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The impact of the visual image of freelance on the identity formation of the freelance professional under contemporary socio-economic situation (based on image analysis in English- and Russian-language segments of the Internet)

Abstract. In the article, freelance is treated as a special form of employment, emerged at the crossroads of global trend to self-employment and spread of remote employment with new information and communication technologies (ICT). topicality of research is supported by the fact that the market of online employment in the world is forecast to grow at least from USD 1.6 billion in 2013 to USD 16 billion by 2020 or even more significantly - by USD 46 billion. About 20% of jobs are projected to become virtual in Russia by 2020, while gross economic effect from remote employment will exceed USD 26.3 billion.

Positive identity of the freelance professional is considered as a significant factor in its adaptability, socio-economic efficiency and progressing in professional terms. The paper is aimed to disclose visual image impact of Internet freelance on the identity building of the freelance professional. Based on content analysis of 746 on-line images, the notion of «freelancer» was refined as a special form of employment, relied upon modern ICT.

Most of the visual images reflect the advantages of freelance and praise it as a progressive form of employment. Facial expressions and gestures of the people often express positive emotions in the pictures (51-55%). The juxtaposition is shown in favour of the freelancers (97.22% of the cases) in those pictures where the freelancers and other employees (office and remote workers) are present.

The Internet visual image of freelance is instrumental for further expansion of freelance activities and attracting new employees to this sector.

Keywords: Non-standard Employment; Freelance; Identity; Visual Image; Content Analysis

JEL Classification: Z1; J21; J23; E27

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Вплив візуального образу фріланса на формування ідентичності фрілансера-професіонала в сучасних соціально-економічних умовах (на основі аналізу зображень у російськомовному та англомовному сегментах Інтернету)
Анотація. У статті вперше розглянуто становлення ідентичності нового соціально-економічного суб'єкта – фрілансера-професіонала, що формується під впливом візуального образу фріланса у російськомовному та англомовному сегментах Інтернету. Основним методом отримання емпіричної інформації виступив контент-аналіз 746 фотографій і малюнків відповідної тематики. Доведено, що візуальні образи фріланса, представлені в російськомовному та англомовному сегментах Інтернету, не мають істотних відмінностей і сприяють формуванню позитивної ідентичності фрілансера-професіонала.
Ключові слова: нестандартна зайнятість; фріланс; ідентичність; візуальний образ; контент-аналіз.

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Влияние визуального образа фриланса на формирование идентичности фрилансера-профессионала в современных социально-экономических условиях (на основе анализа изображений в русскоязычном и англоязычном сегментах Интернета)
Аннотация. В статье впервые рассмотрено становление идентичности нового социально-экономического субъекта – фрилансера-профессионала под влиянием визуального образа фриланса, представленного в русскоязычном и англоязычном сегментах Интернета. Основным методом получения эмпирической информации явился контент-анализ 746 фотографий и рисунков соответствующей тематики. Доказано, что визуальные образы фриланса, представленные в русскоязычном и англоязычном сегментах Интернета, не имеют существенных отличий и способствуют формированию позитивной идентичности фрилансера-профессионала.
Ключевые слова: нестандартная занятость; фриланс; идентичность; визуальный образ; контент-анализ.

1. Introduction

Non-traditional forms of employment emerged as a response to new needs and opportunities of the post-industrial economy are long under scrutiny by the scholars. This interest is keen to elaborate on better creativity, intellectual and professional self-realization of employees which are seen as preconditions of sustainable economic development and instruments to address current socio-economic plagues (poverty, unemployment etc.).

According to the data of Elance-oDesk global freelance marketplace, half of the professionals around the world tend to choose self-employment in decade to come. An increasing

number of companies will apply a hybrid staffing model, using both permanent employees in the office and remote contractors. Referring to the data by international consulting agency of temporary work Agency Staffing Industry Analysts [SIA], Vice-President of Elance-oDesk C. Olsen notes that the market of online employment in the world will grow about 10 times - from USD 1.6 billion in 2013 to USD 16 billion by the year 2020. More optimistic forecasts predict it may reach even USD 46 billion [1].

According to combined data by the United States Department of Labour, Bureau of Labour Statistics, and data by SIA, the number of self-employed workers in the United States has grown from 7.4% in 2005 to 34% in 2015 [2-3].

