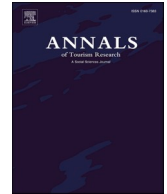




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FULL LENGTH ARTICLE

## Humour and comics for academic change and well-being

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## ABSTRACT

Considering recent calls for change towards a more liveable tourism academia, we combined critical participatory action research with duoethnography to develop *The Academic Line*—a humorous comic project about academic life. We used traditional theories of humour to leverage the effectiveness of comics as communicative devices and explored how and to what extent our project promoted solidarity, reflexivity, well-being, and change. This study reveals our concrete commitment to fostering change within and potentially improving academia, and to experiment with a form of communication, which is still underexplored in the scholarly sphere but fruitfully applied in other contexts to raise awareness of and prompt discussion about crucially important issues.

## Introduction

Although academic life offers abundant opportunities for learning, exploration, and personal growth, various studies have raised concerns about the well-being of academics, highlighting common issues such as workaholicism, poor work–life balance, stress, and burnout (Caesens et al., 2014; Fleming, 2021; Jaremka et al., 2020; Levecque et al., 2017; Taris et al., 2001). Recently, the COVID19 crisis has impacted and, in some cases, worsened such vulnerabilities (Mitchell, 2020). Academic well-being is closely linked to the myriad challenges faced by scholars, as elucidated by Kalfa et al. (2018) and Lucas (2006), who critically referred to these challenges as ‘games’ that are played to acquire reputation and resources, produce publications, and/or resist managerialist imperatives. Editors and reviewers are often perceived as the ‘gatekeepers’ of academia and attract praise and sometimes harsh criticism from colleagues for their substantial influence over authors’ success in terms of publications and self-esteem (Forsberg et al., 2022; Gonzalez et al., 2022; Hames, 2012; Jaremka et al., 2020; Peterson, 2020). Overall, many academics appear to simultaneously derive satisfaction and frustration from their professional lives.

The field of tourism is no exception. Discussions about the challenges that affect well-being are occasionally disseminated through the mailing list and Facebook group of the Tourism Research Information Network, which is formed by international tourism research and education scholars (<https://shidler.hawaii.edu/tim/trinet>). Recently, an experienced scholar initiated two discussions through this network’s mailing list, questioning the current state and future trajectory of academic publishing (“What is happening with some journals?” 15.9.2023) and exploring the ethical dimensions of certain practices (“Is this ethical?” 18.12.2023). In response to these posts, a mailing list member expressed frustration over having papers rejected by reviewers on what they considered arbitrary grounds (15.9.2023), and another person (an editor) highlighted instances of authors “wasting the time of editors” by submitting papers that made “absolutely no contribution to the universe” (27–28.9.2023). Similarly, another scholar (the chief editor of a leading journal)

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reported on the Tourism Research Information Network's Facebook page their disappointment concerning occasional accusations of "unfairness" and commented on unethical behaviours among an increasing number of authors (8.8.2023). These discussions indicate a generalised sense of dissatisfaction, echoing the sentiments expressed by Lee and Benjamin (2023), who advocated transformative change in academia to make it more liveable. This criticism aligns with some PhD students' perceptions of academia as a highly hierarchical, exclusive, and emotionally debilitating workplace structured by unequal power relations (Ayikoru et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2024; Mura & Wijesinghe, 2022).

In our study, we explored the potential of humour and comics—developed by and targeting scholars—as mechanisms for enhancing well-being in academic work environments and as tools to prompt a critical stance on academia and the dynamics and power relations shaping the academic community. In response to the previously mentioned challenges, authors have discussed the coping strategies academics use, such as seeking social support among peers, adopting different 'selves', and practising self-care (Kumar & Cavallaro, 2018; Petersen, 2011; Schmidt & Hansson, 2018). Despite extensive literature on the significance of humour in society and work environments (e.g. Critchley, 2002; Martin, 2007; Scheel, Gockel, & Scheel, 2017; Veatch, 1998; Westwood & Johnston, 2013) and its fictional representations (e.g. in the TV series *The Office* and the comic strip *Dilbert*), humour has rarely been applied to academia. Among scholarly works, an exception is the note 'Bestiarium Academicum', which describes various archetypes of academics (Baruchello, 2021). Outside the scholarly literature, humour is generally restricted to the genre of campus publications (Bulaitis & Bulaitis, 2020), such as *Campus Trilogy* (Lodge, 2011), and a few other mediums, such as the humorous Facebook group page "Reviewer 2 must be stopped!" (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/reviewer2>), the TV series *The Chair* (<https://www.netflix.com/it-en/title/81206259>), and the comic strip *PhD Comics* (<https://phdcomics.com/>). Apart from the latter, humour and comics have not been considered in or applied to the multifaceted aspects of academia. An exception is Bocher et al. (2020), who use text and humoristic comics to comment on the issue of sexual discrimination, which is also discussed referring to the use of jokes in the book project *SexismEdu* (Einersen et al., n.d.). Some tourism scholars have discussed humour and comics in relation to tourist guides (e.g. Tu et al., 2020), practices within the tourism sector (e.g. Cheng et al., 2023), and festivals (e.g. Lemmi et al., 2018), but they have not applied humour and comics to their own work environments and/or personal experiences.

