

The Promise of Kickstarter: Extents to Which Social Networks Enable Alternate Avenues of Economic Viability for Independent Musicians Through Crowdfunding

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Abstract

Since its inception in 2009, Kickstarter, a crowdsourced funding site, has been a platform for independent creative projects to get funding, ostensibly providing alternate routes of economic viability outside of a traditional framework of creative production and distribution. Kickstarter comes onto the scene after the proliferation of online social networking sites, through which bridging social capital ties are more easily maintained. This article investigates the ways in which independent musicians have used Kickstarter in conjunction with pre-existing social networks to fund their album and sustain themselves and their artistic endeavors economically while also exploring how social networks provide ways for these “Kickstarter campaigns” to reach potential backers (funders). Through three online surveys targeting musicians, their backers, and general Kickstarter backers, yielding a total of 61 respondents, this article finds that pre-existing personal social networks and relations are imperative to the successful funding of Kickstarter campaigns.

Keywords

crowdfunding, music, social networks, social capital, economic viability

Introduction

In 2009, the year the crowdsourced funding site Kickstarter was launched, a study was conducted by this author on how Asian American musicians use the Internet to “make space” for their work amid the barriers to entering the traditional media framework as a creative Asian American individual, drawing from critical race theory and tensions within media representations for racial minorities. While the musicians interviewed spoke to the potential of the Internet to broaden their audience and create a sense of community and collaboration, these musicians pointed to the fact that, despite the optimistic outlook, they were unable to find ways to make a living creating music. In these past few years, digital innovation has progressed to a point where using social networks and treading outside of traditional music industry paths to make a living making music has become a real possibility. This article considers how digital media has lowered the barrier to publishing and distributing musical works and promoting oneself as a musician, and examines how digital and social networks have created the potential for economic

viability for independent musicians through the process of crowdsourced funding. In particular, how do social capital and the “weak ties” of digital social networks contribute to the monetary investment that an individual is willing to make toward the creation of a product or work of art? To answer these questions, I employ three online surveys with a total of 61 respondents. My inquiry focuses on individual musicians and bands who have used Kickstarter to start a campaign to fund the production of a music album and argue that the economic viability of indie musicians through Kickstarter relies on personal social networks—networks of friends and family members—that provide an alternate framework of media production and distribution outside of the traditional economic

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and social modes of music production and distribution within the broader cultural industries context (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944) that has largely been based around an authoritative entity (like a record label or established production company) that acts as both a cultural gatekeeper and a sole source of investing. This model follows a “filter then publish” (Shirky, 2008) pattern wherein these authoritative cultural entities dictate the types of creative works that get made, distributed, and seen, elevating certain artistic styles, ideologies, and artists and rendering invisible others.¹ The barriers to distributing and attaining economic viability for one’s work through this traditional, mainstream path tend to be astronomically high.

Independent, or “indie”, musicians are musicians who seek to create art outside of this traditional framework, bypassing the control of powerful production and distribution companies and studios. Rather than having their music and themselves produced by the culture industry, indie musicians promote a more bottom-up approach of making music. Making a living and breaking even has proven to be a challenge. Costs of being a musician include equipment, studio time, rehearsal space, travel expenses for shows and touring, and recording costs, not to mention the time put into the actual creative process of writing music. Doug Moore (2012) of Stereogum.com takes on this question of how indie musicians balance income and costs, stating that in the past decade, “the tactics that bands traditionally use to pay these costs—quitting day jobs, touring incessantly, recouping costs with CD/T-shirt sales, etcetera—have grown less effective to the point of futility.” Moore goes on to suggest some of the things indie musicians can do to bolster their income. His suggestions revolve around increase usage of digital media and sites like Bandcamp, Kickstarter, and streaming services like Spotify and Pandora. The Internet thus represents ways in which musicians who function outside of the traditional media framework of production, performance, and distribution are able to make their music visible to the public in hopes of making money and building a music career.

Debating the Internet

The potential for the Internet to democratize society and make space for diverse voices has long been debated. A number of scholars celebrate the lowered barriers to publishing and participation that the Internet allows, celebrating the ways in which networks encourage peer production and collaboration, and changing traditional social infrastructures (C. Anderson, 2006; Benkler, 2006; Benkler & Nissenbaum, 2006; Shirky, 2008). Connections across geographical distances are made more easily given the instantaneous transmission of communication through digital technologies, enabling the construction of different communities, oftentimes specific to interest or political inclination, and modes of commodification. Networks are formed that “[transcend] the historical limits of networks as forms of social organization and interaction” (Castells, 2004, p. 6). In the digital age,

there is a “remarkable increase in our ability to share, to cooperate with one another, and to take collective action, all outside the framework of traditional institutions and organizations” (Shirky, 2008, p. 21). Pockets of subculture, marginalized groups, and others who have traditionally been unable to participate in discourses of power are now able to form networks, aggregate power, “make space” (Wong, 2004), and have their voices heard. New economic models are also coming into play based on the collective power of the many and niche markets, rather than the few powerful dictating monetary flows and cultural production (C. Anderson, 2006).

