



#### RESEARCH PAPER

### Ending an Exploitative Regime: A Participatory Case Study on Impact of Social Media Use on Handicraft Artisans' Autonomy

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#### ABSTRACT

Creative industry and arts are redefining the parameters of economic stability and revenue generation around the world. Despite having potential, certain crafts are struggling to survive in the marketplace and artisans are suffering at the hands of brokers. This qualitative participatory case study aims to examine the efficacy of digital platforms (Instagram and E-commerce) to address issues of limited autonomy and middlemen exploitation in handicraft industry. The research analyzed the factors contributing to such negligence and future possibilities by incorporating frameworks of Trans-theoretical model and Communication for behavioral impact. The results of observational data and in-depth interviews suggest a positive association between digital platform adoption and artisans' autonomy making them self-sufficient and contributes to betterment of their socio-economic status, but the rate of illiteracy remains the defining hurdle. The study recommends extending the Trans-theoretical and communication for behavioral impact frameworks in other types marginalized creative arts and social media platforms.

#### KEYWORDS

Handicrafts Artisans, Social Media, Instagram, E-Commerce, Qualitative Case Study, Participatory Approach, Trans-Theoretical Model, Communication for Behavioral Impact

#### Introduction

Handicrafts is a tapestry knitted with the blend of creative skills, traditional and artistic expression in forms of pottery, wooden art, metal art, and textile art. According to some academics the Handicraft industry of any region plays a vital role in the reduction of poverty (Abisuga-Oyekunle & Fillis, 2016). Hence it holds great importance in improving the national socio-economic indicators of the country. These crafts are also a means of cultural preservation and promotion for every nation (Yang, Shafi, Song & Yang, 2018), as they not only play a vital role in the national development but also plays role in improving the lives of the citizens particularly, the poor that are associated with this industry (2022). Wherein Handicrafts Industry belongs to the cottage industries of Pakistan which means small homegrown factories are producing the local handicrafts, that are then either sold in the local market or are exported across the world. The government is also neglecting the sector since there is little or no mention of the handicrafts industry in the latest and previous issues of economic survey of Pakistan published by the ministry of finance. This consistent neglect of the industry by the successive governments has led to multiple problems in the handicrafts industry. These problems range from lack of growth of the industry to the exploitation of the skilled labour. These problems directly impact the socio-economic conditions of these labours (2022). Skilled labour in the handicraft industry is observed to be living in dismal conditions while the exploitative wholesalers reap maximum profits. The handicraft manufacturers are mostly labouring and belong to the small cottage industry; hence they are exploited in the worst of ways. The wholesaler buys their products in bulk and at very cheap prices. These same wholesalers sell these products for massive profits.

The exploitation of skilled individuals employed in the handicrafts industry is a cause of concern and a violation of basic human rights. They are not compensated as much as the effort they put into the whole process of manufacturing these handicrafts. Because of

the current digital landscape, the artisans are struggling to cope with the ever-changing digital market demands and market needs (Anderson, 2022). So, there needs to be a platform or entity that helps such small industries or individuals get better compensation for their products in turn ending the exploitation. Most of the profit is kept by the wholesalers while the manufacturers belonging to the small or cottage industry do not even have enough to make ends meet. The industry, where it provides a system of preservation and promotion of our culture, also provides us with a great opportunity to improve the socio-economic conditions of the poor manufacturers. It is critical to understand the importance of the handicrafts industry as it is a low-cost industry which means most handicrafts are not very expensive to make however their market value is very high hence it gives us an opportunity to come up with a reasonable price for items that are affordable and also generates adequate revenue for the manufacturers. There needs to be a profit margin provided to the manufacturers that not only improves their socio-economic condition but also allows them to expand their operation, so that the industry can grow. Since there is huge disparity between the price of product when bought by the wholesaler and the price in which it is sold to the people (Majeed & Swalehin, 2021), there is huge potential to remove such exploitative wholesalers and create a platform where the manufacturers can use modern communication, solutions to reach the customers, as advocated by (Makyao, 2013) that direct control and personal selling is one of the effective strategies of promotion. In simple words the study aims to create platform that allows the handicraft manufacturers to sign a better profit cut and sell the product using e-commerce solutions and have the direct reach/control to the platform.

