

Survival Strategies Of Indonesian Photojournalists In The Social Media Era: A Competency-Based Practices Study

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Abstract

The digital disruption caused by social media has precipitated a crisis of relevance for professional photojournalists, blurring the lines between journalistic integrity and amateur content. While existing literature predominantly examines these structural shifts as external threats, there is limited research on the internal, agentic responses employed by practitioners to sustain their professional viability. This study examines the survival strategies used by elite Indonesian photojournalists (APFI award winners) in the era of social media. Employing a qualitative case study approach within an interpretivist framework, in-depth interviews were conducted with 13 award-winning members of Pewarta Foto Indonesia (PFI). The findings reveal that survival is not achieved by competing with the immediacy of social media, but through a "Strategy of Distinction." This strategy

comprises three pillars: (1) Adaptive Competence, where technical mastery elevates to critical visual literacy; (2) Institutional Capital, utilizing awards and certifications as verification mechanisms; and (3) Ethical Rigidity, utilized as a strategic market differentiator against unverified user-generated content. This research contributes to media management theory by reframing competence as a proactive defense mechanism and highlighting the role of professional organizations as vital "survival infrastructures" rather than mere associations.

Keywords: Survival strategies; Competency; Photojournalism; Social Media Era; Professional Identity

1. Introduction

The digital media ecosystem has fundamentally disrupted the traditional epistemology of news production. As Kahne argues, this has triggered a dualistic environment in which the integrity of mainstream journalism constantly competes with algorithmic logic and social media (Kahne et al., 2015). While social media platforms have fostered the dissemination of information and participatory culture, they have simultaneously undermined the professional authority of photojournalists, who populate the visual landscape with unverified imagery (Fareri et al., 2020; Hermida & Mellado, 2020; Zeng & Cheng, 2024). This disruption has triggered a credibility crisis, blurring the lines between professional photojournalism, with its high ethical standards and accuracy, and amateur, unedited journalism (Baetens & Sánchez-Mesa, 2024; Midberry & Dahmen, 2020).

Academic attention to this phenomenon has been strong, but it has broadly been divided into three distinct domains. The first domain examines structural shifts in news logic, focusing on how platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter) are reshaping journalistic norms. (Kaliyar et al., 2021; Maares & Hanusch, 2020; Sreedhar & Rama, 2024). The second domain addresses the detrimental impact of digitization on trust. (Jin et al., 2024; Ogah, 2020), specifically the proliferation of misinformation and deepfakes. The third domain analyzes evolving audience consumption patterns in the post-truth era.

However, a critical gap remains between the theoretical narrative of professional decline and the empirical reality of

practitioner resilience. The existing literature essentially treats digital disruption as a structural fatality affecting the industry, essentially rendering photojournalists passive victims of technological determinism. This omission is fundamentally problematic, as the institutional foundations of traditional media are being eroded while practitioners actively construct new frameworks for survival. Building on existing research, this study will examine and explain a more crucial anomaly about how elite professionals maintain authority and sustain their careers amidst this ecosystem collapse. Without deconstructing these adaptive mechanisms, an understanding of the future of photojournalism remains incomplete. It is crucial to investigate these strategies not only to document economic survival but also to understand how practitioners maintain standards of visual truth in the era of post-truth.

This study shifts its focus from a structural analysis of media disruption to the active agency of photojournalists. While general socioeconomic studies define "survival strategies" as adaptive tactics for basic economic survival (Bojnec & Knific, 2021; Lucchini, 2020) This study argues that in the fragile economy of digital journalism, survival requires a more complex renegotiation of professional identities (Voronova, 2024; Yin et al., 2024). This study conceptualizes survival strategies as a multidimensional construct encompassing professional agility, competency adaptation, and self-image (Chu, 2023; Masele & Joseph, 2023). Through the primary research question: How do elite Indonesian photojournalists articulate and operationalize professional survival strategies to maintain relevance, credibility, and integrity in the social media era?

The study focuses on award-winning members of the Indonesian Photojournalist Association (PFI). This article argues that enhancing professional competency serves as a primary survival mechanism in an era of information saturation. In an era of information saturation, competency transitions from a passive requirement to an active strategy of market differentiation (Mbatia & Nabea, 2024; Sudrajat, 2020).

