Informality of Media Freelancers in Indonesia: Motives and Prospects

by Jandy Luik

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Abstract

This article presents our analysis of the nature of informality of media freelancers and its implications to creative workers. Employing a series of 15 interviews, we offer an interpretive understanding through the subjective experience of the Indonesian media freelancers. Accordingly, we analyse the participants' responses in four dimensions of informality: personal, professional, technological and social. This analysis brings up a discussion about the flexibility, challenges and opportunities of working as a media freelancer. Specifically, three themes emerged from our discussion: motivations of doing freelance, managing 'uncertainty' through creativity and self-management, and the importance of social–technological infrastructure. Considering the demographic bonus in Indonesia, we suggest a future research agenda towards the potentials of informality of media freelancers. This future direction would shed light on whether the informality, on the one hand, can lead to the casualization of work, or, on the other hand, can lead to the idea of flexibility and self-management of media freelancers.

Keywords

Media freelancers, informality of media freelancers, informality dimensions, social-technological infrastructure, media communication

Introduction

Although the critical understanding of freelance media workers has been studied in terms of problematising the legality of journalistic content produced by stringers in Indonesia (Santoso & Lestari, 2017), there is an underexplored research space in understanding the nature of working as freelancers directly through the subjective experience of the media freelancers themselves.

This study, therefore, offers an interpretive understanding about the *informality* of the media profession from the viewpoint of (media) freelancers in Indonesia. We situate informality as the kind of work that is flexible and not bounded by a long-term permanent contract with a specific company. In other words, this is the kind of work carried out by a freelancer who is 'a worker who is self-employed or contracted to do short-term assignments for one or more individual clients rather than works as a

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permanent employee of a company' (Salamon, 2019). Moreover, from a more global–historical perspective, the shifting of work from the Industrial era to the post-Industrial era raises a concern, for example, 'the substantial growth of freelancing, raises questions about the trajectory of its ongoing evolution and the narratives that underpin and legitimate it' (Popiel, 2017). Conceptually, informality has a processual meaning in the sense that this informality can have different kinds of 'formalised' manifestations (Luik, 2020; Luik et al., 2018). This concept of informality is informed by 'proceeding from the *middle*' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), in which they write: 'It's not easy to see things in the middle, rather than looking down on them from above or up at them from below, or from left to right or right to left: try it, you'll see that everything changes'. However, this article does not attempt to prove or disprove their assertion; rather, our purpose here is to underpin the meaning of *informality* through the reflective experience of media freelancers.

We employ the case of media freelancers in Indonesia to analyse this informality in media and creative industries. With various archetypes of media communication in the digital era (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001), media freelancers are provided with avenues to reach diverse audiences, and one of the challenges for communication researchers is to understand the producers in this 'dramatic fragmentation of media productions' (Croteau, 2006). Moreover, we decide to study the informality of media freelancers because of the emergence of various 'media professions' (Deuze, 2007) in this digital era.

Indonesia's freelancing landscape took our attention because of two factors: the statistical growth of freelancing in the country and the growing attention of media freelancers and related stakeholders in opening the discourse around their working situation. From the BPS-Statistics Indonesia's *Labor Force Situation* (February 2019), Indonesia has 129.36 million workforce who are working, and the report also states that 5.88 million are freelancers (or, 4.55%). Similar data have been collected by an Indonesian freelancing platform that the number of freelancers in 2019 increased to 16% from the previous year. These numbers seem to represent a promising discourse around freelancing in Indonesia despite the working situations experienced by some of the freelancers. In a discussion held in a 'creative hub' in Indonesia, a number of media freelancers expressed the issues surrounding their work such as the need for formal working contracts and their enforcement; how they propose and settle on their fees during 'pitching'; how they manage the intensive timeline; and the issues of welfare, gender and workers' rights (C20 Library and Collabtive, 2019).

These backgrounds on our motivation to understand the informality, the statistics published by the above-mentioned entities and working challenges of media freelancers contribute to our main question of this study: *how do media freelancers perceive the nature of the informality of their work*? This question led us to conduct a qualitative study by interviewing a number of media freelancers in Indonesia. We position this empirical study as a starting point for developing a working categorisation of the nature of informality perceived by the study participants. Furthermore, we analyse the meaning and implications of this perceived informality in the wider context of freelancers in media industries.