Others caution against such optimism, insisting that powers of structure and power inequalities still exist in similar ways to those that are seen in offline situations (Dean, 2003; Hindman, 2009; Sunstein, 2007), or point out the potential issues around the barrage of user-generated content without the expertise of cultural gatekeepers (Keen, 2007). Ideally, the Internet would allow people to be exposed to a plethora of perspectives, including those they do not agree with, given the ease of expressing one’s viewpoints online (Sunstein, 2007). Such a model would presumably work in favor of democratic discourse and equal opportunity, hedging on the hope that people would make choices rationally based on processing and evaluating the information they receive. However, the Internet gives people power in a different way—the power to filter. An overload of information results in a lot of noise, leading users to filter out those perspectives that do not resonate with them, creating a balkanizing effect which does not actually allow them to see everything that is out there, but only those which they choose to see. Filtering greatly affects the question of visibility on the Internet and the amount of attention a certain issue receives from different groups of people. Not all information will be equally seen by everyone because of the amount of user-generated content on the Internet and the necessity to filter out information according to individual interest. Moreover, traditional entities of power with money can purchase visibility on the Internet through search engine optimization (SEO) processes (Introna & Nissenbaum, 2000) and buying featured spots and advertisements on popular participatory media and social networking sites like YouTube and Facebook.

Kickstarter and the Trend of Crowdsourced Funding

Kickstarter, a crowdsourced funding site started in 2009, has been very popular among independent musicians, artists, filmmakers, technological developers, and other individuals who need funding to carry out a project, potentially democratizing the process of music production and distribution by taking it out of the hands of traditional record labels and large music corporations. The driving idea behind Kickstarter capitalizes on the participatory aspects of the Internet to fund various projects, drawing on the power of the crowd to

achieve a certain funding goal, allowing individuals, called “backers,” to contribute money toward a project during a project’s “campaign” through the process of “pledging.” The campaign sets a funding goal. If the funding goal is met, the pledges become actual monetary contributions. Otherwise, the campaign receives no physical funds. Theoretically, anyone can put a project on Kickstarter and run a campaign, and anyone can be a backer. For example, singer-songwriter Alfa determined that it would take US\$2,500 to produce her album, “World Go Blue” (Garcia, 2012). When she started her Kickstarter campaign, she set a funding goal of US\$2,500. This means if backers of this particular campaign collectively pledge at least US\$2,500, Alfa’s project (her album) will receive the pledged amount, even if it exceeds the goal, minus the 8%–10% that Kickstarter takes as its fee (“Fees for the United States,” n.d.). If the funding goal is not met through pledges, her project receives no funding, and the backers retain their donation funds.

Crowdsourced funding has become trendy in the last few years, with the popularization of sites like Kickstarter, Indiegogo, PledgeMusic, and GoFundMe, where fans, friends, family members, or remotely interested individuals can donate money to a project. Superficially, such an arrangement seems to rely on the altruism of the backer, assuming an impetus to assist an artist financially in their endeavor to achieve an end goal, following traditional patterns of philanthropy and charity. However, as this research finds, there are a plethora of different reasons why people willingly open their wallets and put money toward a project and, in this case, the creation of a music album, which ranges from liking the music to supporting a friend to pre-buying an album by making a donation. Furthermore, we find that musicians understand the importance of using digital media to nurture connections, existing and new, that lead to an emotional and monetary investment in their career and their music, even if they do not seek to enter into a traditional framework of a music career. This article explores how this model of crowdsourced funding that exists outside of the traditional media framework presents an alternate model of economic viability for musicians. Moreover, how is this alternate framework of economic viability tightly tied to and enabled by and enacted through different forms of social capital?

Method

In order to interrogate the ways in which Kickstarter has created avenues of economic viability for indie musicians through the funding of albums, three surveys were created and analyzed. Survey A, the longest survey that consisted of several open-ended questions, was targeted toward musicians who have attempted a Kickstarter campaign. For purposes of this article, the term “musician” will be used when describing Kickstarter artists, musicians, groups, and other respondents to Survey A, regardless of whether the respondents are individual musicians/singer-songwriters or a band

containing multiple members. Subjects for Survey A were collected in three ways: (a) by reaching out to personal networks of musicians who used Kickstarter to attempt to fund an album, (b) by snowball sampling through social networks to identify musicians who were not within my immediate network, and (c) by contacting musicians on the Kickstarter site by using the search term “album.” This survey was divided into four sections of questions. The first section assessed the baseline popularity of the musician, including basic information about the musician, like name and location, as well as the musician’s Internet presence, whether the musician has a website or social media presence like Twitter and/or Facebook, and the number of fans they have (which they calculate/estimate themselves as “either likes on Facebook, or Twitter followers, or other forms of measurement”). The second section asked about the musician’s Kickstarter campaigns, focusing on their most recent campaign (if the musician has run multiple ones), including what their funding goal was, the means by which they used to promote their campaign (email, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc), and whether or not their campaign was a success. The third section focused on the economic aspects of the musician’s career, particularly whether or not they made a living making music, and their perspectives on what constitutes a successful career for them. The main purpose of this section was to assess the type of role that monetary compensation for music played for each musician, as “success” or an end goal can range from simply being able to put out an album to making a living doing music to being signed to a major record label. Finally, musicians were asked how they interact with fans of their music in a series of open-response questions (listed below) which included inquiries about methods by which they reach out and stay connected with fans, as well as how having a digital presence impacted the relationship with fans:

- What are some methods you use to reach out to new fans? How do you think they discover your music?
- How do you stay connected with your current fans?
- Why do you think your fans are willing to invest in your Kickstarter campaign?
- Do you support other musicians on Kickstarter (either through funding or otherwise—please explain)? If so, what is your motivation for doing so?
- Has having a digital presence made it easier to get fans? Please elaborate if you can.

A total of 11 musicians responded to Survey A. Ten musicians used Kickstarter to fund their latest album. One musician, Jane Lui, used PledgeMusic (J. Lui, personal correspondence, 4 April 2013). All of the musicians have had an Internet presence for at least 2 years at the time of this research, with a median of 5–7 years. Six of the musicians are based out of Los Angeles, CA. Only one is based outside of the United States (in the United Kingdom).

Table 1. Overview of the Three Survey Instruments.

