

PERCEPTIONS OF SOUTH AFRICAN FREELANCE COPYWRITERS ON CROSS-
CULTURAL COMMUNICATION ON THE UPWORK DIGITAL PLATFORM

by

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AI	Artificial intelligence
DPKW	Digital platforms for knowledge work
FGDs	Focus group discussion
ICTs	Information and communication technologies
JSS	Job Success Score
LAN	Local Area Networks
OLMs	Online Labour Markets
PSA	Public Servants Association
SSI	Semi-structured interview
UK	United Kingdom
USA	United States of America
WAN	Wide Area Networks

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DECLARATION

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Exact wording of the title of the dissertation as appearing on the electronic copy submitted for examination:

Perceptions of South African Freelance Copywriters on Cross-Cultural Communication on the Upwork Digital Platform

I declare that the above dissertation is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

I further declare that I submitted the dissertation to originality-checking software and that it falls within the accepted requirements for originality.

I further declare that I have not previously submitted this work, or part of it, for examination at Unisa for another qualification or at any other higher education institution.

(The dissertation will not be examined unless this statement has been submitted.)



SIGNATURE

DATE: 01.02.24

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores and describes the perceptions of South African freelance copywriters on cross-cultural communication on the Upwork digital platform. The study seeks to examine these perceptions with the aim of making recommendations on how Upwork can facilitate better cross-cultural communication. This study follows the interpretative approach because it seeks to determine perspectives based on how the participants create meaning from interpreting events. Data was collected from 20 participants through semi-structured interviews and two focus group discussions. The freelance copywriters suggest that Upwork lacks cross-cultural awareness to facilitate effective cross-cultural communication. The study proposes some recommendations, such as facilitating training and development, and engaging communication experts to help develop resources that could make it easier for people to communicate on the platform, even if they come from different cultures.

KEY TERMS

Cross-cultural communication, Upwork, digital work platforms, remote work, remote teams, freelance copywriters, information and communication technologies, globalisation, cross-cultural awareness, perceptions

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

In the last couple of decades, the growing availability of information and communication technologies (ICTs), new network technologies in the form of Local Area Networks (LAN), Wide Area Networks (WAN), Internet, and extranets, digital tools for virtual conferencing, artificial intelligence (AI), and the Internet of Things (IoT) have made it easier to connect workers from different cultures in virtual teams (Mwase et al. 2022; Sanders & Cain 2013; Sepehrdoust & Khodaei 2013). This has opened opportunities for different types of occupations, including freelance copywriters, who can now easily accept jobs across borders without immigrating (Oleshko 2021). The technologies allow individuals to communicate about their work from anywhere in the world. However, some scholars argue that communication mediated by technology is not as rich as face-to-face interaction, which provides cues about emotional states and other visual signals that could assist in understanding a message (Purvanova 2014; Watkins 2013; Warkentin, Sayed, & Hightower 1997). Non-verbal behaviour, such as emotions, is vital in communicating states and situations and can help individuals understand how their message impacts the receiver (Hess 2016). This is especially true when communication occurs across cultures (Abdulai et al. 2017).

Without the cues that come with face-to-face communication, as is the case when communicating using ICTs and new network technologies, it becomes vital to consider how communicators can be sensitive to the needs of people from different cultures. When communication overlooks the importance of cultural differences, the probability of miscommunication, misunderstandings, and misperceptions of what is said and implied becomes higher. Ignoring cultural differences when communicating across cultures may also result in a mismatch between the encoded and decoded (Lifintsev & Wellbrock 2022; Vertanova & Gladkova 2020; Abdulai et al. 2017).

Scholars have recognised the idea that there is an important link between communication and culture as far back as the first half of the 20th Century. For instance, Park (1938) proposes that communication operates in two dimensions. The first dimension is based on the assumption that communication diffuses cultural traits and broadens the cultural sphere within which social relations exist. The second

dimension is linked to the idea that communication brings different cultural influences to the fore, exhibiting the common comprehension of certain ideas expected to emerge in the acculturation process – the process through which individuals learn and incorporate the conduct, customs, language, and beliefs, and values of a society into which they have moved (Kliegman 2020; Park 1938).

Based on the understanding that culture and communication have a dyadic connection, it becomes important to consider how this affects people working across cultures, particularly when these individuals are connected by technologies that provide them with communication tools but very few clues about the cultures of the individuals communicating. This study focuses on the perceptions of a selected group of South African freelance copywriters on Upwork (an American freelancing platform connecting freelancers to employers) and how they perceive cross-cultural communication on the platform. The insights obtained from the participants will be used to make recommendations on how the digital platform can improve communication between freelance copywriters from different cultures.

This chapter presents the study's background and rationale. It is structured as follows: context and background of the study, definition of key terms, research questions, research objectives, importance of the study, defining the gap, relevance of the topic to the field of organisational communication, relationship of the topic to the discipline of communication, proposed research design, and delineation of the study.

1.2 The context and background of the study

The proliferation of ICTs and globalisation has made it possible for individuals to work across borders without the need to relocate (Vinaja 2014; Future of Work Institute 2012). This implies that countries that face labour shortages can hire workers from countries with excess labour. However, this also means that people from different cultures work as full-time employees and freelancers in virtual teams. While remote labour sourcing from the developed economies to the developed world dates back many centuries, the International Labour Organisation (2003) notes that the skills required in this outsourced labour are no longer routine administrative work but more intricate tasks. Consequently, the complexity of the work may require more interaction.

Yankah (2013) notes that ideological and cultural incorporation is becoming deeper because of the globalisation of culture. Therefore, there is a need to step back and analyse the interplay between institutions and conflicting norms to determine the strategies and mechanisms that can be deployed to achieve productive coexistence. Croucher (2017:8) further concludes that “the ability of individuals to communicate with individuals from different cultural groups effectively is shown to lead to more effective workplace teams, and in turn lead to more corporate profits.”

Wang, Liu, and Parker (2020) acknowledge that information and communication technology (ICT) is a growing sector employing millions of people worldwide. These authors recognise that as the world attempts to create millions of jobs to avert unemployment, ICTs will play a profound role in creating an inclusive, flexible, innovative, and transparent labour market. Hafermalz and Riemer (2016) posit that remote working allows employees spatial or temporal flexibility and makes employment accessible to those outside major centres. However, Arumugam, McKay, and Grainger (2013) suggest that if governments are to leverage the benefits that come with ICTs, the initial step is to understand how to respond to these technologies. One way of doing this is to understand the cross-cultural communication experiences of those already working on these digital platforms, such as Upwork.

Studying the relationship between communication and culture in digital work platforms has been made more important by the recent experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced many employees to work remotely. During that time, many relied on ICTs for communication. With the anticipation that the work-from-anywhere trend is likely to continue long after the pandemic, it is vital to understand how communication on these platforms can be facilitated in a way that considers the different cultures of the individuals involved (Agba, Ocheni, & Agba 2020; Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi 2020).

1.2.1 Growing globalisation

The fact that globalisation has been rapidly advancing in the last few decades due to the proliferation of ICTs is no longer disputed. This is what Sharafat and Lehr (2017) imply when they say that to participate in the global information economy, one must be a digital citizen. This rapid globalisation has resulted faster, and customers expect

services to be available whenever they need them 24/7. This is a view acknowledged by Dolphin (2015), who writes about Europe and notes that even though some of the changes that can be noted in the labour market tend to be cyclical (for example, resulting from a slower global economy), other changes can be attributed to major structural forces operating in the global economy: the rapid pace of technological innovation, globalisation and demographic change. Dolphin (2015) accepts that globalisation and innovation are not new concepts; rather, the pace at which they are accelerating can be considered new.

The changes in the global economy attract the attention of both multinational organisations and small businesses. This is a view shared by Okoro (2012), who says that the idea of a global economy has broadened consumer awareness, put new rules and standards of operation in place, and made both nations and corporations depend more on each other. The same author argues that it is within this context that multinational organisations are identifying global opportunities. The need to demonstrate sensitivity around cultural differences is driven by the realisation that taking advantage of the opportunities made available by globalisation will require such sensitivity. Okoro (2012) refers to recent studies that confirm that while other organisations have done well in the global space, some have failed because of insufficient acculturation and cultural imperialism practised by the managers of these businesses. The idea that managers should be equipped with cross-cultural negotiation skills becomes crucial within this context.

The views expressed by Okoro (2012) above are relevant to the present study in several ways. For instance, he cites conclusions showing that companies that fail on the global stage are those whose managers are not trained to operate within a cross-cultural context. This gives the present study an idea of the angle of questions that can be asked during the interviews with freelance copywriters on Upwork. The freelance copywriters were asked whether they believe the managers they work with on Upwork show cross-cultural competence in communication. They were also asked if they perceive that Upwork, as a platform connecting freelancers and managers, has assisted the freelance copywriters and managers on the platform in gaining cross-cultural communication competency skills.

In a global arrangement, many boundaries are becoming less apparent. However, this does not imply that the technological advances creating what is known as the global village are correspondingly resulting in the same global culture. He and Liu (2010) note that managers have a new challenge within the set-up of globalisation: cross-cultural communication. Green et al. (2018) argue that the power of globalisation could provide opportunities for more underdeveloped countries. Such a view implies that organisations would have a bigger pool of talent from which to choose. However, this would also imply employing people who can communicate across cultures because companies will need to communicate with their employees from different cultures.

1.2.2 Description of the study problem

In cross-cultural teams, communication quality may be a major concern. Even when everyone uses English as a language of communication, certain slang or colloquialisms may be misunderstood. Teamwork requires everyone on the team to grasp where the conversation is going because it is a group effort. If everyone strives for clarity, misinterpretations can be minimised; otherwise, team effectiveness will suffer. This is a challenge that this study will seek to address by understanding the perceptions of freelance copywriters working on the Upwork digital platform regarding cross-cultural communication.

The present study focuses on the perceptions of freelance copywriters regarding cross-cultural communication on the digital work platform Upwork when dealing with clients from different cultures. The consequences of ignoring issues that have to do with communication across cultures are highlighted by Munhall (2008), who says that if qualitative researchers' objective is to understand, then perceptions of others are crucial for understanding the data produced by a study. The same author notes that biases, prejudice, unsubstantiated judgments, or false assumptions are powerful perceptions with the potential for misunderstanding, punishment, banishment, or oppression (Munhall 2008). Therefore, it is important to understand the perceptions of freelance copywriters working on Upwork if the aim is to ensure that communication is structured in a way that caters for a multiplicity of cultures.

This researcher identified cross-cultural communication challenges while working with clients in different parts of the world and teams distributed across different continents. This type of working arrangement made the researcher aware that what could be perceived as funny in one culture may be seen as offensive in another. Therefore, it can be posited that effort is required to assist people who work across different cultures to become sensitive to the issues that may arise.

1.2.3 The research problem

One of the challenges that South Africa faces is high unemployment (Department of Government Communication n.d.). One way of dealing with this challenge could be for unemployed South Africans to look for work opportunities globally in the 'gig economy' facilitated by information and telecommunication technologies (Petriglieri, Ashford, & Wrzesniewski 2018). However, there seem to be limited studies in South Africa dealing with how communication across cultures could impact the ability of South Africans to find virtual employment outside the country's borders. This study aims to understand the perceptions of a group of South African freelance copywriters on the Upwork platform about cross-cultural communication and how it facilitates or impedes their ability to work and communicate across cultures.

This research is positioned as a unique contribution because it is being undertaken in the South African organisational environment and because no one else has registered this topic, either nationally or globally. The research on themes that are aligned similarly is presented in Table 1.1, which contains similar local and global research retrieved from various databases, including African Journals Online, Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (NDLTD), and the National Research Foundation of South Africa's Nexus Database.

Table 1.1: Similar local and international research

Title	Author	Type Study	Year of Publication	Focus	Institution
Cross-cultural communication in industry - a study of the problem of meaning	Botha L.	MA Dissertation	1989	How meaning is attributed to organisational messages and the role cultural differences play	University of South Africa
The importance and relevance of cross-cultural communication in contemporary South Africa	Somniso M.M.	MA Dissertation	1997	Bridging languages and culture across barriers accomplished through sharing second languages and mutual understanding of the different cultures of South Africa.	University of Port Elizabeth (Now Nelson Mandela University)
Cross-cultural communication: an investigation into compliment response	Govender M.	MA Dissertation	1995	Investigates the compliment response behaviour of Indian and African students at the Springfield College of Education.	University of Natal, Durban

behaviour of Indian and African students at the Springfield College of Education					
Cross-culture compatible leadership strategies for international joint venture success in Botswana Manufacturing Industry	Gumbo C.	PhD Thesis	2017	This study presents empirical research on cross-cultural compatible leadership strategies for international joint ventures (IJVs) success in Botswana manufacturing industry, with partners from emerging economies including China, India, and South Africa.	NWU School of Business and Governance North-West University
Cross-cultural management and the informal economy in sub-Saharan Africa: implications for organisation, employment and skills development	Jackson T.	Journal Article	2012	The importance of cross-cultural communication in understanding the geological context of informal organisations.	Middlesex University Business School, London, UK

Upwork is a platform where businesses connect with professionals to work on projects (Upwork 2020). This platform has been selected for this study because it is the biggest freelancing platform in the world (Upwork 2020), which allows the study to select participants from a much broader population.

Yankah (2013) notes that ideological and cultural incorporation is becoming deeper because of the globalisation of culture. Therefore, there is a need to step back and analyse the interplay between institutions and conflicting norms to determine the strategies and mechanisms that can be deployed to achieve productive coexistence. Croucher (2017) further concludes that the ability of individuals to communicate with individuals from different cultural groups effectively leads to more effective workplace teams and, in turn, more corporate profits. Against this background, the research problem for this study is as follows:

To address the lack of studies investigating the perceptions of South African freelance copywriters on cross-cultural communication on the Upwork digital platform

To address the research problem, a number of research questions (presented in Section 1.3.4 below) have been formulated to guide the study in terms of identifying the relevant literature and determining the data that will be collected to understand the perceptions of South African freelance copywriters on cross-cultural communication and the Upwork platform.

1.3 Definition of key terms

Defining the main terms in a study is vital because one key term can mean different things when used in varying contexts (Tanyu 2023). This is a view also acknowledged by Shipman (2013), who says when researchers fail to define the main terms in their studies, they weaken their attempt to communicate about scientific topics. The main terms in the present study include *communication*, *culture*, *cross-cultural communication*, *freelance copywriters*, and *digital work platforms*. Other crucial constructs include *globalisation* and *Upwork*. These key terms and constructs will be defined in the following sections.

1.3.1 Communication

Rosengren (2000) notes that the term, communicate, is linked to the word *common*. Therefore, the process of communicating involves making things common. Communication can thus be seen as a way of increasing shared knowledge or common sense. The same scholar adds that sharing knowledge through communication does not always involve agreement; it also includes knowledge about conflicting interests and views. This means that sometimes communication can result in conflict instead of building community.

An analysis of the literature shows that there has never been agreement regarding what “communication” or “to communicate” means. However, from the various definitions provided by an array of scholars, it can be posited that communication involves the process of creating meaning, the processes involved in how the meaning is decoded in different societies and the psychology involved (Rosengren 2000; Glare 1968; Littlejohn 1992). From the various definitions, it can be suggested that communication denotes how messages are comprehended from a social, psychological, cultural, and intellectual perspective and how ambiguity develops and is resolved. Therefore, this study focuses on communication as the process through which meaning is created and understood within a setting where the communicators are from different cultures connected by information and communications technologies.

1.3.2 Cross-cultural communication

To understand cross-cultural communication, it is vital to appreciate the meaning of the term culture. Laroche et al. (2003:1) cites the definition by Kluckhohn (1951) as the most seminal one:

Culture consists of patterned ways of thinking, feeling, and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artefacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values.

Zlomislić et al. (2016) report that Edward Burnett Tylor (1924:1) was the first scholar to advance a formal definition of the word culture: “a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”

Based on the definition of culture above, cross-cultural communication is seen as a kind of interface whose aim is to facilitate and improve the interaction between individuals representing different cultures (Lifintsev & Wellbrock 2019). The communication occurs within a context where cultural differences may result in miscommunication, which might cause conflict. Some of the factors impacting cross-cultural communication include language barriers, stereotypical thinking, lack of knowledge about other cultures, lack of experience, lack of trust, and differences in standards of behaviour and values (Almashhadani & Almashhadani 2023; Šerić 2020; Lifintsev & Canavilhas 2017).

1.3.3 Digital work platforms

A digital work platform is a business model where information and communication technologies are used to facilitate interactions – including commercial interactions – between users (Gawer 2021). These platforms, like Upwork, the focus of the present study, provide the technology and infrastructure that allow individuals looking for work to interact with those offering employment opportunities within a digital setting. de Paula et al. (2020) define digital work platforms simply as online services that connect workers with businesses or individuals seeking different types of services on demand.

Digital technologies have changed the way people communicate. This is a view acknowledged by Gawer (2021), who say that with the state of private investments in digital infrastructure and communication technologies, resulting in more people connecting using the internet across the world, it is challenging to imagine a foreseeable future without an array of social, cultural, economic and political exchanges and interactions. Indeed, these digital platforms have made communication instant, and message senders can receive a response within seconds. These technologies have also made it possible for individuals to communicate with people they would never have met in the first place if such technologies did not exist. Behind the safety of a screen, some people may have the courage to say what they

would otherwise not in person. Therefore, it is posited that the changes in communication triggered by digital technologies have implications for communication across cultures and studies attempting to understand these changes are vital.

1.3.3.1 Upwork: the world's biggest freelance platform

The present study investigates the perceptions of freelance copywriters who connect to employers and virtual teams using Upwork. Green et al. (2018) conducted a case study of Upwork.com. They noted that this digital marketplace is a leader in providing a flexible platform for freelancers worldwide, including coders, copywriters, and web developers, putting businesses in touch with reasonably priced workers.

According to promotional material produced by Upwork (2022), the platform claims that it is the largest global freelancing website. The same document indicates that over a quarter of Fortune 500 companies look for talent on the platform, with companies like Airbnb, Samsung, General Electrical, and Dropbox posting over 30,000 jobs in 2017. The platform also indicated that by 2022, it had facilitated over US\$4 billion worth of work for freelancers from more than 1.3 million projects completed. The Upwork digital platform also reports that it operates in 180 countries.

With regards to the social consequences of working in the “gig economy” - a term created by former New York editor Tina Brown - (Hasija, Padmanabhan, & Rampal 2020), Green et al. (2018) note that this economy empowers customers with unlimited and cheaper services, and workers with flexibility in terms of working hours and wages. However, the same authors cite Brown (2017), who notes that this is a situation that causes concern that many of the younger workers who fail to get work in the mainstream of depressed economies end up remaining in the freelancing area and not learning vital workplace skills like communication, teamwork, and leadership.

1.3.4 Freelance copywriter

A freelancer is an individual who is self-employed and does not draw a salary from the same employer on a regular basis. Freelancers work independently, only doing work they choose to do with clients they want to work with (Allen, 2011). On the other hand, a copywriter is a person who focuses on writing marketing content. According to Wilson (2021), the work of a copywriter is to ensure that the words that describe a

product showcase the best aspects of that product so that a buyer can feel motivated to purchase it. The proliferation of information and communication technologies, which are not restricted by physical borders, has made it easier for freelance copywriters to work outside their local areas or countries.

1.4 Research questions

- RQ1: What are the perceptions of South African freelance copywriters regarding cross-cultural communication on the Upwork digital platform?
- RQ2: What guides freelance copywriters on the Upwork digital platform when determining the cultural standpoint from which they communicate with clients and other team members when working in virtual teams?
- RQ3: What do freelance copywriters on the Upwork digital platform perceive as the role of cross-cultural communication in facilitating or impeding productivity when working across cultures?
- RQ4: Based on their perception of cross-cultural communication on the Upwork digital platform, what are South African freelance copywriters' perceptions regarding the platform as a potential source of employment for other South Africans?

1.5 The aim of the study

This study aims to investigate the perceptions of a group of South African freelance copywriters on the Upwork digital platform about cross-cultural communication and how it facilitates or impedes their ability to work and communicate across cultures.

1.6 The research gap

Identifying a research gap is a critical step that contributes to the quality, relevance, and significance of a study. In this regard, Wagner et al. (2012) acknowledge that identifying the gap ensures that the research is purposeful, addresses gaps in existing knowledge, and has the potential to make a meaningful contribution to the field. Focusing on freelancers in the construction industry, Burke (2011) notes that most studies focusing on freelancing often focus on exploitation and tend to ignore the actual voices of the freelancers themselves. Bonina et al. (2021) note that even though digital platforms offer great potential to the economies and societies in the global south, studies available have always focused on business, ignoring the views of the

freelancers themselves. The same scholars further attempted to explain that the lack of scholarly research on digital platforms can be attributed to the fact that they are difficult to study as there is no conceptual definition. While these scholars illustrate the absence of studies focusing on freelancing in connection with business, an analysis of available literature specific to South Africa and the African continent (as shown in Table 1.1 above and the literature review in Chapter 2) shows that there are no studies that have been done specifically focusing on South African freelance copywriters, specifically focusing on their views on cross-cultural communication on digital platforms like Upwork. Therefore, this study seeks to partially close that gap by reviewing literature and theories of cross-cultural communication, and developing a theoretical framework based on the role theory, dimensions of culture theory, and critical theory that can guide studies in this area. The study will also make material recommendations based on the perceptions of freelance copywriters.

1.7 Importance of the study

Although several studies deal with the changes in the labour market and the effects of globalisation on work in Western countries, a search for studies on South Africa shows that this idea has not been explored. This leaves a gap, considering South Africa faces unemployment challenges, particularly among the youth. Therefore, a study such as this one could assist in starting a discussion into how job seekers can acquire the skills to communicate across cultures to earn a living working within a cross-cultural environment in virtual environments like the Upwork digital platform.

The need for a study such as this is highlighted by Wagner et al (2021), who note that research in the digital platforms for knowledge work (DPKW), such as Upwork, Fiverr, and Freelancer, is gaining traction. While agreeing that this area is gaining the attention of more researchers because the digital economy has resulted in substantial socio-economic changes in all aspects of livelihoods and societies, Fu et al. (2022) suggest that none of the available studies focus on the developmental perspective. As noted above, searching the databases in South Africa and internationally shows that none of the studies have focused on the perspectives of freelance copywriters in relation to cross-cultural communication. This makes a study like this one important.

This study is important because it can add knowledge regarding assumptions about the perceptions of individuals working as freelance copywriters across cultures. Understanding their perceptions around this phenomenon could feed into strategic thinking about the type of training and management models that could be effective when working with these individuals. For those looking for work across borders, these perceptions could provide ideas about communication skills required to determine how to navigate cultural differences when working in digital platforms. This study will speak to this by making recommendations to freelancing platforms on how to facilitate cross-cultural client-freelancer communication during projects.

The importance of a study such as this one is captured by Maude (2011), who notes that the proliferation of managers and employees who want to build their careers while working from home increasingly require cross-cultural communication ability to function effectively in their jobs. The same author notes that in workplaces that are increasingly becoming multicultural, managers who hope to succeed need to realise that they will be rewarded based on how well they can motivate and manage a diverse workplace. However, managers would not know the cross-cultural communication abilities they will need to hone if they do not know the perceptions of those they manage. The solution provided by the present study is that it delivers an idea of what freelance copywriters perceive as the main cross-cultural communication issues related to operating effectively in a world where borders are constantly becoming more permeable, facilitated by ICTs.

1.8 Relevance of the topic to the field of organisational communication

The research topic of this study is relevant because the number of people turning to the online labour market has been growing in the last few decades as ICTs become more available (Mwase et al. 2022; Sanders & Cain 2013; Sepehrdoust & Khodaei 2013). Considering that effective communication is central to achieving organisational objectives and harmony between role players, it is important for organisations whose employees are progressively coming from different cultures to understand how they can facilitate effective interaction between these individuals by cultivating the required cross-cultural awareness in both management and the employees.

Concerning organisational communication, exploring cross-cultural communication is vital because it affects relationships within the organisation. People from different cultures have their own assumptions and inclinations when they interact. This can make it difficult to successfully pass a message from one individual to the next. As workplaces become more multicultural as organisations take a global character facilitated by ICTs, cross-cultural communication becomes a crucial element in organisational effectiveness (Sanders & Cain 2013).

1.9 Relationship of the topic to the discipline of communication

This study's topic emanates from organisational communication, a sub-field of communication. The idea that communication is vital for any organisation is supported by Kumaran (2012), who adds that it plays a role in day-to-day activities, determining whether an organisation succeeds or fails. The same author further argues that communication can be challenging if it is unclear. It becomes more challenging if communication occurs across cultures, where it can be misunderstood or lost in translation. This is because when people communicate, they do so based on their history, confirmation biases, and ethnocentrism (ibid). Kumaran (2012:16) further defines ethnocentrism as "judging others using one's own cultural norms" and confirmation bias as "when people confirm their biases by seeing what they want to see." On this basis, the topic of cross-cultural communication on Upwork is central to the field of communication in that it seeks to determine how those who are affected by the communication (freelance copywriters in this case) perceive communication on the platform and how they believe that challenges associated with ethnocentrism, stereotyping, and confirmation bias can be mitigated to facilitate more effective communication on these online digital workspaces.

1.10 Proposed research design

This is a descriptive and explorative study that seeks to understand the perceptions of a group of South African copywriters working on Upwork regarding cross-cultural communication in the virtual teams they work in. The descriptive part involves examining a situation as it exists (Williams 2007), and the explorative part involves exploring a vague problem or situation (Sarstedt & Mooi 2014).

Qualitative methodology will be used within a phenomenological research design that describes the structure of experience. The specific methods employed for data collection are semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (online through Zoom) involving 20 participants selected using the nonprobability sampling approach. This study also deals with issues linked to language and symbols in a cross-cultural communication setting and how these influence how a message is received. Qualitative methods are inherent in interpretive studies (Wagner et al. 2012; Liamputtong 2019). Another reason for selecting the qualitative approach is that the study is based on perceptions of freelancers regarding their own reality, something that is challenging to quantify because there is no correct or wrong way of perceiving cross-cultural communication when working on a platform such as Upwork (Munhall 2008). The primary qualitative method in this study is the semi-structured virtual interviews. The secondary method is the focus group discussions, done with two groups with five participants each. Each participant in the semi-structured interviews was interviewed once, and there was only one focus group session per group. The interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed and coded using thematic analysis (Caliandro & Gandini 2017).

For this study, the most suitable research qualitative strategy is phenomenology. This strategy is suitable because it seeks to study human phenomena without attempting to determine causes or objective reality. The study aims to comprehend how human beings construct meaning from their experiences and interactions. This meaning is created based on human conduct and the cultural objects and social artefacts influenced by human activity (Wilson 2002; Wagner et al 2012). Furthermore, it generates results that anyone can easily understand because they usually describe the lived experiences of people in their everyday lives. This strategy also allows a study to produce novel insights because specific theories do not overly influence the study. The main weakness of this strategy is that it generally lacks rigour and focuses mainly on providing descriptions while overlooking explanation and analysis (Wagner et al. 2012; Johannesson & Perjons 2014).

This study will use the inductive approach, considering the research topic, research question, the methodology adopted and the research strategy. The choice is made because the study will start by collecting raw data through semi-structured interviews.

The data will later be condensed into themes, followed by an attempt to develop conclusions based on the themes and patterns that will emerge from coding and data analysis. The next process will involve developing a framework of the underlying structure of the experiences as depicted by the participating freelancers (Thomas 2006). The collected data is expected to create a deep understanding of the perceptions of freelancers with regard to working across borders in cross-cultural communication and the Upwork platform. The conclusions drawn from this data will then be used to answer the research questions and construct recommendations about how freelancing platforms like Upwork can help facilitate cross-cultural communication in virtual teams.

1.11 Conclusion and chapter demarcation

This first chapter delivers the dissertation's introduction and background and demarcates the study. In delivering the background, the chapter describes the primary concepts, showing how they are connected to the topic of the study and the specific environment at the Upwork digital platform, which is the organisation central to the dissertation. This introduction illustrates how the problem statement informed the focus on the perceptions of freelancers in relation to cross-cultural communication. Chapter 1 also presents the study's aim, explains why the research topic is relevant, and how it relates to the broader field of Communication Science. Chapter 2 presents the literature review. It reviews previous studies focusing on cross-cultural communication in the virtual context and issues associated with freelance workers who connect with employers using ICTs. This chapter provides insights into the seminal authors in cross-cultural communication and how ICTs affect communication across cultures. Chapter 3 focuses on theories related to cross-cultural communication, specifically within the organisational context. It provides this study with a way of identifying questions and arguments in contemporary and past studies so that this research does not just present a description of the phenomenon but goes deeper into interrogating the idea and looking at it from different perspectives. In Chapter 4, this dissertation presents the methodology. It explains why the qualitative methodology and the specific methods of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were employed. The chapter details how the sample was selected, data gathered, and analysed. Chapter 5 presents the data, discusses it, and makes conclusions. It uses

direct quotations from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to answer the questions posed in the first chapter of the study. Chapter 6 delivers the conclusion. It presents the answer to this study. Apart from making recommendations relating to what future scholars may focus on, it also makes recommendations based on the perceptions of participating freelance copywriters on how cross-cultural communication on Upwork can be improve

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW OF CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION CONSTRUCTS

2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter provided an overview of the research topic, established the context and motivation for the present study, defined central concepts and indicated the research gap. This chapter reviews the literature focusing on cross-cultural communication and issues linked to freelance workers who connect with employers and teams using information and communication technologies (ICTs). The chapter starts with a review of primary research by existing scholars. It focuses on the seminal sources they use to understand constructs linked to cross-cultural communication and the effect of ICTs on freelancers communicating across borders and cultures. This review of the literature ensures that the present study is based on a deep understanding and theoretical underpinning of the subject.

This chapter aims to present the main discussions and conclusions in cross-cultural communication about companies such as Upwork and individuals who use the services of freelancers they meet using the Upwork platform. Hence, this chapter is structured as follows: the importance of a literature review, cross-cultural communication perspectives, and ICTs' impact on work across cultures, digital labour markets and online labour markets, cross-cultural communication challenges and advantages, the correlation between effective communication and productivity, perceptions, and the focus of cross-cultural communication research.

2.2 The importance of a literature review

A literature review guides the researcher regarding the development of the study, organising ideas and writing the final report. Hence, it provides the means to describe, summarise, and conduct a critical review of the works linked to the research problem under investigation (Paul & Criado, 2020; Wimmer & Dominick 2011; Wagner, Kawulich & Garner 2012). This implies that the literature review constitutes a fundamental step in a credible research process. It allows the researcher to show how widely they have read about what they want to study and demonstrates how the study fits into the broader academic field.

When researchers conducting scientific studies begin by consulting relevant literature, they do so to get an idea of what has already been accomplished in the area they are interested in, how it was done, and the conclusions arrived at. The literature review needs to explain how knowledge in the area under study has progressed and changed over the years. It is also used to determine existing gaps regarding how the problem has been studied to date, identify any inconsistencies among the leading studies in the area, and attempt to resolve conflict among studies that seem to contradict each other (Paul & Criado 2020; Wimmer & Dominick 2011).

