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Kickstarter project creators' communities:

Building online supportive networks along the
crowdfunding journey

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Dissertation written under the supervision of Pedro Oliveira

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Abstract

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Abstract:

The present dissertation uses the netnography technique to understand the dynamics at place within an online community dedicated to Kickstarter project launchers. Kickstarter is a crowdfunding platform launched in 2009 with the mission of helping bring creative projects come to life, through an innovative model of online fundraising. Ten years later, Kickstarter is the leading crowdfunding platform in the world, and it hosts various kinds of projects. Project creators use the platform to raise funding and awareness for their projects. Analyzing interactions within a closed community of project creators allowed to understand the daily work and struggles project creators go through, and the importance for them to share these moments with other project creators online. Insights from the netnographic observation permit to draw a framework of what creators expect and obtain from participating in such community: technical support, emotional support, and social support. These findings add up to the current academic research on crowdfunding, which until then considered the importance of community only through the relationship uniting single project creators to their backers but did not investigate the cross-project relationship existing between creators. Moreover, the results of the analysis enable to draw managerial recommendations for Kickstarter and crowdfunding platforms in general to improve their service towards more cross-project interaction and support for project creators.

Resumo:

A presente dissertação utiliza Netnografia como método de pesquisa para compreender as dinâmicas dentro de uma comunidade online dedicada ao lançamento de projetos Kickstarter. O Kickstarter é uma plataforma de financiamento colaborativo lançada em 2009, com o objetivo de ajudar a renascer projetos criativos através de um modelo inovador de angariação de fundos online. Dez anos depois, o Kickstarter é a principal plataforma de angariação de fundos do mundo e acolhe diversos tipos de projetos. Os criadores dos projetos utilizam a plataforma para angariar financiamento e criar sensibilização para com os mesmos. Ao analisar as interações dentro de uma comunidade fechada de criadores de projetos, foi possível compreender o seu trabalho diário, as dificuldades encaradas e a importância de partilharem esses momentos com outros. Os resultados obtidos permitem estabelecer um quadro de referência sobre as expectativas e resultados dos criadores ao participarem em demais comunidades: apoio técnico, apoio emocional e apoio social. Estes resultados contribuem também para a existente literatura acadêmica sobre angariação de fundos, a qual até ao momento, apenas reconhece a importância da comunidade através do relacionamento unindo os criadores individuais de projetos aos seus financiadores, mas não investiga a relação entre projetos existentes entre os criadores. Além disso, os resultados permitem criar recomendações relevantes para o Kickstarter e para as plataformas de angariação de fundos em geral, de forma a melhorar os seus serviços focando mais na interação entre projetos e suporte para criadores dos mesmos.

Keywords: Kickstarter, Crowdfunding, Online Communities, Support, Netnography

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1. Introduction

1.1. Problem Definition and Relevance

In the past decade, crowdfunding platforms have emerged as innovative intermediaries for individuals wanting to launch creative or entrepreneurial projects, and a “crowd” of other individuals willing to help them to fund their project. Crowdfunding has raised research attention on many aspects: as a novel financing model, as a tool for project development, and as a platform bringing together many diverse individuals around creative projects. Although the financial transaction is essential, it is not the only reason for using crowdfunding: many researchers have investigated the relationships developed between project creators and their “funders”, showing another critical facet of crowdfunding: the community. However, less light has been shed on the relationships created among creators. The reason may be that most platforms provide few opportunities for creators to meet and exchange. Yet, such exchange takes place on online communities outside the platform, showing that there is a demand for this kind of interaction. The present dissertation intends to throw light on these communities, and to understand the way crowdfunding project creators connect and relate outside the crowdfunding platform.

1.2. Objectives and Research Questions

This dissertation intends to contribute to crowdfunding theory, by providing an analysis of crowdfunding project launchers’ interactions through dedicated online communities, and by identifying how these interactions differ from the ones permitted by the crowdfunding platform. In order not to get lost within the differences characterizing each crowdfunding platform and their specificities, this dissertation will focus only on Kickstarter, the most known and used crowdfunding platform currently.

A netnographic research method will be adopted, using as a major source a specific Facebook Group which gathers Kickstarter project creators. Exploring the interactions at stake within the group will allow to draw qualitative insights on the members needs and user experience.

The analysis should provide possible answers to the following research questions:

Q1: What can be learned from a netnographic analysis of Kickstarter project creators' communities? What can they tell us about Kickstarter?

Q2: Who are project creators and what is their expertise with project management, funding, and digital tools?

Q3: Why do project launchers look for support in online communities external to Kickstarter. How is it different from the platform support tools?

Q4: What does a community dedicated to project creators adds to the action of launching a project using Kickstarter?

1.3. Structure

In the next chapter, the Literature Review will give a general presentation of online communities and crowdfunding, and of the current state of research on these subjects, thus helping to understand the context for the present study to arise.

Subsequently, the Methodology part will describe the approaches chosen to collect and organize data, leading to the construction of a thematic framework for the analysis.

Thereafter, the Result Analysis chapter will unfold the findings resulting from the study of the different themes identified within the community observed. It intends to present motivations of project creators to participate in a group dedicated to them, and the meanings it represents for them. The findings will be put in contrast with previous research findings, in order to examine differences or correlations between the present netnographic analysis and preceding literature based on different other methods.

Eventually, conclusions drawn from the analysis will be presented, giving rise to academic and managerial implications. The last section will account for the limitations of the present research and suggest lines of analysis for future researchers.

2. Literature Review

This section gives an overview of the existing literature on the main dissertation topics, allowing to understand the dynamics at stake within online communities and crowdfunding communities, and setting the path for this dissertation's research perspective.

2.1. Online communities

2.1.1. The Rise of Virtual Communities

Castells (1996) analysed the rise of a “network society”, born with the Internet, and characterized by instantaneity and globality. The development of the Internet has represented an important period of transition towards a new form of society, characterized by a constant flow of information and communication.

When referring the Internet as the “World Wide Web”, we acknowledge it is a very large network of human interaction mediated by technology. Studies on Computer-Mediated-Communication analysed this “techno-social system” (Wilson & Peterson, 2002). Aghaei, Nematbakhsh, and Farsani (2012) however, made a clear distinction between the Internet as a whole, and the web as only one part of it, although the most prominent and growing one. They proposed an overview of the evolution of the web in four different stages: “Web 1.0 as a web of cognition, web 2.0 as a web of communication, web 3.0 as a web of co-operation and web 4.0 as a web of integration”: Web 1.0 appeared in 1989 as a globally accessible space for sharing information, but was mostly mono-directional, as a promotional support for companies, and it did not allow any interaction. Web 2.0, officially defined in 2004, is characterized by the evolution of the Internet as a platform allowing bi-directional communication and participation. At this stage, the Internet acquired the network effect that still characterizes it today. Web 3.0, also referred to as “semantic web”, was developed as a collaborative way of making the web more efficient and easier to read and use for anyone. Web 4.0 marks the advent of a new intelligent era with the development of artificial intelligence.

The development of online communities aroused with “web 2.0”, multiplying into a variety of online communication interfaces such as blogs, forums, or social networking sites (SNS), all

with their specific codes and rules. While offline communities are often closed and limited to specific physical spaces, online communities transcend geographic and time limitations, as they are open to broader and more disperse populations, and accessible at any moment. The notion of e-clusters (Adebanjo & Michaelides, 2010) implies that the “physical proximity” that was characteristic of offline communities, is being replaced by a “digital proximity” in the case of online communities. Moreover, as technology develops, communication is more and more happening through multi-screening, using different devices alternatively or even simultaneously, allowing members to stay connected almost permanently (Dias, 2016).

2.1.2. A New Form of Communication

Virtual communities bring unprecedented aspects to communication. Online communication is expressed through different supports, that may be combined: text, images, video, sound, GIFs, etc. The communication message can be transmitted not only through words, but also through visual emotions: many platforms now give the possibility to share opinions by simply “liking” or even sometimes “disliking” content. Facebook goes even further, with the introduction, in 2016, of different “reactions” that directly refers to emotions such as love, surprise, sadness or anger (Pool & Nissim, 2016). This adds to the already existing “emoticons” offering a wide range of pictorial descriptions, which list is regularly extended by the companies who produce them. All these features permit to humanize online communication: they add a tone or a meaning to a text, helping others to understand a message the correct way, by conveying perceptions such as friendliness, fear, or irony for example (Li, Chan, & Kim, 2018).

