Article

The Renewal of the Webcomic in the Era of Platformization: The Case of 9Gag on Instagram

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Abstract

This article addresses the place that the webcomic occupies as valuable content within the repertoire of consumable options in digital social media platforms. For the new digital generations, these new media spaces of light entertainment are spaces of encounter and interaction. Taking as a case study the Instagram profile of 9Gag, this article analyzes the level of engagement of 9Gag audiences with the webcomics published in that profile during the year 2022. The hypothesis defended in this text is to consider that these new spaces of consumption and interaction between users and content are especially relevant when considering the reach that the webcomic has as a format or content of interest for younger audiences. The results obtained after the data analysis show, even considering its possible exploratory nature of the study, that the webcomic is an attractive content for centennial audiences, although its formal and discursive concreteness remains far from the linguistic innovations that the digital comic promoted in its first manifestations.

Keywords

9gag, digital audiences, Instagram, media platforms, webcomic

Introduction

Technology has been modifying the forms of communication in today's different societies and also how they are studied. There is little doubt that technical innovations have modified the media ecosystems, introducing different variables to be considered in the creation of digital content and in the way it is consumed, shared, or positioned by users in the cultural sphere, establishing what has been called a shift toward infrastructure (Hesmondhalgh et al., 2023; Plantin & Punathambekar, 2019). Specifically, the so-called social media have become complex and rich spaces that redraw the media consumption scenario of the 21st century (Van Dijck, 2019) offering, occasionally, a thematic hyperspecialization and atomization of audiences that can be considered relevant when focusing attention as indicators of trends and preferences of the new digital audiences (Jenkins et al., 2013).

This sort of cultural technological determinism where the dissemination platform compromises the specific way in which the contents are arranged in the new digital spaces implies the adoption of a perspective close to the ecology of the media and how they interact with each other (McLuhan, 2009).

Carlos Scolari (2022) proposes that the importance in this new era of platforms is not so much in the factors that influence the creation of content such as its creative originality (or at least not only on it), but the focus is placed on the interaction that such content can generate with a community or user. Hence, perhaps, replicable and sharable content such as memes has found a fixed space within the consumption needs of new digital audiences (Miltner, 2018). The most successful platforms are "centripetal" (Scolari, 2022, p. 90) and seek to attract and retain users at all costs, introducing variables that go beyond content per se and delving into algorithms and data mining. It is not surprising, therefore, that many companies and brands or individual content creators are increasingly inquiring about what type of content and formats are the most sought after in these new digital markets that social media seem to have become (Hollebeeck & Macky, 2022; Stephen, 2016). The key for many brands

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and individuals who generate content for communities is to ask themselves about the importance of selecting certain formats, arguments, or topics to work on versus others that will ultimately allow them to arouse the greatest interest in their user-followers and audiences.

Given the importance of what—content—and how—format, the variable of who the content is aimed at and, above all, the roles that these new users and audiences acquire come into play, especially when we talk about platforms. Recent reports on the consumption of social networks and digital platforms (Hajró et al., 2021; Hootsuite, 2023; We Are Social, 2023) indicate that consumers and digital users are increasingly younger and, therefore, with concerns and ways of communicating significantly different from other generations that have been dominating the field of digital content consumption (Sidorenko et al., 2022). This sort of generational relay makes it necessary to analyze and think about the interests of these new, increasingly younger profiles that have complex and specific consumption practices that are linked to the new digital spaces of the new millennium.

Inserted in this paradigm, comics have joined the new practices of digital distribution and consumption, involving in their ideation, production, and exploitation, different aspects that once seemed alien to the industry. In this new scenario, the webcomic is presented as a cultural object that adapts the comic to the Internet ecosystem in a sort of remediation that connects with the needs of younger consumer profiles by making the medium transparent (Bolter & Grusin, 1996) since there is no longer a physical format that delimits in pages the time and space of users' consumption. In addition to the issue of the physical dissolution of digitization, webcomics take into account in their definition aspects such as the creation of communities with common interests, the opinions of the followers, and the direct interaction of the authors with the followers, which make the visibility of the works increase according to the algorithms that operate in the digital platforms.

These issues that were originally kept at a distance from the production of this type of narrative work cannot be obliterated today. As Nolwenn Tréhondart (2020) suggests,

> digital comics today represent a vast field of experimentation, in which multiple actors participate: authors who self-publish on blogs and crowd-funding sites; editors who are still hesitant to invest; distributors and distribution platforms driven by strategies of standardization; and, finally, television companies, public organizations, and cultural institutions that support more experimental initiatives, in keeping with the model of the "unique" work of art. (pp. 10–11)

The attention that the webcomic can arouse as an object of study in the professional and academic field ranges from its assumption as a cultural artifact whose novel expressive dimensions should be considered as an advance of the medium and language of the comic itself, to the relevance it has as a product inserted in a certain logic of consumption

and market subject to the practice of "like and share." In this sense, the perspective assumed by this work is not only limited to analyzing the content or format of the webcomic but places it within a general consumption circuit such as that of digital content. In this sense, this article continues along lines initiated with works such as those of Nicolle Lamerichs (2020) who defends the passage of webcomics from texts to business models where readers/users become active and fundamental agents. Even in its digital aspect, the comic book is still a product of mass consumption insofar as it is subject to a broad-spectrum exploitation logic. However, where, in analog comics, a paper edition is necessary to disseminate the work, in webcomics, this process is replaced by a direct publication by the authors, disintermediating the production chain. For webcomic authors, this change allows more direct contact with the public and better promotion and visibility of their works, but also to assume an active role in these communication strategies. Content platforms and social networks become necessary collaborators in the dissemination of webcomic narratives, which makes them coexist with other similar visual formats in an ecosystem rich in images but complex in the consumption habits of those who inhabit them. Although the analysis of narrative images in social media and their consumption by digital natives is of general interest to researchers—mainly focused on the study of memes (Bauckhage, 2021), there is still room for expansion in the study of the comic inserted in this type of user-shared content platforms.

