Digital Graphic Communities: Webcomics and E-Graphic Medicine in Combating Mental Diseases.

Modhura Bandyopadhyay

Introduction

With the onset of the millennial lifestyle and the technological revolution gaining pace – feelings of inadequacy, a constant need to be seen, poor body image, nuclear family structure, social anxiety and, as Gen Z labels it, FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) has added significantly to the upsurge in mental illness. Contemporarily, with the lived experience of 'quarantine' gaining momentum during the pandemic and post-pandemic era, isolation has almost become life's Suo moto mantra. Pandemic-necessitated isolation has greatly affected human interaction by limiting it mostly to a virtual interface. This turn of events has further complicated an already complex scenario of mental disorders – like depression, addiction, bipolar disorder, OCD, etc., stemming from an extreme sense of loneliness, insecurity, and apocalyptic anxiety. This article enquires into ways in which Webcomics or Digital Graphic medicine narratives can help create a virtual literary community where the phenomenology of mental illness finds an empathic representation and serve as a platform for self and collective healing. Artists and illustrators like Debbie Tung, Christopher Grady, Allie Brosh, and Clay Jonathan have now taken to social media handles like Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, or other Webcomics platforms like *Go Comics, Studygroup Comics*, and *Claycomix*, to share their stigmatised personal journey of mental illness with their readers and followers. Unlike the print media, digital readers get to respond to these comic strips and interact with the artist as well as one another by sharing their experience of viewing an artist's rendition of their mental health trajectories. Pandemic-driven isolation has rendered treatment in a personalised physical presence an impossibility, and therefore, the need for digital mental healthcare resources and communities has never been greater. Amy Mazowita, while discussing the concept of a graphic care network, states that it is essential to offer a unique communicative opportunity for people and masses across various socioeconomic, political, and hegemonic entities: these networks offer users the comfort of anonymity besides offering a digital platform for legitimising their shared experiences of both collective and individual mental health realities (Mazowita).

The field of graphic medicine is vast and the possibilities are infinite. However, this paper aspires to specifically study those narratives that are easily accessible on the digital platform and are woven around mental illness, representing the stigma and seclusion associated with it. Further, the paper explores how the creation of these graphic medicine narratives, which are mostly autobiographical or self-reflexive, provides a kind of cathartic and therapeutic experience to both its creator and reader. While the process of creation and illustration is in itself liberating, the self-analytical visual metaphors and dark humour facilitate the formation of an empathic association. Moreover, considering the societal shaming and taboos associated with mental diseases, it has always been easier to turn to popular culture as a therapeutic medium rather than seeking professional medical help. By taking a considerable load off the grimness attached to the subject, webcomics help downsize the visceral fear of absence, anxiety, otherness, and seclusion. Thus, the digital graphic communities birthed possibilities to initiate a dialogue around the mental disease, where random anonymous masses interact, question, and bond over issues that are difficult to address in person. Thereby the silence and shame have been replaced with a cacophony of comments, shares, replies, and feedback. The paper, therefore, clearly enquires into two divergent perspectives of the Digital Graphic Medicine genre: decoding the 'mad artist'[1] experience and examining the potentials of the graphic communities by archiving the reader's/user's response and associations.

Millenials and MDD (Major Depressive Disorders)

At the very outset, it is important to map and analyse the association of modernity with mental disorders, especially depression, which has now taken a pandemic proportion. The need to spread awareness about the disease, to understand the deep-rootedness of the problem, and to learn about its causes, symptom, and cure has never been more pressing. As Hidaka, in her article, rightly points out, Modernity is a continuous concept that begins with agriculture, followed by industrialisation, urbanisation, and ever-accelerating changes in technology and social structure. "Modernization is the conglomeration of a society's urbanization, industrialization, technological advancement, secularization, consumerism, and westernization" (Hidaka 205). In the modern scenario, there has been a significant shift in man's natural habitat, which is violently intercepted with technology and virtual reality. Along with the change in the mindscape, work environment, and social ethics, there was also a significant shift in the regular physical activities required in daily life. With technology taking over manual labour, man has become increasingly tied to his chair. Hidaka further observes that both mental and physical well-being are intricately related. The growing burden of chronic diseases, which arise from an evolutionary mismatch between past human environments and modern-day living, may be central to rising rates of depression. Declining social capital and greater inequality and loneliness are candidate mediators of a depressogenic social milieu. Modern populations are increasingly overfed, malnourished, sedentary, sunlight-deficient, sleep-deprived, and socially isolated (Hidaka 209).