We also position our study to contribute to the efforts of understanding the nature of creative-oriented freelance work. As our field is very much connected with human creativity, freelancers have been playing a key creative role in the creative communication processes. Based on a study of creative industries (firms and freelancers) in London, Mould et al. (2014) argue that although freelancers are a crucial and significant part of the creative industries, and often conduct the more creative aspects of the work, they remain largely 'invisible'. Another similar effort to understand the nature of freelance is a study of freelance journalists in Europe. Nies and Pedersini (2003, p. 20) conclude that 'freelancers constitute an important part of media and play a major role for freedom and quality of the press and media', and freelancers' status should be strengthened. Thus, these two studies have signified the *important nature* of freelancers in the creative and media works, including creative communications, and the freelancers themselves should be made 'visible' and strengthened.

Nevertheless, in terms of the *informal nature* of the working practices of freelancers themselves, we find that there is still room for further exploration. Informality may involve a short period of working arrangements and flexibility in beneficial ways (Edstrom & Ladendorf, 2012; Massey & Elmore, 2011; Storey et al., 2005). However, a form of informal arrangement also implies a 'precarious situation' for the workers (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Neilson & Rossiter, 2008). Furthermore, from the study of media work of a cohort of Media Production graduates of a UK university, Wallis et al. (2020, p. 190) argue that the nature of 'media careers may also come with a limited shelf-life', and even more, they also suggest that 'now, more than ever, media work is being skewed towards the young'. We pay particular attention to this specific age and 'shelf-life' facet that factors a decision of a freelancer to be (continuously) involved with freelance work in Indonesia. Thus, we are keen to understand the nature of informality of freelance work from the Indonesian young freelancers themselves to enrich our understanding of the working practices. The knowledge gained from this study will inform us better in responding to the informality of freelance work in Indonesia. Specifically, we would like to detail our contribution by discussing the following questions: *what are the drivers for these freelancers to be involved in freelance media work?* And, *how do they view the future of their freelance work?* By discussing these questions, here, in this article, our study contributes to making the subjective experience of freelancers in Indonesia visible, which can lead to subsequent supportive efforts from academia and policymakers.

We organise this article according to the following structure. We, first, present our conceptual background of the informality of media freelancers, and the interpretive understanding. In our 'Method' section, we describe our data collection and analysis processes. In the next section, we present the findings though our categorisation and contextualise these findings in the discussions of informality of a profession. We conclude by presenting the implications of this analysis to our future research agenda on media freelancers.

Media Freelancers

Informality and Flexibility of Media Freelancers

We define informality in the context of freelance work as the arrangement of work that is characterised by being project-based, flexible and self-entrepreneurial. This nature of informality allows media freelancers to work from one project to another project, or to work in several projects in a relatively narrow time frame. Freelance working allows the freelancers to work on a variety of projects, and for a range of clients, and that puts them in a position to (in theory) refuse unattractive offers, walk away from difficult clients and renegotiate impossible deadlines (Storey et al., 2005). However, while this is not always the case, as the market is too open, it has been observed that in the context of media workers, 'it was too easy to enter the work space, and with pressure on fees, newcomers or those desperate for work were prepared to accept low fee rates or poor working conditions' (Storey et al., 2005).

The informality of media freelancers is often characterised by the flexibility related to the working life of an individual. Freelancers can manage their own time in which they can have more flexible lives: they have the opportunity to take longer vacations, to have home-based working life with caring responsibilities or other personal commitments, and for being flexible towards the needs of their families (Edstrom & Ladendorf, 2012; Storey et al., 2005). For example, in the survey conducted on women freelance journalists in the USA, most of the respondents stated that freelance journalism is 'the kind of job they want', 'an ideal job', and that they were 'satisfied with freelancing as a job and like it'; in other words, 'For women, self-employment as freelance news workers may function as a refuge; as a "place" where they can find their own right mix of work and family' (Massey & Elmore, 2011).

However, 'flexibility' itself is a double-edged sword. Besides those 'benefits' mentioned earlier, a qualitative study of freelance journalists in northern Sweden found that 'the informants' felt they needed to work even when they were sick, in order to meet deadlines', and that they 'experienced unsteady flows of work and income, and spoke about dips in work supply, such as sometimes going two months in the autumn without work' (Edstrom & Ladendorf, 2012).

Besides the flexibility and project-based nature of media freelancing, entrepreneurism becomes a unique quality. Specifically, this quality is related to the professional role of freelancers as (self)-entrepreneurs and idealists. As entrepreneurs, the freelancers are driven by 'innovation and successful entrepreneurship', and they take this path because 'they did not want the insecurity and bad working conditions of short-term contract work' (Mathisen, 2017). While as idealists, they are motivated by 'the opportunity to work with the kind of journalism they find important, even if it does not always pay well, such as documentaries, books, art projects, and often non-commercial projects related to the ideals of journalism' (Mathisen, 2017).

