

Building Brands Brick By Brick: Branding Practices Of Self-Employed Construction Workers

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Abstract

This study explores the branding practices and challenges of self-employed construction workers in Tadian, Mountain Province, Philippines, aiming to propose possible interventions. Using a descriptive research design, data were gathered from 87 participants through interviews and focus group discussions and analyzed thematically. Findings show that workers mainly rely on word-of-mouth, quality workmanship, and client relationships to establish their brand. Specialization helps them stand out, but the absence of formal training and certification limits skill recognition and market access. Other challenges include limited capital and narrow market reach. To address these issues, the study recommends formalizing skills training and certification, improving digital literacy, promoting niche skills, and establishing systems for contracts, feedback, apprenticeships, and collective bargaining. These can enhance their visibility, income, and long-term growth. However, the study is limited to one municipality and lacks quantifiable measures of impact. Future research should expand the geographic scope and include measurable data for broader applicability.

Keywords: branding, construction workers, self-employed, word-of-mouth

1. INTRODUCTION

The informal sector is a key part of economies, especially in developing countries like the Philippines. It provides jobs and income for many people outside traditional formal regulatory frameworks (Informal Economy | International Labour Organization, n.d.) This sector is dynamic and often entrepreneurial, offering opportunities for those without formal jobs or capital (Chen, 2007). The construction industry is particularly active in this diverse economic landscape and relies heavily on manual labor. Self-employed construction workers are vital to many building projects, from small renovations to large infrastructure (Chen, 2007). Despite their widespread presence and important economic contributions, evidence of these workers' branding or professional identities is barely enough. Unlike formal businesses with big marketing budgets, these workers operate in a competitive environment without standard advertising, certifications, or official directories.

Branding is typically seen as a big business activity focused on creating a unique identity and good reputation to attract customers (Keller, 2013). However, even though formal branding rules do not directly apply to the informal sector, the core ideas of standing out, building trust, and offering value are still very important. For self-employed construction workers, branding happens in less traditional but very effective ways. It heavily depends on personal interactions, showing great skill, being reliable and punctual, and getting positive word-of-mouth referrals. Understanding these informal branding methods is crucial to knowing how these workers get clients, keep them returning, and make a living.

For self-employed construction workers, good branding is tied to their ability to make money, get ahead in their careers, and survive in a tough market. Since there are no formal checks, official credentials, or public directories, clients in the informal construction sector rely heavily on clear signs of quality, trustworthiness, and professionalism (Laryea & Hughes, 2011). These signs, whether shown through keeping promises, having specialized skills, paying attention to detail, or getting great client feedback, build a worker's unique brand. Plus, because their work is informal, their business growth often depends entirely on their personal reputation and their ability to get positive referrals consistently. This emphasizes how significant client satisfaction and good relationships are for a worker's long-term success (Aka et al., 2016).

For self-employed construction workers, building a strong professional identity poses a challenge. With the nature of their profession, financial constraints limit their capacity to invest in formal marketing, advertising, or technology to get noticed. Moreover, with no standard certifications or regulations, their reputation is built mainly on the nature of their work, direct client experiences, and informal peer approval, but no official endorsements (Ceric & Ivic, 2020a). This entails that they must rely on clever

means or local strategies to balance being noticed with being affordable at the same time. As such, they are observed to usually show off finished projects in their communities, build strong relationships, and be active in local networks (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Therefore, this research will explore how these self-employed construction workers overcome these limits to build their brand. In a way, it shall reveal how informal networks, in particular, are key to spreading information, building reputations, and getting support, making up for the lack of formal systems (Issahaku and Abdulai 2020).

