Fostering Digital Entrepreneurship among Santri through Freelance Platform Workshops: A Community Service–Based Empowerment Program

Taufiq Agung Cahyono [a], Joko Iskandar [b], and Mohamad Khoirul Ansor [c]

Department of Informatics, Bhinneka PGRI University, Tulungagung, Indonesia

[a]Corresponding author: taufiqagungcahyono@gmail.com
[b]arsip.indoscript@gmail.com
[c]emkhoirul.ansor@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The rapid development of digital technology has opened new opportunities for online-based work, including freelance employment. However, many students in Islamic boarding schools (santri) still have limited awareness and skills to utilize these opportunities productively. This community service program aimed to foster digital entrepreneurial skills among santri through a workshop on the use of freelance platforms as a productive solution in the digital era. The program was implemented at an Islamic boarding school and involved a series of activities, including preparation, socialization, technical training, hands-on practice, simulation, mentoring, evaluation, and follow-up. The training focused on the use of freelance platforms such as Fiverr and Sribulancer, covering account creation, profile development, portfolio preparation, gig creation, and project bidding. Evaluation was conducted through direct observation, platform activity monitoring, and participant feedback. The results showed a significant improvement in participants' digital literacy and readiness to engage in freelance activities. Most participants successfully created active freelance accounts, developed basic digital portfolios, and published service offerings on freelance platforms. Several participants also began to receive initial responses from potential clients, such as profile views, clicks, and service inquiries, indicating early engagement within the freelance ecosystem. Although not all participants secured projects, these interactions demonstrated meaningful progress for beginner freelancers. In conclusion, the program effectively enhanced santri's digital skills and entrepreneurial awareness. The findings suggest that structured training combined with practical mentoring can empower santri to begin participating in the digital economy and support their long-term digital self-reliance. This program contributes to the limited literature on digital entrepreneurship empowerment in pesantren contexts by demonstrating the effectiveness of experiential freelance platform training based on observable engagement indicators such as account activity, portfolio development, and initial client interactions.

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Taufiq Agung Cahyono [a)], Joko Iskandar [b)], and Mohamad Khoirul Ansor [c)]

INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution has had a significant impact on various sectors of life, including the economic and employment sectors. Digital transformation has given rise to new platform-based economic models that are flexible and open, one of which is freelance work. Through digital platforms such as Fiverr, Upwork, Sribulancer, and Projects.co.id, individuals are now able to offer their professional services to a global market without geographical limitations. This phenomenon creates substantial opportunities, particularly for younger generations, to build economic independence through innovative and productive pathways (Iman Saifullah & Anton, 2024).

However, access to these digital economic opportunities has not been evenly distributed across all segments of society. One group that continues to face challenges in utilizing such opportunities is the community of santri within Islamic boarding schools (pondok pesantren). In general, pesantren institutions remain strongly oriented toward religious education and character development, while the integration of digital skills and entrepreneurial education into their curricula has not yet been optimally realized (Takim et al., 2023). This situation has resulted in a competency gap between pesantren graduates and the skill demands required in the digital era (Mohammad Khoirur Rachman & Ahmad Mohammad Tidjani, 2024).

This condition is clearly reflected at Pondok Pesantren Raudhlatul Mustafa, a religious educational institution that has made a substantial contribution to producing individuals with strong moral values and religious knowledge. Based on preliminary observations and discussions with pesantren administrators, it was found that most santri have limited access to digital skills training and insufficient familiarity with freelance platforms that could potentially serve as productive and independent economic instruments (Rumba, 2024). In general, santri lack adequate insight into how the internet can be utilized to develop online service-based businesses, compile digital portfolios, or access the global labor market through digital media (Zakiyah et al., 2022).

The specific problem identified is the low level of productive digital literacy and the underdeveloped digital entrepreneurial mindset among santri. If this condition is not addressed promptly, pesantren graduates may face difficulties accessing modern employment opportunities and competing within an increasingly competitive digital economic ecosystem. Furthermore, pesantren risk losing their relevance in producing graduates who are not only religiously grounded but also adaptive to rapid socio-technological changes (Yahya et al., 2024).

