



Cultural production and platform mediation: A case in music crowdfunding

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journals.sagepub.com/home/nms**Francesco D'Amato** **Milena Cassella**

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Abstract

Although a great amount of research has been concerned with the growing relevance of crowdfunding for cultural productions, it is still little investigated how the actual functioning of crowdfunding platforms can affect both the way of conceiving and doing crowdfunding and the financing opportunities and performances of different projects. The article illustrates how this occurs in the case of an Italian crowdfunding platform, through activities of project classification and evaluation and campaign consulting it carries out, which are not visible from the outside. It also points out how these activities are shaped through the constant search for a balance between meritocratic principles and company sustainability. Opening what is usually treated as an organizational black box, the article provides an original contribution that enriches the understanding of the ways in which crowdfunding platforms can influence the production of culture as well as the subjectivities characterized by the neoliberal ethos of self-management and self-entrepreneurship.

Keywords

Crowdfunding, cultural production, digital platforms, DIY, gatekeeping, music

Introduction

Over the last decade, crowdfunding has constituted a mechanism of increasing relevance for supporting cultural productions, paralleling a general decrease in public funding and private investments (Bannerman, 2013; Boeuf et al., 2014; Migliavacca et al., 2016),

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especially for small organizations and lesser known creatives with little experience or working in niche markets (Cicerchia, 2013). At the same time, the studies dealing with this practice have increased. The three areas most investigated by the research on crowdfunding concern the following: (1) how different features and strategies of creators affect campaign performance, (2) the reconfiguration of the relationships between creatives and audiences who participate in the project as backers, and (3) the critical scrutiny of forms of empowering often ascribed to creatives and audiences as a result of the disintermediation of traditional producers and sponsors (Brooker, 2015; Davidson and Poor, 2015; Gehring and Wittkower, 2015; Kustritz, 2015). However, what remains relatively little investigated is the active mediation played by the web platforms offering services to manage crowdfunding campaigns. These platforms are not neutral instruments but organizations with their own interests, ideas, and business models. In recent years, several studies have focused on how digital platforms influence the processes for which they are used, both through the design of the technological infrastructure and the terms of use of the service, and through the criteria and procedures that inform content moderation and management, the latter understood in terms of content selection, classification, and organization (Gillespie, 2018; Nieborg and Poell, 2018; Van Dijck et al., 2018). On the one hand, they can condition the actions of different types of users, technically and normatively inhibiting certain uses while rewarding others; on the other hand, their conventional functioning and the discourses through which they promote themselves contribute to generating expectations which in turn orient users' behaviors. The concrete mediations operated by the platforms are generally opaque from the outside, in order to defend an idea of inclusiveness, impartiality, and neutrality (Gillespie, 2018). This also applies to cultural crowdfunding platforms, whose promotional rhetoric often insists on offering all creatives the same opportunities to benefit from the wealth of networks and to find the resources to carry out their projects, favoring a purely meritocratic logic (D'Amato, 2017).

These premises represented the research framework on the Italian crowdfunding platform Musicraiser (MR). The aim is to shed some light on the hidden criteria and practices organizing the operation of a platform used to present, promote, and finance cultural projects, establishing how they influence such aspects of the crowdfunding process and—possibly—the performance achieved by different campaigns. The choice of this particular platform has a twofold motivation: on the one hand, music has always been one of the sectors most affected by crowdfunding; on the other hand, MR is the second reward crowdfunding platform in Italy for funding collected, as well as being the first among those dedicated to a specialized area of cultural production (Starteed, 2016, 2017, 2018). Furthermore, MR has many features common to most of the platforms for cultural crowdfunding, such as the business model and the crowdfunding methods adopted, therefore, it can be considered in many aspects representative of a class of services (De Voldere and Zeqo, 2017).

The research consisted of 25 in-depth interviews conducted between June and October 2019 with people who work or have worked at MR, from its launch in 2012 until today, covering various roles: 4 campaign managers, 1 events manager, 2 social media managers, 1 content manager, 2 internal talent scouts, and 15 external talent scouts. Information gathered through interviews was supplemented by other interviews with the

founders available on the web and by the reading of two non-public documents: the guidelines for musicians and those for the scouts.

