Like Me on *facebook*… and hire me! eLancers being themselves

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the british
psychological society

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Introduction

Working practices are changing from the traditional workplace outside the home, sometimes as part of a *job for life*

The "gig economy" has seen increasing numbers of freelance workers; with **uberisation** one of the biggest paradigm shifts in recent years

Freelancers are also embracing the digital world and engaging in **eLancing**, or *freelancing online*

If the gig economy taxes eLancers' *"cognitive and emotional capabilities"* *(Ashford et al, 2018)*, this study sets out to **Understand the Implications of Freelancing via the Internet**

Materials

2 Focus Groups ← Hosted by IPSE, London

← Self-selecting

➢ 6 freelancers
➢ 7 experts

← Invited

12 Semi-structured interviews ← Self-selecting

Ethics approval: SSEGM REC 30432/FEPS 53894

The work reported here is based on two focus groups, one with freelancers and one with experts in the field. Subsequently, a series of semi-structured interviews were held with a total of 41 eLancers. The work here is based on analysis of the first dozen. *NOTE the focus groups and interviews were all pre-COVID pandemic*

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➤ **Thematic Analysis**

Invited

➤ **Narrative Analysis**
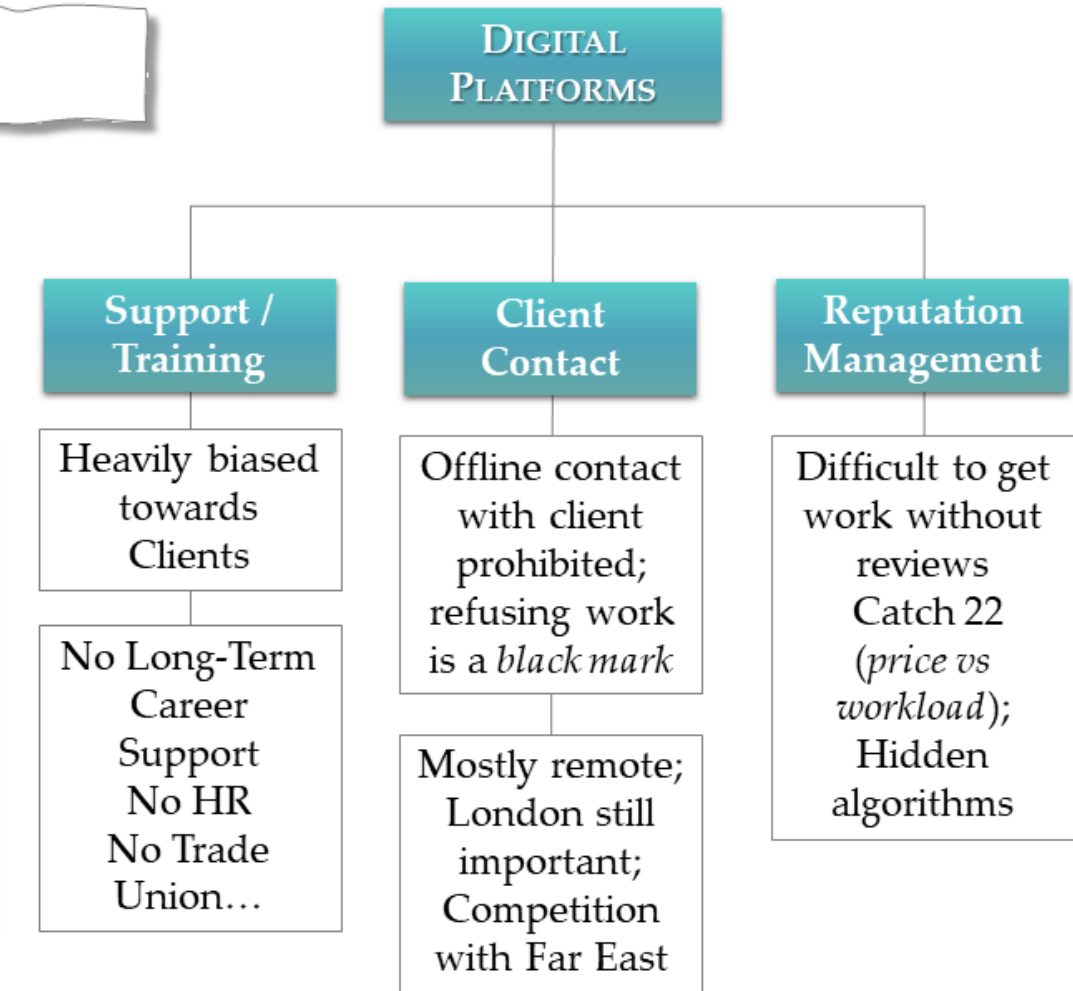➤ **IPA**
➤ **Thematic Analysis**

