

Virtual Freelancing: Reshaping Entrepreneurship and Self-Employment



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Formal Declaration

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Dedication

To my beloved father and mother for their endless love, support, and prayers.

List of Acronyms

\$	Dollar
AI	Artificial Intelligence
BPO	Business Process Outsourcing
CA	Chartered Accountancy
CM	Chief Minister
FB	Facebook
GoP	Government of Pakistan
HCI	Human-Computer Interaction
HR	Human Resource
ICT	Information and communication technologies
K	Thousand
LMS	Learning Management System
M	Million
MoITT	Ministry of Information Technology and Telecommunication
NEP	National Expansion Plan
NFTP	National Freelance Training Program
OLI	Online Labour Index
P.B.U.H	Peace Be Upon Him
PITB	Punjab Information Technology Board
PKR	Pakistani Rupees
SEO	Search Engine Optimization
SNS	Social Networking Sites
UI	User Interface

US\$ United States Dollar

UX User Experience

Table of Contents

List of Acronyms	III
List of Figures	IX
List of Tables	IX
Abstract	X
1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Problem Statement	3
1.2 Research Questions	3
1.3 Definition of Key Terms	4
1.4 Significance of the Study	5
1.5 Thesis Outline	6
2 LITERATURE REVIEW	8
2.1 Understanding Freelancing	8
2.2 Historical Development of the Freelancing Industry in Pakistan	11
2.3 Government Endeavors to Promote Freelancing	14
2.3.1 Digital Pakistan Policy.....	14
2.3.2 National Freelancing Facilitation Policy	15
2.3.3 Training and Development Programs	16
2.3.4 National Expansion Plan (NEP) of NICs.....	16
2.4 Classification Scheme for On-Demand Labor Marketplaces.....	17
2.5 Factors Behind the Increase in Freelancers.....	19
2.6 Satisfaction with Work-Life Balance.....	19
2.7 Bias and Discrimination on Freelance Marketplaces.....	20
2.8 Gig-Economy and Freelance Economy.....	21
2.9 Freelance work as Informal Economy	22

2.10	Redefining Entrepreneurship and Self-employment	23
2.11	Anthropological Lens – A Step from Ethnography to Netnography in the Exploration of Digital Communities.....	24
2.12	Theoretical Frameworks	26
2.12.1	Immaterial Labor 2.0 and Digital Capitalism	26
2.12.2	Neoliberalism.....	27
3	RESEARCH SETTING AND METHODOLOGY	29
3.1	Methodology	29
3.1.1	Rapport Building.....	30
3.1.2	Key Informants	30
3.1.3	Pilot Study.....	31
3.1.4	Participant Observation.....	32
3.1.5	In-Depth Interviews	36
3.1.6	Semi-structured Interview Guide.....	37
3.1.7	Sample and Sampling Techniques	37
3.1.8	Field Jottings.....	40
3.1.9	Audio Recordings	40
3.1.10	Data Analysis	41
3.1.11	Ethical Considerations	44
3.1.12	Problems Encountered During Research	45
3.2	Research Locale: The Online Platforms.....	47
3.2.1	e-Rozgar Training Program	47
3.2.2	Fiverr.....	50
3.2.3	Facebook.....	52
4	VIRTUAL FREELANCING AS SELF-EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY	58

4.1	Virtual Freelancing as a Viable Career	58
4.1.1	Training and Upskilling	59
4.1.2	Building a Portfolio: Assessment of Freelancer	63
4.1.3	Profile Creation.....	65
4.1.4	Mediums for Virtual Freelancing.....	66
4.2	Conceptualization of Virtual Freelancing	74
4.2.1	Digital Divide (Urban vs Rural)	74
4.2.2	Social Structure and Social Dynamics	75
4.2.3	Lived-Experiences of Freelancers.....	78
4.2.4	Influence of Cultural Lag among the Population on Their Perceptions and Conceptualization	80
4.2.5	Generation Gap	83
4.3	Conclusions	86
5	MOTIVATIONS AND CHALLENGES OF VIRTUAL FREELANCERS	87
5.1	Motivations and Inspirations of Virtual Freelancers.....	87
5.1.1	Unemployment Woes and Inflationary Pressure	87
5.1.2	Financial Independence	89
5.1.3	Freelancing as an Inclusive Employment Opportunity.....	90
5.1.4	Freedom and Flexibility of Work	94
5.1.5	Dissatisfaction with Corporate Jobs.....	95
5.1.6	Scope of Increment or Growth.....	96
5.2	Challenges in Virtual Freelance Work.....	98
5.2.1	Lack of Reliability	98
5.2.2	Payment Issues.....	101
5.2.3	Self-management Issues.....	104

5.2.4	Lack of Support from Colleagues	106
5.2.5	Unrecognized Work Experience	107
5.2.6	Frauds and Scams	108
5.3	Freelance Outsourcing and Exploitation of Labor	113
5.3.1	Case Study of a Freelancer Working for Outsourcers	115
5.4	Paradoxical Empowerment	117
5.4.1	Autonomy and Flexibility	117
5.4.2	Self-Expression and Creative Control	120
5.5	Conclusions	121
6	STEP AHEAD TOWARD ENTREPRENEURSHIP	122
6.1	Transition from Freelancing to Entrepreneurship	122
6.2	Solopreneurship.....	123
6.3	Entrepreneurship	126
6.3.1	Case Study of a Trainer: Journey from Freelancer to Entrepreneur	129
6.4	Conclusions	131
7	SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION	132
7.1	Recommendations	135
8	BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	136
9	ANNEXURE.....	148
9.1	Glossary.....	149
9.2	Informed Consent Form	150
9.3	Interview Guide.....	151
9.4	Sample Sheet.....	154

List of Figures

Figure 1: Logo for a restaurant	34
Figure 2: A Facebook group of the enrolled course	35
Figure 3: Mapping of the Thematic Coding	42
Figure 4: Official Advertisement of e-Rozgar Training Program 2023	49
Figure 5: Fiverr Logo.....	50
Figure 6: Fiverr interface of browsing services	51
Figure 7: Facebook Logo	52
Figure 8: Number of active users of social media platforms	53
Figure 9: Screenshot of my graphic designing portfolio created on Behance	63
Figure 10: Screenshot of a respondent's portfolio on Google Drive.....	64
Figure 11: Gig image created for my Fiverr account.....	67
Figure 12: Ad posted anonymously seeking a freelance video editor	69
Figure 13: Job ad posted in a Facebook freelancing group	69
Figure 14: A success post posted by a freelancer on completing first order on Fiverr.....	70
Figure 15: Kinship Chart of the respondent (Majid)	77
Figure 16: Current and projected unemployment rate in Pakistan	87
Figure 17: Pictorial representation of the payment process of the platform freelancers	103
Figure 18: FB post to trap freelancers seeking job opportunities	109
Figure 19: A screenshot of a scam email received by a respondent	111
Figure 20: Kinship Chart of Respondent (Javeria)	115

List of Tables

Table 1: Hourly Rate and Annual Earning of various Freelance Services	10
Table 2: Popularity Index of various Freelance Fields	13
Table 3: Tabular representation of sample and sampling techniques	38
Table 4: Tabular representation of the thematic coding	44

Abstract

In the contemporary era, digitalization has transformed the landscape of employment and work from physical to digital or virtual domains. This paradigm shift brought many opportunities such as virtual freelancing. It has become a viable employment opportunity contributing to the gig economy. Virtual freelancing plays a very significant role in the dynamics of the contemporary job market by providing the population inclusivity in work labor for all, flexibility, autonomy, and independence. This research aims to explore virtual freelancing, its conceptualization as a career among the population, and the lived experiences of freelancers along with the motivations and challenges they encounter in freelance careers. Furthermore, broader implications of virtual freelancing in reshaping entrepreneurship and self-employment have also been elaborated. The current netnographic research employs qualitative research methods and techniques to collect data for analysis including in-depth interviews and participant observation. This netnographic research is conducted online on various online platforms such as the e-Rozgar training program, Fiverr, and Facebook freelancing communities. The sample of the research consists of 34 respondents including 5 trainers and 29 freelancers. The sample has been selected employing purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The data collected has been analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings of the study suggest freelancers use various ways to do freelance work such as social media freelancing communities, freelancing marketplaces, online outsourcing, and freelance agencies. Training and building strong portfolios are very important parts of freelancing careers which allow them to be efficient in their work. The study also explored that there are diverse conceptualizations about freelancing as a career opportunity among the population. The perspectives of the population are shaped by various factors such as the digital divide (rural and urban), social structure and social dynamics, lived experiences, the influence of cultural lag, the generational gap, and lived-experiences of freelancers. Moreover, there are diverse motivational factors that push freelancers to choose to freelance as a career such as flexibility, autonomy, independence, etc. However, they also face a variety of challenges such as unreliability, unsustainability, payment issues, management issues, lack of support, etc. Furthermore, freelancing also provides a sense of paradoxical empowerment. Lastly,

the study observed that freelancing has transcended all barriers including gender, disability, and religion, and offered inclusivity for all.

Key Words: *Virtual Freelancer, Virtual Freelance, gig economy, digital labor, paradoxical empowerment, inclusivity.*

1 INTRODUCTION

In the present era of digital transformation, the labor markets and employment opportunities are changing globally. Consequently, freelance and on-demand marketplaces are planetary in scope and flourishing in a very agile manner. These marketplaces promise project-based or gig-based employment to people with skills and access to the internet. Indubitably, many countries have been facing the issue of unemployment for many years. Individuals have been seeking jobs to make their careers and a better livelihood. Nevertheless, a huge number of people are unable to secure any source of income. Pakistan has been in crisis regarding the unemployment rate as it has increased from 4.40 percent in 2020 to 6.50 percent in 2021 (PBS, 2021).

During the Covid-19, many countries faced economic setbacks as a lot of people were not able to continue their jobs physically. As a result of a firm layoff, some people had to quit their jobs, some were fired or terminated from their jobs, and the rest had to shift their work to their homes (Hassan et al., 2020). Consequently, a rise in the phenomena of "work from home" and working remotely has been observed since then, especially among the unemployed and marginalized individuals. Those who lost their job as a consequence of the global pandemic had to explore and find alternative sources of income to run their households. Freelancing emerged as an opportunity for all, i.e., unemployed seeking a primary source of income, employed seeking a secondary source of income, marginalized being discriminated against, etc., and has provided this generation with a source of income alternative to conventional jobs. It is a self-employed source of income in which the freelancer (the contract-based self-employed individual) is not bound to time or place. Moreover, with the advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI), people have become more aware of remote working and freelancing has become a rapidly permeating phenomenon around the globe. The hype of AI tools, i.e., ChatGPT, MidJourney, etc., over social media encouraged people to explore these tools and learn ways to earn by using such tools as a lot of social media influencers promoted freelancing by using such tools. This brought a lot of the population into the freelance industry either to learn or earn.

Furthermore, due to social and familial patterns in Pakistan, women do not make up a significant percentage of the labor pool (Kaabi et al., 2018). Kathuria et al. (2017) pointed out that the responsibilities of children, a lack of affordable daycare, restrictions from elderly family members, limited career opportunities, and lack of education are the prime factors that result in the unemployment of women (Kathuria et al., 2017). Virtual freelancing has also become a hope for the marginalized, especially women. Even though women in Pakistan have contributed to the country's economy for years, however, there is a huge number of women who are marginalized and deprived of working in physical workplaces. Such women are restricted to stay home. Freelancing provides an innovative and creative opportunity to be financially strong or to contribute to their families.

In a recently published report by Payoneer, a global payment platform, Pakistan was ranked fourth in the freelancers' market in 2020 in terms of revenue growth with a total annual earnings growth of 47 percent, well above India and Bangladesh (Payoneer, 2019). Despite Covid-19, Pakistani freelancers earned \$150m in 2019-2020; the same year mango exports earned \$104m despite multiple subsidies (Nizamani, 2021). According to the report, the freelancing industry of Pakistan has progressed and achieved the rank of second largest contributor in the global freelance industry (Abdullah, 2023).

Virtual freelancing is one of the major factors linked to the development of a start-up culture (Kevin Payne, 2020). Virtual freelancing is a skill-based platform where individuals use their skills to offer services to the online community. In recent years, the government has been initiating innovative ideas to make ways for marginalized or unemployed individuals. E-rozgar, Digiskills, NetKamayee, IGNITE, National Incubation Center, etc, are a few initiatives of the government of Pakistan to promote the digital labor force or freelance industry. A focus on skill-based learning should eventually translate into a significant impact on employment, entrepreneurship, business development, and freelancing opportunities at national and international levels (Nizamani, 2021).

In the era of digitalization, it is important to recognize that the use of technology and digitalization is permeating most aspects of our lives. It has also transformed labor practices and the economy from the physical sphere to the digital sphere. Virtual

freelancing is one of the prominent examples of this transformation. The aforementioned discussion highlighted that virtual freelancing contributes to create employment opportunities for the unemployed and a source of extra income for those who are seeking opportunities to make extra money. Similarly, it has also reshaped the conceptualization of entrepreneurship and self-employment from physical labor to digital labor and physical sphere to the digital or virtual sphere.

1.1 Problem Statement

In recent years, digitalization has altered the landscape of labor and employment with a significant transformation from physical to digital or virtual labor. Virtual freelancing is permeating across the world and proving itself to be a viable career option for the population. This paradigm shift has also altered the traditional notions of self-employment and entrepreneurship by bringing flexibility into the concepts. However, various challenges are faced by the freelancers. It is significant to accentuate the conceptualization of the population about freelancing as a career and the role of freelancing in reshaping self-employment and entrepreneurship. Moreover, this study also aims to explore lived experiences, motivations, challenges, and broader implications of freelancers which push them to choose to freelance as a career rather than opting for conventional office jobs.

1.2 Research Questions

The research questions that are explored in the study are:

1. How do people conceptualize freelancing as a career?
2. What are the motivations and lived experiences of freelancers in choosing freelance instead of traditional/office jobs?
3. What is the role of freelancing in reshaping self-employment and entrepreneurship?

1.3 Definition of Key Terms

This section aims to list down the conceptualization of all the significant key terms that serve as a foundation for the current study.

1.3.1 Virtual Freelance Marketplace

It is a virtual platform for organizations or clients seeking to hire freelancers to do their work remotely within a specified time (Shalimov, 2021).

1.3.2 Freelancer

Freelancers are self-employed and independent workers who are not affiliated with any organization or in long-term commitments. Freelancers work for the highest bidders selecting their clients or customers as per their personal choice (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-a).

1.3.3 Digital Labor

Digital labor refers to a range of tasks performed by individuals on digital platforms using digital technologies, such as computers, the internet, and mobile devices. This can include a wide range of activities, such as programming, data entry, social media management, and online customer service (Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013).

1.3.4 On-Demand Marketplace

The on-demand marketplace provides micro-tasks or one-time tasks to willing workers over the internet. These tasks vary in complexity, nature (virtual or physical), and duration (Hannák et al., 2017).

1.3.5 Gig

The term gig is a slang word that refers to a short-term job or one-time task-based job i.e., a one-time musical performance or a dropping service (Lutkevich & Gillis, 2022).

1.3.6 Gig-worker

A gig worker is a person who enters into one-time contracts with the company or an individual to provide services without being in long-term commitments or obligations. Moreover, they are also free from geographic constraints and huge investments into the business to generate business resources like office space and training (Lutkevich & Gillis, 2022).

1.3.7 Gig-Economy

It is a free market system with an economic environment where temporary positions are common and organizations contract independent workers for short-term engagements (Thakur, n.d.).

1.3.8 Self-Employment

It is an opportunity created by an individual to sell his products or services independently. Self-employment may not be based on any innovative ideas or goals to grow it over time. The sole purpose is to earn money (Szaban & Skrzek-Lubasińska, 2018).

1.3.9 Entrepreneurship

It refers to creating an opportunity from an innovative idea, taking risks to transform it into an innovative business model, and expanding or scaling it (Holt, 2018).

1.4 Significance of the Study

In the current era of digitalization, a plethora of digital literacy and freelance training has been initiated by the government of Pakistan which has tapped into a pool of digital opportunities for livelihood provision and self-dependent employment. Despite the freelance industry or gig economy being a thriving discourse globally, there is a gap being under-explored in academics and policy about their scope, approaches, and outcomes. Digital anthropology has risen as a result of the advancement of digital technologies and

its dependence on the population. Digital anthropologists use their anthropological knowledge and methodology to study technology and its impact on a specific population holistically (Wilson & Peterson, 2002). There are numerous researches done on freelancing worldwide including Pakistan. However, there is a methodological gap in the existing studies. A very limited number of studies are conducted by using anthropological research techniques and approaches to understand the impact of digital technologies and the shift of labor from the physical to the digital or virtual sphere on human culture, labor, and employment especially in the context of Pakistan. Thus, the present study is a holistic contribution to the debate of freelancing as an emerging career opportunity in the context of Pakistan. This research could also serve as a contribution to future studies that can be done with different perspectives and demographics.

1.5 Thesis Outline

The first chapter emphasizes the introduction and problematization of the research topic “Virtual Freelancing: Reshaping Entrepreneurship and Self-employment”. It also includes a problem statement, research questions, the definition of key terms, and the significance of the study.

The second chapter is a concise review of relevant literature used to build a background of the thesis and its problematization. It includes various themes explaining further into the topic leading to the motives of exploration. It includes the understanding of freelancing, the historical development of the freelancing industry, government endeavors to promote freelancing, a classification scheme for on-demand labor marketplaces, factors behind the increase in freelancers, the satisfaction of work-life balance, bias, and discrimination on freelance marketplaces, gig-economy, and freelance economy, redefining entrepreneurship and self-employment, informal economy, an anthropological lens – a step from ethnography to netnography, and theoretical framework.

The third chapter is divided into two parts i.e., research methodology and research locale. The research methodology includes the use of various research techniques and approaches such as rapport building, key informants, pilot study, participant observation,

in-depth interviews, semi-structured interview guide, sample and sampling techniques, field jottings, recording, data analysis, ethical considerations, and problems encountered during research. It also discusses the research locale where research has been conducted. It includes online freelance platforms such as Facebook, and Fiverr, and a training program i.e., the e-Rozgar training program.

The fourth chapter aims to explore virtual freelancing as a self-employment opportunity. It aims to discuss virtual freelancing as a viable career option including discussions on various forms of freelancing such as direct clients, marketplaces, outsourcing, and freelance social media communities. Furthermore, it also accentuates the conceptualization of the population about virtual freelancing as a career and the factors behind it.

The fifth chapter explores the motivations of freelancers that push them to opt for freelancing as a career and the challenges in this career that urge the freelancers to reconsider their decisions and often motivate them to rethink traditional jobs. It also discussed the relationship between outsourcing and exploitation in the freelance industry.

The sixth chapter elaborates on the expansion of freelancing and transforming into entrepreneurship. It includes two forms of innovative business models i.e., solopreneurship and entrepreneurship. The last chapter concludes with the way forward to the future. It concludes the whole thesis and also extends to the future recommendations in future research and in general.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The current chapter aims to review relevant literature on virtual freelancing. The chapter begins with a discussion of the historical background of freelance work and its prevalence in the current era. The discussion moves on to the role of the freelance industry in the digital, gig, or freelance economy of the world. Freelancing is a multidisciplinary or contested term and lies in both virtual and physical worlds. The categorization and classifications of freelance work have also been discussed in detail in global and local contexts. Thus, its link with the neoliberal model of economy has also been discussed. The discussion sums up the pros and cons of freelance work as the relevant literature views it.

2.1 Understanding Freelancing

Freelance conjures an image of a modern type of work opportunity or a career that emerged a few decades ago. However, the history of this term is quite surprising. Defining freelance is difficult as it is a very contested term. It is a multidiscipline term that falls under various marketplaces and career opportunities both in the physical and virtual worlds. Freelancing is over two thousand years old (Younger & Founder, 2021). The term "freelance" first emerged in the English language in the 1800s (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-b). This term was used for a medieval mercenary who worked under the nation or a leader who paid the most and was not affiliated with one nation.

According to the written records, this term was used by Sir Walter Scott in his novel entitled "Ivanhoe." This term is evident in the novel as a feudal lord, a novel character, calls his paid army by the name of freelancers. This term then swiftly shifted to the political terms referring to a politician who is not affiliated or in a long-term contract/commitment with any political party or employer and works independently per his benefits and stipend. Moreover, it is also documented referring to the hired soldiers or military (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-b). Freelance has become a trending terminology for independent workers without the restrictions of long-term commitments with anyone. The term was recreated by scientists in the initiative of career studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Huđek et al., 2020). They referred to freelancers as "Boundaryless Workers" (Tams &

Arthur, 2010). Freelancers are also known as self-employed, independent workers, gig-workers, and corporate mercenaries working for the highest bidders.

In the era of digitalization, freelancing has emerged as a non-traditional career choice for people looking for employment offering flexibility and autonomy over the workload and schedule globally (Iqbal, 2015). 1.57 billion people are working as freelancers around the world out of which 53% of freelancers hold higher education and advanced degrees. The average working hours of freelancers are approximately 20 to 31 hours per week. According to an international survey, freelancers charge an average hourly rate of US\$ 21. Moreover, the average per-hour rate of freelancers is \$21 globally (Raza, 2023).

Service	Hourly Rate	Annual Earning
Writers	\$30-40/hr	\$42,000
Editors	\$25-35/hr	\$40,000
Programmers	\$60-70/hr	\$120,000
General developers	\$50-60/hr	\$100,000
Mobile developers	\$55-65/hr	\$100,000
Web developers	\$50-60/hr	\$90,000
Graphic designers	\$40-45/hr	\$90,000
Transcribers	\$20-25/hr	\$32,000
Bookkeepers	\$30-35/hr	\$40,000

Service	Hourly Rate	Annual Earning
Online marketers	\$50/hr	\$100,000
Photographers	\$35-45/hr	\$42,000
CRM managers	\$50-60/hr	\$120,000
Data analysts	\$55-65/hr	\$100,000

Table 1: Hourly Rate and Annual Earning of various Freelance Services¹

Source: (Raza, 2023)

A person who opts for freelance work is considered a self-employed and independent contractor or worker over the Internet, not committed to a particular employer or an organization for the long term (Gee, 2014). Moreover, having the perks of being their boss can provide services to multiple clients simultaneously and get paid as soon as the task job is completed (Masood et al., 2018). Freelancing is a borderless job as it provides access to local clients and international clients looking for someone to get their job done over the Internet. A person is free from all the restrictions of time, place, and obligations of traditional office jobs (Hannák et al., 2017). Freelancing is an earning opportunity for people worldwide, especially those who are unemployed, marginalized, or want to earn extra money other than their salary. A person in this career can work alone independently, manage all the workload, form a team sharing all the workload collectively, or work under any agency or a company that resells their labor and services to its clients (Gee, 2014).

¹ Disclaimer: The abovementioned list is provided just for informational purposes and is not exhaustive. It is important to note that this list is not fixed and does not intend to restrict or negate other potential possibilities, variations, or options of freelance work or their rates that may exist. The absence of a any option from this list does not imply its insignificance or nonexistence.

2.2 Historical Development of the Freelancing Industry in Pakistan

The freelance industry thrives in developing countries such as Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh as it provides a career opportunity, especially to marginalized and unemployed individuals. In a recently published report by Payoneer, a global payment platform, Pakistan has been facing a crisis of lack of employment opportunities leaving almost half of the graduates unemployed (Masood et al., 2018). This lack of employment opportunities urges unemployed individuals to jump into the freelance industry to earn money. Pakistan is ranked in the top position for Internet communication and Technology (ICT) outsourcing due to the aggressive growth of the IT sector. In 2020, Pakistan was ranked fourth in the freelancers' market in terms of revenue growth, with a total annual earnings growth of 47 percent, well above India and Bangladesh (Payoneer, 2019). In 2017, The Punjab IT Board chairman declared a combined revenue of approximately one billion dollars (1 billion dollars) by 150,000 Pakistani freelancers (Iftikhar, 2017). Pakistani freelancers' work average is 34 hours per week on freelance marketplaces (Desk, 2016) providing numerous services, i.e., Web development, Application development, graphic designing, proofreading, video and animation, sales and marketing support, and data entry tasks. On a web-based freelance marketplace, Freelancer.com, almost 860-thousands registered users out of 23 million global users belong to Pakistan (Masood et al., 2018).

According to an international survey, US\$21 is charged globally as an hourly rate providing evidence that freelancing is an appealing opportunity that has the potential to provide income far more than the average wages. In Pakistan, the estimated number of active freelancers in 2021 was around 100,000, earning approximately \$100 monthly and valuable foreign exchange. It is necessary to devise and implement a National Freelancing Policy to secure and increase Pakistan's freelancer footprint globally and gain a larger share of the global outsourcing business (PSEB et al., 2021).

In recent years, freelance marketplaces have expanded not only in size but also in significance. There are numerous online freelance marketplaces on the internet, such as

Fiverr, Upwork, Care.com, Guru, Freelancer, etc., which have flourished rapidly in the past few years (Munoz et al., 2022). These websites or applications provide a platform for freelancers to generate income via local and international clients. It turned up as a facilitator for individuals striving to earn additional income or even a primary income source for the unemployed or marginalized.

In the pre-digital era, initiating one's own business and advertising it nationally or globally was very challenging. However, the internet has made everything easier and more accessible. Individuals can easily advertise their businesses and services by targeting the audience to make them potential customers (Chaffey, 2015). Internet brings both sellers and clients to the same page where they can connect, the clients can request one-time jobs, and sellers or workers can sell their products or services online. The National Freelancing Facilitation Policy highlights the list of most popular fields for freelancers in their consultation draft (PSEB et al., 2021):

Fields for Freelancers	Popularity
Web Development, Graphics Designing	30%
Computer Programming	19%
IT Services	10%
Multimedia Production	8%
Content Writing	8%
Translation	7%
Marketing	6%
Admin	3%
Customer Support	2%

Project Management	2%
Sales	2%
Quality Assurance	2%
Finance	1%

Table 2: Popularity Index of various Freelance Fields²

Source: (PSEB et al., 2021)

The freelance marketplace is more flexible and fluid as it allows the individual to choose the job's nature, the job, the schedule of the job, and the clients or customers they want to work for. Clients also enjoy this flexibility as it allows them to request any job depending on the range of complexity, cost, or time frame. Brie Weiler Reynolds, a former career services manager and career coach, classifies freelance jobs into a few categories (Reynolds, 2021):

Contract work or contract job: a job in which you make a short-term, temporary contract with an employee or a client, which expires as soon as the job is done.

Independent contractor: a freelancer working independently without being affiliated with any agent or organization, but a temporary contract with the clients specifies the work terms.

Contract consultant: a freelancer who is given employment only for temporary consultations regarding internal issues of an organization or a company.

Contract-to-hire: a freelance job leading to permanent or regular employment, depending on the job outcomes and quality (Reynolds, 2021).

² Disclaimer: The abovementioned list is provided just for informational purposes and is not exhaustive. It is important to note that this list is not fixed and does not intend to restrict or negate other potential possibilities, variations, or options of fields of freelance or their popularity index that may exist. The absence of a any option from this list does not imply its insignificance or nonexistence.

Every freelancer has a niche and expertise in which they strive to earn. They pitch their clients as per their skills and niche to perform their jobs. Some prominent and trending expertise in the freelance marketplace includes graphic designing, digital marketing, web design, journalism, content writing, translation, programming, filmmaking, music video production, management consulting, illustration, virtual assistant, etc. (Masood et al., 2018).

2.3 Government Endeavors to Promote Freelancing

The government of Pakistan (GoP) has been proactive in promoting freelance work through digital literacy and IT. This stance is reflected in the improvement in the rank of the country in freelancing. In the past few years, Pakistan has ranked as the fourth largest contributor to the global freelance industry. However, as a result of constant efforts by the Pakistani government in the past few years, the Pakistani freelance industry has progressed rapidly and the rank has risen to the second largest contributor in the global freelance industry in 2023 (Zehra, 2023).

The government has been working to create accelerators of digital literacy and entrepreneurship opportunities to support digital entrepreneurs and freelancers to launch and build their businesses and services. It also provides funding, loans, incubation services, and incentives to freelancers and entrepreneurs. Freelancing enables people to excel in the fields of their expertise and commercialize their skills without much physical hustle. The government has launched various initiatives to promote freelancing via training and incubation programs in Pakistan. Some of the programs and policies launched by the government are as follows:

2.3.1 Digital Pakistan Policy

The Ministry of IT and Telecom has also envisioned the Digital Pakistan Policy in 2018 as a roadmap to create jobs and promote a holistic digital ecosystem (Ministry of IT and Telecom, 2018). It aimed to promote the use of digital technologies and services and to

provide opportunities for local entrepreneurs to prosper internationally through digital inclusion.

It envisions providing universal and high-quality Information and communication technologies (ICT) that are affordable, accessible, and reliable for the population to improve their quality of life and economic well-being. Along with improving the digital inclusion of all, it promises to promote and encourage digital entrepreneurship by giving incentives to the IT sector and training young professionals (Ministry of IT and Telecom, 2018). It focuses on different key areas to encourage the population to explore and seek opportunities for digital entrepreneurship and freelancing. It includes digital skills training, awareness programs, IT incubators, ICT for girls programs, internships, structured gap analysis programs, and seed funding for startups.

2.3.2 National Freelancing Facilitation Policy

In 2021, the Ministry of Information Technology and Telecommunication (MoITT) created a policy to facilitate freelancers nationally by creating an environment to accelerate the efficiency of the Pakistani freelance industry. It is envisioned to facilitate the freelancers in capacity building, digital banking, upscaling skill development, and providing opportunities for all (MoITT et al., 2021). It also intended to provide inclusion of all genders and facilitation for differently-abled individuals. It envisions promoting freelancing in Pakistan making it a leading global freelance market with the increase in exports and foreign exchange.

The objectives of this policy are to promote the business development of freelancers by providing access to international markets, facilitating them by creating transparent governance models, and introducing digital banking and e-payments with low taxes. Moreover, it also intends to strengthen human resource (HR) development and entrepreneurship through capacity building and skills training programs, creating legal and litigation framework for freelancers, and including women, differently abled persons, and those who belong to remote or underserved areas (MoITT et al., 2021).

