire, they can protect their reputation and start anew with a new pseudonym” (Cerezo, 2023).

The images below are just a few examples, and I think they create, not just a sense of the experiences I have had, but of how difficult this work has been.



Final Examples 1

From 2017 to 2018 I was suffering from psychosis; I was hearing voices and seeing monsters. The first one I ever saw was during a trip to a supermarket to get some essentials. The items had been scanned and I was gathering the few coins I had out of my purse when I looked

up and saw that the features of the cashier had contorted into that of a shark. She had big black eyes that almost filled her face and a wide, terrifying smile with sharp teeth. Sharks have been a phobia of mine since I was young. Looking at them on the TV screen eye-to-eye made me extremely uncomfortable, to the point where I would cover my face. On seeing this monster, I tore my eyes away, thanked the poor woman, and quickly left without a look back keeping my eyes on the ground until I made it safely home.

Red and black feature a lot throughout the comic because I associate black with emotions like despair, depression, loss, and loneliness, and with black being the absence of colour I felt this was appropriate (Color Matters, 2023). Red, on the other hand, has been



Final Examples 2

known to be associated with love, passion, war, conflict, and in some religions even sacrifice and courage (Kassenova, 2023). According to Ammer (2020) the red in horror movies symbolises fear, tension, and violence, and in semiotic terms he says, “colors are

the signifiers, and their meanings are the signified, together they constitute the sign that forms in the mind of the viewer feelings” (p.07). In regard to empathy, this could be seen as a key ingredient in connecting with the reader of the comic. Therefore, I believe that using the red and black as I did, supported the impact that I wanted to create: the black as an impact baseline as sorts, and the red as a strengthening tool to deepen the emotional connection.

Again, this image (Final examples 2) shows the amount of black, and red is used within my work. Although, here it is a little more controlled and used in a different way. Here we see an image of my dad with a tongue made out of a venomous snake. He is saying another insult, telling me I’m not smart enough to be a lawyer, or an archaeologist, the list goes on (which was a regular occurrence during my childhood and teen-years). This is boldly and loosely written in a blood red, handwritten font. I decided, for moments like this where I needed something bold and messy looking, I would use my own handwriting. My handwriting is not neat, it is not cursive, or delicate; it is chaotic, rushed, and consists mostly of scribbles and this I wanted to highlight in the image. I exaggerated the marks I made to create a scrapbook feel to the font that coincided with the red overlay of graffiti, depicting my dad as the devil. Through my artwork I can only display so much to the reader, as Bennett (2005) implies “...*trauma-related art is best understood as transactive rather than communicative. It often touches us, but it does not necessarily communicate the ‘secret’ of personal experience*” (p.07) and so doing keeps a lot of the emotional impact shadowed. It may seem exaggerated to some depicting my father as a devil, but at that age that is how I saw and felt about him. Our relationship was strained and was mostly based on deeply hurtful and confidence diminishing insults. This carried on until I had so little confidence, I hated everything about myself, and eventually became suicidal. I was being bullied at school and then at home, I had nowhere to escape to. Even though our relationship is a lot better now and I have done my best to forgive him for it. It’s hard to get past.



Final Examples 3

As a person I'm rather chaotic. My office/room is a mess with crafting supplies scattered around in piles only I can make head nor tail of, and my desk is littered with notes and tools that I may or may not need. As part of my personality, I wanted to bring this aspect of myself into my work. In this image, as well as the bold red and black colour scheme, I let myself create this sense of chaos in a moment of true vulnerability. Using my iPad and Apple Pencil I didn't worry about where the lines would go while I circled around a small crying version of

myself. I let my hand do the scribbling, and with each circle I made I felt a bubble of anger. The lines may be smooth as they circle around me but inside, I felt anything but content. The font here is also a little different to the rest, with its sharp tips of the beginning and ending of letters and thickness. I'm not sure whether this was a conscious decision (as you need to adjust your brushes in the Procreate software for this type of effect) however, I liked the sharp, painful touch it gives to the image as I thought it added a 'stabbing' look to the font. It's not simply there, it has a task. The purpose of the image was to create a sense of unease, a feeling of vulnerability, to let the viewer see without them actually seeing. I decided against a panel-by-panel sequence of events as I did not want to cause harm to the reader or to myself, but I thought if the reader could *feel* how I felt then that would have the same important impact. The goal for the entirety of the comic was to create something imperfect which focused on the message rather than the work:

“...we cannot limit the function of art – be it pleasure-producing or redemptive; what is important is that art itself challenges rather than reinforces the distinction between art (or the realm of imaginative discourse) and the reality of trauma and war” (Bennett, 2005, p.04).

They say artistic expression can be therapeutic. It helps people with dementia with their cognitive and behavioural functions (Marco and Redolat, 2023), improves mood disorders such as depression and anxiety (Alwledat et al, 2023), and is used to help the development and growth of autistic children (Nadinta et al, 2023). I did think, at the start of this project, that the artistic expression would be a calming and therapeutic process, however since finishing the comic I have had, in total, twenty-three sessions of therapy. I believe that this project has opened my eyes to the number of hidden feelings that needed to be unburied and processed. It has made me more aware of myself and my feelings, it has made me realise just how much thinking can affect your thoughts around your perceptions of people and how that thinking can be harmful. More so, it has made me aware of how I work as an artist, and made me think more deeply about why I make the choices that I do.

An example of one of these choices is the lack of use of the intersection of thirds, which is defined as being a tool to frame scenes so that they are more visually pleasing to the viewer (Dunham, 2022). Another is the limited use of foreground, middle ground, and background to create depth and place in my work.

“A focal point in the middle ground will appear balanced and natural. The foreground helps lead our eyes toward the focal point in the middle ground. The background provides contrast, depth, and context” (Scott, 2022).

Instead, I decided to throw aside the rules such as rules of thirds and the golden ratio (Cole, 2023), and focus on empathy as I wanted to keep the focus on impact and storytelling, and the important reader-author connection (Keen, 2007). In *Making Comics* (2006) McCloud discusses world building by suggesting that by using elements described previously by Scott (2022), they engage the reader's five senses and not just sight. However,

I believed that by following the 'rules' this would, not only hold my creativity hostage, but the recollection of such details within the environments of my trauma would play havoc with my mental and emotional health. Keeping the images flat and simple, let me focus on what I felt was most important, assisted in keeping my health in check, and allowed things to come to the surface more naturally.

13.2 Materials

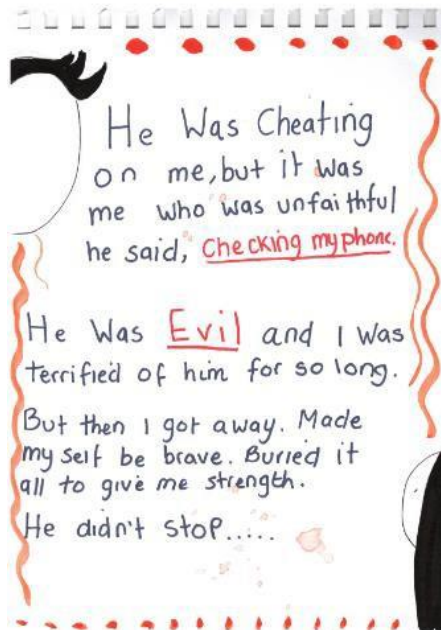
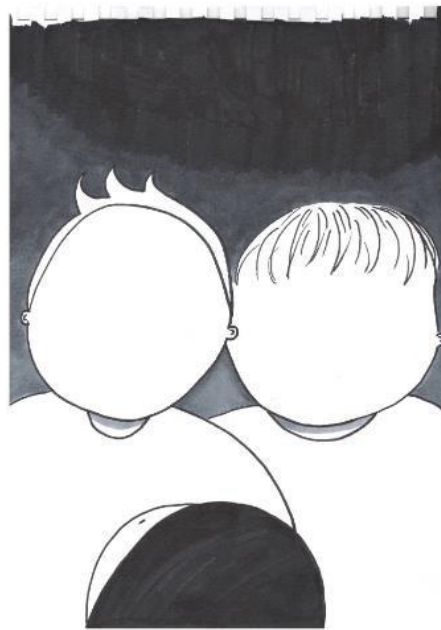
Throughout my art practice I have used various materials, exploring my style with colour, traditional (sketchbooks and paints, etc) and the digital (iPad and Apple Pencil). Since the start of my project I have found, for my art outside of the comic, I like to use black pens to line my work and then I will use watercolours to give the piece a subtle wash. I enjoy working this way because I prefer the black and white aesthetic, the textures you can create with different types of brush pens, and the way you can capture a likeness of someone with little detail. To me less is more (Ludwig Mies van der rohe, 2023). To other autistic readers this may, or may not, be the case. The research identified that autistic readers have different tastes, some bold and some simple. Using bold colours and strong line work could have been another option. However, the data highlighted so many different tastes, styles, colours, and details that my work could not please everyone. This I had to think a lot about: do I adapt everything I've learned and put it into the comic and hope that everyone likes it, or do I create to please myself? The last thing I wanted was to make the comic look messy and forced. So, I decided to create organically, but keep the themes of the research in mind (storytelling, history, relatability, and empathy etc).

At the start, I worked on the comic traditionally using materials that I had at my disposal such as pens, papers, paint pens, charcoal, acrylic, and watercolour and gouache paint, and scanning the pages into the computer for final editing and placing into an Adobe InDesign document. I hoped that the traditional "touch" would make the comic feel more intimate, however, the traditional way of working was causing some distress. Attempting to write the manuscript on campus to clarify whether it was a change in environment that was needed, rather than the re-creation of trauma that was the issue did not help. I found I couldn't concentrate, and trying to get everything down on the page was causing more anxiety. Many research articles in the field of trauma studies suggest that writing about these experiences can be a healing experience (Vela et al, 2017), however Richardson (2013)

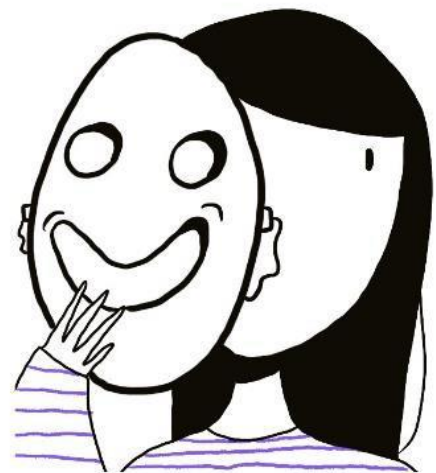
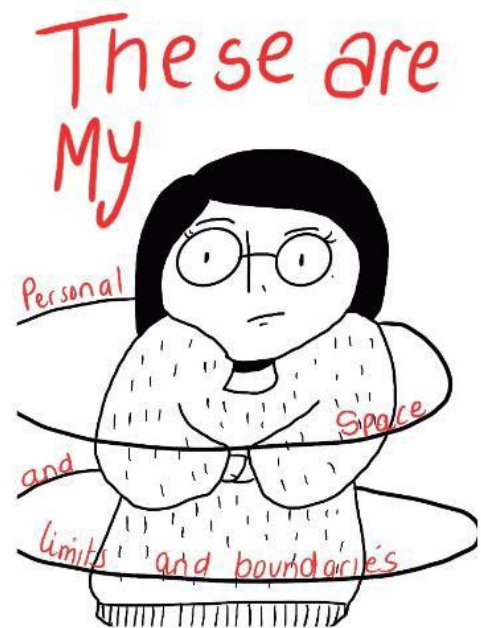
suggests that *“writing is an affective expression”* (p. 157). Meaning, that what I was creating through my art and the manuscript was causing a bodily reaction, so much so that I was becoming stressed, fatigued, and my mental health was deteriorating because of it. Thus, what I was doing was not giving me the trauma-inspired-creative-beauty I originally thought I would achieve (Carstea, 2023), but rather the opposite.

Therefore, I needed to have a barricade between me and the art to continue on the difficult road ahead. The answer came in the form of an iPad and Apple Pencil, and it turned out to be the perfect wall that I needed between myself and the trauma (see figure 1). The art began to flow, and I didn’t feel as clawed at anymore (Fancourt et al, 2020). I have since been attending EMDR (eye movement desensitisation response) therapy, and I now believe that the issue was that I had not fully faced my demons, and when thrown into the hungry, snarling pit that I’d avoided for so long I felt suddenly surrounded and overwhelmed by them. Hence, having an iPad tablet to act as a barricade (a screen) helped to keep the demons at bay until I was ready to exorcise them. Regarding the comic, I’m hoping the readers will notice the honest, heartfelt content but see the distance from the trauma as the research that is within it as I didn’t want to lose the writer-reader connection. This I wanted to use to inspire conversation which, even though Keen discusses fiction here, I feel still shows the power of an empathic connection and the shift to action it can provide:

“The affirmation and challenge to convictions that can occur when readers discuss fiction, especially with the guidance of a teacher who connects the dots between reactions to fiction and options for action in the real world, can be considered” (Keen, 2007, p.146).