It is aimed at improving the poor and allowing them to improve their socio-economic conditions by challenging and ending an exploitative process that has gone on for too long. Generation after generation these manufacturers have not been given their due share. Consequently, the artisans have lived in poverty, and their industries have not been able to grow. Handicrafts contribute to the national economy and play a vital role in promotion of culture (A & Abisuga-Oyekunle, 2020). The constant neglect of the government is also an issue that has threatened this community. This project aims to empower the manufacturers so that they can have more control over their crafts and reap profits from them.

## **Literature Review**

The focus of the study is to bring the unsung heroes into spotlight, by developing a platform on social media which will be a mediated platform. Through this platform, mainly an online website, vulnerable people would benefit by placing their folk arts and crafts for sale. The importance of cultural heritage, especially folk art or craft cannot be denied, it's a way to connect the people through a single thread. In this fast-moving world, one way to preserve this cultural heritage is through the promotion of folk craft which reflects one's own culture (The Importance of Cultural Heritage, 2013). It is highly important to keep folk art alive in this digital age, where world has been changing rapidly and becoming a global village and a blended mixture of different cultures. So, due to these drastic changes, one's country's folk art is dying, as its specialists are getting old and the youth are neglecting this cultural art and are not taking interest in learning it. Apart from the youth, the governments and officials are also not taking interest in promoting this art form, globally even nationally, the exhibitions are at very small level that they fail to transfer its importance and value among the young generation (Liang, 2016; Muzaffar, et. al., 2019). It's the need for time that this folk art should be preserved through different platforms including social media as this is the generation of digital age. A study (MacDowell & Michigan, 2006) conducted in Michigan, folk craft plays a tremendous role in a countries socio-economic growth and development. Through use of today's technology one can increase its GNP growth and GDP as well through the promotion of folk crafts, one of the media of growth is increasing tourism in country.

This folk craft has been promoted through different mediums, for example exhibitions, online websites and craft galleries. This is becoming a great source of income, increase in local economics and has strength to improve the socio-economic standards of the state or community. Wherein suggested by (Bano, 2016; Bha & Yadav, 2016; Muzaffar, et. al., 2019) that the folk art or craft is contributing in economy of many countries like India, America and Michigan, through this sector millions of people are getting jobs and selling their crafts on a good average and contributing in country's economy in millions. This art is also becoming reason for increased tourism around the countries. So, through promoting this artistic craft, a country can boost its national economic growth along with the local economics. Handicrafts are such an indigenous product which gives a huge amount of foreign currency every year to enrich the economy of a country and it's GDP (Mukherjee et al. 2016). Festivals and events are considered as essential factors to promote cultural tourism. In fact, they have become an important part of a destination's portfolio of tourism products (Getz, 2008). Local festivals be a good means to boost economic development, create positive image of cultural heritage and a way of social cohesion between communities. It also provides learning of local customs and ethnic backgrounds. Akhoondnejad, (2016) examines comprehensive model of attendee at a local festival. He argues that attendees who perceived the festival as high quality were more likely to perceive the festival as high value, be satisfied, and trust the festival. Furthermore, perceived value affects satisfaction, trust and loyalty. Mukherjee et al. (2016) said handicraft production can increase diversification of tourism products which include homestays, cultural experiences and help promoting responsible tourism in the respective area. When artisans understand that they can sell their product to the tourists at higher value than the prevailing local market value, they take interest in learning how to diversify their product base and add value to their business. This traditional craft is becoming very important worldwide in economic sector of countries. This study highlights the importance of folk arts in development sector as well as in economic sector of India.