Taking into account all of the above, and with an approach rooted in media studies, this article is interested in the place of the webcomic within the production and consumption of digital content on generalist content-sharing platforms, specifically within the space of Instagram and the profile of 9Gag, assuming that these spaces not defined exclusively for the consumption of comics allow a broader exploration of the impact of the webcomic.

Specifically, the starting hypothesis that this article raises is that within the broad repertoire of light content that dominates digital social media spaces like memes (Lankshear & Knobel, 2019), webcomics seem to respond to similar criteria of consumption when inserted in this type of community platforms and therefore are concerned to the space of humor and speed of consumption.

To assess the impact of webcomic within the generalist consumption of social media content, we analyzed the interaction rates of posts tagged as webcomics on 9Gag's Instagram profile by comparing them with the rest of the publications. Posts shared by @9Gag from 1 January 2022 to 31 December 2022 were considered. From this sample, two publications were randomly selected from each month labeled as webcomics and two others with other labels that allowed a comparison between formats. We also quantified the number of total publications in the year that were considered webcomics and those that were not, dividing the former into several categories that allude to the specific form of the

narrative discourse: an arrangement in several panels, reel, carousel, or single image, to verify whether the innovations of the webcomic were intrinsic to its exploitation in a broad-spectrum profile such as 9Gag.

There is sufficient evidence, based on the results obtained in this study, to suggest that the colonization of the webcomic as a format adapted to the different social networks can shed light on the consumption trends of new users of digital platforms of generalist content, that is, not specifically intended for the exploitation and dissemination of webcomics. The interaction rates are similar among the different formats shared in 9Gag, which suggests that the webcomic is fully integrated as digital content for quick consumption and easy sharing. It is therefore demonstrated that webcomics represent a useful format for profiles outside the world of comics as would be 9Gag, positing that the webcomic allows transmedia exploitation (Jenkins, 2010; see also Jenkins et al., 2013) easily replicable in other profiles beyond those of the creators of such comics. This may allow exploring new avenues and narrative formats that brands or platforms can take advantage of by observing the interaction that users have with this type of content.

Theoretical Framework and State of the Art

Defining Webcomics

The definition of the webcomic needs to add, to the complex nature of the comic as a cultural product, variables that have to do with digital technology (Halsband & Grimm, 2018; Martin, 2017) as its emergence is linked to the new millennium when the possibilities arising from the Internet Age promised innovations because of the convergence and digitization of this medium (McCloud, 2016). However, the concept of webcomics is understood differently from digital comics. There is some academic consensus around the webcomic that defines it as a comic that is presented as a native narrative that can be explored and read through any browser without the need for a specific reading or downloading program (Kleefeld, 2020; Vilches, 2016). The first webcomic that fits these parameters—allowing its reading from its website—was *Doctor Fun*, by David Farley which was "published" between 1993 and 2006.

In the chronology of the history of the webcomic, the first steps of the format were linked to themes that addressed the geek reality, raising arguments where referential and specialized humor and irony of that world prevailed (Vilches, 2016, p. 6). On a formal level, the first attempts to experiment with language appeared through the use of gifs, sounds, small animations, or the inclusion of hypermedia navigation elements. As technology made it possible to incorporate these new narrative tools, the experimental proposals of webcomics continued to expand until the present day.

Thus, the comic hosted in web spaces allows it to "go about adopting any shape or size as the temporal map, the conceptual DNA, of the medium grows on its new plate" (McCloud, 2016, p. 223) linking the concept of the infinite canvas to the nature of the webcomic. At the form level, some discursive possibilities related to multimedia—such as the introduction of animations, hyperlinks, and other navigational elements (Molina-Fernández, 2019)—are inserted in the webcomic, although not all explore them. However, other variables influence the definition of this format that today seem relevant to study the phenomenon in its globality.

On the one hand, there must be an authorial intention, where the creation of the comic must be thought, from the beginning, to "inhabit" the web (Jacobs, 2013; Kleefeld, 2020). Those works that have been digitalized without a specific approach in the first place, such as works scanned from a physical original or made available in PDF for consumption through digital libraries, do not belong to this category.

On the other hand, Leah Misemer (2019) adds an interesting point in the understanding of the webcomic phenomenon by pointing out the relevance of the context of the website containing the comic. The blogs or comments that are associated with the works within these websites, as well as other visual and textual elements of their own, place these new digital cartoon formats in a logic of attention and reading completely different from the one that analog comic works possess (Hicks, 2009) and also in a logic of distribution alternative to traditional publication through publishing imprints.

Misemer's proposal acquires a greater dimension if we consider that in the current context, webcomics participate willingly in the poetics established in social media (Kukkonen, 2014) as well as in the marketing and communication strategies that make possible the connection of minorities and their grouping around common interests (Mazowitta, 2022; Plamondon, 2018). As somehow, Garrity (2011) predicted in his seminal work about the history of webcomics "[t]oday, webcomics are . . ., adapting to social media sites and mobile devices."

