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Social Media Entrepreneurship, an Agent for Sustainable Development in Developing Countries: Case Study of South Africa

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Abstract:

As a result of the ever-improving network accessibility, the past two decades have witnessed a rapid increase in the number of social media platforms and subscribers to these networks. These platforms facilitate users to create, share, and interact with content, information, and other users. Social media platforms are indiscriminate, allowing all subscribers to utilise their facilities equally, resulting in content sharing and interaction across races and geographical boundaries. Young people have seized the potential of social media platforms, improving their skills in content creation and earning income from sharing their content. The potential of social media platforms for entrepreneurship in developing countries comes with the need to address the Social Protection issues that come with this development. Motivated by the need to explore this new phenomenon, the study investigated the existence of social media entrepreneurship in marginalised communities in South Africa and the social protection issues that come with it. This interpretive study interviewed young social media entrepreneurs from marginalised communities in South Africa to confirm the existence of social media entrepreneurship and considered the social protection issues involved. The study applied thematic analysis using Atlas.ti to analyse qualitative data collected from interviews and document analysis. The study confirmed the existence of social media entrepreneurship and its contribution to sustainable development. The findings will contribute to policies on social protection for Social Media content creators in developing countries. The study will also contribute to the development of legal frameworks to protect these marginalised platform workers.

Keywords:

Social Media Entrepreneurship, Sustainable Development, Developing Countries, Economically Marginalised, Content Creators

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Introduction

In recent years, entrepreneurship has been recognised as a driver of economic development for developing countries (Prasetyo & Kistanti, 2020). With the rising unemployment in developing countries, the youth have been found taking advantage of any available resource to venture into entrepreneurship. Social media allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Social media incorporates online platforms, including Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and TikTok (Sarkar, 2023). According to Olanrewaju et al. (2020), social media is a collection of applications based on the Internet and constructed on the technological foundations of Web 2.0. The increase in social media platforms has created entrepreneurial opportunities for youth worldwide, giving birth to the "social media entrepreneurship" concept (Olanrewaju et al., 2020). The rising utilisation of social media platforms has paved the way for new entrepreneurs who capitalise on their online presence, profiting as content creators (Brahem & Boussema, 2022).

Social media technologies have impacted how young people socialise worldwide (Rojas, Moreno & Morales, 2020). Adhikari (2022) asserts that social media has integrated itself into human existence and serves in various forms. With youth unemployment being one of the socioeconomic challenges currently facing developing countries (Sey & Mudongo, 2021), social media is likely to become a resource that some youth could use to support entrepreneurial ventures and alleviate poverty. Many young people use social media to create content and earn money, contributing to economic growth. Goanta's (2021) analysis of content monetisation highlights emerging social media business models that enable content providers to produce cultural content to generate revenue. The disadvantaged communities in developing countries, like South Africa, have not been left out.

Although there is evidence that social media entrepreneurship could alleviate poverty in developing nations, participants in these uncensored ventures still face various challenges. Chavan, Jadhav, and Borkar (2021) identified harassment, password sharing, location-oriented services, data semantics, content control rights, and misleading information as key concerns with Social Media entrepreneurship. Zheng (2023) asserts that in view of these issues, social media corporations have reportedly been pressured to assume more accountability for the welfare of their users.

Whilst the emergence of various social media platforms has resulted in a new generation of entrepreneurs who leverage their online presence to become content creators and generate revenue, the social security issues of participants in this sector have remained unchecked. Social media entrepreneurship evidently supports the attainability of sustainable development goals in developing countries. According to Chavan, Jadhav, and Borkar (2021), social security concerns for players in this sector in developing countries like South Africa remain unaddressed. The complexity of cyberspace remains a privilege for those who dictate the terms (Karjalainen & Kokkonen, 2020). It has become

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necessary for researchers to explore developments in cyberspace, explore social protection issues and raise awareness. The study seeks to contribute by formalising the existence of this sector and examining social protection issues within the sector. This would stimulate the need to regulate social protection for Social Media content creators and contribute to their welfare. Thus, the study aims to explore the contribution of social media entrepreneurship to sustainable development in developing countries.

