

Between Campus and the Gig Economy: Digital Freelancing and the Transformation of Peer Relations among University Students

Anshraj Singh

B.A. Sociology (Hons.), Chhatrapati Shahu Ji Maharaj University, Kanpur

Abstract

The expansion of digital labour has created new opportunities for university students to participate in income-generating activities alongside formal education. Digital freelancing provides students with financial independence, flexible work arrangements and professional experience, but its implications may extend beyond economic outcomes to the social organisation of student life. This study examines changes in peer social relations associated with digital freelancing and explores the emergence of social distance between student freelancers and their non-earning peers. The study was conducted among 50 student freelancers at Chhatrapati Shahu Ji Maharaj University, Kanpur, using a descriptive cross-sectional research design. Data were collected through a structured interview schedule and analysed using frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations. Two dimensions were examined: peer social relations and social distance. The findings indicate substantial changes in students' campus interactions, peer-group participation, friendships and closeness with non-earning classmates. A notable proportion of respondents also reported greater ease in relating to other earning students. Social distance was particularly associated with differences in work-oriented routines, time availability and responsibilities. While 94% of respondents perceived that non-earning students found it difficult to relate to their work-oriented routines, only 46% reported feeling socially separated specifically because of their earning status. This suggests that social distance is more closely associated with differentiated everyday experiences than with explicit perceptions of economic superiority. Drawing on Symbolic Interactionism and the concept of social distance, the study argues that digital freelancing contributes to the relational restructuring of student life by introducing new identities, routines and patterns of social affiliation.

Keywords: Digital freelancing; Gig economy; Student gig workers; Peer social relations; Social distance; University students; Digital labour

1. Introduction

The expansion of digital technologies has transformed the organisation of work and created new forms of employment that operate beyond conventional workplaces and employment relationships. Among these developments, digital freelancing has become an important component of the broader gig economy, enabling individuals to provide services to clients through digitally mediated platforms and networks. Unlike conventional employment, freelancing can offer considerable flexibility in relation to where and when work is performed. At the same time, this flexibility may be accompanied by irregular working patterns, extended working hours and reduced opportunities for interpersonal interaction. Research on

remote gig work has consequently demonstrated that autonomy and flexibility can coexist with social isolation and difficulties associated with the organisation of working time (Wood et al., 2019a).

The emergence of digital freelancing is particularly significant among university students. Students increasingly participate in income-generating activities while continuing their formal education, using digital platforms and personal networks to obtain assignments in areas such as content creation, graphic design, digital marketing, programming, video editing and related services. Freelancing can provide students with financial independence, professional experience and opportunities to develop marketable skills. However, the significance of this transition extends beyond the economic benefits of earning. When students begin to undertake paid work, they acquire an additional set of responsibilities, routines and experiences that coexist with their academic lives. The student therefore occupies a dual position as both a learner and an income earner.

This dual position raises a sociologically important question concerning the relationship between work and student social life. Universities are not merely educational institutions; they are also important spaces of friendship, peer interaction, group participation and identity formation. Students develop relationships through repeated interaction, shared activities and common experiences. Consequently, changes in students' everyday routines may also influence their relationships with peers. A student who must meet client deadlines, manage freelance projects or devote substantial time to paid work may experience university life differently from a student whose primary commitment remains academic and social participation on campus.

Existing research on gig work has largely concentrated on its economic and occupational dimensions. Important themes include flexibility, autonomy, algorithmic control, precarity, income insecurity and working conditions. Wood et al. (2019a), for example, show that remote gig workers can experience considerable autonomy while simultaneously facing irregular work schedules, overwork and social isolation. Their findings demonstrate that the organisation of digital work has consequences extending beyond the immediate labour process. Similarly, Wood et al. (2019b) show that digital labour remains embedded within wider interpersonal and social networks rather than existing as an entirely individualised economic activity.

Yet comparatively less attention has been given to the **peer relationships of students who combine digital work with higher education**. Research on student gig work tends to emphasise why students enter such work, the economic advantages they obtain, the skills they acquire, their career aspirations and the difficulties of balancing education with employment. These are important dimensions, but they do not fully address what happens to students' existing peer relationships when earning becomes part of their everyday identity. In particular, there is limited sociological attention to relationships between students who earn through digital freelancing and those who remain non-earning students.

