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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE DETERMINANTS OF THE INTEGRATION OF ESG CONSIDERATIONS BY FREELANCERS: AN EVIDENCE FROM SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA FREELANCERS

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, a new trend is being observed in the job market. That of people who take advantage of the contribution of ICT in the development of organizational solutions both remotely and on site. These are freelance workers whose activities continue to grow in the African context, where we witness high unemployment rates and high cost of living. This situation has led to deep changes in the workforce structure of many companies, as all tasks are no longer necessarily carried out within companies, but rather outsourced to specialists who operate at different levels of efficiency. It now happens that firms outsourcing tasks may require much more from these specialists, or some of these specialists might integrate more than their specialism in providing their services. This research article therefore analyzes the hypotheses of the role of freelance individual characteristics and business components in the integration of ESG considerations by freelancers. A questionnaire made it possible to collect data from 198 freelancers. Excel, SPSS and Smart PLS softwares made it possible to analyze our data. The structural equations to which we came at depict a positive contribution of individual characteristics and contextual variables to the implementation of ESG pillars by freelancers. More so, the results depict the positive intermediate role of clients and online labor platforms.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a new trend is being observed in the sub-Saharan Africa job market, that of people who take advantage of the contribution of ICT to develop organizational solutions both remotely and on site. These are freelance workers whose activities continue to grow in the African context, where we witness high unemployment rates and high cost of living. This situation has led to deep changes in the workforce structure of many companies worldwide, as all tasks are no longer necessarily carried out within companies, but rather, outsourced to specialists who operate at different levels of efficiency. The number of actors of the gig economy has been rising over the years. As mentioned by Karlsson K. & Wranne J. (2019), *this growth is driven by technological advancements, changing work values and an overall need to adapt to a high-change environment*. The motivational factors of freelancers can be assimilated to those of entrepreneurs, which can lead to confusion. The main reason being that, per definition, entrepreneurs are not short-term oriented as freelancers are. The latter are generally short-term interventions which, for the most part, are not even comparable to fixed-term contracts. However, the idea is not to compare these two types of business ventures, but to look into the motivational factors that could push freelancers to integrate corporate social responsibility considerations in their way of operating. More and more of us are aware of sustainable development and the social issues it raises. At a personal level, each of us is in a position to take his/her own responsibilities, but at a professional level, the question is becoming increasingly acute, especially for freelancers. The question that arises is fundamentally related to the explanatory factors for integrating ESG considerations in freelance work. Among the many possible solutions, the one that is subject to this study relates to the integration of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the freelance activity. Therefore, do Sub-Sahara African freelancers integrate ESG considerations while running their activities? And which factors best explain the integration of ESG considerations by freelancers? To provide answers to this question, the theoretical framework of this research consists of coming out with the necessity of ESG for freelance work, and a theoretical link of these two concepts under the effigy of the regulatory framework, freelance clients and online labor platforms. On the empirical side, a quantitative study with multiple field African freelancers made it possible to verify the research hypotheses; the results obtained are then discussed.

Necessity of ESG criteria for freelance: a theoretical framework

Conceptual review of freelance and corporate social responsibility: It's clear that bringing freelance work and ESG closer together can be pragmatically utopian. However, such a rapprochement could be promising in terms of the sustainability of freelancers, but above all, in terms of

widening the scope of their activities at the international level. Far from making this connection, the aim of this sub-section is to clarify these two concepts.

Freelance work in Sub-Saharan Africa: some details: Over the past two decades, the development of information and communication technologies has fostered the emergence of new professional models and the revision of work organization methods within organizations. Digital technologies have favored the dematerialization of work and its fragmentation into multiple and varied tasks. According to Hudek et al. (2021), this situation has favored the emergence of more mobile and self-determined individuals as per the meaning to be given to their career. We are therefore witnessing a progressive domination of the collaborative approach of human resources, over the traditional career approach characterized by hierarchical advancement. Freelance work refers to any activity carried out by an independent professional. Some freelance activities are becoming real job-promoting companies; others, on the other hand, prefer to remain in the state of an individual society for reasons which can be subject to in-depth empirical studies. In general, companies increasingly resort to self-employed workers for several reasons, among others, because they are less expensive than hiring an employee, and also because they make it possible to adapt skills depending on each project.

Towards sustainable business practices by entrepreneurs: Sustainable business practices by entrepreneurs merely implies entrepreneurs to embark on sustainable ventures. According to Wolk (2008), these are ventures that combine business principles with a passion for social impact. Business main objectives are not just profit-oriented. Actors of such business ventures, the so-called "social entrepreneurs", strive to create social values as well as economic values. For Swanson and Zang (2011), social entrepreneurship refers to the degrees to which entrepreneurs apply business practices to implement social changes. Engaging in entrepreneurial activities with social objectives is nowadays not strange in industrialized countries and in most developing countries. This situation is also gaining grounds in African countries, but not as much as it should. According to Rivera-Santos M. et al. (2012), there are four predominant African contextual dimensions that influence the way social ventures perceive themselves and on their choice of activities. Their empirical study of 384 social enterprises from 19 sub-Saharan African countries suggests that ethnic group identity and acute poverty levels influence both self-perception and activity choices, the country's colonial history influences only self-perception, and informality has no significant influence on either. Therefore, there are contextual realities to integrate when studying sustainable business practices in the context of African countries in general, and sub Saharan African countries in particular. Based on such a complex situation imposed by contextual realities, the question is on how to consider social entrepreneurship. Is it a voluntary behavior or constraint? Be it commercial or legal constraint. Such a complex situation made Zahra S. A. & Wright M. (2016) to raise the idea of the social role of entrepreneurship. They see entrepreneurship as the engine of technological, economic and social growth. How then can a freelancer cope with ESG questions in a theoretical point of view?

Freelancing and ESG: searching for a relationship: According to Elouidani & al. (2022), sustainable investing simply entails taking into account environmental, social and governance criteria in investment decision-making. How to go about it in a context of precariousness of the labor market, characterized by a boom of fixed-term contracts, and the continuous growth of the unemployment rate. We start this sub-section by showing why it is important for a freelance to take into account ESG values; we then proceed by depicting how freelancers can cope with ESG pillars.