The objective of this study was to establish the existence of social media entrepreneurship within marginalised communities in South Africa and its contribution of social media entrepreneurship towards sustainable development in South Africa. The study also assessed the existence of Social Protection for social media entrepreneurship in South African Marginalised Communities.

With internet connectivity to access social media platforms, the youth of South Africa have fit into the global space and use their talent to improve their Welfare. Remoteness can no longer be a barrier for communities from developing countries. South Africa is a case study for this research, as youths from rural areas exploit social media opportunities to uplift themselves economically. This, in turn, contributes to accomplishing some sustainable development goals, such as employment creation, gender equality, poverty reduction, economic productivity and equitable wealth distribution. Interviews were conducted to collect data from creators of social media content from marginalised communities in South Africa. South Africa has a background of having been a colony until 1994, and some racial groups have been excluded from the main economic activities until 1994. Marginalised communities in the context of this study refer to those communities that are still struggling to get included in the main economic activities of the country. They are characterised by the prevalence of poverty, lack of employment, and inadequate resources,

Literature Review

This section provides a comprehensive overview of existing literature relevant to the study. The section begins with defining social media, followed by an understanding of social media platforms and the role of social media, and then the contribution of social media to sustainable development. The section will further delve into social media challenges and various revenue streams for content creators. Social Protection issues relevant to the Social Media Entrepreneurship sector are also explored.

According to Olanrewaju et al (2021), social media is a collection of applications based on the Internet and constructed on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0. Some common social media platforms are Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube and LinkedIn. Each platform is used differently by stakeholders globally (Grover et al., 2022). Recent years have seen rapid growth in subscriptions to these platforms (Hoose & Rosenbohm, 2023)

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Social media has become an essential social tool. Social media Platforms have a vast audience, and among their applications are the following: Market for businesses, Communication, entertainment, Community building, Networking, Customer service, Market research, Education, Politics and activism, health awareness and support, Travel and tourism. Social Media content creators use these applications to create content and earn revenue through the various existing revenue models.

Sustainable Development is development that satisfies current demands without jeopardising the capacity of future generations to satisfy their own needs (Halkos & Gkampoura, 2021). According to Perkins, Kurtis, and Velazquez (2022), the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a set of interconnected objectives meant to guide achieving a better and more sustainable future for everyone by 2030. According to Fonseca, Domingues, and Dima (2020), 17 approved sustainable development goals are meant to support operationalising and integrating sustainability into organisations globally. The activities of social media entrepreneurs from marginalised communities directly respond to some of the goals of sustainable development. Such goals include poverty alleviation, gender equality, food security, employment creation, health and well-being, quality education and economic growth.

Salmony & Kanbach, (2021) defined an entrepreneur as a person who identifies a business opportunity, takes the initiative to start a new business and assumes all the financial risks to make a profit. Entrepreneurs contribute to the economic growth of their communities (Salmony & Kanbach,2021). Entrepreneurs must solve prevalent problems for existing products and technology (Pallavi, Ramachandran, & Sivaji, 2022). According to Pallavi et al. (2022), entrepreneurship involves starting a business and taking all responsibility for possible risks. Entrepreneurs bring innovative ideas that open doors to ventures, markets, products, and technology. Social media entrepreneurship involves leveraging social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, LinkedIn, and Twitter to create a business venture. It allows individuals to engage with potential customers, promote products and services, build a brand, and generate income

Based on the various opportunities created by social media, content creators have managed to establish entrepreneurship ventures, resulting in their ability to generate revenue from their activities. Some revenue models involved with Social Media entrepreneurship are sponsored posts, Display Ads, Influencer marketing, video monetisation, online courses, e-books and audiobooks. Limited resources characterise content creators from marginalised communities and may only relate to a few of these models.

