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**BEYOND THE CRISIS: WHAT IS
THE FUTURE FOR SMALL
BUSINESSES?**

Challenges, opportunities and lessons
learned

3-4 December 2021

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Table of contents

Introduction to the proceedings of the Piccola Impresa/Small Business 5th Workshop: “Beyond the crisis: what is the future for small businesses? Challenges, opportunities and lessons learned”	3
<i>Sustainable Business</i>.....	8
Sustainable business model and organisational resilience: a case study of an Italian winery enterprise - <i>Pischedda G., Corsi K., Marinò L., Fadda N.</i> ..	9
Do sustainability and food safety stimulate innovation among agri-food entrepreneurs? The experience of Italian innovative startups during the Covid-19 pandemic - <i>Sentuti A., Cesaroni F.</i>	27
Innovative SMEs’ circular economy practices amidst the COVID-19 crisis: A policy incentives focus - <i>Cavicchi C., Oppi C., Vagnoni E.</i>	34
<i>Marketing and Strategies</i>	40
The Role of Serial Crowdfunding in Startup Firms’ Innovative Activities - <i>Pagano A., Fortezza F., Bocconcelli R.</i>	41
The impact of covid-19 on the client-consultant relationship: a multiple case study - <i>Gabbianelli L., Pencarelli T.</i>	59
Crisis and resilience in the post pandemic between trust and commons. The role of SME’s strategies of adaptation in emergent European Green New Deal - <i>Pilotti L.</i>	65
<i>Values and Humane Entrepreneurship</i>	71
From values and purpose, to overcome the Pandemic: MGA of the “Poliambulatorio Risana” - <i>Ceraulo S.</i>	72
What leads to SMEs continuity? - <i>Sgrò F., Palazzi F., Ciambotti M.</i>	93
From Skin Care to Health Care: Female entrepreneurship, profitability and humanistic management in Veralab case - <i>Fioravante R., D’Anghela M., Del Baldo M.</i>	108
Exploring the role of circular start-ups in promoting a more sustainable and humane entrepreneurship - <i>Ghisellini P., Quinto i., Passaro I., Ulgiati S.</i>	124
<i>COVID Impact on SMEs: Resilience and Recovery Strategies</i>	151
Growth Strategies and Diversification Processes as a Response to the Pandemic Crisis: an Italian Multiple Case Study - <i>Savelli E., Murmura F., Pierli G.</i>	152

Managing small firms during the Coronavirus pandemic: A survey on the Italian medical devices industry - <i>Bosone M., Evangelista P., Hallikas J., Kähkönen A-K., Lintukangas K., Immonen M.</i>	170
The impact of COVID-19 on SMEs' entrepreneurial elements - <i>Francioni B., Curina I., Cioppi M.</i>	190
The antifragility-opportunity nexus. Empirical evidences at the time of COVID-19 - <i>Rivetti F., Rossi C., Fiore G.</i>	195
COVID and Business Crisis	199
“It-could-work!” Multistakeholder governance mechanisms for firms’ regeneration: An opportunity for SMEs in times of crisis - <i>Di Toma P., Lazzini A.</i>	200
Innovation and Covid-19 crisis: Evidence from Italian medium-sized firms - <i>Chamocho D., Ciambotti M., Del Baldo M., Palazzi F.</i>	218
The impact of covid-19 effects on the life cycle of romanian SMEs - <i>RIZA I., BĂNDOI A., Sitnikov C., TĂNASIE A.</i>	233
NFI for Early-Warning. CSR directive and insolvency directive: their composed impact on SMSs. Searching for a new model - <i>Riva P., Garelli A.</i>	252
Cross-Cultural Contexts	256
“Next Generation Italia” and interventions on Cultural Heritage in small historical towns: from opportunities to actions? - <i>Demartini P., Aureli S., Del Baldo M.</i>	257
An overview of the early research on Covid-19 and SMEs - <i>Bassani G., Sentuti A.</i>	275
European Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises in the pandemic context. Vulnerabilities and next challenges, measures contained in National Recovery and Resilience Plans - <i>Farina V., Lanciano E., Previati D.</i>	295