According to UCLA Centre for Neurobehavioral Genetics, Depression Disorders span from emotions ranging from sadness to the inability to work, to absolute inertia, to panic attacks, to thoughts of suicide (Margonelli). In fact, there are many neurological disorders clubbed under an umbrella term. Depression and other mental disorders massively impact the daily life and productivity of an individual, and since there is no pathological unit to measure its severity, it remains neglected, tabooed, and untreated. With the Covid-19 pandemic clinically isolating an already distant generation, the gravity of the situation has significantly accelerated. Therefore, it has become increasingly necessary to create devices for mass awareness of this disease and strive to build a platform that could potentially help in community building, which in turn aids- empathetic understanding, destigmatising, and healing.

Graphic Medicine: etymology and need for existence

In 2007, Ian Williams accidentally stumbled upon the term 'graphic medicine' while wanting to develop a website that served as a collaborative medium facilitating academic discourse that intersects multiple disciplines, combining biomedical science, psychoanalytic introspection, and graphical rendition through comics aspects. With the term gaining wide currency, he expanded it to a book *Graphic Medicine Manifesto*, a seminal indenture of graphic medicine. This book specifies the objective of graphic medicine as an "exploration of the visual systems of comic art, interrogating the representation of physical and emotional signs and symptoms within the medium" (Czerweic 1). Graphic medicine, being a unique branch of health humanities, encourages and constitutes auto/biographical/memoirs and fictional narratives of patients, caregivers, and physicians in the form of comics. Not only do these narratives[s] uncover misconceptions about various disease conditions and treatment procedures that could affect compliance and prognosis but also "fill a niche for patients and doctors" (Green 574). Through its academic interventions, graphic medicine challenges biomedicine's mere prescriptivism and focuses on the individual voices and the first-hand experience of the disease, making it more relatable and humane.

In his exemplary work "Comics and the Iconography of Illness," Ian Williams categorically mentions three different means of representing Illness through comic form, i.e., the Manifest, the Concealed, and the Invisible (Williams 119). As is evident from the name, the Manifest is a realistic, in-detailed graphic demonstration evoking sympathy and disgust by displaying somatic scars and physically apparent deformations caused by the illness. The second trope is "uncovering a condition that causes immense psychological suffering to many people while rarely causing significant physical harm" (Williams 121). The third category is where the manifestations of the mental disorders can be clubbed- the Invisible. The challenges of demonstrating a mental condition are manifold as it mostly unfolds in the negative space of the mindscape. They involve very little physical expression like distant staring, slumped shoulders, and unkempt demeanour. To illustrate his point, Williams refers to a comic strip from Ellen Forney's masterpiece *Marbles*, where the protagonist is shown to lie motionless, slouched in a foetal position, covered completely in a blanket resembling a shrouded corpse, symptomatic of her incarcerated mind (Williams 126).

Testimony to the above statement is the powerful visual imageries in graphic pathographies as represented in Panel 5 of *Annals of Graphic Medicine* (Doan W17)by William Doan. As Michael Green rightly observes, this panel "convey immediate visceral understanding in ways that conventional texts cannot (Green 1)" and can accentuate "the social construction of labels and stereotypes as well as in the formation of such cultural conceptions as normality, desirability, gender and disease (Gilman 4)." In Panel 5, William Doan implements distinctive elements that may individually make little sense but together speak volumes about the condition of the subject. The absolute lack of panel outline, the almost illegible font, the half-broken sentences, the patches of blotted colours interspersed with black ink spills, the unique placement of the speech balloon, the repetition of the phrase "not good enough" running down the spine, all add up to build the fragility of the mental state that the author is trying to convey. The scribbling lends a sense of urgency, communicating a desperate urge to be heard and understood, the emotions validated and justified. The most interesting, however, remains the arrow that points to the black blob marked "you are," reducing the entire notion of self and identity to a patchy brain that constantly shoots off the message of fear and failure throughout the entire nervous system.

