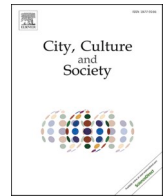


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Bridging the urban-digital divide: Crowdfunding as an online middleground space

Carolina Dalla Chiesa^{a,*}, Anders Rykkja^{b,c}

^a Erasmus University Rotterdam Department of Arts and Culture, Netherlands

^b UIA Crowdfunding Research Center, School of Business and Law, Norway

^c Queen's University Belfast, School of Arts, Education and Languages, UK

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ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to provide a critique of the premise of territoriality in creative cities. A validated hypothesis in the literature on economic geography is that the density and "territoriality" of members of the so-called "creative class" influence the volume of creative goods and services produced in cities. This hypothesis gave rise to several sub-related themes, such as the premise that cities are, par excellence, a place where middleground spaces emerge because of place-based activities located in close-knit communities imbued with creativity and innovation commons. In line with this argument, recent studies have yielded an analytic framework to explain the dissemination of creativity through the so-called "middleground" spaces in cities: places, spaces, projects, and events. This framework presupposes the dissemination of creativity from the physical place to a cognitively constructed space. We revise this argument by suggesting that post-digitalized forms of creation and dissemination of knowledge often blur the boundaries between place and space (which we characterize in this paper as domains of "the local" and "the digital"). By mediating creativity through digital platforms, agents are also capable of outreaching different localities and creating ties that are not subsumed to close-knit communities. As such, our framework incorporates a "digital middleground" space into this existing "middleground" framework, thereby extending the scope of creativity in cities to digitally dispersed forms of exchange. We theorize that contemporary forms of creativity unfold openly, virtually, and non-hierarchically yet are imbued by local concerns such as the ones channeled by crowdfunding communities, which we use as an example in our discussions. Our paper contributes to a better understanding of the increasingly digitalized "urban" spaces and the impossibility of pursuing a dichotomous digital-local divide. We expect that scholars will consider the possibility for creativity to manifest not only in territorial-based middlegrounds, but also in online communities where creativity unfolds dispersedly.

1. Introduction

Cultural markets exhibit a high degree of territorial dependence (Lazzeretti et al., 2008, 2012). The emergence of "creative industries" and "creative economy" in policymaking and market terminology has sparked scholarly debates on how cities cluster economic activities, resulting in cultural and creative spillovers (Scott, 2008). To explain why some cities and regions are more creative, innovative, and entrepreneurial than others, researchers have begun to map production systems within cities and regions. However, a theoretical emphasis on agency (creative work) over structure (the urban milieu) (cf. Florida, 2002, 2003) makes it difficult to determine what causes creative

diffusion in urban settings (Cohendet et al., 2010). Using the concept of "middleground spaces", one can reveal how intermediary associations, communities, firms, and even loosely coupled collectives (Simon, 2009) serve as a foundational creative space for innovation, crowdsourcing, and bottom-up creativity (Lange & Schüßler, 2018). This perspective nevertheless emphasizes the necessity of close-knit interactions in physical spaces for creative flow (Cohendet et al., 2011; Grandaham et al., 2013). According to us, the approach reifies proximity (Grabher & Ibert, 2014) when "little empirical evidence supports broad claims of a supposed predominance of proximate over distant relations in economic interaction" (Oinas, 1999, in Bathelt & Turi, 2011)..

We discuss how to conceptually accommodate the proliferation of

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: dallachiesa@eshcc.eur.nl (C. Dalla Chiesa), anders.rykkja@uia.no (A. Rykkja).

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internet-based interactions within these new online communities at a time when interaction between agents is digitally-mediated. The article takes the stance that social interactions on digital platforms drives the emergence of middleground phenomenon in online spaces. Digital middlegrounds share community-driven characteristics with local middlegrounds, despite not being fundamentally distinct on a physical or territorial basis. The pervasiveness of platformization (Srnicek, 2020; Van Dijck et al., 2021) urges that researchers analyze the complementary potential of online spaces vis-à-vis urban-based creativity. Although conditioned by monetary contributions, we sustain that more complex relationships can emerge through crowdfunding, especially when these platforms as hubs enable diverse forms of creativity and value co-creation between creators and users.