Introduction to the proceedings of the Piccola Impresa/Small Business 5th Workshop: “Beyond the crisis: what is the future for small businesses? Challenges, opportunities and lessons learned”

By Tonino Pencarelli, Francesca Maria Cesaroni, Paola Demartini,
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Dear readers, in this volume, we are pleased to present the proceedings of the 5th Workshop organised by the journal *Piccola Impresa/Small Business* in collaboration with the Association for the study of small enterprises (ASPI), the Research Center on Entrepreneurship and Small-medium firms (CRIMPI), the Italian Academy of Business Economics (AIDEA) and the European Council for Small Business and Entrepreneurship (ECSB). The workshop title was “*Beyond the crisis: what is the future for small businesses? Challenges, opportunities and lessons learned*”, and it took place online on December 4-5, 2021.

The aim of the conference was to bring together scholars of entrepreneurship and small and medium-sized enterprises, to discuss the emerging issues following the Covid-19 pandemic.

As we have highlighted in the call for papers of the workshop and a previous editorial published in the journal mentioned above (Pencarelli et al. 2021), the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered the largest public health crisis in living memory, with serious—and still unpredictable—consequences for the global economy. Available data clearly shows that SMEs have particularly suffered from economic downturn: their inherent weaknesses have amplified and accelerated the effects of the crisis compared to larger firms (Cowling et al., 2020; OECD, 2020). Notably, in Italy, the Covid-19 outbreak has challenged SMEs’ survival after a decade of a slow and incomplete recovery (CERVED, 2020, 2021).

The crisis has also generated the opportunity to (*re*)think about the economy and society as a whole (Barbier and Burgess, 2020), accelerating some already ongoing key trends: *innovation, digitalisation, sustainability,*

Marketing and Strategies

The Role of Serial Crowdfunding in Startup Firms' Innovative Activities

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Abstract

Crowdfunding (CF) has attracted increasing attention from researchers and many studies have been conducted in order to shed light over a variety of aspects of the phenomenon, especially when a start-up is involved in.

Recently, CF has been investigated also in the light of the “seriality” of CF campaigns, i.e. the participation to more than one campaign by the startup. The existing studies in this stream of research, focus mainly on how “serial CF” affects the management of the subsequent campaigns and their performance, thus adopting a merely “tactical” perspective on the phenomenon. More importantly, there is a lack of in-depth studies over the actual processes characterizing serial CF and its role in innovation strategies and practices.

Consistently with the above mentioned gaps in literature, the main goal of this paper is thus to analyze more in depth the role of serial CF in innovation strategies adopted by start-up firms, shedding light on the micro-processes involved, in line with the recent call for exploring the “non-financial” dimension of CF.

To this aim the paper adopts a qualitative methodology based on an exploratory case-study of a company actively exploiting multiple CF campaigns mostly as opportunities for innovation. The case offers insights over the role of serial CF in innovation processes,

as it shows a company deliberately participating to these initiatives with the goal of developing new products and generating innovative ideas through the systematic collaboration with committed early adopters.

Keywords – startup, serial crowdfunding, innovation, business networks

Paper type – Academic Research Paper

1 Introduction

Crowdfunding (hereafter CF) platforms represent a new source of resources to support either business or not-for-profit entrepreneurial projects. CF has received increasing attention by scholars, attempting to explore its main features and processes (Block et al., 2018; Brown et al., 2018; Raab et al., 2020). CF is no longer framed only as a tool for access to financial resources for specific needs, as it is also conceived as a new way to enter the market and compete (Lehner et al., 2015) and to gain access to a variety of resources (Pollack et al., 2019), thus allowing firms to pursue innovative solutions (Hervè and Schwienbacher, 2018).

In parallel, the literature on “serial CF” is gaining growing attention by scholars (Butticè et al., 2017). The few existing studies focus mainly on how serial CF affects the management of the subsequent campaigns and their performance (Sewaid et al., 2021), thus adopting a merely tactical perspective on the phenomenon. More importantly, there is a lack of in-depth studies over the actual processes characterizing serial CF and its role in innovation strategies and practices.