Webcomics add in their conceptualization as cultural objects (Groensteen, 2006) in a digital scenario, factors such as collaboration, technology, and disintermediation although, in essence, webcomics maintain the substratum of being stories generated from images and text, with different degrees of iconicity, whose relationship between their linguistic constitutive elements (speech bubbles, onomatopoeias, kinetic lines, vignettes, etc.) expanded by technological possibilities (sound, animation, hyperlinks, etc.) contributes to tend toward narrative closure.

Platformization and Webcomics: Interaction as the Essence of New Consumers

Associated with the very appearance of the Internet, the history of webcomics is strongly linked to the ability of new generations to create and disseminate their content on platforms, in a completely disintermediated communication chain.

This has meant the emergence of specific web spaces for the dissemination of webcomics such as Webtoons, Tapas, Toomics, or Faneo, as well as platforms for specific genres such as manga—Manga Toons or Ayaka Media—but also the appropriation by authors of other social media and platforms where they have found not only a window to exhibit their works but also an opportunity to capitalize their creative efforts (Pérez, 2016).

The micro-patronage platform Patreon or specific comic platforms such as PopComics or Manta are examples of how many authors have managed to build audience loyalty and transform their creative potential into more or less constant income either from subscriptions or through collaborations resulting from web visibility thanks to the volume of followers.

Webcomics have allowed authors to emancipate themselves from editorial ties (although there are numerous examples of artists and works that migrate from online to print or even to animation upon reaching sufficient notoriety) and above all to increase the conversation with their followers creating a reciprocal benefit (Aldana-Bravo, 2015; Liming, 2012; Walters, 2009).

Liz Dowthwaite (2017, p. 21) states in her thesis that "creators and readers both contribute to the success of a webcomic, and both gain in many ways: products, profit, knowledge and information, cultural impact, entertainment, education, relationships, and so on." Dowthwaite's position reaffirms the idea that the webcomic awakens active commitments on the part of authors and readers who can create communities and whose power of diffusion amplifies the reach of the works. As Berube (2022, p. 3) suggests, "There is an opportunity here to consider the new kind of reader and reading that webcomics have essentially created." In other words, the new situation offers interesting options for exploring what kind of readership and reading webcomics offer.

Many of the so-called social media (social networking sites) such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram have willingly assumed these new rules of interaction between content, users, creators/managers, and positioning and marketing strategies, within the game board. In this way, they make different models of exploitation of their contents coexist that in all cases find accommodation among the *philias* of the participants in these digital spaces born in the heat of the logic of Web 2.0 (Withing & Williams, 2013). Within the wide range of social media applications (constantly increasing), Instagram has seized the opportunity because of the wide range of possibilities it offers both at the user and corporate levels to create strong links between subjects, products, and brands intensely enhanced by the implementation of its use through smartphones and algorithms.

These factors led to the emergence of new professional profiles (influencers) and modified the tools of this application to see the utilities that, from digital marketing, could be offered to brands and companies (Agung & Darma, 2019). In this way, the network user, now converted into a prosumer (Islas, 2010; Jenkins, 2010), allows through his interactions

with the content to attend to trends and uses of specific formats such as memes, webcomics, short pranks, and so on and to know behaviors of improvement in organic positioning of certain content compared with others.

Instagram offers an interesting space for research about webcomics and is a fertile field yet to be explored. On the one hand, it is a very attractive application for the millennial and Generation Z generations (Marinas, 2019) who are the major consumers of this type of content (digital comics) (Gustines & Stevens, 2022; Kaplan, 2022). On the other hand, it offers a series of narrative possibilities that are incorporated thanks to the poetics of the eminently visual platform. The Instagram wall can function as an infinite canvas and the structure of the posts can mimic the panels of a traditional comic page.

In addition to these purely formal issues, it responds perfectly to the expectations of webcomics in the creation of communities that support authors, as the network itself is based on the principle of sharing, commenting on content, and following profiles by registered users.

@*Gag on Instagram: Lightweight Shareable Content Interaction Model*

9Gag is a social content platform born in 2008. Its emergence, according to its founder Ray Chan, arises from the idea of grouping fun content solely to be watched and enjoyed by the community (Escher, 2017). In essence, 9Gag is a website where a community of users can upload images and videos and comment on them via chat. The interesting thing about 9Gag is that it functions as a community that shares content and not as a platform for individual profiles (Wagener, 2014) as is the case with Instagram.

The operation of 9Gag is simple: users registered on the platform share "funny" content in images or videos, although this is usually defined under parameters of sameness set by the community itself. In other words, the contents are focused on topics and trends related to Internet culture that are of interest to 9Gag registered users.

Although there are cultural discrepancies, the fact is that 9Gag remains one of the main portals for shared entertainment content, being especially important in the United States, Germany, and the Netherlands. According to Chan himself,

> It's pretty international. One thing we discovered is that across different countries, people, and cultures, users still understand each other's humor. The jokes shared by one person in one country are still funny to someone in a different country based not on their location but on their life experiences. (Escher, 2017)

From academia, studies such as those by Vermeulen et al. (2018) point out that certain social media such as Instagram or the 9Gag platform itself are used by young people to share positive emotions which reinforces that the content shared by the audiences of these spaces possess certain qualities of

tone and subject matter focused on humor and easy smiles that are similar (Gillis & Pozin, 2023). In a similar way, Gilbert's (2021) work points out how humor serves the younger generations as a way of reconciliation with the difficult reality they have had to live with.