The research has made it possible to highlight the influence of the platform both on funding opportunities and performances for different musicians, and on the musicians' approach to communication and project management. It will be shown how such influence is exercised through (1) various forms of gatekeeping, (2) the evaluation of the project's potential, (3) campaign planning consultancy, and (4) the kind of assistance and promotional support offered to different projects. At the same time, we will point to the cultural and economic logic underlying the policies adopted by the platform, as well as to their continuous adjustments due to the constant search for a balance between the platform objectives and the shifting environmental conditions (such as changes in market trends).

The research allows us to observe the type of mediations that crowdfunding platforms can exert on music production, detecting continuity and discontinuity with traditional intermediaries in the sector, while at a more general level it enriches the understanding of both cultural crowdfunding and the ways web-platforms and -services can influence the cultural production they contribute to articulating.

Music crowdfunding and musicraiser

Most musicians who choose to undertake a crowdfunding campaign opt for the use of web-platforms specialized in offering crowdfunding services, especially those musicians that are less well-known and with fewer resources and who, therefore, represent the main market for such services. The reasons lie both in the convenience of using an existing tool designed ad hoc and in the expectation of reaching a wider audience and achieving greater visibility than would be possible through their own sites and social pages. Moreover, these platforms tend to promote particular representations of crowdfunding and its benefits for creators: it allows them to gain more "artistic freedom" (Sellaband) and "control on their own careers" (Sellaband and Pledge Music), "an equal opportunity to pursue a musical career" (Sellaband), "the opportunity to harness the power of the crowd" (Rocket Hub), to be "your own A&R and Marketing Manager" (Pledge Music), and to fund their ideas "without a middleman dictating the product and terms" (Kickstarter).¹

Since its launch in October 2012, MR has been the reference platform for musical crowdfunding in Italy. The popularity and reputation of the co-founder Giovanni Gulino, front man of the renowned independent band Marta sui Tubi, favored the visibility of the enterprise on the media and its credibility with musicians. After just 2 years, its relevance was attested by the numbers: almost a quarter of the albums produced in Italy in 2014 had been financed through MR (Rusconi, 2015).

Like almost 90% of the crowdfunding platforms dedicated to cultural projects, MR only hosts reward-based campaigns adopting the "all-or-nothing" mechanism² (De Voldere and Zeqo, 2017; Röthler and Wenzlaff, 2011). The revenue model consists in retaining a percentage of the funds from campaigns that reach or exceed their goal, another feature in common with most cultural crowdfunding platforms. MR retains 10% for itself, which with the addition of taxes and transaction costs brings the overall fee to

around 15% (Rusconi, 2015). In addition to the technological infrastructure for presenting the campaign and collecting the funds, MR has enriched its offer with additional services.

First of all, musicians are assisted by a campaign manager in the planning and management of the campaign. Second, the platform contributes in various ways to promoting the campaigns, while through some partnerships it offers its customers discounts for CD printing and merchandising. Finally, for those who have successfully completed the crowdfunding campaign, the MR founders stated that they provide,

at the request of the artist, services that include press office, physical and digital distribution. In practice we will work as a “cold” record company, in the sense that we will not discuss the artistic choices of the artist but we will be ready to publish him if he has reached its funding goal. (Izzo, 2012)

In this case musicians keep 90% of their royalties.

The mission of MR, in the words of its founders, is to “promote co-production supported by fans” (Rusconi, 2015), an alternative way “to make oneself known” compared to relying on traditional labels, considered in crisis and little attentive to quality (FQ, 2015; Raiola, 2014). At the same time the founders have repeatedly stated that the alternative character of crowdfunding does not imply opposition to the traditional music system, since not only can the service be used by record labels but—more importantly—they consider it a success when musicians who reach their goal on MR succeed in establishing production or distribution agreements with traditional labels, including majors. In this way, and on other occasions too, they highlight the positioning and the privileged targets of MR, that is, its appropriateness as an alternative route for the launch of the careers of independent and little-known musicians, to be possibly developed within more conventional routes.

