

The Use of Comics to Promote a Community-based Peer-support Intervention among Young Refugees in a Camp in Greece

Chrysovalantis Papathanasiou^{1,2}, Aikaterini Kougioumtzi², Kanella Georgiou² & Filippos Barbaresos²

¹Department of Psychology, Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, Athens, Greece, ²Association for Regional Development and Mental Health (EPAPSY), Athens, Greece

Abstract

The article presents the creation of an informational and recruitment tool in comic form, for a psychosocial intervention program aimed at refugees as well as the process of its cultural adaptation. We aimed to culturally adopt the comic and ascertain whether the participants' perception of the comic was in line with the illustrator's goal. The study involved refugee communities that lived in the Closed Controlled Access Centre (CCAC) of Samos. In order to culturally adapt the comic's content, three mini focus groups were conducted; one for each of the languages spoken by the communities for which the comic was intended. Thematic analysis was performed to ascertain whether the perception of the messaging by the beneficiaries was in alignment with the creator's intentions. The pilot implementation revealed that no major changes were necessary, as the participants succeeded in discerning the intended message accurately when the comic was presented without accompanying text. Initial customization to the specific conditions of its target population, and the participation of persons with a refugee background in the initial steps of the creation process are some of the reasons that may have contributed to this outcome.

Key implications for practice

- Comics can be utilized as an informational and recruitment tool for MHPSS services.
- Comics referring to MHPSS services enable perception and emotional engagement.
- Cultural adaptation at later stages of the development was not necessary when service users were included in the early stages of the creation of a comic aimed at refugees.

Keywords: comic, greece, intervention, peer support, peer mentoring refugees, refugee camp

In an age of information overload (Anderson & De Palma, 2012; Hoq, 2014) it is crucial to find innovative ways and means to convey essential information, particularly in mental health promotion interventions. Comics, combining visual design and narrative storytelling, have been seen as successful tools in the creation and dissemination of persuasive health communication (Jee & Anggoro, 2012). As McCloud (1993) notes, a distinctive feature of comics is the creation of a story through semiotic interplay between imagery and text.

The use of comics, either short informational leaflets with illustration, or long stories in comic booklets, intended to inform, sensitize and motivate people in matters of mental health, is a largely unexplored domain. The utilization of comics as informational material is most commonly observed in environmental awareness campaigns and health education initiatives.

Comics, in the sense of the combination of textual and visual elements have received increased attention, initially in advertising, measuring effects on memory, attitudes and intentions toward a product (Kim & Lennon, 2008). Drawing upon this body of research, there has been an interest in conveying health-related messages, in a simplified manner. In a systematic review by Houts et al. (2006), it was found that the combination of texts and images had an effect on cognition, including attention towards the message, comprehension as well as an effect on attitudes regarding matters of health. Comics have constituted an effective

Address for correspondence: Dr. Chrysovalantis Papathanasiou, Psychosocial Support Centre for Refugees (PSCR), Mpotasi 9, GR-10682, Athens, Greece.
E-mail: ch.papathanasiou@epapsy.gr

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tool to raise awareness and increase health communication (Alemany-Pagès *et al.*, 2022). Tekle-Haimanot *et al.* (2016) used a culturally adapted comic book for Ethiopian students, to illustrate medical facts about epilepsy and correct intervention techniques in epileptic episodes. It was found to raise awareness and lead to the appropriate understanding of the subject matter. Comics have further been used as educational materials for HIV (Gillies *et al.*, 1990), dementia (Gallagher-Thompson *et al.*, 2015), patient care (Green & Myers, 2010) and immunizations (Muzumdar & Pantaleo, 2017). As regards the latter, a between group randomized trial, compared effects between an informational leaflet from CDC and an adaptation of this information in comic form. The leaflet in comic form was evaluated more positively than the text one and was perceived as more informative. However, the leaflet type (comic vs text) did not have a significant effect on intention (Muzumdar & Pantaleo, 2017).

Comic-style messaging has greatly benefited illiterate populations in Nigeria as part of an environmental sustainability campaign in Madagascar (Tobias, 2016) to promote environmental concern messaging to farmers. In these instances, the use of comics was found to overcome barriers such as written language, indicating that in cases of largely uneducated audiences, or of audiences with mixed levels of education, visual media is an effective means of conveying information. However, even though comics have been seen as a format that is easily used by a variety of audiences, regardless of their level of literacy (McNicol & Weaver, 2013), it has been proposed that they are highly demanding on cognitive skills, requiring the combined interpretation of visual and textual information (Chute, 2008).

Another significant advantage of illustrated narratives is the depiction and dramatization of emotion, giving the reader a more authentic and nuanced glimpse into their life and lived experiences, wherein the reader can recognize their own life and emotional responses (Birge, 2009).

