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An Exploratory Study of Communication Freelancers and Online Communities. A Mixed Methods Approach

Abstract

The present study explores the nature and dynamics of online communities populated by communication freelancers. Drawing from limited scholarship focusing on freelance work practices in communication industries and a reduced number of studies in communication literature regarding online communities, this research applies a complex analytical framework, with mixed methodology: content analysis, social network analysis and thematic analysis. Our main findings reveal the key features of the discursive environment of two Facebook groups, the communication functions employed by group administrators, the engagement practices of group members particularly regarding knowledge production and consumption and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on group practices and dynamic. We conclude by highlighting the supportive and participative culture developed within the two groups.

Keywords: communication freelancers, public relations freelancers, professional virtual communities, knowledge management, COVID-19, mixed methods.

1. Introduction

In the broader context of the accelerated expansion of flexible working schemes, freelancing stands out as the fastest growing labour flexible practice (Papalexandris & Kramar, 1997). Positively associated with creative industries (McRobbie, 2015; Gandini *et al.*, 2017) and individual empowerment (Rose, 1993), freelancing operates through project-based work, where the worker has multiple clients or employers (Cohen, 2012) and is self-employed or functions as a small business (Kitching & Smallbone, 2012). Due to the independent and portfolio contracting type of work, freelance creative and cultural-focussed workers have more agency and control at managing their own labour (Hall & Atkinson, 2005; Shevchuk *et al.*, 2018), but in the same time, they miss out on an employee's benefits, hence they cultivate general skills instead of specialised skills and lack continuous professional development (Tench *et al.*, 2002). The workplace cultures that help professionals to be reviewed, support-

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ed and share specialised knowledge are completely missing in the case of freelancers (Bayazit & Bayazit, 2019).

At the same time, the rise of online communities aggregating professionals from different or similar industries (Phang *et al.*, 2009; Valck *et al.*, 2009) highlights the power of online platforms to bring together like-minded or task-oriented practitioners (Chiu *et al.*, 2006; Chen & Hung, 2010). COVID-19 context has increased freelancers' inward precarity (Payoneer, 2021), their digital nomadism (Aroles *et al.*, 2020) and online competition for jobs and gigs (Sutherland *et al.*, 2020). However, no sociological or communication study has yet explored the informal world of online communities and their role for communication freelancers before and during COVID-19.

Therefore, our study explored two online communities populated by communication freelancers. As project-based work is increasingly digital and transnational in nature, meaning that freelancers are using online and digital platforms to get contracts also from international clients (Watson & Beaverstock, 2016), we selected two Facebook groups who self-identified as communication-focused professional communities. Due to this choice, our research does not focus on the national dimensions of the freelance work; we mostly aimed to highlight the characteristics of these virtual communities for communication freelance professionals, in terms of discursive environment, communication functions employed by group administrators, engagement practices of group members and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on group practices and dynamic.

Building on a mixed methods approach conducted in various contexts during 2020, our research has initially applied a quantitative content analysis of Facebook posts, followed by a qualitative deeper dive into the communication freelancers' views on our researched dimensions, through self-applied questionnaire. Hence, our study contributes to the existent sociological literature exploring the role of freelance and informal work communities (Merkel, 2019) and the communication scholarship that focuses on professional online communities (Chiu *et al.*, 2006; Phang, *et al.*, 2009; Valck *et al.*, 2009; Chen & Hung, 2010). The literature of the professionalisation of communication industries (e.g. PR, advertising, marketing etc.) represents a complementary stream which will provide us with a theoretical understanding of the specificities of these communities' discursive environment, as well as their members' professional habitus.

2. Theoretical overview

2.1. Communication Freelancers, habitus and social media

Freelancing is a very specific work format and freelancers, as a professional category, have specific lifeworld features. The first analytical framework that helps us understand the role of online communities for communication freelancers was Hodges's model of Public Relations practitioner's habitus (2006). The author perceives the PR practitioner as a result of the intermediation between the his/her lifeworld (habitus, occupational identities, experiences and social networks), the occupational structure (knowledge, rules and norms, socialisation) and the structure of the society (socio-cultural structure, political and legal structure, economic structure, historical influences). Hodges (2006, p. 85) recognizes the dynamic and constantly changing nature of PRP culture, as the exposure to different and various experiences does lead to an acknowledgement of the fact that we cannot discuss in function of a mediation between only two cultural instances, but of a process of intermediation where "the na-

ture of the practice will be shaped by the lifeworlds of the practitioners and these will be influenced by changes in the structure of the occupation and wider society, and by the conditioning and conditionings experienced as a result of an individual's position in the profession and in the society." (p. 85) As a freelancer does not belong to a working environment of an employer, he/she will miss working practices and cultures that can be beneficial. Therefore, important dimensions of professional life, such as peer socialisation, belonging, learning, self-assessment etc were important to be captured from this standpoint. The membership and the active participation to the life of these online communities are important professional values for a communication freelancers' lifeworld or habitus.

2.1.1. *Between autonomy and precarity*

Freelancing is included amongst flexible working arrangements. As Tench *et al.* (2002, p. 313) pointed out, "Contracted for a specific task or project for a short period of time, a freelancer works on a temporary basis for a limited period or intermittently. In PR a freelancer may have regular clients and project work with a contract for service agreed between the two parties." Freelancers have been positively depicted as the heroes of the new economy (Crompton, 2003) and the new subjects of creative industries, forming a "creative class" (Florida, 2002). A "hip" discourse has been created in the last decades around freelancing (Gandini *et al.*, 2017), highlighting benefits such as innovation, collaboration and sharing; the economic development of freelancing has been reiterated in numerous studies and reports (Mould *et al.*, 2014).