The distinction between earning and non-earning students is analytically significant because economic participation may introduce differences in everyday experience without necessarily producing explicit social hierarchy. Student freelancers may develop work-oriented schedules, responsibilities and experiences that distinguish them from their non-earning peers. These differences may influence the amount of time available for informal interaction, participation in peer activities and the degree of closeness experienced within existing friendships. At the same time, freelancers may develop stronger affinity with other earning students because of shared work-related experiences. Social differentiation may therefore occur gradually through changing patterns of interaction rather than through direct conflict.

The present study conceptualises this process as a possible **restructuring of peer relations**. Rather than assuming that freelancing automatically improves or damages students' social lives, the study examines whether students perceive changes in their friendships, interaction patterns, peer-group participation and closeness with non-earning classmates. It further examines the emergence of **social distance**, understood in this study as perceived relational separation manifested through reduced interaction, differences in everyday routines, limited participation in shared activities and a changing sense of closeness between earning and non-earning students.

This approach is important because social distance does not necessarily imply hostility or superiority. Students may continue to belong to the same university, maintain friendships and interact regularly while nevertheless experiencing a greater sense of difference from one another. The relevant transformation may therefore be one of degree and pattern rather than complete social separation. Digital freelancing may alter who students interact with, how frequently they interact, and which peers they find easier to relate to.

The present study examines these dynamics among student gig workers at **Chhatrapati Shahu Ji Maharaj University, Kanpur**. It focuses specifically on two dimensions: changes in peer social relations associated with digital freelancing and the emergence of social distance between student freelancers and non-earning students. The study asks:

RQ1: How does engagement in digital freelancing shape the peer social relations of university students?

RQ2: In what ways does digital freelancing contribute to social distance between student freelancers and their non-earning peers?

Accordingly, the study has two objectives:

1. To examine changes in peer social relations associated with digital freelancing among university student gig workers.
2. To examine the emergence of social distance between student freelancers and their non-earning peers.

The study contributes to the sociology of digital labour by shifting attention from the economic outcomes of student freelancing towards its micro-social consequences. It argues that the significance of student freelancing lies not only in students becoming earners but also in the ways in which earning introduces new routines, responsibilities and experiences into an existing peer environment. The central proposition is therefore that digital freelancing may contribute to the **relational differentiation of university students**, particularly where differences in work routines and shared experiences become incorporated into everyday peer relationships.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Digital Gig Work and Social Relations

The expansion of the gig economy has generated considerable sociological interest in the changing organisation of work, particularly in relation to flexibility, autonomy, insecurity and the transformation of workplace relations. Digital freelancing differs from conventional employment because workers frequently operate independently, obtain assignments through digital platforms or networks, and exercise greater control over the timing and location of their work. However, the flexibility associated with such work does not necessarily translate into greater social integration.

Wood et al. (2019a), in their study of remote gig workers, demonstrate that digitally mediated work can provide autonomy, task variety and flexibility while simultaneously exposing workers to irregular working hours, overwork, exhaustion and social isolation. Their findings are particularly relevant to student freelancers because the flexibility of freelance work can coexist with unpredictable demands and changing

daily routines. The absence of a conventional workplace may also reduce opportunities for regular face-to-face interaction with colleagues and other workers.

The issue of social connection is further developed by Yao et al. (2021), who describe gig work as potentially producing an “atomization” effect because workers operate relatively independently of one another. Their study shows that gig workers use online communities to obtain information, develop connections and access emotional support, suggesting that the individualised organisation of gig work does not eliminate social relations but can change the settings through which they are formed and maintained.

Taken together, this literature indicates that digital work can reorganise patterns of social interaction. However, most of these studies examine workers as workers. The experience of students who simultaneously occupy an educational role and an earning role requires a different analytical perspective because their work relationships coexist with an established peer environment within the university.

2.2 Student Employment, Identity and Peer Relations

Research on student employment provides a closer connection to the present study. Unlike full-time workers, employed students must negotiate multiple institutional roles simultaneously. Employment may influence how students allocate time, participate in university activities and understand their own position in relation to other students.

Grozev and Easterbrook (2022) provide particularly relevant evidence. Their study explicitly examines the relationships of employed university students with non-employed students and investigates the identity implications of employment. The study considers the circumstances under which employed students experience themselves as a distinct group from non-employed students and the factors facilitating or inhibiting their social adaptation and integration at university. This is highly relevant to the present study because it establishes that employment can become socially meaningful within the university environment rather than remaining an activity separate from student identity.

Earlier research on student employment has similarly associated work responsibilities with constraints on students' available time and participation. The literature reviewed in the present study identifies work-related time constraints as a factor that may reduce opportunities for casual interaction and participation in campus activities. The significance of these findings lies in the possibility that employment changes not simply how much students work, but how they participate in the social life of the university.