Body of literature highlights the fact that folk artists and crafts are becoming an attraction for tourists and other countries because of their cultural heritage and showpieces. This attraction is now moving towards the development of the country and how this increase in tourism contributes to living standards of the vulnerable folk artists. Because of this increase in economy, the value and role of the folk crafts as we all the folk artists are enhancing at a tremendous rate (Boonyasurat, Piriyaachagu, Thammawong, & Niratsayaputi, 2022; V. & V., 2016). "Consumers buy handicrafts because they like to feel connected with indigenous traditions and cultures in a global and increasingly commoditized world" (HBTL, 2012). The growth and increase of interest for global goods (handicraft) open new market opportunities for artisan (Mahgoub & Alsoud., 2015). It provides employment to a vast segment of craft persons in rural & semi urban areas and generates substantial foreign exchange for the country, while preserving its cultural heritage (Hashmi, 2012). Marketing services provided by the government for the promotion of art and handicraft which includes self-help groups' skills training and cluster development becoming the most important services and playing important role in promotion of art and handicraft Sharma (2016). The Handicraft sector has, however, suffered due to being unorganized, with the additional constraints of lack of education, low capital, and poor exposure to new technologies, absence of market intelligence, and a poor institutional framework (Hashmi, 2012).

There are almost 10 most famous online websites that are working for promotion of these folk artists and crafts, but unfortunately all these websites are UK based, and they are promoting their own crafts, and all the members should be UK based. Some of the websites are Etsy, Folksy, Wow thank you and My Own Creation. These online platforms are contributing to making the lives of local artists better and helping them to sell their crafts at a national level, even some of them are selling the crafts at international level. The online platforms are very important to excel in the growth of cultural heritage, development socially and economically (Startacus, 2012). Another website which is of India named as,

Namaste Craft, is the biggest platform that is providing a way to artisans and wholesalers to sell and place their folk products. This website is becoming a bridge which is mediating between the consumers, sellers, vendors, and local artists. Along with this platform another mediating website in India is working for the local folk artists, HandiCraft, these both websites are the evidence for the need of social platforms if one wants to excel and promote its cultural heritage and local/folk art and crafts (Jain, 2016).

In context of Pakistan as a developing country, Pakistan's Labour Force Participation (LFP) rate of female is 24% which means a massive portion of workforce is idle and includes Pakistan in one of those few developing countries where LFP rate of women is less than world average of 51.2% (Sarwar & Abbasi, 2013). The handicraft industry has tremendous potential. Indian handicrafts are a flourishing sector with sizable market demand and economic potential, which substantially contributes to exports and for employment generation (Jena, 2010). The lack of shop/store in market centers or outlets for the handicrafts is also considered the main hurdle (Sirika, 2008). Handicrafts are an important productive sector and export commodity for many developing countries. Darakhshan (2011) examined the substantial economic potential of these products in exports, and the industry can create such handicrafts and export them to other areas of the world in which such commodities are rare and valuable, it was also empower women. Makhdoom (2016) said in her study that the craft workers are not aware of their products sold to foreign countries but that does not change their financial conditions as middleman exploited their crafts and earn handsome money for themselves.

Comprehensively, there is a necessity for a new platform, mainly digital platform to preserve this traditional folk craft a new platform which should be based on social media or computer-based systems. Through these new technologies these folk crafts could be taught to the youth (Vilbrandt, Vilbrandt, Pasko, Stamm, & Pasko, 2011). Nowadays people are using social media to excel their businesses. Around the world crafts can be seen on social media, the Business retailers are using these social mediums and applying different techniques and approaches to promote this traditional art and developing the economic sector. These platforms are becoming a primary source of income for the local artists who are suffering in hands of manipulating stakeholders. These platforms could help them in making their socio-economic standards better

Conclusively, there is a dire need to develop and establish new platforms mainly digital ones, in this age of technology for the promotion of folk craft. Moreover, if a solid step is not taken then this folk craft and art could vanish across the time. For preserving this art form, social media and websites are proving to be viable and beneficial around the world, as they can be a bridge between the creators and buyers (audience), which could create a hub like framework for effective working (Yair, 2012). So, these social networking sites could be source of removing the social and economic disparities, prevailing in local markets of Pakistan. Pakistani local art market and creators need a viable and sustainable business model for generating revenue, so this study is trying to develop a sustainable business model for generating digital revenue through social media networks for improving the socio-economic disparities among the vulnerable crafters.