The informal nature of this sector results in the lack of social protection structures to guarantee the welfare of social media entrepreneurs. Challenges arising from the lack of social protection in this sector can be classified under mental health and well-being issues (Ghalavand, Panahi, & Sedghi, 2020),

digital inclusion issues (Echezona & Ugwuanyi, 2010), hate speech and radicalisation issues (Chavan, Jadhav & Borkar, 2021).

Social Protection refers to the collection of laws and initiatives designed to shield all individuals, especially the most vulnerable, from poverty, social exclusion, and vulnerability throughout their lives (Masiero, 2020). As per Vujovic, Jonathan & Hacks (2024), social protection falls into three main categories: labour market interventions, which include both contributory and non-contributory schemes that improve employment prospects and offer income support during unemployment; social assistance, which caters to the poorer segments of society; social insurance, which guarantees adequate living standards and requires contributions based on specific eligibility criteria. The cyberspace environment exposes content creators to challenges such as verbal attacks, harassment, supremacist views, and copyright violations (Krishna et al.,2023). The complexity of regulating social media calls for discussions on balancing defending free speech rights and stopping abusive behaviour (Zheng, 2023). In 2022, the UK government unveiled the Online Safety Bill, a legislation designed to safeguard users from harmful information and foster a safer online environment (Krishna et al.,2023; Zheng, 2023). Social protection for social media content creators remains an issue that needs to be explored.

Methods and Data

This section outlines the methodology employed by this study, which investigates social media entrepreneurship in South Africa. This section outlines the context, the research design, the study population and sampling procedure, data collection methods and techniques, and data analysis. It also presents the ethical considerations for the study.

The study was conducted in South Africa, a developing country unique for its blend of an advanced economy and significant developmental challenges. South Africa's population is estimated to have increased to 63,02 million in 2024 (Malherbe et al., 2024). It is a developing country with a relatively advanced economy compared to many other African countries. However, South Africa still faces significant challenges typical of developing countries, including high youth unemployment, poverty, and inequality (Winkler & Black, 2024).

Underpinned by the interpretivism paradigm, this study adopted a qualitative research approach appropriate for exploring complex social phenomena (Junjie & Yingxin, 2022) such as social media entrepreneurship, sustainable development, and social protection in developing countries. South African social media entrepreneurs from marginalised communities, particularly content creators, were interviewed. Participants were purposefully sampled based on their age and activities on social media. The study targeted participants between the ages of 18 and 35 years. The rationale for choosing this age is that the study focuses on youth. South Africa's National Youth Policy and National Youth

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Commission Act of 1996 define the youth as anybody between the ages of 14 and 35 (Bisht & Pattanaik, 2023). Due to ethical considerations, the study targeted youth above the age of 18 years, which is the age of majority in South Africa.

The thematic analysis technique was applied to analyse the collected data. The data was coded to identify principal themes and patterns associated with social media entrepreneurship in developing countries (Lim, 2024). Qualitative data were first transcribed and analysed using Atlas.ti Software version 8. The University of Venda Research Ethics Committee evaluated the study proposal and issued an ethical clearance certificate for the study. Participants' informed consent was secured before data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity of participants' identities were maintained.

Results

Interviews were conducted with fifteen social media content creators, and ATLAS was used to analyse the data using a thematic framework. This section presents the results. According to Qwerty Digital (2017), 15 million people in South Africa make use of social media platforms, which represents a 27% penetration rate of the total population (Budree, 2019). Not all social media subscribers are considered content creators, and there is no specific number for content creators on record. Initially, the study sampled 20 content creators to be interviewed. A total of fifteen participants were successfully interviewed before reaching the saturation point.

Sample Demographics

Table 1 shows that fifteen participants were interviewed. Five participants are in the 18-20-year age group, six participants are in the 21-25-year age group, and four are in the 26-30-year age group. Nine of the interviewees were females and six were males. six of the female participants are married. The findings show a balance between females and males, and both groups dominate content creation via social media platforms. The information provided indicates the number of years these participants have been social media content creators. It shows that eight participants have been creating content for 2 years, four participants have been content creators for 4 years, and three for over four years.