2.2.1 Selecting the appropriate literature review

When conducting a literature review, a researcher must identify the literature review that best suits the study's objectives. Hart (1998) categorises the literature review into different types, as presented in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1: Types of literature review

Type of Literature Review	Main characteristics
Argumentative review	Selectively identifies and examines literature that either supports or debunks a problem already well-established in the literature.
Theoretical review	Attempts to identify the existing theories regarding an issue, phenomenon, theory, or idea and how these theories are connected.
Integrated review	Seeks to critique, review, and synthesise literature related to a topic being studied to generate perspectives.
Systematic Review	Starts by clearly formulating a research question and gathering evidence in a pre-specified manner and follows a standard method to identify and critically appraise relevant studies to collect, report, and analyse data from.
Methodological review	Generally, it focuses not on the points made by a given piece of literature but on the methods the researcher used to arrive at their conclusion.

Historical review	Attempts to analyse literature from studies done over a specific period, in most cases taking a chronological stance in explaining a phenomenon from when the idea, theory, concept, or issue came to the fore and then following how it evolved.
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The present study will mainly conduct an exploratory and interpretivist systematic literature review (SLR) to review, collect, analyse and synthesise existing research literature relevant to the research question. According to Snyder (2019:33), this method “creates a firm foundation for advancing knowledge and facilitating theory development”. Because selecting a particular literature review approach does not imply that the approaches are mutually exclusive (Grant & Booth 2009), this approach allows for the use of the types of literature review presented in Table 2.1 above in varying degrees and in an integrated manner. For instance, the present study’s literature review will focus on the methods used by prior scholars who have studied cross-cultural communication and remote teams. This will involve doing a methodological review. It will also attempt to understand how the theory in this area has evolved over the years as new technologies are introduced. This will comprise conducting a historical literature review to an extent.

2.3 Cross-cultural communication perspectives

Based on the definition of the phrase ‘cross-cultural communication’ as the manner in which individuals from different cultures communicate when dealing with each other face-to-face or at a distance using communication technologies (Hurn & Tomalin 2013) as discussed in Chapter 1, this section will focus on perspectives related to cross-cultural communication.

2.3.1 Implicit and explicit communication

Communication is an ongoing process of creating and decoding meaning. The meanings that people attach to particular behaviours and reactions make it possible for individuals to infer what others think and feel based on what they say and do. Therefore, communication challenges can result from cultural gaps, leading people to infer different meanings to the same message or event (Laroche 2003; Ishii 1993). For instance, Japanese and Americans have been noted to have varying decoders at the cultural level. When people from these cultures interact, communication challenges may be the outcome if the differences between the cultures are not considered. However, these differences are both implicit and explicit, leading some to use the analogy of an iceberg when describing communication across cultures. Viewing communication as an iceberg is based on the perception that there are explicit

messages and behaviours above the surface, yet under the water lies issues such as customs, attitudes, beliefs, and values (Bačik & Turáková 2018; Ishii 1993; Harkiolakis, Halkias, & Abadir 2012;).

Examples of tangible manifestations of culture in the business world include documents, language, dress and appearance (Schein 2015). Examples of the submerged parts include time, problem-solving methods, and how men and women are expected to relate (Maude 2016). People from different parts of the world are likely to have cultural differences at both the visible and invisible levels. While the visible differences may be easier to understand, the invisible aspects will likely be the more challenging. People who share a culture usually have the same ethnic or racial background, reside in the same location and share a way of communication (Laroche et al. 2003; Maude 2011; Bačik & Turáková 2018). While the visible differences may be easier to understand, the invisible aspects will likely be the more challenging ones.

Implicit and explicit communication is impacted by knowledge and competencies relating to a specific society, its belief systems, history, and particular forms of action. This understanding and competency can be gained by having tacit, implicit or explicit knowledge. According to Nonaka and Hirotaka (1995), explicit knowledge is knowledge that can easily be expressed using numbers and words. Consequently, this type of knowledge can easily be shared. However, words and numbers only express limited knowledge. Tacit knowledge denotes knowledge that is not easy to transfer as it can be challenging to state it explicitly. This knowledge is difficult to capture and share because those who have it carry it in their minds, sometimes not even being aware that they do. Consequently, it is easy for those whose perspectives, beliefs, and mental models are impacted by that knowledge to take it for granted, finding it hard to articulate these perspectives, beliefs, and mental models (Foray & Lundvall 1998; Nonaka 2008). Mostly, tacit knowledge is gained in an implicit way, without one being conscious that one is learning (Bussing & Herbig 2003).

Management of knowledge and information has become more central within a world that is becoming more globalised. Therefore, the management of tacit, implicit and explicit knowledge becomes central whether one is communicating with other humans face to face or through technologies that facilitate communication across cultures (Albescu, Pugna & Paraschiv 2009; Loenhoff 2011).

Baker and Hanekom (2022) focus on the role of the internet and internet technologies, coupled with the rise of the sharing economy, in facilitating online communities where knowledge is created and shared. The same authors note that these digital platforms have changed how communication happens and how knowledge is shared and accessed. This has implications for freelance workers interacting with clients via digital platforms like Upwork. This view is acknowledged by Panahi, Watson, and Partridge (2016), cited by Baker and Hanekom (2022), who note that compared to traditional communication tools, using digital media platforms may provide greater potential for knowledge sharing, which could facilitate the flow of knowledge between individuals working across geographical areas.

2.3.2 Influence of culture on communication

In the definition of culture as a system of values, beliefs, and practices that provide particular groups with the ability to understand each other and solve everyday challenges, it was noted that a human being is a product of the culture in which they were raised (Ishii 1993; Laroche et al. 2003; Biddle et al. 2007; Maude 2011; Harkiolakis et al. 2012). Therefore, it can be concluded that culture defines how a group, nation, or community expresses common perceptions and experiences. In shared experiences, communities develop distinct interactive environments, where specific practices and values can be seen in the tendency to favour specific ways of being over others and through rituals, symbols, and heroes apparent to an outside observer (Harkiolakis et al 2012; Maude 2011).

Cross-cultural communication involves acknowledging that the experiences of people from different cultures could vary depending on several factors, such as politics, history, and past or present inequalities. When studying cross-cultural communication, the notions scholars often look at include religion, community, ethnicity, nationality, politics, gender, habits, history, social status, geography, race, customs and subgroups (Croucher 2017; Moola & Sibango 2017).

Understanding cross-cultural communication starts with recognising the reality that culture distinguishes the way members of one group behave and think compared to another group (Lipnack & Stamps 1997). For example, some cultures may prefer speed and enjoy the efficiency of sparse and target prose often used in email communication, where the response is expected to be equally fast. On the other hand,

this type of communication may be perceived as inappropriate in work cultures, where care is taken when producing a response. In such cultures, a written message that does not provide nonverbal cues can be perceived as incomplete (Hofstede 2011; Khaitan 1999, as cited in Vinaja 2013). This implies that people working across cultures need to recognise the differences between cultures if they are to work together effectively. Such an understanding could create awareness regarding the cultural differences that impact communication, providing a basis for dealing with challenges emanating from different cultures in the virtual workplace.

In work facilitated through platforms like Upwork, communication often happens across cultures, expedited by ICTs. In this context, communication denotes the exchange of views as information and knowledge is transferred. It also involves discussion and consultation involving decision-making about actions that need to be taken to solve problems (Johansson 2000). Concerning the present study, several issues come into play when one looks at communication as a way of solving problems. For instance, the main question relates to how clients and freelancer copywriters from different cultures approach the communication of knowledge so that everyone is clear about what a job entails and what is expected from them to meet the job demands. The question will also look at how problems are solved through communication where the expectations have not been met.

Several studies (e.g. Aneas & Sandin 2009; Yusuf et al 2014; Zlomislić 2016) have already concluded that different cultures communicate problems differently. For instance, these studies show that while more liberal and open societies want to define problems and candidly talk about them, people from more conservative cultures want to be less blunt. This relates to one of the questions in the present study, which seeks to determine what guides freelancers on Upwork when determining the cultural standpoint from which they communicate with clients and other team members when working in virtual teams. The question seeks to determine how these freelancers expect issues to be communicated and how problem-solving should be approached.

It can be concluded that people from different cultures have explicit or implicit differences. These differences could be in diverse areas, including attitudes towards gender, location, religion, work styles, race, sexual orientation and language. Therefore, culture influences the way people communicate. This implies that people

from different cultures may attach different meanings to the same event, behaviour, reaction, or term. For this reason, cross-cultural communication deals with the way people from the same culture communicate and how this communication differs from that of other cultures.

2.3.3 The influence of ICTs on cross-cultural communication

The above section noted that people often share a system of values, beliefs and practices based on their culture and culture is often shared by people within a specific geographic location. On this basis, it can be assumed that as ICTs progressively dismantle traditional boundaries, cross-cultural communication in the workplace will become more common. The cultural differences of people from different parts of the world are likely to be more noticeable now that the world has become even more connected to what is generally referred to as the global village. One of the leading scholars who has studied the influence of technology on communication is McLuhan (1964). McLuhan (1964:1) makes the famous statement that has been central to the ideas of many scholars who have studied the influence of ICTs in communication across cultures:

In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message.

McLuhan (1964) explains the above statement by saying that any medium's social and personal consequences are a result of the new scale introduced into the affairs of humans as humans are extended by new technologies. In the above statements, McLuhan (1964) implies that new technologies, as extensions of human beings, change how these humans think and act. For instance, when a technology like a computer or a cell phone is introduced, it begins to control how people communicate and interact. This argument is based on the assumption that the specific type of content these technologies make available would not have been possible without the technologies. Therefore, the "medium is the message" because the medium plays the role of controlling and shaping the actions and associations between humans (McLuhan 1964).

McLuhan's (1964) views above show that attempting to understand the communication without paying attention to the role played by the medium is likely only

to explain half the idea. On this basis, the present study will focus on how ICTs, as a way of connecting people from different cultures in virtual workplaces like Upwork, are perceived by the freelance copywriters whose livelihoods depend on the communication processes facilitated by these technologies. Upwork provides a platform for freelancers, including web developers, coders, and writers, to connect with businesses looking for these skills on a project-by-project basis (Green et al 2018).

Barry and Fulmer (2004) attempted to explain the relationship between the medium and the message by articulating a theory of media adaptation in a dyadic influence. These scholars begin by noting that the motivation for most social interactions in an organisation is driven by the goal of influencing the other party's behaviour, beliefs and attitudes. However, these scholars note that researchers have paid little attention to the role played by communication media used by those who want to influence others in their attempt to attain their social objectives. They proposed the theory that focuses on ways that the communication media affects the generation of behaviour in attempting to influence others and how parties in an organisational communication situation adapt to the communication media. Their efforts to develop the theory are motivated by the changes in communication technology and organisational behaviour. The changes in organisations are resulting in less bureaucracy. Hierarchy is being deemphasised, leading to parties resorting to influencing others, as a means of eir objectives (Barry & Fulmer 2004; Gewant 2016).

Barry and Fulmer (2004) advance the view that the ability of digital networks to bring together structure and technology results in a situation where computing devices and digital networks as vehicles facilitating interaction have introduced considerable changes in the context in which organisations communicate in general. The theory advanced by Barry and Fulmer (2004) proposes that effective communication results from adapting the communication channel to the goal of the communication. For instance, an adamant individual may be persuaded better through a well-reasoned email articulating the influence seeker's points clearly than through the phone or virtual meeting, where someone can answer before a point has been entirely made and they have considered it thoroughly.

More recently, the idea that the medium is the message is shifting in the direction of social media. In their study, Jara-Figueroa et al (2019) propose that communication technologies, from printing to social media, impact historical records by influencing the manner in which ideas are recorded and spread. In a study involving social media platforms, including WeChat, YouTube, and Facebook, Ju, Hamilton, and McLarnon (2021) emphasised the influence of social media on the acculturation of Chinese immigrants in Canada. The researchers concluded that the participants in their study indicated that they used specific social media platforms for specific forms of communication. They also concluded that the same communication activity on different platforms had a different impact. This shows the importance of differentiating precise uses of social media with the aim of better understanding how each platform influences the message. In this regard, Ju et al (2021) propose that this indicates that the results confirm that, at least in part, the medium is the message.

Ground-breaking as it is, the view that the medium is the message has been criticised. For example, McLuhan (1964) seems to place most of the power in the medium, as if without the medium, there would be no communication. This could mean that McLuhan (1964) lowers the value of the content (Lieberman 1967). It could be argued that technology gives people the means to say what they would have said anywhere. So, the message is already there, and the medium just expresses it (Schramm 1973; Sohail, 2018). However, such an argument would also be deficient because it fails to realise that certain concepts may never have become possible if the medium had not been there. For example, the idea of remote work connected by ICTs, which is the present study's focus, would not have been there if the medium (the ICTs) were not there. This means that the expressions that the medium makes possible should not be ignored (Ju et al 2021). Therefore, separating the medium, and the message becomes challenging because they influence each other.

Notwithstanding the criticism, McLuhan (1964), Barry and Fulmer (2004), and Jara-Figueroa et al's (2019) conclusions provide crucial perspectives for cross-cultural communication studies relevant to this study. They introduce the important question of how different mediums can impact the communication process when people interact across cultures. They provide scholars in the field with a point of departure regarding the influence of technology on the message. The views and arguments show the importance of carefully considering the message and the most effective medium to

use when determining how to communicate with people across cultures. These views become even more important in the context of ever-changing technology, which has the potential to bring people together but also separates those who can afford the technologies from those who cannot (Fuchsa & Horak 2008; Doonga & Ho 2012).

2.4 ICTs' impact on work across cultures

It is generally accepted that ICTs boost productivity while adding employment opportunities (Varma & Sasikumar 2004; Shuter 2017). But there remains a question regarding the conditions under which this employment is created. For example, one may ask about the impact of the manner in which communication takes place across cultures on such platforms. It is posited that this question could be better answered by freelancers already experiencing platforms like Upwork.

ICTs denote technological innovations in computing telecommunications, fibre optics, semiconductors and microprocessors. Scholars like Sharafat and Lehr (2017) and Varma and Sasikumar (2004) conclude that these technologies have changed how information and knowledge are processed, stored, and disseminated. They note that such tools can deliver information to people in different parts of the world at rapid speeds, dismantling boundaries and making it possible for individuals to work from anywhere as long as they can connect to the areas where the information is stored. In this context, traditional forms of work are changing, paving the way for new forms of work like freelancing. This is an idea that the Future of Work Institute (2012) has spent some time exploring by conducting in-depth interviews to understand how the changing context of work creates new opportunities and challenges. From its study, the Future of Work Institute (2012:5) concludes that:

The context in which work occurs is changing rapidly, creating new challenges and opportunities for companies ... Traditional working methods are no longer valid, as the work landscape is redefined by advanced technologies, new societal values, changing demographics, and rapid globalisation.

These opportunities and challenges that companies face are likely to be addressed by adopting the agility provided by flexible working arrangements (The Future of Work Institute 2012). These flexible working arrangements solve these challenges because they are characterised by interactivity and the co-creation of knowledge and information. Barker and Hanekom (2022) posit that the interactivity made possible by

digital platforms and the resulting empowerment to work together, co-create, and share concerns, knowledge, feelings, and opinions – no matter where individuals are located – require the management of content, information and knowledge to boost the consumption of information when making decisions. Therefore, it could be argued that digital platforms boost the production and dissemination of information and messages that result in the transformation of behaviour and decision-making processes.

Garcia-Marillo (2016) investigated the impact of ICTs on employment in Latin America and concluded that communication and information technologies are displacing some kinds of employment, particularly those requiring mid-level skills. Using information from The International Monetary Fund, The World Bank and the International Labour Organization, Garcia-Marillo (2016) concludes that it is clear that technology has introduced significant changes in life in general, including the types of employment available. These observations are of interest to the present study because they lead to the question of whether the people in a developing country such as South Africa have the skills that the jobs facilitated by ICTs require. A study focusing on the information society and the digital divide in South Africa by Bornman (2015) concluded when it comes to mobile internet access there are also gaps based on gender, population groups, and levels of education.

Sharafat and Lehr (2017:5) explored research literature focusing on the socio-economic impacts of ICTs. They concluded that the main characteristic of ICTs is that they facilitate “richer, faster, and more flexible communications and decision-making by enabling electronic communication, information gathering, computation, and control at a distance.” While empirical evidence shows that ICTs bring several advantages, some evidence also shows that they also lead to social problems that accentuate social divides. For example, a sizable global population still does not have access to these technologies, resulting in a polarisation of the labour market and widening the income gap (Open Society Foundations 2015; Codagnone et al 2016). These discussions are crucial for a country like South Africa, where income inequality is sometimes considered the highest in the world (International Monetary Fund, 2020).

A discussion that fails to consider the reality that a sizable population does not have access to ICTs will also ignore the reality that ICTs may widen the gap between the haves and the have-nots, perpetuating the problem these technologies are purported

to solve. For example, the people who need the jobs made available by the ICTs may not have the skills to use the ICTs, let alone the skills to do the jobs posted on platforms like Upwork. Therefore, these ICTs will only have the impact they are purported to have on some groups within society while excluding others. For these technologies to be available to everyone, there needs to be an availability of complementary elements like access to devices and universal broadband services (Sharafat & Lehr 2017). This implies that only having ICTs will likely not be helpful unless these technologies are effectively used. This idea is connected to the present study because it seeks to ask whether the participating freelancer copywriters already using ICTs to connect with employers believe that these technologies and platforms present a viable option for those who may want to take up jobs outside their countries facilitated by these technologies.

Other elements that may be taken for granted when looking at the impact of ICTs in the employment sector include the provision of electricity and support services for repairing devices used when freelancers connect with employers worldwide. Even countries that are relatively advanced, like South Africa, still suffer energy shortages (Public Servants Association [PSA] 2015). For instance, the energy crisis in South Africa has been getting worse, mostly affecting small businesses and freelancers who work from home without the resources to mitigate the blackouts (Berahab, 2022).

It is essential to understand the context in which the changes noted above, such as the dismantling of boundaries, introduction of online workspaces, rapid processing of information, and the displacement of some types of employment, are taking place. The available literature shows that the shift is taking place within a context of advancing technologies, societies adopting new values, progressing globalisation, and changing demographics (Sharafat & Lehr 2017; Mcfall 2004, 30; Zlomislić 2016). For this study, an in-depth analysis of these issues is likely to assist in understanding the context in which freelancers on platforms like Upwork do their work. This context has a bearing on the perceptions of these freelancers about these platforms as places that provide possibilities for future work opportunities, how the freelancers approach issues linked to communicating across cultures, and whether these freelancers see these platforms as solutions for companies in countries that have shortages of labour and workers from countries where there are shortages of jobs.

As technologies like computers become more common, they progressively get sophisticated enough to take over iterative tasks such as calculations and answering frequently asked questions. This is exemplified by applications leveraging artificial intelligence (AI), such as the recently launched ChatGTP, a natural language processing tool driven by AI technology that permits users to have human-like conversations and ask specific questions (Ortiz 2023). This has led to the costs of doing standardised tasks experiencing a reduction of a trillion-fold within the last seven decades (Future of Work Institute 2012). At the same time, other roles became more complicated and global (Zlomislíć 2016). As roles become more complex and global, ICTs are likely to fill the gap created by the labour shortage in specific geographic environments by allowing for increased collaboration without being limited by borders. These technologies affect where people can work and who they can work with (Future of Work Institute 2012; Sharafat & Lehr 2017). However, it is still likely that for these jobs - connected by new technologies - to meet their objectives, there is a need to manage communication across cultures (Mantello et al. 2023).

One of the traditional workplace features is that employees need to observe protocol based on hierarchies and the management of power relations (Schirmer & Geithner 2018). However, power relations and hierarchies in different cultures are not managed similarly. For example, some societies may favour the control-and-command style, while others may veer towards the connect-and-collaboration angle (Brotos & Errasti 2018). Therefore, advancing technologies bring about issues that need to be addressed in relation to communication.

The changes brought about by ICTs have also created new social values. For instance, the study conducted by the Future of Work Institute (2012:3) concluded: “that an employee is more likely to find meaning in a company if they have some power over their work conditions and can work in more agile ways.” This situation leads to a push towards agility and autonomy, where individuals want to have a say on how their work environments should be structured and where the work should be located.

This shift in societal values described in the above paragraphs could lead to the argument that ICTs may be dismantling the leader/follower relationship that has been a feature of the traditional workplace. The traditional leader/follower relationship requires a particular way of communicating. The shifting social values propagated by

communication technologies could radically transform work and working identities (Sharafat & Lehr 2017; McFal 2004). One of the main processes defining the new modernity that these technologies boost is individualisation. Work contracts are negotiated individually, management systems are decentralised, and employees are becoming empowered and enterprising. While there are differences regarding whether the technologies empower or disempower employees, work platforms like Upwork make it possible for each freelance copywriter to negotiate their contract, and they are managed from a decentralised location. These freelancers have more power to determine which work they can and will not take (Upwork 2020).

From the views expressed above, it is clear that ICTs and the communication and connections they make possible are changing the way in which people work. For instance, these technologies enable people to connect and share information with ease and more rapidly, working for virtual organisations within a global setting. These types of organisations are described by DeSantis and Monge (1999:693) as “a collection of geographically distributed, functionally and/or culturally diverse entities that are linked by electronic forms of communication and rely on lateral, dynamic relationships for coordination.” Monge et al (1998) and Monge and Kalman (1996) introduce three notable impacts of globalisation and the communication technologies that go hand in hand with it: disembeddedness in single locations, global consciousness, and the compression of time and space.

Globalisation and the accompanying technologies promote a situation where people can work from anywhere and from different cultures who have to communicate and understand each other (McFal 2004; Sharafat & Lehr 2017). The present study introduces the question of how these changes affect communication, not just among people from the same culture but also among people from different cultures working in virtual teams. For instance, a question could relate to what freelancers perceive as the difference between communication when working in colocation (where all employees work from a centralised location) and communication when working virtually (using ICTs to mediate communication) across cultures (Ozimek 2020). Such a discussion leads to questions such as what guides freelancers when determining the cultural standpoint they communicate with clients and other team members when working in virtual teams.

2.5 Online labour markets

Online labour markets are the digital connections that make it possible for people doing work to connect with clients, work and deliver the product or goods and get paid using the internet (Barnard 2015; Graham et al 2017). The interview participants in this study will be copywriters who connect with employers and teams using an online freelancing platform called Upwork. Therefore, this study focuses on the work of such platforms to discover what they do, who has profiles on these platforms, why these individuals select these platforms, and how cross-cultural communication is handled on these platforms. This will form the basis for creating questions that will help the study to address the research problem and answer the question related to the perceptions of freelancer copywriters about Upwork and cross-cultural communication.

Upwork, together with other online platforms that connect employers to freelancers such as Freelancer, Amazon, and Mechanical Turk, are collectively called Online Labour Markets (OLMs). Codagnone, Abadie and Biagi (2016) note that even though evidence tends to be limited and inconclusive, an analysis of the literature about these labour markets shows two main trends. The first trend is that people in these markets are primarily there to make money, with many individuals saying that these platforms are their primary source of income. Most of these individuals are self-employed and underemployed, while a smaller proportion is inactive or unemployed. The second trend is that there is friction and hiring inefficiencies on these platforms. For the present study, this is an important observation because it could assist in shaping questions related to how freelancers perceive Upwork and cross-cultural communication on the platform. The study will determine whether, based on how communication occurs on Upwork, the freelancers see the platform as the solution for other South Africans struggling to get jobs within the local economy.

OLMs are broadly connected to broader trends like the globalisation of labour markets, which is a mixture of job polarisation and computerisation, offshoring and outsourcing, and work decentralisation, which has resulted from the emergence of Non-Standard Work (NSW) (Codagnone et al 2016; Goos, Manning & Salomons 2011; OECD 2017). Proponents perceive these markets as a way of placing power in the hands of individuals, making it possible for them to decide whether they will accept positions that comply with their own terms for financial gain. They also believe these

marketplaces are levelling the field for international service markets, creating a means for people looking for work to work for any employer no matter their location (Lehdonvirta et al 2014). Opponents of OLMs see them as channels that are not regulated and where the exploitation of workers is rampant (Codagnone et al 2016).

Even though ICTs and the proliferation of globalisation have created job opportunities for millions, they have also created threats (Dolphin 2015). Developed economies have seen jobs moving into the less developed world where workers are more willing to take lower rates, resulting in a decreasing demand for low-skilled employees in developed economies (Lehdonvirta et al 2014; Dolphin 2015; Green et al. 2018). This implies that the effects of globalisation and the changing labour market present both advantages and disadvantages; hence it is posited that a need exists to determine the advantages that participants in this study may perceive as emanating from working for clients in different parts of the world.

OLMs like Upwork present many opportunities and challenges. Examples of such opportunities include the following:

- Increased pool of employers and employees by dismantling barriers
- Lowering transaction costs
- Boosting human capital specialisation
- Improving matching
- The potential to increase productivity

These OLMs are predicted to boost the global economy by more than three trillion dollars (Open Society Foundations 2015; Sharafat & Lehr 2017). These platforms could improve productivity through reduced bureaucracy and make it faster for people looking for work to connect with employers, leading to work being available for the currently unemployed and more work for current part-timers (Codagnone et al. 2016).

2.6 Communication challenges in freelancing teams

Even though multi-cultural issues may not always be on the surface, they still exist in virtual teams connected by online labour communities (Ishii 1993; Harkiolakis, Halkias, & Abadir 2012). Such challenges can be connected to communication, project management, technology, and culture. Although cross-cultural communication issues faced by people attempting to communicate across cultures may differ, they all result in a message not getting across. The reason behind the message not getting across

could be that the recipient of the message did not understand the meaning of what was said, or what they understood is different from what was said (Laroche et al. 2003; Vinaja 2014). The challenges linked to OLMs are presented in greater detail in the following sections.

2.6.1 Increased mismatches, biases or frictions

In relation to increasing mismatches, biases or frictions, Lehdonvirta et al (2014) conclude that the online labour markets are international, but domestic contractors' rates are higher than those of international contractors for similar type of work. Also, because the types of employment created by these online labour markets could be precarious (there are often no binding contracts, and employers or freelancers can terminate contracts anytime they want), they could become a source of social costs and risks. The general absence of government laws and the labour union protection available to other full-time workers can be considered a risk for the freelancer. There is often no guarantee for the employer that the freelancer working without supervision clearly understands what needs to be done until a job is submitted. One of the main risks for freelancers on platforms like Upwork is that they may not get a chance to learn crucial skills like communication, teamwork, and leadership because their employers do not treat them like the full-time staff that require an investment in training for these skills. Also, the temporary work prevalent in these platforms could result in blockages to social mobility resulting from the fact that the employee is not fully employed and may not be eligible for promotion (Open Society Foundations 2015; Codagnone et al 2016; Sharafat and Lehr 2017; Green et al 2018; Su, 2022).

2.6.2 Greater chances of misunderstanding

Technologies that enhance communication across cultures can widen employment opportunities, but they can also present a barrier, confusion and misunderstanding. Communicating effectively can be challenging even for people speaking the same language if they have cultural and ethnic differences (Zlomislić et al 2016; Mathews & Thakker 2012; Braesemann, 2022). However, it is not clear whether these challenges are more profound for freelancers attempting to navigate different cultures and languages. This question was answered by the freelancers taking part in the present study.

2.6.3 Constant need to negotiate boundaries

Because they work for different employers, often on short-term projects, freelancers face the challenge of constantly renegotiating the impact of crossing cultural, geographic, project and time boundaries. The phrase *cross-cultural communication* implies that communication happens across boundaries that are culturally defined (Petronio et al. 1998). The metaphor of boundary is found in all facets of life (states, school districts, property lines, cities, jobs, and relationships) and has guided a lot of research in intergroup and interpersonal communication. These boundaries can be sustained, changed, or dissolved and are often misunderstood and misinterpreted (Petronio 1998; Ching 2019; Zakira 2020). This implies that there is always a constant negotiation of intergroup boundaries where social identity and categorisation play a crucial role. Individuals decide how they deal with boundaries, sometimes deciding to remain inside their boundaries or involved in communication that helps them find common ground with people outside their boundaries. These decisions are based on analysing a situation and deciding whether it is within the interest of a group to remain within its boundaries or if their interests will be saved better by dismantling the boundaries and linking with other groups (Petronio et al 1998; Zakira 2020).

In the context of this study, it can be noted that freelancers who decide to transcend cultural boundaries to link with virtual teams and employers probably do so based on the realisation that negotiating the boundaries and shifting them best serves their interests. This view is also related to the power of ICTs to dismantle boundaries and allow communication across cultures. Therefore, these ideas could assist the study in determining the kinds of questions that participants will be asked. For instance, one of the questions (RQ 4) that this study seeks to answer is “Based on their perception of cross-cultural communication and the Upwork platform, what is South African copywriters’ perception regarding the platform as a source of employment for other South Africans?” The interrogations that could assist this study in answering this specific question could be related to whether freelancers perceive platforms like Upwork as having the ability to shift the boundaries or even dismantle them altogether. Where they said they do, participants were requested to offer suggestions on how they accomplish this. These questions assist in eventually answering the question as to whether freelancers working on platforms like Upwork perceive these platforms to dismantle boundaries in such a way that they open the labour market for people to

participate in without multicultural issues that Vinaja (2014) alludes to when people perceive each other as belonging to different boundaries. In this case, the boundaries could be linked to skin colour, language, culture, gender, sexual orientation, title, or geographical region. Such boundaries may influence communication (Zakira 2020; Mallman 2021).

If the impact of boundaries is ignored, the result could be miscommunication. The level of miscommunication that boundaries can facilitate depends on how tight the boundaries are enforced. Where they are too tight, miscommunication could result from the fact that those who try to communicate outside the boundaries do so without sufficient information about how those inside the boundaries communicate a specific event. On the other hand, where boundaries are too loose, miscommunication can result from those outside the boundaries making absurd assumptions about how those inside the boundaries understand events. The loose boundaries may also result in lost individual identities (Petronio et al. 1998; Ching 2019; Zakira 2020).

2.6.4 Lack of opportunity to learn through observation

A significant challenge in cross-cultural communication mediated by ICTs on platforms like Upwork is identified by Johansson et al (2000), who note that the information transferred by modern information technology moves at high speeds in virtual environments where people do not have the opportunity to learn from each other through observation. This lack of learning through observing others renders communication incomplete and impacts information quality, which in turn could affect the productivity of freelance workers on platforms like Upwork (Behl 2021).