By focusing on award-winning members of Pewarta Foto Indonesia (PFI), this article posits that enhanced professional

Competence serves as the primary survival mechanism. In an age of information saturation, Competence transitions from being a passive requirement to an active strategy of market differentiation (Mbatia & Nabea, 2024; Sudrajat, 2020).

This research contributes to the digital journalism literature by reconstructing the understanding of visual journalists' professional survival as a negotiation of agency, rather than simply an economic reaction. Theoretically, this study challenges technological determinism by shifting the focus of analysis from the disruptive power of platforms to the resilience of practitioners in renegotiating their authority and competence. Empirically, this research fills the gap in the representation of the 'Global South' in media studies that are oriented towards Western discourse, by highlighting Indonesia's unique ecosystem where massive social media penetration interacts with a developing democratic press, thus finding a new framework formulation where integrity is operationalized as a primary competitive advantage.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design and Methodological Framework

Grounded in an interpretivist epistemology, this study employs a qualitative research design to rigorously investigate the subjective insights and strategic meanings photojournalists attribute to their adaptive behaviors amidst digital disruption (Creswell, 2012). This epistemological lens is crucial for understanding how practitioners actively construct their professional identities and navigate survival within a volatile media ecosystem. To facilitate a granular analysis of these complex dynamics, the research employs a case study methodology (Kaipainen, 2022), which enables a comprehensive and contextualized examination of the specific adaptive strategies employed.

2.2. Participant Selection and Sampling Strategy

To identify effective survival strategies, this study utilized a purposive sampling strategy targeting "elite" practitioners. Participants were selected from the archives of the Anugerah Pewarta Foto Indonesia (APFI) winners between 2009 and

2022. The APFI is the most prestigious recognition for photojournalists in Indonesia, signifying high peer validation.

We acknowledge that this "elite" sampling approach introduces a selection bias by excluding non-award-winning or struggling freelancers. However, this strategy was deliberately chosen to identify successful patterns of adaptation. To understand how to survive and thrive, it is methodologically sound to study those who have demonstrated exceptional professional resilience and recognized Competence. The final sample consisted of 13 photojournalists. The sample size was determined by the principle of data saturation, where data collection ceased once subsequent interviews yielded no new thematic codes related to Competence or adaptive tactics.

2.3. Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

Data collection was conducted over a period of two months through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The interview guide focused on competency development, strategic use of social media, and ethical decision-making. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were conducted both face-to-face and via digital platforms.

To enhance methodological rigor (validity), this study employed data triangulation. (Florentinus, 2018) By cross-referencing interview transcripts with document analysis. Documents analyzed included the APFI catalogs (2009–2022) and the Indonesian Journalistic Code of Ethics. This ensured that subjective claims were contextualized within broader industry standards. Strict ethical protocols were adhered to; written informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring confidentiality and their right to withdraw at any time.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach following a systematic coding process: (1) familiarization through verbatim transcription; (2) open coding to identify initial concepts (e.g., "certification," "branding," "ethics"); (3) axial coding to group these concepts into overarching themes (Ozanne et al., 1992) and (4) defining final themes such as "Adaptive Competence" and "Institutional Capital".

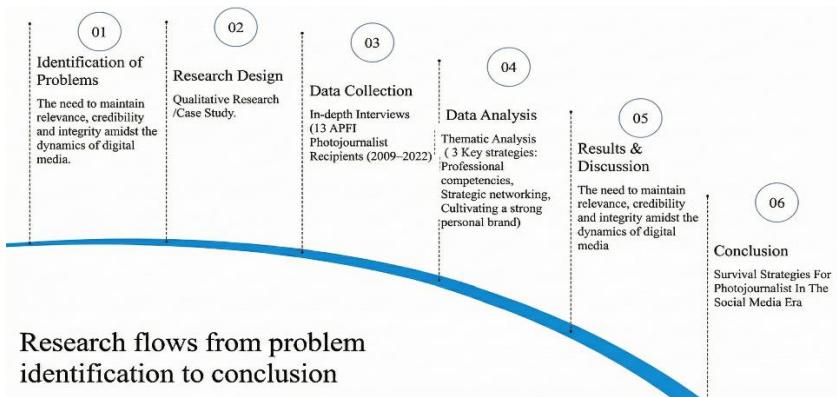


Figure 1. Illustrates the research flow from problem identification to conclusion.