Why crowdfunding platforms may be considered examples of digital middlegrounds is justified by using the economic geography hypothesis: digital crowdfunding campaigns tend to replicate offline patterns of cultural and creative production (Agrawal et al., 2010; Le Bécheq et al., 2018; Mollick, 2014). Scholars have consistently described crowdfunding as a funding mechanism with community benefits (Belleflamme et al., 2014; Brent & Lorah, 2019), a two-sided market solution (Viotto Da Cruz, 2018), a venue for trust-building and career advancement (Dalla Chiesa & Dekker, 2021) and as an answer for existing funding gaps (Cumming & Hornuf, 2018). It has also reinforced *commoning*¹ attributes when it comes to enabling the private creation of public goods. Due to its commercial and non-commercial characteristics, crowdfunding reinforces local ties and heavily draws on existing embedded social networks (Mendes-Da-Silva et al., 2016; Potts et al., 2008). It also permits distant consumers to partake in new creations, thereby overcoming the frictions of local markets through digital tools. The consequence is the creation of privileged spaces of interaction, testing, prototyping, and inspiration for creatives and dispersed users. Although not all projects exert middleground characteristics, we contend that such platforms can be used for innovations based on community-led interactions, similarly to non-digital middlegrounds; yet different when it comes to the dispersion of users. We explore these features in relation to what we call a “digital middleground”: a complement for localized urban middleground spaces.

This paper will develop the argument that territorialized creativity has its limitations in observing contemporary forms of creativity. As such, we hypothesize the existence of digital middlegrounds where online relations occur with or without the premise of the local. We first critically assess the middleground literature contrasting it with literature on crowdfunding. Thereafter, we discuss characteristics that distinguish local and digital middlegrounds and introduce a framework for the underground, middleground, and upperground levels considering our novel conceptualization. In section four, we discuss case examples of digital middlegrounds and conclude by providing a preliminary assessment of our contribution to understanding contemporary forms of creative production.

2. Literature review

2.1. Complementing the territorial premise of middlegrounds

The concept of the creative class is not without its detractors. A longstanding critical debate in economic geography draws attention to the theory's neglect of exploitative characteristics, labor market imbalances, and gentrification in the urban *milieu* (e.g., Peck, 2005; Pratt, 2008; Vivant, 2013). We limit the discussion of the pros and cons of Florida's propositions to understand how creativity emerges and spreads in cities through its “creative anatomy” (Cohendet et al., 2010). For over

a decade, this proposition has been developed and empirically validated (Cohendet et al., 2010, 2011; Cohendet, Grandadam, & Suire, 2021; Cohendet, Simon, & Mehrouachi, 2021; Grandadam et al., 2013; Lange & Schüßler, 2018; Simon, 2009).

Studying how creative processes emerge in urban *loci* reveals that agents take part in stylized “upperground” layers (producer firms commercializing creative goods and services, government, and other institutions) or in informal “underground” realms (artists, cultural entrepreneurs, intellectuals, and bohemians motivated by creative breakthroughs rather than economic profits) (Cohendet et al., 2010). Representatives from upper and underground layers converge in the *middleground*: a domain that mediates creative flows via top-down (upperground-led) or bottom-up (underground-led) processes (Cohendet et al., 2011). By bringing together demand and supply of creative goods and services (Avdikos, 2015), this “missing middle” generates positive externalities and diffusion of knowledge (Grandadam et al., 2013; Simon, 2009).

The middleground comprises four parts (Cohendet, Grandadam, & Suire, 2021). The first component is physical meeting places such as galleries, bars, cafes, nightclubs, and concert halls that allow for direct exchange between upper and underground members through physical interaction (Grandadam et al., 2013). The second component is space, which refers to cognitive tools and structures for understanding and appreciating actual creative expressions and ideas (Cohendet, Simon, & Mehrouachi, 2021). The third component consists of projects representing coordinated efforts to codify creativity as a value proposition in the form of prototypes. The fourth one refers to “events” used to diffuse creative projects.

However, this framework may have shortcomings. First, it is unclear how funding is obtained without clear monetary signals in the middleground framework. The literature merely refers to examples of possible funding sources, such as income generated from employment or work for upperground firms (e.g., Simon, 2009), public grants, or profits invested by upperground firms (Cohendet, Simon, & Mehrouachi, 2021). Still, these exist when a project is finished or when labor is exchanged for money. The framework does not address how actors make a living during the creation processes or the possibility of monetary incentives intertwining sociality.

Second, the essence of the middleground concept is to convey an ideation process transiting through local middlegrounds (e.g., Cohendet et al., 2010). The absence of digitalization from this framework can be justified because (1) it is doubtful whether virtual relations create knowledge transfers between fields and stakeholders because (2) direct interaction is a *sine qua non* for developing and integrating creative ideas, which implies that (3) creative processes are only efficient when agents interact in places and spaces provided within the confines of the urban environment (Cohendet et al., 2011; Grandadam et al., 2013). As a result, the framework may exclude important parts of the “new economy” emerging after the pervasive effects of platformization (Pais & Provasi, 2015; Duffy et al., 2019). Other contributors, however, believe that social media platforms enhance face-to-face interactions and new forms of relationality (Lange & Schüßler, 2018). In other words, there exists an untheorized possibility that digital platforms are complementary enablers of the diffusion of creativity (cf. d'Ovidio & Gandini, 2019) via mechanisms of valuation and connection of entrepreneurs with upperground firms (Lange & Schüßler, 2018).