2.7 The correlation between effective communication and productivity

Some studies exploring the relationship between communication and productivity conclude that when communication is effective, employees understand what needs to be done, a situation that could enhance output, commitment and motivation (Rukmana, Sopiah, & Nora 2018; Femi 2014; Kalogiannidis 2010). Productivity denotes a measure of how efficiently an individual employs inputs like capital and labour to produce the expected output level (Sayin & Karaman 2019). Effective communication is perceived as communication that leads to the desired goal for both parties involved in the communication process. It educates and informs employees at all levels of the organisation and spurs them to support the objectives and strategy of

the organisation while also facilitating collaborative practice (Husain 2013; Suter, Arndt et al 2009). For instance, for freelancer copywriters, effective communication could mean that the details, roles and expectations of the job are precise. For the employer, effective communication may mean that the employee knows what they need to do, and when they do not understand, there are means to get clarity. Therefore, the employee will deliver work that meets the employer's standards based on an express agreement regarding quality and costs (Behl et al 2021).

Based on the understanding that there is a correlation between effective communication and productivity, it can be recommended that managers find ways of dealing with communication barriers, such as cultural differences, to boost the commitment and performance of employees. Businesses can accomplish this by sustaining a good flow of information across the organisation by understanding employees' differences and how these differences can affect communication. This could have the effect of improving performance and, consequently, the profitability of the organisation. Employers can also make it easier for employees to communicate, even outside working hours, to encourage employees to get to know each other (Rukmana, Sopiah & Nora 2018; Femi 2014; Kalogiannidis 2010).

A careful analysis of the conclusions above shows that several scholars have explored the effect of communication on performance in traditional brick-and-mortar organisations. However, there seems to be a shortage of literature regarding how effective communication affects productivity in the digital and freelancing space. On this basis, the present study seeks to determine the perceptions of freelancers on Upwork regarding the effect of communication as facilitated by Upwork on their productivity.

2.8 Perceptions

This study explores the perceptions of freelancers regarding Upwork and cross-cultural communication on the platform. Therefore, it is vital to determine what the idea of perception means and how other scholars who have studied perceptions accomplished their objectives.

2.8.1 Defining perception

Perception is a mode of understanding experience and reality through the senses and other underlying mechanisms (Broadbent 2013). This comprehension results in the

discernment of action, behaviour, language, form and figure. Judgements and opinions held by individuals are influenced by perception. Therefore, perception can be understood to denote how individuals read their environment. Perception is impacted by the context in which an individual views a situation, their subjectivity, history, education, expectations and other elements (Munhall 2008; Broadbent 2013, Lange et al 2018).

2.8.2 Primary elements on which perceptions are grounded

According to Harkiolakis et al (2012), social perceptions are grounded on three primary elements: perceptions of the situation, perceptions of the other party, and perceptions about the individual making the perception. A summary of these elements is crucial for this study. It provides an understanding of the angles from which people from varying cultures communicate. It explains what influences individuals as they adopt positions in negotiations related to issues like deadlines, payment, or ways of evaluating the success or failure to meet objectives related to a particular project.

Perceptions of the situation include judgements made by the individuals in a communication process about the process under which the communication occurs. Factors involved include the structure of the negotiation, the content and how the information is shared. This perception is influenced by an individual's previous experiences and information about the results other negotiators achieved in the same context. Also, the perception is linked to cognitive generalisations about situations and people that the concerned individual brings to social interaction in shaping that interaction (Cantor 1981; Harkiolakis et al 2012).

Regarding *perceptions of the other party*, individuals attempt to assess the beliefs and interpretations of their counterparties. They do this to determine what the other party thinks about them. This is accomplished by looking at behavioural cues like strategies, tactics, reactions, and trait inferences like cooperativeness, expertise, and reputation. Throughout the negotiation process, the communicators look for signs of respect, trust and social relationship development as the communication process proceeds (Harkiolakis et al 2012).

While cross-cultural communication generally deals with people or groups from different cultures, it can also deal with how the *individuals in the communication process perceive* themselves. For an individual to determine how they perceive

themselves, they need to attain a level of consciousness where they can listen to their internal voice. This involves developing the maturity to be clear about the individual's values, motives, and ability to judge their own behaviours (Harkiolakis et al 2012; Grice 2020; Hafri 2021).

2.8.3 Impact of perceptions in cross-cultural communication

Perceptions can assist in understanding what an experience means for an individual, social group or culture. People can express their perceptions in several ways: behaviour, reactions to individuals or groups, storytelling or narratives. For many people, the perceptions and the interpretations they create become their source of truth. Therefore, perceptions also influence relationships by determining how an individual defines another person, such as a friend, employee, employer, relative, acquaintance or colleague. This makes perceptions influential and powerful in impacting how people behave, think, and communicate (Munhall 2008; Knapp, Ellis, & Williams 2009).

Understanding how perceptions impact cross-cultural communication is vital for the present study, principally in relation to instances where the same event is interpreted in opposing ways by different individuals or groups, creating perceptual disparity. This situation is where two different subjective perceptions of the same event or experience are contradictory, occurring between different people or groups. This can be the source of misunderstanding, prejudice, and conflict. Perceptions emanate from subjective judgements influenced by an individual's norms and values, which are then self-influenced by the families, tribes, ethnic, religious, tribal, or regional groups an individual belongs to (Munhall 2008; Harkiolakis et al. 2012).

Understanding how perceptions impact intercultural communication is important not only for the individuals or group a researcher is dealing with but also for the researcher themselves (Munhall 2008). This is because the researcher needs to determine their own perceptions to determine what to do so those perceptions do not interfere with how they understand the experiences of the research participants.

From the insights above, it is clear that perception influences the manner in which people interpret communication messages. For the present study, the concept of perception is crucial in two ways. The first is that it is linked to the topic, which is about the perceptions of freelancers regarding cross-cultural communication on Upwork.

Therefore, the views of the scholars above provide a way of defining perception as a concept. The second is that it provides insights into how communication messages are formed and interpreted based on how the participating individuals perceive the world in general, the specific situation, or the person they are communicating. This highlights the reality that different people can interpret messages differently, depending on their culture (Majid et al 2018).

A more detailed discussion of how perceptions will be managed is included in Chapter 4. Meanwhile, Munhall (2008:123) suggests, "Perceptions are subjective, and when in interaction, individuals or groups engage in an intersubjective dialogue or dialect where the potential for different interpretations exist." This idea forms a central pillar of the present study to provide insights for designing questions for data collection and interpreting the answers.

2.9 The focus of cross-cultural communication research

Several scholars have studied cross-cultural communication in various contexts. This section will summarise and integrate the findings of some of the arguments relevant to the present study.

An analysis of available studies shows that scholars perceive cross-cultural communication as a field of science concerned with the interactions between groups and individuals whose cultures differ (Kinloch & Metge 2001; Aneas & Sandin 2009; Maude 2011; Maliki, Housni & Tayeb 2019). This perspective shows that any attempt to study cross-cultural communication would involve looking at the differences in how people communicate based on the influence of their culture. It also indicates that differences in culture could create differences in communication. Such differences could produce barriers that must be overcome if effective communication is to be achieved (Aneas & Sandins 2009).

Even though the origins of studies into communication across cultures can be located in the years following the end of the Second World War and the establishment of the United Nations, Hall (1959) is generally accepted as the pioneer in using the phrase *cross-cultural communication*. His work influenced many of the studies done in the 1960s and 1970s. As the research into the area became more widespread in the 1970s, scholars started to systematise the areas of investigation. This was followed

by the 1980s when studies focused more on analysing theory and refining research methodology (Aneas & Sandin 2009).

Interestingly, when Hall (1959) used the phrase cross-cultural communication and made it popular, there was also a paper produced by Kartz (1959) citing Bernard Berelson. Berelson (1959) argued that communication research might be dead and supported his argument by saying that the communication scholars of that day had nothing new to contribute and could not be compared to the pioneers of the field of communication. This view was vehemently opposed by the communication scholars of that day. They argued that there were various studies and numerous inquiries that showed that Bernard was missing the point. Kartz (1959:1) suggested that those who dismissed Bernard's views may not have clearly understood what he meant by what he referred to as dying: "communication research viewed as the study of mass persuasion."

An analysis of the arguments related to Bernard's view is telling with regard to the trajectory of communication research. If Bernard (1959) was arguing that the study of mass communication and its ability to change people's thinking in the short term was dead, it can be deduced that the pioneers of communication research were primarily concerned about communication and its impact on opinions, thinking and actions. This explains why quantitative methods had a monopoly in studying cross-cultural communication until the 1990s. This was an epoch when the *International and Intercultural Communication Annual* was established, allowing for methodological pluralism that encouraged more scholars to use qualitative research methods (Aneas & Sandin 2009).

The current debate about digital technologies and their effect on communication seems to have started getting popular in the early 1990s as the networked computer revolution started to explode. This is when new questions related to how technology is influencing the manner in which workers relate to work started surfacing. An analysis of contemporary scholars in various communication disciplines highlights the role of etiquette in the international business management setting and cross-cultural communication situations. This interest is based on the assumption that for someone to manage people from different cultures, the manager should always behave in a way

that shows they understand that people come from different cultures (Okoro 2012; Mukherjee & Ramos-Salazar 2014; Open Society Foundations 2015; Marzena 2017).

Several studies show the importance of cross-cultural awareness for those managing people (Zakaria 2000; Deng & Gibson 2008; Kumar & Anjun 2011). These studies conduct a wide-ranging assessment in the prevailing international context and conclude that the rapid proliferation of multinational businesses in the last few decades makes it essential to learn more about how humans behave based on different cultures to lessen the risk of managerial failures (Yu 2007; Carte & Fox 2008; Bovee & Thill 2011).

2.9.1 Summary of cross-cultural communication studies related to virtual teams

Table 2.2 presents a summary of the studies most relevant to this study.

Table 2.2: Summary of cross-cultural communication studies

Study	Authors	Summary of study conclusions
Communication and trust in global virtual teams	Jarvenpaa & Leidner (1999)	Explores communication and trust in global virtual teams that transcend space, time and culture. The researchers report on case studies where participants were given a collaborative project that they could only accomplish using computer-mediated communication. The results show that while trust is gained quickly in these teams, it is temporal and fragile
A dialogue technique to enhance electronic communication in virtual teams	Tan, Wei, Huang, and Ng (2000)	Note that previous studies have concluded that when virtual teams are ineffective, it is because electronic communication fails to facilitate the establishment of a common understanding in virtual teams. These authors suggest a dialogue method that facilitates a common understanding between members of virtual teams.
Leading virtual teams	Malhotra, Majchrzak and Rosen (2007)	Employ interviews, observations, and survey data to identify six leadership practices of virtual teams. Two of these practices are relevant to the present study: create and sustain trust using communication technology and ensure that diversity is appreciated and understood.
Parameters for successful management of cross-cultural virtual teams	Gullet & Sixl-Daniel (2008)	Involved an analysis of empirical observations from 450 students selected from 18 online graduate classes worldwide and their cross-cultural collaboration in virtual groups. The study concludes

		that positive relationships and trust were established when students responded regularly and on time using various communication channels like discussion boards and emails.
A model for developing effective virtual teams	Lin, Standing, & Liu (2008).	This study presents factors influencing the effectiveness of virtual teams. It concludes that while these factors are still ambiguous, communication is a tool that directly influences the team's social dimensions, impacting both satisfaction and performance.
The power of individual cultural values in global virtual teams.	Mockaitis, Rose, & Zettinig (2012)	Uses a student-based sample to investigate perceptions of culturally diverse virtual teams. The study focuses on the relationship between members of global virtual teams regarding these members' collectivist and individualistic orientations and how they evaluate communication, sharing of information, interdependence, trust, and conflict during team tasks. The study concludes that virtual methods of communication do not conceal cultural differences and that the collectivist orientation is associated with favourable impressions among global virtual teams.
Virtual teams are literally and metaphorically invisible	Au & Marks (2012)	Focus on the effect of perceived cultural differences in forging an identity in virtual teams. The study involves seven virtual teams from Brazil, Malaysia, Myanmar, the UK, and the USA. It concludes that perceived differences in national culture and how individuals within the cultures communicate affect how people make identity decisions in virtual cultures. These authors suggest that this could result in unhealthy national and racial stereotypes that could be the basis for conflict. The results of this study show

		why it is vital to encourage members of virtual teams to appreciate and understand differences.
Are freelancers a neglected form of small business?	Kitching & Smallbone (2012)	Argue that freelancing is ignored by researchers. The paper maintains that even though business research neglects freelancers, they are becoming an important proportion of the business stock in countries like the UK.
The challenge of multicultural communication in virtual teams	Duran & Popescu (2014)	Is based on a study conducted using a questionnaire to analyse virtual teams by considering how national culture impacts the entire team's communication. The researchers conclude that the character of collaboration in a virtual team depends on how cultural diversity is managed.
Working with multicultural virtual teams: Critical factors for facilitation, satisfaction and success.	Cagiltay, Bichelmeyer, & Kaplan Akilli (2015)	Conducted a literature review focusing on collaborative work and how it develops in multicultural virtual teams. The study focuses on the intricacies of communication among team members from different cultures who often have to interact in an environment devoid of social cues, how these teams resolve conflicts emanating from a different understanding of basic issues, and how trust is established and maintained among these teams. The researchers conclude that no properly defined model explicitly investigates the challenge of designing complicated systems involving multiple cultures. They suggest that to determine the leading issues in establishing and maintaining multicultural teams working in dispersed collaborative settings, scholars must focus on coming up with empirical and conceptual research on how

		culture influences computer-mediated communication among virtual teams.
Intercultural challenges in virtual teams	Krawczyk-Bryłka (2016)	Aims to determine whether members of virtual teams appreciate cultural diversity. The researcher presents studies conducted in the IT industry among specialists with experience working in virtual teams. The conclusions show that while the specialists appreciate that virtual teams make it possible for companies to tap into people's skills from anywhere in the world without the restrictions of borders, such teams also come with challenges, such as poor language skills.
Embedded in the crowd: creative freelancers, crowd-sourced work, and occupational community.	Schwartz (2018)	Uses observations and interviews with creative freelancers to explore the characteristics of crowd-sourced work. The researcher identifies limited communication with the employing organisation as one of the main challenges freelancers face. The study also concludes that these freelancers turn to online communities to find meaning and direction for their work, design shared strategies to ensure fair compensation, and collaborate on projects.
Freelancers: A manager's perspective on the phenomenon.	Zadik et al (2019)	The study concludes that managers' leading characteristics when determining whether to hire a freelancer was how well the freelancer would adapt, adjust, and integrate into the organisation. The managers would only start considering the value of the freelancer and their knowledge after these three initial criteria have been met. The preferred freelance candidate also had strong communication, relations, and expressive skills.

<p>Does national culture influence peer evaluations on global virtual teams?</p>	<p>Crowne (2020)</p>	<p>Uses Hofstede's classification of national culture to determine the role played by culture when members of virtual teams evaluate performance. The analysis involving 11,000 students on a 10-week project shows that the effect of cultural variables on peer assessment is weak.</p>
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2.9.2 Analysis of cross-cultural communication studies

The studies presented in Table 2.2 mostly focus on virtual teams in the context of employees working for the same company. An analysis of these studies shows that although several scholars have studied cross-cultural communication in virtual teams such as the ones freelance copywriters work in, there is still no conceptual and theoretical framework for understanding the factors that facilitate success in these teams (Cagiltay, Bichelmeyer & Akilli 2015). It can also be concluded that freelancers, in general, are ignored by researchers (Kitching & Smallbone 2012). This is a view supported by the fact that not a single study could be found in relation to how freelancers perceive cross-cultural communication in online platforms where they find work, both in South Africa and in the global context.

2.10 Conclusion

Based on the discussion in this chapter, it can be noted that the debate around how technology is shaping the future of work has captured the attention of many scholars. It was argued that there is indeed a connection between the proliferation of technologies, a tendency to work across borders using the technology, and communicating across cultures. Regarding ICTs, most of the attention is focused on the changing structure of the labour market, the quality of jobs created and the nature of the work available. Most of the literature and conclusions from existing studies support the argument that there is a shift in the labour market and that shift is taking work across boundaries. While some of the literature focuses on the benefits of ICTs in creating jobs across boundaries, some scholars call for caution, noting that ICTs could result in the polarisation of the labour market, where the income gaps are exacerbated by the reality that a sizeable global population may lack the infrastructure or skills such as communicating using ICTs to take advantage of the job opportunities made available by these technologies.

Regarding cross-cultural communication in virtual teams connected by ICTs and freelancing platforms like Upwork, the literature shows that these platforms connect millions of people who have been paid billions of dollars. This shows that these platforms can be viable sources of employment. However, without understanding the experiences of those already working in the platforms about how communication can be facilitated to enhance productivity, it would be hard to understand such platforms' impact clearly. The lack of studies in this area supports the need for the present study.

This chapter covered the importance of a literature review, the connection between culture and communication, the impact of ICTs on the job market and communicating across borders, digital labour markets, challenges faced by virtual freelancing teams, the connection between productivity and communication, and how the research in the field of cross-cultural communication has progressed over the years. The next chapter focuses on the theories of cross-cultural communication.

CHAPTER 3: THEORIES OF CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

3.1 Introduction

The preceding chapter expanded on the key constructs of the present study and reviewed extant literature. This chapter will focus on the theories related to cross-cultural communication, particularly within an organisational context. This will make it possible to identify some of the questions and arguments in contemporary and past studies to provide an opportunity to go beyond the simple description of a phenomenon to interrogate the idea in depth by looking at its aspects from various angles. The selected theories are connected to the research problem and research questions and will assist in determining the theoretical criteria for the research. The main theories presented in this chapter include the role theory, cultural dimensions theory, and critical theory. The chapter is structured as follows: theories of cross-cultural communication, conceptual approaches, critique of the identified theories, and theoretical framework.

3.2 Theories

It is essential to define the theoretical approach followed in a study because the researcher must determine how his/her approach will contribute to the methodology. The idea of theorising a subject is concerned with determining how valuable the explanations in a particular theory are regarding the studied processes. However, theory should not be understood in terms of law-like propositions but as a group of organised ideas that can assist those who want to make sense of a phenomenon, guide action or guess the result (Wagner, Botha, & Mentz 2012; Thusu 2006; McQuail 2010).

Communication theories provide scholars with a way of speaking about different concepts involved in communication. Theories of interest to cross-cultural communication studies focus on the differences and similarities between the way people in different cultures communicate and how such differences facilitate or hinder communication (Carbaugh 2016; Merkin 2017).

The main theories used for this study in understanding cross-cultural communication are the role theory, cultural dimensions theory and the critical theory (Bell 1973; Mansell 2000). These theories have been selected because they focus on the age of the information explosion, which has resulted in the online labour markets that are the

main focus of this study. McLuhan (1959), who advances the view that "the medium is the message," is one of the seminal authors of this area (Thusu 2006). His view implies that the effect of media technology on society is more influential than the media content. Even though McLuhan advanced his ideas before most of the current ICTs, he still refers to the idea of a "global village." Within this context of the global village, Thusu (2006:57) refers to a proliferation of the "informatisation" of the economy and the establishment of a global economy characterised by commerce facilitated by the internet. This kind of commerce allows workers to trade their skills on platforms such as Upwork.

3.2.1 Theories associated with cross-cultural communication

A broad range of theories have been proposed by scholars attempting to explain the influence of culture on cross-cultural communication. Table 3.1 presents the most prevalent theories in this field.

Table 3.1: Theories of cross-cultural communication

Table 3.1: Theories of cross-cultural communication

Theory	Brief Description	Author
Cultural dimension theory	The theory demonstrates how society's culture impacts the values of members of the society and subsequent behaviour and communication preferences. Initially, the theory suggested that cultural values could be analysed based on four values: power distance, individualism-collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity-femininity. A fifth dimension was added later: long-term orientation.	Hofstede (1980)
Cultural identity negotiation theory	This theory assumes that an individual has many identities based on factors like gender, social class, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or profession. These identities are mainly acquired through lived experience, social-cultural conditioning, and continuous interactions with others. The theory proposes that identity negotiation can help individuals be more mindful when communicating with people from different perceived identities.	Tajfel (1978)
Uncertainty reduction theory	This theory is posited on the assumption that people are constantly involved in attempts to reduce uncertainty about others by obtaining information about them. This is accomplished through passive strategies such as observing the other person, active strategies where individuals ask questions about the person they are interested in communicating with or interactive strategies where direct communication is involved.	Berger & Calabrese (1975)
Anxiety/uncertainty	This theory is an extension of Berger and Calabrese's (1975) uncertainty reduction theory and proposes that in interacting with members of a group they perceive to be different from them,	Gudykunst (1988)

management theory (AUM)	individuals often experience anxiety and uncertainty. This implies that when cross-cultural communication happens between people from different cultural groups, it can be expected that anxiety and uncertainty will exist. Therefore, effective communication will depend on how the anxiety and uncertainty are handled.	
Ellingsworth's adaptation theory	This theory explains the process of how individuals adjust their communication during the first stages of cross-cultural communication. It further shows how previous cross-cultural encounters may hinder or facilitate the individuals' adaptive attempts when communicating with people from different cultures.	Ellingsworth (1988)
Critical theory	The critical theory addresses how communication in groups is either facilitated or hindered by power and institutional, historical, and economic structures. The theory is guided by what is perceived as the ethical duty to create a more equitable society by transforming oppressive discourses and structures.	Hoops (2017)
Role theory	This theory suggests a set of normative expectations assumed to define specific social statuses or positions. These positions impact the roles people assume for themselves and others and how they interact with others. Therefore, communication is likely to be more effective if a shared understanding of these roles and behaviours is expected from people playing such roles.	Biddle (1979)
Edward Hall's theory of proxemics	This is a theory based on the reasoning that the primary differences in the way people from different cultures perceive reality is the reason behind miscommunication. The theory defines the personal spaces individuals operate in when communicating: social space, consultative space, and public space. It is assumed that the definition of these spaces differs based on	Watson & Hall(1969)

	<p>culture. These differences can result in miscommunication between people from different cultures, as maintaining the boundaries demarcated by such spaces determines how individuals communicate.</p>	
Face negotiation theory	<p>This theory is based on the assumption that individuals want to be perceived by others positively. The idea of <i>face</i> denotes this favourable way in which individuals expect others to perceive them. Therefore, conflict comes about when an individual feels that their face is questioned or threatened.</p>	Ting-Toomey & Kurogi (1998)
Conversational constraints theory	<p>Defines and explains the differences between conversational strategies across cultures and the impact of such differences. The theory identifies the organisational constraints as consideration for the feelings of others, clarity, effectiveness, decreasing imposition, and the risk of being negatively evaluated by others (Kim 2009).</p>	Kim (1993)
Expectations violations theory	<p>The theory assumes that every culture has expectations regarding how individuals conduct themselves. It perceives communication as happening within a context of set expectations, where individuals react in specific ways when such expectations are violated. These expectations include verbal and non-verbal behaviours based on social rules and norms. Therefore, these expectations and subsequent violations vary along dimensions of cultural variability. For instance, the theory posits that members of collectivist cultures expect politeness and verbal indirectness and are more understanding when the response is delayed than members of individualist cultures.</p>	Burgoon, Walther, & Baeslar (1992)

From the theories presented in Table 3.1, the following three theories have been selected as the most relevant for this study: the role theory, Hofstede's theory, and the critical theory. These theories have been selected based on the concepts that this study deals with and the questions it seeks to answer. The main concepts included in the research questions include communicating across cultures in the workplace, cultural factors impacting communication between clients and freelance copywriters in a cross-cultural context, the impact of cross-cultural communication on productivity in facilitating or impeding progress in a cross-cultural work setting, and how perceptions are formed based on cross cultural communication in a freelancing context. In this regard, the three theories selected provide this study with a basis for making assumptions that will assist in gathering data to answer the research question. Thus, the three selected theories cover most of the key concepts that this study explores and contain some of the assumptions made by the other theories summarised above.

3.3 The role theory

Biddle (1979) defines role theory as a science that focuses on studying behaviours expected from humans based on context and the many processes that create, explain or are impacted by these behaviours. He notes that the role theory's leading idea is that roles are connected to statuses (or social positions). For example, people are often identified based on their social positions, such as manager, employee, preacher, teacher, delinquent or prisoner. These positions determine how the individuals are then treated, influencing the way they behave. Therefore, it can be posited that each social position is a designation of a particular role.

The role theory emphasises the idea of expectations. Ihtiyar (2017) explores Biddle's (1979) role theory and concludes that people come into a communication setting with expectations. The same author notes that the role theory presumes that humans belong to social positions and have expectations regarding their own conduct and that of others. The theory proposes that human behaviour is both predictable and different is based on context and the social identities of such humans (Biddle 1986)

3.3.1 Critique of the role theory

Biddle (1979) himself notes that the idea of thinking about roles in relation to expectations is problematic in that the definition of the term expectations is different

for different groups. He notes that while some believe that the term means anticipation, others perceive it to mean values or norms, feelings, or even what others think about the feelings of others.

Furthermore, Jackson (1998) posits that the role theory ignores the ability of humans to work out their understanding of a situation they find themselves in, challenge existing social practices, or come up with creative methods to adapt to an environment and that the theory also does not explain the role of the individual in defining their role. This leaves a gap in explaining whether people willingly play the roles to which they are ascribed or if they do so based on the expectations of others or society.

Jackson (1998) examines five contemporary criticisms of the role theory, which are summarised below:

- The theory concretises the idea of a sense of universality.
- The theory highlights social conformity rather than questioning social policies.
- The socialisation processes portrayed by the theory are not adequately explained.
- The theory fails to adequately address the human capacity to make choices and impose them on their environment.
- The theory presents an idea of segmented as opposed to extended occupations.

3.3.2 Relevance of the role theory to cross-cultural communication

Notwithstanding the criticism presented above, the role theory still provides the present study with ideas on the questions included in the interviews with participants to determine how roles influence their communication when working in cross-cultural virtual teams on digital platforms like Upwork.

For the present study, the assumptions made by Biddle (1979) in the role theory addressed the relevant questions to answer RQ 2 to find out from the participants what they believe to be their roles as freelancers working in cross-cultural contexts regarding the clients they work for. This is a crucial question because role expectations may not always be shared. It is also possible that individuals playing specific roles may not always act in the manner expected of people playing such roles. Ladge and Little (2019) conclude that there could be a discrepancy in social, organisational, and

familial expectations, leading people to not always live up to the expectations of others.

Specifically, in the present study, the question was whether a freelance copywriter communicating with a person who gives them work sees that person as a manager or client: two different roles that can impact communication. For instance, some people may see a manager as someone giving orders and a client as someone looking for guidance. If the person offering the job perceives themselves to be playing the role of a manager, but the freelancer sees them as a client, there could be issues related to how the two expect communication to happen. Also, even when the two agree that one is playing the role of a manager and the other is playing the role of a subordinate, there could still be a difference regarding how each, based on their culture, and believes that a manager and a subordinate should communicate. Secondly, this study's participants assisted in gaining an understanding of how role expectations impact their communication with people they interact with when they do their work.

The role theory is also related to the present study in that when freelancers work across borders, the social expectations are always in a state of flux as one freelancer may work with employers from different cultures simultaneously (Nica 2018). This can result in what Ihtiyar (2017:38) calls a "contradiction of expectations", leading to conflict. If the role theory proposes that human behaviour is different and predictive, this study attempted to find out from the participating freelancers how they navigate and predict behaviours when communicating across cultures.

3.4 Hofstede's dimensions of culture

One of the most popular scholars in cross-cultural communication studies is Hofstede (1980). His seminal work is considered the first survey that produced a theoretical basis for comprehending national culture. It is from this survey that the dimensions forming the differences in national culture are derived (Maude 2011). In the initial survey, Hofstede (1980) identified four dimensions that categorise the differences in national cultures: masculinity-femininity, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and individualism and collectivism. After an iteration of the initial study in China, a fifth dimension was created: Confucian dynamism/long-term orientation (Hofstede 1997).

In summary, Hofstede (1980) concludes that countries and regions that follow the individualism paradigm are the Western democracies in North America, Australia, and

Europe. The individuals in these countries follow the values of independence, and managers often believe in a clear distinction between the boss and subordinates. Relationships in such an environment are clearly defined according to goals that must be achieved. On the other hand, collectivism, a paradigm common in Africa, Asia, South America, and the Middle East, is characterised by close social relationships. Workplaces in collectivistic cultures highly value loyalty. Children are taught from a young age to have a receptive mind as opposed to those in individualistic societies, where a critical mind is valued. Consequently, individuals brought up in these different cultures grow up to view the world using independent lenses. The former sees family, the group and the tribe coming first and being a part of their identity (Maude 2011).

High power distance denotes the closeness of the relationship between the managers and subordinates. In such cultures, typical in France, Russia, and India, the management methods used tend to be autocratic, and communication between managers and employees does not occur on equal terms. This could result in subordinates not fully disclosing how they feel, acting more formally, and being less open. On the other side lies the low power distance cultures represented by Israel and countries in Scandinavia. In such cultures, the relationship between the boss and subordinates is managed from an assumption of being equal. This results in employees and their bosses communicating more informally (Maude 2011; Liu et al 2016; Gul et al 2017).

Hofstede (1980) proposes that in countries where the masculinity culture is prevalent, such as Italy and Japan, the roles of females and males tend to be distinguished. The distinguishing features between males and females are competitiveness and achievement. On the other hand, as represented by countries in Scandinavia, feminine societies tend to value the quality of life, the well-being of the general society, and equality between the sexes.

Hofstede (1997) proposes that the Confucian dynamism cultures see order and harmony as important values in the governing of relationships. He adds that individuals who believe in this culture tend to value hard work and respect for hierarchy.

3.4.1 Relevance of Hofstede's Theory to this study

Hofstede's theory delivers a theoretical foundation for understanding substantial variances between the cultures of different people based on the regions where these

people come from. It provides a starting point for understanding that people's nationalities determine their worldviews. Therefore, the theory can assist this study in comprehending the features of cross-cultural communication and how managers can approach this area, which would otherwise present problems for someone who fails to appreciate that people will view the world differently based on their national cultures. For freelance copywriters on platforms like Upwork, the theory could assist in understanding preferences in communication. For instance, some communicators may prefer direct answers. In contrast, others may tend to leave individuals to fill in the gaps. Hofstede's theory could also be used to understand why some workmates may be straight to the point while others hesitate to give opinions (Jonasson & Lauring 2012; Merchant, 2012; Hicks, 2020).

3.4.2 Testing Hofstede's theory

Some studies comparing organisational culture conclude that those who run organisations in China tend to be more reserved when compared to those in the US (Earley & Erez 1997; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi 1998; Okoro 2012). Conclusions from these studies show that organisational and personal relationships are perceived to be separate in the US. On the other hand, business etiquette in China is directly related to the Chinese sensitivity to face. Face denotes the assessment of a person's self-image, integrity, and credibility. These studies conclude that Chinese managers running organisations employ several communication strategies to either give face or receive face, such as being indirect, shaming, using intermediaries, making requests, and praising. The face is preserved by avoiding open confrontation; where confrontation is unavoidable, individuals would employ the services of an intermediary to deal with the situation. If an individual does not live up to the dictates of an agreement, research conclusions propose that the Chinese would often use shame to expose that individual.