This study is significant in the Philippines, where the informal construction sector is strong. This is due to the nature of heavily relying on personal connections, close community ties, and a deep culture of trust, common characteristics in the country. Delving deeply into the "bricks"—the personal actions, skills, qualities, and interactions—that build these workers' strong brands, it is hoped that this research will provide practical advice that could benefit policymakers on labor development, as well as vocational and technical training schools looking to improve worker skills, not to mention the self-employed construction workers themselves. Additionally, this study offers a complete picture of how reputations are created and maintained in the vital informal sector that would aid in a better understanding of entrepreneurial success, market forces, and the significant role informal laborers play in shaping their economic futures.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Self-employed construction workers are important personas in the workforce. They can be found everywhere and play a vital role in local economies. However, despite their widespread presence and important economic contributions, there is hardly any academic research on how these self-employed individuals build their professional identity or "brand." Unlike formal businesses that spend a lot on marketing and advertising, workers in the informal construction sector compete without the usual tools like advertising, certifications, or official directories. This shows a big gap in what is known about how these essential workers create and maintain their professional image.

Traditional branding focuses on how big companies create a unique identity and good reputation with consumers, often using logos and advertising (Keller, 2013). However, these formal branding rules do not quite fit the informal sector, where resources, infrastructure, and regulations are largely missing. Still, the basic ideas of standing out, building trust, and offering value are very important in informal settings. For self-employed construction workers, branding happens in less conventional but effective ways. It heavily relies on personal interactions, showing great skill, being consistently reliable and punctual, and getting positive word-of-mouth (WOM) referrals. Comprehending these informal branding methods is essential to knowing how these workers get clients, keep them, and make a living. Most academic studies focus on formal branding, leaving a significant gap in understanding how small entrepreneurs in resource-limited environments build their reputations and attract customers.

Since there are no formal checks or official credentials in the informal construction sector, reputation and trust are incredibly important. Clients rely heavily on clear signs of quality, trustworthiness, and professionalism (Laryea & Hughes, 2011). These signs are shown through consistently keeping promises about work and deadlines, demonstrating specialized skills and attention to detail, and getting strong positive feedback from clients. All these elements build a worker's unique "brand." Consistent and trustworthy behavior also helps build deep emotional connections with clients, which is key for loyalty (Gremler & Gwinner, 2008). Because their work is informal, a worker's business growth often depends entirely on their reputation and ability to get positive referrals consistently. This highlights the importance of client satisfaction and strong relationships for long-term success (Bitner, 1990). When workers deliver on their promises, they satisfy clients and strengthen their brand as dependable professionals, qualities highly valued in informal markets where formal vetting is absent. Studies in places like Ghana also show that self-employed construction workers widely use client referrals to promote their services, emphasizing the universal importance of trust-based strategies in informal economies (Issahaku and Abdulai 2020).

As mentioned, word-of-mouth (WOM) is arguably the most powerful marketing tool for self-employed construction workers in the informal sector. Workers often intentionally use WOM as part of their branding and client-getting strategy. Through letting satisfied clients act as informal marketers, these workers effectively use their social capital—a strong, low-cost resource that builds credibility without formal credentials (Banerjee & Duflo, 2011). This trust-based approach helps compensate for the lack of formal advertising or a strong online presence. Workers consistently find that clients gained through referrals tend to be more loyal, likely because they already trust the service based on someone else's positive

experience. This matches broader marketing research showing that referred customers often have a higher lifetime value, directly helping a business stay sustainable (Trusov et al., 2009). Also, WOM is naturally cost-effective as workers do not spend money on digital ads, print ads, or promotions. For small service businesses, especially in emerging markets, informal and experience-based marketing is often more practical and sustainable than formal campaigns (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Minimizing expenses is not just a choice but a basic need for survival and growth for low-income entrepreneurs (Banerjee & Duflo, 2011). Showing off completed projects in the community helps balance visibility and affordability, letting workers build a reputation without considerable financial costs. However, this low-cost strategy can also limit long-term income potential and overall business growth (Berthon, Pitt, and Campbell 2008; Mburu and Thuo 2015).