In 2010, Instagram began its journey as a social app in which users shared photographic content and edited it using filters. Throughout its life, Instagram's possibilities have been expanding, incorporating AR filters as well as introducing other multimedia formats such as video or live streaming, refining algorithms, to become a key shared visual content platform for brands (Casaló et al., 2021; Choi & Sung, 2018).

The app's reach and level of introduction with centennial and millennial audiences (Dimock, 2019) have consolidated its validity as a space for interaction and conversion from passive audiences to active consumers. Studies such as that of Kim et al. (2016) point to the relevance of Instagram as an image-based social network in the consumption of young people. The increase in the use of Instagram is continuous and is evidenced, for example, in Hootsuite's latest Social Trends report, which notes that Instagram is the second most preferred social network to search for entertainment content, only behind TikTok (p. 19). It is not surprising that 9Gag launched its Instagram profile in 2012 as a logical extension of its light content taking advantage of both the visual (Milosavljević, 2019) and agile character of the app (Casaló et al., 2021), as well as the very synergies of shared content that the app offers by redirecting a large amount of traffic from the Instagram profile to the 9Gag website as well as to the individual profiles of those sharing the content.

In this way, 9Gag has ensured an expanded community that is not so encapsulated or limited to the parameters of its original website by promoting both content and authors and placing the profile at the top of light entertainment consumption experiences in competition with other similar platforms such as 4Chan.

Material and Method

As it is a visual platform that largely brings together segments of digital users of "Generation Z" and millennials, this research will be carried out on Instagram, and thus know the level of validity that currently has an artistic-communicational format such as the webcomic and its eventual relationship with the memetic culture, so associated with these segments of users (Groisman & Amado, 2022).

For such purposes, we have chosen to focus the study on the case of the American profile 9Gag (@9gag), a global reference as a repository and showcase of satirical and memetic digital content.

The main objective of the study is to denote the level of importance that eventually still has the webcomic format within the evolution of formats and content that digital platforms have experienced as a result of the communication and digital consumption habits of emerging segments of users, as well as the narrative elements most used in this process.

Therefore, the research questions that allow us to address the work are as follows:

> *RQ1.* Is the webcomic a current format in the supply of content on Instagram?
>
> *RQ2.* Does the webcomic enjoy a similar interest and engagement to memetic and satirical content of other kinds?
>
> *RQ3.* Which is the most common webcomic category in the face of the evolution of the demand for formats that Instagram has experienced lately?

The review of the sample has been carried out from the first publication of 2022 (1 January) to the last of the year (31 December), determining how many obey the webcomic category and how many on the contrary are memes and posts with other characteristics or graphic categories.

The profile under study has 31,100 posts up to 1 January 2023, of which a total of 2,577 have been reviewed for this research, that is, almost 10% of the account's production, except for the "stories" that have not been taken into consideration. Attention has been focused only on the content of the feed where, in this particular case, other formats such as videos and reels, apart from photographs or images, also coincide.

In the specific case of webcomics, different categories—linked to the esthetic and narrative particularities that Instagram fosters—have been identified: carousel "CR" (sequence of several images), a single image divided into several scenes from distribution in panels and strips "IPS," animation in reel or video format "RV" and single panel "SP" (graphic joke). Intentionally, the so-called rage comics are left out of this categorization since they have an essentially memetic dimension as opposed to the narrative and authorial variable of webcomics.

From the conjunction of quantitative and qualitative techniques to obtain a greater contextualization of the object of study (Gaitán & Piñuel, 1998, p. 286; Soler & Enrique, 2012, p. 887), we first propose the construction of an analysis table that brings together each established content category, contrasted with pre-established engagement ranges for the research interests, represented in "likes" (platform mechanism that allows users to express their agreement and appreciation for content), and the number of comments.

Likewise, to deepen the comparative analysis of the contents, in each month studied, two publications were randomly selected in the general webcomic category and the "other publications" category. In this way, a total of 48 contents have been selected for which the engagement index will also be calculated to compare their behavior toward the community of users and determine which ones generate more attention and involvement on their part, even if it is possible to

determine their possible "viralization." The formula used to carry out this calculation will be the one proposed by Newberry (2022) of Hootsuite:

Total "likes" of the post + Total post comments/Total profile followers × 100

The @9gag profile has been taken into consideration because it is one of the digital content platforms susceptible to viralization (high load of topicality and satire), especially memes, with greater recognition on a global scale (Wagener, 2014). The case study has focused particularly on the presence of such platform on Instagram, as it is the digital channel where most young people are currently (Iqbal, 2023) who are ultimately the most assiduous users of such content (YPulse, 2019). Instagram is also considered for being an eminently visual content platform.

Therefore, being a collaborative platform, as it happens on the web, @9gag publishes the content provided by users, so in the particular case of webcomics, these belong to third parties that often have their accounts in this digital social channel. In many cases, they are identified with signatures or watermarks. In addition to this, 9Gag labels the authors of the webcomic it publishes.

Likewise, taking into consideration that, as of 1 January 2023 @9gag had 53,100,000 followers, and given the importance of hashtags as mechanisms that seek greater organization and visibility of content within the platform by its algorithm, the number of times #comic or #webcomic accompanied the selected publications was quantified.