2.3.3 Training and Development Programs

The Pakistan Federal Ministry of Information Technology and Telecommunications (MoIT&T) has been striving to promote freelancing and grow the digital market force in Pakistan by launching several training programs related to IT, skills development, and freelancing such as DigiSkills, e-Rozgar, National Freelance Training Program (NFTP), etc. Some of these programs offer free of cost training and some are charged with affordable rates.

The modes of training are both online and physical. For instance, DigiSkills provides online freelancing training courses. Whereas, e-Rozgar provides both virtual and physical training in various fields of digital skills and freelancing. It collaborates with different government/public educational and vocational institutes as the centers (a location where physical training is conducted).

2.3.4 National Expansion Plan (NEP) of NICs

The Ministry of Information Technology and Telecommunication (MoITT) and Punjab Information Technology Board (PTIB) launched a project entitled National Expansion Plan (NEP) of NICs which aims to foster economic growth, entrepreneurship, and technology in the country (The Launchpad, 2023). It was launched to facilitate new startups by providing incubation centers to those who seek opportunities to create a startup and work on their tech startup ideas across all provinces in Pakistan to nurture the entrepreneurial and tech ecosystem.

It offers services of mentorship from national and international experts and stakeholders, guidance and assistance in business development, free-of-cost workspace, legal guidance, and networking opportunities with a wide network of linkages with partners and stakeholders (Tanwir, 2022). According to the official website of NEP³, more than

³ Official Website: <https://nep.pitb.gov.pk/>

4000 applications have been received in 13 incubation centers located in 6 regions across the country. It has incubated 130 startups across the country.

2.4 Classification Scheme for On-Demand Labor Marketplaces

The on-demand marketplace provides micro-tasks or one-time tasks to willing workers over the Internet. These tasks vary in complexity, nature (virtual or physical), and duration (Hannák et al., 2017). The system works on a few simple steps. An individual or an organization creates tasks or requests a job online with an instructive description. The system often secures the payment before the job is completed or credited into the requester's account. The system then offers the job to one or multiple willing workers, which a willing worker accepts as per the nature of the job. The worker gets paid off by the system after the job is completed. The system deducts a fixed percentage (i.e., 2%, 10%) of the total amount paid by the requester and pays the rest to the worker. Some web-based freelancing marketplaces are significantly complex, expensive, and profitable. They not only allow the clients or customers to hire or select a single freelancer to complete the work but also provide transparency and accountability for both the sellers and the buyers of the services. The individual sellers or workers are critically evaluated based on their work, and their behavior and reviews are posted (with images and work histories) on their profiles which are visible to the other visitors of the profiles. This evaluation and review process minimizes biases and allows individuals to be judged depending on their work. This reduces pre-existing biases based on race or gender and enables marginalized groups to be evaluated and hired with the prospect of a worker (Hannák et al., 2017).

Teodoro et al. (2014) categorize the on-demand labor marketplaces into two dimensions. The first category is the complexity of the job created by the client. The complexity ranges from simple tasks to more complex tasks, i.e., editing pictures or videos, brand kit designing, developing websites or applications, household chores, shifting or moving, plumbing, building painting, etc. The second dimension is the nature of the task or the kind of job being offered or requested. The nature of the job includes two main categories, from virtual jobs to physical jobs (Teodoro et al., 2014). Hannák et al. (2017) refer to the physical tasks workers who choose flexibility and fluidity of freelance work

over traditional office jobs as an on-demand mobile workforce, while the virtual or online workers as an on-demand virtual workforce. The physical tasks occur in physical spaces in the actual world, which varies according to the client's requirements, i.e., driver, plumber, photographer, videographer, etc. Uber, Careem, and InDrive are the most prominent examples of on-demand or freelance physical workforce companies.

Similarly, TaskRabbit, GharPar (hygiene and beauty services), Mahir Company (home services, i.e., electrician, plumber, personal care, carpenter, etc.), Karsaaz (home services, i.e., home maintenance, repair, tailor, or beauty services), etc. are few prominent examples of the emerging on-demand workforce. The virtual tasks exclusively rely on computing devices and internet-mediated environments with flexibility and autonomy over the location. Virtual tasks also vary according to the client's requirements and expectations, i.e., creative designer, web developer, video producer, logo designer, academic or non-academic writer, content creator, digital marketer, app developer, etc. Some prominent web-based marketplaces are Fiverr, Guru, Freelancers, Amazon, Upwork, etc. (Zyskowski et al., 2015).

Akhmetshin et al. (2018) explore freelancing as a type of entrepreneurship and examine its advantages, disadvantages, and development prospects in the modern economy. According to him, working as a freelancer has numerous advantages and disadvantages. Freelancing is a remarkable platform for introverts, who do not feel comfortable interacting with others much, as it mostly relies on computer-mediated communication. It also provides an opportunity to earn extra money for the students seeking to meet their end meets. Moreover, it provides a fluid environment to work in with the flexibility of time, location, and workload. Finally, freelancers enjoy the perks of independence and hold on to decision-making, especially when choosing clients to work with. Discussing the disadvantages of being a freelancer, Akhmetshin et al. mentioned in their study that, on the one hand, freelancers appreciate being self-reliant. However, on the other hand, it also is an obstacle to issues and problems. Unlike the traditional office environment, they do not get to consult with experienced colleagues and have to do self-study and create their solutions (Eden, 1973). Freelancers often face job insecurity as their

jobs are not permanent and only depend on their consistency, market activity, and hard work.

Consequently, along with being insecure about the job, freelancers also face the possibility of long-term unemployment, especially when they cannot pay attention and time to their work. Lack of health facilities, pension benefits, sick leaves, paid leaves, or experience-based increments is another serious disadvantage of working in a freelance marketplace. Freelancing also requires money and time management skills and consistently sourcing new clients (Reynolds, 2021). Besides, the freelancers who tap into this workforce have to be consistent, innovative, competitive, and good planners for their future work to survive in the industry.

2.5 Factors Behind the Increase in Freelancers

An unforeseen pandemic due to COVID-19 shattered the global economy into crisis (Clayton, 2021) and left a huge population unemployed in 2020. However, the freelance industry and gig economy flourished and provided efficiency for the freelancers' livelihood despite the pandemic. The workforce worldwide shifted from physical to remote work, accelerating the growth of the freelance industry in the latter half of 2020 as most people and companies began seeking work online. Akhmetshin et al. (2018) also identify some major factors increasing the number of freelancers such as growth in unemployment and sudden staff reduction in job sectors, the flexibility of job location, atypical job timings, control over the range of income, control over the activity, lack of transportation expenses and time consumption on traveling for a job, and lack of influence of other people on work (Akhmetshin et al.,2018)

2.6 Satisfaction with Work-Life Balance

The flexibility and fluidity of freelance or on-demand work is something by which this industry is known. This flexibility and fluidity come with another appealing perk of an improved work-life balance for those who work as a freelancer. However, they have to trade this flexibility for modest pay, little or no health or retirement benefits, tax

complications, and out-of-pocket equipment expenses. Furthermore, a blurred line exists between those who voluntarily work as contractors and those who are being taken advantage of by an employer that might classify someone as a contractor to get out of paying fair wages and benefits. (Lutkevich & Gillis, 2022). Eikhof et al.'s (2007) critical examination of the work-life balance debate correctly asserted that within the literature, there has been a conflation of "work-family" with "work-life." Equating "life" with "caring responsibilities" has had the distinct effect of narrowing both the range of theoretical explanations brought to bear on work-life balance and also on the policy implications proffered for alleviating work-life conflict (Eikhof et al. 2007). We have chosen to engage first the literature on work-family balance to broadly situate our study, integrating throughout research on work-life balance (Davis et al., 2013).

2.7 Bias and Discrimination on Freelance Marketplaces

In the cooperate job market, there are multiple issues like the gender pay gap and glass ceiling which often lead women to be exploited in terms of payment and job positions. According to the 2022 global freelancer income report by Payoneer, the gender pay gap persists in freelance work as well although women have higher rates of education and representation. Although female participation has increased from 24% to 29% globally since 2020 (Clayton, 2022). Females only earn 84% of what male freelancers earn which is 16% less (Khan, 2020). Males make \$28/hour on average to \$23/hour earned by females.

Web-based Micro-Tasking Freelance marketplaces promise labor equality and an unbiased working environment. Hannák et al. (2017) studied discrimination in online freelance marketplaces focusing on two renowned freelance marketplaces, TaskRabbit and Fiverr. He states that many freelance marketplaces are designed on a traditional workflow model, such as TaskRabbit, Top Coder, and Fiverr. These platforms allow customers to search and view personal profiles containing their names and, most of the time, pictures of the freelancers before selecting them. The personal information of the freelancers often allows the customers to infer the race and gender of the freelancer.

Consequently, biased customers become preoccupied with explicit stereotyping or subconscious preconceptions in their hiring decisions (Hannák et al., 2017). The freelancers' profiles also show their clients' reviews and ratings. Hannák et al. indicate in their study that the ability to review and rank the freelancers by their clients also negatively influences the freelancer's reputation as this rating is used for maintaining recommendations and search systems by the marketplace. It also provides a doorway to potentially biased and harmful clients who often hire freelancers to exploit them by making biased reviews and ratings, leaving a permanent mark on their profiles. As a result, these freelance marketplaces potentially reinforce real-world inequalities in the workforce (Hannák et al., 2017).

2.8 Gig-Economy and Freelance Economy

The term "gig economy" was coined during the height of the great recession to describe the increasing numbers of people, including the well-educated, who held multiple part-time jobs and were employed by temporary agencies or freelancers (Brown, 2009). The gig economy or freelance economy is growing into one of the biggest economic trends. The freelance management system provides a platform in the marketplace for the freelancers and the clients (individuals or organizations) to connect.

It is a free market system with an economic environment where temporary positions are common and organizations contract independent workers for short-term engagements (Thakur, n.d.). The term gig is a slang word that refers to a short-term job or one-time task-based job, i.e., a one-time musical performance or a dropping service. Gig workers work in a variety of workforces, i.e., be writers, rideshare drivers, photographers, accountants, realtors, handymen, programmers, tutors, artists, babysitters, dog walkers, or anyone who enters into formal agreements or one-time contracts with the company or an individual to provide services without being in long term commitments or obligations. Moreover, the gig-workers are also free from geographic constraints and huge investments into the business to generate the business resources like office space and training (Lutkevich & Gillis, 2022).

2.9 Freelance work as Informal Economy

As discussed earlier, freelance marketplaces are considered as the part of gig market or digital market which is referred to as an informal market or informal economy. The term informal economy was coined by Keith Hart, a social anthropologist, in 1972 (Hart, 1973). It refers to the economic activities which operate beyond the formal and legal regulatory framework and are unregulated or unprotected by the government. It includes small-scale unregistered businesses, street vending, home-based workers, cash-in-hands jobs, freelancing, digital micro-tasking, virtual currency, etc. In his study of western Africa, Hart argued that the informal economy is a source of survival for huge populations in developing and poor countries as they sustain their economic transactions and survival on their everyday informal business practices and dealings with mutual cooperations of buyers and sellers rather than formal and legalized contractual dealings (Castells & Portes, 1989). The informal market, also known as the grey market (Rangaswamy, 2019), includes the flow of business or economy without formal or legal frameworks of the country. Virtual freelancing is also a form of informal economy. Freelancing does not count in the formal economy as filers (those who do not pay direct income taxes), they are not accountable to the government or the state, and their income is self-independent. Business dealings i.e., buying and selling, are governed by mutual negotiations, commitments, and informal contracts instead of formal or legal contracts recognized under the legal system of the country. Freelancers often enjoy the feature of being non-filers even when they expand their as solopreneurs by skipping registration of their business.

Virtual freelance work operates as a dynamic component of the informal economy, embodying flexibility, autonomy, and a lack of formalized structures characteristic of informal economic arrangements. Virtual freelancers navigate a landscape defined by short-term agreements, informal networking, and a cash-based nature, resembling the traits commonly associated with the informal economy. These individuals, often working without formal contracts, leverage their entrepreneurial spirit to manage their businesses independently. The varied skill sets and diverse services offered by virtual freelancers reflect the adaptability essential in both informal economic activities and virtual

freelancing. However, it's crucial to note that while virtual freelance work shares features with the informal economy, not all freelancers strictly adhere to informal practices, as the nature of their work and the platforms they use can influence the level of formality in their engagements. Nonetheless, the informal aspects of virtual freelancing underscore the evolving and diverse nature of contemporary work arrangements.

2.10 Redefining Entrepreneurship and Self-employment

Entrepreneurship is a new buzzword of the present times which is often used as fashion. The word “entrepreneurship” originated from the French word “entreprendre” which refers to one who undertakes the challenges of a new enterprise (Holt, 2018). Entrepreneurship is a contested and dynamic term that has no consensus on its definition and its conceptualization (Gumusay, 2015). The term has been prone to ambiguity and reconstruction over time. No definition is universally agreed upon (Davidson, 2005). There is confusion about the basic tenets or the elements of entrepreneurship i.e., innovation, self-employment, ownership of a small business (Brown et al., 2004).

Self-employment and entrepreneurship are often used interchangeably. However, there is a difference in approach which makes them different from each other. Entrepreneurship refers to the creation of innovative ideas, identification of opportunities, and taking calculated risks by implementing those ideas to build a business venture (Davidson, 2005). On the other hand, Self-employment involves creating employment and generating income by providing products or services to customers and clients. It does not focus on innovation or growth, and the primary goal is to create income single-handedly. Both self-employment and entrepreneurship, are declared as ways of creating new jobs and labor market opportunities for the masses, especially for the unemployed, minorities, and other disadvantaged social groups (Szaban & Skrzek-Lubasińska, 2018).

The ideas of self-employment and entrepreneurship are no longer restricted to the physical world or physical labor. Digitalization and technological transformation have led these ideas to shift into the digital sphere as well. The idea is not limited to selling and dealing with tangible products or services. It has been reshaped into dealing with selling

intangible or immaterial services and products (Davidson, 2005). Virtual freelancers are known as self-employed individuals who often tend to expand their skill-based work and upscale it to grow it into an innovative business model by using their entrepreneurial capabilities.

2.11 Anthropological Lens – A Step from Ethnography to Netnography in the Exploration of Digital Communities

Human being and their cultures are not static as keep evolving and progressing over time. Cultural evolution does not occur independently or solely but also alters some entangled cultural traits, norms, values, practices, and institutions by reconstructing or reshaping the identities and narratives of the individuals. The discipline of anthropology is an evolutionary perspective in which the evolution of humankind, their cultures, and other social interactions are studied holistically concerning time and space. Initially, ethnography has been the central research method used by anthropologists to collect data from any culture or new community to learn about it and to study it (Salzmann-Erikson & Eriksson, 2012). For instance, Malinowski's popular work of living with Trobrianders in Papua New Guinea (Malinowski, 1922). During the 20th century, anthropological studies and ethnographic work then shifted to the concept of "anthropology at home" (Messerschmidt, 1981).

In the present time, digitalization and the internet are permeating our daily lives to the extent that virtual communities are formed in which people interact, socialize, and reconstruct their identities. Virtual communities have become very essential part of our lives which is altering our lifestyle, identities, and socio-economic conditions. In the world of the internet and digitalization, the ethnographic research method has been extended to study virtual communities in the form of netnography, digital ethnography, or virtual ethnography for over 20 years. Netnography originated in 1995 by Robert Kozinets as an ethnographic approach used to observe, study, analyze social interactions, and interpret digital communication contexts in virtual communities (Kozinets, 2010). It is also known as online ethnography (Markham, 2005) or virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000). The

researcher connects to the virtual community and immerses themselves into the virtual community by engaging in online participant observation through a computer or any other screen. The researchers observe naturally occurring discussions and social interactions rather than artificially topicalizing anything.

Anna Todsén, in her article “Overcoming the Ethical, Methodological and Analytical Challenges of Digital Anthropology”, argues that ethical considerations are a very significant part of any research (Todsén, 2020). She discusses that while conducting research in digital or virtual environments, there are numerous ethical challenges about which a researcher has to be aware. It includes the challenges of informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and privacy of the respondents. Moreover, the researcher has to adapt new methodological techniques that are more appropriate for digital research and combine them with traditional anthropological research techniques to study better (Todsén, 2020).

Anthropologists have been exploring the evolution of digital technologies, virtual communities, and digital labor and their impact on human cultures and behavioral patterns. This includes the emergence and advent of virtual freelancing and digital labor. Tiziana Terranova explored the digital economy and digital labor in her article entitled “Free labor: Producing culture for the digital economy” (Terranova, 2000). Terranova argues that with technological evolution and digitalization, digital labor has become a very significant part of the cultural economy as they have enabled some new forms of production and capitalism. She states that digital labor in the form of cultural production such as user-generated content is often underpaid or unpaid.

Ursula Huws has conducted extensive research on digital labor, technology, and its impact on human cultures, work, and employment. She argues that digital labor is similar to conventional or traditional labor, the only difference is the medium. Digital labor is carried out online in the digital sphere and traditional labor is carried out in the offline world (Huws, 2013). She highlighted that shifting labor into the digital sphere and digital economy has led to the emergence of various new forms of work such as virtual freelancing

and gig work. This shift has also created new opportunities and challenges for the laborers or the workers.

2.12 Theoretical Frameworks

In this section, the theoretical frameworks of the current study have been discussed. In the light of above discussion, it is analyzed that freelancing is an example of Immaterial Labor 2.0 and digital capitalism, and neoliberalism.

2.12.1 Immaterial Labor 2.0 and Digital Capitalism

Web 1.0 was the first phase of the web which evolved in 1996. It was a very limited and read-only web allowing users to search and read information without any real-time interaction between the publisher and the audience (Choudhury, 2014). In 2006, the Web evolved to the second phase known as Web 2.0 which is an interactive and people-centric platform inclusive of the collaborative relationship between the users and the Web itself (Murugesan, 2007). Web 2.0 is also known as read/write web, participative web, or social web as it allows the users to generate and share content on it, create communities, and grow the audience. Social Networking Sites (SNS) are examples of web 2.0.

The past two decades have witnessed the emergence of the so-called ‘informational capitalism’ (Castells, 2010) or ‘digital capitalism’ (Schiller, 2000) —an informational, digital, and networking capitalist society—to explain the changing nature of capitalism in the Internet age. Because the development of information technology has exerted a huge impact on the whole network of productive relations, productive forces, and productive capacity, this development has become a sort of representative of the advanced productive power of capitalism. At the very heart of this advanced capitalist society is the so-called ‘information economy’ or ‘digital economy’, which is constituted by the production, distribution, and consumption of items in digital form (Koloğlugil, 2015). Freelancing involves tasks centered on the utilization of knowledge, creativity, and various skills such as communication, social media management, graphic designing, content creation, writing, programming, digital marketing, and web designing. This involves intellectual and

informational creativity and does not produce any tangible outputs. Hence, freelancing is also considered immaterial labor which refers to the work involving the production and manipulation of information, knowledge, and cultural content. Virtual freelancers can be considered a hybrid between employees and entrepreneurs. On the one hand, they are employed because companies almost always employ them to work for a while offering only their intangible professional knowledge i.e., immaterial services (Opait et al., 2019). This differs from other entrepreneurs and self-employed who sell tangible products to customers. On the other hand, they can be called entrepreneurs because they work at their own risk and for their reward without any support or organizational guarantee (Born and Witteloostuijn, 2012).

Freelance work is inherently connected to the informational economy, serving as a crucial component of the broader shift toward a knowledge-based and information-driven economic landscape. In this economy, where the exchange of information, skills, and knowledge is paramount, freelancers play a vital role. Digital platforms that connect freelancers with clients exemplify the technological infrastructure characterizing the informational economy. Freelancers often offer specialized skills, contributing to innovation and problem-solving, and their adaptability and continuous learning align with the dynamic nature of an economy driven by information. The global collaborations facilitated by freelance work reflect the interconnected nature of the informational economy. Moreover, freelancers, particularly in creative fields, contribute to the innovation and creativity that define this knowledge-driven paradigm. Their entrepreneurial spirit, remote work practices, and flexibility further underscore the symbiotic relationship between freelance work and the informational economy, where individuals leverage their expertise to create value and drive economic opportunities.

2.12.2 Neoliberalism

In the mid-20th century, a group of economists coined the term neoliberalism which is rooted to various scholars. However, Friedrich Hayek, an Austrian economist, and Milton Friedman, an American economist, played a significant role in the development of its early ideas. Friedrich Hayek's idea of neoliberalism is an economic philosophy that advocates

weakening government regulations in business and financial sectors and promotes it (Schroer, 2011). Neoliberalism is a governance model of the free market, allowing people to buy and sell property and resources as per their own choice without the state's interference. David Harvey (2005) defines neoliberalism as "a theory of political, economic practices that proposes that human wellbeing can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey, 2005). Governments that subscribe to the neoliberal ideology put their theoretical premises into practice by introducing a set of policy actions that may include deregulating financial industries, cutting public benefits, and passing anti-union policies and laws.

Virtual freelancing is also a neoliberal economic model that liberates individuals by providing entrepreneurial freedoms and skills. Virtual freelancing, emblematic of the gig economy, can be closely linked to neoliberalism, a socio-economic ideology emphasizing individualism and free-market capitalism. In the context of virtual freelancing, neoliberal principles have facilitated the rise of platforms that connect independent workers with tasks globally, promoting flexibility but often at the cost of job security and labor protections. The neoliberal framework prioritizes market forces over regulatory intervention, enabling the unchecked growth of virtual freelancing platforms that often exploit the precarious nature of freelance work. The emphasis on self-reliance and competition, inherent in neoliberal thought, shapes the virtual freelancing landscape, fostering a hyper-competitive environment where workers navigate uncertain income streams and limited social safety nets, emblematic of the broader neoliberal ethos that permeates contemporary labor markets.

3 RESEARCH SETTING AND METHODOLOGY

Research methodology and research locale are very significant parts of research. The current aims to discuss the detailed description of the methodology employed to conduct this research and its locale. The study aims to explore freelancing as a non-traditional platform for employment opportunities, its conceptualization, and motivations to opt for a career among people. Netnography has been conducted for this research involving in-depth interviews and participant observation to obtain comprehensive and detailed data, dimensions, and perspectives about the research objectives.

The current chapter is divided into two parts i.e., research methodology and research locale. As the current study is a netnographic study (virtual/digital ethnography), it was not conducted in any physical locale but online in virtual communities and marketplaces such as Facebook, Fiverr, Upwork, etc. The further details of the research methodology of this study are dealt with in Section 3.1. The second part, discussed in Section 3.2 in detail, discusses the research locale employed for the data collection and data analysis process of the current research.

3.1 Methodology

The current research is a netnographic exploration of virtual freelancing as an opportunity to reshape self-employment and entrepreneurship. Netnography was originated in 1995 by Robert Kozinets as an extension of ethnography used to observe, study, analyze social interactions, and interpret digital communication contexts in virtual communities (Kozinets, 2010). Netnography is also known as online ethnography (Markham, 2005), virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000), or digital ethnography. It is a qualitative and interpretive research methodology conducted in a digital space that explores the construction of techniques and processes in the presence of a virtual community (Pink et al., 2016). In digital ethnography, the researcher adapts traditional ethnographic techniques and collects data virtually (Fieldwork, 2017). The duration of this netnographic fieldwork was four months from October 2022 to January 2023.

3.1.1 Rapport Building

Rapport building is a technique to establish a communication relationship that removes the participant's hesitation. It also enables the participants and researchers to have a better understanding and in-depth conversation, allowing for better data collection (Zakaria & Musta'amal, 2014). Before conducting interviews, the rapport-building technique was used to ensure the respondents feel at ease, open up, and get comfortable answering all the questions with their opinions.

I was added to the official Facebook group of the enrolled course. All the students were able to interact with each other and with the trainer regarding the course. Moreover, an unofficial WhatsApp group, which was created by one of my fellow students, was also joined. The WhatsApp group had 33 more members from the same course. The purpose of the group was to help each other with the course and freelance-related queries and networking. Being a part of the three-month-long interactive training program allowed me to create networking and build rapport among other trainees, freelancers, and trainers as well.

3.1.2 Key Informants

A Key Informant is an individual who has deeper insights and close relationships with any particular area, field, or community as a result of their position within a community, personal skills, and experiences (Faifua, 2014). The characteristics of an ideal key informant are to be neutral, unbiased, knowledgeable, and communicable. Moreover, they play an important role as gate openers in a community by introducing the researcher to the required community members and samples.

During the initial phase of my fieldwork, it was difficult to contact reliable and trustworthy trainers and experienced freelancers. I had a total of 4 key informants who assisted me throughout my fieldwork by introducing me to other potential participants. Firstly, Waqar Tayyub, a 42-year-old freelancing and creative design trainer at e-Rozgar, was the first trainer whom I interviewed. He not only guided me about freelancing and

stepping towards entrepreneurship as a freelancer but also became my key informant. He, as a trainer and an experienced freelancer, used his connections and facilitated me to be introduced with some more participants including freelancers and a trainer.

Secondly, I was able to contact Majid Jagirani, a 30-year-old freelance e-commerce expert, through a mutual friend. He expressed his willingness to be my key informant during his interview. He assisted me during the research by introducing me to his fellow experienced freelancers among his peers and fellow freelancers. Moreover, he also shared some relevant material to learn more about freelancing not only to help me in my research but also to encourage me to learn freelancing deeply.

Thirdly, Najma, a 27-year-old freelance digital marketer and creative designer, was a fellow trainee in the e-Rozgar course who had been working as a freelancer for two years and had joined the course to upgrade her graphic designing skills and to be certified. She introduced me to Kamal, a 19-year-old 3D animator and trainer, and a few other experienced freelancers as well. Lastly, Kamal, with whom I was introduced by Najma, also helped me as a key informant by introducing some of his students who were experienced freelancers. All of the key informants facilitated me to reach out to the relevant participants. Reaching out to the trainers solely without their help would not have been an easy task as all the trainers were renowned in their fields and had multiple jobs to do, i.e., freelancing, training, agency work, etc.

3.1.3 Pilot Study

A pilot study, also known as a feasibility study, is a small-scale pre-testing research protocol used to test the research methodology or research instruments such as an interview guide (Malmqvist et al., 2019). It enhances the credibility and reliability of the research methodology and research instruments.

Before the commencement of the large-scale fieldwork and data collection, a pilot study was conducted to test the interview guide's reliability and improve it. The aim of conducting a pilot study was not to collect data and explore the perceptions, rather it was to improve and redefine the semi-structured interview guide. For this purpose, three

interviews were conducted randomly before conducting actual fieldwork. The interview guide was modified as required after the pilot study. This allowed me to remove all the gaps, issues, and repetitions lying in the interview guide to make it more comprehensive. The semi-structured interview guide used in the pilot study lacked some questions related to personal experiences such as scams and frauds, payment methods, experiences of working with or as freelance outsourcers, etc. After incorporating the necessary changes, the actual fieldwork began.

3.1.4 Participant Observation

Participant observation refers to rapport building within a community or a research field, learning to act like the natives of that community to blend into the community so extract the natural actions and knowledge of the community members in natural settings for a better understanding of the community (Kawulich, 2019).

Moreover, the freelance training program was joined to do the participant observation of the training provided to the freelancers. The training was keenly observed to explore how the trainers motivate and train the marginalized or unemployed⁴ individuals for freelancing. The behaviors and motivations of freelancers to join the digital labor force or freelance industry were also explored.

I enrolled in an online training course on E-Rozgar, a platform launched by the Government of Pakistan to promote freelancing and digital literacy in Pakistan. The course I enrolled in is entitled "Creative Design" (also known as graphics designing) and is instructed by a professional trainer and a creative designer named "Waqar Tayyub"⁵. The period of course is three months and has fifty-five interactive sessions of 2 hours each. The course required a minimum qualification of 16 years of education in any field. Hence, the students were all graduates, MS/MPhil scholars, or PhD doctors. Initially, the number of students in the official Facebook group of the batch was nearly 250, however, a lot of students dropped out of the course due to low attendance. The minimum attendance is 80%

⁴ Being unemployed is among the criteria of the course enrollment in e-Rozgar.

⁵ The consent to reveal the identity was taken from the trainer during the training sessions and interview.

to secure the graduation from the course and the certificate. The evaluation of the attendance and shortlisting of the students with low attendance was done every one or two weeks. The overall course outline was as follows:

1. Introduction to Freelancing
2. Introduction to Creative Design
3. Introduction to Adobe Illustrator
4. Introduction to Adobe Photoshop
5. Introduction to Canva
6. Introduction to Fiverr.com
7. Introduction to Upwork
8. Introduction to Behance
9. Portfolio Building
10. Designing Ads and Banners
11. Tracing Cartoon characters
12. Business Card Design
13. Presentation Board Design
14. Designing Logos
 - 14.1. Signature logo
 - 14.2. Minimalist logo
 - 14.3. Playful logo
 - 14.4. Mascot logo
 - 14.5. Pictorial logo
 - 14.6. Monogram logo
 - 14.7. Letterform logos
 - 14.8. Arabic/ Urdu logo
15. Flyer and Brochure Design
16. Book Cover Design
17. T-shirt design
18. Merchandise Design
19. Mug Design
20. CV & Resume Design
21. Podcast Cover Art and Album Covers
22. Carousel Ad Design
23. Presentation Designs
24. Poster Design (A4, A3)
25. Caricature Design
26. 3D modelling and labelling
27. GIF Design and Image Processor
28. Introduction to App UI/UX Design
29. Introduction to *Camtasia Studio*
 - 29.1. Video Editing
30. Freelance Platforms (Freelancer, Peopleperhour, etc.)
31. Small Scale Business Earnings using these Skills

Freelancing techniques were guided properly in almost every lecture. Some lectures were purely focused on designing, however, after 1 week the instructor started to teach about freelancing techniques and platforms. There were few assignments and designing

contests in which all the students had to compete in designing. The top three designs get selected every time and those students were awarded with access to some paid *mockups*⁶.

