

How can comics be used to support young people's meaning-making with museum collections?

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**What would this item mean to people in
50 years' time?**

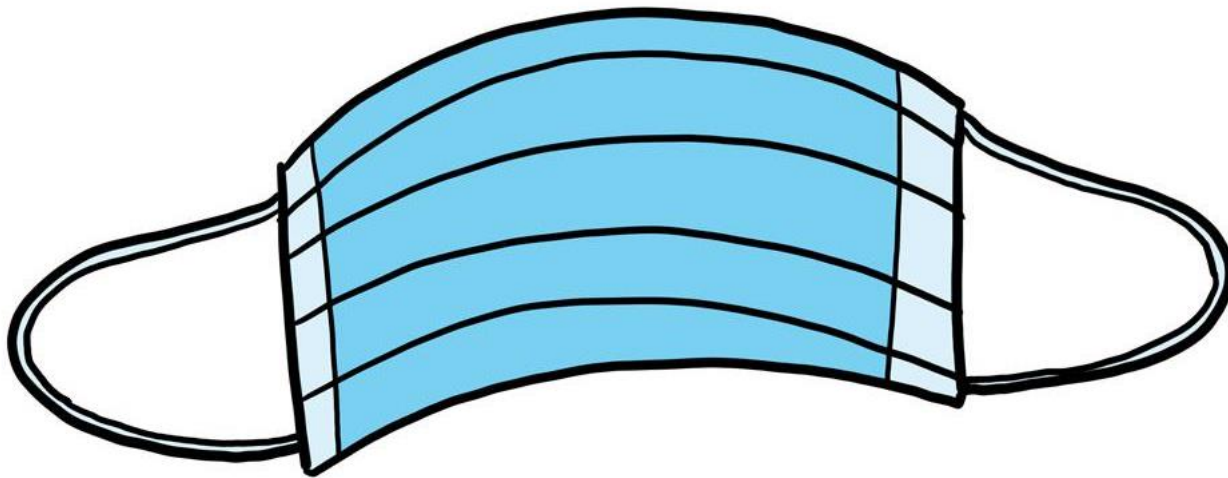


Figure 1. A drawing of a disposable face mask.