Results

Throughout 2022, the @9gag profile on Instagram published 268 contents considered webcomics. Of this total, 217 correspond to the category of a single image divided into several scenes based on the distribution in strips and panels "IPS" (Table 1).

As can be seen in Table 2 and Figure 2, despite being fewer in terms of quantity, the webcomic published on @9gag through Instagram reports interaction rates similar to and even higher than those of the rest of the publications.

In terms of Instagram's algorithm, a high interaction rate is important for the platform to achieve greater reach and greater visibility of posts organically. However, in none of the cases and categories studied, there are signs of "viralization."

With respect to the hashtags #comic and #webcomic, we found that @9gag's profile only uses #comic and #comics (usually also associated with the hashtag #doodle) in publications of this type of format and does not use the hashtag #webcomic in any of them. In the analyzed sample, the category identified as VR in this study is also discriminated under the hashtag #reels or #animation. In addition, specific hashtags such as #dogcomics (appears in two publications) or #manga (only in one publication of the analyzed sample) are introduced.

Table 1. Total Webcomics by Category on the @9Gag Profile on Instagram From 1 January 2022 to 31 December 2022.

Month	Total webcomics	CR	IPS	RV	SV
January	21	2	15	2	2
February	17	1	15	1	–
March	21	2	14	4	1
April	21	–	18	1	2
May	17	2	15	–	–
June	17	2	15	–	–
July	29	3	21	4	1
August	27	1	24	2	–
September	19	1	14	3	1
October	27	–	26	–	1
November	24	2	17	3	2
December	28	2	23	2	1
TOTAL	**268**	**18**	**217**	**22**	**11**

Source. Own elaboration.
CR: carousel format; IPS: in panels and strips; RV: reel or video; SV: single panel.
However, the publication efforts of this profile are concentrated on the content of a more memetic nature not associated with the webcomic format (Figure 1).

Discussion

Maintenance of "Traditional" Narrative Formats in 9Gag's Webcomics

After analyzing the results, we can see that Instagram is one of the social media that easily accommodates the formal aspects of the webcomic phenomenon. Its eminently visual nature has allowed graphic content of different natures such as photographs, memes, or comics to coexist adequately in the 1:1 format.

After examining the data, it can be affirmed that the type of webcomic narrative that predominates on the platform within 9Gag is the category identified as IPS (several panels distributed in strips). This type of webcomic manifestation is, curiously, the one that most resembles the analog comic. We can see that this category accounts for almost 81% of the total number of publications under the webcomic label in the year analyzed (Figure 1).

The narrative type IPS is followed, almost equally, by the categories RV and CR with 8.2% and 6.7%, respectively, of the total number of publications analyzed. In this sense, there is an evident and differentiated predominance of the exploitation of the most traditional and canonical narrative model of the webcomic: the one in which the Instagram post functions as a traditional comic page compared with the rest of the categories. This percentage superiority of the narrative canon collides with the promises of experimentation that the digitalization of the comic implied. It places the focus of the webcomic not on its formal expressive possibilities, as pointed out by early theories of digital comics such as McCloud's (2016), but on the plot and a much broader concept of genre or format. The same is reinforced by using hashtags that focus on the specific topic of the story that is

Table 2. Total Interactions and Interaction Rate of the Analyzed Sample of Contents of the @9Gag Profile on Instagram From 1 January 2022 to 31 December 2022.

