

Discursive legitimation in online crowdfunding: A study of Kickstarter projects promoting human rights

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Abstract: The internet-based crowdfunding platforms have in many ways changed the way projects are nowadays funded. Apart from opening to the small businesses, it has created funding opportunities for non-governmental organisations, citizens' initiatives, non-formal groups and individual projects, which used to have rather limited access to this sort of resources. However, the widening and liberalisation of the market poses new challenges for these entities as well – the project ideas have to be effectively elaborated in order to stand out from the crowd, reach the potential supporters and persuade them to get engaged with the project. This paper explored the discursive practices in crowdfunding for human rights projects, with particular focus on discursive strategies employed in project descriptions on the crowdfunding platforms Kickstarter. Within the discourse analysis framework, the study addressed the various strategies employed in the legitimation of social action (van Leeuwen 2008), in this case, donating money or otherwise supporting the projects. The findings suggest that rationalisation and appealing to morality are most frequently used to legitimise the social action of crowdfunding on online platforms. The research into discourse of crowdfunding highlights the current tendencies employed for engaging the potential contributors, but also reveals how the crowdfunding and human rights activism are socially constructed on online platforms like Kickstarter.

Keywords: Online crowdfunding, human rights, legitimation strategies, discourse analysis, corpus methods.

1. Introduction

Digital technology has changed not only the communication aspect of our lives but also the way people do business. Online platforms have made crowdsourcing, especially crowdfunding, fairly simple and accessible to a wide range of individuals or groups with ideas for new projects. Unlike with the traditional forms of funding, they do not need to go through lengthy administrative procedures with banks or potential investors. Operating online platforms and setting up crowdfunding calls can be done quickly and the project creator can raise fund within days. A lot of research into online crowdfunding has looked at its economic and financial aspects, psychological and behaviour background of the process, but few studies have addressed the discursive aspect of online crowdfunding. Likewise, human rights activism in the context of online crowdfunding has been underrepresented in research.

This paper approaches the online crowdfunding practice from the perspective of discourse analysis. In particular, I focus on the discursive strategies used to legitimise crowdfunding in projects related to human rights set up on the Kickstarter platform. Drawing on van Leeuwen's (2008) model of social legitimation, I have explored the projects' descriptions to see which legitimation strategies have been applied by the project creators and how. The first section of this paper provides an overview of the phenomenon of online crowdfunding and recent studies in the field. Van Leeuwen's (2008) model of discursive legitimation is then presented, as well as some of its elaborations and applications. Following this, I outline the research design of my study, introducing the methodology, tools and data used. Finally, the key findings of the study are presented and discussed.

2. The practice of online crowdfunding

2.1. Development and significance

Crowdfunding, in some of its forms, has been present for a long time in the process of starting a

business. Many entrepreneurs have asked for and relied on the help of numerous supporters, mostly family members and friends, offering small-scale investments, rather than having their own starting capital or taking a credit from the bank. This can be challenging and new businesses often fail to secure the necessary funding (Hellmann 2007; Casamatta & Haritchabalet 2013). Crowdfunding, therefore, might offer a viable alternative for reaching a larger number of potential supporter and eventually securing the funds needed for one's project. The term itself can be addressed within the wider notion of *crowdsourcing*, which was first used by Michael Sullivan in 2006, to refer to using the crowd, rather than a single investor, to gain resources necessary for business development, from ideas and feedback, to financial support (Howe 2008). Online crowdfunding is focused primarily on the latter and takes place via computer-mediated communication channels.

It is important to note that the term is used as an umbrella term for various forms of crowdfunding. The two primary types of crowdfunding are *rewards-based crowdfunding*, where project creators pre-sell a particular product or service, and *equity crowdfunding*, in which supporters are provided with shares or part of rights in exchange for their investment. Another type is *debt-based crowdfunding*, or peer-to-peer lending, which is built around a large number of mostly unsecured personal loans. *Litigation* is a type of crowdfunding where project creators ask for and receive donations, possibly providing rewards in return, the latter varying in value, and sometimes depending on the overall success of the project. Finally, crowdfunding can be exclusively *charitable* too, referring to funders supporting charity-related projects. Apart from the financial support, project creators often welcome feedback and suggestions regarding their proposals and, in some cases, voluntary help, although this is not in the primary focus of this type of ventures.

Crowdfunding might be seen as democratising the process of business development, as it effectively enables a wider participation and offers the project creators with new opportunities to reach potential supporters, without having to rely on the strict bank and investing bodies' policies, and overcoming, for example, the distance or gender-based gaps they might be otherwise facing. The geography of crowdfunding has been of particular interest to the researchers. Due to the virtual environment, it is expected that crowdfunding enables the project creators to bridge the geographical distances and reach potential supporters from all over the world. However, it should be noted that some of the platforms (e.g. Kickstarter, IndieGoGo) are open to the projects based or managed from certain countries only, while donations and support are not limited in this way. Furthermore, studies in online crowdfunding have shown that majority of early investors are actually fairly local to the project creators (cf. Sohl 1999; Wong 2002; Mason 2007). Agrawal et al.'s (2011) study of Sellaban, a Netherlands-based online crowdfunding platform specialised for supporting musicians producing their first album, has however shown "that investment patterns over time are independent of geographic distance between artist and investor after controlling for the artist's offline social network" and, furthermore indicated that "online mechanisms can reduce economic frictions associated with investing in early-stage projects over long distances (Agrawal et al. 2011: 15). A more recent study by Lin & Vinwasathan (2014) investigated if funders on online crowdfunding platforms exhibited home bias. They have focused on Proseper.com, one of the largest peer-to-peer lending platforms in the US, and the findings from the quasi-experiment they conducted show that home bias still exists, and that there is evidence to support behavioural, rather than rational, motivation for such investing patterns.

In relation to factors like gender, some studies (Radford 2015) suggest the replication of institutionalised gender discrimination on the crowdfunding platform following the publication of actors' gender, while others (Marom et al. 2015) indicate that, while online crowdfunding does not annihilate the gender-based obstacles women project creators often encounter but, with Kickstarter projects "[w]omen are 35% of the project leaders and 44% of the investors on the platform and are concentrated in specific sectors, ... enjoy higher rates of success" (Marom et al. 2015: 3). Such findings indicate the opportunities online crowdfunding platforms offer for expansion of women's

participation in project leadership.