	Survey A	Survey B	Survey C
Type of respondents	Musicians who ran a Kickstarter campaign	Kickstarter backers of musicians of Survey A	Anyone who has ever backed any type of Kickstarter campaign
Number of respondents	11	10 (all backers of one musician)	40
Recruitment method	Personal networks, snowballing	Request from musicians from Survey A to backers	Personal social networks (Facebook, Twitter), snowballing
Main Purpose	To assess why and how musicians run Kickstarter campaigns, how they maintain relationships with their fans, their perspective of the trajectory of their career, and the role social networks play	To understand the motivation of backers to invest in the musicians in Survey A and to get a more complete perspective of the relationship between Survey A musicians and their fans, in particular, the role that social networks play in this relationship	To understand the motivation of Kickstarter backers to invest in any crowdfunded project

Surveys B and C consisted of the similar questions, but targeted different groups of people. The main difference is that Survey B targeted the Kickstarter backers of the musicians who answered Survey A in order to observe more directly the relationship between the musicians interviewed and their backers. Survey C focused on anyone who has ever backed a Kickstarter campaign, in order to get at the intentions of the backers themselves and their motivation for funding a project. In addition, Survey B asked the respondent to identify on which musician's behalf they are completing the survey, while Survey C sought to broadly identify the nature of the project. These two surveys included questions about how the respondent heard about the particular Kickstarter campaign, the amount pledged/donated, and why the decision was made to fund a particular project. Subjects for Survey B were collected through asking musicians to send out the link to their backers. Kickstarter allows emails to be sent to those who have pledged money toward a campaign, ensuring that only those who have backed a project would be sent the link. The 10 viable responses received from Survey B were all from backers of TangleTown Trio's project. Subjects for Survey C were collected through a snowball method using my own social networks of Facebook and Twitter. There were 58 respondents, with 40 that reliably answered most or all the questions. Almost all respondents are based in the United States, with two based in Canada, one in the United Kingdom, and one who was unsure (Table 1).

Results and Discussion

Social Capital and Social Networking

Kickstarter is a way in which social capital is seen to have a direct effect on economic capital. All of the musicians use Facebook and YouTube to promote their music and stay connected with fans. It seems as though if one were a musician nowadays, maintaining a presence on social networking sites

is a necessity, not only to accumulate new fans but also to keep in touch with existing ones. Every musician surveyed cited Facebook as one of the ways they stay connected to their current fans. While the survey lumps "fans" as the number of supporters the musician perceives to have themselves, there is a subtle difference between fans and family/friends, which, for purposes of this article, will be delineated by the enactment of either bridging/non-intimate (fans) or bonding/intimate (friends and family). There are three types of social capital associated with the success of a Kickstarter campaign—bridging and bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000) and maintained social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Bridging social capital consist of loose social ties, or "weak ties" (Granovetter, 1973), whereas bonding social capital is characterized by "tightly-knit, emotionally close relationships, such as family and close friends" (Ellison et al., 2007, p. 1146). Maintained social capital, which came as an addition to the originally conceived bridging and bonding types of social capital, is put forth by Ellison et al. as relationships, both loose and close, from the past that are maintained through time. Musicians who use Kickstarter to fund their albums draw on all three types of social capital to achieve their goal—from bonding social capital through intimate connections of friends and family, bridging through non-intimate fans and admirers of their music, and using digital networks to enact maintained social capital across time.

Facebook increases value for musicians' social capital because it provides "motivation to activate a latent tie" (Ellison et al., 2007, p. 1163). For musicians with relatively large number of fans like Jane Lui, Ernie Halter, and Dave Seaman, weak ties that are maintained via Facebook "may provide additional information and opportunities, which are expressed as dimensions of bridging social capital that speak to interaction with a wide range of people" (Ellison et al., 2007, p. 1163). On the other hand, Facebook allows musicians who may not have such a large fan base to maintain relationships with actual friends and family members who are likely to back a project, using Facebook as an avenue

through which to make people aware of and provide information about their musical endeavors. This latter situation was more common within the scope of this research project. The survey results found that, for the majority of the musician respondents, the majority of their funds came from friends and family and people they already know (“intimate funders”), while the number of fans is directly correlated with the amount of funds that come from people who the musician does not know (“non-intimate funders”). Note that while intimate and non-intimate funders can be grossly lumped into the categories of bonding and bridging social capital, respectively, with the claim that maintaining these different types of social capital directly and positively affected the economic capital of the specific project, we cannot ascertain exactly where the boundaries are drawn between people musicians “know” and “don’t know,” nor can we confirm consistency of this loose definition between different musicians. Nonetheless, the characteristics of these two different kinds of funders are closely related to the nature of the relationship the musicians have with their fan base. This brings up the question of whether or not the model of economic viability becomes less subversive or “new,” as a musician accumulates more fans and increases investment from non-intimate fans, mimicking a more traditional model of music creation, and whether crowdfunding sites are simply a vehicle through which pre-existing dynamics of power of production and distribution are enacted.²

Funding Amount and Level of Intimacy

The three musicians (Jane Lui, Ernie Halter, and Dave Seaman) who claimed that the majority of their funds came from people they do not know (non-intimate funders) have the greatest number of fans. Halter and Seaman are also the two musicians surveyed who have had an Internet presence for over 7 years, which is a longer period than the other musicians, save one. They also have half a million and 116,000 fans, respectively, making them the two musicians surveyed with the greatest number of fans.

Interestingly, a similar pattern is seen in the relationship between the amount funded and the percentage of non-intimate funders, where greater percentages of non-intimate funds are positively correlated with higher amounts of funding received.