Measure	Item	Number of Participants
Age	18-20	5
	21-25	6
	26-30	4
Gender	Female	9
	Male	6

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Marital Status	Single Married	9 6
Number of years of being a content creator	0-2 2-4 Above 4	8 4 3

Table 1: Interviewee demographics

Social Media Entrepreneurship Existence

The following participant perspectives highlight social media's adaptability and influence in marginalised communities in South Africa. The participants' opinions also demonstrated that social media is a flexible platform that facilitates a range of entrepreneurial endeavours. Revenue generation from social media activities was also mentioned, as illustrated in Figure 1.

*"Social media is a platform where people share their skills, work and where information is found and where content creators create content and earn from it." (*P1)

"It is a platform of entertainment." (P2*)*

"It is a digital platform used to create, share and exchange content and information among people. These platforms enable us to engage with each other." (P3)

"I started off creating content just for fun until I realised that many people were following and gaining interest in my content" (P5)

"*People share experiences through Social Media content*" (P9)

"I get sponsorships, I am an author, and I work directly with authors, so sometimes the authors get tired of writing, so sponsors always come through to motivate them by giving financial support, and apart from sponsorships, I get paid by Facebook, TikTok and Twitter." (P1)

"I get paid on Facebook when I post reels and adverts come in automatically whenever the mini video is playing, after getting many reactions on a picture, as well, I get a bonus once a month from the platform". (P2)

"*More views result in me being paid more*". (P12)

"*I think advertisers on the social media platforms pay some of the revenue that later gets dispatched to us as content creators. I am not sure how the system works, but the platform pays me*" (P15)

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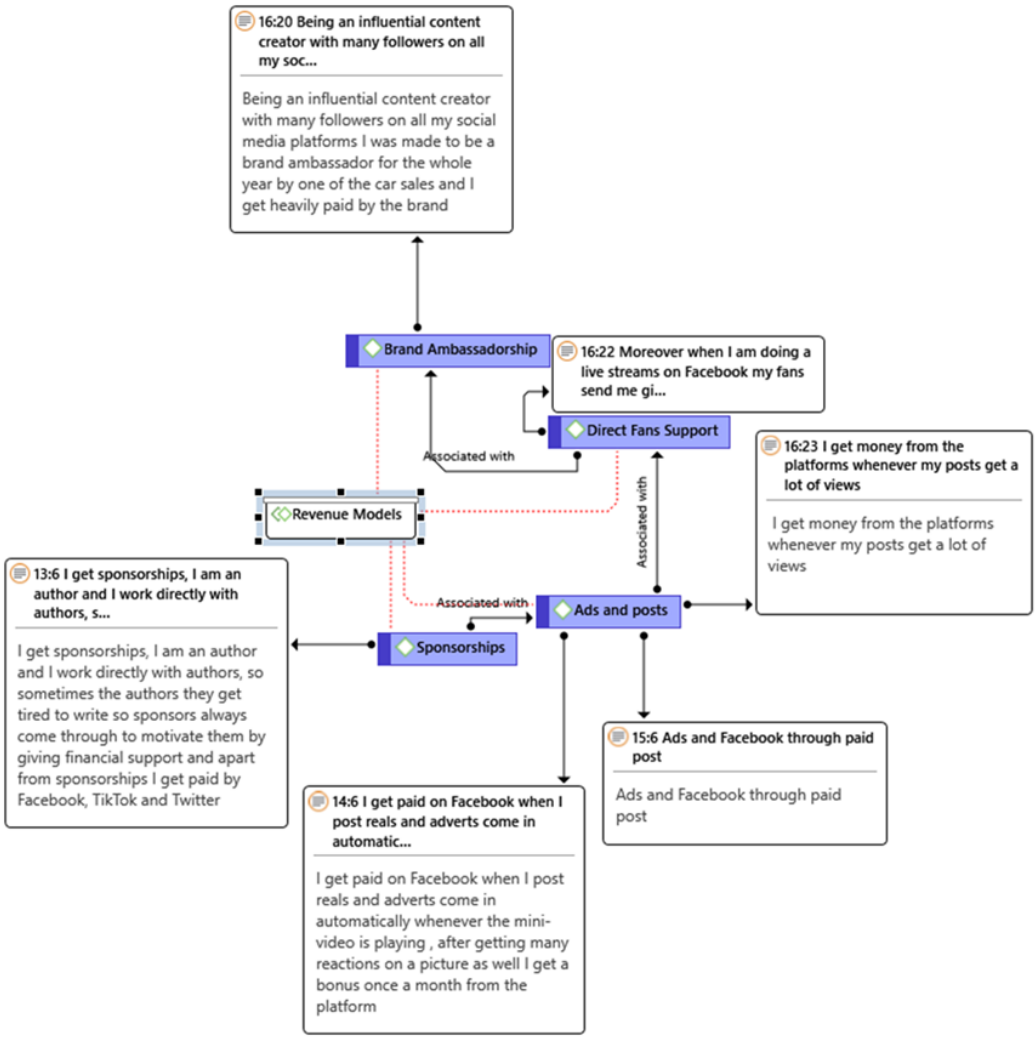