Research by Congden, Matveev, and Displacers (2009) focuses on how the national cultures of the US and Germany influence participants. They concentrated on four dimensions: interpersonal skills, cultural empathy, team effectiveness, and cultural uncertainty. The same authors hypothesised that a positive relationship exists between the level of cross-cultural communication competence of multicultural team members and the performance of a multicultural team (Congden et al 2009). They also hypothesised that Americans would score higher in the dimensions of interpersonal

skills, cultural uncertainty, and cultural empathy, while the scores would be similar in the team effectiveness dimension. Using a communication competency questionnaire, the study revealed no significant differences between Germans and Americans, except in cultural empathy.

While the results of a study by Congden et al (2009) show that the differences between Americans and Germans are not significant in most dimensions and, therefore, underplay Hofstede's theory, it's vital to note that the participants in the US were MBA students while those in Germany were also students of business. The participants were selected because they were available. This could affect the results because the sample represents individuals of society that are not representative of the ordinary members of a specific culture. Also, both countries are Western. Therefore, future studies may attempt to determine whether similar results would be obtained if the participants were from different world regions, such as Asia and Europe.

From the few conclusions drawn by the scholars cited above, it can be inferred that some authors lend credence to Hofstede's (1980; 1987) view that people from different cultures can be categorised based on specific behaviours and attitudes related to how relationships and communication should be managed. The views also support the idea that an essential aspect for businesses faced with dismantling boundaries by technologies and globalisation is the management of cultural differences, mainly through cross-cultural communication. However, to understand these issues empirically, studies such as the present study need to focus on those already working within this environment, such as freelancer copywriters and the marketplaces allowing these freelancers to connect with employers. Understanding the experiences of these freelancers on such platforms provides an opportunity for platforms like Upwork to determine how they can facilitate cross-cultural awareness, develop a global mindset, and multicultural sensitivity to help companies and freelancers grow their businesses (Okoro 2012).

3.4.3 Critique of Hofstede's Theory

Even though Hofstede's theory may be helpful in the present study, it has some weaknesses. The theory has been criticised based on the methods it uses and sampling. Some critics have noted that the sample was biased and imposed Western

values on everybody (Maude 2011; Venkateswran & Ojha 2019). It consists mainly of well-educated white-collar professionals working for the computer giant IBM. Using this view, it can be argued that the sample does not represent the actual societies from which these professionals come but rather the elite part of those societies.

Hofstede's theory is also based on averages. Therefore, the study's findings lack meaning in explaining the daily lives of individuals. For example, if one-half of a group in a hypothetical country had a very high masculinity score and another half had a very low score, the average score could be medium masculinity. This would be an erroneous conclusion because the medium score will represent no one in that hypothetical country (Mcsweeney 2002).

3.5 Lewis model of cultural types

A model of classifying cultures, which has similar undertones to that suggested by Hofstede (1980), is proposed by Lewis (2006), who comes up with three categories:

3.5.1 Task-oriented

This culture that Lewis (2006) calls the linear-active culture denotes a culture that prefers things to be done incrementally. People in such cultures thrive when there is order and proper planning, and people always stick to stipulated times and follow procedures. These individuals avoid accepting presents because they prefer not to feel like they owe anyone favours. If there was conflict, they would rather have it resolved using logic. Privacy is of substantial importance, and the expression of emotions is generally discouraged. As can be expected, people from such cultures tend to treat time as an essential commodity, ensuring that they arrive for appointments on time. Business and personal issues are clearly separated. Examples of societies that follow the task-oriented culture are Anglo-Saxons, Germans, and Scandinavians (Lewis, 2005; Harkiolakis et al 2012; Wach 2015).

3.5.2 People-oriented

These cultures, known as multi-active cultures, act based on the assumption that a personal relationship forms the basis for a business relationship. On this basis, professional life is perceived as an extension of personal life. Such cultures can view favours as a part of a negotiation process. Flexibility is common in such cultures because time is not held in high esteem. Nationalities that often fall under this category

include Arabs, Latinos, Mediterranean, and South-East Asians. Such communities are often outgoing, feel comfortable showing emotions, and see a schedule as something that can be changed without much fuss (Lewis 2005; Harkiolakis et al 2012; Wach 2015).

3.5.3 Introverted

This culture category is also called reactive because people in such societies prefer to act only as a way of responding to others. They believe that personal relationships are founded on personal interactions. Because they see losing face as something that should be avoided, they also avoid confrontation. The Chinese, Japanese, and Northern Europeans are examples of groups that show these characteristics. These groups tend to show high levels of respect for others, are inclined to be punctual, and act calmly (Lewis 2005; Harkiolakis et al 2012; Wach 2015).

3.5.4 Geographical depiction

A rough indication of the various cultures from which the people in the categories presented above come is graphically depicted in Figure 3.1 below.

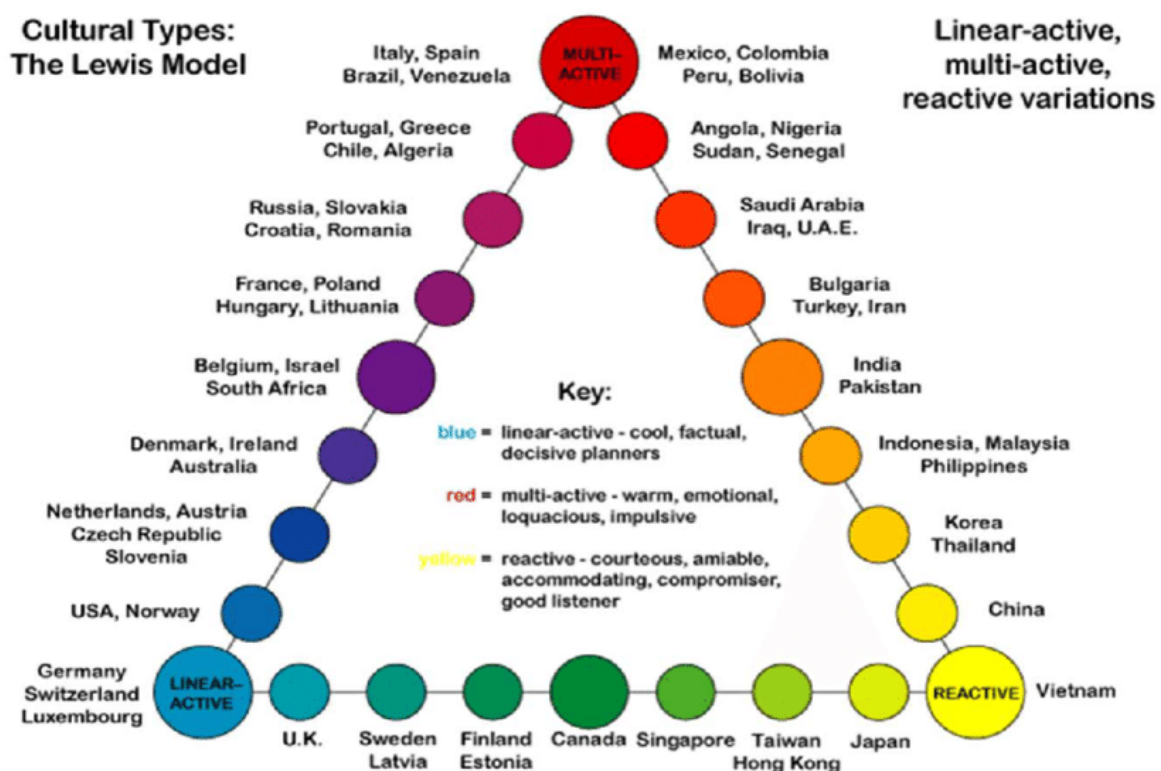


Figure 3.1: The Lewis model of cultural types (Source Lewis 2006:89)

Based on Figure 3.1, South Africa is placed under the multi-active category. According to Lewis (2006), people in this category tend to be warm, emotional, loquacious, and impulsive. As an extension of Lewis's (1995) model of cultural types, Harkiolakis et al (2012) add time and context, summarised below.

3.5.4.1 Time

One way of understanding the outlook of a group of people is to look at how the group treats time. For instance, Harkiolakis et al (2012) say that in polychronic/unstructured cultures, individuals are often simultaneously involved in several activities comprising numerous people. On the other hand, monochronic/structured cultures are characterised by people focusing on a single activity per time and concentrating only on the individuals involved in the activity of focus (Adams & Van Eerde 2010).

Harkiolakis et al (2012) note that although polychronic societies may look disorganised to a casual observer, this is not always the case. Instead, it is a reflection of varying cultural outlooks. The differences in outlook are that the polychronic cultures see the present as more critical, while the view in the monochronic culture is the opposite. This observation implies that someone from a polychronic culture may involve issues that may look irrelevant to a person from a monochronic culture during a business meeting. For instance, the former may want to start a meeting by discussing their holiday or a political event in their country.

Concerning the present study, the interviews with participants will focus on how polychronic monochronic/structured cultural outlooks impact communication mediated by ICTs. This may also provide insights into whether these cultural demarcations proposed by scholars like Hall (1983) in his work, *Dance of Life*, are still relevant. This is an area that scholars have focused on. For instance, Chung and Lim (2005) propose that a hybrid mobile-chronic culture seems to be emerging, where people in primarily monochronic cultures are engaging in more polychronic conduct mediated by mobile communication.

3.5.4.2 Context

It is generally accepted that communication messages do not happen in isolation but within a context. For instance, a statement said to a workmate considered a friend could have a different meaning when said to a manager. This view is also

acknowledged by Harkiolakis et al. (2012), who note that communication messages are loaded with indirect details connected to the context of the situation expressed by such messages. Context ensures that the communication message is understood beyond its literal meaning. People from high-context cultures use cues within the environment where the communication occurs, such as body language and facial expressions. Therefore, people in high-context cultures work on attaining meaning based on knowledge of the context in which the interaction occurs, with participants and the context consisting of important elements. On the other hand, in low-context cultures, the expectation is that most of the details should be contained within the communication text's content (McKay-Semmler 2017).

3.5.4.3 Relevance of time and context to this study

The cultural concepts relating to time and context are crucial for this study because they speak to vital elements in managing a freelancing relationship. For instance, the Upwork platform allows employers to set deadlines, and freelancer copywriters who fail to meet these deadlines can lose points, which affects what is known as a Job Success Score. According to Upwork (2021, para. 1),

Your Job Success Score (JSS) measures your client's satisfaction with your overall work history on Upwork's platform. It reflects your client's satisfaction, as shown by relationships, feedback, and job outcomes over time. A high JSS score can help freelancers stand out in the Upwork marketplace.

Therefore, issues related to time have to be negotiated by freelancers on projects they conduct.

Regarding context, the present study attempted to determine how communication on Upwork allows freelancers to determine the context under which communication occurs. For instance, many communication situations will happen through written text and video calls, which may not give freelancers enough cues to determine context. Therefore, the interview questions for collecting data allowed participants to provide their views regarding how Upwork deals with these issues to allow people from different cultures to communicate based on their cultural perceptions, values, and ways of transmitting messages.

3.5.4.4 Relevance of Lewis's Model of cultural types

As an extension of Hofstede's cultural dimensions model, Lewis' (1995) model provides a basis for understanding where a specific culture fits into the continuum of social values. For this study, the model raises helpful insights on how different beliefs and values impact communication across cultures. This provides a basis for discussions into how communication across cultures can be organised to take these cultural differences into account. This model can guide managers when leading or negotiating with individuals from different cultures, especially freelance copywriters, who often accept jobs mediated by ITCs regardless of the location of the client they are working for.

3.5.4.5 Critique of Lewis's Model of cultural types

Lewis' (1996) model is often criticised for not being based on scientific inquiry. This criticism is related to the reality that the scholar makes sweeping generalisations based on what he observed travelling in 135 countries and working in 20 of them (Bačík & Turáková 2018). Lewis (1996) anticipated this criticism and warned against stereotyping. However, he stands by his conclusion that in travelling, he has come to be convinced that people living in a particular country possess a specific set of assumptions and beliefs about reality, which can be seen in the way those people behave and communicate.

3.6 The critical theory

Another theory relevant to this study is the critical theory, which assumes that the power interplay between communicating individuals has implications for the communication process in organisations. However, people from different cultures may have different understandings of how this power dynamic plays out. The ideas linked to the critical theory, such as those of the Frankfurt School and the traditions of the Marxist theory, on which it is based, are important in the study of culture, particularly in the context of the proliferation of digital communication (Fuchs 2016; Feldner & Vighi 2015; Clegg et al., 2006).

The critical theory resulted from the 1980s scholars who had started seeing the limitations of research that only focused on comparing national and cultural dimension frameworks (Nakayama & Halualani 2010). These scholars started considering matters linked to what Nakayama and Halualani (2010: 127) refer to as "macro context

(historical, social, and political) as well as power or status difference between the persons in interaction.” This placed issues such as history (e.g. colonisation), differences in gender (and the linked gender role associations), sexual orientation and gender as central concepts in cross-cultural studies.

The critical theory implores researchers to go beyond concepts like cultural dimension scores and differences and micro practises of interaction. Advocates of the critical theory note that attempts to use cultural dimension scores perpetuate historical inequalities instead of identifying the sources of the inequalities and addressing them. An example of these differences is when individuals from the developed world are perceived as expatriates, while those from the former colonised parts of the world are called migrants. There is a dimension of inequality in this naming where one group could be perceived as befitting better treatment and the other not (Feenberg 2008; Nakayama & Halualani 2010; Christian 2016).

3.6.1 Critique of the critical theory

Some of the criticisms of the theory are that it is not based on scientific principles and is political and value-laden (making statements based on the idea that such statements are fact when, in fact, they are likely to be opinion). This is the basis on which critics posit that the theory is favoured by those individuals who do not want to commit to the scientific work required to separate values from facts. It has also been noted that critical theory fails to indicate any rational standards to justify its existence and how it is better than other theories (Held 1980; Alvesson & Willmott 2012).

3.6.2 Relevance of the critical theory of cross-cultural communication

For this study, the critical theory provides a way of thinking about issues relevant to freelancer copywriters. For instance, freelancer copywriters exist in an environment where power play between individuals exists. It was noted in the introduction that for a country like South Africa, it could often be challenging to separate the apartheid past – where certain groups were treated as superior to others in the past based on the law – from the present. It, therefore, becomes crucial to determine how this past may affect the present. The question that arises is whether the power imbalances of the past between the races may impact the communication happening through the mediation of digital platforms like Upwork, either consciously or unconsciously.

3.7 Conceptual approaches

Aneas and Sandin (2009) cite Triadias (2000), who asserts that research studying culture, especially cross-cultural communication, can approach its methodological design and theoretical foundations from three distinct perspectives. These three perspectives, including the indigenous, cultural, and cross-cultural, are summarised below as presented by Aneas and Sandin (2009).

3.7.1 Indigenous

The indigenous perspective pays attention to what concepts mean in culture and how this meaning could change based on demographics within a particular cultural context. Studies within this perspective focus mainly on a specific culture and do not attempt to generalise their findings to other cultures. The main challenge with studies using this perspective is related to the definition of the term indigenous.

3.7.2 Cultural

Studies within the cultural approach employ ethnographic methods. Such studies mainly focus on the meanings of constructs within a culture, and very little attention is given to attempting to compare the constructs across cultures. This area of research aims to comprehend the individual within a sociocultural setting and place culture as a central element in understanding the behaviour of the individual. Aneas and Sandin (2009) cite Adamopoulos and Loner (2001), who note that the main challenge with this perspective is that it lacks a research methodology that is broadly accepted.

3.7.3 Cross-cultural

Scholars who follow the cross-cultural perspective collect data from two cultures based on the assumption that the constructs they are investigating are universals that can be found in all the cultures they are studying. The main advantage of this approach is that it attempts to deliver a better comprehension of the generalisability and cross-cultural validity of the theories and constructs being investigated. However, this approach can be criticised for its assumption that all cultures share the same constructs that can be compared (Papayiannis & Anastassiou-Hadjicharalambous 2011).

Even though the present study does not attempt to gather information about different cultures to compare them, it is closest to the cross-cultural approach. This is because it starts from the assumption that freelancer copywriters work with employers and team members from different cultures when they take jobs across borders. Therefore, it can

be expected that their understanding of constructs is based on the cultures from which they come. The assumption is also based on the view that cultures share constructs that can be compared.

3.8 Critique of the identified theories

Even though the theories presented above focus on the dynamics of communication between people of different cultures, they are primarily drawn from research that focuses more on the face-to-face paradigm. This leaves questions about how relevant these theories are when technology is changing rapidly due to the introduction of the internet, computer-mediated communication, blogs, virtual worlds, Zoom, Skype, WhatsApp, social media, and online games. The advent of these technologies has exponentially increased contact between cultures. The technologies have enabled individuals and groups to communicate instantly without the limits of space, boundaries, and time (Monge & Kalman 1996; Monge et al 1998; Samovar et al 2017). Consequently, the theories identified in this chapter have a limitation in that they do not specifically focus on some of the newest media technologies. Also, where the theories focus on organisational communication within the workplace, they emphasise the traditional forms of work and fail to address virtual teams such as those that freelance copywriters work in.

Since the leading seminal theories on cross-cultural communication were proposed before many of the current technologies became pervasive or while they had been developing rapidly, there is a need to come up with studies that examine the new technologies so that the 20th Century theories that are still influential in cross-cultural communication can be refined. Scholars can determine if these theories are still relevant in the current environment. The rapid changes in technologies also call for more work in defining culture in the context of the reconfigurations in time and space emanating from digital technologies and the dismantling of boundaries due to ICTs. In this context, new theories are required to explain the continuous contact between individuals from different cultures, how cultural identity is maintained or changed in these cultures, and how the new virtual cultures affect the theories from the 20th Century (Shuter 2017; Bagga, 2023).

3.9 Theoretical framework

In this section, the theoretical framework is presented, and the section synthesises the insights obtained from the contextualisation of the study, the literature review and the theories of communication to present the precise viewpoint (framework) that will be followed in this study regarding the analysis and interpreting the insights gained. Figure 3.2 indicates that the present study is based on theory and offers the basis for constructing knowledge (Grant & Osanloo 2016).

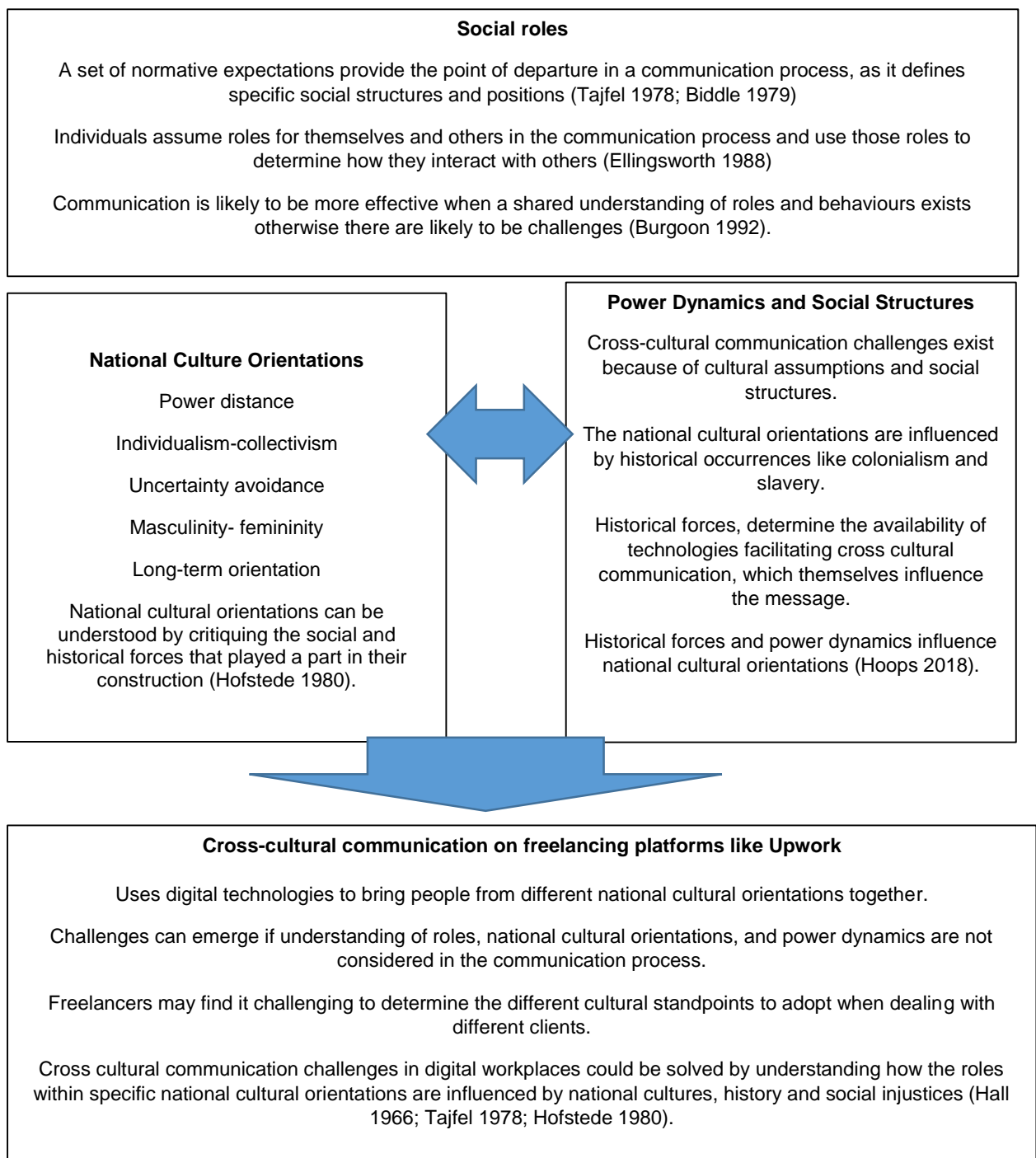


Figure 3.2: Theoretical framework (Source: Author)

The theoretical framework in Figure 3.2 presents the main assumption of Biddle's (1979) role theory as the point of departure in conceptualising cross-cultural communication in the present study. The theory is based on the assumption that communication roles are adopted based on predetermined roles connected to social positions. These positions then determine how an individual behaves. However, behind these positions are processes and explanations related to the culture of the people who create them. Also included in the role theory is the idea that based on their roles, people expect to be treated in a specific way. Therefore, knowing the social role of an individual should assist in determining how that individual should be communicated with. In the present study, the role theory will be used to understand how freelancer copywriters approach roles on Upwork and how these roles impact their communication when dealing with team members or employers from different cultures. Freelancers could also speak about dealing with conflicting role expectations when communicating across cultures.

Suppose individuals behave and communicate based on the role they ascribe to themselves or are given as assumed by the role theory. In that case, Hofstede's (1980) dimensions of culture theory posits that individuals from different regions and cultures have substantial differences. This implies that the roles and expectations that the role theory relates to are not uniform across society. Therefore, in cross-cultural communication, there could be a misunderstanding in the interpretations related to differences. Lewis (2006) proposes a related theory of cultural types. This model provides insights into differences between how people from different cultures view the concepts of time and context. Participants in the present study were requested to talk about their experiences in relation to dealing with people from the regions, as identified by Hofstede (1980). Discussions will also be related to how cross-cultural communication is impacted by polychronic monochronic/structured cultural outlooks in the teams in which the Upwork freelancer copywriters work. This will help the study to determine whether the assumptions of the theory apply to the participants in the present study. Other questions could be linked to whether the freelancers believe that they must constantly change roles when dealing with people from different cultures.

The critical theory is the other theory relevant to this study. In relation to the role theory and Hofstede's Dimensions of Culture, the critical theory introduces the idea that power dynamics are at play in cross-cultural communication. Thus, if individuals are perceived to be playing roles that can be interpreted differently depending on the dimensions of culture, there is a need to go beyond these roles and cultural dimensions and look at interaction based on micro-practices of interaction and the history behind these practices. In relation to the present study, these insights helped design questions around how the freelancers perceived these micro-practices to be at play when they are involved in cross-cultural communication.

If applied from the perspective of this study, the three theories are connected in that they identify the main concepts involved in understanding behaviour when communicating across cultures. The role theory recognises the importance of roles and how they influence actions and worldviews. Thus, it is crucial to base any understanding of communication messages on the roles played by the people involved in the communication. Hofstede's dimensions of culture theory introduce the idea that even though people behave and communicate based on specific roles, these roles are not always defined in the same way across cultures. Therefore, attempting to understand cross-cultural communication should be based on an attempt to comprehend cultural differences. The critical theory adds the dimension of invisible influences such as power relations, the history of such relations, and how they influence the way people communicate across cultures.

3.10 Conclusion

Based on the assumption that individuals working with employers and teams across borders have to deal with people from different cultures, the theories presented in this chapter focus on helping the present study focus on how cross-cultural communication occurs and how people from different cultures communicate based on their cultural differences. These theories assisted the study in determining the critical assumptions in researching cross-cultural communication, selecting the methodology, and designing the questions used to collect data. The chapter focused on the role theory, Hofstede's dimensions of culture theory, Lewis's model of cultural types, the critical theory, and the conceptual approaches to studying cross-cultural communication.

Apart from describing the theories and what they propose, the chapter critically analysed each theory and its relevance to the present study. It also looked at how the three selected theories are related and how they can be combined to create a theoretical framework of cross-cultural communication and the experiences of freelancer copywriters working on platforms like Upwork. The following chapter will provide details on the methodology used to accomplish the study's objectives.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

The last three chapters presented the research background, the research question, aims and objectives, the literature review, theories of cross-cultural communication, and the theoretical framework. Using the insights from these chapters, this chapter presents a detailed description of the research methodology. It forms an integral part of the scientific research process because it justifies the decisions taken in designing, conducting and presenting the data and conclusions from the study. The chapter is an indication that the study is based on systematic reasoning supported by an analysis of the best methods and approaches suitable for the research context, question, aims and objectives (Bloomberg & Volpe 2012; Habib et al 2014).

This chapter is structured as follows: defining research methodology, research philosophy, research strategy, data collection techniques, data analysis and interpretation, ethical issues and the pilot study.

4.2 Defining research methodology

Although the terms 'methods' and 'methodology' are usually treated as synonyms, they mean different things. Wimmer and Dominick (2011) suggest that the term methodology denotes the study of the methods and the basic philosophical assumptions regarding how research is done. The same authors suggest that methodology deals with why a specific study is done in a certain way. Therefore, the methodology represents the researcher's overall approach, encompassing the steps or procedures employed by a researcher as they investigate a specific area. The selected methodology needs to correspond with the issue or problem being investigated. On the other hand, methods are the specific tools such as interviews, case studies and observations that the researcher will use throughout the study (Leedy & Ormrod 2001; Clough & Nutbrown 2002; Saunders 2003).

Although a scholar studying an area can use several methods and tools, not all methods will be suitable for every study because each method has its own strengths and weaknesses. However, what may be seen as a strength for one study may be a

weakness for another. For instance, a method whose strength is providing accurate figures from precise results can be drawn may not be the best for determining how people feel about changes in their culture or language (Wimmer & Dominick 2011). Therefore, good research begins by determining the methodology that will be best for the research topic, objectives, questions, and available literature (Saunders 2003). A well-selected research methodology can make things more transparent and justify why a researcher selected one technique and not the other (Bryman 2016). This means that a researcher does not choose a particular method because they like it or because it will make their work easier. Instead, the selected methodology is the culmination of studying various available approaches and then determining which will be the most suitable for a specific study based on a deep understanding of all the methods, tools and techniques available (Bryman 2016).

4.3 Research philosophy

According to numerous researchers (e.g. Bryman 2003; Gournelos et al 2019; Williamson 2021), philosophical assumptions play an essential role in research because they reveal the way a researcher thinks about their study and, therefore, influence the choices made by the researcher at the different phases of the research project. The term philosophy denotes the assumption that the world and its processes can be perceived in different ways. Philosophy is concerned with perspectives regarding how the world works and, when used in the academic setting, mainly emphasises what can be considered reality, knowledge and existence. Therefore, the research process is primarily founded on a researcher's assumptions regarding the character and source of knowledge. The research philosophy is apparent in the way the researcher selects how and where the data will be gathered, the role of the researcher in the process, the methods used in data analysis and the way the results will be presented (Mason 2014; Cazeaux 2017).

Specific to the research process, the idea of a research philosophy defines how data related to a precise phenomenon will be gathered, processed, analysed and applied (Edson et al 2017). The importance of determining this element is that it is the basis on which a researcher looks for the evidence or data they will use to make the conclusions they present in their study. This way of viewing the world and selecting methods through which "reality" and "truth" are perceived is called a paradigm. The

process forms the basis of the research methodology (Khaldi 2017; Kamal 2019; Zukauskas et al 2018).

The central factor when considering a research philosophy is the type of study and the practical applicability of the philosophy. For instance, vital philosophical differences exist between a study whose focus is numbers and facts to determine a better choice between two modes of communication, such as email and phone calls, when selling a product and a study that focuses on the perceptions of individuals regarding their feelings when dealing with a difficult employer on an online labour platform and how they put those feelings aside to ensure that a project succeeds. Thus, the data collection techniques applied during a study greatly influence the research philosophy adopted for a specific study (Edson et al 2017).

The embraced research philosophy in a specific study is linked to the research paradigms pertinent to a specific study. In academic research, the term paradigm denotes a worldview or central set of beliefs guiding an investigation or study. For a researcher to select a research paradigm, it is vital to comprehend the concepts of ontology and epistemology (Denzin & Lincoln 1998; Maree & Maree 2010; Brynard, Hanekom, & Brynard 2014).

Wimmer and Dominick (2011:115) define paradigms (sometimes referred to as models) as “an accepted set of theories, procedures, and assumptions about how researchers look at the world.” Mason (2014) introduces three important questions used when comparing paradigms:

- What is real (ontology)?
- How can a person know anything (epistemology)?
- What methods should be used to conduct research (methodology)?

4.3.1 Ontology

Mason (2014) notes that the question ‘What is real?’ attracts two potential responses, which depend on the paradigm that the responder subscribes to. For the individual who subscribes to the quantitative paradigm, the answer would be that reality consists of one truth that can be objectively verified, is knowable, and is affected by a constant set of laws. On the other hand, the supporter of the qualitative paradigm will answer

the question by saying that reality is subjective and, therefore, the idea of objective truth does not exist. This assumption is based on the understanding that there are numerous subjective truths. The advocates of a single subjective truth are categorised as positivists. On the other hand, those who believe that reality depends on the subjective interpretation of each individual are grouped under the category of constructivists or interpretivists.

According to Wagner et al (2012), the positivism approach (also referred to as logical positivism) is based on the argument that the only way objective reality and truth can be established is through research that uses scientific methods. The same authors note that the term positivism was coined to reflect a strictly empirical approach where any conclusions made about knowledge have to be supported by experience and tangible evidence. Therefore, the approach focuses on the causes of behaviour and facts.

