

Knowledge Production and Consumption for the Creation of Value in Comic-making in Mexico

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Abstract. Social networks have become spaces where hopeful entrepreneurs can exchange and promote knowledge. Artists and other creatives have found various ways to use technology to create value, building communities where techniques, technologies, and business dynamics can be shared. In this context, social media management is key to producing and consuming knowledge, with the aim of enhancing visibility, competition, and above all, innovation in art and technique. As a result of these dynamics, comics have enjoyed a resurgence worldwide, thanks to the development of new formats and innovative uses of comics as a means of communication and a line of business for a range of artists and corporations. Nonetheless, in Mexico this sector has encountered challenges in securing its position in the international development of the industry, raising a need to explore business practices in order to generate strategies that may help to bring about a transformation. In this research, a series of interviews was conducted with 13 artists and creators in Mexico to examine how they have assimilated the global dynamics of the industry in terms of social media management, with a particular focus on the production and consumption of knowledge relating to their line of work. One key finding is that Mexican comic-makers typically do use social networks to promote their products in their various formats, but only to a limited extent, which poses challenges for creating tutorials or courses to increase the visibility of their knowledge about the comic craft and the nature of this kind of work.

1 Introduction

Right from the very earliest theoretical developments and initial frameworks, the key ingredient for the creative economy has been a policy that combines the benefits of creativity and innovation with the importance of knowledge distribution systems, social production, self-promotion, and networking [1], [2]. This has implications both for established companies and for workers themselves, and in particular for those hoping to pave their own way to entrepreneurship [3], improving presence in the market and, at the same time diversifying funding sources to overcome the conditions of precarious work which in this type of economy. This approach provides artistic businesses with greater opportunities to find niches of consumers with common interests and offer content that reflects technical excellence in ever more novel formats.

In this context, the aim is for producers, consumers, working professionals and artists in training to interact to create close-knit communities where self-promotion is an opportunity to exchange knowledge, a strategy to advertise one's services, and a means of validation. Networks allows workers to establish a

certain level of prestige that can be capitalized on with new clients or sponsors for artists in business [4], [5].

The hope is to channel their interest toward new proposals and esthetics for their products or brand [6], while networks and connections are made that may lead to value-generating opportunities [4]. However, this does bring with it some complications for the arts scene. Firstly, establishing these connections requires an ability by artists to balance their own creative desires with economic interests, and secondly, constantly engaging on social networks may become an additional burden on top of creative work, that requires technical abilities and social skills, which are now important for achieving success [7].

This new understanding of the profile of creative professionals, brought about by the development of the creative economy, has transformed the way in which design, production, promotion, and distribution are handled within the cultural and creative industries (CCIs) [8]. Indeed, countries with a strong graphic tradition, like the United States, Japan, France, and more recently South Korea, have witnessed a revitalization in the industry, having succeeded in aligning their processes with technology innovations and new global dynamics leveraging demand for goods

of this nature and taking the lead in the exploitation of copyright [9].

Although Mexican comics possess all the qualities of a cultural object loaded with meaning and an expressive means of communication, and they have the potential to become a driver of creative and cultural activity, a change of perception is still needed – both from a public policy perspective, with respect to the way in which these business ventures are conducted, and from the perspective of comic-makers themselves, in terms of adopting new trends by professional artists to continually improve their products as they seek new niches and opportunities.

Against this backdrop, this study offers deeper insight into the self-promotion process, understood as a process of knowledge exchange and collaborative networking, among comic artists in Mexico. To this end, we conducted 13 interviews with practicing Mexican comic-makers to gain an understanding of the ways they promote their creative work, and their ability and interest in building relationships with other professionals or potential customers, to improve their working conditions and find their way to success.

