

Musicians and artists are taking control of their careers with new subscription-based crowdfunding models

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- Creatives hit hard in the pandemic have found new, lucrative ways of selling their work online
- Artists are using social media to attract fans, then selling content through subscription platforms like Patreon
- This new model generates more regular income, but is open to abuse and leaves artists playing the role of agent and promoter as well as creative

Musicians are building more financially sustainable careers using subscription platforms like Patreon, according to a new study published offering hope amid the challenges of streaming and copyright theft.

A shift towards selling digital forms of art in the pandemic, when artists could not perform, has led to a permanent move for many, with increasingly positive results.

According to new research by the University of Sussex, University of Warwick and the Institute for Employment Studies, musicians and other creatives, like visual artists, have found new routes to commercial success without the need for widespread fame.

Fanbases are increasingly cultivated online through social media. To build a sense of community and generate regular income, followers are offered exclusive content through subscription platforms, with proceeds going directly to artists.

“Amid the challenges of music streaming, copyright theft and AI-generated art you’d be forgiven for thinking an artistic career was only realistic for the privileged few, but this is far from true,” said University of Sussex Business School Professor Dimitra Petrakaki. “Today’s savvy creatives are using social media like YouTube and Instagram to build a fanbase, then monetising this through subscription platforms like Patreon. In exchange for a monthly fee, fans get exclusive benefits from early music releases to behind-the-scenes footage and one to one interaction with artists.”

The researchers interviewed musicians and visual artists about how using this model influences relationships with fans and the creative process, as well as income. With more than six million users and 200,000 artists using its platform Patreon has paid out over \$2billion to creatives since 2013. While most of those interviewed by the researchers use multiple platforms, all said Patreon enabled them to generate the most revenue.

Artists also reported creative benefits and stronger relationships with patrons. Professor Petrakaki added: “Artists can get a sense of freedom with monthly subscriptions, compared to the hamster wheel of working to commissions, and a real sense of loyalty from their community. In some ways it’s taking the dynamic back to an earlier, pre-twentieth century understanding of the relationship between patrons and artists, with patrons supporting individual artists instead of the wider art economy. At its best, this closer relationship can provide mentorship and personal support as well as funds.”

But the researchers found this new model comes with potential downsides too:

Becci Newton, Director, Public Policy Research at the Institute for Employment Studies, said: “Some artists feel a sense of creative pressure, fearing that close contact with fans led them to become

crowd-pleasers. The model is also open to abuse, with subscribers able to join a channel, download all the content and then unsubscribe. Lastly there were worries of becoming overly dependent on Patreon itself, and vulnerable to changes to terms and conditions or charging structures, although that was generally considered a reasonable price to pay.”

To build a successful regular income under this model the researchers found creatives need to develop entrepreneurial skills to work out how to incentivise their patrons. This includes managing the pros and cons of offering a flat rate subscription versus a tiered system, essentially taking on the role of agent and promoter as well as artist.

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