Third, the middleground fosters ideation in an atmosphere of low rivalry and high collaboration. According to our argument, this shows an excessive cooperative bias of the theory. From the literature on gatekeeping (Janssen & Verboord, 2015), we know that the rejection or acceptance of creative works and ideas is an outcome of brokerage (Foster & Ocejo, 2015). Since middleground events are inherently field-configuring (Meyer et al., 2005), they establish norms for future development in competitive settings. In the presence of gatekeepers, members may be governed by a set of implicit and explicit rules, peer pressure, and homogeneity, thereby leading to less disruption

¹ *Commoning* as in the “cultural commons” framework whereby actors use open infrastructures to share common resources and public goods (Hess & Ostrom, 2007).

(DiMaggio & Hirsch, 1976). Consequently, the influence of homogeneity rather than contestation may be what characterizes processes of evaluation within the local middleground. This can be explained by non-diverse recruiting, power imbalances, or lack of attention to how creative communities develop in diverse ways (outside the scope of top-down funding by established firms). In online dispersed domains where socialization is not the precursor for certain forms of relationality, cooperation may emerge not due to the homogeneity of actors but because of diverse skillsets.

To emphasize the online dispersed modes of interaction where valuation is independent of member-based selection, we expand the middleground notion towards a combination of online and local exchanges that combined lead to different forms of creativity non-restricted to territorially-based interactions. In this sense, we follow Pratt's (2013) views on the irrelevance of segregating the analog and the digital as it overlooks important developments in the field of the creative economy: the hybridization of socio-cultural and technological development. As such, we should observe how the advancement of platforms as infrastructures make emerge new forms of relationality beyond the limitations of geographical proximity (Alaimo & Kallinikos, 2019).

The development of various social ICT tools since the birth of mass digitalization may represent this point even more clearly, especially regarding the role of social media apps and other platforms in the making of novel relations (Schüßler et al., 2021). We follow Duffy et al. (2019), Gerlitz et al. (2019), and Poell et al. (2021) in that online websites, apps, new tools, and social media do not simply represent a technical assemblage of tools but also a multi-layered of social relations and cultural patterns entangled in the web of socio-technical apparatuses which give rise to powerful shifts in the structuring of labor and creativity. In fact, if the development of apps fails to provide relationality, it is likely that users will see limited benefits in these tools. In most cases, the relationality embedded in most digital tools reinforces, changes, or feeds into local, place-based social ties as our socialization emerges in non-digital spheres. While in some cases, the digital is seen as a secondary complement to local interactions (d'Ovidio & Gandini, 2019), we discuss a rather different case in which relations are born in the digital, of which the local may come as a complement, or that geographical proximity is not at all fundamental for knowledge sharing, transactions, and community building to take place. As a "distinctive" case, crowdfunding illustrates this argument as it represented a (then) "disruptive" digital tool in which strong and weak ties can leverage the outreach of creative projects (Mollick, 2014; Le Béchec et al., 2018). While relationality in crowdfunding is sparked by a financial appeal, we contend that monetary and non-monetary exchanges always intertwine (cf. Zelizer, 2010) as campaigners use this opportunity to exert *commoning*, public good attributes and fandom. For supporters, patrons or investors, money is also a signal of appreciation, a voting mechanism to support favorite artists, ideas or creations that should deserve a "kick-start". When these relationships evolve to other channels, we observe a long-standing connection between creation and users who eventually contribute to co-creating value.

2.2. The glocal characteristics of crowdfunding: a "place" in a space

Cultural and creative goods have distinctive economic features (Caves, 2001; Towse, 2001). With high demand uncertainty, over-supply, and limited access to information on product quality (Kretschmer et al., 1999), digitalization has provided valuable solutions to cultural production by making access to information cheaper (Waldfoegel, 2017). In this context, crowdfunding emerges as a disruptive innovation for testing, prototyping, and validating cultural products before substantial investment (Dalla Chiesa & Handke, 2020). It is expected that through crowdfunding creators and consumers temporarily lift the risks of uncertain exchanges until the campaign reaches its target goal and assurance is covered (Handke & Dalla Chiesa, 2022).

Crowdfunding is one of the manifold examples of digital solutions;

this one focused on raising funds while also exerting non-financial benefits to both creators and supporters (Gleasure & Feller, 2016; Mollick, 2016). As widely documented (Srnicek, 2020; Van Dijck et al., 2021), digital platforms promote new forms of governance, data organization, online interactions, and production of content, which have transformed how creators produce, distribute, and make content accessible to consumers (Swords, 2017). Although not always the case, these patterns reflect that in some cases, cultural crowdfunding initiatives may emerge similar to the way in which online spaces mediate and shape "communities of practice" (Grabher & Ibert, 2014; Faraj et al., 2016; Reppenning, 2022) with commoning features. While the platformization literature focuses on crowdfunding as simply a means of monetization and financial revenue (cf. Duffy et al., 2019), we understand that this tool can exert positive externalities and, often unmeasured, benefits when it comes to spillover of knowledge, information, and value-creation, which go beyond simply a means to monetize existing products. While monetization implies looking for revenues of already made products, funding can comprehend the process of supporting a creator on its creation process, hence a step prior to monetizing.