In both Figures 1 and 2, the two points on the far end of the scale represent Seaman and Halter (from left to right). As we can see, out of the musicians surveyed, the two of them had the greatest number of fans, the highest funding goals and results, and the highest percentages of non-intimate funds. Although the number of subjects is very small, Seaman and Halter seem to go beyond the alternate model of social capital into a higher stakes fan-based investment model, and this model is viable outside of an intimate, bonding social capital relationship, mirroring a more traditional, non-intimately based relationship between musician and fan, where Kickstarter is merely a vehicle by which great levels of

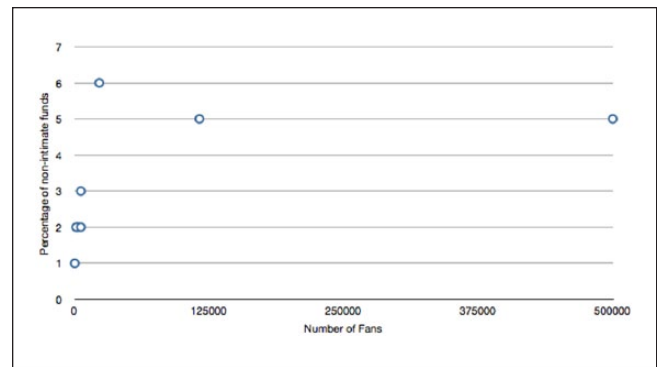


Figure 1. Survey A—Direct correlation between number of fans and the amount of non-intimate funds. On the y axis, “1”=0%–10%, “2”=11%–30%, “3”=31%–50%, “4”=51%–70%, “5”=71%–90%, “6”=90%–100%.

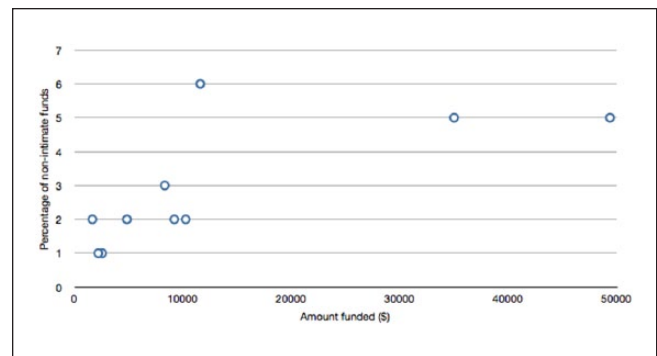


Figure 2. Survey A—Direct correlation between amount funded and percentage of non-intimate funds. On the y axis, “1”=0%–10%, “2”=11%–30%, “3”=31%–50%, “4”=51%–70%, “5”=71%–90%, “6”=90%–100%.

bridging social capital that still relies on “information, trust, and norms of reciprocity” (Woolcock, 1998) are converted into economic capital. This is a pattern observed in celebrity cultures and cultivate potential parasocial relationships (Giles, 2002), in that the fan feels more intimately toward the celebrity than vice versa and creates a foundation to generate more economic capital through these interactions. Despite the seeming non-intimacy that frames these parasocial relationships, the musicians surveyed understood the importance of a personal connection with their fans. When asked why they think their fans invest in their Kickstarter campaign, Halter states, “Because the idea is unique, and they have faith in my word to pull it off and re-invest back into them.” Similarly, Seaman thinks that “they want to support [him] personally . . . Plus, it gives them a feeling of ownership. That’s [*sic*] very important.” They both indicate that their relationship with their fans is a dialectical one based on personal connections, whether it is “faith” in the artist, wanting to support him or her, or a “feeling of ownership.” Therefore, although non-intimate funds are crucial to the financial success of their career, these musicians still understand the importance of personal connection.

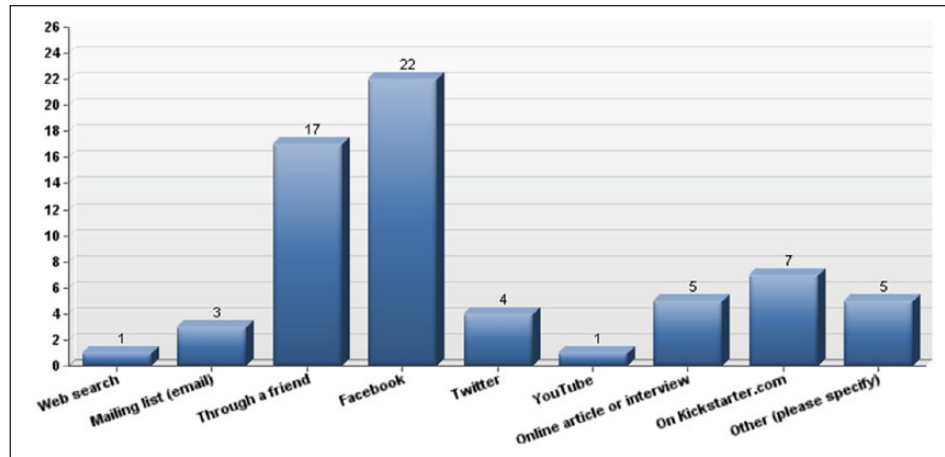


Figure 3. Survey C—How did you hear about the Kickstarter campaign you backed?

The importance of this personal connection is understood regardless of the number of fans and the percentage of non-intimate funders. The band, KaVaN, fully acknowledges the power of social networks in the process of running a Kickstarter campaign and the potential exposure they would get, even hinting at a community of musicians helping each other out:

Most of the people who invested are either friends of ours or fans of the band that we've met along the way, but they all seem to really believe in us. They would often post on their own facebook pages to promote our campaign to ensure that we met our mark. We noticed some people we didn't know invested as well, which was great, so it showed we were getting some outside exposure and they were interested in our music and our success.

