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THIS IS HOW WE DO IT – A QUALITATIVE ASSESSMENT OF SUBSCRIPTION-BASED CROWDFUNDING CAMPAIGN MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Research Paper

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Abstract

Subscription-based crowdfunding is an emerging type of crowdfunding that is characterized by enabling regular payments from supporters to creators and a creator-centric rather than one-time project focus. To create a successful subscription-based crowdfunding outcome creators can utilize managerial levers e.g., information control and relational labor. However, thus far, little is known about how creators employ the managerial levers at their disposal and the strategic considerations behind their use. To holistically capture the utilized managerial levers and strategic considerations, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 22 creators on the popular subscription-based crowdfunding platform Patreon. Our findings highlight four key managerial levers of subscription-based crowdfunding creators: information control strategies, supporter interaction strategies, supporter acquisition strategies, and supporter retention strategies. We contribute to IS literature by enabling further exploration of creators' thought processes in managing their subscription-based crowdfunding campaigns and offer practical advice to practitioners (e.g., creators and crowdfunding platforms).

Keywords: Subscription-based crowdfunding, Campaign management strategies, Customer retention.

1 Introduction

Subscription-based crowdfunding is an emerging type of crowdfunding which enables creators to inquire for continuous support (e.g., on a monthly basis) from their followers/supporters (Crosby and McKenzie, 2021; Lin et al., 2022)[1]. It is further characterized by an increased focus on the campaign creator, rather than a one-time project (Bonifacio et al., 2021; Lin et al., 2022; Lingnau, 2022; Regner, 2020). While subscription-based crowdfunding platforms act as an intermediary to enable payment processing and presenting one's crowdfunding campaign, the actual promotion of the campaign is decoupled from the crowdfunding platform and primarily takes place on social media platforms (e.g., YouTube, Twitter, Facebook) (Hair et al., 2022; Lingnau, 2022). Further, the success of a subscription-based crowdfunding campaign is linked to social media integration (Hong et al., 2018; Jöntgen, 2022). Vice versa subscription-based crowdfunding adoption was shown to have a positive effect on channel performance on YouTube (Fan-Osuala, 2019). Subscription-based crowdfunding offers creators a predictable income stream independent of ad- and algorithmic dependency and without the need to cater

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[1] While there exist various naming schemes for crowdfunding stakeholders, we will refer to the funding-seeking party as "creator" and the funding-providing party as "supporter" throughout this article.

to popular content preferences (Lin et al., 2022; Lingnau, 2022; Regner, 2020; Sun and Zhu, 2013). During the so-called "adpocalypse" on the social media platform YouTube, the downsides of this dependency became especially apparent, as content got demonetized due to algorithmic classification and adjustments in YouTube's policies (Kumar, 2019; Lingnau, 2022). The need for subscription-based crowdfunding becomes especially evident in times of crisis, for example during the Covid-19 pandemic popular subscription-based crowdfunding platforms experienced accelerated growth of creators (Lingnau, 2022; Martinez Dy and Jayawarna, 2020; Perez, 2020). Nowadays, there are multiple large-scale and financially successful subscription-based crowdfunding platforms including Patreon (over 250,000 creators and 8 million users (Patreon, 2022)) and OnlyFans (2 million creators and 130 million users (Browne, 2021)). Patreon is a platform where creators from various categories can host their subscription-based crowdfunding campaigns (Patreon, 2022).

While subscription-based crowdfunding is a rather new phenomenon, notable contributions to research have been made: popular streams of research include quantitative analysis of subscription-based crowdfunding campaign success (e.g., Crosby and McKenzie, 2021; Jöntgen, 2022; Lin et al., 2022; Mukherjee et al., 2021; Regner, 2020), examining subscription-based crowdfunding platform dynamics (e.g., Lingnau 2022, Swords 2018) and qualitative analysis of relational labor (e.g., Bonifacio et al., 2021; Hair, 2021; Hair et al., 2022). To date, little is known about how creators employ the managerial levers at their disposal and the strategic considerations behind their use. Lin et al. (2022) and Crosby and McKenzie (2021) explore the information control strategies present in subscription-based crowdfunding and their effects on campaign success. Hair (2021) and Bonifacio et al. (2021) examine the relational labor of creators towards their supporters and what type of relationships emerge as a result of it. We built upon these findings and theories to holistically capture the known and unknown managerial levers in subscription-based crowdfunding campaigns. Our research specifically focuses on examining the types of managerial levers creators have at their disposal in order to succeed in their subscription-based crowdfunding endeavors. We further address the strategic considerations of creators in the way they present their campaigns, interact with their supporters, and promote their campaigns.

Gaining an understanding of these managerial levers, their use and the strategic considerations of creators is crucial to IS research and practitioners (e.g., creators or crowdfunding platforms). Our research offers IS scholars a framework in which creators' actions can be assessed. Further, we extend the body of knowledge of IS research by accounting for creators' individual-level strategic choices and considerations for subscription-based crowdfunding success. For creators our findings can act as a blueprint for their own crowdfunding campaigns. Similarly, crowdfunding platforms may benefit from our findings by facilitating better accommodating for creators' managerial levers and strategic considerations in the platform design (e.g., by offering improved communication tools).

We hereby address the following research question:

RQ: What are the managerial levers that creators leverage in subscription-based crowdfunding campaigns in order to achieve successful crowdfunding outcomes and how are they utilized?