Moreover, with this self-entrepreneurial drive, freelancers also engage in reputation management or personal branding. These self-branding practices are largely conducted on social media as seen in the freelance media workers in London and Milan, in which 'self-branding becomes an investment in social relationships with expected return for the acquisition of a reputation' (Gandini, 2016). For example, freelance journalists utilise social media to 'build audiences and brands while reinforcing and repairing journalistic norms, including transparency' (Holton, 2016). Similarly, in the study of Dutch and Flemish employed and freelance journalists on Twitter, social media platforms have created an avenue for freelance journalists to build their own independent persona rather than 'names or initial under articles' (Brems et al., 2017).

Therefore, informality of media freelancers is associated with their flexibility working from one project to another project and of managing work–life time, and freelancers prefer to see themselves 'as entrepreneurs and creatives, innovators and change makers'—rather than a precarious, freelance working class that opposes capitalism and its latest advancements' (Gandini, 2016). We see that this viewpoint is related to discourses of entrepreneurism that contribute to the attractiveness of freelance lifestyle and of working under short-term projects and personal goals (Edstrom & Ladendorf, 2012). Consequently, this informality of media freelancers is related with the idea of an ideal neoliberal worker: 'flexible, unattached, and adaptable' (Cohen, 2015).

Interpretive Understanding of Media Freelancers

Studies related to Indonesian freelance media workers have predominantly covered the critical ground, for example, problematising the legality of the content created by the *stringers* (Santoso & Lestari, 2017) and framing the stringer practices through commodification and exploitation (Santoso & Lestari, 2016). By definition, a stringer is a freelancer 'who does not work as a staff member of a news organization' and who 'is paid for each piece that an organization publishes or broadcasts rather than a regular salary' (Salamon, 2019). Besides those studies, in contributing to the discourses and efforts to make freelancers more visible, we offer to frame the informality of media freelancers through interpretive understanding.

We refer to an interpretive understanding as an inquiry that relies on the subjective experience of the participants themselves, for example, in this study from freelance media workers. The nature of this understanding is constructed through the individual and collective reconstructions, and accumulated through vicarious experience (Guba et al., 2018). That is to say, we offer the understanding that is based on 'the analysis and interpretation, through verstehen or empathetic understanding, of the meaning that people give to their actions' (Jankowski & Wester, 2002). Therefore, this understanding relies on the

subjective experience of media freelancers, for example, their motivations, their actual experiences working in the field and how they manage their work and their clients, and how they view their work.

Our interpretive understanding, here, is related to the idea that freelance media workers themselves have their reasons and plans in facing this informality. Previous studies of women freelancer journalists who have left traditional employer-based news jobs for self-employment have contributed to the argument that 'freelance journalism can be more family-friendly than organised journalism' (Massey & Elmore, 2011). Other drives of doing freelance can be identified from the study of freelancers who are part of a union. There is the drive to selling content and running one's own, and the drive of 'working in-depth on large-scale, non-commercial projects that they find professionally satisfying' (Mathisen, 2017). Besides this understanding, we are interested to know more about the specific drives or motivations of young, non-union-based freelancers. Gaining insights on why they want to be part of this informal working arrangement will make us better informed to think about the kind of support offered for these young freelancers.

Furthermore, another facet of informality is the sustainability of the creative work itself. The 'project-based turn' (Mould et al., 2014) of economic activities, including the creative industries, has allowed freelancers to secure more projects. There is a sense of opportunity that freelancers become more visible and more significant in the creative industries (Mould et al., 2014). At the same time, in strengthening freelancers' positions, there is a call for the recognition of freelance status, improving the protection needed, establishing minimum conditions, improving social security and ensuring the possibility of collective bargaining (Nies & Pedersini, 2003). Nevertheless, young media freelancers' views on the issue of future prospects have received less attention from researchers. Filling this gap with the subjective experience of the 'newbies' will enrich the dimensions of informality.

Method

We used a qualitative approach, in particular, we used an interpretive–constructivist view (Creswell, 2009; Guba et al., 2018; Jankowski & Wester, 2002; Jensen, 2002a), to bring up an understanding of freelance media workers in Indonesia. In our study, we define media freelancers as those who engage in the creation of media content. Table 1 summarises our study participants' profile in terms of their sex, their kinds of work or expertise, and whether they have or do not have other jobs—a piece of information that is significant to our discussion regarding the meaning of *informality* from the participants' viewpoint. Moreover, we triangulated our findings with a manager of a media company who had been working with the freelance workers. For the journalistic content, this practice of freelancing was informally established with the connection with local correspondences (personal communication with a manager of a media company, 2020). For the other kinds of content, this practice was observed through the presence of platforms for digital freelancers. Based on our initial observation, we identified the kinds of media-related freelance work categories: journalist, videographer, photographer, writer, graphic designer, content creator and social media manager.