Specialization is another smart way for self-employed workers to brand themselves and stand out from general laborers. By focusing on a specific skill, like being an "expert tile fitter," workers position themselves as professionals in that niche, creating a strong brand identity. Specialized skills create recall value, making clients more likely to remember and recommend a worker for their specific expertise. Unlike general work, niche abilities get noticed, making it easier for workers to build a distinct brand without formal advertising. However, the typical lack of formal training and certification among these skilled workers is a big challenge. Instead, informal practices are common: experienced workers subjectively decide if unskilled workers are ready for promotion. This means skill validation often relies on personal opinion rather than objective assessments. This informal system can lead to a "halo effect," where being good at one construction skill makes people assume broader competence, even if real experience in other areas is lacking. This is very different from international standards; for example, the UK requires a CSCS card, Croatia demands exams and a three-year high school education (Ceric & Ivic, 2020b) and becoming a skilled US construction worker typically takes 3 to 4 years of on-the-job training (Woods, 2012). These differences point to potential inconsistencies in skill levels and productivity, as workers might miss out on theoretical knowledge and basic principles usually learned through formal education. The need for ongoing skill improvement is also recognized as customer preferences change with technology, pushing for a shift from traditional to digital processes for cost-effective project delivery (Hussain, Xuetong, and Hussain 2020).

Existing research focuses on branding in formal businesses and shows how important informal networks and trust are in developing economies. It also recognizes the economic impact of the informal sector and points to word-of-mouth as a key way small business owners get customers. However, there is a clear gap in research regarding the specific branding practices and challenges of self-employed construction workers in informal settings. It is acknowledged how numerous studies mention reputation or referrals, but they rarely combine these ideas to fully explain how individual workers who do not have formal marketing, training, or official endorsements—systematically build and maintain their brand. This will be addressed in this study. Thus, it will fill that gap by carefully looking at the "bricks" of their brands: their personal actions, skills, qualities, and interactions. It shall provide practical insights and a thorough framework for understanding how these workers build, maintain, and succeed with their professional reputations in the important informal sector, ultimately leading to understanding how entrepreneurs succeed and how markets work in these less formal environments.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

This study employed a descriptive research design to examine how self-employed construction workers approach their branding practices. Descriptive research attempts to both describe current realities and analyze the existing norms and beliefs together with ongoing procedures and developing patterns (Calderon & Gonzales, 2018). This method was selected as it aligns with the study's objective of evaluating how self-employed construction workers develop their branding strategies. Descriptive research enables the identification of practical challenges, which serves as a foundation for developing suitable intervention recommendations.

3.2 Respondents

The study involved eighty-seven (87) self-employed workers in residential construction in Tadian, Mountain Province, Philippines, selected using snowball sampling. The respondents were engaged in various construction services, including masonry, carpentry, steel fitting, plumbing, plastering, and

painting. Before participation, informed consent was obtained from all respondents, and they were assured of the confidentiality of their responses.

3.3 Research instruments

A semi-structured interview guide was utilized to collect data that helped participants provide thorough answers. To ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, focus group discussions (FGDs) were also conducted to validate the data gathered through individual interviews.

3.4 Data collection procedures

The primary data collection tools were interviews and focus group discussions. Each interview lasted approximately 15 minutes, while FGDs took at least 30 minutes. All interviews and discussions were audio-recorded with the participant's consent. Following data collection, the recordings were transcribed and organized based on emerging patterns of similarity and difference. The study obtained ethical clearance from the Mountain Province State University Ethics Committee prior to its implementation.

3.5 Data analysis

The thematic analysis approach, as outlined by Clarke and Braun (2013) was employed to identify recurring patterns and themes within the data. The transcripts were coded, categorized, and examined to uncover central themes related to the participants' branding practices. Code identifiers such as SECW 1 (Self-Employed Construction Worker 1), SECW 2, and so on were assigned to maintain participant anonymity.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Reflecting critically and thematically on the transcript of the interviews and focus group discussions resulted in the following themes.

4.1.1 Word-of-Mouth

The respondents heavily rely on word-of-mouth (WOM) referrals from satisfied clients for client acquisition and branding. This means that WOM is not merely incidental but a deliberate component of their marketing strategy. Respondents capitalized on social capital by allowing satisfied clients to serve as informal marketers, a cost-effective resource that builds credibility without formal credentials or an online presence. In their view, word-of-mouth (WOM) appears to offset the lack of formal advertising. Respondents admitted that WOM sustains long-term client relationships and encourages repeat business. It was observed that referred clients were more likely to be loyal, perhaps due to an inherited trust attributed to the referral's positive experience. This finding reaffirms what Issahaku and Abdulai (2020) found concerning self-employed laborers in the construction industry of Ghana. Furthermore, following the work of Trusov, Bucklin, and Pauwels (2009), this represents another basis for the consideration that referred customers would have higher lifetime value, thus contributing towards sustainable business.