3. Results

The analysis reveals that for elite Indonesian photojournalists, "survival" is not merely about economic endurance, but about struggling for legitimacy in an image-saturated ecosystem. The findings are categorized into three distinct strategic dimensions: (1) Adaptive Competence as Distinction; (2) Institutional Capital for Credibility; and (3) Ethical Rigidity as a Market Differentiator.

3.1. Adaptive Competence: Beyond Technical Proficiency

Contrary to traditional views, which defined Competence solely by photographic technique, participants redefined Competence in the social media era as "multimodal agility". The data indicates a consensus that technical quality alone is insufficient to compete with the speed of User-Generated Content (UGC). Instead, participants emphasized the necessity of visual literacy, the ability to construct narratives that are visually arresting yet contextually rich, as a barrier that amateurs cannot easily bypass.

As Irsan Mulyadi (39) articulated, the competency test (UKW) was crucial for "understanding visual narrative" beyond mere capture. This supports recent findings by Mbatia and Nabea (2024) who argue that professional Competence now requires a deep understanding of context. Elite practitioners like Givo Alputra (38) utilize this advanced Competence to "capture compelling community issues," effectively shifting the battlefield from "speed," where social media wins, to "depth," where

professionals prevail. Table 1 below details the taxonomy of competence strategies identified from the participant interviews.

Table 1. Taxonomy of Competence Development Strategies Among Elite Photojournalists

Strategic Dimension	Actionable Tactic	Contextual Evidence (Participant)	Interpretive Analysis
Symbolic Validation	Participation in elite competitions (APFI)	<i>"The photo... was selected as the winner... I was proud that highly regarded judges recognized my work."</i> (Mugni Supardi, 31)	Awards function as a "credibility shield," validating the journalist's status against unverified content from amateur creators.
Normative Gatekeeping	Mentorship & Ethical Training	<i>"Photojournalist competence is enhanced by... practicing ethical photojournalism... and ensuring recognition of copyrighted works."</i> (Atmaji S. Anggoro, 45)	Training is used to enforce professional boundaries, framing "Ethics" as a premium skill that distinguishes professionals from the public.
Career Diversification	Knowledge Transfer	<i>"After my photo was selected... opportunities to speak at photo</i>	Competence is monetized not just through the

Strategic Dimension	Actionable Tactic	Contextual Evidence (Participant)	Interpretive Analysis
		<i>discussions became more frequent." (Givo Alputra, 38)</i>	production of photos but also by performing the role of an "expert" in public forums.
Regenerative Investment	Student Engagement	<i>"It is even more interesting now that PFI has created short workshop programs involving students." (Dhemas Reviyanto, 35)</i>	Establishing a pipeline of "competent" future journalists ensures the survival of professional standards.

The output of this Competence is visually distinct from standard social media imagery. As illustrated in Figure 2, the award-winning images demonstrate high technical difficulty and narrative depth.

Picture A



Alex & Frans Mendor Trophy (Source: PFI Documents, 2020)

Picture B



Anugerah Pewarta Foto Indonesia (APFI) best photo award. (Source: indonesiakaya.com)

Picture C



APFI's best photojournalism in 2010. (Source: APFI Catalog 2010)

Figure 2. Manifestations of Competence

The Left image shows the Alex & Frans Mendur Trophy, a gold-plated trophy symbolizing professional achievement. The right image shows an exhibition of APFI winning works, demonstrating the physical curation of journalism in contrast to digital ephemerality.

3.2 Institutional Capital and the Construction of Credibility

In the digital ecosystem, where the provenance of imagery is often obscured, credibility becomes a scarce resource. The findings suggest that participants actively seek to construct "epistemic authority" through external validation. Unlike the algorithmic validation of social media (likes/shares), participants relied on Institutional Capital (Ivan, 2025), specifically through Prestigious Awards (APFI) and Formal Competency Testing (UKW). Awards as Verification Mechanisms: Participants identified the APFI not merely as a celebratory event, but as a rigorous verification mechanism. In a landscape flooded with unverified content, an award serves as a "quality badge" that signals adherence to journalistic standards.

The Journalist Competency Test (UKW) acts as a defensive perimeter. M. Agung Rajasa (40) noted that the test enables him to be "more professional... fulfilling the public's need". This certification process institutionally distinguishes between the "journalist" and the "content creator." Table 2 illustrates how these credibility mechanisms translate into professional outcomes.

