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Journal of Creative Communications

Volume 17 • Number 1 • 2022 • March

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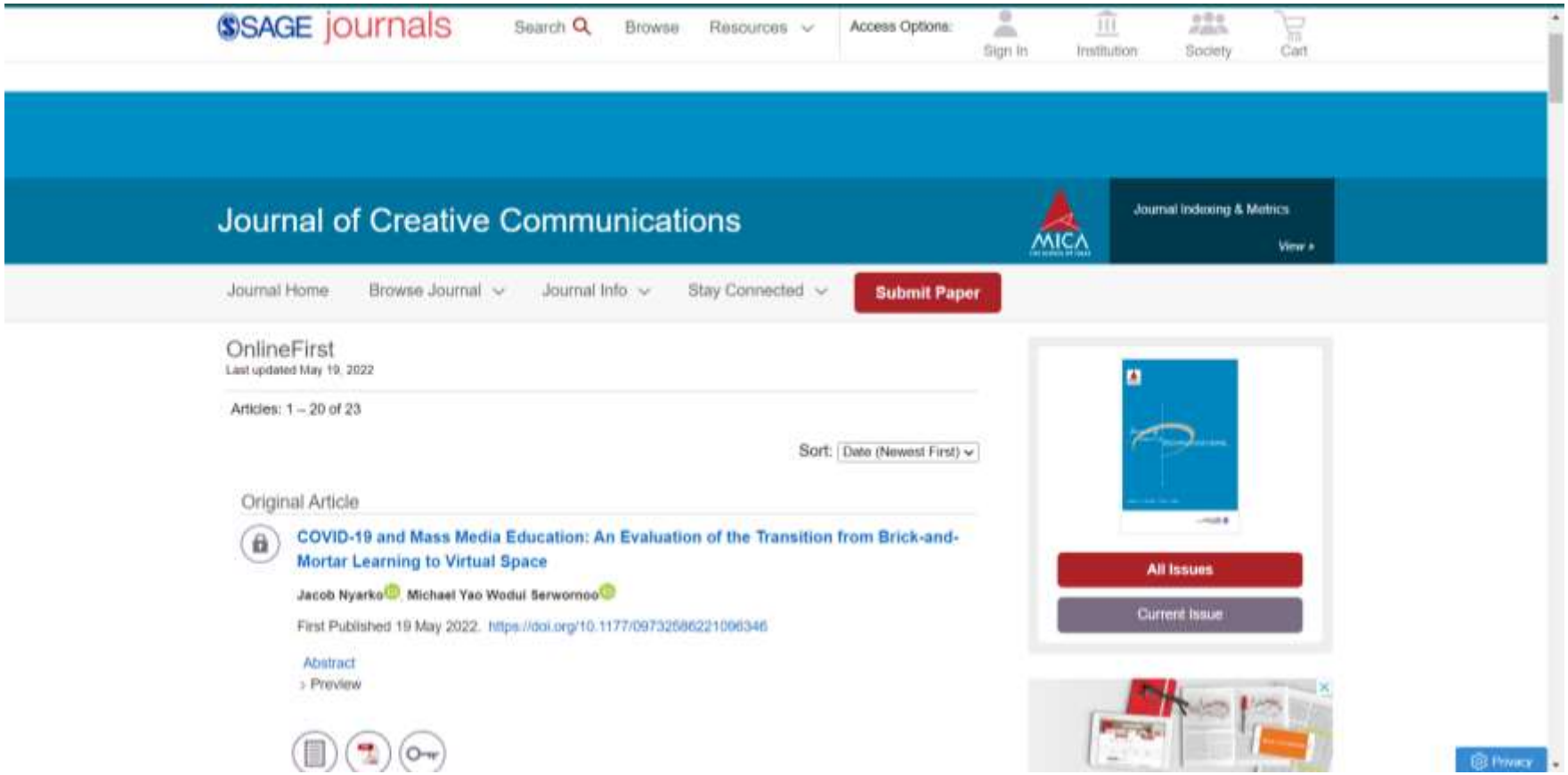