The identification of the characters' emotions is very important "since emotions provide key clues to understanding cognition, motivation and people's behavior in general" (Matsumoto, 2001, p. 171). Identifying emotional expressions correctly is an essential skill for successful social interactions (Carstensen *et al.*, 1997). Facial expressions are the main communication channel used by people to convey a range of meanings in various contexts (Elliott & Jacobs, 2013). Kukkonen (2013, p. 15) points out that "the faces of comics characters are spaces which give you textual clues as dense as any speech bubble." He claims that facial features provide readers/viewers with information about comics characters' mental states intended to be represented by the comic illustrator. While the universality of basic emotions is a common assumption in the field of Psychology, expressions may be affected by "culturally prescribed display rules" (Matsumoto, 2001, p. 173). Therefore, comics need to be adapted culturally to ensure that the message conveyed is the desired one. The reader/viewer acquires a multifaceted understanding of the depicted experiences and can more easily take perspectives

previously foreign to them (Dallacqua *et al.*, 2021). Dallacqua *et al.* (2021) used a comic as a psychoeducational tool about underage violence geared towards adolescents. They discovered that adolescents working through the complex issues depicted, as the characters were going through them, created significant empathic responses, with complex emotional reactions (e.g., the children expressed feelings of sadness for the characters' ordeals). It has been proposed that the empathic process is also facilitated by the fact that the visual medium slows down observation and gives time for introspection, reflection and nuanced emotional visualization (Prosser & Loxley, 2007).

Both McAllister (1992) and McNicol (2017) have found that comics can encourage empathy and self-awareness. By relating with the characters and their stories, readers/viewers can use comics not only as a means of information transfer but also as tools to better understand the social aspects of illness and provide reassurance.

However, the process of emotional engagement may also make the message susceptible to misunderstanding or misinterpretation (Chisholm *et al.*, 2017). Bosqui *et al.* (2020) attempted to use a psychoeducational comic for the dissemination of research findings on mental health for adolescents struggling to overcome adversity. It was discovered that occasionally, the intended message was not understood and in fact was interpreted incorrectly in ways that were opposite to the intended message.

With regards to identification with the comic characters, it was found that the simplification of language and imagery, characteristic of comics, allowed readers/viewers to identify with the character depicted through observation of similarities and differences (McCloud, 1993). For instance, in a Dallacqua *et al.*'s study (2021), the fact that the characters were of the same age as the target audience made the readers/viewers empathize more effectively with them.

On the other hand, components of the readers'/viewers' identity can influence how the message is perceived and whether the intended message is conveyed unaltered to the reader. One way to account for cultural interpretations of the message that might not be intended by the creators of the informational material and to overcome personalized and culturally influenced interpretations is to invite research participants originating from the target population to engage with the material and provide feedback, so that the message and its illustrations are a product of co-construction between the researchers and the readers/viewers. A similar process was followed by Darnhofer (2018) while studying family farm resilience indicators and resilience tactics in Australia and its depiction in comic form. The end result of the cultural adaptation process was deemed successful as participants felt qualified to decode the images' meaning and facilitated engagement as well as fruitful discourse between researchers and participants, indicating the utility of a participatory and not top-down approach. The researchers received requests from local establishments to receive posters to post for themselves. It is possible that a comic that is culturally appropriate and

has been created in a participatory manner, including the target population in the creation process might be more likely to create a sense of ownership and identification in the community and thus leading to greater community engagement and making people more eager to share and advertise it themselves. The participatory nature also reduces the power imbalances and the asymmetrical relationship between researchers and readers/viewers, opening avenues for critical thought and discussion on the material (Denney *et al.*, 2018).

In another example, Logie *et al.* (2021) invited refugee youth not only to facilitate the creation process of the informational material, but also to facilitate recruitment and act as peer navigators. These refugees went on to be recognized by their peers as positive role models and successfully raised awareness of sexual gender-based violence (GBV) in their community. Their participation through the entire process increased their investment in the materials they helped create and empowered their role in their community.

Below we will present the process of creating a comic intended to serve as a means of recruiting young refugees to a mental health program offering peer support. All the steps followed from the conceptualization until the cultural adaptation and the assessment will be presented.

To ascertain whether the cultural adaptation was effective, the objective of the present study was to assess whether the participants' perception was in line with the illustrator's goal, with regards to three indicators: (1) the key messages

of the story, (2) the feelings of the characters depicted in the comic and (3) their ethnic background.

Subjects and Methods

The Greek nongovernmental organization (NGO) "EPAPSY" (Association for Regional Development and Mental Health) in partnership with UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, started a pilot project for enhancing the resilience of young refugees living in the Closed Controlled Access Centre (CCAC) of Samos, called "Samos Peer Support" in August 2021. The goal of the project was to train members of the refugee communities in basic counselling skills for providing peer mentoring services (young refugees supporting younger members of their communities), as well as the principles and procedures of conducting peer-support groups.