Therefore the main goal of this paper is to analyze more in depth the role of serial CF in innovation strategies adopted by start-up firms, shedding light on the micro-processes involved, in line with the recent call for exploring the “non-financial” dimension of CF (Nielsen, 2018; Hervè and Schwienbacher, 2018, Pollack et al., 2019).

Notably, this paper aims at answering the following research questions (RQ):

- Which is the role of serial CF in innovation processes implemented by startup firms?
- How do startup firms manage innovation processes emerging from serial CF?

To answer these questions the paper adopts a qualitative methodology based on an exploratory case-study of a company actively exploiting multiple CF campaigns mostly as “opportunities” for innovation. The use of a qualitative approach is in line with the call of Elridge et al. (2021) viewing companies “*as living organisms*” and arguing that “*it is not possible to capture all intrinsic characteristics of crowdfunding and its role in financing SME growth through a purely quantitative approach*”. The analysis of the case-study is pursued through the lenses of the IMP approach and of the ARA model (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995), as it provides a useful framework to examine the evolution of networks while placing attention on the underlying processes involving different actors, multiple activities, and development and combination of relevant resources. This approach is in line with the call by Nielsen (2018) “*to adapt their research approach and to look beyond the single actors (platform, campaigns, and crowdfunders) of the process and instead seek to empirically observe how the overall crowdfunding process is maintained*”. It also answers to Manning (2018), placing emphasis on “*the actual process of reaching out to different ecosystems, to better capture how resource-bundling and market-building happens over time and what role various platforms and ecosystems play in this process*”.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section two addresses the literature background; after an exploration of the research on the serial CF phenomenon, the IMP studies on startups and the role of relationships and networks is discussed, with a specific attention to the networks of actors, activities and resources (ARA). In the third section some methodological notes about the single case study development are addressed. Section four is devoted to the case analysis. The following section discusses the main results of the study. Finally, the main contributions of the study under a theoretical and managerial perspective and the future research developments will be outlined.

2 Literature review

2.1 Serial CF

In recent years CF has received great attention in the field of management studies (Belleflamme et al., 2014; Brown et al., 2019; Chaney, 2019; Lagazio and Querci, 2018; Mollick, 2014). It can be defined as “*an open call for the provision of financial resources, either in the form of donations or in exchange for non-financial rewards or financial gains to support specific initiatives*” (Fortezza et al., 2021).

It is widely known that CF can take many different forms, in the light of the objectives set up by the promoting organization and of the features of the chosen platform and related CF scheme. The two more widely used CF schemes are the equity crowdfunding (hereafter ECF) and non-equity crowdfunding (hereafter NECF); the former is characterized by the access to a capital share by backers/funders leading to an entrepreneur-investor relationships, while the latter is concerned with various kinds of rewards for those providing financial support.

Existing literature on CF highlights its strong relational dimension (Brown et al., 2018; Brown et al., 2019; Nielsen, 2018). Participating in CF campaigns implies on the one hand activating relationships with partner organizations and firms, such as CF platforms, consultants and suppliers of tangible products and services (Fortezza et al., 2021), on the other hand starting the interaction with the world of backers, which includes actors – individuals, organizations, firms – already part of the existing proponents’ networks and newly contacted through the launch of the CF campaigns (Butticè and Noona, 2020). The networked nature of CF campaigns has been explored with regard to the role of social capital, as it effectively shapes their evolution and performance. A key distinction has been made between “internal social capital” – related to backers participating to the campaign – and “external social capital” concerning the networks surrounding the CF proponent (Eiteneyer et al., 2019). CF campaigns are able to connect – and are shaped by – multiple contexts and local ecosystems (Manning, 2018). Overall, CF campaigns are characterized by strong complexity: *“the crowdfunding process appears to inhabit multiple organizational molds simultaneously network, community, market, and organization, each of which explains aspects of the crowdfunding process but fails to explain it in its entirety”* (Nielsen, 2018). CF complexity implies also organizational hurdles, which might represent key barriers for effectively implementing this type of projects (Di Pietro et al., 2021).