## **Material and Methods**

The focus of this study is to explore the efficacy of digital media, specifically social media in promoting handicrafts and countering exploitation. So, Qualitative research design has been employed under which case study approach and method is utilized. For that in the initial phase, three families, handicraft manufacturers (mainly potters) have been selected. These manufacturers were selected based on extensive research into their socio-economic conditions. By using participatory approach, the study identified the area of problem and their requirements. In the next stage major handicrafts have been selected as per their skills. Before implementation stage, a contract was formulated for defining a better negotiated

percentage (60% for the handicraft providers and 40% for the project maintenance). Once the initial phase of selection and identification was done, the research towards the implantation stage where social media accounts on Instagram were created, for the promotion and marketing of these offered handicrafts, using pictures, small videos and other advertising techniques. Moreover, in the last stage TCS (cash on delivery) e-commerce solutions as well to sell the products, in order to provide the people with an option of ordering from the page.

Basically, this research study is based on the Learning-process approach/people-centered approach and two models: trans-theoretical model and COMBI model. These approaches are open-ended strategies to planned social change and involve a cybernetic process by which development administration can adapt themselves to changing environments and incorporate mid-course corrections, based on existing local conditions. The emphasis is on planning with the people, not for the people. Furthermore, these approaches view an individual not as a subject but as an actor, who defines the goals, controls the resources and directs the processes affecting his/her life.

### **Case Study: Handicrafts Artisans**

The major objectives of this case study approach were to create a pool of handicrafts manufacturers that use social media to sell their product, to set a reasonable and non-exploitative payment regime, to end the exploitative regime imposed by the wholesaler, to create social media platform to sell their product, to set up an e-commerce solution for the handicraft manufacturers, and to improve the socio-economic conditions of the poor handicraft manufacturers. And to achieve these aims electronic commerce in today's world is enormously popular, people like comfortability and ease in everything, so they are using electronic platforms for different purposes.

From online shopping to online payments and transactions, the audiences are moving towards digital services rather than in person. So, this project is initiating electronic commerce to make it easy for both the buyers and sellers, to sell and buy the offered products and services. Initially, this study in hand targeted Instagram as a platform because of its popularity among the businesses and its affordable business services. The most important factor in choosing this platform was that it outwardly reaches the mass audience (heterogenous and homogenous). In 2 thousand rupees a business can reach 10 thousand audiences among which the business can promote its products and services with more appeal.

The central theme of the research is to improve the socio-economic conditions of vulnerable manufacturers. From field research the fact was established that these handcrafters were unable to attain meals for a day and could not enjoy the necessities of life. The reason behind this vulnerability was exploitation. Which proves the standpoint of this study that the main need is to have a better lifestyle. Which is only possible by establishing a non-exploitative payment regime.

### **Process of Case study's Development: Participatory Approach**

Following are the important steps which have been drawn from the process of development and are followed throughout. Based on these steps, the process has been formulated and executed for effective results and to attain sustainability.