The respondents revealed that word-of-mouth (WOM) is a cost-effective marketing strategy that reduces expenses in digital media, print advertisements, or promotional campaigns. This approach aligns with the necessity of minimizing expenditures for business survival and growth, making grassroots strategies like showcasing completed work crucial for balancing visibility and affordability. These findings resonate with Kotler and Keller (2016) who posit that informal and experiential marketing strategies are often more viable and sustainable for small-scale service enterprises, particularly in emerging markets, compared to formal campaigns. However, it is important to note that this low-cost strategy may concurrently restrict long-term income potential and business expansion, a limitation identified by Mburu and Thuo (2015) and Berthon, Pitt, and Campbell (2008).

Nonetheless, the strategy's sustainability has been disputed. Mburu and Thuo (2015) established that even though WOM can facilitate the development of early-stage businesses, it tends to stifle long-term growth, as it inhibits exposure to the outside world beyond the immediate network of the worker. Similarly, Berthon, Pitt, and Campbell (2008) posit that the lack of formal or electronic marketing impedes competitive positioning, particularly in environments where clients increasingly turn to online platforms and professional branding to choose service providers. Without scalable outreach mechanisms, independent laborers might be limited to narrow, localized markets and lose access to higher-value or more frequent job opportunities.

Additionally, the respondents said that accessing broader markets and increasing income limit their ability to use WOM as a marketing strategy. The localized and interpersonal nature of the WOM has rendered it possible for the respondents to be exposed to immediate social or geographic networks, which limits

their ability to scale operations or attract clients outside familiar circles. According to a study on informal sector entrepreneurs in Kenya by Mburu and Thuo (2015) informal sector entrepreneurs in Kenya, businesses that depend on "word-of-mouth" referrals or visible outputs alone, have income stagnancy and very limited diversification of clients, despite the consistency of their services.

Moreover, in increasingly competitive and digitally connected markets, Berthon, Pitt, and Campbell (2008) argue that consumers are more likely to engage service providers with a visible online presence, testimonials, or branding strategies extending beyond WOM's reach. The absence of such formal or semi-formal promotional efforts by the respondents can render even highly skilled laborers invisible to higher-value clients or institutions seeking professionalism and accountability. This lack of visibility may weaken their bargaining power, as workers cannot effectively communicate their track record or expertise to unfamiliar clients, making them more vulnerable to price suppression.

In essence, while WOM offers initial traction, particularly for workers with minimal capital, its limitations become noticeable as workers aim to scale or reposition themselves in more lucrative market segments. Without supplemental strategies—such as basic digital marketing, networking events, or simple portfolio development—self-employed workers risk remaining confined to low-margin, low-volume work despite their technical competence.

The respondents admitted that a single dissatisfied client caused negative word-of-mouth, which is more difficult to respond to due to the lack of formal complaint or feedback mechanisms. In the absence of formal complaint or feedback mechanisms, the respondents are often unequipped to manage reputational harm, which can spread quickly through local communities and jeopardize future work opportunities. Luo (2009) emphasizes that NWOM tends to be more influential than positive WOM because consumers perceive it as more credible and urgent, particularly in high-risk services like construction. Moreover, self-employed workers lack the tools to formally respond to or correct negative claims without structured ways to capture and resolve complaints—such as service contracts, customer reviews, or post-project surveys. This increases their exposure to long-term damage from a single incident, especially in small communities where personal reputations carry significant weight. The absence of formal dispute resolution also leaves clients with limited channels to voice concerns, often causing them to vent dissatisfaction informally through gossip or social networks, as noted by Anderson (1998).