In order to inform the community living in the CCAC about this intervention, the EPAPSY team depicted the core philosophy of the project in comic form. The process is divided into three stages (Figure 1). Stage A was the creative stage. During this phase, an expert panel (psychologists, communication expert, comic illustrator, project management staff and refugees) proceeded with the conceptualization of the storytelling and the design of the illustrated characters. In stage B, a partnership meeting took place. During this meeting, the two partner institutions, EPAPSY and UNHCR reviewed and finalized the tool before the pilot implementation. Stage C was a pilot phase for the evaluation of the tool. During this stage, the comprehension of the delivered messages by the target

Figure 1

Creative Process and Implementation

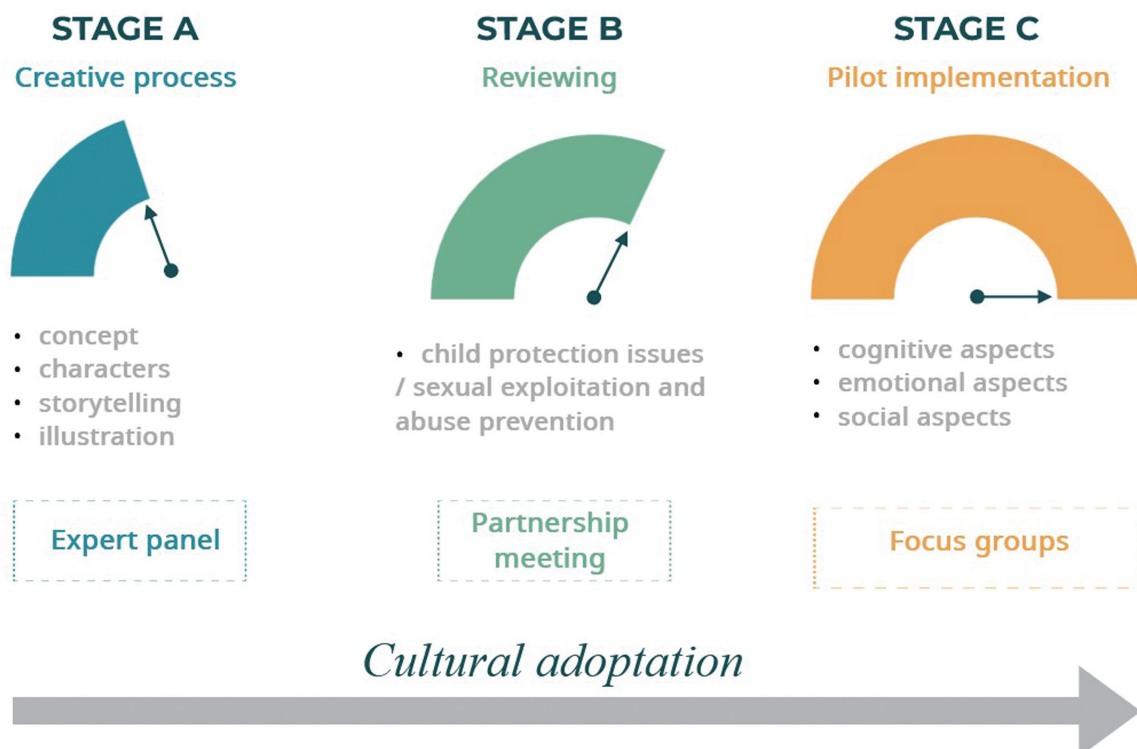


Table 1***The Storytelling***

The story concerns a refugee boy of African origin that lives in a refugee camp. He feels lonely and depressed. Then, a young man of African origin and with refugee background, working as a Community Psychosocial Worker in an NGO with presence in the refugee camp, approaches him and invites him to discover the pilot peer support project to get help. Although the boy is a little hesitant in the beginning, he eventually accepts the support and the two characters form a connection. The same happens with a refugee girl of Arab origin and a young woman of Arab origin and refugee background that works as a Community Psychosocial Worker for the same NGO. The message of the story is that when people are together and help each other, things get better.

group was tested. The cultural adaptation process was a continuous process, starting in stage A with the participation of members of the target communities (Arabic-, French- and Farsi-speaking communities) and being finalized in stage C with the participation of representatives of the target population.

Stage A: Conceptualization, Design and Development

Two meetings for group brainstorming were conducted in the initial stage of the design process (stage A), one with the participation of mental health professionals, a communication expert, the project manager and a professional cartoonist and a second one with the artist, the project manager and participants with a refugee background, originating from the target population.

During the first meeting, the context, the characters, the protagonists' emotions and the core messages that summarize the intervention's philosophy were discussed, leading to the conceptualization of the storyline (Table 1). The first idea that was discussed involved two different settings for the story, one inside the CCAC (before the intervention) and one outside it (during the intervention). However, the participants agreed that improvement in mental state could be attributed to the setting and not the intervention, while the purpose of the intervention was to empower young people to deal effectively with the adversities of their real life, inside the camp. Thus, the whole action was unified. The positive changes stemming from the participation in the peer support groups were shown by the different colour grading. More specifically, while the first page of the comic that covers life before the intervention was presented in blurred colours, the second page, following the intervention was presented in vivid colours.