Another aspect characterizing the discourse on crowdfunding through which the founders of MR promote their service consists in the constant referring to *meritocracy*; thanks to crowdfunding the products deemed most deserving by music fans are finally realized:

It is a completely meritocratic tool and we wanted it! (Raiola, 2014) It gives the public the opportunity to decide which artists should go on. It seemed to us a beautiful and meritocratic thing, which somehow bypassed the traditional process. (Ciccotti, 2015)

At the same time, the founders repeat in many interviews that the quality of the project is not sufficient to achieve public appreciation: the ability to communicate is at least as important. The concept of merit appears to be closely connected to the ability to communicate effectively with the means available:

It’s not enough to be good musicians, to make a good crowdfunding campaign you also need to be good at communicating ideas and emotions (Raiola, 2014). It all depends on how you communicate your project to the fans. It’s like a means of locomotion, it takes you to your destination or not, it only depends on your ability to drive it. (Rusconi, 2015)

Musicraiser history and functioning

Two forms of gatekeeping

One of the main research perspectives on the production of culture is concerned both with the criteria and processes through which organizations mediating the relationship between creators and public select the excess of creative inputs available, and with the factors affecting these processes (Hirsch, 1972). The attention to digital platforms in terms of organizations mediating cultural production has produced research focused on an analogous interest in various forms of gatekeeping and content curation as part of the platformization of cultural production, particularly in the music field (Bonini and Gandini, 2019; Morris and Powers, 2015). Gatekeeping can be defined as the application of selective criteria in both the admission and active search for content (Janssen and Verboord, 2015). Both processes are integral to the way MR operates.

First, MR does not automatically accept all the projects proposed by musicians interested in undertaking a crowdfunding campaign. In various interviews, the founders Gulino and Varuni underlined the relevance of this initial selection, motivated by the desire to gather projects that “have the basics to evolve” (OndaRock, 2013), coming from musicians with “a certain credibility and not entirely beginners” (Raiola, 2014). Their idea was that “arriving on the site should be a goal and a springboard” (OndaRock, 2013). In 2015, Gulino stated that “we publish one project in four” (Rusconi, 2015), while a campaign manager confirmed to us that in the first years of the platform’s activity the selection was “very very rigid,” aimed at favoring those who had clear ideas, an already formed fan-base and—above all—excellent communication skills (Interviewed 1, campaign manager).

Starting from the second-half of 2016, coinciding—according to the interviewees—with a first drop in demand, MR has also begun to carry out a systematic *scouting activity*, until then sporadic and marginal, employing figures specifically dedicated to it and hugely extending its network of external collaborators. Internal scouts are employed full-time at the MR headquarters with a fixed salary, while external scouts are collaborators scattered throughout Italy who autonomously choose how much time to devote to scouting and only earn percentages on the crowdfunding campaigns they help to activate. The scouts’ tasks consist in *identifying* musicians considered suitable and interesting as potential customers and *convincing* them to undertake a crowdfunding campaign on MR. Scouts are trained to carry out both activities according to precise criteria, spelled out also in a guideline document. In the words of many interviewees, both scouts and campaign managers, scouting is explicitly defined in terms of a commercial activity, aimed at selling the service to potential customers rather than discovering new talent:³

Actually, I started with Musicraiser as a salesman, who was called talent scout there. [...] Scouting is a job for sales force. (Interviewed 2, campaign manager)

Talent scout maybe it’s a very big term for what was done... she/he was a person who proposes something, a business promoter. (Interviewed 16, external scout)

There was a strong activity on the commercial side, there were colleagues scouting via social networks to get in touch with potential musicians, to propose and present Musicraiser. (Interviewed 8, social media manager)

In this regard, the scouts' guidelines do not provide only the criteria to be adopted to evaluate and select musicians but also the strategies to convince them to use the service and the answers to their more frequent doubts and perplexities.

Our interviews with scouts and the guidelines—as well as the interviews with social media managers, regarding the target of MR communication—have made it possible to outline the ideal profile sought: (1) independent band or musician without label, (2) not absolute beginner but supported by an already acquired fan-base, and (3) good at interacting with fans, a skill measured by social media engagement. The latter is considered the most relevant parameter by all the scouts and campaign managers interviewed, while the guidelines warn that “the artist's communication skills are the most important thing in crowdfunding, more than the artistic value and the music proposal.”