Therefore, a structured, contextual, and application-oriented intervention is required to bridge the digital competency gap among santri. The community service program entitled "Creative and Independent Santri: Fostering Digital Entrepreneurial Mindsets through Freelance Platform Workshops as a Productive Solution in the Digital Era" was designed as an empowerment strategy aimed at equipping santri with both conceptual knowledge and practical skills in digital entrepreneurship.

This program was systematically developed to provide intensive training on the utilization of freelance platforms, professional service profile development, digital-based client relationship management, and marketing techniques through online portfolios. Such an approach has been proven effective in fostering digital entrepreneurial awareness among santri. Previous studies also indicate that digital marketing training within pesantren contexts significantly enhances technological literacy and entrepreneurial orientation among santri (Fuadi et al., 2024a).

The urgency of implementing this program lies in the importance of strengthening santri capacity as

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an integral part of developing superior, independent, and adaptive human resources. In addition to broadening santri perspectives on digital-based economic opportunities, this program aligns with research findings emphasizing that the digitalization of santri cooperatives can serve as a strategic instrument for strengthening pesantren economic development through the integration of online platforms (Fuadi et al., 2024b).

Despite growing studies on digital entrepreneurship training, empirical community service–based interventions targeting santri through freelance platforms remain limited. Most existing initiatives focus on general digital literacy without integrating real platform-based work experiences. Therefore, this program aims to enhance santri's digital literacy, freelance readiness, and entrepreneurial mindset through structured and practice-oriented training on freelance platforms.

METHOD

This community service program employed a participatory and practice-oriented approach aimed at enhancing santri's digital entrepreneurial skills through the use of freelance platforms. The program was conducted at Pondok Pesantren Raudhlatul Mustafa and involved santri as the primary participants. The implementation focused on experiential learning, combining theoretical explanations with hands-on practice and continuous mentoring. The program was conducted over a period of four weeks, encompassing preparation, training, practice, and evaluation phases. A total of 20 santri participated in the program. Prior to implementation, participants were informed about the program objectives and procedures and provided informed consent for participation, documentation, and evaluation.
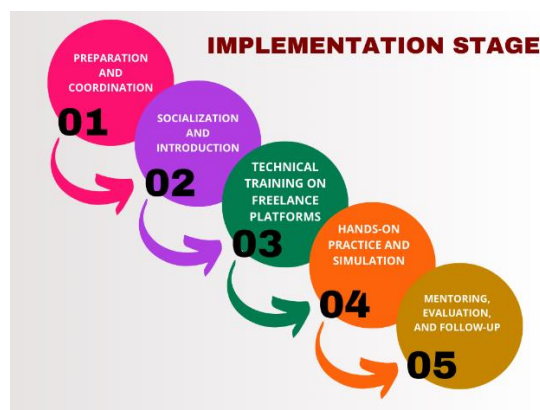

FIGURE 1. Implementation Stage

Program Location and Participants

The program was implemented at Pondok Pesantren Raudhlatul Mustafa, an Islamic boarding school that primarily focuses on religious education and character development. The participants consisted of santri at the senior level who were selected based on their availability and interest in learning digital skills. Most participants had basic experience using digital devices but had limited exposure to productive digital activities and freelance platforms.

Stages of Program Implementation

The implementation of the program was carried out through several structured stages to ensure systematic learning and skill development.

Preparation and Coordination

The initial stage involved coordination with pesantren administrators to determine the schedule, facilities, and technical requirements of the program. At this stage, training materials and modules related to digital entrepreneurship and freelance platforms were prepared, and the computer laboratory was arranged to support practical sessions.

Socialization and Introduction

This stage aimed to introduce participants to the concept of digital entrepreneurship and freelance work. The facilitators explained the objectives of the program, the potential of freelance platforms, and the relevance of digital skills in the current economic context. This session also served to build participants' motivation and readiness before entering the technical training phase.

