Communication Freelancers, Facebook Groups and COVID-19.
A Qualitative Analysis. Research Report

Anca ANTON, *PhD Lecturer*
University of Bucharest, Romania
anca.anton@fjsc.ro

Raluca MOISE, *PhD Lecturer*
University of the Arts London, United Kingdom
r.moise@lcc.arts.ac.uk

1. About the study

The study looked at the relationship between communication freelancers and online communities, in particular Facebook groups populated by communication professionals. We were interested in the dynamic of the group, in knowledge production and knowledge sharing, as well as in the challenges faced by communication freelancers during the COVID-19 pandemic and the role of Facebook groups during this particularly difficult time.

2. Data collection status and participants

Our study conducted 19 directed interviews with freelance professionals, members of Facebook groups, and 3 interviews with group administrators. The interviews were self-applied, based on an interview questionnaire. 22 communication freelancers took part in the study, out of which 20 women and 2 men, all with different and varied professional expertise and level of experience.

The freelancers were invited via the Facebook groups to take part in the study and the interview questionnaire was sent to those that expressed their interest and availability to participate. Upon receiving their written responses, we de-identified and anonymised all interviews by using numbers as pseudonyms. We also anonymised the names of the Facebook groups, in order to keep the identity of the participants untraceable.

3. Findings
3.1. Professional identities as communication freelancers

In order to explore a professional community, it is first necessary to determine the professional identities, as communication freelancers, of those who make up the community. Our research focused on four dimensions:

A. freelancer vs employee status
B. reasons for becoming a freelancer
C. level of experience
D. expertise

A. Freelancer vs employee status

The answers our participants provided through the interview questionnaire pointed to two different employment configurations:

a. ***mixed work scheme***, blending freelance work with employed work (either part-time or full-time),

b. ***fully freelance status*** (occasionally considering going back as an employee because of the impact of COVID-19).

B. Reasons for becoming a freelancer

The answers are varied, but they point to a common profile and a need for fundamental changes regarding 1) employment, 2) professional development, 3) work/life balance and health. These reasons are oftentimes mentioned together, in a cause and effect relationship where one is difficult to separate from the other. What stands out is the constant accumulation of the different configurations of these reasons and freelancing being perceived as a professional reset.

- Fundamental change regarding employment,
- Fundamental change regarding professional development,
- Fundamental change regarding work/life balance and health.

The COVID-19 pandemic was also cited as a reason behind the employee/freelancer switch.

C. Level of experience

We asked about the level of experience, both from a professional and a freelance point of view. The majority of the answers we received come from professionals present in the communication industry, in various capacities, for 10+ years, with some going even above 15 or 20 years. It must be mentioned that, as this was not a quantitative research, the profile cannot be generalized and this level of experience characterises only our respondents.

The majority of our respondents have been acting in a freelance capacity for around a quarter up to half of their professional life in communication. We received answers from only one person whose freelance activity represented 100% of their

professional life in communication.

D. Expertise

We explored two dimensions: 1) what areas the members of professional communication communities have expertise in and 2) how they maintain their expertise level.

The areas of expertise are extremely diverse: PR, Marketing, Digital marketing, Leadership and Management within marketing and PR agencies, Consumer PR, Brand identity, Consultancy, Content creation, Corporate communication, Crisis communication, CSR, Employer branding, Event and project management, Internal communication, Media relations, Public relations, Sales, Social media, Strategy.

Our participants mentioned these **sources and activities** as the ones that they use in order to maintain their expertise at the level they require (alphabetical order, no quantitative hierarchy):

- direct client interactions,
- formal education (e.g.: MBA),
- industry events, seminars/webinars, workshops, conferences,
- industry publications/websites and newsletters (e.g.: PR Week, PR News, Vuelio, ResponseSource, Campaign Live),
- media databases,
- mentors,
- newsletters from professional associations (e.g.: PRCA, CIPR),
- relevant courses and training organised by professional associations,
- relevant courses organised by industry platforms (e.g.: HubSpot Academy)
- seasoned professionals sharing their expertise on social media, at industry events and through interviews,
- shared practices, discussions, and consultations with other professionals,
- social media communities/groups,
- specialised books and articles,
- webinars and podcasts.

3.2. The impact of COVID-19

Many survey reports and research findings have emphasised the dramatic effect the COVID-19 pandemic has had upon freelancers (Hickman, 2020).

We asked our participants what were ***the most relevant forms of impact of COVID-19 on their professional activity***. These were the highlighted key-areas: a massive slowing-down of the activity, losing a staggering percentage of their contractual work (even up to 80%), reducing their range of activities to social media and copywriting, a high level of uncertainty in media relations (e.g. journalists furloughed, press outlets folding) and even abuses coming from clients (e.g. delays in payment, pressure in outputs delivery).

The impact of COVID-19 was different for every professional category (Pulignano et al., 2021). However, for most of our participants, as communication self-employed professionals, the image is definitely meager: the social and financial insecurity, the increase in market competition, and clients' abuses were complemented by a decrease in the possibility of achieving their contractual targets. For some of them, the pandemic saw a drastic loss of contractual activities, for others, a great limitation to online (content, social media, copywriting) and technical activities (e.g. delay of strategic programmes/campaigns).

Another dimension we investigated *was **the impact of COVID-19 on the professional Facebook group*** of which our participants were members and these were the most relevant aspects: a) an increase of collective anxiety; b) increased number of freelancers without contracts; c) increased membership in the Facebook group; d) more supportive and helpful than ever (for the information provided, guidance, advice, lived experiences, administrative freelance, and self-employed work, but mostly "camaraderie").