A theoretical look at the importance of ESG considerations for freelancers: Given the large scope of ESG considerations, it's not surprising that freelancers find themselves concerned by these practices. Beyond one's personal convictions, a freelancer might have several good reasons to integrate ESG considerations. First and famous is the economic reason, for ESG factors optimize business expenses. Another crucial reason is that of brand image and reputation. ESG factors are important to all profit-making organizations in the sense that they help them improve brand image (Béji-Bécheur A., 2014) and guarantee reputational risk coverage (Orlitzky et Benjamin, 2001). The table below summarizes the reasons for a freelancer to be socially and environmentally responsible:

Table 1. Freelance work and ESG criteria

Environnemental pillar	Societal pillar	Governance pillar
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reducing paper and ink consumption; Choice of eco-responsible equipment (e.g. laptops rather than fixed computers, quick standby mode); Limiting energy consumption (lighting, heating, air conditioning); Reducing consumption of disposable products (e.g. reusable mugs rather than plastic cups); Opt for search engines that promote sustainable development (Ecosia, Lilo, Ecogine, etc.); 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Freelancing promotes spin-offs; Empowering young people; Bypassing burnouts; Work from home with complete freedom; Satisfies several business partners; Increases tax base; The freelancer is a source of motivation for young people eager to "get started"; Develops cooperative and mutual networks; Source of job creation; Dematerialization of services; Employability of disadvantaged people (women, the disabled, etc.): IT sector; Offers the possibility of doing what you've always wanted to do (self-accomplishment); Income commensurate with experience; Getting self-employed ; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Be your own boss; Manage your own project; Can choose which missions to carry out oneself and outsource others; Single shareholder ; Unemployment reduction (people getting self employed); No board of directors or red tape; Autonomy at all levels

Source: A synthesis of an opened gray literature review

ESG factors serve freelancers as a tool of innovation. Mokhtari B. and Asdiou A. (2016) underline that ESG considerations help observe and adopt new ways of acting, working and communicating. It helps mobilize customers and partners around a common cause while differentiating from competitors. Above all, being ESG contributes to the development of the local economy, to the respect of people and the environment. Therefore, the concern is no more on why freelancers should integrate ESG considerations, but how they should do it and what main determinants drive these considerations.

Theoretically envisaging the explanatory factors of ESG practices by freelancers: An empirical survey carried out by Anteby M. et al. (2005) in USA alongside with many freelancers, depicts that most of the freelancers (85 %) have at least a college degree, but less than 30 % of the prospected freelancers spent the year before without health insurance. More so, less than half of them save money each month for work retirement. Based on such a situation, if they don't care much about themselves, what could push them take care of the society and the

environment? As a matter of fact, organizations are facing one of the most critical challenges of the 21st century. These challenges focus on the moral dilemma posed by digital platforms and their disregard for ethical and moral considerations by obfuscating national legal frameworks that govern labor rights and protections. As technological advances create a new concern about how companies should be regulated, a new principles-based approach is needed to promote responsible corporate behavior. This holds for independent workers like freelancers. We have therefore employed the notion of “freelance activism” to describe this situation. We now look at what might create such a behavior in freelancers in terms of human capital, business components, corporate clients and intermediaries.

Human capital and freelance activism: Understanding human capital has become a major preoccupation for researchers and practitioners alike, the major concern being that of the impact of such a capital on a company's competitiveness and performance. Human capital brings together all the individual capabilities knowledge, talent and experience of the company's employees and managers. According to Boussadi Abdellah (2018), the importance of human capital in creating value in the knowledge-based economy cannot be overlooked. Based on the poor literature background of freelance activism being dependent on some human capital indicators, we believe that some of these indicators might explain why freelancers will integrate ESG considerations while operating in their business environment. Liu G. and Fraumeni B. M. (2020) classified these indicators as monetary measures and index-based measures based on an overall survey carried out in many countries worldwide. Inspired from this classification and based on a sub-regional perspective, the following measures of human capital are envisaged as theoretical factors that might play a role in making freelancers to integrate ESG considerations: gender, age, education, skills, experience, IT literacy (Bidi G. et Feige J., 2018; Cherkaoui 2016). These indicators are thus mobilized to appreciate the possible contribution of human capital to the integration of ESG considerations by freelancers. Besides human capital, business components can also play a role in making freelancers to be socially and environmentally sensitive.

Business components and freelance activism: More than just being free, freelancing means being responsible. Responsible for your time, responsible for finding clients, responsible for the good management of your business, but also responsible for your choices. And that includes deciding how and with whom to work. In this perspective, some freelancers choose to work only with clients who correspond to their values or who are themselves committed to a cause (Rachel P., 2019). Some, for example, choose to offer their services to a particular type of organizations (public companies, NGOs, very small enterprises, and the like). As well as working in accordance with their own principles, freelancers who only target a certain type of customer can fine-tune their offering to suit their specific needs and benefit from niche effects. In addition to their main activity, freelancers can offer an association their skills, a bit of their time (professional project) and/or their visibility. The benefits to the association are clear: they can take advantage of a service they can't afford and/or benefit from the extensive network that all good freelancers maintain. According to Rachel P. (2019), there's another key for freelancers who want to improve the world around them: supporting their peers (those in the same activity, but also all the other freelancers). She underlines that there's a lot of fun being such an actor:

Start by responding online solicitations, taking 15-30 minutes to reply to a fellow member who has questions about the profession or self-employed status;

Go further and take advantage of the networks to create an exchange group where it is possible to share questions;

Take part to events, or even organize them if demand is not enough in the domain of the freelancer;

Run workshops. The “meet up” app can be used to best organize and manage communication;

Interact with schools to inform the next generation and give them a concrete view of the world of work and its infinite possibilities;

Write articles. Don't have the time or don't feel like having your own blog? You can become a contributor to other blogs or share your articles on Medium;

Join or create a freelance society in your field of activity.

Freelance customers and freelance activism: beyond commercial friendship: One can attribute the rapid growth of freelancing and freelancers to two factors: advances in technology that have led to the development of online labor and service-based platforms that allow for the execution of online contracts (Katz and Krueger 2017); and the COVID-19 pandemic, which appears to have led to an exponential growth in virtual work and freelancing (Dunn et al. 2020; Sawyer et al. 2020). But the question is still on whether or not, freelancers' clients can play a role in making freelancers to integrate ESG considerations. In a recent empirical study of the influential factors of hiring freelancers, Ren J. al. (2023) studied the role of three key factors: country of residence, amount earned and duration on online labor platforms. They took societal and environmental variables for granted. They found that two of these three factors played a significant role when hiring a freelance, namely the country of residence and duration on online labor platforms. Zadik Y. et al. (2019) took a sound empirical study of the criteria on which management rely when selecting a freelance. They carried out two studies, the first being a quantitative study and the second, a qualitative study to deeper the findings of the first study. One of the main findings of the first study is that, the greater the perceived expertise level of a freelancer, the higher the readiness to hire the candidate. As for the second study, the content analysis revealed three main themes (and 15 total subthemes). The main themes are personal characteristics, work-relevant characteristics and same characteristics as relevant employees. The results reveal that the characteristics that came first are the personal ones. But what was unexpected and surprising is that the first subtheme is “*responsibility, reliability and integrity*”; the second subtheme is “*Adjustability, adaptability, and integrability (to an organization/system)*”. These results urge freelancers to be flexible (adaptability) and not only profit oriented (responsibility). In other words, clients might play a role in making freelancers to adopt socially responsible behavior. This situation will be deeply studied in the empirical stage of this work.