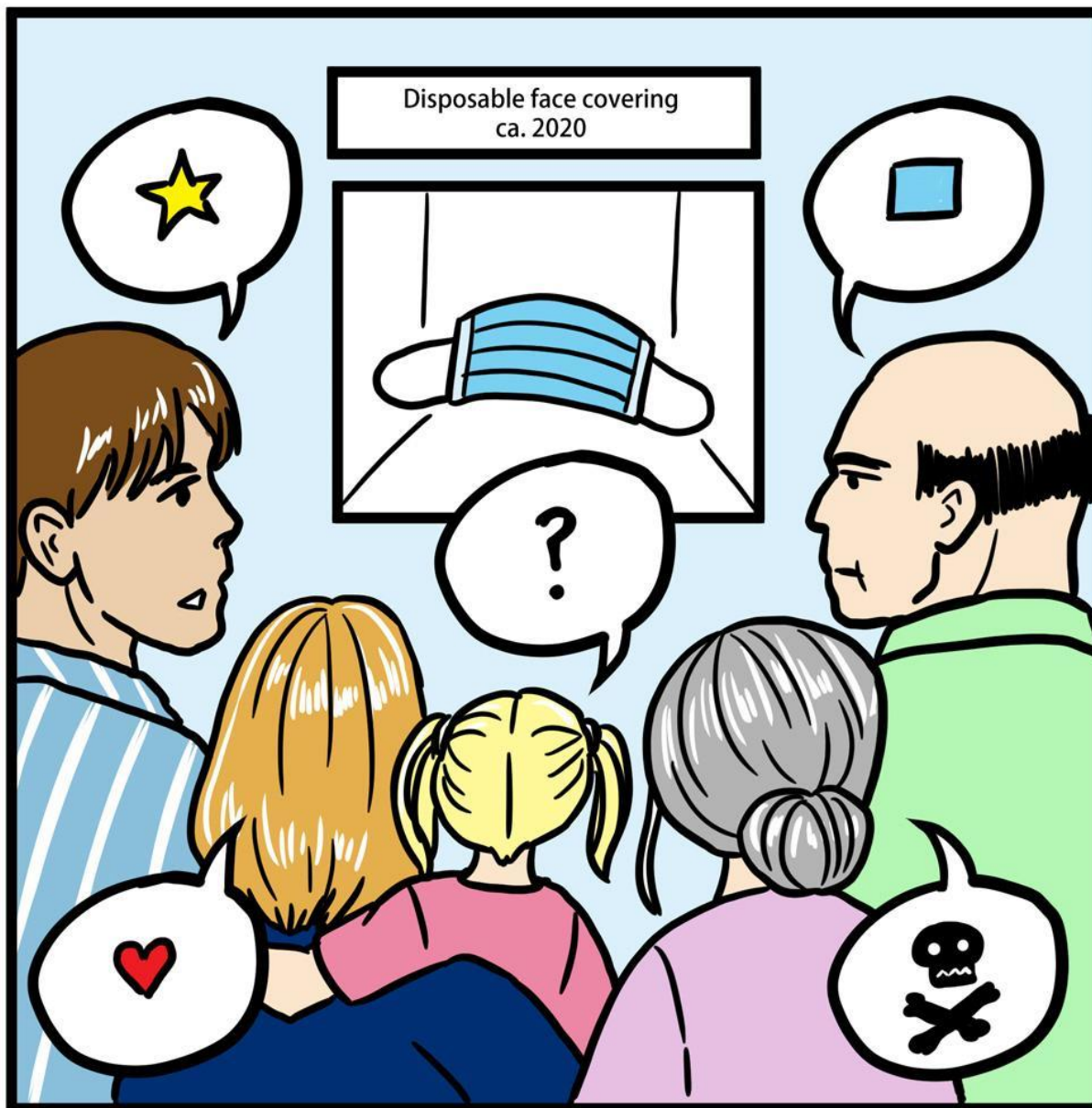


Figure 2. Representation of meaning-making in museums.

Project rationale and aims

The project aims to:

- investigate how creating comics may support young people's meaning-making with museum collections;
- analyse potential benefits and limitations of using comics in museums.

Meaning-making in museums

- **Meaning-making** is “the process of making sense of experience, of explaining or interpreting the world to ourselves and others” (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999, p. 12).
- In museums, the construction of meaning is **not “neutral or unbiased”** (Toronchuk, 2018); the way the items are presented, interpreted, and curated can have an effect on the meanings made by visitors.
- In my practice, both as museum staff and an artist working with museums, I have noted that museums often lack activities aimed at **young people aged 10-19**, in favour of more activities for the younger age group/families.

Using comics as a research method

- Existing museum activities rarely involve **participatory comics creation**, despite the increasing use of comics in museums and heritage sectors to “communicate research about the past” (Swogger, 2019, p. 137).
- Creating comics allows participants to “construct and tell their own stories, in **their own voices** and in their own ways” (McNicol, 2019, p. 5).
- Comics are particularly suitable for evidencing **individual meaning-making** as they present “an opportunity to explore and communicate [creators’] subjectivity” (Kuttner, Sousanis, and Weaver-Hightower, 2018, p. 401).

Context

- A cohort of **8 young people aged between 10 and 19** with an interest in art was recruited through two arts organisations in Cambridgeshire.
- Due to the pandemic-related constraints, the project took place online, using the online collections of **The Fitzwilliam Museum** (an art and antiquities museum in Cambridge).