These considerations motivated us—two tourism scholars passionate about humour in fictional narratives and comics—to engage in a project named *The Academic Line*, which develops and disseminates a humorous comic strip about academia. In September 2023, we initiated the project based on our personal experiences as former PhD candidates, authors, reviewers, editors, and PhD supervisors, which are roles that we vividly represent in the comic strip. In this paper, we discuss how we combined critical participatory action research and duoethnography (Kemmis et al., 2014a; Kemmis et al., 2014b; Sawyer & Norris, 2012) and applied them to this project to examine humour and comics in academia. In this paper, we discuss the theoretical background of our project and draw on some of the key elements of traditional humour theories (Morreall, 2009, 2012; Scheel, 2017) to elaborate on our experiences during the project's initial months.

## Theoretical background

Humour has been extensively studied from philosophical, psychological, sociological, anthropological, and linguistic perspectives, and its applications span diverse contexts, including politics, healthcare, and organisational management. It is not within this paper's scope to provide a comprehensive review of such a transdisciplinary corpus of literature. Instead, our focus is on delineating the elements of humour that have the potential to foster critical self-reflection and positive change in academia. Specifically, we reflect on some of the core ideas of the traditional superiority, relief, and incongruity theories of humour. In line with Lintott (2016), we consider these theories complementary and useful for shedding light on humour, as presented in the next sections, in which we explore and discuss key aspects of humour and argue for the utility of comics as effective media for humorous communication.

### *Humour theories and their application to academia*

When tracing the chronological evolution of humour, the first impressions are rather negative, but upon closer examination, some constructive elements are particularly applicable to academia. The first accounts of humour in Western culture, preceding the Enlightenment, tended to associate laughter with scorn, domination, violence, mockery, and insolence (Morreall, 2009, 2012; Scheel, 2017). Such accounts formed the foundation of superiority theory, different versions of which share the feature of seeing laughter as a way to compare oneself with others and judge oneself as superior. Playful competition based on ridicule, sarcasm, and even aggression at the expense of others is central to this theory (Morreall, 2009, 2012). The resulting type of humour is sometimes claimed to be maladaptive and disparaging and, due to its emphasis on interpersonal comparison, is particularly relevant to inter- and intragroup dynamics (Ferguson & Ford, 2008; Scheel, 2017; Wolfgruber, 2023). Such a relational dimension highlights the social double-edged sword aspect of humour as both a unifier and divider, marking boundaries in terms of superiority/inferiority, but also promoting solidarity within, for example, working teams (De Bres & Holmes, 2023; Meyer, 2000; Scheel, 2017; Zekavat, 2017). The latter aspect is relevant to academia, which has, among its ideals, the vision of a global community of scholars collaborating to advance knowledge and address real-world challenges.

The relational dimension of superiority theory can help us understand humour's pertinent role in criticism, directed either towards others or ourselves and ultimately contributing to reflexivity—a quality that is intrinsically relevant to academia. Humour, as a form of communication, implies a degree of similarity between those employing it and their intended audience, and this similarity encompasses shared symbols, ideas, and cultural knowledge (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014; Tesnohlidkova, 2021). Such dynamics are particularly evident in the genre of satire, in which humour's superiority dimension is applied to situations familiar to both the authors and

recipients. In this genre, authors typically depict and mock these situations with the dual intention of amusing and critiquing, often implicitly referencing specific moral values that are shared among people but not fully adhered to (Tesnohlikova, 2021). Importantly, superiority theory accommodates self-deprecating humour regarding ourselves and/or the specific roles we play; we laugh at others, but also at ourselves (Morreall, 2012; Veatch, 1998). This highlights the potential of humour to voice criticism of situations, including those pertaining to the institutions and organisations with which we may be affiliated, as well as self-criticism. These considerations underscore humour's significance in fostering reflexivity, which encompasses self-awareness, introspection, and the capacity and willingness to effect positive change in both ourselves and our circumstances (Finlay, 2003; Watts, 2019).

Shifting the focus to relief theory, it is possible to reflect further on the mechanisms of humour that are potentially relevant to academia. This theory is informed by the evolution of Western perceptions of humour since the eighteenth century, marked by the initial positive connotations of the term *humour* (Morreall, 2009, 2012; Scheel, 2017). Relief theory posits humour as a release of tension that merges physiological arousal with cognitive appraisal (Banas et al., 2011; Morreall, 2009, 2012; Scheel, 2017). Relief theory, the most prominent promoter of which was Sigmund Freud (1886–1939), is used extensively in psychoanalysis and refers to employing humour to trigger catharsis in response to uncertain and stressful circumstances (Banas et al., 2011; Bouwmeester, 2013; Cheng et al., 2021). As for the superiority theory, also according to this theory humour can be directed towards ourselves (Cohen, 2013) and also used for self-defence, since we often laugh at something that troubles and frightens us (Critchley, 2002). Based on this perspective, some scholars have explored humour in relation to workplace dynamics, including hierarchical relationships (Plester & Kim, 2021) and burnout (Torgheh & Alipour, 2015). This approach is particularly pertinent to the pervasive challenges regarding well-being that scholars experience in academia (Caesens et al., 2014; Jaremka et al., 2020; Taris et al., 2001), including tourism academia (Ayikoru et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2024; Lee & Benjamin, 2023; Mura & Wijesinghe, 2022).