Digital freelancing may intensify this issue in distinctive ways. Conventional student employment often involves a relatively fixed workplace and schedule, whereas freelancing can involve variable deadlines, client communication and project-based responsibilities. Consequently, the boundary between academic time, working time and personal time may become less clearly defined. Wood et al. (2019) similarly identify irregular working hours and overwork as important characteristics of some forms of remote gig work.

The identity dimension is therefore particularly important. Once students begin earning independently, they may acquire experiences and responsibilities that distinguish them from peers who remain exclusively engaged in education. Such differentiation does not necessarily imply superiority. Instead, students may simply perceive themselves as having different priorities, routines and experiences. Grozev and Easterbrook's findings are therefore particularly useful for the present study because they place the relationship between employment, student identity and peer-group relations at the centre of analysis.

2.3 Work Routines, Time and Everyday Interaction

A recurring theme across the literature is the relationship between work responsibilities and the organisa-

tion of everyday time. For student freelancers, this relationship is especially important because work must be incorporated into an existing schedule of classes, academic requirements and peer activities.

The present study's literature review identifies irregular work schedules and client deadlines as factors that may interfere with students' academic and social lives. This is consistent with the broader gig-work literature, which shows that flexibility may coexist with unpredictable working demands. Wood et al. (2019a) demonstrate that digitally mediated workers can experience working at unsocial and irregular hours despite the apparent autonomy of remote work.

From a sociological perspective, the importance of time extends beyond scheduling. Repeated interaction is one of the foundations through which social relationships are maintained. When students become less available for informal meetings, casual campus activities or peer-group participation, the frequency and context of interaction may change. Over time, these changes can influence the degree of closeness experienced within friendships.

This does not mean that reduced interaction automatically produces social isolation. Yao et al. (2021) demonstrate that gig workers can construct alternative forms of peer connection through online communities. Similarly, student freelancers may develop stronger connections with peers who share their experience of earning and managing work responsibilities. Thus, the relevant sociological process may be **relational reorganisation rather than simple social withdrawal**.

This distinction is particularly important for the present study. If student freelancers report greater ease in relating to other earning students while simultaneously reporting changes in their relationships with non-earning classmates, the pattern suggests a redistribution of social affinity rather than the disappearance of social relationships altogether.

2.4 Social Distance and Relational Differentiation

The concept of social distance provides a useful way of interpreting this relational reorganisation. Social distance refers broadly to the degree of perceived closeness or separation between individuals or groups. In the present study, it is operationalised through indicators such as reduced interaction with non-earning peers, work-related constraints on social participation, perceived difficulty in relating to different routines, changes in friendship, reduced involvement in casual activities and a sense of being different from non-earning students.

This conceptualisation is consistent with the distinction between physical proximity and social closeness. Students may remain members of the same university community and may continue to encounter one another regularly, yet their everyday experiences can become increasingly differentiated. A freelancer's client responsibilities, deadlines and work-oriented routine may create experiences that are less easily shared with peers who do not work.

The distinction between **difference and hierarchy** is crucial. Social distance should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of status superiority. A student may experience distance from non-earning peers because of different responsibilities without considering those peers inferior. Conversely, non-earning students may perceive or respond to the freelancer differently without there necessarily being deliberate exclusion. The process may therefore be gradual and relational, emerging through everyday interaction rather than explicit conflict.

The findings of the study provide empirical support for examining this possibility. Respondents reported changes in campus interaction, peer-group participation, friendships and closeness with non-earning classmates, while a large proportion also reported that non-earning students found it difficult to relate to their work-oriented routines.

2.5 Research Gap

The existing literature establishes three important points. First, digital gig work can reshape workers' routines, autonomy, social interaction and experiences of isolation. Second, student employment can influence identity, time allocation and relationships with peers who do not work. Third, work responsibilities and differentiated everyday routines can affect students' participation in university social life. However, these strands of research have rarely been brought together to examine the specific relational consequences of digital freelancing among university students.

More specifically, limited empirical attention has been given to what happens to peer relationships when a student moves from being exclusively engaged in education to simultaneously occupying an earning role through digitally mediated work. Existing research has provided valuable insights into why students participate in gig work, the economic and career-related benefits they obtain, and the challenges of balancing employment with education. Yet the question of how freelancing may alter interaction, friendship, peer-group participation and perceived closeness with non-earning students remains comparatively underexplored.

