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PORTRAYALS OF FAMILY RESILIENCE IN WEBCOMICS DURING THE
COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Science in
Family Sciences in the College of Agriculture, Food and Environment
at the University of Kentucky

By

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Lexington, Kentucky

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Lexington, Kentucky

2023

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

Portrayals of Family Resilience in Webcomics During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Thematic Analysis.

Families and couples were challenged with stresses unlike any other as individuals faced adversities from lockdowns, as well as fears derived from the coronavirus. During the pandemic, trends of webcomics became more popular, particularly comics that depicted characters in romantic relationships dealing with “the new normal.” In this project, I suggest that social media webcomics incorporated topics of coping. The purpose of this study was to examine webcomics that documented daily life situations during lockdowns and stress-buffering skills found in couples’ interactions when dealing with concerns. Utilizing Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis, 585 romantic relationship webcomics posted from March 2020 to December 2021 were analyzed through Walsh’s (2003) theoretical framework of family resilience. Walsh’s (2003) nine themes used for coding included: 1) make meaning of adversity, 2) positive outlook, 3) transcendence and spirituality, 4) flexibility, 5) connectedness, 6) social and economic resources, 7) clarity, 8) open emotional expression, 9) collaborative problem-solving. Additionally, three sub-themes emerged during coding: (1) Caregiving, (2) Differences in Opinion, (3) Physical Touch. Results indicated that the theme of “connectedness” appeared most frequently ($G_r=450$). The findings provide unique insights into how popular trends of webcomics distributed through social media are beneficial to learning patterns of couples’ coping strategies. I conclude the emphasis of webcomics used more frequently as resources for families to learn resilient approaches.

KEYWORDS: Webcomics, COVID-19 Lockdowns, Family Resilience

Claire Catherine Heaney

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In the face of COVID-19, the pandemic changed lives drastically worldwide by disrupting people's daily routines. Although social isolation in 2020 was an approach to combat the spread of the virus, research revealed increases in individuals' negative moods and social behaviors (Falicov et al., 2020; Gonzalez-Sanguino et al., 2020). Specifically, disruptions caused by COVID-19 lockdowns led to anxiousness for many families and couples, as "stress contagion" became a frequent factor to manage within households (Liu et al., 2020). Importantly, to combat negative feelings, it has been emphasized that family and couple resilience is strengthened from shared support and learned processes to handle hardships (Walsh, 2003). In times of social distancing, finding alternative ways to encourage positivity and social connectedness became crucial to maintaining mental wellbeing (Brock et al., 2020; Falicov et al., 2020). In fact, amongst the fears the COVID-19 pandemic brought on for many, one study examined the uptick in social media trends as a coping strategy which helped online users find pathways to reassurance, kindness, and resilience (Sin, 2020). Coping mechanisms are needed for functionality in times of adversity and to build relational transformations (Walsh, 2003).

During a historical time when Western society shifted in part to the reliance of social media platforms for maintaining personal connections, webcomics gained popularity. As Leah Misemer (2019) noted, social media acts as a "virtual bookshelf" (p. 9) for webcomic collectives. During the pandemic, the global webcomic market saw a growth of 52.45% in 2020 (Anonymous, 2021). More specifically, the Fortune Business Insights report mentioned that popular adult viewership spiked as many people turned to

technology, and romantic webcomics specifically surged during the pandemic because the genre addressed topics such as modern lifestyle, dating, and work culture of young adults. Yet, despite the increase in popularity of webcomics, there is still a significant lack in scholarly attention to this sort of artistic expression. Moreover, some research about webcomics focused on the use of digital media as alternative learning tools. Some examples include webcomics as a tool for students to promote literacy (Ahamad & Harun, 2016), as well as webcomics for health literacy rather than traditional doctors' pamphlets (Lee et. al, 2019; Kearns & Kearns, 2020). To my knowledge, there have yet to be any studies that examines how a range of webcomics can be utilized as problem solving resources for families and romantic relationships, let alone for understanding pandemic resilience. The only study close to the objectives of this project is that of Issari and Papadopoulos (2021). In their work, a thematic analysis was conducted based on the stories and drawings of one mental health counselor, Elli. Results showed that during lockdowns, Elli, a Greek citizen, regained hope in the Greek Easter traditions of painting red eggs, a symbol of victory of life over death (Issari & Papadopoulos, 2021). In fact, their research results exemplify Walsh's (2012) statement "...family and social transmission of stories and metaphors supports adaption through relational, ecocentric, and cosmocentric concepts of self, personhood, and collective identity, and through agency in pollical activism, empowerment, and reconciliation" (p. 402). Elli was able to use artistic approaches through her drawings and painting of red eggs to cope and regain an understanding of roots during the coronavirus crisis.

By reviewing webcomics posted during the height of the pandemic, this study documented similarities in situations and unique concerns of young adults in romantic

relationships during quarantine lockdowns. The aim for this study was to decipher patterns using Walsh's (1998; 2003) foundational key process of family resilience. Through thematic analysis, results found patterns of illustrated cartoon couples that "struggle well" (Walsh, 1998), as well as an emphasis for the importance of webcomics as resourceful tools in learning innovative ways to handle healthy bonds in times of hardship.

CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND

2.1 The COVID-19 Pandemic

COVID-19 was announced as a public health emergency in the United States in January 2020. The novel coronavirus disease was announced as a global pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020, triggering recommendations across the world to practice quarantining and social distancing as ways to slow the spread of the virus (World Health Organization, 2020). A downward spiral of national and global economics triggered mass shutdowns of vital operations, such as stores, private businesses, factories, restaurants, schools, churches, and more (Ventriglio, 2020; Chaney, 2020). Additionally, shutdowns and quarantine caused life shifting changes to people's lifestyles by introducing uncommon daily challenges throughout communities (Goodboy et al, 2021; Lades et al., 2021; Liu & Doan, 2020; Torales et al., 2020; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). Many of those who were not essential workers shifted jobs to work-from-home environments, in addition to home schooling school-aged children. In even worse situations, many faced layoffs (Mojtahedi et al., 2020). As everything became centered around home living, personal daily routines changed drastically. However, "the new normal" (a commonly used pandemic phrase), forced families and relationships to redesign their habits to adapt to quarantine. Families and couples had to find alternatives until restrictions were lifted. One Irish study reported 78% of people's time was allocated to spending eating, watching TV/steaming, working, or studying (Lades et al., 2021).

Stressors amplified as people were faced with isolation, fears of infection, job loss, and death of loved ones. Social isolation is consequential for the stability of humans' mental wellbeing over extended periods of time (Usher et al., 2020). Findings

from another study conducted in the United Kingdom during the first month of lockdowns found increased symptoms of generalized anxiety disorders in participants, primarily revolving around lost incomes and fear of infection (Zavlis et al., 2020). Additionally, Cooke and colleagues' meta-analysis showed that approximately one-in-four adults depended on mental health services throughout the pandemic due to posttraumatic and psychological stress surrounding COVID-19 (Cooke et al., 2020). For parents, stress contagion caused by financial burdens, schooling responsibilities, caregiving, and change in routine caused stress “spill over” to their children, and “crossover” within all family members (Liu & Doan, 2020). In January 2023, President Joe Biden announced that pandemic-related emergencies are set to end on May 11, 2023 (Smith-Schoenwalder, 2023). Scientific understandings on how the pandemic widely changed people are still being researched. Moreover, Researchers in the family science field recognize the need for more longitudinal studies on how the COVID-19 pandemic changed romantic relationships in different stages and how social connections during quarantine effected mental health over a longer timeframe (Brock & Laifer, 2020; Rivers & Sanford, 2021; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021, Walsh, 2020). However, conclusions to one study suggested that intimate social bonds promoted resilience against infection of the COVID-19 through both behavioral and physiological stimulation (Smith & Biblo, 2021).