Table 2. Matrix of Credibility-Enhancing Strategies and Professional Outcomes

Credentialing Mechanism	Participant Testimony	Strategic Outcome (Analysis)
Standardization (UKW)	<i>"I feel very fortunate to have taken the photojournalist</i>	Regulatory Compliance as Identity: Uses adherence to "rules"

Credentialing Mechanism	Participant Testimony	Strategic Outcome (Analysis)
	<p><i>competency test... especially in understanding journalism, visual narrative, and producing photojournalism according to Press Council rules.</i></p> <p>Irsan Mulyadi (39)</p>	<p>to differentiate professional work from unstructured amateur snapshots.</p>
<p>Reputation Building (Exhibitions)</p>	<p><i>"I had the opportunity to test my skills as a speaker... I became more motivated to improve my credibility as a photojournalist further."</i></p> <p>Jessica Helena Wusyang (36)</p>	<p>Thought Leadership: Leveraging exhibitions to transition from a "content creator" to a "subject matter expert."</p>
<p>Market Distinction (Awards)</p>	<p><i>"That award serves as a significant motivator... I became more enthusiastic in reporting and eager to capture compelling community issues."</i></p> <p>Givo Alputra (38)</p>	<p>Incentivizing Quality: The award system shifts the journalist's focus from "viral" content to "socially relevant" content.</p>

3.3. Ethical Rigidity as a Strategic Market Differentiator

Perhaps the most significant finding is the operationalization of "integrity" as a strategic asset. Participants consistently framed adherence to the Indonesian Photojournalist Code of Ethics not just as a moral obligation, but as a market differentiator. (Nur & Abidin, 2023; Skola, 2020).

While social media algorithms reward sensationalism, participants reported exercising "visual restraint" to maintain long-term trust. For example, Givo Alputra (38) chose to

anonymize an infant born during the COVID-19 pandemic to "maintain the good name of the subjects," despite the potential for viral engagement.

Jessica Helena Wusyang provided a pivotal example regarding the horizontal conflict involving the Gafatar community. Rather than capturing the visceral violence, she focused on a moment of national unity: two individuals rescuing the Indonesian flag from the fire. As shown in Figure 3, this visual choice shifts the narrative from division to resilience. Description: Panel A (The Constructive Frame: A photo by Jessica Helena Wusyang focusing on the rescue of the national flag during the Gafatar conflict. Panel B (The Empathetic Frame): A photo by Givo Alputra demonstrating protective composition to document the COVID-19 crisis.



Figure 3: Visual Rhetoric of Ethical Journalism

Table 3. Thematic Matrix of Ethical Commitments and Professional Outcomes

Participant (Age/Role)	Ethical Context	Strategic Action (Quote)	Analytical Outcome
Trisnadi Marjan (48)	Political Crisis		Career Mobility: Ethics

Participant (Age/Role)	Ethical Context	Strategic Action (Quote)	Analytical Outcome
<i>Agency Photographer</i>		<i>"I adhered to the code of ethics... thanks to which I became a photographer at the Associated Press."</i>	is converted into economic capital.
Jessica H. Wusyang (36) Photojournalist	Social Conflict	<i>"I am responsible for... prioritizing public interests over personal ones."</i>	Social Responsibility: Journalism functions as a tool for conflict resolution.
Givo Alputra (38) Photojournalist	Subject Privacy	<i>"A photographer must be smart... in making choices and maintaining the good name of the subjects."</i>	Risk Management: Proactive ethics prevent legal/social backlash.
Irsan Mulyadi (39) Photojournalist	Injustice Representation	<i>"Produce news photos that convey positive values or expose injustice."</i>	Value Proposition: Differentiates professional work from the "noise" of social media.

4. Discussion

This study demonstrates that the survival strategies of Indonesian photojournalists are characterized by a shift from passive reliance on media institutions to active, individual brand management through Competence and ethics. Figure 4 visualizes the influence of photographer competence on outcomes.