The figure given below was the logo created by me during the contest with instructions to make a playful textual logo for a new restaurant named “*Brisk Fire BBQ*”. The design was shortlisted in the top 10 designs by the instructor. The mockup was provided by the instructor to make sure the presentation of all designs would be the same and the judgment would not be affected because of the overall appearance of the designs and mockup. Rendering



Figure 1: Logo for a restaurant⁷

Moreover, Fiverr, a web-based freelance marketplace, was also joined as a freelancer to experience the journey and experience of a freelancer. Along with the web-based freelance marketplaces, social media communities (groups) of freelancers were also

⁶ Mockup is an artistic rendering or a demonstration of a design or product as a final look or practical showcase.

⁷ The presentation mockup was downloaded from <https://www.freepik.com/> by the instructor.

joined to connect with the other freelancers and to get freelance work from the outsourcers and direct clients.

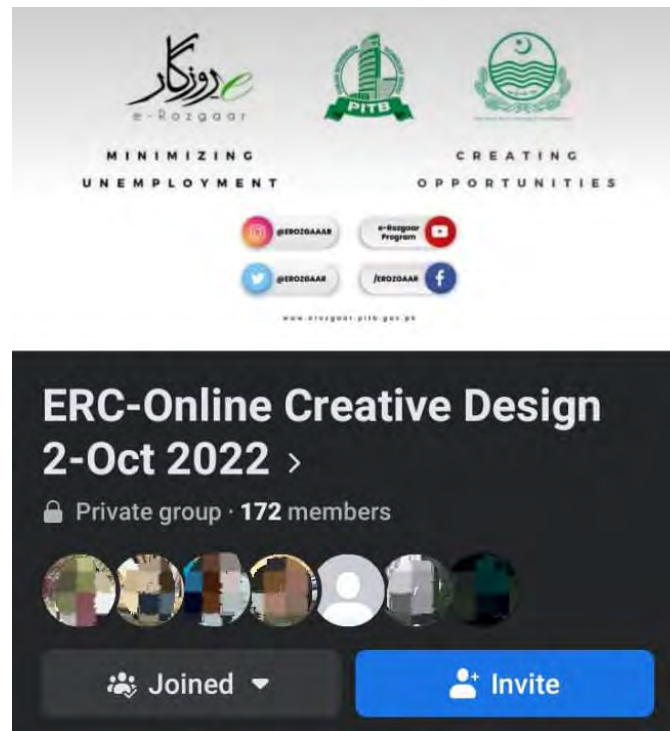


Figure 2: A Facebook group of the enrolled course⁸

However, I was not successful in getting any orders from Fiverr in the niche of creative designing as I did not have any prior experience or portfolio. I succeeded in building a network with a few outsourcers and freelancers via a Facebook community of freelancers.

Moreover, to delve into the experiences and challenges faced by the freelancers who work for the outsourcers. I worked with Ibrahim, a 32-year-old freelance outsourcer, who used to outsource work related to the niche of writing and proofreading. The tasks given to me included paraphrasing, writing, creating presentations, plagiarism removal, and proofreading. I worked with him properly for 3 months and still work occasionally to date. As one of his existing team members was unable to work with him, he had a lot of

⁸ The profile pictures of the members displayed on the screenshot taken from the group were blurred to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of the members.

workload which he shared with me. As I was already busy with the course classes and all the required tasks and practice of graphic designing which consumed a lot of time, I included another writer, Javeria, among my respondents as a team member to share the workload. This created a stronger bond with that respondent which eventually helped me to gain deeper insights into freelance work. Working for freelance outsourced work helped me to understand deeper insights and the experiential reality of freelancers working with outsourcers.

3.1.5 In-Depth Interviews

Besides online data, data collection has been done by conducting in-depth interviews with the freelancers, trainees of freelance training, and trainers. An in-depth interview is the basic technique of data collection for this research. In-depth interviews involve direct and one-to-one engagement with participants individually to get deeper knowledge (Steber, 2017). These interviews also use body language to add a high level of understanding. This method is conducted to understand and extract the required knowledge from the individuals. The interview schedule was set according to the feasibility and ease of the participants to avoid any inconvenience to the participants.

For data collection, I have conducted thirty-four⁹ in-depth interviews with professional freelancers, freelance trainers, trainees, outsourcers, and digital entrepreneurs. The majority of the interviews were conducted online via Zoom Meetings, Messenger, Google Meet, or WhatsApp¹⁰ as per the convenience of the respondent. The online platform, i.e., Zoom Meetings, Google Meet, Messenger, and WhatsApp, was used for the interview and the time was scheduled before the interview according to the respondent's convenience and availability. In-depth interviews were conducted informally in bilingual, i.e., Urdu and English languages allowing respondents to talk freely in a relaxed manner to ensure the legitimacy of the interviews. The informal nature of interviews enables the researcher to get rich and descriptive data about people's behaviors, attitudes, and

⁹ See Sample and Sampling Techniques for further details about the sample.

¹⁰ A separate WhatsApp account was created for this purpose which is strictly restricted for freelancing and research work and is not for personal use.

perceptions. Probing was also done while interviewing to get detailed and comprehensive information from the participants. However, the narratives of the participants were not controlled or led while interviewing instead the respondents were in control of their narratives and their way of expressing themselves.

3.1.6 Semi-structured Interview Guide

For this purpose, a semi-structured interview guide has been created to explore the research objectives of the respondents. The interview guide was designed to address the present study's research questions to assimilate all the significant areas. The interview guide was based on the research questions that explored: How do people conceptualize freelancing as a career? What are the motivations of freelancers for choosing to freelance instead of traditional / office jobs? What is the influence of freelancing on increasing the inclusion of the unemployed or marginalized? The interview guide includes open-ended questions allowing the respondents having direct experience to talk freely and me to collect rich data. The questions in the interview guide were not leading questions. While conducting interviews, the discussion included some probing questions as per the requirements of the discussion to extract more data from the respondents. (See appendices for semi-structured interview guide)

3.1.7 Sample and Sampling Techniques

This section discusses the sample and sampling techniques used to choose the selected sample for data collection. Firstly, the sampling techniques have been discussed and then the discussion moves on to the selected sample and their characteristics.

3.1.7.1 Sample

The sample size in qualitative research is supposed to be neither too big that it becomes hard to extract thick and rich data from the data collection, nor too small that it does not even achieve the saturation point (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). The sample size in qualitative research relies on the saturation point. Saturation is a point at which the researcher is assured that from this point further data collection will yield similar data and

information (Faulkner & Trotter, 2017). This technique allows the respondents to communicate better as they are the acquaintances of the existing sample (Naderifar et al., 2017).

The sample size comprised 34 respondents, 18 men, 15 women, and 1 transwoman (see sample sheet in the appendixes for more details). The age range of the sample was between 19-45. All of the 34 respondents were involved in freelance work. The sample included freelance trainers, professional freelancers, trainees, outsourcers, and digital entrepreneurs. The sample belonged to different categories of freelance niches i.e., creative designing (also known as graphic designing), blogging, 3D animations, script writing, content writing, academic writing, e-commerce, amazon product lead, digital marketing, and virtual assistance.

Sample								
34 participants (18 men, 15 women, 1 transwoman)								
Purposive Sampling				Snowball Sampling				
13 participants				21 participants				
8 men		5 women		10 men		10 women		1 transwoman
2 trainers	6 freelancers	5 freelancers	2 trainers	8 freelancers	1 trainer	9 freelancers	freelancer	

Table 3: Tabular representation of sample and sampling techniques

(Source: Field data)

3.1.7.2 Sampling techniques

Sampling is the process of choosing a part of the population to represent the whole. If the researcher considers a part of the population as a representation of the whole, the analysis will be more comprehensive. The sample of the research was identified and selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques.

Purposive Sampling Technique

The purposive sampling technique allows the researcher to focus on certain characteristics of the population to identify and select the individuals or groups of individuals related to the concerns and objectives of the research (Crossman, 2018). The sample was selected irrespective of their age, qualification, economic status, ethnicity, marital status, and gender. The only criteria for inclusion into the sample were of being a virtual freelancer and being knowledgeable about their field. The requirements of the research objective include the participants with knowledge of freelancing and digital entrepreneurship. The selected sample is proficient and knowledgeable about the particular phenomena which enables the researcher to collect comprehensive and in-depth data from them. The total number of participants selected through purposive sampling was 13 which comprised a total of 8 men and 5 women including 2 trainers (men) and 11 freelancers (6 men and 5 women).

Snowball Sampling Technique

The snowball sampling technique is a non-probability sampling technique as it allows the researcher to choose the sample subjectively (a non-random method in which all members of the population do not have equal chances of being selected) based on objectives, purpose, knowledge, or experience. The name of this technique explains itself as the sample selected grows like a rolling snowball with time. It enables the researcher to recruit participants with the help of existing participants selected through purposive or any other sampling technique. It is also known as the chain method or chain-referral method as existing research participants refer to some other participants sharing similar characteristics relevant to the study (Simkus, 2022). Members of any community, especially those who are untraceable, tend to be closely connected as they are often involved in similar activities or groups and share the same interests. Hence, they can easily introduce the researchers to them and build a sense of trust and rapport ensuring anonymity with other potential respondents.

This method was originally used to identify the sample of sensitive nature such as HIV patients, transgenders, homosexuals, etc. However, in present times, the sample that

is not available can also be traced with this technique. This specific sampling technique was employed as freelancers are only found virtually and cannot easily be accessed through any specific physical locale. This method allowed me to identify and select freelancers as freelancers are usually connected with other freelancers of their niche at least. In this research, the initial sample was selected through purposive sampling from the training course of e-Rozgar and a few from Facebook. The participants of the research were asked to refer some more freelancers and those referred freelancers were further asked to do so. This created a referral chain or snowballing selection of participants. While interviewing, the need for more participants was shared which automatically in some cases led to the referral to some more individuals with the relevant characteristics. This sample referral chain continued until the saturation point. The total number of participants selected through snowball sampling was 21 which comprised 10 men, 10 women, and 1 transwoman including 3 trainers (2 men and 1 women) and 18 freelancers (8 men, 8 women, and 1 transgender).

3.1.8 Field Jottings

Field Jottings are the foundation of complete field notes in the form of brief phrases or keywords written into a diary or any other device during the fieldwork (Emerson et al., 2011). It allows the researcher to focus on the fieldwork rather than being occupied with noting down all the details and to write the complete field notes or transcriptions later. Field jottings were written during the interviews. Some participants were not comfortable with audio/video recordings of the interview. Hence, data from those interviews was jotted down and not recorded keeping the ethics of research and the comfortability of the respondents in mind in such situations. The data was transcribed into the English language with the help of audio recordings and field jottings.

3.1.9 Audio Recordings

Modern technology and machines are used as data collection tools for ethnographic and netnographic fieldwork (Polunin, 1970). The researcher uses this technique when they get into some important conversations with key informants and other participants of the

research. In the past, professional recording machines were used to record visual and audible data. However, with technological advancement, recording devices have also become compact and portable in the form of mobile phones and smart devices such as tabs, laptops, etc. Mobile phones have become all-in-one devices having the capability of doing jobs of multiple devices such as camera, audio recorder, notepad, etc.

Similarly, during my fieldwork, I also used a smartphone to record the audible data while conducting in-depth interviews. As the current study is a netnographic study and the interviews were taken online through WhatsApp, Zoom Meeting, and Google Meet, the feature of the “Sound Recorder app” was useless for me as it only records live audio present in physical surroundings. Instead, the interviews were recorded using in-built features of the smartphone such as “WhatsApp Mode’s call recording option” and Zoom Meeting’s recording feature. These updated features of smartphones allowed me to record data with high capacity and storage. Recording the audible data through the sound recording feature allowed me to store the conversations during interviews with the respondents and focus solely on the interview instead of jotting and writing the field notes. Verbal consent was taken from the respondents before recording the interviews to avoid violating research ethics. The recorded interviews were transcribed in English after the interview to make it easier to comprehend and analyze data.

3.1.10 Data Analysis

The data collected through interviews and participant observation are analyzed through a thematic analysis approach as it uncovers the underlying themes and provides rich insights into the research objectives. Thematic analysis is a flexible method developed and adopted by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke. This method is used as a qualitative paradigm which involves identifying, analyzing, and interpreting recurring patterns, themes, or topics within qualitative data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis generally entails a few iterative steps encompassing familiarization with the data, generating preliminary codes, identifying themes, reviewing and refining them, categorizing and labeling those themes, and interpreting and documenting the findings.

The thematic analysis process typically involves various steps. Firstly, the data familiarization stage allows the researcher to get familiar with the data collected by going through it repeatedly to identify the key concepts or ideas. The data collected through in-depth interviews was transcribed which helped me in the analysis stage. I thoroughly scrutinized the transcribed data and the other data collected which allowed me to become familiar with the data. Secondly, in the coding stage, codes are generated from the data collected by identifying underlying patterns and themes. Being familiar with the data enabled me to identify some patterns and connections based on similarities, differences, and relationships of the data and generate codes of the data. Thirdly, in the theme development stage, the codes generated from the data collected are joined together to develop the themes distinct from each other. In this stage, I combined the existing codes into themes having clear and identifiable distinctions. All the data was cohered together meaningfully while creating themes. Fourthly, the themes are analyzed by exploring their meaning and significance, relationships between other themes, and comparing themes to existing research. This stage is called the theme analysis stage. Lastly, the themes are reported or documented clearly and concisely which includes a description of the themes, as well as evidence from the data and literature to support the themes.

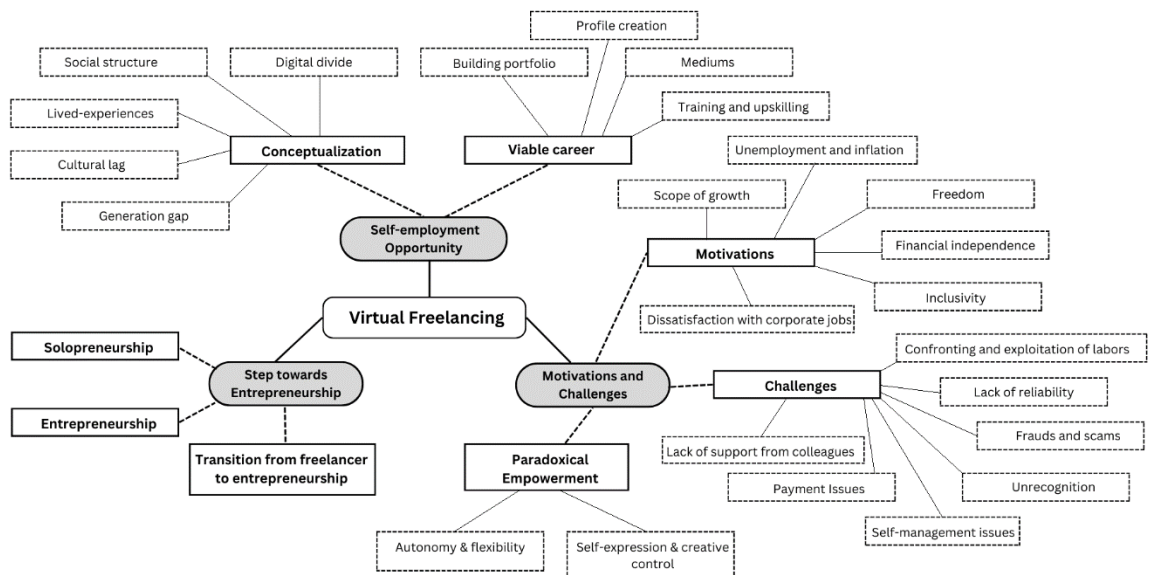


Figure 3: Mapping of the Thematic Coding

(Source: Field Data)

Figure #3 presented above is a figurative representation of the mapping of thematic coding of the field data. The rectangular boxes represent codes generated from the data. The grey oval boxes represent themes generated from the data collected. The lines represent the link of codes with the themes.

Codes	Subthemes	Themes
Training and Upskilling	Viable Career	Self-employment opportunity
Building a Portfolio		
Profile Creation		
Mediums for Virtual Freelancing		
Digital divide	Conceptualization	
Social structure		
Lived experience		
Cultural lag		
Generation gap		
Unemployment and inflation	Motivations	
Financial independence		
Freedom and flexibility		
Dissatisfaction with corporate jobs		
Inclusivity		
Scope of growth		
Lack of reliability	Challenges	
Payment issues		
Self-management issues		
Lack of support from colleagues		
Unrecognized work		
Frauds and scams		
Autonomy and flexibility	Paradoxical employment	

Self-expression and creative control		
Transition from freelancing to entrepreneurship	Transition from freelancing to entrepreneurship	Step towards Entrepreneurship
Solopreneurship	Solopreneurship	
Entrepreneurship	Entrepreneurship	

Table 4: Tabular representation of the thematic coding

The table above demonstrates the tabular representation of thematic coding generated from the data collected during the fieldwork.

3.1.11 Ethical Considerations

The research ethics were keenly followed throughout the study. The research objectives were elaborated to the respondents or participants to make them aware of the nature of the study before every interview to avoid uncertainty. An informed consent form was created, stating the objectives of the study and their right to quit being a part of the study if they want to, and be shown to the participants before the interview to avoid any ambiguity. Permission from the participants to conduct interviews was taken verbally. Verbal consent was taken from the respondents before recording the interviews to avoid violating research ethics.

The respondents were ensured the confidentiality of their identity and the data collected. Pseudonyms have been used instead of the real names of the respondents in the field jottings and writing process to ensure the anonymity of the respondents further. Only the original names of those participants are used who have consented to it. Moreover, the account names, usernames, or any other personal information of the participants in the data collected virtually, such as posts, comments, etc., through screenshots are also blurred to maintain the anonymity of their identity. Furthermore, another very crucial and ethical decision was choosing the data suitable and ethically appropriate to be used in the research from all of the publicly available data on the internet. The ethical considerations have been keenly observed while collecting public data from the internet.

3.1.12 Problems Encountered During Research

During the data collection process, a researcher has to face numerous problems in the field. Although netnography is conducted online in virtual communities, without many physical hindrances, it is not as smooth and obstacles-free research as it is thought to be. To begin with the challenges that I encountered during the fieldwork, gaining access to experienced freelancers was challenging. Freelancers are not easy to find in the physical sphere. Hence, I chose to gain access to reliable and authentic freelancing communities online which was also a task. I had joined multiple Facebook freelancing communities, however, some of them were not active and there were only a few participants who posted actively but their posts were also not relevant. Some of the groups had active participation but a lot of posts were merely scams trying to trap people in the name of outsourcing projects or hiring them as a team. However, such members used to take money from the freelancers seeking jobs in the name of registration, account activation, or anything like that. Hence, I had to explore more to find some active, authentic, and relevant Facebook communities such as ‘Learn Freelancing with Hisham Sawar’, ‘GFX Mentor Community’, etc.

As the research is netnographic in nature, I was able to access a lot of relevant data and naturally occurring discussions on social media and freelancing platforms. However, it was a challenging decision to decide whether the available data was suitable and ethically appropriate to be used in the research or not. I had to make sure about ethical considerations before taking any screenshots as data.

While conducting interviews, some of the participants were contacted via Facebook. I had to interview them online on the apps at their convenience i.e., Zoom Meetings, Google Meet, Messenger, or WhatsApp. A separate WhatsApp account was created for this purpose which was strictly restricted for freelancing and research work and was not for personal use. Some freelancers, whom I contacted initially accepted to be interviewed yet when I contacted them at the scheduled time, they did not respond. Similarly, an experienced freelancer, who had been working as a freelancer for 6 years, rescheduled her interview thrice. On our fourth scheduled meeting online, I was successfully able to conduct the interview.

Gaining access to trainers and convincing them for the interview was also a task. I tried to contact a lot of trainers including a pioneers of freelancing in Pakistan, Hisham Sarwar, but I was unable to successfully reach them and interview them. Nevertheless, I was introduced to the other trainers by some participants and my e-Rozgar course trainer. I eventually got access to more trainers through the snowball sampling technique as it was not easy to contact a reliable and experienced trainer. This also took a lot of time and patience.

Moreover, convincing females for the interview was also not easy as it was to convince male participants. To include female perspectives and voices in the research, I had to put more effort into building rapport and trust. Some female freelancers deemed it to be a trick to scam them and felt unsafe. Eventually, I conversed with them to build rapport by sharing the aim of the research, ensuring the confidentiality of their data, and informing them about their right to quit the interview whenever they feel uncomfortable which convinced them to be part of the research. I had to complete the e-Rozgar course to get my request to join the Alumni group of e-Rozgar students and access experienced freelancers. For which I had to complete all the assignments and weekly tasks given by the instructors about graphic designing and the other course requirements including portfolio building. As it is a very time-consuming skill that requires a lot of practice and hard work, it consumes a lot of time during that time.

Furthermore, to explore the key theme of outsourced freelancing, I had to connect with the outsourcers. To delve into the experiences and challenges faced by the freelancers who work for the outsourcers. I worked with Ibrahim, a 32-year-old freelance outsourcer, who used to outsource work related to the niche of writing and proofreading. The tasks given to me included paraphrasing, writing, creating presentations, plagiarism removal, and proofreading. It consumed a lot of time; hence, I included another writer, Javeria, among my respondents as a team member to share the workload. This created a stronger bond with that respondent which eventually helped me to gain deeper insights into freelance work. Initially, the outsourcer used to pay for the work on time but gradually the payments were delayed. Late payments caused embarrassment for me as I was the mediator between Javeria and the outsourcer delays in Javeria's payments as well. Although she

understood my position and the issue, this experience was very challenging and embarrassing as the payments got delayed for three months. I had to ask for the payments now and then to pay Javeria. This provided me with a deeper understanding of the challenges a freelancer goes through especially while working with undisciplined outsourcers.

3.2 Research Locale: The Online Platforms

This section aims to discuss the research setting or the locale of the study. As mentioned earlier, the current research is a netnographic study and is not conducted in any physical locale. A netnographic ethnography incorporates all the features of ethnography but is conducted in virtual communities or online. The research aims to explore freelancing, its conceptualization, motivations, and lived experiences of freelancers, and the inclusion of all in the labor market. Thus, the locale of the research is online training platforms i.e., E-Rozgar, Facebook freelance communities, and marketplaces i.e., Fiverr and Upwork. The detailed discussion of the locales of the study is as follows:

3.2.1 e-Rozgar Training Program

The e-Rozgar program is a freelancing training program launched by the Punjab government as a flagship project of the Affairs & Sports Department, Government of Punjab and Punjab Information Technology Board (PITB). It was inaugurated by the Chief Minister (CM) of Punjab, Shahbaz Sharif, on March 28, 2017, with an aim to empower young unemployed graduates with digital and freelancing skills. E-Rozgar is limited only to unemployed graduates with a domicile in Punjab. This training platform offers different courses such as Technical, Creative Design, Content Marketing and Advertising, E-Commerce, Mobile App Development, Digital and Social Media Marketing, and UI¹¹/UX¹² Design while freelancing is taught in all courses. Initially, the program was

¹¹ UI stands for User Interface. UI Design focuses on the construction of the interface of the product or service dealing with the interaction between users and computer system, software, and applications.

¹² UX stands for User Experience. UX Design focuses on the designing overall meaningful experience of a user with the product or service including design, branding, function, and usability.

launched in 40 training centres in 36 districts of Punjab aiming to produce 10,000 freelancers per month.

The courses offered by the e-Rozgar program are free of cost. There are two modes of training i.e., Physical and Virtual. The eligibility criteria to secure admission are mentioned below.

Eligibility Criteria	
Age	Up to 35 years
Qualification	Minimum 16 years of Education (Graduation)
Employment Status	Unemployed
Domicile	Punjab

Table 5: Eligibility Criteria of e-Rozgar Admission

The admission is offered four times a year after every three months. The admission process involves 4 steps. Firstly, the candidates have to apply and register themselves online for the course they are interested in. They can either choose physical training or online training. Physical training is only offered in a few cities. Secondly, the registered candidates or the applicants have to appear for an online entry test. The test is 30 minutes long based on short MCQs related to their courses and general digital knowledge. The applicants who pass the test successfully are then shortlisted. Thirdly, the shortlisted candidates are required to submit their documents online via their website. The documents are then verified for the further shortlisting of the candidates. Lastly, the selected candidates are required to join the official Facebook group of their batch and course where they get all the details of the classes and course.

Figure 4: Official Advertisement of e-Rozgar Training Program 2023¹³

The e-Rozgar program has trained more than fifty-two thousand (+52,000) graduates who have earned more than verified and reported 3.6 billion PKR¹⁴ including 350 million PKR during training. The participation of female trainees is 57% which is higher than male participation 43%. Some rules have to be followed to continue the course such as:

1. The official group name has to be joined by the Facebook account having the student's original name mentioned on the Computerized National Identity Card (CNIC). No nicknames are allowed.
2. Students must join the classes through the *Zoom Meeting* link shared, by the Lab Attendant of the course, in the official group every day 15 minutes before class. The username of the students on the Zoom account must be their original name following the middle 7 digits of the CNIC number.
3. It is mandatory to maintain 80% attendance. Those who are not attending live lectures and have attendance below 80% get removed from the official course group.

¹³ Source: (Facebook official page of e-Rozgar Program)

¹⁴ PKR stands for Pakistani Rupees.

4. Weekly feedback for every week is mandatory for every student to submit a feedback form once a week. The weekly feedback form includes three sections, i.e., about the Instructor, lab technician, and Lab manager, each carrying some question related to their performance during the week, topic covered, and suggestions for improvements.
5. Every student must submit assignments on time. An assignment is usually given once or twice a month.
6. Profile links of freelance accounts and portfolios with active gigs or profiles are mandatory for every student to submit to be a graduate.

Lacking any of these rules may result in expulsion from the course and removal from the graduates' list of the course even if you complete the course.

3.2.2 Fiverr

Fiverr is the world's largest freelance marketplace which offers digital services. There are more than 4.3 million active buyers and approximately 400,000 sellers from 160 countries (Fiverr, n.d.). 6.28% of Fiverr users come from social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Telegram, etc.



Figure 5: Fiverr Logo

Fiverr¹⁵ was founded by two entrepreneurs belonging to Israel, Micha Kaufman and Shai Wininger, in 2010 (Santos, 2022). Fiverr operates around the globe with numerous offices yet the headquarters is located in Tel Aviv, Israel. It is a platform used by the sellers and the buyers of digital services irrespective of geographic location. The clients are referred to as buyers and freelancers as buyers on Fiverr. Buyers of digital services can connect with sellers with high-quality skill sets and can buy their required digital services by paying them the amount of the service set by the seller.

The minimum rate of any digital service is \$5 and can be increased depending on the nature of the service (Fiverr, n.d.). Fiverr provides two modes, i.e., buyer and seller, of

¹⁵ The logo has been taken from the official website of Fiverr.

profiles which can easily be switched just by a click. Fiverr can be joined free of cost by just creating a profile and verifying it. However, sellers have to pay a 20% commission to Fiverr on every earned order and the buyer has to pay a minimum 5.5% fee on every transaction (Gertenbach, 2022). It also allows buyers to give tip amounts to the sellers for their satisfactory outcomes of the orders. Fiverr allows various payment methods i.e., Paypal, Fiverr revenue card, Payoneer, or direct deposit. It varies according to country (Fiverr, n.d.).

A seller has to publish a gig which refers to the post or ad of the services along with their offered package details which include the type of service, price, and further details of the order. The buyer can browse the website or application of Fiverr to find their required services and purchase from the gigs published by the sellers. Fiverr also allows buyers and sellers to negotiate and make customized orders (Fiverr, n.d.). For instance, sellers can offer three types of packages in one gig, i.e., basic package, standard package, and premium package, which vary in various terms such as package offer, price, and delivery timings.

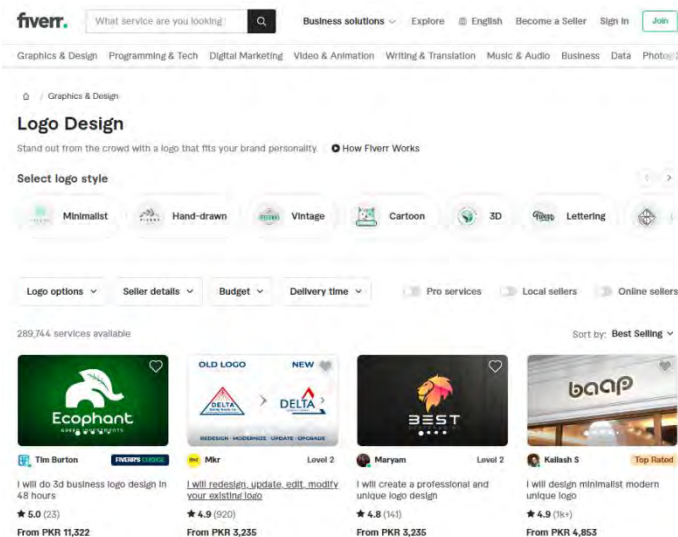


Figure 6: Fiverr interface of browsing services¹⁶

Fiverr profiles are awarded with badges and seller levels on their profiles for their successful completion of orders and fulfilling the badges and levels requirements. The

¹⁶ The figure has been taken from Fiverr's official website.

“New Seller” badge is given to the new or beginner accounts and then moves on to the “Rising Talent”, “Level One”, “Level Two”, and Top-Rated Seller” badges respectively after fulfilling the badge requirements (Santos, 2022).

3.2.3 Facebook

Facebook (also known as FB) is a social networking site founded in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, Eduardo Saverin, Dustin Moskovitz, and Chris Hughes, students of Harvard University. It was originally designed for connecting college students, however, people aged more than 13 were given access to join it by using a valid email address. It has



Figure 7: Facebook Logo

become the largest social networking platform with more than 2.958 billion (nearly 3 billion) users (Statista, 2023) with 37.3 million people from Pakistan (Dixon, 2022) as of June 2023. It allows people to connect with people around the world and share their thoughts, pictures, videos, and other stuff with their family, friends, and the public online¹⁷.