Wilson and Peterson (2002) observed that “Internet practices are becoming normalized or institutionalized in a variety of contexts”. While the first online communities were generally created by individual users or consumers around a specific topic of interests, soon companies and brands also saw this new trend as an opportunity, either to interact with already existing online communities or to create their own. They recognized a potential to learn about their consumers and create a more direct relationship with them through these online channels, giving rise to the concept of online brand communities (Brogi, 2014). Most companies who operate online now include social and community features in their websites, with the aim of boosting user engagement through new and more direct means of reaching their customers (Inbar & Barzilay, 2014).

2.1.3. Introduction to Netnography

Netnography is a qualitative research method that takes its origin from ethnography, applying and adjusting it to the study of online communities and online social interactions. It is used to explore and understand the natural behaviours of members of a specific online community, and to study their interactions and shared meanings. These interactions may offer very valuable insights to marketers: they can freely observe natural behaviours without distracting the people observed, who are not feeling the pressure of being interviewed or scrutinized by an external researcher. In this regard, netnography is less intrusive than traditional market research techniques such as focus group, individual interviews or even traditional ethnography, and it avoids biases due to the research context (Kozinets, 2010).

Kozinets (2002) offers a methodology for conducting a netnographic study: he suggests that the observation must be carefully prepared upstream, by defining specific marketing research questions, identifying appropriate online communities, and collecting prior knowledge about the community and its members. The data collection and analysis rely on a combination of two elements: existing publications posted by members of the online community; and observations made by the researcher on the community members interactions and meanings. In a third phase, the researcher should verify that its interpretation of the behaviours observed is trustworthy, and that it respects research ethics, especially by ensuring confidentiality to participants. Finally, the researcher should discuss findings with the community members, to complete “member checks” and incorporate any comment or feedback from them.

Although the online community landscape has very widely evolved since 2002, most of these guidelines are still valid today, and can be adapted to the new possibilities offered by blogs and SNS for example, as the volume of interaction is now enormous and requires rigorous categorization (Kozinets, Dolbec, & Earley, 2014). The researcher must be attentive to the number of contributors and sources, the different formats used, the frequency of publication and must distinguish publicly open communities from closed or private ones, corporate-owned communities from user-spontaneous ones. The researcher must also pay attention to cross-platform communities, with conversations following up through different online spaces and formats.

It is important to note that as a qualitative method, netnography has its limitations. As it targets a specific online community, the focus is quite narrow and may not provide a representative

picture of the entire consumer community of a brand or product for example. Identifying the appropriate community for a particular marketing research is not an easy task, and the netnographic method may not be suited to all industries. Furthermore, researchers must stay aware that their interpretations could be influenced by their own interests and knowledge. For these reasons, cross-validation should be used to understand and verify relations and differences between online and offline behaviours (Marshall, 2001). As a result, it is advised to use netnography as a baseline or a complement for other research methods such as interviews or surveys, to better insure representativity and relevance, and validate or offer a broader view on the netnographic conclusions (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018; Kozinets, 2002).

In this dissertation, the netnographic technique will be used to study behaviours within crowdfunding communities. Before going further in the research, it is necessary to examine the existing research on crowdfunding and assess the literature gaps that this dissertation will contribute to fill.

2.2. Crowdfunding

2.2.1. The Origins of Crowdfunding

One of the main challenges commonly found by any person wanting to launch a new project is to raise outside capital to pursue and grow their activities. Although many different potential sources for external finance exist, not all of them are equally available to any venture, as traditional investors favour firms with high growth objectives or significant assets guaranteeing future profits (Cosh, Cumming, & Hughes, 2009). Smaller firms and individuals are less likely to obtain investments from banks or venture capitalists for example, however they can rely more easily on private individual lenders, who are often part of a close circle of friends and family (Agrawal, Catalini, & Goldfarb, 2011; Lin, Prabhala, & Viswanathan 2013).

In recent years, the development of the web and its communication features have allowed project launchers to readily access a larger pool of potential investors through online crowdfunding platforms, that also allow a much broader geographic dispersion of investors than traditional borrowing schemes (Agrawal et al, 2011). Taking its origin from both micro-finance and crowdsourcing (Howe, 2008), online crowdfunding is a novel fundraising concept that is open to anyone: this alternative model allows any private project launcher to appeal to a

“crowd”, that is a “large number of relatively small contributions from a relatively large number of individuals using the internet, without standard financial intermediaries” (Mollick, 2014).

The recent global financial crisis pushed banks and traditional investors to be increasingly cautious and to accept less risky projects, paving the way for the rise of alternative and more collaborative funding systems such as microfinance, peer-to-peer lending and crowdfunding (Bruton, Khavul, Siegel, & Wright, 2015). In 2011, the government of the United States recognized that crowdfunding had a key importance in the country’s economic growth because it allowed any citizen “to engage as producers and consumers in the economy without the backing of high net-worth individuals or institutions” (Gerber, Hui, & Kuo, 2012). This official recognition contributed to give visibility and legitimacy to crowdfunding.

2.2.2. Different Actors at Stake

Crowdfunding platforms (CFPs) act as intermediaries facilitating the interaction between two types of actors: fundraisers and funders. In the early existence of crowdfunding, fundraisers (also referred to as project creators, project launchers, or project owners) were often operating in the cultural industry and seeking investment to produce cultural goods (music, cinema, video games, etc.). As crowdfunding developed, it also became an important tool for small business entrepreneurs to present their business ideas online with an open call for investment (Agrawal, Catalini, & Goldfarb, 2014).

On the other hand, crowd funders, contributors, or project “backers”, are individuals who commit to financially contribute to a project in exchange for a reward. Investors enjoy additional benefits compared to traditional consumers: depending on platforms and projects, they can be granted tangible rewards in return for their participation in the project, either in the form of an early access to a product or service before it is launched in the consumer market, or by becoming future shareholders of a company (Belleflamme, Lambert, & Schwienbacher, 2014). Furthermore, they also gain from a community-based experience: backers enjoy the emotional satisfaction of participating in a community of early adopters and eventually being associated with the development and potential success of a project (Aaker and Akutsu, 2009).

When launching a campaign on a CFP, creators decide on a funding threshold and a time limit, usually a few weeks. A project is considered successful only if it is able to raise enough funding

before the set deadline. If the goal is not reached, the campaign is cancelled, and no money is exchanged.

While the first CFPs were dedicated to creative projects, the growth of crowdfunding resulted in opening the market to a wider pool of project launchers, allowing many new CFPs to appear and rapidly gain higher market shares. Kickstarter, created in 2009, is now the largest reward-based CFP. Other major platforms include Indiegogo, GoFundMe, etc.

The crowdfunding platforms' business model is built upon a transaction fee for successful projects, which amounts to about 5% of the total funding amount on average (Agrawal et al, 2014). CFP's profits thus depend on the campaigns' success, hence relying on a positive network effect attracting a large community of project creators and of backers.

2.2.3. Crowdfunding Success and Failures

The advisory firm Massolution's latest Crowdfunding industry report (2015) indicated that the crowdfunding industry had reached more than \$34 billion in 2015 and was on the verge of surpassing traditional venture capital, forecasting a growth of about 26% per year until 2020.

However, as CFPs benefit from a rapid expansion and growth, the results are not as bright for all the campaigns launched on these platforms. Indeed, less than half of the projects launched reach their funding goal (ICO Partners, 2018). Kickstarter latest statistics indicate that the success rate on the platform since its creation has been below 37% (Kickstarter, 2019). Etter, Grossglauser and Thiran (2013) explained this figure by a low awareness of success factors by creators and backers and offered a quantitative method for predicting the success of Kickstarter campaign, based on two factors: direct information and social features. Wang, Li, Liang, Ye, and Ge (2018) also questioned this trend and raised the issue of an often-weak relationship between project launchers and backers, suggesting possible improvements for owners of crowdfunding platforms to enhance social interactions.

Exploring further the role of social interactions in the success of crowdfunding campaigns, we will analyse the different types of communities revolving around Kickstarter projects.