Intermediaries and freelance activism: Despite the arguments for and against hiring freelancers, in recent years, a new breed of talented freelancers ('talents') has emerged, also referred to as "knowledge workers" (Davenport, 2013). They are highly skilled and specialized human capital who often earn significantly more than equivalent full-time employees. These top freelancers are involved in projects that require innovation, strategy, change management and technological development (Burke & al., 2008). It is very difficult to get in touch to them at first glance. Only intermediaries might play a vital role to bring freelancers and their clients together. However, when there exists sufficient trust in the “freelancer-customer” relationship, there exists a high risk for intermediaries to be circumvented. But the concern here is not disintermediation, but the role intermediaries could play in making freelancers to adopt ESG behavior. In fact, most of the time, these intermediaries are nowadays, the so called *online labor platforms*. These platforms have witnessed an accelerated increase in their activities (Ren J. et al., 2023), due to a disproportionate increase in the number of actors of the gig economy. These platforms make it possible to disperse transactions and tasks geographically. They also offer opportunities to access a pool of jobs, leading to an increase in the number of self-employed workers (Gawer A., 2022). Intermediaries mitigate some of the historical challenges of the traditional work environment, such as location, cost, unavailability of skills, lack of diversity and restricted movement of workers. By overcoming some of these challenges, online intermediaries reduce the asymmetry that came to be because of inequalities in the market. Therefore, as mentioned by Borchert et al. (2018),

intermediaries' overall effect is positive, with improved economic conditions, poverty alleviation and improvements in the quality of life. Above all, these intermediaries consider freelancers as real business ventures and therefore bring them together with clients on a B2B perspective. In other words, they require freelancers to register as real businesses and to disclose their activities as such. Above all, these freelancers, through a unique identifier number, might have to pay their taxes in due form. Henceforth, intermediaries portray clients by sharing their requirements with freelancers. Among these requirements, one might identify some ESG requirements; and freelancers who want to embark on the venture must cope with it.

The theoretical role of the regulatory framework: Admittedly, ESG considerations remain within the realm of voluntary initiatives and flexible legislation, but it is evolving towards a much more comprehensive regulatory and legislative framework, due to four major areas: climate, the circular economy, mobility and extra-financial reporting. For instance, as far as the latter is concerned, the 35th appendix note of the 2018 revised OHADA accounting framework urges companies to adopt and practice extra financial reporting on their end-of-year annual reports. And this is applicable to enterprises from all member-states. More so, all these countries adopted the OECD "polluter pays" principle. Also known as the "disrupter pays" principle, this principle means that the costs of pollution prevention, reduction and control measures are borne by those who cause them. As a result, companies are somehow inclined to comply with this principle. Based on all the theoretical developments above, we can frame the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Freelance human capital plays a vital role in the integration of ESG considerations by freelancers

- Sub hypothesis 1.1: The regulatory framework fosters the contribution of human capital to the integration of ESG considerations;
- Sub hypothesis 1.2: Freelance customers can play a role in making freelance human capital to be ESG-oriented;
- Sub hypothesis 1.3: Intermediaries play a role in the relationship between freelance human capital and the integration of ESG considerations.

Hypothesis 2: Freelance business variables play a vital role in the integration of ESG considerations by freelancers.

- Sub hypothesis 2.1: The regulatory framework makes business components contribute to the integration of ESG considerations by freelancers;
- Sub hypothesis 2.2: Freelance customers cause business components to integrate ESG considerations;
- Sub hypothesis 2.3: Intermediaries play a role in the contribution of business components to the integration of ESG considerations.

As shown in the figure below, these hypotheses will be tested under the moderating effect of clients on one side and intermediaries on the other side.

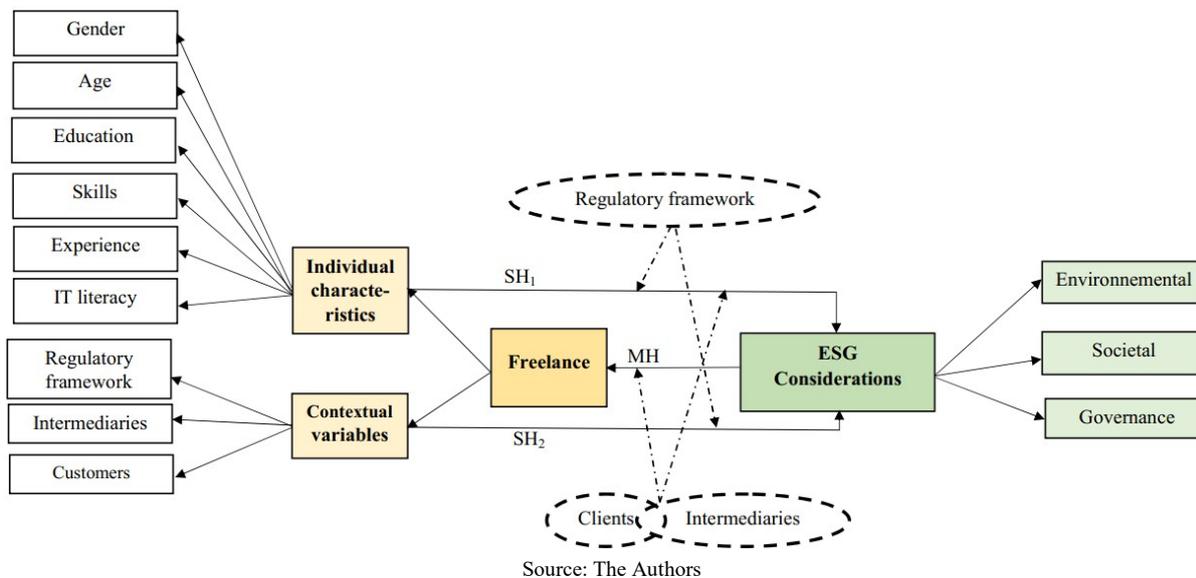


Figure 1. Mutualizing the contributions between freelance and ESG: the intermediary role of ITC

The verification of the above stated hypotheses require a sound methodological approach, clearly stated and in line with the research questions and objectives.