Interviews were from our data collection method (Jankowski & Wester, 2002; Jensen, 2002b); in these interviews, we explored questions that related to the informality of this profession. By informality, we refer to the practice of working to create content that is typified by being project-based, flexible and self-entrepreneurial. During the interviews conducted by our research assistant, the semi-structured questions covered the following informality-related topics: the motivations of working as a freelancer, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on freelancing, the nature of the profession in terms of its growth opportunities and its sustainability challenges, the use of digital technologies in supporting freelancing activities, the impact of co-location spaces in the urban area and the social aspects of freelancing

Table 1. Study Participants

Participants	Kinds of Work/Expertise	Has Other Jobs?
P1 (female)	Writer	No
P2 (female)	Logo designer and branding	Yes
P3 (male)	Photographer	Yes
P4 (female)	Writer	Not yet
P5 (female)	Writer	Not yet
P6 (female)	Logo and product designer	Not yet
P7 (female)	Content creator	Yes
P8 (female)	Content creator	Yes
P9 (female)	Journalist	Not yet
P10 (female)	Logo and product designer	Not yet
P11 (male)	Journalist	Yes
P12 (male)	Videographer	Not yet
P13 (male)	Content creator	Not yet
P14 (male)	Logo and product designer	Yes
P15 (female)	Writer	Yes

Source: The authors.

profession in the context of Indonesian culture. As discussed, we aim to gather data from young freelancers in Indonesia, and our interviewees (age range: 20–35) came from different cities. Fifteen freelancers, recruited with snowballing techniques, were interviewed during the third quarter and the fourth quarter of 2020. Twelve interviews were conducted through online communication channels, and three interviews were conducted through in-person mode with a strict social distancing protocol. The freelancers permitted us to do audio recording during the interviews. In total, the interview transcripts contained 12.019 words.

We, then, inductively analysed our data to construct the four dimensions of the informality of freelancing. We followed the procedures of the grounded theory approach to explain the process, action or interaction on a topic (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Creswell, 2007). Specifically, we employed open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). This approach allowed us to be sensitive to the iterative nature of data collection and analysis, and to recruit subsequent interviews (theoretical sampling) with different expertise and social–technological characteristics. For example, our initial coding through breaking down the results from our earlier interview found that 'long-term involvement' and 'the future of freelancing' were part of the 'personal dimension' of the informality category. However, as we gained more data and more samples to corroborate the initial categories and sub-categories, we found that 'long-term involvement' and 'future of freelancing' were part of 'personal dimension' and 'professional dimension', respectively. In ensuring the validity of our data, we maintained constant comparative analysis during the iterative data collection and analysis processes. Furthermore, in triangulating the coding results, we asked our research assistant to independently apply the result of selective coding into the transcripts. Finally, we, then, organised all the coded categories (or, in our study: dimensions) to a 'core' category of the nature of the informality of freelancers.

Findings and Discussion

We organised our participants' responses into four dimensions: *personal*, *professional*, *technological* and *social dimensions* to understand our participants' subjective experiences regarding the informality of work as a media freelancer.

Nature of the Informality

Personal Dimension

The personal dimension refers to the motivations of our study's participants and the perceived long-term 'involvement' of the participants, regarding the informal nature of working as media freelancers.

We identified participants' motivations for working as a freelancer. These included fit with their interest (*P5-writer*); make use of their idle time (*P2-logo designer & branding*; *P10-logo & product designer*; *P13-content creator*); opportunity offered by their peer (*P6-logo & product designer*; *writer*); their idealism for not working in a specific company or as a certain full-time professional (*P3-photographer*; *P4-writer*); gain more experiences (*P3-photographer*); and to pay for their bills (*P14-logo and product designer*). Furthermore, a common thread found from their responses was the idea of 'having more freedom' or flexibility that interested them the most. The participants said that having a degree of work management autonomy gave them the ability to manage the time and place of their work (*P9-journalist*), gave them more space to explore their creativity and critical thinking (*P3-photographer*) and offered them the flexibility to take a side job as well as their permanent job (*P3-photographer*).

Another sub-theme of this personal dimension was the participants' responses regarding their long-term involvement in freelancing. Our participants provided us with two different answers. On the one hand, for the 'I have set a time limit' camp, they planned to quit freelancing when they reached a certain age (e.g., *P11-journalist said* '35 years old'), when they decide to start a family and have kids (*P4-writer*) or when they have secured a permanent job (*P15-writer*). On the other hand, the 'I have not set a limit yet' camp stated that they found working as a freelancer satisfying, and they wanted to be there longer (*P9-journalist*; *P10-logo and product designer*) and, for as long as there are still job offers, then would take it, since doing freelance was a 'side job' *(P8-content creator)*. This kind of involvement was also reflected by the participants' answer: 'not yet' to the question of 'has other jobs?' (see Table 1).