In order to capture the managerial levers and strategic considerations we conducted semi-structured interviews with 22 creators on the popular subscription-based crowdfunding platform Patreon. We then utilized a three-stage coding approach of open, axial, and selective coding, following Strauss and Corbin (1998). This approach is well-established and commonly used in IS literature (e.g., Berente et al., 2011; Seidel and Recker, 2013). Key findings include the observed four key managerial levers of subscription-based crowdfunding creators (information control strategies, supporter interaction strategies, supporter acquisition strategies, and supporter retention strategies) and the strategic considerations in using them. After this introduction, we present the related research upon which we build during our coding process. In Section 3, we explain the utilized coding process and give insights into our data set. We then present the results of our coding process in Section 4. In Section 5, we discuss and summarize our findings, present our theoretical and practical contributions, and outline the limitations of our study.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Subscription-based crowdfunding

Subscription-based crowdfunding follows the general premise of crowdfunding, whereas a fund-seeking party casts an open call towards a group of other entities and thereby requesting monetary contributions toward a commercial or social goal (Paschen, 2017). Gaining access to a continuous income stream offers financial predictability and stability to the creators and reflects one of the key benefits of subscription-based crowdfunding (Hair et al., 2022). Usually, financial support is exchanged for digital or physical rewards (Lingnau, 2022). Further, Creators of niche content can also generate financial income without having a large following (Bonifacio et al., 2021).

Another key characteristic of subscription-based crowdfunding is its creator-centric funding approach (Bonifacio et al., 2021; Lin et al., 2022; Lingnau, 2022; Regner, 2020). This dynamic demonstrates the increased importance of creators forming relationships with their fans in subscription-based crowdfunding (Lin et al., 2022). Extant literature on subscription-based crowdfunding explores multiple avenues in which creators are able to influence the subscription-based crowdfunding outcome. Notably, Lin et al. (2022) and Crosby and McKenzie (2021) explored how campaigns' use of information control mechanisms – namely hiding campaign earnings and private postings – affect the success of the campaign. Patreon offers creators the ability to display or hide the current monthly earnings of the campaign, further creators are empowered to post their content privately or publicly (Lin et al., 2022). Lin et al. (2022) observe that hiding campaigns earnings, as well as private postings, increase the number of supporters and fan engagement. Similarly, Crosby and McKenzie (2021) find that campaigns with hidden earnings had higher numbers of supporters. Another possibility for creators to influence their subscription-based crowdfunding outcome lies in the interaction and communication with their supporters. Research of Hair (2021) and Bonifacio et al. (2021) explore the relational labor of creators directed at their supporters (i.e. purposefully communicating with fans in order to build a relationship and acquire financial support). Specifically, Bonifacio et al. (2021) address the different relationship types emerging from creator-supporter-interaction, as well as the positive and negative aspects of relational labor by utilizing the masspersonal communication model (O'Sullivan and Carr, 2018). Hair (2021) focuses on artists on Patreon and scrutinizes how artists' relational labor efforts are reflected in their campaign rewards. Our research examines interaction strategies in multiple campaign categories and thus follows Hair's (2021) call to research to further explore this phenomenon in different contexts. To understand the communication strategies creators employ to interact with their supporters and followers, we utilize the masspersonal communication model by O'Sullivan and Carr (2018) to classify the observed communication strategies.

2.2 Communication strategies

O'Sullivan and Carr's (2018) masspersonal communication model emerged as a response to novel digital media disrupting the traditionally dichotomous concepts of mass (e.g., television) vs. interpersonal communication (e.g., face-to-face communication). While interpersonal communication is personalized and takes place in private, mass communication remains impersonal and public (French and Bazarova, 2017). However, the masspersonal communication model (O'Sullivan and Carr, 2018) proposes a third classification to better reflect the characteristics introduced through novel digital media: masspersonal communication. Masspersonal communication combines personalized and public communication and offers a spectrum in which novel communication approaches are properly represented (O'Sullivan and Carr, 2018). Subscription-based crowdfunding creators utilize a plethora of communication approaches/channels to promote their campaigns and interact with their supporters and followers via social media or their subscription-based crowdfunding platform of choice (Hair et al., 2022; Lin et al., 2022; Lingnau, 2022). While Bonifacio et al. (2021) and Hair's (2021) findings offer important insights into creators' relational labor efforts and the emerging relationships between creators and supporters, our research focuses specifically on the managerial levers and strategic considerations of creators in order to achieve a successful crowdfunding outcome. We use the classification into

interpersonal, mass, and masspersonal communication proposed in the masspersonal communication model (O'Sullivan and Carr, 2018) in our qualitative examination of creators' managerial considerations to categorize the employed communication strategies. These communication strategies play a role in acquiring and retaining supporters (Bonifacio et al., 2021)