A further gap concerns the nature of social distance. Differences between earning and non-earning students need not necessarily reflect an explicit hierarchy or perception of superiority. They may instead emerge through differences in time availability, work responsibilities, routines and shared experiences. Examining these processes allows social distance to be understood as a relational outcome of everyday interaction rather than simply as an economic or status divide.

There is also a contextual gap. Much of the established literature on digital gig work has examined workers in international or metropolitan settings, while comparatively less attention has been directed towards student freelancers within Indian university environments outside major metropolitan centres. The present study addresses this gap through an empirical examination of student gig workers at Chhatrapati Shahu Ji Maharaj University, Kanpur.

Accordingly, the present study moves beyond asking why students freelance or what economic benefits freelancing provides. It examines how participation in digital freelancing is associated with changes in peer social relations and the emergence of social distance between earning and non-earning students. By bringing together the sociology of digital labour, student employment and social distance, the study conceptualises student freelancing as a process of **relational restructuring within the university environment**.

3. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The present study is primarily informed by **Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969)**, particularly its emphasis on the construction of meaning and identity through everyday social interaction. From this perspective, social reality is continuously produced and negotiated through interaction with others. Individuals interpret their social positions through their relationships, roles and shared experiences, while identities are shaped through the meanings attached to these interactions. This perspective is particularly appropriate for examining student freelancers because freelancing introduces an additional social role into an environment in which individuals already possess the identity of students.

The transition from being exclusively a student to simultaneously being a student and an earner may therefore alter how individuals understand themselves and how they believe others perceive them. The significance of earning is not restricted to the possession of income. It may become meaningful through everyday interactions with peers, particularly when earning students and non-earning students develop

different routines, responsibilities and experiences. The interaction between these groups may consequently produce new perceptions of similarity, difference and belonging.

The study further employs **social distance** as its central analytical concept. Social distance is understood here as perceived relational separation between student freelancers and non-earning peers. It is not treated as physical separation or necessarily as interpersonal conflict. Instead, it is reflected in reduced interaction, declining participation in common activities, difficulty in relating to different routines, changes in friendship and a perceived sense of difference between earning and non-earning students.

The conceptual relationship proposed by the study can therefore be represented as:

Engagement in digital freelancing → new work routines and responsibilities → changing student identity and everyday interaction → altered peer affiliations → perceived social distance

The framework also recognises that this process may operate in more than one direction. Freelancing may reduce interaction with non-earning students because of work schedules and responsibilities, while simultaneously increasing affinity with earning students who share similar experiences. Thus, social distance is conceptualised not simply as withdrawal from social life but as a possible **reorganisation of social relationships**.

This framework provides a sociological interpretation of the empirical findings. If respondents report changes in friendships, campus interaction and peer-group participation, these findings can be understood as changes in everyday interaction. If they also report greater ease in relating to earning students and difficulty relating to non-earning peers, the findings indicate that work-based identity and shared experience may influence patterns of social affiliation. Similarly, reports that non-earning peers find it difficult to relate to freelancers' work-oriented routines suggest that social distance can emerge through differences in lived experience.

The framework therefore avoids treating freelancing as an inherently positive or negative force. Instead, it examines how the incorporation of paid digital work into student life may create new meanings, routines and relational boundaries. The central theoretical proposition is that **when a new economic role becomes embedded in students' everyday interactions, it may contribute to the restructuring of existing peer relationships and the emergence of perceived social distance**.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The study adopted a **descriptive, cross-sectional research design** to examine the relationship between digital freelancing and the social relations of university students with their non-earning peers. The study was conducted at **Chhatrapati Shahu Ji Maharaj University (CSJM University), Kanpur**, with student freelancers constituting the primary unit of analysis. The research focused specifically on two dimensions: changes in peer social relations and the emergence of social distance between student freelancers and non-earning students.

The cross-sectional design was considered appropriate because the study sought to capture respondents' perceptions and experiences at a particular point in time rather than trace changes longitudinally. Accordingly, the findings are interpreted in terms of **reported patterns and perceived associations**, rather than as evidence of a causal effect of freelancing.

4.2 Population, Sampling and Sample

The population comprised university students engaged in digital freelancing or other forms of digitally mediated gig work alongside their studies. Respondents were selected through **purposive and snowball**

sampling. Purposive sampling enabled the researcher to identify students who met the central criterion of being engaged in freelance work, while snowball sampling facilitated access to additional student freelancers through existing peer networks.

The study comprised a final sample of 50 student freelancers. The respondents represented different academic backgrounds and types of freelance activity, providing a varied student context for examining peer relations.