Before Barrier



After Barrier

Figure 5 Before and After Implementation of iPad

13.3 Art Inspiration and Key Theorists

I have been reading comics for a few years now and have found that my favourites are usually relatable, horror (varied in style and colour), and sometimes simplistic. *Lady Killer* by Rich and Jones (2015) is one of my favourites with its three volumes of a serial killer



Lady Killer 1 (2015) Rich and Jones.



fifties housewife with a stalker who is trying to recruit her for something bigger. Its style, colour and humour captivated me. Perhaps it's due to my past why I am so drawn to this concept of an

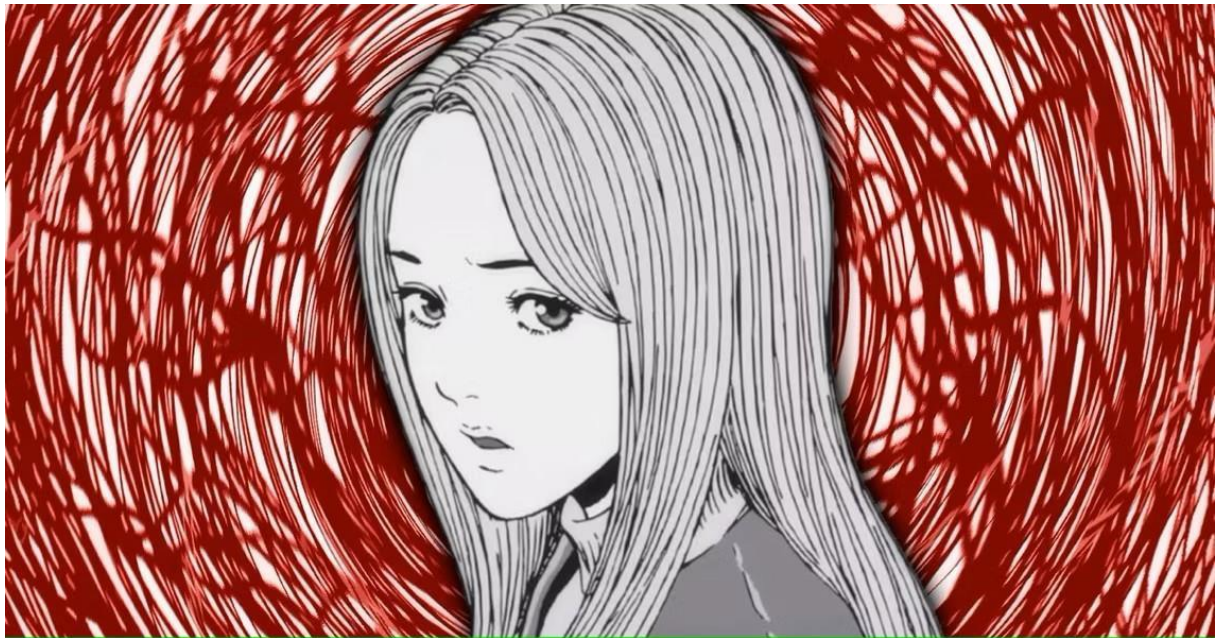
empowered woman. She might be a housewife in the fifties, but she is in control. She does these things because she wants to not because she must, out of fear, or being demanded. She chooses to put aside her knife and become one with her family: cooking, cleaning, the school run. To me, that is a strong and powerful woman. As well as the lure of the empowering narrative, I kept this one in mind for the colour scheme and page layout to help me to experiment with ideas.

The framing of the panels of this page is interesting as they are varied shapes and sometimes overlap, as though pinpointing key moments within the quick paced action. The borders of the panels are also varied in thickness and in style. For instance, the panel at the top of the page has a rough ink texture to it to indicate a moment of chaos, while the others gradually become more ordered, more basic, as the scene plays out and events settle down.

Other comics I found were more simplistic, often in black and white and usually about everyday things and some were of issues such as domestic violence, rape, and abuse. The

style of these comics were mostly bold black lines, extreme grey shading which seemed to get stronger the more intense a scene was. In her memoir *Commute* (2019) William's used a splash of colour on the positive things in her life. I found it interesting how she used nothing but black, however, when her daughter or something as simple as a beautiful house she passed everyday was described, colour was always present.

Junji Ito was a returning feature for inspiration due to his use of black and white, with colourfully creative spreads. This bold style can be seen throughout each of his books which are filled with monsters that I found could be metaphorical in nature.



Junji Ito 1 (Hanumanth, 2023)

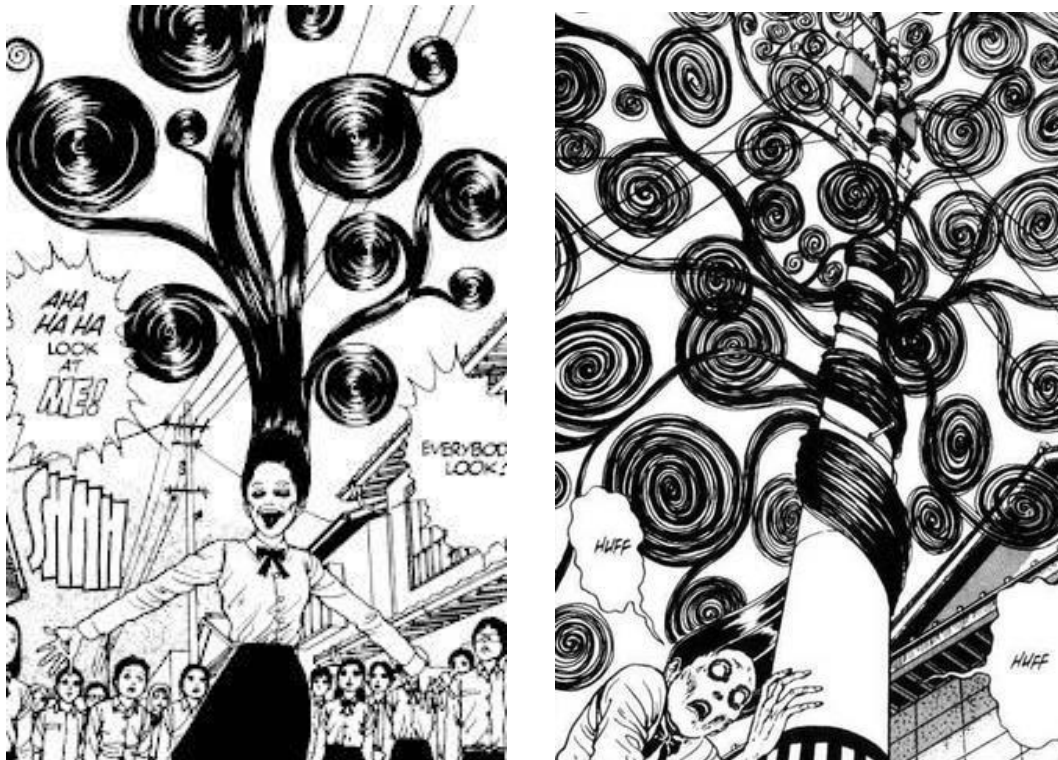


Junji Ito 2 (Hanumanth, 2023)

For instance, in *Uzumaki* (2013), a character is cursed, and her hair grows into tall spirals which the other students are entranced to look upon continuously. Another girl who has the same affliction, takes this as her opportunity to revel in the limelight. As someone who had not formally been popular at the fictional school, she is poisoned by jealousy of the other girl and, after a brief fight between the two, she meets her untimely death at the hands of the electrical current of a telephone pole. My interpretation of this volume of Ito's work is that each chapter covers a seven deadly sin, and this chapter of the book resembles the sin of envy and how destructive the force can be. I found this interesting, mostly due to the questionable nature this type of work can have: am I right in my interpretation, or is this work simply just *is*? In my questioning, I thought about the relationship between writer and reader, leading me back to the work of Keen (2006) and how these connections are built to influence the reader's responses:

"Order and disorder in the storytelling can have a significant impact on how a reader receives, comprehends, and interprets a story" (Keen, 2017, p.98).

As we can see in example Junji Ito 2, the man is sitting within a compacted room staring at the swirls that have taken over his life. The man himself, however, is created rather simply; he wears a white shirt and what look like jeans. He is a sharp contrast to that of his chaotic surroundings which speaks of the intensity of his obsession. This intensity I tried to capture in my own work, not through depth and background, but through the use of colour and handwritten font.



Junji Ito 3 Uzumaki (2013)

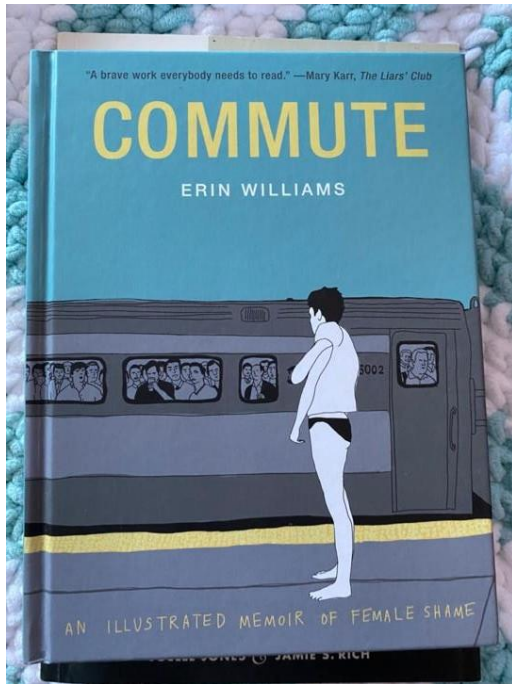


Figure 6 *Commute* (Williams, 2015)

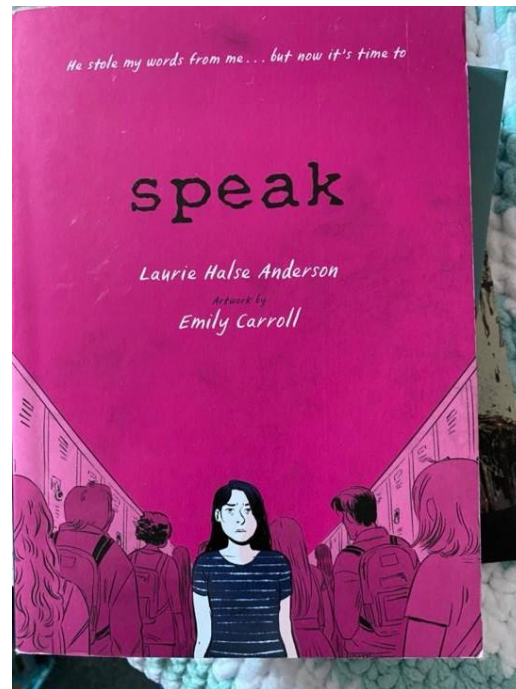


Figure 7 *Speak* (Anderson and Carroll, 2018)

I wanted to have a well-rounded view of different comics so when it came to creating my own, I had an idea of what I would like to make. *Speak* (2018) is a graphic remake of the novel by Anderson (2008), which depicts a schoolgirl who is made an outcast after calling the police to report a crime but ending up breaking-up the party she was at. The crime is revealed later down the line in a finale which sees her taking back the control over herself, and her voice, by speaking out against the popular boy who raped her after he tries a second time during the school day in a closet. This spoke to me for obvious reasons, but also for the art style. I've been a lover of Emily Carroll's art for a while before reading this, but the way she captures the horror, the despair, and the demonic nature of the mood and rapist was unique. These moments are stoned in gloomy and dark tones, which grow ever deeper when the rapist is in the panel. This technique I kept in mind during the development process, and found that it worked really well when I wanted to really cast a shadow on the horrible moments to deepen the empathetic connection with the reader, especially when using only black and blood red, as Carroll has done with tones of blacks and hot pink.

Theorists such as McCloud, Cohn and Keen helped me to understand more about putting together the pieces of the puzzle. McCloud (1993) assisted with building my self-confidence in my artwork by showing me that a simple form can be as impactful as a detailed style. McCloud implies that through the representation of a simplistic character one can see themselves within them, allowing the reader to connect and immerse themselves as that character rather than simply following along with the protagonist of the story on their journey. Although he does add that:

“Some characters are born as doodles in a sketchbook, some are improvised in the middle of a story, some are conceived in the script stage – maybe to be visually designed by others. But no matter what sequence of steps brings them to life there are three qualities that no great comics character can do without. An inner life, visual distinction, expressive traits” (McCloud, 2006, p.63).