According to the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions Eurofound (Eurofound) and the International Labour Office (ILO), today about 17% of workers in the EU-28 are engaged in daily work remotely at permanent basis, using information and communication technologies (ICT) and mobile working applications (T/ICTM), and even more people work remotely on non-permanent basis [4].

As the economic effect of the remote employment is high, share of the remote employees will further grow. Thus, according to the consulting company J'son & Partners Consulting (2015), in the Western countries saving per remote employee is USD 9-11 thousand per year. In 2014, J'son & Partners Consulting estimated the economic effect of remote employment for companies in Russia at more than USD 2.5 billion (direct savings without taking into account the effect of the higher productivity). About 20% of jobs are projected to go virtual in Russia by the year 2020, and gross economic effect from remote employment will exceed USD 26.3 billion [5].

We may forecast good prospects in the development of freelance as a special form of employment at the intersection of two global economic trends: the spread of self-employment and the emergence of remote employment due to development of ICTs. More and more people choose freelance as their option of employment through ICT in India [6], China [7], Ukraine, Russia and CIS countries [8].

International freelance marketplaces show the universal steady growth in numbers of registered users [9]. The world's largest website Freelancer.com has more than 25 million registered users, and just one hour observation ended up with increase of another 846 (!) people (sampling date: August 08, 2017; sampling time: 9.56 a.m.) [10]. The largest Russian freelance exchange FL.ru has more than 1.5 million registered users, and more than 1.5 thousand projects are offered daily [11].

While overall assessment of this trend is positive among experts and scholars, the long-term effects of such a major shift in the employment area are unclear. It is obvious that the primary reasons for the expansion of non-traditional forms of employment are of technological and economic nature. At the same time, we should expect physiological, psychological, and sociocultural consequences of such phenomenon impacting our lives both at the personal and social levels.

To understand contemporary state and further development of the phenomenon under revision, it is important to review major traits of the new socio-economic entity engaged in professional freelance activities - the freelance professional. The study of freelancer identity is of special interest.

The questions «Who am I?», «Who are we?» are in the centre of identity as they address both individual characteristics and influence by the social environment. When thinking of the identity of freelance professional, we place these questions into the context of professional activities and forms of employment.

According to the author's concept of harmonious identity, we think that positive and adequate identity of the freelance professional is a significant factor in his socio-economic efficiency, adaptability, and ensures progressive development of the relevant professional field.

Identity is the product of self-identification, as individual is absorbing certain values, norms, roles, etc. Mass media, and the Internet in particular, play an important role in the production and translation of socio-cultural patterns. Every dominant form of culture soon becomes visual. We need to consider visual images of the freelance in the Internet as significant source of identity of freelance professional.

Thus, we see the purpose of our study in definition of the identity of freelance professional in the modern world.

The central identity issues for the freelance professionals are contradiction between the objective trend to build distinct socio-professional identity of freelancers and uncertainty of specific cultural references for the identity.

2. Brief Literature Review

There are a significant number of studies of freelance activities in the research literature. Many scholars work on non-traditional types of employment, self-employment, remote work, and impact of modern ICT, namely: Handy (1984) [12], Kalleberg (2000) [13], Pink (2001) [14], Pratt (2003) [15], Stone (2004) [16], Ashford (2007) [17], as well as Nissim & De Vries (2014) [18], Eichhorst & Marx (2015) [19], Cooke & Brown (2015) [20], Quinlan (2015) [21], McKeown & Leighton (2016) [22], Maurizio (2016) [23], Grimov (2016) [24] and others. Lately, Russian scholars also joined the ranks of researchers interested in freelance and its position on the employment landscape (the emergence of the field is presented in the Table 1).

Tab. 1: **Number of Russian scientific publications in Sociology and Economics fields on freelance activities in 2014-2017**

Terms in titles of publications, annotations, keywords	Number of publications
Non-standard employment	182
Self-employment	242
Remote operation	67
Freelance	154

Source: https://eLibrary.ru [25]

Kharchenko (2013) [26] and Chaplashkin (2013) [27] approached the very phenomenon of freelance. Strebkov, Shevchuk & Spirina (2015) [8] provided the most vast up to date quantitative research of freelancers (and sole study of freelancers and remote markets involving monitoring process).