As mentioned earlier, it was developed for college students only. It was initially known as Facemash in 2003 which connected college students to judge their fellow students based on attractiveness and appearance. Mark Zuckerberg, the main developer was forced to shut it down as it was a violation of Harvard University’s policies of resources. Despite that, it gained popularity and Zuckerberg later got it registered in the name of TheFacebook and URL <http://www.thefacebook.com> in January 2004 for which some of his fellows named Saverin, Moskovitz, and Hughes also joined him to create it as a social network. The company’s headquarters are in Menlo Park, California.

¹⁷ The logo inserted above has been taken from Facebook.

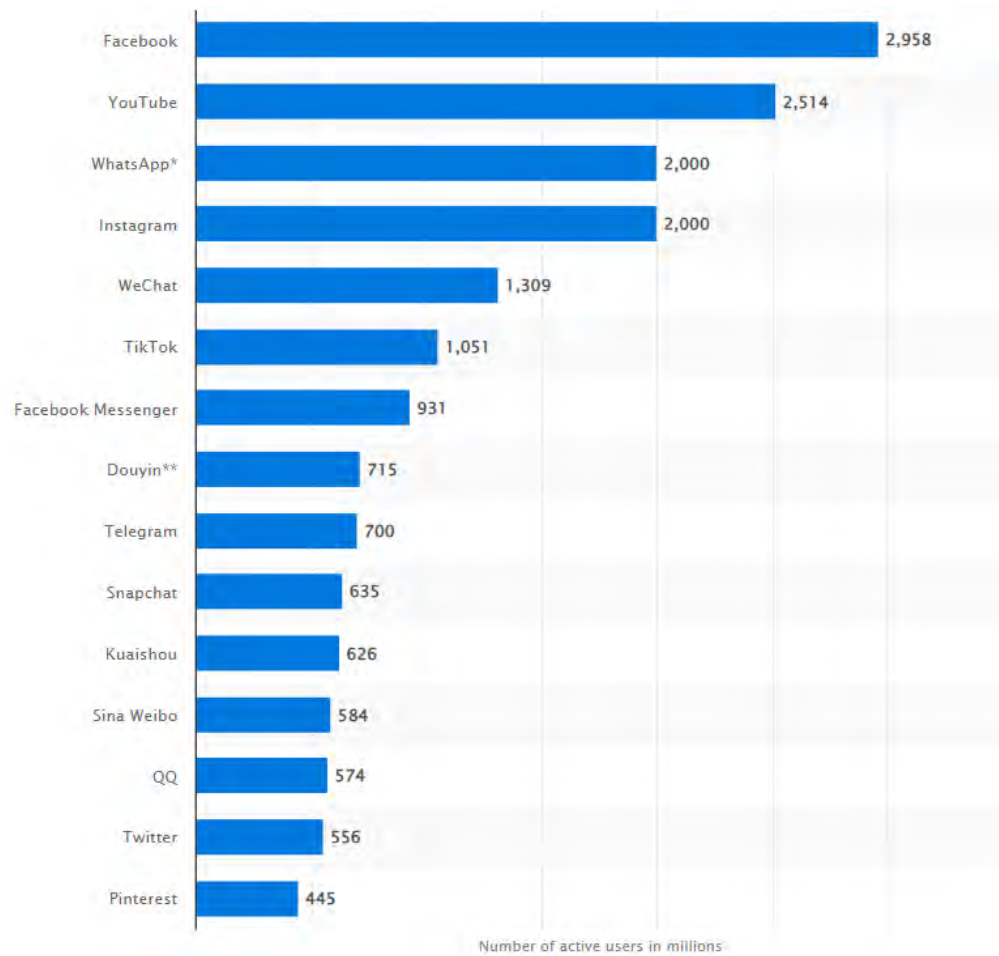


Figure 8: Number of active users of social media platforms¹⁸

The site was then attracted by the advertisers as it allowed them to engage with their customers on a large scale directly for the first time. This encouraged other businesses and companies to use it for marketing and advertising. Soon it also became a powerful tool and a platform for political movements which was initiated for the U.S. presidential election which was between Barack Obama and John McCain. To support them, thousands of groups were formed to support the candidates. Facebook became a public company in February 2012 and changed its parent company to Meta Platforms in October 2021 which emphasized it being a metaverse that would allow people to interact in virtual reality

¹⁸ Source: (Statista, 2023)

environments (Ray, 2017). The other apps or services of this Meta Platform are Instagram¹⁹, Messenger²⁰, and WhatsApp²¹.

3.2.3.1 Features

Facebook allows access to it free of charge but earns through advertisements and business campaigns. People are allowed to create profiles and connect with others through friend requests, pages, or groups. They can either join the existing pages or groups of their interests or create new ones on their own. The users can connect, share their pictures, and videos, live stream, grow and promote their business, buy and sell products or services to the users, and much more. Users can respond or react to one's shared content by the Like button and comment option. They can also chat with one another by sending private messages. It also allows you to set your privacy by limiting the audience who gets to see your shared content. Facebook urges its users to be transparent in terms of their identities and avoid using fake identities to socialize with others. This feature allows bottom-up and peer-to-peer connectivity which makes it easier to build trust and connect businesses to the consumers of their products.

3.2.3.2 Facebook Communities

The mission of the Meta platforms is to empower people to connect and build a community to share their ideas and support each other. It also promotes economic opportunities by assisting people to grow their businesses, create jobs, and be economically strong.

Facebook allows its users to create communities based on any of their interests and add other like-minded people to it or join some existing Facebook groups/communities. Facebook groups are a powerful tool to promote e-learning, grow businesses, engage with customers easily through content, and build a thriving and profitable community. These communities allow businesses to bypass the complex Facebook newsfeed algorithm and

¹⁹ Instagram is a photo and video sharing social network.

²⁰ Messenger is an instant messaging app which is connected to your Facebook account. All the messages received on Facebook can be accessed via Messenger.

²¹ WhatsApp is a text-message and Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP). This allows users to connect by creating an account on their private cellular numbers to connect with their contacts.

connect or interact with the users through their branded posts. It also allows businesses to build and solidify long-lasting relationships with their customers organically. Moreover, it also provides chances to access and learn valuable market research data to scale up one's own business (McLachlan, 2020). Vendors can also live stream their products to their customers to show the original products which strengthens the trust of customers as you provide quality assurance by virtually presenting it.

The Facebook groups or communities that I joined were *'Learn Freelancing with Hisham Sawar'*, *'GFX Mentor Community'*, *'GFX Mentor Nation'*, *'Pakistan Freelancers'*, *'Get Orders on Fiverr'*, and *'Graphic Design'*. The brief details of these groups are as follows:

Learn Freelancing with Hisham Sawar: Hisham Sarwar is a very reputed figure who is also considered a guru (mentor) and one of the pioneers of freelancing in Pakistan. He not only earns through freelancing but also teaches it to the youth of Pakistan through various mediums i.e., YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, etc. The Facebook group "Learn Freelancing with Hisham Sawar" is one of those platforms that he uses to promote freelancing in Pakistan. Hisham Sarwar is well connected with all of his group members as a mentor and not only encourages them to actively participate in freelance activities but also responds to the queries of the group members about freelancing posted in the group. The group is known as Hisham Sarwar's freelance community which includes freelancers from all over Pakistan who consider him as a mentor. The group was created in August 2018 and has more than 516k members. The group activity of the group represents that more than 200 posts are shared in a day and more than 3000 posts in a month²². It is a private group that can be joined after the admin approves the joining request. Moreover, the content posted in the group can only be seen by the group members.

GFX Mentor Community: It is a group made by the viewers and followers of GFX Mentor. GFX Mentor is a YouTube channel of Pakistan's outstanding creative designer and ardent educator, Imran Ali Dina, who helps and teaches his viewers about graphic

²² The stated data is taken from the group activity section of the official group on Facebook.

design without charging any money. He teaches his viewers and community members about the theoretical and practical complexities of graphic design. The group members tend to post their queries, designs, job ads, etc. in the group to seek guidance from Dina and other members. Dina actively responds to the queries asked by the group members, encourages them by reviewing their graphic design samples, and suggests the gap for improvement in the designs. The group, created in 2020, is private and can only be joined with the approval of the group admins. There are 139k members in the group. The group activity shows that more than 300 posts in a day and more than 2000 posts in a month are shared by the group members and admins of the group.

GFX Mentor Nation: GFX Mentor Nation is also a Facebook group of the followers and students of Imran Ali Dina who are interested to be connecting with their mentor and seeking guidance from him. The nature of the activities is similar to that of the abovementioned group “GFX Mentor Community”. The group was created in 2020 and has 70k members. The group activity demonstrates that 100+ posts in a day and 1000+ in a month are shared in the group. The group members share their queries, designs, and job ads in the group.

Pakistan Freelancers: It is a group joined by 787k members belonging to all the provinces of Pakistan. It includes freelancers, recruiters, and job seekers. The group is private and was created on May 12, 2018. Group activity suggests that 100+ posts a day are shared in the group. The group members post job ads and also support one another related to any query posted in the group.

Get Orders on Fiverr: This group was created in 2021 to provide a platform for freelancers who use Fiverr as a platform. The group is made public to all Facebook users across the world. The number of group members is 375k which includes freelancers working on Fiverr from all over the world. The group activity shows that 150+ posts in a day and 4500+ posts in a month are shared by the group members. The posts are generally about the promotion of Fiverr gigs, queries related to gig ranking, profile improvements, and ads of paid services related to Fiverr profile creation, ranking, reviews, and ratings to the group members. The group members tend to support each other and also promote their

profiles. Moreover, some freelancers also post jobs for freelancers seeking outsourced work.

Graphic Design: This group was created in 2013 for job posts for graphic designers in the domain of freelancing, full-time onsite jobs, or part-time jobs. The group is public in nature and everyone on Facebook can view its contents. A total of 718k members from all over the world who are interested in graphic designing freelance jobs and onsite jobs have joined the group. Almost 100 posts in a day and 2000 posts in a month are shared in the group. People post job ads and relevant people contact the ad posters to get hired.

4 VIRTUAL FREELANCING AS SELF-EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY

Since the last decade, the freelance industry of Pakistan has been evolving rapidly and contributing to the economy of the country. A large population of Pakistan is working as a freelancer for various reasons such as to earn extra money, be financially independent, or build something of one's own. There are different types of freelance work such as physical and virtual. This chapter aims to explore and discuss virtual freelancing as an opportunity for self-employment, its startup from training to building portfolios and moving towards freelance marketplaces to sell the services. Moreover, various types of freelancing methods have been discussed such as freelancing on marketplaces, social media communities, online outsourcing, and working with freelance agencies. Finally, the conceptualization of freelancing among the population in various aspects is also discussed in this chapter.

4.1 Virtual Freelancing as a Viable Career

Anthropology is a discipline with an evolutionary perspective. The anthropologists have been studying societal changes and evolution concerning time and space holistically for ages. They have contributed to studying primitive societies to contemporary societies. In the past few years, the rapid technological development has brought a paradigm shift in the society. Internet users who were initially merely consumers of the content available on the internet became prosumers²³ of the Internet who not only consumed the content available online but also began to produce it. The one-way process of provision of information shifted into the two-way process of information production and consumption. The phenomenon of physical labor has shifted to the idea of digital or virtual labor. This brought new opportunities for individuals seeking employment such as virtual freelance work. This paradigm shift is not merely a shift in the medium or platform of employment or work, it has impacted the lives of the individuals linked with this shift in multiple ways.

The transformation of physical labor to digital labor has brought changes in the ideas of employment, self-employment, and entrepreneurship. In this chapter, virtual

²³ Prosumers are the individuals who not only consume information but also produce it at the same time.

freelancing has been discussed as an opportunity for self-employment which generally refers to employing oneself by selling products or services to generate income. Digitalization has transformed and reshaped the idea of self-employment from physical employment to virtual employment. Employment is no longer restricted to the idea of work in the physical sphere. It has expanded into virtual or digital form i.e., virtual freelance work. The foremost and requisite step towards becoming a freelancer and self-employing in the digital sphere is the learning and training process of digital skills, freelancing skills, and platform algorithms.

4.1.1 Training and Upskilling

Digital skills and communication skills are requisite for a freelance career. Personal development is a very significant part of career development whether it is online or onsite. Training and upskilling are an essential part of personal development or career development. It helps a person to outshine, stay up-to-date, and actively pursue the knowledge and skills in their careers. Freelancing is a career that requires up-to-date information and skills about their field. If freelancers do not upskill themselves, they have to face consequences in terms of loss of orders and clients.

There are numerous private and public training programs and institutes that offer free and paid digital skills training to the population. The government has also played a very significant role in prevailing digital skills among the population and encouraging them to explore new opportunities available to earn money and support themselves. The government of Pakistan (GoP) has initiated several training programs and institutes to promote freelancing and the digital economic ecosystem on provincial and national levels. Such training programs provide training free of cost and some charge a minimal amount. These programs provide training on both virtual and physical mediums. Some of the training programs are based on regular and interactive classes conducted on online meeting apps such as Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, or Zoom Meeting. e-Rozgar is one of the interactive training programs launched by GoP. It provides training in both online (free of cost) and physical mediums (paid).

I enrolled in the creative designing course of the e-Rozgar training program to explore in-depth insights and the experiential reality of trainees and freelancers who are interested in opting for freelancing as a career. The details of e-Rozgar training programs are already mentioned in the section on research locale and participant observation. These courses are conducted for 3 months providing online interactive classes. During the course, the instructor and lab managers also keep an eye on the progress of the trainees and encourage them to start freelance careers during the course. Initially, almost 250 trainees were enrolled into the course, but a lot of trainees could not continue the course and some of them were dropped out from the course due to their low attendance. Inquiring about the number of trainees being trained through e-Rozgar in every batch Waqar Tayyub, a 42-year-old freelancing and creative design trainer at e-Rozgar, stated

We do not have any exact data, but according to the data calculated by the E-Rozgar program almost 30-40 percent of the trainees initially opt for freelancing as a career, and those who do not go for it rejoin it after a few years. the total percentage is above 50 percent for those who go for a freelance career. (Trainer, 42; In-depth Interview)

Learning complex digital skills and becoming an expert in the span of 3 months is not possible. However, these courses provide intermediate-level in-depth learning of the skills that are to be mastered through consistent practice and self-learning. For instance, I learned intermediate-level knowledge and usage of different graphic designing software including Adobe Illustrator, Adobe Photoshop, Canva, and Camtasia Studio during the course. Moreover, the course also taught the algorithms of various freelance platforms i.e., social media communities, Fiverr, Upwork, TeacherOn, etc. I started learning graphic design from scratch and after completion of the course, I was able to create various forms of designs i.e., advertisement designs, banners and posters designs, flyers and pamphlets designs, logo designs, book cover designs, merch (t-shirt, caps, notepads, pens, etc.) designs, podcast thumbnails, YouTube thumbnails, etc. I feel skilled and capable enough to create a portfolio, improve my skills, and offer services online. Moreover, after the completion of the course, all the graduated students were invited to an official group of alumni of the e-Rozgar training program who are also active in the freelance industry. This

proved to be an open gate to access experienced freelancers and trainers. Numerous success stories are also shared in the alumni group to appreciate the individuals and motivate other freelancers. Nimra Zain, a 28-years-old trainee of the e-Rozgar course and freelance creative designer shared her experience and stated

The content the e-Rozgar training program teaches to its trainees is sold by private instructors for thousands of rupees. It is a very good initiative for those who want to learn but cannot afford to pay expensive charges for the courses. (Trainee, 28; In-depth Interview)

Some training programs introduced by the government are based on scheduled uploaded lectures in the training program's online system. For instance, Digiskill is a training program based on an online Learning Management System (LMS) launched by the government which enrolls thousands of students in every batch free of cost. It has its online portal known as LMS which allows its enrolled trainees to access recorded video lectures uploaded and scheduled every week. A trainee has to enroll in three courses at a time of which two are related to digital skills which can be chosen by the trainees according to their choices and one compulsory course of learning freelancing. Trainees have to watch those videos to mark their attendance and submit hands-on exercises and quizzes to get the required scores. Trainees need to secure a minimum 50% score in the course to be eligible for an e-certificate. Roohi Ali, a 28-year-old freelance writer and proofreader, shared her views about online non-interactive courses and said that such portals are automatic and run on some algorithms. These algorithms can easily be breached and misused. A lot of trainees enroll in such training merely to get certificates and those trainees are not concerned with learning or content of course. She mentioned

I joined an LMS-based course to learn freelancing and content creation skills. However, as there were no checks and balances or monitoring of trainees, I lost all the motivation to complete the course. The only motivation to complete the course was to get an e-certificate. (Freelancer, 28; In-depth Interview)

She further added that she was able to learn how the algorithm of LMS of that training works and the tricks to mark attendance without watching full lectures uploaded and submitting hand-on-exercises. She shared

I used to watch only the first 20 seconds of the videos and skip the remaining video as the LMS marked the attendance after 20 sec of watch time. The passing score was only 50% which is very low and achievable by just completing 100% attendance and filling out some quizzes using Google. (Freelancer, 28; In-depth Interview)

The study observed that trainees who seek learning opportunities prefer interactive courses rather than courses with old recorded videos as they are often not up-to-date and are prerecorded. However, the interactive courses provide more up-to-date information and skill sets.

Moreover, there are numerous paid and unpaid digital skills and freelancing courses offered by private institutes and trainers. The study observed that although a lot of freelancers and trainers seek assistance from paid courses and prefer them. However, most freelancers discourage trainees from buying or enrolling in paid courses and prefer to enroll in unpaid freelance courses and YouTube channels that provide quality content and knowledge free of cost. The trainers I interviewed and the trainer of the course I enrolled in also discouraged paid training courses. Waqar Tayyub, a 42-year-old freelancing and creative design trainer at e-Rozgar, suggested following free online tutorials and courses available online free of cost and also suggested some mentors of graphic designing and their YouTube channels such as GFX Mentor²⁴. Mujhtaba Sial, a 34-years-old freelance creative designer, shared his views about the paid training courses and cited

I have purchased paid courses, enrolled in unpaid courses online, and followed YouTube channels as well in the past to learn graphic design. I must say that the trainers who sell paid courses (especially pre-recorded courses) are only intended to make money by selling

²⁴ GFX Mentor is a YouTube channel of a renowned graphic designer “Imran Ali Dina” of Pakistan.

‘chooran’ (powder for digestion) and ‘manjan’ (dentifrice). (Freelancer, 34; In-depth Interview)

4.1.2 Building a Portfolio: Assessment of Freelancer

Learning the skill, upskilling, and using the skill and knowledge in earnings is a chain that goes on. Being up-to-date is a very necessary element of being a freelancer. A freelancer does not require any formal degrees or grades but requires quality of work. For this purpose, freelancers have to practice their skills and create a high-quality portfolio. A portfolio is a collection of samples of one’s excellent work.

There are some freelancing platforms such as Fiverr which work on service advertisement posts known as gigs posted by the sellers. Such platforms do not require an extensive portfolio and can work just based on a short portfolio attached to the gallery of a gig. However, some platforms require a portfolio to be shared with the clients which is assessed and evaluated by the buyer before buying service. Different websites allow a user to create and share portfolios such as Behance and Google Drive.

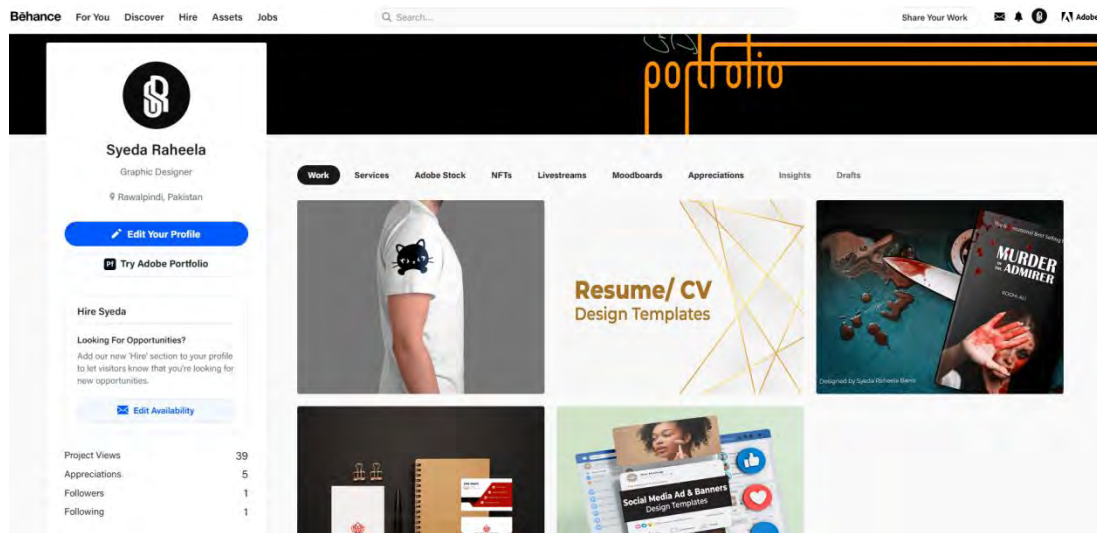


Figure 9: Screenshot of my graphic designing portfolio created on Behance²⁵

²⁵ The screenshot of the portfolio has been taken from my graphic designing portfolio which was created during the course.

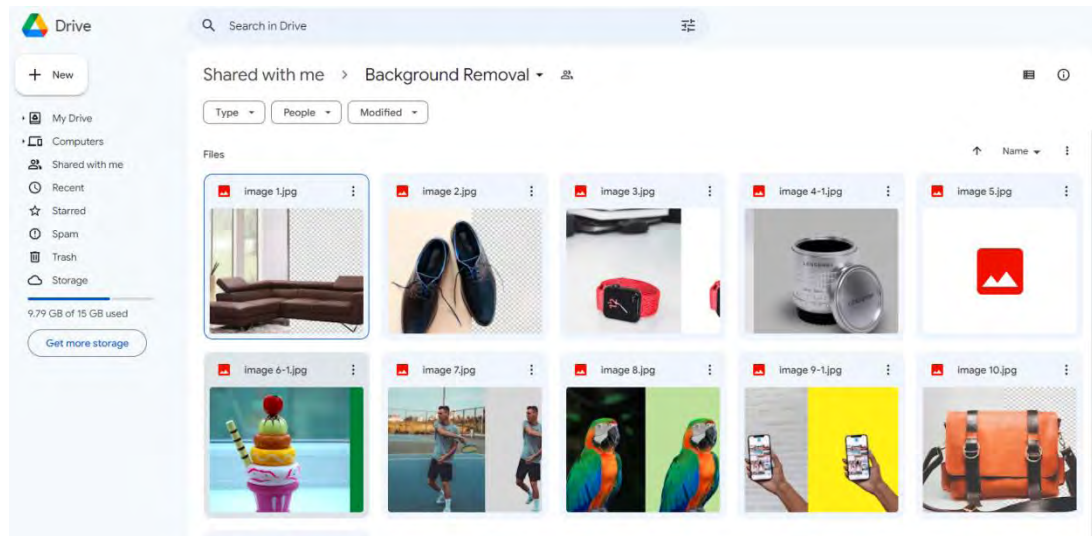


Figure 10: Screenshot of a respondent's portfolio on Google Drive²⁶

Behance is a platform that allows its users to create, showcase, and share their portfolios in creative niches including pictures, videos, illustrations, photography, graphic designs, etc. Similarly, people also use Google Drive to save their portfolios and share them by sharing the link to the respective folder. Both platforms allow users to create separate folders to upload different categories of portfolios. Shohaib Raja, a 44-years-old trainer at e-Rozgar and a blogger, shares his views about building a portfolio and stated

What is seen is sold. If someone is investing their money to buy a service, they need to be sure about the quality of the service. No one likes to invest money in low-quality services when there a numerous options available to choose from. (Trainer, 44; In-depth Interview)

Additionally, he expressed that creating a good portfolio is an art that not everyone can master. He further mentioned

The brighter and shinier the shop, the more customers come to it.
(Trainer, 44; In-depth Interview)

He suggested that the portfolio should not look like a drawer in which all of the samples are thrown randomly. The portfolios must be attractive, high-quality, and

²⁶ The screenshot of the portfolio created on

organized. Unorganized portfolios often lose the attraction of buyers and they lose interest in the samples.

4.1.3 Profile Creation

Once freelancers are satisfied with their skill sets and consider themselves skilled enough to sell their services, they are required to create good-quality samples or portfolios. The next step is to explore various platforms and create profiles on them. Creation of profiles on freelance marketplaces requires verification of identity and personal description. In the case of platform accounts, a freelancer has to complete profile requirements by adding all the necessary details.

As for the Fiverr account, after completion of the profiles, freelancers have to create and publish gigs about the service offered with the help of keyword research along with three attractive images as thumbnails and a brief portfolio. A seller has to stay online to get orders. There are two criteria to self-analyze and improve a gig i.e., impressions and clicks of the gig. Impressions refer to the number of times one's gig has appeared on someone's search area or profile. Whereas, clicks refer to the number of times any user has clicked and opened the gig. The use of proper keyword research and eye-catching gig images attracts more impressions and clicks. The more the clicks and impressions are, the more the chances of getting an order increase. Freelancers need to get positive ratings and reviews to get more orders. Ratings and reviews are typically gained from the clients after the completion of orders. However, some freelance communities on social media are created to support freelancers. Services of providing paid or unpaid reviews and ratings are often offered there to help others get orders.

Creating a profile is not enough to work on platforms. Learning about the algorithm of platforms is equally important. Arooj, a 23-years old freelance writer, stated

Freelancers often complain that they are unable to get orders even after months. After investigating the issue, freelancers confess that they have not invested their time in learning the algorithms of the platform they use. (Freelancer, 23; In-depth Interview)

Freelancers have to be focused on the algorithms of platforms to master client hunts. Trying to work without an understanding of platforms and their algorithm does not allow career growth.

4.1.4 Mediums for Virtual Freelancing

Freelancers use various methods and mediums to do freelance work. Some prefer to seek work online on social media communities through direct clients and some prefer to stick to freelancing marketplaces such as Fiverr. Every medium has its way of client hunting, rapport building, dealings, payment methods, and security. Some of the most common mediums used for freelance work are as follows:

4.1.4.1 Virtual Freelance Marketplaces

It is very important to realize that having skills is not enough to be a freelancer. One must also be aware of how to sell their skills on various platforms. Virtual freelance marketplaces are one of the most prominent spaces for freelance work worldwide. These marketplaces offer a medium for freelancers and clients to meet, interact, negotiate, and work together. Some of the famous freelancing marketplaces in Pakistan include Fiverr, Upwork, Freelancer, PeoplePerHour, Guru, etc. The freelancers who sell their skill-based services are known as sellers. Whereas, those individuals who hire freelancers to get their one-time jobs done are known as buyers.

Freelance marketplaces or platforms operate through some specific algorithms. The study observed that the freelancers working on such platforms need to be vigilant about how their algorithms function. They need to create or operate their freelancing profiles and publish their gigs or job proposals according to the requirements of algorithms. Every platform has its own rules and policies which are to be strictly followed by both, the sellers and the buyers.

A profile of a freelancer is the technical portal to the freelancer which provides all the necessary information about a freelancer such as skills, profile photo, description, charges, portfolio, skill test results, client feedback or reviews, response rates, orders delivered, orders in the queue, hours worked, etc. (Sengul-Jones, 2017). Freelancers have to follow the implicit norms and policies of the platform while creating a profile. For

instance, when freelancers create a profile on Fiverr, they have to create a unique username that cannot be changed later. They also need to write a description about themselves and their work and share display gallery pictures as gig pictures in the profile.



Figure 11: Gig image created for my Fiverr account²⁷

Gig images have the capacity to attract potential clients and bring orders to the business on the platform. If freelancers are very skilled but the gig image they use is not attractive, they will not get enough clicks which ultimately reduces the chances of getting orders,

4.1.4.2 Social Media Freelance Communities and Direct Clients

Freelancers often use various social media platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, etc. to access direct clients. Direct clients are the clients who are contacted or accessed without the mediation of the platform. Facebook is the leading social media platform and LinkedIn is the professional virtual platform for freelancers which is gaining popularity globally. (Clayton, 2022). As mentioned in Chapter 2 (literature review), there are numerous Facebook community groups created by Facebook users according to their interests and are joined by numerous other Facebook members who are interested in it. All the members actively participate in the discussions or activities held in those groups or

²⁷ The image was created for my Fiverr account during the course to post a gig.

communities. Similarly, there are numerous freelance communities or groups on Facebook in which freelancers actively participate in the activities. The people who are interested in hiring freelancers temporarily to get their work done also join these communities to access freelancers. They post their job ads with the requirements of the job and instructions. Some of them post the ad anonymously (as shown in the figure below) and some post it with their original account.

A strong portfolio is the main tool for reaching out to direct clients and convincing them to order placement of the task they want to do. A portfolio is a curated collection of good samples of work done by a person in a specific category. For instance, a portfolio of a freelance writer includes the best sample of writings written by the writer over time. Similarly, a portfolio of a creative designer includes the best samples of designs created by the designer over time. A portfolio is created digitally on various platforms such as creative or graphic designer use 'Behance²⁸' to create and showcase their portfolio. However, some also use Google Drive to build their portfolios which can be shared with the clients by sharing its link. Social media accounts and pages are also used to build and showcase the portfolios of various freelancers. At the beginning of the practice phase of learning a skill or building a portfolio, freelancers, especially in a creative niche, offer people to give them tasks to do free of cost. This allows them to explore and learn new ideas, build portfolios, and network with other freelancers. They call it a win-win situation.

Before hiring any freelancer, a sample of their work or portfolio is demanded from the side of the person who wants to hire to make sure the work quality is good. Interested freelancers either contact the person who posted into the group via private messages or by commenting on the post. The ad poster then selects the person whom they think is the best for their work. Sometimes the budget (payment) is mentioned on the ad/post and sometimes the budget (payment for the order) is negotiated among both members privately.

²⁸ Behance is a platform which is used to create and showcase the portfolio in creative niche including pictures, videos, illustrations, photography, graphic designs, etc. It is known as one of the social media platforms owned by Adobe.