#### **Step# 01**

Identify the area of problem and community (area where socio-economic conditions of handcrafters are bad)

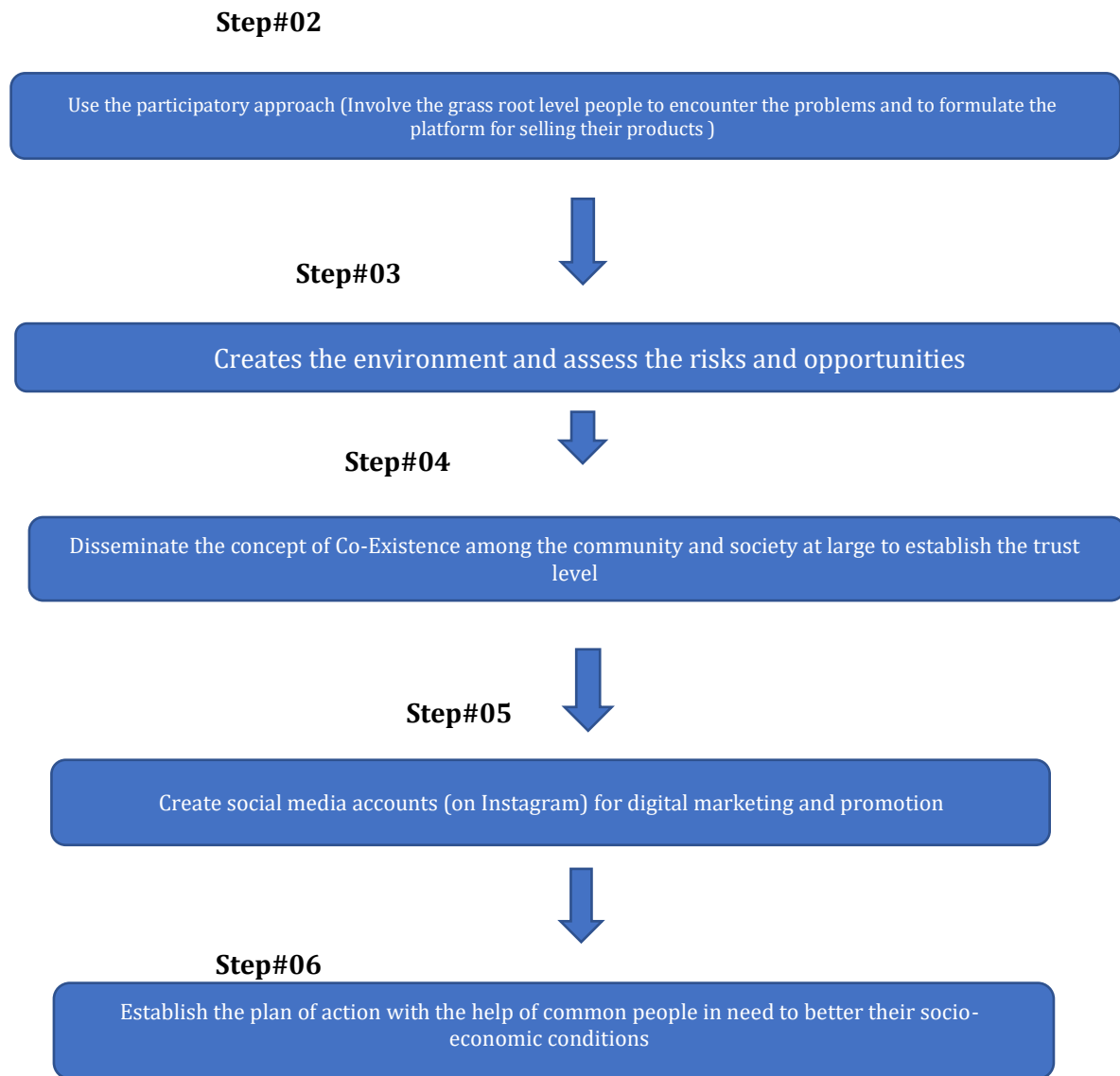


Figure 1: The Stages of Development Process in a Participatory Approach

**At first**, Rawalpindi around the Twin cities was selected for this project, as this city is accommodating vulnerable people more than Islamabad. After selecting the city specific area was located, i.e. Girja Road Qabristan, near Dhoke Syedan, Rawalpindi. In this area many people are suffering from socio-economic vulnerability. The families which were selected as per their financial conditions were handicraft manufacturer's families. The bread earners of the families are Muhammad Taj, Fazal Kareem and Habib Kumhyar, whose source of income was to sell the pottery utensils and toys.