This paper is organized in five sections. The first section states the problem, setting out the arguments and rationale underlying the theoretical and practical value of the study. The second section offers a theoretical discussion on the characteristics of new professionals, self-promotion in the CCIs, and its importance in the modern-day dynamics of independent comic production worldwide. The third section describes our methodology, highlighting the qualitative nature of the approach taken and our use of interviews for empirical data collection. The fourth section presents the results, with a focus on the conceptions, practices, and opinions of Mexican comic-makers regarding self-promotion and social media management processes. Lastly, we offer conclusions on the way Mexican comic-makers are tackling the challenges of the creative economy.

1.1 Problem statement

This section presents the reasons why research in this field is needed, which include the lack of literature on the behavior of those engaged in trades such as comic production, or the problems these professionals face in their work. The practical relevance of this study lies in its contribution to knowledge on the behavior of cultural industries and business ventures of this nature in Mexico.

The growth of CCIs like comic-making is of interest for development as it facilitates access to new spaces where innovations can be generated and applied. As an interdisciplinary medium, comics offer potential

as a tool for the development of creative activity, through collaboration by professionals in different fields [10]. Currently, these industries provide opportunities to generate wealth and serve as a means of communication, given the cultural and economic impact of the process of creating, producing, and distributing copyrighted work [11].

Despite original content by artists of international renown, Mexican comics are lacking in the domestic market, due primarily to a monopolization of traditional outlets by global industry leaders¹, with bookstores, trade fairs, and conventions constituting an integral part of the promotional and distributional apparatus for these companies. These spaces prefer to market more widely recognized content over independent products made in Mexico, which are high quality but not as profitable. This limits the visibility of content produced by Mexican artists, who are left battling precarious conditions of labor and unfavorable system.

This study sheds some light on the outreach and limitations of those who are attempting to pursue this art form as a business, while filling some knowledge gaps regarding the production and exchange of ideas, techniques, or strategies essential for the development of collectives, comic-makers, and other professionals.

It is not easy for Mexican indie authors to generate enough interest to adapt to the technological and social changes associated with their profession. They must also be able to build synergies and create new revenue streams to support innovation in this type of production in Mexico.

2 Literature review

This section outlines the various theoretical perspectives underpinning this research. First, we discuss the importance of self-promotion. We then examine the value of generating collaborative networks to share knowledge that supports the generation of innovation and artists' professional development.

In the CCIs, promotion serves to establish continual dialogues with potential consumers, with the goal of steering their interest toward whichever new products, narratives or artistic ideas are being marketed [6]. For Perren [12], in the case of comics, promotion should be the result of a series of accommodations between publishing interests, the item's target audience, and the choice of channels to reach this audience, in this case comic readers.

Although conventions are very costly to organize, they are one of the main channels for promotion and have become big business for the states that host them [13]. One leading example is the San Diego Comic-Con (SDCC), reported as a substantial

¹ Marvel Comics and Detective Comics, represented by Mexican publishers specializing in republishing iconic comic series in special formats for the collectors' market.

source of revenue for California, exceeding even the conventions of Los Angeles or New York [14].

Another important aspect of comic promotion can be found on the internet, in the form of distribution channels in the social media accounts of leading production companies and publishers, and private channels specializing in promoting products associated with geek culture², such as comics, video games, collectibles, or new series or movies. Collins [15] notes how the influx of social networks and the advent of digital file storage formats like CBR or PDF, portable ICT devices, and artists' own self-promotion endeavors have become key elements to sustain interest, and hence a market for publications.

Similarly, social networks have provided opportunities for self-promotion through new formats like webcomics, digital comics, and webtoons, and have reshaped the work of artists, mainly through an increased workload. Indeed, in addition to perfecting the skills, adopt new technologies and techniques associated with their art, creatives must now be able to offer their services and promote their work through social networks with the aim of finding alternative forms of revenue. [3].

These self-promotion dynamics are reflected in the wide array of online tutorials covering drawing techniques, the use of digital tools, and comic production methods, offered by industry professionals of different levels and backgrounds [12]. However, this has given rise to ongoing tension within the arts scene as this engagement requires artists to balance their own narrative and creative interests with consumer trends and needs, but above all due to the toll this can take on their reputation as creatives [7].