These dynamics reveal that while WOM can be a powerful promotional tool, it also operates with high volatility, and in informal settings, its negative forms are complex to mitigate. Therefore, integrating even basic feedback systems or client agreements could help self-employed workers protect their reputations and address service gaps before they escalate into lasting damage.

4.1.2 Quality of Workmanship

Quality of workmanship is the visible element in the branding of respondents. They stated that high-quality outputs are visible proof of their attention to detail, competence, and professionalism. Since most respondents do not maintain formal portfolios or websites, their completed projects serve as informal portfolios. These projects are often located within the client's neighborhood, allowing neighbors or passersby to observe their work. Issahaku and Abdulai (2020) and Gindling and Newhouse (2014) found that this visibility can spark word-of-mouth referrals and direct inquiries, making each finished job a branding and marketing tool. However, Gann and Salter (2000) argue that branding in construction increasingly depends on demonstrable competencies through formal credentials and customer relationship management, not just visible outcomes.

Moreover, according to the respondents, their craftsmanship affected how clients perceived their credibility and trustworthiness. This result reflects that in the absence of formal credentials, licenses, or business infrastructure, self-employed construction workers often depend on a performance-based reputation to build client trust. This phenomenon aligns with relationship marketing theories, which emphasize the value of trust and credibility in service-based transactions (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). It appears that clients, especially in residential or small-scale projects, may lack the technical knowledge to evaluate processes, so they instead judge service providers based on visible outcomes and interpersonal behavior. High-quality workmanship—manifested through neatly aligned tiles, leveled floors, or structurally sound installations—becomes a proxy for honesty, reliability, and professionalism, thereby reinforcing the laborer's personal brand.

High-quality workmanship led to repeat business and gave the respondents an edge to bargain for better prices and work on more complex projects. This reflects the strong link between perceived value and

marketing in residential construction. The respondents depend heavily on reputation derived from output quality as a currency for financial gain. The result implies that delivering excellent results allows them to satisfy existing clients and differentiate themselves in a saturated market, where trust and reliability are critical decision factors for potential clients. Similarly, Love and Holt (2000) and Cannon and Hillebrandt (1994) noted that in the construction industry, high-quality workmanship often leads to invitations for higher-value projects, as it signals skill and a commitment to detail and professionalism. Clients often pay more for laborers with a proven track record of excellence, making workmanship a value-based branding strategy (de Chernatony & Segal-Horn, 2003). However, according to Laryea (2011), skilled workers in formal sectors often cannot get better pay for their high-quality work because intense competition and pricing demands prioritize low cost over quality.

It is crucial to recognize that this quality of workmanship is according to the perception of the respondents, and it is important to acknowledge that clients may have different perspectives on what constitutes quality. The findings underscore that the respondents typically operate using their own internal quality standards, based on experience and client feedback. However, it is essential to recognize that what these workers perceive as "quality workmanship" may differ from the expectations or standards held by their clients. Several studies suggest that relying solely on individual experience and informal feedback can lead to inconsistent quality outcomes and potential misalignments with professional or regulatory benchmarks. For instance, Winch (2010) argues that subjective interpretations of quality in construction often conflict with formal quality assurance processes and industry standards. Similarly, Gorse and Emmitt (2007) found that workmanship can vary significantly without standardized training or adherence to codified quality systems, especially among self-employed workers who lack external supervision. Additionally, Dainty, Cheng, and Moore (2005) emphasize that client satisfaction is not always a reliable proxy for quality, as clients may lack the technical knowledge to assess workmanship accurately. Such mismatched perceptions may lead to dissatisfaction, disputes, or undervaluation of the labor. To avoid such confusion, a standard quality description should be understood by both clients and self-employed workers.