METHODOLOGY

This research article mainly seeks to determine whether freelancers from sub-Sahara African countries integrate ESG considerations while operating and identify the most important determinants for integrating such considerations. We therefore have to get in touch with a large number of freelancers to investigate on these issues. We are therefore going to rely on the quantitative methodological approach for collecting and analyzing our data. This approach is reinforced by the idea of hypotheses testing. Before presenting the method of investigation and the data analysis techniques, it is crucial to present the situation of independent labor market in the low- and middle-income countries.

Background to the study area: Self-employment in low and middle income countries (LMICs): The incidence of self-employment is reversely linked to the level of a country's per capita income. In LMICs, a majority of the economically active population is self-employed (Gindling and Newhouse, 2014). There is a high propensity for men to embark on self-employment than for women. The proportion of self-employed increases with age up to the age of 40 years, then stabilizes and starts to decline after this age. Fields (2014) found that, in LMICs, self-employment is often synonymous with low-paid work in the informal sector and limited access to social protection or coverage schemes. Most of the self-employment activities carried out in LMICs "are not productive and generate only low incomes, as a result of which many of these workers and their families remain in poverty" (World Bank, 2012). The other aspect of the problem is that, incentives to be self-employed are obviously high where the possibilities of salaried employment are limited, as is the case in low-income countries.

We therefore expect to collect data from many freelancers as possible so as explore the situation in Sub-Sahara Africa.

Methods of data collection and data analysis: As seen at the end of the theoretical part of this article, there are hypotheses that we intend to verify. As such, we intend to tackle a large number of freelancers across the six countries of the CEMAC region using online techniques, especially a google form throughout various networks. Given the impossibility to physically get in touch with the expected freelancers, the most suitable method is the quantitative method. The most suitable tool for data collection being the questionnaire. The questionnaire that we administered was built based on the operationalization of our variables.

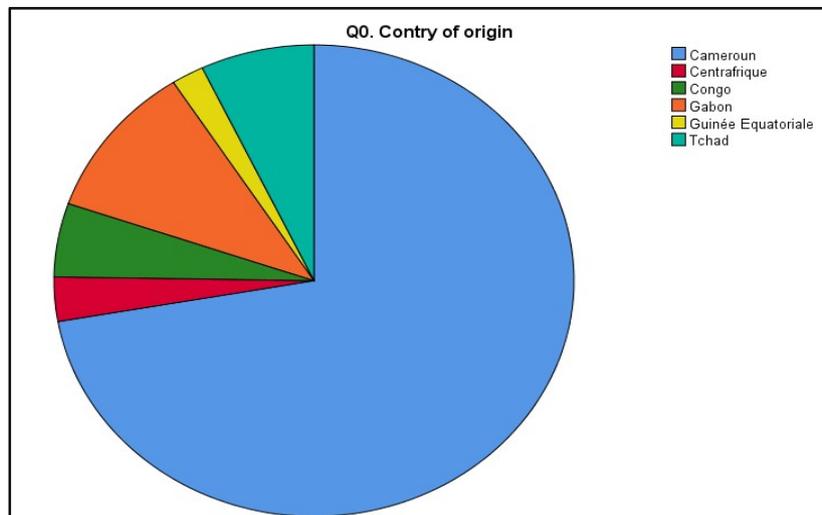
Model variables: Based on our research objectives and hypotheses, the variable being explained here is the integration of ESG considerations. We consider it to be our dependent variable, while freelance stands for our independent variable. The moderators being “the regulatory framework”, “freelancers’ clients” and “intermediaries”. The table below depicts a granular look at these variables.

Table 2. Operationalization of variables

Main drive	Hypotheses	Variables		Indicators
		Nature	Title	
<i>There exist socially responsible freelancers</i>	<i>Freelance individual characteristics play a vital role in the integration of ESG considerations by freelancers</i>	Independent	Human capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender & Age; • Education & Skills; • Experience; • IT literacy
		Dependent	ESG considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental; • Ethical & legal; • Philanthropic; • Governance;
		Moderator	Regulatory framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Align to norms; • Payment of taxes; • Possess a UIN;
	Clients		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clients Impose ESG; • Team work; • Familiar to clients; • Conform to clients; 	
	<i>Freelance contextual variables play a vital role in the integration of ESG considerations by freelancers</i>	Independent	Intermediaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trade unions; • Conformity; • Require ESG;
			Business components	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professionalism; • Reactiveness; • Diversified portfolio; • Workshops; • Team work;
Dependent		ESG considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental; • Ethical & legal; • Philanthropic; • Governance; 	

Source: The Authors

A questionnaire was built based on the above table. The questionnaire’s main topics are taken from the “title” sub-column of the operationalization table. The questionnaire is made up of 47 questions making it possible to capture the independent and the dependent variables, as well as the various moderators. The online administration technique made it possible to tackle more than a hundred of freelancers from three countries out of the six countries we expected. The expected countries were the six countries of the CEMAC region, namely: Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, the Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon. A first look at the countries whose freelancers responded to the questionnaire is given below:



Source: The authors

Figure 2. Respondents' country of origin

A look at the figure above shows that within the CEMAC region, most of the freelancers who responded to the questionnaire are from Cameroon. Indeed, 72.20 % of them are from Cameroon, seconded by Gabon which depicts a percentage of 10.60 % of freelancers. This situation could be explained by the extent to which the population of these countries is acquainted to information technologies, because we proceeded by an online administration of the questionnaires given the time and the means necessary for a physical or hardcopy administration. Though the facilities to invade these countries online, we witness a low response percentage from African Central Republic (3.0 %), Congo (5,10%), Equatorial Guinea (2.0 %) and Chad (7.10 %). The information collected with the questionnaire were then analyzed with specific tools and techniques that we present in the next paragraph.

Methods and tools of data analysis: After the data were collected, we had to go through numerous data analysis techniques to come out with the results. The techniques involve longitudinal analyses, principal component analyses and simultaneous regression analyses. The table below depicts the resume of the various techniques employed for the purpose of our data analyses and the tools used:

Table 3. Tools and techniques for hypotheses testing

Purpose of analysis	Techniques	Tools
Describe freelance activities	Longitudinal analysis	SPSS
Extract the most important items	Principal Component Analyses	Excel, SmartPLS
Test of hypotheses	Structural Equations Modeling	

Source: The authors

The starting point of our data analysis consists of describing the freelancers in general. Their main drives and the nature of their activities; whether they operate as formal or informal business ventures. The next point consists of bringing freelancing and ESG considerations to find out whether the freelancers reconcile with such considerations. These two points will help us come out with our results.