Technical Training on Freelance Platforms

Participants received technical training on the use of freelance platforms, specifically Fiverr and Sribulancer. The training covered platform features, service categories, account registration procedures, and an overview of how freelance marketplaces operate. Emphasis was placed on understanding platform mechanisms and ethical communication with potential clients.

Hands-on Practice and Simulation

Following the technical training, participants engaged in hands-on practice sessions conducted in the computer laboratory. During this stage, santri created freelance accounts, developed basic professional profiles, prepared digital portfolios, and published simple service offerings (gigs). Participants also practiced writing project proposals and submitting bids on beginner-level projects as part of a simulation process.

Mentoring, Evaluation, and Follow-up

The final stage involved intensive mentoring and evaluation. Facilitators provided individual guidance to help participants refine their profiles, improve portfolio quality, and enhance service descriptions. Evaluation was conducted through direct observation, monitoring of participants' activity on freelance platforms, and informal discussions. Follow-up activities included monitoring account development over a certain period and providing feedback to support continuous improvement and sustainability of participants' digital entrepreneurial efforts.

Data Collection and Evaluation Techniques

Data for program evaluation were collected using qualitative methods, including observation, documentation, and participant feedback. Indicators evaluated included participants' ability to create and manage freelance accounts, portfolio completeness, level of engagement on freelance platforms (such as views, clicks, and initial client inquiries), and changes in participants' confidence and motivation toward digital entrepreneurship.

RESULTS

The implementation of the community service program resulted in several measurable outcomes

related to participants' digital skills development and initial engagement with freelance platforms. The results indicate that the program successfully introduced santri to productive digital activities and facilitated their first experiences within the freelance ecosystem.

Overall, the results indicate improvements in participants' digital literacy, freelance readiness, portfolio development, and confidence in engaging with freelance platforms. These outcomes demonstrate the successful initial integration of santri into the freelance ecosystem through structured training and mentoring.

- Improvement of Digital Literacy and Freelance Readiness

    Following the training and mentoring sessions, participants demonstrated a notable improvement in their understanding of digital entrepreneurship concepts and freelance workflows. Santri who initially had limited knowledge of freelance platforms became familiar with key terms such as freelance services, digital portfolios, gigs, and project bidding. This improvement was evident during hands-on practice sessions, where participants were able to independently follow the required steps for account creation and profile setup.

FIGURE 2. Students Take Part in Training and Socialization

    Most participants successfully created active accounts on both Fiverr and Sribulancer platforms. They were able to complete basic profile information, select appropriate service categories, and upload profile photos that reflected a more professional digital identity. These outcomes indicate an increased readiness among participants to engage in online-based work environments.

- Development of Digital Portfolios and Service Listings

    One of the key outcomes of the program was the development of basic digital portfolios. Participants compiled simple portfolios consisting of design samples, written content, or other service-related outputs produced during training sessions. These portfolios were then uploaded to their respective freelance accounts as supporting materials to attract potential clients.

    In addition, several participants successfully created service listings (gigs) on the Fiverr platform. Although the service offerings were relatively simple and targeted beginner-level markets, the completion of these gigs represents an important milestone for novice freelancers. Participants demonstrated the ability to write short service descriptions, determine service scopes, and set entry-level pricing under facilitator guidance.

- Initial Engagement on Freelance Platforms

    Monitoring conducted over a period of several weeks following the simulation and mentoring phase

revealed early signs of participant engagement within freelance platforms. Some participant accounts began to receive profile views and gig impressions, indicating that their services were appearing in platform search results. Furthermore, several participants recorded click activities on their service listings, suggesting potential client interest. A small number of participants also received initial messages from potential clients. These messages generally involved inquiries regarding service details, pricing, or requests for additional examples. Although none of the participants had secured confirmed projects at this stage, such interactions represent meaningful early progress for beginner freelancers and demonstrate that participants' accounts had entered the active freelance ecosystem.