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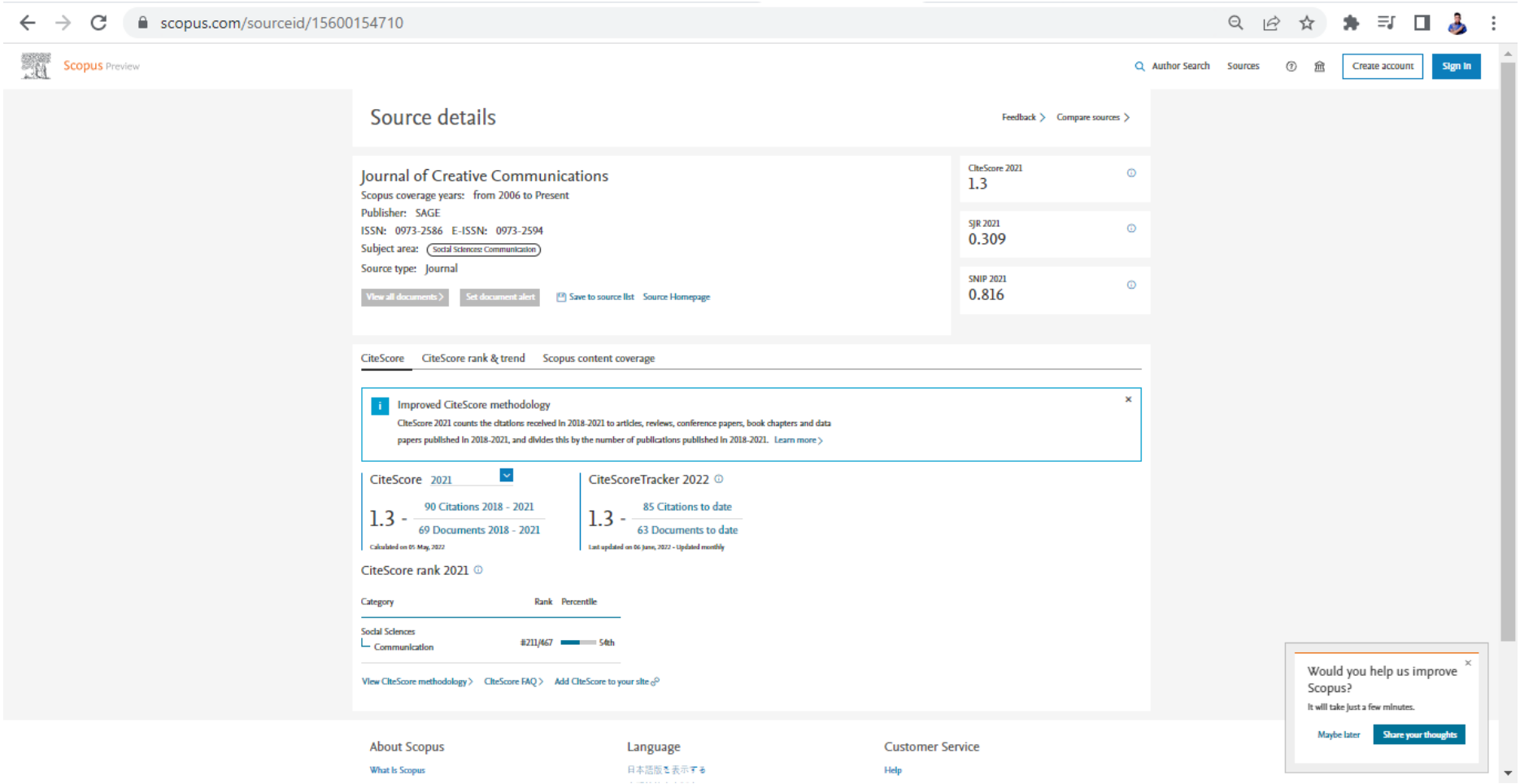
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Informality of Media Freelancers in Indonesia: Motives and Prospects

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DOI: 10.1177/0973258621050332
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Jandy E. Luik[1] and Agusly I. Aritonang[1]

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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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.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: This project was supported with funding by Petra Christian University, Indonesia.

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