During the second meeting, the ways to culturally adapt the comic for the target population were addressed. The depicted characters' physical traits, clothes and religious symbols made up the crux of the creative discussion (Figure 2). The participants, who had refugee background (a young man from Syria, a young woman from Iran and a young man from Cameroon), lived in the refugee camp and were aware of the living conditions of the camp, guided the cartoonist to shape the characters according to the cultural norms of the specific population. For example, the Iranian cultural mediator asked the group to decide whether the young woman in the comic would come from Iran or from Syria, as the way women wear the head covers (hijab) in these two Muslim countries is different. Another example

was that, initially, the cartoonist had designed the girl character wearing a dress. However, the Syrian participant, who had lived in a refugee camp reported that girls and women from Arab countries usually wear sports clothes within the camp as these are the clothes that NGOs offered them, without having a choice. Finally, the African participant guided the cartoonist to create the African characters of the comic by giving them characteristics of people from French-speaking West (young man) and North (boy) African countries. It is obvious that without the participation of the cultural mediators in these creative meetings the experts and the cartoonist would have made cultural mistakes that could result in misunderstandings and failure in conveying the message.

Stage B: Reviewing and Finalizing the Tool

An additional meeting was held between EPAPSY professionals and UNHCR staff specialized in child protection, focusing on prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) issues. As a result of this discussion group, the helpers called Community Psychosocial Workers (CPWs) were shown wearing jackets with the insignia of EPAPSY, marking them as members of the organization and a comment was added, to indicate that community members wearing the depicted jacket are trustworthy ("You can trust community members with the EPAPSY vest").

After the meetings presented above (stages A and B), the comic was finalized (Figure 3). The logos of the two

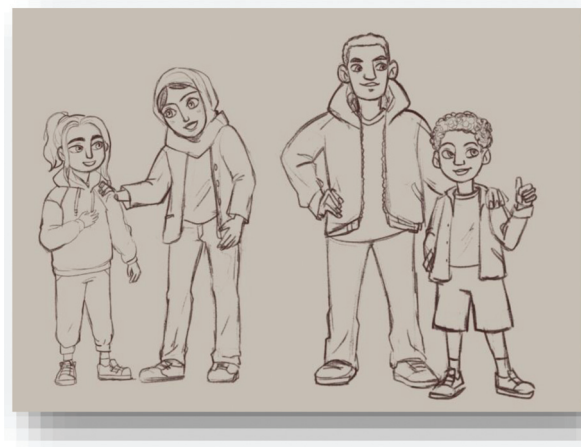
Figure 2***Character Design Concept***

Figure 3

The comic, Side A and B



organizations were added, as well as the phone numbers that CCAC residents could call (with the possibility to be called back) or send a message through Viber and WhatsApp to get more information and/or express their interest in joining the peer-support groups.

Stage C: Pilot Implementation

Setting

The study took place in the UNHCR's container inside the new CCAC on the island of Samos that has a capacity of 3,000 persons. However, at the time of the study, approximately 350 people resided on site.

Having in mind that both age and living conditions influence viewpoints and create unique perceptions of reality, we determined that a cultural adaptation, specifically concerning the experiences and viewpoints of the people living in this unique condition was required. Therefore, the final stage of the pilot for the comic focused on beneficiaries 16 to 24 years old residing inside the CCAC at the time, in order to assure that the comic corresponds fully, not only to the target population's cultural background, but also to their current life context.

Objectives

The specific research objectives were to assess the understanding of the participants, regarding (1) the key messages of the story, (2) the feelings of the characters depicted in the comic and (3) their ethnic background.

Recruitment

From October 2021 to December 2021, adolescents and young adults between 16 and 24 years old were recruited to participate in the creation and pilot dissemination of the comic, aiming to introduce a program of peer support to the CCAC population.

Three CPWs, employed by EPAPSY, were responsible for the recruitment of participants. The CPWs are refugees themselves who have completed their asylum-seeking procedure and are trained in various skills and tools including Psychological First Aid (PFA), Problem Management Plus (PM+) and Peer Support Work (PSW) in order to provide basic psychosocial support to asylum seekers. More specifically, they received 120 hours of training, 80 hours of PM+ training and 40 hours of PFA and PSW. Regarding their country of origin, one of them was Syrian, the other one was from Afghanistan and the third one from Cameroon. Each of them represented and was responsible for one of the three main communities residing inside the camp: Arabic-speaking, Farsi-speaking and French-speaking communities. The fact that the CPWs had similar refugee experience with the residents of the camp and had the same ethnic and linguistic background facilitated the connection between the research team and the participants.