Motivation is probably one of the most interesting elements of crowdfunding research. A model is proposed by Wang & Fesenmaier (2003) and based on communities of online sharing, they suggest five categories of motivation, including instrumental, efficacy, quality, assurance, status, and expectancy. Recent studies by Gerber et al. (2012) and Gerber & Hui (2013) were focused in particular on motivation for participation in online crowdfunding practices, both raising and giving donation. Semi-structured interviews revealed that “[c]reators are motivated to participate to raise funds, receive validation, connect with others, replicate successful experiences of others, and expand awareness of work through social media”, whereas “[f]unders are motivated to participate in order to seek rewards, support creators and causes, and strengthen connections with people in their social networks” (Gerber et al. 2012: 8).

Crowdfunding has been used in many different disciplines and sectors. In some of the previous studies, Vasileiadou et al. (2014) have, for example, researched the crowdfunding niche for projects related to the use of renewable energy, as a means of sealing the gap supply and demand in funding of energy transition models. Their study reveals relatively low volume of crowdfunding and high dependence on governmental market support, but also predicts the growth of crowdfunding in areas where little or no structural support is available for projects and initiatives developing renewables. Wheat et al. (2013) explored the use of crowdfunding in academia. In particular, they focused on crowdfunding as a means of supporting scientific research. The findings suggest that funding success is related to the scientists’ ability to effectively communicate their research and that gains from such relationship with supporters surpass financial benefits, highlighting the need to encourage “scientific transparency and public involvement in the earliest stages of the research process and fostering lasting ties between scientists and non-scientists” (Wheat et al. 2013: 72).

Human rights activism and campaigning has been explored to great extent, both general reference and certain topics in particular, like for example women’s rights (cf. Williams Crenshaw 2000; Chappell 2003; Friedman 2003). However, there has been no research of human rights activism within the context of crowdfunding. The online environment of such crowdfunding practices offer many new possibilities for human rights activities and, as such, makes for an interesting research topic.

2.2. *The language of crowdfunding*

Since the project creators cannot reach their potential supporters in person, the online crowdfunding allows them to use text and audio-visual aids to present their projects and gain the necessary support. The current study will focus on the textual dimension of crowdfunding projects. Some of the research in the field of crowdfunding has looked at the language employed in online platforms, but few have approached it from the discursive or wider linguistic perspective. For example, Marom & Sade (2013) have applied text data mining techniques to explore crowdfunding pitches in a large corpus of projects from Kickstarter platform. Their findings indicate that project creators choose to focus either on themselves as individuals or an organisation or on the project itself. This seems to vary across different categories so, for instance, artistic projects seem to focus more often on the project creators’ personality and abilities, whereas the technology themed ones place the emphasis on the idea and details of the project.

Furthermore, Gao & Lin (2015: 3) explored the project from peer-to-peer lending platform Prosper.com to find out if “crowdfunding investors consider texts provided by fundraisers, can text characteristics explain or predict the actual quality of crowdfunding projects, and if yes, can crowdfunding investors correctly interpret the informational value of these texts”. Their research showed that the readers do pay a lot of attention to the project descriptions when considering lending, that features such as *readability*, *positivity*, *objectivity*; and *deception cues* determine the success of the project and, lastly, that the supporters can accurately interpret the elements, but only

to some extent, e.g. in some cases they fail to recognise the deception cues. Larrimore et al. found that funding success in microlending was positively associated with “the use of extended narratives, concrete descriptions and quantitative words that are likely related to one’s financial situation”, while “humanizing personal details or justifications for one’s current financial situation were negatively associated with funding success” (2011: 19). Similarly, recent study of projects on microlending platform Kiva.org by Allison et al., drawing on Cognitive Evaluation and Self-Determination theory, reveals that “lenders respond positively to narratives highlighting the venture as an opportunity to help others, and less positively when the narrative is framed as a business opportunity” (2015: 53). Finally, Herzstein et al. (2011) analysed how the use of narratives influences decision-making in microlending context. Their results indicate that project creators often present multiple identities, although this does not reflect favourably on the success of the project. However, lenders’ trustworthiness in narration increases the chances of invested funds being returned.

3. Socio-semantic analysis of discursive legitimation

Legitimation is an important part of human communication. Individuals and groups always seek ways to legitimise their beliefs and actions. A lot of research has been done to explore how legitimacy is realised and understood by others. Approaches to legitimacy in social sciences, recently revisited by Beetham (2013), could be categorised as either *prescriptive*, through which social scientists determine the what is legitimacy and which behaviour and phenomena can be understood as legitimate, or *descriptive approach*, through which scholars in social sciences explore and aim to explain what makes particular actors or action legitimate in their own or the in the eyes of the society.

Legitimacy and legitimation have also received attention from scholars in the field of critical analysis of the discourse. Legitimation can be perceived as a means of achieving social validation and, in that, attaining social power. Therefore, the way of accessing different channels and tools of legitimation, as well the underlying ideological framework, might be explored from a discursive point of view. This case study draws on the socio-semantic model developed by Theo van Leeuwen (1995, 2006, 2008). Van Leeuwen sees discursive legitimation as realised either through *authority, morality, rationalisation or mythopoesis*. Speaker or writer employ a variety of these strategies in order to legitimise particular or general social action. *Authorisation* is legitimation by referring to a particular source of authority. These sources vary greatly, from a single individual to the official authorities. Authority can be *personal*, in cases where it is related to people because of their status or social role, e.g. teachers’ or parents’ are often represented as having this type of authority. *Impersonal* authority, on the other hand, is related to laws, policies, regulations, etc. *Expert* authority comes from individual or group’s professional expertise in a particular field. This can be noted, for example, in academic writing, where reporting verbal clauses are used to legitimise the introduced arguments. *Role model* authority is of particular importance in campaigns, endorsement and similar contexts, where person’s social status is used to extend attitudes or behavioural patterns to the group of others who identify themselves with that social actor. The authority of *tradition* relies on the maxim “we have always done it (this way)”, rejecting the opposing notions. Similarly, the authority of conformity, is built on the rule of majority and the ideas of normal and appropriate social practice.