Other responses ranged from feeling their fans “believe in [their] music” (Katie Quick), to “[supporting] a friend who's making art” (LA Font), to “inviting them to invest in an experience” (Jane Lui). Pre-sales also came into the conversation. Charles Thomas of Twisted Gypsy feels that because people “genuinely like the music [Twisted Gypsy makes],” they were “happy to ‘pre-buy’ the album supporting its production,” acknowledging that the promise of receiving a copy of the finished product provides a motivation for donating money up front. TangleTown Trio (arguably the group surveyed that capitalized on their bonding social capital the most) intertwined their understanding of their fan's personal investment and the group's personalization of the finished product:

Kickstarter lets people give a small amount and feel that they have done a lot to make a difference. We put their names on the album jacket and in our programs. We personalized a copy of the CD just for them. They feel personally involved.

TangleTown Trio sits on the other end of the spectrum from Seaman and Halter in terms of the characteristics of their campaign, their method of reaching out, and their fans. TangleTown Trio successfully ran a Kickstarter campaign at

the end of 2010 and raised US\$2,556 to produce their debut CD (Nardolillo, 2010). In relation to the other musicians, this group's campaign and digital presence were rather small. They have only 188 fans and relied on personal connections to fund their album, with most of their funds (90%–100%) coming from people they know or from intimate backers. Their backers comprised all of the respondents of Survey B, and every single backer stated as their main reason for donating to the campaign was that they “wanted to support a friend or family member.” Their main method of promoting their album was through personal emails. Hence, TangleTown Trio capitalized on bonding social capital and relied on not only the personalization of reaching out to their friends but also sold the personalization of the product itself.

Motivations of Backers

Facebook and friends are by far the most common way people hear about projects,³ according to Survey C, the survey for anyone who has backed a Kickstarter campaign, had respondents who backed projects that ranged from films to albums to books to games (Figure 3).

As Facebook interactions, for the most part, are built of pre-existing relationships, this indicates that personal connections, no matter how weak, play an important role in driving backers to a particular musician's Kickstarter campaign. Similarly, when asked how backers are connected to people involved with the project, the response “I am a real life friend” received the greatest amount of responses, confirming real-life connections is a major factor in getting people to economically invest in a project, which stands in contrast to the traditional form of non-intimate music popularity, visibility, and celebrity that command the attention of millions of strangers (Figure 4).

The two major motivations for people to donate to Kickstarter were to support family or friends—confirming the fact that the personal, intimate connection is important to

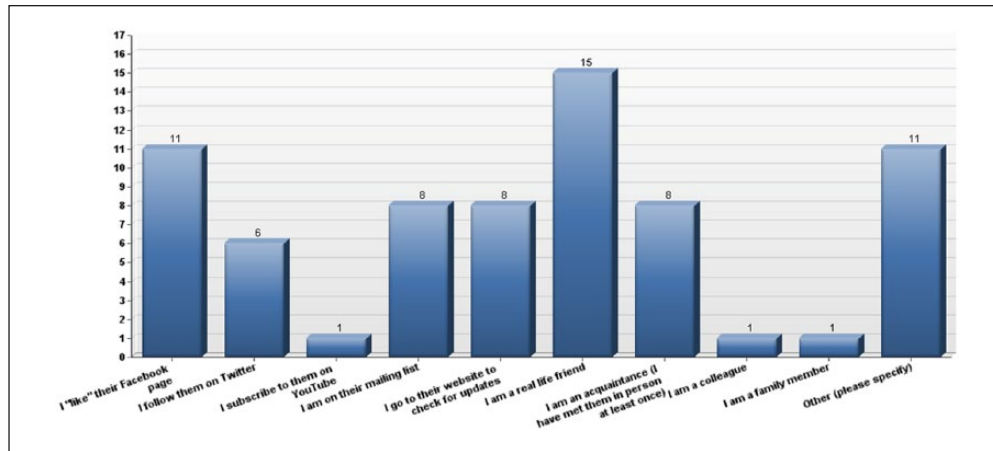


Figure 4. Survey C—How are you connected to the people involved in the project?

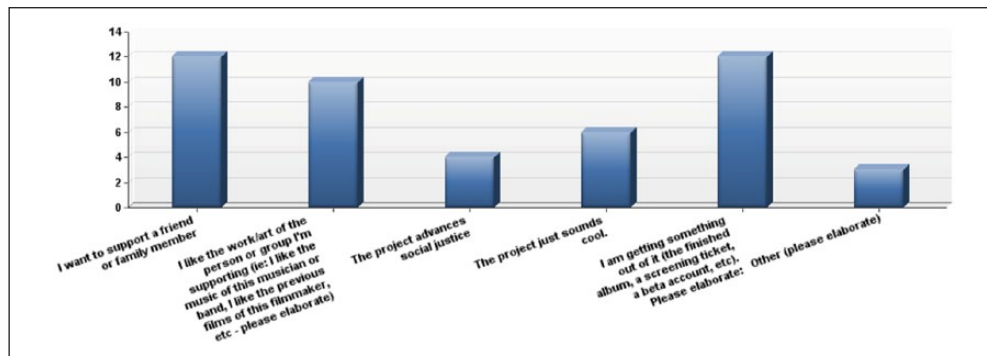


Figure 5. Survey C—What is your MAIN reason for choosing to invest in this particular Kickstarter project?

a successful campaign or getting something out of it—indicating that some form of material return for their economic investment of the Kickstarter product, in the form of a pre-sale, is also a motivating factor for someone to invest in the project (Figure 5).