This increase in responsibilities for professionals in the CCIs increases the demand to build and maintain ongoing relationships with customers in ways that bear a greater resemblance to those with friends and family [16]. The concept of "relational labor" shares features with the neighboring concepts of "emotional labor," "affective labor," "immaterial labor," "venture labor," and "creative labor," but is novel in that it stresses ongoing communicative practices and skills to build and maintain the interpersonal and group relationships that are crucial to many careers today [18].

In this sense, the notion of personal branding, popularized in the late 1990s and rooted in self-help and personal development methods, has emerged as a strategy for business success [19]. This was originally conceived as a process of self-identity branding, essentially detached from skills, motivations, and interests, and is centered on the development of a unique, authentic image that can be marketed [20]. Self-branding has now become embedded in the dialectics of

online production and consumption as part of strategies to gain prestige and thus boost job opportunities.

Similarly, social networks have become alternative sources of self-funding for independent publishing projects that tap into the passion of their followers through funding platforms like Patreon, Gofundme or Kickstarter, which allow artists to increase the visibility of their work and offer avenues to raise additional revenue.

In the same vein, various crowdfunding platforms exist to support anybody who has a good idea but needs capital. Ever since their launch, they have provided a market for potential investors to scout for initiatives and supply infrastructure [21].

The most popular platform is Kickstarter. Since it was founded in 2009, a total of 116,560 projects have been launched, with a total investment of US\$812 million from 4.9 million sponsors. All in all, 49,397 projects have been successfully funded and 11 million "pledges" made: expressions of intent to invest in exchange for exclusive material from the artist or discounts [13].

While methods of artistic promotion for comics still depend to some extent on presenting work at specialized conventions or trade fairs or in catalogs, social networks play an important role in disseminating artwork. The internet is a key part of the innovation value chain within the CCIs, and for comics, online communication often facilitates the exchange of knowledge at different stages of the production cycle.

This does not come without a cost for creatives, who are compelled to develop areas of knowledge to complement their line of work if they wish to reap the corresponding benefits, in the form of increased international prominence or extra income. These efforts are apparent in artists' willingness to pursue new skills and abilities to build collaborative networks with other professionals.

Social networks have become a working tool for professional image curation and social relationship management for the purposes of career progression and professional success. Social network activity is made up of what can be seen as performative practices of sociality, which exist around a shared notion of reputation as the cultural conception of value. This becomes a form of "digital work," as an investment in social relationships with an expected return, aimed at acquiring a reputation [16, p. 2].

In short, social networks provide tools to disseminate artwork but also represent an increased commitment for artists or entrepreneurs who must now. If they want to improve their conditions, incorporate new techniques and technologies related to production, and build a commercial persona on social media, promote themselves and validate their knowledge and skills. As a result, it is important that they develop close

² Commonly associated with the consumption of fictional content, including movies, series, video games, technology, role plays, comics, etc. [17, p. 1].

relationships with peers before going into business or seeking publication with a renowned publisher, as it is these networks that offer the strategies, technologies, niches, and contacts that will support personal professional development and business to ensure a successful future.

3 Method

This section presents the methodology employed for this research, which was based on collecting qualitative data on the opinions and experiences of 13 Mexican comic-makers. Table 1 describes the profile of study participants, detailing their age, place of residence, gender, specialization, and professional education.