When discussing *rationalisation* as a legitimation strategy, van Leeuwen (2008) distinguishes between *instrumental* and *theoretical* rationalisation. The instrumental one strives to justify the existence of particular social practices and account for the way in which these are presently implemented. In such manner, social actions can be legitimised by referring to a particular social goal, being a means in itself or as having a desirable social effect. It is important to note that this form of rationalisation is tightly linked to moral legitimation, the goals, means and effect need to be

morally legitimised in relation to the valid social values. The theoretical legitimisation can be employed independently of the moral one. With these strategies, social action is legitimised by *definition*, i.e. objectivisation, *explanation*, which generalises it, and *prediction*, which might be based on expertise. Finally, rationalisation can be *experiential*, which is in its nature pragmatic and applicable, and *scientific*, which can legitimise specialised institutional practices.

Legitimation by *morality* is based on social values. In case of *evaluation*, social actions are assessed in terms of their social desirability and their descriptions reflect the quality. With abstraction as legitimisation strategy, discourses are linked “to practices (or to one or more of their component actions or reactions) in abstract ways that “moralize” them by distilling from them a quality that links them to discourses of moral values” (van Leeuwen 2008: 111). If *comparison* is applied, the legitimised practice is juxtaposed to an ideal one or, on the contrary, to a less desirable circumstances, relying again on the set of values established in the community.

Mythopoesis is construction of legitimisation through narration, i.e. storytelling. *Moral tales*, as one of the mythopoetic strategies, present protagonists who are “rewarded for engaging in legitimate social practices or restoring the legitimate order” (van Leeuwen 2008: 117). Furthermore, these characters are often reported to have overcome many obstacles and challenges, but eventually triumphed. *Cautionary tales* do the opposite, they serve to warn about what might happen if social actors do not adhere to the desirable social practice. With *single determination* and *overdetermination*, the desirable practice is presented in specific semantic terms or symbolised/inverted, respectively, introducing what is appropriate and expected of the audience. Finally, it is important to emphasise that all of these strategies can be altered, combined or used simultaneously to effectively legitimise social action in different context.

Another approach to legitimisation is presented by Rojo & van Dijk (1997) in their analysis of legitimisation of the expulsion of Melilla migrants in Spanish parliamentary discourse. They found their analysis on the premise that legitimating is a means by which powerful social groups seek normative approval for their actions, also extended to the group themselves. Legitimising discourse can thus be approached on a *pragmatic level*, as it aims to legitimise a controversial action, on *semantic level*, legitimising a particular version of the narrative, and delegitimising others, and on *socio-political level*, where the employed strategies legitimise a whole discourse on macro level. Investigating a speech given by the Spanish Secretary of Interior Mayor Oreja, Rojo and van Dijk examine in detail different levels and functions of discursive structures, like style, rhetorical structure, figures of speech, semantic roles, etc.). Finally, they suggest that legitimisation obtained in this way becomes a source of power for the social group, as it extends to the global interactional sequence (Rojo & van Dijk 1997). Unlike van Leeuwen’s (2008) grammar of legitimisation, where the emphasis is on organising the reasons for (not) taking action, Rojo & van Dijk (1997) focus on the relationships between in-group/out-group representations and power distribution.

Discursive legitimisation has also been discussed within the field of critical organisation studies (cf. Vaara et al. (2007) and Erkama & Vaara (2010)), which draw on Van Leeuwen’s model (2006), but also, more recently, studies of political discourse investigating macro- and micro-legitimatory discursive strategies in media (KhosraviNik 2015), framed by discourse-historical approach to critical discourse analysis (Wodak 2001; Reisigl & Wodak 2009).

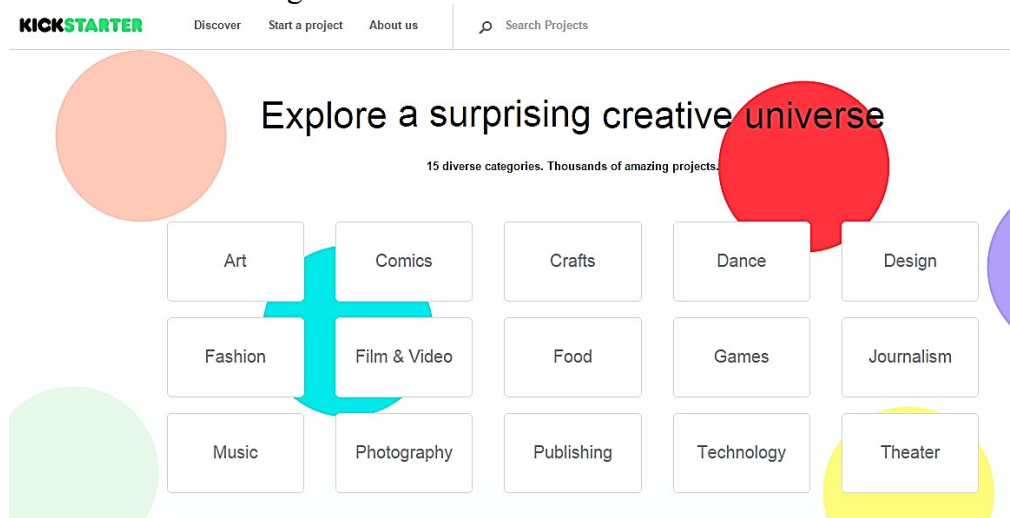
The current study relies on van Leeuwen’s (2008) socio-semantic approach to legitimisation and within the methods section it is explained in more detailed how it has been adapted and applied in this context. This choice is to a large extent motivated by the nature of phenomena explored, as calls for crowdfunding provide an indication of how a group should act and aim at mobilising individuals.