Figure 1: Revenue models for Social Media Entrepreneurship.

Social Media Entrepreneurship and Sustainable Development.

As alluded to by the literature, there is evidence that social media entrepreneurship has the potential to contribute immensely to sustainable development in the marginalised communities of South Africa. Figure 2 illustrates how the views of interviewed content creators support the hypothesis that social media entrepreneurship promotes sustainable development. The following are the views of interviewees in support of that.

"I employed a videographer, logo creator who works under me, and this means I have created employment for someone because I pay him, therefore alleviating poverty." (P1)

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"Content creation gave me financial independence. I am able to feed myself and my family because I have been gaining revenue from social media platforms based on the engagement that I get from every post, and since I am getting paid from it, it means it is contributing to the sustainable development." (P3)

"*We employ other people to facilitate the creation of our content, and we pay other service providers for various services*" (P11)

"*I also leant a lot through content creation*". (P10)

"*Through our content, we also advocate for social good like gender equality and equal rights*". (P7)

"*Some of us came from disadvantaged backgrounds, and with the high levels of unemployment, jobs were not forthcoming. Social media brought some form of employment and allowed us to generate income to feed our families*". (P8)

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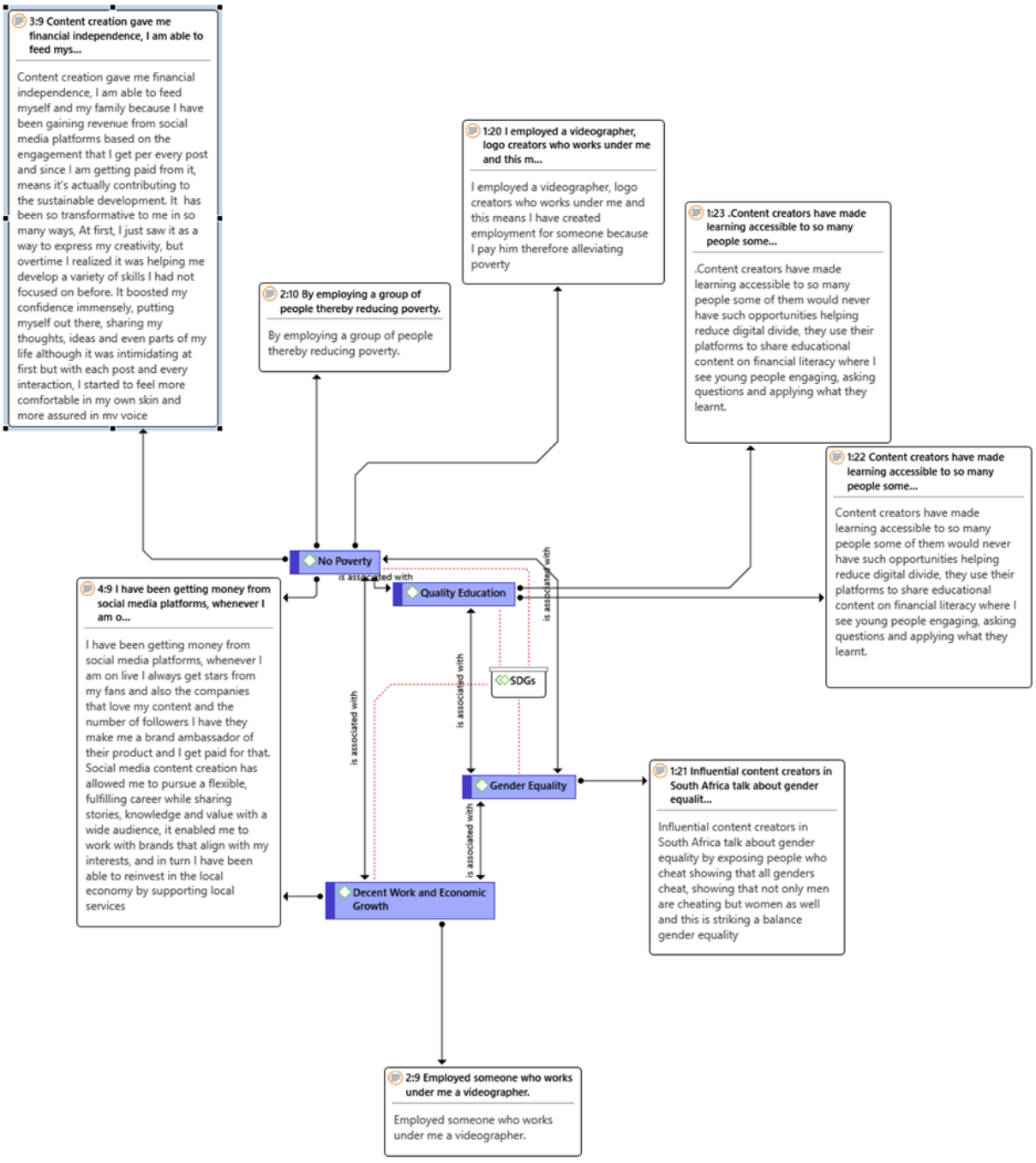

Figure 2: Social Media Entrepreneurship and Sustainable Development

Challenges for Social Media Entrepreneurship

Despite the many benefits of social media entrepreneurship, content creators mentioned some challenges they faced while trying to establish themselves. Some challenges are extracted from transcribed interviews from Participants 1, 5 and 10 below.

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*"There is inconsistent income on social media because I am paid based on how many views I get for every post, if a post has few views, it means I will get less or no money at all, and this is one of the biggest challenges because even if I get sick though sick leave on these platforms, all they want is for us to post content so that they can pay us." (*P1)

"It's very difficult to predict how much you can make in the near future since things can just change. The amount earned is not consistent" (P5)