An inner life of a character is the unique history and perspective that they have, the visual distinction is classed as memorable physical qualities (body, shape, face, and clothing), and expressive traits can be defined as speech and behaviour that character would possess. With my research suggesting immersivity is of utmost importance to the reader, I decided to keep the comic visuals simple, especially given the subject matter. For my sake, and the readers, I wanted to keep as little visual detail out of the darkest parts of my memoir as possible. I wanted to explore a way to represent these moments without giving myself a mental breakdown, or traumatising the reader. Kunka (2018) suggests that trauma comics “...evokes and provokes memory...” (p.85) especially with its condensed moments set on the page into sequences. Eventually, I decided to keep details out of the equation and create pages about the feelings I were having upon recollecting the events rather than re-creating them for all to see, and develop a personification that was a true reflection of myself.

The Visual Language of Comics by Cohn (2018) helped me to better understand meaning-making and sequential art structure. He suggests that meaning making is the association we have with a symbol. For instance, a heart shape does not have a meaning of love without the projection of this from the drawer/viewer. With this in mind, I tried to experiment with symbolic meaning-making in my own art practice. I experimented with animalistic symbols to represent other, more morbid, underlining metaphors, such as a rabbit. Docile in nature, and cute and fluffy in appearance, I tried to create a non-threatening metaphorical creature to represent my inner voice. I wanted to have something which represented my state of mind without being triggering for the audience during the darker periods of the comic, this was later removed. I felt compelled to remove the sugar-coating, and lay myself bare whether I received a positive outcome from the readers or not.

In terms of comic structure, Cohn's book helped me to grasp the importance of having a plan to a page. His six narrative categories (see table c) provide structure to a page by demonstrating the build-up between interactions to ultimately end with a satisfying conclusion, and this I kept in mind while experimenting with page layouts, particularly where to place panels for the best representation of ideas/story.

Cohn's *The Visual Language of Comics* (2013) also helped me to understand how schemas combined to develop into new images and ideas:

"...the iconic reference between graphic schemas and their meanings allows for the easy creation of new signs. For example, if someone did not know how to draw a dolphin they could either 1) find someone else's schema for this object and copy it, or 2) invent their own schema, either by their own imagination (possibly borrowing from a "fish" or "shark" schema to make a very "unrealistic" dolphin) or by looking at an actual dolphin..." (p.34).

This implies that through the examination of others work my own developed through the combination of the imagery I had seen and the style I was currently playing with. Plus,

the more I looked at my work in my sketchbooks the more I saw small pieces of others within it.

Cohn's Basic Narrative Categories.

Category	Purpose
Orienter	Provides a setting.
Establisher	Sets up an interaction without it happening.
Initial	Builds tension of narrative arc.
Prolongation	Marks a medial state of extension, often the trajectory of a path.
Peak	Height of narrative tension and point of event.
Release	Releases tension of interaction. Ending.

Table C: Cohn (2018) *The Visual language of Comics*, pp.70.

Keen (2020) helped me to understand the mechanics of narrative empathy, specifically the importance of the author-reader connection:

“Narrative empathy is the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another’s situation and condition. Narrative empathy plays a role in the aesthetics of production when authors experience it, in mental simulation during reading, in the aesthetics of reception when readers experience it, and in the narrative poetics of texts when formal strategies invite it. Narrative empathy overarches narratological categories, involving actants, narrative situation, matters of pace and duration, and story world features such as settings...” (p. 820).

She calls this connection imaginative collaboration, where author-reader work as one to produce the narration, thus the empathic connection occurs. Although, Keen also highlights that empathic inaccuracy may occur, meaning that even though the author may succeed in that connection, there is no way to know whether the reader will empathise or respond in the way the author intends:

“A reader persuaded that she has felt with a fictional character may defy the stated or implicit intentions of an author...Empathetic inaccuracy, to craft a hypothesis out of this circumstance, may then contribute to a strong sense that the author’s perspective is simply wrong” (Keen, 2007, pp.139-40).

This was one of my concerns of the comic for a time; I was afraid that people would judge me and not believe me. I was concerned about the impact it would have on me after the energy, time, and pain it had cost me to put everything down on paper. Even though I knew it was for a good cause, and in fact a necessity as I believe there should be a range of voices within academia and about personal matters regarding such things as autistic women issues, it filled me with dread for a long time. Then I finally decided to use a pseudonym to protect myself, and I knew that this way I could work in peace and not have to worry as much about any hate.

Keen (2020) is one of the main influences on my work, not just in designing the comic in a way which fulfils the reader-author connection, but also because of the empathic stigma which surrounds autism itself (Bollen, 2023a). Empathy has become a major interest of mine, not just in the connection between media and the viewer, but also how empathy can be shown, received, and interpreted. Alongside Milton’s (2017) views on double-empathy, and Richardson’s (2013) views on bodily reactions to narrative through the reading and writing of it, I argue empathy in autistic people to be more than what the stigma wants society to believe, especially as studies of empathy have recently been found to be confused in identifying the definition of empathy within the area of autism (Bollen, 2023b). Research should extend upon the papers that I have found to fully explore this further, as the empathy stigma is a damaging one to the autistic community in the form of neurotypical gatekeeping (Bollen, 2023a).

12.2 Part Two: Comic Reflections

Here, I shall be discussing the comic in more detail chapter by chapter. I decided against using a storyboard. I wanted the art to flow organically and to use my memories, reflections, and emotions in the moment to form a page. By doing this I hoped to connect with the reader using Keen's (2020) theory on reader's empathy and through the mixture of imagery and text I hoped that imaginative collaboration (between reader and writer) would occur. By combining situational empathy and a first-person narration, Keen (2007) suggests this would increase the probability of character identification and the drawing of the readers' own experiences. Situational empathy is suggested to be the empathic response from the reader to the plot and circumstance of the character (Keen, 2007), thus this was an important connection for me to try and achieve in my comic, and one which I tried to accomplish without causing the reader the same stress and anxiety that I'd felt during the creative process.

The scratch and clawing of discomfort while pursuing the difficult chapters was hard to ignore at times. I spent hours sitting at my desk, pencil in hand, trying to ignore it and get something, anything, on paper. Danny Gregory of Sketchbook Skool (2022) says that something small is perfectly fine if you're doing something every day, so, I decided to take little breaks to create anything in hopes it sparked some inspiration, and courage. I wanted to create something with impact, but how could I do that without upsetting others, and myself? In the end, I decided to include a trigger warning at the beginning. That was a start.

There were moments where I would simply sit and procrastinate while trying to work on the manuscript or a page that was uncomfortable. Even while I was on campus (I thought a change of scenery would help) I sat for hours trying to get my fingers to type the words. Eventually, I managed to set myself a goal and finished the difficult pages first doing little and often. Keeping this mindset helped to generate motivation and keep myself on track with other parts of the comic. The decisions I made throughout the comic were to allow the reader into my head. The chaotic feel of the layout, text and imagery is a representation of

how my mind, an autistic mind, works and what it *can* look like. The use of bold colours, patterns, scribbles, and the lack of panels and borders demonstrates how my mind works. In my mind I feel there are no limitations to what I can do, and the chaos within it is reflected upon the page in this way. Meanwhile, outside of my brain is the problem - it encourages and demands order where there is very little. I wanted the reader to try and see my perspective and experience things alongside me and see what I was already living with inside my head. Thus, I was determined to not have anything perfect in the comic.

13.2.1 Front and Back Pages

For the title and end pages there is a difference between the two. Normally, a book will have a matching back cover to the front cover. However, I wanted to have a before and after to reflect the growth and change that occurred. Therefore, I used a deep red colour stripe for the title page, and a bright yellow for the back, with images to pinpoint the mood of that time of my life on the cover. Stripes feature immensely in the comic because I loved mood rings as a child (the gem would change colour depending on body temperature which was supposed to represent an emotion) and used the stripes to show my feelings of an event or chapter.

“Stripes are powerful because they unite and divide in equal measure. They unite through repetition, while forming boundaries that sharply divide planes and colors at the same time. In the process, they create rhythm like no other pattern” (The Art of Stripes, 2023).

I chose grey for anxiety and stress, pink for harmony and joy, dark blue for depression, royal blue for sadness and a deep, almost black colour for despair.

Stripes are a pattern which I enjoy on clothing, and I feel as though I can relate to a stripe. The way the colour block moves freely over the page, undisturbed, makes me yearn for a life like it. A life undisturbed, a position of homeostasis, instead of the life of constant anxiety over social interactions, financial concerns, and waves of sensory chaos that hit me

every time I leave my safe space. However, even though these are challenges, I feel as though they are essential to who I am as a person and gives my life flavour. Although, whether this is a result of years of 'masking' I'm not sure:

"Another observation about camouflaging is that it was reported to be associated with various disadvantages. These included a sense of exhaustion and confusion about the individual's true identity. Furthermore, as is discussed below, some women believed that a tendency to mimic others and prioritise fitting in above their own needs had led them to be manipulated and abused by others; and had caused others not to notice their needs for help" (Bargiela et al, 2016, p. 3290).

The font I chose was originally going to be my handwriting, unfortunately my writing was found to cause problems with readability. The participants suggested that the writing was inconsistent and overwhelming at times, therefore, to rectify this issue but keep the handwriting style I wanted to achieve, I chose a font called Carrot flower. This font had the readability the participants yearned for with its clear and bold style and had a consistent variation of letter placement, creating a predictability which was easy on the senses. Additionally, I believed it was a good font to match the style of the imagery and helped the personality of the creator to shine through (e.g., quirky, bubbly, a bit messy, imperfect). Having a font that is of a handwriting style provides a creative illusion that it has been handwritten, which I wanted for the empathetic connection; however, they can now read the story more easily.

The image I created for the title page is a dishevelled self-portrait with the lips stitched together. Some people may feel that that is a little extreme, but I think it fits perfectly with how I felt and what happened to me. I didn't have a voice, or I did have a voice, but no-one listened so instead of moving my lips my throat bobbed about with unrelinquished words, opinions, and ideas. I was just there - a subservient female, and I wanted this to come across from the beginning to demonstrate the topic of the comic. The blood red stripes

were chosen with the purpose of accentuating the pain and suffering, but the dash of yellow in the title hints at a touch of hope within the future pages. By describing the comic as an Aut-ethnographic memoir it indicates that this piece of work is of an academic nature but keeps the tone light and fun with the carrot flower font.

Naming the comic was a difficult process. I wanted something direct, which said everything it needed to, with the basis being one of the most important points of this project: the need for early diagnosis, but was quirky enough to grab attention and draw readers. The title has changed a few times, but each one didn't sit right with what I wanted to say. *My Un-Diagnosed Autistic Life*, I believe, says it all. It's quirky, clear, and direct, which is helpful to the autistic community when it comes to communication, but also interesting to attract a diverse range of readers.

This comic is dedicated to other late-diagnosed autistic adults because, as well as being part of the community, I know they can relate to the trauma, the mental illness, and the raging thoughts and distress the diagnosis can cause. It makes you feel as though your entire life has been one big lie, and you've been masking for so long you don't know where the mask ends, and you begin. Accepting and learning yourself after you thought you knew who you are is hard, and that's why I dedicated this to them, to us. I also decided to add a trigger warning in the author's note at the beginning to push the importance of taking mental health breaks during the read through. Even though the topic is a difficult one, I still wanted to create a safe, immersive experience for the reader.

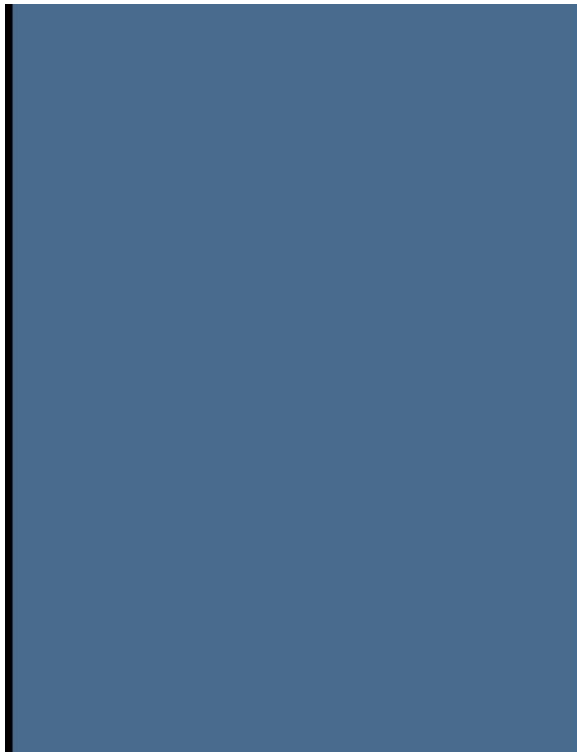
The chapters are titled as the years and periods of my life, as I wanted a unique and new way of separating the sections without focusing on a cliché (e.g., Chapter One). By using periods of my life, I could use the years as sub-sections to highlight the enormity of the events that took place in a short time, for example my school days might seem seconds in the comic, but to me they were an eternity.