2.2 Mental Health and Romantic Relationships during COVID-19

Much of the scholarship on families during the pandemic has focused on mental wellbeing of households. Handling interactions successfully, particularly during challenging times, are key fundamentals to not only maintaining healthy relationships,

but facilitating support systems (Walsh, 2006). The pandemic challenged cohabitating couples emotionally by forcing members of a shared household to adjust to long amounts of time spent together in shared physical spaces (Mari et al., 2020; Rivers & Sanford, 2021). Relationship functioning during the pandemic became a major concern for many in relationships as partners were faced to confront dyadic processes as they encountered stresses brought on by the pandemic, such as economic concerns, employment issues, psychological fears, and physical health (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). Dilemmas and unpredictability from the pandemic unsettled many relationships.

To minimize the risk of exposure, social distancing limited face-to-face interactions with those outside of immediate households to minimize the risk of exposure and transmission of the virus (CDC, 2020), potentially impacting one of the main support strategies in relationships, affection. One study in the United States found decreased frequency of intimate and sexual contact amongst couples during the pandemic, which included hugging, kissing, cuddling, or holding hands, as well as decreased sexual activity (Luetke, 2020). Furthermore, the study suggested how decreased emotional and physical contact resulted in high levels of conflict (Luetke et al., 2020). In another instance, partner interdependence for college students in relationships decreased due to limited physical contact during the lockdown and moves off-campus caused geographical separation of young couples (Goodboy et al., 2021). Social distancing amongst the study's college-aged participants caused an increase in negative emotions during the pandemic transition, which resulted in anger, fear, and sadness towards their partners. Previous research explains the importance of physical contact in a relationship, for instance, "pillow talk" communication after sex as "emotional reserves", where couples

learn to handle stress with one another rather than in solitude (Denes et al., 2019). The pandemic caused shifts in couple's physical space and whether it forced boundaries closer than usual or socially distanced, these changes tested partners' resilience.

2.3 Key Processes in Family Resilience

Relational networks and strong connections after experiencing extreme situations are vital to the processes of healing from trauma (Walsh, 2007). Walsh (2003) stated, "Resilience is fostered by shared facilitative beliefs that increase options for problem resolution, healing, and growth. They help members make meaning of crisis situations, facilitate a hopeful, positive outlook, and offer transcendent or spiritual connections" (p. 407). In fact, people struggling find meaning through the utilization of different types of resources, including journals and artwork (Walsh, 2007). When discussing the project "My Hurricane Katrina Story", Walsh (2007) explained that these written and pictorial creative outlets gave a platform for children to express emotional grief after Hurricane Katrina, as well as a voice of inspiration on how their families and communities planned to rebuild.

As Ungar (2010) described, resilience is a product of the negotiation abilities families have within difficulty social, economic, and political instances. Although resilience can be a form of self-persistence, strength is also fostered through families, communities, and skill-building resources (Saul & Simon, 2016). Patterson (2002) defined adaptation processes for families exposed to significant risks and nonnormative stressors. Patterson (2002) also emphasized two resilient patterns to protect family balance: family cohesiveness and flexibility (p. 356). As Walsh (2006) mentioned,

American culture tends to lean towards handling national crises with two options- shake it off, or “wallow” (p. 5).

Walsh’s (2003) derived a theoretical framework to focus on how families adapt to properly function as a unit. Walsh (2012) stated, “The family response is crucial: Key processes in resilience enable the family system to rally in troubled times to buffer stress, reduce the risk of dysfunction, and support optimal adaptation” (p. 401). In her framework, Walsh (2003) created three domains of family functioning to describe the dynamic processes to increase family resilience, which include family belief systems, organizational patterns, and communication processes (see Table 1). Within the domains, there are subthemes: 1) make meaning of adversity, 2) positive outlook, 3) transcendence and spirituality, 4) flexibility, 5) connectedness, 6) social and economic resources, 7) clarity, 8) open emotional expression, 9) collaborative problem-solving. The empirical grounding of Walsh was designed to help families thrive through healthy interactions during negative unanticipated situations.

Walsh (2020) discussed how influential family belief systems were to families in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. The overwhelming challenges that came from lockdowns and isolation affected families differently but could also be considered a “collective experience” (p. 899). In the article, Walsh (2020) explained the different “losses” the pandemic brought about (i.e. deaths, loss of contacts, loss of jobs/financial security, loss of hopes and dreams, loss of normalcy, and situational losses based on complexities families were faced with. This article examines common experiences families dealt with during this time in history as reflected in webcomics published during this period.

Table 1: Reproduced from Walsh (2003)

<p><i>Belief Systems</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Make Meaning of Adversity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - View resilience as relationally based vs. “rugged individual” - Normalize, contextualize adversity and distress - Sense of coherence: crisis as meaningful, comprehensible, manageable challenge - Casual/explanatory attributions: How could this happen? What can be done? 2. Positive Outlook <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hope, optimistic bias, confidence in overcoming odds - Courage and <i>encouragement</i>: affirm strengths and focus on potential - Active initiative and perseverance (can-do spirit) - Master the possible: accept what can’t be changed 3. Transcendence and Spirituality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Larger values - Spirituality - Inspiration - Transformation
<p><i>Organizational patterns</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Flexibility <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Open to change: rebound, reorganize, adapt to fit new challenges - Stability through disruption: continuity, dependability, follow-through - Strong authoritative leadership: nurturance, protection, guidance Varied family forms: cooperative parenting/caregiving teams Coping/Co-parent relationship equal partners 2. Connectedness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mutual support, collaboration, and commitment - Respect individual needs, differences, and boundaries - Seek reconnection, reconciliation of wounded relationships 3. Social and Economic Resources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mobilize kin, social, and community networks - Build financial security; balance work/family strains
<p>Communication/Problem Solving</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Clarity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Clear consistent messages (words and actions) - Clarify ambiguous information, truth seeking/truth speaking 2. Open Emotional Expression <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Share range of feelings (joy and pain, hope and fears) - Mutual empathy, tolerance of differences - Take responsibility for own feelings, behavior and blaming - Pleasurable interactions, humor 3. Collaborative Problem Solving <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creative brainstorming: resourcefulness, seize opportunities - Shared decision-making conflict resolution, negotiation, fairness, reciprocity - Focus on goals, take concrete steps, build on success, learn from failure - Proactive stance: prevent problems, avert crises, prepare for future challenges

2.4 History of Comics

Compared to comic books, newspaper funnies, and graphics novels, webcomics are still a relatively newer form of comics and not widely studied in academic research. Contrary to popular beliefs that comics are solely for laughs (hence, “funnies”), comics have been used purposefully as guided resources, as previously mentioned. Many artists create narratives from real-life events, including serious and meaningful times (Baetens & Frey, 2015). For example, McCloud explains that the origin of the term “graphic novel”, also known as long-form comics, was coined in 1978 by the writer Eisner who wrote *A Contract with God*. McCloud states, “*A Contract with God* was a serious work, drawn from Will’s own life experiences and a sincere exploration on comics’ storytelling potential” (p. 28). In more recent times, Davies (2019) addressed the purpose of comics regarding the Lebanese Civil War in Beirut by artfully reflecting the emotional harm brought on by wartime. Comics can also be a platform for irony and satire on popular ideas, for instance how the Swedish feminist comic writer, Liv Strömquist, critiques society’s nuclear family structure in her work, “The Nuclear Family Project” (Fägersten, et. al., 2021). Comics, used as a type of multimodal art form (Fernandez-Fontecha & O’Halloran, 2018), highlight important subject matter more than just for entertainment purposes.