Transcriptions of the focus groups were analysed using Thematic Analysis to identify common themes; for the semi-structured interviews, there was a combination of Narrative Analysis, IPA and Thematic Analysis

Results I

DIGITAL PLATFORMS

Experts

- Founder / Director freelancer platform
- Co-founder freelancer platform
- Freelancer (*digital innovation*)
- Senior lecturer, Business School
- Professor and Entrepreneur, Business School
- Head of Press / PR (*freelancer association*)
- Professor, US Business School (*via SKYPE*)

7 attendees

Support / Training

Heavily biased towards Clients

No Long-Term Career Support
No HR
No Trade Union…

Client Contact

Offline contact with client prohibited; refusing work is a *black mark*

Mostly remote; London still important; Competition with Far East

Reputation Management

Difficult to get work without reviews
Catch 22 (*price vs workload*);
Hidden algorithms

Lack of control ~ No support ~ Competition
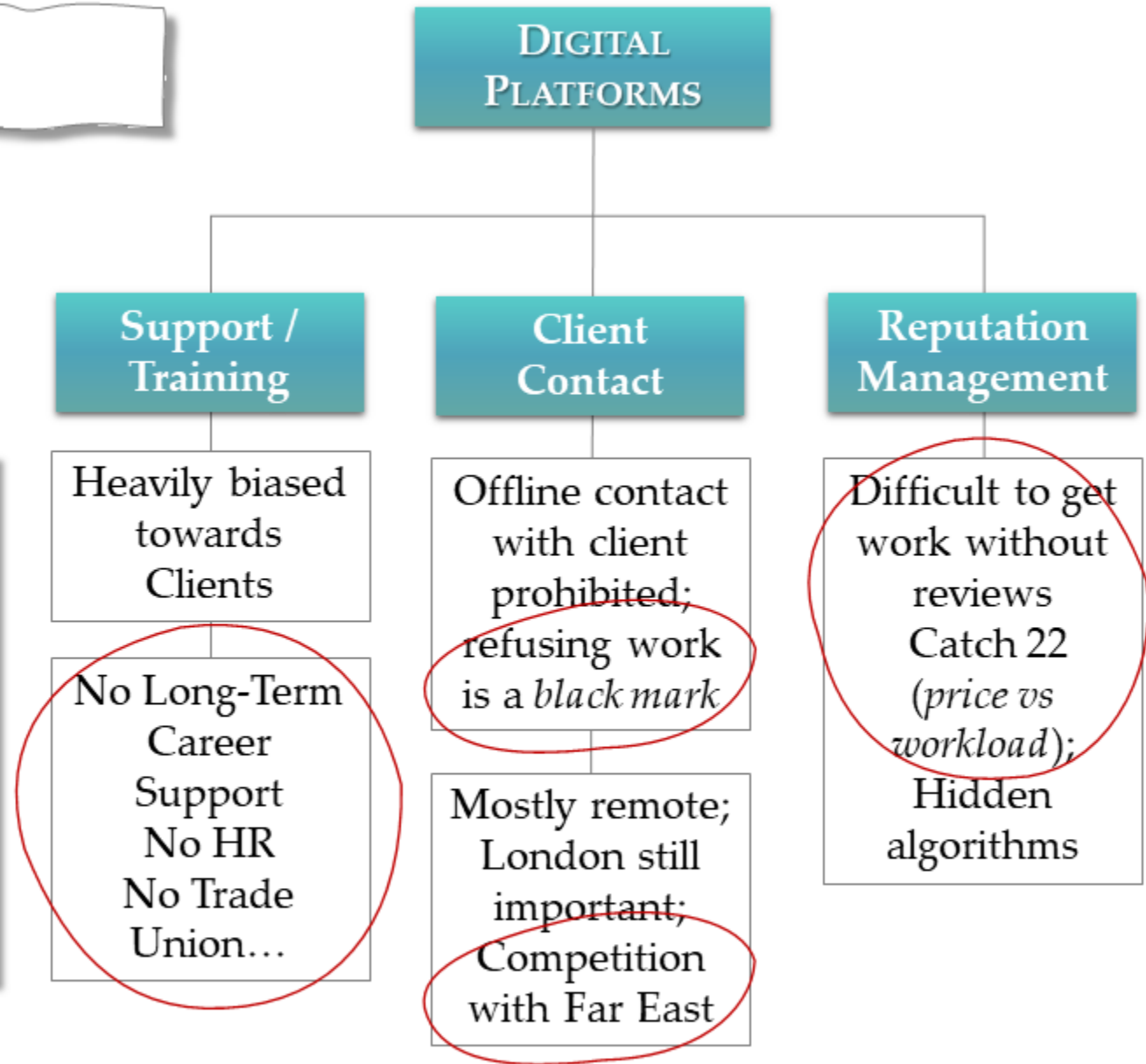
The *experts* identified issues they felt were important for eLancers using digital platforms to market themselves and run their businesses. They mainly focused on control shifting to those running the digital platforms – the platforms therefore dictate terms for the eLancers - and the lack of generic career and admin support for the eLancers themselves – like HR and finance