2.2.4. Kickstarter Communities

2.2.4.1. *Within Kickstarter website*

As an online platform that connects project creators and backers, Kickstarter (KS) may be considered an online community in itself. Indeed, crowdfunding's emergence was made possible because of the community and communication features that had developed with web 2.0 (Bouncken, Komorek, & Kraus, 2015). In that respect, crowdfunding cannot be reduced only to financial transactions: the “crowd” part is what brings its specificity and create a more powerful relationship between project creators and backers. The relationship surely relies on financial support, but also on longer-lasting qualitative support: backers express a personal curiosity to the projects they contribute to: they offer sympathetic encouragement, provide feedback and tips, and are likely to become early adopters and promoters of the product or service when it is launched. In certain cases, crowdfunding thus closely relates to crowdsourcing, when investors also become co-thinkers and partners (Willfort & Weber, 2016).

Inbar and Barzilay (2014) noted that Kickstarter does not gather only one community but a “hierarchy of multiple, partially-overlapping, competing communities”. The website offers different categories of interests, among which Design & Tech, Film, Food & Craft, Games, Music or Publishing (Kickstarter, 2019). These categories aggregate the different campaigns under common topics. Each project then generates its own specific community.

Each project page is made of different sections: the first section, “Campaign” is informed by the project creator: it contains the description of the project, and can include text, pictures, videos presenting the project. In this section, creators also indicate their funding goals, with the different pledge possibilities and the rewards they offer. A backer can directly click to make a pledge. The second section, “FAQ” (Frequently Asked Questions) is also filled by creators, who select by themselves the questions and answers. The third section, “Updates” allows the creator to give additional information about the advancement of the project or of the campaign. The fourth section, “Comments” is open only for people who have backed the projects to encourage the creator, ask any questions or offer suggestions on the projects. The project creator can then reply to the comments. However, backers cannot reply to each other's comments, and they cannot write a comment before they have made a pledge. The last section, called “Community” allows any visitor to know how many people already supported the project. These different features thus allow content sharing and interaction between the creators and backers of a

specific project. However, the interaction is relatively limited as backers can only participate in the discussion after making a funding commitment and cannot interact directly with other backers. Moreover, there is no possibility of cross-project interaction.

Nonetheless, several authors (Hardy, 2013; Kuppuswamy & Bayus, 2017; Ward & Ramachandran, 2010) found that the social information provided by the platforms about past contributions, such as the ones disclosed in the “Community” section of Kickstarter, had a significant influence on the behaviour of new backers. As a result, it can be argued that the CFPs users’ behaviour rely on community information, even when there is no direct interaction.

2.2.4.2. Outside Kickstarter Website

However, the Kickstarter community does not exist only on the Kickstarter website. As the website offers the possibility of sharing a project on Facebook, Twitter, or via e-mail, it allows the discussion to be pursued outside the website, therefore generating what Kozinets defines as “multiform communicative connectedness”, that is cross-conversations over multiple platforms and communities (2010; 2014). By doing so, anyone can thus extend a project’s reach outside the platform, through individual or group conversations. These outside extensions have different purpose: some are dedicated to giving further visibility and awareness to projects, reaching a larger pool of potential “backers”, and some are created to generate discussion and feedback around existing or future projects. The latter can be understood as help or support groups, providing additional resources and direct feedback that cannot necessarily be found on the Kickstarter platform itself, which does not allow to comment on a project without contributing to it and thus committing financially. Park, Kee and Valenzuela (2009) reported that getting peer support from others was one of the main motivations for individuals to participate in a Facebook social group. On the other hand, for the members giving advice to the others, the motivation can emerge from a sense of reciprocity, in helping others in return for their help, or a desire to initiate social interactions with peers (Chan, & Li, 2010).

The importance of the crowd and the community dynamics is widely recognized by authors working on crowdfunding. Numerous researchers have observed the backer’s motivations to participate in crowdfunding platforms, and the role of community in their decisions (Mollick, 2013; Ryu & Kim, 2016; Schwienbacher & Larralde, 2010). Moreover, considerable research has been conducted on the relationships binding creators and owners not only around funding,

but also around social capital: shared ideas and interests, and common willingness for a project to grow (Colombo, Franzoni, & Rossi-Lamastra, 2015; Da Cruz, 2018; Galuszka & Bystrov, 2014).

Hui, Greenberg and Gerber (2014) have investigated further the community dynamics between crowdfunding actors, especially from the perspective of project creators. They noted that project creators seek additional resources than the default ones provided by the CFP, and look for insights before launching their campaigns, on how to adequately present their project on the website. Moreover, they resort to online communities of project launchers to find personalized information and tips. Interacting in such communities also permits to maintain a sustainable ecosystem supporting collaboration rather than competition.

The purpose of this dissertation will be to use a netnographic approach to observe behaviours and interactions within Kickstarter project creators' online groups and to understand the need of an extended community outside the CFP.

3. Methodology

This section intends to clarify the procedures chosen to collect and analyse data, in order to develop insights and answers to the proposed research questions.

3.1. Research Method

As mentioned previously, netnography was selected as the main technique used in this dissertation. Several authors observed the role of communities in crowdfunding work, usually resorting to interviews, surveys, or quantitative analysis using CFP data. However, no netnographic study has yet been conducted on crowdfunding, and we believe choosing this alternative method can bring a fresh perspective on the matter, by immersing in the daily work of crowdfunding project creators without disturbing them in the process. We expect this approach will give us a clearer idea of what the journey of creators launching a crowdfunding campaign on Kickstarter looks like, what they need and look for in a community of other project creators. The netnographic technique allows to follow them through different stages of their interaction with Kickstarter and with the community and observe the way they communicate and identify with the other members. The purpose is to distinguish patterns in their behaviours or messages that could suggest possible improvements for Kickstarter.

3.2. Online Community Selection

3.2.1. Crowdfunding Platform selection

According to Massolution (2015), there were more than 1250 crowdfunding websites as of 2014. These platforms vary depending on their geographic reach, the types of projects they host, the type of reward for contributors, etc. However, all of them gather two parties who interact together through funding, and occasionally through additional social interactions. However, analysing all of them would require an extensive implication from the researcher. Therefore, most researchers choose to focus on either one platform (Crosetto & Regner, 2018;

Etter et al, 2013; Inbar & Barzilay, 2014; Kuppuswamy & Bayus, 2017), or a selected sample of platforms (Gerber et al, 2012; Hui et al, 2014).

In this dissertation, we chose to limit the analysis to only one platform: Kickstarter, rather than a sample of multiple CFPs, which is considered more suited to quantitative analysis. Presently, Kickstarter is the most popular and profitable CFP worldwide. It hosts a wide range of projects and thus attracts many users from different backgrounds and profiles. Moreover, its crowdfunding model is rather “classic” and representative of most CFPs (Hardy, 2013). We can thereby infer that some part of the analysis should offer useful insights applying not only to the specific platform, but also for CFPs in general.

Furthermore, given the limited amount of time provided within the framework of the master thesis, the netnographic method will be applied to only one specific community of KS users.

3.2.2. Specific Kickstarter Community Selection

As suggested in the Literature Review, many communities have formed around Kickstarter projects, and they expand outside the Kickstarter website, in different online places and shapes. They were identified by entering search queries on Google, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Reddit, using keywords containing the name Kickstarter associated with other terms targeting specific types of people (“creators”, “project”, “launchers”), or what they were looking for (“support”, “help”, “tips”), etc.

On SNS such as Facebook and LinkedIn, several groups are dedicated to sharing crowdfunding projects to invite other members to participate in the funding. On most of these groups, however, interaction is rather limited: many participants share projects, but few people like or comment each other’s posts, making it difficult for a researcher to analyse any pattern. Most members of these communities may be defined as “tourists” using Kozinets’ terminology (1999), which distinguishes four types of virtual community members: “Tourists” are the least engaged in the community, while “Minglers” maintain strong social ties to it. “Devotees” have a strong attachment to the community topics and activities, but a weaker interest for the social side of the community. Finally, “Insiders” are the most attached to the community, both for its activity, and for the social aspect.

Another type of outside online communities gathers project creators seeking for help when creating their own project using Kickstarter. Various websites, blogs, Youtube channels or podcasts offer help and tips for launching a Kickstarter campaign, covering all phases of the process such as content creation, design, reward model, etc. These different channels indeed bear a strong role of transmitting consumer knowledge and recommendations online (Morimoto & Trimble, 2012). If they allow interaction, generally through a comment section, or through the indirect means of related social media accounts, the relationship between members is uneven and generally limited: there is a difference between the authors, usually a single person or a small group, versus a larger number of followers, whose participation can be only passive (no interaction, or just a “like”), or reactive (posting comments in reaction to the content proposed by the authors).