Regarding how comics are used for research-based purposes, comics have been helpful in developing health literacy (Lee et al, 2019; McNicol, 2016; Kearns & Kearns, 2020). For example, Lee and colleagues (2019) created a web-based comic about the emotional stages and trauma of undergoing surgery for breast cancer. When presenting the storytelling comic about the process of dealing with breast cancer to their focus group of women who were all breast cancer survivors, participants acknowledged that comics

created a reader-text bond that created feelings of compassion and representation (Lee, 2019). Furthermore, the research showed that unlike pamphlets and text-only materials, focus groups felt comics depicted facial expressions of the sufferer helpfully represented emotions linked to their internal conflicts and fears. Comics allow readers to visually interpret characters' body language, faces, and eyes (Baetens & Frey, 2013), helpful tools for emotional connectedness in times of hopelessness.

American Romance Comics, such as *True Story*, *Intimate Love*, and *Young Romance*, were top sellers during and following World War II (Gardner, 2013). Gardner mentioned how romance comics appealed typically to women in their early twenties, and although the works were fictional, the stories addressed common fears of marriage and relationships that readers connected with. In 2019, the most popular genre for webcomics incorporated romance themes (Puc, 2020). With digital media platforms like social media websites, art production, distribution, and consumption are more obtainable for comic artists, or as Heekyoung Cho (2021) called it, "platformization of culture." Artists across the world can share their work and ideas online, connecting to worldwide audiences. As early as 2000, McCloud recognized the future of digital production and digital delivery of online comics, stating "Through discussion board and group projects, a sense of community is beginning to emerge and that community will be going through some dramatic upheavals in the next few years- when the other 90% of creators get in the game" (p. 166).

Specifically, to staying healthy and avoiding the spread of COVID-19, Kearns and Kearns (2020) implied that comics should be used as communications tools. Artists have the platforms to share important messages directed from health professionals

without harmful effect of misinformation or fear to the readers (Kearns & Kearns, 2020). However, for many artists, webcomics proved to be an outlet of expression of lived experiences during the pandemic. It is their depictions of relationships and family life during the pandemic that are the focus of this work.

2.5 Research Question

I take the position that webcomics are worthy of study because are portrayals of couples' relationships during the pandemic and illustrate the impact of common social behaviors between couples during a time of crisis. Furthermore, as mentioned by Misha Grifka (2015), the popularity of webcomics and alternatives to digital storytelling are bound to grow through the advancements of digital media. Through both serious and humorous depictions and comic textual cues, the project examined how artists represented ways that couples navigated difficult times brought on by the pandemic. In particular, the following research question was addressed:

RQ1: How do webcomics posted between March 2020 and December 2021 illustrate the narratives of romantic relationships consistent with Walsh's (2003) key processes of resilience dealing with stress of the COVID-19 pandemic?

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

3.1 Procedure

I screened the webcomics for demonstrations of couples' resiliency throughout the pandemic, specifically at the time of quarantine throughout different Western nations. Although lengths of COVID lockdowns differed in various parts of the world, I chose to look at March 2020 to December 2021. By choosing this period to select comics, I included art from the time of mass announcements of COVID-19 and by December 2021 after vaccines were underway, more and more daily routines started returning to the way it was pre-pandemic.

Based on the sample strategy guidelines of van Rijnsoever (2017), I started with the typical target sample of 100 comics and since saturation was not reached through emerging codes, I increased the target by 10s. I followed webcomic artists on Instagram and chose relevant comics during the timeframe for the sample (total N=585). "Theoretical saturation" was reached as comics were screened based on purposive sample scenarios (van Rijnsoever, 2017).

3.2 Inclusionary Criteria

In the preliminary review process and after further discussion with the thesis committee, I have developed three selection criteria protocols for finding webcomics that will best contribute to the focus of this project.

The first criterion was webcomics of one to six panels that depicted two characters within a romantic relationship. From the start of this project, I was primarily interested in seeing how illustrations of character body language and character dialogue

displayed themes of family resilience during times of the pandemic, meaning that comics that only focused on sole characters or friendships were excluded. Characters depicted as romantic couples were determined based on the overall patterns of posts on Instagram pages. Knowledge about the relationships of the comic characters also derived from provided information on the comic artists' webpages. Moreso, some Instagram comic pages explicitly state in their profile taglines that characters are in relationships, for example, "Me & my bearded fiancé doing things. New comics every week" (@Catanacomics). Similar to newspaper Sunday "funnies", webcomics were limited to standalone comic strips that follow ongoing settings and set of characters. By doing so, I was able to understand characters' bonds and dynamics by observing each situation individually, but also able to recognize the larger foundation of the characters depicted and their running storylines. This process eliminated lengthy graphic novels and fictional comic series. Additionally, I excluded any comics that lacked consistent character development.

To get a better sense of the relationship stress from COVID-19 lockdowns, the second criterion focused on comics directly from the artists' Instagram pages posted between March 2020 and December 2021. In the preliminary steps, I noticed that comics were re-posted to subpage accounts not affiliated with the artists, which were excluded due to misleading posting dates, as well as dissociation of original content directly from the comic creators.

Comics must have illustrated characters together and depicted day-to-day activities in quarantine. Although many comics did not explicitly mention COVID-19 or

allude to the pandemic, it is important to note trends found. The timing of posts lends to this study's purpose in how resilience is portrayed.

Lastly, the third criterion was to collect samples from artists who live in Western countries. Some of these countries include, Australia, Canada, England, Germany, and the United States. After following artists' pages on Instagram, I visited artists' webpages where many selling their artwork and merchandise. From there, I was able to read "About Me" sections which include where the artists reside and what inspired their art. Additionally, I also searched comic Facebook pages. On artists' business Facebook pages, I was able to verify location by navigating through the "About Me" link and confirming the primary location of the page managers in the "page transparency" section. Choosing artists from Western countries helped with my interpretations. In preliminary searches, I found that some comics outside of Western society that relied on translations skewed my understanding of the art and messages. By considering comics that use English as the original language, this lessened discrepancies in coding. Additionally, by using Western comics, I understood romantic relationship norms through a cultural lens. Interpreting visual cues of characters, such as facial expressions and body language, were more open to certainty. Although dates for lockdowns were slightly different regionally throughout the world, many Western societies handled COVID-19 by following similar guidelines, recommendations, and timeframes.

3.3 Data Analysis

Using the systematic framework of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach, data was coded by identifying patterns in comics used for this project.

Analyses are derived from both pictorial content and specific quotes found in the written

dialogue of the comic actors. A deductive approach was used as the analytical process for creating themes directly from major categories of family resilience founded by Walsh (2003). As van Rijnsoever (2017) specified, codes provide unique “bits” of information, each label a different representation of a theme. The concepts are displayed in Table 1. There was a constant process in developing, defining, and labelling themes from the codes generated by the comic conversation data and depictions. Interactions between comic characters are coded into themes as they appear, indicating that some comics strips had more than one theme per panel. I fully immersed myself in the data by thoroughly reading and interpreting the drawings multiple times. I uploaded the selected comics from my sample into Atlas.ti 22 software and organized each tab by comic artist. Then, I highlighted phrases and labeled expressions that I correlated to Walsh’s key concepts. I continued this process multiple times through the revision process by myself, as well as in meetings with a “critical friend” and faculty advisors.