Another feature of the crowdfunding phenomenon demonstrates how local and international audiences intertwine (see Fóá, 2019). Previous research has discussed the power of local ties and social networks in supporting crowdfunding ventures (Agrawal et al., 2010; Agrawal et al., 2015; Josefy et al., 2017; Mendes-Da-Silva et al., 2016), while other studies have reinforced how geographically-dispersed funding behavior bypasses distances thereby overcoming problems of distribution of creative goods, rather typical in the cultural sectors (cf. Cameron, 2016). Recent studies have also demonstrated how crowdfunding outreach depends on the kind of product under offer (Breznitz & Noonan, 2020; Rykkja, 2023). For instance, digitally reproduced goods such as video games, recorded music, and digital writing projects present intrinsically distinctive features that set them apart from performing arts or tangible creative consumer goods. This has manifold consequences: some projects may be more product-oriented, others can be more altruistic in nature, and there will be some projects that are more embedded in the urban *milieu* than others. While engaging in de-territorialized relationships to fund projects and propose creative innovations is not a premise of these platforms, reaching new audiences is expected and desirable. Most often, a combination of both local and global audiences intertwines in new digitally-mediated environments. In line with Schüßler et al. (2021) typology, we understand crowdfunding as a hybrid case in which both mutuality and autonomy exist - often aimed at challenging the traditional power of established gatekeepers, which reinforces the "community-based" premise of collectively funded projects whose biggest benefit is the creation of online communities of supporters (Mollick, 2016).

To clarify our stylized distinction between place-based and virtually dispersed middleground, we further explore their contrasting features in the next item and further propose a framework to understand digital middleground.

3. Expanding the locus of creativity: the features of digital middlegrounds

Five aspects of the local and digital middle ground are compared in Table 1: configuration of space, function, emphasis on economic and non-economic factors, valuation mechanism, and degree of openness. The respective descriptors can be viewed as a continuum. This is due to the specificity of the configuration of space depending on varying degrees of either digital or local forms of interaction. Therefore, the optimum type will be context- and project-specific, and the elected configuration's effectiveness can only be fully appreciated retroactively. Even though collective action and participation are prominent in both the local and digital spheres, the value of extending the middleground to the digital sphere is the ability to consider both middlegrounds in

Table 1
Characteristics of digital and local middlegrounds.

Aspect	Local	Digital
Configuration of Space	Proximity, Place-based interactions	No <i>aprioristic</i> proximity, digitally mediated interactions
Function	Foment collaboration, experimentation, and ideation	Selection and valuation of propositions
Direct benefits	Creating symbolic/cultural capital through ideation for upperground exploitation	Converting symbolic/cultural capital into products through crowd validation
Indirect benefits	Create repositories of shared skills and knowledge for exploitation by private firms	Leveraging participation and co-creation to create use or exchange value, depending on the type of project
Valuation Mechanism	Peer Selection	Market Selection
Degree of Openness	Closed access, geographically constrained.	Open access, geographically dispersed.

relation to and as extensions of one another. In both instances, both upperground and underground agents benefit. It provides a more precise valuation (in a market context) for the former, thereby reducing risk. For the latter, it enables participation, dialogue, and potential interaction in a more bottom-up manner. In turn, this fosters forms of participation and engagement within the middleground—potentially less ‘elitist’ and more susceptible to bounded rationality biases.

Local middlegrounds have been framed as spaces for experimentation for creative solutions. The main task in these communities is to codify knowledge in a specific location to provide commercial stakeholders (upperground) with innovation. Adding a digital middleground extends the primary function and purpose of the local middleground by comprehending a mechanism to openly value creativity while testing commercially exploitable innovations. Or by seeking to ascertain whether solutions to civic and societal problems are suitable and acceptable to affected community members. In the latter case, digital middlegrounds represent conduits for fomenting bottom-up initiatives by focusing on producing public value through in-demand goods and services of a non-commercial nature. By expanding the *locus* of creation to include interactions that unfold in digital realms, we mean that ideas

flourish due to decentralized participation.

A conceptual proposition for a digital middleground could be formulated as follows: A digital middleground presupposes (1) suspending the premise of the middleground as a place exclusively dependent on prior socialization or sharing tacit knowledge *in loco*. This implies (2) accepting that interactions grounded in offline environments can also happen in a virtual context. Furthermore, (3) digital middlegrounds allow for parallel processes of evaluation of creativity in a complementary space where (4) preferred signals of contribution may range from simple approval, a comment, direct participation, or a monetary signal. Thus, the digital middleground.