However, critical studies have emphasised that the autonomy and individual empowerment are mere myths when it comes to freelancer's professional life. Firstly, the so-called benefit of having control over finances being self-employed has been demounted by studies who have showed that one risk of freelancing is represented by precarity, especially during economic crisis. As Anton and Moise (2021) emphasised, many survey reports and research findings have underlined the dramatic effect the COVID-19 pandemic has had on freelancers. Creative and promotional industries have been particularly impacted from this standpoint, as they do count the largest population of flexible workers, including self-employed. For example, in the United Kingdom, the quantitative survey conducted by The PR Calvary and Inuit Research has highlighted that, for the communication sector, 1) 50% of freelancers have lost at least 60% of their income, with a staggering 33% reporting that their income has been slashed by 80% or more; 2) two-thirds of respondents reported losses of at least 40% as businesses and agencies slash freelance budgets to curtail discretionary spend (Hickman, 2020). European governments did try to absorb this impact by introducing state-compensation schemes. Some national governments have implemented tailored support measures for freelancers within diverse subsectors (Pulignano *et al.*, 2021). However, freelancers have reported that these measures were not sufficient to address the difficulties arising from the pandemic context. For example, in Romania, the government introduced a monthly compensation of 75% of the average gross salary (from the state fund) if the freelancers interrupted their activity due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Relating cultural workers and cultural intermediaries with the concept of flexibility (understood as freedom, autonomy, self-control), critical theorists consider that the relative autonomy is incorporated and embedded in the nature of cultural work, from the idea-creation stage of production in the labour process (Ryan, 1992; Banks, 2010). From this perspective, cultural work is prone more to flexibility and employee autonomy, as it enables its workers "to enjoy more time, autonomy, and resources than other workers are granted, which diminishes experiences of alienation (Hesmondhalgh 2007, 70)." (Cohen, 2012, p. 142) New and

more recent studies (Epstein & Kalleberg 2004; Shevchuk *et al.*, 2018) have highlighted the clash between the promises and the realities of freelance life, especially when it comes to time management. The autonomy paradox comes mostly from an increasingly self-driven knowledge work intensification: “In their study of connected freelancers from the United Kingdom, France, and the United States, Gold and Mustafa (2013) reported that most of their informants worked unsocial hours. Contract-based project work may consume even more of workers’ time than do organizations (Evans *et al.* 2004).” (Shevchuk *et al.*, 2018, pp. 4-5)

2.1.2. *The gig economy and the professional non-progression*

Another critique brought to freelancing is the impossibility of progression in a career, the fact that freelancers, most specifically, do not build a career. As we previously mentioned, the fact that freelancers are fixed-term contractually paid and their employers are less likely to invest in their training, this leads to a decreased capacity of skills progression and development. The ‘gig’ or contract-based new capitalist economy has focussed on the unique development of “creative cities” as hubs for mobile and flexible workers (Shevchuk *et al.*, 2018).

Occupational analysis (Kitching, 2015, p. 16) show us that most of freelancers mostly are active in creative and cultural industries; particularly, the occupations mentioned so far are “creative and media occupations (Storey *et al.* 2005; Creative Skillset 2013; Mould *et al.* 2014), including journalism (Baines 1999), television and radio (Dex *et al.* 2000; Saundry *et al.* 2007), film (Davenport 2006; Rowlands and Handy 2012), publishing (Stanworth and Stanworth 1995), photography and make-up artists (Moeran 2009), public relations (Tench *et al.* 2002), translation services (Fraser and Gold 2001; Dam and Zethsen 2011), design (Henninger and Gottschall 2007), art (Menger 1999) and music (Armstrong 2013). Arguably, there are many more freelancers in the UK than are conventionally described as such.” Tench *et al.* (2002) specifically pointed to the fact that, from the perspective of organisations or clients, the study identified a tendency to use the same number of freelance staff and to look for general PR skills; in addition, some respondents mentioned the poor quality of freelance applicants, with poor motivation and low level skills.

2.1.3. *Creative Freelancers, technology and social media*

Another phenomenon that is specific to freelancers’ habitus and that has not been sufficiently researched is the relationship between technology and freelancers. Freelancers do rely on personal networks and use technology in order to find contractual jobs. New technologies and mobile devices in particular facilitate flexible mobile work practices (Hislop *et al.*, 2015) and are therefore likely to be vital for freelance working. Freelancers use technology to brand themselves, to expand their networks and to find contractual jobs. Studies recognised and emphasised the need for freelancers to engage with other freelancers or people who provide ideas and support on how to run a business as being essential for their work.

In their study, Reuschke and Wilkins (2017) started from the point that social media does enable new forms of networking and community building (Fischer & Reuber, 2011). However, little is known about the importance of social media for freelancers and how they use particular platforms. Their study’s aim was to reveal how important social media was for freelance work and which social media platforms and networks were used. The main finding of the study, which is of great relevance for our research, is that freelancers do not use a large number of social media platforms for their work. LinkedIn is the most relevant social media platform by a large margin, used by almost all of the respondents who provided information

on the kind of social media they use (97.1% or 439 respondents out of 452). LinkedIn is also perceived as the most important social media platform by freelancers in this study. The second most relevant social media platform for professional freelancers is Twitter, but this social media network is in a large proportion of cases not perceived as very important, and for a notable number of respondents even not important at all. Apart from LinkedIn and Twitter, only Facebook, YouTube and Google+ were mentioned by a relevant number of freelancers, ranging between 60 and 43 respondents. Facebook was less often used by freelancers for their work compared to Twitter, but those who used Facebook valued this social media network more for their business than Twitter users did.

