An Exploration of How Sri Lankan Creative and Multimedia Freelancers Experience the Tension of Projecting a Competent Image

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Online freelancing falls under the category of "crowd work," which is a subset of the "gig economy." Securing a project relies on how freelancers present themselves to clients. Hence, freelancers show a competent image even without enough competency to perform certain gigs that may lead to develop an unfavorable image and/or potential feelings of depression. This phenomenon is under-explored. To fill this gap, this study aims to explore how Sri Lankan freelancers who are engaged in creative and multimedia-related projects experience the tension of projecting a competent image. The research contributes specifically to the gig working literature and provides practical insights for freelancers, platforms, and clients. An interpretive philosophy, inductive approach, and multiple case study strategy was adapted to conduct the research. Through purposive and snowball sampling, nine semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted, each lasting 40-55 minutes, with online freelancers who work on various macro-work platforms. The content analysis revealed that online freelancers in this field experience seven types of tensions due to projecting a competent image: account-related tensions, learning-related tensions, self-management-related tensions, communication-related tensions, client-related tensions, order-related tensions, and earning-related tensions. Tension in reviews, profiles, and performance reduction under account-related tension, provides a new perspective to the literature. Further, learning-related tensions, self-management related tensions, and communication-related tensions resulted in learning credibility tension, a phenomenon that has yet to be addressed in online freelancing. The findings reveal that online freelancers deploy several self-presentation strategies. It also highlights that it is challenging to work with female clients. Platforms should consider offering socializing programs, efficient feedback systems, and addressing power and information asymmetries to improve freelancers' job security. The mental health and wellbeing of freelancers should be a concern for both freelancers and government health officials. Additionally, skill development programs in language proficiency can help freelancers to mitigate communication-related tensions.

Keywords: *Competent image, Gig economy, Online freelancers, Self-presentation, Tensions*