In the light of its nature and features, CF has become a key tool for accessing also non-financial resources to implement innovative projects. CF can provide useful technical and market knowledge, which can be used for upgrading products and services and for tapping into new markets (Nielsen, 2018; Hervè and Schwienbacher, 2018, Pollack et al., 2019). Even though various studies emphasize the benefits offered by CF, its actual impact on innovation is strongly debated. While Troise and colleagues (2021) and Wachs and Vedres (2021) find a positive effect of CF on the innovation enhancement, Eldridge (et al., 2021) instead, provide evidence of a positive impact on SMEs’ growth, but not on their innovation performance. However, various scholars highlight the need of more in-depth research over

the actual innovation-related interaction processes between CF actors (Hervè and Schwienbacher, 2018), placing emphasis on the role of “active backers” (Butticè, 2020).

Opportunities offered by CF have fostered the development of serial CF, which could be defined as “*the participation in more than one CF campaign*” (Fortezza et al., 2021). Serial CF is a relevant phenomenon attracting increasing interest by various scholars engaged in research on CF (Bessièrè et al., 2019; Efrat et al., 2021; Lehner et al., 2015; Noonan et al., 2020; Onochie Fan-Osuala, 2021). Existing studies have been mainly concerned on the performance of campaigns and on the main factors – such as social capital and learning – shaping it (Butticè et al., 2017; Lee and Chiravuri, 2019; Skirnevskiy et al., 2017; Stanko and Henard, 2016): achieving CF targets in subsequent campaigns is positively impacted by building on consolidating social networks emerging in the first CF campaigns and by learning generated through the initial experience in CF. Limited emphasis – instead – has been placed on the actual serial CF processes and specifically on the motivations, behavior and practices of serial CF proponents. An exception is the study by Efrat and colleagues (2021) shedding light on the “emotional” side of CF and the role of passion and achievement in pushing entrepreneurs to undertake subsequent campaigns. Notably, the connection between serial CF and the underlying innovative processes have not received yet adequate attention in the management literature.

To better explore serial CF as an innovation strategy we argue that the Business Network perspective – as outlined in the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group – provides a useful framework, as it places strong emphasis on the evolution of business networks – a key feature of CF and serial CF – and on interaction processes among actors leading to the emergence of new activities and the development of new resources. This perspective will be discussed in more depth in the following paragraph.

2.1 Startup development in IMP studies

IMP-related studies dealing with startups and entrepreneurship have known a huge development in the last years (Aaboen et al., 2017; Baraldi et al., 2019). Notably, Business Network approach has been applied in order to understand the main role played by interaction and relationships in affecting the evolution of the start-ups. Contributions on this theme rely on the main IMP concepts - interaction, business relationships, networks - and on the main frameworks - Actors-Activities-Resources (ARA) model and resource interaction framework (Bocconcelli et al., 2020; Håkansson et al.,

2009), in order to shed light on the evolution of the start-up from its foundation (and even before) and throughout its development.

The starting point of these analyses is the recognition that startups are not in a *vacuum* (Snehota, 2011), instead they emerge and develop within complex sets of actors, activities and resources. New businesses are engaged in "assembly of resources" with the involvement of partners, customers and suppliers (Ciabuschi et al., 2012). Various studies focus on the role and impact of networks and notably of initial relationships in the path undertaken by start-up firms to become a new node (Gadde et al., 2012; Havenvid and La Rocca, 2017; La Rocca et al., 2013). Start-ups might be engaged in interaction with a variety of business networks, which might be related to different development, production and user settings (Landqvist and Lind, 2019) and also with communities - sharing interest or passions - thus simultaneously dealing with both business and social networks, which could be characterized by both overlapping and distinct culture and values (Brown et al., 2018; Pagano et al., 2018). Overall startups - in the light of their limited availability of resources and liability of newness (Guercini and Milanesi, 2019; Baraldi et al., 2019) - might face difficulties while being engaged in complex activities involving high degree of innovation - i.e. new product development, market analysis, commercialization. Therefore startups in the early stages deal with uncertainty and ambiguity in terms of product development and overall offering, potential customers, and organisational configuration (Ciabuschi et al., 2012; La Rocca et al., 2013).