3.3. The relationship with communication freelancers Facebook groups

The relationship between freelance professionals and Facebook groups dedicated to the industry is at the core of our research. The interview questionnaire our participants received addressed three dimensions:

A. reasons for joining
B. reasons for (active) participation
C. knowledge sharing practices within the communication freelance Facebook group

Here are the main observations drawn from the analysis of our participants' answers given on these three dimensions.

A. Reasons for joining

There are three core reasons for joining the group: networking, support, and socialisation. Networking was mentioned in relation to contacts, information, and possible collaborations; the group is considered a balancing factor for the lack of professional contacts (and expertise in a particular field). Support is seen as both professional and personal: members joined looking for advice (received and, later on, given) or to check their ideas with someone else, but also received reassurance and fulfilled part of their need of belonging to a professional community. This feeling of isolation is mentioned repeatedly, therefore socialisation is seen as a third core reason for joining.

B. Reasons for (active) participation

While the reasons for joining carry through as reasons for staying and (actively) participating in the discussions (to be sure, some prefer to sit on the side-lines and

"listen"), there are other reasons, both informational and relational, that motivate the members of the Facebook groups in their online engagement with the professional communities:

- information gain,
- pre-testing ideas,
- camaraderie and sanity checks,
- industry insights,
- professional and personal connections.

C. Knowledge-sharing practices

As both the level of professional experience and freelance experience vary among our participants, it was foreseeable that the role Facebook groups would play for each category would vary as well. Therefore, the Facebook group is seen as particularly useful for debutants in terms of knowledge exchange and for advanced freelancers in terms of best practice sharing (contracts, client management) and industry dynamics (price trends, legal context transformations).

3.4. Administrators' perspectives

The Facebook groups' moderators or administrators have also been asked to provide their perspectives on the following key points. The findings of this section are outlined as follows:

A. the Facebook private group as a necessary supportive community
B. specific features of group's membership composition
C. the role of the administrator
D. members' communitarian behaviours
E. the impact of COVID-19 onto the community's dynamics: "desire to help"

We, therefore, interviewed both current and former administrators, as well as administrators fulfilling different roles.

A. The Facebook private group as a necessary supportive community

When it comes to the reason for initiating the group, both groups' initiators have mentioned that the newness of freelancing, as a working format, generated specific needs for self-employed communication professionals, such as the lack of appropriate content for freelancers, lack of support group, lack of accountability for employers/clients.

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.

B. Specific features of group's membership composition

Both Facebook groups have a large majority of professionals coming from

communication and creative industries (e.g. Public Relations, marketing, advertising, design, social media, web design, etc.).

The communication freelancers represent the core of both Facebook groups. Hence, the focus is double: on freelance practices and on communication-related content (e.g. deliverables, trends, shifts caused by COVID-19, etc.).

C. The role of the administrator

The administrator as the gatekeeper of the community: The administrators see the groups as tight communities, as their role has always been to build and preserve a group's integrity and legitimacy.

The administrator as the listener of the community: Listening to the community is one of the main functions the administrators use and employ on a current basis.

D. Members' communitarian behaviours

The administrators also emphasised belonging communitarian practices of groups' members:

a) when advice is being asked, experienced members respond, help and support the member in need (as they said, this is a "take what you need, give what you can" type of attitude);

b) when there are absurd proposals/discussions or threads, members ally to explain why that approach is wrong;

c) when other members have mentioned personal issues (family troubles or issues with clients), they always received advice and offers of help;

d) unique opportunities only for group members (e.g. tickets for events, meet-ups, subscriptions for specific freelance services, etc.);

e) reporting posts which they see as breaching the rules and spirit of the Group. However, in general, the groups' administrators appreciated the fact that, usually, the tone is calm and views are well-argued.

The identity of the group in comparison with other online professional groups: the groups' administrators focused in their answers on the informal character of the Facebook private group they managed as a great distinctive feature. Due to this ethos, "members of the Facebook group feel much less inhibited, in my view. There is a huge element of trust, that others will keep their confidence and treat them respectfully. There is no such thing as a silly question and they are likely to get a kind reply. I haven't witnessed bullying or belittling in the group." (Respondent 9)

E. The impact of COVID-19 on the community's dynamics: "the desire to help"

The intrinsic feature of the Facebook groups we analysed, the support, became vital and essential during COVID-19. The group administrators mentioned 1) support and help for those clients/industries which have been most impacted by the pandemic and

several lockdowns (by providing services *pro bono*, etc.) or 2) support for their freelance peers, through intensive collaborations and projects.

One administrator mentioned using the group as a platform to support lobbying within the PR industry to highlight how freelancers' business has been affected.

The online has replaced the previous networking contexts which brought members together.

References

Hickman, A. (2020, April 7). Coronavirus impact: half of freelancers consider quitting and have lost at least 60 percent of income, *PRWeek*. Available at https://www.prweek.com/article/1679652/coronavirus-impact-half-freelancers-consider-quitting-lost-least-60-per-cent-income

Pulignano, V., Domecka, M., Muszynski, K., Vermeerbergen, L. & Riemann, M-L. (2021). *Creative labour in the era of COVID-19: the case of freelancers*, European Trade Union Institute. Available at https://www.etui.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/Creative%20labour%20in%20the%20era%20of%20Covid-19%20the%20case%20of%20freelancers-2021-web.pdf