Sample

The webcomics chosen were based on location of the artists, public availability, and dates of posts. The list of artists, their Instagram handles, location, and “about me” can be found in Table 2. Webcomics drawn by artists from the United States included: @Artbymoga; @Catanacomics; @Hannahhillam; and @Dami_lee. Webcomics created by Canadian artists included: @CassandraCalin; @Hubman.chubgirl; @Lunarbaboon; and @Mrs. Frollein. European webcomic creators included: @Inyourfacecake (Denmark); @Kathacomics (Germany); @Threeundertherain (Spain); @OurSuperAdventure (United Kingdom); @Wheresmybubble (England). Lastly, @MooShoo and @LovePieces7 were created by Australian artists.

Table 2 Webcomics

INSTAGRAM COMIC ACCOUNT NAME	NUMBER OF COMICS USED	COUNTRY OF ORIGIN	CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS	Comic explanations from artists' "About Me" Bios
@Artbymoga	23	USA	Wife, husband, and their two dogs.	"From the joys of marrying your best friend to the bizarre musings of a twelve-pound pup to the humor and heartbreak of mental illness, Meg's all-too-relatable comics leave no stone unturned. Dorky and downright hilarious, ARTBYMOGA explores what it means to make fun of oneself and find laughter in the little things."
@CassandraCalin	1	Canada	Female protagonist and her boyfriend.	"I write a semi-autobiographical webcomic series titled Cassandra Comics in which I talk about my life with curly hair, daily problems and high expectations."
@CatanaComics	114	USA	Female protagonist, her fiancé, and their dog.	"Catana Comics was started on Thanksgiving Day, 2016, when John made a casual suggestion to me that we should make a comic about our relationship. One hour later, the first Catana comic was created – and within the next few days, five more were

				created. The comics were never intended to be published online, but thanks to John, they were! I was prepared to be embarrassed and torn apart (the internet is a scary place, you know), but to my surprise, the comics took off. Completely unprepared, without a website or social media, or even a <i>name</i> for the comics, we got to work and started to create what we know as Catana Comics today.”
@DamiLee	11	USA	Female protagonist and her husband (eloped in September 2020).	Background explanations about this comic were not stated, except past publications found on the artist’s webpage.
@Hannahhillam	2	USA	Female protagonist, her husband, two kids, and two cats.	Background explanations were not mentioned about the comics on their webpage, Facebook, or Instagram.
@HubmanChubgirl	44	Canada	Hubman (husband protagnost), Chubgirl (wife), and their first born named Floobie. The comics primarily focus on the couple’s pregnancy woos and being first-time parents.	There is only a store page for merchandise. There are no descriptions on Instagram.

@InYourFaceCake	27	Denmark	Female protagonist and her boyfriend.	Stated on BoredPanda.com: “I Illustrate the Hilarious Side Of My Everyday Life With A Boyfriend.”
@KathaComics	27	Germany	Female protagonist and her boyfriend.	Facebook “About” section: “Every day is a Kat-toon....get it? Comics of my everyday life with my boyfriend. Drop by and get to know us!”
@LovePieces7	29	Australia	Female protagonist and her boyfriend.	The link to the artists’ webpage did not work. Also, there were no explanations mentioned about the comics on Facebook or Instagram.
@Lunarbaboon	8	Canada & USA	Male protagonist, his wife, and his one child.	From the artist’s About section of his webpage: “Lunarbaboon is married and has one child. He works as a schoolteacher and lives a life similar to most North American humans.”
@MooShoo	15	Australia	Female protagonist (Mooshoo) and her husband (Shooshoo).	The artist’s tagline on webcomicsapp.com: “We are a young couple from Australia sharing little bits of our life, that makes life fun, through comics.”
@MrsFrollein	45	Canada & Germany	Female protagonist (Mrs. Frollein) and her boyfriend	From the artist’s About section of her webpage: “Mrs.Frollein is an ongoing webcomic

			(according to BoredPanda.com).	about the life of its creator Valérie Minelli.”
@ThreeUndertheRain	159	Spain	Heterosexual couple and their dog.	From the artist’s About section of the comic webpage: “Three Under the Rain is a series of comics and illustrations based on our daily life and on the things we enjoy. After having this in mind for a long time, in September 2017, I uploaded my first comic on Instagram, and it soon started to grow and to get a lot of love from you guys :)”
@WheresmyBubble	9	England	Female protagonist, her husband, and their child.	Her work is inspired by events from everyday life, personal experiences and the beauty of ordinary things in the world.
@SarahGraley (AKA OurSuperAdventure)	71	England	Sarah, Stef, and their four cats.	The tagline of their webcomic page is: “A diary comic of Sarah Graley and Stef Purenins”. Their Facebook About section is: “Comics about cute stuff!”

Role of Researcher as Instrument

Like many others’ experiences, COVID-19 lockdowns were rapid, confusing, and concerning for me in March 2020. Nobody was truly aware of the types of impacts it

would have on society. I was a full-time employee at the University of Kentucky at the time and we were notified on March 17, 2020 that all non-essential workers were required to work remotely. Although my job provided flexibility, my boyfriend at the time, on the other hand, was a field engineer in Southern Indiana and did not get to work from home. In my role as the researcher, I understand that bias can be present from my own assumptions and my personal romantic relationship hardships during the time of lockdown. The initial ideas and hypotheses originated from seeing webcomics during the pandemic when I spent a lot of my downtime using social media, particularly Facebook. I decided to pursue this project idea as I started following more webcomic artists, discovered personal correlations to my own experiences, and found connections reading others' comments. There is an understanding that the positive stance could potentially affect the analysis of the data. In an effort to reduce biases, intercoder reliability was utilized with the assistance from the committee chair and committee. The committee continually supported my research by asking questions throughout different stages and suggesting feedback. Through their guidance, I learned to provide clear descriptions of the reasoning, data procedures, and results.

By providing detailed procedures, I aim to guide replicability in case other researchers are interested in continuing similar studies in the future. There may be some difficulty on whether or not the sample is representative due to the fact that the comics were individually selected. When doing this study, I recognized that a vast number of comics circulated during the time of the pandemic and that the sample used for this study only captured select few. I chose the sample based on my best judgement and made

careful considerations to examine only the most suitable comics that represented the goals of my thesis.

I collected data based on my assumptions of the phenomenon of the project. The role of the researcher as an instrument entails some bias, so through bracketing, I confirm that personal experiences related to the reasoning for the project may add to personal subjectivity. It is important to acknowledge that personal perceptions influence each and everyone. Rather than disregarding my own experiences during the pandemic, I make note that my personal accounts may have had an impact on how data was interpreted. By approaching the data through bracketing processes, “The opportunity for sustained in-depth reflection may enhance the acuity of the research and facilitate more profound and multifaceted analysis and results” (Tufford & Newman, 2012).

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The 585 comics analyzed were pulled from 15 webcomic artists' Instagram pages. A deductive approach was used by deriving themes from Walsh's Key Processes in Family Resilience table as a framework. Additionally, two codes emerged through independent coding and through collaborative consensus from a critical friend. The data provided in Table 2 gives some understanding of the background of each webcomic: the characters' situations, the number of comics used by each artist, where the artists are from, and information pulled from the comics' webpages. In this chapter, the larger goal of the project will be addressed, "What common patterns of family resilience are prevalent in webcomics posted during March 2020 to December 2021?" This study sought to explore how webcomics can be analyzed as resources for readers to develop skills of resilience through day-to-day routines during pandemic lockdowns. In all cases, codes overlap and comics in all cases, each were coded with as many themes that were presented.