"For autistic students, mainstream school can be a complex, chaotic and demanding social environment" (Horgen et al, 2023).

A similar take on this technique can be seen in *Billy, Me, and You* by Streeten (2011) where she turns the diary she created during and after the death of a child into a graphic memoir. Streeten separates sections in parts using a lined paper background, which looks like a yearly diary extract, with a mixture of full pages, double page spreads, photo, and graphics throughout to release her feelings of grief and helplessness.



Figure 8 *Billy, Me, and You*, Streeten (2011), pp.1-2.



9

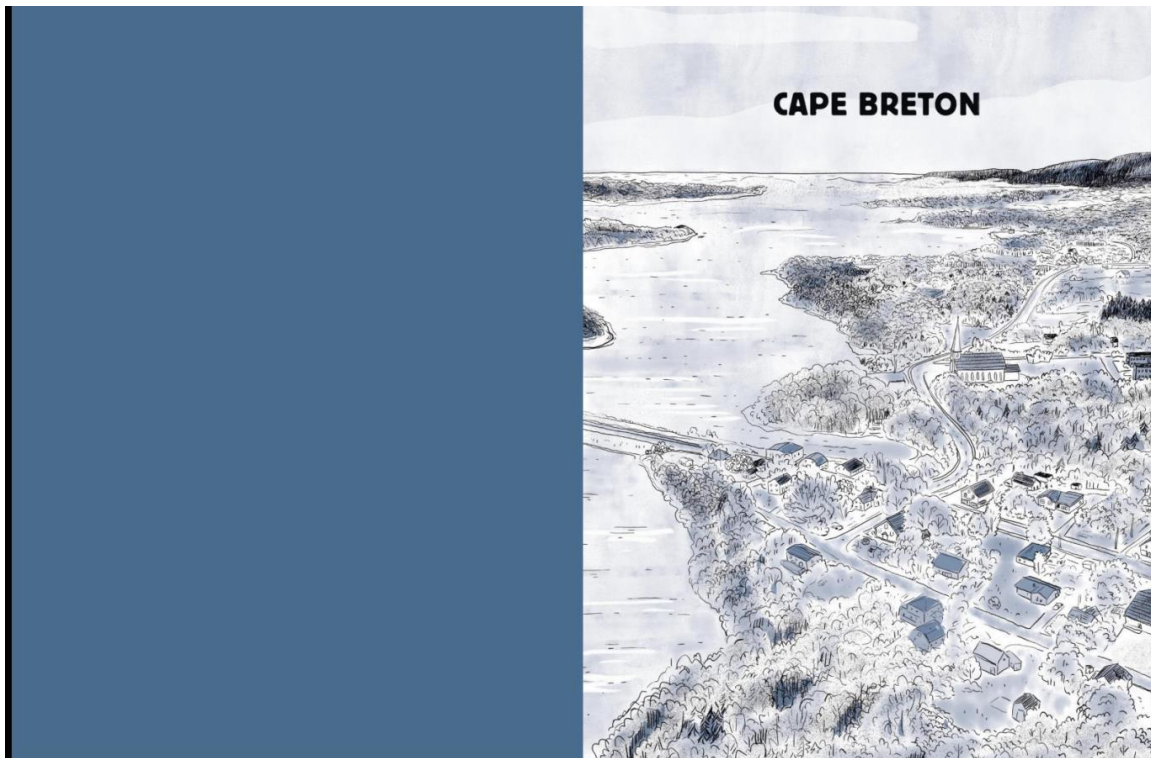


Figure 9 Ducks by Beaton, 2022, pp. 1-9.

Beaton (2022) also uses this technique to separate her chapters by using colour and landscapes in her memoir *Ducks* (2022). She also uses an introduction page to begin the story off without an overwhelming amount of text, or information. From the data I collected in the data analysis of my reader survey, regarding storytelling and lore, it suggested presenting history in this way as an introduction would be a positive way of gaining reader-author connection at the beginning to the comic.

13.2.2 Chapter One – Hi There.

I chose the first page to be a big hello because I'm so grateful that someone would want to read anything that I've written. The inner critic has always been my companion, but I've been trying to put these feelings aside. I wanted my personality and humour to shine through here as I wanted to grip the reader and create a connection, allowing them to peek behind the curtain. The style of my character is simplistic and innocent looking, which gives the reader a glimpse into how I used to see myself as being. Lining out my traits and providing a pie chart to showcase the quantity of each affect I thought was important, as I wanted to show that this is how autism affects me, but also, I wanted to demonstrate that this was only one version of the autism spectrum. By comparing my autism to my brother's, I hoped to provide an example of the fluctuations shown in the chart. The illustration which accompanies this, me taking off a mask, relates to the masking phenomenon which autistic individuals hide behind and develop as they grow to blend into society. Again, stripes are ever present, however, they are a rose colour which indicates a mood of calm and affection when talking about passionate topics like autism and family.

The illustration featuring my special interests is to show how many different obsessions I have, and sometimes I develop new ones. For instance, recently I have discovered a love of dinosaurs. Although, another recent discovery is that I become quite distressed when I have the overwhelming need to read and play video games at the same

time and I can't, so having lots of special interests have both good and bad consequences (Grove et al, 2018).

The purpose of this image and description was to show how overwhelmed and passionate I can become, which I hoped the reader would be able to empathise with.

Admitting that I'm a failed adult by society's standards was hard for me. I live at home at the age of thirty-two, I have no offline friendships, no romantic relationships, no job, no money, no children. To a neurotypical maybe it sounds bleak, but I love being a singleton, being in my thirties, having no obligations or responsibilities like children. I have my family, and that's enough as they surround me with the support and love that I need. They know my limitations, boundaries, and continue to learn what I'm happy with and what I'm not. For example, they understand that I'm not open to physical contact that comes as a surprise, so they always ask permission before wrapping their arms around me for a strangling hug.

I wanted to show that I'm better off now than I was living with a man I thought I was in love with, who was never around, lonely, drinking alone, and depressed. We don't always see eye-to-eye my family and I, but we get along for the most part. By ending chapter one on a high note, this chapter is kept light, as I knew the next few chapters would be hard to read, and harder for me to create. I wanted this chapter to be a brief introduction into autism and using colours seemed to help highlight the key points.

13.2.3 Chapter Two - 1996

The contrast between black and white was used to dramatize the events that took place, and to show how cloudy of a memory it is due to the impact it had. I wanted the imagery to present to the reader the innocence, and the ripping apart of it. I was a little girl who ran around in fairy wings to Spice Girls, until I wasn't. The faces of the people who feature in this comic are blank. I believe I did this for two reasons: 1) to separate myself from

them emotionally and mentally, and 2) to dehumanise them so that their actions were the centre of the issue/image.

The lettering is more comic like here. It is separated by bubbles at times and others not. I had an issue with the text fading into the linework when I typed over the image, therefore I chose to place a shape behind the text to stop this from happening, creating speech bubbles. I had tried to place the text elsewhere; however, it didn't look appealing. McCloud (2006) emphasises the importance of bubble and text placement in his book *Making Comics*, and highlights that too much variation of font, and text, can have a negative effect on the immersivity of the work, and this I wanted to avoid. I tried to keep a nice balance by keeping the bubbles simple and the font consistent, however, if I could go back to the beginning, perhaps I would have experimented more with dramatic variations of size and styles of text. With the project focusing on autistic participants, I wanted to focus on their needs, therefore I kept the style simple and clean.

The double page spreads were my favourite to create. I wanted them to say a lot without needing many words or images, and this was a challenge at times. In this chapter, I chose a black background with a short sentence coloured white to help me say how uncomfortable, impactful, and negative the next few pages will be. Throughout the comic, I decided to use paragraphs to describe the events and imagery to display the emotional, or mental, interpretation. This way I could protect the reader from viewing the horrible incidents, as well as protect myself, but also, they are immersed within the story. I took inspiration from Smy's *Thornhill* (2017) for this, as she also uses paragraphs alongside images to grab the reader and throw them into the story. *Thornhill* (2017) is the story of a girl who discovers a diary by a girl who lived in the abandoned orphanage across the field to her new home. The story is full of ghosts, loss, and heartache with a sad ending which all seeps from the deep blacks and greys. This hints at a mysteriousness which surrounds the diary and orphanage which keeps you turning the page. The last couple of pages of this chapter are a good example, as I used description and an image alongside each other to *show* the reader what happened.

13.2.4 Chapter Three – Teenage Years.

The beginning of this chapter is a double page spread with the words *Teenage Years*. Scattered around the page are mathematical symbols demonstrating that at this time I was in secondary school. Maths was, and still is, my most hated subject. Once someone asked me whether I had dyscalculia, which I could neither confirm nor deny, because it has always been something I have struggled with. Perhaps, if I'd had a diagnosis from a young age this might've been something I could have investigated, and I wouldn't have struggled so much during my GCSEs.

Teenage Years describes some very difficult topics which occurred in a short space of time. The imagery of a burning fire across a double page represents Hell, while the text talks about the bullying and its impact. Drawing multiple images for this felt as though the attention would be drawn away from the description, and I wanted to create something which reflected the text. Using digital methods, I created a pastel drawing of flames reaching across the pages. The glow around the top of the flames is the pinnacle of me succumbing to the mental torment, and finally having a breakdown. By putting keywords in capitals, I wanted to stress the point that at fifteen years of age I had clinical depression, which is something a fifteen-year-old should not be experiencing however its purpose was to connect with the reader returning to the theme of empathy.

In 2009 the strange eyes in the zeros of words and numbers were a popular phenomenon, maybe even before then. I wanted to demonstrate the times in which I lived, so to create a break between periods of my life I chose to create double page spreads with little things I remembered from that period, such as the googly eyes and faces people my age used to decorate their work.

At this stage of my life, I was in college, but the relationship with my father was still as toxic – it had never changed. The imagery within this period reflects this toxicity. Every year, on his birthday card, I draw something cheeky (for example, a little doodle of him

yelling at me with googly eyes and sprigs of hair) so I chose to take this and use it within this area of the comic. I drew a side portrait of him, and used a red digital pen to draw the devils features on his face. He has always had a poisonous tongue, and I used the snake as a metaphor for this within the artwork. Almost like the snake within the garden of Eden, hissing at me things that damaged my self-esteem and broke me down until I was a teary mess.

Bullying has been a constant theme within the comic, and on reflection I was surprised at how much I was bullied growing up by people I thought were my friends. Tiny moments of bullying slipped my mind at the time, but working on this comic brought a lot of it back and now I understand just how vulnerable I was, and if I'm being honest, still am. This felt strange to me because I've never seen myself as a victim, or vulnerable, or someone in need of help as I've always thought that other people had it worse. Now though, I know that my experiences are valid and important. Like many other autistic adults, I'm a survivor of Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault, Bullying, Depression, Child Molestation, Stalking and Miscarriage. It took me to do this comic to realise that I'm worthy of the term Survivor and that none of it was my fault (Gibbs and Pellicano, 2023; Libster et al, 2023).

I wanted to demonstrate that bullying doesn't stop once you leave school. I used grey stripes to try and create the anxious mood of the moment, the black and white contrast, and capitalised keywords to create an uncomfortable atmosphere. Research also features in this chapter to increase the importance of awareness of bullying on autistic children. I chose to use a double page spread, a black background and white text to push the importance of the information, similar to that of splash pages of superhero comics to grip the reader and add dramatic weight (C. Tumey, 2011). However, to create a formal tone and increase accessibility I decided to include only the key points of the research paper.