2.3 Supporter acquisition and retention

In order to achieve successful subscription-based crowdfunding outcomes creators aim to acquire and then retain their supporters (Lin et al., 2022). To acquire supporters, subscription-based crowdfunding creators have multiple mechanisms at their disposal. A common practice is to promote the campaign via various social media platforms (e.g., YouTube, Twitter, Facebook) (Hair et al., 2022; Lingnau, 2022). The promotion via social media can take different forms, for example, creators may share their content and reference their subscription-based crowdfunding campaign directly (mass communication), they may also engage in communicating with their followers in order to bond with them either as a public response to followers' comments (masspersonal communication) or on a private/direct message level (interpersonal communication) (Bonifacio et al., 2021; Hair et al., 2022; Lingnau, 2022). After leading potential supporters to the campaign (e.g., via social media or other promotional outlets), the offered content and rewards on the subscription-based crowdfunding campaign need to be appealing in order to acquire the supporter. For example, by using information control strategies (i.e., hiding earnings and posting privately) creators can improve the success of the campaign (Crosby and McKenzie, 2021; Lin et al., 2022). However, for creators to only focus on acquiring supporters is not sufficient in subscription-based crowdfunding, as supporters are able to cancel their subscription at any time (Regner, 2020). Rather, due to the continuous income stream and the ongoing relationship with the supporters, customer retention becomes an additional consideration in subscription-based crowdfunding campaigns. One important factor in forming a long-term creator-supporter relationship lies in the interaction and communication of the creator with the supporters (Bonifacio et al., 2021; Hair, 2021). Further, in order to achieve long-term success creators may utilize traditional customer retention strategies, e.g., by nurturing cross-buying behavior (Kumar et al., 2008; Kumar and Reinartz, 2016), offering discounts (Anderson and Simester, 2004), providing affective commitment and loyalty programs (Verhoef, 2003), utilizing pricing strategies (Bolton and Lemon, 1999), or offering participation in special interest groups and additional rewards (Bhattacharya, 1998; Kumar and Reinartz, 2016). We use these customer retention theories as a theoretical lens to examine subscription-based crowdfunding supporter retention. As we will show in the result section of this paper, creators utilize subscription-based crowdfunding platforms and social media platforms to enable these customer retention strategies for their campaigns.

3 Methodology

To explore how and which managerial levers creators utilize in their subscription-based crowdfunding campaigns in order to achieve successful crowdfunding outcomes, we conducted 22 semi-structured interviews with creators from the popular subscription-based crowdfunding platform Patreon (Patreon, 2022). We utilized an interview guide with a set of preplanned questions to capture the topic of interest (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). The interview guide questions encapsulated three key guiding themes which emerged from our research question:

- What are the managerial levers creators in subscription-based crowdfunding use in their campaigns?

- How are these managerial levers used in order to achieve a successful crowdfunding outcome?

- What are the strategic considerations of creators using different managerial levers in their campaign?

While the existence of some managerial levers in subscription-based crowdfunding is already established in the literature (e.g., information control (Crosby and McKenzie, 2021; Lin et al., 2022) and relational labor (Bonifacio et al., 2021; Hair, 2021)), we built upon those findings and aim to holistically capture the known and unknown managerial levers at hand. Further, we specifically focus on the strategic considerations of creators in their use of various managerial levers. The interview guide starts with general questions about the creator's subscription-based crowdfunding campaign, offering

an easy entry into the conversation (Knott et al., 2022). In the later parts of the interview, the questions target specific managerial levers based on the existing subscription-based crowdfunding and related literature (e.g., by questioning how creators interacted with their supporters). The interview guide was constructed by the two authors and then verified by two external experts familiar with the research field and methodology.

3.1 Data and participants

To generate a representative sample of Patreon creators, we utilized the third-party website Grapthreon (Graphtreon, 2022). Grapthreon crawls data from Patreon and presents an overview of creators' campaigns, their supporters, their earnings, the duration of the campaign, and the category of the campaign (e.g., Videos, Podcasts, Music). Patreon provides nine categories and one other option in which creators can classify the content of their campaign during the campaign creation process: Podcasts, Videos, Illustration & Animation, Writing & Journalism, Music, Games & Software, Communities, Photography, and Local Business (Patreon, 2022). Using Grapthreon, we were able to access an overview of all creators for each of the campaign categories. We restricted the sample to only include Patreon campaigns that had ten or more supporters at the time of the data collection to ensure that the observed campaign had at least a certain level of support. We then extracted a random sample of creators for each of the categories, leaving us with a sample of 342 campaigns. We cleaned the data set by excluding non-English and non-German campaigns to ensure that the involved researchers are able to understand the contents of the campaign. Further, we excluded campaigns for which we were unable to obtain any official contact information via the campaign, website, or social media channels. In total, we excluded 72 campaigns leaving us with a total sample of 270 campaigns.

Interview ID	Gender	Age	Campaign Category	Supporters	Earnings $USD/Month
P01	Male	47	Podcasts	35	129
P02	Male	38	Photography	32	152
P03	Female	38	Local Business	82	700
P04	Female	54	Videos	57	678
P05	Female	48	Local Business	75	213
P06	Male	27	Music	11	65
P07	Female	32	Photography	11	47
P08	Female	28	Photography	533	8379
P09	Male	31	Podcasts	21	208
P10	Female	32	Illustration & Animation	29	169
P11	Male	19	Illustration & Animation	55	160
P12	Non-binary	37	Illustration & Animation	24	397
P13	Male	46	Writing & Journalism	18	100
P14	Male	36	Videos	64	350 per Video
P15	Non-binary	31	Podcasts	23	180
P16	Female	62	Writing & Journalism	69	257
P17	Female	58	Games & Software	24	57
P18	Male	64	Photography	12	78
P19	Male	40	Music	12	143
P20	Male	38	Music	24	58
P21	Male	26	Games & Software	2764	8907
P22	Male	37	Games & Software	24	300

Table 1.   Interview participants.

We then messaged these 270 campaign creators across the nine content categories via e-mail or provided contact forms. Twenty-one of the 270 creators agreed to take part in our interview. Additionally, we contacted four creators during a large-scale in-person event, one of which agreed to take part in our interview. The twenty-two interviews took place between June and October 2022. The interviews took between 42 min 06 sec and 119 min 03 sec, with an average duration of 73 min 39 sec. Before the start of the interview, we collected demographic information of the interviewees. All interviews were conducted via video call by the same interviewer following a semi-structured interview guide. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and anonymized – the interviewees were informed about this procedure before the interview and agreed to it. Additionally, we utilized publicly available information from the creators' subscription-based crowdfunding campaigns to guide the questions of the interview and supplement the interview data. An overview of the 22 interviewees is provided in table 1.