FIGURE 3. Students Doing Practicals In The Computer Lab

- Participant Confidence and Motivation

Beyond technical outcomes, the program also influenced participants' attitudes toward digital entrepreneurship. Observations and informal feedback indicated increased confidence among santri in using digital platforms for productive purposes. Participants who were initially hesitant to engage with freelance platforms gradually became more confident in managing their accounts and communicating with potential clients. This change in mindset was reflected in participants' willingness to revise their profiles, improve portfolio content, and continue exploring freelance opportunities after the formal training sessions had concluded. The emergence of this positive attitude suggests that the program not only enhanced technical skills but also fostered motivation and self-efficacy related to digital entrepreneurship.

DISCUSSION

The results of this community service program demonstrate that structured and practice-oriented training on freelance platforms can effectively enhance santri's digital literacy and readiness for digital entrepreneurship. The observed improvements in participants' ability to create freelance accounts, develop basic portfolios, and publish service listings indicate that santri are capable of adapting to digital work environments when provided with appropriate guidance and mentoring.

One of the key findings of this program is the importance of hands-on practice combined with continuous mentoring. Participants did not only receive theoretical explanations about digital entrepreneurship but were also directly involved in real platform workflows, such as account registration, profile completion, portfolio uploads, and project bidding simulations. This experiential learning approach enabled participants to better understand how freelance platforms operate and

reduced their initial hesitation toward engaging in online economic activities. These findings support previous studies emphasizing that practical digital training plays a crucial role in improving digital competence and confidence among learners in non-formal educational settings.

The development of basic digital portfolios and service listings represents a significant milestone for beginner freelancers. Although the portfolios and gigs created during the program were relatively simple, they functioned as foundational assets that allowed participants to enter the freelance ecosystem. This aligns with the program's objective of providing initial exposure rather than immediate financial outcomes. For novice freelancers, the ability to publish services and present digital work publicly is an essential first step toward long-term participation in the digital economy.
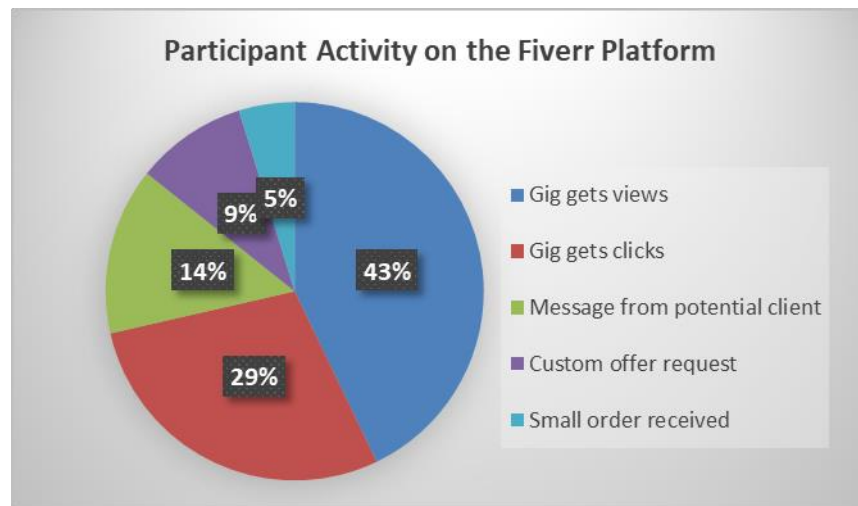
FIGURE 4. Evaluation of Participant Activity on the Fiverr Platform
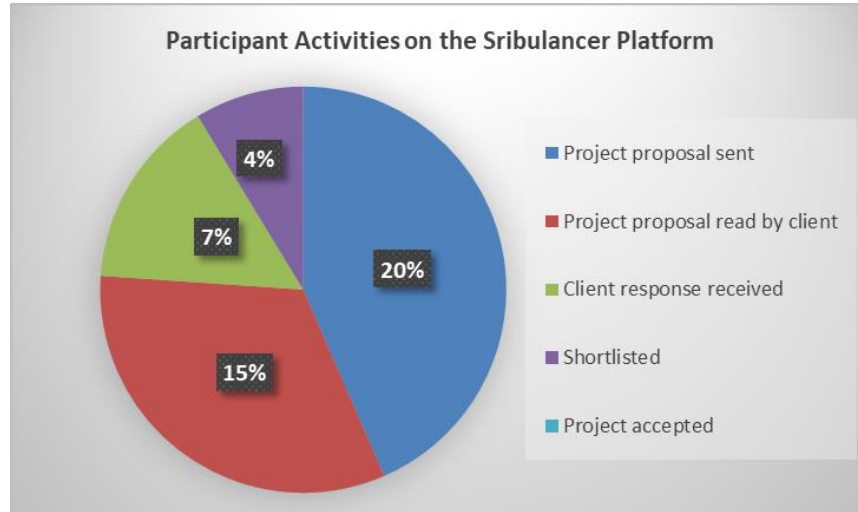
FIGURE 5. Evaluation of Participant Activity on the Sribulancer Platform