Project description

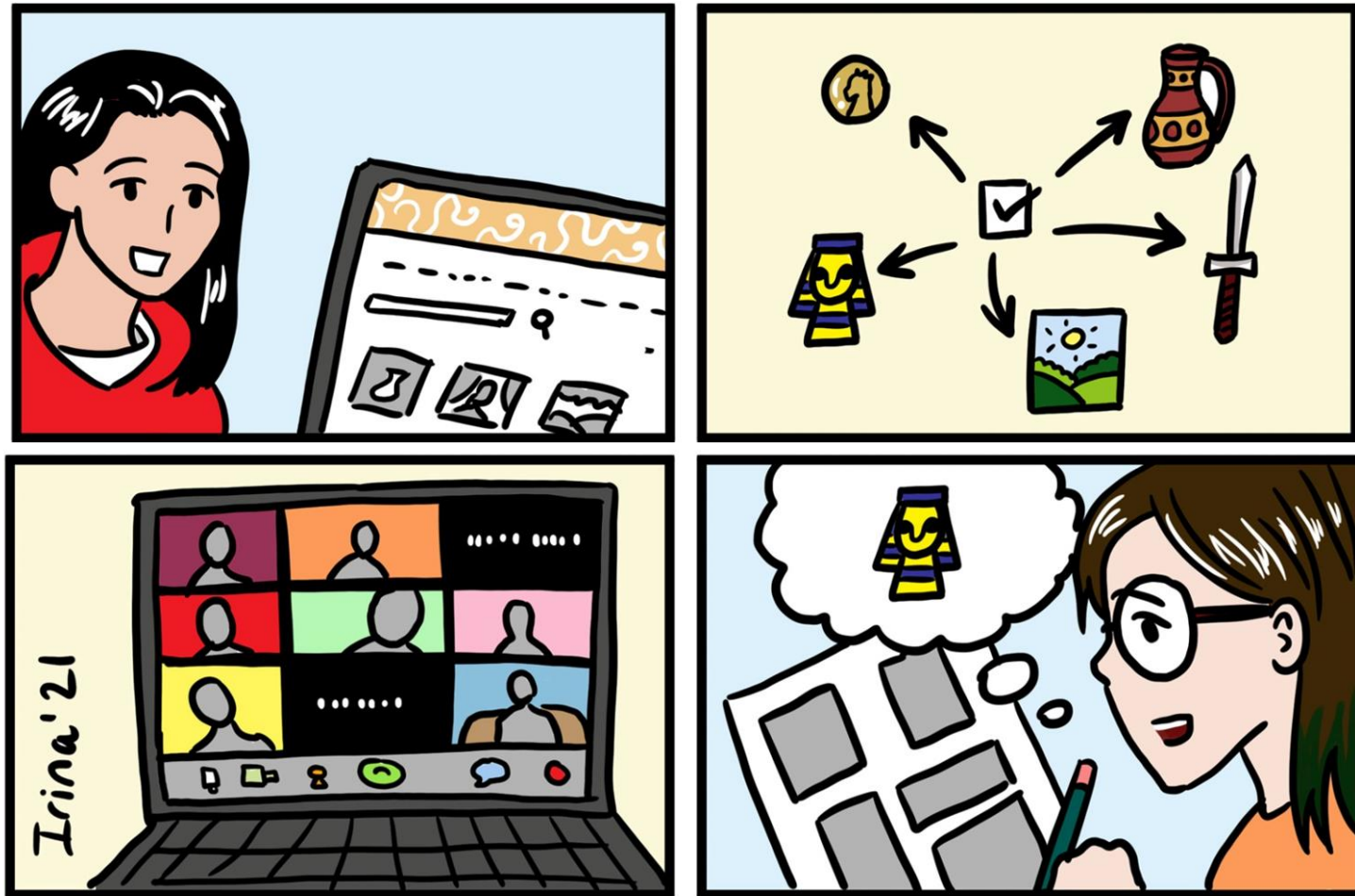
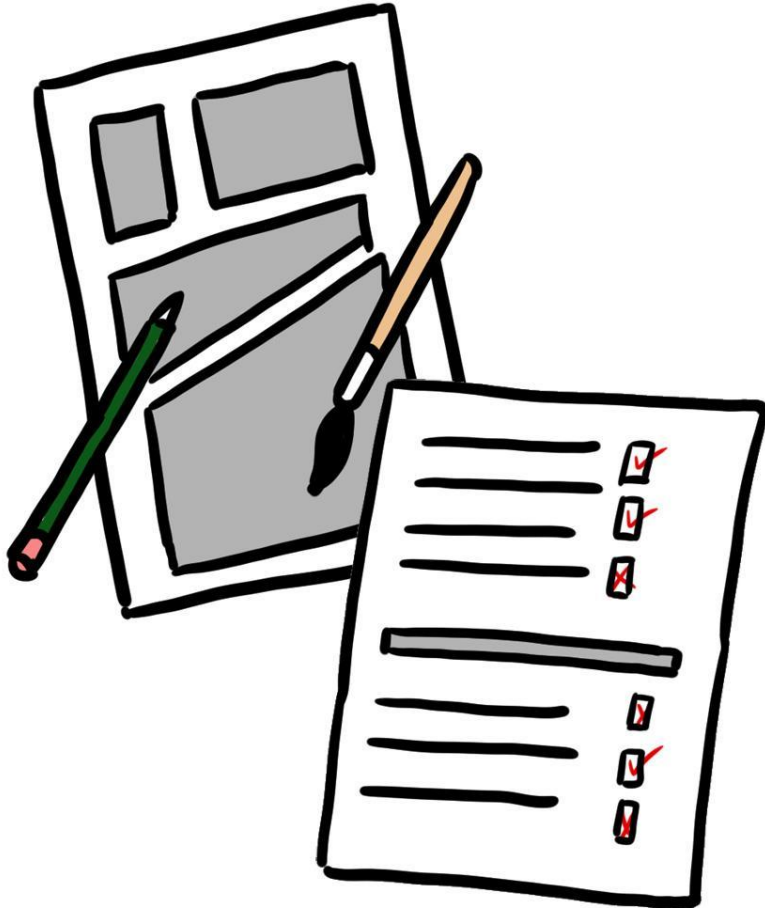