The participants were initially approached during field work at the CCAC. Eligible participants were verbally informed about the pilot study and were invited to an introductory session, during which they were further

informed about the goals of the research, the topics that would be discussed during the focus groups, as well as the rules concerning their participation (e.g., voluntary nature of the participation, confidentiality, right of dropping out of the procedure). Interested participants were invited to a second session, during which they gave their consent by signing a consent form in their native language before finally participating in the focus group. Purposive sampling was used based on the characteristics of the participants: adolescents and young adults, aged between 16 and 24 years, speaking one of the three main languages of the communities residing in the CCAC.

Participants

In total, 10 participants took part in the focus groups. Three focus groups were held: one with three Arabic-speaking participants, one with four Farsi-speaking participants and one with three French-speaking participants. The demographic information of all the participants is available in Table 2. The three groups corresponded to the three predominant linguistic communities of the CCAC of Samos at that time. It was important that the focus groups were culturally homogenous so that the participants would be able to express themselves in their native language, would be comfortable to share their views and we would be able to detect differences in the way people from different cultural backgrounds understood the narrative (Liamputtong, 2011). Only 10 participants offered to participate and were included in the groups, of whom only one was a woman. Implications of the small sample size and small representation of female participants are noted in the Discussion section.

Materials

A version of the comic, just as presented in Figure 3, but without the accompanying text, was presented to the participants, one for each of the focus groups. The participants were asked to comment on the pictures of side A and side B of the comic. They were not asked to comment on the last picture of side A of the comic as no persons or emotions were depicted.

Procedure

A focus group was selected as a research tool for this pilot study, because we wanted to encourage the participants to share their views and perspectives about the comic (Adler *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, Liamputtong (2011) mentions that focus groups are preferable for adolescents and young adults to individual interviews, as participants feel more comfortable when they share their views with theirand a Farsi-speaking participant guessed that peers. In order to ensure the homogeneity of the three mini focus groups we conducted a semistructured guide with questions about the elements we wanted to culturally adapt. The questions were (1) "Narrate the story following the pictures," (2) "Which country do you think each of the children in the pictures are from?," (3) "Could one of them be from your country and community?," (4) "Look at the pictures one by one and name the emotions of each character." The questions were

Table 2

Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

| Participants | Language | Country of Origin | Age | Gender |
|--------------|----------|-------------------|-----|--------|
| 1 | Arabic | Syria | 18 | Male |
| 2 | Arabic | Syria | 22 | Male |
| 3 | Arabic | Palestine | 23 | Male |
| 4 | Farsi | Iran | 18 | Male |
| 5 | Farsi | Afghanistan | 18 | Male |
| 6 | Farsi | Afghanistan | 24 | Male |
| 7 | Farsi | Afghanistan | 21 | Female |
| 8 | French | Congo | 24 | Male |
| 9 | French | Mali | 22 | Male |
| 10 | French | Cameroon | 24 | Male |

selected with the purpose of exploring both the cognitive and emotional components of the message. Specifically, the first three questions assessed the cognitive aspects (information processing), while the last one assessed the emotional aspect (emotion processing). The purpose was to confirm that what the readers/viewers understood-felt, corresponded to the meaning and emotions that the creators wanted to convey.

Ethics

The study has received ethical approval from the Research and Ethics Committee of EPAPSY and adheres to the principles of the declaration of Helsinki.

Data Collection

Data collection was carried out by the field research team, including two psychologists and three CPWs. After signing the consent forms, the participants also shared their demographic information.

The main part of the data collection took part during the focus groups. In each focus group, one psychologist facilitated the conversation and posed the questions to the participants, one CPW was responsible for the translation of the participant's responses, while the second psychologist was taking thorough, detailed notes of the translated discussion, the nonverbal communication of the participants and the power dynamics. Concerns about linking the focus groups with the asylum-seeking interviews led us to avoid recording their voices and instead, chose to keep notes, as a less intrusive way of recording their responses.

Data Analysis

The results of the focus groups were analysed in two different ways, depending on the nature of the data. Firstly, the characters' emotions and countries of origin were gathered and presented descriptively in a table, followed by the frequency distribution. Secondly, the storylines that the participants described according to the comic's picture were organized and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In order to conduct the thematic analysis, the researchers followed six steps, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Results

Characters' Emotions

One of the objectives of this pilot study was to identify the emotions of the characters and to assess if the participants' perception was in line with the illustrator's goal. The results of the focus groups have shown that the young residents of the CCAC correctly identified the emotions and the characters' body language. In Table 3, the emotions that participants identified for the character of each picture are displayed, followed by the number of participants who mentioned each emotion.