Works by Ostapiovskii (2011) [28], Jenkins (2014) [29], and Kozlova (2016) [30] are significant for their studies of the formation of professional identity and its functions.

Wagner (1979) [31], Barnard (2001) [32], Sztompka (2007) [33], Maresca & Meyer (2014) [34], and Pauwels (2015) [35] devoted their studies to the analysis of visualising of social practices. Author's own doctoral dissertation also provided study of the characteristics of harmonious identity, conditions of its formation, role of socio-cultural samples in the broadcasting of identity through mass media [36].

Yet, the number of studies of the identity formation of freelance professionals is very limited and the issue remains mostly uncharted.

3. The purpose of the article is to reveal the impact of visual image of the Internet freelance on the identity of freelance professional.

4. The methodology for obtaining empirical data

The main empirical data have been obtained through a quantitative content analysis of on-line photos and drawings, essentially related to freelance.

In our research, we have proceeded from the presumptions that:
- visual sociology recognise photo and pattern as important loggers and interpretation tools of social facts and phenomena (Sztompka, 2007; Wagner, 1979) [31; 33];
- semiotic sociopsychological paradigm allows interpreting photo and drawing as text (Dridze, 1996) [37];
- structural and semiotic approaches consider image as a visual fact, separated from the author (Bart, 1967; 1981) [38-39];

We founded our application of the content analysis on the work by Fedotova (2001) [40], where method to sociological

practice analysis was presented, and Lutz & Collins (1993) who elaborated quantitative content analysis of photo materials [41]. We also used typology of freelance autonomy, developed by Strebkov, Shevchuk & Spirina (2015) [8] to highlight the values of freelance.

At the first stage, the research question was formulated: how freelance is visually shown and what are its benefits, risks and values? Thus, the categories of analysis are benefits, risks and values of freelance, foundational for further development of the identity of the freelance professional.

At the second stage, we have selected the source that provides a rich array of visual forms to analyse the issues and has a high potential impact on the identity formation of freelance professional in the modern world. We presumed the Internet as such a source because of its accessibility, latitude and power to deliver information.

At the third stage, the selection of photographs and drawings was made. The unit of context is a separate image (picture). Using the most popular Russian-language search engine Yandex, we have received 12 thousand images on request «freelance pictures». This figure has determined the boundaries of our general population of units. The size of the stratified sampling design with error ratio of 5% is amounted to 372 images. Considering multiplicity of hits on the Internet resource, we conclude that the selection of the first 372 images only is appropriate. The sampling was made at 3.15 p.m., July 10, 2017. The sample for English-language segment was made with search engine Google in a similar way. The general population size amounted 14 thousand images and typological sample - 374 images. Sampling time - 6.15 p.m., June 10, 2017.

This stage put forth two questions:
1) how to account for duplicate pictures?
2) how to consider an image composed of several images?

While solving the first question, we emphasized the cumulative effect (the more the image catches the eye, the higher impact it has), and consider each of the repeating image as a separate unit. We had 18 recurrent images with total of 41 repeats. To tackle the second question, we consider any meaningful image that is part of a collage as a separate unit.

At the fourth stage, we set up the protocol of images encoding. We have identified the analysis units - external visual elements, visually noticeable, that are significant for the research question. They represent the specific characteristics and values of freelancing, its advantages and risks. The reconnaissance study (on the sample of 100 images) has allowed us to adjust and clearly define variables among which were the following:
- the presence of inscription (yes or no);
- features of inscription (strengths and weaknesses of freelance or neutrality in meaning);
- values of freelance as reflected in the inscriptions (organizational, market, labour, financial, social autonomy);
- risks of freelance, as reflected in the inscriptions;
- presence of a person or a group;
- social interaction (interaction with employers, with partners);
- opposition of contractors (freelancers and office workers, freelancers and unskilled workers, freelancers and remote workers);
- gender identity or gender distribution in the group;
- clothing (business or other style, classic suits for women, tie for men, home clothing, beachwear, exposed tattoos, etc.);
- position of the body in space (reclining, unstable, relaxed etc.);
- facial expressions and gestures expressing positive, negative, or neutral emotions. For example, the symbols of success, victory, are a smile, a raised thumb, etc. Drooping corners of the mouth, shifted or raised eyebrows are the signs of sorrow, anger, irritation, fear, anxiety, etc.;
- environment: outdoors (city street, coastline etc.); indoor working space (office or home); ambiguous place. We also specifically targeted every sign of declared

privacy: cosiness (fireplace, rocking chair, bed etc.), presence of children, pets relaxed posture (person without shoes, in home footwear etc.);
- labour technology (primary and collateral);
- presence of food, drinks, smoking accessories at the workplace;
- symbols of material well-being (banknotes, coins, bank cards, piggy banks).