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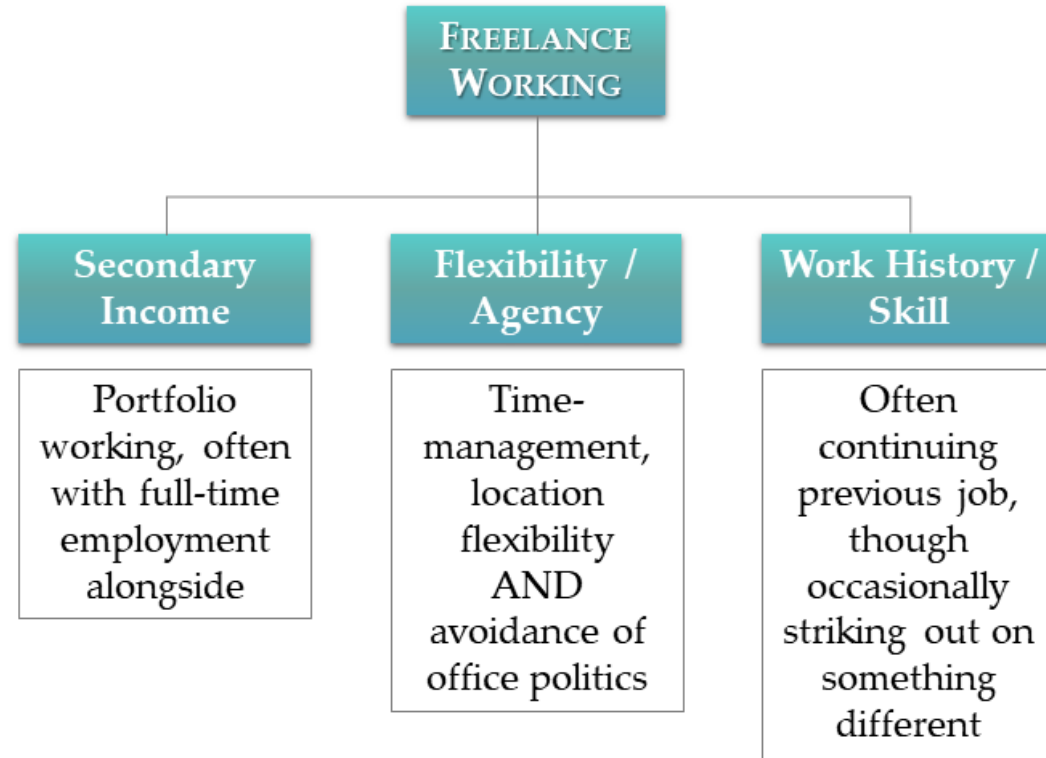Difficult to get work without reviews Catch 22 (*price vs workload*); Hidden algorithms