3.2   Interview coding

We conducted a three-stage coding approach consisting of open, axial, and selective coding following guidelines of Strauss and Corbin (1998). This coding approach is well-established and commonly used in IS literature (e.g., Berente et al., 2011; Seidel and Recker, 2013). According to Strauss and Corbin (1998) this approach is both inductive and deductive, which offers us the benefit of not being too prejudiced in the initial coding process, while also drawing from existing theories during the refinement of our model. We utilized MAXQDA 2022 (VERBI, 2022) during the coding procedure. Our coding approach was conducted iteratively. First, we engaged in open coding by reading through each interview line-by-line, thereby extracting text snippets from the transcribed interviews, closely examining them, and identifying broad categories and higher-level concepts based on the observed differences and similarities (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Second, in the axial coding stage, we formed subcategories further examining the underlying relationships among categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) while relating to the existing literature on information control (Lin et al., 2022) and communication strategies in subscription-based crowdfunding (Bonifacio et al., 2021; Hair, 2021).
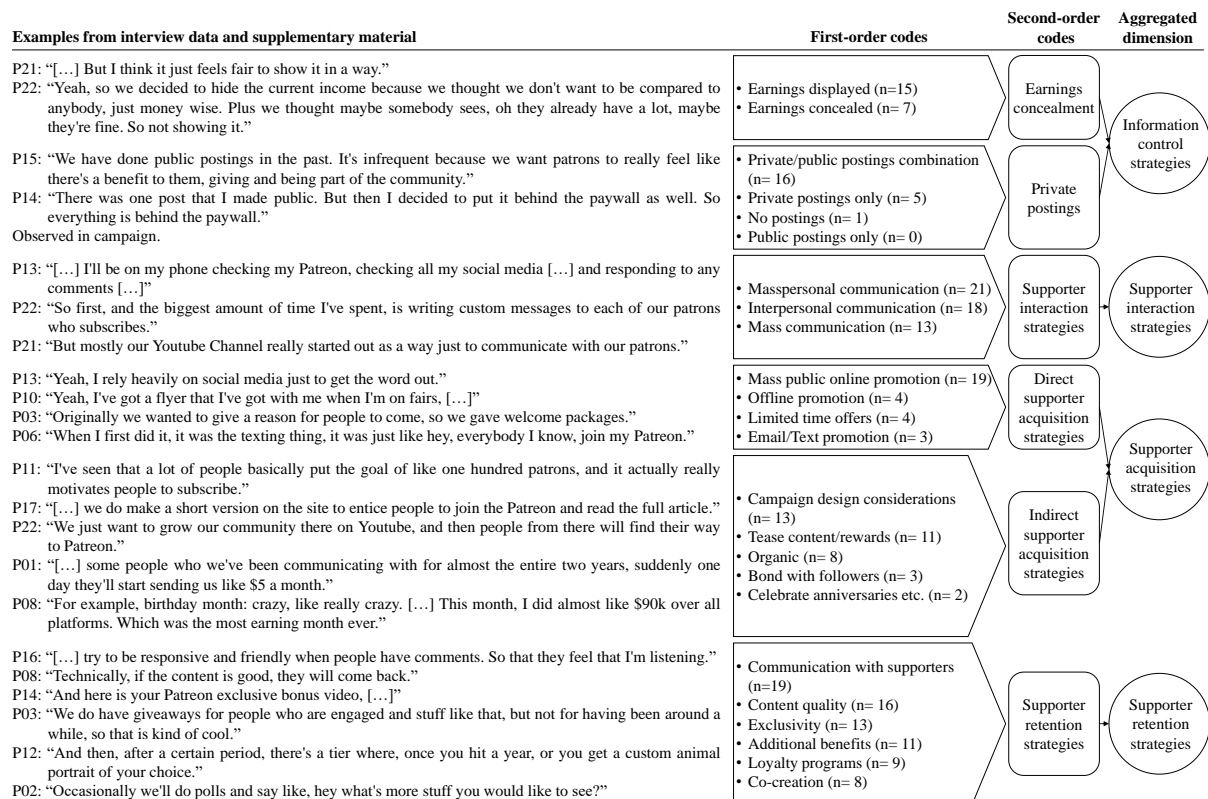

Figure 1.   Exemplary coding scheme. n = number of interviewees mentioning the code.

Thirdly, in the selective coding stage, we integrated and refined emerging theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), leaving us with four key managerial levers of subscription-based crowdfunding creators: information control strategies, supporter interaction strategies, supporter acquisition strategies, and supporter retention strategies. However, it has to be noted that some of the strategies may apply to multiple managerial levers and benefit multiple areas of a campaign and thus also dependent on the intention of the creator. We present an overview of our results as well as code examples in figure 1.

4 Results

4.1 Information control strategies

There are two mechanisms in subscription-based crowdfunding campaigns in which creators can utilize information control: by hiding their earnings and by posting privately so that only supporters can see the content of the post (Lin et al., 2022). In the interviews, we observe two main reasons why creators hide their earnings. Some creators felt uncomfortable sharing information about their income with their supporters. Second, creators considered hiding earnings to be beneficial for their campaign outcome, as displaying the money they make could scare off potential supporters due to not seeming to be in need of additional funding.