- a) Extends cognitive space by lowering the entry barriers
- b) Allows diffusion of creativity through spillovers and positive externalities
- c) Has no *aprioristic* selection mechanisms. Valuation is subject to decentralized decision-making.
- d) Is open for users to decide on how valuation takes place (e.g., via monetary or non-monetary signals).

The image below (Fig. 1) depicts a stylized proposition of digital middlegrounds as a complementary online arena for interactions, testing, and prototyping, emphasizing the way in which both digital and local middlegrounds can be used in combination. The arrows identify the direction of the contribution (i.e., the crowd of dispersed supporters can provide demand validation to digitally-born innovative projects, while these can eventually become novel businesses with distinctive features). We propose that the so-called digital middleground exhibits traces of a dispersed digital environment, distant from an enclosed local community whose members are known and whose characteristics are homogeneous. What makes the online crowdfunding case distinctive from a place-based form of knowledge-creation is the openness and plurality of channels through which innovative ideas emerge and are channeled to the upperground. In that sense, the role of a crowdfunding platform is to become a **hub** through which exchanges (monetary and non-monetary) unfold and further continue in other channels such as social media websites, online communities, or offline gatherings whereby creators and users meet.

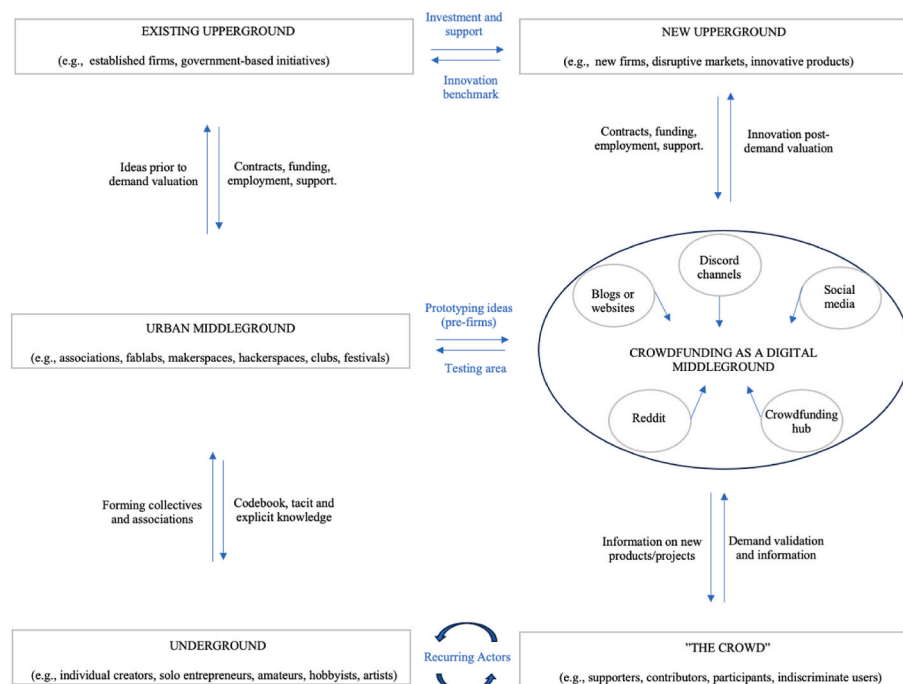


Fig. 1. The middleground arena of exchange.

In the following section, we unpack our claims using a few examples from crowdfunding campaigns. We accomplish this by applying the aforementioned features in the context of a few cultural crowdfunding cases.

4. Case studies: illustrative examples on digital middleground

In the following subsections, two cases will be discussed to illustrate the functions of crowdfunding as a digital middleground: one case explores the dispersed collaborations in the development of board and video games, whereas the second case explores value co-creation through virtual negotiations between consumers and a fashion brand which expands into an international network of collaborators engaged via several recurring crowdfunding campaigns, greatly exerting patronage characteristics. These case studies should be considered exploratory in nature (cf. Yin & Campbell, 1989). Exploratory case studies are commonly used to help support the development of a conceptual framework or to venture into domains where empirical studies are scarce.

The aim of exploratory cases is to illustrate the application of the framework in a number of ways. First, due to the dispersed nature of online interactions, the cases unveil a myriad of actors intertwined in rather superficial relationships.² Second, establishing solid relationships is not the goal of such projects but rather the focus on the product as a result. This differs from the ideal-typical local place-based middle-ground where establishing solid relationships can yield economic and non-economic benefits through collaborators following tacit or explicit conventions (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991). Our case examples are better understood as instances of *strategic temporal alliances* driven by pragmatism for the purpose of completing a project or securing an expected outcome. When a defined goal is reached, the community may disappear or become inactive until its members are called upon again, much like the “innovation commons” phenomenon (Potts, 2019), whose *raison d’être*, rather ephemeral and short-lived, enables unconventional forms of creativity at the fringes of commercialization.