Similarly, Kickstarter also owns its own blog, podcast, and support sections, but these channels provide general advice and rarely consider specificities or a particular project. Yet, KS also offers project creators to “preview” their project before launching them officially, and to share a “preview link”, allowing anyone who has the link to see the project and directly provide feedback on a dedicated section (Kickstarter, 2013). This “preview” feature allows creators to collect feedback from people they shared their links with, but not directly from KS visitors.

Additionally, different groups on Facebook and LinkedIn are created not for promotion purposes, but for collaboration and support between Kickstarter project creators. In these groups, creators can share their “preview links”, to solicit tips and feedback, but also to receive early peer-validation before making their projects publicly visible on Kickstarter.

In regard to the proposed research questions, it was interesting to focus on a community in which members could interact equally, in which their conversations reflected personal experience rather than general information, and in which interaction was frequent enough to offer a representative sample for analysis. For these reasons, communities which generated few reactions or conversations were eliminated. The selected community is a closed Facebook group created in 2012 and dedicated to support between project creators. The group was created by a Kickstarter project creator and is not officially affiliated with Kickstarter. This group was preferred because it was the largest in terms of members and frequency of interaction, thus providing more extensive data to analyse. For anonymity reason, the name of the group cannot be disclosed, and will be thereafter referred to as “the Facebook Group” or “the community”.

Contrarily to other “niche” groups identified that focused on specific categories of projects, such as board games, comic books, or healthy products for example, the selected group is open to any kind of project creators, thus providing a wide range of profiles of KS project creators. Many join the group to receive help on their projects and the way create their campaign on the website. This kind of content reveals insightful aspects about how project creators perceive and appropriate the platform, providing interesting avenues for improvement for Kickstarter or other CFPs.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

3.3.1. Access to the Community

The selected Facebook group is private and requires anyone who wants to join it to fill a small form explaining their motivations to join the group, as well as certifying they read and accepted the rules of the group. Indeed, the group is governed by a set of rules, and a team of administrators and moderators carefully monitor that everyone respects them. The rules are posted in the group description, which can be read even before joining the group, as well as in a post pinned at the top of the group, so that they are easily accessible to any member. For instance, simply sharing a KS campaign without any advice or question is considered as spam and is not allowed on the group. While many other groups are clearly dedicated to promotion, this one has a support and advice purpose only, and any off-topic post will be rapidly deleted. Another important rule of the group invites members to provide honest feedback, even if it may be harsh to take, as long as they remain polite, respectful and constructive.

3.3.2. Archival Data Collection

Netnographic data was collected between March and May 2019, using mainly publications dating from January To May 2019, with a few older ones. Over 200 threads (one thread gathers a post and the comments associated to it) were read. Posts that were too specific, or just asked for general feedback without getting any answer were not analysed. In total, the dataset contains

87 threads that were collected and analysed for the netnography study. On average, these posts obtain 2 to 3 “likes”, and 9 comments. All were published on the specific Facebook group selected for the analysis. Different types of content can be found on the group: many posts take the form of a question, that may be general, specific, or related to their own work. Sometimes, members share visual content they created themselves for the promotion of their campaign, or the preview link to their KS campaign, asking for feedback. Others give updates about their campaigns progress, or share tips, articles, best practices based on their experience. Many threads thus closely relate to specific projects, but some patterns can be identified across different posts and projects.

3.3.3. Thematic Framework Construction

Netnographic data collection requires the researcher to be methodical and systematic. To do so, the researcher should establish a framework to facilitate the analysis of the qualitative data collected. Although netnography can be conducted with the help of qualitative analysis software, such as NVivo or ATLAS.ti for instance (Kozinets et al, 2014), it was preferred to proceed manually to define specific research criteria related to the research questions and data collected. Thus, the identification of the codes, categories and themes, as well as the construction of the framework was done manually, in order to ensure the qualitative character of the analysis, allowing induction and reflexion.

After considering the most recurrent and relevant keywords and topics of discussions expressed by the members of the community, a thematic framework was developed. The framework is broken into three reading levels: codes are the smallest units, corresponding directly to keywords found within the community postings. Categories gather different codes related to a common characteristic. Themes are the largest units, they combine categories into more abstract bundling, allowing for interpretation from the author (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

For a schematic representation of this framework, please refer to Appendix A. Further detailing will be provided in the next section of this dissertation, “Result analysis”.

3.3.4. Ethical considerations and additional methods used

The researcher respected research ethics by introducing herself and disclosing her intentions and research interest to the group's administrator before starting the data collection.

As the selected Facebook group is private, it was necessary to ensure anonymity and confidentiality of the group members and their interaction. For this reason, the name of the group cannot be disclosed.

As mentioned earlier, researchers consider netnography as a basis for analysed, that should be coupled with other methods in order to verify and validate hypotheses. In the present case, two members of the group were interviewed, in order to better understand their own backgrounds and motivations, as well as to validate intuitions inferred from the netnography. The members were contacted individually using Facebook Messenger and were provided with an overview of the research context and topic. After giving their consent to participate in the study, the interviews were conducted in a semi-structured form. Both members are males, around 25 years old, and come from the United States. The first interviewee is a student who defines himself as a "geek". He has been active on Kickstarter for seven years, has run two projects around role-playing games, and has backed 40 others, mostly in the "games" category. The second interviewee is a Marketing specialist, passionate about poetry and he has been active on KS for four years. He has run 6 successful projects about poetry and has backed 200 others. Both were thus considered very active members on the platform, as well as on the Facebook Group analysed.

The research approach chosen allows to understand the behaviours of project creators when launching a KS campaign, and to analyse their relationship to a community of other project creators. The interpretations and assumptions withdrawn from the analysis should provide managerial insights for Kickstarter and crowdfunding platforms to improve their features in response to the needs expressed by the creators.

4. Results analysis

This chapter provides an analysis of the data collected and subsequently develops answers to the proposed research questions. As a qualitative method, netnography can be conducted applying the grounded theory approach: the researcher designs its own theory based on the consumer quotes extracted and analysed, and then makes it communicate with previous theories established by other researchers, thus creating a conversation between online field observation and academic research. Therefore, grounded theory is characterized with flexibility that allows it to capture the specificities of the phenomenon observed (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Willig, 2008). A thematic framework was built to facilitate the process of pattern identification and structure interpretation (Appendix A).

Three main themes were identified: technical support, emotional support, and network building.

4.1. Technical Support

One of the first reasons why members join the community is usually to receive feedback and answers concerning technical aspects of using the Kickstarter website and creating a campaign on it. Many posters introduce themselves as “*newbies*”, “*noobs*” or “*first timers*”. Additionally, Facebook permits to identify members who recently joined a group with a “New member” badge on their first posts (Facebook, 2018). Most of these new posters ask questions about Kickstarter as a platform, about its specific features for creating a crowdfunding campaign, or about different stages of the process of developing of a project using Kickstarter.

Indeed, although Kickstarter is often presented as one of the easiest-to-use CFPs because of its intuitive user interface (Meyskens & Bird, 2015), creating a project and launching a crowdfunding campaign always comes with some responsibilities and risks (Schwienbacher, 2018). Crowdfunding may be perceived as only one of the different steps of project creation. However, it appears that the most successful projects on CFPs are the ones that have been prepared taking into account the specificities of the CFP and adapting every step of project creation to them (Mollick, 2014). Launching a crowdfunding campaign is never an easy task, and it requires time, preparation and dedication. As one of the group members presents it: “*Just realize it's hard work. It's literally a full-time job*”, an expression that was also used by Hunter

(2016). Indeed, the project launcher must consider many different aspects of creating and managing a project, in relation to the requirements of the platform: legal and administrative aspects, product development, marketing, pricing, crowdfunding goals, timing, analytic skills, community management, etc (Gerber et al, 2012; Jensen & Özkil, 2018). Some aspects may belong more to general project management, and others are more specific to crowdfunding or KS, but none can be separated from the campaign creation process. As such, new project creators often feel “*overwhelmed*”, or “*anxious*” with the amount of aspects they need to take into account, and have difficulties knowing where to start.