Once the musicians reputed to be ideal clients have been identified, more experienced internal scouts contact them directly to promote the service, while the external scouts and the less experienced internal scouts must first deal with a campaign manager performing the function of scout coordinator. It is not infrequent that some of the proposed profiles, in particular from external scouts, are rejected by the campaign manager and, therefore, not contacted at all. The reasons for such discrepancies between the evaluations of the campaign managers and those of the scouts lie in the aforementioned criteria: sometimes, the latter propose musicians under contract with important labels or consider only the extensiveness of the fan-base and not the actual engagement, or they have not recognized a fake engagement resulting from the purchase of likes. Moreover, more than one campaign manager has stressed the tendency of many scouts—especially external ones—to try to attract as many musicians as possible, sometimes not discriminating enough. This can happen for two reasons. First, scouts, both internal and external, are rewarded with 3% of the funds raised by the musicians they brought to the platform whose campaigns reach or exceed the goal; while for the internal scouts this is an additional income that integrates their salary, for the external ones it is the only remuneration for their scouting activity. Second, scouts have to deal with the high percentage of both musicians not interested in crowdfunding and dropouts (people who register on the platform but do not get to launch the campaign). Therefore, some external scouts tend to be less selective, in order to reach an acceptable number of published campaigns.

The platform has employed as scouts mostly people active at various levels in different areas of the music field: record producers, sound engineers, DJs, music critics, bloggers, social media managers, musicians who had previously carried out successful campaigns on MR but also new graduates, and young enthusiasts with knowledge of the sector. This means that the 3% economic incentive, designed to encourage scouts to search for projects with high potential, can become a factor influencing the chances of success of the campaigns: on the one hand, earning a percentage on successful campaigns can incentivize scouts to engage also in their promotion; on the other hand, different scouts occupy positions in the field characterized by a different capacity to push musicians. As an example, a scout who works as a journalist at a music magazine and

who has a good reputation and large following on his social pages is clearly in a better position to effectively promote the campaigns from which to make a (small) profit if successful, compared to the young music lover for whom scouting at MR is the first work experience.

Finally, there are two other aspects that scouts are expected to consider and that can change the assessment according to which musicians are worth being contacted: the number of members of a band and the musical genre. The relevance of the former is quite obvious: the campaign managers believe that a band with several musicians can count on more extensive social ties to be mobilized for funding. For example, this means that if a single musician and a big band have an analogous (small) fan-base and (low) engagement on social media, the latter still has more chances of arousing the interest of the platform:

There were also other types of mistakes [made by scouts]: bands that were not contacted because they had little engagement but that would have been perfect for crowdfunding. For example, the classic folk group, with twenty-six elements, from Frosinone: it was perfect to make a campaign, even if it had a ridiculous engagement. (Interviewed 6, internal scout and scout coordinator)

Regarding the second aspect, although MR accepts projects of any musical genre, some of these are associated with audiences with greater economic resources or greater propensity to support musicians. The two most recurrent examples in respondents' reports are classical music and heavy metal:

Particular genres were sought more, I'll give you an example: metal, it's a genre that goes a lot, because they have a solid fan base, actually also because metal groups are less than before, fan-bases are strong and ready to help bands. A newly born indie group maybe doesn't have the same strength. (Interviewed 20, internal scout)

Trick or Treat made a campaign, a band that is not enormously famous but they are very strong in the metal field, and we know that metal audience is very inclined to buy CDs and to spend, so obviously we go for a lot on that campaign [. . .]. If a metal band arrives [on the platform] we know that it tends to have a certain type of audience, who is used to spending and that has a certain propensity to support the artist. (Interviewed 3, campaign manager)

In the next paragraphs, we will see how these criteria also influence the setting up of funding goals and the effort that the campaign managers put into different campaigns, two factors that in turn can affect the funding performances.

Assessing the potential

Once approved, crowdfunding requests and scouted projects are entrusted to the care of a campaign manager, who assists the musician/band both in the initial planning of the campaign and after its launch. In particular, the activity of the campaign manager focuses on the following five aspects: (1) the evaluation of the project potential, in order to suggest an achievable goal; (2) the suggestion of the rewards to be associated with different funding quotas; (3) the indications concerning how to present the project to the audience through the platform; (4) the evaluation and the suggestions concerning the

pre- and post-launch communications planned by the musician; and (5) the post-launch adjustments in the campaign communication if needed. The work of the campaign manager also includes explaining crowdfunding to the less experienced who autonomously register on the platform, motivating those who are uncertain in the phases prior to the launch of the campaign, supporting those who during the campaign decrease their commitment to communication or become demoralized if things are not going well.