4.1.3 Client Relationship Management

In the absence of formal marketing strategies and digital platforms, the respondents said that personal interactions with their clients are the most important touchpoint. These interactions are before, during, and after each project and serve as informal yet powerful marketing channels. Similarly, Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault (1990) found that service quality is communicated through output, behavior, communication style, and responsiveness. The respondents who lack websites, business cards, or promotional materials maximize their manner of speaking, listening, and problem-solving as their branding. These face-to-face engagements by the respondents seem to allow their clients to assess reliability, trustworthiness, and expertise in real-time. Gremler and Gwinner (2008) revealed that a professional demeanor and respectful and clear communication create positive emotional connections, which are described as precursors to brand loyalty in service-based relationships. In particular, the flexibility of the respondents in accommodating client needs and providing custom-made solutions seems to enhance the customer's perception of personalized service. Clients often evaluate service quality based not just on the final output but on how they are treated throughout the construction process. Likewise, a friendly demeanor, listening actively to client preferences, and making accommodations when necessary by the respondents foster trust and satisfaction. According to Gremler and Gwinner (2008), such relational behaviors lead to greater emotional connection, strengthening brand loyalty and increasing the likelihood of repeat business or referrals.

The respondents stated that their punctuality and honoring commitments help reinforce a dependable image. When the respondents consistently show up on time and deliver within agreed-upon timelines, they build a brand associated with reliability. According to Parasuraman, Berry, and Zeithaml (1990), reliability is one of the five key dimensions of service quality and is defined as the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately. In construction, where project delays are common, a laborer's ability to adhere to timelines distinguishes them from competitors and cultivates client trust.

Workers reported that honoring their commitments—regarding work scope, price, and deadlines—boosts their credibility and leads to repeat business. Gremler and Gwinner (2008) support this, arguing that consistent, trustworthy service builds client loyalty. In informal markets, where formal vetting is absent, reliable delivery enhances client satisfaction and establishes a dependable and professional brand. This is

important for informal workers, where getting jobs often depends on word-of-mouth and their reputation. Workers who consistently do good work are more likely to get recommended and hired again. As Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault (1990) point out, clients judge service by the final result and how the worker acts, communicates, and keeps promises. Thus, being on time and keeping promises are not just polite; they are smart strategies for self-employed workers. These actions build their reputation, earn client trust, and lead to more work and referrals. This is a huge advantage since informal workers often do not have formal marketing or certifications.

4.1.4 Specialization or Niche Skills

Respondents indicated that specialization is a strategic branding mechanism, enabling differentiation from general laborers. Respondents positioned themselves as experts by concentrating on a specific craft or skill, fostering strong brand associations (e.g., an "expert tile fitter"). This specialization enhances recall value, increasing client remembrance and recommendations based on specific expertise. Niche capabilities notably distinguished these self-employed workers, facilitating the development of a distinct brand identity even without formal advertising.

However, formal training and certification for skilled laborers were not observed among the respondents. Instead, certification relied on subjective judgment by existing skilled workers who evaluated and determined the eligibility of unskilled workers for promotion. This process indicated skill advancement was based on opinion rather than objective criteria.

The duration in unskilled roles varied, with 62% of respondents spending less than one year and 38% spending over a year before transitioning to skilled positions. A "halo effect" was evident: once deemed skilled in one construction area, respondents were perceived as proficient in other construction aspects. Respondents did not revert to unskilled status while acquiring new skills, suggesting their experience duration was insufficient to establish a broad skill set fully. Interview data revealed that 84% of respondents claimed to be multi-skilled, possessing expertise in more than three construction skills. This contrasts with international standards, where formal certification is mandated. For example, the United Kingdom requires a Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS) card, Croatia mandates examinations and a three-year high school education (Ceric & Ivic, 2020a), and the USA requires 3 to 4 years of on-the-job instruction and education to become a skilled construction worker (Penn Foster, n.d.). These discrepancies suggest the necessity of establishing an assessment committee to certify skilled workers based on objective merit.

Adopting a specialized identity motivated respondents to engage in continuous skill refinement to enhance service quality and maintain competitive brand positioning. Younger respondents reported utilizing online resources for new designs and strategies, while older respondents observed their younger counterparts for ideas. This highlights a potential for obsolescence among those who do not actively engage with evolving designs, strategies, and methods within the industry. Hussain, Xuetong, and Hussain (2020) emphasize the imperative of enhancing labor force skills to address the needs of the present and future of the construction sector, viewing improved skills and intellectual capacities as directly proportional to higher productivity, minimized labor expenses, and enhanced quality of services. Because customer needs and technologies constantly evolve, there must be a shift from conventional to digitalized construction techniques for cost-efficient project delivery. This calls for the application of capability development programs that embrace modern designs, strategies, and approaches applicable to contemporary construction methods.