In relation to a contemporary challenge, that is, the COVID-19 pandemic, participants mostly agreed that they were affected. Freelancers whose work needed them to be in specific outside locations (such as freelance photographers, journalists, videographers and content creators) acknowledged the impact to their jobs. They described the pandemic's impact on their work. These impacts included cancellation or rescheduling their agreed projects (*P3-photographer*; *P12-videographer*); having to reject job offers from locations with higher COVID-19 exposure (*P8-content creator*); improving their working methods due to restrictions in the field (*P9-journalist*); and, also, having to make an adjustment to their fee (*P14-logo and product designer*). In a different situation, only a few participants whose freelancing work were primarily online-based like logo designing and online branding (*P2-logo designer and branding*), and content creation (*P13-content creator*), acknowledged that they were not affected.

Professional Dimension

The second category is the professional dimension that refers to the participants' perceived characteristics of working informally as freelancers like 'career' development and the future of the profession.

Our participants agreed that there was no 'formal' career development in doing freelance, but they agreed that there was a fair 'classification' of freelancers. For example, one freelancer (*P7-writer*) said that the quality of a freelancer's portfolio and its received social media engagement affected the reputation of that freelancer, which then influenced the range of remuneration offered. Two of the participants (*P3-photographer and P12-videographer*) provided a more self-defined answer that the level of a freelancer was defined by the freelancers themselves; it depended on how the influencers valued themselves. Another related answer provided by one participant (*P6-logo and product designer*) told that although there was no 'formal' career development, the formal training or educational experiences (certificate of completions) could also be an alternative to consider the level of a freelancer. Furthermore, P6 said

that, often, the fee offered to a prospective client, or fee range, implies the level of experience of a freelancer.

Concerning the future of freelancing, that is, in responding to the topic of job security, participants disagreed that freelancing lacks long-term prospects. Our participants *(P2-logo designer and branding*; *P11-journalist*; *P3-photographer)* argued that the creative nature of the profession would equip the freelancers to make improvements and find creative solutions to face future challenges regarding job security. They believed that freelancers would be able to maintain their clients and be open for new work opportunities. Moreover, our study participants responded back by offering a deconstruction of this notion of 'lacking future prospects' through capacity building to equip themselves, do networking and keep doing their creative work. Particularly, one participant (*P11-journalist*) clarified that notion of insecurity was merely an outsider's construction; *P11* emphasised on the flexibility of a multi-skilled freelancer working for different jobs. In a similar tone, another participant (*P5-writer*) said that freelancing these days was promising and different than before; *P5* emphasised that although there was a financially tough beginning, *P5*'s career prospects as a freelance writer had developed better despite there being no fixed amount of monthly income.

Our participants also highlighted external factors that affect the future of freelancing such as the growth of general industries that need media-related jobs, the growing practices of freelancing in media industries and the globalisation of jobs. One of the participants *(P7-content creator)* noted the growth of businesses and products that needed media-related work in digital media—particularly creating content and branding for social media. Interestingly, in the media industries themselves, another participant (*P3-photographer*) highlighted the increasing practices of industries employing freelancers or part-timers due to reasons like efficiency. Regarding globalisation of jobs, our participants *(P7-content creator*; *P8-content creator)* raised the concern that the competition for securing a freelance job would increase, but, at the same time, job opportunities would also increase. However, one of the participants (*P8-content creator*) expressed that the number of jobs and number of freelancers contribute to the future of freelancing; less jobs mean not many freelancers can secure a job, while another participant (*P4-writer*) said that less freelancers (in a situation where freelancers shifted to more permanent 9-to-5 jobs) would threaten the future of freelancing too.

Another subject related to the future of freelancing is the flexibility of working. Participants (*P3-photographer*; *P9-journalist*) said that freelancing allows for working from different physical locations without a requirement to stay permanently in an office and to do 'check-clock'. In other words, that working flexibility is one of the working preferences of the creative young people. However, regarding this flexibility, one participant (*P3-photographer*) warned the threat from within the freelancers themselves—that the tendency to stay in one's comfort zone would jeopardise this working situation.

Technological Dimension

In this third dimension, we refer to the participants' view of recent technological development in supporting the informal nature of working as media freelancers.