Figure 12: Ad posted anonymously seeking a freelance video editor²⁹



Figure 13: Job ad posted in a Facebook freelancing group³⁰

²⁹ Source: 'Pakistan Freelancers', a Facebook group of Pakistani freelancers

³⁰ Source: 'Freelancer Jobs – Online Earning | FIVERR | UPWORK | FREELANCER ✓', a Facebook group of freelancers

Unlike other freelancing platforms, the dealing between direct clients and a freelancer is not mediated or controlled by the platform on social media. However, freelance marketplaces control every activity on the platform and interfere with it via its policies and rules. These marketplaces also charge some commission fees from the freelancers when they get any order completed.

The study observed that the new freelancers who do not have ranked profiles with some positive reviews from their clients tend to join social media freelancing communities to connect and communicate with other freelancers and potential clients. They take suggestions from other experienced freelancers by posting their queries in the groups. Experienced freelancers respond to such posts and guide other freelancers with their queries. Freelancers also share their success stories to motivate each other to keep trying hard to be successful.

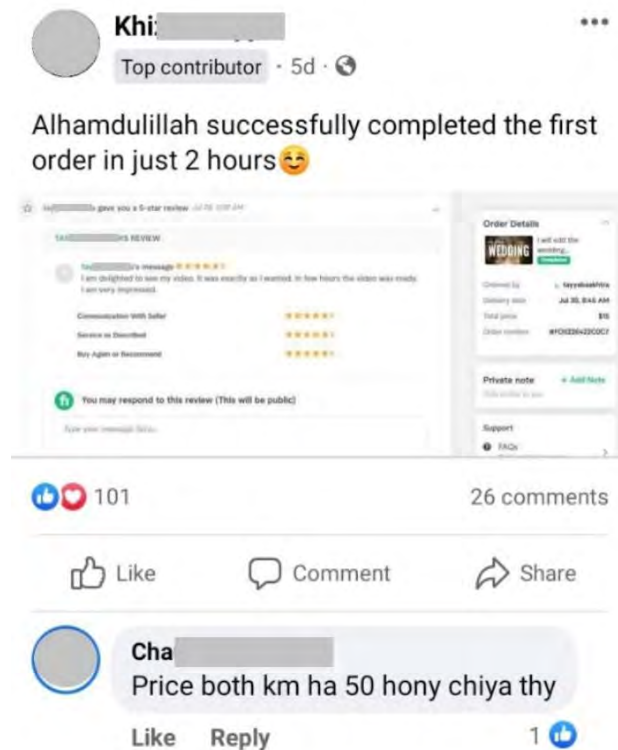


Figure 14: A success post posted by a freelancer on completing first order on Fiverr³¹

³¹ Source: 'Fiverr Freelancers', a Facebook group of freelancers working on Fiverr.

The figure above is the screenshot of the post of a freelancer sharing his success story of achieving and completing his first order on Fiverr. The post shares the screenshot of his Fiverr gig on which he has completed the order of a wedding video editing. The figure shows that the post got 26 comments and 101 thumbs-up or love reactions. The study observed that the members of the freelance group tend to encourage their fellow freelancers to share their success stories either by reacting positively (thumbs-up, heart, care, or wow Facebook reactions) or by commenting positively on the post. Some members also suggest some tips to improve the work of their fellow members in the comment section of the post. For instance, the figure shown above shows a comment by a member which states

Comment in Roman Urdu: *Price both km ha 50 hony chiya thy*

English Translation: *The price is very low; it should have been 50'.*

The member commented on the post to suggest that the price of the task completed is set as 15\$³² which is very low but the value of the task performed is more than that. The commenter suggests the poster set the price at 50\$ as per the value of the task performed.

Freelance work is not restricted to a specific workplace and is done remotely usually at the personal place (house or a personal office setup) of a freelancer. Hence, there is no workplace environment or colleagues. This often leaves freelancers with no options to interact or take support from the experienced ones as one usually gets in a traditional or corporate job sector. However, being a part of social media freelance communities, such as Facebook freelance groups, creates a sense of support and fellowship with other freelancers.

³² \$ is a sign used to represent the dollar currency. There are multiple countries which have their own version of dollar currency such as United States dollar (USD), Canadian dollar (CAD), Australian dollar (AUD), New Zealand dollar (NZD), etc. However, Fiverr uses USD as its currency which is fixed by the seller as per the value of the service provided via a gig.

4.1.4.3 Online Outsourcing

Since the mid-2000s, freelance work has evolved all over Pakistan due to the prevalence of global Business Process Outsourcing (BPO)³³. BPO is a method in which several major businesses, companies, or other organizations sub-contract or outsource their work operations to third-party companies or contractors (individuals). Initially, the focus of BPO was large production companies requiring assistance in their supply chain management. However, in present times, the scope of BPO has grown in all sectors offering different services. It has drastically been embedded in freelance work all over the globe.

Outsourcing generally refers to distributing the internal business or work to a third party on a contract basis or for a one-time job. Freelancers often tend to outsource their orders to other freelancers to get it done. The study explored that various factors lead freelancers to outsource their orders. One of the most common factors behind outsourcing is an increase in workload. Experienced and reputed freelancers often get more orders than they can manage at a time. Most of the freelancers usually accept the order and contact fresh freelancers or low-demand freelancers to get their work done from them to avoid financial loss and increase order rates in their profiles. This allows them to reduce their burden without rejecting any orders. Furthermore, it also enables the outsourcers to access a wider talent pool and improve the efficacy of their work. The outsourcers often rely on hiring freelancers for their jobs because they get to choose the experts after viewing their portfolios or previous work. This enables them to avoid relying on people with outdated skills and knowledge.

Salar, a 25-year-old freelance web developer, mentioned that outsourced work is also an opportunity for a lot of freelancers who are in an early stage of their freelance career and are unable to hunt clients or get orders. He shared that he also started working with an outsourcer at the beginning of his career which enabled him to learn from an experienced freelancer and upskill himself. He further added

³³ BPO is considered "offshore outsourcing" if the vendor or subcontractor is located in a different country; for instance, in the case of customer support.

Outsourced work is a blessing for those who are in their initial stage of freelance careers as it strengthens the connection with experienced freelancers, and provides work opportunities to earn money without hunting or negotiating with the clients. Lastly, it also improves the skills of an individual and allows them to add more samples to their portfolios before working on their own. (Freelancer, 25; In-depth Interview)

Noor, a 35-year-old electrical engineer and content writer, shared her experience that she had worked with outsourcers in the past and had been exploited by getting more work done but paying a very minimal amount. She stated

Outsourcers often hire inexperienced freelancers and exploit them by paying them less than the budget or what they deserve. They are aware that freshers need work. (Freelancer, 35; In-depth Interview)

The study observed that outsourcing work is on one hand an opportunity for those who do not have highly ranked freelancer profiles or client base and are new to this field. It allows them to earn money without worrying about client hunts or negotiations. On the other hand, outsourcers exploit new freelancers by using them as underpaid labor to earn more profit.

4.1.4.4 Freelance Agencies

Freelancing is also done by working as or with freelance agencies. A freelance agency refers to an agency or a business run by multiple freelancers without being in long-term contracts with any other agency, clients, or companies. The study observed that experienced freelancers who get multiple orders a day are motivated to create their agencies by building a team of freelancers to work together. Some freelancers are hired to hunt orders and some are responsible for completing the orders. These agencies may or may not have a physical workspace in which the team works together. Freelancers often prefer to work remotely with freelance agencies instead of being available physically in the workplace.

4.2 Conceptualization of Virtual Freelancing

Despite that the freelance industry has been flourishing in Pakistan since the last decade and nationals of Pakistan have opted for it as an opportunity to get employed (self-employed) and start a career. In the post-pandemic (Covid-19) era, the acceptability of freelancing as a career i.e., full-time and part-time, has increased. The conceptualization of the term freelance is contextual, multifaceted, and subjective. The idea is not static and has multiple meanings attached to it. There are diverse perceptions and narratives of people which are defined by how people perceive or interpret them. The perceptions and narratives are usually constructed by their lived experiences or observed reality. The social structure and socialization in that structure also shape the narratives and perceptions. Hence, the perception of those who have lived experience would be different than those who do not have firsthand experience or perspectives. The study observed that the conceptualization of freelancing among the population can be characterized by different categories of the population such as digital divide (urban vs rural), social dynamics, freelancers, close relatives and friends of freelancers, relatives or other relations of the freelancers, and the general population.

4.2.1 Digital Divide (Urban vs Rural)

The social structure and socialization of urban areas are different than that of rural areas. Thus, the infrastructure, facilities, and opportunities are also different. Urban areas are generally more developed and have more facilities and opportunities available as compared to rural areas. The urban areas are more technologically advanced and people have easy access to the internet and digital devices. Whereas, the rural areas are comparatively less developed and advanced in terms of technology. Hence, they do not have easy access to the internet and digital devices. This ultimately constructs their perceptions and narratives about the prioritization of the nature of work, labor, or career. The urban areas, having advanced technology, tend to be more open and welcoming to the idea of opting for freelancing or digital labor as a career than the rural areas, which have comparatively less advanced technology. Bhunesh, a 28-year-old freelance digital marketing expert and virtual assistant, originally belongs to Thar and is currently settled in Islamabad with his family for a better livelihood and future. He shared his thoughts about this digital and

technological divide between urban and rural areas and its role in constructing people's perceptions and narratives. He stated:

I have lived lives of two different worlds (rural and urban areas) in my life and the difference between both is vast in terms of facilities and advancement. (Freelancer, 28; In-depth Interview)

He further added

The people in Thar are very intelligent and capable of doing wonders. However, they have to encounter numerous challenges and struggles throughout their lives. I did not have proper facilities and opportunities that the people in urban areas do not even think to live without such as a proper electricity system, internet, or public internet and computer centers. (Freelancer, 28; In-depth Interview)

He shared that although the youth in Thar has started opting for freelancing as a career. Yet, the lack of facilities and weak internet connection become obstacles to their progress. However, the older generation does not recognize and acknowledge freelancing as a career option and wants the younger generation to focus on physical and traditional jobs.

4.2.2 Social Structure and Social Dynamics

The division of labor, conceptualization, and job preferences is influenced by the social dynamics of an individual living in any group or society. It includes the complexities of social interactions, social influence, and the cultural or historical context of any group or individual. Similarly, the conceptualization of freelancing is also influenced by these complexities. The study observed that what people perceive or interpret about freelancing is constructed or reshaped by the social dynamic they live in, their lived experiences, and socialization with other people.

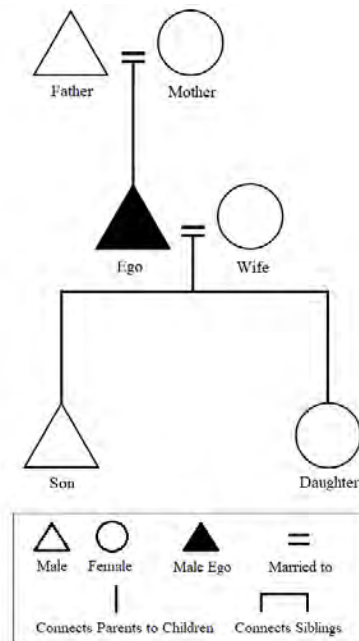
Nasir Khoso, a 28-year-old freelance digital marketer and advertiser belonging to Dera Ghazi Khan, shared his views and mentioned that the socio-cultural structure he belongs to is power-oriented and there are a lot of power hierarchies. People prefer

authoritative, powerful, and government jobs over private jobs or any other jobs having no power. This preference over job employment is because the structure they live in is hierarchal in which people with power are the most influential over others. He mentioned that his parents wanted him to get a job in bureaucracy or government job so that they could also be among the influential people of the area. His parents and other elder relatives were against his decision to choose freelancing as a full-time career over power-oriented jobs.

The study observed that the freelancers who belong to comparatively moderate and urban socio-cultural settings were more open to accepting private jobs, businesses, and self-employing job opportunities like freelancing. Social dynamics and socialization influence the preferences of job employment and career choices.

4.2.2.1 Case Study of Majid, a Freelance E-commerce Expert

Majid Jagirani, a 30-year-old freelance e-commerce expert, shared that the structure people grow in molds their perceptions about various things in their lifestyle. He belongs to a lower-middle-class family living in the rural area of Ghotki (a district in Sindh province). He lives with his parents, wife, 5-year-old son, and a 3-year-old daughter³⁴.



³⁴ See kinship chart in the figure attached

Figure 15: Kinship Chart of the respondent (Majid)³⁵

He started freelance work after his Bachelor's degree. He shared that after completing his undergraduate degree, in 2017, he was employed in a company offering only ten thousand rupees (10,000 PKR³⁶) which was not enough to support his family. He wanted to change his social class and wanted to upgrade the lifestyle he and his family had been living since his childhood. He knew that being employed in any job sector with such a monthly salary would never help him fulfill his dreams. He started exploring his options to bring change and began learning about e-commerce via the internet. Eventually, he became a freelance e-commerce expert on digital platforms and freelance marketplaces such as Fiverr and Upwork. He used to be at his home all the time working on his laptop. He knew that he was doing well. Despite that, his parents were not satisfied with his work and were insecure about his future plans. He shared that his mother used to say

Your father is old and still working but you are very irresponsible as you sit at home all the time and do not care to find a job. You tell us that you are working but I have just seen you wasting time on your laptop. Is this how work is done? (Freelancer, 30; In-depth Interview)

Additionally, he shared that when he gave his first income to his parents, they were doubtful about the source of the income. Majid was unable to convince his parents about freelancing for almost two years and his parents kept insisting him find a job with a secure income. According to him, some of the reasons behind their rigid perception of freelancing were their educational background, job expectations, socialization, and social structure. Both of his parents were not formally educated and believed that one has to go to a workplace and get a fixed amount of salary each month when they are employed. They did not understand the concept of working at home and variable or flexible salaries. Moreover, his parents socialized with like-minded people who had similar views about job preference. He mentioned

³⁵ The Kinship chart was created to demonstrate the family of the respondent visually as it plays an important role in her case study.

³⁶ PKR stands for Pakistani Rupees.

Initially, my parents wanted me to get a government job or get employed at any rank in any company or organization like the children of their relatives and friends. So that they can explain my job to anyone who asks about it. My relatives used to tell my father that I was worthless and inefficient and did not want to take responsibility for supporting my family. (Freelancer, 30; In-depth Interview)

Eventually, he was able to convince his parents about freelance work by educating them about the whole idea. At present, Majid is earning more than any of those he was compared with by his elders. He has built his house in an urban area of Karachi and is planning to buy a car from his freelance earnings. He mentioned that he wanted to convince his close friends to follow his path. Unfortunately, they, being impatient, did not put much effort and gave up before they could see the outcomes of their efforts.

4.2.3 Lived-Experiences of Freelancers

The lived experience refers to the firsthand experience or subjective experience of any phenomenon by an individual (Depraz et al., 2003). Lived experiences construct the perceptions and worldviews of an individual. Despite the insecurities and doubts of people on the potential of virtual freelance work as a career, the freelancers who have lived experiences of working in this industry and have more knowledge about it perceive it differently than those who are not directly linked with it.

The study observed that most of the experienced freelancers agreed to choose freelancing as a full-time career opportunity for life. Some of the respondents were even convinced that being employed under someone else limits the potential of individuals makes them uncreative and bounds them in an invisible cage of compromise. Syeda Nomaira Waseem, a 20-year-old freelancer, shared her experience that she has been struggling to be financially independent. She mentioned that she had faced a lot of discouragement from her relatives and friends for prioritizing freelancing over any other activity. The case is not like that she has prioritized freelancing after quitting studying. She

is an undergraduate student doing her BBA³⁷ from a renowned university in Attock. She shared that although her parents support her financially, however, she proudly bears the expenses of her education through her income. She stated

Freelance work has uplifted my confidence and self-esteem. I do not think that any other job would have been able to empower me in this age. (Freelancer, 20; In-depth Interview)

She added that freelancing requires a lot of effort, skill learning, and patience but all these are worth doing. Unlike traditional or corporate jobs, freelancing requires a lot of effort and patience to get the first order. It is very unpredictable as sometimes it may take months of effort before getting the first order and sometimes it only takes a few days or weeks. Haziq, a 29-year-old freelance pictures/video editor, photographer, and trainer, shared his views about this and mentioned

When I started working as a freelancer, I received my first order after a whole year. Patience is very important for a freelancer. I have seen people waiting for years for an order but some people often give up before even trying patiently. (Freelancer, 29; In-depth Interview)

The study observed that some of the trainee freelancers, who were in the initial phase of their freelance work experience, were confused about their choice and were open to reconsidering their options in the future. They were not even clear about their niche they wanted to grow themselves as a freelancer and tried to fix themselves in multiple niches. Meer Hassan, a 34-year-old PhD student, visiting lecturer³⁸ at a renowned university, and trainee freelancer from the e-Rozgar course, was convinced by his friend to get freelancing training and try it as a source of extra income by freelancing as a part-time job along with his full-time lecturer job. He expressed frustration about putting in effort and not getting orders and stated

³⁷ BBA stands for Bachelor of Business Administration. It is an undergraduate degree.

³⁸ A visiting lecturer is a person hired on a contract base for a specific subject or course for a limited span of time and is not part of the permanent faculty at the university or core curricula.

It is a very time-consuming activity which requires a lot of patience. I know that it is very fruitful in the end as I have some good examples in my circle who are earning well from it. However, I do not think that it is my thing. I would not be able to be that patient because I have a lot of other things to do as well. Hence, I am thinking to focus on my job and quit freelancing. (Trainee, 34; In-depth Interview)

Freelancers enjoy the flexibility of the nature of work and its routine. Despite the diverse opinions of freelancers about freelancing, the freelancers are open to exploring their options.

4.2.4 Influence of Cultural Lag among the Population on Their Perceptions and Conceptualization

As mentioned earlier, in the past few years, technological development and advancement have brought a paradigm shift of digitalization of many important aspects of our lifestyles. Along with various other aspects, work or labor has also shifted from the physical to the virtual or digital sphere. Since the last decade, digitalization has led virtual freelance work to grow rapidly in Pakistan and people have started opting for it as a career. However, there is a cultural lag among the general population. Cultural lag refers to the societal phenomenon that occurs when one part of the culture (material culture) evolves and changes rapidly but the other correlated part of the culture (non-material culture) fails to evolve with that pace or shows resistance to adopt the change and prioritizes to be the same as it used to be (Ogburn, 1964). For instance, technology has been rapidly evolving for a few decades in Pakistan. Whenever a new technology is introduced in Pakistan, a part of the population foresees its potential and accepts it, however, the other part of the population resists the change and becomes rigid to accept and adopt it completely.

Similarly, the growing digitalization has flourished virtual freelancing as a career in Pakistan. People started to research about it, explore their interests, learn new skills, and sell their skills and services by doing freelance jobs for those who want their jobs done by freelancers. This led them to earn money and to create employment for themselves independently without working under any employer. However, the Pakistani population is

still on the way to accept freelancing as a career option. People are unaware of its potential. However, it does not have any risks and does not require investments in most of the cases. Yet people fear failure and avoid trying it as a career option.

Pakistani society is not so evolved not only in freelancing but also in aspects of any digital business. A person who is working from home and even earning a handsome amount is usually considered a jobless and free person and is not seen as a successful person. Such a person is criticized for being at home all the time and busy on a laptop.

The study explored that those people who are not directly connected with freelance work or freelancers are more critical and unsure about freelancing as a career option. Some referred to it as *Hawai Rozi*³⁹ (insecure source of income) and believed that freelancing is a form of work that is not long-lasting and has no future. They preferred it to be a short-term or part-time opportunity to opt to earn extra money along with a traditional job.

The respondents of the study also highlighted that most people in Pakistan are unaware of freelancing. Asma Mariam, a 23-year-old freelance scriptwriter, mentioned that people often misunderstand the term freelancing when they are told about their work. she stated

I have been asked many times if I work free of cost or voluntarily as I am a freelancer. People get confused by the term “Free” in the word freelancing. (Freelancer, 23; In-depth Interview)

She added that she had started freelancing at the age of 19. Although, her parents were supportive, however, her friends and class fellows could not understand what she was doing and made fun of her when she told them that she was busy. People who are unaware do not recognize their work seriously and think that this type of work is done to kill or pass extra time. She further added that deadlines and commitments are very important for freelancers but people do not understand this. They believe that it is something that is of no importance and can be delayed as it is not restricted by time or workplace.

³⁹ “Hawai Rozi” (ہوائی روزی) is an Urdu term which literally means airlike livelihood. It refers to a source of income or livelihood which is not secure and can vanish anytime as air vanishes away.

Waqar Tayyub, a 42-year-old freelancing and creative design trainer at e-Rozgar, mentioned that freelancers play an important role in shaping the public's perceptions and conceptualization of their careers. One of the biggest factors behind misconceptions and negative perceptions about freelancers is themselves as what they are doing does not reflect any outcome for others. For instance, in conventional jobs, even if the employee does not have any achievements, but has a fixed routine and is dressed for the job every day. It would become evident to the people that he is busy doing some job or important task even if that person is not so successful in his job. On the other hand, if a freelancer is very successful in his freelance career, making a handsome amount, and buying a car or a house, but his appearance does not reflect his success then people would consider him a jobless person. Furthermore, he suggested that freelancers must be thoughtful about personal grooming and personality development. He added

I've seen that if a freelancer is working all day in his room, he would be in shorts and a t-shirt with a rough appearance all day. Then it becomes obvious for those who do not know much about work from home or freelance work to consider him as a useless or jobless person.

(Trainer, 42; In-depth Interview)

They should groom their personality, socialize with people, and share their ideas with others so that people become aware that they are doing something valuable. He further added that freelancers have to educate people and end the misconceptions about freelance work by portraying a positive image of freelancing. They need to educate people that there are a lot of skills involved in online businesses that are learned by investing a lot of time and practice.

Nevertheless, freelance work was not recognized and appreciated as a full-time career by a huge population. This was due to a lack of awareness about the potential of a freelancing career. A lot of people did not even understand this nature of work and considered it as a disrepute profession. Moreover, freelancers play a significant role in shaping public perception about freelancing. People perceive things according to what they see or experience. If a freelancer does not portray a good image of their career, then those who are unaware would not understand it.

4.2.5 Generation Gap

The generation gap plays a significant role in shaping some rigid conceptualizations and perspectives about virtual freelancing as a career among different generations. Older generations have spent their whole life in the world of 9-to-5 office jobs or conventional businesses. Whereas, in the present time, numerous alternate opportunities replace 9-to-5 office jobs including freelancing. The study observed that the individuals from older generation who are more rigid towards 9-to-5 office jobs or conventional businesses rather than freelancing or digital entrepreneurship deem freelancing to be risky. However, the younger generation who grew up in the era of digitalization shows a tendency to be more flexible about career choices.

Roohi Ali, a 28-year-old freelance writer and proofreader, mentioned that it is hard to convince the older generation about digital labor, freelancing, or digital entrepreneurship. For them, mobile phones and laptops are either used to study or to waste time. Earning from a phone or a laptop is just an illusion or deception. She shared her experience and cited

My father used to say that I do not want my children to be called *nikamma* (inoperative or good-for-nothing). He wanted me to focus on my studies only. (Freelancer, 28; In-depth Interview)

Similarly, Kamal, a 19-year-old 3D animator and trainer, shared that he had faced a lot of criticism when he started freelancing. Initially, he got demotivated but then he realized that he has to do what he has committed to himself. He decided to stand up for his choices and decisions. At that time, he kept everyone's opinion aside and worked for himself with commitment.

If you want to do something extraordinary, you have to ignore everyone and put their opinions aside. You have to convert that demotivation that you get from others into motivation by saying to yourself “I will show them by doing it”. I have always done that. When anyone questions my abilities, I show them by actions by doing the

same thing about which they had told me that it would not be possible for me. (Trainer, 19; In-depth Interview)

Kamal tried to convince a lot of his friends to join him in the journey of freelancing, but none of them listened to him at that time which demotivated him. Kamal shared that he blocked a lot of relatives and friends because they were not good for his self-esteem and were only the source of negativity. This was his determination to prove himself through actions. He further added that it is hard to convince elders when they think that they are right and you are on the wrong path. Elders do not criticize individuals to harm them, rather they want you to make secure decisions according to the norms. According to him, the only thing that can convince elders that a freelancer is not wasting time and is determined to make the future secure is money. When a freelancer tries to explain freelancing as a career opportunity while holding outcomes (income) in hand, then people understand that it has the potential to earn a good amount and make the future better.

Arsalan, a 37-year-old freelance writer, shared some statements that were told to him at the beginning of his freelance career by the people in his surroundings. For instance, a close relative of nearly age of late 50's had a conversation with him which made him promise to prove himself and his career choice. The relative (Let us consider "Mushtaq" as his relative) asked about his job and Arsalan told him that he works from home as a freelance writer. Mushtaq was not able to understand the concept of working from home and kept explaining his question. According to Arsalan, the following dialogues transpired between Arsalan and his relative:

Mushtaq: I am not asking about your leisure activity. I just asked what is your profession and where do you work?

Arsalan: I am telling you about my profession. I stay home all day and work from home. I am a writer and I write for my clients online.

Mushtaq: What sort of job is this which does not have a workplace? You should find another job because a man is worthless and a disgrace to the family if he stays at home all day and does not go out to earn.

(Freelancer, 27; In-depth Interview)

Arslan added that the moment his relative said “*A man is worthless and a disgrace to the family if he stays at home all day and does not go out to earn*”, he knew that he would not be able to explain this and convince him (relative) about the potential of freelance work because he has rigid point of views about work and workplace. Arsalan decided to let it be as it was and focus on his work so that the people questioning him at the beginning phase of his work would see the outcomes in the future and then understand its worth on their own.

Most of the respondents shared that the older generation did not understand and appreciate the idea of working from home as a freelancer in the beginning and eventually realized its worth. Ali Khan is a 24-year-old student of Chartered Accountancy (CA), who has been working as a freelance digital marketer since 2021. He shared his experience that when he started working as a freelancer, his parents used to doubt his deeds and believed that he was involved in something illegal which was paying him a handsome amount of money without even having any job (office/ on-site job). He stated

My father specifically came to me one day and asked if I was doing anything illegal and about the source of the money that I tried to give my parents. (Freelancer, 24; In-depth Interview)

He further added that it took a long discussion to convince his father about freelance work. Initially, his father thought that he would leave his studies in the greed of “easy money”. He assumed that freelancing was an easy task that could be done without much effort. He did not know that it requires skills, effort, and a lot of patience to earn money from freelance work and it is not at all “easy money”. Moreover, he shared that his teacher also tried to investigate his work routine. Although the teacher understood what he was doing and that he intended to do part-time until he got his CA degree and a permanent job. Yet, his teacher tried to convince him to give up on freelancing as it is not a secure source of income. However, Ali was able to convince his teacher about his future goals. He is focused on working as a freelancer as a part-time job or side hustle in the future as well even when he gets a permanent job after securing his degree. His teacher played an important role in convincing his parents that he was not doing anything illegal and was working hard to earn that amount.

Similarly, Sajid, a 35-year-old electrical engineer and content writer, shared that he was criticized for being in his room all the time busy using his laptop. At the beginning of his freelance career, he further added

I was told by my father not to waste time and focus on finding a “9 to 5” job. He also tried to persuade me by asking one of my teachers to lead me to the right path. (Freelancer, 35; In-depth Interview)

The current study noted that people often call freelancing *Hawai Rozi* (insecure source of income). They believe that freelancing is not a long-lasting livelihood, the boom that freelancers are enjoying will not last long, and everything will collapse as soon as this trend settles down. However, freelancers argue that nothing lasts forever if it is fated to collapse. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, a lot of corporate organizations, companies, and businesses encountered a downturn which led to a substantial loss of livelihood for thousands of people globally. They had a secure source of income but eventually, they encountered a downturn and financial insolvency. The study observed that cultural lag was observed in the context of freelance work among the general public in several ways such as limited acceptance among the population (especially the older generation).

4.3 Conclusions

In conclusion, the current chapter explored that the substantial global employment opportunities stemming from the rise of virtual freelancing, emphasizing the diverse mediums freelancers can choose, ranging from platforms like Fiverr and Upwork to direct clients, social media communities, and freelance agencies. Significantly, the study highlighted the often-overlooked importance of continuous training for freelancers' long-term success. New freelancers, unranked on platforms, tend to gravitate towards outsourcers and direct clients, building connections and paving the way for platform opportunities. The chapter also delved into diverse perspectives on virtual freelancing as a career, noting generational gaps in acceptance, with the younger, digitally-oriented generation more open to embracing freelancing. Freelancers were acknowledged as key influencers in shaping public perception, as their portrayals play a pivotal role in shaping opinions of those unfamiliar with the freelancing landscape.

5 MOTIVATIONS AND CHALLENGES OF VIRTUAL FREELANCERS

The current chapter explores the motivations of freelancers that push them to opt for freelancing as a career and the challenges in this career that urge the freelancers to reconsider their decisions and often motivate them to rethink traditional jobs. It also discusses the relationship between outsourcing and exploitation in the freelance industry. Lastly, it also explores the sense of paradoxical empowerment that freelancers experience.

5.1 Motivations and Inspirations of Virtual Freelancers

As discussed earlier, the perceptions and worldviews of an individual are shaped by various factors including socialization, social dynamics, economy, status, experiences, etc. Similarly, an individual gets inspired to do something that is encouraged or appreciated in the social circle. It is essential to understand Pakistani freelancers' thoughts to comprehend why they choose to freelance as a career over conventional employment. These motivations and inspirations are the pull-in factors towards the freelancing career.

5.1.1 Unemployment Woes and Inflationary Pressure

Pakistan has been grappling with some significant economic challenges for years. Increasing inflation and unemployment rates are the most prominent and important challenges.