Lack of control ~ No support ~ Competition

Results II

Freelancers

- CEO and Co-founder of freelancer platform
- ICT freelancer (*architect; middleware*)
- ICT freelancer (*web developer*)
- Director freelance graphic design company
- Photographer / Graphic designer
- Photographer

6 attendees

FREELANCE WORKING

Secondary Income	Flexibility / Agency	Work History / Skill
Portfolio working, often with full-time employment alongside	Time-management, location flexibility AND avoidance of office politics	Often continuing previous job, though occasionally striking out on something different

Autonomy ~ Flexibility

The eLancers themselves, meanwhile, stated that they appreciated a greater level of control over their own destiny. Interestingly, though, although they could carry over skills from a previous job, the attendees reported that they often would continue traditional employment alongside their eLancing
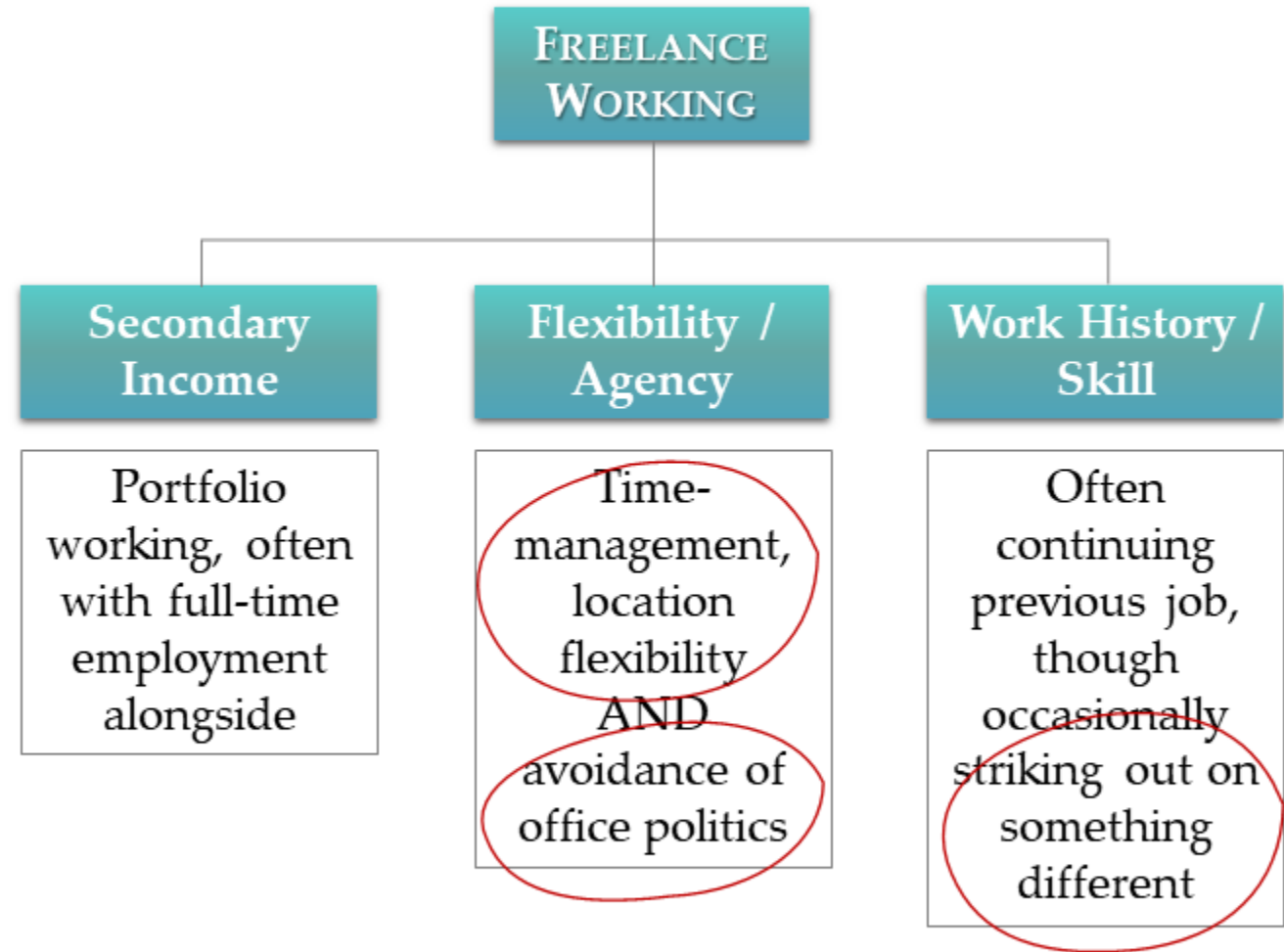
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Explanatory Models?