Wimmer and Dominick (2011) note that the positivist approach is the oldest and the one many mass media scholars turn to. This paradigm incorporates concepts like objective measures, quantifications and hypotheses. Scholars who embrace positivism aim to explain phenomena based on the already available knowledge (Daymon & Holloway 2011). While positivism may be relevant for scholars intending to explore questions about cause and effect or for measuring and evaluating something, the characteristics of positivism may not be appropriate for researchers in complex fields where perceptions of individuals and their subjective choices are involved (Slife & Melling 2012; Purnamasari 2016).

The positivist paradigm ignores the possibility that the researcher is a subjective being who starts a study with conscious and unconscious biases, emotions, experiences, philosophical stances, and background that may affect both the way an inquiry is designed and the conclusions that such an inquiry can bring about. Doina (2020) suggests that this is why positivism has lost some of its appeal in recent decades because it neglects the role played by humans in constructing or changing the world. Therefore, it has been argued that positivism leaves scientists unable to fully comprehend the human brain (Kincheloe & Tobin 2009). For instance, it is challenging to objectively measure such concepts as attitudes, intentions, or thoughts of humans. In such a context, social science scholars started looking for alternative methods,

embracing approaches like constructivism, interpretivism, and social constructionism. These approaches focused chiefly on the human being and qualitative information gathering through interacting and communicating with the humans that the researchers were attempting to understand (Mc Hugh 1970; Pham 2018).

Pham (2018) identifies some of the advantages of positivism, noting that this paradigm assists researchers in gaining a clear understanding of objects through empirical tests and techniques such as sampling, measurement, focus groups, and questionnaires. The insights obtained using this paradigm can be considered high quality in terms of reliability and validity, making it easier to generalise them to a larger population (Cohen 2017). Notwithstanding positivism's advantages, the paradigm is not suitable for this study. By attempting to understand the perspectives of freelancers on Upwork, the study has already embraced the assumption that there are varying realities based on how freelance copywriters perceive cross-cultural communication on the freelancing platform.

4.3.1.1 Interpretivist

The interpretivist approach (also referred to as the constructivist approach) is the opposite of the positivist way of thinking. The interpretivist attitude focuses on the meaning and the manner in which multiple viewpoints can assist the researcher in gathering information about multiple interpretations of the same issue (Saunders et al 2009; Wagner et al 2012). This interpretivist approach acknowledges human interaction in conducting research and interpreting data as an essential element. Thus, human interests become part of the study because reality is assessed through social construction inherent in shared meaning, instruments, language and consciousness.

The main advantage of the interpretivist approach is that it makes it possible for a researcher to gather data on issues that are not easy to measure objectively, such as unspoken anger, feelings of betrayal or happiness. Interpretivism also allows researchers to holistically comprehend the human experience in varying contexts (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea 2014; Rahman 2017). The ability of the researcher to interact with the subjects or participants of the study means that they have the potential to get a deeper understanding of the subject than would have been possible if they collected information from the point of being detached from such subjects (Cohen & Manionl 2011).

One of the biggest criticisms of the interpretivist paradigm is that it has a greater potential to introduce bias into the study (Saunders et al 2009). This bias emanates from the reality that the participants' perspectives and values can impact the researcher's interpretation. In addition, the researcher can also have their own explicit and implicit biases that may interfere with the way they understand what is happening or being said. To varying degrees, this reality could impact the validity and reliability of the study's conclusions (Saunders et al 2009; Chowdhury 2014; Rahman 2017).

This study follows the interpretative approach because it seeks to determine perspectives based on how the participants create meaning from interpreting events in their world. Because the participants will interpret the world in their own way, reality will be perceived as subjective, which the interpretivist approach supports (Abdel-Fattah & Galal-Edeen 2009; Wimmer & Dominick 2011).

4.3.2 Epistemology

Mason (2014) notes that how one responds to the question 'What is real?' impacts how knowledge is gained. This is the basis on which the question is followed by another inquiry: "How do we know anything about the world?" The same scholar notes that how individuals define reality impacts their knowledge about the world. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) summarise the contrast between ontology and epistemology by indicating the connection between 'the knower and the known' (meaning the individual doing the research and the subject being researched). In quantitative studies, the two are independent of each other. On the other hand, the relationship between that which is being studied and the individual conducting the study is in constant interaction and cannot be separated in a qualitative study. Therefore, quantitative scholars employ the deductive approach, while qualitative researchers usually employ an inductive approach (Teddlie & Tashakkori (2009).

4.3.2.1 The quantitative approach

Research based on the quantitative methodology usually follows a linear process model. The main focus of such studies is developing instruments and measurement methods, gathering empirical data, mostly through variable manipulation and experimental control, and using methods like statistical control in analysing data (Recker 2013; Salmons 2021).

Typically, quantitative studies start from the assumption of the existence of a theoretical model whose hypothesis is clearly articulated (Brennen 2012; Recker 2013). Quantitative scholars begin from the assumption that the world is primarily objective and evidence about the state of things in the world is gained using numbers and other objective evidence.

4.3.2.2 The qualitative approach

The qualitative approach is based on the understanding that the world is primarily subjective and cannot always be understood based on numbers and evidence. This perspective recognises that people may interpret the same thing differently, which can be shown by their words when describing phenomena (Brennen 2012; Mason 2014).

Creswell and Poth (2018) and Rossman and Rallis (2017) list some of the most common characteristics of qualitative research:

- It is done within the natural settings of human life.
- It focuses on the interpretation and meaning that participants give to concepts.
- It emphasises contexts.
- It focuses on multiple realities and holistic accounts.
- It uses multiple techniques.
- Instead of being strictly predetermined, qualitative research is emergent.
- It is fundamentally interpretative.

A qualitative design is used in this study because contemporary theoretical debates related to the subject of this study. This design was selected because this study also deals with issues linked to language and symbols in a cross-cultural communication setting and how these influence the way a message is received. Qualitative methods are inherent in interpretive studies (Wagner et al 2012; Liamputtong 2019). Another reason is that the study is based on freelance copywriters' perceptions of their own reality, which is challenging to quantify because there is no correct or wrong way of perceiving cross-cultural communication when working on a platform such as Upwork (Munhall 2008). For this study, the primary qualitative method used is semi-structured virtual interviews. The secondary method is virtual focus group discussions. The interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed and coded using thematic analysis (Caliandro & Gandini 2017).

The collected data creates a deep understanding of the perceptions of freelancers with regard to working across borders in cross-cultural communication and the Upwork platform. The conclusions drawn from this data were used to answer the research questions and construct recommendations about how freelancing platforms like Upwork can help facilitate cross-cultural communication in virtual teams.

4.3.2.3 The mixed methods approach

Mixed-methods research involves combining the elements of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Instead of being perceived as replacing either the qualitative or quantitative methodologies, the mixed methods approach combines and extends the two main approaches (Williams 2007; Schoonenboom & Johnson 2017).

4.3.3 Inductive and deductive approaches

Whether one selects to follow the qualitative, quantitative or mixed-methods approach, scientific research should be based on logic. There are two primary approaches to logic: inductive and deductive reasoning (Burney & Saleem 2008). The inductive approach starts by making a series of observations that eventually lead to a conclusion. On the other hand, the deductive approach begins with a general rule, which can be tested using data. In this instance, a specific conclusion is arrived at only when the data indicates that the assumption made initially is valid (Dudovskiy, 2016).

The differences between the inductive, deductive and abductive approaches are presented in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Comparing approaches (Summarised from Dudovskiy 2016)

	Deduction	Induction	Abduction
Logic	The deductive inference is based on the assumption that where the premises are true, the conclusion is also true.	The inductive inference uses premises already known to create untested conclusions.	The abductive inference uses known premises to create testable conclusions.
From/to	The general to the specific	Specific to general	The interactions between the general and specific
Use of data	Data is gathered with the aim of evaluating hypotheses or propositions linked to an existing theory.	Data is collected with the objective of exploring phenomena, identifying patterns and themes and developing a conceptual framework.	Data is collected with the objective of exploring phenomena, identifying patterns and themes and developing a conceptual framework, which is then tested

			through a subsequent collection of data.
Theory	Verification or falsification	Theory development and construction	Theory is generated or modified so that new theory can be incorporated where applicable.

This study used the inductive approach, considering the research topic, research question, the methodology adopted and the research strategy. The choice was made because the study started by collecting raw data through semi-structured interviews, which were later condensed into themes, followed by an attempt to develop conclusions based on the themes and patterns that emerged from coding and analysis of data, and then developing a framework of the underlying structure of the experiences as depicted by the participating freelance copywriters (Thomas 2006).

4.4 Research strategy

A research strategy is a general plan followed to accomplish the aims and objectives of a study. The strategy provides details on the specific methods used and provides precise guidelines to follow (Wagner et al 2012; Johannesson & Perjons 2014; Marson 2014).

Johannesson and Perjons (2014) identify three main questions that should guide the designing of a research strategy:

- Is it suitable with regard to the research question?
- When considering the resources available for the project, is the strategy feasible?
- Is it ethical regarding the potential impact on people, animals, and the environment?

Rubin et al. (2010) suggest that a good research strategy in studying communication requires careful planning to create a clear action plan. A clear plan of action involves specifying how each research stage will be carried out and how the different stages will be connected. A well-planned research strategy is appropriate for its purpose, meaning that it needs to be able to help the researcher study the issue under consideration. Planning also ensures that the strategy is feasible based on the availability of data sources, such as documents, people, or situations to observe. A good research strategy also provides details about how the researcher will deal with any ethical dilemmas that may emerge during the study (Johannesson & Perjons 2014).

Numerous empirical strategies exist for researchers using the qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods approach. The different strategies are summarised below in Table 4.2 below.

Table 4.2: Research strategies (Summarised from Johannesson & Perjons 2014)

Strategy	Purpose	Key Concepts	Key Activities	Forms	Major Concern
Experiment	Investigate cause and effect relationships	Hypothesis Dependent variables Independent variables	Control factors that may influence the dependent variable	Laboratory experiments Field experiments	Weak external and internal validity for experiments
Survey	Investigate some aspects of a phenomenon to get an overview	Sample Representative sample Exploratory sample	Sampling (random, purposive, and convenience)	Interview survey Observational survey Document survey	Lack of depth Limitation to measurable aspects Lack of theoretical grounding

Case study	Investigate in-depth a phenomenon with a well-defined boundary	Case/instance Natural setting Holistic view	Multisource data collection Triangulation	Exploratory case study Descriptive case study Explanatory case study	Weak generalisability
Ethnography	Investigate cultural practices and social interaction	Culture Empathy Researcher as an active participant	Fieldwork Capture social meanings	Holistic study Semiotic study Critical study	Reflexivity A-theoretical storytelling Ethical dilemmas
Grounded theory	Develop concepts and theories through analysing empirical data	Categories and codes Open-mindedness Theory and concept generation	Theoretical sampling Coding (open, axial, and selective)	Positivist Interpretivist Constructivist	Reflexivity Lack of context

		Theoretical saturation			
Action research	Produce valuable knowledge by addressing practical problems in real-world settings	Active practitioner participation Change in practice Action and research outcomes	Cyclical process: Diagnosis Planning Intervention Evaluation Reflection	Technical action research Practical action research Emancipatory action research	Weak generalizability Lack of impartiality
Phenomenology	Describe and understand the lived experience of people	Lived experience Reflectivity	Unstructured interviews		Lack of rigour

For this study, the most suitable research strategy is phenomenology. This strategy is suitable because it seeks to study human phenomena without attempting to determine causes or objective reality. The study aims to comprehend how human beings construct meaning from their experiences and interactions. This meaning is created based on human conduct and the cultural objects and social artefacts influenced by human activity (Wilson 2002; Wagner et al 2012). Furthermore, it generates results that anyone can easily understand because they usually describe the lived experiences of people in their everyday lives. This strategy also makes it possible for a study to produce novel insights because specific theories do not overly influence the study. The main weakness of this strategy is that it generally lacks rigour and focuses mainly on providing descriptions while overlooking explanation and analysis (Wagner et al. 2012; Johannesson & Perjons 2014).

Data collection in a phenomenological study is usually done through a long interview, sometimes over an hour. This length of time helps to comprehend and interpret the perception of the participants (Williams 2007). In the present study, the format was informed by the views of Creswell (1998), who suggests that the data collection process should begin by designing the research questions, exploring what an experience means, doing the interviews, and then analysing the data to determine if there are categories of meanings, and then creating a report that helps the reader understand the essential structure of the experience. This procedure assisted the study in determining the common themes in the perceptions of freelance copywriters on Upwork regarding their experience with cross-cultural communication on the platform.

4.5 Data collection techniques

The primary data for the present study was collected using individual semi-structured interviews with freelance copywriters on Upwork. The secondary method was focus group discussions. The main topics investigated during the interviews and discussions were determined by the research questions stated in Chapter 1 and the concepts summarised in the conceptual theoretical framework in Chapter 3. Through the interviews and focus group discussions, the participants provided details about their perceptions regarding the platform and how they communicate with employers to find

and manage jobs. They were also asked about how they deal with issues linked to cross-cultural communication and if there are any differences between communication on virtual platforms and face-to-face communication. The participants were also questioned on what they suggest should be done to encourage better cross-culture communication on the platform to make it more inviting for individuals looking for work. The full list of questions is presented in Appendix 4a.

The questions used to collect the data are based on the views of Munhall (2008), who says that individuals using the qualitative method are primarily interested in individual perception to obtain access to comprehending the meaning of the experience for a social group, an individual or a culture.

4.5.1 The population

In research, a population denotes the potential respondents of interest or the aggregate set of cases available to a researcher (Bacon-Shone 2015; Taherdoost, 2016). Therefore, regarding the present study, the population consists of all freelancers working on Upwork who indicate that they are based in South Africa. The Upwork website provides a feature that allows a searcher to access a list of freelancers whose profiles indicate that they are based in South Africa, as illustrated in the screen capture from the Upwork website below. However, for a searcher to access this list, they must create a profile on the platform. This researcher already has a profile on Upwork.

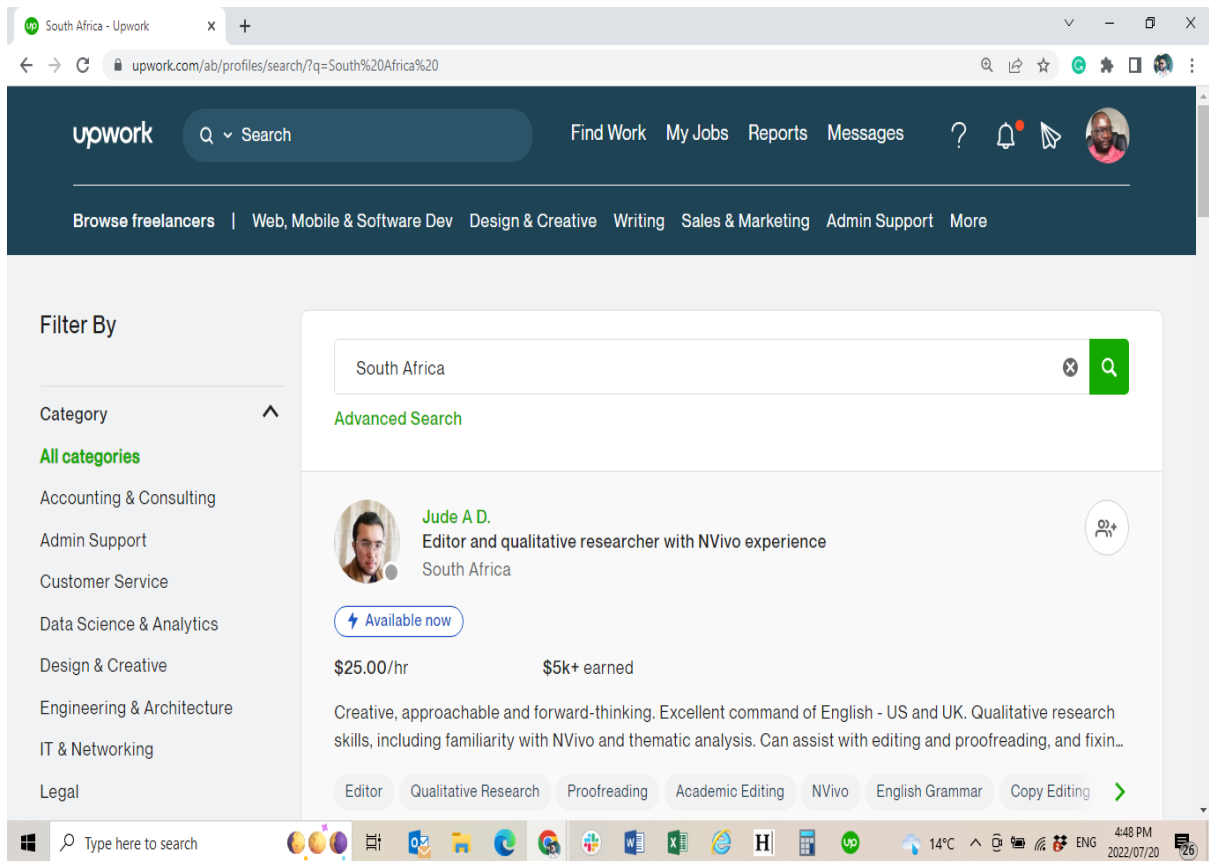


Figure 4.1: Screen capture of the Upwork search page (Source: www.Upwork.com)

4.6.1.1 The Target Population

The target population is the comprehensive group of individuals from whom the researcher will collect data to make inferences (Wimmer & Dominick 2011). For this study, the target population includes all freelancers with profiles on Upwork who list their specialities as copywriting and are located in South Africa. The Upwork search feature (as illustrated in Figure 4.1 above) was used to identify freelancers who were asked to participate in the study.

It is essential to clearly identify the target population by defining what determines whether a specific individual is eligible for inclusion in the sample. Thus, there needs to be clarity regarding the specific characteristics of the target population to provide confidence when drawing conclusions (Lavrakas 2008; Martínez-Mesa et al. 2016). On this basis, the inclusion criteria of the target population in this study are the following:

- The freelance copywriters need to have a profile registered on Upwork to ensure that the study involves only individuals working on the platform as specified by the research topic.
- All freelance copywriters included in the study should have done at least one job and received and given feedback on the platform to ensure that they interacted with clients and, therefore, have a perception of such interaction.
- Freelance copywriters need to be able to speak in English to make it easy to interpret what they are saying.

The exclusion criteria will be as follows:

- Freelance copywriters whose profiles show that they have not done any work on Upwork.
- Freelance copywriters who cannot communicate in English.

The above criteria made it possible to create a sample frame in the form of a list used by a researcher to define the population of interest. It defines factors impacting a researcher's choice when selecting the sample from the target population (Lewis-Beck 2004). As indicated before, the population frame for this study is the list of South African copywriter profiles on Upwork. The list of these names was accessed using a free profile, as illustrated in Figure 4.1.

4.5.1.2 The accessible population

The accessible population is the group of individuals from the general population that the researcher can include as participants in the study because they meet the selection criteria (Bartlett et al. 2001; Creswell 2003). All freelance copywriters registered on Upwork with public profiles are accessible. Contacting them involves doing a filtered search using keywords like *South Africa* and *Copywriter* and then sending them a message using the Upwork platform's message feature.

4.5.2 Sampling

A sample consists of the individuals, items, or entities selected from the target population using the sampling frame defined above (Becon-Shone 2015). Therefore, sampling denotes the process of selecting individuals from the sample frame using either of the two main sampling types: probability and non-probability.

Probability sampling seeks to ensure that each subject of a study gets the same possibility of being chosen. Therefore, this type of sampling aims to develop a representative sample – when looked at in terms of the total population – to generate better confidence when generalising the results to a more significant population. To generalise the conclusions to a larger population, it is vital to ensure that participants are chosen randomly from the greater population. This type of sampling is usually used in quantitative studies, where statistical analysis is employed to produce unbiased data and conclusions (Wimmer & Dominick 2011; Daymon & Holloway 2011; Wagner 2012). Nonprobability sampling is mainly used by scholars doing qualitative studies. This type of sampling employs non-random deliberate procedures when choosing a study’s participants. Therefore, the results from such a study are generally not used in generalisations regarding a specific group (Wimmer & Dominick 2011; Daymon & Holloway 2011; Wagner 2012). Martínez-Mesa et al. (2016: 11) present a graphic illustration of the two main types of sampling in Figure 4.2 below:

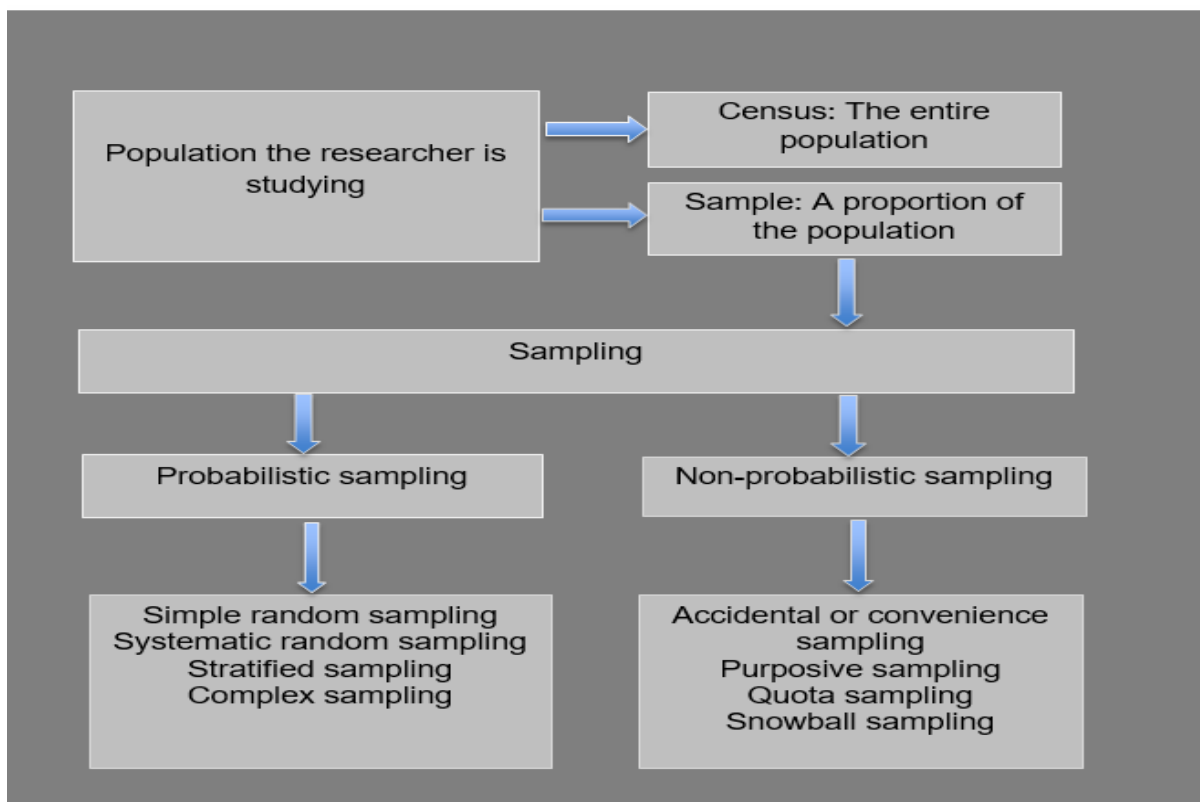


Figure 4.2: Sampling types in scientific studies (Adapted from Martínez-Mesa et al. 2016:11)

For this study, the participants' subjective experiences are more critical than generalising the attitudes of all the South African freelancers working on Upwork. On this basis, non-probabilistic sampling is chosen. Specifically, the study uses convenience sampling, where freelance copywriters with profiles on Upwork (Figure 4.1) who agree to participate were selected (Wegner et al. 2012).

4.5.2.1 Sample size

Since the idea is to go deeper into the experiences of the individual as opposed to generalising the findings, there was no need for a large sample (Bartlett, Kotrlik, & Higgins 2001; Daymon & Holloway 2011). Therefore, the sample consists of 20 individuals and/or until data saturation has been reached, which is within the scientific framework for semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. This is a decision based on the consciousness that the sample should not be too small that it will be challenging to reach data saturation. At the same time, it should also not be too big that it becomes impossible to undertake a deep and meaningful analysis of data (Wimmer & Dominick 2011; Punch 2014).

4.5.3 Phase 1: Semi-structured interviews

This study's main data collection method was semi-structured interviews with ten selected participants. The interview technique is a broad category encompassing several types of interviews. One type is the structured interview, where the researcher presents several questions planned in detail so that each question permits a restricted number of response categories. The questions for this type of interview are rigid, and all respondents must answer the same questions. Another popular type of interview is the unstructured interview, in which the researcher does not approach the discussion with a list of predetermined questions. This type of interview encourages respondents to speak openly and honestly to provide as much detail as possible. This is a popular technique for interviewers who want to explore a topic that has not been broadly studied yet. However, this method presents the challenge that when answers are too broad, it may be challenging to determine which ideas to follow and which ones to ignore (DeMarrais 2004; Boyce & Neale, 2006; Minichiello, Aroni, & Hays 2008; Salmons 2012).

The semi-structured interview (SSI) is an interview technique that mixes the characteristics of structured interviews and unstructured interviews. This is the technique that was selected in the present study. Semi-structured interviews employ an amalgamation of closed- and open-ended questions. This technique provides the leeway to answer follow-up questions regarding why a respondent says something or how the idea presented by the respondent happened (Adams 2015). The semi-structured interview method was selected for this study because, as an interactive method, it allows a conversational exchange akin to a real-world setting. This encouraged a frank conversation that could reveal important information. However, the main disadvantage of the method is that it is time-consuming when collecting the data and analysing the massive volume of data generated (Willson 2014; Adams 2015).

This study followed the semi-structured interview guidelines suggested by Adams (2015). Since the sampling techniques have already been defined, these guidelines include drafting the interview guide and the questions and techniques used during the interviews. The semi-structured interviews were conducted online using the Zoom platform.

4.5.3.1 Selecting interviewees and arranging for the interviews

After carefully analysing the accessible sample selected (as explained in Section 4.6.2) and illustrated in Figure 4.1 above, eligible freelance copywriters were invited to participate in the study through their profiles on the platform. The invitation (Appendix 2) included a short letter of introduction telling the potential participants what the study was about and how their insights could be valuable to the study. Other critical information respondents were provided with includes the amount of time they were expected to give to the project. The participants were also informed that any information they shared during the interview and focus group discussions would be treated confidentially. None of their names are made public in this research report. Participant codes are used in the discussion of the findings. In the present study, the time taken for each interview was determined through a pilot study. Interviewees were also asked to state the time most suitable for them. The time for FGDs was discussed with the participants so that a time that best suits most can be selected.

4.5.3.2 *Drafting the online interview questions*

Considering that this study used semi-structured interview questions, there was no need to create a questionnaire with a rigid list of questions. Instead, the study used an interview guide (Appendix 4a). The semi-structured interview questions were guided by the research questions presented in Chapter 1, the literature review in Chapter 2, and the conceptual theoretical framework presented in Chapter 3. The following recommendations were considered when creating the SSI guide (Minichiello, Aroni, & Hays 2008; Salmons 2012; Adams 2015).

- Adequate time was budgeted to draft, edit, pre-test, and refine the interview questions.
- The potential topics discussed during the interview were prioritised in such a way that the questions that capture details about the freelancers' experiences and perceptions about cross-cultural communication were asked first so that in the event of time running out, the most important data would have been captured.
- The guide was created in a manner that there were no questions that pressured respondents to answer in a certain way. This was achieved by looking for ways to remove any stigma attached to specific responses.

4.5.3.3 *During the interview*

Adams (2015) suggested some principles for putting the SSI guideline into action:

- To break the ice, the interview can start with some pleasantries and easy questions that could put the respondents at ease before the most serious questions are introduced.
- The questions should be asked in a non-threatening way.
- When using critique questions, the interviewer should consider starting with positive inquiries, such as asking respondents what they like about a specific situation before asking them what they do not like. This could assist interviewees to feel more confident to share negative criticism without feeling guilty about saying something negative.
- The controversial, embarrassing, or awkward questions should be introduced towards the end of the interview after the interaction has progressed to a stage

where the interviewer is no longer viewed as a stranger but as non-argumentative and professional, genuinely interested in the respondent's valuable opinion.

- To end the interview on a substantive note, the interviewer can consider a conclusion that returns to an easy question, possibly about the interviewee's views regarding how cross-cultural communication may look like on Upwork going into the future.

Galletta (2013) advises that even though the SSI guide constitutes an integral part of preparing for the interviews, it is vital to remember that the guide should remain flexible. This implies that the interviewer should seek to continuously improve the process based on observations from one interview to the next. This can be done by evaluating each interview to determine the strengths, weaknesses, and possible remedies for each interview.

In this study, permission was requested from participants to record the interviews. Considering that the interviews for the present study were conducted online and recorded with permission from the participants, an important issue is taking notes during the interview. While taking notes during the interviews can ensure that issues that may not be contained in words, such as non-verbal clues of the interviewee, are recorded, this can cause a fundamental conflict because an interviewer ends up dividing their attention between listening to what the respondent is saying and writing what has just been said (Hahn 2008). This challenge was mitigated by video recording the interviews with permission from the participants and ensuring that note-taking during the interview was minimal. Specifically, the Zoom meetings feature used in this study allowed for recording both video and audio locally to a computer. The recorded video and audio were uploaded to a storage file on Google Drive (Zoom Video Communications 2021). Considering the importance of the data collected during the interviews, all recordings were stored on two different password-locked devices as a form of backup to ensure security.

4.5.4 Phase II: focus group discussions

Apart from the semi-structured interviews, this study used the focus group discussion (FGDs) approach to enhance its qualitative results. The main purpose of FGDs was

to draw on the participant's views about the issues raised during the one-on-one interviews, allowing the researcher to address common issues and any points of difference. FGDs have been selected because they share several common features with semi-structured interviews (Gill et al 2008; Clifford et al 2016). A focus group discussion can be defined as a guided discussion involving a group of participants. The researcher acts as a moderator during the discussion, ensuring that the issues discussed are in an organised manner. In the present study, the FGDs method will be used as a secondary method to the semi-structured interviews, providing the researcher with an opportunity to clarify and possibly challenge the points made during the individual interviews with participants (Gill et al., 2008).

Lambert and Loisel (2008) note that qualitative method triangulation is supported as a strategy for attaining a deeper comprehension of a specific phenomenon. The same scholars note that an amalgamation of individual interviews and FGDs is growing as a way of creating and synthesising knowledge. As a method of triangulating the data collected from the semi-structured interviews, FGDs can have a considerable influence on the views of individual interviewees so that they can question their earlier assumptions or validate them. This allows the researcher to match or compare the in-depth details gathered from the individual interviews (Stokes & Bergin 2006). In the present study, combining the two strategies assisted in revealing whether the same insights will be obtained from one-on-one interviews and FGDs.