Table 1. Profiles of participating comic-makers

ID code	Place of residence	Age/ Gender	Specializa- tion	Educa- tion
ART01	Tijuana	41 Male	Illustrator	Graphic design
ART02	Mexico City	32 Female	Illustrator/ Writer	Graphic design
ART03	Mexico City	44 Male	Illustrator	No educa- tion
ART04	Monterrey	26 Male	Illustrator/ Writer	Arts
ART05	Mexico City	36 Male	Illustrator/ Writer	Adminis- tration
ART06	Chihuahua	31 Male	Illustrator/ Writer	Graphic design
ART07	Mexico City	26 Male	Illustrator	Advertis- ing
ART08	Ensenada	38 Male	Colorist	Graphic design
ART09	Mexico City	29 Female	Illustrator	Graphic art
ART10	Mexico City	48 Male	Cartoonist	Advertis- ing
ART11	Monterrey	36 Male	Colorist	Graphic design
ART12	Mexico City	48 Male	Illustrator	Arts
ART13	Monterrey	28 Male	Illustrator/ Writer	Arts

The initial questions in the semi-structured interview (Table 2) fell into two categories: questions relating to self-promotion strategies and questions designed to gain insight into comic-makers' experiences using social networks.

Table 2. Interview guide for participating comic-makers

Self-promotion strategies	Promotion strategies
	Production of tutorials or other materials
	Mechanisms to promote their work
	Level of competition
Use of social networks	Collaboration with other artists
	Dialogue with consumers
	Promotion of products

4 Results

In this section, we discuss the various promotion strategies employed by Mexican comic-makers and how they use social networks. First, we present our results on their use of self-promotion as a strategy to enhance the visibility of their work. Then we describe comic-makers' experiences and ability to generate reach on social media.

Comic-makers view promotion as part of their business, mindful that through their promotional efforts, with better knowledge of consumer demand, they may discover ways to enhance their methods and content. Most explained that just as with their production work, they bear the burden of self-promotion themselves:

(...) in this job you've got to be constantly posting stuff about work (...) most people post little drawings or activities like interviews or discussions with other creators (...) others are content just to get likes on their drawings (...) but it's additional work, it takes up time (...) you have to remain visible to your followers (...) (ART05).

Self-promotion on social media is a complement to art production and has become an important part of the marketing apparatus within the CCIs. Social networks allow artists to reach a wider audience and to appeal to a more diverse range of consumers around the globe. Indirectly, artists capitalize on these platforms by earning money from content, like tutorials or entertainment, which are not directly related to their artwork but requires time and a set special social skills. Indeed, artists see in these media an opportunity to start a business venture and make a living from their art [22].

To determine how effectively they used social networks, the comic-makers were asked, in the interviews, about their use of digital marketing or audience profiling strategies when posting on social media accounts. This elicited a negative response from most of the interviewees, who cited a lack of knowledge and time or monetary constraints:

(...) there's no time to do that much (...) we have to work on production and sometimes promotion is thin on the ground (...) I still find it tricky to deal with the technical aspects of the networks (...) and there's not much budget to launch a campaign or anything like that (...) (ART12).

Although comic-makers recognize the importance of social networks as a promotional strategy, they use them only to a limited extent, with no marketing strategies or profiled targeting for their posts in order to better understand their audience and their audience's needs.

No market research is being done (...) we don't know where readers are or what age they are (...) in fact, we don't even know what they're reading or what they want to read (...) this makes it very difficult to develop networks (...) or businesses, [or] sell special editions, because

nobody understands how important it is to know these things (...) in the past, this was the job of publishers (...) nowadays, everyone does whatever they like (ART11).

While managing and developing social networks may be perceived as essential skills in the CCI, the opportunity to derive maximum benefit from them in these industries will always be dependent on users' ability. Workers are forced to struggle with incorporating technology to exploit and make the best use possible of social media for their own benefit and to gain prestige among their customers, in this case comic readers if they wish to establish themselves or achieve a certain level of financial success [23], [18].

Many comic-makers deplore the knowledge gaps in the profile of comic readers/consumers in Mexico, from the perspective of Mexican artists. This stands in stark contrast to the transnational corporations operating in the country, like Marvel, DC, or distributors like Panini, which follow a methodology to gain insight into market trends, putting domestic producers at a disadvantage.