First of all, campaign managers draw up an estimate of how much the musician/band can collect, considering on the one hand the pool of potential financiers, represented by the strong and weak ties of the musicians and the pre-existing fan-base, on the other hand the average funding per person, based on previous campaigns. Following these assessments, a lower goal is established, to further increase the chances of succeeding, sometimes inducing musicians to recalibrate their expectations. Of course, the evaluation of the project potential also takes into account the aspects mentioned earlier, such as social media engagement, number of members of a band, and musical genre. The evaluation of the potential of a campaign and the consequent setting of the objective can affect its results: if, on the one hand, it is true that a low goal does not preclude the possibility of exceeding it, since the campaigns reaching their goal before the deadline can still continue until the end of the pre-established period, on the other hand, some studies argue that the premature achievement of the objective can discourage the contribution of further potential financiers (Burtch et al., 2013). Furthermore, the evaluation of the campaign potential serves not only to establish a credible goal but also to estimate the potential profitability of the various published projects for the platform.

We will see how this estimate influences the commitment of the campaign managers to different campaigns and, therefore, their results, at least if we believe that the former can help to improve the latter.

Cultivating marketing attitude and skills

All respondents attach great importance to the different rewards that the creator establishes in exchange for different contributions. Although everyone acknowledges that most of the funders of little-known musicians are relatives, friends, and fans, the rewards—especially those consisting of objects with a clearly quantifiable economic value—are considered crucial to incentivize financing on the part of weak and latent ties. At the same time, all the campaign managers have remarked that one of the greatest difficulties, during the planning of the campaign, consists in making musicians understand the appropriate criteria for the choice of the rewards and for their association with a particular funding share, that is, for their “pricing”. For this reason, the musicians’ guidelines include a very extensive and detailed part concerning the formulation and pricing of the rewards, with lots of recommended funding shares, referred to as “rewards prices.” Campaign managers and guidelines also suggest to design the rewards taking into account their communicative function, in order to make them part of a strategic storytelling.

The communication of the campaign does not end with its presentation on the platform, for which campaign managers and guidelines offer standard indications, but commit creators for the whole duration of the campaign (maximum 2 months). As widely

attested by the literature on crowdfunding (D'Amato, 2011; Thorley, 2012), and confirmed by the interviewees, this work is the hardest for musicians, as almost all the promotional activity falls on them. Again, the campaign managers and the guidelines offer detailed indications on the techniques of engagement to be used, the type of contents to be published and the most appropriate ways and moments in which to do it.

Pushing those who deserve it

A few months after the MR launch, Gulino explained that

Our service includes online and off-line promotions that allow a crowdfunding campaign to also become an excellent opportunity to foster buzz and acquire immediate visibility, especially on the web but also in print media. [...] In addition, Musicraiser promotes the projects it considers most interesting or most original at its own expense. (Don Pizzica, 2013)

Our interviews confirmed that promotional boost follows a discriminatory logic, based on campaign performances in the period following their launch. Starting from January 2017, shortly after the drop in demand and the consequent development of the scouting system aimed at countering it, this mechanism was more articulated and formalized in the crowdfunding program called “Accelerator.” This program introduced a gamification framework that configures certain actions aimed at supporting the campaigns—such as promotion on the platform home page, social media, newsletter, and blog, or the possibility of playing live at events organized by MR—as prizes reserved for the most deserving, that is, as promotions activated according to the number of raisers progressively reached. The final prize, initially corresponding to 200 raisers, consisted in the proposal of a contract by Believe Digital, partner of the initiative, for physical and digital promotion and distribution.

The program was presented as “a new absolutely meritocratic opportunity for the development of an artist’s career” (Cinzia, 2017), intended to “create a launching pad for musicians who really deserve success regardless of the type of music they propose. Only quality matters” (Distopic, 2017). In this context, merit—and quality—are then measured by the results of the campaigns, or rather by the ability to mobilize increasing numbers of people willing to back the realization of the project proposed by the musicians.

Here too, other criteria can carry weight in the choice of the campaigns to be awarded. In particular, the research revealed some factors that could influence the choice of groups to be played live in the events organized by MR. Starting from the second-half of 2016, the service implemented two formats: the first consisted in giving the creators of the most successful concluded campaigns the opportunity to open the concert of well-known musicians, at renowned festivals and clubs; the second—named Musicraiser Unplugged—consisted of an acoustic half-hour showcase followed by an interview, broadcasted live on Facebook, taking place twice a month and aimed at rewarding the campaigns that were going best among those still open. However, the choice of who to let play sometimes took into account also the musical genre: in the first case, to propose musicians congruent with the headliner or with the club or festival in which they were hosted; in the

second, to ensure a harmonious combination between the MR musicians playing on the same evening, so as to avoid that “the evening was a little confused, strange” (Interviewed 1, campaign manager). Moreover, especially in the second case, the geographical distance between the place where the musicians lived and the cities of Rome and Milan, where the showcases were held, conditioned the possibility of taking advantage of the offer:

Since they were promotional dates and there wasn't a budget for the band that was going to play but only hospitality, the geographical distance was also considered. I cannot send a group from Sicily to Rome, without any expenses refund [...] the choice is up to the band, but it's quite unlikely that a Sicilian group will spend six hundred euros for a thirty minutes show, even if broadcasted live on Facebook. (Interviewed 5, event manager)

The choice of linking the Accelerator prizes to the number of raisers, and in the case of the final prize even to a minimum objective of raised funds,⁴ seems to have depended on the willingness to test the market potential of a musician/band, therefore, producing crucial information to decide on a possible investment on the promotion and distribution of the project on the part of a record label:

If you have made a certain number of raisers you have automatically sold a certain number of CDs, because Accelerator was reserved for campaigns with sales of record products. There was the obligation to insert the physical copy of the disc in all the rewards, so it worked like a kind of pre-order. Therefore, I think that was the basic logic: if you sold a certain quantity it means that you have a certain potential for a record proposal, since you present yourself to the label with already 200-250 copies sold. (Interviewed 3, campaign manager)

After just 10 months, MR introduced a new version of Accelerator, in which the last prize, the non-binding proposal of a recording contract, was made directly by MR. Therefore, the service proposed itself as a phonographic label for the creators of the most successful campaigns. The change was presented—once again—insisting on the meritocratic nature of such mechanism:

Musicraiser Accelerator is an alternative to self-production or to the constant knocking on the doors of record companies, a meritocratic way to involve the public and lead it into a collective experience of success (Cantire, 2017). To reach the end of the Accelerator journey, talent and professionalism are required, as well as a lot of effort. We are able to measure all this with the number of fans that the artist manages to involve during his campaign, rewarding him with ad-hoc services that we have thought of and whose effectiveness we have tested in all these years of activity. (*Musicoff*, 2017)

Toward the end of 2018, the program undergoes a further change, becoming “Futurissima Speed Up,” reserved for musicians and bands below 30 years. Futurissima is a new integrated management agency, created as part of the Music Innovation Hub with which MR collaborates. It explicitly uses the crowdfunding platform as a scouting tool, offering a distribution contract and press office to musicians whose campaigns reach the last step of 150 raisers.

Campaign management as portfolio management

According to the interviewees, scouting worked well especially during the first year, until the early months of 2018, when there was a new drop in demand, interpreted in terms of market saturation. The platform responded to this event in two related ways. First of all, by broadening its target:

We tried to aim at different targets, because we had reached a point where we were going to stir a little bit within the same target, there were always very similar campaigns: a lot of folk music, alternative rock, and the age was always more or less the same, so we wanted a little change and tried to expand to other targets, even trying to change the whole communication a bit [. . .]. Let's say the mood of the moment was to be open to different target and genres, different age, that is to change a bit the communication. (Interviewed 10, content manager)

The second move consisted in loosening the inbound selection, thanks to a different organization of the work of campaign managers. MR has always devoted a greater amount of time and attention to the relatively few campaigns of established musicians, capable of generating more revenue and publicity for the service:

Then there were the big projects, those from artists who already had a name, a credibility, a history, on whom obviously you worked differently, deeper, working more closely with them, that's normal. Like everything, if you get the customer who can make a 20,000 euro campaign, and with that one customer you have a 10% fee, it means you can get 2,000 euros, while when you have an artist aiming to collect 1,000 euros the proportion changes, and so also the attention and the effort that you can put in it, and this is something that must be clear to everyone from the beginning. (Interviewed 2, campaign manager)

When you get an artist, who is already well established and has an extra potential, special attention is given to him. (Interviewed 3, campaign manager)

For the communication of MR we mostly used the top artists using the platform. Having important musicians is the best way to promote the service. (Interviewed 8, social media manager)

However, when the drop in demand led to loosening the inbound filter, a differentiated way to manage *all* projects was devised, aimed at allocating resources on the basis of the estimated profitability of the projects, that is of the expectations of return on investment, a mechanism that evokes the portfolio management adopted by large traditional labels (Negus, 1999):