Figure 3. Stages of research project.
No true likeness of participants is depicted.

The Fitzwilliam Museum online collections can be found at:
<https://collection.beta.fitz.ms>

Research methods



- **Participants' comics** (main data collection method)
- **Participants' questionnaires** (additional data collection method)

Figure 4. Data collection methods.

Data coding and analysis

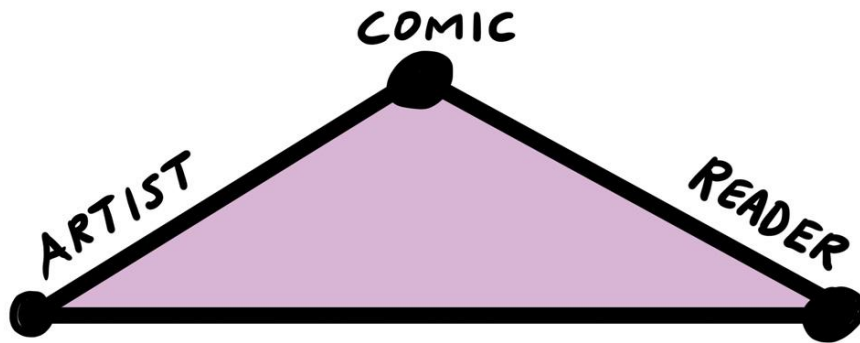


Figure 5. The rhetorical triangle.

- Writing **analytic memos** about participants' comics (Saldana, 2015, p. 41-56).
- The “**rhetorical triangle**” approach (McNicol, 2018, p. 9).