4. Research design

4.1. Kickstarter and corpus data

Kickstarter was chosen as the site of this case study, given that it is one of the most popular online crowdfunding platforms in the world (see e.g. Forbes 2013). It was launched in 2009 and has since then enabled successful funding of 94,581 projects, gathering 2,031,781,841 USD (figures on 25/10/2015), under the motto *Kickstarter – Bringing projects to life*. While fundraising for charity is forbidden, Kickstarter invites creative project proposals in variety of fields, from art, music and film to games, design and technology (see Figure 1); the only requirement is that the project has a clear, finite goal. Project *creators* are the individuals or groups who are asking for donations to meet the *funding goal* and parties who donate money or, in Kickstarter jargon *pledge*, often in exchange for *rewards*, are referred to as *backers*. The platform is open to the creators based in the USA and UK, while pledges are welcome from all over the world.

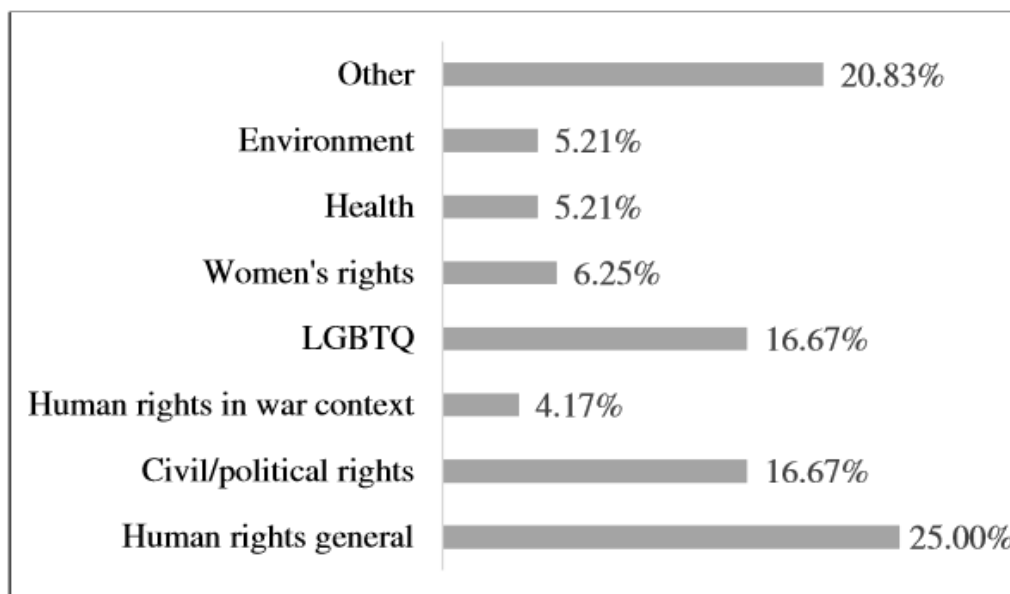
Figure 1: Kickstarter's Discover section



Fundraising is preceded by a preparatory phase in which the creators develop their project descriptions, add audio-visual contents, set-up social media channels and decide on the rewards they might wish to offer. Before going live, all the projects are reviewed by the Kickstarter team and creators can in particular ask for the staff feedback. Once they are ready for launch, the projects go live. The creators set a deadline by which they need to reach their funding goal; in case this is not the case, all the donations are returned to the backers. Not every crowdfunding platform has the *all-or-nothing policy*, but Kickstarter argues that it reduces the level of risk for both creators and backers, motivates and increases the efficiency of project delivery. Apart from impressive figures, the platform and the crowdfunding phenomenon in general got a lot of attention due to some of the projects it hosted. One of these is the *Veronica Mars Movie*, in which the fans of the cancelled series *Veronica Mars* have pledged over \$5.7 million to see the film version made, later followed by *Wish I Was Here*. The projects spurred debate on the role and power of the audience, as well on the policies of the large television and production houses. Furthermore, the Kickstarter community argued about the impact of such block-buster projects on the smaller initiatives run by relatively anonymous creators.

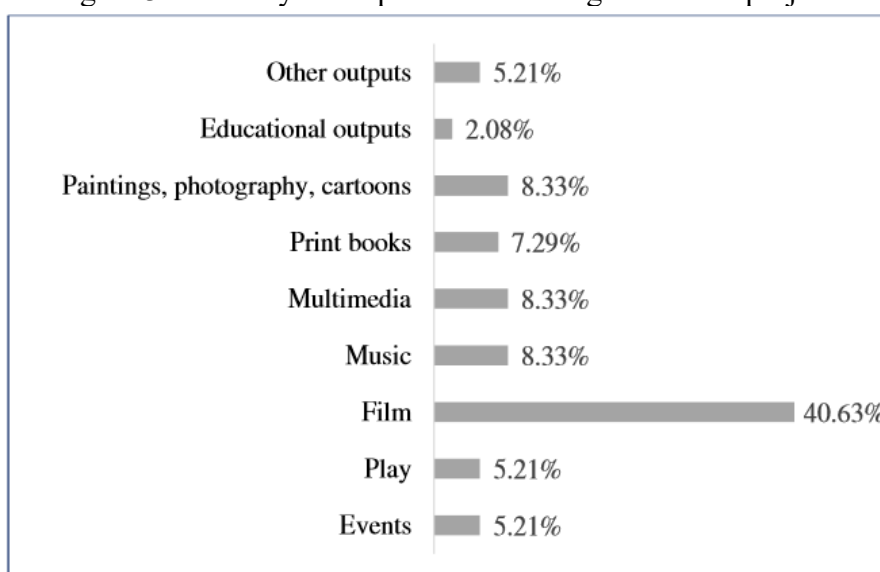
For the purpose of this study a specialised corpus was compiled to include projects related to the topic of human rights awareness and protection. Since Kickstarter categorises the projects based on the genre or, to some extent, medium of their delivery, rather than the topics, these were found by searching the available database for projects using the query "human rights". A total of 96 projects were identified, launched in the period from 2013 to 2015.