Getting a return on the economic investment put into a project through receiving the product in the future, though, is not presented to potential backers as pre-sales, but “rewards.” By treating pre-sales as “rewards,” the personal relationship between musician and funder can be preserved outside a traditional transaction of capital for product.

As we can see from Figure 4, social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, and digital means of communication like mailing lists or websites, play major roles in retaining potential fans and investors. Social networking sites, in particular, are useful and effective in terms of raising the visibility of projects. Technological advancements and the Internet have greatly lowered the barriers to production and distribution of music, creating the potential for niche markets that exist outside of traditional economic frameworks of power, creating what Chris Anderson (2006) calls the “long tail.” No longer do musicians have to pay excess amounts of money to record an album or track with an audio engineer in a

professional studio. Digital cameras and webcams that cost a couple hundred dollars are sufficient to record simple music videos or live performances that immediately published on one of the numerous video-sharing sites like YouTube, instantly shared with the public. These new technologies democratize the tools of production. Barriers to distribution and publishing are lowered with the ease of uploading content to digital platforms, as Shirky (2008) points out. Many musicians put their music for sale on iTunes and Amazon, which musicians indicated are the two most utilized ways to sell music online.⁴ The ease of uploading content corresponds to the ease of consuming this content as well, hence making it easy and inexpensive for musicians to connect with potential fans and share their new material with existing ones.

Lowered barriers to publishing result in a glut of content available to the non-discerning cultural consumer. With the removal of technological limits, the social limits of “communicative capital” (Dean, 2003, p. 98), whereby publicity of information is necessary for the flourishing of a democratic, become a contending factor in hope of more democratic dynamics through new technologies. Attention and time spent consuming media and content online are limited, so musicians, who are relying on the visibility of their Kickstarter

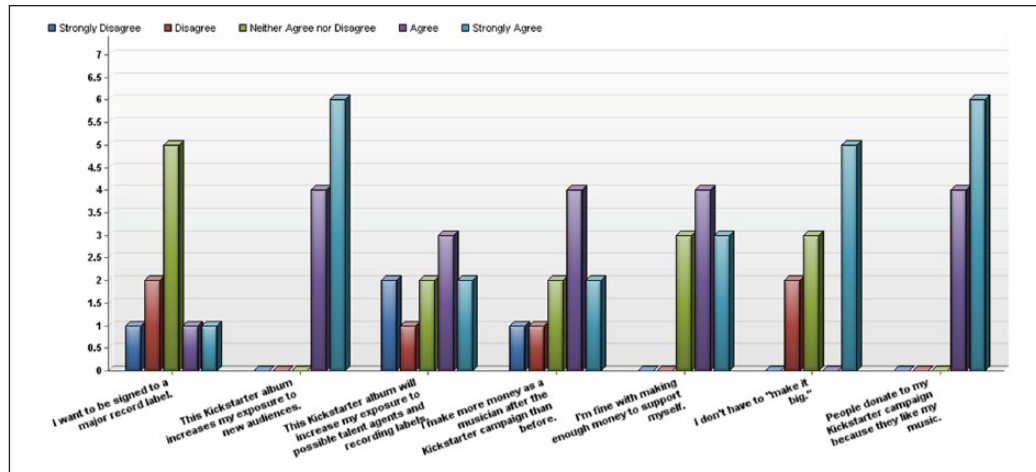


Figure 6. Survey A—Please indicate to what degree you disagree or agree with the following statements.

campaigns, rely heavily on social networks and personal relationships to help filter their posts through to people with whom they may only be loosely connected. Hence, in this way, maintaining bridging social capital through digital networks becomes crucial in getting attention to one's project with the prospect of enticing people to back it.

Economic viability to ensure a livelihood for musicians outside of traditional forms of music-making is also evident in this study, with many scholars espousing the potential for digital media to create new markets. According to Survey A responses, although the reach of each musician may not have the scope of music that is produced and distributed within a traditional framework of a major record label, 7 out of 10 musicians make a living playing their own music, while only 3 out of 10 have a day job that is unrelated to music. Chris Anderson posits that, with the Internet, niche markets will pop up in a way that may not command a large portion of the economic market, but will prove viable on a smaller scale. This perspective brings up a tension that Shirky addresses through a discussion of fame. The more famous someone is, the less that someone is able to reciprocate communication to his or her fans and followers, relying, therefore, more on the non-intimate bridging social capital to leverage for economic capital. According to Robert Putnam (2000), social capital is based on expected reciprocity and is cultivated through participation in group activities. Therefore, there is a temporal aspect to social capital that becomes limited as the number of people with whom to meaningfully interact increases, yet a weaker tie through bridging social capital with many potential backers seems to counteract the lower levels of personal interaction. The more fans one has, the greater their potential for economic benefit. Hence, while intimate funds do provide an alternate model for creative production, the weak ties and bridging social capital augmented by popularity and fame drive a more traditional configuration of artist–fan relationship.

Although it seems as though a traditional model of music-making may seem desirable, given the economic power that

may be wielded through extensive social networks, the musicians surveyed were ambivalent in their pursuit of traditional means of music production through recording labels and talent agents, recognizing that new configurations of social networking provide a way to survive as an artist (Figure 6).

Every musician surveyed agreed that their Kickstarter campaign increases their exposure to new audiences, supporting the idea that digital social networks create new avenues of visibility. About half feel they will make more money after the campaign (presumably with an album they can then sell), which demonstrates the potential for alternate avenues of economic viability through digital platforms. While they do not necessarily reject a traditional path, they are ambivalent as to whether or not the campaign will increase their exposure to possible talent agents and recording labels. And yet, they feel like the Kickstarter album has the potential to expose their music to more people and allow them to accumulate more fans. In this way, there is an understanding that Kickstarter allows them to function outside of the traditional framework of music production and management that is based more on a bottom-up model of fan-supported career sustainability.