To assess the problems of affected people, study incorporated the participatory approach. Under this step, the project management team meets the selected family and talks about their needs and requirements. So that the developmental project could be formulated according to their needs rather than general assumptions. The main bread winners of the families were Muhammad Taj, Fazal Kareem and Habib Kumhyar, who creates mud utensils and toys. The meeting went for one and a half hour, in which one of them (Muhammad Taj) specified that ***“Mehant bht zada hy or Mazdoori bht kam hy” (There is too much hard work and less monetary reward)***. So, their basic problem was financial vulnerability and exploitation. They mentioned that the lowest price they get from selling those utensils and toys is 5 rupees only, which is very low. So, this developmental plan of the study was formulated as per their requirement by using the horizontal approach rather than vertical approach.



**Muhammad Taj**



**Fazal Kareem**



**Habib Kumhyar**



After selecting these manufacturers, researcher narrowed down the products and services which the artisans can easily provide us. The targeted products include pottery, decoration pieces, mud utensils, and toys along with the embroidery (cloths and bags). Following are the products, according to which the content was created and offered to mass audience.

### Plan of action

The plan of action for this study was formulated on the basis of the developmental models, known as the: “Trans-theoretical Model” and “COMBI model”. These models are being used because of their effective steps which motivate individuals to act upon healthier behaviors through multiple strategies and techniques.