The third traditional theory of humour is incongruity theory, which focuses on a mechanism of humour that, we argue, could be fruitfully applied within academia. This theory's core idea is that we recognise the incongruous elements of a situation by leveraging our cognitive faculties and reconciling conflicts through amusement (Scheel, 2017). Humour encompasses elements of understanding, surprise, absurdity, and nonsense (Meyer, 2000), disrupting expected patterns based on our experiences and beliefs. By considering humour's temporary disruption of patterns alongside its relevance to reflexivity—understood, as outlined previously, not only as introspection but also as a willingness to change—incongruity theory offers a viable perspective on reshaping academia for two reasons. Firstly, given humour's recognised role in fostering change, particularly in social and political realms, such as peace activism (Sørensen, 2017) and politics (Tsakona & Popa, 2011), it is plausible to envision its utility within academia, where ideals and engagement are usually rewarded. Secondly, humour, rooted in cognitive abilities, can be particularly suitable for application to scholars who share an innate sense of intellectual curiosity. Regarding the element of expectation, incongruity theory may be particularly valuable for PhD candidates and junior researchers who are among the most vulnerable academics (Ayikoru et al., 2009; Levecque et al., 2017; Mura & Wijesinghe, 2022) and tend to experience mismatches between their expectations of academia and the difficulties they face within it.

Drawing on the literature on humour theories, we identified four key elements relevant to academia: solidarity, reflexivity, well-being, and change. Aligned with insights from various humour scholars (e.g. Lynch, 2002; Martin, 2007; Miczo, 2019), we understand humour as a form of playful communication. It involves a communicative process that entertains and surprises recipients with unexpected insights into familiar contexts, potentially prompting critical reflection and implicitly providing opportunities for personal and collective change. Consequently, humour facilitates changes in perspective that can enhance our individual well-being within work environments. Within tourism academia, where transformative shifts are increasingly advocated, as highlighted by Lee and Benjamin (2023) and Lee et al. (2024), who are calling for a shift towards more caring approaches towards graduate students, fostering such improvements is imperative.

### *The role of comics in humour*

Our decision to use comics stemmed from their effectiveness, versatility, and potential for facilitating disruptive and meaningful communication based on combinations of images and texts. A comic strip—a specific format characterised by minimal text, many images, and brief narratives conveyed through speech bubbles—is a multisemiotic medium in which images cannot be dissociated from texts, since they complement each other in a hybrid form of expression (Rollo, 2018). In France, during the latter half of the twentieth century, comics were identified as the 'ninth art' because they provided an engaging medium suitable for telling stories, conveying emotions, and expressing ideas through artistic techniques (Lacassin, 1971). Comics—and their authors—have played a crucial role in fostering awareness, deeper understanding, and novel perspectives regarding societal, political, and cultural practices and changes (Magnussen & Christiansen, 2000). For example, in the 1970s, Claire Bretécher played a pioneering role in analysing societal changes through the humorous lens of her comics, widely acknowledged as a form of graphic sociology (Pezzullo, 2020; Rollo, 2018).

Comics have been largely created, published, and discussed as a form of activism and cultural and political dissent (Lund, 2018; Nordenstam & Wallin-Wictorin, 2023), as in the cases of Marjan Satrapi's *Persepolis* (Ostby, 2017), Kate Evans's *Red Rosa* (Davies, 2017), Quan Zhou Wu's *Gazpacho Agridulce* (Collado, 2020), and the black humour of *Charlie Hebdo* (Keane, 2015). Hence, as a medium for humorous entertainment, sociological analysis, and activism, comics are catalysts for discussions on social issues, societal changes, and trends. Moreover, as reported by Doherty (2011), comics have a remarkable ability to capture and comprehend individuals within their social contexts, as exemplified by the office dynamics portrayed in Scott Adams's *Dilbert*. Using simplistic, archetypal characters, comic strips facilitate the projective identification of readers (McCloud, 1994)—a process further augmented by technological advances, such as the proliferation of webcomics (online comic platforms) and e-comic tools (web-based applications for

creating and sharing comics) (Berube, 2022; Gardner, 2012; Lazarinis et al., 2015).