13.2.5 Chapter Four – Twenties.

The opening double page spread for this chapter is a violet colour with a soft glow, which I used to try and spotlight the hope going forward into my twenties. I'd left college and begun to work at my first job as an Argos Warehouse picker, after months of failed interviews and applications. Then from the years 2010 to 2011, this a year I would rather forget, therefore the start of this chapter of my life is a bold black and white with a red cross to simulate how "cancelled" I want this year of my life to be. I wasn't sure how to present this period, so, settling for a one, two, three approach I began a beginning, middle, and an end. I kept the imagery light and relaxed at the beginning because that's how I felt. He didn't seem to be a horrible person when we met but looking back (after years of experience) I can see the red flags. Gradually the imagery becomes more sinister to reflect the change in the relationship and his treatment of me. I used lots of black, white, and red and claustrophobic feeling imagery to create a sense of how closed in and trapped I was. The research I included in this part of the comic was important because it demonstrates how frightening and dangerous leaving an abusive relationship can be, which is necessary to understand when people suggest to you to just leave as though it is the easiest thing in the world. Using red for this was to make the point clear to those who believe differently, or feel that those who are abused, whether that's men, women, non-binary, etc are to blame (Bates, 2022). The dark purple stripes represent the depression, the fear, and the anxiety that I felt throughout this experience. The imagery of me with tousled hair and simple clothing shows how beaten down I was, and how much control he had over how I presented myself at home and in public. I was there to please him, and only him, and that is shown within the voodoo doll type image of me on a lead like an animal. The lead is red to define that that object is more important than the voodoo doll it's attached to, with its hair all neat and tidy – *the perfect little doll just for him*.

The bathroom scene has been drawn to be crowded, with him coming out of the mirror to give the reader a peek into a world where I was never alone. He would always be

there, with these big arms wrapping around me to always keep me close, forcing me in place.

I didn't want to draw a rape scene. It would be a trigger for the audience as well as for myself. Instead, I sat down and drew how I felt about it overall to try and grip the reader and bring them into this void with me. I used a big, bold, red brush for the text. I only used three words, and that's all I needed to describe what happened to go along with the vortex of lines and tiny little me in the centre crying. I let out the confusion, the anxiety, and the shame in those lines, as well as the shame since. The shame of having to go to the clinic a few months later for a STI check, and the continued shame of it being something that will affect me for the rest of my life. This I chose to leave out of the comic, and this just shows the level of shame that still engulfs me. This shame has affected my confidence since, which impacts my ability to develop close romantic relationships. This is something else that I discovered about myself during this project – how much shame I still have about something that wasn't my fault, and the fear of the stigma, and bias, stuck to me by society. As seen in *Maus* by Art Spiegelman (2003), he used animals to help ease the viewer into the story, and this I tried to replicate in my own way to drown out the pain of the experiences I've had.

I describe research which provides statistics on sexual violence against autistic women and the cycle in which increases the chances of further assaults and mental health issues. However, I end the chapter on a positive with an image of me wearing yellow stripes, rosy, red cheeks, and a smile. Yellow is the colour I chose for the happy moments of the comic. I wanted something bright and bold which is very different to the dark, black tones of the rest of the comic.

The year 2012 page is a bold black with a thorny flower wrapped around the numbers, with a few petals falling to the bottom of the page. The flower is a symbol of growth, freedom, and romance with the fallen petals suggesting that something is untoward. This part of the chapter starts of positive, with an image of me and my work friends enjoying being young and single. The text has been placed on a white square background with a border to prevent the fading into the dark colours that I had trouble with earlier. The next few

pages show a scruffy and exhausted self-portrait because I was running on fumes during this time. Every weekend we would be going out socialising, then on Monday we would be back to work as usual, and I was struggling to cope with all the stimulation, the new friendship expectations, and social aspects that seemed to be thrown at me as soon as I became single. I was having fainting spells at work, and needing to take breaks which affected my performance. I'd had a couple of dates, but nothing came of anything until a friend handed me a note from a young man which gave me a surge of anxiety, but also curiosity. The next few pages describe a relationship which was hard at times but somewhat happy. It was one of those: "well I've had worse" relationships, and that's what I was trying to get across to the reader through the blurring technique on one of the pages – an illusion. I wasn't happy, I'd just settled for less because it wasn't like before, but I didn't believe I deserved better. I knew I was different, I'd felt it all my life, so when someone showed interest, I held on with both hands. Why would anyone want me?

As time went by my mental state went downhill, and I wanted to express that I was close to breaking point through hatching and scribbles. I chose to draw a small version of me sat in the chair (in which I sat every day) within this hatching. This small me was surrounded by loneliness and a dark void which I was trying to simulate on the page. To prevent upsetting the reader, I decided to blank out the next page with a double page spread of simple black with white writing telling the story of how I began to self-harm. I didn't say how or gave any details other than just how I felt, keeping an emotional empathetic connection rather than the visual which could be too much for the reader.

I wanted my experience with psychosis to be impactful and honest. I've had a lot of conflicting emotions about creating this project, mostly whether people would believe me or seek me out for hateful comments. Fortunately, I've managed to outweigh these fears by telling myself that this is important, not just to me but for other people who are too afraid to speak, or create, or write about their experiences and this helps me to cross the metaphorical bridge to carry on.

The first ever experience of psychosis I had was a woman's face turning into something monstrously shark-like. Sharks are said to be attracted to the smell of blood, so I decided on a red blotchy background with a hint of grey to give a dreamy feel to it. Looking at this image still makes me uncomfortable, and I wanted the reader to feel the same way for this portion of the comic.

The spiders in the cup were drawn from imagination, however, I used references for the cup so I could create a shape that was interesting and less generic. I didn't want to draw a simple mug, I wanted to create something with personality and a hint of colour. The main challenge of this portion of the comic was the zombie page, and how to add the text without it being blended into the background or cut off. Eventually, I came up with the idea to have a comic style bubble effect for the text which would solve the issues I had, and by using black boxes and white text this would be more interesting to look at and would not take away from the background image due to the colours I'd chosen. I found experimenting with the gore therapeutic as I moved the digital brushes around the page and splashing splotches of red here and there to create stains. It was one of the most horrifying moments of my life, but to create it artistically was a fun experience and made me feel calmer about the memory. What I've found during this experience of re-living these moments, is that how what I've seen have been phobias of mine: sharks, spiders, zombies. They're all connected as something that I fear – that has been interesting to delve into and made me think whether this has a connection for other psychosis sufferers.

To end this chapter, I chose to talk about relationship and sex education, and by highlighting the different types of abuse, using a grey striped background to create a feeling of anxiety. I wanted to highlight the importance of consent, and what my own experience of sex education was like for me. I finalised it with an image of a self-portrait of me saying no, which is a powerful word but doesn't get utilised, or listened to, enough.

13.2.6 Chapter Five, Part One - Diagnosis.

The day I received my diagnosis was a mixture of emotions. Of course, I was happy, but how was I supposed to live my life now? I now belonged to a community of people who are looked down upon, stigmatised, and bullied. How would I manage relationships, employment, or everyday life? I felt invisible, as though my family had let me down because my brother's autism was more apparent than mine. It took a long time for that feeling to go away. I wasn't given any help after my diagnosis, I was sent away with paperwork and left to find everything out about myself independently. Gradually, I did feel a connection with other autistic women who spoke out at Ted Talks, on YouTube, and in books. It gave me a sense that I wasn't alone, and that I wasn't the only one that had been left behind. However, meeting other autistic women remains challenging as, I have found during my time with the participants, we are not the most sociable group.

For the double page spread of this chapter title, I wanted something tranquil to show that I was finally at peace. I chose a violet colour, delicate lines, and happy sunshine faces to illustrate this. When I think of a peaceful moment, I think of spring with its cool, soft colours and the fragile feeling of petals against your fingertips, and the warm glow of the sun on your face while you have a cup of tea in the garden.

Soft and delicate are consistent themes in this section of the comic as I describe growing up not knowing, but also knowing that something was different. Something was wrong with me. When I got the diagnosis, I was overwhelmed, and decided to use different yellow tones to show the joy, but also this overwhelming feeling. It hit me like a hurricane, and this I wanted to create for the reader to share this important moment with me as I tracked back through my childhood reflecting upon how I treated my brother, and how I was treated by the police during the period of stalking I reported back in 2011. It could be argued that more training should be provided for those working in the community services so that ASC individuals' feel seen and listened to, rather than being seen as the guilty party due to their autistic characteristics such as avoiding eye contact and swaying (Crane et al, 2016).

If I'd known earlier maybe my brother and I would've had a better relationship, I might have done better at school, and maybe I could've had assistance when making my report.

13.2.7 Part two – The Aftermath

In the aftermath of my diagnosis, I sought out as much information about myself as possible. When you're diagnosed as an adult, you are left to get through this moment by yourself with a pile of documents that are filled with clinical information which I could not stomach to look at for long. The text was small, unappealing, and the sheer number of booklets thrust me into a meltdown. I decided to conduct my own research and found lots of information resources which I felt would benefit the readers of the comic. I signposted YouTube, TedTalks, memoirs, autobiographies, TV shows, documentaries, and comics which are created by autistic women. These voices are important because, they not only show autistic women in roles which are empowering (author, public speaker, film maker, etc), they are providing their stories which have gone unspoken – and are all very similar. Why are our stories so similar?

I wanted to add my voice to help others, especially after an incident which made me realise that information on autism can be very hard to digest for some. My parents rejected the idea of trying to read books I lent them, or suggested that they knew autism already so they didn't need to learn anything else because they "live" it (If this was true, then I wouldn't have gone twenty-eight years not knowing I was autistic). These incidents made me think about how information could be given out that was more accessible, entertaining, and enjoyable. I wanted to show the importance of sharing autistic voices, of autism education, and providing this education in a reader friendly format. Hence, why I chose to create pages telling the story of these happenings and how I made the decision to create this comic. With the comic being an aut-ethnographic piece, I wanted to add a description of why I chose to create it to try and conjure a connection described by Keen (2020).

The next couple of pages describe research associated with the lack of support for autistic women, and how, without that support, we are vulnerable even when we don't believe we are.

“It has been my lack of self-awareness and inability to predict other people’s intentions that has left me vulnerable, to an extent that I am only beginning to comprehend. All of my intimate relationships have been abusive, but I did not know at the time, not until the ‘serious stuff’ happened: the throttling, the broken nose, the stalking, and the death threats” (Running, 2020).

A rough sketch of a bloodshot eye contrasts the happy, yellow striped background to indicate a malicious intent by those around those women, but also a metaphor for people needing to open their eyes to the suffering around them.

As I have said before, I had never felt, or seen myself, as a victim or vulnerable. However, our autistic traits make us vulnerable due to the pressure to conform and people please to receive validation from others (Gibbs and Pellicano, 2023), which has come to be more apparent to me since my diagnosis. This, I stress, is why safety should be a priority and the first step, in my opinion, is learning who you are (diagnosis) and developing mechanisms to help you.

13.2.8 2023 – Final Chapter

The final chapter begins with a fresh, bright yellow striped background which replaces the previous black and white. Beginning the chapter this way shows that there has been change, growth, and new discoveries which have impacted positively on the author’s life. The self-portrait demonstrates this growth with the change of artistic style, bold colours and details which haven’t been used before now. The next pages show a building confidence within the original style of the comic. I decided to return to this style to keep the comic consistent and predictable which the autistic participants suggested they needed. The comic continues to explore challenges that I’ve been able to manage by putting systems in place or work on, for example, my communication skills, hyperfocus, and an overwhelming number of special interests.

During the creation process of these images, I wanted to show that I had bad days, but good days as well. By showing what I believe to be faults to the reader I'm creating vulnerability, and therefore, an empathetic and relatable scenario. An example would be when I spend an hour or two out of the house it takes me the rest of the day to recover in bed. Instead of being productive, I'm in bed trying to recuperate after being over stimulated which society may see as laziness or avoidance. Trying to dissolve this perception was difficult, but with a diagnosis I was able to put aside those feelings of guilt and let myself be who I am and do what I need to do to recharge.

The comic concludes with me explaining the revelations and decisions that I've made, as well as goals for the future. Double page spreads describe these moments, from coming out as bisexual to my career goals after my Ph.D. Each page is designed to give a sneak preview of those desires, adding a touch of colour to intensify certain points. The last pages point the way to a bright future, with orange stripes and a self-portrait of myself smiling with a soft blush. I finish by writing about how all the experiences of my life have pushed me forward to be where I am now, building my confidence enough to pursue something I didn't think I could as an autistic woman. As an autistic, I feel, you focus so much on your limitations and things that overstimulate you that you forget how capable you are of other things, and this is an issue I wanted to address.

13.2.9 Extras

I added a bibliography and relevant book list with a yellow striped background. I wanted to have a positive ending, with the back of the book using an opposite effect to the beginning. The blurb of the comic was hard to write as I had to squeeze so much information into a small space. I wanted to attract potential readers, but not overload them with information to the point where they didn't need to read it, nor want to.