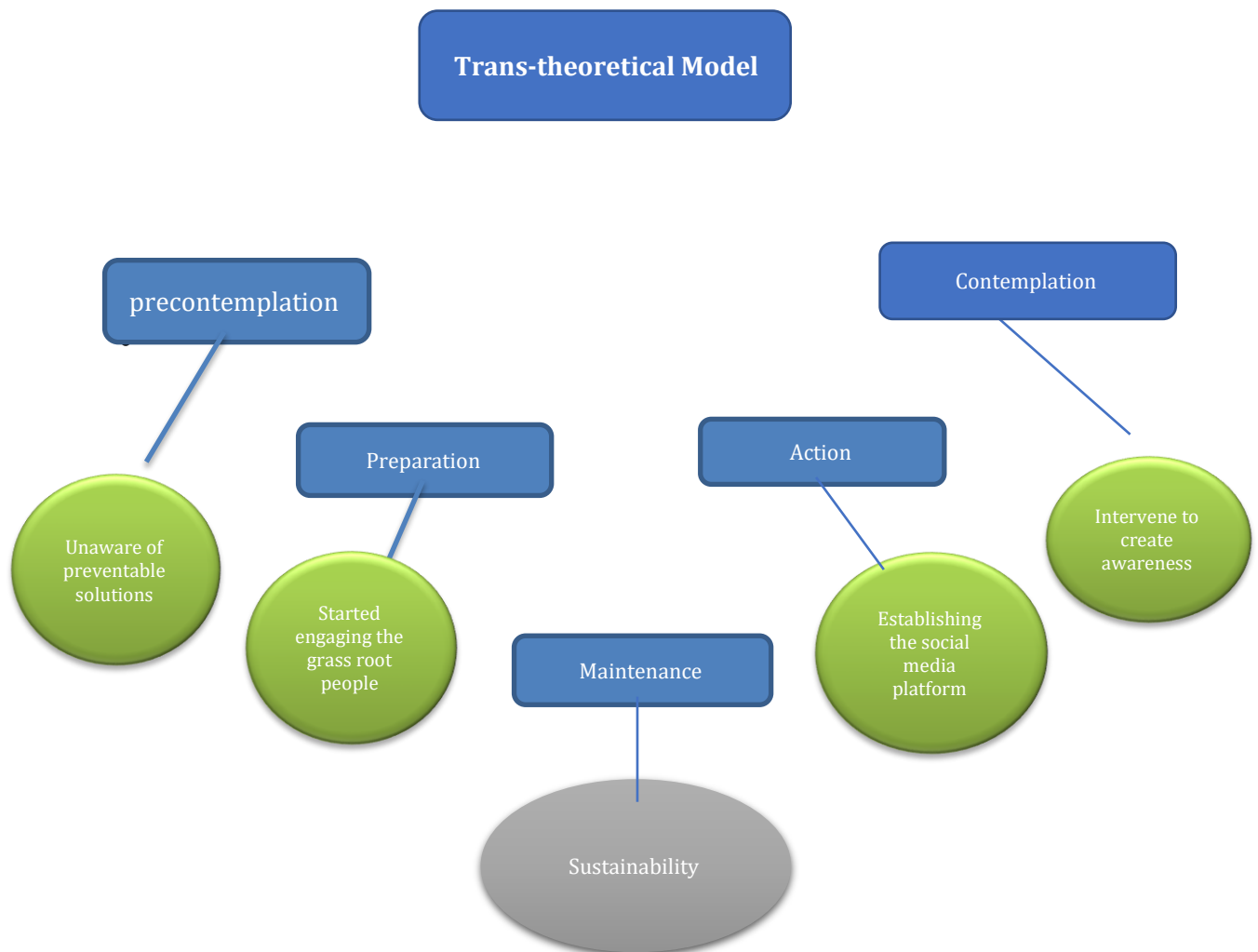


Figure 2: Trans-theoretical Model as a developmental model of the study

To attain these aims, COMBI (Communication for Behavioral Impact) model was being utilized, as this model is incorporating interpersonal communication along with the advertising component, it was appropriate for this developmental project. This model is a methodology that entails marketing strategies along with communication theories to integrate a desired result.