P14: *"Initially I had also my earnings public. I just disabled that because I thought that if people see that he already makes three hundred and thirty or forty euros per month, then they don't see the need to support me. That was just what I thought could prevent people from signing up."*

Creators displayed their earnings for various reasons. Many creators stated that they observed more successful campaigns also displaying their earnings and thus followed their example. An overarching theme was that creators perceived displaying earnings as an honest and fair way to offer the supporters transparency. One creator mentioned, that not displaying the earnings might be perceived as deceitful and leading supporters to question whether the creator has something to hide – displaying the earnings signals trust to the supporters.

P19: *"It's kind of that transparency thing. I think people like the transparency. If you're not showing them how much you're making, and if you're not showing how many supporters, it's kind of like, What are they hiding? What else are they hiding from us? Are they somebody I can trust? So by being open about it, and showing all that kind of stuff, I think it kind of already implies that transparent trust with the public. I think people appreciate that."*

Additionally, creators consider displaying their earnings to set realistic expectations and demonstrate that they do not make copious amounts of money in their subscription-based crowdfunding campaign – they thereby want to signal to potential supporters that their support makes a difference and that their campaign offers a small tight community. Further, creators think displaying earnings acts as a signal of quality and makes potential supporters curious about the campaign and leads to them engaging in herding behavior by joining the campaign. Lastly, one creator mentioned that by displaying her earnings she also hopes to encourage other people who consider doing subscription-based crowdfunding.

P10: *"And I also think for people to see that there are twenty-nine people supporting also indicates, yeah, maybe there's something nice there."*

Creators shared multiple strategic considerations in the way they engage in information control in their postings. Instead of only posting privately or only posting publicly most creators did use a combination of private and public posts in their subscription-based crowdfunding campaign. Creators posted privately to create a sense of exclusivity in their content and making their paying supporters feel valued. Creators use public posts in order to give potential supporters a preview of what the content of the campaign looks like and entice them to join the campaign.

P18: *"So the public postings primarily aimed at sort of giving visitors to the site some inkling of what they might find there if they were supporters, and then the private ones were really more aimed at giving exclusive content to the people who actually did support me."*

Creators also utilize private postings to grant their supporters early access to their content, by changing a posting from private to public after a certain amount of time.

P13: *"I would sometimes post something that's like a complete image or a complete page from the graphic novel and it will become public after a few days. I think you can set how many days, it can be like up to a week, maybe, where only patrons can see it for a set amount of time, and then it becomes public."*

Interestingly the two financially most successful creators we interviewed (P08 & P21) built their own frontend to control the access and distribution of their rewards and additional content to their supporters.

P21: *"And so we did have to make like our own website to give these codes away. So people log in using their Patreon accounts on our website, then our website checks Okay, Are you eligible for the games [rewards], and it shows them all the games [rewards]. So that's like a small thing we built on top of Patreon. I think a lot of people have something similar, if they're like writers or something, they might have a WordPress with an additional like layer on top of Patreon. But yeah, that is pretty easily doable with Patreon. So it's nice. So they handle all the payments and everything. And we just have this small extra thing on top of it."*

4.2 Supporter interaction strategies

We were able to observe all types of communication as outlined by the masspersonal communication model (O'Sullivan and Carr, 2018): masspersonal, interpersonal, and mass communication. Creators engage in mass communication during posting content via their subscription-based crowdfunding campaign or on their social media platforms or content platforms of choice.

P21: *"And yeah, all the social media stuff that we talked about earlier is the more indirect mass communication."*

Creators use interpersonal communication when engaging directly with their supporters and followers in direct messages (on subscription-based crowdfunding platforms or social media platforms), writing custom welcome messages or letters.

P11: *"Patreon has the feature to send direct messages just like on Twitter and on Instagram. So I do it that way. I connect with them directly on Patreon to them privately, [...]"*

P07: *"And then I guess I didn't mention the letter that I sent here, but I sent everyone a welcome letter when they first signed up."*

Lastly, as creators try to build a relationship with a group of supporters, they commonly utilize masspersonal communication strategies (Bonifacio et al., 2021; O'Sullivan and Carr, 2018). For example, creators will respond publicly to supporters' and followers' comments on social media or the subscription-based crowdfunding campaign. Further, creators use personalized content, rewards, and shoutouts based on individual or group-based supporter requests. Another commonly used technic is to send automated direct welcome messages, offering the appearance of one-on-one communication to the supporter – but the simplicity of mass communication to the creator. Interestingly multiple creators explained that they engage in co-creation with their supporters, meaning that supporters can participate in the content creation process e.g., by making suggestions or joining during live sessions.

P22: *"So we posted a script of that so they can take a look and give us their comments."*

P10: *"Yeah, I try to involve them [referring to the supporters] in certain decisions and thought processes, so they feel connected."*

However, multiple creators noted the lack of response from their supporters:

P14: *"I personally feel that most people don't really care about you contacting them or you trying to get in touch with them. They don't really care, and they usually don't respond."*

Creators stressed the importance of focusing one's efforts into their supporters:

P19: *"Whereas Patreon, you're finding those handful of people who truly value you, and they're supporting you, and they believe in you. So to me, it makes more sense to put all my effort towards those people."*

4.3   Supporter acquisition strategies

We classified the supporter acquisition strategies we observed into two categories: direct and indirect acquisition strategies. In direct acquisition strategies creators actively engage in promoting their campaign to potential supporters through various channels. Indirect acquisition strategies focus on other aspects of the campaign without directly asking followers to subscribe to the campaign, which can still lead to an increase in supporters, due to e.g., an increase in content on their social media outlets or by bonding with their followers through interaction. However, it should be noted that most creators engage in a combination of both types of acquisition strategies (direct and indirect) to acquire new supporters.