Although several scholars have discussed comics and noted their multifaceted potential, little attention has been paid to humorous comics employed within and targeting academia. This oversight persists despite acknowledgements, such as Bahl's (2015) recognition, of a symbiotic relationship between scholarly pursuits and comics. Bahl (2015) claimed that comics offer "an alternative mode of meaning-making that ... embraces a sense of wonder, discovery, and delight in the messy process of knowledge creation in and of itself" (p. 179). One notable exception is the work of Jorge Cham, a mechanical engineer from Stanford University who became a full-time cartoonist and launched *PhD Comics* in 1997. Described as "piled higher and deeper", as stated on the official website, this comic strip humorously depicts the tribulations of PhD candidates' lives, or rather, their lack of lives (<https://phdcomics.com/about.php>). Based on Cham's personal experiences and those of his peers, this webcomic resonates strongly with junior academics as a prime example of cocreative consumption thriving within and nurturing a global community, as noted by Wohlfeil and Solé (2013).

Except for *PhD comics*, no comic strip seems to be specifically crafted by and for scholars, with the aim of humorously depicting academic life, eliciting laughter and surprise, and fostering constructive critique. It is difficult to identify the reasons for this scarcity, although several factors may contribute to the near-complete absence of such comic strips. These factors could include scholars' apprehension about being perceived as trivial, as proposed by Watson (2015), in relation to the use of humour; their limited inclination towards activities that do not directly contribute to their professional recognition; discomfort with employing mediums of communication other than traditional academic texts; and/or their widespread humourlessness. Uncertain about the reasons for such a lack of attention to humour and comics to improve the work environments of academics and eager to introduce a novel approach to such improvement, we decided to design and implement a project.

## Methodology

To explore the use of humour and comics in academia, we combined critical participatory action research and duoethnography. The former approach resonates strongly with our thinking and acting when engaging in research on humour and comics in academia. We adopted this approach due to our concern about declining well-being in academia and the current practice of being an academic and our strong commitment to the collective self-reflective reconsideration of that practice (i.e. are we, as individuals and members of the academic community, thinking and acting in relation to our practice and each other in the only possible way?) (Kemmis et al., 2014a). Critical participatory action research was particularly relevant to our conceptualisation of humour as a form of playful and critical communication due to its emphasis on creating communicative spaces for engaging in novel forms of participation (Kemmis, 2009; Kemmis et al., 2014a, 2014b; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000, 2005). This perspective also supported our decision to use a comic strip as a communication medium. Furthermore, critical participatory action research rests on the belief that revised research practices must adhere to the principles of rationality, sustainability, and justice (Kemmis et al., 2014a; McTaggart, 1991). In our context, we interpreted this as adopting an academic practice that is more comprehensible, satisfying in the long term, and inclusive.

Our commitment to critical participatory action research guided our choice of duoethnography, which prioritises direct engagement and adaptability over strict adherence to standard research procedures with clear successive steps, including the cyclical model of action research proposed by Lewin (1951). Duoethnography builds on ethnography, as noted by several scholars in relation to its possible compatibility and synergies with action research (e.g. Eisenhart, 2019; López-Gopar et al., 2014). We thought that autoethnography, since it accommodates researchers' engagement, subjectivity, emotions, and reflexivity regarding themselves and their situations (Ellis et al., 2011), was particularly suitable for a study that rested on a critical participatory action research approach that radically departs from the positivist ideals of objectivity and distance from the researched (Kemmis et al., 2014b). Duoethnography involves two researchers who collaboratively engage in a scholarly conversation on a topic that deeply matters to them (Norris & Sawyer, 2017). They do so through dialogue characterised by reciprocal trust and recognition of differences, polyvocality, diverse interpretations, openness, flexibility, and accessibility (Sawyer & Norris, 2012; Spencer & Paisley, 2013). These features of duoethnography appropriately describe our spontaneous engagement with our project, which we conceptualised as a safe art space to share, reflect on, and laugh about the academic world and which, taking inspiration from Osvaldo Cavandoli's *The Line*, we named *The*

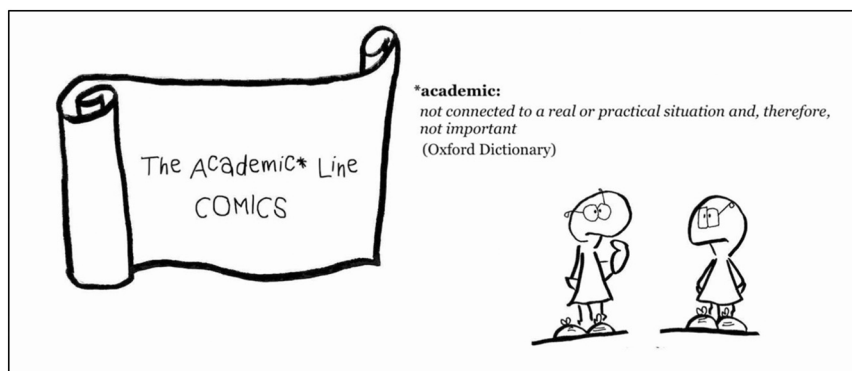


Fig. 1. *The Academic Line* comic strip banner.