Early engagement indicators, such as profile views, gig impressions, clicks, and initial client inquiries, further demonstrate the effectiveness of the program. While no confirmed projects were obtained during the evaluation period, the presence of interaction from potential clients suggests that participants' accounts had become visible within platform search systems. In the context of beginner-level freelance participation, such interactions are considered positive progress, as they indicate platform recognition and initial market interest. These outcomes reflect realistic expectations for early-stage freelancers and avoid overestimating short-term economic results.

Beyond technical competencies, the program also contributed to positive changes in participants' attitudes toward digital entrepreneurship. Increased confidence, willingness to improve profiles, and motivation to continue exploring freelance opportunities were consistently observed among participants. This shift in mindset is particularly important for santri, as it highlights the potential of digital entrepreneurship to complement religious education by providing adaptive life skills without undermining pesantren values.

From an institutional perspective, the findings suggest that pesantren-based digital entrepreneurship programs can serve as effective strategies for bridging the competency gap between traditional religious education and contemporary digital skill demands. By integrating contextual and application-oriented training, pesantren can enhance the relevance of their educational outcomes and better prepare santri for future economic challenges.

Overall, the discussion indicates that the community service program successfully achieved its intended outcomes by fostering foundational digital skills, increasing freelance readiness, and encouraging sustainable digital engagement among santri. The results underscore the importance of continued mentoring and follow-up activities to ensure that initial competencies develop into long-term digital entrepreneurial practices.

Despite the positive outcomes, this program was limited by its relatively short duration and the absence of long-term income tracking. The evaluation focused on early engagement indicators rather than sustained economic outcomes. Future community service programs should incorporate extended mentoring periods and longitudinal evaluation to assess the sustainability and long-term impact of freelance-based digital entrepreneurship training.

CONCLUSION

This community service program demonstrates that structured, practice-oriented training on freelance platforms can effectively enhance santri's digital literacy and readiness for digital entrepreneurship. Through a systematic series of activities, including technical training, hands-on practice, simulation, mentoring, evaluation, and follow-up, participants were able to develop foundational skills necessary to engage in online-based work environments.

The findings indicate that most participants successfully created active freelance accounts, developed basic digital portfolios, and published service offerings on freelance platforms. Early engagement indicators, such as profile views, clicks, and initial inquiries from potential clients, suggest that participants' accounts had begun to enter the freelance ecosystem. Although confirmed projects were not yet obtained during the evaluation period, these early interactions represent meaningful progress for beginner freelancers and reflect realistic outcomes for initial stages of digital labor participation.

Beyond technical outcomes, the program also contributed to positive changes in participants' attitudes toward digital entrepreneurship. Increased confidence, motivation, and willingness to continuously improve digital profiles were observed, indicating the development of an entrepreneurial mindset among santri. These results highlight the importance of combining experiential learning with sustained mentoring to support long-term digital engagement.

Overall, the program successfully addressed both technical and non-technical dimensions of digital empowerment among santri. The findings suggest that similar community service initiatives can serve as effective models for fostering digital self-reliance in religious-based educational institutions, provided that continuous guidance and follow-up mechanisms are maintained.

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Future initiatives should integrate freelance platform training into pesantren educational programs and establish partnerships with digital platforms or local industries to enhance sustainability. Such efforts can strengthen pesantren's role in producing digitally adaptive and economically independent graduates.

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