When thinking about launching a crowdfunding campaign, the first step creators go through is to choose the crowdfunding platform is best suited to their needs and interests. The Facebook group is evidently targeted towards Kickstarter, we can therefore infer that most members already made the choice to go with Kickstarter. However, members occasionally compare different platforms, permitting to distinguish the reasons for their preference for Kickstarter over another platform. First, some members express disappointment as Kickstarter is not accessible in their countries. Currently, Kickstarter is available for project creation in 22 countries across Europe, America, Asia and Oceania, but it allows people from all over the world to back projects (Kickstarter, 2019). On the group, some members try to find strategies to counter the rule, by associating with members of another country that is eligible for project creation for instance. These members express a strong willing to launch their campaign on Kickstarter rather than on another CFP available in their countries, because they consider Kickstarter to offer a larger audience, especially for some kind of projects such as games. Furthermore, not all projects fit on Kickstarter. For instance, a member remarks that Kickstarter does not accept charity projects, and that other CFPs such as GoFundMe or Indiegogo should be more appropriate for such projects. They also note that different platforms offer diverse features: for instance, Indiegogo promotes its “flexible funding” feature, for creators who don’t want to set a precise funding goal but are ready to accept any amount of money they can raise (Indiegogo, 2019). However, different members of the Group express mistrust towards this feature, that they consider very risky, as it means backer’s money is taken no matter what, without being sure it will be enough to pursue a project. They prefer Kickstarter’s possibility for backers to modify their pledge. Additionally, some creators consider running crowdfunding campaigns on multiple CFPs. But several group members express suspicion towards this strategy: first, this strategy could “*dilute attention*” and complicate the creator’s work, but additionally, it may be considered a “*scam*” by backers. Moreover, loyalty to a platform seem

to be highly valued by members, as it shows motivation and dedication to address a particular audience, rather than trying to promote a project everywhere to raise more money. Finally, some creators simply choose Kickstarter because of the website's notoriety: *"I never really considered Indiegogo, I think Kickstarter is the way to go. Just get better at it, but I guess it does offer a different audience"*.

Even prior to starting the campaign, creators must ensure they are aware and ready to fulfil administrative and legal requirements. For instance, creators need to make sure their project is not infringing any intellectual property rights such as patents, copyrights or trademarks, otherwise they would not be approved by Kickstarter (Kickstarter, 2019). On the other hand, some creators also want to protect their own ideas from *"stealers"* and *"knockoffs"* before making their projects publicly visible on the platform. Roma, Petruzzi and Perrone (2017) have noted that protecting one's idea with a patent reduces uncertainty for the creator, but also contributes to demonstrating a creator's seriousness and capability to develop a novel, useful, and inventive project. However, filling a patent application requires an investment that is not accessible to all creators. Moreover, not all projects can be protected the same way. As such, members of the group value the need for a patent differently depending on their specific projects. Discussing with other helps them evaluate the pros and cons of taking this decision, although it is a decision that eventually is taken using other sources such as consulting a lawyer: *"Copyrights are probably better for what you're doing, but of course I'd talk to a lawyer. Personally, I didn't wait for either other than to simply put © 2014 [author's name] on the cards and boxes."*

A second phase consists in creating the campaign on Kickstarter. This is one of the phases for which creators require the most technical support, as they need to understand how the platform works. Kickstarter requires creators to create a first draft of their project before submitting it for review by the platform. Project review is a mandatory step in which Kickstarter team checks the project is suitable for Kickstarter, meaning that it corresponds to one of KS's project categories, and follows the rules of the website (Benovic, 2016). In addition to the rules mentioned previously, one of the rules states that *"projects must be honest and clearly presented"* (Kickstarter, 2019). This rule appears as the most stressing for project creators who are worried that their presentation may not be clear enough. Indeed, several members explain that their projects were rejected by Kickstarter for *"unclear prototype"* or *"existing product"*, but also sometimes with no explicit reasons. In order to reduce the pressure, members like to request the help of the community to make sure they are *"doing things right"* and avoid *"bad*

surprises". Passing the official review is a "*relief*", but also the gateway to actually running a Kickstarter campaign.

However, even after having received Kickstarter official approval, stating that the project is consistent with the website rules and ready to be launched, creators may want to get extra feedback before officially launching their projects. Indeed, "*feedback*" is a recurrent keyword in the group. Many members share the link to their campaign's preview page and ask other to give them feedback. Feedback may be general, or very specific. Indeed, feedback may be given on many different aspects: the quality of the project itself, the way it is described on the campaign page, the images, videos, or other tools used to promote it, the funding goals chosen and the different pledges and rewards offered, the timing of the campaign, etc.

Besides the aspects that are specific to the crowdfunding campaign, members also help each other on aspects that belong more to project management. As mentioned before, the campaign is part of a larger activity of launching a new product, and both are interrelated. Thus, members of the group do not only speak about Kickstarter, but also about technical aspects of project management for example. These may come before the launch of the campaign, as discussed before with legal or administrative checks, but also during and after the campaign. Indeed, if the campaign is successful, that means that the project can be developed, and that backers must be recompensed with the promised reward. When the project is about a physical product, such as a board game or a piece of clothing for example, creators must consider production and manufacturing, taking into account costs and lead-time needed for their product to actually be created. In order not to delay the rewards shipping, they must anticipate these aspects even before the campaign has ended, and ideally even before starting the campaign, in order not to set promises they can't fulfil, which may upset backers and make them retire their pledges. As noted by Mollick (2014), delivery delays are very frequent among crowdfunding projects. Occasionally, members share articles about projects that were funded but unable to be developed, because of inexperience and badly anticipated costs and delays. This is again a very complex topic that is often discussed on the group: creators are conflicted between advertising short deadlines that may not be respected, or more realistic longer deadlines that may repel the most impatient backers. Many struggle to estimate the time they will need to complete their projects, and have to deal with unforeseen problems that slowdown the process. Although this type of problem may be common among all project creators, regardless of their funding methods, crowdfunding projects creators are additionally facing the difficulty of dealing with backers' expectations and communicating publicly about the problems they may encounter.

Members suggest honesty and transparency are necessary, although meticulous preparation to avoid this problem would have been more useful. Many backers however actually seem to be interested not only in the product that they will eventually receive, but also about the whole process of creating it, and thus can excuse delays, as long as they are kept updated about the situation and still feel engaged in the process “ *by way of compensation for having to wait so long*”. Indeed, backers’ comments on Kickstarter project updates reflect their appreciation when informed about problems and delays. Despite these efforts at keeping backers in the loop, some creators still fail at covering unexpected manufacturing costs and time delays, resulting in losses or even sometimes in failing to pursue their projects, despite a successful crowdfunding campaign.

It is interesting to notice that despite the difficult period members may go through, some still feel part of the community and contribute to share what they learned from their problems, and give support to other creators going through the same passes. Some members reopen past discussions to follow-up and ask updates from other creators they have previously discussed with. Thus, members really develop a sense of community with other members and want to interact not only through technical advice and support, but also through more personal bonds.

4.2. Emotional Support

As inferred from the previous section, creating a Kickstarter campaign is a long and complex “*journey*”, that members alternatively or sometimes simultaneously describe as “*scary*”, “*stressful*” or “*exciting*”, whether they are new creators or more experienced ones. Few researchers have investigated the emotions project creators go through when launching a crowdfunding campaign. However, observing the group’s posts allowed us to understand how creators internalize the process, and the emotions associated to it.

Indeed, it appears that many of the group members are not experienced entrepreneurs. In fact, many of them launch their KS project as side projects. Indeed, the two members interviewed discovered KS when they were still students and launched projects on matters that they were passionate about (games and poetry), as side projects during their studies. Being a crowdfunding project launcher is not a “professional” activity, although some members may have more experience with the website or with project management or have some expertise they are willing to use to give advices to others. One interviewee added that he valorises the

experience he gained from developing his Kickstarter campaigns on his LinkedIn account and during job interviews. Hui, Greenberg and Gerber (2014) used the term “Crowdfunding work” to talk about the process and activities crowdfunding project launchers go through. In regard to our analysis, it seems more appropriate to describe this process here as a “*journey*”, as some members describe it, that requires high involvement and effort from the part of the creator. However, it seems that creator don’t “work” on their projects the same way they would “work” on any other job: they have at heart to pursue their projects as a more personal goal, and thus want to make sure they are doing it the best way possible.