4.1. The games community: connecting through the crowdfunding hub

Much in the same way as the literature on global, offline production networks emphasizes the capacity of users to add value to certain types of games (Pratt et al., 2018), crowdfunding offers independent developers of both board and video games an online space for prototyping and product development using crowdfunding as a form of user-engaged co-production (Chaney, 2019). These forms of adopting co-production are typically described as the use of crowdfunding by the campaign promoter to facilitate and coordinate direct participation of the end-user (as a backer of the campaign) in the product development and valuation process (Steigenberger, 2017). Because co-production is a collaborative mode of project design and development, it becomes a form of consumer empowerment comparable to crowdsourcing (Boeuf et al., 2014). Although gaming communities are recognized for engaging with online co-production forms (Lind & Bowman, 2016; Nieborg and Van Der Graaf, 2008), recognizing these features through crowdfunding needs further exploration.

Both video and board game categories of campaigns shared via crowdfunding provide examples for understanding interactions and dynamic exchanges between communities of backers and developers. On Kickstarter, the founders of indie game firms test products and engage with potential consumers or hardcore game fans willing to pre-purchase

prototypes and assess them while bypassing traditional gatekeepers (Tyni, 2020). Potential backers not only first detect problems but also provide feedback and social network endorsements (Butticè & Noonan, 2020). In the case of crowdfunding tabletop gaming communities, collaboration is prototype-driven based on the enlarged view that open communities draw on a common pool of intangible resources (knowledge, information, and culture in a large sense) that contribute to market development and matching individual preferences. In sum, crowdfunding facilitates user participation in the development of a final product through collaboration (e.g., often geek users, fans, and “hard-core” gamers). This may become a reason for consumption aside from utilitarian motives or “self-signaling” (cf. Benabou & Tirole, 2003). We further illustrate such mechanisms using two cases of successful Kickstarter projects (November 2023).

The first example is the campaign for the game *Star Racer* (Kickstarter, 2023a), which raised 18,547 euros from 166 backers with an initial goal of 18,233 euros. *Star Racer* is a sci-fi arcade combat racing game with a retro aesthetic. The goal of producing the game was described as a “genuine attempt” to capture the feel of a retro game, down to the “heart-pounding rush when you are on the last level and your last life.” The campaign presentation also uses the biographical information of the development team to build trust and signal quality and used several channels to build an audience and connect users.

While in the past, the creation process would be rather hidden from the eyes of the final users, through crowdfunding, the back-office of the creation and distribution processes are relatively open to the public. Without such openness, backers have limited means of engaging with producers. By participating in a pre-buying campaign, backers fulfill the role of amateur investors, end-users, and collaborators. In the case of *Star Racer*, the campaign page served as a **hub**, connecting existing backers and future players to both Steam³ - where they can add the game to their wish-list and download a playable demo - and the Discord server, where players and backers used the dedicated #demo-feedback channel to provide comments on the demo version and interact directly with the development team. Backers could purchase rewards on the campaign page, ranging from 32 euros for an official beta test role and status on the Discord channel to 46 euros for a customized car to 500 euros for the ability to design their own racecourse to be included in the game. In this case, creators, users, and future players initially connected via crowdfunding for funding reasons but expanded their roles via Steam and Discord - the first used for retailing and another for feedback and connection with game developers. The same strategy happened in various other game campaigns (see Chaney, 2019), where developers report how crowdfunding provides a standardized framework (e.g., communication channel, platform design, updates, comments) for user-creator interaction which ultimately feeds back into better product development. As Chaney (2019) demonstrates, creators frequently change specifications because of backers’ opinions. While this configures co-production, it can also unveil overlooked intellectual property issues - as users thus become producers, too, to a certain extent.

The second case we explore is the board game *House of Poison* by Mythic Games (Kickstarter, 2023b). According to the campaign pitch on the crowdfunding platform, *House of Poison* is a competitive strategy board game for 3–8 players. The purpose of the game is to engage in the power struggle of the Roman Empire of the first century A.C. by eliminating opponents by cunning and poisoning. The campaign was successful, having raised €17,877 of an initial goal of €9116.

The case illustrates how producers of boardgames create a digital middleground using the Boardgamegeek (BGG) platform. BGG could be described as an online common curated by thousands of hobby gamers (Wachs & Vedres, 2021), with many of the same functions for board games as sites for films such as Rotten Tomatoes. Individual pages are

² Since online interactions do not require place-based connections, we understand that actors often participate for the sake of contributing to a project, an idea, or a specific product rather than engaging because of personal relationships per se. As such, we suppose a certain level of superficiality due to more ephemeral connections.