### Academic Line.

*The Academic Line* was initiated in September 2023 and launched on 15 October 2023. It began with the first author's accidental discovery of the second author's passion for comics. This shared passion sparked an exchange of short texts and drawings based on what we considered the absurd and hilarious aspects of our jobs. For example, Fig. 1 shows the comic strip banner that we designed based on one of the definitions of "academic" in the Oxford Dictionary ([https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/american\\_english/academic\\_1](https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/american_english/academic_1)) that suggested possibly conflicting perceptions of the academic role. Another example is shown in Fig. 2, which depicts the same topic of different perceptions in a strip based on the actual response of an artificial intelligence tool to a question about the description of academics and how they are perceived. At the time of writing, the project includes 23 characters, and the main ones are represented in Fig. 3.

The organisation of the project included creating an alter ego, the project's dissemination via the internet, and the recruitment of active participants. We named the alter ego Dr. Ellen Fant to symbolise the presence of 'an elephant in the academic room', consisting of the unsatisfactory, laughable aspects of our practice. Ellen was designed as a person we could relate to (Ellen is a 50ish Western female tourism scholar) and who could inspire us (Ellen is smart, critical, and brave) and help us maintain a certain level of anonymity. From the start of the project, we strove to disseminate the comic strips and invite other academics to engage actively with them. In addition to a few academic friends, the dissemination occurred through a dedicated Facebook page, the occasional sharing of the strips

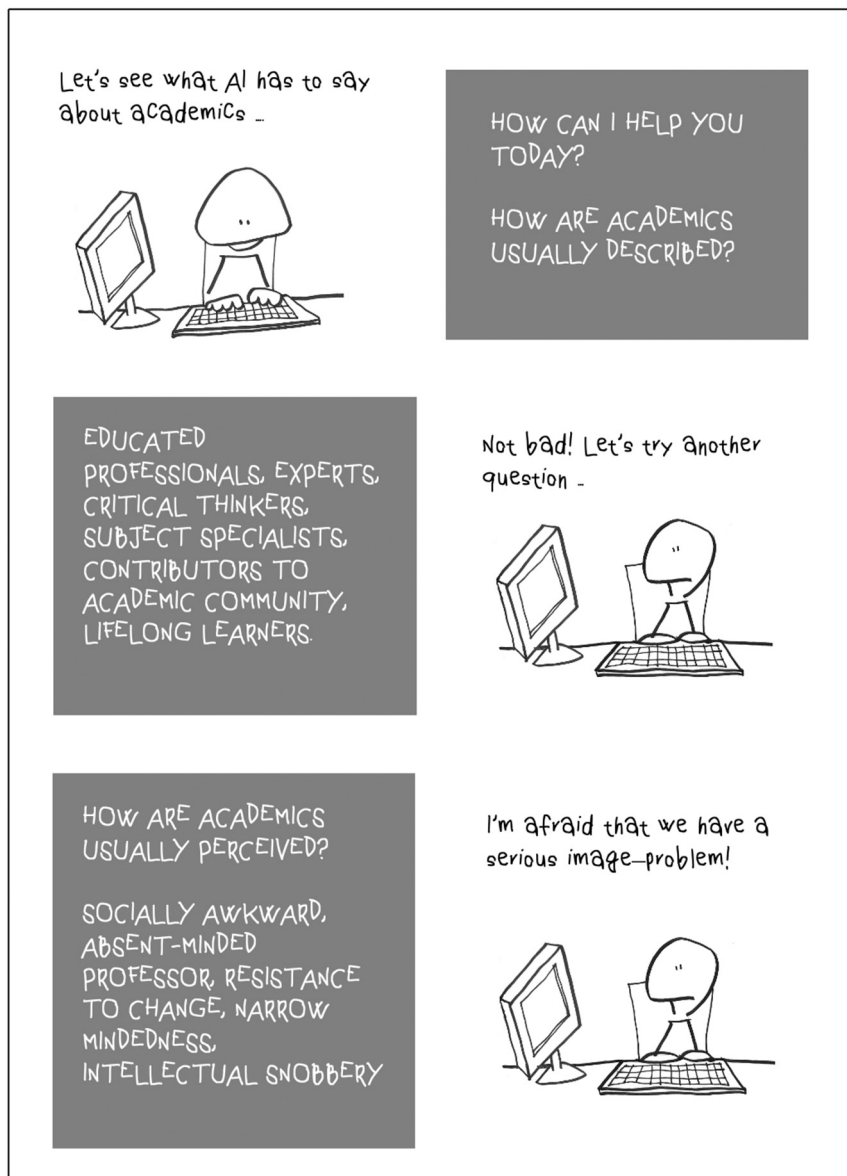


Fig. 2. An example of *The Academic Line* comic strip.



Fig. 3. Main characters of *The Academic Line* project.

on the Facebook page (e.g. “Reviewer 2 must be stopped!”), a newsletter, an email to the tourism researchers’ mailing list (15.11.2023), and an email to 42 editors (24.11.2023) of some of the major tourism journals. The emails included a description of the project that highlighted our intention to involve academics with different roles and experiences (“to help your critical and ironic voice to emerge and contribute to a better academia”) and to use humour in a constructive way (“to make the readers smile, laugh and think critically about academia”). It also provided examples and texts that we could use to develop comic strips. We considered it important to guarantee the anonymity of all contributors.