Therefore, project creation often comes from very personal reasons and interests, even though some projects a run by more than one creator. But when they decide to make their projects public, by running a crowdfunding campaign, creators choose to expose them to a new audience, that does not necessarily know them or their personal interests. Creators who make that move thus must be ready to take their projects to an external audience. Although some may develop their projects alone or with the help of a few people around them, others choose to broaden their reach and surround themselves with people who “*have been there before*” or are currently going through the journey. Joining the Facebook Group is an easy way to find such people and interact with them.

As mentioned previously, new members often feel “*confused*” with the amount of aspects they must consider when launching their crowdfunding campaign. Joining the group is a way for them to find some “*guidance*” through the journey and ask any question they may have. It is also an opportunity for creators to expose their projects to a new audience, that is unfamiliar with their projects, but rather familiar with crowdfunding and Kickstarter, and can thus offer more objective advice to grow their project in a promising direction, thanks to their experience or expertise. As the journey is complex, many learn “*lessons*” and “*best practices*” along the way that they are happy to share with new members, who are grateful for the advice: “*Our Kickstarter Campaign would have been doomed without this group. The advice from here has made our success possible*”. In the group, honesty is valued as a way to help each other without bias: “*Thank you very much that what I was looking for, constructive guidance. I hope to fix everything today*”. Some members note they prefer to receive brutal constructive feedback that help them improve their campaigns before making them public, rather than directly launching a project that was likely to fail.

Another aspect that members appreciate when joining a community of project creators is to be able to share their expectations, progress, frustrations and satisfactions with others that can understand and relate to them, encourage them and accompany them in the process. Indeed, the unformal setting of the closed Facebook group can be perceived for some members as a more appropriate place to share feelings than the more institutional ones provided by Kickstarter. It is interesting to note that posts that show the personality and emotions of the posters are often the ones that get the most Facebook “reactions” (“like”, “love”, “wow”, etc.) and comments. Some posters even let their frustrations and emotions appear, as a cry for help to the community: *“So my campaign has been 50% funded for like 3 days. I still have 22 days to go but ahhhhhhhhh. Advice?”*.

Some of the most active members give updates about their progress in the KS journey celebrating their success with the group. For instance, some posts do not share any projects or tips, but only the excitement or satisfaction of reaching their campaign goals. This kind of posts usually generates a high amount of reactions and congratulations from other members, especially when the poster has previously shared information and updates about their projects in the group. Indeed, members like to be able to recognize and keep in touch with other projects and see how they evolve, even when they don’t directly contribute to them. Thus, the most frequent contributors receive more comments or “likes” to their posts than one-time posters, and they also get more support when they are struggling with any other aspect of their campaign.

New members are also more than welcome but should often prove their sincerity by explaining carefully their intentions and interacting with each other, before being fully considered a member of the community and replied to all their doubts. As such, it is possible to say there is an initiation process into the community and into Kickstarter world. It takes a little bit of time and effort to get there, they once you are, they are more likely to develop social bonds with other members, that may prove useful for their network building, project development and visibility.

The community appears as a safe place for exchanging knowledge, tips, feedback, in an atmosphere of trust, and thus reduce the apprehension and pressure due to the unknown outcome of their crowdfunding campaign. Moreover, interacting with people who have the same interests in Kickstarter and exchanging about each other projects allows to raise curiosity and attention to the projects, and thus get access to a targeted audience.

4.3. Network building

Being active on the Facebook Group is also a way for creators to develop bonds with other members who are highly engaged in Kickstarter participation, and may help them to develop the network they need to grow and promote their projects.

The same way members that are the most active on the Facebook Group receive more comments to their posts, members that are the most active on Kickstarter are more likely to attract people to back their campaigns. In both cases, engagement goes both ways: members should not only be there to receive help or funds, but also show they are willing to help others. On Kickstarter, it is possible to see how many campaigns a member has run before, and how many campaigns a member has backed before. Recurrent backers are very attentive to these numbers, as they are a proof of a member's engagement in the Kickstarter community. The term "*loyalty*" is even employed to explain such engagement: "*I'd also suggest backing more games- the backers in that category are fiercely loyal and a community. They look at how many projects you've backed as a barometer of whether you support other creators and if you know how Kickstarter works.*". As such, in the same dynamic as the one at place within the group, creators that are active on KS regularly, as creators but also as backers for other projects, are more likely to be recognized as faithful members of the Kickstarter community, which is a valued aspect by other members who are therefore more likely to help them and back their projects.

Thereby, although most members of the Facebook Group are there as project creators, this is not an exclusive status, and it is likely that they also occasionally back other's projects. Indeed, some members sometimes reply to each other from their inner "backer" point of view. Hence, despite the group rule stating that it is banned from the group, promotion is not completely absent from the community. Many posters do indirectly promote their projects by talking about them, sharing pictures or videos they created for their projects, or direct links to their campaign's pages or preview pages, accompanied with questions or advice. Every time a project is shared in the group, it is likely to raise the attention of other members that may be interested in the project and become backers themselves or share it with other potential backers. One interviewee admitted: "*I 100% only joined these groups to promote my own campaign, which I think is the case for many people. But after I got over myself and realized that no one wanted*

to listen to me these groups turned out to be a great resource for insights and suggestions on the ins and outs of running a Kickstarter.”

Some members like to notify each other in the Group when they back another member’s campaign. This is thus another way to support each other and develop a relationship that goes beyond simple technical help.

Additionally, it is important to note that even though Kickstarter relies on communities, the platform does not necessarily permit users to build their communities directly, but rather to activate existing connections, which can serve as a springboard for reaching a larger pool of potential backers. Indeed, projects are not all created at the moment the crowdfunding campaign is launched: some have a previous existence, and a previous community associated to it. The way Kickstarter is currently built allows little relationships between the different internal KS communities, which are each related to specific projects and are therefore built like “silos”, with no or very little cross-projects interaction. Thus, people who back one project are not necessarily aware of other projects they may be interested in. It is important for creators to ensure they already have a community around them, and can rely on it, before they start their campaign, otherwise it is likely their project won’t be noticed and thus will fail: *“Kickstarter is the table at the park. YOU need to bring people to it. Just like any other crowdfunding project, they’re just the portals, they don’t bring people to you, that’s your job.”*; *“Depending on Kickstarter to gain visibility is a dead end. Your audience needs to already be in place, through ads, through your email lists, through your fans. Some people may find your project as they browse Kickstarter, but that percentage is very low.”*

Many creators thus start building their network by creating social media accounts dedicated to their projects, to ensure they have a follower base who will be the first to back the project, thus giving visibility for it to attract backers outside this base. Mollick (2014) found out that crowdfunding projects that were not associated to a Facebook page performed better than the ones associated with a Facebook page with few activity and followers, although the ones with a very active and widely followed Facebook page were the most successful, suggesting that project creators should think their social media presence strategically. Creators advise each other not only to build their audience, but also to keep them active and engaged in the process: *“Even with a billion followers you can’t sell something if nobody knows you are selling”*. Therefore, creators must manage their community properly to convert followers into backers, and prefer *“quality over quantity”* when building their following base.

Members are also interested in sharing visibility and obtaining “*influencers*” reviews to help promote their projects through different channels: for instance, some members spontaneously offer others their services for reviewing a product or a project on their blogs or social media accounts. Being active in groups such as the one presented here allows creators to grow their network and build their own communities. These groups allow cross-project interaction and the construction of a larger and more unite Kickstarter community that cannot be created on the platform itself. Ultimately, as more and more projects are launched on KS over time, creators must find ways to stand out, not only with the quality of their project, but also with the quality of their promotion and involvement in the Kickstarter community, as a community that goes beyond the Kickstarter website, but also follows up on social media and various online spaces. Building relationships with other members and raising trust about one’s project are necessary to evolve in a highly competitive environment.