In further detail, the participants mentioned that the boy who is sitting alone next to the tents is feeling various unpleasant emotions, such as sadness, loneliness, grumpiness, desperation and depression. When the young man approaches the boy giving him his hand, the difficult emotions are maintained as the boy experiences anxiety, fear, suspicion, sadness, cautiousness and other strange feelings towards the unknown young man. Participants mentioned that the young man who was approaching the boy had the feeling of hope, willingness to help, and happiness, while one participant mentioned that "his heart was breaking" when he was looking to the young boy. As it is shown by the results of focus groups, the young man continued experiencing positive emotions towards the boy, such as happiness, empathy and acceptance. However,

participants mentioned both pleasant (e.g., hope, friendship, acceptance) and unpleasant emotions (e.g., feeling strange, hesitance, feeling unsure/ wondering) in the boy's illustration.

Characters' Ethnic Background

The second objective of the pilot study was to identify the country of origin or more generally, the ethnic community to which each character belongs. The goal was for the participants to identify with at least one of the depicted characters. In Table 4, the character's ethnic background as identified by the participants is presented, along with the number of participants giving each answer, in parenthesis.

The results of the focus group showed that the participants correctly guessed the continent from which the young man (Africa), the girl and the young woman (Asia) come from. For the boy's illustration, the answers were not as homogeneous, as the participants from the French-speaking and the Farsi-speaking communities recognized the boy as African, while in the Arabic-speaking community they thought he was Arab. In addition, there was a participant for whom it was difficult to specify the country of origin of any of the characters. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that when the participants were asked if they think that any of the characters could be members of their own cultural or ethnic community, all of them answered positively.

Table 3

Character's Emotions as Identified by the Participants

| Picture | Character | Emotions |
|---------|-----------------------------------|--|
| 1 | Boy | Sadness (4)*, Loneliness (3), grumpiness (2), desperation (1), depression (2) |
| 2 | Boy | Anxiety (2), fear (2), suspicion (2), sadness (1), cautiousness (1), feeling strange (1) |
| 3 | Young man | Hope (3), willingness to help (2), happy (2), his heart is breaking (1) |
| 4 | Boy | Hope (3), friendship (2), acceptance (2), feeling strange (1), hesitance (1), feeling unsure/wondering (1) |
| 4 | Young man | Happiness (3), empathy (2), acceptance (2) |
| 5 | Boy | Happiness (5), trust (2), satisfaction (1), connection (1) |
| 6 | Boy, young man, girl, young woman | Happiness (5), feeling comfortable (3), solidarity (2), trustworthiness (1), empathy (1) |
| 7 | Young woman | Sadness (7), loneliness (3), upset (1), desperation (1) |
| 8 | Boy, young man, girl, young woman | Happiness (4), solidarity / togetherness (4), freedom / relief (2), |
| 9 | Boy, young man, girl, young woman | Happiness (5), empathy (2), pleasure (1), satisfaction (1), solidarity (1), overcoming sadness (1) |

*Note. The numbers in parentheses stand for the number of participants who mentioned the respective emotion in each picture.

Table 4

Character's Ethnic Background as Identified by the Participants

| Characters | Ethnicity/Country of Origin |
|-------------|--|
| Boy | African (5)*, cannot specify (3), Arab (2) |
| Young man | African (8), cannot specify (1) |
| Young woman | Asia (1), white (1), cannot specify (2), Arabic (6), Muslim (2) |
| Girl | Asian (3), Arabic (3), cannot specify (1), Afghan (1), Syrian (1), unit from all the nationalities (1) |
| Hands | Asian and African (1), black and white (1) |

*Note. The numbers in parentheses stand for the number of participants who mentioned the respective country/ethnic background in each picture.

Table 5*Thematic Analysis Results*

| Themes | Quotes |
|---------------|---|
| Distress | “The boy has a psychological problem, or a difficult time and he wants to isolate himself from the others” (P2*) |
| Support | “They made contact and I can interpret from his face that now he’s in a better state” (P6) and “The females are making their own contacts and it’s obvious that they have a good time” (P6) |
| Vulnerability | “She’s a sad person with many problems and no one helps” (P4) |
| Empowerment | “They became like a family and they decided to be all together in order to help the others” (P1) |

*Note. The code in parentheses refers to the participant reported in Table 2 who mentioned the specific words.

The Storytelling

The stories that the participants of the focus groups narrated were analysed through thematic analysis. The results of the thematic analysis led to five broad themes, which are presented in Table 5. Below there is a description of each theme.

Theme 1: Distress

The first theme is about “Distress”, a mental state attributed to the boy’s character. Participants from all the communities agreed that the boy is “not in a good mental state” (P6), has a “psychological problem” (P2) and is “mentally ill” (P8). More specifically, they spoke about emotions of isolation, loneliness, depression and sadness. Two additional emotions noted by one participant (P9) were fear and grumpiness.