As noted by [16], social networks provide opportunities for self-promotion and have transformed the work of artists, but also represent an increase in workload. In addition to perfecting the skills associated with their art, creatives must now be able to offer their services and promote their work through these networks in a constant endeavor to garner favor with both the consumers of their work and potential employers. As a result, they often deploy strategies such as offering free or paid courses, videos of their processes, or advice for new artists.

It is undoubtedly of interest to understand how Mexican comic-makers employ self-promotion strategies to access opportunities for paid work in comic production. The responses from comic-makers in this regard were negative; not all of them use self-promotion strategies to complement their work. The reasons include the following:

"it's difficult to teach someone; you need other knowledge for that (...) anybody can make a video of themselves drawing or something, but teaching something properly [is another matter] (...) there are lots of people who do that, regardless of whether they're any good or not (...)" (ART07).

On the other hand, artists who regularly engage in forms of self-promotion explain:

(...) the workshops are part of the job (...) that's what's on offer, but after you've been doing free tutorials for a while (...) what I do is I upload one video a week of me drawing or designing a character of some kind, or painting or whatever (...) that's how you have to show yourself and the commissions come rolling in (...) it's a matter of discipline (...) there are people who make a good living solely from commissions, they don't even make whole comics anymore (...) (ART03).

A significant source of tension for creatives lies in the fact they are selling themselves, and therefore, any professional or work-related problem can be easily seen as a reflection of personal weakness. Issues of self-esteem or confidence can further erode professional success or performance, given that cultural work is temporary and intermittent, the boundaries between work and play have broken down, pay is low, and people require new technology, social skills to engage with costumer and still create innovation. The mindset of cultural workers is "an attitudinal mindset that is a blend of bohemianism and entrepreneurialism; informal work environments and distinctive forms of sociality; and profound experiences of insecurity and anxiety about finding work, earning enough money and 'keeping up' in rapidly changing fields" [1, p. 14].

Due to a short supply of formal programs, comic-makers are required to develop self-management strategies in the face of a range of courses offered by other artists with a degree of authority, gained through their experience or prominence within the circle of Mexican artists. However, many of these resources have not been professionally developed and are often recorded drawing exercises or discussions between creators and enthusiasts. ART01 explains:

(...) I learned by watching tutorials by American artists on YouTube (...) there are ways to learn everything, even how to do business (...) you don't need to go to school (...) nowadays there's no reason for not learning so long as you're willing (...) I watch videos by people who upload software tutorials, drawing techniques, and even videos by collectors...

For Bridgstock and Cunningham [24], knowledge transfer has become increasingly important; arts and humanities departments have a positive impact on society and provide good value for money as they contribute to the development of creative capacities. However, more flexible planning is needed to promote collaboration and innovation.

However, this requires encouraging collaboration among creatives from various fields, not just those focused on drawing or writing, but also professionals with greater experience in advertising and market dynamics, which would help Mexican artists lighten their workload.

This has an effect on the quality of collaboration; the comic-makers explained that this can be attributed to creative differences within the milieu, as outlined by ART04:

"The difficulty of finding people who share the same ideals regarding comics and what we want to convey (...) for me, it's very important that the person I decide to work with is able to keep pace."

This is a recurring comment that speaks of the dynamics of comic production and the associated commissions, with a development process that is very time-consuming and requires specific submissions and a group of colleagues working together at the same pace. Another

explanation put forward by comic-makers concerns the economic potential of their work, which generally has a limited profit margin:

“Collaboration means diluting earnings, which are low to begin with, so sharing them with someone else makes it much more difficult to make money from the books” (ART09).