The "control" of key resources, the development of core activities as well as the exploitation of previous business relationships with different actors could allow start-up firms to implement interactions on a more equal footing (Petrucci, 2018) and thus facilitate the process of "strategizing" in a network context (Laari-Salmela et al., 2015). Effective strategizing is shaped by the construction of a network identity able to attract customers, suppliers and supporting organizations (La Rocca et al., 2019; Laari-Salmela et al., 2019). All this could lead to three distinct processes of start-up firms' network embedding: establishment, consolidation and stabilization (Baraldi et al., 2019).

In the context of startups IMP studies have been only marginally concerned with the financial aspect (Strömsten and Waluszewski, 2012). More precisely, IMP studies have questioned the traditional approach that considers the process of start-ups financing as isolated and linear and emphasize its interconnectedness with other relevant processes of start-ups development. IMP concepts has been recently adopted in the study of the role of networks in CF activities. Brown et al. (2019) argue that CF is much more than money when a network perspective is taken over such processes.

In particular, they show “*the important role that different types of networks – interpersonal and inter-organisational networks, strong and weak, close and far – play in mediating the equity CF process for start-ups*” (Brown et al., 2019: 9). Moreover, it has been showed that participating to more than one CF campaign - i.e. serial CF - can be considered as an actual strategizing tool undertaken by startups in order to deal with the various challenges that a startup faces in its path of development (Fortezza et al., 2021).

In this line of thought, in this paper we are interested at shedding more light on the role of serial CF in innovation processes implemented by startups firms and on the way they cope with innovation processes emerging from serial CF.

3 Methodological notes

In order to answer the two RQs, the paper is based on a single case study methodology (Yin, 2003). The choice of this method rely on the exploratory nature of the RQs aimed at disentangling the complexity of the process of CF and its role in the development of innovation processes of startup. The choice of qualitative methodology is in line with recent call for more in-depth qualitative research on start-up and CF (Bessièrè et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2018; Brown et al., 2019) and represents a complementary methodology to existing contributions - mostly adopting a quantitative approach (Butticè et al., 2017) - on serial CF campaigns. Moreover, the processual approach in CF projects is called upon in recent contributions (Brown et al., 2019), is in line with IMP studies on new venture development and is deemed necessary to examine in detail the evolution over time of CF campaigns, while linking the analysis of CF processes to the overall evolution of startup, especially in relation to the innovation strategy.

The company selected for conducting the study is *Delta*. *Delta* started its activity in 2012, and was formally constituted in 2014 in the business of 3D integrated solutions, notably in the development of 3D printers to be employed in different B2B contexts.

Delta has been selected for two main interrelated reasons. First, it is active in a high-tech sector characterized by a fast evolving technology (at the time of the foundation), and thus allowing us for more easily catching the main innovation “upgradings” throughout different CF campaigns. Second, the company has been involved in five CF campaign with the same CF scheme - i.e. NECF. This “seriality” in approaching the CF strategy - characterized by a certain regularity in time of the campaigns form the

beginning on, and by the use of the same scheme - allowed us to trace the linkages between the CF and the innovation path followed by the company.

Data has been collected from different sources. Primary sources are direct semi-structured interviews and netnographic based analysis. Notably, three interviews have been conducted in the time frame January 2018-October 2021 with the co-founders of the startup. The average duration of the interviews is 1 hour. For what concerns the netnographic data collection, we analyzed a number of codified content items (comments, replies, posts and communications) from different Web sources such as CF platforms, company blogs/websites and their social media platforms, for a total of 16 pages of scanned material and 37 items in CF platforms of the five campaigns. Secondary data has been also collected, such as the companies' newspaper interviews, articles and press releases and used to complete our data collection and support the ex post reconstruction.

We then followed a systematic combining procedure, adopting an abductive approach (Dubois and Gadde, 2002) for the data analysis, given the explorative nature of case research based on a logic of investigation based on the match of theoretical approaches to the topic and empirical observations. In particular, the analysis has been based on the ARA framework that constitutes the conceptual frame of reference for the study (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995).