4.3 Data Collection Instrument

Primary data were collected through a structured **interview schedule consisting of 45 questions divided into five sections.** The first section covered the socio-economic and freelancing profile of respondents. The subsequent sections addressed social relations, social distance, financial independence and perceived social status.

For the present article, only the components directly relevant to the two research objectives were retained. These comprise **16 Likert-scale statements:** eight statements concerning peer social relations and eight concerning social distance. Responses were recorded on a **five-point Likert scale**, ranging from disagreement to agreement. The instrument was pretested with five student freelancers, after which revisions were made before the final data collection.

4.4 Variables and Analytical Approach

The first construct, **peer social relations**, examined changes in friendship, interaction, peer-group participation, perceived behaviour of non-earning students and closeness with non-earning classmates. The second construct, **social distance**, examined reduced interaction, work-schedule constraints, perceived separation, differences in routines, friendship gaps, reduced participation in casual activities and feelings of differentiation associated with freelance responsibilities.

The analysis is primarily **descriptive**, using frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations to identify patterns in respondents' perceptions. For the purpose of this article, the two constructs are analysed together to examine whether reported changes in peer interaction correspond with perceptions of social distance. The study reports a mean of **3.59** for the social-relations construct and **3.82** for social distance, with Cronbach's alpha values of **0.86 and 0.81**, respectively.

The methodological approach therefore allows the study to identify patterns in the lived social experience of student freelancers while avoiding an unsupported claim that freelancing itself causally produces changes in peer relations.

5. Results and Analysis

The empirical findings indicate that the social consequences of student freelancing are more clearly visible when individual dimensions of peer interaction are examined together rather than relying on a single question about whether relationships have changed. The results point towards a pattern of **relational restructuring**, involving changes in interaction, friendship, group participation and perceived affinity with earning peers.

Table 1. Selected Profile of Student Freelancers

Characteristic	Category	Percentage
Age	21–23 years	54%
	18–20 years	24%

Characteristic	Category	Percentage
	24–26 years	22%
Gender	Male	68%
	Female	32%
Residential background	Urban	66%
	Semi-urban	18%
	Rural	16%
Main motivation	Financial independence	52%
Weekly freelancing	10–20 hours	32%
Monthly income	₹5,001–₹15,000	36%
Deadline overlap with university	Often	42%

The profile provides useful context for interpreting the subsequent findings. Financial independence was the most frequently reported motivation for undertaking freelancing, while a substantial proportion of respondents worked between 10 and 20 hours per week. The overlap between freelance deadlines and university schedules is particularly relevant: **42% reported that such overlap occurred often and another 36% reported that it occurred sometimes.** This suggests that freelance work was sufficiently integrated into students' routines to potentially influence their availability for activities beyond academic and professional responsibilities.

5.1 Changes in Peer Social Relations

The findings demonstrate that respondents experienced changes in their relationships with non-earning peers, although the intensity of these changes differed across dimensions.

Table 2. Reported Changes in Peer Social Relations

Indicator	Respondents agreeing/strongly agreeing
Freelancing lifestyle affected friendships	52%
Relate more easily with earning students	72%
Social interactions on campus changed	86%
Non-earning students behave differently towards them	64%
Peer-group participation changed	72%
Closeness with non-earning classmates affected	62%
Because of freelancing, I spend less time with non-earning students.	44%
My interactions with non-earning students have become more limited after freelancing	76%

The strongest finding is that **86% of respondents reported that their social interactions on campus had changed after engaging in freelancing**. This indicates that the incorporation of freelance work into student life is associated with a broad alteration in everyday interaction patterns.

The finding becomes particularly relevant when considered alongside peer-group participation. **Seventy-two per cent** reported that their participation in peer groups had changed, while the same proportion stated that they related more easily to other earning students. This parallel is sociologically important. It suggests that changes in peer relations may involve not merely reduced interaction but a **shift in social affiliation** towards students who share comparable experiences of earning and work responsibilities.

Friendship-related effects were somewhat less pronounced: **52% reported that freelancing had affected their friendships**, while **62% reported that their closeness with non-earning classmates had been affected**. The difference suggests that existing friendships may not simply disappear when students begin freelancing. Instead, their intensity, frequency and everyday character may change.

A further dimension concerns reciprocal perception. **Sixty-four per cent** of respondents perceived that non-earning students behaved differently towards them because they earned money. This introduces an important relational element: changes in social relations may arise not only from the freelancer's altered routine but also from how that changed position is perceived by peers.