³ A famous two-sided market platform connecting consumers and game publishers.

created for board games, which are both rated and approved through forum discussions by the community. In the case of House of Poison, the developers promoting the campaign entered a partnership with two board game content creators. Shelfside was one of the paid testers of the game while it was under development. Their extended review was subsequently posted to the forums of BGG during the campaign's launch.

In both cases, the engagement of either dispersed backers or other stakeholders as community-building actors does entail several conventions. First, backers are prior socialized in game production standards and are intense game users themselves; second, creators standardize campaign projects to fit certain parameters (e.g., goals, rewards, transparency, regular updates, sensemaking strategies etc.), connecting the crowdfunding campaign page with related digital platforms comprising social media, forums, and video blogs. This shows a distinctive difference between local and digital middlegrounds: while place-based relationships develop due to personal connections, digitally-based relationships (in this case) emerged because members had a mutual interest in a specific good that they envision consuming or experiencing. When the product is finished, the dispersed users may engage in another project without forming a homogenous group of middleground participants. In fact, we understand that the digital middleground depicts not one close community of makers but an "arena of exchanges", as visualized in Fig. 2, happening within and across various online platforms forming a temporary networked ephemeral space.

4.2. Fashion brand development: recurrent crowdfunding for audience-building

The role of place in forming digital middlegrounds may be illustrated through the example of the serial crowdfunding activities of the fashion brand Linjer (Rykkja & Hauge, 2021). In 2014, Jennifer Cho and Roman Khan founded Linjer (Norwegian for "lines"). The company offers handbags, leather goods, and jewelry. Between 2014 and 2018, Linjer ran ten crowdfunding campaigns on Indiegogo and Kickstarter that brought in about \$3 million USD. On their campaign pages, Linjer uses place (i.e., location) not to build a brand but to emphasize transparency and authenticity. Over the years, the company's location shifted from San Francisco to Oslo, Florence, and Hong Kong. While the first location served as a bootstrapping strategy, Oslo and Florence were employed as "placeholders" to convey the venture's production philosophy. The company relocated to Hong Kong because of the availability of warehouse and logistics facilities. Thus, the place is important in relation to brand and operational positioning but never important enough to be exploited as a local middleground.

In addition, Linjer also relied on a strategy for cognitive appreciation that bears similarities with the House of Poison case. Instead of using Instagram (Lange & Schüßler, 2018), Linjer used the Styleforum platform and ascribed some of the success to value creation:

"The key to our success was connecting with a hardcore and genuine community online on Styleforum, where men around the world go to share their passion for menswear. A few senior members took interest in us and positively reviewed our products, which gave us credibility. These guys saw what we were trying to do and how much we were nerding out on specs, and it created a very strong level of trust. Once we found a community online that cared deeply about quality, our products sold themselves." (Chasing Foxes, 2019)

The valuation of the brand can be said to represent the outcome of negotiated co-creative interaction between the founders and backers on the crowdfunding campaign pages and other virtual, hybrid communities (Rykkja & Hauge, 2021), as depicted in Fig. 3. By recurrently testing and validating ideas, the brand managed to maintain a rather consistent pool of users/audiences while geographically displacing product development. The trick to their success was fundamentally based on the scarcity of resources available at the time of the campaign; as a startup, Linjer could not afford influencers for product placement or

paid posts (Chasing Foxes, 2019). As such, they had to rely on a combination of organically creating a digital community of followers through collecting e-mails via their website and some paid advertising through social media (e.g., Facebook website, blogs, and other similar channels)⁴ to reach potential consumers that either found their offers were great value economically relative to the build and craft, or that found their minimalist style and designs appealing.

5. Concluding remarks

The article's contribution has been an exploratory examination of whether the local middleground layer of the anatomy of the creative city can be complemented with a digital extension or vice-versa. As is evident from the preceding discussion, the article takes a stand against the view that the only offline forms of creativity at the middleground level are permissible and that relationality for creativity is better unfolded locally. Following the contribution of Lange and Schüßler (2018), proposing that crowd-based platforms, online media, and virtual communities also contribute to cities or regions' creative output, we propose a definition of digital middleground to encompass pervasive phenomena of contemporary economies where platformization prevails. The creation of project-specific digital middlegrounds via crowdfunding platforms illustrates how creators supported by engaged, geographically dispersed contributors can create and distribute new ideas, thereby expanding the view that diffusion of creativity is a parallel activity spanning both digital and local spaces.

Instead of proposing the digital and non-digital as dichotomous, we contend that they are complementary. Users can develop ideas in local middlegrounds and test them on a wider public via digital ones. They can also create online projects which spillover to local interactions. As our examples evidence, digital middlegrounds enable valuable input from potential heterogeneous audiences, sometimes unreachable in local middlegrounds. All the cases illustrate how crowdfunding platforms as hubs facilitates co-production or co-creation of values based on decentralized decision-making in the form of both commercial and non-commercial campaigns generating monetary and symbolic benefits to users and creators.