Theme 2: Support

The second theme focuses on the interaction between the young man and the boy and the “Support” that is offered. All participants started describing this interaction noting the extension of the young man’s hand towards the boy. They all agreed that the young man’s intention was to help the boy. Following this picture, the participants noticed that the boy was initially apprehensive. Answers included that the boy “doesn’t feel secure” (P2), “neither has any trust, nor wants to trust the other person” (P6), “has some doubt” (P7) and “is a little bit hesitant” (P10). In the following pictures, participants noticed that the boy started to feel more trust. Regarding the shift in the boy’s behaviour, a Farsi-speaking participant thought that it happened because the young man “looked at the boy with kindness” (P7), while another participant from the same community mentioned that the young man “was understanding, because he has experienced the same” (P4). Participants’ responses regarding the last picture of the first page of the comic, showing the holding of hands, are of great interest. One Arabic-speaking participant thought that this picture communicates to the readers/viewers the message that “If we see someone like him, we should help him and not leave him alone” (P3). Accordingly, one French-speaking participant interpreted this picture as a white and black hand holding: “It would give him a lot of courage and empowerment, because it would show that we can work together, you and us, the white and the black” (P10). Lastly, referring to this picture, another French-speaking participant shared

that “We understand that the organizations help people to feel less pain. Only by helping each other we can help the world feel less pain” (P8). The same supportive behaviour was observed in the interaction between the young woman and the girl, while the young man and the boy are depicted in the background. A French-speaking participant guessed that “There is one lady who tries to help a little girl” (P9) and a Farsi-speaking participant guessed that “The females are making their own contacts and it’s obvious that they have a good time” (P7).

Theme 3: Vulnerability

The third theme focuses on the picture of the young woman who is sitting on the rocks with the hands on her face and we call it “Vulnerability” as it refers to the inability to manage serious problems alone. A participant from the Arabic-speaking community mentioned that “This person is alone, she is trying to carry the stuff, but found none to help and she’s depressed” (P3), while a Farsi-speaking participant mentioned likewise that “She’s a sad person with many problems and no one helps” (P4). On the other hand, one French-speaking participant thought that “The lady, who works for an organization, doesn’t have the power to help the girl” (P9).

Theme 4: Empowerment

The fourth theme corresponds to the two last pictures of the comic, where all the characters are standing together. We call this theme “Empowerment”, as peer support could empower people to deal with their problems efficiently. Both Arabic-speaking and Farsi-speaking participants mentioned that in these pictures the young man, the boy and the girl gathered to help the young woman, while a French-speaking participant said that “The organization helps the beneficiary and this makes the beneficiary capable to help other people, like she’s working for the organization too” (P10). The conclusion of the story according to a participant’s words was that “At the end, they became like family and they decided to be all together in order to help others” (P1). A French-speaking participant highlighted that “It’s the story of a CPW, just like the CPW helped us and in that way the organization grew bigger” (P9).

The pilot implementation revealed that no significant changes were necessary, as the participants succeeded in

discerning the intended message accurately when the comic was presented without accompanying text.

Discussion

The present study aimed to culturally adapt a comic as a means for recruiting young refugees to a mental health program offering peer support. There is a little precedent of comics being used as a recruitment tool for a mental health intervention. Until now, comics were used mainly with the purpose of educating the audience about specific topics, particularly public health issues, such as HIV (Gillies *et al.*, 1990), immunizations (Muzumdar & Pantaleo, 2017) and dementia (Gallagher-Thompson *et al.*, 2015).

The goals of the current pilot study were to assess whether the participants' perception of the comics' story and the characters' emotions were in line with the creator's intentions, as well as to assess if they could identify whether any of the characters belonged to the same ethnic background as them. The results of the study showed that all the participants recognized at least one character that could be a member of their own cultural community. In addition to that, they identified characters' feelings, correctly interpreting the visual cues and body language of the depicted characters. Regarding the narrative of the comic, the conducted thematic analysis revealed that participants mentioned all the main intended messages of the storyline.

Mental and emotional engagement was also observed in the present study, with participants noting emotional reactions that were in fact in line with the emotions that the creators wished for their audience to experience. The participants were able to experience emotions while viewing the comic and those emotions were identical to the emotions intended by the researcher, showing that comics are an efficient means of transferring information and eliciting appropriate emotional reactions. The finding agrees with Bearne (2009) that suggested that comics facilitate mental and emotional engagement when transferring content.

The alignment of emotional reactions can also be understood with regards to empathic responses, as also noted by Dallacqua *et al.* (2021). In the aforementioned study, the fact that the characters were of the same age as the target audience, made the readers/viewers empathize more effectively with them. In the case of the present study, the fact that participants were able to experience emotions for the characters depicted, might be due to their own refugee background.

The findings of the present study do not agree with the results from Bosqui *et al.* (2020), which noticed that the intended message was occasionally not understood and was misinterpreted when disseminating research findings through comic form. We hypothesize that this difference can be explained by the fact that community members were involved in the initial stages of the creation of the comic.