Some of our participants were not aware of the presence of the different kinds of freelancing platforms. For example, four participants (*P3-photographer*, *P5-writer*, *P6-logo and product designer*, *and P7-content creator*) acknowledged that they were not aware of these digital platforms. However, one participant (*P5-writer*) used social media like LinkedIn to build a working profile and Instagram to build reputation. Similarly, another participant (*P11-journalist*) utilised Instagram as a medium for portfolio.

In contrast, one participant (*P2-logo designer and branding*) was familiar with freelancing platforms and had been doing freelance works from these platforms. Through experiences of working with two platforms, the participant pointed out that each platform had a different system. For example, the

presence/absence of entry test during the signing up and registering to the platform, the option for the 'employer' to set preferences in creating a job offer and the probability of securing a job for different kinds of freelancers—that is, a freelancer's rating affected the probability of securing a job.

In relation to securing a freelance job through digital platforms (social media and freelancing platform), participants *(P2-logo designer and branding*; *P8-content creator)* gave a similar response that building a good first impression and maintaining a good relationship with clients were the best strategy. Moreover, participants (*P7-content creator*; *P8-content creator)* emphasised the use of social media platforms for their business purposes. They had to understand followers' preferences and engage with followers for increasing the possibility to secure freelance jobs.

Social Dimension

Finally, we categorised participants' responses as a social dimension that refers to the relation between the informal nature of media freelancers and the social aspects such as disclosure to the public as a freelancer, building public image and the presence of other infrastructure for freelancers' interactions.

Our study participants had a split-response concerning disclosing that they were working as a freelancer. Participants (*P15-writer*; *P3-photographer*; *P8-content creator*; *P7-content creator)* revealed to the public that they did freelance works; for instance, one participant (*P5-writer)* presented himself as a freelance writer to emphasise the skill set. They did this to build their identity and to promote their works. While other participants *(P10-logo and product designer*; *P13-content creator)* hesitantly opened up their work to the public because they felt that they had no strong identity yet, and they had just started doing a couple of freelance works.

In terms of reputation building, participants acknowledged the importance of reputation and then provided us with their strategies. Besides utilising digital platforms like profile account in freelancing platforms and social media (*P2-logo designer and branding*; *P12-videographer*; *P8-content creator)*, creating websites (*P3-photographer)* and joining WhatsApp groups *(P11-journalist)*, our study participants *(P10 and P14, both logo and product designers)* said that positive word of mouth was another strategy to build and increase their reputation. However, other participants (*P13-content creator*; *P15-writer)* argued that improving oneself first through gaining more experience and giving meaningful work would parallelly increase one's reputation.

Also, our participants (*P2-logo designer and branding*; *P3-photographer*; *P5-writer*; *P7-content creator*; *P9 and 11-journalists*; *P12-videographer)* were aware of the presence of infrastructure that facilitated social interactions among freelancers. Of these participants, only one of them (*P3-photographer)* was actively involved in spaces such as creative hubs, co-working spaces and other kinds of forums. Furthermore, the participant argued that these kinds of infrastructure have a potential to form a union that supports freelancers; in other words, the participant said that the establishment of local-level infrastructure would benefit freelancers in their localities.

Finally, we organised our aforementioned categorical findings into Table 2.

Discussion

This section discusses the meanings of informality in working as a media freelancer from the point of view of *millennial* participants in Indonesia. We offer three points of discussion: (a) motivations of doing freelance; (b) managing 'uncertainty' by combining creativity and self-management; and (c) social–technological infrastructure.