"Most of us are ignorant about certain legal implications of what we do, and we are always threatened by lawsuits making us to be limited in our creativity in content creation. We are also not affiliated to any board that can give us protection or educate us on our rights". (P10)

Social Protection and Content Creators in South Africa.

This section highlights participants' insights regarding social protection issues in the content creators' sector. Participants commented on current contracts, agreements, and social protection policies. Interviewees were not aware of any social protection measures available in their sector. The following remarks were captured to support this.

"I have never heard about any social protection measures in South Africa ever since I started with content creation; I am self-dependent without any assistance or insurance. I do not have any contract with my platform developers, so there is no provident fund arrangement and any medical aids they offer." (P2)

"I am not aware of any social protection measures in South Africa, personally I do not have any financial assistance or any insurance, I am on my own with no contracts or agreements that allows me to access benefits from developers of Facebook and TikTok." (P3)

"Lack of social protection in the sector is worrying because if one doesn't invest what they earn whilst they are still getting paid, they are not guaranteed of any income in future". (P7)

"There is no financial assistance, health insurance or business support that is available; there are no agreements." (P4)

"*Unlike other workers who can rely on their pensions on retirement, with content creation, there won't be any pension guaranteed. This makes it difficult for many to consider content creation as a lifetime career*." (P11)

"I have no experience of receiving government or institutional support as a content creator." (P1)

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"I have benefited, in my opinion, there is no support because the majority still see social media content creation as a hobby and a place for fun, but we see it as a daily bread, so it's not recognised by the institution." (P3)

"I have no experience of receiving government or institutional support as a content creators, every support is lacking, especially financial support." (P4)

The above views of content creators show no support from the Government and Institutions available for social media content creators in South Africa, meaning that no social protection is provided to content creators. The network diagram in Figure 3 illustrates findings from empirical evidence.