This is also seconded by the statement Clay Jonathan makes in an interview while discussing the shortcomings of creating his series *Depression Comix*. He remarks that the most difficult strip he has ever done is #228 (Jonathan, "228: Here it comes"). It remained as a blueprint sketch for a considerable time, and he would often go back and redo it. He could never satisfactorily land up with a suitable visual metaphor that could holistically represent "that feeling of dread that one gets for no reason at all, and how terrible it feels when you're in the middle of being social." The panic attack catches an individual completely off guard, like being hit by a massive wave or being sucker punched in the gut, while the people around remain completely oblivious of the entire phenomenon. Moreover, this could occur unannounced anywhere, anytime (*WordPress*). The monochromatic panel #228 may apparently look aesthetically unembellished, but a closer scansion will reveal the vicissitude of emotions and craftsmanship that went into its making. The monochrome itself is symbolic of the lacklustre existence, and the impenetrable darkness is only broken by a crashing tsunami of despair. The stark simplicity of the utterance "here it comes" within a speech bubble resembling a crinkled paper further adds to the horror of the panic attack. However, the most remarkable element of the panel is the play of proportion that the author implements. The gigantic bold font of 'despair' compared to the tiny italicised font of the speech, the all-consuming wave occupying the lion's share of the panel that makes the figure appear puny and cornered, eventually pointing at the magnitude of the disease.

These illustrations may possess therapeutic potentials, providing justification for the usage of the word 'medicine' while coining the term graphic medicine. These may not be able

to clinically cure the diseases but definitively aid in the healing process. A single look at these panels creates an immediate empathic resonance, providing validation and assurance and facilitating the creation of a shared safe space. The sense of belonging that a reader achieves from these panels is a crucial breakthrough in nullifying the acute sense of isolation for anybody suffering from depression. The process of creating these "pathographies" is in itself a cathartic experience for the authors, who are mostly dealing with first-hand accounts of the lived experience as a patient or a caregiver. Recreating their mental journey through art destigmatises the taboos associated with the mental diseases and, to a great extent, normalises seeking professional help when required.

Webcomics: a diachronic study

Before delving further into webcomics or, more specifically e-graphic medicine about depression and mental diseases, it would be pertinent to chronologically map the genesis and rise of webcomics and locate it within the purview of this paper. The idea of sharing comic strips on the world wide web began as early as the 1980s, but only with the advent of the 21st century did the idea gain currency. Previously webcomics were merely a derivative of print comics, which were shared online for wider publicity, but with the boom of the internet, this genre began to gain exclusivity and aesthetic recognition. Scott Mc Cloud's *Reinventing Comics* redefined and structured the genre of webcomics as he introduced the idea of "infinite canvas"[2] and projected how digital media could be used to experiment with space, forms, shapes, and sizes of comic strips that are an impossibility in the print medium. Chris Crosby's *Keenspot* and Joey Manley's *Modern Tales* are the earliest examples of the genre that were hosted through free portals and were financially sustainable. However, webcomics mostly operated through free portals hosted independently by comic creators. *Patreon*, launched in 2013, was quite a game-changer in this scenario as it allowed creatives to offer exclusive content with a paid subscription model, which meant that creators could professionally take up webcomics as a career option as it began to gain a considerable reader base. Nonetheless, it was South Korea that revolutionised webcomics by launching Webtoons, a portal that provided long scrolling formats with a user-friendly interface for smartphones powered by Android technology. As Zhdanova correctly informs, Webtoons has launched many successful webcomics that have been adapted by other mediums like films, graphic novels, web series, television dramas, etc., and has fifteen million daily readers worldwide (Zhdanova). Testimony to the affirmation is the popular graphic novel *Nimona* by Noelle Stevenson which started life as a webcomic in 2013, *Check Please!,* a webcomic by Ngozi Ukazu, also started out on Tumblr in 2013 and was selected for print medium; further, the award-winning anime and manga *One Punch Man* was a webcomic by Japanese cartoonist ONE before being adapted into other media. More recently, the original webtoon *Lore Olympus* is getting an animated series by the Jim Henson Company. Evidently, webcomics have emerged as a discretely effective tool of mass circulation and education which are highly stylised, context-specific, and consumer-oriented, delivering their purpose with precision and often extending beyond it. It must be reinstated that webcomics are texts with multimodal elements strictly created for digital distribution online, on digital platforms, and for digitally networked audiences.