5.2 Social Distance between Earning and Non-Earning Students

The social-distance dimension presents an even stronger pattern. The overall mean reported for this construct was **3.82 on a five-point scale**, making it the strongest of the measured dimensions. The individual indicators reveal that the distance was associated particularly with differences in routine, time availability and participation.

Table 3. Indicators of Social Distance

Indicator	Agree/Strongly agree
Work schedule reduces social interaction	54%
Feel socially separated because of earning status	46%
Non-earning students find work-oriented routine difficult to relate to	94%
Freelancing created a gap with some non-earning friends	74%
Less involvement in casual social activities	84%
Freelancer responsibilities make them feel different	82%

The most striking finding is that **94% of respondents believed that non-earning students found it difficult to relate to their work-oriented routine**. This is considerably higher than the proportion who directly reported feeling socially separated because of earning status (**46%**).

This distinction is central to interpreting the findings. Social distance does not appear to operate primarily through an explicit feeling of superiority or separation based solely on income. Instead, it appears more strongly through **differences in everyday experience and routine**. Respondents may not necessarily describe themselves as socially separated because they earn, yet they overwhelmingly perceive that their non-earning peers have difficulty relating to their work-oriented lifestyle.

The same pattern is visible in informal social participation. **Eighty-four per cent** reported reduced involvement in casual social activities, while **74%** felt that freelancing had created a gap between

themselves and some non-earning friends. Further, **82%** reported that their freelance responsibilities made them feel different from non-earning students.

Taken together, these findings suggest that social distance is associated less with physical separation and more with a **divergence in routines, responsibilities and shared experiences**.

6. Discussion

The findings of the present study indicate that digital freelancing is associated with a restructuring of peer social relations among university students. Rather than producing a uniformly negative effect on social relationships, freelancing appears to introduce a distinct work-oriented dimension into students' everyday social lives. The respondents reported changes in campus interaction, peer-group participation, friendship, and closeness with non-earning students. These findings suggest that the entry of students into paid digital work creates differences in routines, responsibilities, experiences, and patterns of interaction that can gradually reshape their relationships with peers.

A particularly important finding is that **86% of the respondents reported changes in their social interactions on campus after becoming involved in freelancing**, while 72% reported changes in their participation in peer groups. This indicates that freelancing is not confined to the economic sphere of students' lives. The demands associated with client communication, project completion, deadlines, and managing work alongside academic responsibilities can alter the amount of time and availability students have for conventional peer interaction. Wood et al. (2019a) similarly observed that digital gig work can provide workers with flexibility and autonomy while simultaneously producing irregular working patterns, overwork, and social isolation. In the context of student freelancers, these characteristics become particularly significant because work is performed alongside an already demanding academic and social environment.

The findings can be understood through the perspective of **Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969)**, particularly the idea that social identities and meanings are continuously constructed through everyday interaction. A university student who begins freelancing does not cease to be a student; however, the meaning attached to that identity may change as the individual acquires a second, work-related identity. Experiences such as dealing with clients, meeting deadlines, earning income, and managing professional responsibilities become part of the student's everyday self-conception. Consequently, interactions with non-earning peers may also acquire new meanings. The difference is therefore not simply between students who have money and those who do not, but between students whose everyday experiences and responsibilities have become increasingly differentiated.

This interpretation is supported by the finding that **72% of respondents reported relating more easily to earning students**. The result suggests the emergence of an experiential affinity based on shared circumstances. Students involved in freelancing may find greater common ground with other earning students because they share experiences concerning work pressure, deadlines, financial responsibility, client interaction, and the management of work alongside education. Granovetter's (1985) concept of embeddedness is useful here because economic activity does not occur independently of social relationships. Economic participation remains embedded within interpersonal networks and can itself reshape the networks through which individuals interact. Thus, entering the digital labour market may modify not only a student's economic position but also the social contexts in which the student feels understood and connected.

At the same time, the findings demonstrate that the emergence of social distance cannot be explained exclusively through income or economic status. The strongest finding within the social-distance dimension was that **94% of respondents believed that non-earning students sometimes found it difficult to relate to their work-oriented routine**. In comparison, only **46% reported feeling socially separated from non-earning students specifically because of their earning status**. This difference is analytically significant. It suggests that social distance among student freelancers is more closely associated with differences in everyday routines and experiences than with an explicit perception of economic superiority. The distinction between these two findings provides an important sociological insight. Student freelancers may not necessarily view themselves as socially superior to their non-earning peers, yet their responsibilities can make their everyday lives increasingly different. A freelancer may be required to respond to a client while attending university, complete a project before a deadline, work during evenings, or decline informal social activities because of an ongoing assignment. Such differences can gradually reduce opportunities for spontaneous interaction. In this sense, social distance can emerge without deliberate exclusion by either group. It may be an unintended consequence of differentiated routines.