Although advances in technology have made it possible to learn how to make and promote comics online, and build a career on social networks, methods of promotion are still somewhat reliant on more traditional means of communication like trade fairs or conventions, given that print versions of comics are still commercially relevant. Therefore, comic-makers rely to some extent on presenting their work at specialized trade fairs or conventions or in catalogs [25]. In this respect, most comic creators remarked that trade fairs and conventions are the main spaces where they promote and market their work:

(...) You always need to be prepared to buy a stand at the FIL [Guadalajara International Book Fair], (...) in Guadalajara, Mexico City, wherever (...) and go around with your product so people know who you are (...) know how to stand out (...) it's nice when your social media followers come up to you (...) it's better when people know you because then you can secure a sale (...) on the internet people want everything for free (...) you can always develop better relationships at fairs or conventions, because that's where consumers of comics and manga go (...) it's always better to secure a spot at events (ART04).

Mexican comic-makers view events like book fairs as their main promotion strategy: a space to showcase and promote their products, contact their followers, and make sales. In the words of ART10:

“Fairs and conventions are places where readers who might be interested in your books meet (...) they're the only places where you can see and mingle with artists (...) there are three or four events a year, so everyone takes this opportunity.”

Online funding platforms are another promotional strategy used by creatives worldwide. These include Kickstarter, Gofundme, and Patreon, and they offer an opportunity for anybody who has a good idea and needs to raise capital to undertake a project. With this in mind, we also asked comic-makers about their use of online funding. Although most claimed to be familiar with these platforms, they use them only very little, as one participant explained:

“Asking for help does work (...) it is difficult because promotion takes longer (...) when you're asking for money, it's really hard to win them over, even when you offer lots of extra material (...) it works, but only when you have (...) a lot of followers (...) I've seen people try, but it's very rare they hit their goal (...)” (ART09).

On this basis, comic-makers would appear to understand the role and opportunities of online media but are reluctant to perform additional work that goes beyond art creation. Sadly, the burden of both learning and creating by themselves is a substantial drain on their time and energy.

5 Conclusions and recommendations

In closing, this section discusses our findings on the importance of self-promotion strategies and the use of social networks as strategies for knowledge exchange in efforts by Mexican comic-makers to create value.

Mexican creators encounter various challenges in developing self-promotion and social media strategies to support their work and their presence in international markets. These difficulties can result in a need to operate on a small scale and make it nearly impossible to position their work on transnational circuits like those of the industry giants, leading to endogamic behavior that entails a dependence on local markets. This is not altogether bad, provided there is balanced demand in a stable market [26].

It is also necessary to establish ways to promote one's work through social networks. To achieve this, comic-makers need specialized knowledge in social media management and the creation of artificial demand by identifying potential consumers with campaign profiling techniques, a method widely employed in online marketing. These mechanisms could help to build communities of consumers/followers, which are essential to gain deeper insight into the characteristics of consumer demand and thus guide the creation of new products.

One proposal is to facilitate self-promotion by developing online audiovisual production techniques. This sort of initiative is aimed at improving the quality of content offered to other people, boosting their interest in learning technical and artistic aspects from other Mexican creators. The idea here is to improve the relationship between authors and readers; one key element for comic production and the comic market is competitive quality.

Similarly, support in designing work portfolios would also help to enhance job opportunities. Self-promotion techniques lie in developing a personal brand focused on generating constant appeal through posts, videos, and tutorials, so a strategic use of platforms, combined with social media management, may help to raise the presence of Mexican products in international networks of comic creators or readers.

To gain ground in international markets and increase the exploitation of copyright, there is a need – in addition to better promotion and self-promotion strategies for comic-makers in Mexico – for a transformation of the role of publishers, who promote product quality in terms of content, techniques, and styles. At present, professional publishers are continuously exploring new international markets for

domestic products, and they play an important role in the most successful industries [15].

An ongoing education program designed for publishers could be an additional approach to improve the visibility of Mexican products internationally, as one problem we identified is publisher dependence on business models that are restricted to direct sales in the local market, an unappealing prospect for independent authors who, in spite of these circumstances, control all the stages of content production due to a lack of incentives to engage in a continuous process of editorial review.

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