The most common direct supporter acquisition strategy creators use is to publicly promote their campaign via their social media channels or content hosting platform of choice by referring to the campaign in the offered content (e.g., via YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Podcasts). Creators also engaged in interpersonal communication via text or e-mail by messaging their peers and followers asking them to join the subscription-based crowdfunding campaign or press outlets to promote their content.

P19: *"If I'm going to post anything on YouTube or TikTok, or Facebook or Instagram, it's going to be one of my cover songs, because that's kind of stuff that people already know, and that might get them interested. And then everything kind of funnels to Patreon. So like my YouTube has a banner that says "Get the unlisted YouTube videos on Patreon"[…]"*

Creators also engaged in promoting their campaign offline e.g., via in-person events like conventions or meetups, during regular in-person encounters, or using flyers and business cards to refer to their subscription-based crowdfunding campaign. Creators noted the stronger personal connection they are able to build during in-person encounters.

P19: *"That's more just word of mouth and in person. I find that all the people who have become a patron are people that I've actually met in person and taught face to face, and actually had that personal connection with."*

Lastly, to directly acquire supporters some creators publicly promoted a limited time offer in their campaign, for example some creators offered a welcome package with physical rewards for the first supporters to join the campaigns. However, the creators who offered welcome packages mentioned the relatively high upfront costs that need to be considered. Still, offering welcome packages can be considered to give one's campaign a head start.

P05: *"[…] initially when I first started to get people in, I offered a […] badge, it's a little tiny badge that I had made up, they cost me about four pounds each. So I got 100 of them made, so when people join, they would get that sent out to them. But I've stopped doing that now, because obviously that was quite intensive having to post and I knew I would take a bit of a hit posting to America, if someone stayed with me for two months, I would get the money back. But I wanted the Patreon to start up really well in the first place, because you want people to join so that's why I over-offered in the beginning, I think."*

Multiple creators suggested to not be too pushy in the communication with potential supporters but rather relying on indirect supporter acquisition strategies.

P09: *"We didn't ever want to come across as being pushy for asking for money. So we've really tried to limit any direct advertisements for the Patreon. We try to always keep it organic."*

Indirect supporter acquisition strategies focus on improving aspects of the campaign in order to indirectly attract new supporters. Some creators focus on content production on their social media channels in order to grow their Patreon campaign through a sort of ripple effect. To further spread one's content some creators also engage in collaborations with other content creators to share their respective audiences.

P15: *"It would be a different story if, like all of our main content was on our Patreon only, but because it's a public and free access podcast. We see it more as a ripple effect where it's like the efforts that we're putting into growing our main audience, we're hopefully just going to see that naturally lead into a growth of our Patreon interaction."*

Secondly, strategic choices in the campaign design are used by creators to acquire supporters. Most commonly creators suggested offering their potential supporters exclusive offerings in their subscription-based crowdfunding campaign, for example by offering exclusive content or rewards, or early access. Interestingly the two financially most successful creators we interviewed (P08 & P21) utilized a magazine-subscription-like approach, meaning that the content of a given month is only available during the given month and can otherwise only be acquired by paying a higher price, thus increasing the incentive to join in supporting the campaign during a given month.

P21: *"So it's like a magazine subscription. That's always what we compare it to. So you don't get all the older issues, you just get the ones that were released while you were subscribed, and the one just before that, so that if you join you already have something to start with."*

Further, creators noted that it is important to keep producing content for one's subscription-based crowdfunding campaign even if the audience of the subscription-based crowdfunding campaign is still limited so that people who think about joining are persuaded to join by the offered amount of content.

P10: *"To keep posting, even if nobody is there because otherwise people won't come."*

Creators suggested to lower the initial barrier of entry, by offering a high-value lowest price tier or an initial joining reward when a supporter first starts supporting a campaign (e.g., a handwritten welcome letter, tote bag, or shoutout).

P08: *"So basically on Patreon what I would do regarding marketing, it would be like thinking about how to bring people to stay there. Like first, you have to bring them and they have to make an account. And that's the hardest part because once they have an account, things are much easier. [...] As long as they have an account, you already won the first step, which is the hardest one because they have to start filling in stuff, it takes time, it's annoying. They don't really want to do that, so creating the account and subbing would be the main interest, and for that, I would actually bring like perks on low tiers. [...]"*

Another campaign design choice creators suggest is setting realistic and attainable campaign goals thereby enticing potential supporters to join to reach the campaign goal. Campaign goals can be set by creators if the set level of supporters or monthly income is reached – they might offer additional rewards or be able to invest more time in their campaign. It also is beneficial to share real-world equivalents of what the support helps the creator afford. Similarly, openly sharing one's earnings may signal a campaign's quality to potential supporters, making them more likely to join. Teasing content or rewards to potential supporters e.g., by utilizing public postings in the campaign (i.e., information control) or mentioning the available campaign rewards during events or conversations.

P16: *"Because most of the content you have to be a patron to see. So I just want to let people see what they're missing, and hopefully get some people to subscribe."*

Indirect supporter acquisition also can take to form of bonding with one's followers by being responsive to the needs of followers, meeting their expectations, and thereby building up supporters' confidence in the prolonged success of the campaign – after bonding with the followers some of them may decide to become a paying supporter due to the value they were offered during the time building a social relationship with the creator.

P14: *"Try to bind them on you and try to have a bond between you. Try to create a bond between you and them, and maybe eventually they will end up becoming your patron."*

Lastly, creators can leverage celebrating anniversaries, holidays, or birthdays to increase the income of their campaign. For example, during the birthday month, P08 experiences an income spike across the utilized subscription-based crowdfunding platforms (e.g., Patreon, OnlyFans).