As researchers embedded in the context we are studying (Ellis et al., 2011; Finlay, 2003), we considered it important to reflect on our backgrounds, specifically our differences, similarities, and experiences within academia. Having worked closely on several projects, some of our experiences were shared, while others were different, as different were our academic backgrounds (a master’s degree in Business, a master’s degree in Architecture and Urban Planning, a PhD in Community Planning, and a PhD in Sustainable Tourism Management), past work experience (industry worker, waitress, museum attendant, language teacher, municipality employee, non-governmental organisation worker, tour leader, and entrepreneur), and professional experiences in the institutions we had been and are affiliated with (University College, University, University of Applied Sciences; Departments of business, economics, hospitality, and tourism), and the countries we had worked in (Norway, Italy, Ecuador, the United Kingdom, Germany, and the Netherlands). Regarding the similarities, we noted our shared cultural background (Italian, classical studies foundation), gender

(female), age (around 50), research interests (community-based, local, rural development, animal ethics, and food sustainability), and, importantly, concerns about being part of the production and reproduction of an academia characterised by increasingly deteriorating well-being. Such differences and similarities were the basis for many conversations over three years that intensified in the last year. The tone of such conversations was characterised by trust, openness, willingness to help each other, and, not least, humour. The last of these became particularly evident after some difficulties arose during some common projects, when we found ourselves laughing at ourselves, our expectations, and others' behaviours, which we sometimes found odd, incompressible, or even wrong.

## Findings and discussion

In the tradition of duoethnography, this section presents and discusses the main findings concerning the use of humour and comics in *The Academic Line* project based on dialogue. The latter was developed based on an in-depth conversation among the authors and its adaptation to short dialogues that could fit the journal format. Such dialogues focus on the key elements discussed regarding the theoretical background (solidarity, reflexivity, well-being, and change). For each of these elements, we present short dialogues that exemplify the most important ideas that surfaced during our numerous conversations following the start of the project. Each dialogue is followed by a short discussion to emphasise the learning that emerged.

### *How and to what extent does The Academic Line promote solidarity?*

Author 1: I used to believe that the idea of a global community of tourism researchers was valid ... that there was general solidarity, despite the differences in our contexts, backgrounds, and so on ... which *The Academic Line* project could build on. I expected that our participatory approach would yield more engagement than it has thus far, but only a handful of individuals, mostly friends, have contributed ideas for scripts and characters. None of the chief editors have responded to our email and (something that I find curious), it seems that very few of those following *The Academic Line* have Anglo-Saxon backgrounds. I'm beginning to doubt the existence of a widespread sense of solidarity on which we can build. Humour, it seems, may be another divisive element among researchers.

Author 2: It was idealistic to assume that fellow academics would pay attention to our emails, given their intense workloads and their unfamiliarity with both *The Academic Line* project and the name Dr. Ellen Fant. However, let's not overlook the positive outcomes of these past few months! The number of followers of our Facebook page has been slowly and steadily growing. Unfortunately, I can speak about a sense of solidarity only regarding my network of friends and colleagues, with whom I usually share anecdotes about academic experiences for a laugh. Fostering solidarity through *The Academic Line* project among a broader academic community is currently not working.

We both concurred with the significant, albeit limited, role that the project could play in fostering solidarity within academia. In our theoretical reasoning, we posited that humour and comics could cultivate a sense of solidarity among tourism scholars and, ideally, we aimed to engage the global scholarly community. However, after reflecting on our experiences, we now better understand the importance of shared symbols, ideas, and cultural knowledge in harnessing the potential of humour (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014; Tesnohlikova, 2021). We have come to realise the dual nature of humour as both a unifying and dividing force (Meyer, 2000). We are aware of the vast diversity among scholars, including those within the tourism research network whom we invited to join our project. It became evident that a comic strip would naturally resonate with only a subset of this diverse group and potentially reinforce existing boundaries between people, partly due to different cultural backgrounds. Additionally, we recognised that solidarity and the willingness to share experiences and ideas—foundational to our participatory approach—depends heavily on the initiator's perceived academic prominence and the ability to foster trust, which is challenging to establish solely through online interactions, underscoring the limitations of webcomics' interactive aspects (Berube, 2022). Nevertheless, our aspiration to cultivate an *Academic Line* community, comprising academics actively engaged in the development of the comic, remains plausible but uncertain. So far, *The Academic Line* has demonstrated its capacity to strengthen solidarity only within certain closely linked groups (Zekavat, 2017), such as those in our immediate circle of academic acquaintances and friends.

### *How and to what extent does The Academic Line promote reflexivity?*

Author 1: Creating comic strips has helped me step back and reconsider quite common occurrences, such as facing communication and technical difficulties during a review process, from a detached and comic perspective, which has prompted reflections on my sometimes-unrealistic expectations. I must say that some expectations are quite legit, especially those about ethical conduct, and I note that, in those cases, I sometimes use humour to highlight these cases and criticise them. When it comes to adopting the perspective of others to reflect more deeply on academic life ... well, we've developed several strips about humorous episodes involving chief editors based on our experiences as authors. The recent introduction of the character of an inexperienced chief editor and creating a strip taking his perspective required some extra effort: it forced me to imagine the role from a different angle ... It was fun, I must admit.