Moreover, interacting with fellow project creators can help members to meet or be put in contact with people who operate in a field that is related with their work or project. For instance, there are many Kickstarter projects about games. On Facebook, some groups are dedicated to this type of projects. However, some creators may not be aware about them, and when they ask some questions that are too specific on the Facebook Group analysed here, which is more general, they are sometimes redirected to these other groups or resources that provide better answers to their specific needs, but also give them access to a more suitable audience to which they can promote their projects. Although the general group is not related to all the specific groups and not run by the same administrators and moderators, some members are part of both and can redirect each other to different places to find help and support. Therefore, the Facebook Group can be perceived as one chain of a larger network of crowdfunding or Kickstarter project creators on Facebook. Moreover, acquiring a network around projects is also a way to get in touch more personally with people who share the same interests, and to develop friendships. One interviewee confirmed that some “*have turned into long distance friends*”.

Additionally, members sometimes use the group to find people who can provide them professional services or become potential partners. It happens frequently that members ask others if they are aware a good manufacturing company they could work with to produce their products for instance. Some members advertise their own skills in one area and point out they lack experience in another one, and offer to exchange services that go beyond simple help on a Facebook thread, but leads to developing a professional network around their projects.

Thus, the Facebook Group covers many different aspects of a “Social Network”: the community gathers Kickstarter project creators or more generally people interested in Kickstarter project creation and participation. Members of the group are likely to support each other through technical advice, encouragement and motivation, but also to create stronger links and potentially interact on a larger scale than the group itself, by backing each other on Kickstarter, sharing or reviewing projects through other channels, or involve in partnerships.

5. Conclusion and Implications

The purpose of this dissertation was to understand why crowdfunding project creators feel the need to gather in a community to exchange about their projects and their experience using Kickstarter. Community is an important aspect in crowdfunding, since it involves the participation of a “crowd”, which provides financial and social support. Although this aspect has often been studied by academics, few of them have analysed relationships between project creators. The analysis of a Facebook Group dedicated to this target allowed to infer patterns within the communities: launching a Kickstarter campaign is an important part of project creation, and creators feel the need to surround themselves with people that can provide experience, support and feedback on the process.

Although project creators are somehow competing against each other since they all want their projects to perform on Kickstarter, they generally have a sense of solidarity that is fundamental when taking part in a kind of funding based on voluntary participation in the creation a project. This solidarity motivates them to shares technical advice, but also a more individual touch through personalized emotional and social support. Additionally, the group serves as a springboard to make oneself recognized as an active member in the group and more generally in the Kickstarter community, and therefore acquire visibility to achieve their crowdfunding goals more rapidly, and develop their project with a larger supportive base.

The insights gathered within the community helped the researcher to develop a framework that contrasts or completes findings from previous researches on the subject. Moreover, the results of the study allow to draw some recommendations for Kickstarter Marketing development, or for crowdfunding platforms in general.

5.1. Academic Implications

Choosing a novel approach to study crowdfunding communities permitted to understand better creators’ ways of thinking and preparing their projects, and their feelings and doubts during the process, which are rarely taken into account by quantitative studies. Additionally, the method used here also differs from traditional qualitative studies: when interviewed formally,

interviewees may want to reflect back on their journey and emphasize or minimize certain aspects of it. They may also be intimidated by the interview setting, and not provide complete answers. In contrast, netnography permits to observe behaviours as they occur, without disturbing their authors.

Hui and colleagues (2014) identified five different steps in crowdfunding work: “preparing campaign material, testing it, publicizing the project, following through with project goals, and reciprocating resources to the community”. In the Facebook Group observed, all these steps can be recognized, with members especially using the group as a sort of laboratory to test their projects, and to publicize them indirectly. However, we noted that crowdfunding projects were more seen as a “journey” by creators, who were sometimes launching their projects as side activities, although they implied extensive involvement and preparation.

Hui and colleagues recognized that collaboration was present in every step of the crowdfunding work, however, they noted that creators focused more on maintaining collaboration with backers, with their own team, or with their existing network, rather than entering new networks. Yet, Aggrawal et al (2010), and Mollick (2014) noted that social network size had a key role in crowdfunding projects success. On that matter, Hui noted that some creators had difficulty to find people who were willing to help them outside their personal network, and were afraid of asking feedback or promote their projects at a larger scale, by lack of experience, or fear from being rejected. The Facebook Group shows us that some creators actually feel the need to extend their network to a community dedicated to creators, in order to reach more potential collaborators, may they become backers, partners or simply advisors and mental supporters. The advantage of the Group is that it is composed of other creators, who are therefore knowledgeable about how Kickstarter works and can give their advice from this point of view. However, it is true that not all group members obtain answers to their questions, and that it requires some time and effort to get really integrated in the group and get to exchange with others: they need to develop what Mitra and Gilbert (2014) described as “social proof”: actively participating in the community to raise awareness about their project. On the group, feedback is sometimes negative, which may scare unprepared creators, however, members note that confronting themselves with this type of criticism helped them take a step back on their projects and rethink the aspects that were not done right.

Additionally, both Hui and the present study recognize that links built by collaborating on a crowdfunding campaign were strong and maintained even after the end of campaign, sometimes

even after a campaign's failure, an aspect which is rarely noticeable in any other forms of funding. Moreover, many crowdfunding project creators are interested in building supportive relationships with other creators, rather than considering them as competitors. Creators tend to trust more advice given by other project creators than the one they can find in various online articles: they especially value the possibility to obtain personalized answers and get a real "one-to-one" exchange with others rather than general advice that may not be suited to their own case. Gerber et al (2012) highlighted the importance for project creators of receiving validation from backers. In the present study, we saw that creators also appreciated receiving validation and encouragement from other creators. Gerber also noted that people participate in crowdfunding because they have seen others succeed and hope to get the same success. Joining the Facebook Group is also a way to observe the success and struggles of others before launching one's own project on the platform. It helps creators and future creators understand how Kickstarter works through the internal point of view of existing creators.

In their analysis, Hui and colleagues (2014) mentioned the threads dedicated to crowdfunding on the microblogging website Reddit: they explain that relationships between members within the communities are relatively weak because Reddit members are anonymous, and interaction is not pursued very much. On the Facebook Group, however, members can be easily identified through their Facebook profile, they can also potentially keep in touch or continue conversations by becoming "Facebook friends", by following each other's Facebook pages dedicated to their project for example, or by conversing privately through Facebook Messenger. The relationship can thus be taken further depending on the willingness of participants to build and maintain a network around Kickstarter or around their projects.

All these different aspects identified by previous literature and by the present analysis suggest there is room for improvement for Kickstarter in giving its project creators the possibility of interacting across projects, in addition to interaction already possible within a project between a creator and its backers.

5.2. Managerial Implications

Understanding the importance for project creators to meet and surround themselves with other project creators, Kickstarter should consider offering dedicated spaces for cross-projects

meeting and interaction, diversifying from the current system of “silo” communities specific to each project.

This space could take place online in the form of an online forum attached to Kickstarter website for example, to allow project creators to exchange advice and develop their network directly within Kickstarter platform, rather than through an external group. Currently, different websites offer advices or forums using the name “Kickstarter”, although they are not directly affiliated with the website. Creating their own official forum would be a way for KS to avoid misidentification with unrelated websites using their brand name. Kickstarter actually used to have its own creator forum, “Campus”, which was created in 2016 but was taken off from the website in February 2019, claiming that KS had gathered enough feedback from users (Benovic, 2019). However, some members argued that “Campus” was badly managed and required extensive delays between the moment when creators asked a question, the moment it was actually published, and the moment it was replied to (Sun, 2019). Interviewees also noted that only the “*generally applicable*” questions were answered, and that there was no notification system on Campus, thus making it difficult to know if and when questions were answered. Comparatively, the Facebook Group allows anyone to post messages and answers to others instantaneously, on subjects that may be very general as well as very specific. Therefore, it is important for Kickstarter to understand the way creators like to interact, and take the time to build and manage their forum appropriately rather than launching it rapidly without giving it enough attention.

Keeping creators on the website through an internal forum or social network would also reinforce the “*loyalty*” than some members already feel towards the website. Kickstarter already has some elements of a social network: members have a profile page they can personalize with a picture and a description and they can follow each other and see what projects others have launched and backed. KS could build on these already existing features to develop a more complex network with further interaction possibilities. For instance, Kickstarter could give creators the possibility to share their “preview” page directly through the platform with other creators eager to give them feedback and support on their projects. Furthermore, members interviewed have pointed out they were rather satisfied with the general technical help provided by the website but regretted it did not offer much “*personalised*” or “*user-focused*” tools. Generally, developing this kind of internal social network would benefit to creators, but also to backers, who could potentially interact with creators before backing their project.