According to the Pakistan

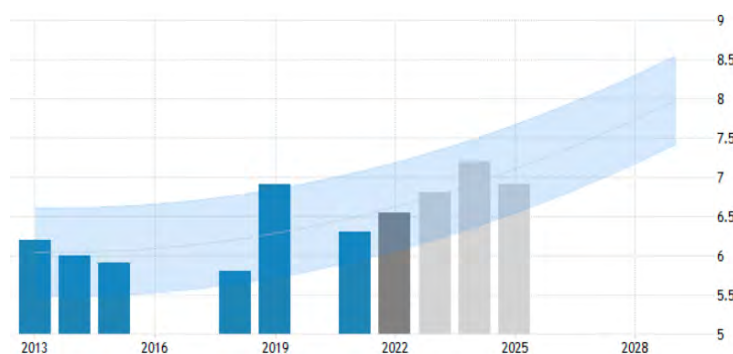


Figure 16: Current and projected unemployment rate in

Bureau of Statistics, the projected unemployment rate by the end of 2023 is expected to be 6.80 percent which might increase up to 7.20 percent by the end of 2024 as shown in the figure⁴⁰ attached (*Pakistan Unemployment Rate*, 2019). Due to the pandemic, the unemployment rate increased from 4.40 percent to 6.5 percent between 2020 and 2021

⁴⁰ Source: Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (*Pakistan Unemployment Rate*, 2019)

(*Pakistan Unemployment Rate, 2019*). However, the inflation rate was recorded to be 37.97% during May 2023 in Pakistan according to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (*Pakistan Inflation Rate, 2019*).

Increasing inflation and unemployment have not only left individuals without any stable job opportunities but also have eroded the ability to uplift living styles or standards. In some cases, it has also undermined the purchasing power of the public. The job sector in Pakistan is struggling to grow employment and workforce. Consequently, frustration, hopelessness, and anxiety are heightened among unemployed and job seekers. As the

It has become very challenging to handle such issues while earning enough money to support the entire family. Sajid, a 35-year-old electrical engineer and content writer, spoke his opinions on his challenges in finding employment despite having a degree from a very reputed university in Islamabad. He stated;

After my dad's unexpected death in June 2020 due to Covid-19. I became the primary provider for my family. I applied for many jobs but was repeatedly turned down, and even if I had been hired, the pay was not enough to support my large family of eight members. Therefore, in September 2020, I decided to explore the skill of article writing and freelancing. Thus, I created my own Fiverr and Upwork accounts to begin selling my services. (Freelancer, 35; In-depth Interview)

He further shared that it took some time to get his first order. However, after hard work of long 2 months, he received his first order. He is working as a content writer to date. In addition, he mentioned that he has hired a team of four writers to help him with his workload and he is making more money from these freelancing platforms than the physical job he has done. Moreover, he explained that freelancing has helped him overcome hopelessness and thoughts about leaving Pakistan in search of better job opportunities. Now that he has established his writing business, he is also helping to create new jobs by hiring fresh freelancers with no experience as members of his team.

Similarly, a huge number of freelancers opt for freelancing as a career as a solution to unemployment. The poor and unstable economy is yet another cause of increasing unemployment rates in Pakistan. According to the study, Pakistan produces almost 480,000 university graduates annually across the country, yet only 35% of them acquire jobs

successfully (Yousafzai, 2022). The rest of the population struggles with the unemployment crisis. Freelancing and entrepreneurship are the light flashing at the other end of unemployment's dark tunnel.

5.1.2 Financial Independence

The increase in inflation has eroded the purchasing power of the general public in Pakistan. People are striving hard to earn enough money to meet their monthly ends. Yet due to the current inflation rate in Pakistan, which increased up to 37.97 percent in May 2023 (*Pakistan Inflation Rate*, 2019), even the necessities have become expensive to the unaffordable level for a lot of the population in the country.

The study observed that this inflation rate has increased the financial issues among numerous households to the extent that people have been pushed to make difficult choices while spending money and tightening their budgets to meet their ends. Freelancing has emerged as a potential solution for all these issues by offering full-time and part-time employment for individuals seeking employment or part-time secondary jobs to earn extra income. It is the need of time to have financial independence for everyone including women.

Traditional employment has several restrictions, such as fixed monthly money, the same working hours, and many other things that follow the same patterns. Freelancing has the potential to shift this entire perspective by giving people more autonomy and enabling folks to make as much income as a freelancer can generate in a whole month while working the hours that are most convenient for the freelancer. Salar, a 25-year-old freelance web developer has been working as a freelancer since 2022. He shared that his parents separated in 2014, due to which he had to reside with her mother and her family. He further added

Since my parents' divorce, my uncle and *Nana* have financially supported us. Because of my grandmother's cancer diagnosis in 2021, our family's financial situation has been precarious. I wished to lend them my support during this difficult time. I began working as a freelance web developer since I am interested in it. I started using a

premium account I bought just for training purposes, and then I went out and did my solo practice afterward. (Freelancer, 25; In-depth Interview)

In addition to this, he expressed

I created an account on Fiverr and started selling my services online. With this job, I have traveled to many cities in Pakistan and earned two lacs per month. It has not been easy, but I know I made my mom proud today. (Freelancer, 25; In-depth Interview)

Freelancing has been shown to improve individuals' health and happiness by allowing them more control over their finances and expenses. A person becomes independent financially which is a good achievement towards independence as a whole.

5.1.3 Freelancing as an Inclusive Employment Opportunity

In the contemporary era, inclusivity is considered a beacon of development in any country. Freelancing fosters inclusivity by acknowledging and encouraging everyone to be skilled and use their skills or abilities to seek employment opportunities. This chapter aims to discuss the role of freelancing in transcending traditional barriers and promoting inclusivity. This includes the inclusion of all genders, minorities, and specially-abled or people with disabilities.

5.1.3.1 Gender Inclusion

Gender roles have been part of human societies for ages. It is typically recognized that gender roles were fixed even in hunting and gathering societies. Men were considered as hunters and women were the gatherers. However, a recent archeological study suggests that gender roles were not as rigid as they are assumed to be. Women were not only the gatherers but also the hunters and roles were generally decided on skills, abilities, and physical attributes rather than gender (Anderson et al., 2023). However, the agricultural societies caused of shift in the division of labor based on gender. Men were associated with work that needed physical strength and women were associated with child-rearing, food production, and work that needed lesser physical strength (Hansen et al., 2015). The more societies became structured, the more their gender roles became complex and rigid.

Human societies are stuck in the complexities and rigidness of gender roles to date. However, in present times, gender roles have become a bit flexible and all genders have entered the workforce transcending traditional barriers. However, Pakistani society, being a patriarchal society, is still not a gender-friendly society. A hierarchy of gender in the workforce still exists as it is deeply ingrained in Pakistani culture. Women are expected to handle domestic roles and stay out of the roles that are assigned to men i.e., economic and political.

In the present time, women and transgender are challenging the patriarchal norms of the country and they are going beyond gender roles. Nevertheless, a huge population is still suffering from the patriarchal hierarchy and norms. Women and transgenders face discrimination in workplaces. They face multifaceted challenges such as discrimination, exploitation, harassment, the glass ceiling effect, and much more. However, freelancing has brought a notable shift in the landscape of labor and employment by providing gender equality and inclusivity in the workforce. It has transcended cultural barriers and social norms, reduced gender bias, reduced the wage gap among different genders, and removed geographical barriers for all genders.

Freelancing provides an opportunity for all based on equality (Hannák et al., 2017). People of all ages, genders, and educational backgrounds can find work through freelancing platforms. The only requirement is expertise in a particular skill, effort, and patience. Freelancing is becoming an increasingly popular choice for people in Pakistan for various reasons, the most significant of which is its inclusivity. As mentioned earlier, most Pakistani families adhere to the patriarchal model of family structure in which male family members are typically considered responsible for all aspects of running the household. Moreover, they are considered to be responsible for organizing any activities that take place outside. Whereas, female members of a family are considered to be the homemakers and are responsible for the activities that take place inside the house. The current pattern has shifted, and more and more women are taking full responsibility for running their houses. There is more than one contributing aspect, but the most obvious is that a greater inflation rate makes it highly challenging for a single individual to maintain a home alone. Therefore, female family members assist their male family members to

improve the family's prospects for the future. Ayesha, a 24-year-old freelance digital marketer, started working as a freelancer because of her family issues. Due to the divorce between her parents, she lives with her mother. She discussed her experience and mentioned

In 2020, around COVID-19, I began working as a digital marketer. After the divorce of my parents in 2021, which was brought on by my father's remarriage, my siblings and I moved into a rented house close to our grandparents' residence. Because he has a new family, my father stopped supporting us after his divorce from my mother. During that period, I became a member of several Facebook groups, offered my services to several abroad clients, and created my portfolio. (Freelancer, 24; In-depth Interview)

And then she added that;

I was hired as a full-time digital marketer for a company with one of my international clients. Now, Alhamdulillah, I am making money in dollars despite the inflation, and I can maintain my family. Additionally, I plan to build my own home for my mother since she deserves the best in every aspect of her life. (Freelancer, 24; In-depth Interview)

Freelancing offers greater freedom, independence, and command over one's professional and personal life than regular jobs can. Hence, family concerns may be a big reason for people switching from traditional jobs to freelance jobs. Freelancing additionally offers more money than traditional jobs. Freelancing has many benefits, but it may be stressful if mismanaged. Bisma, a 38-year-old social media marketer from Mansehra, has shared her experience.

When my husband died, raising our son on my own while maintaining my teaching career became tough. Initially, I teamed up with my friend's clothing business as a commission-based online salesperson by promoting and selling items via WhatsApp. It enabled me to save a significant amount of money but I had to do something permanent. In

2022, I began formal training in social media marketing. (Freelancer, 25; In-depth Interview)

In addition, she said,

After the training, I applied for various marketing positions and now work as a professional social media marketer for an NGO. Reflecting on my journey makes me incredibly proud that I have made myself enough to sustain myself and maintain my household without the help of my parents or a man. (Freelancer, 25; In-depth Interview)

Freelancing has improved many people's lives by allowing them to work on their terms and conditions i.e., set their hours and determine how much money they make. The flexibility of freelancing also allows women to overcome geographical constraints and societal norms that might hinder their participation in the workforce and invest in personal and professional development. It has also empowered a huge number of freelancers to be independent and financially support themselves without compromising their interests and priorities such as families, households, education, etc.

5.1.3.2 Case Study of Noor: A Transwoman Freelancer

Noor, a 29-year-old freelance SEO expert, identifies herself as a transwoman and belongs to a wealthy family. She got her early education from one of the elite schools in the city. She shared that she was kicked out of her house by her family when they learned that she is a transwoman. She only had Rs. 100 and a phone with a broken screen when she had to leave her house and did not have any other resources. The money was not even enough to buy a proper meal. In front of society, they declared her dead to protect their honor and dignity and did not look back. She had no hopes and did not know where to go. She went to Sadar, Rawalpindi as she knew that she would be able to find people like her in the market. She met Ayesha, her first transwoman friend, who took Noor to her house and gave her a shelter to live. Ayesha used to survive on the money earned by begging and dance performances at weddings. Noor was not comfortable begging or dancing in front of the public. For some time, she begged in the markets and traffic signals with Ayesha to earn money. She expressed her disappointment and stated

Although sex is a biological and natural phenomenon and is uncontrollable. However, living in an abusive patriarchal society, men dominate and discriminate against the rest of the gender identity or sexes very openly. Due to this discrimination based on gender identity and a lack of fundamental respect, members of the transgender community are deprived of finding decent-paying and respectful employment. (Freelancer, 29; In-depth Interview)

As mentioned earlier, she got her early education from one of the elite class schools in the city, she was fluent in English and digitally literate. Surviving on the money earned by begging and a few dance performances, she was able to save Rs. 23,000 in a year. She invested all her savings to buy a pre-used laptop from a local market. She did an online course on Search Engine Optimization (SEO) available on YouTube without any charges. She mentioned

I knew that I would not be able to secure a decent job with my gender identity and lack of education. I could not live the life of a beggar and had to do something for myself. Learning digital skills and SEO was a life-changing decision. After finishing the training, I joined a few Facebook groups where I could advertise my skills and eventually got some work. (Freelancer, 29; In-depth Interview)

It has been four years since she started her journey of becoming a freelancer and she earns a very handsome amount of money. She lives in a rented house now and is earning enough money to afford her livelihood and save some money for the future. She shared that she proudly shares her journey from a beggar to a successful SEO expert. She aims to grow in this field and also support needy members of the transgender community by teaching interested individuals about digital literacy and motivating them to learn skills to make their lives better.

5.1.4 Freedom and Flexibility of Work

Virtual Freelancing is perceived as a type of work having greater flexibility in scheduling time, choice of work, unfixed workplace, and the capacity to maintain a healthy work-life

balance. People with personal duties such as family responsibilities or other commitments may find this especially interesting. Freelancers often have more control over their careers since they may pick and choose the clients and tasks they take on. This allows freelancers to have a better work-life balance and to pursue other interests and activities.

Arooj is a 23-year-old graduate of English Literature and has been writing professionally for three years. When asked about her personal experience, she has always enjoyed reading and writing and participated in many writing and reading-related activities as part of her degree program. A lot of people have been appreciative of the poems she has been posting on Instagram. After much consideration, she decided to keep on a freelance writing career. It was useful in helping her make money for university. In addition, she stated that

I was stressed because I had no work to do during the holidays. After that, my brother gave me the idea to research freelancing. My brother helped set up accounts for me to use Fiverr and Upwork. My accounts were successful for me since they led to the acquisition of projects. It was challenging to balance university with a job after the vacations ended. When I didn't have time to complete things by myself, my sister assisted me in completing projects. As a result, our freelance accounts are generating a respectable income. (Freelancer, 23; In-depth Interview)

When you work as a freelancer, you are your boss because you are responsible for managing everything by yourself. People, including students, are now better able to handle everything under the flexible nature of freelancing due to the rise of freelancing.

5.1.5 Dissatisfaction with Corporate Jobs

People are increasingly making the transition away from traditional employment and toward freelancing for a variety of reasons. The lack of experience, the risks associated with the physical job, the high transportation costs, the greater inflation rate, nepotism, a lower salary, and an increased number of working hours are only a few of the numerous challenges. How can a student balance regular education with regular work when the hours of both commitments are the same? Most companies want at least five years of relevant

work experience and a degree. People often hire recent university grads even though they pay them significantly less and want them to put in more time.

After the regime controversy brought on by the government of Imran Khan, the price of petrol has increased by more than twenty percent, and inflation has also increased to a level that has never been seen in the history of Pakistan after the country gained its independence. As a result, it is becoming increasingly difficult to deal with these difficulties while also caring for an entire family at the same time. The issue of nepotism is the most significant difficulty for Pakistan since it allows families with higher authority to amass more power, opportunities, and facilities than the families of ordinary people. This scenario in Pakistan is incredibly awful, but unfortunately, it is occurring, and people there have to deal with such problems daily. Sameer, a 28-year-old software engineer and content creator from Sahiwal, shared his experience of working in a very reputable firm and being underpaid. He used to earn thirty-five thousand rupees per month. Everything went smoothly until his boss's nephew got a paid internship for six weeks at a rate higher than him, despite the requirement of relevant work experience. He added that

My manager and I discussed this discrimination, and he advised me not to bring it up again. Then I decided to start a YouTube channel, and once it generated income, I quit my job. I now make a living off of my YouTube channel. Now, not only am I making more than the wage they were willing to give me, but I am also making more than my boss's nephew. (Freelancer, 28; In-depth Interview)

Because everyone should be given equal respect, opportunities, facilities, and the right to speak up, people have been forced to transition from regular work to freelancing due to the issues they have been facing.

5.1.6 Scope of Increment or Growth

Freelance career development is very important for sustainability and growth. The study observed that the criteria for growth in freelance work are different than those of the conventional job sector. The conventional job sector considers growth in terms of promotion or salary increment. However, freelance work does not rely on such concepts of

growth. The income of in freelance industry is in control of the individual. The more an individual works more income he will be able to generate. If someone wants more money, they can take more work and earn it. The conventional salary does not work like that, you get a fixed amount even if it is too good i.e., 70k 80k and you cannot earn or expect more salary than the fixed amount.

Although, unlike conventional jobs, the income of freelance jobs is exponential, the growth is gradual. A freelancer can grow step by step. Waqar Tayyub, a 42-year-old freelancing and creative design trainer at e-Rozgar, explained this idea and

If I ask you what will come after one, you would say two which is a wrong concept. A Greek philosopher, Zeno of Elea, introduced Zeno's paradox. He claimed that 2 does not come after 1, but if you focus then you'll realize that 1.1 comes after 1.0, then 1.2, and so on. These are the infinite numbers. But when we round off these infinite numbers, we get a finite number 2. The numbers between 1 and 2 are infinite but the sum of these infinite numbers is a finite number, 2. (Trainer, 42; In-depth Interview)

He further explains that when individuals say that they have to progress from one finite position to another finite position, they will get numerous infinite numbers of steps to consider to progress step by step i.e., skill level, portfolio, presentation, communication with clients, experiences with previous clients, the ratings or reviews of the previous clients, etc.

As in traditional jobs, an individual can measure their progress as per their positions of the job and promotions. For instance, the promotion of a person from sub-inspector to inspector, assistant manager to manager, or associate professor to professor. As a freelancer, they can measure their progress not only in an increase in income but also in skill set. The advancement of a skill set, either by adding new skills to it or advancing it, is very necessary for progress. This learning process is progressive and gradual. For instance, as a graphic designer one can earn a limited amount of money but to get more work and earn more one needs to learn another stage of designing skills i.e., UI/UX design, web

design, or video editing. This advancement would allow the person to progress in terms of increase in income, clientage, and promotion to the next level of the skill.

The income between a fresh freelancer and an experienced freelancer cannot be compared because the time and efforts of both are different. The fresh freelancer is in a struggling phase, which cannot be compared to an experienced freelancer because he has invested many years to progress and get experience to the point he is right now. The gap is huge. Even if an experienced freelancer is not active and in practice, their income could also not be compared to a fresh freelancer.

However, viewing it as numeric data, the difference between both would be 500%. For instance, if a fresh freelancer is earning up to 200-250 dollars monthly on average, the experienced freelancer would be earning more than 1000-5000 dollars. The income also varies as per niche, consistency, and efforts. We cannot look into it in numbers, we have to look into it beyond numbers such as duration, niche, efforts, consistency, etc. The experiences are exponential. For instance, it cannot be said that a person who has experience of 2 years would reach the level of that person who has experience of 10 years because the gap is of 8 years because their efforts and experiences would always remain different. When that person reaches his level, the experienced person becomes more advanced and experienced. That gap of 8 years cannot be filled and that progress won't be covered in 8 years.

5.2 Challenges in Virtual Freelance Work

In the emerging digital landscape, freelancing is a pervasive career opportunity that has the potential to help people earn money and create something of their own by offering their specialized skills and services. Nevertheless, this opportunity comes with its own set of challenges as freelancers encounter several challenges while working as freelancers in their daily lives. Several significant problems need to be addressed by developing and implementing effective policies for the benefit of the Pakistani freelance community. Some of the prominent challenges explored in the current study are as follows:

5.2.1 Lack of Reliability

As discussed earlier, flexibility and autonomy in working in the freelance industry is an important tenant that attracts a lot of people to opt for it as a full-time or part-time job

opportunity. Whereas, the study observed that freelancers and non-freelancing individuals often criticize freelancing as a career with a lack of stability. People often show resistance to going towards freelancing as a career because of its most prominent drawback i.e., lack of stability. It means that the payment and job are very insecure, unstable, and unpredictable. There is no guarantee whether a freelancer acquiring projects or earning money will keep up or maintain the pace every month throughout the year or not. There are also some instances when freelancers do not get any orders or projects to do and get no earnings throughout the months which makes it difficult for the freelancers to manage their households or other expenses during such times.

As discussed earlier, a lot of freelancers opt for this opportunity as a sole and full-time career to earn their livelihood and are somewhat dependent on the income these online platforms offer. Ali, a 27-year-old native of Sialkot who currently resides in Rawalpindi for his job, is a content writer and an electrical engineer. Ali was paid 30,000 (thirty thousand) per month as a salary for his 9 am to 5 pm job. Ali, unsatisfied with his payment, explored various alternate options to earn better and learned freelancing via a free course provided by one of the pioneers of freelancing in Pakistan, Hisham Sarwar, on his YouTube channel. Ali quit his job in 2021 as the job he was doing did not pay him enough to meet his ends throughout the month. He started focusing on freelancing and created his profile on Fiverr after leaving the job. He struggled for a month yet he was able to rank his profile within a month by fulfilling the milestones and targets required to rank his account as a "level 1 seller account". He was proud of himself for building something independently. He was able to earn enough money to provide for his family and save some for the future. However, he had to face some unwanted circumstances which left him in depression for a few months. While sharing his experience, he said

My Fiverr account got disabled because of a fake report by a customer. I complained to customer service and provided all the proof and evidence to defend my position but the customer was given priority and my account got terminated. It was my sole source of income and I was the sole breadwinner of my household. This left me in depression for a few months as I not only lost my source of income but also lost all of my savings in household expenses. (Freelancer,27; In-depth Interview)

Furthermore, he added that he and his family had to face a lot of financial issues and had to tighten their budget for a few months. He even had to request his previous job's manager to favor him in getting re-hired for the same position. However, the manager refused to assist him in this. He had to move out to Rawalpindi to find a better job. He shared that he lost all hope of freelancing after the incident and understood that it is not a reliable source of income. Hence, he was convinced that freelancing has potential but it should not be opted as sole full-time or primary source of income as its stability is not guaranteed. He suggested that one must save some money for uncertain and unwanted circumstances in the future while working as a freelancer. Similarly, Waqar Tayyub, a 42-year-old freelancing and creative design trainer at e-Rozgar, also suggested that although freelance work has a lot of potential, however, one must not rely on a sole source of income or platform while working as a freelancer.

Moreover, the study observed that freelancers also experience challenges connected to the instability of freelancing and face several issues such as fluctuating income, late payments difficulties in hunting clients, effectively managing their finances, feelings of loneliness, tiredness, and mental exhaustion.

Implementing budgeting and building networking techniques might help resolve these issues and overcome those obstacles. Moreover, creating a passive source of income as a backup option is very necessary. Kamal, a 19-year-old 3D animator and trainer, shares his perspectives about the unreliability of freelance work and the importance of budgeting and savings in any career. He suggests that everyone has to consider savings and budgeting to be part of financial strategies due to the increasing rate of inflation. He raised some questions to explain the importance i.e., what if a freelancer working on a single platform without any backup plan and the platform crashes down? What if he does not receive any orders in the future? What if you are not a freelancer but you get terminated from your job? You wouldn't have anything to work and earn from. Moreover, he stated

Creating backup options and passive sources of income is very important. If I am a trainer but a time comes when I do not get students anymore, I would have the option of doing freelancing because I have this option as a backup. Moreover, if freelancing is not getting me a good income at a certain level, I would have other options available for

me to earn. My earnings would not get halted unlike those who rely on a single source of income or single platforms. (Trainer, 19; In-depth Interview)

The study observed that the more experienced a freelancer is, the more they encourage others to create alternate sources of income, passive income, or backup options to work on. None of the freelancers among my respondents suggested relying only on one source of income. All of them stressed to have multiple sources of income.

5.2.2 Payment Issues

One of the major challenges that a large number of freelancers face is receiving payments from freelancing platforms or international clients due to the unavailability of PayPal in Pakistan. PayPal is a digital wallet and one of the most reliable merchants for online payments (Abdullah, 2023). Freelancers do not have any alternate medium to receive payments directly from online platforms or international clients. Although there are various alternate ways to receive online payments the tax and charges deduction and transfer rates of those alternate methods are greater than that of PayPal. Freelancers have to rely on alternate methods, such as Payoneer, Skrill, and Binance, to receive payments.

Moreover, freelancers have always been facing the issue of financial inclusion in Pakistan. banks also do not offer bank accounts in the name of freelance work because they lack documentation and do not have income statements that are needed for account verification. Freelancers have to rely on digital wallets to receive payments and they often connect wallets to their bank accounts (if available) which results in double deductions of taxes and charges. Soleh, a 26-years-old freelance writer, highlights the need for bringing PayPal to Pakistan and stated

The government has to put some effort into bringing PayPal to Pakistan. this will allow the freelance industry to grow and benefit the overall economy of the country. (Trainee, 26; In-depth Interview)

Bhunesh, a 28-year-old brand manager and Amazon expert, mentioned that some banks provide facilities for Asaan (Easy) accounts but it has a very small transaction limit.

One can always make an Asaan account which does not require any income statement. Once you start earning enough to exceed your account limit then you can look for an alternate solution. Besides that, there are a few banks now that offer bank accounts to freelancers as well such as Faysal Bank. (Freelancer, 28; In-depth Interview)

Furthermore, if a person starts working with various agencies or outsourcers, their rights are not recognized, and are even underpaid for their job. The outsourcer individual or agency takes the whole credit and payment and pays only a small portion of the total budget of the project. This leads beginners to be exploited by sub-contractors or outsourcers, especially if sub-contractor gets work from international clients because they pay a high amount but workers are given very little of it.

Kamal, a 19-year-old 3D animator and trainer, mentioned that there are some alternate ways used by freelancers to get access to PayPal which allows them to receive online payments such as using someone else's account. He cited

Initially, the payment issue comes in terms of bank accounts. There are multiple tricks to get the account indirectly from someone else's behalf who is reliable, trustworthy, and living abroad. I got the account in the name of a very trustworthy international client. In this way, the freelancer gets the account number of that account and then can directly get the payments from it. Otherwise, they would need payment statements and a lot of paperwork to get their bank accounts with high transaction limits locally. Even if you get your bank account, you will have to connect it to the Payoneer account online. (Trainer, 19; In-depth Interview)

He added that connecting Payoneer with your local bank account will charge double inter-bank transaction rates and taxes. He further added that if a freelancer works for 10\$, after all the tax reductions and service charges from the platform itself, online wallet account i.e., Payoneer, local bank account, and government, he is left with half of the amount paid by the client. Fiverr charges 20% of every order as its service charges, banks

also deduct some amount, government also does that. He shared that a few years back, the taxes and service charges were comparatively low and reasonable. Back then, if freelancers would have worked for 10\$, they used to get at least 8\$ in their accounts. He added

It is very heartbreaking that after all the hard work, we do not get the whole income we have earned. In simple terms, the more the mediators, the more deductions will be charged. (Trainer, 19; In-depth Interview)

The above-mentioned discussion can be demonstrated through the figure below. The figure was shared by one of my respondents, Javeria, through WhatsApp while discussing payment issues. She shared the picture and stated

This is the story of our life. (Freelancer, 26; In-depth Interview)

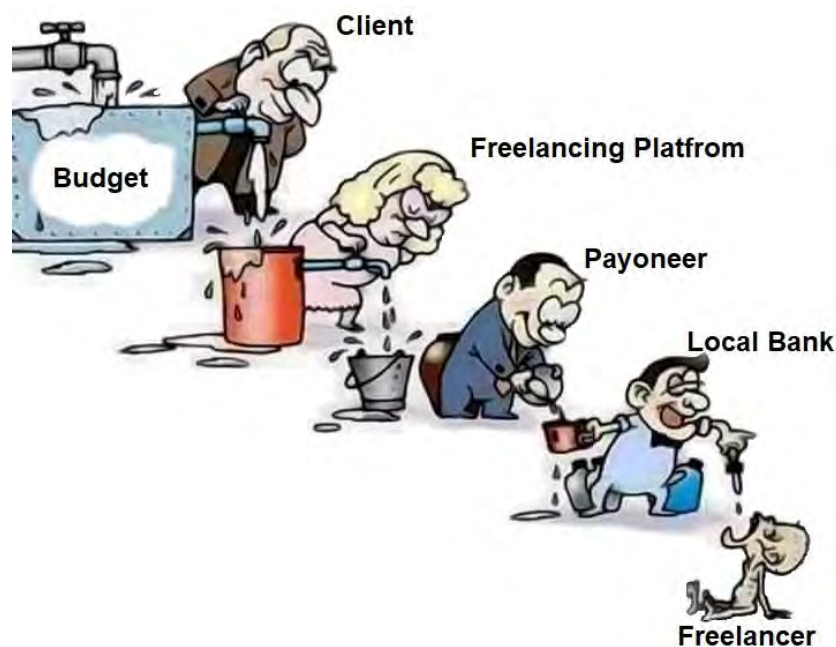


Figure 17: Pictorial representation of the payment process of the platform freelancers

(Source: Respondent; WhatsApp Communication)

The figure above highlights the budget flow of freelancers from clients to them with mediation of various factors. The water flow in the figure represents the flow of cash or budget. The more mediators are there in the client-freelancer work, the more the budget is reduced as every mediator charges some amount as a commission for facilitating the

freelancer. For instance, the client pays the total budget to the freelancing platform, which deducts its service charges and pays the freelancer via Payoneer. Payoneer also deducts its service charges and transfers the remaining amount to the local banks of the freelancer as Pakistan does not have a Payoneer facility yet. The local banks also deduct their service charges and then the amount reaches the hands of freelancers which is comparatively lower than what the client paid for the service. This highlights the most significant payment issues faced by the freelancers.

5.2.3 Self-management Issues

Management is one of the prominent challenges that majority of the freelancers face at least during the initial phase of their careers. Management comes in various ways i.e., time management, money management, and work-family management. Some issues that surface due to a lack of management include careless behavior on the part of freelancers, the deadlines of multiple projects co-occurring, challenges associated with ensuring the continued productivity of the projects, ineffective routines, household issues, unreliable customers, and a lot of additional issues.

Naheed, a 34-year-old social media marketer, is a mother of 4-year-old twin baby boys. She began her job as a freelancer in 2019 before getting married. At the time, she was earning an adequate amount of money by creating content for a friend's website. She continued providing financial assistance to her husband after the marriage because she wanted to save more money for her children's future. However, managing all of this was a real task. While discussing her experience, she stated

After my pregnancy, balancing my health and work commitments became very challenging. My friend was there for me throughout this difficult time, but the delayed work and poor quality of work from my end led her to find someone else to fill the position I had been holding. I intended to keep working so that I could provide for my husband, but balancing both roles has become even more challenging. (Freelancer, 34; In-depth Interview)

Freelancers can overcome these obstacles by implementing tactics for managing their time, defining distinct goals, and setting up a disciplined work atmosphere for themselves. The study observed that management can be learned with experience.