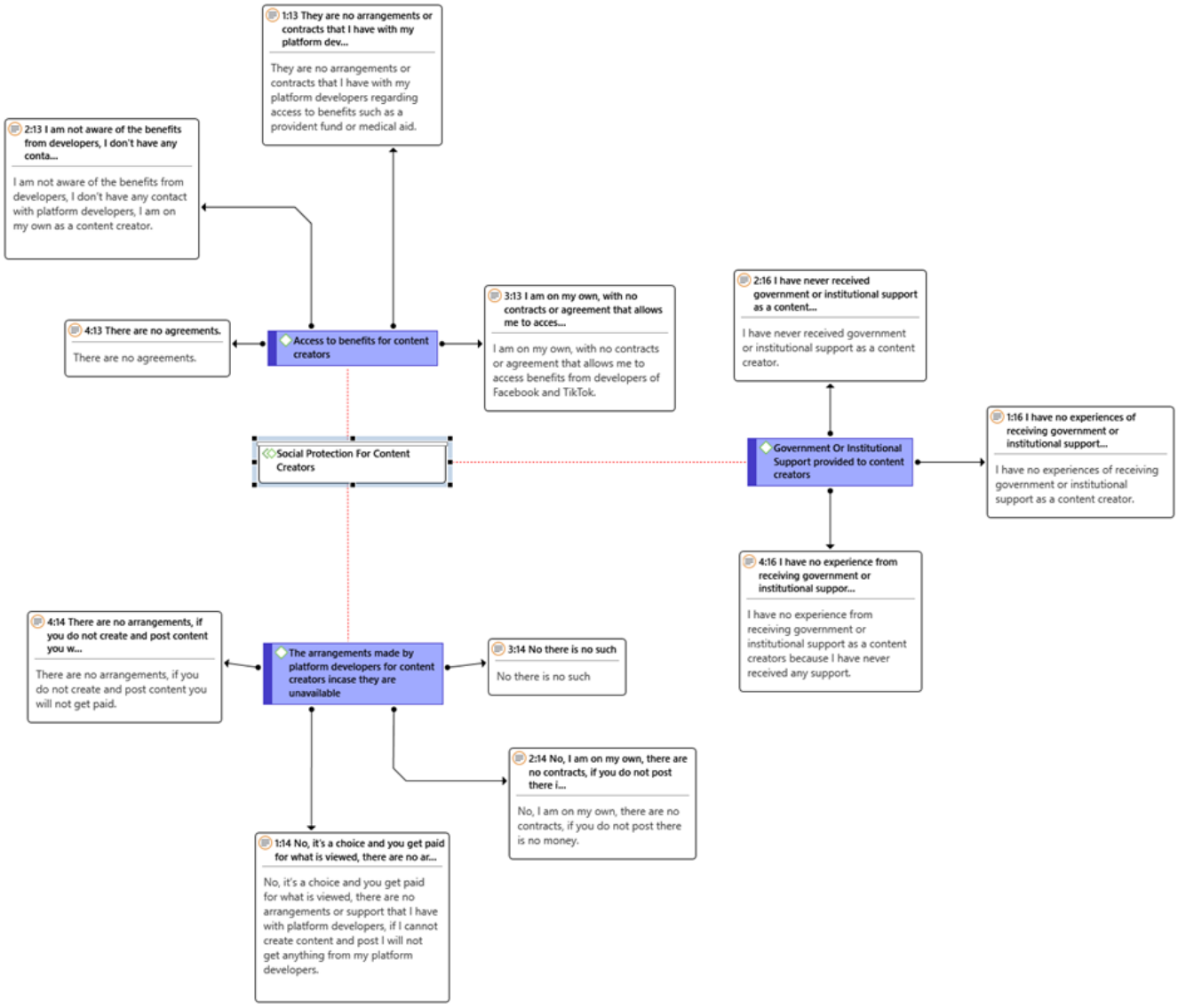

Figure 3: Social Protection Network

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Discussion

The study explored the existence of social media entrepreneurship in developing countries and its contribution to sustainable development. Social Protection Issues in the Social Media Entrepreneurship sector were also analysed. This section concludes the findings of the study by consolidating the literature review findings and empirical evidence.

Existence of Social Media Entrepreneurship

A review of available literature confirms the youth's usage of Social Media platforms for entrepreneurial activities (Troise et al.,2021; Olanrewaju et al., 2021; Grover et al., 2022). Empirical evidence from data collected from marginalised communities in South Africa confirms the above. The youth, including those from marginalised communities in South Africa, are using social media to venture into entrepreneurship. Quoted responses from interviewees revealed the potential of social media activities to generate revenue for social media content creators. Some content creators grow from being local creators to earning big marketing deals with big companies. Their revenue models also transform as they settle for contracts with big enterprises (Lopes & Casais, 2022). Arriagada & Bishop (2021) alluded that recent years have seen the commodification of social media content by influencers and the increase in consumers becoming addicted to social media content, resulting in increased revenue.

Social Media Entrepreneurship and Sustainable Development

The literature revealed that some Sustainable Development Goals are attainable through Social Media Entrepreneurship. All Participants interviewed highlighted a link between Social Media Entrepreneurship and some SDGs. Poverty alleviation, gender equality, food security, employment creation, health and well-being, quality education and economic growth are some of the SDGs supported by social media entrepreneurship (Sey & Mudongo, 2021; Chen et al., 2021; Brahem et al., 2022; Saini et al., 2022; Rachmad, 2024). Social media content creation has become an occupation for some youths in developing countries. Most governments of developing countries are battling with social security for unemployed youths. It comes as a relief when some of the youth venture into content creation and start generating revenue for the welfare of their families. This has an overall effect of alleviating poverty and guaranteeing food security for the community. Activities on social media are independent of the influence of gender.