One crucial factor in succeeding in acquiring supporters is the importance of building a fanbase and connection with one's followers prior to being able to convert them into paying supporters and achieving a desirable subscription-based crowdfunding outcome.

P21: *"[...]if people don't know you already, they're not gonna subscribe to your Patreon if they don't know you. So it feels more like people should already know you, then they go through your Patreon, and it's like this last little push like Oh, it looks cool, I'm just gonna subscribe."*

4.4   Supporter retention strategies

We observed multiple strategies to retain supporters in our interviews. Most commonly, creators suggested interacting, communicating, and building a community with their supporters is a crucial factor in order to retain them as supporters. More than half of the creators recommended to show supporters their gratitude and reminding them that they are an important factor in keeping the campaign running, e.g., by sending thank you messages and welcome messages, or publicly shouting out the supporters.

P19: "The crucial thing is doting on those supporters. Once you get somebody, you don't want them to leave, so once they join you, as soon as you get that message, [...] you write them a personal note, saying Thank you so much for doing this, and give them a shoutout right away [...] So if you really want to be successful, you need to be showing your gratitude to those patrons every single day, [...] there's always one or two people who will comment and like, So you want to respond back to them, Thank you I appreciate that, you know. Give a heart back to their comment, and always be interacting with those people. Because when you fail to interact, then they feel like they're being ignored and they leave.

Creators also mentioned that it is important to give supporters the option to message them. However, interestingly multiple creators mentioned that they do not experience a lot of interaction or response from their supporters, and potentially just leaving supporters in peace might help in retaining them, as they are not reminded to reevaluate their subscription.

P15: "But where we're at, and when you're just getting started, keeping communication lines open. We message every new patron, just saying, Hey, welcome to the community, any feedback, please feel free to share, because this is for you, etc."

Actively communicating that one is reinvesting the campaign earnings back into the campaign and showing the supporters how their support affected the content or the campaign e.g., by improving the production quality by buying new equipment, can be beneficial in retaining supporters.

P20: "I'm trying to remind people that basically all the money that I get from the show goes into buying new music for the show. Sort of like a circular economy, if you will."

Simply providing quality content (either in subscription-based crowdfunding campaigns or their social media outlets) improves supporter retention according to the creator statements. Creators noted that it is important to offer high value in the content and rewards they offer (e.g., by offering personalized rewards and catering to supporters' needs or content preferences). Meeting or exceeding the expectations of supporters is valuable. Additionally, physical rewards might be beneficial, as they potentially entice supporters to engage in interaction with the supporter and creating a bond.

P19: "Post it for them and just overload them because they're gonna be like I'm paying five dollars a month. But he's giving me like forty-plus tracks every single month. It's more than worth their buck, and I think that's the reason why nobody has left."

Creators leveraged the exclusivity of their campaign in order to retain their supporters. Exclusivity can be generated via multiple mechanisms. First of all, the content or the offered rewards may be exclusive to the subscription-based crowdfunding campaign. As mentioned in the acquisition strategy sections the two financially most successful creators we interviewed (P08 & P21) utilized a magazine-subscription-like approach, making their content of a given month only available during that month and otherwise the content only can be acquired by paying a higher price. This technic also builds supporter retention, since supporters are enticed to keep supporting the campaign in order to continue receiving the monthly new content and not lose out on a month's exclusive content. Similarly, offering early access to content creates a sense of exclusivity and binds supporters to the campaign by creating a sense of community and appreciation. In addition to that, one creator suggested offering a limited number of spaces in a given reward tier may create a feeling of appreciation for having a spot in the tier. Further, limiting the tiers simplifies catering to the needs of the limited number of supporters.

P05: "Yeah, when it's limited, I think that really helps because people are like, oh I've been lucky and unlucky and there's no spaces."

P21: *"This idea of having it for the patrons first is mostly just so they have a little reason to go to the five-dollar tier instead of the three-dollar tier. And I think it's nice, like you get to see some of the videos earlier. It creates more of a sense of community around the videos, which is nice."*

Interestingly, multiple creators used co-creation in their campaign, either as a feedback mechanism or a form of interaction and content creation with their supporters to bind them to the campaign, e.g., by having supporters participate in games by video call or making suggestions and voting for future content.

P15: *"Let's just sit down and play nights. We really saw a lot of response from that [...]"*

Like in traditional customer retention theory (Verhoef, 2003) creators offer long-term rewards or loyalty programs to improve supporter retention, e.g., by rewarding supporters who pledged a certain amount of money or subscribed for a certain time. Creators may also offer long-term subscriptions at a discount.

P19: *"[...] So once somebody hits the triple digits, I know they're invested so they're getting a Cdr. And then, moving forward, I figured every six months, if somebody sticks with me, I'll send them a personal Cd. Aside from the free digital downloads."*

Creators suggested to offer additional benefits beyond the regular campaign scope to retain supporters. This can be achieved by hosting giveaways, distributing extra rewards (e.g., if a campaign goal is reached), celebrating anniversaries, holidays, or birthdays. Interestingly, one creator offered a subscriber who struggled financially the subscription for free to keep them on board – acting as a sort of scholarship.

P19: *"More like a surprise. Because people like surprises, you know, because they already know what they're getting with the daily downloads and with the live stream, and with the shout-out, and then all of a sudden they'll just get surprised. A handwritten note. Surprised with these direct messages. Without knowing that it's coming, I think that more makes an impact on them to want to stay. They'd be like, I wonder what he'll surprise me next with something."*

5 Discussion and Conclusion

In order to create successful subscription-based crowdfunding outcomes creators can utilize managerial levers e.g., information control (Crosby and McKenzie, 2021; Lin et al., 2022) and relational labor (Bonifacio et al., 2021; Hair, 2021). To holistically capture creators' strategic considerations, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 22 creators on the popular subscription-based crowdfunding platform Patreon. Our findings highlight four key managerial levers of subscription-based crowdfunding creators (information control strategies, supporter interaction strategies, supporter acquisition strategies, and supporter retention strategies) and the strategic considerations behind their use.