With the meteoric rise of social media, a new sub-genre of webcomics has evolved that has taken the internet by storm. With a great chunk of civilisation being addicted to their social media handles, comics on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr are quite the rage. As Shannon observes, once remnants of the early Internet age, now revived with the emergence of social media, webcomics are a precise, hybrid mode connected to increasingly mobile and fluctuating platforms and audiences (Sandford 3). Zhdanova, in her article, states that today, Instagram comics, four-panel comics that tell a simple joke or make a profound commentary on society in 1-10 square-cropped images, are booming, with over 500,000 posts tagged #instacomic on the platform. More and more cartoonists are turning to the algorithm-powered, picture-driven platform as a vehicle for narrative storytelling (Zhdanova). It's quite common to find autobiographical comics on Instagram. These are short stories based on the cartoonist's experiences and can explore a wide range of topics, from social issues, mental

health, childhood experiences, diary comics, and more. There's often a raw honesty to these comics, and they can be a window into the lives of other people on a platform that greatly relies on 'filters'. The vital changeover brought about by webcomics of social media is, however, the introduction of the interactive interface, which has significantly broken 'the fourth wall'[3] , as now the readers/followers can directly communicate and participate in the meaning-making process by writing comments and feedbacks and also by interacting with each other by replying to others comments. This has opened a whole new possibility in the evolution of webcomics, and features like the share button and hashtagging have made the process of circulation, advertisement, and discovery fairly simple, that too without any financial investment.

E-Graphic Medicine: Mental Illness and Webcomics.

Published in 1998, Chester Brown's "My Mom was a Schizophrenic" set a precedent for illustrating mental illness experiences within the genre of graphic medicine. This biographical comic strip exposed the fragilities of the mental disease, a haunting personal account of the lived experience of witnessing psychiatric disorders as a caregiver. This was followed by Clem and Olivier Martini's *Bitter Medicine: A Graphic Memoir of Mental Illness* (2010) and Ellen Forney's *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, and Me* (2012). A plethora of creators took this lead and enriched the field of e-graphic medicine dealing with mental disorders- Clay Jonathan's *Depression Comix*, Allie Brosh's *Hyperbole and Half*, Kayden Hines, Gemma Correll, Christopher Grady, etc. It must be noted in this context that most of the comics in this subgenre of e-graphic medicine are mostly autobiographical in nature and exhibit fragmented, spontaneous, and digital acts of self-display, and seek audiences that are increasingly mobile and interconnected.

The geographies and subjects of comics are always in motion, responding to new generations of cartoonists and the urgent socio-cultural and political issues emerging out of the contemporary moment. The roots of autobiographical comics are often traced to the literary counterculture of the *Underground Comix* movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Comix artists – Robert Crumb, Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Gilbert Shelton, and Justin Green, among the most prominent – depicted stories of sexual experimentation, explicit drug use, political unrest, and violence in order to challenge dominant taboos and break the silence and censure around such experiences. As *Underground Comix* became "a vehicle for the most personal and unguarded of revelations," e-graphic medicine, too, builds a legacy of transgression by offering a way into the subjective realities of illness and/or disability and granting its sufferers agency to challenge dominant cultural attitudes around illness through a hybrid visual-verbal mode (Shannon 3). The *Underground Comix* movement shook the cultural codes associated with popular culture across America between 1963 and 1975. During this time, voluminous artworks were created by artists and publishers of small-press comics challenging contemporary taboos and stigma. James Danky, in his pathbreaking work *Underground Classics: The Transformation of Comics into Comix*, explains that "catharsis was often a motivation for comix. Flaunting fears, shedding demons, confession, confrontation and revenge were often behind the creativity" (Danky 19).