At the fifth stage, the image coding has been produced - assigning each of them to the established categories.

At the sixth stage, the quantitative analysis has been made - to determine the frequency of each category in the selected array of images. Here the unit of analysis is the appearance of new visual element, the number of which is measured by the natural series of numbers in absolute terms and as percentage in relative terms. We have used a binary analysis (the visual element is either present or not), the analysis of dichotomous nature (present a visual element or its opposite), scaling (e.g., identification of emotions - positive, neutral, or negative).

At the seventh stage the visual text, tables have been produced and conclusions have been made on the basis of calculated relative weights of various characteristics.

5. Results

The notions of «freelance» and «freelancer», denoting specific form of employment and employee, are borrowed from the English language and became widespread in Russia over the last two decades. At the request of «freelance» tag search engine Yandex gave about 138 million results and for request «freelancer» another 149 million results; search engine Google produced 200 million and 59.8 million results, respectively (sampling date: at 3.05 p.m., July 10, 2017).

«Freelance» and «freelancer» are not the formal legal terms, neither in Russia, nor in Europe. However, according to some researchers (Benson & Brown, 2007; Kitching & Smallbone, 2012; Shevchuk, 2008), these terms are widely used by self-employed, independent, highly qualified professionals which are related primarily to the creative, managerial, scientific or technical areas for self-identification [8].

We also accepted two main characteristics of freelance: the independence of the employment and independence of decision-making on part of the employee (Pink, 2001) [14]. In this case, the labour activities and skills level are not taken into account.

It is obvious that the concept requires further elaboration and scientific research. According to the heuristic role of photography, as noted by Sztompka (2007), it is useful to develop new categories to illustrate verbal language, as it may further contribute to the theory [33].

Our analysis has shown that freelance involves the use of personal computer in most cases, while paper work remains secondary technology. Phones and smart phones are also considered as related technologies (see Table 2). Our research showed that widespread visual image of freelance on the Internet emphasises on electronic freelance, and freelancers are shown as producers of information products with active use of modern ICTs.

English-language segment of the Internet has shown higher number of images containing statistical material about the freelancers, documents, certificates, so the number of images that reflects the technologies directly was

Tab. 2: **Freelance technologies**

Technologies	Russian-language segment of the Internet	English-language segment of the Internet
Desktop, laptop, computer accessories (keyboard, mouse)	75.42%	47.3%
Paper-level technologies (paper, pen, pencil, typewriter etc.)	32.68%	28.05%
Phone, smartphone	19.55%	14.53%
Calculator	3.07%	1.7%
Camera	3.07%	1.7%
Artists tools (paints, brushes, etc.)	2.8%	3.14%

Source: Elaborated by the author

smaller than in the Russian-language segment, where there was almost no statistical materials, documents, etc. However, in both cases computer technologies play the leading role.

Most of the visual images reflect the advantages of freelance and praise it as the progressive form of employment. Facial expressions and gestures of the people often express positive emotions in the pictures (see Table 3). The juxtaposition is shown in favour of the freelancers (97.22% of the cases) in those pictures where the freelancers and other employees (office and remote workers) are present.

Freelance is shown mainly as an individual activity (see Table 4).

In most cases male emerges as a freelancer (see Tables 5, 6). Here the percentages we have obtained coincide with the data of the studies of gender distribution within on-line Russian-speaking freelancers' community [8].

The institutional autonomy, ability to choose the time and place for work, is turned out to be the most pronounced among the values of freelance (see Figure 1, Table 7).

Another value of freelance broadly reflected in the visual images in our sampling is social autonomy understood as independence from the corporate culture - people are presented in totally informal outfit (beach or indoor clothing, ripped jeans, etc.) in about 15% of pictures.