Job Demands-Control

As the Experts claim: Lack of control increases stress levels : **eLancing is unattractive**

Job Characteristics

As might be expected: Autonomy and *'meaningful work'* : **eLancing is attractive** ... *yet freelancers prepared to take on admin as well as actual work*

Effort-Reward Imbalance

As might be expected: Effort should be balanced with return : **eLancing is unpredictable** ... *yet admin does not directly create revenue whilst increasing the* **effort** *required*

Uses and Gratifications?

So what are they getting out of it?

Traditional (psychological) models of work tend to predict ambivalent outcomes: eLancing has its attraction but the lack of control and its unpredictability would suggest that it is unappealing. The question arises, therefore, as to why eLancers continue to pursue independent and insecure work

Uses and Gratifications

Uses and Gratifications dealt originally largely with entertainment media where viewers actively seek out media which satisfy (*gratify*) their needs (*uses*) to consume

Uses and Gratifications applied to the Internet becomes more about prosumption

Identifying **Uses** for eLancers – i.e., the *needs* they seek to fulfil – might throw some light on what the virtual environment offers them (**Gratifications**) and provide a perspective on eLancing in general

Uses and Gratifications Theory might provide a different perspective – *specifically*: we used the semi-structured interviews with eLancers to try and identify what their motivation might be (*uses*) and on consequence what they get out of eLancing (*gratifications*)
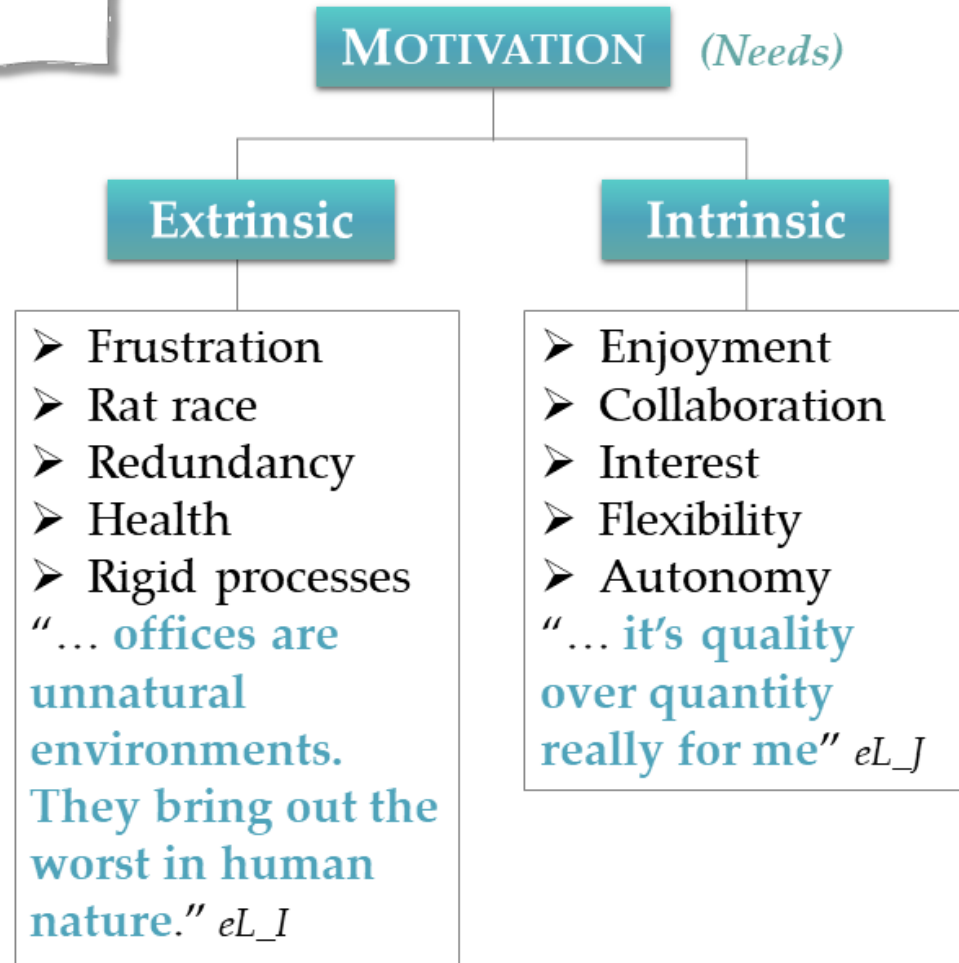
Results III

Freelancers

- Narrative Types
  - *10 x progressive*
  - *2 x stability*