Author 2: Certainly, embodying roles and perspectives different from our own is an excellent self-reflection exercise. It prompts me to gain broader—often funny—insights into the perceptions of academics and academia. Moreover, regarding *The Academic Line* comics, I've noticed that the characters—and points of view—of children, animal companions, and non-academic people are particularly popular. The children always get plenty of likes on Facebook! They offer an outside view of academia, so their perspective seems to debunk some of our self-perceptions and certainties. The success of these strips suggests there's fertile soil for humour and reflexivity among some scholars.

Author 1: Even the notion that scholars might not be the sole and most important drivers of change for a better world, as some of us

like to believe, seems more palatable when it's coming from cute children like *The Academic Line* characters!

Several points can be made about the manner and extent to which *The Academic Line* has contributed to reflexivity from the perspective of superiority and incongruence theories. Our experience of working on *The Academic Line* suggests that self-deprecating humour in relation to our roles in academia can provoke reflections on some of our limitations, such as the unrealistic expectations mentioned in the previous dialogue, and therefore contribute to self-awareness and introspection (Finlay, 2003; Morreall, 2012; Veatch, 1998; Watts, 2019). Some comic strips have severely criticised academia, and the employment of non-academic characters has proved particularly fruitful in this respect. Our considerations are sometimes sarcastic and derive from comparing 'how things are' with 'how things should be' (Tesnohlikova, 2021). We use sarcasm to point out behaviours and practices that not only do not meet our expectations but also, in our view, do not adhere to ethical values—something that we condemn with scorn and mockery, making these episodes seem ridiculous (Morreall, 2009, 2012; Scheel, 2017). Reflecting further on the sense of superiority that emerges in some strips, we note that most of the scripts (the ones developed by us, and the ones received from others) are based on first-person experiences. Challenging people to impersonate their own roles, as well as others' roles, can prompt some interesting discussions. An example is the recent discussion started by two academics reacting to a strip shared with the Facebook group ("Reviewer 2 must be stopped!") and commenting on what these individuals perceived as misleading and unfair ironic comments on the work and role of chief editors.

#### *How and to what extent does The Academic Line promote well-being?*

Author 1: *The Academic Line* has become one of my ways of dealing with the disappointment I sometimes experience due to what I perceive as the unclear, unsatisfying aspects of my job.

Author 2: I totally agree! To consider such episodes, smile, and make a comic strip out of them makes me feel better, too. To me, envisioning possible *The Academic Line* characters and their key features is also a relief.

Author 1: Often, we have concluded that some of our experiences are bad ... but they give us great material for *The Academic Line*. I'd like this kind of relief to be felt by some of our troubled colleagues: everyone has their own way of dealing with disappointment, and I feel that humour and making comics are still underestimated in our work environment.

*The Academic Line* has enhanced our well-being, which accords with relief theory (Morreall, 2009, 2012; Scheel, 2017). However, we recognise the challenge of replicating such enhancement on a larger scale and involving more scholars, ideally those who experience poor well-being. We acknowledge our use of humour as a tension-relieving mechanism when facing uncertain, stressful, and frustrating circumstances (Banas et al., 2011; Bouwmeester, 2013; Cheng et al., 2021), as exemplified by some ongoing discussions with the tourism research network mailing list recipients, on the Facebook page, and mentioned in the introduction and some scholarly tourism literature (Ayikoru et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2024; Lee & Benjamin, 2023; Mura & Wijesinghe, 2022). The spontaneous emergence of humour in our pre-*The Academic Line* conversations underscored the comic's significance as a tension-relieving coping mechanism. However, our experience with *The Academic Line* in recent months has highlighted that what feels natural to us may not resonate as strongly with others. Recognising this obstacle, along with potential resistance to utilising a comic as a medium, which may be perceived as too trivial by academics (Watson, 2015), it may be worth developing user-friendly tools to facilitate comic strip creation to encourage potential contributors to engage more actively with the project at their own pace and feel useful. This notion aligns with discussions in the literature about comic creator tools for educational purposes (Lazarinis et al., 2015) and echoes the projective techniques commonly employed in psychology studies.

#### *How and to what extent does The Academic Line promote change?*

Author 1: I'm not sure that the change *The Academic Line* can promote is positive, as we intended it to be when planning the project.

Author 2: What do you mean?

Author 1: Well, I feel that using humour and comics as we do in *The Academic Line* has something to do, at least for me, with a sense of resignation and the feeling that things will never change.

Author 2: Like you, I can't see any imminent major changes in the dynamics and practices of academia, especially not because of the few months we have spent on our small project ... but it's a start! By showing dysfunctions and oddities in a humorous way, *The Academic Line* can facilitate engaging criticism that questions and undermines taken-for-granted practices, awakening or activating a different awareness of the limits of one's own role. This use of comics is not new, and ... is academia so peculiar a context that it is impossible to initiate activism through comics? Until now, we have seen only a few signs of appreciation and limited active participation, but the "activist" potential of *The Academic Line*, for me, lies in exposing the dark side of academia ... planting a seed for change. Of course, much still needs to be done.