4.5.4.1 Applying the FGDs method

Regarding the number of members in each focus group, the 10 participants were divided into two groups with five participants each. This decision is based on the realisation that the success of focus groups depends on the quality of interaction (Krueger & Casey 2000; Gill et al 2008). Also, it is based on the assumption that groups that are too small may lead to a limited discussion, while groups that are too large may be too chaotic and difficult to manage, and some participants may feel that they were not provided with adequate opportunity to speak. It is also crucial to ensure that the number of participants is large enough so that even if one or two do not attend, the discussion can still proceed (Bloor 2001).

As was the case in the interviews, the researcher requested permission from the participants to video record the interactions. This made it possible to watch the interviews later for non-verbal cues (Fontey et al 2008). Burrows and Kendall (1997) recommend that adequate data can be collected from one FDG session. The present study conducted two FDG sessions, with five participants in each focus group. Each session lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. This decision is guided by the view of Gill et al. (2008), who note that the participants' time needs to be respected, and the discussion should not be too long to end up exhausting the participants.

Clifford et al. (2016) note that when listening to recorded focus group discussions, it can be challenging to identify the speaker who made a specific point. In the present study, this problem was solved by having a video recording of the focus group interactions.

The discussions done in the focus groups emerged from the issues raised during the semi-structured interviews. The researcher identified the main points raised during the interviews and then presented them to the focus groups to determine the collective consensus or differences in relation to those topics. The points below suggested by Cyr (2019) informed how the FGDs were conducted:

- After the interviews, the researcher determined the main points to be discussed during the FGDs.
- The facilitator introduced themselves to the participants and informed them about the topic for the day, and the group set ground rules.
- Before the recording began, participants introduced themselves.
- The participants were reminded that the group discussions were recorded and requested to provide verbal consent.
- The facilitator introduced the topic and specific views raised during the interviews and then prompted the group members to respond.
- The facilitator ensured that each group member got an opportunity to talk; and discouraged a situation where one member dominated the discussion.
- The facilitator summarised the main points and asked the participants if they had anything to add before the discussion was closed.

4.5.5 COVID-19 protocols

Regarding COVID-19 guidelines, the present study did not involve direct contact with participants as all the interviews and focus group discussions were done online. Thus, the risk of infection is non-existent. Therefore, there was no need to stipulate any safety protocols followed during the semi-structured interview and focus group process.

4.6 Data analysis and interpretation

Data analysis is how a researcher makes sense of the collected data. This process involves consolidation, reduction, and interpretation of the participants' words, actions, experiences, and feelings (Merriam 2009). The main reason for analysing the data is to find insights that help answer the research questions. Such insights can be presented in different ways, including pictures, tables or figures (Cresswell, 2012). The data analysis in this study followed the deductive content analysis approach, which Kawulich and Holland (2012) say works well in a study that starts from a general standpoint and then moves to the specific data. Data analysis started with the process of open coding, which made it possible to develop the initial ideas (Blair 2015). This was followed by focused coding to investigate the codes and see if there were any relationships between them (Robson 2011). These relationships were compared to the prevailing themes presented in the literature review in Chapter 2 and conceptual theoretical framework in Chapter 3.

4.6.1. Unit of analysis

Daymon and Holloway (2011:364) define a unit of analysis as a "cluster of concepts and ideas with similar characteristics." In this study, the unit of analysis was the individual freelance copywriters who participated in the study through semi-structured interviews. For the focus groups, the unit of analysis was the two groups into which the participants were divided.

4.6.2 Thematic analysis

This study used thematic analysis to analyse the data collected from both the SSI and content analysis. Thematic analysis is a method through which patterns are identified

and organised before insights can be extracted. By focusing on the meaning inherent in a dataset, the thematic analysis allows a researcher to identify the common trends regarding how a topic is talked or written about (Braun & Clarke 2012). In both the semi-structured interviews and focus groups, thematic analysis will be applied. Thematic analysis has been selected for the present study because it is a flexible and accessible method. This view is also acknowledged by Braun and Clarke (2012). They note that thematic analysis makes available a way for new researchers to do research that would otherwise come across as mystifying, vague, overly complex, and conceptually challenging. The thematic analysis, therefore, offers a pathway into qualitative research that teaches the technicalities of coding and analysing qualitative data in a systematic manner (Braun & Clarke 2006; Kiger & Varpio 2020). In this study, the thematic analysis was achieved through transcribing the data collected from the interviews and focus group discussions. The coding will be done in stages as described in Table 4.3 below.

4.6.2.1 Interview and focus group discussion transcription

Once the data had been gathered from the participants through interviews and focus group discussions, the next stage involved turning the audio copies into written text through transcription. In this study, this was done using transcription software available on Zoom Meetings, which automatically creates a transcript of what was said during a meeting. The transcription permits the user to edit the text to correct instances where the transcript is misunderstood or fails to record a specific term (Zoom Video Communications 2021b).

4.6.2.2 Coding

The coding process suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006: 15-25) was used in this study. The specific details are presented in Table 4.3 below.

Table 4.3: The coding process

Phase	Description of Process
1. Familiarising with data	This stage involves transcribing and rereading the data collected during the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions.
2. Generation of initial codes	The analysis begins to identify any interesting features from the data collected in the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. This will result in the development of the initial codes, collating data from each code, giving the codes labels, and providing a brief description of each one. These codes will be reviewed and polished continuously throughout the stages that follow.
3. Searching for themes	At this stage, the analysis process begins to collate the codes to create possible themes and then gather the data fitting each possible theme.
4. Reviewing themes	In this phase, the analysis process checks if the themes work concerning the coded extracts and the aggregate data set.

5. Defining and naming themes	The analysis will continue refining each theme and the general story the analysis tells. This will result in precise definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report	This marks the final stage in the analysis and involves the identification of compelling and vivid examples to support conclusions, doing a final analysis of chosen extracts relating to the research questions, theories, and literature relating to cross-cultural communication. This is the section that will present the final results.

Based on the guidelines in Table 4.3 above, this study will be based on the following specific steps:

1. Since the transcripts and video recordings can be downloaded as soon as the interview or focus group discussion is done, the data analysis in this study began with the researcher reading through the transcript and ensuring that what was said in the interview or discussion was captured accurately.
2. Since the idea is to answer the four research questions (RQs) as presented in Section 1.2.5 of Chapter 1, the researcher created the initial themes based on the questions and themes presented in the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 3 as follows:
 - RQ1: Perceptions about cross-cultural communication on Upwork
 - RQ2: Determining roles and cultural standpoint when communicating on Upwork
 - RQ3: Role of cross-cultural communication in facilitating or impeding productivity on Upwork
 - RQ4: Freelancer perceptions of Upwork as a viable source of employment, based on their perception of cross-cultural communication on the platform.
3. From the specific words, narratives, and observations of the freelancers regarding cross-cultural communication on Upwork, the initial codes were generated from the answers to each question.
4. Once the initial codes were established based on the data collected from the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions in this study, the researcher created a way of collating the sections that fit into each code developed in the above step.
5. The researcher then looked at the list of codes to determine which ones can be amalgamated to create themes and determine which would be subthemes to others. Codes that do not seem to add value to the study's aims were discarded.
6. The researcher named the themes emerging from the coding done in the steps above. For instance, possible themes that could emerge from the data may include "Lack of cultural awareness when communicating on Upwork (could be by freelance copywriters or employers), "Lack of cross-cultural communication

competence,” or “Effectiveness of cross-cultural communication depends on media used.”.

7. The researcher then produced the data analysis report where the themes from the data are interpreted and communicated. The conclusions were drawn from the themes that emerged from the data and recommendations made.

4.6.3 Reliability

Qualitative studies are often limited because their findings cannot be generalised to a broader population, with the same level possible for quantitative analysis. The main reason behind this limitation is that these qualitative studies are not tested to determine whether their conclusions are statistically significant or a result of chance (Atieno, 2009). However, qualitative researchers can use numerous methods to ensure that the results of their studies are trustworthy. The idea of trustworthiness denotes the level to which a researcher could be said to have used methods and processes that ensure appropriate collection, analysis, and reporting of the data (Carlson, 2010).

Proving reliability can be challenging in qualitative research because replicating the process and results is not always easy because the approach follows a diversity of paradigms. Leung (2015) notes that on this basis, the reliability of qualitative studies lies with consistency. This means that a margin of variability (relating to the degree to which observations differ from one another) is acceptable in qualitative studies as long as a researcher can prove that the methodology and epistemological logistics will continue to produce similar data from an ethnological point of view. However, there may be variances in the ambience and richness within comparable dimensions. Leung (2015) proposes measures that a qualitative researcher can take to ensure that the research process and results are acceptable, including comprehensive data use, constant data comparison, and reflexive analysis. In the present study, this requirement was met by first clarifying how the data was collected and how the sample from which the data was collected was put together (see Section 4.6.2 Sampling). The researcher clearly indicated the processes involved in data analysis (see Section 4.7 Data Analysis and Interpretation). Added to this, the researcher ensured that the collected data was as accurate as possible by allowing the interview and FDG

participants to see the results of the data analysis and the quotations attributed to them (George 2004).

The use of the FDGs technique in the present study seeks to enhance triangulation, making it possible to access the topic under study from different perspectives. The FDGs represent a collective construction of ideas among participants, which may not have been possible when interviewing participants as single individuals. For this reason, the technique can lead the researcher to access different kinds of data compared to that which would have been possible with semi-structured interviews alone (Caillaud & Flich 2017).

An important aspect of this study to ensure reliability involved ensuring that the interviewees clearly understood the questions asked. This was ensured by including a pilot study before the main interviews began (see Section 4.9 Pilot Study).

4.6.4 Validity

Even though qualitative studies do not need to be reliable in the positivist sense, it is vital to ensure that the conclusions drawn from such studies are credible (Golafshani 2003; Collis & Hussey 2009). This can be done through validity, which focuses on the appropriate tools, processes, and data used in a study. This is determined by answering questions relating to whether the chosen methodology suits the question a researcher is attempting to answer, whether the design is valid in terms of the methodology, whether the process of sampling and analysing the data is suitable, and finally, whether the results presented by a researcher are valid for the context and sample (Leung, 2015). In qualitative studies, validity can be assured by focusing on rigour. Whitemore et al. (2001) suggest methods that qualitative researchers can employ to ensure rigour, which denotes the strength of the research design and the suitability of the methods employed to answer the research questions. The strengths of the research design and suitability of the methods used lead to trustworthiness, which denotes the truthfulness, authenticity, and quality of findings. It relates to how much confidence or trust readers can place in the results (Cypress 2017).

In the present study, validity was established by ensuring that even though the sample was selected using non-probability sampling, the researcher attempted to approach a diverse sample of individuals, including women and people from different races and age groups. This was done to reduce the possibility of bias associated with selecting a homogeneous group. Also, the study has clarified why specific tools and methods were selected and why they are appropriate. The researcher will keep all the recordings from the interviews and focus group discussions to make a well-documented audit trail available (Carcary 2009; Jansen 2010).

4.7 Ethical issues

Daymo and Holloway (2011) identify some important ethical considerations that should be considered regarding participants: the right to informed and free choice, protection from harm, and assurance that anonymity and privacy will be maintained. All these issues have been taken into consideration in this study and will be defined and described in detail below.

4.7.1 The right to informed and free choice

The right to informed consent denotes the process in which the individuals participating in research are educated about the study. It involves providing adequate information so that the participant is clear about the benefits and risks of participating in the study (Thornton, Terrin & Hipskind 2022). Informed consent also ensures that the researcher and participant agree on the obligations and roles that will be played by each part. Ensuring informed consent provides a way for the researcher to guarantee that all the participants involved in the study are fully informed and have provided their explicit consent to participate in the study. This is a view acknowledged by Strauss et al (2001), who note that when the researcher fails to obtain informed consent or when research participants have not been provided with adequate details, research abuses can happen.

In the present study, each participant was provided with a letter requesting them to participate in the study (Appendix 2). The assumption is that when adequate information is provided to the participant, the decisions made by that participant will be more informed (Nishimura et al 2013) In this study, each participant will be informed

in the introduction letter that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any point without providing a reason.

In the present study, the researcher will ensure that adequate information is provided to the participants. This information will include the following elements as identified by Eysenbach and Till (2001):

- The scope and purpose of the research
- The kind of questions that have the potential to be asked
- What the results of the study will be used for
- How the researcher will ensure that the participant's data will be anonymised
- The degree to which the things mentioned by the participants will be used in the report

4.7.2 Protection from harm

Considering that the present study identifies participants on the internet, there is a potential that the researcher may violate the privacy of individuals, which could result in harm. For example, the researcher may quote a review written by a specific participant and include it in a report. Using the quoted words, someone may search for the terms on Google and identify to whom the specific words are attributed. For this reason, the researcher in this study requested the participant's informed consent whenever the need to quote any participant verbatim arises. This view is supported by Eysenbach and Till (2001), who say that the other reason the researcher should speak to participants regarding the use of their quotes is that there are certain instances where the author is not necessarily worried about harm but actually wants publicity. In such cases, issues of misuse of someone else's intellectual property may arise. If the participants in the present study could be identified, they may suffer harm in that potential clients on Upwork may identify them. This could lead them to suffer prejudice or lose work.

4.7.3 Assurance of anonymity and privacy

In the present study, the researcher ensured confidentiality and anonymity by making sure that all the information collected was stored in a password-locked computer. No participant is named in the final report. Participant codes are used in the data analysis.

The researcher carefully studied the report to ensure that no other information that can be used to identify the respondents remains.

4.7.4 Other ethical considerations

Other ethical issues in the present study may involve distress and anxiety, exploitation, misrepresentation, inconvenience and opportunity cost (Richards & Schwartz, 2002). Considering that the study consists of questions that may be probing and require participants to discuss their beliefs and defend them, some participants may find the process uncomfortable. It is also possible that some will be worried about how they come across to the researcher and if their answers are considered clever or intelligent. In terms of exploitation, the participants may sometimes misunderstand their role in the study and view the researcher as a senior who could help them solve the problems being researched. Considering that the present study's data is analysed qualitatively, there is potential for the researcher to present a biased view. In this study, this specific challenge has been addressed by clearly articulating how validity and reliability were ensured.

The researcher in this study attempted to reduce distress and anxiety during the interviews by ensuring that the participants knew what to expect. Adequate information about issues such as how long the interview will take and the kind of questions asked was used to calm the nerves of the interviews. The researcher also began with general questions that helped build rapport with the interview participants.

To reduce the risk of misinterpretation and misrepresentation, this study employed the method of "respondent validation." Eysenbach and Till (2001) note that this method is the process through which researchers share the analysis with the participants and request their feedback before publishing the findings. However, the authors note that this method could have drawbacks in that repeated contact with the participants may be costly, impractical or considered harassment. Consequently, this researcher determined first whether participants wanted to see the analysis before the findings were published. The analysis was then shared only with those who indicate they would like to.

Regarding the issue of inconvenience and opportunity costs, it is important to ensure that none of the participant's time is wasted. This means that the interview and focus group discussions do not last for longer than the time the participants are informed they will last. Also, all interview and focus group discussions started on time so that no participants are kept waiting.

4.8 Pilot study

The pilot study or preliminary study makes it possible to test the instruments used in the main study (Janghorban et al 2014). Kim (2010) discusses some reasons a pilot study should precede the main study:

- To identify the barriers and challenges related to participant recruitment.
- Evaluate how acceptable the interview protocols are to the participants.
- Assessing the feasibility of the proposed research process, including the local political and cultural process.

There are generally no hard and fast rules for selecting the number of participants for a qualitative pilot study (Hooper n.d). The current study requested two freelance copywriters who fit the target population to participate in the pilot study. These freelance copywriters were identified using the search function on Upwork described in Chapter 4, Section 4.6.1. The participants of the pilot study indicated that all the questions were phrased in a manner that was easy to understand. Therefore, nothing was changed and the same process used in the pilot study was used in the final study.

4.9 Conclusion

This chapter presented the research methodology embraced in this study. It was indicated that the philosophical standpoint employed in the study is the interpretivist paradigm. Regarding logical reasoning, the chapter has indicated that inductive logic was used to determine the perceptions of freelancer copywriters regarding cross-cultural communication on the Upwork platform. It was posited that qualitative methodology, within a phenomenological research design that describes the structure of experience, was the most suitable. The section detailing the research strategy shows that the specific methods employed for data collection are semi-structured interviews and FGDs (online through Zoom) involving 20 participants selected using

the nonprobability sampling approach. The chapter also presents the steps followed during the data analysis stage, including coding and creating themes. Details regarding how the study ensured the conclusions' validity, reliability, and trustworthiness were also presented. The chapter also discussed the ethical considerations pertinent to the study and the pilot study. The next chapter will present the findings based on the data collected.

CHAPTER 5: PRESENTATION OF DATA/FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

In Chapter 4, the study's research methodology was outlined. This chapter will focus on presenting, analysing, and discussing the data collected using the methodology, methods, and process presented in Chapter 4. The findings and results presented in this chapter were obtained from semi-structured interviews (SSIs) conducted with 10 participants selected using non-random deliberate sampling and two focus group (FGDs) discussions held with five participants each also selected through non-random deliberate sampling. The SSIs and FGDs were conducted with freelance copywriters on Upwork to address the research questions and objectives presented in the introduction chapter. The theoretical framework presented in Chapter 3 was used as the guideline for determining the questions to ask during the interviews and the guidelines for the FGDs.

As soon as each of the SSIs were completed, the researcher developed transcripts, thoroughly reviewed the data, and cleaned it to ensure that all the points eligible for the analysis would be captured and presented. At the same time, that which was irrelevant was discarded. Following the data cleaning process, the researcher remained with a smaller amount of data that was easy to manage.

The qualitative methodology was applied because this study aims to determine freelance copywriters' perceptions regarding cross-cultural communication on the Upwork platform. This methodology was chosen as it is perceived to be best for dealing with subjects within constructivist viewpoints. Also, the study did not attempt to come up with generalisable findings that can be attributed to all the freelancers on the platform. Rather, its objective was to determine the specific perspectives of the participating freelance copywriters to determine how they approach cross-cultural communication on the platform, how they determine which cultural standpoint to follow when working on the platform, whether they believe that the platform takes measures to ensure smooth cross-cultural communication among freelance copywriters and clients, and if they believe that the way communication is handled on the platform could make it possible for South Africans using this platform to perceive it as a viable place to find work in a country where jobs are in short supply.

This chapter is structured as follows: participant profiles, research questions, data analysis overview, analysis of primary themes and sub-themes, and a conclusion.

5.2 Participant profiles

The data for the semi-structured interviews were collected from the sample of 10 freelance copywriters working with clients using the Upwork platform. Five males and five females participated in the SSIs. Six females and four males participated in the FGDs. The main focus of the SSIs and the FGDs was to obtain the participants' perceptions regarding cross-cultural communication on Upwork. Participants were assigned codes based on their participation in the SSIs or FGDs. For example, the first participant in the interview is coded SSI-P1 (semi-structured interview Participant 1), and the tenth is coded SSI-P10. The same applied to the FGDs where the first participant is coded FGD-P1 (focus group discussion Participant 1) and the tenth is coded FGD-P10.

Table 5.1 presents the demographics of participants in the semi-structured Interviews, and 5.2 for the focus group discussions.

Table 5.1: Demographics of participants in SSIs

Participant Code	Race	Gender	Age	Years on Upwork
SSI-P1	Black	Female	32	3
SSI-P2	Black	Female	27	1
SSI-P3	Black	Female	37	2
SSI-P4	White	Female	28	2
SSI-P5	Black	Female	30	0.5

SSI-P6	White	Male	23	1
SSI-P7	White	Male	27	1
SSI-P8	Black	Male	28	1
SSI-P9	Black	Male	19	1
SSI-P10	Black	Male	34	6

Table 5.2: Demographics of participants in FDGs

Participant Code	Race	Gender	Age	Years on Upwork
FGD-P1	Black	Female	33	4
FGD-P2	Black	Male	19	1
FGD-P3	White	Female	52	8
FGD-P4	White	Female	27	4
FGD-P5	Black	Male	23	1
FGD-P6	Black	Female	30	3
FGD-P7	Black	Female	39	3

FGD-P8	Black	Male	47	3
FGD-P9	White	Male	33	1
FGD-P10	Black	Female	40	5

5.3 Research questions

The research questions addressed in this chapter are as follows:

- **RQ1:** How do South African freelance copywriters perceive cross-cultural communication on the Upwork platform?
- **RQ2:** What guides freelance Upwork copywriters when determining the cultural standpoint from which they communicate with clients and other team members when working in virtual teams?
- **RQ3:** What do freelance copywriters on Upwork perceive as the role of cross-cultural communication in either facilitating or impeding productivity when working across borders?
- **RQ4:** Based on their perception of cross-cultural communication and the Upwork platform, what are South African copywriters' perceptions regarding the platform as a source of employment for other South Africans?

5.4 Data analysis overview

As indicated in Chapter 4, the data analysis was accomplished using a coding process as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006: 15-25) presented in Table 5-3 below

Table 5.3: Recapping the coding process

Phase	Task	Description of Process
1	Familiarising with data	Transcribing and rereading the data collected during the SSIs and FGDs.
2	Generation of initial codes	Identifying any interesting features from the data, developing the initial codes, collating data from each code, giving the codes labels, and providing a brief description. These codes will be reviewed and polished continuously throughout the stages that follow.
3	Searching for themes	At this stage, the analysis collates the codes to create possible themes and then gathers the data fitting each theme.
4	Reviewing themes	The analysis checks whether the themes work concerning the coded extracts and the aggregate data set.
5	Defining and naming themes	Each theme is refined and the general story the analysis tells starts to become eminent, resulting in definitions and names of each theme.

6	Producing the report	Constitutes the final stage of the analysis. It involves the identification of compelling and vivid examples to support conclusions and doing a final analysis of chosen extracts relating to the research questions, theories, and literature relating to cross-cultural communication. This is the section that will present the final results.
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5.5. Analysis of primary themes and sub-themes

The questioning for the SSIs and the FGDs was organised based on the three main theories forming the present study's theoretical framework, presented in Chapter 3:

- The role theory (Biddle, 1979)
- Cultural dimension theory (Hofstede, 1980)
- Critical theory (Hoops, 2017)

These three theories were then applied from the perspective of the present study to determine the main concepts involved in understanding behaviour when people communicate across cultures. The role theory recognised the importance of roles and how they influence actions and world views. The theory proposes that understanding communication messages starts with understanding the roles the communicating individuals believe they are playing. On this basis, the first five of the 15 questions in the SSIs were concerned with understanding what the participating freelance copywriters believe are the roles they occupy within a freelancing context, the factors they take into account when defining their roles, whether there is always a shared understanding of these roles between the freelancers, colleagues, and clients, and how a shared understanding of these roles influences the success of the communication process.

The use of the cultural dimension theory by Hofstede (1980) in the present study is based on the idea that even though individuals communicate based on specific roles, these roles are not always defined in the same manner across different cultures based on the regions from which participants come. Therefore, an endeavour to comprehend cross-cultural communication should be based on an attempt to understand the influence of the different regions and cultures from which those participating in the communication process come. Using these assumptions as a basis, the next three of the 15 questions in the interview focused on the frequency with which participants work with people from different cultures on Upwork, how the freelancers tell that someone comes from a different culture, and the culture freelancers adopt when they communicate and interact with clients.

In relation to the present study, the critical theory adds the dimension of invisible influences like power relations, the history of such relations, and their influence on how people communicate across cultures. This theory inspired the tenth question in the study, which attempted to understand freelance copywriters' perspectives on the influence of the perceived historical power of countries or regions concerning the way cross-cultural communication occurs on Upwork. With the basic questions covered, the last five questions focus on the present study's main question relating to the freelance copywriters' perception of cross-cultural communication on Upwork. The questions focused on collecting data relating to whether freelance copywriters agree that Upwork is a cross-cultural environment, how they determine the cultural standpoint to adopt when working with different clients, whether they believe that there is cross-cultural awareness from Upwork as an organisation and also from the clients who use it to find freelancers. Other questions focus on the recommendations to ensure that cross-cultural communication on Upwork can be improved so that such digital work platforms can assist in alleviating the employment challenges faced by developing countries like South Africa.

The relationship between the questions and the theories is graphically presented in Figure 5.1 below.

Questions 1 to 5: Biddle's (1979) social roles theory

Would you say the roles ascribed to individuals within an online cross-cultural communication relationship determine how communication occurs in such a relationship?

How would you define the role you play when working with clients and colleagues from different cultures on Upwork? For instance, do you see yourself as having an employee-employer relationship or rather a client-independent contractor relationship?

What factors influence the role you ascribe to yourself and others within a freelancing relationship on Upwork?

Do you, clients, and colleagues on Upwork have a shared understanding of the roles you are each playing within the cross-cultural relationship?

How does a shared understanding of roles and behaviours influence the success of a communication process?

Questions 6 to 9: Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions theory and

Question 10: Critical Theory (Hoops 2009)

On Upwork, how often do you work with people from a culture that is different from yours?

How do you tell that the person you are working with on Upwork is from different culture from yours?

How often do you make assumptions about a client or a colleague regarding their culture and social values only to discover that your assessment was wrong or right?

What do you think is the role of historical occurrences like slavery and colonialism on the way people from different cultures address each other on Upwork today?

Questions 11 to 15 Perceptions of cross-cultural communication on Upwork

Would you agree that the clients and colleagues you meet on Upwork are from different cultural orientations?

When working with different clients and colleagues on Upwork, how do you determine the cultural standpoint to adopt? How challenging would you say this is?

Concerning roles, national cultures, history, and social injustices, how do you think cross-cultural communication challenges can be addressed on Upwork?

From your experience working on Upwork, would you say the platform makes any effort to ensure smooth cross-cultural communication?

Based on your experience with cross-cultural communication on Upwork, do you believe it is a viable place to help South Africans find sustainable incomes, which could be part of the solution to the challenge of unemployment in the country?

Figure 5.1: The relationship between the questions and the theories.

The data collected from the semi-structured interview transcripts and focus group discussions were analysed using the coding approach Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested and presented in detail in Table 5.3 above. To highlight the main points raised by the participants with regards to cross-cultural communication on Upwork, the analysis process of the perceived historical power of one country or region plays in relation to the way cross-cultural communication occurs on Upwork includes direct quotes from the participants in the SSIs and FGDs (Hofstede 1980). Table 5.4 below presents the six main themes and 45 subthemes developed from the analysis of the collected data.

Table 5.4: Main themes and sub-themes

Theme	Sub-theme
<p>Defining freelance copywriter roles is challenging, and understanding the roles between the freelance copywriter and client is often misaligned.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Often, roles are not clear. ● Freelance copywriters play different roles. ● Freelance copywriters are collaborators. ● Freelance copywriters are employees. ● The client determines the roles. ● Freelance copywriters are subservient to their clients. ● A freelance copywriter changes their role depending on the client.
<p>People from different cultures communicate differently, have different expectations, and emphasise different factors of a task.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Emphasis on time and deadlines ● Addressing the freelancer copywriter ● Willingness to communicate and get involved in pleasantries. ● Clients assume that freelance copywriters know that a job is urgent, and freelance copywriters assume that the client knows that an allocated job takes a long time. ● Expectations on when to work ● Expectations on when messages should be replied to. ● Preference in terms of being called by first name or last name.
<p>Freelance copywriters use visible cues to assume clients' cultures.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Name ● Picture ● Spelling ● Time zone ● Accent

<p>Race subconsciously plays a part in relationships and communication.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● People give jobs to those who are like them. ● Communication involves racial undertones. ● Freelance copywriters feel cognitively and intellectually inferior when dealing with someone from the developed world. ● Race subconsciously plays a part; a specific language is used. ● Freelancer copywriters feel more connected to other Africans and can communicate more freely. ● Freelance copywriters suggest black people make less money on Upwork compared to whites.
<p>Success on Upwork depends on adopting Western culture</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Upwork is indeed a cross-cultural setting. ● Upwork works only in Western culture, and everyone who wants to succeed should communicate from the perspective of Western culture.
<p>Freelance copywriters suppress their culture to avoid turning the workplace into a political battleground.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Taking the client's culture and communication style so as not to be combative. ● Clients often do not attempt to meet freelance copywriters halfway regarding culture. ● Asserting my culture translates to being political and making others feel uncomfortable.
<p>Lack of cross-cultural awareness on Upwork</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Communication challenges linked to lack of cross-cultural awareness leads to failure to understand what needs to be done, leading to many task revisions that could have been avoided. ● Lack of thorough instructional guidelines as sometimes clients believe the freelance copywriter should know what needs to be done while the freelancer believes the client should have provided instructions.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A lack of time for aligning on project expectations as clients do not want to pay for the time taken to come to the same speed on a project, while freelance copywriters do not want to attend such sessions without being paid.
<p>Improving cross-cultural communication on Upwork must start by including cross-cultural awareness.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Include cross-cultural awareness. ● Provide onboarding for clients and freelance copywriters. ● Ban sexist and rude clients from Upwork. ● Encourage cultural sensitivity. ● Avoid cheap labour, which makes freelance copywriters feel inferior, affecting their communication. ● Provide more personalised information so it is easy to understand each other's cultures.
<p>The government and private sector should collaborate to ensure the availability of communication technologies that encourage South Africans to participate in digital work platforms.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Take advantage of youths who are always on their phones. ● Reduce internet costs to make it easier for people to connect. ● Deal with bad internet. ● Improve the energy situation and ensure clients see freelance copywriters as reliable. ● Invite the private sector. ● Smart government should invest in freelancers.

Below is a more in-depth discussion of the main themes and their subthemes, as presented in Table 5.4 above.

5.5.1 Freelance copywriters adapt to different roles and communication styles based on the client

Following from the assumption that when individuals communicate, they do so based on the roles that they either ascribe to themselves or are ascribed to them by others, as postulated in Biddle's (1979) role theory, participants were asked to state how they define their roles when dealing with clients and other freelancers, the factors that influence the roles they ascribe to themselves and others, if there is a shared understanding of the roles played by each role player, and how a shared understanding influences the communication process. From the participant's answers, the main theme that emerged was that defining roles is challenging, and there is often a misalignment in understanding roles between the freelancer and the client. The subthemes that developed from the answers provided by participants are presented in greater detail below.

5.5.1.1 Freelance copywriters play different roles

Almost all the study participants agree that freelancing involves playing different roles at different times. The idea is that the clients employing freelance copywriters are as different as the freelancers themselves. Therefore, freelance copywriters take on different roles. Sometimes, they are expected to be employees, managers, or advisors, among other roles. On this basis, the participants say that they ascribe roles to themselves and others based on how they read the situation, using such factors as the organisation's culture as described in documents belonging to the organisation, the way people in the organisation behave, the language used by the clients and their representatives, and other cues.

In this regard, SSI-P6 said he wears different hats: "I work in different capacities. Depending on what the client has me for, I could be a content writer, content strategist, digital marketer, technical writer, or copywriter."

Asked whether the wearing of different hats described by SSI-P6 has any effect on how they communicate, SSI-P10 said:

The way I communicate depends not only on the role I am playing but also on my perception of the client. My perception of the client is more crucial in determining how I communicate with them than the role that I am playing.