Clay and *Depression Comix*

Clay Jonathan was greatly influenced by the confessional tone and monochromatic style of the *Underground Comix*, so much so that he used the term Comix instead of the regular Comics while naming his oeuvre. In several interviews and works, he has uninhibitedly and unabashedly shared his personal encounters with depression and panic attacks. He also wished to experience the cathartic process of creation, as Danky had referred to in the context of *Underground Comix* and further commented that in his first autobiographical webcomic, *A Heart Made of Glass*, he aspired to convey his struggle with depression, but he got squarely caught up in the details of explaining the idiosyncrasies of his life and ended offering explanation and justification for the illness. In an interview with *Persephone* magazine, he stated that one day he had a mini meltdown, and while he was trying to recover his senses,

he thought to himself that he must find a way to draw this. The next day he drew two panels and posted them on Tumblr, and he was shocked by the massive response – "I was surprised by how many people felt the same way like me" (Jonathan). He further added that it took significant painstaking effort on the part of the artist to create a perfect visual metaphor to express his visceral fears but only a minute for a reader to digest it. He says, "It's simpler to write it out, but that's not visually appealing" (Jonathan).

Depression Comix – as the author, Clay Jonathan himself, claims – is "simply a graphical representation of how depression and other related [illnesses] feels from a personal perspective" (Jonathan). The four-panel comic appeared regularly, like a kind of digital journal entry, a few times a month and has been published as individual comic strips since 2011. The monochromatic tone sets the mood for a faded, bland ambiance befitting a depression narrative. It employs a hard-edged drawing style spread across 450 episodes of four-panel comics. *Depression Comix's* popularity largely rests on its regularity and wide accessibility, even if it is devoid of sound and movement features explicitly observed in contemporary advanced webcomics of a similar genre. The vertical panel arrangement is another unique feature that renders it reader-friendly, especially in a digital interface, a much-needed subversion of the horizontal panel and vertical tier arrangements that are deployed in comic books. *Depression Comix* narrates the sufferer's intrapersonal and interpersonal lives in an expansive way bringing to the fore the socio-cultural ramifications of the disease. The narrator, though from an impersonal point of view, effectively employs conventional as well as innovative metaphors of representing the disease in his attempt to undermine the traditional ways of representing depression and emphasises how diversified the experience can be across the suffering population. The use of metaphor accentuates the visual narration of illness and concretises the abstract, offering a more comprehensive representation of the illness of depression. This paper delineates the representational aspects of depression, emphasising the use of metaphorical devices by closely reading the tropes in *Depression Comix*, and outlines the interface of webcomics and graphic medicine.

There are several comic strips in *Depression Comix* that draw a comparison between the protagonist suffering from depression to participation in a video game. In the strip titled "Game Start," the patient exhibits tremendous physical fatigue and exhaustion that manifest in performing the daily chores of domestic life. The simple tasks render him immobile to the extent of displaying an existential crisis. In "All my effort to get up," in the format of a video game wherein the sufferer loses "power points" with passing the time and "lives" when he/she accomplishes a small usual chore in a lazy mood, and finally reaches out for his/her bed out of mental exhaustion. The author wisely juxtaposed the attributes of a video game and gave it a metaphorical twist, emphasising the similarities of the sufferer's day to that of a character in a video game drained of his/her emotional capacities. The use of video game imagery presents the sufferer's burnout through a video game's familiar image. The chances you have been termed as "lives" even though it is the same life jeopardised by a troubled mind in the sufferer's life. The stylistic details of these panels are designed in the form of video games.