2.2. Online freelancing and online communities

A second concept that is central to our theoretical framework is professional virtual communities. The concept of online communities has been long investigated from two perspectives: an individual perspective and collective perspective. The focus on the individual has generated a rich literature that highlighted the knowledge sharing motivations and dynamics; from discussion around personality traits (Matzler *et al.*, 2008) and motivations (Lin, 2007), to categorising members of online communities in posters and lurkers, in function of their engagement level (Lai & Chen, 2014), these studies have all emphasised that altruism has a direct and significant effect on online knowledge sharing (Ma & Chan, 2014) and that “it is the social capital factors (e.g., social interaction ties, trust, norm of reciprocity, identification, shared language, and shared vision) that lead to greater level of knowledge sharing in terms of quantity or quality.” (Chiu *et al.*, 2006, p. 1884). However, most of the referenced studies have investigated generalistic online or virtual communities; our focus has been to explore communication freelancers’ online communities and to identify their specific features. As communication freelancers are professionals, our study has then used the concept of professional virtual communities.

The concept of Professional Virtual Communities (PVCs) reflects a specific type of online aggregate. As Chen and Hung (2010) define them, PVCs bring together geographically dispersed, like-minded people to form a network of knowledge exchange (p. 226). PVCs are formed by groups of people who engage and communicate on a regular basis, in an organised manner, using a communication medium. In terms of PVCs’ discursive environment, these are professionally based communities, therefore the knowledge produced and generated in these communities is specific to that professional field. The success of such a community depends on members’ active role as contributors donating their knowledge (Chen & Hung, 2010, p. 226), therefore the content is always member-generated (Chiu *et al.*, 2008). Most studies have focussed on PVCs linked to an organisational setting, where the nature of the discursive environment was to discuss opportunities for new products and product improvement (Chen & Hung, 2010). At the same time, the existent studies investigating PVCs have focussed more on the engagement practices, such as knowledge sharing. However, as it is the case with communication freelancers, this professional category is flexible and self-employed, its work being contract-based. Little is known about the type of knowledge that is produced and shared within freelancers’ communities, therefore this was one of our major research dimensions.

The whole reason for the existence of PVCs is the sharing of information and knowledge, from sharing ideas, thoughts, to solving problems, improving individual capability and creating innovations (Chiu *et al.*, 2006). Their members communicate regularly in an organised

manner via a communication medium. The professional virtual communities knowledge-sharing behaviour has also been investigated from a motivational point of view. It seems that members of PVCs are highly influenced by interpersonal trust as an extrinsic motivation, while the most relevant intrinsic motivational factor to be found was the knowledge-sharing self-efficacy. Another key feature of professional virtual communities is the member-generated content (Chiu *et al.*, 2006). The biggest challenge in a professional virtual community is the constant supply of knowledge and members' proactive contribution to the community's knowledge. According to Chen & Hung (2010, p. 229), the high degree of knowledge-production can be tracked through the intensity of postings and comments, as this engagement dimension can give a clear idea of members' behaviour and social support level.

3. Research methodology

Purpose

Taking into consideration the lack of knowledge on how precarious contexts such as the COVID-19 pandemic impact communication freelance professionals and the role of online communities in their professional activity, this research aims to explore the fabric and dynamic of the relationship between communication freelancers and the professional virtual communities they are part of, sampling moments in the life of the communities that are both COVID and non-COVID related. Also, the research takes into consideration the individual level by looking into freelancers' motivations to engage and participate actively in the professional online communities, their knowledge-sharing practices and the forms of engagement which make these professional online communities some of the most active and dynamic online aggregates.

Sample

Two Facebook groups are included in the research sample. They were selected based on three criteria: 1) having the word "freelancer" or a derivate in the title, 2) addressing the field of communication and/or PR, and 3) being a PVC (professional virtual community). Group A is a community of freelance professionals representing a variety of communication and communication-related fields of practice, while group B is a community of practice focused on PR professionals. After the first 18 months since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, group A increased its number of members by roughly 300%, while group B registered an increase of approximately 10%. According to their online descriptions, both groups prioritise the exchange of ideas, experiences, recommendations rather than employment or simple job posting, either by encouraging collaboration or by creating/diverting such announcements towards other connected or recommended online platforms.

Research questions

The research questions take into consideration discourse, communication functions and scope of communication, all approached from a COVID/non-COVID perspective enabled by the selection of a relevant research corpus.

RQ1. What is the discursive environment of communication freelancers online professional communities?

RQ2. What are the communication functions employed by group administrators?

RQ3. What are the engagement practices of group members?

RQ4. What is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on group practices and dynamic?

Corpus

The quantitative corpus of the research is formed out of 1639 posts coming from both Facebook groups (see Table 1). They represent all the content posted in the two groups over a period of three non-consecutive months, selected based on their relevance to the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic: January 2020 (pre-pandemic), March 2020 (pandemic declared by WHO, lock-downs, quarantines), and July 2020 (post first wave, reopening talks). All percentages related to the quantitative data are calculated in relation to the group-specific corpus (A and B).

Table 1. Post distribution

(N=1639)	Group A (n=436)	Group B (n=1293)
January 2020	76	391
March 2020	141	480
July 2020	129	391

The text of the posts was manually extracted, alongside posting date, engagement indicators (number of reactions and number of comments), status of the poster (admin or member), and content type (text, image, video, link, poll, social media, document). No other data was extracted in order to preserve poster anonymity and prevent traceability. The names of the groups are also anonymised in this paper, following an ethics approval granted to the researchers by their respective institutions.

The qualitative corpus is formed out of the responses of 22 freelancers with different and varied professional expertise and years of experience (19 members and 3 admins of the groups; 20 women and 2 men) that answered a self-applied online questionnaire. The respondents were recruited following an open call on the sampled Facebook groups, where they expressed their availability to participate in the study. They received the questionnaire and submitted their answers online, in writing. The questions were open-ended in order to foster reflection and addressed the following themes and sub-themes:

Table 2. Online questionnaire construction: themes and sub-themes

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Sub-themes</i>
Professional identities as communication freelancers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – freelancer vs employee status; – reasons for freelancing; – level of experience; – fields of expertise.
The role of professional online communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – specific features of group's membership composition – the role of the administrator – members' communitarian behaviours – the impact of COVID-19 on the dynamics of the community

The first theme explores the characteristics of the professional identity of freelancers. It is not directly linked to a specific research question, but the answers associated with it provide the background information on which all gathered data can be analysed. The second theme provides an individual perspective regarding the relationship of members with PVCs.