Additionally, KS may want to give its members the possibility to suggest new features for the platform: indeed, KS promotes creativity and innovation, and should thus lead by example by letting its members suggest improvement for the CFP itself through an online based “suggestion box” for example. By definition, KS users are interested in innovation and would thus be really interested in participating in such initiative. Collaboration is at the centre of crowdfunding and Kickstarter should reinforce its leading position by offering even more collaborative tools and opportunities for its customers. Taking into account the recurring questions or struggles that members of the group may go through, Kickstarter may want to extend its support tools: for instance, creators have questions that are not always related directly with Kickstarter, but with project management in general. Kickstarter may consider providing content or resources for these aspects, even though they are more remote from Kickstarter’s field of competence. Currently, Kickstarter already provides a list of partners for all fulfilment aspects (design, manufacturing, distribution, shipping, etc). An idea could be to allow members suggests their own partners or services, and rate them through Kickstarter.

The interactive space could also be occasionally taken offline through events and meetings for project creators, reinforcing the emotional and social involvement of creators. On this point, Kickstarter may want to have a look at what some other crowdfunding platforms do. For example, KissKissBankBank, a major French CFP, has opened a “Crowdfunding house” in Paris, that is a space open to all people interested in crowdfunding to join and take parts in networking events, conferences, meetings around the themes of creation and entrepreneurship, including free trainings to crowdfunding once a week (Maison de Crowdfunding, 2016). The space being located next to the company’s headquarters, it also allows attendees to meet the CFP team and potentially directly suggest improvements for the platform. Indiegogo also offers different events, although less regularly, some of them being hosted online in the form of live webinars. They also organize free “crowdfunding bootcamps”. KS occasionally organise events, generally in their Brooklyn headquarters, but these are not commensurate with what KissKissBankBank does with its “Crowdfunding House” (about one event every two months for Kickstarter vs several events a week for KissKissBankBank). Offering events more regularly and in different locations could not only reinforce project creators’ engagement, but also give even more visibility to the platform to attract new project creators or backers.

Considering Kickstarter was launched in 2009, its tenth anniversary is celebrated this year. This is an appropriate occasion for the website to launch new features and include its users in the process.

6. Limitations and future research

Despite the careful and systematic analysis the researcher aimed to conduct for this dissertation, some limitations were encountered.

As mentioned previously, netnographic analysis can rarely provide authoritative conclusions on its own and can only suggest results that should be validated with additional sources. Indeed, grounded theory necessarily implies partial choices from the researcher and therefore bears a part of subjectivity. Although member checks allowed to validate or reorient the analysis, they were also limited to a small number of people questioned and to their own subjectivity. Additionally, it is not possible to determine if the behaviours of project creators that are part of the specific Facebook Group observed can be generalized to all Kickstarter project creators. Indeed, the Facebook Group gathers a relatively small number of members compared to the number of Kickstarter users. It is likely that the sample represent a part of the Kickstarter community that is particularly active and eager to interact with other creators, but they don't necessarily represent the behaviour of all Kickstarter project creators. Others may well manage their campaign by themselves and not need support other than the one already provided by Kickstarter or by other resources such as blogs for example. As a result, representativity cannot be ensured.

Furthermore, the community chosen is only English-speaking and it has been noted that a great part of its members is located in North America. Although Kickstarter offer is mostly the same in all countries it is available in, some characteristics of project creation, and especially those concerning legal or administrative tasks, may differ depending on countries. But more importantly to our research interest, there might be a difference in the way project creators behave, share and express their doubts depending on their culture. Future research may consider comparing the Kickstarter experience from different cultural point of views. For example, the chosen Facebook group encourage their members to give honest feedback, even when it could be harsh. Picking up on Hall concepts of "high context" and "low-context" cultures (1976), Würtz (2005) noticed that internet communication differed widely across culture: therefore, we can conceive that in "high context" cultures, where communication is less direct and more implicit, the way people support each other may be completely different. If further research finds a significative difference between the way different cultures use Kickstarter, the website

may consider differentiating more its services depending on the countries it is present in, or when entering new markets.

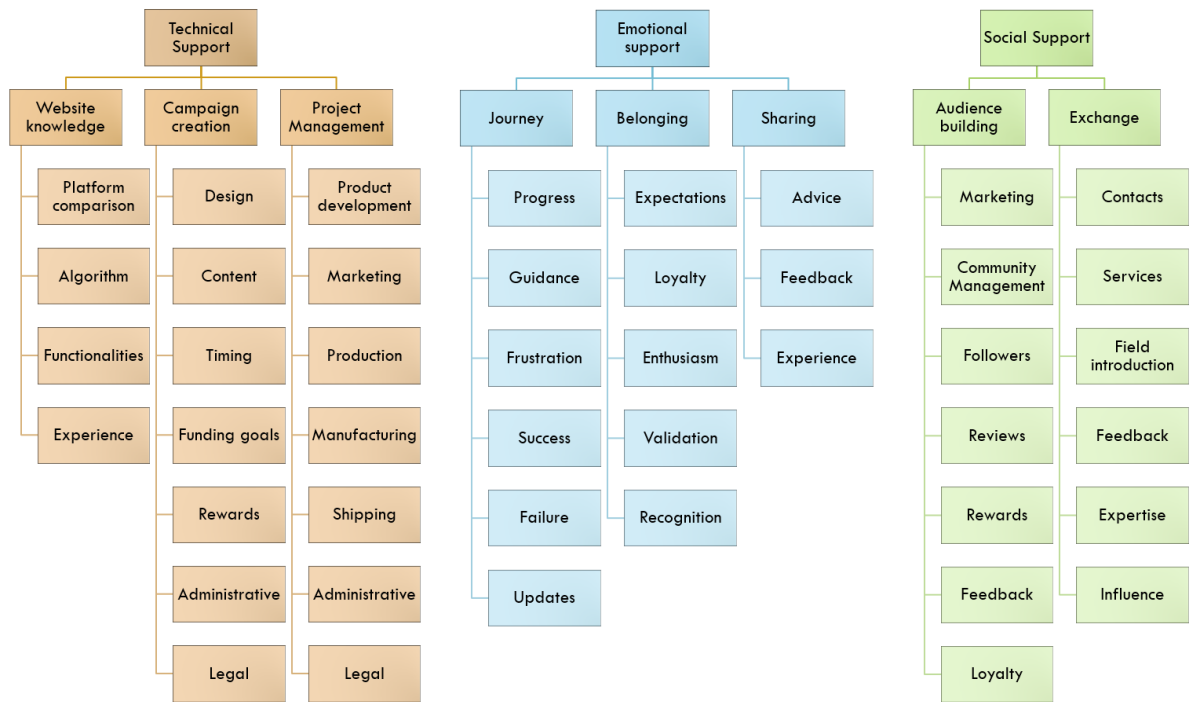
Finally, the context of the master thesis in a limited time and specific formats constrained the scope of the analysis and of the methods chosen. For this reason, it was not possible for the researcher to simultaneously analyse and compare between different online communities for example, or to support the netnography with more interviews or quantitative data. Moreover, given the complexity of the topic, it was chosen not to focus on details regarding specific types of projects (i.e. board games, clothing, etc.). Future researchers may want to conduct comparative studies and differentiate between types of project and communities.

Finally, despite the useful insights unveiled about the importance of the community for project creators through netnography, it was not possible to establish a formal correlation between involvement in the community and crowdfunding project success. This could be an angle of analysis for future studies.

In an era in which many brands want to show they are close to their consumers, managing customer success and support through different tools is essential. In two-sided market, where the sense of community is already strong, brands may want to take the lead of the community and thus reinforce their brand image. Crowdfunding platform have known an important success, but after a successful first decade, they must continue to innovate to keep growing and keep engaging their communities. Thereby, the results provided in this dissertation may be considered as setting bases for more elaborate studies on the way platforms keep track of their communities and the way these communities evolve within or outside the platform.

7. Appendices

Appendix A: Thematic Framework:



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9. Glossary

CFP	Crowdfunding Platform
KS	Kickstarter
Pledge	Commitment to fund a crowdfunding project
Project Backer	Someone who participates in a Crowdfunding project by “backing it”, i.e. supporting it financially
SNS	Social Networking Site