Figure 2: Distribution of human rights-related topics in Kickstarter project



The projects were categorised based on the topic, i.e. particular aspect of human rights field they were focused on, as well as according to the format of the projects' final output. With regards to the topics, the following themes emerged: general human rights awareness, civil/political rights, human rights in the context of war or violent conflict, LGBTQ rights, feminism/women's rights, human rights related to health and environment and other projects, which were mostly focused more on individual aims. In cases where projects were eligible for two or more categories, only the one estimated as dominating was assigned. The distribution of topics is presented in Figure 2. As shown, the majority of projects were classified as dealing with human rights in general, without a more narrow focus, and the second most numerous category includes projects focused on other topics or individual ventures. The fewest projects dealt with human rights protection in war and conflict affected environment.

Figure 3: A variety of outputs in human rights-related projects



The projects selected to be included in the project offered a wide range of various expected outputs, from educational programmes, to paintings, books, films or web applications. However, films, mostly documentary, were most frequently in the focus of human rights related projects, as presented in Figure 3.

Once the suitable projects were identified in the Kickstarter platform, the focus shifted on the “Campaign” section (Figure 4) text of the projects. This is the part of the project proposal where the creators describe their project in detail, introduce their motives and explained the desired outcomes, highlighting the potential benefits but also reflecting on risks and challenges they might encounter implementing the project in case it gets funded. This section was deemed the as the most appropriation to explore the legitimation strategies creator use because, as Marom & Sade (2013) note, project descriptions do matter and influence the way potential supporters feel and act on a project.

Figure 4: An example of a project heading



The text of “Campaign” sections for these 96 projects was then copied into software-accessible format, comprising eventually a specialised corpus of 58,979 words. The corpus was then uploaded to UAM Corpus Tool. Although campaign creators used images and video material to accompany their texts, within the scope of this paper I will focus on the textual mode of the selected campaigns.

4.2. Tools and methods

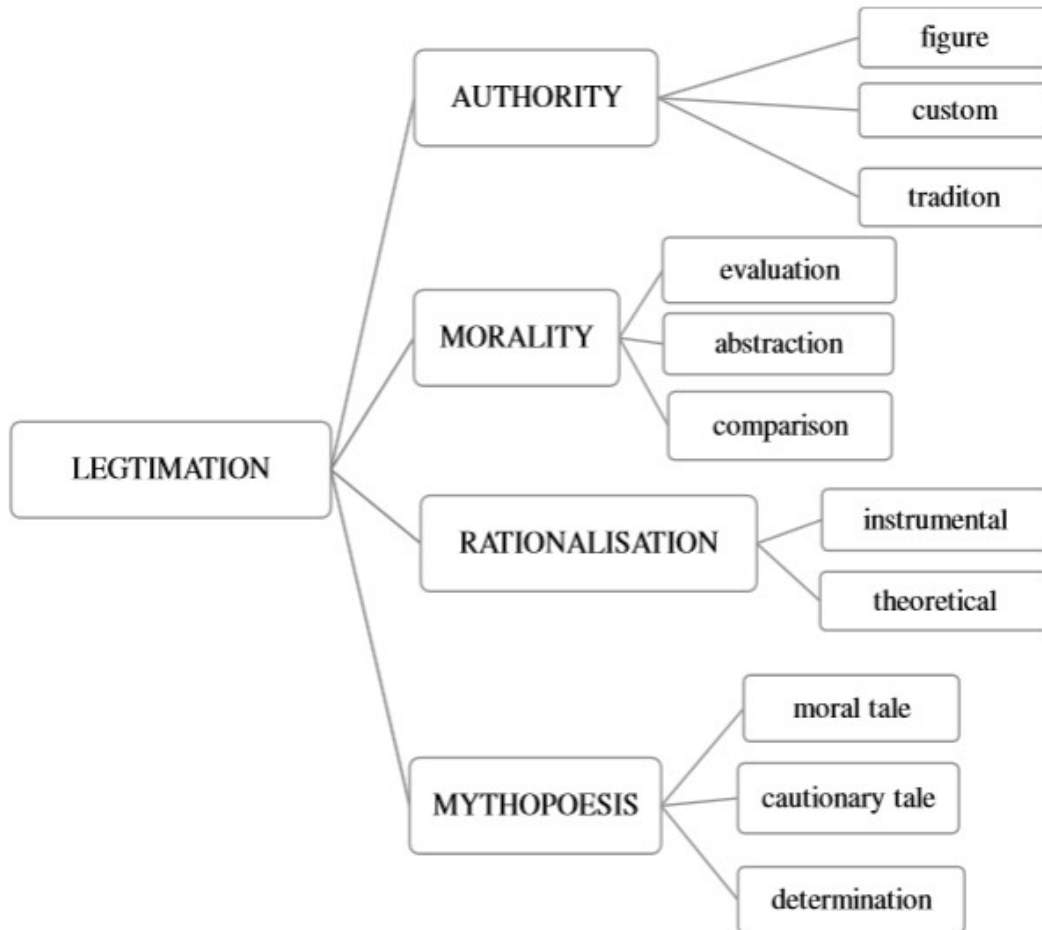
UAM Corpus Tool 3.1.4.,¹ the software package developed by Michael O’Donnell (2008) was selected for the annotation of the Kickstarter corpus. It is an open source tool which enables multi-layered annotation, both manual and automatic, on document and segment level. It was found particularly suitable for this study as it allows the users to create their own annotation scheme.

Van Leeuwen's (2008) model was employed to develop the annotation scheme for the corpus. The initial scheme was modified after I have done some pilot annotation, to make a better account of the legitimation strategies occurring. The whole corpus was then manually coded using the scheme shown in Figure 5. The annotations were added on text segment level, the length of segment varying, sometimes from a two words phrase to a whole paragraph. The cases where it was

1 The software is freely available for download at <http://www.wagsoft.com/CorpusTool/>

uncertain how to annotate a particular strategy were re-visited at the end of the analysis. Double annotations were avoided, although there were cases of strategies overlapping. The findings are presented in the following sections, first quantitatively, and then qualitatively.