RESULTS

Socio-professional characteristics of freelancers: Some characteristics of freelancers might help best understand their integration or not, of ESG pillars to their activities. Some of them include the type of training, certifications, their ability to satisfy many clients simultaneously and respect deadlines, the possession of a Unique Identifier Number, their membership to freelancers' groups, the organization of workshops and the knowledge of corporate social responsibility. Some of these issues are addressed here under.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Professional	99	50,0	50,0	50,0
Academic	54	27,3	27,3	77,3
Professional & Academic	45	22,7	22,7	100,0
Total	198	100,0	100,0	

Based on the table above, most of the freelancers are vocational professionals. At least 50 % of them have undergone a professional training program; while more than 22 % have both academic and professional training backgrounds. This might serve as a proof of their ability to provide satisfaction to their customers. Nevertheless, this is not to say academicians aren't up to the task. Because, a sound alternative to professional training is to undergo some certification programs.

Table 5. Holder of one or more certifications

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	128	64,6	64,6
	No	70	35,4	100,0
	Total	198	100,0	100,0

As a matter of fact, almost 65 % of the freelancers have gone through a certifying program to make them competitive at all scopes, as many of them might have to tackle the international market. And at such a level, it is always good to have certificates depicting their propensity to cope with international clients. Those who have not yet aligned themselves (35,40 %) should follow suit.

Table 6. Holder of a Unique Identifier Number (UIN)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	128	64,6	64,6
	No	70	35,4	100,0
	Total	198	100,0	100,0

What seems impressive here is the fact that almost 65 % of our respondents have a unique identifier number, while only 35,40 % of them are still operating on the dark. This situation is quite to appreciate, since in the past, there has been a high tendency for freelancers to operate in the dark. They are therefore increasingly getting conscious of the need to operate as formal freelancers.

Table 7. Respect contracts' deadlines

Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent	
Always	106	53,5	53,5	53,5
Frequently	69	34,8	34,8	88,4
Rarely	5	2,5	2,5	90,9
Never	18	9,1	9,1	100,0
Total	198	100,0	100,0	

More satisfactorily, above 88 % of our respondents frequently respect the contracts deadlines with their clients. This sounds good for professionalism. Whatever the reasons, those, it is important for those who don't do so to follow suit.

Table 8. Membership to a freelance group

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	29	14,6	14,6	14,6
	No	169	85,4	85,4	100,0
	Total	198	100,0	100,0	

However, the alarming fact is that of the poor belonging of prospected freelancers to a freelance group. Most of them (more than 85 %) still operate on their own without belonging to a freelance platform. The reasons for this situation are still to be discovered. This surely explains why they rarely organize workshops.

Table 9. Knowledge of CSR

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	68	34,3	34,3	34,3
	Fairly	82	41,4	41,4	75,8
	No	48	24,2	24,2	100,0
	Total	198	100,0	100,0	

As far as CSR is concerned, even if almost 76 % of the respondents have already heard about it, one can still deplore the fact that up to 24,20 % are not aware of it. This situation gives all it senses to our hypotheses, insofar as, we are to discover what might cause a freelancer to think about and integrate ESG pillars why operating as a freelancer.

Hypotheses testing: Before any verification of hypothesis, it is of the utmost importance to check the overall reliability of our variables. This has been done by calculating the overall Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. The result is provided below:

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.898	46

Source: The authors

As seen in the table above, the reliability coefficient of all the 46 variables of our data base is 0.896, far beyond the required level of 0.5. As such our data base variables are highly reliable for the purpose of the analyses. In other words, there is no outlier to remove from the data base before proceeding to the verification of our hypotheses. It is worth mentioning that the main hypotheses of this article state that freelance human capital on one hand and freelance business variables on the other hand play a vital role in the integration of ESG considerations by freelancers. The verification of these hypotheses is done with integration of moderators. The idea is to appreciate the role of these moderators in the integration of ESG considerations by freelancers.

ESG pillars and freelance human capital: The main drive here is to test the first hypothesis which foresees a vital role of freelance human capital on the integration of ESG considerations. We first check this relationship without integrating moderators. Afterwards, we introduce moderators. The empirical models below are the final ones, after confirmatory principal component analyses are performed, that is, after the removal of outliers.

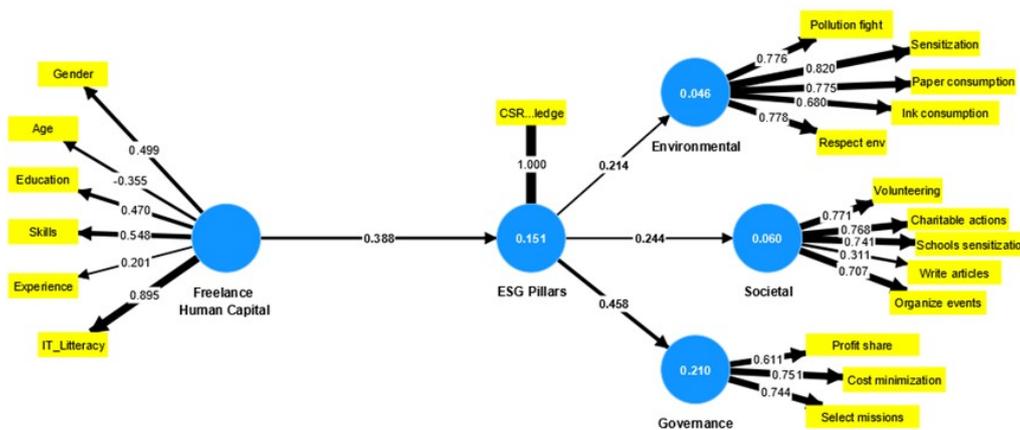


Figure 3. Freelance human capital and ESG considerations: looking at the direct effect

A look at the figure above shows that freelance human capital has a positive but fair effect on the integration of ESG considerations by freelancers (provided by a weak path coefficient of 0,388). Among the human capital indicators that boost the integration of ESG considerations, IT literacy plays a major role. Followed by freelancers' skills, gender and level of education. More so, the ESG pillar influenced more than the others is governance (provided with a path coefficient of 0,458). Given this low contribution of freelance human capital to the integration of ESG pillars, we pushed the analysis forward by introducing moderators to see if this influence could grow further or lower in presence of intermediate variables. First is the role of the regulatory framework. The figure above shows that the regulatory framework slopes down the effect of freelance human capital on ESG pillars from 0,388 to 0,332. This is statistically explained with a very poor and insignificant slope of the regulatory framework on the studied link (coefficient path of 0,006).