Dividing the data into themes helped understand how resilience processes emerge. Utilizing themes revealed patterns and provided the base for interpretation. The method of thematic analysis is appropriate for this study because it allowed me as the researcher to examine recurring messages imbedded in the foundations of Walsh's key concepts of resilience. By further looking into the key concepts, I was able to further my thoughts by creating emerged themes of additional patterns I discovered. The following sections provide a close examination of the themes, where the themes were portrayed in webcomics, and an accompaniment of a few representative webcomic examples from the study's sample. Table 3 shows the frequency of the themes found in this study.

Table 3 Relative Frequency of Themes Across the Sample of Webcomics

THEME	RELATIVE FREQUENCIES
Belief systems: Make Meaning of Adversity	Gr=70
Belief systems: Positive Outlook	Gr=337
Belief systems: Transcendence and Spirituality	Gr=106
Caregiving (new code)	Gr=136
Communication/problem solving: Clear, Consistent Messages	Gr=178
Communication/problem solving: Collaborative Problem Solving	Gr=116
Communication/problem solving: Open Emotional Expression	Gr=296
Difference in Opinion (new code)	Gr=47
Organizational patterns: Connectedness	Gr=450
Organizational patterns: Flexibility	Gr=267
Organizational patterns: Social and Economic Resources	Gr=61
Physical Touch (new code)	Gr=192

4.1 Belief Systems

4.1.1 Make Meaning of Adversity

The theme “make meaning of adversity” is best coined as a “shared challenge” (Walsh, 2012, p. 407). Couples and families normalize adversity and bond to get through the hard challenges together, rather than resulting to accusations and negative feedback. As discussed by Walsh (2012), families use difficult situations as “milestones” to understand challenges as meaningful interactions, as well as what to expect in the future. Comics that directly referred to the pandemic lockdowns were coded under the theme of make meaning of adversity. The theme was used to represent the idea that despite challenges, comic couples resolved their situational predicaments with a “we’ll get through this” mentality. In fact, certain comics, such as @ThreeUndertheRain, depicted

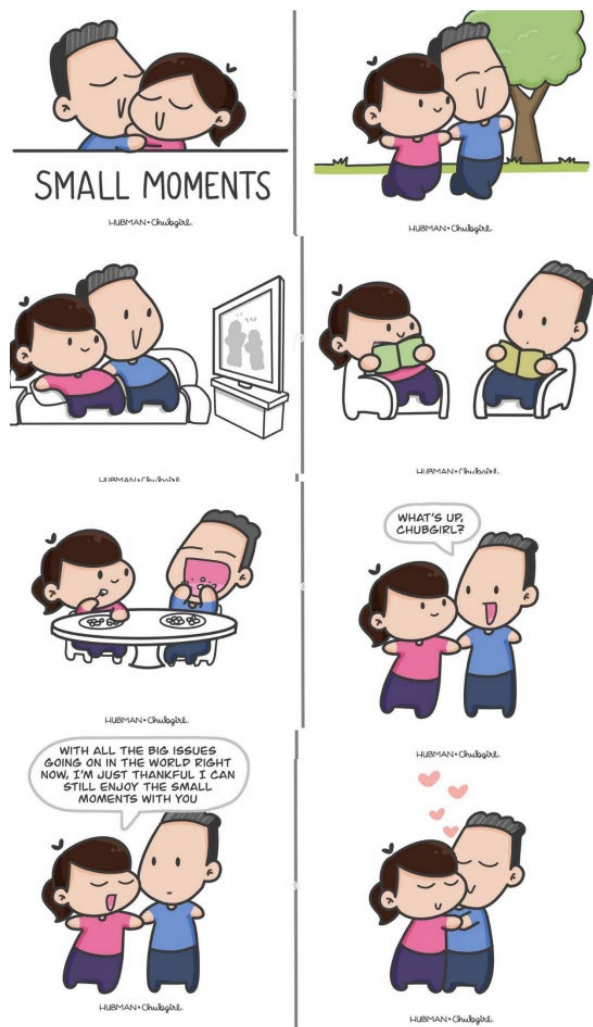
couples who discussed their dreams and growing old with one another. Other comics, like @Dami_Lee's comic (Figure 1), focused on the idea that there would be an end to the pandemic eventually.



Figure 1: Make Meaning of Adversity. @Dami_Lee United States. Posted on February 4, 2021.

The meaning making theme also emphasizes the many stages of reflection. Alternative to future-seeking, comics with this theme also included concepts of living in the moment and appreciating the present day. For example, in one comic of @HubmanandChubgirl, the couple creates “grateful lists”. Hubman’s list has daily items such as, “waking up next to Chubgirl each morning”, “Getting hugs from Chubgirl”, and “Being healthy and safe with Chubgirl”. Lightheartedly, Chubgirl’s list includes all food and drink items, resulting in a displeased husband about the situation, but an overall upbeat tone to the end panel. Another example is the June 26, 2020 comic of @WheresMyBubble, which illustrates four panels with different scenes. In the first panel,

the mother character is cooking. The second panel depicts her reading by her laptop, the third has he doing yoga, and lastly the fourth is the family taking a walk outside. The words for the comic are “Feeling thankful; for the little things; and simple moments; in everyday life.” Comics in this theme show that although lockdowns in Western society created confining situations, families approached the situations by getting through it together day by day.



June 4, 2020

Figure 2: Make Meaning of Adversity. @Hubman.Chubgirl Canada. Posted on June 4, 2020.



Figure 3: Make Meaning of Adversity. @WheresMyBubble Canada. Posted on July 31, 2020.

4.1.2 Positive Outlook

Positive Outlook described by Walsh (2012) is hope and optimism (p. 408). Like the “make meaning of adversity” theme, there is an overall uplifting sense that the future will bring potential. Walsh (2012) stated, “When events cannot be changed, they can be recast in a new light that fosters great comprehension and healing” (p. 409). Family efforts lead to possibilities of new opportunities and transformation, leading to positive growth together.

In this theme, encouragement was a major trend, seen through partner reassurance in building confidence. I used the “positive outlook” theme when I found panels that

commonly followed similar patterns of short storylines of progress. Typically, these comics followed a pattern with the start of one partner showing signs of concern in the first panel, and then resulting with the couples having loving moments together or ending on a joke between characters. In fact, I found a trend where artists used hearts above the characters in the last panel, which I coded as “positive outlook.” I categorized these depictions as “positive outlook” because the illustrations concluded that couples found happiness during conflicting times through love. Together, couples have capabilities to see through adversity because of their unitedness and loving “can-do” attitudes.

Interestingly, in many instances, males affirmed their female partners regarding physical traits and beauty. In @MrsFrollein’s comic (Figure 4), the boyfriend kisses his girlfriend’s forehead after she cut her hair. Another example, seen in Figure 5, the woman wishes her fiancé good luck as he walked away from her. He then replies, “I’ll be fine, I brought my good luck charm”, and as she tries to figure out if it’s his lucky watch, lucky button, or lucky sock, he turns around and points at her, to gesture that she is the one who always makes him lucky.

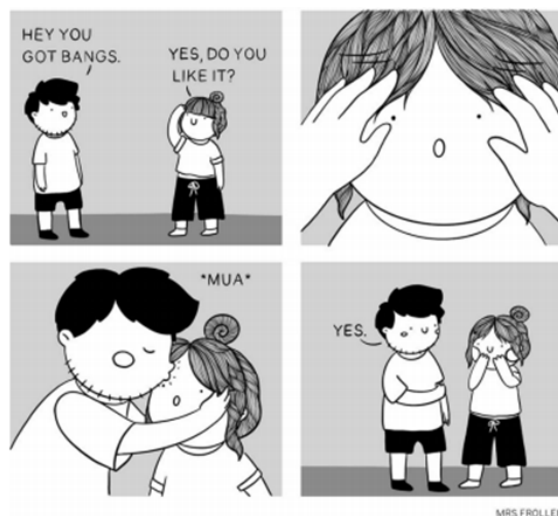


Figure 4: Positive Outlook. @MrsFrollein Canada and Germany. Posted on September 17, 2020.