Table 2. Informality of Media Freelancers

Personal Dimension	Professional Dimension	Technological Dimension	Social Dimension
Motivations of working as a freelancer: • *fit with their interest,* • *make use of the idle time,* • *opportunity offered by peers,* • *idealism for not working in a specific company or as a certain full-time professional;* • *gain more experience and* • *to pay the bills.*	No 'formal' career but fairly a way of 'classifying' of freelancers: • *freelancer's portfolios influence the level of reputation,* • *the freelancers themselves define their level and* • *formal trainings or education completed influence the level of a freelancer.*	The use of used social media such as: • *LinkedIn to build working profile,* • *Instagram to build reputation and* • *utilised Instagram as a medium for portfolio.*	Disclose the profession to public as a freelancer: • *revealed to public that they do freelance works and* • *hesitantly opened up their work to public because they felt that they had no strong profile identity yet.*
Long-term involvement in freelancing ('I have set the time limit'): • *planned to quit freelancing when they reach a certain age,* • *when they decide to start a family and have kids and* • *when they have secured a permanent job*	The future of freelancing (regarding job security): • *freelancers can find creative solutions for future challenges,* • *maintaining the quality of work and improving themselves,* • *notion of insecurity was an outsider's construction,* • *freelancing these days was promising and* • *the flexibility of working is attractive*	The use of freelance platforms: • *one platform has different system form another,* • *the presence/absence of entry test when signing-up to the platform,* • *the option for the 'employer' to set the preferences in creating a job offer and* • *the probability of securing a job for different kinds of freelancers.*	Building public image through: • *positive word of mouth,* • *creating websites,* • *joining instant messaging groups and* • *creating a meaningful work.*
Long-term involvement in freelancing ('I have not set a limit yet'): • *they wanted to be there longer and* • *as long as there are still job offers.*	External factors that affect the future of freelancing: • *the growth of general industries that require media-related jobs,* • *the growing practices of freelancing in media industries and* • *the globalisation of jobs (coming in/out the country).*	Securing freelance jobs through digital platforms: • *(less) aware of the presence of freelance digital platforms,* • *building a good first impression and maintaining a good relationship and* • *understanding followers' preferences and engaging with followers to increase the possibility of securing jobs.*	The presence of social infrastructure for freelancers' interactions: • *involve in spaces like creative hubs and other forums,* • *social infrastructure have a potential to support freelancers and* • *local-level infrastructure would benefit freelancers in their localities.*

Source: The authors.

Why Freelancing?

We suggest thinking of the informality of media professions as a 'means' for maintaining independence and idealism, and as a welfare vehicle. First, working as a media freelancer, which creates either journalistic or other kinds of content, is driven by individual values or passion. The most obvious one from our study is the idealistic nature of freelancers who want to achieve a goal that is not accommodated through the organisational formal structure. Besides this motivation, working on something that the freelancers are passionate about is a driving force emerging from our participants' responses. However, this personal value-driven freelancing is not the only reason why our participants decided to take freelancing jobs.

The second reason for engaging in freelancing is what we call a welfare vehicle. We offer this second motivational point to capture different answers from our participants as presented in Table 2. We see that those responses convey the meaning of informality of media freelancing as an opportunity for gaining financial benefits or for increasing their chance of securing other jobs in the future. For a part of our participants, considerably still in the stage of seeking another job opportunity (as seen in Table 1), working as a freelancer is considered as a starting point to build their portfolio and work experiences.

The significance of these drives to our conceptualisation of informality of media professions is that those drives influence the way the freelancers perceive their freelancing jobs, including their long-term plan. The informality of working as a freelancer attracts an individual with a particular drive to engage in these professions of media communication. At its basics, human needs may range from physiological needs to self-actualisation needs (Maslow, 1970), and different human motivations like freedom and autonomy and self-realisation may become important for highly skilled freelancers (Stel & de Vries, 2015). Here, we discuss the young freelancers' views in our study in terms of doing freelance as a manifestation of their idealism or of their welfare aims, and we contend that the motivations of doing freelance define the way the freelancers perceive the informal nature of this profession.

Yet, our study reveals that the freelancers themselves realise the challenge of future 'uncertainty' or in terms of job security, although there were participants who had different views regarding 'uncertainty'. An implication of this split-view from our millennial participants is that one should prepare oneself—which will be our second discussion point.

Combining Creativity and Self-management

In this section, we offer to think that informality represents an entrepreneurial culture that relies on individual creativity and self-management. Media freelancers from our study acknowledge the need to prepare themselves for facing the challenges such as the availability of jobs, competition with other freelancers and managing their projects. Successfully addressing these challenges could impact the efforts of the studied media freelancers to reduce the uncertainty they face.

Moreover, media freelancers realise the importance of both creativity and self-management. Not only giving the best work at their current projects, freelancers are also aware of the need to improve their skills to keep up with the changing requirements. Furthermore, freelancers need to equip themselves to manage their actual work and reputation. One of the concrete actions is the use of various digital channels for freelancers' self-branding (Brems et al., 2017; Gandini, 2016). Our study participants also highlighted the awareness and actions of reputation building as part of how they managed their persona. Developing a good reputation can contribute to how freelancers deal with the competitive nature of media careers, for example, the 'shelf life' of media careers (Wallis et al., 2020). In other words, they are the managers of themselves because they manage the work, the networks and relations with clients.

The meaning of informality seems to point in the direction of bringing out the best of freelancers in every situation. Either there are many simultaneous projects or no projects at all; they have to be responsible and be creative to find their way out. In a general sense, 'each individual is held responsible and accountable for his or her own actions and well-being' (Falnikar et al., 2019). One might argue that it is the way the work is because there are ups and downs; others may argue that freelancers should not be left alone, especially during difficult times—even more, at any time, the freelancers should get more structural support from the policymakers (Mould et al., 2014; Nies & Pedersini, 2003).