Musicians who use Kickstarter are hardly seeking to subvert the traditional framework of music publishing. Instead, their impetus to start a campaign to raise funds for an album that they can then sell, use to retain old fans, and reach new audiences belays a desire to seek out alternate modes of economic viability through the accumulation and maintenance of social capital through interacting with fans and sharing their work, while continuing to build a wide fan base of non-intimate individuals with which to leverage the networks potential economic power and funnel it into current or future projects. At the same time, musicians are cultivating a sense of social capital and participating in new types of communities through a process of economic capital exchange mediated by Kickstarter and social media networks.

A Community of Crowdsourced Funded Musicians

The advent of Internet was a “technological change that unleashed the power of networks” (Castells, 2004, p. 6) and has provided ways for people with similar interests to connect across vast geographical distances. Digital networks have enabled and eased the formations of “imagined communities” (B. Anderson, 1983) along lines of commonality and understanding. In this study, in addition to the artist–backer relationship, musicians who use crowdsourced funding methods have formed communities of their own. When asked whether they would support other musicians on Kickstarter (either through funding or otherwise), most of the musicians responded that they would. The band, LA Font, illustrates the potential formation of community between musicians by saying, “Often a \$10 Kickstarter donation generates more goodwill and support between bands who are already friends.” Other responses varied from those of TangleTown Trio, whose representative said that she would support “only projects launched by my friends. My motivation is to support the efforts of people I care about,” to those of Katie Quick and Alfa, who expressed their willingness to support other musicians because, having done a campaign, they can relate.

While some musicians focus on supporting their friends (and in the case of TangleTown Trio, with the highly personalized campaign supported mostly by friends and family, this is no surprise), a community of mutual support and knowledge is being constituted through the process of running a campaign. Moreover, more than half of the musicians mentioned that they used Kickstarter because bands they know used it successfully before. Jane Lui, who used PledgeMusic, credited her friendship network in helping her choose that particular site. Although PledgeMusic is not Kickstarter (they are two different crowdsourced funding sites), crowdsourced funding itself and its virtues are being extolled upon these networks of indie musicians, causing increasingly more of them to give it a shot and making popular the idea that fans can invest in the production of indie music and lend to the sustainability of these musicians’ careers.

Limitation and Challenges, and Future Directions

There are a number of limitations to this research and a number of ways to expand this research in the future. First, the number of subjects involved in all three surveys was very small, and statistical and regression analyses would not have revealed significant correlations. Survey B, the survey which measured the motivations for backers of the musicians who responded to Survey A, presented some challenges. It was hard to get artists to send Survey B to their backers. Charles Thomas, of Twisted Gypsy, told me, “I am not willing to send out a questionnaire [*sic*] to my backers, simply because

we were very clear that we would never give out their information, or submit them to any marketing that wasn’t us.” Alfa allowed me to post the link to Survey B on her musician’s page. The only musicians who definitely sent the link out to backers were TangleTown Trio and LA Font, as only those backers answered Survey B, but the one LA Font respondent did not answer any of the other questions. Even if musicians sent out the survey, they could not guarantee that their backers would respond. Future research could involve following up with musicians and implementing a more rigorous recruiting process for backer respondents. More data on Survey B would allow us to more directly trace the relationship between motivations for backers to invest in a campaign and the perception of the musicians for why they think backers will support their project.

This research targeted musicians who were considered indie musicians, yet did not inquire after their professional status. At the time of the research, Ernie Halter is signed to Rock Ridge Music, which considers itself an “independent record label,” yet is distributed by Warner Music Group, which is a major company.⁵ Future research can explore the motivations for professional musicians backed by a record label to do a Kickstarter campaign. For example, is the motivation to garner emotional investment through economic support from fans rather than desperately needing the funds to produce an album? How do these motivations differ from someone who is not already signed to a record label? The intensity of friendships and interpersonal relationships could also use some probing. Much of this study was based on the power of social capital and friend networks to give artists exposure, publicize the Kickstarter campaign, and entice people to donate to a project. The category of “friend” versus “acquaintance” can oftentimes be vague. What is the nature of some of these friendships? A numerical scale of friendship intensity may help with the correlation of data points to determine the influence of social capital and the power of networks in a successful crowdsourced funding campaign.

There is also potential to do a comparative study of indie musicians before and after a Kickstarter campaign. Did the album that the campaign help produce increase cash flow for the musician? Did it allow the musician to make enough money to quit his or her day job? Did it broaden opportunities for economic viability and career sustainability? More direct questions can be asked as to whether musicians are satisfied with an alternate career path or whether they desire to enter into the more traditional framework of the music industry. Furthermore, how do these social networks that exist outside a traditional media framework, perhaps one based on kinship rather than capital, reconfigure the power dynamic and money-making methods for creative artists? Or, conversely, how do crowdfunding platforms like Kickstarter reinforce the power of traditional processes of creative production whereby popularity and celebrity gather the greatest amount of economic capital?

This study can be expanded to include other crowd-sourced funding platforms like Indiegogo and Pledgemusic and can also include campaigns which did not meet their funding goals. What are the factors why certain campaigns do not reach funding goals? The parsing out of musical genres can be potentially revealing. Who chooses to invest in what types of music? And finally, this research was very US-centric. It would be interesting to get an international perspective and examine other models of funding for indie musicians in other countries and cultures.