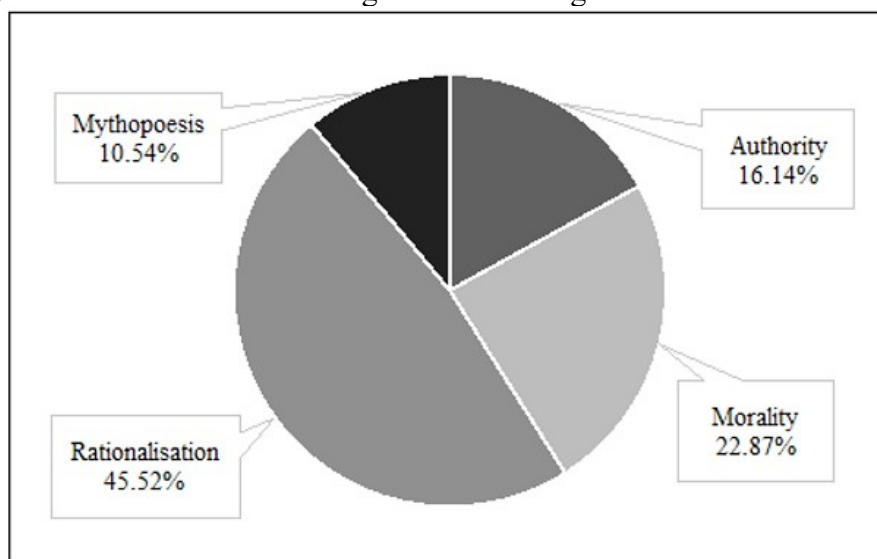
Figure 5: Legitimation strategies annotation scheme (adapted from Leeuwen 2008)



5. Findings

Once the annotation process was completed, the UAM Corpus Tool was used to gain insight into basic descriptive statistics features. First of all, I was interested in learning which legitimation strategies merged most frequently in the Kickstarter corpus. Looking at the first level only (Figure 6), it can be noted that legitimation by strategies relying on rationalisation was employed most often, followed by morality and authority based strategies, while mythopoesis was the least frequent vehicle for legitimation. Next, I focus on each of these categories separately.

Figure 6: Distribution of different legitimation strategies across the Kickstarter corpus



5.1. Rationalisation

Within the legitimation strategies found in the corpus, 45.52% of these are in the category of rationalisation, 35.43% belonging to instrumental and 10.09% to theoretical rationalisation. Creators employ instrumental rationalisation strategies when describing their project both to legitimise the act of them crowdfunding the resources and the donors pledging their funds to support the respective project. In terms of describing the project, its effect is often highlighted on community, as well as on the individual level. In these example, it is expected that by reading this book the young audience will be adequately educated about social reality, and that the water map would facilitate urbanistic planning in the area:

The first part of the book explains what the society in which children of the present live is about. It also discusses the values the families cherish which are often opposed to that reality. **Thus the children are faced with a realistic picture, through valid arguments the worldview of their parents is strengthened.** (*Humanism for Children*)

This vision map would **directly serve the communities** that are connected to the South Platte River and would **support the communication** about projects that emerge from "the Downstream Neighbor". (*Vision map for water future South Platte River*)

It could also initially create a negative effect, but lead eventually to a positive change:

The images in the film, though disturbing to many, are designed to do just that--**alert people to the pandemic state of LGBT hate crimes and unnerve them to the point of action.** (*Who Are You?*)

Furthermore, many creators rationalise the crowdfunding by explaining their financial needs and how the pledges will cover for these:

Funding from the Kickstarter campaign will go **towards completing the rough-cut version of the film and allow for us to most urgently screen the film** at an important meeting of decision makers and mining sector CEOs in Africa on TB and Mining later

this year. (*They Go to Die*)

With theoretical legitimation, strategies very often include sharing experience, explaining the context or using scientific data to urge the potential pledgers to support the project. To illustrate, some creators choose to enclose statistical evidence to illustrate the extent of the problem they are aiming to address:

Over 10 billion animals raised for food in the U.S. annually endure inhumane treatment. Crowding and stress from these conditions compromise animals' immune systems. **They must ingest antibiotics regularly to prevent disease.** (*Smell the Bread*)

Finally, there are 203 annotations of legitimation strategies employing rationalisation, which averages over 2 occurrences per project.

5.2. *Morality*

In the second most frequent category the project creators legitimise social action by appealing to morality. In the projects comprising the Kickstarter corpus, the majority of creators have done this through abstraction. This means that they have effectively linked individual, very specific action or behaviour to a more global social action or phenomenon. For example, in *Don't Ask Me Why* project, donating money is not only a means of financially supporting the making of a single film, but, moreover, transcends into a much higher and worthy aim:

We are asking you to **take a stand for equality and for the power of storytelling** through music and video, and we are forever grateful for your support. (*Don't Ask me Why*);

It is even magical:

We believe that **magic happens when people come together in passion and purpose for creative collaboration**, and we hope for the opportunity to do that with you. (*Don't Ask me Why*).

Although less often, evaluation also appears as a legitimation strategy in the corpus, most when creators ascribe very positive features to their current and/or proposed work:

This book will be an enchanting, entertaining, treasure that children will want their mothers, fathers, grandmothers, and others to read to them over and over again. (*The Lost Bear & Free Bees: A Human Rights Parable*)

Positive evaluation also regularly appears through the strategies the project creators use to write about themselves as individuals or as a group, but also when they are referring to the potential pledgers. Lastly, comparison strategies have also been applied to legitimise crowdfunding, although not that often. Comparison is often made between one's own project and the other projects addressing the same human rights issue or producing an output of the same or similar format. As described in the following paragraph, it is important to make the project distinguishable among so many others:

We have stories that need to be told but **what makes this project different?** We are

stepping out of what is seen as the stereotype and showing you members of the LGBT community who contributes to society, who raise their families, and that work beside you to create a better life for themselves and those around them. (*Lovin Me: A Human Rights Story*)

5.3. Authority

Authorisation is the third most frequent discursive strategy, employed in 16.14% cases of legitimation in the Kickstarter corpus. It is often related to a specific figure of authority (9.42%) and realised as recommendation (6.50%). Some of the creators choose to place the focus on an important figure which inspires their project, therefore justifying its necessity, to illustrate:

Roberto Clemente is a **hero to the world**, particularly Latin Americans and the people of his native Puerto Rico, as he was **the greatest Latino player in the major leagues**, the Jackie Robinson of the Spanish-speaking world. (*Baseball's Last Hero: The Roberto Clemente Story*)

In other cases, the authority figure referred to is a known expert in the field who is somehow involved with or supporting the project:

The Summer School is led by **Nick Danziger, an internationally renowned practitioner in the field of human rights documentary making**. (*Her dream: to be the human rights filmmaker of Afghanistan*)

These figures can also offer recommendations or be presented as role-models for the type of social action which was being promoted. The source of authority might be an impersonal figure too, like an official institution or a prominent organisation in the relevant field:

Border of Lights is an **international arts/human rights collective, formed in 2012 and championed by students, educators, activists and humanitarians**. The collective utilizes art and education as a social justice tool within the US, Dominican Republic and Haiti, to commemorate, collaborate, and continue the legacy of hope and justice (*Border of Lights 2015*).

Legitimation by authority was also recognised in reference to awards or titles received by project creators or supporters.

5.4. Mythopoesis

Finally, mythopoesis was also employed in the Kickstarter corpus in order to achieve legitimation, although less frequently than other discursive strategies. Moral tales (6.50%) and cautionary tales (3.59%) emerged more often than determination narratives (0.22%). The use of moral tales varies, in some cases they are an integral part of the project itself and often become its final output, for example, in a form of a book or a documentary. The narrative is then in the focus of the project description:

His motto was that if you had a chance to help others and fail to do so, you are wasting your time on this earth. To Clemente, wealth and fame were created to be resources of compassion to those less fortunate. His moral global responsibility extended beyond the playing field. (*Baseball's Last Hero: The Roberto Clemente Story*)

Elsewhere, project creators use moral tales to frame their own work and give account of what they have achieved so far:

I have spent endless, sleepless nights working on these paintings. From sketching the preliminary idea to painting the first layer to realizing "it needs something more" or "it could be better" to re-doing a painting and making another version and another and another. **I'm proud to say that the paintings below are in their purest, final form.** And, while it did not come easy, they were worth it. (*EQUALITY | Feminism, LGBT, & Racial Equality Paintings*)

Cautionary tales are also present in the Kickstarter corpus:

Imagine you are experiencing the worst pain of your life. Now imagine that the only way to get the pain medication you need is to travel several hours on a rickety public bus, while you are in agony. That's the reality for thousands of people every year in Mexico. (*A video on pain relief in Mexico*)

However, just like with some of the moral tales, these are often left open ended, indicating that the pledgers have an opportunity to change the course of events in the narrative, where in this strategy is linked with legitimation by rationalisation.

6. Discussion

Before analysing these findings within the theoretical framework and in the context of the previous studies, it is necessary to point out some of the limitations of this paper. Firstly, this is a small-scale case study, the corpus including only projects from a single crowdfunding platform. However, it can be argued that it is representative of a particular genre within the crowdfunding sphere and discourse in general. Finally, the annotation process is inevitably subject to researcher bias, with possibility of mistakes. Nonetheless, the findings open a space for discussion of legitimation strategies used in online crowdfunding.

First of all, it is interesting to explore in more detail the use of the "tag" and the expression human rights. Although all the projects undergo a review and are subject to approval from the Kickstarter team, choosing to add this tag and classify the project as related to human rights is a decision made by creators themselves. The thematic distribution of projects on Kickstarter reveals that majority of project are concerned with human rights in general, without focusing on a particular aspect of it. These aim to raise awareness of the importance of human rights and encourage their protection, sometimes all over the world sometimes on a very local level. Another prominent category is comprised of projects labelled as "Other". It was either not possible to link these projects to any existing theme or they were set with an individual or even creators' personal agenda. This raises the issue of conceptualising human rights, as these might be the cases where the creators do not fully understand what human rights entail or, more likely, choose to use the "human rights" in order to represent the project as linked a to particular wider agenda or even to generate more interest and attract potential pledgers. As Allison et al. (2015) have suggested, presenting the project as a chance for the pledgers to help others yield better funding outcomes. These projects are nonetheless saved in Kickstarter's archive. Projects related to civil rights in the context of political or wider social issues are also frequent, many topics within this category linked to political persecution, cases of structural and institutional violence, issues related to migration, citizenship and so on. Interestingly, majority of these projects and initiatives are dealing with human rights issues outside of the USA and UK, but are set up and implemented by creators in these countries (as

required by Kickstarter's terms and conditions of use). Another prevailing theme are the rights of LGBTQ community. Projects mostly warn about recurring cases of discrimination and are intended raise the awareness of the importance of educating and informing the general public. In terms of location, project aim to create change in both in the USA and the UK, as well as in some other countries, with varied legislative and sociopolitical frameworks. Gender matters and women's rights, environment, health issues and human rights in areas affected by war and conflicts have also emerged repeatedly in the Kickstarter corpus.

If considered in the terms of general CDA framework, it can be noted that the projects tend to deal with wider social phenomena or individual cases where human rights of a particular group have been endangered or somehow challenged by different factors, sometimes circumstantial, sometimes resulting from another group exercising their power. The Kickstarter projects can therefore be seen as a means of intervention by the creators. Firstly, they have recognised as social problem, in many cases, a consequence in stark power disparity between social groups in particular socio-political context. Next, the campaign creators proposed their projects as a solution or a means of alleviating or even preventing it such power disparity. Crowdfunding is the step in which they are asking for wider approval and, eventually, financial support, justifying the need for the platform to support the online community development and motivational crowdwork (Gerber & Hui 2013). Therefore, crowdfunding platforms might be seen as channel of constructing what Höijer (2004) calls the discourse of global compassion. This process includes informing the public about human rights (or other) crisis, and suggesting ways in which the supporters might more or less directly help the situation.