Figure 5: Positive Outlook. @CatanaComics Canada. Posted on March 31, 2021.

4.1.3 Transcendence and Spirituality

Despite the fact that this theme resulted in over 106 reoccurrences in the dataset, there were no comics that directly referenced religion or churchgoing. However, as Walsh (2003) explained, spirituality can also be affiliated with a connection to nature. Examples of enjoying nature included throughout the data where couples engage in activities outdoors. This is depicted in comics of characters sitting or walking in parks (@Where’sMyBubble, @LunarBaboon, @Mooshoo), or even gazing admiringly out windows (@DamiLee, @lovepieces7, @ThreeUndertheRain). An example of this can be

found in @DamiLee's comic, where the one partner is seen in the first panel looking out the window. She dramatically expresses in the dialogue how she missed playing outside. Although her boyfriend initially snickers at the idea, she comes up with a creative solution to her lockdown situation by making a basketball from a pumpkin. Moreover, many artists drew webcomics that hinted on, not only the tranquility of nature, but also the playfulness that outdoor activities bring out in many. This also is depicted in a few comics where couples play in leaves (@CatanaComics, @SarahGraley), create snowmen (@CatanaComics, @Sarahgraley), enjoy beach days (@CatanaComics, @ThreeUndertheRain), and go camping (@CatanaComics). During the pandemic, there was a strong focus centered around using technology to stay connected socially and to continue raised awareness about staying healthy (Saud, et al., 2020). It is interesting to consider how nature was a role in wellness in a society the depended so heavily on the internet and digital modes of communication. The diverse aspects of this theme highlight the importance of pleasurable moments outdoors during times of adversity. As Walsh (2012) mentioned, "The paradox of resilience is that the worst of times can also bring out the best in the human spirit" (p. 409).



Figure 6: Transcendence and Spirituality. @ThreeUndertheRain. Spain. Posted on May 13, 2020.

The theme of transcendence is represented in comics in references to calendar events, such as holidays and birthdays. In fact, Walsh (2012) suggested that transcendence was also seen through “creative expression” (p. 409), which resulted in the reasoning behind why I coded many comics that dealt with holiday decorating under this theme. Excitement for holidays, such as Halloween (@ArybyMoga, @CatanaComics), birthdays (@InYourFaceCake, @Lunarbaboon, @Mrs.Frollein, @ThreeUndertheRain, @Sarahgraley, @HubmanandChubgirl, and @Kathacomics), Christmas (@CatanaComics, @Mrs.Frollein, and overall change of seasons (@Mrs.Frollein, @ThreeUndertheRain), show the human need for milestones. This sort of reliance on holidays also is explained in the article of Imber-Black (2020) who described life cycle rituals as crucial for meaning making, particularly during the COVID pandemic. In times when daily rituals were indistinguishable, depending on traditional events created special moments. When there were hardly any in-person activities, it’s interesting to consider that many people relied on dependable occasions as reasons to celebrate or mark change.



Figure 7: Transcendence and Spirituality. @ArtbyMoga. USA. Posted on September 21, 2021.



Figure 8: Transcendence and Spirituality. @MrsFrollein. Canada & Germany. Posted on October 11, 2020.



Figure 9: Transcendence and Spirituality. @CatanaComics. Canada. Posted on December 15, 2021.

4.2 Organizational Patterns

4.2.1 Flexibility

Walsh described “Flexibility” as ways for families to restore stability through openness to change, as well as maintaining structure. Only 4 of the 15 comic artists (25%) depicted family units with children. Comics of couples with children displayed positive encouraging moments (@Hannahhillam, @HubmanandChubgirl, @Lunarbaboon, and @Where’sMyBubble), but additionally highlighted stresses about parental management, particularly in regards to having younger family members. For instance, in @HubmanandChubgirl, many of their comics explain joyful moments of watching their first child (Floobie) grow, but they also mention topics of lack of sleep, fears of not being good enough for parents, problems with breastfeeding, and postpartum. In the situations depicted in @HubmanandChubgirl, the theme of flexibility is most prevalent because both parents are learning the trials of being first-time parents together, as well as dealing with their own relationship goals, and handling pandemic crises. Another example of flexibility surrounding the focus of having a child is the comic by @LunarBaboon, where the father influences their child to let the mother rest.



Figure 10: Flexibility. @Lunarbaboon. United States and Canada. Posted on May 13, 2020.

In addition to families with children, I included couples responsible for pets in this theme since the comic characters were responsible for taking care of a living being. Couples depicted with pets expressed flexibility as they worked on their differences to cater to pets in ways similar to that of parenting styles. Interestingly, many illustrations followed storyline patterns of remedying negative romantic moods with the help of pets (@ArtByMoga, @CatanaComics, @Mrs.Frollein, @ThreeUnderTheRain, @OurSuperAdventure). According to Walsh (2009), pets and service animals play a key

role in mental health and relational dynamics throughout life cycles, but also particularly during times of adversity.



Figure 11: Flexibility. @SarahGraley. England. Posted on May 25, 2021.

4.2.2 Connectedness

Connectedness is depicted by nearly all the comic artists, being the most frequently occurring theme (Gr=450). As Walsh (2012) mentioned, connectedness is expressed through “varied reactions, coping styles, and time needed to process an adverse event...” (p. 411). Due to the ambiguity of the definition of this theme, many comics were labeled in this category. According to Walsh’s (2003) descriptions, aspects of connectedness, include mutual support, collaboration, commitment, respect, and

reconnection. Moreover, by using this theme, I chose to code comics that illustrated couples bonding.

It is important to note how connectedness is expressed, even if the partner of the comic was not necessarily depicted in each panel. A few comics by @Lovepieces7 depict the couples away from one another, but the characters find time to text, enjoy chats on the phone, or video call. In @ThreeUndertheRain, seen in Figure 13, the girlfriend is shown listening to music on her laptop while she writes, but puts her pen and notebook down because the music reminds her of her boyfriend, leading her to cry into her pillow. Another example is when @Mrs.Frollein finds a note from her boyfriend wishing her safe travels, which ends with her clutching the letter close to her body and smiling. This shows that although the characters are not physically connected, artists are still able to signify the importance of seeking reconnection through various modes of communication.



Figure 12: Connectedness. @MrsFrollein. Canada & Germany. Posted on March 25, 2020.



Figure 13: Connectedness. @Threeundertherain. Spain. Posted on February 17, 2021.

4.2.3 Social and Economic Resources

Larger systems, such as extended family outside of the household, or friends, rarely appear in any of the webcomics across the data. There is a reference in the @KathaComics May 9, 2021, post that depicts the appreciation for both partners' mothers on Mother's Day. Another example is in the comic from @ThreeUndertheRain (Figure 15) when the couple quickly straighten up their appearances and surroundings in hurry after they heard an incoming video call from their family. The family is able to stay in touch through virtually modes of contact.

HAPPY
Mother's Day



KATHA
COMICS

HAPPY
Mother's Day



KATHA
COMICS

Figure 14: Social and Economic Resources. @KathaComics. Germany. Posted on May 9, 2021.



Figure 15: Social and Economic Resources. @ThreeUndertheRain..Spain. Posted on September 3, 2021.