The finding that **84% of respondents reported reduced involvement in casual social activities** further strengthens this interpretation. Casual interactions—such as spending time with friends, participating in informal gatherings, or simply remaining available to one's peer group—are important mechanisms through which social relationships are maintained. When work responsibilities reduce these opportunities, relationships may become less frequent even without any conscious decision to withdraw. Similarly, 74% of respondents felt that freelancing had created a gap between themselves and some non-earning friends. The resulting distance can therefore be understood as a gradual relational process rather than a sudden breakdown of friendship.

The role of peer perception is also important. Around **64% of respondents perceived that non-earning students behaved differently toward them after they began freelancing**. This indicates that social differentiation is not produced solely by the freelancer's own changed behaviour; it may also emerge through the interpretations and responses of peers. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, individuals construct meanings about one another through interaction. Earning status may become a visible marker through which students interpret each other's lifestyles, priorities, and social positions. Consequently, even when freelancers do not consciously claim superiority, peers may perceive them as more professionally oriented, financially independent, or less available for conventional student activities.

The findings also resonate with research on the social organization of gig work. Yao et al. (2021) found that gig work can generate atomization because workers frequently operate independently, although digital communities can simultaneously provide forms of informational and emotional support. For student freelancers, a similar process may occur within the university environment. Their work may separate them from some conventional peer activities while bringing them closer to other students who share comparable work experiences. Thus, digital freelancing can simultaneously produce **connection and separation**: it creates new networks and affinities while potentially weakening participation in existing peer relationships.

Wood et al. (2019b) further demonstrate that digital labour can be simultaneously embedded and disembedded. Although online freelancing connects workers to clients and professional networks beyond their immediate geographical environment, it can also weaken certain forms of local social interaction. This dual character is visible among student freelancers as well. Their social world may expand beyond the university through digital clients, professional contacts, and earning networks, while their participation

in some campus-based social relationships becomes more limited. Digital connectivity, therefore, should not automatically be equated with greater social integration.

The findings of Grozev and Easterbrook (2022) are particularly relevant because their study directly examines relationships between employed and non-employed university students. Their work demonstrates that employment can have implications for students' identities and relationships with different social groups. The present study extends this line of inquiry by examining **digital freelancing as a specific form of student employment** and by focusing explicitly on the emergence of social distance between earning and non-earning peers. Unlike conventional employment, freelancing is often characterized by greater flexibility, individualized work arrangements, and digitally mediated interactions. These characteristics make its implications for student social relations worthy of separate sociological attention.

Overall, the findings point towards **relational restructuring rather than straightforward social deterioration**. Digital freelancing does not necessarily destroy students' friendships or make them socially isolated. Instead, it reorganizes the conditions under which relationships are formed and maintained. Students acquire new responsibilities, develop different routines, interact with professional networks, and may develop stronger affinities with peers who share similar earning experiences. At the same time, these changes can reduce participation in casual campus interaction and create a perceived gap with non-earning classmates.

The study therefore contributes to the sociology of digital labour by demonstrating that the consequences of student gig work extend beyond income, employability, and career development. Digital freelancing can become a mechanism of **social differentiation within the student community**, producing differences in everyday experience and interaction between earning and non-earning students. The central issue is consequently not whether freelancing is inherently beneficial or harmful to student relationships, but how participation in digitally mediated work reorganizes students' social identities, routines, networks, and perceptions of one another. The observed pattern of social distance appears to emerge primarily through these relational and experiential differences rather than through a simple divide between economically advantaged and disadvantaged students.

7. Limitations and Implications

7.1 Limitations of the Study

The findings of the present study should be interpreted within the limitations of its research design and scope. First, the study was conducted among student freelancers at a single university, Chhatrapati Shahu Ji Maharaj University, Kanpur. The institutional and socio-cultural context of the university may influence students' experiences of freelancing and peer relationships; therefore, the findings should not be treated as representative of all university students or student gig workers in India. Second, the study employed a cross-sectional design and captured respondents' experiences at a particular point in time. Consequently, the findings establish patterns of association and reported experience rather than demonstrating a causal relationship between freelancing and changes in social relations. Longitudinal research could provide greater insight into how peer relationships develop before and after students enter digital freelancing.