4 The *Delta* case

Delta is an Italian startup venture specialized in designing and producing resin-based 3d printers co-founded by Davide and Manuela.

Davide is an industrial designer with a long experience as an independent professional working for companies operating in several fields. He also is a creative maker (he defines himself a "self-made maker") with huge passion for all forms of art. In 2012 he realized the potentialities of 3D printing, especially for makers. He was particularly intrigued by a new technology (i.e. stereolithography) which was less common at the time, but able to allow for better performance to makers because of a higher level of accuracy. His brilliant intuition was that of combining accuracy with design and portability of printers with the ambitious aim to create the first portable 3D printer. To this end he involved a friend of him (i.e. Manuela) in this challenge. Manuela is a multi-skilled professional with a strong on-the-field experience as a production and marketing manager in the interior design and fashion sectors. Although she had no specific background on 3D printing, she quickly learned the basics thanks to the training provided by Davide and greatly helped him in fine-tuning his initial product idea.

In 2013 Davide and Manuela presented their first prototype (as a ‘simple trial’) at an important exhibition fair in Rome dedicated to inventors and creatives. The project received strong attention because it was the first time that the concept of portability was introduced into the so-called “additive manufacturing world”.

In order to turn the prototype into a real product, they decided to launch a first explorative NECF campaign on Indiegogo (2013) with the specific objective of testing their product idea in an international competitive setting and:

“interact with knowledgeable people able to act as sort of co-developers in an open project.” (Delta’s co-founder Manuela, interview).

This first campaign was an unexpected success (see Table 1 for details) for the two co-founders since it had not been “professionally” built and no communication strategy had been implemented. What impressed Davide and Manuela was much more than the raised money (i.e. around \$15,000 out of \$1,500 as the CF campaign goal). In fact, they got numerous valuable tips from very committed backers as well as enthusiastic mentions on leading international online newspapers and magazines which made them feel that their product idea had been validated and successful.

Notwithstanding that, they also clearly realized that CF was not as easily managed as they had originally thought.

“We needed to study hard to get prepared for such a challenge!” (Delta’s co-founder Manuela, interview).

“I had heard about this powerful grassroots funding tool for dreamers without resources like me, but - to be honest - I only had a rough idea of it.” (Delta’s co-founder Davide, company website).

The CF campaign success persuaded them to formalize the creation of a real company in 2014, also thanks to the support of a digital startup incubator.

The initial product prototype was developed further, evolving into a several different models, by means of the continuous feedback from backers, that the company actively prompted through daily interactions either inside or outside the chosen CF platform. From this point of view, the first CF campaign was an icebreaker and a trigger for a network of committed and qualified “co-creators” to emerge. Therefore, from that point on, Davide and Manuela decided to systemically rely on (NE)CF campaigns (Table 1) to improve the product and boost the business as it became clear

that CF could be the perfect path for them to follow to access the market in an exploratory, co-evolutionary, and innovative manner within a potentially never-ending collaborative process.

“Our goal is to get the product into the hands of early adopters like you as soon as possible. We want you to be involved, whether to provide feedback on the experience, and we’ll be hard at work too, delivering updates and new functionality on a regular basis to add more performance and capabilities to the product.” (Excerpt from one of Delta’s CF campaigns introduction).

“Through CF campaigns we could get in touch with users who did not really want a structured product; rather, they wanted a smart idea to work on with us and we had to be able to interact with them. In a nutshell, our business domain was not ‘the whole market’ exactly, but the special market space built through CF campaigns.” (Delta’s co-founder Manuela, interview).

In 2014 the second CF campaign was successfully performed, again on Indiegogo, specifically to enhance the product. Just one year later, in 2015, it was time for the third (successful) CF campaign, on an Italian platform (i.e. Eppela), to further strengthen the product development process. These two campaigns provided a further validation to *Delta*’s existing products, which were enriched with new features, but also lead to a brand new item to meet additional requests by backers. In fact, in the same year a lighter-weight 3D printer was launched on the market again with a (successful) CF campaign (the fourth one), on the best-known international CF platform, Kickstarter.

In 2016, a new technology specialist and other part-time professionals joined *Delta*.