- Employment type
  - *6 x main job*
  - *6 x secondary income*
- Location §
  - *5 x London*
  - *7 x provinces*

12 semi-structured interviews

MOTIVATION *(Needs)*

Extrinsic

➤ Frustration
➤ Rat race
➤ Redundancy
➤ Health
➤ Rigid processes

"… **offices are unnatural environments. They bring out the worst in human nature.**" *eL_I*

Intrinsic

➤ Enjoyment
➤ Collaboration
➤ Interest
➤ Flexibility
➤ Autonomy

"… **it's quality over quantity really for me**" *eL_J*

The Narratives were largely *progressive* ~ eLancers reported specific goals and the achievement of those goals

At the same time, their Motivation for exploring eLancing including both *extrinsic* and *intrinsic* factors: the intrinsic factors include not only autonomy but also *relatedness,* through collaboration with other eLancers

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Taking *back* Control ~ Contributing

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They bring out the

Taking *back* Control ~ Contributing

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So that's something I never thought I would do. ***That's really rewarding for me***: to work with other women and changing their lives.
eL_A Social media marketing (Our emphasis)

…and some evidence of freelancers forming 'collaborative groupings'

Experts had focused on *extrinsic* motivators like a lack of control and no support for admin or career development. By contrast, the eLancers themselves focus on *intrinsic* motivators, especially the ability to identify and connect with similar others, occasionally creating more formal mutual support networks

Results IV

Trying to situate these findings within existing literature on working, remote contact and collaboration….