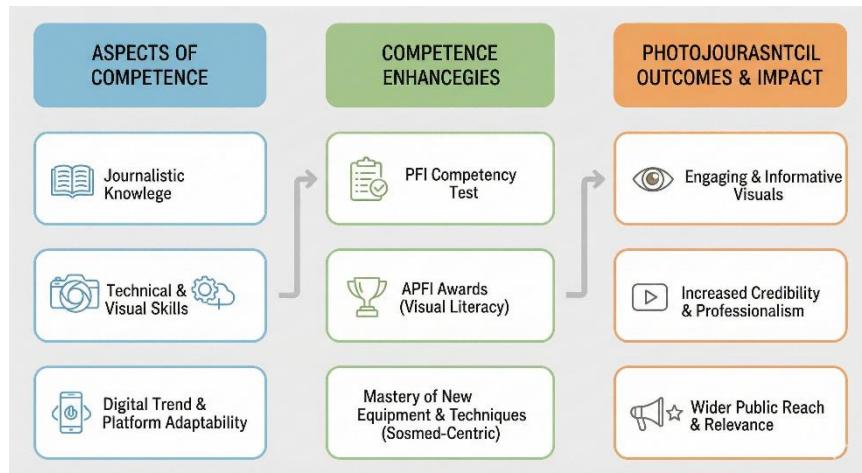


Figure 4. Influence of Photographer Competence on Outcomes

4.1. Competence as a Mechanism of Distinction

The findings regarding 'Adaptive Competence' extend Voronova's (Voronova, 2024) Concept of professionalism in the digital attention economy. However, unlike previous studies that portray photojournalists as passive victims of technological determinism (e.g., (Fareri et al., 2020; Kahne et al., 2015) This study reveals a proactive agency where practitioners utilize competence as a defensive mechanism. This divergent finding can be attributed to the specific demographics of this study's participants. Unlike general studies on precarious freelancers, our sample consists of elite award-winners (APFI) who possess the cultural capital to resist market pressures by elevating technical mastery into critical visual literacy. As illustrated in Figure 4, this competence is not merely for operational efficiency but acts as a distinguishing factor that leads to increased credibility and professional outcomes.

4.2. Credibility in the Age of Disinformation

The strategic reliance on Institutional Capital (awards and competency tests/UKW) highlights a critical response to the post-truth era (Capilla, 2021). This finding contrasts with research on citizen journalism (e.g., Maares & Hanusch, 2020), which suggests that digital popularity (likes/shares) has replaced traditional authority. In the Indonesian context, however, our results indicate the opposite: the proliferation of unverified content has ironically increased the market value of institutional verification. (Osuagwu et al., 2023) Note, credibility involves expertise and verification. Figure 5 illustrates this relationship, showing how 'Foundational Credibility' (expertise and verification) serves as a counter-narrative to the challenges posed by social media. By anchoring their reputation to established institutions like PFI, these elite journalists create a 'credibility shield' that amateur content creators cannot replicate.

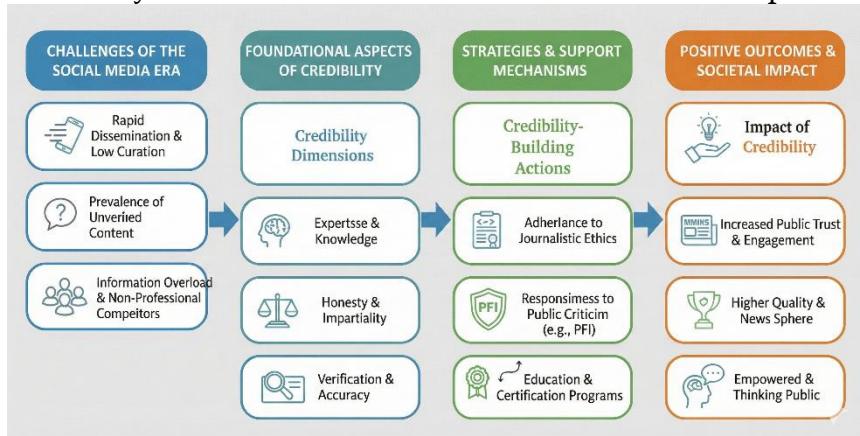


Figure 5 maps the relationships between the themes of credibility.