The way of working has changed a bit, it has become a bit more streamlined, we leave more autonomy to creators to build their own campaign and then, at a second level, we review and fix. Let's say that the filter has been loosened. [Question] What was the reason for this change, this loosening? [Answer] the work of the campaign manager obviously requires a lot of time, above all consultancy, to make people understand how the platform works, what is the best way to set up the campaign . . . to dedicate the same number of hours to a campaign that can do a thousand euros and to a campaign that can make ten thousand is clearly a messy management model, because it means that you spend a lot of time on campaigns that maybe make you gain a tenth. The loosening is because we have tried to streamline the whole consultancy process for the campaign . . . at that point, being able to

afford to use fewer hours for each campaign, we could also accommodate a greater number of campaigns [. . .] there is the basic service that is always done, then when you find a campaign that actually has many chances to raise ten thousand euros instead of a thousand you put more work in it, because, very trivially, there is a potential revenue higher than the standard. (Interviewed 3, campaign manager)

The same campaign manager emphasizes that this change has been dictated and facilitated also by a different market trend:

Then the market changed a bit, in recent years we have seen more and more campaigns that were small, both in terms of potential and goal; clearly less time is needed for them, so you go to increase a little the inbound numbers. (Interviewed 3, campaign manager)

Concluding remarks

Crowdfunding involves the communication of a project and the fundraising for its production. While the platforms enabling this practice are often represented and perceived as tools that only connect demand and supply, their organizational and entrepreneurial nature, as well as their culture and their constant search for sustainable business models within highly dynamic environments, affect the ways they mediate the crowdfunding process, possibly influencing the chance and extent of the funding of different campaigns and, therefore, the cultural production based on crowdfunding.

In the case of MR, the founders' intent to promote a fair and meritocratic mechanism to support musicians—like they are—takes on specific forms conditioned by the actual difficulty in balancing the company's sustainability and ethics. On the one hand, they offer a service committed to helping musicians in achieving their goals and which is paid only if this happens; on the other hand, they try to balance efforts and returns by adopting specific criteria and procedures for the selection, evaluation, and classification of projects, which influence the kind of boost granted to different projects and tend to favor those deemed to have the greatest chance of success.

By explicitly selecting published projects, MR positions itself as guarantor of the seriousness and credibility of the chosen musicians and their proposals. In this regard, previous research, concerning musicians who carry out campaigns on MR, highlighted the fact that some of them consider the selection and publication of their project on the site as an important form of accreditation, useful to stand out from the crowd of proposals generated by widespread self-production (Cassella and D'Amato, 2014). The criteria and procedures for evaluating projects and promoting campaigns tend to favor those musicians who seem to have greater social capital and who show a greater ability to mobilize it.⁵ Such evaluations consider not only the extensiveness of their existing fan-base and social ties and their skills in communication, measured through indexes of engagement on social media, but also the type of musical scene and genre in which the musician is contextualized. In this way, crowdfunding appears not only as a way to finance the content through which the musicians present themselves to the market, but also as a test to verify their effective ability to promote themselves and to aggregate a certain number of people willing to pay for their projects, therefore, useful in assessing

their potential in view of possible investments by other subjects. Any positive results to this “test” can offer creators the opportunity to reach conventional agreements with traditional intermediaries of music production and distribution. From this perspective, the platform seems to fulfill a typical function of independent labels within a phonographic system that connects their propensity for innovation (discover and launch new talents) with the innovation capacity of larger labels (promote them more effectively to a wider market). As we saw in the second paragraph, since the beginning, MR has positioned itself ambiguously with respect to the traditional record industry: on the one hand, a more meritocratic “alternative,” which is a typical value proposition of musical crowdfunding since the days of Sellaband; on the other hand, a service available for and interested in integrating with that system, promoting its use by record labels and suggesting that succeeding on MR would facilitate musicians to further evolve their career attracting traditional labels. However, this is not a unique position of MR: in 2016, the head of Kickstarter Music stated that she intended to overturn the perception that Kickstarter was part of a disruptive world, especially with regard to labels, and to find ways to collaborate with music companies, rather than stand as an alternative to them (Gehring, 2018). However, while Kickstarter seems to have modeled itself after social media (Davidson, 2019), the path taken by MR has been characterized by similarities to the organizational and operational methods of the labels. Considering DiMaggio and Powell’s observations on isomorphism (1983), this disposition could be attributed to the following two factors: first, an implicit mode of legitimization of the crowdfunding service through adaptation to an environment in which labels—despite many comments—have not lost their relevance, either practical, as a means for the development of a musical career, or symbolic, since many musicians still consider it important to obtain the support of a label (Hesmondhalgh and Meier, 2018; Marshall, 2012); second, the MR founders’ background in the professional culture of the independent record industry.