Information control strategies include earning concealment and private postings. Even though information control literature suggests to engage in earning concealment to achieve subscription-based crowdfunding success (Crosby and McKenzie, 2021; Lin et al., 2022), only about a third of the creators in our interviews concealed their earnings. Creators considered displaying earnings as a means of signaling honesty and transparency to their supporters. Further, creators mostly engaged in a combination of private and public posting with the goal to offer potential supporters a preview of their content, while also maintaining content exclusivity for their supporters. Our findings contribute to theory by demonstrating that although previous findings suggest that earning concealment and private postings are important for crowdfunding success (Crosby and McKenzie, 2021; Lin et al., 2022) there may be additional beneficial aspects of displaying earnings or posting publicly that need to be considered, e.g., as a signal for transparency and honesty to the supporters which may affect long-term success.

Concerning supporter interaction strategies creators commonly used a combination of interpersonal, mass, and masspersonal communication. Interestingly, multiple creators offered co-creation in their campaign, meaning that supporters can partake and influence the content creation process in order to make their supporters feel connected. Some creators noted, that their supporters are not responsive to their communication efforts. We extend upon existing research on creator-supporter communication (e.g., Bonifacio et al., 2021; Hair, 2021) by specifically addressing creators' strategic considerations in their choice of communication channels. Additionally, we suggest future research to explore the role of co-creation in facilitating crowdfunding success.

We observed two categories of supporter acquisition strategies: direct and indirect. In direct acquisition strategies creators actively engage in promoting their campaign to potential supporters through various channels. Indirect acquisition strategies focus on other aspects of the campaign without directly asking followers to subscribe to the campaign, which can still lead to an increase in supporters, due to e.g., an increase in content on their social media outlets or by bonding with their followers through interaction. Notably, most creators engaged in a combination of indirect and direct supporter acquisition strategies. While the most common direct promotion strategy was mass public online promotion (e.g., public posts via social media channels), creators also suggested that offline promotions may form stronger personal connections with potential supporters leading to an improved acquisition. Interestingly, creators offered limited time offers and promoted them publicly, e.g., by offering a limited time welcome package. Offering such welcome packages can be considered in order to give one's campaign a head start, however, one also needs to factor in the relatively high upfront cost. A common indirect supporter acquisition strategy was to simply focus on content production, as the increase in supporters may follow as a sort of ripple effect. Engaging in collaborations can further facilitate the spreading of one's content. To further indirectly acquire supporters, creators suggested offering exclusivity in their campaign content or rewards and lowering the initial barrier of entry to the platform and campaign (e.g., high-value low price tier). Further, teasing the offered content and rewards (e.g., during events) is commonly done to acquire supporters indirectly. Similarly, leveraging anniversaries, holidays, or birthdays and bonding with potential supporters can also improve campaign success according to the interviewed creators. While existing research established the importance of mass social media online promotions for crowdfunding success (e.g., Hong et al., 2018; Jöntgen, 2022), our research offers insights into multiple other beneficial acquisition strategies and captures creators' reasoning and strategic considerations in their acquisition strategy choice.

Due to the ongoing nature of subscription-based crowdfunding campaigns, supporter retention strategies also need to be considered in order to achieve a successful outcome. Consistently offering high-quality content and meeting the supporters' expectations is a crucial factor in retaining supporters. Showing gratitude and bonding with supporters is another important factor in supporter retention. As suggested by customer retention theory (Verhoef, 2003), creators offered long term rewards and loyalty programs to long term or high-value supporters. Giving the option to participate in a tight community provided by the creator and offering additional bonus rewards and content may also improve supporter retention in line with customer retention theories by Bhattacharya (1998). The interviewees suggest that co-creation may also improve the creator-supporter relationship, thus improving supporter retention. Lastly, campaign exclusivity may improve customer retention since supporters do not want to miss out on limited available exclusive content. The two most financially successful interviewees (P08 & P21) both built their own frontend to control the access and distribution of their rewards and additional content to their supporters. P08 & P21 also both utilized a magazine-subscription-like approach, meaning that the content of a given month is only available during the given month and can otherwise only be acquired by paying a higher price. To the best of our knowledge this paper is first in utilizing traditional customer retention research as a theoretical lens in examining subscription-based crowdfunding supporter retention. We recommend future research to further explore the effects of the observed retention strategies, especially for strategies such as the magazine-subscription-like approach.

Our research offers important contributions to the body of knowledge about subscription-based crowdfunding. By presenting the four key managerial levers of subscription-based crowdfunding creators and the strategic considerations in using them, we enable IS scholars to further explore and assess creators' thought processes in managing their subscription-based crowdfunding campaigns. For practitioners, the presented managerial levers and strategic considerations may act as a blueprint for managing their own subscription-based crowdfunding campaign or optimizing subscription-based crowdfunding platforms in order to account for these managerial levers and strategic considerations. A limitation of our research is the inherently subjective nature of interview coding processes. To make the coding process as objective as possible, we utilized a well-established three-stage coding process consisting of open, axial, and selective coding, following guidelines by Strauss and Corbin (1998). This practice is commonly used in IS literature (e.g., Berente et al., 2011; Seidel and Recker, 2013).

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