Basic risks of freelance are very poorly reflected - the number of related images does not exceed 6%. Among risks shown we should name issues related to improper time management (projects running under
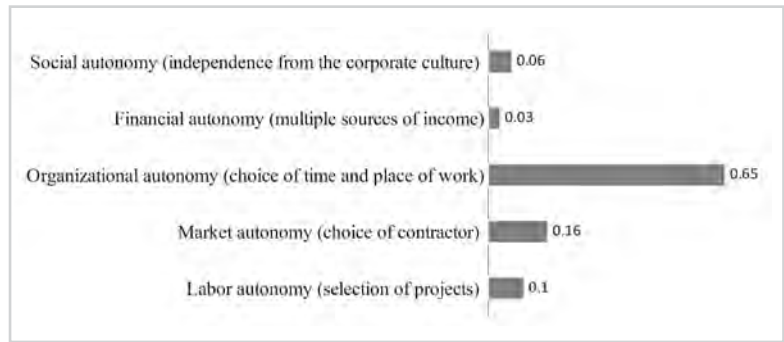

Fig. 1: **Basic values of freelancing, as reflected in the inscriptions**
Source: Elaborated by the author

Tab. 7: **Reflection of organizational autonomy of freelancer**

Criteria for organizational autonomy of freelancer	Russian-language segment of the Internet	English- language segment of the Internet
The opportunity to take refreshments in the workplace	32.12%	22.62%
Work outdoor	18.16% (of 17.48% - in the open country, and 8.1% - at the seaside)	5.91%
Work from home	9.78%	4.34%

Source: Elaborated by the author

Tab. 8: **Position of freelancer at working place**

Body position	Russian-language segment of the Internet	English-language segment of the Internet
Freelancer shown sitting in a relaxed position	14.79%	16.28%
Freelancer shown reclining	6.43%	3.1%

Source: Elaborated by the author

Tab. 3: **Emotional state of a freelancer**

Reflected emotions	Russian-language segment of the Internet	English-language segment of the Internet
Positive	51.72%	55.8%
Neutral	33%	34.79%
Negative	7.88%	7.37%
Hard case	7.4%	2.04%

Source: Elaborated by the author

Tab. 4: **Is freelance an individual or group activity?**

Presence of a person or a group	Russian-language segment of the Internet	English-language segment of the Internet
Person	70.5%	38.82%
Group	9.36%	13.88%
Absence of people	20.59%	47.3%

Source: Elaborated by the author

Tab. 5: **Gender distribution of freelancers**

Gender	Russian-language segment of the Internet	English-language segment of the Internet
Male	56.87%	37.09%
Female	27.10%	25.83%
Gender is not defined	16.03%	37.09%

Source: Elaborated by the author

Tab. 6: **Gender distribution in the groups of freelancers**

Groups	Russian-language segment of the Internet	English-language segment of the Internet
Group of men	48.57%	14.28%
Group with an equal number of men and women	28.57%	42.86%
Male-dominated group	8.57%	14.29%
Group with a predominance of women	2.86%	7.14%
Ambiguous case	11.43%	21.43%

Source: Elaborated by the author

time pressure), the absence of weekends, diversion from work as children or pets interfere with freelancer, health problems as an outcome of prolonged work with the computer work, low income.

Initially we have assumed that significant number of visual images would represent freelance as freedom and independence, which is associated with «easy» money. However, this part of the hypothesis has not been confirmed - the people shown in the pictures, as a rule, are focused (see Table 8), and the symbols of material prosperity are present only in 9% of images. However, in the Russian-language segment of the Internet freelancers are more romanticized, while in English segment they are depicted in more realistic way.

6. Conclusions

Our study has shown that visual image of freelance on the Internet promotes the formation of a positive identity of the new socio-economic entity, the freelance professional, due to organizational and social autonomy values. The positive way to identify the freelancer is a professional engaged in intellectual work, in fairly comfortable conditions, using personal computer as the main mean of production and communication with the customers. Despite the fact that the risks are reflected poorly enough, the visual image of the freelance broadcasting by the Internet is able to attract new agents to this form of employment, primarily from related groups that have appropriate characteristics and skills, like self-employment or remote employment.

The visual image of the freelance planted by the Internet represents freelance as an established form of employment with particularly comfortable and personalized working environment. The visual image of the freelance in the Russian-language segment of the Internet adequately reflects the gender distribution of Russian freelancers and their core values.

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