Third, the study focused primarily on student freelancers' perceptions of their relationships with non-earning peers. The perspectives of non-earning students themselves were not independently examined. Including both groups in future research would provide a more balanced understanding of how social distance is mutually produced, perceived, or negotiated. Finally, the study concentrated on peer social

relations and social distance and did not examine other potentially relevant dimensions such as family relationships, academic performance, mental well-being, or professional networks.

7.2 Implications of the Study

Despite these limitations, the study has important implications for understanding the changing social organisation of university life in the context of digital labour. The findings suggest that universities should recognise student freelancing not only as an employment or career-related phenomenon but also as an experience that can influence students' social participation and campus relationships. Student support systems can therefore consider the challenges associated with balancing academic responsibilities, freelance deadlines, and participation in campus life.

The study also highlights the need to understand **social distance as a relational outcome of differentiated routines and experiences rather than simply as an expression of economic inequality**. This perspective can contribute to sociological research on the intersection of youth, higher education, digital labour, and social stratification. Future studies could adopt comparative and longitudinal designs, include both earning and non-earning students, and examine whether similar patterns occur across universities, disciplines, socio-economic backgrounds, and different forms of digital gig work. Such research would help establish whether the relational restructuring identified in the present study represents a broader feature of the emerging student gig economy.

7.3 Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should extend the present inquiry across different universities and geographical regions to examine whether the relationship between student freelancing and peer relations varies according to institutional and social context. Comparative studies including both freelancing and non-freelancing students would provide a more balanced understanding of how social distance is perceived and negotiated by both groups. Since the present study is cross-sectional, longitudinal research could further examine how peer relationships, student identity and social interaction develop before and after entry into digital freelancing. Further research may also examine gender differences, particularly the experiences of female student freelancers, and investigate how campus culture shapes perceptions of success, prestige and social influence among earning and non-earning students. Finally, larger samples and mixed-method approaches combining quantitative and qualitative data would provide deeper insight into the social consequences of the emerging student gig economy.

8. Conclusion

The present study examined the relationship between digital freelancing and peer social relations among university student gig workers, with particular attention to the emergence of social distance between earning and non-earning students. The findings demonstrate that digital freelancing is not merely an economic activity undertaken by students for additional income or financial independence. It can also become a significant social experience that reshapes students' everyday routines, patterns of interaction, peer-group participation, and perceptions of their relationships with classmates.

The study found considerable changes in the social interactions of student freelancers. A large proportion of respondents reported changes in campus interaction, peer-group participation, friendship, and closeness with non-earning classmates. The stronger tendency of respondents to relate to other earning students further indicates the emergence of an experiential similarity based on shared work responsibilities and routines. These findings suggest that participation in digital work can contribute to the differentiation of students' social worlds, even when they continue to share the same university environment.

An important conclusion emerging from the study is that **social distance is not primarily explained by a straightforward perception of economic superiority**. The contrast between the 94% of respondents who perceived difficulty among non-earning peers in relating to their work-oriented routine and the 46% who explicitly felt socially separated because of their earning status is particularly significant. This indicates that differences in time availability, work responsibilities, deadlines, and everyday experiences may be more important in producing social distance than income itself. Freelancing therefore appears to create relational differentiation through changes in routine and interaction rather than simply through economic inequality.

From a sociological perspective, digital freelancing can consequently be understood as a process of **relational restructuring** within student life. The student freelancer occupies both an educational and an economic position, and the interaction between these identities influences how relationships with peers are maintained and interpreted. The findings support the relevance of Symbolic Interactionism in understanding this process, as changing identities and everyday experiences acquire meaning through interaction with others.

The study contributes to the emerging literature on student participation in the gig economy by shifting attention from predominantly economic outcomes such as income, flexibility, employability, and career development towards the **social consequences of student gig work**. Existing research has increasingly documented the motivations and challenges associated with student gig work, while research on how such work reshapes peer relationships remains comparatively limited. The present study addresses this dimension by demonstrating how digitally mediated earning can alter the relational boundaries within the university student community.

Overall, the study does not suggest that digital freelancing inevitably damages students' social relationships. Rather, it shows that freelancing can reorganize the conditions under which those relationships are formed, maintained, and experienced. The central sociological issue is therefore not whether student freelancing is inherently positive or negative, but **how participation in digital labour changes the social organisation of student life**. In this sense, the expansion of student freelancing represents not only a transformation in how students earn, but also a transformation in how they experience work, identity, friendship, and social belonging within the university.

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