In the meantime, the company could benefit from the “long tail” of the previous CF campaigns which enhanced *Delta*’s direct sales as well as the brand’s visibility and reputation, above all through the special collaboration with some of the most active backers who acted as opinion leaders in creative fields consistent with *Delta*’s business. They got involved in dedicated special events organized or promoted by the company and voluntarily started to endorse *Delta* on their social media channels and in their professional circles.

Thanks to the brand awareness and reputation generated by the successful CF campaigns performed by *Delta*, the start-up was also involved by other companies to the development of projects in their behalf. In particular, a very important agreement was signed with a multinational

company operating in the dental industry for an important innovation project which became an important part of *Delta*'s business.

In 2018, a fifth CF campaign was launched, again on Kickstarter, but this time it was a failure with roughly \$4,000 collected out of an initial goal of \$25,000. Indeed, *Delta* very soon realized that the item put up as a reward (i.e., a 3D professional viewer) was more suitable for a business-to-business context than the one usually engaged by Kickstarter platform (which, on the contrary, relies more on a consumer context). Nevertheless, it can be argued that the start-up saw this episode as a valuable opportunity in marketing terms thus showing a clever tension to learning.

“It seems that, despite the success and the enthusiasm we received, the project is not yet mature enough to be considered a commercial product ready for the market. We will now take some time to review the project, thanks also to the feedback we have received; we will keep working on it, so you will still hear about it in the future!” (Delta’s CEO, CF campaign webpage).

“CF teaches you to always to be prepared to fix something in your product, in your working method, in your supply, even in your team! You always need to be flexible and responsive to find a new solution. That’s a great way of enhancing your company in the long run!” (Delta’s co-founder, interview).

Table 1 – *Delta*'s CF journey

YEAR	CF PLATFORM	PRODUCT AS A REWARD	FUNDING GOAL	FUNDING OUTCOME	No. OF BACKERS
2013	Indiegogo	A small and foldable 3D printer	\$1,500	\$15,642	51
2014	Indiegogo	A compact 3D printer	\$50,000	\$70,030	177
2015	Eppela	A compact 3D printer	€ 10,000	€ 11,053	43
2015	Kickstarter	A compact 3D printer (lighter-weight version)	€ 39,000	€ 61,328	134
2018	Kickstarter	A volumetric visualization device	€ 25,000	€ 4,093	10

Consistently with its market approach, the company is currently about to launch a new special product, a self-assemble 3D printer, and it will highly likely be through a new NECF campaign. From this point of view, *Delta*'s co-founders see CF as an experimental journey, in order to sustain, test and optimize each product which is introduced in the market until it proves ready to be sold through the company e-shop or specialized distribution channels.

“For us - our source says - CF is like a journey. Each time, we get to know something new and that provides us with new opportunities. We know well when we can stop experimenting with backers and move on to the next step, which consists of a more structured and linear distribution of the product.”
(*Delta's co-founder, interview*)

5 Discussion of results

The *Delta* case offers insights over the role of CF in innovation processes, as it shows a company deliberately participating to these initiatives with the goal of developing new products and generating innovative ideas through the systematic collaboration with committed early adopters. This case study highlights that CF could represent a key tool for innovation and therefore a main component of the innovation strategy pursued by startup firms (Stank and Henard, 2016; Pollack et al., 2019; Hervè and Schwienbacher, 2018).

Beside the relevance of CF, the *Delta* case offers an empirical example over the evolving process of CF participation and innovation outcomes. The evolution seems to be characterized by three distinct phases: the “entry phase”; the “consolidation phase”; the “planned exploration” phase.

The “entry phase” is related to the first experience in the CF setting. *Delta* is aware of the potential benefits in terms of new ideas, but is not knowledgeable the CF mechanisms and processes, which represent a new playground for the startup. Therefore the basic attitude is to explore CF as a context for innovation in an experimental manner and face managerial difficulties when they emerge adopting different, incremental “not planned” solutions (Brown et al., 2018).