Walsh explained that another aspect of the social and economic theme is the emphasis on jobs and income. In many situations during catastrophic life events, couples and families are presented with financial struggles. I chose to use this code in depictions that had characters working from home. Interestingly, these character situations were always behind a computer. In fact, on March 18, 2020, @CatanaComics posted an illustration titled “Working From Home.” In this specific comic, the boyfriend messages

his girlfriend “Busy day at work today”, in which she replies “Same, wanna meet up for lunch?” They confirm to meet at their “usual spot”, and in the last panel, the artist depicts both characters swiveled around in their computer chairs at the workstations smiling at one another. As mentioned by Guler and colleagues (2021), working from home during the pandemic shifted health habits, like eating, sleeping, and exercise. This is jokingly expressed by @HubmanandChubgirl as they depict these types of distractions that came from working from home. In the comic posted on March 17, 2020, Chubgirl is at her computer when she gets the many ideas to reconsider spending time either getting a snack, taking a nap, watching tv, or walking outside. It is only until Hubman reminds her that she needs to finish her work drawing, in which she laughs it off by asking if it’s time for food yet.



Figure 16: Social and Economic Resources. @Hubman.Chubgirl. Canada. Posted on March 17, 2020.

4.3 Communication and Problem Solving

4.3.1 Clear, Consistent Messages

In crisis situations, anxieties are inevitable. Therefore, clear, and consistent messages are important to address as family members to distinguish any ambiguity. Through open communication of shared information, as well as personal emotions, family members build stronger comprehension together (Walsh, 2012, p. 412). One example of a comic that illustrates this is in @Mrs.Frollein (May 24, 2020), which began with the boyfriend outright saying that he is sad after Mrs. Frollein asked him what's wrong. She then acts by throwing him into bed and wrapping him in a blanket and kissing his forehead. On June 4, 2020, Mrs. Frollein continues this same theme, only reversing the roles. Mrs. Frollein is depicted sitting on the floor, wrapped in a blanket. Her boyfriend asked her what's wrong. She replied, "Sometimes I feel like I'm not good at anything", which he then responded, "Well... you're the best at making me happy" and patted her on the head. The panel ends with the two embracing while she is still wrapped up, with a heart above their heads.



Figure 17: Clear and Consistent Messages. @MrsFrollein. Canada and Germany. Posted on June 4, 2020.

4.3.2 Open Emotional Expression

One way to process the dealings of difficulties is to find humor through open emotional expressions (Walsh, 2012, p. 413). Considering the adverse times, pandemic lockdowns presented couples with opportunities to find time and space to form positive connections. This theme is found in comics, such as “you are my happy place” (@ThreeUndertheRain, December 3, 2021). This theme appeared 296 times.



Figure 18: Open Emotional Expression. @LunarBaboon. Canada. Posted on September 23, 2020.

4.3.3 Collaborative Problem Solving

In the time of the “new normal”, COVID-19 presented many changes that forced people to think creatively together. As Walsh (2020) discussed, couples and families were forced to adapt to disruptions by forming new habits to regain hope. Messages about problem solving were evident in a multitude of comics. One example of this theme is revealed in ThreeUndertheRain’s comic from August 28, 2020 (Figure 19). The couple is shown wearing masks, and although they are unable to share a lip-locking kiss with one another as they say goodbye, they come up with an alternative farewell by touching foreheads.



Figure 19: Collaborative Problem Solving. @Threeundertherain. Spain. Posted on August 28, 2020.

4.4 Emerged Themes

In addition to themes derived from Walsh's Key Concepts, I noticed trends that emerged related to situations benefiting the wellbeing of couples. From there, I created additional themes that could relate to both the overall benefits of resilience, as well specifically dealing with COVID-19 lockdowns.

4.4.1 Caregiving

The emerged theme of "caregiving" represents generosity. It entails outward expressions that focus on positive physical and emotional experiences of couples. Although this theme shares similarities to a few different aspects of Walsh's key concepts, caregiving presents an additional layer of kindness seen in couples, as it is shown when characters offer some sort of condolence or gift that is received as a surprise. Caregiving was expressed in different comics through different means, such as characters built blanket forts together for quality time (@CatanaComics), randomly giving their partners snacks or drinks (@CatanaComics, @InYourFaceCake, @Mooshoo). Another popular type of caregiving characteristic was gift giving as a form of generosity. When considering the pandemic, doing these "out of ordinary" acts of kindness create memorable moments, especially during a time of history where people felt idle. As previously stated, one aspect of resilience is to lean on rituals as a way to bridge the connection between the past, present, and future (Imber-Black, 2019).



Figure 20: Caregiving. @SarahGraley. England. Posted on November 8, 2021.

In @CatanaComics, John purchased a nerf-gun to bring a playful mood to living together in lockdowns. As depicted in the @CatanaComic, even in situations where the gift-giving would not be considered romantic, caregiving can be expressed in different ways and playfulness is his unique of telling her he is thinking about her.



Figure 21: Caregiving. @CatanaComics. Canada. Posted on July 23, 2021.

4.4.2 Differences in Opinion

Compared to other themes, the theme of “differences in opinion” was the least commonly found, only emerging 47 times. Depictions of couples’ disagreements were lighthearted and did not address crisis situations. Comics instead focused more around couples’ annoyances with one another regarding certain situations. Although the data was limited, this theme seemed too important to ignore, especially considering the context of the lockdown. Some examples include differences in cleaning (@CatanaComics, @Mrs.Frollein.), difference in eating habits (@ArtByMoga, @OurSuperAdventure.), sleeping habits like sharing blankets or snoring (@CatanaComics, @ThreeUndertheRain, @KathaComics), and shared child or pet responsibilities (@OurSuperAdventure, @ThreeUndertheRain, @HubmanandChubgirl). As seen in Figure 22, @ArtByMoga (posted on May 13, 2020) jokingly illustrated the frustrations couples had to face when sharing workspaces.



Figure 22: Differences in Opinion. @ArtbyMoga. United States. Posted May 13, 2020.

4.4.3 Physical Touch

Another theme that Walsh's Key Concepts did not mention but frequently appeared within comics was "physical touch". In fact, many illustrations that prominently focused on physical touch (i.e. hugging, snuggling, cuddling, handholding) were depicted in comics with limited dialogue or thought bubbles, or no words at all. Highlighting that physical contact is a key to resilience is an interesting discovery, especially in a historical time context of the pandemic where physical closeness was highly discouraged by the CDC. In most situations, physical contact pictured was another way for couples to reassure one another. Comics depicted couples reaching out for closeness, such as handholding, cuddling, kissing, sitting on partners' laps, massages, and more.



Figure 23: Physical Touch. @lovepieces7. Australia. Posted on October 12, 2020.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

As outline earlier, there are numerous perspectives that provide context when considering the pandemic on romantic relationships and partners' coping. Disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic caused many young adult couples to try to navigate transitions, which resulted in negative emotions for many (Goodboy et al., 2021). However, one study's results showed that lockdowns generated a safe space for cohabitating partners and families with children to learn innovative stress coping strategies and results showed that participants found comfort in planning for the future (Mari et al., 2020). It is important to note that couples who had lower external stressors were more likely to endure during lockdowns as they were more likely to become adaptive in supporting one another through open communication (Pietromonaco et al., 2021). Thus, research shows that strong social bonds and willingness to adjust during the COVID-19 pandemic promoted positive change in couples. This is why promotion of skills to better develop social interactions are needed so that couples feel more confident in handling challenging situations.