The phenomenon we observe stems from typical fundraising aims but produces some unexpected positive spillovers. In this sense, we argue that the evident monetary exchange happening via the crowdfunding campaign is not deterring the formation of more complex webs of social connections happening in complementary channels (local and digital). Only because these relationships are mediated by money, it does not mean users and creators are symbolically far apart (cf. Zelizer, 2010). Relationality on platforms is not restricted to social media websites, gig work environments and other immediate forms of online communication, it is rather placed in social (human and non-human) creative interactions and how they make the best use of available social infrastructures (Frischman, 2012).

The boundaries between crowdfunding and crowdsourcing are also becoming more blurred. Many digital platforms are now incorporating crowdfunding technology, sometimes combined with access to distribution and valuation. Writers publish books through Substack (Hepworth, 2021). Bandcamp enables artists to fund vinyl editions of their recordings if they can generate 250 pre-orders over a thirty-day campaign period (Hinton, 2021). Other platforms, such as Etsy, have their own proprietary digital and local arenas of exchange. These digital middlegrounds expand in the local direction by facilitating the marketing of virtual or offline events in their area.

As an addition to broader concurrent research on the effects of platformization from the perspectives of creative cities (Lange &

⁴ In the figure below, Facebook and Blogs appear smaller due to their minor role in sharing news of the project. Styleforum's role was more preeminent due to its already established community of interested users.

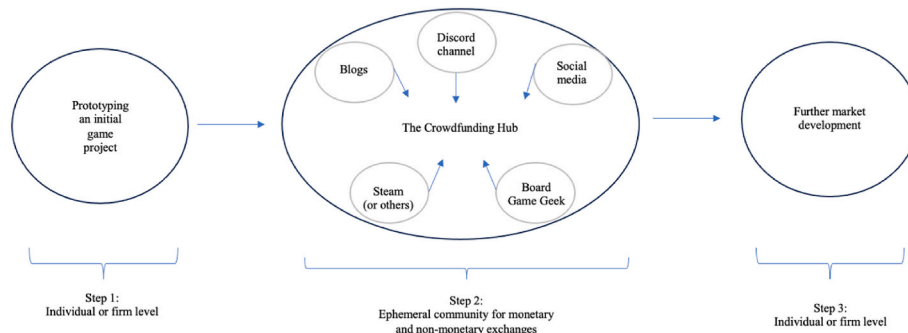


Fig. 2. Digital middleground applied to a video game case.

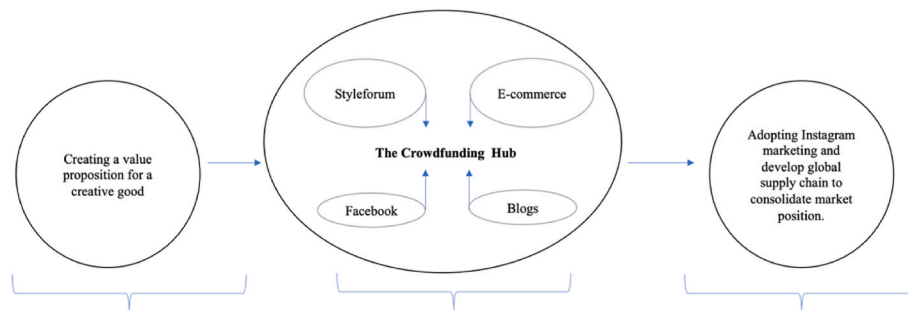


Fig. 3. Digital Middleground applied to a fashion brand case.

Schüßler, 2018) and institutional theory (Duffy et al., 2019), our conceptualization provides one possible explanation for online processes that have not yet been integrated into formalised theoretical frameworks. Our proposal makes the case for bridging an existing online/offline divide in the thinking on the topic of cities and creativity. Here, the integration of platforms as digital middlegrounds adds explanatory power to our understandings of cultural production in cities by showing how it is becoming increasingly difficult to interpret the way cultural entrepreneurs work by relying solely on place-based approaches. However, having said that, neither do we suggest or advocate for all-encompassing explanations of how the digital will solve local gaps and labor issues or that the pervasiveness of platformization should be treated as a given. In some cases, an over-reliance on digital platforms as means of communication, creation, exchange, and distribution can promote the advancement of a platform as if an all-encompassing infrastructure (Helmond et al., 2019). Instead, what the proposed framework suggest is an understanding of how digital infrastructures can provide a fruitful, complementary, and co-constitutive space for the discovery and flourishing of creativity. This aligns well with a move towards understanding creativity and cultural production in cities and at the regional level using a *glocal* view.

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

Carolina Dalla Chiesa: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Anders Rykkja:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

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