There is a wide variety of project output formats in the corpus but it need to be noted that this is to great extent stipulated by the project categories hosted by Kickstarter. As a measurable or concrete output of their project, vast majority of creators (over 40%) have chosen to produce a film. Their rationale is that film is an effective way of communicating the message across and engaging with a wider audience. This might leave with the impression that film industry, documentary film in particular, benefits hugely from crowdfunding but, as Sorenson (2015: 2789) notes, film production and distribution is "still dominated and controlled by established media institutions" and in order for crowdfunding to become a stable complementary financing model, "new sustainable peer-to-peer distribution routes and exhibition networks that are not predicated and dependent on legacy media outlets need to emerge". Apart from documentary and fiction film, other the Kickstarter corpus host projects resulting in artistic forms such as paintings, photography, music and multimedia, as well as plays and organisation of different events. This illustrates the diversity of channels recognised as suitable for conveying the message about human rights.

When it comes the annotation of corpus for legitimation strategies, the first thing to note is that the elaborated model presented by van Leeuwen (2008) was applicable on the higher levels of hierarchy; however, further branching did not emerge and the two-level scheme was found more appropriate and sufficient to encompass the legitimation strategies in the corpus. The fact that a single legitimation strategy was rarely used on its own and that there were cases of overlapping, suggests that project creators are likely to opt for a combination of two or more legitimation strategies, to ensure that they have highlighted all the aspects of the project that might be relevant to the potential supporters. It should be noted that there is two-fold link between the legitimation strategies employed and the contents of Kickstarter corpus. On the one hand, strategies, in particular legitimation by rationalisation or authority are employed to legitimise pledging for particular campaigns, but in other cases legitimation refers to the processes of crowdfunding and fundraising in general, and to the action of supporting a particular cause;

Legitimation by rationalisation emerges as most frequent discursive strategy and, just like with microlending (Larrimore et al. 2011), providing detailed explanations of the project's aim and quantifying the financial needs is a viable means of increasing the project's transparency (Gerber &

Hui 2013). The project creators seem to recognise the supporters' desire to know how their donation will be used exactly and point out the measurable impact they supporters might create if the pledge. Although justification of one's current financial circumstances and rationalising the need to raise money in this way is negatively related to funding success, many project creators tend to include this in their project descriptions. These segments include an accounts of all the other options too, rationalising why crowdfunding in the most appropriate on. Appealing to morality in order to justify crowdfunding and encourage donations is fairly expected in the context of human rights related causes, given that empathy and being ascribed the identity of an altruistic person can motivate giving (Aaker & Akutsu 2009). This is also in line with studies that outlined receiving social validation as one of the motivating factors for individuals participating in online crowdfunding (Gerber et al. 2012; Gerber & Hui 2013).

However, the discursive strategy of abstraction is novel in this context. When this is applied, a very concrete action within the proposed project or the act of pledging itself, are being first linked to and then equated to very general and often vague social processes. This leads to the project descriptions being evidently exaggerated, unrealistic or even melodramatic, but nonetheless is among the most frequent forms of legitimation in the Kickstarter corpus. When evaluation is used, these strategies we focused on the project creators themselves, which is the case with artistically inclined project descriptions (Marom & Sade 2013). These strategies often intertwine with legitimation by authority, as sometimes, the project creators are presented as an authority and eminent figures within the respective field, either due to their qualifications or the previous work and experience. It is interesting to note that authority legitimation in the corpus does not rely on customs and traditions. If considered in the context of human rights activism, this might be due to the facts that majority of the projects challenge the current state of affairs and aim to bring about social change, rather than validating and reproducing the present circumstances. This supports the argument that legitimation is employed not only in relation to specific campaigns and causes, but also to justify the idea of crowdfunding.

Narration legitimation strategies in the Kickstarter corpus often revolve, not only around the individuals or groups who are affected by the human rights issue being addressed, but the project creators themselves. They become the protagonists of the story and link their abilities with the project aims. As Herzenstein et al. (2011: 26) note, narratives do not only offer rich qualitative data about the project creators, but also provide the opportunity to "expand current decision making models of lending (and other economic transactions), reduce uncertainty transaction partners usually face and limit future challenges similar to those recently experienced in the financial markets". Finally, narratives in the Kickstarter project also serve to present the possible development of events and improved future situation regarding the human rights awareness and protection. These go to illustrate the effect that might be achieved by potential supporters taking part in the project.

7. Conclusion

The current study applied the model of discursive legitimation of social action to explore how the crowdfunding for human rights has been legitimised on the Kickstarter platform. The findings presented indicate that it is possible to operationalise the model in the context of specialised corpus, such as has been compiled from the project descriptions published on Kickstarter. The projects in question have encompassed a variety of specific topics within the field of human rights, as well as a myriad of different formats, in particular documentary and fiction films. Human rights are here framed within wider discourse humanitarianism, where individuals are offered social validation and altruistic identity, in return for their support of the project. Although projects vary in scope and approach, they all focus on interventions leading to positive social change. Within a CDA framework, this can be regarded as redistribution of power between social groups in a way that

lessens the current disparity.

Through the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the annotated discursive strategies, I have discovered that rationalisation and appealing to morality appear most frequently in the descriptions of projects promoting human rights awareness and protection. Such specific two-fold use of legitimation strategies in reference to particular campaign causes as well as the wider phenomenon of crowdfunding might be seen as indicative of a new genre. Furthermore, when regarded in reference to Martin's definition of genre as "the system of staged, goal-oriented social processes through which social subjects in a given culture live their lives" (2015: 46, 1992), online crowdfunding does feature such goal-oriented social processes, staged in a very specific medium. Finally, the implications of crowdfunding arise not only from the effect of project and initiatives it enables, but also through its influence on the accessibility enterprise development resources in general.

Exploring the legitimation of social actions from a discursive point of view does not only have the potential of informing the practice of crowdfunding, but also provides an insight into how the social action, in this particular case human rights activism, is discursively constructed and exercised by both project leaders and supporters. It would be fruitful to pursue further, more extensive research into the multimodal aspects of crowdfunding discourse, as the scope of this paper is limited to the textual and discursive dimension. Moreover, a research into the interactive elements available on online crowdfunding platforms would provide a deeper insight into the crowdfunding discourse from the perspective of project supporters, but also the dynamics of their interaction with project creators.

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Corpus source

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