Month	Type of publication	Link	Total likes	Total comments	Engagement rate (%)
January	Webcomic	https://bit.ly/3TI719g	1,153,275	4,895	2.18
		https://bit.ly/40D8T5e	5,724,513	4,641	10.78
	Another type of publication	https://bit.ly/3K96PfT	1,187,747	11,094	2.25
	(meme, picture, video, etc.)	https://bit.ly/3Ka5xRR	300,743	681	0.56
February	Webcomic	https://bit.ly/3ID35tV	360,169	939	0.68
		https://bit.ly/3IFVo5Z	943,230	1,890	1.77
	Another type of publication	https://bit.ly/3TSZzrR	856,518	6,351	1.62
	(meme, picture, video, etc.)	https://bit.ly/3JO23mC	655,172	2,759	1.23
March	Webcomic	https://bit.ly/3LOb5Tv	664,355	2,088	1.25
		https://bit.ly/3ngZAcR	532,741	1,332	1.00
	Another type of publication	https://bit.ly/3JP4EwP	401,045	1,034	0.75
	(meme, picture, video, etc.)	https://bit.ly/3JPtoow	487,500	1,054	0.92
April	Webcomic	https://bit.ly/3LQEpZq	112,769	1,052	0.21
		https://bit.ly/3FOeU7e	144,785	269	0.27
	Another type of publication	https://bit.ly/3ZdaUEl	251,748	519	0.47
	(meme, picture, video, etc.)	https://bit.ly/3LWBqi7	305,397	766	0.57
May	Webcomic	https://bit.ly/40eG3s8	218,963	583	0.41
		https://bit.ly/3K8Z49N	372,246	920	0.70
	Another type of publication	https://bit.ly/3IGBCHy	323,039	625	0.60
	(meme, picture, video, etc.)	https://bit.ly/40FcnV5	376,835	1,503	0.71
June	Webcomic	https://bit.ly/3N7nhzb	830,078	4,439	1.57
		https://bit.ly/3nqbKjB	520,255	953	0.98
	Another type of publication	https://bit.ly/3IKMww2	562,000	2.322	1.06
	(meme, picture, video, etc.)	https://bit.ly/3FR3nny	346,511	679	0.65
July	Webcomic	https://bit.ly/3JNH2bW	57,112	342	0.10
		https://bit.ly/3nl6Apf	157,385	467	0.29
	Another type of publication	https://bit.ly/3TSDmu8	124,349	390	0.23
	(meme, picture, video, etc.)	https://bit.ly/3TJF3ty	210,364	613	0.39
August	Webcomic	https://bit.ly/3JFh0aG	450,075	2,893	0.85
		https://bit.ly/3K8N9sD	362,703	627	0.68
	Another type of publication	https://bit.ly/3IOwKA7	342,841	672	0.64
	(meme, picture, video, etc.)	https://bit.ly/3TIskYg	586,933	4,243	1.11
September	Webcomic	https://bit.ly/3TJLblA	271,124	702	0.51
		https://bit.ly/3ZfZaB0	438,178	1,260	0.82
	Another type of publication	https://bit.ly/3FXiwUv	286,748	759	0.54
	(meme, picture, video, etc.)	https://bit.ly/3FSMIQS	185,379	517	0.35
October	Webcomic	https://bit.ly/3z4DdtZ	61,104	329	0.11
		https://bit.ly/3z4DfC7	110,179	323	0.20
	Another type of publication	https://bit.ly/3TP2iCO	392,372	1,450	0.74
	(meme, picture, video, etc.)	https://bit.ly/3nlojwS	122,978	651	0.23
November	Webcomic	https://bit.ly/40FESlv	489,775	3,315	0.92
		https://bit.ly/40hSCTl	445,909	2,489	0.84
	Another type of publication	https://bit.ly/42K2SFE	373,870	1,044	0.70
	(meme, picture, video, etc.)	https://bit.ly/40A9Qvk	163,663	370	0.30
December	Webcomic	https://bit.ly/3FNy4u3	261,000	656	0.49
		https://bit.ly/3LSkGZn	230,407	985	0.43
	Another type of publication	https://bit.ly/3FOHOEn	274,444	506	0.51
	(meme, picture, video, etc.)	https://bit.ly/3FSNuxd	779,842	4,691	1.47

Source. Own elaboration.

published in a sequence of tags that always include the term #comic and #9gag along with others that select the main topic of the plot.

The non-use of the #webcomic tag is symptomatic because, for @9gag's profile, there is no distinction between the webcomic concept and it covers all publications in the
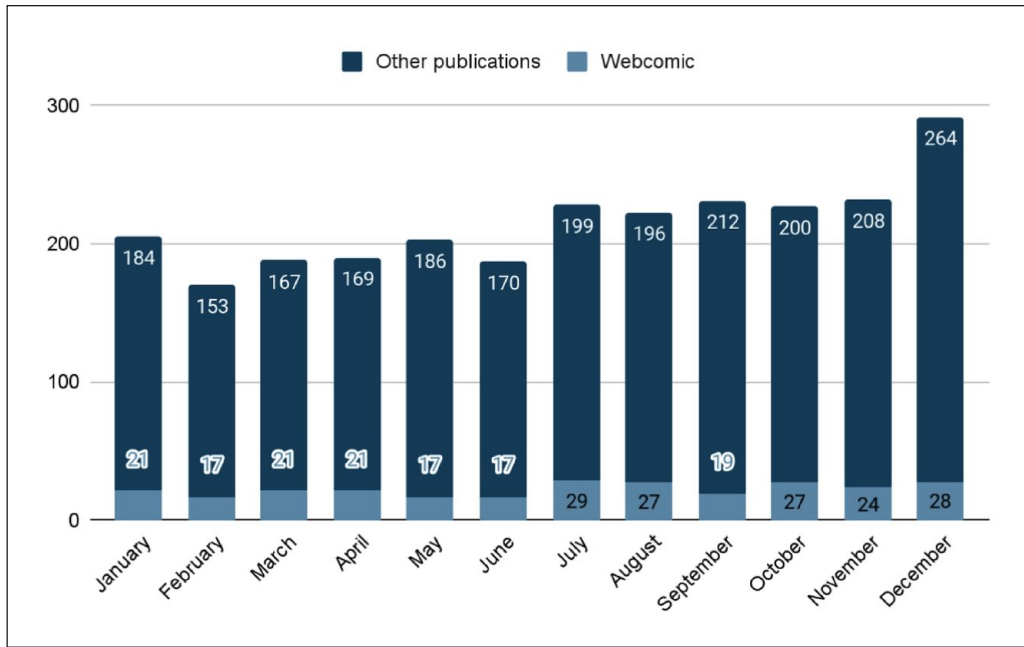
Figure 1. Comparison of webcomic totals and posts of any other type on the @9gag profile on Instagram from 1 January 2022 to 31 December 2022.
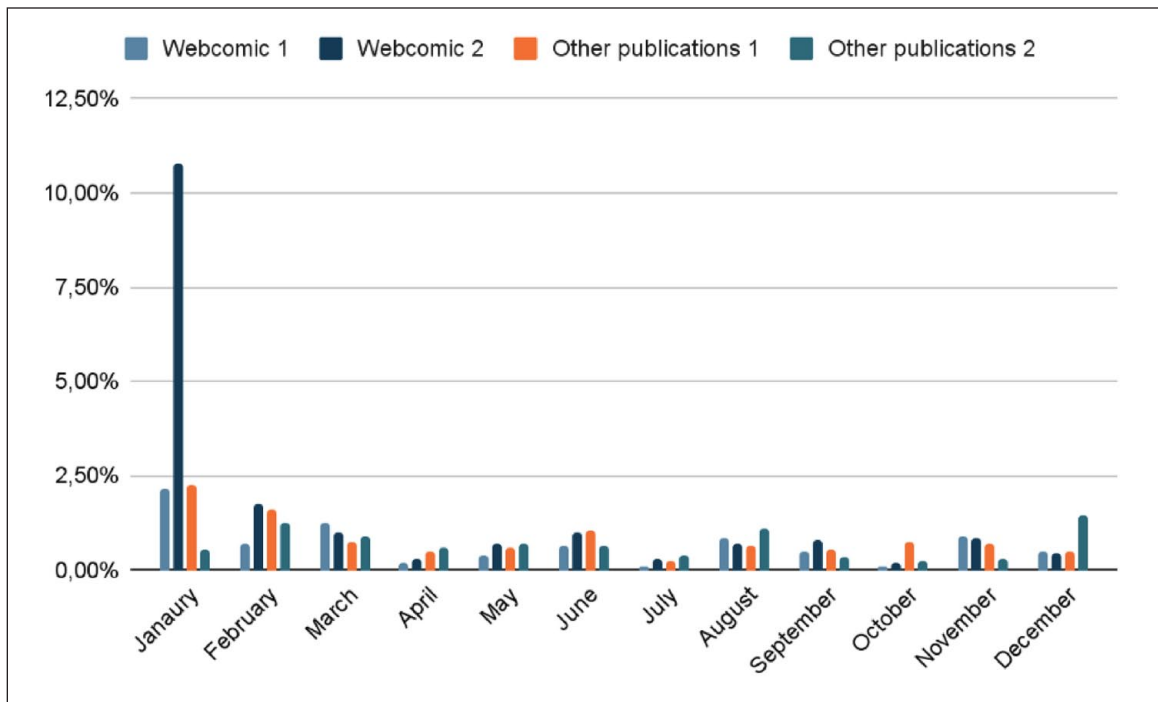*Source.* Own elaboration.