Turkle (2017) *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other*

Norman (2010) *Living with Complexity*

Jetten, Reicher, Haslam, Cruwys (2020) *Together Apart: The Psychology of COVID-19*

Pickering et al. (2021) Radical collaboration during a global health emergency: Development of the RDA COVID-19 data sharing recommendations and guidelines

Results IV

eLancers did not report any alienation	Technology *(mediating human-to-human connection)* does not need to be alienating
eLancers accepted platform constraints	We take advantage of technology when and where we need to for our purposes
Future work: **did the pandemic affect eLancers?**	We will and do adapt to a technology-mediated environment … though when imposed there may be consequences
Some eLancers seem to go further with ICT	Intrinsic motivation *especially prosociality* is a significant factor to encourage engagement

What emerges is a more nuanced and positive view of technology-mediated activities than may initially have been predicted: eLancers accept the virtual environment because that's a necessity, *but* they go beyond passive acceptance to find what is important to them (*gratifications*) which includes *Prosociality* and *relatedness*

Conclusion

Expert fears about eLancing *(focused largely on uberisation and regulation)* suggested that online freelancing would increase stress levels and leave freelancers exposed

eLancers embrace virtual-world affordances accepting increased competition and lack of admin support as well as optimising how they interact to their own advantage

Uses and Gratifications applied to *eLancing* suggests it's just the start… once *online,* users explore and expand to find new *uses* offering new and perhaps unexpected *gratifications*

I have this photography portfolio website which I built years and years ago and like two years ago I started talking to agents throughout Europe to find work and commission stuff and so on. And I realised that it didn't mean anything to them what I shot for Lipton ice tea with lots of flowers and a nice view at the background and so on. They weren't interested in that at all. *They were more interested in what I went ahead and shot on my own time*. So the social media became more important in my line of work since a few years. It's more important than your portfolio website. *Because they're interested in what you're interested in*. What you shoot. What you do on your own time. *They see how passionate you are about what you do, about your interests and they want to hire someone that they actually like as a person*.

our emphasis

eL5 (IPSE hosted focus group)

One of the eLancers from the original focus group highlights something perhaps unexpected about the virtual environment: apart from anything else, there is a cross-over with 'leisure' and 'personal connection'

I have this photography portfolio website which I built years and

The virtual environment is much more than a tool to enable and digitalise existing behaviours. It provides different affordances to be identified and exploited by users, consumers and prosumers

years ago I started talking to agents [to] find work and commission stuff and so on. [It] didn't mean anything to them what I shot for [picture]s of flowers and a nice view at the background [wasn']t interested in that at all. **They were more** [...w]**ent ahead and shot on my own time**. So the [...] more important in my line of work since a few [...impor]tant than your portfolio website. **Because** [...w]**hat you're interested in**. What you shoot. What [...ti]me. **They see how passionate you are about** [...what you are, about y]**our interests and they want to hire someone** **that they actually like as a person**.

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ABSTRACT

Objectives/Purpose: It is tempting to see the online gig economy, 'eLancing', as little more than technology-mediated freelancing. This paper shows, however, that the Internet offers different opportunities for eLancers to build professional and personal lives in tandem contributing to our understanding of new technologies in working lives. Individual 'gigs' are theoretically open to anyone irrespective of ethnicity, location or disability. However, a professional persona on a digital platform exists alongside a semi-private one in social media requiring careful impression management and contextual compartmentalisation. Design/Background: In this study, we focus on contradictions reported in the literature to show that eLancers themselves build a comprehensive client-facing profile. Methods:Two focus groups, one with eLancers, the other with platform providers and domain experts, and semi-structured interviews with 12 eLancers were analysed qualitatively to identify stakeholder perspectives. Results:The experts confirmed traditional findings on social isolation, insecure compensation, legal protection, and professional training. Providers focus on improving technology to ease remote communication. eLancers themselves, by contrast, highlight intrisic motivating factors like autonomy and personal satisfaction. Those in the creative industries, in particular, exploit the entirety of their online presence, including social media like facebook, to create a comprehensive virtual portfolio. Far from trying to contain online impressions, they accept the new environment. eLancing for them is not simply about equality and geographic reach, but a socio-technical context encouraging digital entrepreneurship. Conclusions: Rather than confirming existing models of working psychology, our findings suggest that eLancers integrate the virtual world into a progressive narrative of autonomy exploiting technology potential.