Social Protection for Social Media Entrepreneurs

Lack of Social Protection for participants within the Social Media entrepreneurship sector in developing countries has been identified as a challenge. Empirical evidence from marginalised communities in South Africa also indicates the need for Social Protection Issues to be addressed within this sector.

Diakonidze (2022) alluded to social protection being a contentious issue for gig workers with no purposeful contracts that protect the rights of these workers globally. Content creators from marginalised developing countries are also not spared. Many of them lack the support to sustain their activities within the sector and to guarantee their welfare upon retiring.

Conclusion

The main objective of this study was to confirm the existence of social media entrepreneurship in marginalised communities in developing countries. The study also evaluated the contribution of social media entrepreneurship to sustainable development and the need for social protection for these social media entrepreneurs.

Based on the findings from empirical evidence and literature review, the study confirms the following:

- Social media entrepreneurship is rising amongst youth in developing countries like South Africa and should be recognised and supported.
- Social media entrepreneurship contributes to the goals for sustainable development.
- Social Protection for social media entrepreneurs is lacking, and there is a need for responsible authorities in developing countries to come up with strategies to address this.

Based on the confirmed findings, the study establishes the following suggestions:

- Frameworks should be established to guide the adoption of Social Media Platforms as a resource for entrepreneurship.
- Social media entrepreneurship should be recognised and supported as an occupation.
- Structures should be established to regulate Social Protection amongst the content creators for their benefit.

Future studies may target the development of the Social Media Entrepreneurship adoption frameworks and the social media Social Protection frameworks. Without proper Social Protection, the marginalised communities from developing countries might not be able to benefit from their efforts as content creators.

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