Figure 2. Comparison of the interaction rate of the sample of contents analyzed in the @9gag profile on Instagram from 1 January 2022 to 31 December 2022.
Source. Own elaboration.

more traditional categories—CR, IPS, and VU—under the same umbrella of #comic or #comics. Considering 9Gag's generalist approach, this idea is that the discursively more conservative webcomic is the most published as opposed to the other mentioned categories that take better advantage of the expressive and linguistic resources that Instagram allows.

In this sense, these categories that have been considered in this study as native and typical of the usual content within visual social media have a lower impact in terms of volume of dissemination for the 9Gag community. Even if both percentages were added together, they would barely exceed 14% of the total.

The last category analyzed has a marginal percentage representation. A 4.10% of the total number of webcomic publications appear as a single cartoon in the way graphic jokes are manifested in other media such as newspapers or "traditional" press formats. Although it seems to connect adequately with the budgets of other contents in terms of subject matter, as they are still jokes or gags, this category is the least exploited by 9Gag compared with the rest of those explored in this study. One of the possible reasons for the scarce use of this type of format is that its comic function is better fulfilled by the meme.

While the graphic joke is a traditional and established format in the analog press, the meme has more solidity in the digital platform and is scalable to other formats of the same ecosystem such as the animated GIF (Miltner & Highfield, 2017) or stickers—for WhatsApp, for example—so popular among Gen Z users.

Lower Investment in the Publication of Webcomics Compared With Other Types of Content

The number of webcomic publications compared with other types of content collected in 9Gag's Instagram profile is substantially lower. None of the months that make up the sample offers a higher number of webcomics than the rest.

This can be justified, in part, due to the niche nature that comics possess. Not all the users of the 9Gag community are capable of creating a webcomic as it requires a certain capacity and skill on the part of the creator.

On the contrary, the rest of the content is user-generated content that does not require too much technical training to create it. Memes, for example, due to their own replicable and easily editable nature (Gil, 2021; Milner, 2012; Shifman, 2014), can be reused by any user. The sample shows how the managers of the @9gag profile do not tag authorship in the memes, while in all the webcomic publications, the author of the shared piece is tagged. The "mainstream" nature of the meme, however, finds a certain thematic harmony with the type of webcomics that are usually published in 9Gag where humor and irony prevail. Despite this, the number of webcomics published maintains a regular proportion to the total number of monthly publications that 9Gag publishes on its Instagram profile.

Approximately the range of publication of webcomics remains between 8.9% in the month in which fewer webcomics were published (September) and 12.5% in the month in which more webcomics were published (March).

Similar Interaction Rate Between Webcomics and the Rest of Content

Although the proportion of webcomic publications is quantitatively lower than that of other contents, as shown in Figure 2, the results show that the interaction rate between 9Gag publications classified as "webcomic" and "other contents" does not differ too much.