4.3. Sociological Implications and Structural Constraints

The use of integrity as a strategic asset aligns with and revitalizes classical journalism theories related to verification. While recent studies on the "gig economy" in journalism often suggest that economic precarity leads practitioners to compromise their ethics in favor of speed, commonly referred to as "clickbait logic," our participants exhibited a phenomenon we call "Ethical Rigidity." This divergence from the prevailing trend

can be attributed to the "Strategy of Distinction" employed by elite practitioners. For award-winning journalists, long-term reputational capital is valued more highly than short-term audience engagement. As illustrated in Figure 6, this commitment to quality and ethics creates a positive feedback loop, which fosters a more informed society and sustains the demand for high-quality photojournalism.

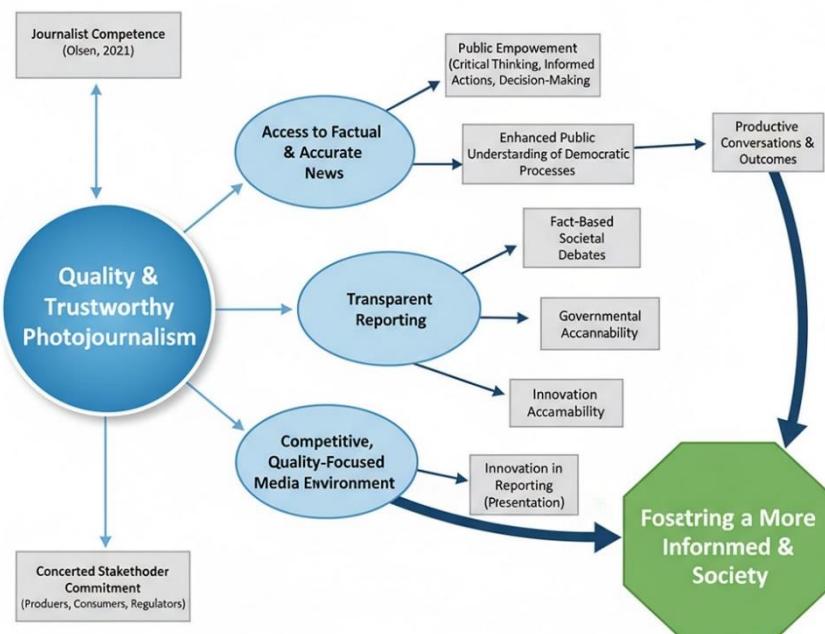


Figure 6. Societal Impact of Trustworthy Photojournalism

A conceptual map linking 'Quality Photojournalism' to 'Access to Factual News' and 'Transparent Reporting', which fosters 'Public Empowerment' and a 'More Informed Society'. Furthermore, while participants claimed that ethical adherence builds trust, this study highlights a potential tension between these ideals and economic reality. As hinted by freelancer participants, the choice to be "ethical" (e.g., missing a viral shot to protect privacy) carries a monetary cost that not all photojournalists can afford. Therefore, the strategies identified here, while successful for this group, may represent a

"privileged" form of survival accessible primarily to those with existing social or cultural capital.

5. Conclusion

This study establishes that for elite Indonesian photojournalists, professional survival is not achieved by mimicking the accelerated logic of social media, but by operationalizing a sophisticated "Strategy of Distinction." This strategy functions through a synergistic cycle of three core elements: (1) Adaptive Competence, where technical mastery is elevated to critical visual literacy to separate professionals from amateurs; (2) Institutional Capital, which leverages awards and certification (UKW) as tangible badges of credibility; and (3) Ethical Rigidity, which positions integrity as a premium market differentiator rather than a constraint.

Theoretically, these findings challenge the narrative of technological determinism often found in Western-centric media studies. Instead of being passive victims of platform disruption, Indonesian practitioners demonstrate active agency in renegotiating their authority. However, it is imperative to contextualize these findings within the study's methodological scope. Unlike studies focusing on precarious freelancers, the resilience observed here reflects an "ideal type" of survival specific to award-winning practitioners who possess significant symbolic capital.

Practically, this study redefines the role of professional organizations. In the Indonesian context, Pewarta Foto Indonesia (PFI) functions not merely as an association but as a vital "survival infrastructure" that provides the collective validation necessary to compete in an algorithm-driven marketplace.

Acknowledging the "elite bias" in our sampling, this study likely captures the best-case scenario of professional adaptation. Consequently, future research should adopt a comparative framework to contrast these elite strategies with the experiences of non-award-winning freelancers. Such a comparison is essential to empirically test whether the "Strategy of Distinction"

is a universal solution or a privilege accessible only to those with existing high-level status.

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