13.2.10 Conclusion

To conclude this part of the commentary, I must stress that the journey has been challenging, not just creatively but also personally. Although I knew it was for the good of my autistic community, there were days where I couldn't face sitting at my computer typing about the horror I've been through. I found that I had demons I needed to exorcise, I found I had internal biases that needed addressing and squashing, and I found that my love of literature expanded. Finally, I found a passion which happily became my special interest leading me to write down ideas for future projects which focus on empathy and its expression through the autistic brain. I found writing, and art, to be a way to self-soothe when separated from my study, and I finally took the plunge to access therapy.

Creatively, I feel like I've grown and found ways of expression which brings me joy. I've experimented and tried things with the comic which I didn't think I would at the beginning. I've challenged myself to follow through with mistakes so I could learn from them, and stepped out of my comfort zone by talking with unique people about their unique tastes in graphic literature. I feel the comic, upon its completion, has become something I'm proud of. I feel as though I've achieved an information/research light narrative which is relatable and accessible, that communicates important issues regarding autistic women.

13. Part Three: Knowledge Contribution

13.1 Key Points

13.1.1 Misrepresentation is Damaging to Autistic People's Picture of Self.

I found that, in the beginning, I had my own biases that I needed to overcome. This was surprising as I have always thought of myself as someone who accepted people and knew that anyone could be autistic, no matter their background.

However, I found that I had pictured a *look* of an autistic person before a meeting and was surprised to be wrong. According to Jones et al (2021), it's harder to change implicit bias than the explicit bias of a being.

"Autistic adults face prejudice from non-autistic people. They are often judged unfairly and left out of social activities because of their differences. This can make it difficult for autistic people to make friends and find jobs" (p. 01).

He argues that implicit biases can lead to poor mental health treatment and hurt diagnostic opportunities, which needs to be addressed. Even though Jones et al (2021) had success improving the explicit biases of his participants, he found that they still held autism stigma and negative views of autistic behaviour.

Including autistic people in the research process may be a positive future objective as Botha and Cage (2022) argues in their paper focusing on autism constructions which researchers have made in their own papers. They highlight that having the autism community more involved would help to alleviate ablism, which would be beneficial for all.

Future researchers working with the autistic community should keep an open mind, and think about their own views of an autistic individual before beginning their study. I found this useful in understanding what I thought an autistic person *should be* then placing the

social construct aside as this was clouding my view, as well as creating a layer over my eyes during analysis.

I also found that I had already decided on a comic design of what I assumed that the autistic participants would discuss: black and white, plain, simple, and basic. This was not the case! The participants were as varied in their interests and likes as any other being. I found this enlightening, and I was surprised and disappointed in myself for having such thoughts about a community I am in and whom I wanted to help. Where did these biases and ideas come from?

I hunted down information and found that most of the autistic representation in media (TV, Film, Literature) is a white cis male, who loves numbers and is a savant (Pomerance and Palmer, 2022). If these representations are simple, repetitive, and basic, then maybe this is what led me to assume that the autistic community would also choose basic comics.

“Texts may thus be regarded as scripts for narrative empathy, but by themselves they are inert, requiring the meeting of readers’ and authors’ minds to come to imaginative life” (Keen, 2020, p. 822).

Being fed these representations over time could have affected my ideas of what an autistic person *should* like or *should* be: *“Authors’ intentions in their worldmaking, though frequently contested by critics and often elusive, matter a great deal to our everyday procedures of judgment of the legitimacy of “readings,” or interpretations of narrative texts”* (Keen, 2020, p. 822).

A more positive and realistic outlook on autism representation is through the *headcanoned* phenomena in *The Queens Gambit* (2020). A headcanoned autistic character is defined as being written, or scripted, a certain way but not exclusively stated to be. For example, *The Queens Gambit* on Netflix has a main character who lives and breathes chess and holds a lot of the traits of the autism spectrum (valneilbooks, 2020). She wears certain clothes to fit in, is socially awkward, and has internal meltdowns instead of the usually represented visual distress like you can see in *Rain Man* (1988). This appears to be a good example of a more realistic and interesting aspect to being on the spectrum, also, instead of

the common mathematical representation, we see the character sharing a special *hyper-fixation* with chess which, perhaps, shows the branching out of the outdated stereotypical norm often seen in media outside of the character being a woman.

The autistic savant in media is a flat representation in comparison to the people I have collected data from. They are bright and bold characters who want to be accepted for who they are but are fearful of judgement because of these misrepresentations.

13.1.2 Empathetic Comics Improve Wellbeing of Autistic People.

Empathy is an important aspect of telling a story for autistic people. Not only do autistic participants want to lose themselves in a story driven world but they need to feel connected and understood. Participants focus on comics which they can relate to, even when those they read include fantasy worlds or superheroes. These worlds encourage them to feel included due to the characters being different and either fighting for the good of the people so earning their acceptance or feeling less alone because of the characters being treated like an outcast. *X-Men* (Claremont et al, 2009), for example, was said to be a favourite by participants, where the superheroes are seen as a ticking time bomb by the public and therefore should be eradicated. *Superman* (Morrison and Quitely, 2018) is a good example of a superhero winning over the public with his heroic deeds, but still, he must battle against those who see him as different even as Clark Kent.

In a world that fears those who are different, seeking solace in characters, and worlds, that are true to life, lessens loneliness within the autistic community. Immersive empathy is the process of walking in a person's shoes, so an individual has a first-hand experience of their life.

"Empathy is a term that describes an ability to share and understand the emotions of others...empathy influences intergroup social situations by increasing understanding between groups" (Young et al, 2022, p.3415).

For example, Heath Ledger lived the life of The Joker for his role in the Batman film by throwing himself into walls and studying ventriloquism as he wanted to create an authentic character (Wheatley, 2021). Through the development of my comic, I have attempted to create an immersive empathetic experience for the reader to increase their knowledge of autism in women, domestic violence, and abuse against those with disabilities, and to express the need for a diverse and thorough sexual and relationship education system.

13.1.3 Diverse Needs Require Diverse Educational Tools.

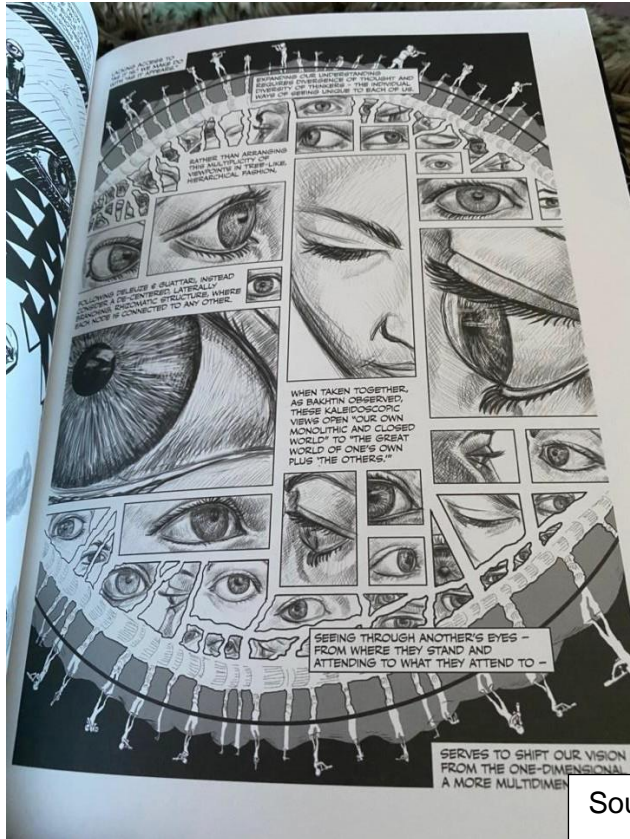
The world is beautifully diverse and with the development of technology, education and academia could be a more neurodivergent friendly place. Combining the home entertainment of graphic texts (comics) to an educational environment helps to keep the student's attention, motivates them to participate in classes and improves their knowledge as they are communicating ideas with their peers (Moses and Reid, 2021).

A recent example of graphic texts is the work of Darmayanti et al (2022), who developed digital comics to improve mathematic and critical thinking skills. They found that through their trials the participants had a positive result (92%), meaning that the comics they used did make a difference to their learning and development.

"It means that students appreciate comics as a medium of learning...Therefore, this digital comic media can help and facilitate the learning process" (p.14).

When discussing academia, and research papers, participants of my study suggested that comics would be a valued, and appreciated, alternative to the traditional blocks of text. Comics would help provide context to the method that had been used and help neurodiverse academics understand what they are reading with small chunks of information alongside relevant imagery. A *graphic* research paper would assist in keeping

the reader's attention through *telling*, and *showing*, the story of how the results were gained. The graphic text *Unflattening* (Sousanis, 2015) is a perfect example of using information and research while creating an intriguing, eye catching, and informative graphic text.



Sousanis, N (2015) pp.39

The results of my study suggest that comics are a tool which would impact positively students of all ages in the classroom and academics. With the combination of imagery and information graphic texts, and graphic research, could improve neurodiverse people's understanding and knowledge, grip their attention, and motivate people to have conversations between each other and institutions. The benefit of using comics as a way of building bridges can be seen in the work by Maples et al (2016), during their use of comics to teach English to a diverse classroom:

"...the art and illustrations in graphic novels help struggling readers understand the story, downplaying the students' difficulty with reading in English. The immigration narratives themselves illustrate the very human issues at play as individuals, families, and communities wrestle with issues of cultural assimilation and retention of native traditions" (p.04).

Similarly, a paper by Akcanca (2020) who felt similarly during her research using comics to help educate science students. She suggests with the combination of image and text they provide context within an abstract subject, as well as explain the information in a story-like way. Not only this, but they go further by developing creative thinking skills which, she argues, a traditional textbook may struggle to do and the bridge between a home activity and education increases motivation to participate.

“...it is thought that transferring scientific knowledge to students in an interesting way will be effective in terms of students’ perception of science subjects, with which they often have a difficulty, with a clearer meaning in a more interesting way” (p.1563).

14. Strengths and Weaknesses

Although the strength of this study is in the results which highlight important issues, there are limitations such as a small sample size, and strictly online communication with participants. With more time a rapport might have been built enough for the autistic participants to feel more comfortable to express themselves and meet in person, leading to richer data and the potential of a bigger sample size through word of mouth (friends, family, etc of participants). Another limitation is the knowledge of the researcher of the methodology. As CGT is a new methodology for me, I found that I struggled to grasp the main mechanics and needed to seek out assistance and encouragement from those more experienced. However, I found learning the techniques and experimenting with my own way of working helped me to overcome these obstacles and enjoy the journey and process. Gathering participants and having them take part in the study was also a limiting factor, and one I didn’t foresee. Advertising on social media was sometimes hostile, with groups removing my messages or making it abundantly clear that researchers were not welcome, in groups I was already a member of. I overcame this by approaching the owner of the group beforehand and having them approve my message and links before posting. This has been a learning process, as being part of the autistic community, I thought, perhaps naively,

that I would be quite welcome to voice the advertisement. My eyes were opened further when it came to working with the participants when trying to communicate with them. Emails were not returned, and messages went unanswered for a few days, rather than a few hours like I would communicate. I provided question sheets prior to any interviews, and they returned the sheet to me filled in without interacting with me like I'd hoped. Again, if I had had the time and finances, I would have liked to have in person focus groups to discuss the questions and create open conversations, however this could not be the case. So, despite a few moments of researcher despair, I brushed things off and began to go with *their* flow. I found by taking things in my stride I discovered more because I was not holding a pressure over any of our heads. I worked to their timeline, letting them email me when they were ready and filling my time with other things in the meantime, and through this I feel as though they were happier to keep being a part of the study.

Regarding the graphic memoir, the main limitation is that it's one point of view out of a vast community of people. Even though there is endless literature, in many different fields, suggesting that autistic women experience domestic violence, bullying, and harassment the graphic memoir is from the perspective of a single entity. By producing a graphic text that included more than one story, this could have strengthened the key point of creating it (awareness). Although, having a single perspective shows the loneliness of being an autistic woman/girl, as myself and many others feel isolated from the world. I believe that this is a strength to the graphic memoir, as this single perspective gives the comic authenticity.

15. Conclusion

The present study sought to explore the comic design preferences of autistic individuals to assist in developing and finalising an aut-ethnographic memoir, focused on the experiences of the autistic researcher before diagnosis. Through this by-practice journey, the study extends upon current research in multiple areas such as empathy, comic and literature, autism, and feminist studies. Alongside this thesis is a finished graphic piece which has utilised techniques from various theorists, and demonstrates the importance of more insight needed into the autistic female brain and the requirement of diagnosis opportunities in childhood.