Overall, when the comic was presented without accompanying text, the participants from all three communities managed to discern its intended message and therefore, a need to culturally adapt the comic at a later stage, using the

feedback from the focus groups was not deemed necessary. The lack of need for further adaptation might be because the cultural component was taken into account from the initial steps of the creation process. The participation of people from a refugee background in the first round of focus groups may have already given a culturally appropriate direction to the creators. Furthermore, the fact that the message was so accurately understood by the participants, not only in a descriptive manner, but also in its emotional and experiential components, is an indicator of the efficacy of the empathic component of visually presented narratives (Dallacqua *et al.*, 2021).

Limitations

The number of participants in our study was small. This was the case both for the overall number of participants and the number of people that were present in each separate group. The small number of participants was due to the overall small number of people currently living in the CCAC that fell within the age group our intervention was addressed at (16–24 years old). In total, 10 people participated, with no more than 3 being present in any individual session. This may have limited the diversity of responses to the questions and the plurality of the interactions in the conversation between participants. Furthermore, we were not able to have multiple focus groups with two out of the three linguistic communities in the CCAC due to a lack of participants. The participants were chosen by convenience criteria, according to their voluntary expression of interest to participate in the intervention, or even only in the focus group. Therefore, the participants are not demographically representative of the population our intervention is meant to target and results should be interpreted with caution and at this stage cannot be generalized to the population in Greece, in CCACs or the refugee and asylum seeker population in general.

It is notable that only one woman participated in the focus groups, even though both men and women can participate in the intervention. Even though the focus groups were open to both genders, minimal interest for participation was observed by women. Women were approached during outreach activities; however, they declined to participate. At that time, the three CPWs involved in the program and the study were male. It has been observed that Muslim women are reluctant or unable to participate in the studies if their participation entails interaction with male researchers (Subeh & Alzoubi, 2021). This aspect should be addressed in future study designs, including women in the research team in order to address the cultural aspects of participation.

Another methodological limitation was the use of interpretation for the instructions and the transcription of the participants' responses. The instructions were delivered by the research team's Greek psychologists, who were also tasked with the transcription of the answers. The instructions were then translated by the team's CPWs and the participants' answers were then translated again for the psychologists. While we were as thorough as possible in

ensuring that the participant's words were transcribed unaltered, a focus group held in a single language, native to all present, would have been a methodologically more secure approach.

Finally, in the present study, educational background was not measured. This poses a limitation as we are not able to discern whether the use of comics can bypass level of literacy and be an accessible means of transferring information regardless of educational background, as found in a Tekle-Haimanot *et al.* (2016) and in Tobias (2016) where the participants gained appropriate understanding through the comic form, correctly identifying the intended message, regardless of level of literacy.

Suggestions

The use of a comic as a recruitment and informational tool for psychoeducational interventions is relatively novel. More research of quantitative nature might be useful in determining the extent to which a comic is more effective than other traditional, nonvisual methods. Therefore, in the future it might be useful to include a control group, receiving the same information in text form and comparing the two groups as regards the indicators measured to ascertain whether perception differs between the groups and also whether the type of recruitment tool has an effect on the persons recruited.

In that respect, the present study did not proceed with measuring the impact of the tool on number of people recruited for the EPAPSY CPW intervention. In future research, the outcome of recruitment could be measured and presented. Additionally, a comparison could be made on recruitment numbers between comic recruitment materials and text recruitment materials.

Quantitative research might also enhance our understanding of how cultural adaptation methods and participatory processes influence the effectiveness of these materials and might need to further explore the secondary benefits of using this process, such as the sense of ownership and emotional investment of community members that participate in the process.

In our case, the pilot study did not call for significant alterations to the material. That might be because some people of the cultural background of the target populations were involved in the process from the initial steps of the comic's creation. Their involvement from the initial steps ensured that the depiction of cultural norms was accurate. For instance, how the hijab is worn by women, depending on whether they are from an Arabic-speaking country or a Farsi-speaking country as well as what clothes would be preferred, depending on cultural background. In addition to this, the knowledge of living conditions inside a CCAC by the participants led the researchers to adjust the depiction of clothing. For instance, a dress would be culturally appropriate clothing for a woman; however, inside a CCAC, only sweatshirts are available and that would influence their appearance, as well as the participants' understanding of where they currently live. Examples like

this that have contributed to the present study's success should be further explored in future qualitative studies to reveal additional contributing factors, as in the present study the sample was too small (10) to yield results that can be generalized or to allow for a wide range of responses.

Conclusions

The purpose of this article was to present the methodology followed for the design of a culturally sensitive comic as a means of informing the communities of a refugee camp for a psychosocial intervention. It is a participatory process, where both experts (artists and scientists) and experts by experience (community members) are involved equally. The participation of the community members in all phases resulted in the cultural adaptation of the material, as found in the pilot study. Further elements from upcoming studies could upgrade the process and arrive at the formation of a methodological model of cultural sensitization and adaptation of any visualized material.

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