As presented above, these perceptions of the participants lend credence to Biddle's (1979) role theory, which supposes that normative expectations define the specific social states of positions. These positions determine the roles people assume of themselves and others and how they interact with others. From the participants' answers to the interview questions, it is clear that perceived roles impact how they define themselves and communicate. It can also be seen from the responses that the way freelancers define their roles depends on the client. However, participants generally indicated they do not hold the power to determine their roles. They all seem to base their roles on how others, particularly the client, define them. This can mean that the client holds the power to define what each role player sees themselves as. The question of whether participants feel they have the power to determine their roles was discussed in the FDGs. The general view of participants was that many freelance copywriters approach digital work platforms the same way they would full-time jobs. Therefore, most freelance copywriters wait for clients to define their roles.

An analysis of the answers to the questions also shows a link to the critical theory (Hoops, 2017). The theory assumes that communication is either facilitated or hindered by economic structures, whether current or historical. In this regard, considering that participants indicate that they get their work from Western clients, in most cases in the United States, it can be seen that those who have the power, based on money, determine how things go. Therefore, it can be concluded that if the client has more power in deciding what roles each player plays, they will also have power over the communication process and other aspects of the relationship, such as how much the freelance copywriter will get paid. This validates the critical theory, which supposes a need to create a more equitable society by transforming oppressive discourses and historical structures. However, based on the perceptions of the freelancer copywriters in the present study, formed from reading their responses, it can be posited that Upwork perpetuates imbalances and oppressive discourses. This

is in keeping with the views of some opponents of online labour markets (OLMs) presented in the literature review, such as Codagnone et al. (2016), who see these OLMs as channels that are not regulated and where the exploitation of workers is rife.

In agreeing with this view that the client holds most of the power in freelancing relationships, SSI-P2 said, "He who pays the piper calls the tune." The same participant said she never feels power in the relationship and will accept whatever the client wants because she wants the money. So, she will adopt whatever role the payer ascribes to her and adapt the way she communicates with the client using cues provided by the client. For example, the participant says if the client indicates a willingness to accept an honest opinion, she will provide an honest opinion. Where the client takes offence when an honest opinion is provided, she will only say what pleases the client. This perspective shows that when it comes to the roles and cultural standpoints the freelance copywriter takes, there is an imbalance because the client has the resources (money) the freelance copywriter wants. Therefore, the later copywriter will always do what the former wants.

However, some participants indicate that they still hold the power to determine how they define their roles. For example, SSI-P5 indicated that while she often adapts her role and communication style based on what the client wants, she will only do this for short-term jobs because, in that case, she will only suffer the inconvenience for a short period. She added that if she is working on a big job that will take time, she will often let the client know her preferences, too. She gave an example:

I will accommodate a client who wants me to wake up in the middle of the night to answer a call if I know the job is small and will be finished within a few days. However, if I am working on a job that will take several months, I will let the client know when they can call me and when I will not be available.

From this perspective, it can be concluded that, to an extent, the participating freelance copywriters believe they can determine how the relationship works based on their criteria. However, the participants' answers indicate that they are not always willing to take control of the relationship with their clients, often leaving the client to determine how things will be done.

During the FGDs, all the participants agreed that defining roles is often challenging. Generally, the view is that what makes defining roles challenging is that a freelance copywriter juggles many jobs, whereas clients understand roles differently. For example, during the discussion, FGD-P5 said, “I am currently experiencing [a situation] where the lines are ... blurred in terms of whether I am an employee or if I am just a freelancer.” It can, therefore, be posited, from the views expressed by the participants in both SSIs and FGDs, that some of the communication challenges they face on Upwork can be attributed to the reality that roles are not always clearly defined. If indeed, as Biddle's (1979) role theory supposes, effective communication depends on a proper definition of roles, then it can be concluded that the challenges met by the participating freelance copywriters on Upwork can, to an extent, be attributed to the fact that roles are often not adequately defined.

5.5.1.2 Freelancer copywriters are perceived as collaborators

Several interview participants used the specific term collaborator. Analysing the responses from participants, it can be noted that the word collaboration means equality between the freelancer and the client. When asked what the term collaboration means, the general view of participants was that it denotes a relationship where the client is not necessarily an employer to the freelance copywriter but someone who recognises the freelancer's expertise and seeks to use it for a short period. However, the word collaborator has been defined as problematic by some scholars, such as Zimmerman (2011), who notes that it ignores the power differential between the individuals involved in a specific task or interaction. Indeed, some participants also noted this, saying that when they determine the roles they play, they take their cue from the client since the client is the one who pays.

A study by Duran and Popescu (2014), presented in the literature review chapter, used a questionnaire to analyse virtual teams by considering how national culture impacts the entire team's communication. They concluded that the character of collaboration in a virtual team depends on how cultural diversity is managed. In the present study, participants indicated that they do not believe there are any attempts, whether from the perspective of Upwork or clients, to deliberately work out how cultural diversity should be managed in collaborations. Therefore, it can be noted that while the term collaborator is employed by the participants when talking about their roles, its definition

is not always shared. A coherent definition of the term could assist in determining how freelance copywriters see themselves as collaborators to influence the communication between them and their clients.

5.5.1.3 Freelance copywriters adapt based on their perception of the client

Several participants agree that before engaging with a client on Upwork, they find as much information about the client as possible to create a perception of that client. This guides them to describe their role when dealing with that client. For example, SSI-P9 said he determines whether he will see himself as a collaborator or employee depending on the seniority of the person the client has seconded to deal with him in the freelancing relationship. The same freelancer said: "I will be subservient if the role I am given is junior. If the client gives me a senior role in the collaboration, I will assert myself more and clearly communicate my needs."

A connection to the critical theory and its reference to historical imbalances between the races and how they impact relationships today (Hoops 2017) can also be noted from the perception of SSI-P9, who says that he is always conscious of not turning the workplace into a political battleground. Asked to elaborate further on what he meant by this, the participant indicated that even when he feels that a client is being rude, he often lets it pass to keep the peace and his job. He gave a specific example, noting that if a client pronounced his name wrong, he did not attempt to correct the client. He said that he often notices that white clients are sensitive when working with blacks and try hard not to be perceived as racist; correcting them when they make a mistake with the name of a black person can create an awkward situation. This participant said:

When, as a black person, you try to assert your culture, you tend to make other people uncomfortable. Now, I am not saying that I am pandering to the sensibilities or sensitivities of white people; what I am saying is I do not want to politicise the workplace because there is no way you will assert your culture as a black person without the white people feeling like they are doing something wrong that could offend you. For example, if people mispronounce my name, if I were to assert my culture, then I would demand pronouncing my full name and pronouncing it correctly, which I think is unnecessary. It's just going to make me come across as someone who is difficult to work with and who is overly sensitive.

People around me will walk on eggshells when relating to or relating with me. Unless I feel that my culture is being directly attacked, I do not feel the need to defend it; I don't feel the need to propagate it; I don't feel the need to promote it. I am fine adopting your culture to keep it moving, get the job done and get paid.

Several other participants shared the above sentiments during the FGDs. They said that in a world where work doesn't come easily, there is no room for freelance copywriters to be sensitive and attempt to assert their own cultures in the communication process. Participating freelancers noted that culture would not pay their bills.

5.5.2 People from different cultures communicate differently, emphasising different factors about a task

From Questions 6 to 10 of the interviews, the discussion focused on questions related to Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions theory and the critical theory (Hoops 2007) and how these theories influence cross-cultural communication on Upwork. The main theme developing from this question was that people from different cultures on Upwork communicate differently and emphasise different factors about a task or relationship. In response to the question about how the differences in cultures, extending to communication, can affect the work done by freelancers, SSI-P6 said:

In my earlier time as a freelancer, I worked with some Indian clients, and my main conception of those guys was that they were terrible employers, they were stubborn, and they did not pay well. Working for them, I didn't feel like a freelancer anymore; I felt like an employee. Because of the misunderstanding emanating from our different ways of communication, these clients would send an article back two or three times over based on silly things.

The same participant says this "almost felt like a dubious engagement."

The idea that working for Asian clients, particularly Indians, was difficult because of differences in culture and communication and the emphasis on different factors about the task came across from several other participants. Some participants indicated that instructions from these clients tended to be vague to the extent that it was not easy to give the client what they wanted. These challenges often lead to the client refusing to

pay for the work or the freelancer giving up and walking away without pay. Interestingly, when asked how often this happened when freelancers worked with people from cultures that follow the Western culture, like the British, Australians, or Americans, almost all participants agreed that such clients tended to be professional both in their communication and in providing feedback and ensuring that freelancers were paid for their work. For example, when asked if he has had the same challenges he met with his Indian clients when working with clients from the West regarding communication and feedback, SSI-P6 said,

I felt like an American would never do that. The Americans I have worked with would appreciate the work, and if they felt like the work wasn't good enough, they wouldn't try to play you; either they say they can't work with you anymore or if you ever need to make changes that would go beyond the scope of the initial work, they would pay you. When they believe you deserve no payment for your work, they will tell you outright that this is not good enough and that they will not pay you.

The question of whether clients from Asian cultures tended to be dubious and vague, while clients from Western cultures tended to be clear and honest, as indicated by SSI-P6, was put to the FGDs, and participants seemed uncomfortable discussing the issue. However, while several participants agreed with the statement during SSIs, all participants did not agree with it in the FGDs. During the FGDs, the researcher noted that participants seemed to be careful not to be perceived as politically incorrect. This persisted even when the researcher informed the FGD participants that this was an academic discussion and that they should be free to say what they thought.

From the views of SSI-P6 and several other participants who agree with him, the ideas advanced by Hofstede (1980) come to the fore. The participants' views give credence to the idea that how people conduct themselves, communicate, and deal with situations depends on their cultural dimensions. From the views under this sub-theme, it is clear that participants believe that people of Asian origin tend to be vague and do not explicitly say what they want. The participants agree that employers from this part of the world attempt to get as much work as possible for free by deliberately being vague about what they are looking for from a freelance copywriter. On the other hand, most of the participants believe that clients following the Western culture tend to be

straightforward in stating their needs, and they are equally straightforward about whether a job has been done properly or not and whether they will pay what they agreed to pay or not.

From the views presented above, it can be concluded that participants feel that they can expect dubious behaviour from Asian clients on Upwork while they would not expect such behaviour from clients who follow the Western culture. However, it's vital to note that in FGDs, the participants did not validate this view, all noting that they had not noticed these differences. It is vital to consider the idea of stereotyping when reading the views expressed by the participants above. In a study presented in the literature review chapter, Au and Marks (2012) focus on the effect of perceived cultural differences in forging an identity in virtual teams. The study involves virtual teams from Brazil, Malaysia, Myanmar, the UK, and the USA. It concludes that perceived differences in national culture and how individuals within the cultures communicate affect the way people identify themselves within virtual contexts. These authors suggest that this could result in unhealthy national and racial stereotypes that could be the basis for conflict. The results of the Au and Marks (2012) study show why it is vital to encourage members of virtual teams to appreciate and understand differences. Considering that the participants in the present study note that people from Western cultures are often professional in their conduct and communication, could lead to questions about what could be defined as professional. This could take the discussion back to the critical theory, which posits that past relationships and power imbalances affect current relationships. For instance, one could ask about the influence of the past in a country like South Africa and how the people in the country generally perceive whites in relation to other groups, such as Asians.

5.5.3 Using visible factors like name and picture to assume the cultures of others

All the participants agree that they make assumptions about the cultures of others using visible cues like skin colour, name, the spelling someone uses in their communication, and the way they strictly adhere to set times for things like meetings. In this regard, SSI-P6 said that when he has a client who is not punctual for meetings, he will already know that such a client is not from a Western society because people from Western societies come from a culture that respects time.

In agreement with Hofstede's (1983) cultural dimensions theory, all participants indicated that they also work out the culture a client or team member comes from by looking at specific factors, including whether the individual speaks candidly in a straightforward manner or they expect the freelance copywriter to work out what they are saying through reading between the lines. In this regard, SSI-P5 said she would know that a client is from an African country when they do not seem to care about deadlines and from Asia, America, or Europe if they emphasise deadlines and arrive on time for meetings.

5.5.4 The way the client addresses the freelancer copywriter

Participants also agree that they listen to how the client addresses the freelance copywriter to determine the culture from which that specific client comes. For example, one participant said that when a client uses a first name, he assumes that the client comes from a Western culture. On the other hand, when the client prefers using the surname, the freelance copywriter assumes such a client comes from Africa or Asia.

In the FGD, participants agreed that because clients often come from rich parts of the world, they treat freelance copywriters with a general lack of respect. The participants agreed that this indicates that clients from the rich countries of the West do not value freelance copywriters as people who have their own cultures. For instance, FGD-P4 said clients "look down on the freelancers." She adds, "You don't always get the respect that you deserve." Other participants in the FGD also agreed that clients generally believe that freelancer copywriters are desperate for work and can be treated however the client wants. This speaks to the view expressed by participants in the SSIs who said they will do whatever the clients want because the client pays the money.

The views expressed by participants concerning the lack of respect for them and their cultures on the Upwork platform can be explained based on the view expressed in the critical theory, which addresses how communication in groups is either facilitated or hindered by power and institutional, historical, and economic structure (Hoops 2017). The FGDs and SSI participants agree that most of their clients live in the West. Therefore, it can be concluded from the views expressed by participants that their employers are from the West, indicating that Upwork may be perpetuating the past

imbalances where people living in formerly colonised countries like South Africa are still treated with general disrespect by the generations that came even after the colonial system had ended.

5.5.5 Race subconsciously plays a part in relationships and communication

One theme supported by several interview participants is that the culture of the freelance copywriter is irrelevant because the client is superior. Asked if they believe this to be the case, one freelance copywriter (SSI-P6) said that since the client pays the money, the client's culture must be followed when doing business on Upwork. Some black participants indicated that when they take work from participants overseas, the work often comes from white clients, and they always feel that they are cognitively inferior to those clients. Interestingly, this view was shared mainly by the black participants. When asked during the interview whether they ever had felt cognitively inferior to the clients all, the white participants in the study said that they never felt this way.

Asked whether he feels intellectually inferior when dealing with clients from other races, including blacks and Asians, SSI-P9 indicated that this was not the case. However, he said he often has low regard for employers who are not white because they often paid less, refused to pay, or were generally stubborn. This statement agrees with the views of SSI-P6 expressed earlier when he said that in his initial freelancing years, he worked with clients from India who made him feel as if he was in a dubious arrangement but felt that a client from the United States would never do anything like that.

5.5.6 Success on Upwork depends on adopting Western culture

The participants agree that Upwork is indeed a cross-cultural setting. According to the participants, this can be seen in how people behave. For example, SSI-P3 said that the role-players on the platform show different traits, indicating that Upwork is a cross-cultural platform. For instance, the same participant said she meets certain clients who do not even greet her when dealing with her and jump straight to the point. On the other hand, she indicates that she meets clients who want to start by greeting her and asking about her family and other things unrelated to the job.

While all participants agree that Upwork is a cross-cultural setting, they also note that to be successful on Upwork, a freelance copywriter must be willing to adapt to the Western culture. This view is still related to the earlier perception that clients are in Western countries where the money is, and freelance copywriters are usually in developing countries where the labour is. Therefore, the participants indicated that it is inconsequential what culture the freelance copywriter comes from because when communication occurs on the Upwork platform, it happens based on the culture of the person who pays for the services because that is where the power lies.

5.5.7 Lack of cross-cultural awareness on Upwork

While the participants in this study indicated that it is clear that Upwork is a cross-cultural setting, they indicated that they have noticed a general lack of cross-cultural awareness on the platform. For example, SSI-P1 indicated that this lack of cross-cultural awareness introduced challenges when communicating with clients and getting to know exactly what the client wants. Amid this ambiguity, the participant says that she often does many revisions that could have been avoided had there been smooth communication between herself and the client. She gave an example where she says that some clients did not explicitly indicate that certain things were a requirement, rather presenting them as less important. The participant says this results in a lack of thorough instructional guidelines, as sometimes clients believe that freelance copywriters should know what to do. In contrast, freelance copywriters believe that the client should have provided more information. Her view is that this is often the case when she communicates with clients from African and Asian cultures where speaking directly is uncommon. The participants propose improving cross-cultural communication on Upwork by including cross-cultural awareness.

SSI-P1 noted the differences in communication styles when making the time to brief the freelancer at the beginning of a project. She said some clients did not invest the time to align the freelance copywriter with the project. Often, she said she notes that this has to do with perceptions that if the freelance copywriter needed more information, she would have asked. On the other hand, the freelance copywriter believes that if the client wanted more to be done, they should have said so. Speaking specifically about Asian clients, SSI-P5 indicated that she often finds Asian clients unwilling to invest time in aligning the freelance copywriter with the project because

they want to save money. She added that Asian clients sometimes are rude and refuse to pay. This is a view shared by several other participants in the present study. In the same vein, when asked whether he would agree that Upwork takes measures to ensure that cross-cultural communication on the network is effective, SSI-P4 said

No. I don't think so. I have never seen Upwork mention anything about culture or how to communicate with clients. It is funny because they are a platform that deals with people from over a hundred countries, so you would expect that to form the core part of their value system.

During the FGDs, FGD-P2 adds that if Upwork were indeed willing to make cross-cultural communication smoother on the platform, they would have an in-built translation system. This resonates with the feelings of other participants who agree that every decision taken on Upwork is not there to make the freelance copywriter's life easier but to ensure that Upwork, as a platform, makes more money. In the same manner as the SSI, the participants in the FGDs agree that there is a lack of cross-cultural awareness of Upwork.

5.5.8 Improving cross-cultural communication on Upwork must start by including cross-cultural awareness

Participants agree that much can be done to improve cross-cultural communication on Upwork. The general view is that this can start by acknowledging that within a cross-cultural setting, there are bound to be differences in communication, which can result in miscommunication, badly done projects, and wasting of time for both the freelance copywriter and the client. The general view is that cross-cultural awareness on the platform is needed.

Participants believe Upwork can improve cross-cultural communication by doing the following:

- Establish onboarding programs for clients and freelance copywriters so they know what to expect.
- Improve communication by dealing with sexist and rude clients and taking action after they have been reported.

- Discourage cheap labour because it makes others feel inferior, affecting how they see themselves and communicate.
- Upwork should consider the economic and cultural realities of people's origins.
- Allow people to provide more personalised information on their profiles so it is easy to understand each other's cultures.

The idea of improving cross-cultural awareness is supported by FDG-P1, who said,

Upwork can collaborate with experts in cross-cultural communication to develop and offer training programs for freelancers and clients. These programs can provide insights into cultural norms, communication styles, and expectations, helping users navigate cross-cultural interactions more effectively. Upwork can create a dedicated section or resource centre on its platform that provides information and resources on various cultures. This can include guides, articles, and videos that offer tips and best practices for working with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Upwork can enhance its language support features to facilitate cross-cultural communication. This can include real-time translation tools, language proficiency verification, and language-specific customer support to ensure effective communication between freelancers and clients who may not share a common language. Upwork can enhance its feedback and rating system to include specific categories or criteria related to cross-cultural communication. This can allow freelancers and clients to provide feedback on how well their counterparts understood and respected their cultural nuances, fostering a culture of awareness and improvement. Upwork can showcase case studies and success stories that highlight successful cross-cultural collaborations. These stories can inspire and provide practical examples of how effective cross-cultural communication can lead to positive outcomes for freelancers and clients. By incorporating cross-cultural awareness into the fabric of Upwork, the platform can foster a more inclusive and respectful environment for freelancers and clients from diverse cultural backgrounds. This, in turn, can lead to improved cross-cultural communication and more successful collaborations.

While the suggestions above may help facilitate cross-cultural communication on platforms like Upwork, some freelance copywriters called for caution. They note that

anything that could emphasise that people come from different cultures could backfire, as clients may seek only to work with those from similar cultures to theirs. They indicate that emphasising that people come from different cultures may make clients or freelance copywriters dismiss each other outright without giving each other a chance to showcase their skills. However, some participants indicated that they believe a situation where clients and freelance copywriters dismiss each other outright because they belong to different cultures is welcome, as this will ensure that people only work with those they want to work with. Nonetheless, some participants noted that when a situation develops where people can discriminate in such a manner, it would be hard to deal with racism and sexism on such platforms. Therefore, these participants suggest that although platforms like Upwork should ensure smooth cross-cultural communication, it is vital to ensure that vices like racism, tribalism, and sexism are not allowed to exist freely.

5.5.9 The government and private sector should collaborate to ensure the availability of communication technologies

Concerning whether cross-cultural communication on Upwork can encourage people seeking jobs in developing countries like South Africa to look for work in developed countries, all the participants agree, noting that the youth are already always on their phones and communication across cultures is something they are already used to. Participants also note that to be able to communicate with clients and find jobs on platforms like Upwork, the governments and private sector must play their role in ensuring the availability of affordable internet. This is because reduced internet costs will likely make it possible for more people to connect. Another issue that participants referred to is the availability of infrastructure. For example, SSI-P1 said South African participants face the challenge of reliable power. In addition, this gives clients overseas the idea that South Africans are unreliable. The power challenges in the country are also affecting the ability of Internet service providers to deliver a consistent internet that enables people to work online.

SSI-P1 suggested that:

The government and private sector should collaborate to establish a clear regulatory framework for digital work platforms. This framework should ensure

fair labour practices, protect workers' rights, and address any potential issues related to job security, payment disputes, or discrimination.

The same participant adds:

Joint efforts can be made to raise awareness among South Africans about the benefits and opportunities offered by digital work platforms. This can be done through public campaigns, workshops, and educational programs that highlight success stories and guide how to get started in the digital work sector.

5.6 Conclusion

Regarding the data collected on the perspectives of freelancers relating to cross-cultural communication on Upwork, it can be noted from the perspectives expressed by the participating freelancer copywriters that determining roles on the platform is often a challenge because understanding these roles depends on individuals' perceptions. While some participants indicate that they see themselves as collaborators, others believe they are employees of their clients. The participants agree that this lack of agreement about their roles can harm communication and understanding of what needs to be done in relation to a specific task. These participant perspectives lend credence to the role theory proposed by Biddle (1979), who proposed that communication is likely to be more effective if there is a shared understanding of roles and behaviours expected from role-players. Participants also agree that Upwork is a cross-cultural space where people behave, communicate, and work differently based on their cultures. The participants in this study agree that the behaviour and communication of clients differ depending on the region in which the clients live. Almost all participants believe clients in countries that follow Western culture, such as the United States, approach freelancers professionally. They agree that this also extends to how they communicate tasks and feedback. On the other hand, most participants agree that clients in Asian countries generally have vague descriptions of the task, do not communicate their needs clearly, and often behave in a manner that shows they want to get as much free work as possible.

The participants' views in the present study largely agree with Hofstede's (1983) theory of cultural dimensions, which proposes that how people behave and communicate can

be traced back to the regions in their world and the prevailing cultures in such places. It is also clear from the participant's views that clients mostly come from Western countries where the money is, and freelancers are mostly from the developing world where labour is abundant. The freelancers' perspectives show that the past imbalances, where people in former colonies still work for the former colonisers, still hold. Participants also agree that those with the money often determine the culture and communication styles used during the Upwork interactions. Again, these views lend credence to the critical theory, which supposes that the imbalances of the past can still be noted in today's relationships. This chapter shows that the participating freelancer copywriters agree that Upwork is a cross-cultural setting where freelance copywriters mostly follow the culture of the clients because they are the ones who pay the money within a platform that does not seem to care much about facilitating smooth cross-cultural communication but rather to make more money for itself as a business. In the process, the participants suggest that Upwork perpetuates the imbalances of the past, where those in former colonies still work for the former colonisers, communicating in a manner determined by those who are powerful because they have the advantage of having the money that the freelancer copywriters are looking for on online job platforms. Participants in both the SSIs and FGDs noted the challenge of load shedding in South Africa, indicating that it perpetuates stereotypes held by some clients that freelance copywriters from South Africa are not reliable.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

6.1 Introduction

This descriptive and exploratory study aimed to understand the perceptions of South African freelance copywriters on the Upwork digital platform regarding cross-cultural communication. The research problem expounded from gaps identified in the literature review and on various academic platforms. From these sources, it was noted that even though there is a proliferation of digital platforms like Upwork that allow freelance copywriters to work across borders, no studies – as was indicated in Chapter 1, Section 1.3 and Table 1.1 – have focused on the perceptions of these freelance copywriters regarding cross-cultural communication on digital platforms. This gap leaves the management of these digital platforms without the necessary insights on creating cross-cultural awareness to ensure harmony in the communication between freelance copywriters in South Africa and their clients based overseas, especially in the United States and Asia.

In dealing with the identified problem, the present study reviewed the literature on cross-cultural communication on digital platforms. This resulted in the development of a theoretical framework based on Biddle's (1979) role theory, Hofstede's (1983) dimensions of culture theory, and the critical theory (Hoops, 2017). From the insights obtained in the literature review, the proposed theoretical framework, and the data collected, two qualitative instruments were used to collect data: semi-structured interviews (SSIs) and focus group discussions (FDGs).

The central purpose was to determine how freelancer copywriters who participated in the study perceived cross-cultural communication on the Upwork digital platform. Following the chapters presenting the literature review, theories of cross-cultural communication, methodology, presentation and analysis of results, this chapter concludes the study. It provides an overview of the study, its limitations and strengths, and recommendations for future scholars who want to study the same area. This chapter also offers recommendations based on freelancers' perspectives on improving cross-cultural communication on the Upwork digital platform.

6.2 Answering the research questions

From the literature review, theoretical framework, the collected data, and presentation of findings, answers to the specific questions guiding the present study are presented below.

RQ1: How do South African freelance copywriters perceive cross-cultural communication on the Upwork platform?

Freelance copywriters who participated in the present study perceive that while Upwork is a cross-cultural environment, there is a lack of cross-cultural awareness on the digital platform because no efforts have been made to focus on it. This lack of cross-cultural awareness on Upwork poses significant challenges to effective communication and collaboration. Participating freelancer copywriters suggest that in a cross-cultural environment, the understanding of roles between freelance copywriters and clients on Upwork is not always aligned, which can impede effective communication. The freelance copywriters accept that communication depends on a proper definition of roles, and communication can be challenging when roles are not understood coherently.

Because the definition of roles on Upwork is not always congruent, the freelance copywriters noted that they play different roles when they work for different clients. It can be concluded that the challenges associated with defining roles often lead to a misalignment in the understanding of roles between the freelance copywriter and the client. If defining roles, as proposed by Biddle (1979), forms the starting point of defining relationships and determining how individuals communicate, then it becomes easy to understand why freelance copywriters suggest that there are challenges with communication on the Upwork digital platform. However, it can also be concluded that to establish an effective relationship, freelance copywriters often leave the task of defining roles to the client, and they simply act and communicate the roles that clients ascribe to them. From this regard, it was noted in this study that since the clients are often located in wealthy Western countries, platforms like Upwork may be perpetuating historical imbalances where people formerly colonised parts of the world like South Africa are still subservient to people who live in the former colonisers, a situation that gives credence to the arguments proposed by those who support the critical theory. It

can be concluded that the Upwork digital platform perpetuates imbalances and oppressive discourses where the weak forgo their rights because they want to be paid. This is in keeping with the observations made in the literature review by Codagnone et al. (2016), who said the lack of regulation in online labour markets (OLMs) may lead to the exploitation of workers. From these views, it is posited that if cross-cultural communication has to be effective, there has to be an attempt at dismantling the oppressive economic and social structures that make freelance copywriters feel intellectually inferior when they compare themselves to their clients, especially from the West.

RQ2: What guides freelance copywriters on Upwork when determining the cultural standpoint from which they communicate with clients when working in virtual teams?

From the insights obtained from participating freelance copywriters, it can be noted that they determine the standpoint from which they communicate with clients by using specific cues. These include noting where the client comes from. In both the SSIs and FGDs, participants noted that the client's name, the image on their profile, the spelling conventions they use, their time zone, and accent are the primary factors in gaining clues about the client's culture. Once they have made this assumption, they then focus on other factors, such as how the clients emphasise specifics such as time and deadlines, willingness to be involved in small talk, and how clients approach onboarding and providing feedback. From these insights, it can be noted that the participants do not believe Upwork makes an effort to assist them in determining the cultural standpoint from which they should communicate with clients and other team members on the digital platform.

From the participants' perspectives regarding the question of how they adopt a cultural standpoint when dealing with clients, it is noted that freelancer copywriters agree with the assumptions made in Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions theory, which suggests that it is possible to assume someone's cultural orientation based on where the individual comes from. The perspective of freelance copywriters is that they prefer to work with clients from Western countries as opposed to those from Asia because it is easier to predict the behaviour of the former than the latter. However, it is vital to read this perspective from the consciousness that the participating freelance

copywriters live in a country that is a former colony of Western powers. This leads to the question of how familiarity with Western cultures impacts the manner in which freelance copywriters see their relationships with clients from different regions.

The general recommendation of participants is that the Upwork digital platform creates a dedicated section or resource centre on its platform that provides information and resources on various cultures. This can include guides, articles, and videos that offer tips and best practices for working with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. They add that Upwork can enhance its feedback and rating system to include specific categories or criteria related to cross-cultural communication. This can allow freelance copywriters and clients to provide feedback on how well their counterparts understood and respected their cultural nuances, fostering a culture of awareness and improvement.

RQ3: What do freelance copywriters on Upwork perceive as the role of effective cross-cultural communication in either facilitating or impeding productivity when working across borders?

Participating freelance copywriters believe cross-cultural communication on Upwork can facilitate effective collaboration between clients and freelancers from different cultural backgrounds. They note that understanding the importance of cross-cultural awareness is a way of making every collaboration a success. Freelance copywriters note effective cross-cultural communication allows each role player to understand the cultures of others, including their communication style, values, and business etiquette. Cross-cultural communication makes it easy to establish a personal connection by asking about the cultural traditions or interests of others. Effective cross-cultural communication also plays a crucial role in helping deal with challenges related to cultural differences. Instead of getting frustrated or making assumptions, cross-cultural communication provides role players with a way to proactively seek clarification and ask appropriate questions to ensure mutual understanding.

Participants in this study also indicated that effective cross-cultural communication strengthens collaboration. They note that the cultural sensitivity made possible by understanding cross-cultural communication makes it possible for role players to adapt their communication styles to align with each other's preferences. According to

participants, effective cross-cultural communication ensures effective communication by making it possible to use appropriate greetings, honour the preferred communication channels of others, and adjust tone and language to ensure clarity and respect. Consequently, effective cross-cultural communication can ensure the successful delivery of high-quality work while helping build a lasting professional relationship based on trust, respect, and understanding. From the participants' answers in SSIs and FGDs, it can be noted that they believe that effective cross-cultural communication makes it clear to role-players that they appreciate each other's efforts. Thus, it can be concluded that when cross-cultural communication is effective, it helps achieve project success and fosters a sense of connection and appreciation between individuals from different cultural backgrounds. By embracing cross-cultural awareness, clients and freelance copywriters can demonstrate the power of empathy, respect, and open-mindedness in creating an inclusive and thriving digital workspace.