Theoretically, we argue that introspection can be accompanied by the willingness to introduce change in both ourselves and our circumstances (Finlay, 2003; Watts, 2019), but our opinions in this regard differ slightly. As commented on in the preceding text concerning the contribution of *The Academic Line* to enhancing well-being through relief, both authors recognise some positive change at the individual level. However, we also recognise some obstacles, including the possibility that many scholars may face difficulties in and/or feel uncomfortable about seeing value in a humorous comic and trying to use ways to communicate that differ from traditional academic ways, especially in relation to important issues, such as changes in our work environments. These months working on *The Academic Line* project have given us the opportunity to think more deeply about potential obstacles to active participation in the project and its impact in terms of changed behaviours and practices. One of us has kept the initial activist attitude, which can be described as the belief that our humorous comic strip can ignite change in line with Lee and Benjamin's (2023) call for transformative change, as



has happened through the use of humour in other fields, such as peace activism and politics (Sørensen, 2017; Tsakona & Popa, 2011), sometimes through comics (Lund, 2018; Nordenstam & Wallin-Wictorin, 2023). However, the other author feels differently since her enhanced well-being is accompanied by a sense of resignation and acceptance of the persistence of certain behaviours and practices in academia, including those that we consider negative and even unethical. Also, due to the limitations of our project in terms of time and outreach, it is impossible to confirm how and to what extent *The Academic Line* can promote change. Nevertheless, the different opinions of the authors can be interpreted as indicating a need for initiatives that aim to trigger positive change to be sustained by greater acknowledgement, recognition, and appreciation than we have experienced so far.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored humour and comics as mechanisms to enhance well-being and as tools to prompt a critical stance on change in academia. We have done so by referring to traditional theories of humour, leveraging the effectiveness of comics in communicating opportunities for change, and applying critical participatory action research and duoethnography to *The Academic Line*—an ongoing participative project to develop a humorous comic that we initiated in September 2023. Our findings concern our experiences over the first few months of the project regarding how and to what extent it has promoted solidarity, reflexivity, well-being, and change. We agree that the project has demonstrated its capacity to strengthen solidarity within certain groups and foster reflexivity and individual change in the form of enhanced well-being. We think that a broader impact is possible but still uncertain. Concerning the comic's potential to foster change at the collective level, we have different opinions, with one of us fearing that the project might lead to the acceptance of the status quo and the other believing that it could be the seed to nurture activism towards a more liveable and constructive academia.

This study makes two main contributions. First, it responds to recent calls about what seems to be widespread dissatisfaction with some behaviours and practices that are leading, especially among younger scholars, to a perception of tourism academia as a hierarchical, exclusive, unfair, and emotionally debilitating environment. While other studies have argued for the necessity of change, sometimes highlighting the need for such change to be transformative and proposing feasible approaches, our study has adopted an active research approach. In the belief that reflection and criticism must be followed by the concrete commitment of one and all of us, both in close circles of colleagues and in broader terms, to implementing some changes, we have designed and are still working on a project that can potentially influence tourism academia.

The second contribution concerns the adoption of a form of communication based on humour and comics to draw attention to crucial issues in academia. Such a form of communication is not new, but it has rarely been used in the academic world, is excluded from discussions about potential change in academia, and has been completely ignored in tourism academia. Unlike those who regard humour and comics as too trivial to enter the official sphere of academia, we strongly believe that introducing a novel way to communicate is a courageous initiative that is worth trying to implement and disseminate, especially when younger talented researchers face extreme dissatisfaction and frustration that could lead to them distancing themselves from the academic world and declining to pursue scholarly careers.

The findings concerning *The Academic Line* project should be considered preliminary, since future developments are under consideration. Although it might be argued that waiting longer to discuss the project's findings could have generated more insights, we are positive that this was the right time to reflect on our experiences so far and consider improvements. Among these, we have identified the possibility of developing a toolkit that could facilitate active participation in the project and, importantly, be used directly and in the moment when participants need relief, with no need to wait for *The Academic Line* team to respond to a possible request to translate an idea into a comic. Other improvements that are worth considering are the recruitment of a higher number of active participants, especially across cultures and roles, and a clearer invitation to develop ideas by adopting perspectives on different roles, including those of which we do not have first-hand experience. We also recognise that some of the limitations of our project derive from our limited resources, and we are therefore considering applying for funding to professionalise the project. Another limitation of the project and the present study is that, to reflect on the project's findings, we have relied exclusively on our own experiences without involving others (e.g. the colleagues who have shown appreciation for the project and, in some cases, contributed to the comic strips). When more participants are engaged, it will be possible to overcome these limitations and use the project to identify the aspects of academic life that are perceived to be problematic, expose them to discussion and, through a participative approach, elaborate on their origin and develop possible viable solutions.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Giovanna Bertella:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Lucia Tomassini:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

## Declaration of competing interest

Nothing to declare.

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