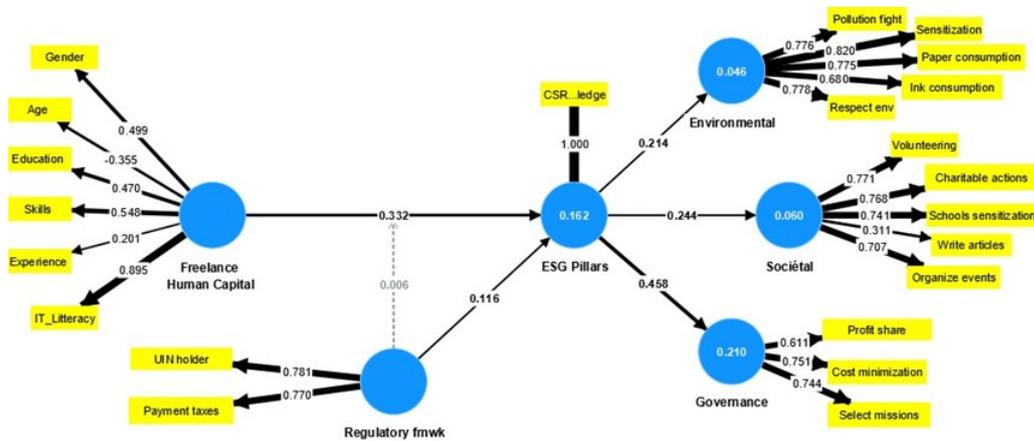


Figure 4. Freelance human capital and ESG considerations: the role of the regulatory framework

What seems interesting however is the direct effect of the regulatory framework on the integration of ESG pillars (path coefficient of 0,116), but the overall effect remains poor based on an adjusted coefficient of determination still below average (Adjusted R-Squared of 0,162).

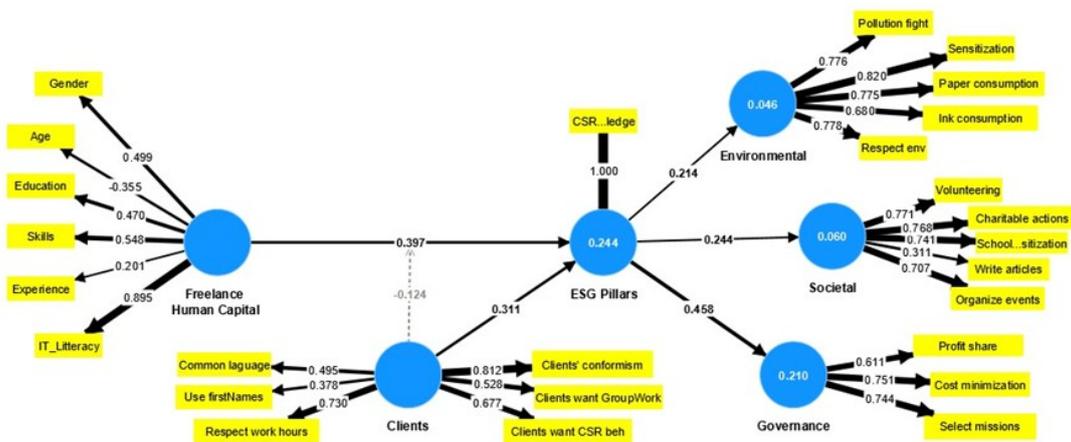


Figure 5. Freelance human capital and ESG considerations: the role of freelance customers

Unlike the regulatory framework, clients boost the contribution of freelance human capital to the integration of ESG considerations. This statistically explained by a positive increase of the path coefficient from 0,388 to 0,397 and a direct effect of 0,311. This contribution of clients is seen by freelancers as a kind of pressure or constraint depicted by a negative moderating coefficient of -0,124. Meaning that some clients impose environmental, societal and governance issues on freelancers. Above all, the coefficient of determination grows up from 0,151 to 0,244; confirming the positive role of clients on the implementation of ESG pillars by freelance human capital.

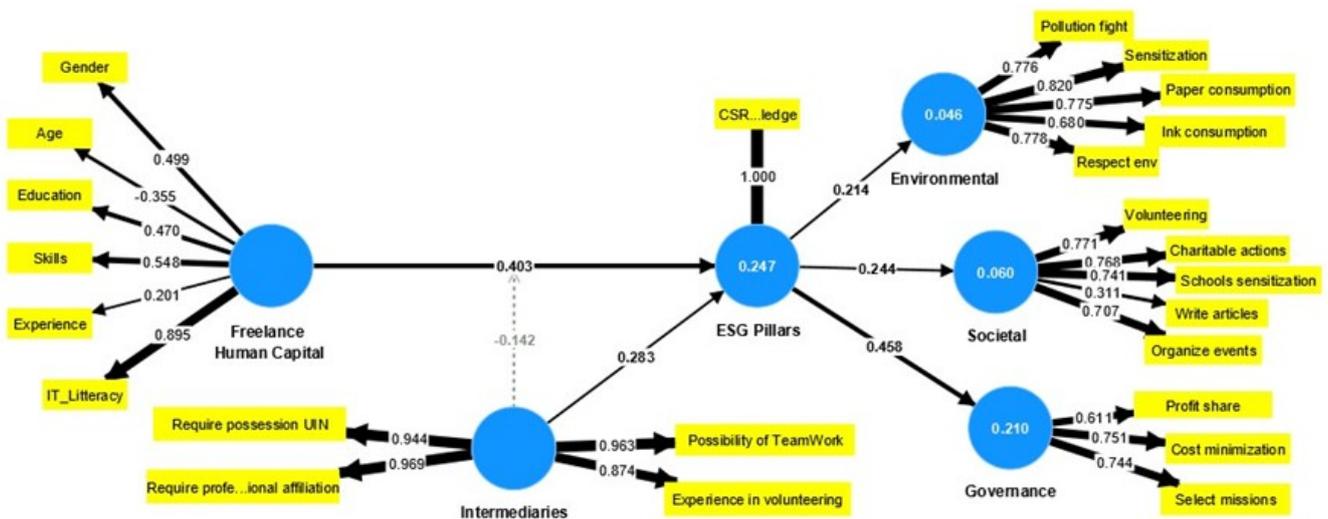


Figure 6. Freelance human capital and ESG considerations: the role of intermediaries

The role of intermediaries on the implementation of ESG pillars is vital and even higher than that of clients; provided by a path coefficient of 0,403 between freelance human capital and ESG pillars. More so, the direct effect of intermediaries on ESG pillars is provided by a positive path coefficient of 0,283. And the overall coefficient of determination is 0,243 is not to be taken for granted.

Based on the above findings, we can reframe our hypotheses to come out with the following research conclusions:

For the first main hypothesis, freelance human capital has a positive but weak effect on the integration of ESG considerations by sub Saharan African freelancers. As for the moderators:

The regulatory framework slopes down the contribution of human capital to the integration of ESG considerations by sub Saharan African freelancers; Freelance customers play a positive role in making freelance human capital to be ESG-oriented in sub Saharan Africa; Intermediaries play a vital role in the relationship between freelance human capital and the integration of ESG considerations by sub Saharan African freelancers.