Benefits and limitations of comics as a research method

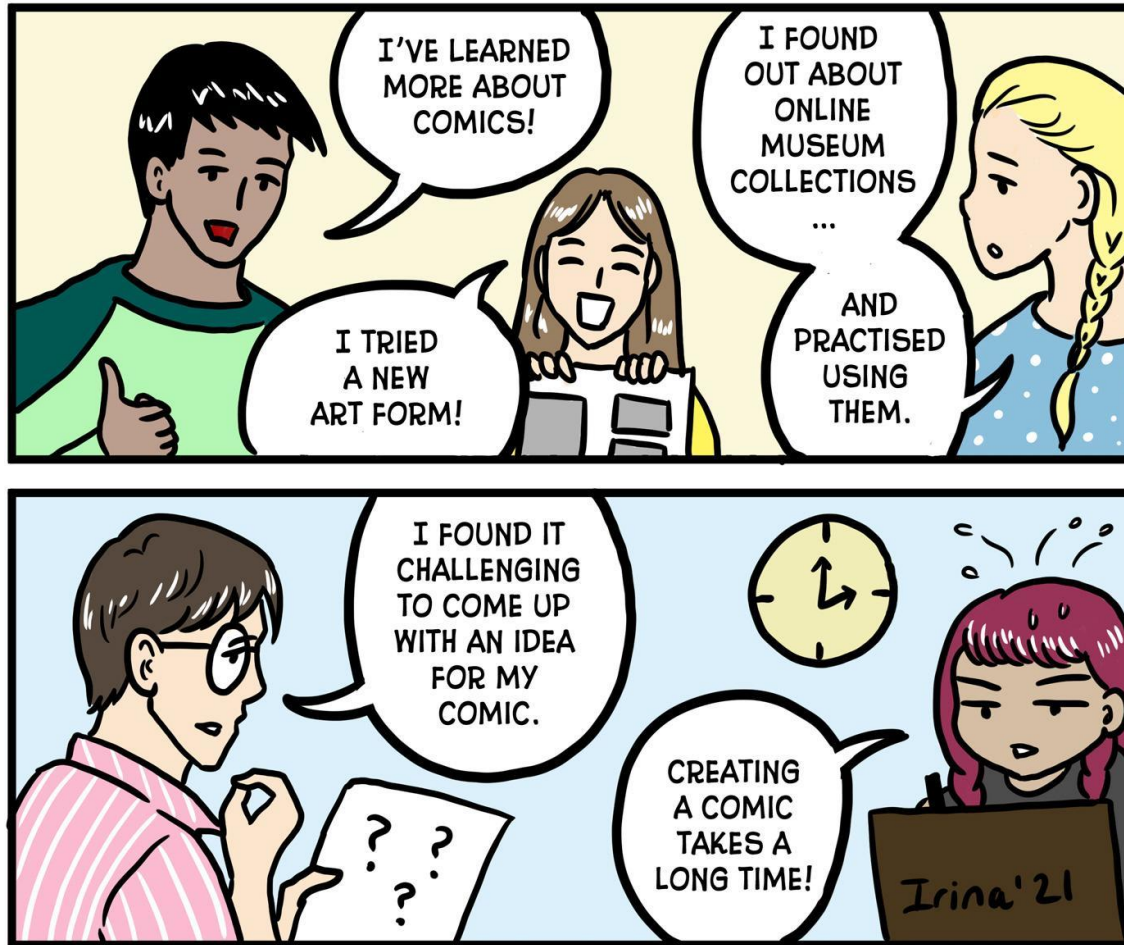


Figure 7. Representation of the benefits and limitations of using comics.
No true likeness of participants is depicted. Participants' responses have been rephrased whilst preserving the meaning of the original quotes.

Conclusion

- Despite being a work-in-progress, the study has demonstrated ways in which young people may “**make personal sense of public meaning**” (Payne, 2018, p. 562).
- The project has provided an insight into the **creative use of online museum collections**, which may be particularly relevant for museums during prolonged periods of closure.
- There may be future opportunities to apply the project model in a **physical space** (a museum or heritage organisation) and with a **larger group** of participants.

References

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