Additionally, the results also call attention to how important immersive worlds are to autistic individuals as they provide a sense of safety and understanding which has not been provided in their everyday lives. These feelings could also be exacerbated by the representations of autistic individuals within the media, which are usually shown in a negative or savant-like light which creates implicit and explicit bias, which we can see from the literature has created further challenges.

Finally, as seen in the literature, and the extension of this through the results of this study, comics would be a useful tool to add to the method of providing accessible education and research for diverse audiences.

16. Appendix



Figure 5 Leamy (2012)



This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Germany license.

Figure 6 Hosler Ted Talk (2018)

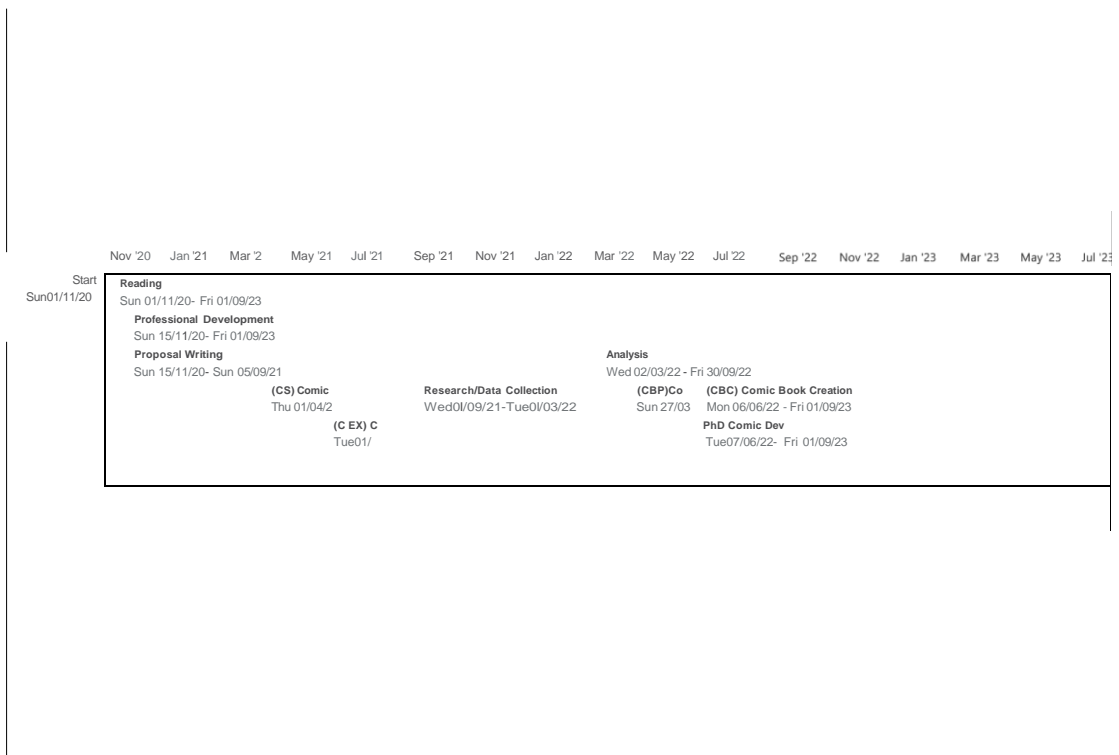


Figure 10 Gantt Chart Final (2021)

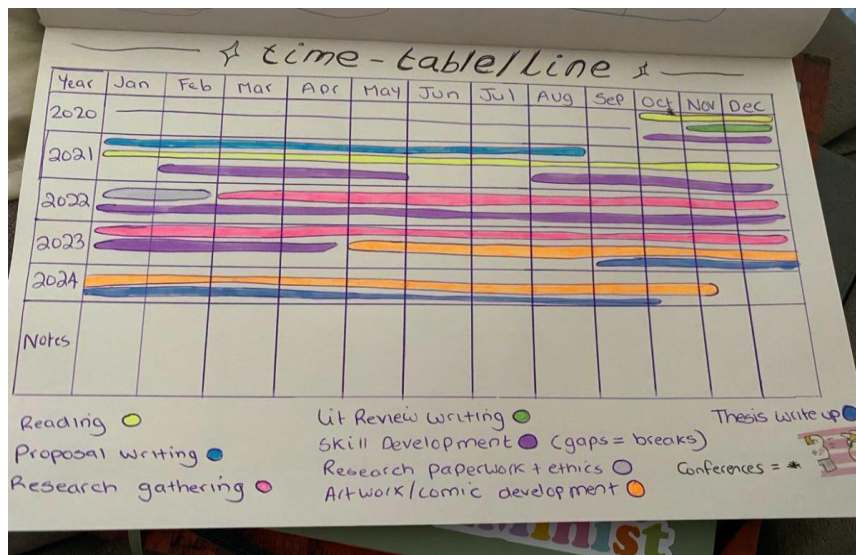
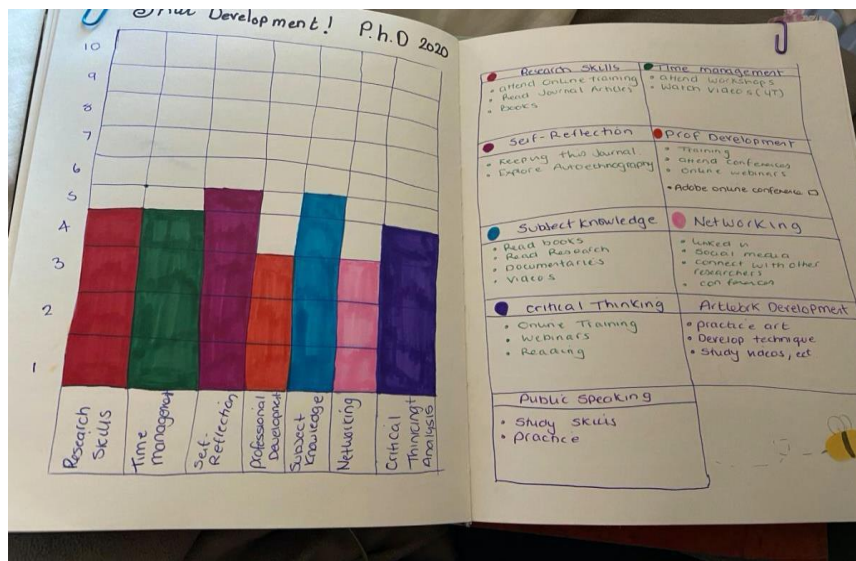


Figure 11 Original Gantt Chart and Skills Progress (2020)

Table 1
Theoretical underpinnings for comic development

Objective	Comic design	Comic content	Construct	Theoretical basis
Social Cognitive Theory	Contraceptive method decision empowerment	Interactive information about side effects, benefits	Bust myths and fears through the narrative comic	Situational learning
Social Cognitive Theory	Knowledge	Element of fun, learning from friends or peers	Modeling with peer experts and peer experiences	Observational learning
Health Belief Model	Inform individual consideration of contraceptive benefits compared to potential risks and side effects	Narrative persuasion	Embed the discussion of "effectiveness, feasibility, and other advantages...to prevent pregnancy" ⁴⁸ benefits of contraceptive methods in a realistic scenario	Perceived benefits
Health Belief Model	Inform individual consideration of the possibility of pregnancy	Overarching theme of pregnancy as a choice	Portrayal of sexually active heterosexual women and real contraceptive effectiveness	Perceived threat
Health Belief Model	Audience of contraceptive seeking patients	NA	Models women successfully obtaining methods and overcoming side effects and risks	Perceived barrier
Elaboration Likelihood Model	Identification with character and topic involvement	Topic engagement	Issue involvement	Central processing

Figure 12 Table of Theories Used

Figure 10 – example of my memos.

September 2021

6th

I've found that with Ethnography there is not right way of using it in a study. This has caused me some anxiety as I am without guidelines. However, my autistic brain wants to continue with Ethnography as they feel it's a challenge worth accepting. Moving has caused some disruption unfortunately. But I am still waiting for ethical approval. In the meantime, I've decided to start planning the storyboard.

7th

Gained ethical approval and finished setting up the survey and exhibit. Time wise, I thought I would provide the participants with seven days to complete the survey and exhibit. I'm hoping this will be enough time for the research tools to make their way around the internet. All the advertisements and links have been uploaded onto social media (groups with permission and personal page). I also decided to use Reddit and Tumblr as a way of trying to encourage a thorough diverse range of people to take part.

8th

It's been harder than I thought trying to get the surveys out in the Facebook community. The autism research community is rather negatively seen, and a lot of groups decline to have research advertisements posted. At this point I've also been questioning whether creating and posting an exhibit was the correct move? People seem to be happy to fill in a quick survey, but when it comes to taking up a little more of their time, they appear to avoid the exhibit.

4pm – I have just checked on the exhibit and people have begun to comment. Having my artwork out into the world for criticism is making me nervous. On a separate topic, I thought each chapter could have a different topic, but would this have the impact I wanted, or should I talk about autism from childhood to adulthood?

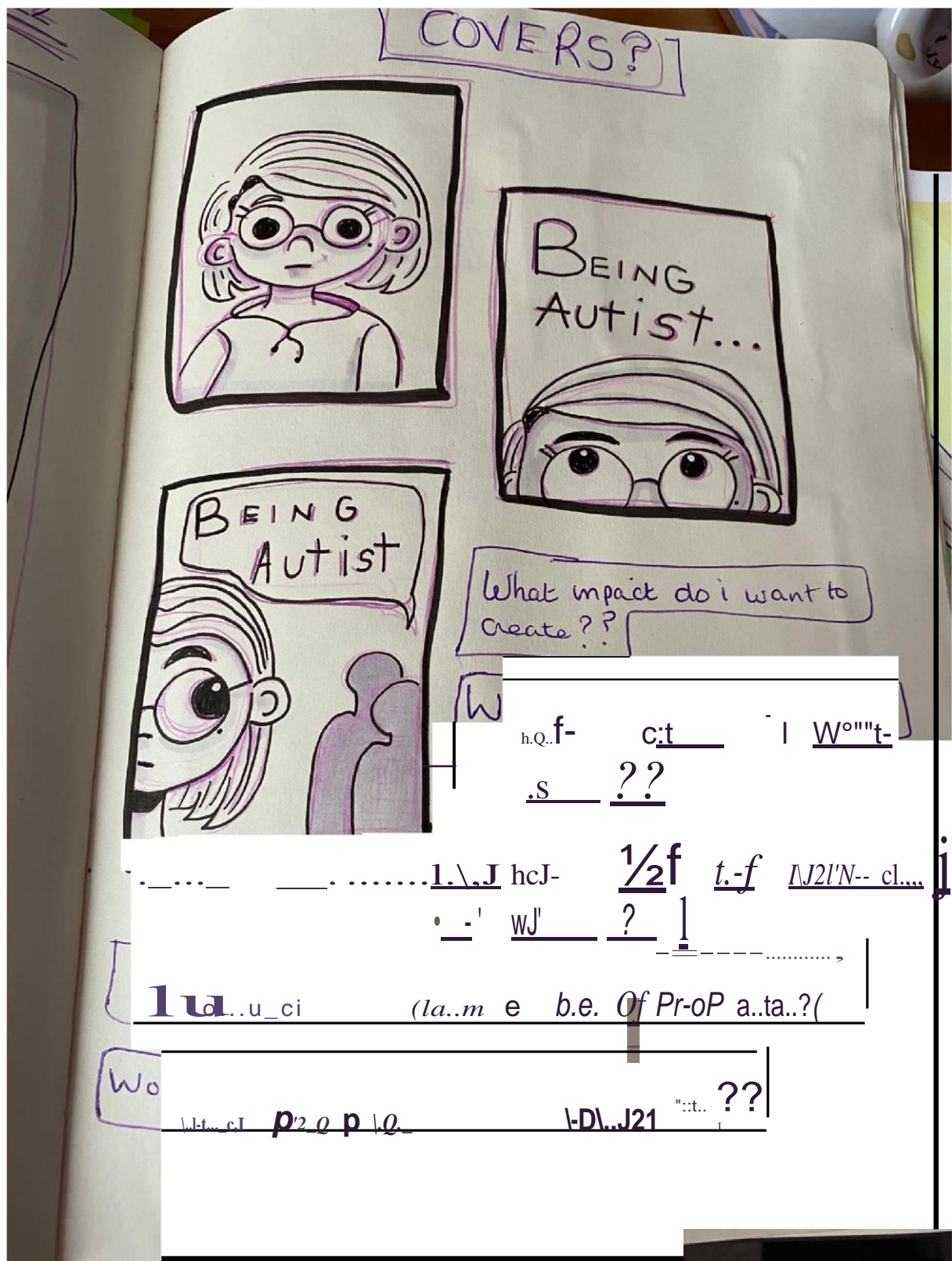


Figure 11 – example of art memos.