Allie Brosh's *Hyperbole and a Half*

Graphic medicine is geared towards the personal and communal aspects of illness, layering visual depictions of identities, perspectives, and experiences to develop more subjective knowledge around illness as a life event. Webcomics occupy a complex and manifold space in relation to illness narrative, responding to the fluid and unstructured writing prevalent online, and likewise, a vacillating online community who freely contribute to its story. Allie Brosh's *Hyperbole and a Half* is perhaps the most significant example of webcomics coming into cultural recognition as a mode for challenging stereotypical representations of mental illness and contributing to the developing candour around these experiences. Fracture and duality form part of a distinct framework for subjectivity, narration, and identity in Brosh's webcomics, constituting a dominant metaphorical trope. These images are divided into unequal halves that re-envision the fractured ill self as separate entities ('depressed' versus 'not-depressed' Allie)

in conversation (Brosh). Hyperbole deploys an overtly simplified drawing style where raw and jagged lines are heaped together to construct shaky outlines of human forms, more like a doodle in a kindergarten schoolbook rather than a sketch. This simple technique, with its evident vulnerabilities, took the internet by storm. Purposely stripped off from visual sophistication, the plainness of the sketch exposes the vagueness and status of a mind suffering depression, as the reader keeps glaring at the vacant infinite negative space where the panel and the gutter have blurred. Apart from the stylistics, the absence of a speech balloon and the unnecessary self-loathing over a dish of pasta makes the disorder appear more convincing as the constant mental blabbering encroaches on the boundary of sanity. This echoes Scott McCloud's philosophy of "amplification through simplification" (McCloud, *Reinventing Comics* 30). With a body constituting a pink rectangle fused to stick arms and legs, bulging white eyes, and a yellow triangle of 'hair,' this frog-like figure is an assemblage of caricature, animation, and parody far removed from Brosh's real appearance. Yet, it is also clearly self-representation, one that both draws upon and dismantles cultural perceptions of the "freaked and Othered bodies" that have historically coded illness as visual difference. As Krista Quesenberry writes, Brosh's purposefully ambiguous avatar allows for certain slippages in its representation of gendered illness: "A non-human self-representation eliminates some or all of the predictable identity markers in order to convey a reconstituted identity (Quesenberry 418).

Graphic Communities, Networked Publics, and the Care Network

As reiterated earlier, Amy Mazowita, in her very interesting article Graphic Communities has redefined Danah Boyd's conception of Networked Publics as a Graphic Care network. After documenting and analysing the response to the works of Instagram illustrators like Kayden Hines (@kaydenhines), Gemma Correll (@gemmacorrell), Debbie Tung (@wheresmybubble) and, Matilda (@crazyheadcomics), Mazowita stated that especially in the wake of post-pandemic reality it is pertinent to examine the patterns of engagement with mental health. She asserts while normative, traditional, i.e., interpersonal spaces of mental healthcare consultation and sociality remain largely inaccessible, perhaps digital platforms and the comic strips posted therein might serve as a nexus for creating digital graphic communities based on self and collective healing, which she labelled, the networks of graphic care. The users of these networks or reader base resonate with Stanley Fish's idea of 'interpretive communities' as they function predominantly on a shared knowledge base, a cryptic mental health discourse which is intrinsic, individualistic and universal at the same time. The visual metaphors like codes affect the members of the graphic care network in a certain way, provoking an empathic response which others might not be able to interpret in a similar way. As is evident from the Instagram posts there is a considerable dialogue generated against these simple single panel comics. In Kayden Hines' (@kaydenhines) illustration, the vicious cycle of anxiety and isolation is craftily presented by the cyclical arrows rotating in an endless loop around an unkempt woman, with eyes wide open, glaring in confusion, who clearly is unable to put herself together (Hines). The article concerns more with the comments and participation of the social media users who empathically mention their shared feeling of anxiety. Some even offer solidarity, help, and advice and note the complexities of living an anxious life. While some indicate that they are learning to "love" their anxiety, others explain that they are working towards accepting the fact that they will never be rid of it. The intriguing part is that 4818 people have reacted to this simplistic illustration because it has been able to make an instant connection and trigger a chain of responses and narratives far beyond the perimeters intended by its creator.