Methods

This is a mixed methods research, using content analysis with an integration of social network analysis for group content and thematic analysis for individual content. Qualitative and quantitative findings are correlated for consistency and bias avoidance. All RQs are addressed through the quantitative methods, while the qualitative method brings an individual perspective on RQ2-4.

3.1. Quantitative

Content analysis. We used content analysis to classify and analyse the posts as transcripts of asynchronous, computer mediated group communication (Erlin, Yusof, & Rahmn, 2008, p. 2). We developed a coding scheme comprising 15 criteria that reflected 1) the research questions (Topic, Communication function, Scope of communication, Communication field of practice, and COVID-19 mention), 2) the post configuration and Facebook group dynamic (posting date, type of content, no. of reactions, no. of comments, status of poster, and tone of voice), and 3) whether or not specific terminology was used for self-reference as freelancer and for referencing the Facebook group as community.

After applying the coding scheme to our quantitative corpus of 1639 posts, we initially used open coding, aiming to identify as many relevant codes or themes (*Topics*) in the data as possible without distilling or combining codes into broader categories, and then employed axial coding, aiming to identify common categories and linkages (*Topical categories*) that would subsequently be used to generate networks (Williams & Shepherd, 2017, p. 276).

Social network analysis. Social network analysis was used to identify patterns and connections, being designed to search for deep structures, regular network patterns beneath the often complex surface of social systems (Wellman, 1983, p. 157). Density, centrality and marginality, homogeneity and diversity are core concepts that offer the possibility to analyse the resulting clusters using a network approach which focuses on the characteristics of ties rather than on the characteristics of the individual items (Otte & Rousseau, 2002, p. 442). The categories that resulted during the coding phase are each considered to be a node (vertex), while their connections constitute a network.

The graphs are done using the Gephi software (Bastian, 2016) and are based on the Force Atlas 2 algorithm, adapted for the qualitative interpretation of relationships between concepts. Data is presented as a model where attraction and repulsion are proportional to the distance between nodes. The modularity uses clusters to develop a map of interdependencies, then it aggregates and reiterates the process, thus creating a structure of networks of nodes. The hierarchy of nodes and clusters is based on median distance; therefore, the closer a node or a module is to the centre of the network, the stronger and more diverse are its connections.

The graphs used in this paper vary in position, size and colour. In addition, the clusters that form the networks are marked by different colours that are reset for each graph; therefore, no chromatic code is maintained from one graph to another. The position of each circle points to connectivity: the more connected a node, the more central its position is going to

be within the network (the graph) and/or within a cluster (a network is formed by multiple clusters, differentiated by colour – all elements in a cluster share the same colour). The size of each circle does not indicate frequency (how often a category or any other criteria appears in the posts), but connectivity: the more connected something is, the larger the size of the circle. When a category shares many connections with all the other categories in the network, then its circle will be large and central to the whole network; if it shares many connections with only a few of the other categories, then its circle will be large, but most likely marginal to the network and central to the cluster it will most likely form with the categories it shares the most connections with (Anton, 2020, p. 87).

3.2. Qualitative

Thematic analysis

The individual content data collected through self-applied online questionnaire was then analysed by using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that can be widely used across a range of epistemologies and research questions. As Braun & Clarke (2006) have pointed out, it is a method for identifying, analysing, organising, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set and it also provides a highly flexible approach that can be modified for the needs of many studies, providing a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data. The process of thematic analysis involves three major stages: description (data collection, coding and memoing), interpretation (linking data with to the larger literature developed by others) and theorisation (bringing meaning and insight to the words and acts of participants in the study by generating concepts and theories – or theory-based generalisations – that explain the findings).

Our qualitative data analysis started with deductive analysis, as we extracted from the literature review specific codes that we then followed in our analysis. The reason for this initial stage was the predominance of the theme of precarity associated with flexible working schemes, especially with freelancing, which we associated with the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 3. Codes deduced from the literature review

<i>Literature review themes</i>	<i>Codes used in the analysis of self-applied questionnaires</i>
Freelancing and flexible working schemes	independence; precarity; creative industries; communication professionals.
Freelancing and PR	training; work cultures; fields of specialisation.
COVID-19 and freelancing	digital working environments; loss of contracts; clients' abusive behaviours.
Online professional communities	uses of technologies; uses of social media; forms of support; modes of engagement, sharing of information and knowledge.

At the same time, as deductive coding could have restricted the adaptability of our research, causing us to overlook interesting and useful aspects that are outside the question structure (Lewins & Silver, 2007), we also used inductive coding, in order to identify topics and discursive dimensions which might be relevant and important for our study. Using open

coding as the main type of technique, we identified in the individual content relevant themes which will be articulated with the quantitative findings.

4. Findings and discussion

RQ1. What is the discursive environment of the online professional communities?