The alternative character of crowdfunding, therefore, seems to lie simply in constituting a different option for funding among others, one which seems to favor some people more than others. The discourse and the *modus operandi* of MR clearly represent the communication ability, strategically deployed and regarding, in particular, the use of social media, as the main quality on which the success of the subjects who use crowdfunding depends. Through the advice about the qualities and work required to succeed, the criteria guiding the scouting activity, the evaluation and classification of projects, and the suggestions for the planning of the campaign, the platform appears to select and train specific subjectivities, considered the most suitable to maximize the opportunities offered by crowdfunding. The analysis of the actual functioning of MR, therefore, provides an original contribution that enrich and deepen the understanding of the concrete ways in which common declinations of crowdfunding are conducive to the production of subjectivities characterized by the neoliberal ethos of self-management and self-entrepreneurship (Bannerman, 2013; Booth, 2015; Gehring, 2018), aligning crowdfunding platforms and practices with the ecosystem of social media and web services that both promote self-marketing and self-branding attitudes (Klein et al., 2017; Marwick, 2013) and encourage people to consider social relationships as social capital, whose cultivation should be an integral part of the artistic work and whose mobilization is deemed crucial to develop a career. This relational labor (Baym, 2015),⁶ especially

insofar as it is mediated by digital platforms, requires a lot of effort and time, resources to invest, differentiated skills to be trained, even an adequate personality (D'Amato, 2019; Davidson, 2019).

These considerations bring us to the last point, concerning the rhetoric about democratization—and meritocracy—associated with crowdfunding. In contrast with the discourses asserting the ability of the platforms to level the playing field, different opportunities to benefit from the wealth of networks still seem dependent on the unequal distribution of different kinds of resources in the social field, especially social capital, which research attests as a key factor for succeeding in crowdfunding (Borst et al., 2018; D'Amato, 2016; D'Amato and Miconi, 2012; Zheng et al., 2014) and that, in turn, it could eventually depend on one's position in the social field and on the amounts of economic and cultural capital possessed by different subjects (Bourdieu, 1986).

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Notes

1. Those are just a few examples, one of which (about Kickstarter) quoted from Davidson (2019: 124), while the others are quoted from old web pages—not online anymore—of the mentioned websites. They were collected between 2010 and 2012 for a previous research. (More on the crowdfunding platforms rhetoric on D'Amato, 2011, 2014, 2017; Gehring and Wittkower, 2015.)
2. In “all-or-nothing” campaigns, those who launch a campaign actually receive the funds raised only if they have reached or exceeded the pre-established goal within the set deadline. On the contrary, in “all-you-can-get” campaigns, the applicants can access the amount collected regardless of the achievement of the initial goal.
3. As far as we know, MR is the only cultural crowdfunding platform that carries out this kind of practice, proactively searching for clients. Anyway, this activity is hidden from the public, not mentioned on the website pages and in public interviews: we initially came to know about it during some previous research, consisting in interviews with musicians using MR, therefore, we cannot exclude that other platforms do the same without publicizing it and we cannot know for certain whether this practice is unique to MR or more conventional than is generally thought.
4. The reports from interviewees attest that MR had established both a minimum figure for the single pledges, and a minimum of 4000 euros or 5000 euros as a requirement for the final prize (in addition to the total number of raisers). Both rules aimed to avoid having campaigns with a very high number of raisers that invest very little and—consequently—an excessively low overall financing, even for successful campaigns.
5. Here, social capital is understood as an embodied productive investment in relationships based on trust, norms, shared values, and affection that can lead to benefits for those who made the investment, therefore, constituting a resource of people to achieve goals they could not achieve by themselves or could only achieve with great difficulty (Bianco, 1996; Field, 2008).

6. Baym's (2015) definition of "relational work" in terms of continuous and personal interactions with the public, in view not of immediate compensation but as an investment aimed at building and maintaining social relationships that will support a career and will allow people to earn money (pp. 14–16), seems to describe an important part of the process of building social capital as defined in Note 5.

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