Matilda's (@crazyheadcomics) panel is more surrealistic in nature as it depicts eyes randomly floating in a vacuum, staring blankly in every direction with utter exhaustion. The absence of a definitive boundary in the panel lends certain fluidity and eeriness to the visual metaphor as it feels like the exhaustion and despair in those lost eyes are stretching infinitely

(Matilda). Similarly, for this panel as well readers share the cathartic experience of finally being heard, noticed, and understood, the exhaustion stemming from the constant need to justify and explain one's feelings to those that don't belong in the discourse. Commonplace disappointment and anxiety often get eclipsed by domestic chores, negligent relationships, and professional deadlines. Stanley Fish proposed that if the 'interpretive strategies' are subverted owing to certain external stimuli, it will result in a substantial change in the text as it is intrinsically related to the way a text gets rewritten by the reader. Therefore, it can be conjectured that members or users of the same interpretive community/graphic communities essentially establish an agreement in interpreting the same text, not from the text itself but from the shared communal strategy (Fish 220). Echoing Fish's thought, Clay Jonathan, in an interview, stated that it is natural for visual artists to incorporate intricate symbolism. Jonathan recalls that in his work *Depression Comix*, he uses varied symbols as his objective corelative to represent a certain mental state, such as the black depression ball weight (Jonathan, "Your depression can't be bothering you too much"), the smile card (Jonathan, "How's it going"), the black hole, and the Nope Door. "These symbols only work if the reader understands immediately what they represent — otherwise, it's confusing" (Jonathan).

Debbie Tung, @wheresmybubble, brilliantly handles the contrast of the mindscape and the landscape by intelligent use of the negative space (Tung). In the first half of the panel, where the protagonist is asked whether she is worried about something, the backdrop is empty, contrarily in the second one, when she responds "everything," the background appears like a patchy scribbling, all thoughts knotted together like poisonous snakes hissing in the background. 10,344 people reacted to this post, and some comments strike altogether different notes. The virtual space has not only blurred the distinction between physical and virtual communication by facilitating the readers/social media users to bond over the mutual experience, regardless of the physical communication and socioeconomic, political, geographical, and cultural biases. The communication between the users can be in the form of loosely exchanged views involving a single comment or a pattern of engagement, like an extended communication chain spanning across multiple posts. The first comment, where the reader requests a tour of the bookshelves or the recommendation of her favourite book, speaks volumes about digital community building where not just the sufferers but people beyond such afflictions connect with the artist, and that too with a sense of intimacy cautiously stepping inside the boundaries of interpersonal space. This can also be seen as a cathartic moment when the content of the art gives way to something beyond it. This is where art creates a common space where the purpose reaches out to people even, irrespective of their mental state. This expresses that the digital world is an open space with no boundaries which can open new vistas of communication.

Referring to one of the most popular strips, #183 of Depression Comix, which received around 10,000 likes and reblogs on Tumblr, Jonathan remarked that as much as it is essential to get help for coping with depression, with the complication getting more layered and delayed the person gets easily demotivated to seek out help and address the matters at hand. The person is incapacitated to take any positive action as it tricks one into thinking that nothing is wrong or that problem is unworthy of medical attention. This panel is also conceived in his iconic monochrome, where we see a woman trying desperately to reach the telephone while the immense weight of depression is shackled to her feet, as in Panel #228. In Panel #183 also, Depression is written in a gigantic bold font using capital letters, and so is Help, but the protagonist is unable to reach it. It is also interesting to see the faceless character struggling in the centre; stripping her of a facial identity further facilitates a reader's possibility of identifying themselves in her place.

"Getting help is not as easy as some think it is." (Jonathan, "One Panel at a Time")

In this comic, the character tries to get help but is weighed down by depression in a symbolic way. Her mother is unaware of the struggle and tells her that if she was really

suffering, she'd pick up that phone and get help. This simple frame resonated with so many readers, who might have suffered the phase with similar intensity. By far, the visually most striking comic strip of Jonathan is Panel #5 (Jonathan, "How's it going")), where the protagonist uses a smile card to dawn a fake smile and curtly reply, "Couldn't be more awesome!" as he knows that he will never be understood and his feelings remain forever bottled up behind the mask of socialising.