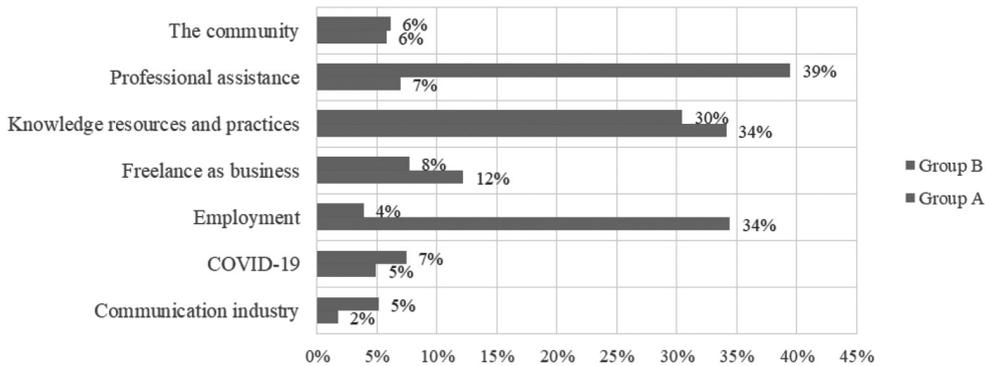
Topics. By using open coding we identified a high number of topics (45), which was reduced to seven topical categories generated through axial coding (see Table 4): *Communication industry, COVID-19, Employment, Freelance as business, Knowledge resources and practices, Professional assistance, The community.* These topical categories correlate with RQ1 and showcase the discursive richness of the environment generated by the two online communities.

Table 4. Topics and Topical categories

<i>Open coding – Topics</i>	<i>Axial coding – Topical categories</i>
Communication and creative industries legislation, General news, Industry news and events, Professional associations	Communication industry
Business performance during the pandemic or crisis, Business support during the pandemic or crisis, COVID-19 regulations and impact on freelancers, Professional performance during the pandemic or crisis, Reaction to COVID-19 first responders	COVID-19
Introduction/Self-promotion, Job collaboration/sharing, Job facilitation, Job offer, Job request, Switching to or from freelancing	Employment
Entrepreneurial education, Entrepreneurial struggles, Freelancing standards, Performance and productivity, Physical and mental health, Services and events for freelancers, Services/prices/fees information request, Work-life balance	Freelance as business
Client issues, Ethics, Experience sharing and consultation regarding professional practices, Knowledge resource sharing, Knowledge resource request, Knowledge resource offer, Mentoring	Knowledge resources and practices
Feedback, Specific contacts, Recommendation, Collaboration, Technical resources, Media monitoring save, Terminology, Troubleshooting	Professional assistance
Client project promotion, Community benefits, Community life, Community dynamics, Community rules, Community support, Formal research	The community

This topical diversity is, however, focused around certain topics that, in turn, point to the specificity of each group (*Employment* for Group A and *Professional assistance* for Group B), as well as to a common denominator (*Knowledge resources and practices*).

Figure 1. Dominant Topical categories



Therefore, when going in depth into the common denominator represented by the Topical category of *Knowledge resources and practices*, the discursive environment of Group A (communication professional from various fields of practice) is focused around topics such as *Experience sharing and consultation* (12%) and *Knowledge resource offers* (14%), while that of Group B (PR professionals) focuses primarily on topics such as *Experience sharing and consultation* (18%), with *Knowledge resource offers/requests/shares* forming a combined secondary discursive dimension (11%).

The other dominant Topical category for Group A is *Employment*, covering a wide range of topics: *Introduction/Self-promotion*, *Job collaboration/sharing*, *Job facilitation*, as well as *Services and events for freelancers* as networking opportunities or *Information requests regarding services, prices and fees*, making the *Employment* category extremely connected to the *Freelance as business* one. This connection is consistent throughout the quantitative data (see Figure 2 connecting Topical categories to the communication functions employed by group administrators and Figure 5 connecting Topical categories to the communication scope of members’ posts) and conveys a professional tension that is reflected in the dominant topic within the *Freelance as business* category: *Entrepreneurial struggles* (9%).

The dominant Topical category for group B is quite different and it reflects the specialised profile of the group: while the first group is concerned about employment opportunities in a wide array of fields and in the diverse entrepreneurial challenges that accompany the life of a freelancer, the members within Group B focus on *Professional assistance* regarding two very distinct dimensions connected to the field of PR in general and media relations in particular: firstly, *Recommendations* (21%) for media outlets, journalists, bloggers, experts, influencers that could be interested in a story or a product, as well as for media lists, media services, various resources, technical tools, other PR or communication professionals and, secondly, requests for *Specific contacts* (9%) of journalists or other PR professionals and publicists representing public figures.

Self- and group-referentiality. There is an implicit understanding among the members of both groups, conveying an unspoken agreement regarding their status. Less than 2% use explicit terminology in original posts, calling themselves predominantly *freelance* or *freelancer* ($p=0.000$), with notable exceptions: only some members of Group A identify themselves outside the communication field or by a different concept (*independent artist*, *musician*, *self starter*, *solopreneur*), while only members in Group B identify as *freelance PR* or *PR free-*

lancer. This self-referentiality reiterates the heterogeneity of Group A and homogeneity of Group B in terms of professional identity, how members present themselves to others in the group and are accepted as such, without the community filtering them out or rejecting them.

These features of the self-referentiality identified at the level of quantitative data are complemented by the respondents' individual perspectives. Communication freelancers define themselves as change-makers and pride themselves in the risk they took and in the independence which came with the freelancer status. They were drawn into freelancing by fundamental changes regarding their employment, such as toxic working environments, employer abuses, or by the need to make decisive changes in relation to their professional development in order to preserve their personal identity, creativity or sense of fulfillment. Also, a key point mentioned by freelancers as one of the drivers into freelancing is the need for a better work/life balance and mental health; the burnout defining the agency environment has been recurrently brought up as a reason for making this change.

In opposition, the group-referentiality is well represented in original posts, with 20% of original posts in Group A and 15% original posts in Group B mentioning the group, the community or its members. Collective nouns are primarily used, both formal and informal (*group, team, community, folks, lot, gang, guys, hive, colleagues, peeps, buds*), often associated with positive adjectives conveying appreciation (*excellent, wonderful, nice, dear, cool, beautiful, wise, lovely, amazing, brilliant, creative*); the sense of community is present and visible in the discourse of the members, although the actual names of the groups are rarely used, counting for less than 1% of the original posts ($p < 0.05$). Members' perceptions of what the group means to them fully echo these quantitative findings, as the self-applied questionnaires have revealed that both Facebook groups were seen as supportive communities for the transition from full-employed to self-employed (e.g. accounting, project management, sales, negotiation, marketing, networking, P&Ls, etc.) As Anton and Moise (2021, p. 80) point out, "Trust is a major implicit norm, as the information which is shared within the group is deemed to be very sensitive. For this reason, both Facebook groups have a very high social function, as all members understand the role and the value of trust, especially when it comes to sharing professional practices and information about clients, etc."