In conventional jobs, the employee is aware that they will get the salary at the end of the month. They also are aware of the amount of income they will receive each month. However, the income of freelancers fluctuates over time due to various reasons i.e., workload, number of orders, working conditions, internet stability, personal issues, health issues, external influences, etc. There are times when a freelancer would be able to earn in lac in a month, and sometimes they would not even get a single order.

Soleh, a 26-year-old freelance content writer, shared his views about the income management issues in freelance work. He mentioned that income from any type of job is not secure when the time is not right for a person. For instance, during COVID-19, a lot of businesses were shut down due to the pandemic, but government employees were satisfied during that time because they knew that they would get a salary even if they did not have to do much of the work during that time. Their salary was secured. However, the businesses were influenced on a major scale as they had to observe social distancing. A lot of other conventional jobs were shifted to remote work or work-from-home. Although, at that time freelancing got hyped up and their work was not negatively affected by the pandemic. However, there are some cases when freelancers face genuine and uncontrollable issues that affect their work. For instance, internet outage due to political instability or any other reason has affected the work of freelancers in the past. He stated

When you come to the freelance industry, you have to decide before that you are coming to this field and understand that you will not get a fixed amount from this; it might fluctuate upwards or downwards.

(Freelancer, 26; In-depth Interview)

Saira, a 31-year-old freelance trainer in a private online academy, content creator, and blogger, mentioned that self-management is a big challenge for freelancers which they should learn before entering the freelance industry. There is no one to command, the individuals are not aware of the punishments, or the virtues of their deeds or actions as they are abstract until one does not get it. The young generation of freelancers have in most cases goal to earn money and are inspired by others around them. They are not motivated to do it as per their interest or motivation. You have to define what would happen if you did not do it, and see the consequences and loss from it. Then you'll realize its importance and then you will be compelled to do it.

5.2.4 Lack of Support from Colleagues

One of the most common difficulties of freelancing is the need for more social interaction with colleagues, which can lead to isolation and the inability to ask for help when things go wrong. Regular interaction with colleagues makes it easier for freelancers to develop meaningful relationships with their online clients or find solutions to problems. Shahid, a 45-year-old resident of Rawalpindi, is an online tutor in an online academy administered by himself since the beginning of 2023. Before this, he used to work in a private company but was underpaid. The online academy was his first experience of running any kind of business. Unlike the office environment, I did not have any colleagues in the same field who could guide me or support me in this. Although I have hired more teachers now, the struggle of promoting and strategizing this whole concept was a bit difficult as he was clueless about how to manage and there was no support. He mentioned that he promoted his business by asking his few friends who were not aware of such marketing skills yet tried different ways to promote his academy on social media. Consequently, his page got reported as they were promoting his page by spamming the link into different pages and groups. Thus, he lost all the progress he had made till that point. He expressed

When my page got deleted based on violating Facebook community standards, I was deeply saddened. I thought that online business was not my thing as there was no support which I used to get from my colleagues whenever I used to get stuck in any issue. There is a sense of loneliness however the office environment was much encouraging.

(Freelancer, 45; In-depth Interview)

However, Freelancers counteract the absence of assistance by developing new connections and networking online with freelancing communities, especially on social media. Yet, at certain points, a sense of lack of support and encouragement is encountered by freelancers, especially those who are struggling to start their careers as freelancers. examples of this are Freelancers need to network with one another, as this can lead to mutually beneficial partnerships and career advancement. For instance, by getting in touch

with similar areas of interest, joining groups for professionals, going to conferences and seminars, and learning from experienced freelancers.

5.2.5 Unrecognized Work Experience

Unemployment is one of the most prominent issues of Pakistan with which a huge population of the country is dealing with. The employment rate is lower than the needed ratio. Individuals seeking job opportunities often struggle to find jobs due to various reasons such as market saturation, higher competition, requirement of prior work experience, etc. Individuals with some work experience are usually kept on priority in most cases. Although, freelancing is an opportunity that provides you with a lot of work experience and learning. Yet this work remains unrecognized when it comes to switching jobs and seeking conventional jobs. Freelancers may need help getting hired for permanent positions or being recognized for their work experiences. The duration of working as a freelancer is not officially considered in the list of recognized experiences in traditional marketplaces as freelancing is often not considered "real" work experience, especially by larger organizations.

Nimra, a 32-year-old freelance translator and online tutor, has command over various languages i.e., Urdu, Punjabi, English, Arabic, Persian, Pushto, Spanish, and German. She has been learning languages since she was 12 years old. She started offering services as a translator and online tutor in 2017 on different online platforms. She got married in 2020 and has a 2-year-old baby boy. After the birth of her baby, she feels distracted and is unable to set her routine to work as a freelancer as she used to do. She decided to look for a conventional job as a translator or language teacher so that she could work without disturbance. Although she has adequate work experience as a translator and an online language tutor she was rejected from a few job opportunities based on unavailability of work experience letters or certificates. She shared her disappointment and mentioned

I opted to look for a conventional job as it is getting difficult for me to manage work from home and I cannot afford to quit working because

of unbearable inflation. I was hoping that my six years of relevant work experience would help me secure a job. Since the interviewers did not believe freelance work was feasible and counted in work experience, I was rejected or offered to be underpaid. (Freelancer, 32; In-depth Interview)

She is still trying to get a secure job although her hopes are reducing. Another respondent, a 34-year-old technical writer named Akbar, shared his views and stated that some employers would prefer to hire a person with fake documents and experience letters than a person having work experience as a freelancer in the relevant niche. It seems like papers are valued more than the skills of such employers. He further expressed that even if there are challenges to having freelance work recognized as valuable expertise, freelancers should take proactive steps to showcase their skills and accomplishments to potential employers. He suggested that networking effectively and making a good impression in past freelancing jobs can increase their chances of being hired for specialized work. It is very disappointing to see that the recruiters focus more on formalities and documents rather than focusing on skills and knowledge.

5.2.6 Frauds and Scams

Scams and Fraud are some of the most significant issues freelancers have to face throughout their careers, especially in the beginning phase. One of the reasons behind such activities is that freelancers work with unknown individuals whom they do not know personally. Hence, they do not know whether the person they are working with is trustworthy or not. The sellers and clients both come from diverse backgrounds and geographical locations. The clients and sellers both have to build trust while communicating about the order. Besides, the lack of legal repercussions or laws to penalize those who are involved in fraudulent activities in Pakistan makes the situation easier for scammers and fraudsters. They often use fake identities while doing such activities to protect their real identity. In such cases, if victims want to know their real identity, they have to pay more money to the appropriate authorities or individuals providing such services. Moreover, if they wish to pursue legal actions for the fraudsters, it would be also very expensive as compared to their loss.

The study observed that various methods are used to scam freelancers. Most of the scams are done via direct clients. For instance, they ask to make free samples and lure you for the order after the sample submission but they do not give any order and get their job done in the name of samples. Scammers often invite freelancers to WhatsApp or Telegram for further details as there is no mediator monitoring and controlling them. Besides, they create a public profile/account/page and post ads of unpaid internships leading to jobs. They get their work done by the hired interns and do not hire them as permanent (paid) employees. Moreover, an ad is posted on social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn, via freelancing groups or any posts having an audience. The ad does not contain any clear information about the work responsibilities or roles. The ad mentions the flexibility of working hours, income in dollars, no age limit, and no educational background required. The only requirements are having a smartphone, computer, or laptop with a good internet connection. A sample of an ad is shown in the figure below:

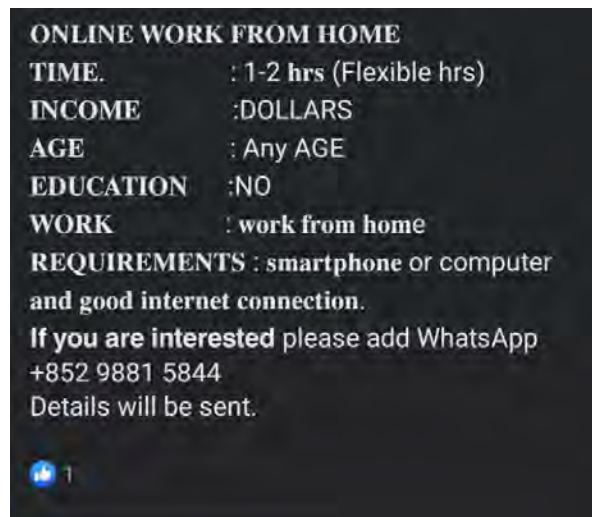


Figure 18: FB post to trap freelancers seeking job opportunities

Sometimes the ads claim to be government-approved agencies and provide a few screenshots of money transactions or withdrawal amounts.

The clients order the tasks for the freelancers as per their requirements. Initially, no rules are told about the payment. After the order is delivered, they ask for the deposits to pay international taxes before sending the payment for the order. When the freelancer pays

the international tax payments into their account, they block them and never contact them again. A respondent mentioned that he has been struggling to work as a graphic designer with direct clients to build his portfolio and also to make a client network. He expressed disappointment about being scammed multiple times. He shared his experience about the latest scam he has faced while working with an international client. The client ordered him to make a few logos in the name of different company names, each having different requirements. As the client was pretending to be an international agency/company, he mentioned that he would pay in dollars to his bank account after the work was submitted.

However, as he delivered the order, he received an email (shown in Figure) from the client mentioning that the decided payment had been made to his (the respondent's) bank account but it is still pending as he (the respondent) has to pay the amount of 150\$ to clear mandatory international money transfer levy to receive the decided amount. He contacted the company to cut the tax/ levy amount from the payment and send the remaining amount. They denied doing so and told him that the payment had already been made and no changes could be made now. After that, he denied that he could not pay 150\$ in advance and offered to send the tax amount after he received the payment. After all these unsuccessful negotiations, the client blocked him from all sources and didn't reply to his emails. Moreover, he mentioned that he posted his experience in a freelancing group of digital graphic designers on Facebook. on his post, many freelancers commented to express or share the same scam.

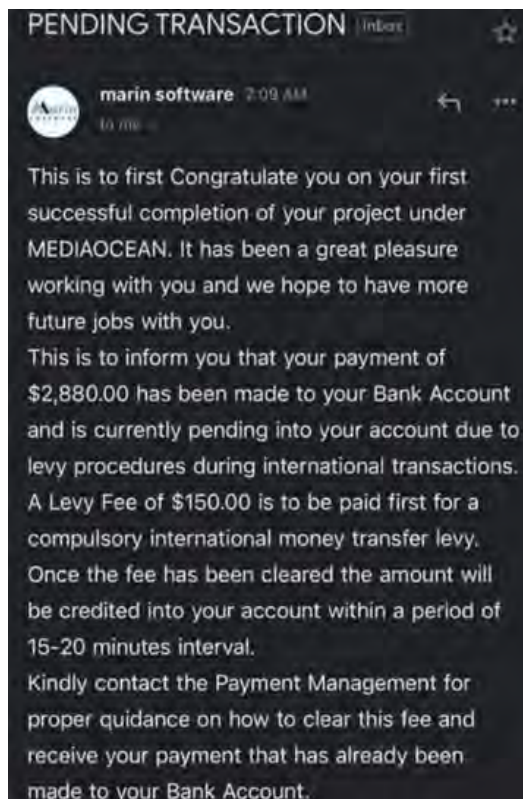


Figure 19: A screenshot of a scam email received by a respondent

Freelancers are often lured to get registered as permanent team members or employees of an agency to get contract-based work. They are told that the agency will train in the initial few weeks and meanwhile, the freelancer would be given various tasks. The payment is told to be set as per the work quality. After all the details, some charges for registration in the agency are demanded. Moreover, they use different tactics to get some payments from the individual such as asking for investment or payment for the package.

Ibrahim, a 32-year-old lawyer, writer, and outsourcer, suggested a few strategies to avoid scams and frauds. He stressed that at least 30-50% advance payment must be demanded before working on an order. The portfolio of the freelancers must be of high quality which would convince the client to have trust in them and to order without doubt. Moreover, he suggested that freelancers should use minor delivery tricks before payments such as delivering the order with a “watermark” if it is in a creative category or sharing a video of the completed order to convey that the work has been completed and will be delivered after half payment. He further stated

Although, freelancers are often knowledgeable about all the tricks they get scammed and lose money. No matter how much I inform you about such things, you will only learn how to deal with these situations with your personal experiences. (Freelancer, 32; In-depth Interview)

Amna, a 26-year-old freelancer, began working as a freelance writer after completing her BS degree in 2022. After a period of struggle for a few months, her cousin introduced her to freelancing marketplaces. Subsequently, she started seeking projects through Facebook groups by posting in various groups about her need for work. A person approached her for an assignment and asked her to prepare a free sample of the assignment. It was decided among both individuals that he would pay her according to the condition of the client's approval of the work. After the delivery of the projects, he blocked her from FB, changed the information on his FB account, and blocked her on WhatsApp and Facebook. When she told her cousin about the situation, she learned that she had been scammed and the person would not pay as it was a clear fraud. She stated

I learned from this incident that one should always demand half of the payment upfront as security, and the other half to be due once the project is finished. (Freelancer, 26; In-depth Interview)

She further added about the procedure to get the real identity of the scammer and mentioned

I wrote a post in a cyber security group that included the specifics of my communication with him and screenshots of the relevant parts of that conversation. One person texted me, and after I explained the details, he told me that I needed to pay \$200 for the entire procedure. After asking numerous people to assist me with this problem, I was also highly shocked by that person's actions. However, learning from mistakes is preferable to repeatedly making the same ones. (Freelancer, 26; In-depth Interview)

The study observed that the ratio of scams on social media or direct clients is greater than the platforms or freelancing marketplaces. This is because social media clients or direct clients are not monitored or controlled by any mediator. Whereas freelancing platforms or marketplaces provide a controlled and monitored environment to both, the

clients and the freelancers, and intervene wherever an issue is reported by any of the individuals. The profiles or the individuals involved in fraudulent activities or scams get banned from the platforms as a penalty. The respondents stressed that as the number of people working as freelancers in Pakistan is increasing with time, people should learn about freelancing skills and deal with all the challenges before working so that they would know how to deal with such issues. Moreover, there must be some platform or policies allowing freelancers to lodge complaints against these problems through an appropriate channel.

5.3 Freelance Outsourcing and Exploitation of Labor

Outsourced work is often linked with exploitation and wage inequality (Witschge et al., 2016). Freelancers, especially those who are fresh in this industry with very little experience, are hired and exploited by paying less amount than the worth of their work. This is very common not only among individual clients but also among companies and organizations. Corporate companies and organizations often hire freelancers to get their tasks done without getting into any long-term contract. It allows them to reduce the cost of the project and save training time. They hire expert freelancers to get their temporary jobs done without hiring anyone permanently. As a result, they also get their task completed on time and do not have to go through the training phase of a fresh employee.

Haziq, a 29-year-old freelance photographer, shared that he is often contacted by companies to cover their big events on a one-time contract basis. He added that some companies have permanent photographers and media cells that do such tasks as covering events, photo /video editing, etc. However, some companies avoid hiring permanent employees for such jobs to reduce their expenses. He shared his views about working as a freelance photographer and photo/ video editor and mentioned

Being a freelancer, I am not bound to work with any single company or party. I have the authority to make decisions and explore new things rather than sticking to one type of work. This allows me to grow, learn, and upskill myself. (Freelancer, 29; In-depth Interview)

Similarly, Najma, a 27-year-old freelance digital marketer and creative designer, also shared her experience of working as a graphic designer and digital marketer for companies and businesses. She was hired as a graphic designer by a renowned cafe in Islamabad last year. She had to create promotional social media posts, ads, and banners. While interacting with the Human Resources (HR) Manager, she got to know that the cafe always hires freelancers to get their promotional posts and ads designed instead of hiring any permanent employee. She stated

Why would they hire anyone permanently and pay a monthly salary to the employee when they can get their work done in half of the budget by the freelancers? (Freelancer, 27; In-depth Interview)

The study observed that the freelancers who get exploited often know that the outsourcer is not paying them according to the value and profit of the work being done. However, they often do the job to earn some money. Freelancers who do not have another job to do and need to earn money often become the victims of such exploitation. The outsourcers also realize that they are not doing a fair job but they also know that the freelancer they hired will do the job even if they get underpaid as they need the job.

As aforementioned, to delve into the experiences and challenges faced by the freelancers who work for the outsourcers. I worked with one of my respondents, Ibrahim, who was a 32-year-old freelance writer and outsourcer. The niche of their work was writing and proofreading. The tasks given to me included proofreading, writing, creating presentations, plagiarism removal, and paraphrasing. One of them used to outsource a lot of work as his existing team member was not working with him during that due to personal reasons. Although, the budget offered for every task varied still it was good.

Due to excessive workload, I had to offer one of my respondents, Javeria (a 25-year-old freelance writer), to be my team member to share the workload and payments respectively. This built trust and rapport with her even more which helped me to observe her closely and explore the deeper insights of the freelancer's experience which was not opened up during her interview. Initially, the outsourcer used to pay right after the assignment delivery. However, the payments started to be delayed gradually and a time

came when the payments got delayed for 3 months. However, she understood the situation as she already had faced such issues in her freelance journey. Yet, I had to pay my team members with my own money to maintain the trust and relationship. However, most of the payments were paid after 3 months.

5.3.1 Case Study of a Freelancer Working for Outsourcers

Javeria, a 25-year-old freelance writer, holds a BS degree in Sociology. She lives in a nuclear family system with her parents, two young sisters aged 19 and 16, and a brother of age 7 (as shown in the Figure below). Her father is an amputee⁴¹ and had a stroke due to which he is unable to work, and her mother is a housewife. Her paternal uncle supports some of the financial expenses. She is responsible for taking care of the rest of the expenses as she is the oldest daughter of the household and the only breadwinner of the household.

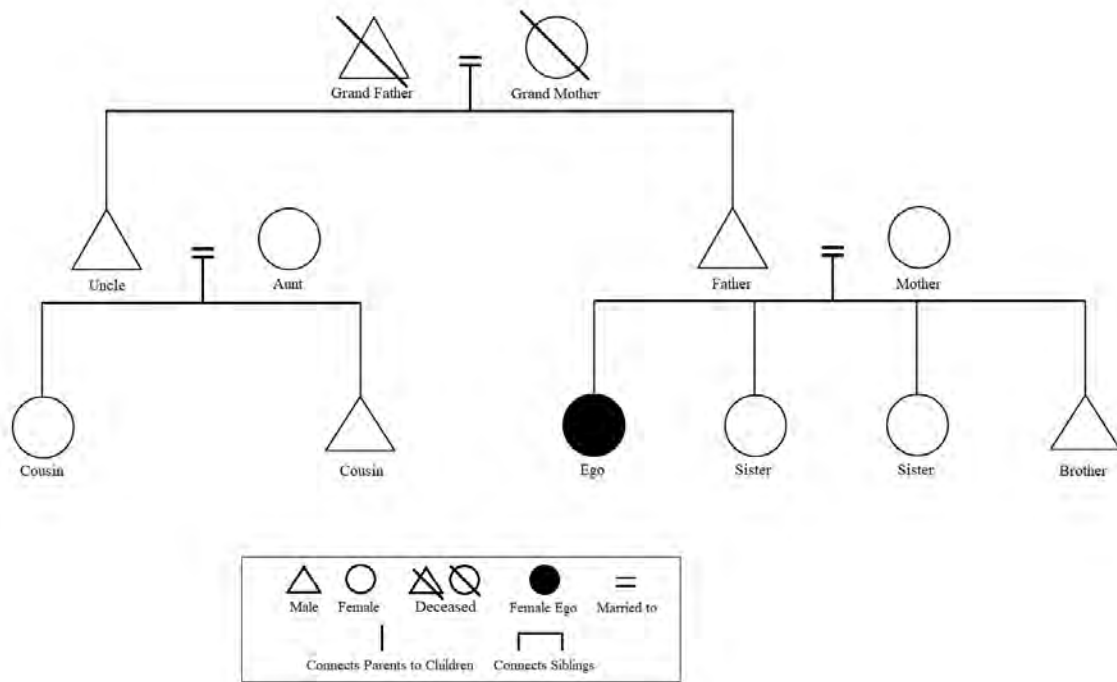


Figure 20: Kinship Chart of Respondent (Javeria)⁴²

⁴¹ A person who has undergone through an amputation through a surgical procedure which involves removing a limb to prevent spread of a chronic disease (*Amputee*, n.d.). The respected person had lost his foot through surgery to prevent damage to the rest of his body.

⁴² The Kinship chart was created to demonstrate the family of the respondent visually as it plays an important role in her case study.

As mentioned above, Javeria's father had a stroke a few years back due to which he lost his job. Consequently, she started to look for a job to support her family and make some money for her expenses. After extensive struggles, she lost hope of a job as she was unable to find a suitable job. She was introduced to virtual freelancing by her friend. Initially, she was not much aware of it other than it being a source of online earning. Following extensive research, she began searching for work in social media freelancing communities. She encountered a lot of challenges, frauds, and scams. She started working as a freelance academic writer with various direct clients⁴³.

She shared some of the ways she had been scammed by the clients. Firstly, clients ask to submit a free sample or trial order to check the quality of work before placing the main order. However, when the writer submits the sample, the client does not reply or discuss the main order. Sometimes clients order a task with a condition of revisions after the submission. When the task is submitted, they simply block the freelancer and never respond so that they do not have to pay for it. She shared that she had encountered frauds of nearly lac rupees. She shared that she was hired by an outsourcer via a Facebook group to do a content writing job. She had to write essays on his (outsourcer) provided topics and was told to do the work with no plagiarism and without using Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools. She was promised to pay a good amount but the condition was that the payment would be approved by his clients after they were satisfied with the work. She accepted his order and delivered 5 essays within 2 days because she needed money. Initially, the outsourcer kept saying that clients would get their work checked and then give their feedback. However, when she asked for the payment after 12 essay submissions and two weeks of waiting for feedback from the client of the outsourcer, the outsourcer refused to pay and told her that the client was not satisfied with the quality of work. She expressed her disappointment and stated

I was in shock that if the quality was not satisfactory then why did the outsourcer not mention it earlier and stop me from working? He wasted two weeks of my life which I could have invested in something

⁴³ Direct clients are the clients who seek some help directly from the freelancers to do their tasks without any mediating party or medium.

else and would have earned something. I do not know how much freelancers can exploit other freelancers after going through all the struggles that a fresh freelancer goes through. Such outsourcers just hire us to get their work done and earn profit without working. If an outsourcer pays 5000 for a task, he might be getting 15000 or 20000 for it. (Freelancer, 25; In-depth Interview)

She further added that the outsourcer was an educated person and had abilities to judge the quality of work. However, the outsourcer did not mention it before she asked for the payment and kept giving her more assignments.

5.4 Paradoxical Empowerment

The virtual freelancers experience a sense of empowerment as they can self-govern their work. The key features of this sense of empowerment are autonomy and flexibility. However, what they experience is paradoxical empowerment. Paradoxical empowerment is a concept that highlights complex dynamics that create an illusion of empowerment in the presence of structural constraints. It refers to an experience of a sense of empowerment or agency despite functioning in the system or structure which inherently puts structural limitations to restrict their power.

Similarly, virtual freelancers feel empowered, accomplished, and elevated while working on digital or virtual platforms. However, the system they work in inherently limits their power and reinforces power structure and structural constraints. Working on virtual platforms often provides several empowering factors and constraints such as:

5.4.1 Autonomy and Flexibility

Virtual freelancers often experience a sense of autonomy and flexibility as they have freedom in decision-making without others' intervention and control. They are independent in choosing their clients, nature of work, projects, and workload. They are not bound to meet any target set by anyone else, rather they set their targets. They are not accountable to anyone other than their clients, that too in terms of a specific task given by them. They have the autonomy to select or reject any client or task as per their comfort

level, ease, and choice. Moreover, the working hours are also flexible as freelancers do not work in a fixed time frame as any corporate or traditional worker has to work in a fixed time frame such as 9 am to 5 pm. Similarly, they are also not geographically or physically bound to work in a specific locale. Freelancing provides the freedom to work wherever they want to work. These factors provide a perception of empowerment to virtual freelancers. For instance, Sabiq, a 26-year-old freelance web developer, has short experience working as a web developer in the cooperate sector. She had to leave the job as she is the eldest of all her siblings and has responsibilities towards home as well. She started working as a freelance web developer shortly after leaving her job. She expressed that she feels independent and free while working as a freelancer. She stated

During the eight months of working in a renowned software house, I had to neglect my home and my family. I had to go to the office no matter whether my parents were not well or I had some other issue. However, since I am working as a freelancer now, I feel that I have become in charge of all my decisions. I do not have to feel guilty while working for leaving my mother in unwell condition all by herself doing all the house chores and other stuff. (Freelancer, 26; In-depth Interview)

Additionally, she mentioned that she is in charge of deciding when to work, how to work, and with whom to work. She believed that she could not feel more independent while working in any other form of work.

However, freelance work creates a sense of being in charge of your own and independent in making choices. However, the digital or virtual platforms are inherently enforcing power structures on the digital labor or virtual freelancers. Virtual freelancers are subject to the power of virtual freelancing platforms, such as Fiverr, Upwork, etc. The power structure constrains their abilities and influences their choices. For instance, although freelancers have autonomy and flexibility to choose their clients, however, it is constrained by the client's expectations and requirements of the hired freelancer. Besides, freelancers also have to maintain their ratings and response rates while working on freelancing platforms to sustain the level of their accounts. Mujhtaba Sial, a 34-year-old

freelance creative designer, shared his views about this sense of empowerment and mentioned that although freelance work makes the worker feel empowered and decisive, it controls and constrains your freedom indirectly. He further mentioned:

Being a freelancer, I am aware of all the apparent empowering features such as choice of clients, work, time, etc. However, if you start working as a freelancer and look closer into how it works, then you will be able to realize that I am not 100 percent independent in making choices. My choices are being controlled by some not-so-obvious external factors. (Freelancer, 34; In-depth Interview)

He added that freelancers do have a choice as to when and how to work. However, some factors influence our decision-making. For instance, freelancers cannot be inactive for a long time or else they have to face the consequences. One of the most important consequences of staying inactive for a longer period is the loss of loyal clients to other freelance workers. The clients need their work to be done no matter who does it. Even loyal and old clients with whom a freelancer might be working for years will start looking for an alternate person to do his job. Moreover, a decrease in response rates and ranks is another factor. While working on freelancing platforms, one has to maintain their response rates and ranking. A response rate is the track of the first responses sent to a new request of the clients who contact you. For instance, a freelancer working on Fiverr has to reply within 24 hours of a new order request. If they do not reply, the response rate will be decreased. The response time is evaluated over 60 days to track the response rate. Hence, freelancers have to be active every day to maintain their profiles, response rates, reviews, and ranking. Syeda Nomaira Waseem, a 20 years old Google ad expert, shared:

I have worked on my vacations, festivals, Eids, and many other occasions as I cannot afford to lose my loyal clients for my leisure because I have worked hard to get them. (Freelancer, 20; In-depth Interview)

She further explained that most of the clients she works with are international. Hence, they do not celebrate the same festivals as she does. The clients would not give

relief and wait for the freelancer to have vacations on the days of Eid⁴⁴, Muharram⁴⁵, or any other occasions. One has two options, either lose the clients and let the hard-maintained profile be devalued or stay active.

The flexibility in the selection of work is constrained by the need to secure orders or assignments. On one hand, freelancers feel empowered by getting autonomy and flexibility, yet their choices are constrained by the power structures of the virtual freelancing platforms.

5.4.2 Self-Expression and Creative Control

Virtual freelancing enables freelancers to express their ideas and creativity as they want to. Unlike cooperate jobs, freelancers get a choice of selecting the type of work and projects they do for their clients. They can shape their nature of work according to their vision and goals by aligning their interests and skills. They can create work opportunities that resonate with their personality and caliber. The ability to self-expression is also one of the prominent key factors that are not provided to the other types of workers such as cooperate workers. Freelancers get a platform to express their individuality, innovation, unique ideas, creativity, skills, and talents in their work which satisfies them mentally.

Freelancing empowers the workers to present their expressions and creativity. However, it poses some challenges for the freelancers while working. The freedom of self-expression and creativity is inherently controlled and restricted. Although freelancers are capable of being innovative and creative as per their interests, they are often restricted to controlling their ideas and presenting outcomes as per the requirements of the client. The system also prioritizes the client over the seller (freelancer) as the client pays to get their job done and the platform gets a commission from each order or project. Najma, a 27-year-old freelance creative designer, expressed disappointment with the policies of the freelancing marketplaces or platforms. She expressed:

⁴⁴ Festival celebrated by Muslims.

⁴⁵ Muharram is the first month of Islamic year. It is celebrated as a month of remembrance of the martyrdom of Prophet Muhammad's (P.B.U.H) grandson, Hussain Ibn e Ali, and his companions during the battle of Karbala.

It is very disheartening to see that we (freelancers) complete our orders with such hard work. However, if a client gives a false report about the order that the delivery is not satisfactory or according to the requirements, the platform facilitates the client by canceling the order and refunding the payment. This often leads the clients to pretend that they are dissatisfied with the order and then get away with the payment and the order. (Freelancer, 27; In-depth Interview)

Similarly, the study observed that this sense of being able to express one's self but in a restricted environment of creative control makes freelancers have restricted independence. Freelancers, especially in the initial stage of their career, often struggle with making their clients satisfied with their work as they need to create a balance between self-expression and the client's control over their creativity. It often leads them to make multiple revisions to their orders to make their clients satisfied with their work and to complete their orders. During the participant observation in a training course for freelancers, I observed that the new freelancers often get frustrated in the struggle of completing their orders as they do not have experience in balancing creativity and client demand.