Instagram artists succeed in normalising their shared experiences of mental illness by employing their unique artistic styles and devices as a means of demonstrating their personal realities. Likewise, the diverse group of users who engage with Instagram comics are able to, in a sense, pick and choose when and with which comics they relate to and see themselves in—at times relating to the narrative in its entirety and at times to one panel, one character, or one statement. As Shannon Sanford has also remarked, the Internet has a precise communicative function for telling stories of the self, within which webcomics illustrate certain tensions around shared disclosure and graphic representation in popular culture. Understanding how autobiographical webcomics operate amidst the digital and social affordances of the Internet and leveraging personal experiences to create and build an audience requires a new set of critical skills from readers (Sanford 20).

Similarly, on examining Alec MacDonald's Instagram account, @alecwithpen, there is a pertinent emergence of the artist to regain mental control from chronic anxiety and depression. Like Brosh and Jonathan MacDonald, self-reflexive humour portrays an underlying struggle with mental health that appeals to over 270,000 followers. In a simplistic cartoonish style, MacDonald uses metaphors to make his imaginings communicable: he shapes his childhood anxiety into the shape of a giant, purple amorphous blob prone to swallowing him up; his black eye symbolises mechanised parts of himself that shut down when exposed to mental illness and trauma (MacDonald). His schedule for the day includes remaining in a state of panic from 10 am to 6 am, while 2 am in the night is reserved for mindless phone scrolling in the dark. This addiction and panic, resulting in insomnia, plagues a majority of the urban population. The situation keeps worsening and plays on an endless loop taking a toll on the physical and mental wellbeing till all sense of reality is lost.

Conclusion

To conclude, it must be acknowledged that Graphic Medicine is a nascent discourse, and by no means can these comic strips or graphic communities undermine or replace the need for prescriptive bio-medication or professional counselling and therapy. It provides a sort of elevated comic relief, providing a sense of belonging to the victims of mental illness who often remain social outcasts in the public domain. Besides the limitations, the paper endeavours to propose that the genre and its potential to impact people across the globe demands serious academic intervention and could be incorporated into the mainstream curriculum. Simply put, Digital Graphic medicine can provide companionship through shared experience in a more immediate manner than might be gained from joining a self-help group or reading patient information leaflets. It must also be acknowledged that these verbo-visual metaphors craftily engineered by the artists not only affect those suffering, but the spontaneity of digital engagement also facilitates the generation of nuanced visual understandings of a relatively emotionally intangible disease for those who want aren't victims of mental illness. As Shannon Sanford, in her article "You Can't Combat Nothing," asserts, these virtual communities could fill in multiple personal and mental voids by deploying tools to deconstruct complex relationships to power, representation, and privacy (Sanford 20). The confluence of visual and digital media prompts personal storytelling simultaneously with a rare blend of aesthetic and ethical distancing while giving access to raw, uncharted intimate territory.

Notes

 'Mad artist' refers to the stereotype associated with the Greek philosophers Plato (Phaedrus) and Socrates, who tried to establish a link between creative genius and insanity. However, here it simply denotes artists suffering or recreating mental illness in their artwork.

[2] The **infinite canvas** is the feeling of available space for a webcomic on digital media in comparison to paper. The term was introduced by Scott McCloud to hint at the fact that a web page could grow as large as needed. This infinite canvas gives infinite storytelling possibilities and creators more freedom in how they present their artwork.

[3] The fourth wall is a performance convention in which an invisible, imaginary wall separates actors from the audience. The method of **breaking the fourth wall** in literature is a metalepsis (the transgression of narrative levels). This can be done by either directly referring to the audience, the play as a play, or the characters' fictionality.

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Modhura Bandyopadhyay
Assistant Professor and HoD
Department of English
Jamini Mazumder Memorial College
modhura411@gmail.com