Field of practice. 30 fields of practice emerged out of the data, both traditional PR fields and more technical ones or not necessarily related to communication: App and software development, Branding, Celebrity PR, Content and copywriting, Corporate communication, Crisis communication, CSR, Digital marketing (ads, seo, etc.), Events, Fundraising, Graphic design, Human resources, Influencer marketing, Internal communication, Journalism, Law, Lobby, Management, Market research, Marketing, Media relations, Photography, Podcasts, Public relations, Sales, Social media, Strategic communication, Translation and transcription, Video editing, Web design and development.

45% of Group A posts and 75% of Group B posts reference a professional field of practice, pointing to a strong correlation between the profile of the group and this code category ($p = 0.000$, $\tau_b = 0.512$). The types of professional fields and their variety confirm the profile of the two groups and condition their discursive environment. Group A does not have a dominant field, but registers posts clearly anchored in communication and web-related fields: *Content and copywriting* (9%), *Digital marketing* (10%), *Graphic design* (9%), *Web design and development* (10%). Group B reveals a highly specialised perspective: 41% of the posts correlate with *Media relations*, while only 13% mention *Public relations*; the next fields of practice that are present in the posts lag far behind (*Journalism* 3%, *Influencer marketing* 2%,

Events 2%), pointing to a hyper-specialisation of the community in terms of information circulated within the group and of the profession of PR specialist, thus prioritising the publicist role. The self-applied questionnaires have also revealed a strong focus on digital and strategy, as well as a B2B and SME focus of the freelance activity, particularly in fields such as technology, consumer, arts and cultural sectors.

In both groups, posts that do not point to a specific field of practice correlate with specific Topical categories, such as *COVID-19* (focus on regulations and business impact for Group B), *Communication industry*, *Freelance as business* (focus on the *Entrepreneurial struggles*) and *The Community* (focus on *Community life* and *Community support*).

RQ2. What are the communication functions employed by group administrators?

The Communication function categories correlate with RQ2 and address the way in which admins used the interactions with the members in order to develop relationships and, thus, the group – the code was applied only to admin posts. The categories are inspired by Cmeciu and Cmeciu’s (2014) framework of online strategies used in improving the online communication of an organisation with its stakeholders: to inform (information posted by the organisations in order to make their activities visible and to provide useful content to stakeholders), to connect (allows the creation of “bridges of digital communication”), to engage/participate (allows online visitors to become active participants), to mobilise (persuade online users to promote the actions of the organisation) and to interact (highlights the shift from one-way communication to bilateral symmetric communication).

Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the networks created by the Communication functions and the Topical categories, connecting the discursive environment of the groups to the actions and in-group statements of the group administrators.

Figure 2. Topical categories / Function graph – Group A

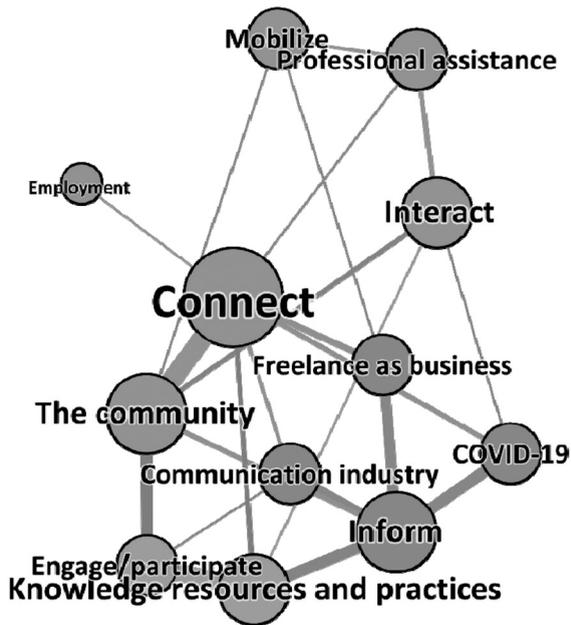


There are several clusters that are formed in both networks, underlining the role the administrator assumes in each group, whether by design or as a consequence of circumstances. The volume of activity points to a sharp increase in March 2020 for the moderator of Group

A (daily posts compared to once every three days in January and then once every two days in July of the same year) and a moderate increase in the same month for the moderator of Group B (daily posts compared to once every two days in January), a rhythm that he kept throughout the first year of the pandemic.

Figure 2 shows the centrality of the Inform communication function, thus becoming the defining element of its cluster. Therefore, the administrator of Group A puts at the center of their activity the action of providing the community with relevant information about the majority of Topical categories, with a particular focus on the entrepreneurial struggles and education situated at the core of the *Freelance as business* category and the *Knowledge resources and practices* necessary for freelancers as entrepreneurs. They use their business and professional experience to filter and create relevant content, while also stimulating and interactively guiding the discussions generated within the community. Their role is that of a *dialogic creator – gatekeeper*.