Social–Technological Infrastructure's Awareness and Impact

The presence of various infrastructure like social spaces (e.g., co-working space, creative hubs and discussion forums) and digital platforms (e.g., social media and freelance platforms) would ideally benefit the social interactions and reputation of freelancers and, in turn, would lead to the accumulation of their social capital.

Yet, a discussion point that emerged from our findings is an agenda towards increasing awareness of the presence and impact of social–technological infrastructure for media freelancers. This future direction will make a more socially networked type of media freelancing for the purpose of, for example, gaining information about a freelance job opening or succeeding in job negotiations—a situation that can be captured as 'network sociality' (Wittel, 2001). Particularly, in the type of job that relies on networking and word of mouth in the recruitment process that can contribute to gendered outcomes (Wreyford, 2015), freelancers' awareness of the social–technological infrastructure can contribute to the democratisation of access and opportunity. A possible future situation is to assess whether social media socially enhance or compensate (Gadekar & Ang, 2020) the freelancers.

Moreover, building freelancers' awareness of these infrastructure would increase the social capital of freelancers. Besides the individual efforts of building online persona and reputation, media freelancers' efforts in increasing their social capital would benefit them, for example, as found in a study conducted on the work environment in the UK film and TV industry, social capital 'provided access to work, guaranteed quality and helped to share skills and knowledge. It also offered a speed and flexibility unlikely to be matched by more formal systems' (Grugulis & Stoyanova, 2012).

In contextualising these three discussion themes with the context of Indonesia, particularly with its 'demographic bonus', we see that freelancing seems to gain more interest among the millennials. In this study, their responses to the informality reveal the flexibility, challenges and opportunities of working as a media freelancer. Our study has captured these dynamics of informality in the practical space. Simply put, 'demographic bonus' means a lot of job opportunities, and freelancing these days has its 'perks' that attract millennials in our study. However, there is still a subsequent concern that needs to be explained further that is related to the future of media freelancers in Indonesia in relation to the growth of the population or workforce. A concern that can open a discussion regarding what kind of support do the media freelancers need. Moreover, in a wider context, that concern can open a discussion regarding the informality of the media profession with different stakeholders. Informality of the media profession, on the one hand, may lead to the casualisation of work that involves the issues of, for example, job security and employment benefits. On the other hand, informality of the profession may lead to the idea of flexibility, creativity and self-management of the media freelancers. Either ways,

Mould (2018) warns us against creativity that is oppressed and exploiting creative (media and communication) workers.

Conclusion

This study revealed the meaning of informality to media freelancers in terms of perceiving flexibility, addressing the challenges and identifying the opportunities for further improvement. Furthermore, as a result of understanding the growth of freelancers in the media profession, we presented the nature of informality through the personal, professional, technological and social dimensions. To highlight the implications of this understanding, we, first, discussed the informality of the media profession through independency and idealism, and welfare drives. We, then, conceptualised that those drives influence the way the freelancers perceived their freelancing jobs, including their long-term plan. We also discussed the meaning of informality that pointed to the direction of bringing out the best of the freelancers in every situation. Media freelancers were expected to be responsible and be creative to find their way out during times of, for example, many simultaneous projects or no projects at all. Our last discussion point suggested an agenda towards increasing the media freelancers' awareness of the presence and impact of social–technological infrastructure. An agenda that can shape media freelancers to be more socially networked and can increase the social capital of media freelancers.

Conceptually, the results of this study expanded our understanding of the nature of freelance work. Besides previous studies' contributions on the important nature of freelancers, this study contributed to the conceptualisation of the informal nature of freelancers in our creative fields. Particularly, this article highlighted the dimensions of informality, personal motivations and prospects of freelance from the perspective of young (millennials) freelancers. With the awareness of the informal arrangement, flexibility and challenges of freelance, the freelancers described their views and plans. Our study, here, was based on certain characteristics of the sample; hence, we did not aim to generalise our findings to represent the whole Indonesian freelancers since there were different profiles of freelancers such as different age groups and experiences, operational domains (platform-based and non-platform-based) and expertise. Further studies may address these limitations and enrich the dimensions of informality that emerged from this study.

Moreover, our study can set a further research agenda in addressing the challenges of uncertainty faced by media freelancers in Indonesia, for example, in terms of the kinds of micro–macro interventions and social–technological interventions needed. In doing so, mapping the various practices of freelancing in different contexts and experience levels would be viewed as a fundamental starting point.

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Informality of Media Freelancers in Indonesia: Motives and Prospects