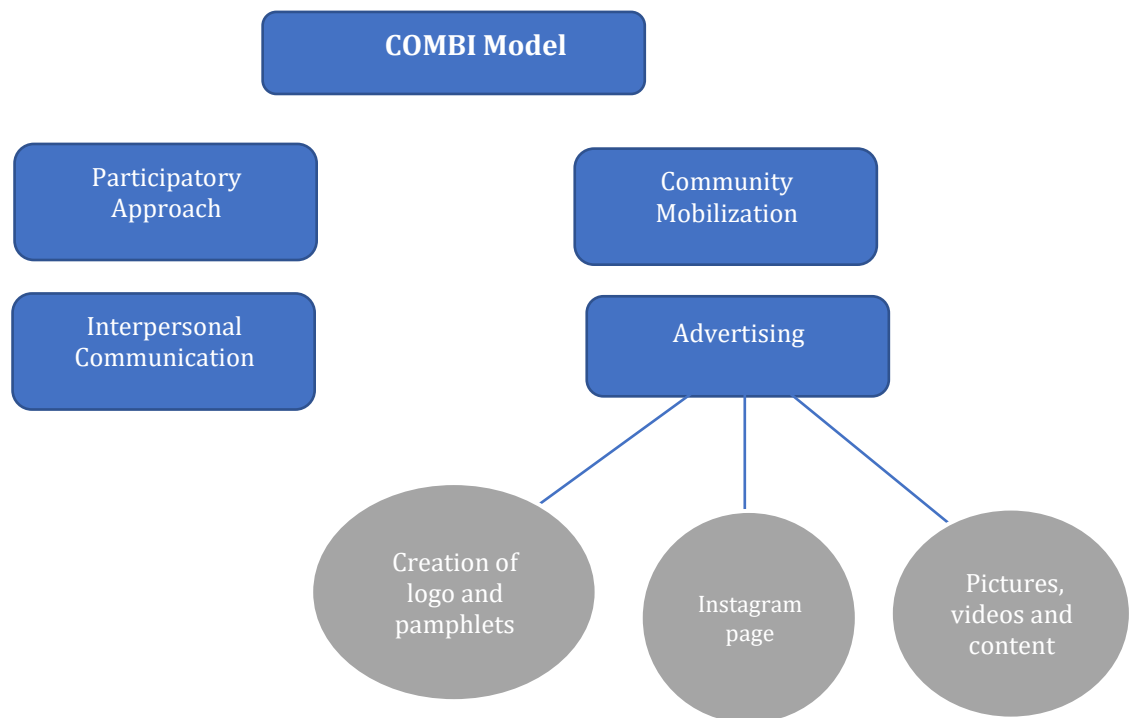


Figure 3: Communication for Behavioral Impact Model

## Results And Discussion

The objectives of the operation were completely met, and the project is predicted to become more stable if scope is increased. A smart e-commerce solution was given to the handicraft manufacturers and revenue was also generated from it. It was difficult to generate revenue at the start, however, after some time the products started to get some attention. This was mostly done due to Instagram sponsored posts which allowed greater penetration among the potential customers based on preferred demographics. The sponsor and targeting services of Instagram offer reasonable prices to reach a maximum number of audiences. For Rs. 500, the reach was up to 5000 people based on the preferred demographics. All correspondence with the customers was done on the Instagram page. The page direct messages provided a one-on-one channel for communicating with our customers. So, the finding suggested Handicrafts can help achieve an optimal model of sustainable development through a subtle combination of both, indigenous and modern knowledge considering the resources and potential of the place via digital platform.

Moreover, the participatory approach proved to be an affective method for artisans' progression and familiarity with the new tech platforms. The involvement of the key stakeholders of the targeted families at early stages provided a closer outlook on difficulties they face in the sale of their products. The project showed positive indicators of sustainability, since revenue was generated and the handicraft manufacturers were interested in exploring an opportunity which could provide them with an alternative means to sell the product and end their exploitation. Since the operations and running costs are very low, hence risk is minimal. There is more opportunity and less risk involved. The artisans received orders as well, which proves that audience/masses are interested in these kinds of crafts. It's evident that digital is future, this project's future is also digital means of communication, as we are incorporating machine-aided communication, i.e. through Instagram page.

The outcome of the study concluded that it is possible to alleviate poverty by using digital methods. Digital technology, communication for development projects can indeed

bring prosperity and Behavior change in the lives of people. Revenue can be generated, and we can think of it as an untapped market. Since the future of shopping is online, e-commerce is the way of the future, business entities can strategically place themselves online so that when the Pakistani society fully adopts online shopping, they can bear the maximum profits rather than loss.

Usage of digital methods can put an end to exploitative regime by removing the middlemen from the process, as the digital platforms will be acting as a bridge between the provider and purchaser. It empowers both the seller and the buyer. This can challenge the exploitative regimes, by establishing a system where people themselves are empowered enough so that they do not need middlemen to provide them with customer base.

## **Conclusion**

Conclusively, based on extensive research and results, the main reason behind the socio-economic vulnerability is the exploitation of the weaker segments of society. That proves the standpoint of the Marxist approach that the exploitation by the powerful creates fragmentations among the haves and have nots. So, the solution is to eradicate the exploitation regime through different techniques and strategies with the help of developmental theories, approaches and models.

There is however one drawback, i.e. the manufacturers are still not using the digital methods themselves since they are not well versed in ICT and computers. Because of the higher rates of illiteracy there remains a chance that someone else might exploit them until they themselves operate these platforms. To encounter this issue developmental strategies could be planned to conduct training sessions in which the artisans will be taught how to use the digital platforms for business.

## **Recommendations**

1. In future the scope should be expanded to other social media sites and networks and platforms, in other cities as well, apart from Rawalpindi only.
2. Moreover, this project initially targeted three families only, however, in future the reach towards the artisans recommends being expanded by involving the artisans of the underdeveloped areas as well to make the socio-economic conditions of these deserving folk crafters.
3. Furthermore, the targeted handicrafts are very specific in present study, In future other forms of handicrafts, e.g. calligraphy, Bed Wears, handmade chappals etc. should be involved.

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