On some occasions, it can even be seen that the interaction rate of webcomic content is not only similar or comparable but sometimes higher, as in January, March, or November. Table 2 shows some cases in which webcomic publications stand out from others. This is the case of the publication "Webcomic 2" (Table 2) in January, where the format used is video (VR) and the story has a comic cut linked to pets. However, the exaggerated difference between the specific case of January and the rest of the months should be examined taking into account the content of the story and whether there are similar levels of interaction in stories that use the same format (discursive level) or deal with similar arguments (content level). It is worth remembering here that @9gag uses a specific hashtag (#dogcomics) to signal narratives with this type of plot theme which could be a sufficient indication to delve into the narrative evaluation and extract data about the thematic preferences of @9gag's Instagram community.

Conclusion

The webcomic phenomenon has restructured the relationship between creators and audiences by formalizing social networks around specific narratives that facilitate the active listening of creators. For their part, webcomic consumers find in the virtual spaces where webcomics have hosted a possibility to share and interact with both the author and the rest of the readers, transforming their identity toward what we propose as the idea of the reader/follower.

In this way, the logic of digital content platforms and the adaptation of webcomics to their consumption dynamics give greater visibility to artists and creators if we take into account the reach that certain social networks such as 9Gag reach. In this sense, and according to the research questions posed in this work, it is concluded that 9Gag works with the logic of platformization described above in the terms in which they are posed by Scolari (2022) as it does not sell anything concrete, there is no exact and defined content, but it fluctuates between a series of pieces that converse with users who interact with them in a fun, agile and mentally relaxing logic. Van Dijck points out that the negotiation processes (De Certeau, 1984) that users execute with omniscient platforms can question the bargaining power of all the factors involved.

However, the current scenario is sensibly different as digital content platforms cannot be understood as mere containers as the media were previously understood, but must be

imagined more as connectors and catalysts of small nodes that are the users belonging to the community.

The key to social media spaces such as 9Gag's Instagram profile allows us to visualize the capacity that digital platforms have when it comes to linking users with each other and relating content with consumer preferences. Therefore, the profile serves as a showcase for content but, because of the high rate of interaction of the same, it gains exposure with the content and therefore monetizes for the interactions of its users.

Another question addressed in the study was the adequacy of the webcomic to the memetic culture, that is, fast in consumption, humorous, and easily replicable, prevailing in digital platforms such as 9Gag. There seems to be a more or less clear link in terms of the tone adopted by webcomic works and their dissemination platform.

The bibliographic review about the origins and evolution of webcomics allows us to identify a certain narrative canon based on humor, irony, and satire that is corroborated, ultimately, with the data of the study. All the webcomics published in 9Gag obey the humorous cut since humor and relaxation are the very *raison d'être* of 9Gag.

Likewise, it can be seen, because of the interaction rate identified in the sample cut of the study, that the webcomic format has transcended its first incursions into the digital medium and remains as a format of interest for the new generations.

This is an important indication that the webcomic through social media proposes another format in which various areas of communication can benefit to connect with potential audiences, especially those who are younger and digital. To quickly propose an example, digital media could perfectly well through a webcomic propose the explanation of news or event through this resource, in the same way, that Sidorenko et al. (2021) have demonstrated with @pictoline on Instagram and the scientific message, or Ardèvol et al. (2021) with environmental activism.

In the end, the intention is to be able to connect more efficiently with the different segments of digital audiences, increasingly distributed not only in the so-called generations, but also by platforms, and within them, by formats, because those who consume stories and reels, do not consume videos and photos in the feed, and vice versa, those who do, do not necessarily connect with more ephemeral formats.

It is up to journalists, communicators, and academics to develop effective formulas to adapt and exploit this type of resources in the development of disruptive and more effective messages with segments of the public that are eventually farther away from conventional information formulas and channels. Webcomics adapted to social media offer certain formal limitations that, nevertheless, seem to be very well suited to the consumption preferences of the 9Gag community, which mainly responds to the centennial and millennial segments.

Most of the webcomics disseminated in 9Gag respond to the category of several panels arranged in strips, which is the general format of any comic, including analog formats. In this sense, this may indicate that the formal discourse adapted to the social network is not as crucial when it comes to creating interaction with the community as the content itself, the tone, or the theme of the story.

Although the study proposes a distinction of formats that obey the narrative concreteness of the webcomics published in 9Gag according to one type or another, the analysis of interactions in these concerning the specific content has not been detailed. In this sense, further studies could sample only the publications labeled as webcomics and evaluate whether the multi-strip, reel, single panel, or carousel formats interfere with the level of user preference when sharing the content.

It would be convenient to analyze the specific content of each publication, and the results advanced in this work allow us to point out that webcomics, at least those disseminated by 9Gag, address common interests and places for this specific community as well as that of Instagram users who follow their profile which is located in a young segment. This is why we can verify that the webcomic format, at least the humorous one, transcends the temporal limitations that circumstantially may occur and maintain a stable and intense connection with the new audiences of digital platforms and social media.

Independent artists and creators of digital content not only gain Instagram an important window to increase the reach of their content but find, particularly in profiles like 9Gag, an important resource in this process. Therefore, future research should focus on the origin and status of those responsible for the webcomics disseminated through this platform, that is, are they individual authors and artists who want their work to gain visibility? Are any publishers taking advantage of this context to try to gain greater reach for their content organically? Who are ultimately responsible for this artistic content? Tentatively and comparatively, one could explore how well-established webcomic profiles such as @_yes_but, @dinosaurcouch, or @sarahandersencomics, all of which have over a million followers, amplify traffic with others with a smaller reach such as @fossilfoolcomic or @sorrowbacon.

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