RQ4: Based on their perception of cross-cultural communication and the Upwork platform, what are South African freelance copywriters' perceptions regarding the platform as a source of employment for other South Africans?

In both the SSIs and FGDs, participants agree that Upwork can be an important source of employment in a country like South Africa, where the shortage of jobs is perennial. However, the participants recommended how the platform can enhance cross-cultural communication and become where those with skills can thrive. The recommendations of the participants are presented later in Section 6.4 below.

6.3 Study overview

In this overview of the study, this report presents a summary of the study's background, findings, and conclusions based on the findings from the collected data.

6.3.1 Background

In the first chapter of this study, the research problem guiding the project was presented as follows: *To address the lack of studies investigating the perceptions of South African freelance copywriters on cross-cultural communication on the Upwork digital platform.* To address the research problem, Chapter 2 explored the literature on cross-cultural communication on digital platforms and conclusions from previous

studies focusing on the same subject. In Chapter 3, the study focused on the theories of cross-cultural communication and conceptual approaches. It also proposed a theoretical framework to guide this study's data-gathering process. Chapter 4 presented the methodology with details on how the participants were selected and the data gathered using SSIs and FGDs. Chapter 5 presented, analysed, and discussed the data collected in relation to the literature review and theoretical framework. This chapter presents the present study's concluding remarks and recommendations.

6.3.2 Brief discussion of conclusions

The core conclusions to answer the research problem presented in Chapter 1 based on the reviewed literature and the data collected using the SSIs and FGDs are presented in the following sections.

6.3.2.1 Insights from the literature

An analysis of the reviewed literature shows that debates relating to how technology has changed the way people work have captured the attention of many scholars, who have concluded that a connection exists between the proliferation of technologies, the preference for working across borders, and the employment of technology to communicate across cultures. Most of the literature from existing studies supports the view that the labour market is changing, and geographic location no longer restricts where people can work. Even though some scholars accept that working across boundaries and cultures comes with several advantages, many call for caution, noting that the proliferation of ICTs may lead to the exploitation of the weak as these online labour markets are difficult to monitor and regulate.

The reviewed literature validates the idea that online labour markets like Upwork connect millions of freelancers and are legitimate sources of employment. These could particularly be important for job seekers in countries like South Africa, where unemployment is high. However, an analysis of the literature showed that no studies had been conducted (as indicated in the search of academic databases in Chapter 1, Section 3) to understand how cross-cultural communication on these platforms can be enhanced. This creates the gap that the present study seeks to partially address by proposing the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 3. That framework amalgamates Biddle's (1979) role theory, Halsted's (1980) cultural dimensions theory,

and the critical theory (Hoops 2017). From these three theories, the study suggested that determining roles is vital to communication. On the other hand, it recognises that roles have cultural nuances based on where the individual defining the role comes from. Still, such individuals are a product of their history and prejudices. Therefore, it posits that determining how to make cross-cultural communication effective must begin by understanding the roles played by each participant in the communication process, the culture of the region from which they originate, and the historical and economic factors impacting how they view the world and others.

6.3.2.2 Concluding remarks

Using SSIs conducted with 10 participants and FGDs involving two groups of five participants each, the study gathered data on participants' perspectives regarding cross-cultural communication on the Upwork platform. Considering that freelance copywriters use Upwork in 180 countries, and there are 18 million freelancers (including copywriters) on Upwork and 793,000 active clients, it is clear that Upwork provides valuable services to many (Campbell 2023). Upwork has emerged as a global platform connecting freelancers and clients from diverse cultural backgrounds in today's interconnected world.

From the collected data, it can be concluded that freelance copywriters agree that determining roles in freelancing relationships mediated by ICTs within a cross-cultural communication setting is challenging. They note this is particularly because the understanding of roles between the freelancer and client is not always aligned. Participants agree that communicating can be a challenge when there is no alignment in the definition or understanding of roles. This is in keeping with Biddle's (1979) role theory, which supposes that communication is likely more effective when there is a shared understanding of the roles and behaviours expected from the different role players. The participants in the present study also agree that clients' behaviour on the Upwork platform is indeed distinct, based on the regions from which they come. While the participants in the SSIs strongly agree that they prefer to work with participants from countries that follow a Western culture as opposed to those following non-Western cultures, FGD participants did not validate this view. Participants in both the SSIs and FGDs agree that the differences in behaviours of clients based on the regions from which they come also extend to how they communicate about tasks. The

general view is that clients who share the Western culture tend to be explicit and clear when they provide instructions about a task, which saves effort and time when freelance copywriters do their work. The participants also noted that clients from non-Western cultures tend to provide vague descriptions of tasks, fail to communicate their needs, and often behave in a manner that shows they want to take advantage of the freelance copywriter.

It can be noted that the participants' views in this study support the assumptions of the study's theoretical framework. Specifically, the data shows that participants agree with Biddle's (1979) social roles theory, which proposes that communication is generally based on predetermined roles associated with specific social positions. The participating freelance copywriters agree that Upwork is a cross-cultural environment where the definition of roles is not always aligned between different role players. In this case, the ideas proposed by Hofstede's (1983) cultural dimensions theory become relevant. For example, the participants accept that when they work on Upwork, they often notice that they can predict a client's behaviour and communication style based on their geographic location. For example, the participants in the SSIs explicitly said that they favour working with clients that follow a Western culture because they tend to be clear in their expectations and often pay what the freelancers believe is a fair price for their services.

It is vital to note that coming from South Africa, a former colony of Western powers, participants in this study may hold more positive views of clients from Western cultures because they share a language with them: English. Also, by living in a country that is a former colony of Western powers, participants may find it easier to understand clients from the West and their culture. It is also important to note that FGD participants were reluctant to support the observations that clients from countries that share Western culture are preferred to those from countries that follow a non-Western culture. This may be attributed to participants not wanting to appear biased or prejudiced in front of other group members. This could be noted in the reluctance of participants to support or debunk this view, preferring to be vague in their answers.

From the results of the present study, it is clear that participants believe there is a lack of cross-cultural awareness on the Upwork platform. The participants indicated that Upwork can become a better platform if management focuses on cross-cultural

communication. They note that cross-cultural awareness is not just a buzzword but a crucial skill that can drive success on Upwork. The participants noted that freelance copywriters and clients who possess cultural intelligence can navigate the complexities of cross-cultural communication, build trust, and foster meaningful collaborations. Their answers to the interview questions and insights during FGDs show that they believe that by recognising and valuing cultural differences, freelance copywriters, clients, and the digital work platform can tap into diverse perspectives, ideas, and talents. It can also be concluded from participants' views that misunderstandings and misinterpretations due to cultural differences can hinder effective communication on Upwork. Participants believe that freelance copywriters and clients can bridge these gaps and ensure clear and concise communication by embracing cross-cultural awareness. This includes understanding different communication styles, non-verbal cues, and cultural nuances influencing how messages are conveyed and received. The data collected in this study shows that the lack of cross-cultural awareness on Upwork poses significant challenges to effective communication and collaboration. Therefore, by addressing this issue head-on, the digital work platform can unlock its full potential and create an inclusive and successful digital workspace where role players can communicate effectively, even from different cultures.

6.4 Recommendations

To ensure that it provides practical value, this study aimed to use participants' perceptions about cross-cultural communication on the Upwork digital platform as the foundation for making recommendations about how the platform can improve and ensure effective communication so that it becomes a place where South Africans looking for work can thrive. Figure 6.1 illustrates the recommendations based on the insights gained in the present study.

- 1 Provide cross cultural communication training to clients and freelancers.
- 2 Enhance language support features to facilitate cross-cultural communication.
- 3 Showcase success stories as a way of illustrating the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication in the freelancing relationship.
- 4 Establish a national digital work strategy where the government collaborates with the private sector to address specific questions around digital work.
- 5 Develop infrastructure to ensure access to electricity and the internet required to communicate when working on digital platforms.
- 6 Facilitate training and development in cross-cultural communication and use of ICTs.
- 7 Work on the regulatory framework so as to ensure that freelancers are protected when working on digital platforms.
- 8 Launch public campaigns to raise awareness about the benefits of digital work platforms.
- 9 Facilitate research and development with the aim of creating innovative solutions that can enhance the participation of South African job seekers in digital work platforms.

Figure 6.1: Recommendations

Each of these recommendations are subsequently discussed in detail.

6.4.1 Cross-cultural communication training

It is suggested that Upwork hire communication experts who understand cross-cultural communication to create and deliver training programs for freelance copywriters and clients. Such programs can contain insights into different cultural expectations, communication styles, and norms, assisting platform users to traverse cross-cultural interactions more effectively. As part of its cross-cultural communication training, the Upwork digital platform can establish a specific resource or section on the platform providing resources that will help users understand different cultures. These resources could include videos, articles, and guides that provide tips and best practices for working with individuals from different cultural backgrounds.

6.4.2 Enhance language support features

The Upwork digital platform can also improve its language support features to facilitate cross-cultural communication. This can involve tools that translate in real time, language proficiency verification, and language-specific customer support. This will ensure that communication between freelancer copywriters and clients is more effective even when they do not share a common language.

6.4.3 Improved feedback system

The Upwork digital platform has a system where freelance copywriters and clients rate each other at the end of a project. In this feedback, the platform can include questions specifically collecting data about the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication. Through such features, freelance copywriters and clients can give feedback regarding how well those they worked within a specific project respected and understood cultural nuances. This feedback has the potential to nurture a culture of awareness and improvement.

6.4.4 Showcase success stories

To show the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication in a freelancing relationship, the Upwork digital platform can establish a program that showcases case studies of success highlighting successful cross-cultural collaborations. Such stories can inspire freelance copywriters and clients and deliver practical examples of how effective cross-cultural communication can result in desirable outcomes. When cross-cultural awareness is incorporated into the fabric of Upwork, the digital platform can nurture a respectful and inclusive environment for clients and freelancers from diverse backgrounds. This can, in turn, result in improved cross-cultural communication and more successful collaborations.

6.4.5 Establishing a national digital work strategy

In collaboration, the government and private sector can establish a national digital work platform to ensure South Africans have access to these digital work platforms like Upwork. Such a strategy will lay the ground concerning specific questions around digital work, such as defining the skills that make people employable on digital work

platforms, how such training can be funded, and other related mechanisms. A strategy that brings together the government and the private sector would stipulate South Africa's direction regarding the diversity of digital skills, which skills to prioritise, and how digital skills and subject matter knowledge could be converged. Such a strategy could become a blueprint for determining how individuals can access support services, training resources, and job listings. In terms of how such a strategy can be implemented, the South African Department of Communications and Digital Technologies (2020) has already gazetted the National Digital Skills Strategy South Africa, which proposes providing the necessary infrastructure, reforming tertiary curriculum, conducting research into the impact of the digital skills revolution in South Africa's labour market, addressing the digital skills divide, building digital skills awareness, coordinating across government, industry, labour and other stakeholders, and providing funding for digital skills.

6.4.6 Develop infrastructure

It was noted in the introduction and literature review that the growth in freelancing experienced in the last few years could be attributed to the availability of supporting ICT infrastructure. Therefore, it is not surprising that participants in the present study also noted that improving the availability and quality of communication technologies like broadband and Internet in all areas, including rural areas, would open up job opportunities to a broader part of the population. Making ICT infrastructure available will ensure that all South Africans have equal work access to digital work platforms, regardless of the part of the country in which they live.

6.4.7 Training and Skills Development

Training, not only in cross-cultural communication but also in the use of ICTs, can assist in equipping South Africans with the skills they need to thrive in digital work platforms like Upwork. The government could introduce these skills in school curricula, showing learners that digital work platforms are a viable alternative for finding employment. Specific examples of training the government can introduce in collaboration with the private sector include online courses, vocational training, and coding boot camps.

6.4.8 Regulatory framework

It was noted in Chapter 5 that freelance copywriters indicate that when they work on the digital platform Upwork, they allow clients to do whatever they want because any attempts to stand up for their rights could lead to the freelance copywriters losing their jobs. This can be attributed to the reality that governments and regulatory authorities have not yet developed robust methods of monitoring and regulating digital platforms like Upwork, as was noted in the literature review. It was also noted in the literature review that digital platforms like Upwork could exacerbate the exploitation of workers by organisations that operate in a different country while employing people from another.

6.4.9 Public awareness campaigns

Joint efforts can be made to raise awareness among South Africans about the benefits and opportunities offered by digital work platforms. This can be done through public campaigns, workshops, and educational programs highlighting success stories and guiding how to get started in the digital work sector. Universities can play their part by introducing these platforms to their students.

6.4.10 Research and development

The government and private sector collaboration can support research and development initiatives to advance communication technologies and digital work platforms. This can lead to the creation of innovative solutions that further enhance the participation of South Africans in the digital economy. By collaborating, the government and private sector can create an enabling environment that promotes the availability and accessibility of communication technologies, encourages skills development, and fosters the growth of digital work platforms in South Africa.

6.5 Strengths and limitations

The strengths and limitations of the present study are summarised in the following sections.

6.5.1 Strengths

As noted through the literature review, although previous studies focused on cross-cultural communication in other organisational contexts, none of the studies investigated yet focused on South African freelance copywriters' perceptions of Upwork regarding cross-cultural communication on this digital platform. This study has allowed these freelance copywriters to articulate their views, showing that the platform lacks cross-cultural awareness and can do more to make cross-cultural communication more effective.

The qualitative methodology adopted in this study was valuable because it allowed the researcher to gain the perspectives of freelance copywriters using SSIs and FGDs. These techniques permitted the participants to articulate their views and the researcher to ask follow-up questions. The qualitative methodology was a strength because it allowed varying perspectives to be articulated. Regarding arriving at findings, the qualitative paradigm allowed the researcher to analyse thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. This made it possible to explore and understand the specific views of freelance copywriters relating to cross-cultural communication on the Upwork digital platform and obtain their views on what could be done to improve how freelance copywriters and clients communicate across cultures on the platform.

6.5.2 Limitations

The sample employed in the present study included freelance copywriters on the Upwork digital framework only. During the data collection process, the researcher realised that more experienced freelance copywriters were reluctant to participate in the study. This resulted in most of the participants being newer and less experienced. The insights of these new copywriters may be limited by their lack of experience. Also, because the sample was small, it is impossible to generalise the results to a wider population. While the qualitative methodology made it possible to gain the specific views of the participating freelance copywriters, it could introduce bias as participants

may provide the answers they believe the researcher is looking for. Also, this study has the potential for self-selection bias, where the people who participated in the study do not represent the greater group of freelance copywriters on Upwork. Therefore, it can be suggested that the results may have been enhanced if a quantitative study was employed in combination.

6.6 Recommendations for future studies

The results of the present study, as presented in Chapter 5, show that freelance copywriters believe that the cross-cultural communication challenges on the Upwork digital platform are related to the fact that there is a general lack of cross-cultural communication awareness on the platform. Future research could explore this area and focus on how digital labour markets can enhance cross-cultural communication by introducing cross-cultural awareness. Future scholars may also include larger samples of freelance copywriters or other freelancers from different categories, including coders, sales assistants, virtual assistants, and translators.

6.7 Concluding remarks

The reality that digital technologies have increased the interaction between people from different cultures in the workplace mediated by communication technologies is now generally accepted. The freelance copywriter participants in the present study accept the important role of cross-cultural communication in their work, noting that it makes it possible for them to work across borders with diverse clients and projects. Therefore, it is vital to focus on facilitating communication within this cross-cultural environment to enhance harmony and production. While this is recognised, the literature review made it clear that few studies have focused on the perspectives of freelance copywriters regarding cross-cultural communication on the Upwork digital platform. This study has partially closed this gap by proposing a theoretical framework that helps understand how the definition of roles, considering cultural dimensions, and the historical and existing imbalances in factors like race and gender impact communication across cultures.

From the literature review and proposed theoretical framework, SSIs, and FGDs, the present study has answered the research question about how freelance copywriters perceive cross-cultural communication on Upwork. The literature review validated the idea that there are changes in the labour market due to digital technologies and that some of these changes are positive while others are negative. It was also noted that without understanding the perspectives of those working on digital platforms like Upwork about how communication can be facilitated to enhance productivity, it would be hard to understand such platforms' impact clearly. The lack of studies in this area supports the need for the present study. The present study shows that freelance copywriters believe the Upwork digital labour platform lacks cross-cultural awareness to facilitate effective cross-cultural communication. Participants suggested that to deal with the issues related to cross-cultural awareness noted in this study, the Upwork digital platform will need to put in place measures such as making available resources, training and development, and engaging communication experts to help with resources that could make it easier for people to communicate on the platform even if they come from different cultures.

The present study makes several important contributions to the broader area of communication science and organisational communication. When researchers study how freelance copywriters deal with cross-cultural communication on digital platforms like Upwork, they understand these individuals' communication challenges. Based on this understanding, they can suggest strategies to deal with the problems identified by those who work on the platform. The study also provides insights regarding how platforms like Upwork, which bring people from different cultures together, influence communication. Comprehending how these platforms impact communication practices, interactions, and relationships can add knowledge to the field of communication by allowing them to explore the tools that can facilitate cross-cultural collaboration. The present study provides a basis for understanding cross-cultural competence and communication skills required to succeed in a progressively growing workplace. The perspectives of the participating freelance copywriters can assist digital workplaces like Upwork in designing their platforms and policies. The perspectives can highlight areas that could be improved while also discussing regulating these platforms so that freelance copywriters can feel protected when working on such platforms. This is especially important if one considers that the

participating freelance copywriters agree that the power on the platform lies with the clients. This study also made it possible to focus on Biddle's role theory (1979), Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions theory, and the critical theory, determining how relevant these theories are in the contemporary setting. It has laid a foundation for future scholars who may expand their research to cover other types of digital workers or platforms.

Indeed, there are many opportunities for expanding research in this area. For instance, Kenney et al. (2019) note that the area of work and value creation in digital platforms still needs to be understood. They note that these "platforms are only a minor part of a story that is far bigger." To tell the full story, scholars need to continue asking questions about how an important aspect such as communication can be leveraged to ensure value creation that such platforms make possible can benefit humanity, increase opportunities, and reduce inequality.

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APPENDIX 1: RESEARCHER ACKNOWLEDGEMENT FORM

THE COLLEGE OF HUMAN SCIENCES

RESEARCHER ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Hereby, I Busani Moyo, ID number FN736975, in my personal capacity as a researcher, acknowledge that I am aware of and familiar with the stipulations and contents of the

- Unisa Research Policy
- Unisa Ethics Policy
- Unisa IP Policy
- SOPs on ethical clearance risk assessment

And that I shall conform to and abide by these policy requirements

SIGNED: 

Date: 05 January 2023

APPENDIX 2: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Ethics clearance reference number: 49962876_CREC_CHS_2023

Research permission reference number (if applicable): REC-240816-052

Research title: Perceptions of South African Freelance Copywriters on Cross-Cultural Communication and the Upwork Digital Platform

Dear Prospective Participant,

My name is Busani Moyo, a master's student at the University of South Africa. My supervisor is Professor Rachel Barker, a Full Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of South Africa. I hereby invite you to participate in the study entitled "Perceptions of South African Freelance Copywriters on Cross-Cultural Communication and the Upwork Digital Platform".

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

The purpose of the study is to understand the perceptions of a group of South African copywriters on Upwork regarding cross-cultural communication in the virtual teams they work in. The study seeks to determine if freelancers believe that online work platforms like Upwork could be a viable solution for South Africans looking for employment mediated by ICTs and involving communicating across cultures. If so, it seeks to determine how cross-cultural communication can facilitate or impede their work.

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO PARTICIPATE?

As a freelancer already connecting with clients on the Upwork platform, your experience could help this study achieve its objectives. Seeing that South Africa faces the challenge of high unemployment and equality, the views of people like you could determine whether policymakers begin to see the digital space as a possible solution for the job crises. Your experiences with cross-cultural communication on a platform like Upwork could provide the management of such platforms with an idea related to how they can improve communication in these digital workplaces.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?

You will be expected to participate in one semi-structured interview lasting between 30 and 45 minutes and two group discussions lasting about 45 minutes. The study involves videotaping semi-structured interviews and group discussions.

CAN I WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY EVEN AFTER HAVING AGREED TO PARTICIPATE?

Participating in this study is voluntary, and you are under no obligation to consent to participation. There is no penalty or loss of benefit for non-participation. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written consent form. You are free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. Due to the fact that the interviewees and group discussion participants will not be named, it will be impossible to withdraw your opinions and ideas once you have participated.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

As a participant in this study, your biggest benefit is that you are taking an active role in making suggestions that could assist in improving a platform through which you make some of your income. You would also get an opportunity to have specific issues you meet related to cross-cultural communication addressed by the views of other participants. Even though you may not directly benefit from participating in this study, your views could impact the improvement of conditions for the wider community of freelancers.

ARE THERE ANY NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES FOR ME IF I PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH PROJECT?

There will be no harm in participating in this study. The risks involved in participating in this study involve potential inconvenience and/or discomfort during the interview or group discussion process. Your participation will remain anonymous and the information will be treated with the privacy and confidentiality that it deserves. The Informed Consent safeguards you against any disclosure of your identity or the information you have provided.

WILL THE INFORMATION THAT I CONVEY TO THE RESEARCHER AND MY IDENTITY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

The confidentiality of your information will be maintained in this study. You have the right to insist that your name and signature will not be recorded anywhere and that no one, apart from the researcher and identified members of the research team, will know about your involvement in this research (confidentiality), and no one will be able to connect you to the answers you give (anonymity). The privacy of information is guaranteed.

Your answers will be given a pseudonym, and you will be referred to in this way in the data, any publications, or other research reporting methods such as conference proceedings (confidentiality).

Your answers may be reviewed by people responsible for making sure that research is done properly, including the transcriber, external coder, and members of the Research Ethics Review Committee. Otherwise, records that identify you will be available only to people working on the study unless you give permission for other people to see the records.

Your anonymous data will be used for the purpose of a research report, journal articles, and/or conference proceedings. A report of the study may be submitted for publication, but individual participants will not be identified in such a report.

The screenshots from the interviews and focus group discussions will not show the faces of the participants.

Notwithstanding the pledges to confidentiality made above, there may not be any guarantee for anonymity in the focus group interviews because ten individuals will be taking part at the same time.

HOW WILL THE RESEARCHER(S) PROTECT THE SECURITY OF DATA?

All the information related to this study will be kept in a password-locked computer and only accessible to the researcher and other people involved in the study, as indicated above. A backup copy will be maintained in a password-locked hard drive that can only be accessed by the researcher.

WILL I RECEIVE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?

There will be no payment or any incentives for your participation in this study.

HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICS APPROVAL

This study has applied for written approval from the Ethics Review Committee of the University of South Africa. A copy of the approval letter will be made available as soon as it is available.

HOW WILL I BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS/RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH?

If you would like to be informed of the final research findings, please contact the researcher Busani Moyo at +27 (0)834490975 or 49962876@mylife.unisa.ac.za. The findings are accessible after the approval of the research report. Should you require any further information or want to contact the researcher about any aspect of this study, please contact the researcher at the above contact number and email address.

Should you have concerns about the way in which the research has been conducted, you may contact Professor R. Barker at 012 429 6772 or barker@unisa.ac.za. You can also contact the chairperson of the research Ethics Review Committee (ERC) of the University of South Africa, Professor A Khan, at khana@unisa.ac.za if you have any ethical concerns. Alternatively, you can report any serious unethical behaviour at the University's Toll Free Hotline at 0800 86 96 93.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.

Busani Moyo

APPENDIX 3: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

Research title: Perceptions Of South African Freelance Copywriters on Cross-Cultural Communication on the Upwork Digital Platform

Researcher: Busani Moyo

I, _____ (participant name), confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet.

I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable).

I am aware that the findings of this study will be processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings, but that my participation will be kept confidential unless otherwise specified.


I agree to the recording of the interview and focus group discussion.

I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

Participant Name & Surname..... (please print)

Participant Signature.....Date.....

Researcher's Name & Surname: Busani Moyo

Researcher's signature 

Date 05/01/23

APPENDIX 4A: INTERVIEW DATA COLLECTION TOOL

Semi-structured Interview Question Guide

Demographic information

Participant Code:

Date of Interview:

Interviewer:

Theme 1: Social Roles

1. Would you say the roles ascribed to individuals within an online cross-cultural communication relationship determine how communication occurs in such a relationship?
2. How do you define the role you play when working with clients and colleagues from different cultures on Upwork? For instance, do you see yourself as having an employee-employer relationship or rather a client-independent contractor relationship?
3. What factors influence the role you ascribe to yourself and others within a freelancing relationship on Upwork?
4. Do you, clients, and colleagues on Upwork have a shared understanding of the roles you are each playing within the cross-cultural relationship?
5. How does a shared understanding of roles and behaviours influence the success of a communication process?

National Cultural Orientations, Power Dynamics and Social Structures

6. On Upwork, how often do you work with people from a culture that is different from yours?
7. How do you tell that the person you are working with on Upwork is from a different culture from yours?
 - 8. How often do you make assumptions about a client or a colleague regarding their culture and social values only to discover that your assessment was wrong?
 - 9. What do you think is the role of historical occurrences like slavery and colonialism on the way people from different cultures address each other on Upwork today?
 - 10. What role do you think the perceived historical power of one country or region plays in relation to the way cross-cultural communication occurs on Upwork?
- **Cross-Cultural Communication on Upwork**
 - 11. Would you agree that the clients and colleagues you meet on Upwork are from different cultural orientations?

- 12. When working with different clients and colleagues on Upwork, how do you determine the cultural standpoint to adopt? How challenging would you say this is?
- 13. Concerning roles, national cultures, history, and social injustices, how do you think cross-cultural communication challenges can be addressed on Upwork?
- 14. From your experience working on Upwork, would you say the platform makes any effort to ensure smooth cross-cultural communication?
- 15. Based on your experience with cross-cultural communication on Upwork, do you believe it is a viable place to help South Africans find sustainable incomes, which could be part of the solution to the challenge of unemployment in the country?

APPENDIX 4B: FOCUS GROUP DATA COLLECTION TOOL

Focus Group Discussion Question Guide

Date of Discussion:

Moderator:

Theme 1: Social Roles

1. How do social roles influence communication?
2. How do individuals define the role they play when working with clients and colleagues from different cultures on Upwork?
3. What factors influence the role people ascribe themselves and others within a freelancing relationship on Upwork?
4. Do freelancers, clients, and colleagues on Upwork have a shared understanding of the roles each play within the cross-cultural relationship?
5. How does a shared understanding of roles and behaviours influence the success of a communication process?

Theme 2: National Cultural Orientations, Power Dynamics and Social Structures

6. How do freelancers on Upwork tell that the person they are working with is from a different culture from theirs?
7. How often do encounter people make assumptions about a client or a colleague regarding their culture and social values only to discover that the assessment was wrong?
8. What do you think is the role of historical occurrences like slavery and colonialism on the way people from different cultures address each other on Upwork today?
9. What role do you think the perceived historical power of one country or region plays in relation to the way cross-cultural communication occurs on Upwork?

Theme 3: Cross-Cultural Communication on Upwork

10. Do clients and freelancers on Upwork come from different cultural orientations?
11. When working with different clients and colleagues on Upwork, how do freelancers determine the cultural standpoint to adopt? How challenging would you say this is?
12. Concerning roles, national cultures, history, and social injustices, how do you
13. Does Upwork make any effort to ensure smooth cross-cultural communication?
14. Is Upwork a viable place to help South Africans find sustainable incomes, which could be part of the solution to the challenge of unemployment in the country?

APPENDIX 5: CONFIDENTIALITY FORM

CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT WITH RESEARCH THIRD PARTIES

Hereby, I [name], ID number, in my personal capacity as a [transcriber/coder/data capturer/statistician, etc] collaborating with [name of principal investigator] on a research titled [the title of the study], acknowledge that I am aware of and familiar with the stipulations and contents of the conditions of ethical clearance specific to this study. I shall conform to and abide by these conditions. Furthermore, I am aware of the sensitivity of the information collected and the need for strict controls to ensure confidentiality obligations associated with the study.

I agree to the privacy and confidentiality of the information that I am granted access to in my duties as a [transcriber/coder/data capturer/statistician, etc]. I will not disclose nor sell the information that I have been granted permission to gain access to in good faith, to anyone.

I also confirm that I have been briefed by the research team on the protocols and expectations of my behaviour and involvement in the research as a [transcriber/coder/data capturer/statistician, etc]

SIGNED: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX 6: ETHICAL APPROVAL

COLLEGE OF HUMAN SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS REVIEW COMMITTEE

27 June 2023

Dear Mr Busani Moyo

NHREC Registration # :
Rec-240816-052
CREC Reference # :
49962876_CREC_CHS_2023

Decision:
**Ethics Approval from 27 June 2023
to 27 June 2024**

Researcher(s): Name: Mr. B. Moyo
Contact details: 49962876@mylife.unisa.ac.za
Supervisor(s): Name: Prof R. Barker
Contact details: barker@unisa.ac.za

Title: Working across borders using ICTS: perceptions of South African freelance copywriters on cross-cultural communication and the Upwork platform

Degree Purpose: Masters

Thank you for the application for research ethics clearance by the Unisa College of Human Science Ethics Committee. Ethics approval is granted for one year.

The **low risk application** was reviewed by College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee, in compliance with the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics and the Standard Operating Procedure on Research Ethics Risk Assessment.

The proposed research may now commence with the provisions that:

1. The researcher(s) will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.
2. Any adverse circumstance arising in the undertaking of the research project that is relevant to the ethicality of the study should be communicated in writing to the College Ethics Review Committee.
3. The researcher(s) will conduct the study according to the methods and procedures set out in the approved application.
4. Any changes that can affect the study-related risks for the research participants, particularly

confidentiality of the data, should be reported to the Committee in writing, accompanied by a progress report.

5. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to any applicable national legislation, professional codes of conduct, institutional guidelines and scientific standards relevant to the specific field of study. Adherence to the following South African legislation is important, if applicable: Protection of Personal Information Act, no 4 of 2013; Children's act no 38 of 2005 and the National Health Act, no 61 of 2003.
6. Only de-identified research data may be used for secondary research purposes in future on condition that the research objectives are similar to those of the original research. Secondary use of identifiable human research data require additional ethics clearance.
7. No fieldwork activities may continue after the expiry date (**27 June 2024**). Submission of a completed research ethics progress report will constitute an application for renewal of Ethics Research Committee approval.

Note:

*The reference number **49962876_CREC_CHS_2023** should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants, as well as with the Committee.*

Yours sincerely,

Signature:



Prof. KB Khan
CHS Research Ethics Committee Chairperson
Email: khankb@unisa.ac.za
Tel: (012) 429 8210

Signature: PP



Prof ZZ Nkosi
Acting-Executive Dean: CHS
E-mail: nkosizz@unisa.ac.za
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