The “consolidation phase” is characterized by a more explicit CF strategy both in terms of product and platform choice. *Delta* founders have been keen in analyzing the first CF experience and thus learn how to exploit CF for their innovation goals. In this phase three distinct CF campaigns have been undertaken in a short period of time, pursuing always the NECF scheme as it represents a more adequate option for collecting new ideas and receive technical feedback (Hervè and Schwienbacher, 2018). This

apparently “linear” approach has been combined with a flexible orientation in terms of products and platforms.

This preference towards an “incremental” approach is shown in the recent phase where *Delta* attempts to explore new contexts and products within CF, while building on the previous experience of CF campaigns and interactions with active and innovative backers. This phase could be labelled “planned exploration” as *Delta* accepts to take on more risks. This is apparent with the most recent campaign where *Delta* has not been successful. Notwithstanding the negative outcome, *Delta* has been keen on learning from this experience.

The evolution of *Delta* in its approach to pursuing innovation through CF campaigns could be examined in more depth using the ARA framework.

In terms of actors, a key role is played by the founders. Davide is in charge of the technological side of the company and therefore has a main role in the interaction with active backers. Manuela instead is focussed on the administration and marketing sides and plays a key role in the actual planning and management of the CF campaigns. The *Delta* case highlights the relevance of active backers (Butticè and Noonan, 2020) since the first CF campaign, where an “inner circle” of passionate and supportive backers start following the evolution of *Delta* and provides useful technical feedback in the light of their strong expertise. This consolidated network is actively involved in the various CF campaigns (Brown et al., 2019) and therefore represents a supportive context *Delta* and its projects.

In terms of activities, the *Delta* case shows that the pursue of innovation-related goals in CF campaigns is linked to the implementation of ad hoc product development on the one hand and marketing and communication activities on the other. With regard to the former, *Delta* attempted to involve active backers for the provision of technical feedback and has placed great emphasis on activities promoting and supporting intense technical interaction. A wide and deep role of active backers has been possible because of appropriate marketing and communication activities – within and outside the CF campaigns – able to raise interest among potential backers and promoting word-of-mouth among technical experts in the field.

In terms of resources, CF campaigns have been themselves a relevant “source of sources” in terms of financing and technical knowledge. Success in the first CF rounds allowed *Delta* to invest financial resources in product development and marketing effort. However, the systematic use of CF has been crucial to generate and develop new ideas and technical feedback thanks to the interaction processes and to the combination of expertise held by the technical staff in *Delta* and the active backers representing a stable and committed source of knowledge (Butticè and Noonan, 2020). This has

meant – for *Delta* and notably for its founders and technical staff – devoting time, energy and commitment for planning and managing CF campaigns and their aftermath. This approach had a key role in the development of an inner circle of active backers, representing a main resource themselves in terms of relationships and networking opportunities.

6 Conclusions

The aim of the paper is to explore the role of serial CF in the innovation process of startup firms. The in-depth analysis of a case study – *Delta* company active in developing 3D printers and involved in five CF campaigns – provides interesting insights to be further examined in next research initiatives. The IMP approach and the ARA framework have been used to highlight the main underlying patterns and factors. This paper shows that CF – in its serial configuration – might represent for startup firms an “experimental temporary setting” for pursuing both product and organizational innovation. *Delta* case-study suggests that the “innovation profile” of serial CF processes might be characterized mainly by 1) an “inner circle” of “active backers”; 2) structured product development and marketing activities; 3) strong technical expertise and commitment – in terms of effort and time – by startup firm’s founders. These “features” could be taken into consideration by startupperes when evaluating or planning CF campaigns, as “seriality” in connection with “innovation” could represent the building blocks of a CF experience oriented to startup growth (Stanko and Henard, 2016).

Future research could further explore how CF and serial CF could spur innovation processes and outcomes, analyzing in more depth organizational practices and communication and interaction patterns, leading to business relationships development. CF campaigns are complex projects and might have “enduring” effects to be properly managed. However, it is well known that startup firms have limited resources, also in terms of time and commitment. Unveiling “best practices” in CF management (Fehrer and Nenonen, 2020) for innovation purposes could be very beneficial for emerging startup firms, which represent increasingly valuable actors in economy and society.

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