ESG Pillars and freelance business components: This sub-section has the objective of testing the hypothesis that freelance business variables play a vital role in the integration of ESG considerations by freelancers. Again, this relationship is first examined without moderators, before introducing them. The final results, after extracting outliers during principal component analyses, are given below:

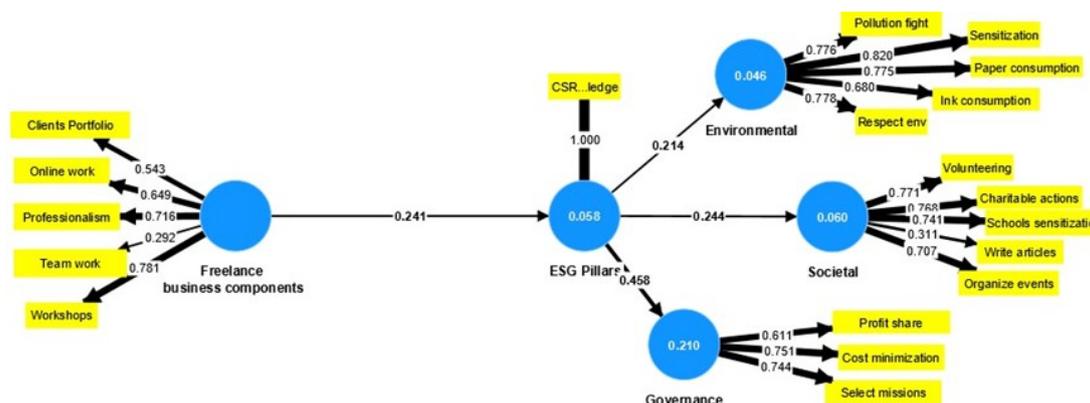


Figure 7. Freelance business components and ESG considerations: looking at the direct effect

As seen in the above diagram, freelance business components have a positive but weak contribution to the implementation of ESG pillars by sub Saharan African freelancers. This contribution is even weaker than that of freelance human capital (0,241 < 0,388 of figure 3). However, it is worth mentioning that some particular business components play a significant role to this positive contribution; these are the participation of freelancers to workshops, their professionalism, their customers’ portfolio and the fact of making some online work. Nevertheless, the coefficient of determination remains very weak (Adjusted R-Square of 0,068). Meaning that the direct effect of freelance business components to the implementation of ESG pillars is insignificant.

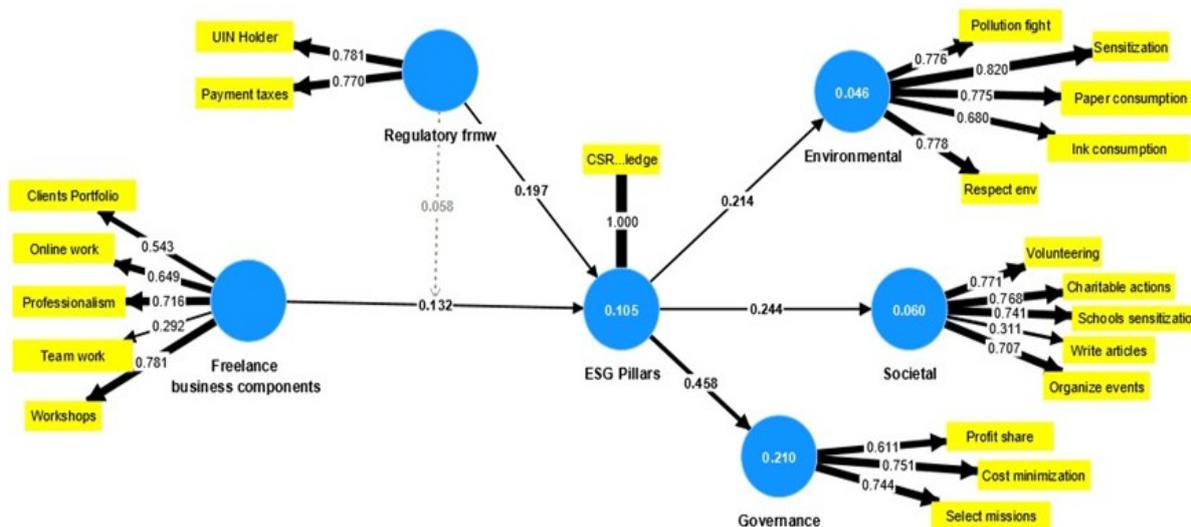


Figure 8. Freelance business components and ESG considerations: the role of the regulatory framework

Just like it was the case for freelance human capital, the regulatory framework slopes down the effect of freelance business components on ESG pillars (a fall of the main path coefficient from 0,241 to 0,132). Taken alone, the contribution of the regulatory framework to the integration of ESG pillars is positive rather, but still very small (path coefficient of 0,197). And the overall effect, though slightly higher than that of figure 6, remains insignificant (Adjusted R-Square of 0,105). The figure above shows that clients do not play the expected vital role in making freelance business components to contribute to the implementation of ESG pillars by freelancers. The path coefficient instead slopes down from 0,241 (direct effect of figure 7) to 0,013; even if the coefficient of determination increases from 0,068 to 0,118. This is so because the direct contribution of clients to ESG pillars is given by a coefficient of 0,306 while the moderating effect is almost nil (coefficient of 0,036). Just like it is the case for clients and the regulatory framework, intermediaries do not catalyze the relationship between freelance business components and ESG pillars because of a path coefficient loping down from 0,241 (figure 7) to 0,043. Even though intermediaries’ direct contribution to such an implementation is positive and fair (path coefficient of 0,281) and the overall effect of 0,120 is non negligible. Nevertheless, the foreseen moderator effect is not as expected. As a result, the second hypothesis’ findings can be summarized as follows:

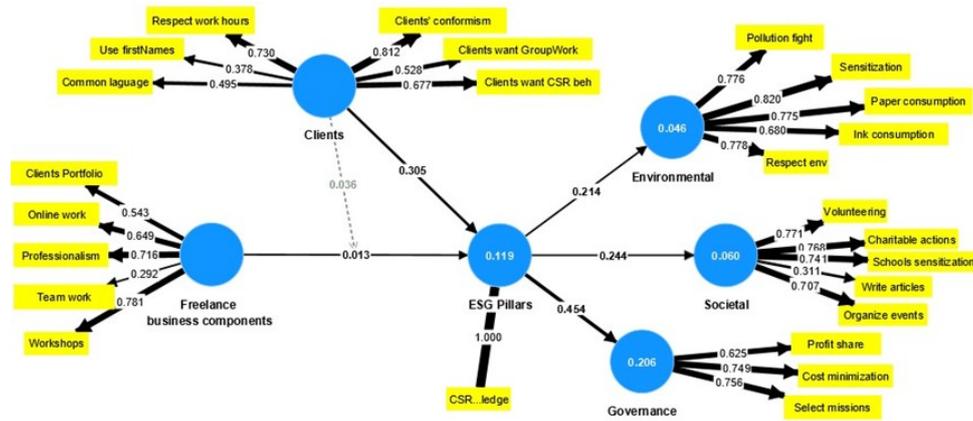


Figure 9. Freelance business components and ESG considerations: the role of freelance customers