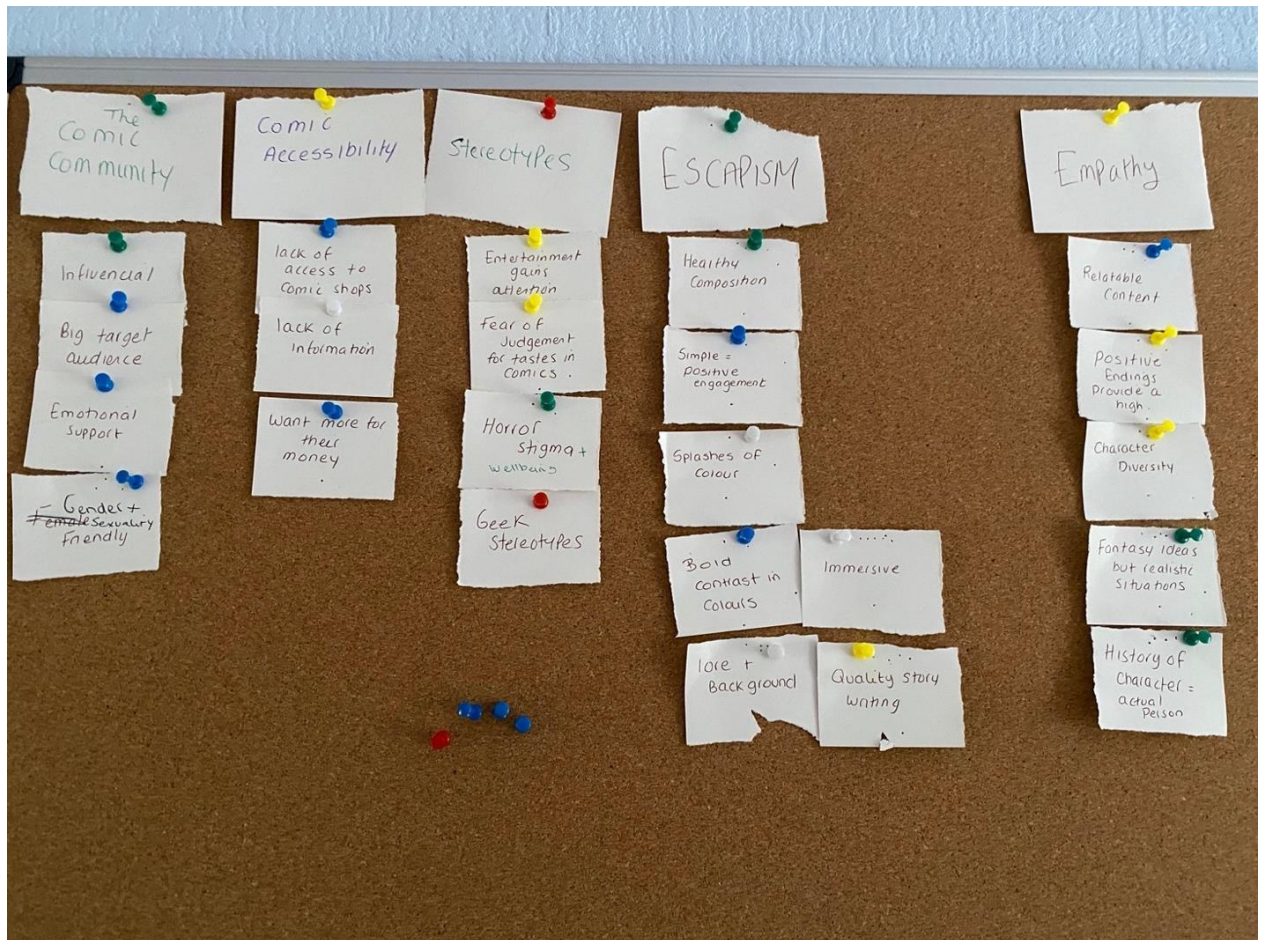


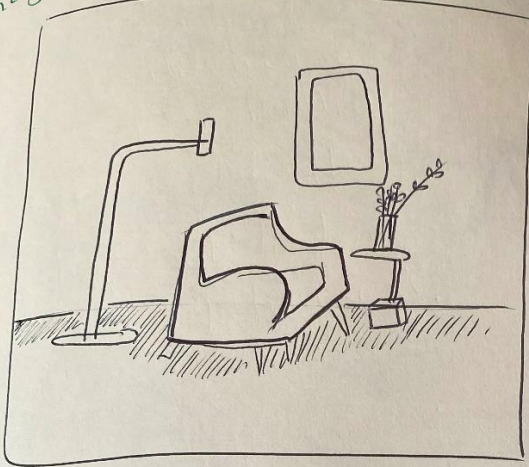
Figure 12 – example of my memo/category pin board.

Figure 13 – [Link to Survey/Exhibit Data](#)

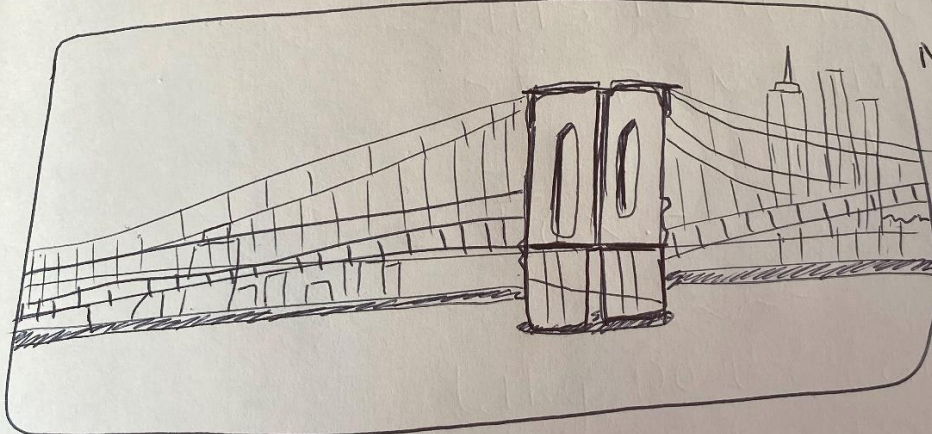
Figure 14
Pages from Art Journal

Think this page
looks pretty good.
maybe I'm getting better?

~ Interiors ~
- 17.9.21 -



- Cityscapes -



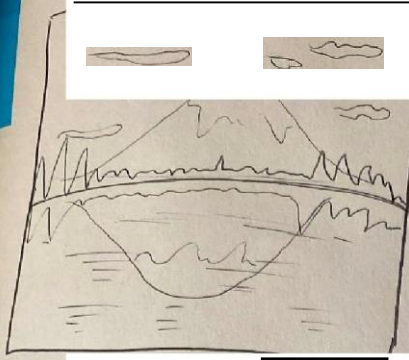
New
York.



Statue of
Liberty.

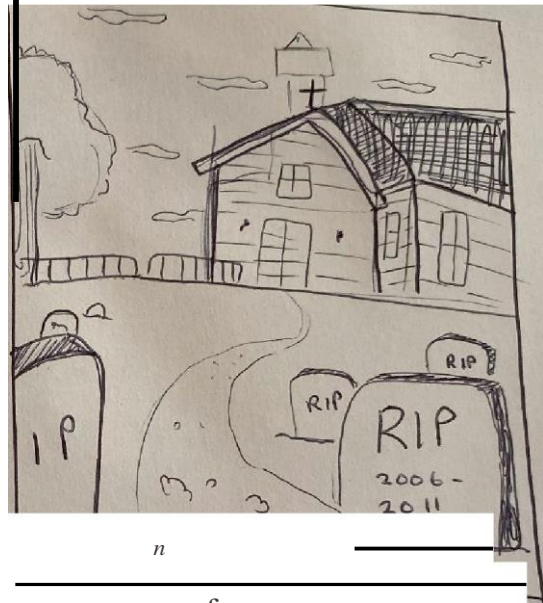


path
with
trees



← Inspired by ASMR GALAXY
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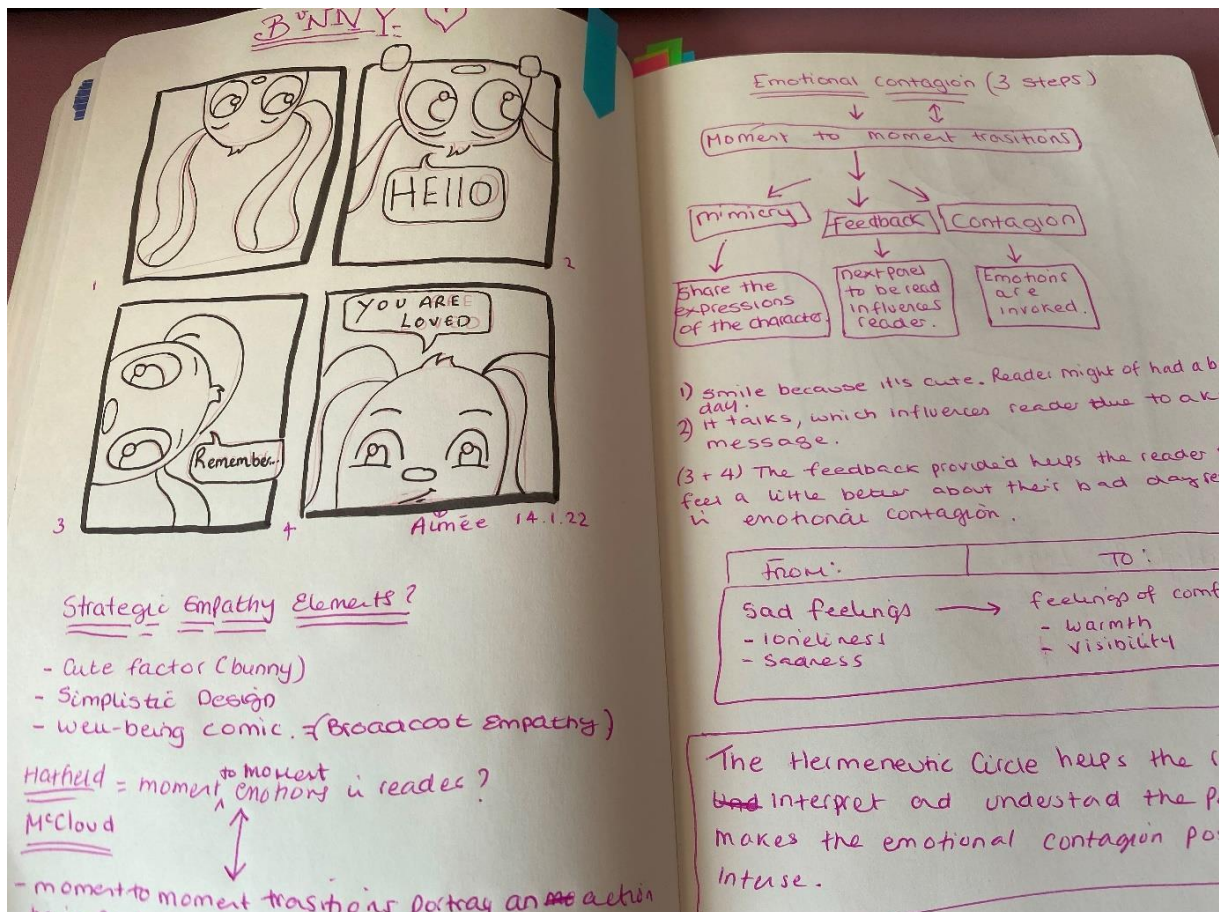


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17. Personal Development

I have been continuing my development through SAM by attending the appropriate workshops and seminars (research skills and methodologies, COR, time management, etc). Also, I attended online conferences such as Adobe MAX 2020, PhD Summit and Thought Bubble Comic Con to network and seek advice and information. As well as this, I took it upon myself to watch YouTube tutorials and lectures and invest in books when I was unfamiliar with a subject and to learn new art techniques on the SkillShare website.

Additionally, I decided to work on my critical thinking and self-reflection by keeping a journal. Here I doodled and used illustration, as well as words, to help me process ideas and thoughts and will continue to do so throughout the PhD. By keeping a second journal this has been helping with my time management and skill development in the form of a weekly diary and skill chart (see Appendix, figure 3). In 2023 I have assisted the art department at Leeds Beckett University by taking on teaching duties, and working alongside Mind the Gap and York University on a project. My duties include attending sessions to live draw as much as I can to then finalise the sketches into a four-page comic strip. These comic strips present the events of that session (the research) for easier public consumption.

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