Figure 3. Topical categories / Function graph – Group B



By comparison, the administrator of Group B plays a *connector – gatekeeper* role. This specific function and role of the group administrator has been echoed by the self-applied on-line questionnaires that the administrators of both sampled groups have completed. They perceive their role as gatekeepers, protecting the groups from outside intervention, but also from malevolent inside practices that might harm the group's members (e.g. spamming, trolling, hate speech). Their interventions within the discussions have always had the role to build the group as a safe space, focused on knowledge sharing, help, support, and socialisation. The position of the small, yet central Connect cluster makes this the defining function used by the Group B administrator, particularly in light of the strong connection with *The community* topical category, without putting a particular emphasis on interaction from a dialogic communication perspective. However, the thick edges (lines) connecting several of the nodes situated

in the lower clusters point to a complex approach to the communication functions: the administrator prioritises keeping the community connected, informed about *COVID-19*, the *Communication industry*, and the *business side of freelancing*, while also engaged regarding *Knowledge resources and practices*.

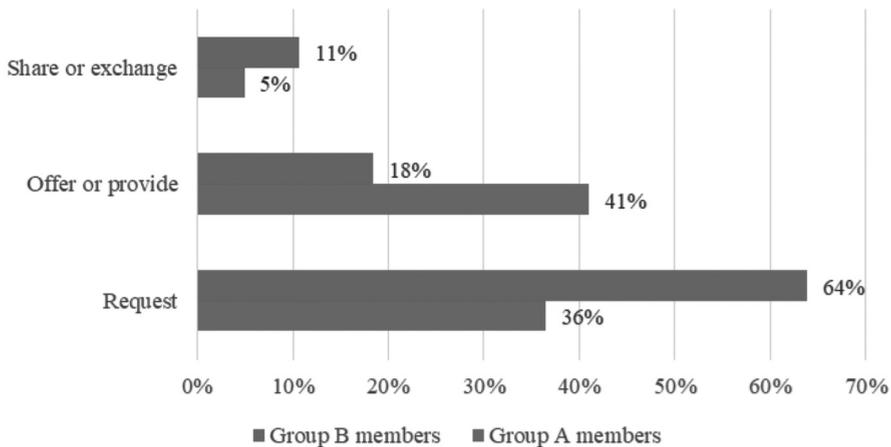
A distinctive element in the two networks is the *Communication industry* topical category: it is completely absent in the discourse of the Group A administrator, but central in that of the Group B administrator, underlining the freelance business focus of Group A and the freelance as a form of the PR profession perspective of Group B.

The thematic analysis has also highlighted the role of the group administrator as the *listener* of the community. For instance, at the beginning, when one of the groups had just been founded, a series of interviews were conducted to identify the most stringent need freelancers had. This exercise identified the lack of stability in client acquisition, lack of predictability, and financial security as prime needs, the broader issue being a lack of knowledge and education about what it means to be a self-employed person. In the same way, another administrator mentioned the use of surveys, especially during COVID-19, to understand how the group’s members coped with the governmental policies related to self-employed status.

RQ3. What are the engagement practices of group members?

The Scope of communication categories correlate with RQ3, are developed based on knowledge management dimensions (Sharratt & Usoro, 2003) and refer to content, resources, information, expertise, experience, assistance: Request, Offer or Provide, and Share or Exchange. Alongside Topical categories and Communication functions categories, these are the main items used to generate networks. The Scope of communication categories were applied only to member posts (unlike Communication function categories, which were applied only to admin posts).

Figure 4. Scope of communication – comparison



The way members engage with the groups is centered, according to the quantitative data, around an Offer (41% of posts) and Request (36% of posts) logic for group A and a Request (64% of posts) dominant for Group B; in both networks the *Knowledge resources and practices* topical category is central, albeit allocated to a different cluster. However, this scope-

driven interaction can be better visualised and understood from a topic-based perspective. The dominance of certain Topical categories (see Figure 1) is correlated with these *Scope of communication* categories, as seen in Figures 5 and 6. Each of the two networks has two clusters: a *Request* cluster and an *Offer/Share* cluster. However, the way the clusters are formed differs and points to a specificity in engagement practices for each group, from a topic perspective, which will be further nuanced by the qualitative data.

Figure 5. Topical categories / Scope graph – Group A



In the case of Group A, there is a central link in each cluster, revealing the strongest connections in these give and take interactions: when the members of group A make a request, it is primarily focused on *Knowledge resources and practices* (particularly *Experience sharing and consultation* regarding freelance platforms, technical and business best practices and solutions, as well as *requests for knowledge sources* such as courses, trainings, podcasts, websites dedicated to professional and entrepreneurial development); when they make an offer to the group, it is often connected to *Employment* (particularly *Job offer* coming from current customers, industry contacts or the freelancers themselves as an externalisation of part of their workload). This configuration of the network points to a community focused on learning and networking practices, with an emphasis on entrepreneurship and a heterogeneous communication field.

Figure 6. Topical categories / Scope graph – Group B



The two clusters of the Group B network are structured around the same vertexes represented by the scopes of communication as in the case of the Group A network, with the *Knowledge resources and practices* topical category occupying the central position, therefore being the one connected to most other nodes. The strongest connection within the Group B network can be found in the *Request* cluster, between *Request* as a communication scope and *Professional assistance* as a Topical category. The 466 connections form the strongest edge (link) generated in this research, bringing together seven topics: *Collaboration* (17), *Feedback* (26), *Media monitoring save* (33), *Recommendation* (257), *Specific contacts* (119), *Technical resources* (2), and *Troubleshooting* (12). This configuration of the network points to a strong instrumentalisation of the group by the members, balanced to a moderate degree by the complexity of the *Offer/Share* cluster, pointing to involved, albeit utilitarian engagement practices (related primarily to the field of media relations). The COVID-19 pandemic changes this pragmatic approach: March 2020 registers a 19% drop of the *Request* posts and a 15% increase of the *Offer* posts, focusing more on topics related to the community, the communication industry, the pandemic, employment and freelance as business.

This difference in engagement practices can be seen, for example, in the case of podcasts: while in Group A discussions revolve around creating and managing a podcast, in Group B the discussion focuses on obtaining contacts of podcasters and getting the client on the podcast guest/speaker list.