By applying the research strategies developed by Braun and Clarke (2012), this study documented frequency and variations of resilience in comic depictions. Results from this study provide an overall understanding of how webcomics' portrayals of couples represent ways to be resilient during times of crises. As previously mentioned, comics contribute as resourceful information tools (Fraudkin et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2019; McNicol, 2016). The results of the present study indicate that couples portrayed in this art genre display helpful strategies to handle problematic situations. Walsh (2003) explained that resilience comes from a multitude of skills, resources, and approaches that

help individuals adjust. Results from this study suggests that social media and webcomics could be one approach to assist with individuals' navigation skills to healthier habits during times of adversity. The present study uniquely contributes to literature regarding couples' resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic in that webcomics can be used as portrayals of how relationships positively dealt with challenging times.

Examining comics to describe Walsh's key concepts revealed "Organizational Patterns: Connectedness" as the main theme. As seen in Table 2, the "open expressions: connectedness" theme generated the most results (GR=450). One possible explanation for the high results is because "organizational patterns: connectedness" is defined by a more generic idea of family cohesion and mutual support. The broad description of "connectedness" was more likely to be seen throughout the majority of webcomics depicted through various character interactions. Walsh (2012) did not explain specific coping styles, but rather summed up this concept as an opportunity for couples and families to come to mutual understandings of respect (p. 411).

I also found a pattern in the webcomic sample that tied in hope and reconnection. Like the "Organizational patterns: Connectedness" theme, "Belief Systems: Positive Outlook" generated a total of 337 results, "Communication/problem solving: Open Emotional Expression" was found 296 times, and "Organizational patterns: flexibility" resulted 267 times. Unlike other themes that focused on specific aspects of resilience, these themes' definitions were broader. For instance, "Organizational patterns: social and economic resources" only occurred in 61 situations, possibly because the theme specifically addresses work and family financial hardships. The code I created, "difference in opinions" had the lowest results, only appearing 47 times. One explanation

for these low results could be the upbeat purpose of many webcomics. Comics in this category remained a lighthearted “annoyance” towards lockdowns with their partners, rather than relationship turmoil.

Another finding is the interplay of themes throughout comics. Webcomic characters revealed approaches to difficult times through various outlooks. In most cases, multiple themes were present in individual panels. Given these results, it can be concluded that family and relationship resilience require various approaches to work most effectively. Handling challenging situations cannot simply be answered by a uniform solution or one approach. A wide variety of alternative efforts over an extended period of time is needed to develop functional family units.

Much of the literature about the impact the pandemic had on relationships has been about the effects (Cooke et al., 2020; Gonzalez-Sanguino et al., 2013; Goodboy et al., 2021), but not about alternative resources for partners to build skills to strengthen their bonds during the troubling times of lockdowns. Walsh (2012) explained that resilience-oriented intervention can encourage families to rebuild hope during times of adversity (p. 421). From my results, I suggest that the genre of romantic webcomics can be considered a source for readers to learn alternative coping skills. Although many artists stated in their “about me” sections of their websites that their depictions were loosely based on everyday situations, the results show that various key concepts from Walsh’s (2003) framework were reoccurring and prevalent. This shows that Walsh’s (2003) framework is fundamental to skill building and that her strategies are engrained in many. Couples can build skills towards resilience and reinforce the key concepts with practices. Findings from this study indicate that Walsh’s (2003) key processes, seen in

Table 1, are more commonly found than one might expect. Not only have Walsh's key concepts been acknowledged throughout the foundations of family studies and in other fields, but her foundations are found in common arenas of daily occurrences. Living through a catastrophic historical event such as the COVID-19 pandemic, Walsh's research is vastly used, even by those who unknowingly know her work. This study shows that although artists may not be fundamentally aware of Walsh's fundamentals of resilience, her themes are commonly represented. Resilience is imbedded in certain characteristics and behaviors which can be implemented accordingly. These key concepts are not only a theory but are executed in interpretations of real life and represent the possibilities of healthy coping.

CHAPTER 6: LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations of this thesis to be considered. First, artists create comics for entertainment purposes and base webcomics stories, jokes, and experiences on what they want to share. As stated on many artists' webpages, the comics are loosely based on personal daily occurrences. In fact, webcomics can be exaggerations of the truth or entirely fictional, something readers will not know for certain unless the artist states otherwise. With this in mind, my findings could have been further enriched by incorporating the Instagram comments of followers who expressed their direct feedback on the relatability of the artists' posts. Another consideration would be to approach the data through inductive thematic analysis, where themes naturally emerge. However, with solely looking at the sample comics alone for the purposes of tying in Walsh's (2002) framework, the approach and data set supports the purposes of this paper.

Secondly, all of the webcomics found on Instagram depicted relationships of heterosexual couples in stable, middleclass socioeconomic standing. In my search, I found one comic that depicted homosexual couples, but the depictions did not follow a steady timeline of characters. Each depiction was solely represented, indicating that the comics were for commission, rather than a followed storyline. From the data I gathered, although occupational status was never explicitly stated, comics hinted that couples were easily able to rebound financially by relying on work-from-home situations remotely. Images of homes and settings also indicated that couples depicted lived in spacious environments that allowed for peace. During COVID-19 lockdowns, this is important to note because of wellbeing. Not all who experienced lockdowns were able to retreat to

quiet and calming spaces. This lends into the connotation that webcomics were only depictions and may be considered “unrealistic expectations” for some.

Lastly, in my search for Instagram accounts with comics that fit my criteria, I was unable to find any webcomics depicting black or Latin-American couples. My inclusion theory only focused on comics in Western societies. Cultures outside of Western societies were excluded due to my search for commonalities in pandemic rules and timelines, as well as certain romantic relationship standards but in my search for comics. I am intrigued that I was unable to find Black or Hispanic couples, or families depicted. It is interesting to point out that the majority of couples were either American (white or Asian decent), Canadian (white or Asian decent), and European (white or Hispanic).

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

During the historical time of the COVID-19 pandemic where people's daily routines changed drastically through upheaval of adopting a "new normal", families had to adapt to find peace. Research explained ways the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted consistency in peoples' lives (Chaney, 2020; Goodboy et al, 2021; Lades et al., 2021; Liu & Doan, 2020; Torales et al., 2020; Ventriglio, 2020). Walsh (2006) stated "What distinguishes healthy families is not the absence of problems or suffering but rather their coping and problem-solving abilities" (p. 16). The purpose of this study was to examine how webcomics documented representations of couples' resilience through skill building and effective family functioning in times of crisis. To my knowledge, this study is the first to analyze romantic webcomics through a lens of Walsh's key concepts resilience framework, as well as through a lens that considered how depictions of couples dealt with the pandemic challenges. This study's results show that the most common themes based on Walsh's key concepts were Connectedness (Gr=450), Positive Outlook (Gr= 337), and Open Emotional Expression (Gr=296).

This contributes to the field by reiterating that webcomics can be considered rich resources on how to handle real-life situations, rather than for solely entertainment purposes (Baetens & Frey, 2015). Through my discoveries, webcomics can be viewed as ways for both artists and readers to make meaning of certain stresses found in challenging situations. As explained by Walsh (2020), individuals, families, and communities have been encouraged to "Bounce Forward" (p. 910), a long-term recovery process following the COVID-19 pandemic. As recommended by Walsh (2020), shared reflections of painful experiences, but also emphasized resourcefulness.

From my findings, I became aware of how popular social media trends of webcomics can be used as resources for family and couples' resilience. Patterson (2002) stressed the need for research to develop meaning-making processes for assisting families, including boosting community resources (p. 359). Although social media is an alternative type of community, artists and online followers engage through webcomics to express shared experiences. Building on previous research and literature, this study's findings could be used to further investigate more ways in which webcomics are used as a medium for family functioning in challenging times.

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