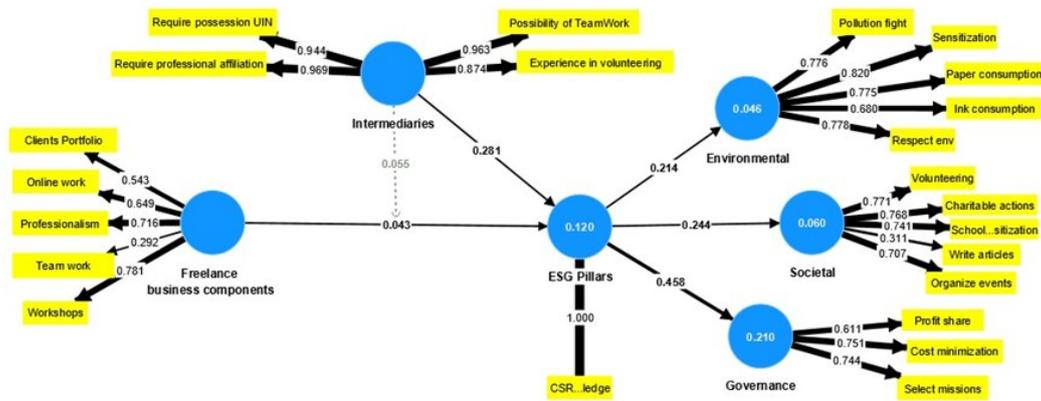


Figure 10. Freelance business components and ESG considerations: the role of intermediaries

For the second main hypothesis, freelance business variables play a positive but weak role in the integration of ESG considerations by sub Saharan African freelancers. The regulatory framework make business components contribute less to the integration of ESG considerations by sub Saharan African freelancers; Freelance customers reduce the incentive of business components to integrate ESG considerations in sub Saharan Africa; Intermediaries play a neutral role in the contribution of business components to the integration of ESG considerations. Before discussing the results, it is important, summarize them in a table so as to sort out the aspects on which to pay a particular emphasis.

Table 10. Synthesis of results

Relationship	Moderator	Influence on ESG considerations		
		Nature	Magnitude	Overall
Freelance individual characteristics	Regulatory framework	Downward	weak	Weak
	Clients	Upward	Fair	Fair
	Intermediaries	Upward	Fairly good	Fair
		Positive	Weak	Weak
Contextual variables	Regulatory framework	Downward	Weak	Weak
	Clients	Downward	Weak	Weak
	Intermediaries	Downward	Weak	Weak
		Downward	Weak	Weak

Source: Authors

As shown in the table above, the aspects on which we pay a particular emphasis without neglecting the others, are the straightforward relationships and the moderator effects of clients and intermediaries on the relationship between freelance human capital and ESG pillars. What is interesting is the situation displayed in the table above. A situation whereby, all the negative influences are weak and therefore negligible. The discussions of the results will focus much on fair and fairly good influences; these are the direct effects of freelance individual characteristics and contextual variables and the moderating role of clients and intermediaries.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

How doing good is good for freelancers: It is a fact, doing good has shown proof of profitability to large firms. On a daily basis, freelancers can act and make choices that might have real positive repercussions on the society and the environment as a whole. There are harmless actions that could help freelancers reduce their environmental impact and still be profitable. Freelance could reduce or optimize their travelling by plane or car. They can print only when necessary and on recycled paper; delete unnecessary files and emails, because storage generates CO2; turn off the lights when leaving a room and use low-energy bulbs; unplug electronic devices when not necessary. All these actions will help freelancers save money in terms of bills and time.

How clients and intermediaries boost freelance human capital to be ESG: Just like it is the case for companies, social pressure appears to be the main motivation for freelancers to integrate ESG considerations in their activities. Clients and intermediaries could be considered as freelancers' primary stakeholders, and as such, they push freelancers to be socially responsible. This observation falls in line with that of Freeman (1984) who recognizes the pressure of stakeholders on companies. Freelancers might integrate ESG considerations just to respond to clients' requirements in terms of innovation and respect of deadlines while providing satisfactory services. The absence of these secondary requirements might explain why some clients' satisfaction will still reduce even if freelancers do the job. Intermediaries like online labor platforms even play a more remarkable role when it comes to require responsible behavior to freelancers. Online platforms in charge of the selection of freelancers filter these independent workers by requiring some responsible features. For instance, equally performant freelancers will be discarded if they don't have a unique identifier number got from the tax authority. Sometimes, these requirements imposed by intermediaries are not even required by clients.

CONCLUSION

The question that arose from this article was fundamentally related to the explanatory factors for integrating ESG considerations in freelance work. Among the many possible solutions, the one that drew our attention was that of the integration of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in freelance activity. Therefore, to determine which factors best explain the integration of ESG considerations by freelancers, we carried out a theoretical survey coupled to an empirical phase. The theoretical framework of this research consisted of coming out with the necessity of ESG for freelance work, and a theoretical link of these two concepts under the effigy of three control variables, namely the regulatory framework, clients and online labor platforms. The existing gray and sound literatures made it possible to describe the theoretical role of these intermediate variables between freelance individual characteristics and contextual variables on one hand, and the integration of ESG considerations on the other hand. Authors like Anteby & al. (2005), Liu and Fraumeni (2020), Rachel P. (2019) and Ren J. & al. (2023) played a vital role among others, to bring forth the role of these intermediate variables. On the empirical side, a quantitative study with multiple field African freelancers made it possible to verify the research hypotheses. A quantitative research with a questionnaire as data collection tool, was conducted. We built a 198 final sample size. The data collected were first stored in a SPSS file to come out with some descriptive statistics concerning the individual variables of the study. The data collected were then transferred to SmartPLS through an Excel-Csv file for the purpose of hypotheses verification. The main results show a positive contribution of freelance individual characteristics and contextual variables to the integration of ESG considerations by freelancers. Above all, the results depict a fairly positive contribution of clients and intermediaries as moderators of the relationship. While the regulatory framework is somehow insignificant.

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