5.5 Conclusions

In conclusion, the chapter highlighted the appeal of freelancing as an alternative means to earn income and navigate economic challenges. Beyond economic considerations, factors such as financial independence, dissatisfaction with corporate jobs, and the unique scope for growth in terms of workload and upskilling were identified as significant contributors to the freelancer's choice. Despite its appeal, freelancing presents challenges, including issues of reliability, unrecognized work experience, and self-management problems. The study noted freelancing's perception as an unreliable and unsustainable form of work, with work experience often overlooked in traditional job sectors. Payment hurdles, fraud, and scams, especially in regions without access to platforms like PayPal, were acknowledged as obstacles. While freelancing provides empowerment and a sense of accomplishment, the study found a paradox in the system, as virtual freelancers, though feeling elevated and empowered, still contend with inherent structural constraints and power dynamics within the freelancing landscape.

6 STEP AHEAD TOWARD ENTREPRENEURSHIP

In the previous chapters, virtual freelancing as an opportunity for self-employment, its conceptualization, and challenges have been discussed. As discussed earlier, freelancing is an unpredictable career that is often considered an unreliable source of income if it is not managed properly. However, freelancing provides a lot of opportunities to opt for it as a long-term source of income such as digital entrepreneurship. This chapter aims to discuss the relationship between freelancing and entrepreneurship and the opportunities for sustaining freelancing in the long run.

6.1 Transition from Freelancing to Entrepreneurship

Anthropologists have been studying entrepreneurship, shifting trends, and its impact on social dynamics (Shapiro & Sokol, 1982). As digitalization permeated globally, the concepts of entrepreneurship and self-employment have also reshaped into the virtual world, especially after the growth of the virtual freelance industry. The current research focuses on entrepreneurship as a step ahead of freelancers in the digital sphere or virtual communities.

As discussed in previous chapters, freelancers often consider freelancing as an unreliable source of income. However, freelancers enjoy autonomy, independence, and many more opportunities making their lives easier. Yet, they also face a lot of challenges which often makes it difficult to survive in a freelance career. The unsustainability and unreliability of this work are the most prominent challenges that urge freelancers to opt for alternate opportunities. The study observed that experienced freelancers are motivated to grow their freelance work using innovative ideas and their skills by creating new business models through their entrepreneurial capacities. There are two types of business expansion opportunities that freelancers tend to choose to expand their work including solopreneurship and entrepreneurship. Solopreneurship and entrepreneurship are often considered as the same thing. There are a lot of similarities which make them hard to distinguish. However, some elements distinguish both business models or concepts.

6.2 Solopreneurship

Freelancers are independent individuals who work by offering their services to clients on a one-time or order-by-order basis without long-term commitments. Freelancers are considered as client-focused individuals who tend to focus on delivering services to the clients. Freelancers often consider upscaling their freelance and client-oriented work into a more established independent business model. This approach is known as solopreneurship and the individuals who work under this model or approach are known as solopreneurs. The word solopreneurship comes from the two words “solo” and “entrepreneur”. Solopreneurs take challenges and risks of transitioning their work (online or offline) into a business model, agency, or enterprise and manage and organize everything solely without the help of any partner. (Merriam-Webster, 2023). Solopreneurs are also known as freelancers with an entrepreneurial spirit (Middlemiss, 2022). They tend to upscale themselves independently without seeking investments or funding from others. This allows them to maintain autonomy in decision-making. Solopreneurs do not prefer to hire someone permanently or build a team and manage them. However, they tend to temporarily collaborate with other skilled professionals and outsource work. Syeda Nomaira Waseem, a 20-years-old Google AdSense expert and Amazon private label and wholesale expert, mentioned

I have been working as a freelancer for the past few years as I started in my early teenage period. I have been struggling in self-branding using different platforms and Alhamdulillah I am working to expand my work into an independent enterprise. For now, I want to be a solopreneur and be independent without being answerable to anyone else. (Freelancer, 20; In-depth Interview)

Most of the respondents who were experienced in their freelance careers suggested that freelancers must not rely on a single source of income or single platform and should struggle for self-branding or creating several passive sources of income. The study observed that freelancers rely on platforms or social media for their work in the beginning phase of their journey as freelancers. However, when they begin getting more orders than

they can manage on their own, they start outsourcing their work to other freelancers either new or experienced depending on the nature and quality of their work rather than declining the orders. This helps both parties, the outsourcer, and the worker, to earn money. Outsourcing freelancers get their orders completed, increase the rating of their profiles, and get reviews as well which makes their profile stronger. They also get paid more than the new freelancers because of their high-rated profiles. Outsourcing freelancers pay the amount of money negotiated and decided among both parties and also get profit from the order by keeping the rest of the amount to themselves.

Zeeshan, a 37-year-old freelance graphic designer, web developer, and private trainer, considers this as the best way of expanding any freelancer's work. He mentioned that outsourcing and hiring a team to share the workload is the first step to becoming a solopreneur or entrepreneur. He further stated:

I started as a freelancer and gradually transformed my work into a solopreneurship model and now I call myself an entrepreneur.

(Freelancer, 37; In-depth Interview)

Additionally, while asking about his journey from a freelancer to an entrepreneur, he outlined some steps that can lead a freelancer to be a solopreneur. The steps to transform freelance work into solopreneurship include:

1. **Self-Assessment:** The first step is to evaluate the existing freelance work by doing an in-depth assessment of skills, client base, and income being earned by the existing work. One has to reevaluate the existing work by upskilling and client hunting before considering expanding it if any gap lies in it.
2. **Specialization:** After assessment and evaluation of existing work, if an individual perceives it as in a good position to expand, the next step is narrowing down the services offered and niche. It is better to select the niche or service that stands out and attracts clients. This specialization would enable the individual to be more focused on attracting a targeted audience that values the services offered rather than being stuck in a lot of work.

3. **Planning the Business Model and Branding:** Effective planning is a very important step and a roadmap to success which requires clarity of ideas and future prospects. It includes outlining business goals, models, target market, marketing and advertisement plans, price management strategies, and financial structure. After planning all the details of the business model, planning and creating a business brand identity is an important aspect which includes logo, theme, brand name, business social media handles, and business website. There must be an identity or brand theme that would reflect the niche or business and enable the clients to associate it with the brand.
4. **Registration of Business:** Registering the business or enterprise with a suitable brand name is an important step that makes the business legal and filer. This may require consulting with legal entities or tax professionals to ensure compliance and regulation by understanding tax procedures. Some solopreneurs skip this step to avoid taxes and prefer to stay in an unregistered small-scale solopreneurial setup.
5. **Marketing and Client Acquisition:** Efficient marketing strategies through suitable marketing channels are a very thoughtful step as they enable the business to attract a targeted audience and bring sales or business. There are various marketing channels used by solopreneurs such as online and offline networking, content marketing, digital marketing and advertisement, and social media promotions. A solopreneur has to be active in seeking a potential client base and diversifying it. This allows them to reduce dependency on clients as more clients would bring more work.
6. **Networking and Collaboration:** As mentioned earlier, networking is a very effective source of promoting and marketing the business model. Relationships and connections within the industry and collaboration with the connections bring a wide range of opportunities.
7. **Upskilling, Adaptation, and Innovation:** Finally, a solopreneur must be flexible and open to adapting new concepts or ideas and be up-to-date to achieve long-term success. It may require investments in skill development and upskilling. Digital businesses require time to time upgrading of skills and business techniques to stay competitive in the respective niche.

Saira, a 31-year-old trainer in a private online academy, content creator, and blogger, associates herself more as a solopreneur than a freelancer or entrepreneur. She shared that she has expanded her blogging and content creation work into a business by monetizing it through paid advertisements, sponsored content, and affiliate marketing on her blog. Moreover, she also offers copywriting, content writing, and script writing services for content creators and other clients through her blog. She considers herself to be on the right track toward success and cites

I started as a freelance blog and content creator. The transition from being a freelancer to a solopreneur was not easy. I faced a lot of challenges such as managing everything independently from client acquisition to finances and investments. Yet, it helped me to be more in control by setting my direction and growing beyond freelancing. (Trainer, 31; In-depth Interview)

Expansion of virtual freelance work into an innovative individual business model or solopreneurship involves a lot of planning and risks. It enables individuals to shift work into a more structured and sustainable form while maintaining anonymity and independence over decision-making and finances. Solopreneurship allows individuals to enjoy most of the qualities of freelancing and makes it more reliable and secure for a longer period.

6.3 Entrepreneurship

Freelancers are proving themselves to be creative human capital promoting the economy of their countries by bringing their innovative ideas to reality in the form of entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship is considered a step ahead of solopreneurship. There are a few features of entrepreneurship that distinguish it from solopreneurship. The individuals who use their innovative ideas and transform the idea to establish and operate a new business model with a desire to upscale and grow it are called entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs are considered to be more open to change and risks than solopreneurs. Entrepreneurs may start as freelancers and transition their work into solopreneurship, but

they are not limited to that point and aim to expand their solopreneurship business to the next level.

As discussed earlier, solopreneurs prefer to work independently without doing a partnership, hiring employees, or building a team. In contrast, entrepreneurs are flexible about partnering up and hiring employees to scale the business or company. Moreover, unlike solopreneurs, entrepreneurs often develop growth strategies and seek investments for the rapid expansion of their business or enterprise (DiPiazza, 2016). Entrepreneurship varies from a small-scale start-up to a large company or organization depending on their scalability and efforts.

The study observed that freelancers seek to progress from self-employed freelancing to solopreneurship to entrepreneurship. This accentuates a spectrum of aims, business size, independence, and growth prospects. Freelancing before entrepreneurship allows individuals to work on a smaller scale and learn from it before actually risking all their efforts and investments. Moreover, it allows entrepreneurs to learn and have experience in dealing with clients and negotiating with them.

Salar, a 25-year-old freelance web developer, has been working as a freelancer for years now. He shared that he is considering expanding his freelance work to entrepreneurship. He stated

I have been enjoying flexibility in freelance work for years. Working as a freelancer has provided me with a lot of experience and a steady stream of clients. I am looking forward to using all the experience and growing my work to entrepreneurship. (Freelancer, 25; In-depth Interview)

Zeeshan, a 37-year-old freelance graphic designer, web developer, and private trainer, also outlined some steps that can lead a freelancer to be an entrepreneur. He shared that most of the steps of transforming one's work to entrepreneurship are similar to that of solopreneurship, yet there are a few additional steps. The steps to entrepreneurship include:

1. **Concept Development and Validation:** The first step to transforming work into entrepreneurship is to create innovative business ideas by brainstorming and validating their efficiency and reliability by conducting market research and assessment on demands and targeted clients.
2. **Business Planning and Strategy:** Outlining all the details such as business concept, vision, goals, marketing strategy, financial structure, revenue model, legal structure, registration, and financial projections is an important step that allows you to set a clear direction for the business model.
3. **Investments and Capital Acquisition:** Unlike solopreneurs, entrepreneurs seek investments and funding for startups. They explore various options including personal savings, investors, loans, crowdfunding, incubation centers, or grants to finance and scale the business.
4. **Team building:** Entrepreneurs prefer to hire teams rather than work independently. They consider this as a part of growing demands and upscaling the business. They have to manage a team and align them with the business goals.
5. **Service or Product Development:** As solopreneurs have to narrow down their niche and services, the entrepreneurs have to focus on developing a core service or product and refine it with innovation according to customers' needs and market competition.
6. **Expansion and Scaling:** When entrepreneurs enter the market, they need to be open to innovations and changes. They must seek opportunities to expand their business into new markets, countries, and regions. They must be open to adapting to changes and upgrading their services or products in an innovative way to compete.
7. **Networking and Collaboration:** As mentioned earlier, networking is an important aspect of growing a business or company. Entrepreneurs also need to be active and social among people in their domain. Collaborating with experienced individuals brings new opportunities.
8. **Patience and Persistency:** Being an entrepreneur, an individual must be aware that growing a business and scaling it requires a lot of time and patience. Hence,

they must not expect extraordinary results in little time and must be persistent in putting effort into the business.

Shohaib Raja, a 44-year-old trainer at e-Rozgar and a blogger, suggests that every freelancer who depends on it as a sole source of income must consider making it more sustainable by using their skills and transforming it into a proper business model. He also highlighted that the biggest challenges that freelancers face in transforming their work into entrepreneurship are risk and uncertainty. He mentioned that

Shifting my freelance work into entrepreneurship was challenging for me initially, but it is worth the hard work. It was very risky and difficult to scale it, yet I am satisfied with its growth now. (Trainer, 44; In-depth Interview)

He further added

We, freelancers, have to educate our people and end the misconceptions about freelance work. Our people are unaware of the digital businesses. We have considered CAPTCHA code, email marketing, and stuff like this as a digital business. We need to educate people that there are a lot of skills involved in online businesses that are learned by investing a lot of time and practice. (Trainer, 44; In-depth Interview)

The study observed that transforming freelance work into entrepreneurship is quite challenging and requires a lot of patience, persistence, investments, risks, and effort. Yet it is more sustainable and capable of growing larger than freelance work can ever grow.

6.3.1 Case Study of a Trainer: Journey from Freelancer to Entrepreneur

Waqar Tayyub, a 42-year-old trainer of creative design course at e-Rozgar, prefers to call himself an entrepreneur rather than a freelancer. His educational qualification is electrical engineering and is also a Microsoft IT professional. Despite his good educational records, he did not become a part of the ecosystem of conventional jobs and focused on learning digital and freelance skills. He is a full-time trainer and offers training services as an

entrepreneur or freelancer to different companies. Companies hire him as per their requirements on a contract basis and he is not a full-time employee at any company.

He chose to freelance as a career and to pursue it as a full-time trainer and entrepreneur because he believes that his personality does not suit the field that he chose during his student life. He stated

I am not the person who would like to be stuck among machines my whole life. I want to explore new opportunities and socialize with new people. (Trainer, 42; In-depth Interview)

During the course⁴⁶, he always encouraged the trainees to learn skills and be connected with the other freelancer fellows for future collaborations. Furthermore, he explained his stand for freelancing during the interview taken for data collection and stated

One should not focus on freelancing as a full-time career. If one thinks that he can earn throughout their life as a freelancer, then he is living in a world of misconceptions. (Trainer, 42; In-depth Interview)

He further stated that Freelancing is done using mediated platforms, i.e., Fiverr, Upwork, etc., and people become dependent on those platforms. Such platforms keep on changing and upgrading their policies over time which influences work. For instance, Fiverr has updated its system, and people especially in Pakistan were not getting any orders after the update as the policies became stricter (in December 2022). He added that one should think for the longer run and focus on building something for the future as well. He added

What one has to do is earn money as a freelancer, invest the earned money somewhere else or upgrade your skills, and then take a few steps further and work to make your brand or agency. Using your skills in innovative ideas to create yourself or your services as a brand is the

⁴⁶ The creative design course which I enrolled to get access to the trainees and freelancers, and do participant observation by observing their interactions and behavior during the course.

road to becoming an entrepreneur from a freelancer. (Trainer, 42; In-depth Interview)

During the course, Tayyub shared various ideas of how a creative designer or graphic designer can create a business. For instance, a graphic designer can create new designs and launch their brand by printing those designs on t-shirts, mugs, caps, frames, etc.

6.4 Conclusions

To sum up the discussion, the study discerns that experienced freelancers are driven to enhance their freelance endeavors by employing innovative ideas and leveraging their skills to create new business models, showcasing their entrepreneurial capabilities. Freelancers typically opt for two paths to expand their work: solopreneurship and entrepreneurship. Although the terms are often used interchangeably, they differ in terms of scale, dependency, investments, and teamwork. Solopreneurs generally prefer independent work, while entrepreneurs aim to broaden their business models, seeking partnerships and investments. The research underscores that experienced freelancers are motivated to expand their work, emphasizing sustainability as a key driver in their entrepreneurial pursuits.

7 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In the contemporary era, digitalization and the internet have permeated every aspect of our lives transforming crucial parts of our lives into digital form. Freelancing is one of the examples of digitalization and transformation of physical labor into digital labor which provided vast employment opportunities. The current netnographic research aimed to explore the multifaceted phenomenon of virtual freelancing as a career option and its broad implications on our conceptualizations and lives. It also emphasized the lived experiences of freelancing while exploring the motivational or inspirational factors that push them towards non-conventional career options i.e., virtual freelancing, and challenges faced during their career that may pull them out of it and motivate them to join the conventional workforce. Furthermore, it also investigated the role of virtual freelancing in reshaping or redefining self-employment and entrepreneurship in the domain of digitalization.

The current netnographic research was conducted on online platforms such as the e-Rozgar training program's online course, Facebook freelancing communities, and Fiverr. The netnographic research employed the research methods and techniques of ethnography but in a virtual sphere. In-depth interviews and participant observation were conducted for the data collection process. The sample of the research consisted of 34 participants including 5 trainers and 29 freelancers and trainees. The sample was selected by employing purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The duration of this netnographic fieldwork was four months from October 2022 to January 2023. Data collected has been analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. Moreover, ethical considerations have been keenly observed throughout the research.

In the initial chapters, an overview of the research topic, a comprehensive literature review, and an elaboration of the research methodology and research locale have been discussed. The fourth chapter aimed to discuss virtual freelancing as a self-employment opportunity. The findings suggest that the growth of virtual freelancing has provided employment opportunities to a huge population of the world. There is not a single way of working as a freelancer, rather freelancers choose their medium of work from a variety of options available to them including freelance marketplaces or platforms (such as Fiverr,

Upwork, PeoplePerHour, etc.), direct clients, social media communities, online outsourcing, and freelance agencies or businesses. The study suggested that training and upskilling is a very significant part of the freelancing career which is often overlooked by new freelancers. Consequently, such freelancers do not last for the long term as they are not aware of up-to-date information about trends, demands, and algorithms of freelancing platforms. The new freelancers are more open to working with outsourcers and direct clients as they are new to this career and their platform profiles are not ranked or reviewed due to which the chances of getting orders from platforms are low. Working with outsourcers or direct clients allows them to build connections with clients and experienced freelancers. Moreover, it also enables them to bring direct clients toward their platform profiles after building trust and negotiation. At the beginning of the practice phase of learning a skill or building a portfolio, freelancers, especially in a creative niche, offer people to give them tasks to do free of cost. This allows them to explore and learn new ideas, build portfolios, and network with other freelancers. They call it a win-win situation.

The study also observed that there are diverse opinions and conceptualizations of the population about opting for virtual freelancing as a career. People often prefer it to be merely a part-time job opportunity to bring extra income and cannot be relied upon. However, some people consider it a golden opportunity, especially in a country whose unemployment rate is high in this inflation. Some factors shape the perspectives and conceptualizations of people such as social dynamics, socialization, and generation gap. People often become rigid with the ideas adopted from the environment they grew up throughout their lives. The younger generation who grew up in the digitalized world with a stream of digital opportunities is more open and flexible to opt for virtual freelancing as a career. Whereas, the older generation who grew up in the 9-to-5 office routine may stick to a more strictly static routine. Furthermore, freelancers also play a significant role in shaping public perception as people who are unaware of freelancing and its potential would perceive it according to what freelancers portray.

The fifth chapter intended to explore motivational or inspirational factors pushing freelancers to opt for a career opportunity. The study observed that increasing inflation and unemployment urged freelancers to consider freelancing as an alternative to survive by

earning income to run their households. Furthermore, there are a lot of other factors involved such as financial independence, dissatisfaction with corporate jobs, and scope of increment and growth. People often choose freelancing as it provides a different scope of growth. Freelancers are capable of earning the amount according to their workload. The more work they will do, the more they will earn. Furthermore, growth is considered in terms of expansion of work and upskilling rather than promotions or income. However, in conventional job sectors, growth is evaluated in terms of income or promotion. Moreover, freelancing has transcended the barriers of gender and cultural norms and provided inclusivity to all.

Similarly, there are some challenges faced by the freelancer such as lack of reliability, unrecognized work experience, and self-management issues. The study observed that freelancing is considered an unreliable and unsustainable form of work whose work experience rarely gets recognized in the conventional workforce or labor market. Furthermore, receiving payments is one of the most prominent issues that most freelancers encounter during their initial phase as PayPal is not available in Pakistan. Frauds and scams are the challenge which is experienced by most experienced freelancers. However, experienced freelancers suggest that freelancing either gives you money or a lifetime experience of how to deal with certain situations such as frauds and scams. The findings suggest that freelancers often get exploited by the outsourcers as they consider new freelancers as unpaid labor and use them to earn profits. Although freelancing provides a sense of empowerment to the freelancers, it is paradoxical. Virtual freelancers feel empowered, accomplished, and elevated while working on digital or virtual platforms. However, the system they work in inherently limits their power and reinforces power structure and structural constraints. On one hand, it provides a sense of autonomy, flexibility, self-expression, and creative control. On the other hand, it puts some structural constraints and limits their autonomy and freedom.

Finally, the sixth chapter provides insights of freelancers about the role of virtual freelancing in reshaping and redefining entrepreneurship. The study observed that experienced freelancers are motivated to grow their freelance work using innovative ideas and their skills by creating new business models through their entrepreneurial capacities.

Freelancers choose two ways of expanding their work i.e., solopreneurship and entrepreneurship. Although both are considered interchangeable, they distinguish in the scale of growth, dependency, investments, and teamwork. Solopreneurs usually prefer to work independently. However, entrepreneurs tend to expand their business models and seek partnerships and investments. The study observed that experienced freelancers are motivated to expand their work to make it more sustainable.

7.1 Recommendations

This study suggests that although freelancing is expanding drastically, people in Pakistan are unaware of its potential. The government has been playing a very important role in promoting digital literacy and freelancing. However, there is a need to expand it on a bigger level so that it can help the country to expand its digital economy and reduce unemployment. Furthermore, there is an urgent need to bring payment gateways that are suitable for online and international payments. For instance, the unavailability of PayPal in Pakistan has challenged a huge population of freelancers. Moreover, freelance work experience has to be recognized in the conventional workforce. The research sector needs to focus on digital communities to study the occurring paradigm shifts in the country and their impacts on human cultures and behavior.

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9 ANNEXURE

9.1 Glossary

Words	Meanings
Alhamdulillah	Praise be to Allah or thanks to Allah
Chooran	A powder used for digestion made by mixing different powders and spices i.e., salt, ground spices, dried green mangoes, limes, etc.
Eid	A religious festival celebrated by Muslims twice a year i.e., Eid ul Fitr and Eid ul Azha
Hawai Rozi	Insecure source of income which can vanish away at any time unpredictably
Manjan	Dentifrice and powder or paste used to clean teeth
Muharram	The first month of the Islamic calendar
Nana	Refer mother's father in Urdu language
Nikamma	A person who is good-for-nothing, lazy, or inoperative

9.2 Informed Consent Form

Asalam-o-Alaikum!

I am a student of MPhil Anthropology at Quaid I Azam University, Islamabad. The research I am conducting is a partial requirement for my degree of MPhil in Anthropology. This research aims to explore the conceptualizations of people freelancing as a career, the motivations and lived experiences of freelancers in choosing freelance instead of traditional/office jobs, and the role of freelancing in reshaping self-employment and entrepreneurship. For the data collection, I must interview you. I assure you about the anonymity of your identity. The information provided will only be shown to the supervisor and used only for research and academic purposes.

I will be highly grateful for your cooperation.

Signature of the Researcher

I have carefully read all the information provided by the researcher and agree to be part of this research. However, at any stage, if I feel the need, I will withdraw from the research.

Signature of the Interviewee

9.3 Interview Guide

Name.....

Age.....

Gender.....

Education.....

Occupation.....

City you belong to.....

Questions for trainers and trainees

1. Are you a full-time freelancer?
2. Are you working in some organization other than freelancing?
3. For how long have you been working as a freelancer?
4. Why did you choose to freelance over a traditional job?
5. How do you conceptualize or define freelance?
6. What do you think about how the general population conceptualizes freelance?
7. What professional category do you belong to?
8. What type of freelancing activities do you do?
9. How many hours do you work online per day/week?
10. What is your reason motivation behind starting freelancing?
11. What top three things motivate you to continue being a freelance worker?
12. Whether or not you have taken any freelance or skills training courses?
13. Which institutes did you choose to be trained from? Why?
14. Share your training journey.
15. What issues do you face while working as a freelancer?
16. How do you see freelancing in general?

17. How do you see freelance as a full-time career?
18. What is the contribution of freelancing to your life?
19. What types of freelancing activities are prevalent in Pakistan?
20. How strong is the freelancing activity in Pakistan? Answer both international and local clients.
21. What are the financial support needs of the freelancing community?
22. What are the non-financial support needs of the freelancing community?
23. What are your top three challenges as a freelancer?
24. Did you experience any discrimination, harassment, or bias from the clients on the freelance marketplace?
25. Which job (freelance or traditional office job) do you think is more secure? How?
26. Are you happier working as a freelancer/ independent contractor than a permanent employee? How?
27. Do you have more free time as a freelancer / independent contractor than as a permanent employee?
28. What are the factors behind the change in the demand for freelancers and independent contractors and the rapid growth of the freelance industry in Pakistan?
29. If you decided to make a change and leave your job/career during the pandemic to go freelance, what was the reason for this?
30. In terms of income, which job (freelance or traditional office job) is better?
31. Have you ever experienced difficulty finding or losing a job because of your age?
32. Do you feel more stable as a freelancer/ independent contractor on freelance marketplaces, i.e., Fiverr and Upwork?
33. What are the benefits of being a freelancer?
34. What are the disadvantages of being a freelancer?
35. How fast do you typically get paid by clients on the freelance marketplace?
36. How fast do you typically get paid by independent clients outside the web-based freelance marketplace?
37. Which web-based freelance marketplace do you prefer?

Questions only for Trainers

38. What are your academic qualifications?
39. Why did you choose freelancing as a career rather than being in your field?
40. What was your initial niche?
41. Since when you have been training freelancers?
42. How do people conceptualize freelancing?
43. How many freelancers have you trained, and through which platforms?
44. Do all of the trainees opt for freelancing as a career after the training?
45. Which gender is more likely to opt for freelancing as a career? Reasons?
46. What are the gender or nationality-based challenges freelancers face, especially fresh freelancers?
47. How can freshly trained freelancers be successful in this industry?
48. How long does it take for a fresh freelancer to become a successful freelancer?
49. What is the average monthly income generated by a fresh freelancer and an experienced freelancer?
50. What is the motivation for most students to opt freelancing?
51. What are the challenges that the trainees and trainers face during the training period?

9.4 Sample Sheet

This section provides an elaborated sample sheet including details of respondents such as names, age, sex, status, the niche they work in, average monthly income, and the city they belong to. Although average monthly income has been included in the sheet, the income of the respondents who did not want to disclose their monthly salary is not added.

Sr.	Name	Age	Sex	Status	Niche	Average Monthly Income	City
Trainers							
1	Waqar Tayyub	42	Male	Trainer (e-Rozgar)	Creative Design	In lacs	Multan
2	Shohaib Raja	44	Male	Trainer (e-Rozgar)	Blogging	-	Taunsa Sharif
3	Kamal	19	Male	Trainer (Private University & Online academy)	3D Animations	In lacs	Karachi/ Islamabad
4	Zeeshan	37	Male	Trainer (private institute)	Graphic designer and Web developer	-	Islamabad
5	Saira	31	Female	Trainer (Private online academy)	Content Creator and Blogging	-	Islamabad
Freelancers and Trainees							

6	Roohi Ali	28	Female	Freelancer	Writer and Proof Reader	-	Rawalpindi
7	Soleh	26	Female	Freelancer	Content writing	60,000	Jhang
8	Javeria	25	Female	Freelancer	Content writing	40,000 to 70,000	Sialkot
9	Amna	26	Female	Freelancer	Academic writer	-	Rawalpindi
10	Arooj	23	Female	Freelancer	Writer	30,000-1.5lacs	Rawat
11	Asma Marium	23	Female	Freelancer	Scriptwriting/ digital content writer	70,000 – 80,000	Karachi
12	Ayesha	24	Female	Freelancer	Digital Marketer	-	Peshawar
13	Syeda Nomaira Waseem	20	Female	Freelancer	Google AdSense Expert Amazon private label and wholesale expert	1 to 3 lacs per month	Attock
14	Nimra	32	Female	Freelancer	Translator and Online Tutor	-	Bahawalpur
15	Nimra Zain	28	Female	Freelancer	Creative designer	10,000	Sialkot
16	Najma	27	Female	Freelancer	Digital marketer, Creative Designer	25,000-60,000	Rawalpindi
17	Sabiqa	26	Female	Freelancer	Web-developer	-	Islamabad
18	Bisma	38	Female	Freelancer	Social Media Marketer	50,000 - 1 lac	Mansehra

19	Naheed	34	Female	Freelancer	Social Media Marketer	-	Lahore
20	Noor	29	Transw oman	Freelancer	SEO expert	-	Haripur
21	Majid Jagirani	30	Male	Freelancer	E-Commerce	2-5 lacs	Karachi
22	Arsalan	37	Male	Freelancer	Writer	-	Jhang
23	Meer Hassan	34	Male	Freelancer	Freelance and Creative Designing Trainee, PhD student Visiting Lecturer	-	Multan
24	Shahid	45	Male	Freelancer	Online tutor	60,000-90,000	Rawalpindi
25	Haziq	29	Male	Freelancer	Video Editor/ photographer/ YouTuber	-	Islamabad
26	Mujhtaba Sial	34	Male	Freelancer	Creative Design	90,000-1.5lacs	Lahore
27	Sameer	28	Male	Freelancer	Content Creator	-	Sahiwal
28	Akbar	34	Male	Freelancer	Technical writer	60,000-1 lac	Multan
29	Nasir Khoso	28	Male	Freelancer	Digital Marketer and Advertiser Google Adsense	-	Dera Ghazi Khan

30	Ali Khan	31	Male	Freelancer	E-Commerce and Web Development	70,000-80,000	Chakwal
31	Bhunesh	28	Male	Freelancer	Brand Manager, Amazon	1-1.5 lacs	Islamabad & Thar
32	Salar	25	Male	Freelancer	Web developer	-	Lahore
33	Ibrahim	32	Male	Freelancer	Writer and outsourcer	4-5 lacs	Rawalpindi
34	Sajid	35	Male	Freelancer	Content Writer	70,000-1 lac	Islamabad

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