Conclusion

Unlike a more traditional form of music distribution which includes a record label and a distribution apparatus involving non-intimate investors and music fans, Kickstarter works because people want to support their friends. Kickstarter, then, is inherently personal and relies on pre-Kickstarter social capital and relationships, even when non-intimate fans invest. The same can be said for celebrities—that the investment people put into pop music celebrities and rock stars are equally personal, if somewhat parasocial at times. The difference between the two lies in reciprocity of the musician given the limitations of time. The more fans a musician has, the less time that musician will have to correspond personally with his or her fans. Reciprocity is congruent with social capital. Whereas buying a Kelly Clarkson album is an exchange of capital for goods, backing Alfa on Kickstarter is perceived to be a personal investment, despite the fact that, if one donated enough money, one would get the album for “free,” mimicking a traditional model of exchange.

Hence, Kickstarter does not necessarily offer alternate avenues of economic viability on its own, but rather leverages pre-existing relationships, social networks, and musician visibility, which incites further questions about the power of these pre-existing social relationships as it intersects with technological advancements to enable new processes of creative production and distribution. At what point, as Chris Anderson (2006) wonders, do “the professionals leave off and the amateurs take over?” (p. 6). At what point does bridging and bonding social capital matter less to the economic viability of a musician’s career? It is hard to say whether these musicians really function in an alternate economic model or whether the Kickstarter process is just a means to an end for a major recording contract. At what point is simply surviving enough? The definition of the “indie” musician is very hard to pin down. What constitutes an indie musician? To that end, what constitutes a mainstream recording label? Where are the boundaries, and who draws them?

So, does the Internet democratize music production and distribution? Does Kickstarter provide an alternate model of economic viability for musicians? While the Internet has lowered barriers to the production of music, if

production were really that accessible, people may not be asking for Kickstarter funds in the first place. Kickstarter albums are anticipated to be made in professional or semi-professional recording studios, with sound engineering and mastering.⁶ They intend to undergo at least a semi-professional process of music production in order to make a product that can be sold for profit. This takes us back to the original argument of whether the Internet is a democratizing force or whether it still adheres to power structures and logics of capitalism that exist outside of it. In the case of indie musicians on Kickstarter, the answer is somewhat moderated and lies somewhere in between the extreme polarities of utopian and dystopian. The lion’s share of the market does not only lie in the hands of the few and powerful. In the way of Anderson’s Long Tail concept, there is more stuff being produced, and this stuff is being distributed and consumed more inexpensively than before.

As Kickstarter becomes ever more popular among not only indie artists but also mainstream artists embedded in traditional media frameworks, which we have already seen with the successes of campaigns started by the celebrity actor Zach Braff and the production team of the popular CW network show, *Veronica Mars*, it is important to consider the role that pre-existing social capital or social capital begotten from more traditional means of creative production play in a platform that purportedly evens the playing field for creative endeavors, as the use of digital platforms often reproduces and reinforces inequitable power dynamics. In essence, social relationships outside of the Kickstarter platform are not just helpful, but positively essential in ensuring the economic viability of musicians. While Kickstarter provides a mechanism by which the exchange of social capital for economic capital occurs, the strength of the ensuing economic capital depends strongly on existing social capital independent of the digital platform. In this way, Kickstarter may potentially reproduce and reinforce inequitable power dynamics that it strives, theoretically, to disrupt.

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Notes

1. There has been substantial scholarship done on the ways in which mainstream media cuts out minority groups, particularly racial and sexual minorities, in a way that normalizes a certain type of (White, straight, male) ideal figure. Darrell Y. Hamamoto tackles race in television representation in

- his (1994) book, *Monitored Peril: Asian Americans and the Politics of TV Representation*. Grace Wang's (2015) book, *Soundtracks of Asian America: Navigating Race through Musical Performance*, speaks specifically to the racial dynamics present in music production and performance. Deborah Wong's seminal (2004) book, *Speak it Louder: Asian Americans Making Music*, likewise explores the ways in which social minority musicians sought alternate avenues of music-making outside of traditional mainstream media means. Other works like Robert McChesney's (2004) book, *The Problem with the Media: US Communication Politics in the 21st Century*, and Todd Gitlin's (2003) piece, *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media and the Unmaking of the New Left*, explore the ways in which mainstream media has a tendency to reinforce certain dominant political and social views and perspectives through the types of people and events that get represented and seen.
2. During the data-gathering process of this survey, the Veronica Mars movie was successfully funded via Kickstarter. A few of the respondents of Survey C donated to the Veronica Mars movie. Veronica Mars was a TV series on United Paramount Network (UPN)/CW, a major TV network, from 2004 to 2007. Veronica Mars reached their funding goal of US\$2 million in less than half a day, closing with a whopping US\$5.7 million from 91,585 backers, setting the record for the greatest number of backers, and the fastest Kickstarter campaign at the time to reach its goal (Dionne, 2013). This campaign seems to be a case of a traditional media co-opting an alternate model and capitalizing on the investment of fans (non-intimate funders who became invested because of Veronica Mars' exposure; thanks to the power of traditional media).
 3. Respondents were asked to choose up to two responses for this question. The survey did not ask the respondent to clarify how they heard about the project on Facebook (was it through a friend or through the project's or artist's page?) or whether they heard about the project through a friend via Facebook.
 4. Many musician respondents from Survey A also mentioned that they sell hard copies of their CDs in independent record stores and at live shows.
 5. It seems that Halter and Rock Ridge Music have parted ways, as Halter's latest album in 2013 was self-released, and his biography has disappeared from the Rock Ridge Music artist site ("Ernie Halter," n.d.).
 6. Alfa's Kickstarter album, "World Go Blue," was produced in both LA and Nashville by music producers. KaVaN's debut album, funded via Kickstarter, is "being mastered at the WORLD FAMOUS Bernie Grundman Mastering Studio by the WORLD FAMOUS Joe Bozzi" (KaVaN, 2012).
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