Nuancing these findings with qualitative insights, we can observe that the informational and relational dimensions of the groups' dynamics are main motivators for them to engage on a constant basis. The information gain that our respondents have mentioned ranges from freelance-specific resources to more communication and PR-focused items: financial (contracts, filing taxes, etc.), client management, industry information, updates from journalists, specific information on PR good practice, and media updates.

However, the relational aspect of the engagement in both groups is highly valued by all our respondents. As freelancers, they mentioned the lack of a work culture and peer review, therefore, pre-testing ideas on both groups is a common practice: members can get professional feedback from peers before engaging clients. They also benefit from the experiences and industry wisdom developed over time by senior members of the community. At the same time, both groups are spaces where members offer and receive technical and emotional support, particularly in two areas: technical issues and client-freelancer relationship issues. Respondents often mention the overall mood and feeling of the group as positive, supportive, and constructive, a configuration enabled and closely monitored by group administrators and cited as one of the main reasons to stay in the group, even if as a silent member, a "lurker" as some self-define. Industry insights, shared through discussions, help members to get a pulse of the industry, of its dynamic, of the intersection between various areas of communication. Also, the group enables its members to develop professional connections, as well as friendships, but this is not seen as a main gain or role of the group.

RQ4. What is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on group practices and dynamic?

COVID-19 was primarily mentioned in March 2020 (15% of posts in Group A, 19% of posts in Group B), with a sharp drop in mentions in July 2020 (3% of posts in Group A, 5% of posts in Group B). There is only one post in January wondering in an amused tone about how the communication department of the Corona beer brand is handling the situation. However, there is a hesitancy to explicitly use the name of the virus, most mentions being implic-

it. In Group A, 18% of posts mention the pandemic, but only 5% are solely about it; similarly, in Group B, 24% of posts mention it, but only 7% of posts address it directly.

The pandemic acts as an activity and engagement enhancer: member posts increase by 5-12%, while administrator posts triple when comparing March to January. July posts remain at the same level for the members and for the administrator of Group B, while the administrator of Group A reduces the post frequency, albeit at a higher level than before the pandemic. In addition, although not frequent, COVID-19 posts register top engagement rates in both groups: in Group A these are admin posts, while in Group B they are member posts. This dynamic is consistent with the functions and scopes previously discussed.

The topics included in the COVID-19 category convey the stress associated with the impact of the pandemic on the business of the freelancers; the posts are infrequent, but generate a lot of engagement. There is, nevertheless, an exception: 4% of Group B posts are on the topic of *COVID-19 regulations and their impact on freelancers*; this dynamic is not shared with Group A, but is rather an effect of legal transformations taking place in the geographical space associated with the group, as well as of the involvement of the administrator in initiatives representing the communication industry in its dialogue with the government (confirming their connector – gatekeeper role).

From a members' perspective, the previous dimensions highlighting a high level of engagement for both groups (information and relational) made these communities vital spaces for communication freelancers during COVID-19. Both groups developed supportive practices for their members, intensifying the sharing of information and relational engagement. Many members voiced their gratitude for the support they received from the other members or the administrator of the group, through intensive collaborations and projects. Similarly, lockdown affected some industries more than others, so communication freelancers used the group to develop practices of support and assistance for those clients/industries that were impacted the most (by providing *pro bono* services, for instance).

5. Conclusions

The study explored the role of online communities for communication freelancers' professional lifeworld or habitus. The paper applied Hodges's framework of PRP culture to communication freelancers and linked this particular area of research with the use of Facebook groups to develop online communities. Findings from our study advance the knowledge on both communication freelancers and professional virtual communities. It identifies the key dimensions of communication freelancers' habitus or lifeworld: the constant oscillation between independence and precarity, the lack of work cultures and the vital reliance on online and digital platforms.

As communication freelancers are risk takers by having transitioned to full self-employment or mixed schemes (blending freelance with employed work), they find these professional virtual communities among the only knowledge production and sharing spaces worthy to spend time. For freelance debutants, the knowledge exchange provides these members with the foundational understanding of what freelance means; for more experienced freelancers, best practice sharing (contracts, client management) and industry dynamics (price trends, legal updates) are key practices. Therefore, we can conclude that one of the main gains of this type of group is that it adjusts knowledge-sharing practices to the experience and expertise

level of the freelancer inquiring about a particular issue. Furthermore, this accelerates the knowledge acquisition process for debutants and early career freelancers.

Just as Armstrong and Hagel (1996, p. 134) mentioned, “communities of interest bring together participants who interact extensively about specific topics of interest. Participants not only carry out transactions with one another, but their interactions are generally focused on a specific topic area.” Communication freelancers, as online community members, enjoy themselves, discuss freely and mobilise in micro-groups around an ardent conversational topic. Especially when a member was in need of advice (e.g.: regarding unethical behaviour from a client), the more experienced members shared valuable advice (e.g. management, legal, contract-wise etc.) in order to help and support. From generating knowledge as a community to acting as a pressure group, advocating for freelancers’ rights, the two communication freelancers’ communities create new content and resources that can be either used by the community members or by external actors. Peer production is the vital mechanism that makes community members (re)engage within the group and contribute to the participatory ethos. While the COVID-19 pandemic was the main disruptor in the dynamic of both groups, it did not fundamentally change their fabric. It became a catalyst for the exacerbation of existing characteristics regarding support, knowledge management practices and the listener/creator/gatekeeper role of the administrator that ultimately optimised the various communication functions of the communities and showcased (or sometimes reminded) members the relevance of such connective spaces in times of precarity, risk and change.

Our study opens pathways for future research. Firstly, a deeper focus through the comparative analysis between the different members of communication freelancers’ online communities is required; a netnographic approach regarding the interactions between the online and offline would provide greater insights into the ways freelancers also develop networks of relationships. At the same time, as many of our interviewees were women, critical questions around the feminisation of flexible working schemes have to be addressed.

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