According to the demographic profile of respondents, the majority, 70%, were secondary school graduates who started tertiary education but did not finish. The Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA)-TVET Competency Assessment and Certification System (PTCACS) had certified only 6% of the respondents through formal training.

Respondents reported acquiring skills primarily through shadowing, mentoring by experienced workers, and hands-on practice. However, the quality of this informal training appeared inconsistent, attributed to exposure to various trainers possessing diverse skill sets and teaching methodologies. This inconsistency potentially contributes to gaps in skills and knowledge, particularly in theoretical understanding and foundational principles typically gained through formal education or structured training programs.

Therefore, productivity performance appears uncertain if it does not align with established standards. Similarly, a study by Dagdeviren (2016) revealed that only 2% of construction workers had received training through apprenticeship courses organized by governmental and professional institutions in

Turkey. The construction industries in South Africa and the UAE also continue to face issues of poor output quality when workers cannot secure either formal certification or informal work experience gained through years of practice on construction sites (Albattah et al., 2019; Windapo, 2016). Formal training and education are required in assessment and certification because they require construction skills (e.g., procedures, specifications, and calculations), frameworks, flexible structures, and physical and mental roles. It is agreed that training enhances employee skills and makes them learn new work techniques, thus increasing productivity (Kumar & Siddika, 2017). Recognizing the correlation between education, training, and productivity, it is imperative to set formal standards for construction skill certification. This approach will contribute to standardizing the performance and productivity of skilled workers in the construction industry.

4.2 Challenges experienced by self-employed laborers

The respondents experienced a lack of standardized certifications, formal training accreditation, or official licenses. This makes it difficult for potential clients to objectively verify their skills, competence, or adherence to industry standards. Their professional standing develops mainly through personal achievements, direct client feedback, and unstructured peer assessments. The subjective validation lacks the institutional weight of formal endorsements or industry-wide recognition and produces inconsistent results, making it challenging to develop a widely recognized brand.

The interviewees admitted that they have limited funds, which do not allow them to invest heavily in official advertisement campaigns, extensive advertisements, or technological improvements that may increase exposure. They cannot pay for conventional marketing media such as television commercials, billboards, or online marketing. Moreover, most interviewees have no professional websites, social media marketing skills, or other digital resources official companies employ to promote their projects and gain more exposure. This restricts their audience beyond their direct local network.

Respondents possess control over marketing outreach through their current social connections and local area reach. Workers face obstacles when they attempt to reach new clients outside their immediate surroundings and secure valuable work assignments. The skill validation system depends on knowledgeable peers to assess skills yet lacks objective evaluation methods, creating potential recognition discrepancies between skill levels. The combination of high costs, limited time, and awareness about formal vocational training programs restricts workers from staying current with changing construction methods and technology.

4. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

4.1 General discussion

Self-employed construction workers primarily depend on word-of-mouth (WOM) as their affordable branding strategy, which uses trust and personal relationships to gain clients while maintaining customer loyalty. The dependence on this method restricts market expansion opportunities and growth potential, while bad word-of-mouth quickly harms their reputation because they lack official complaint procedures. The combination of quality workmanship and strong client relationships forms essential branding tools, but unstructured, informal training and missing certifications create mismatches in client expectations. The workers must incorporate formal training, objective skill assessment, and digital presence development to achieve sustainable growth because of their current informal practices.

This current research adds to the literature. First, it shows how WOM serves as a cost-effective, community-based marketing strategy in resource-constrained contexts. WOM is an incidental effect of service delivery but is intentionally leveraged as a strategic marketing tool. This supports and expands on the idea that word of mouth can be intentionally developed, even without an official marketing framework, by utilizing satisfied clients as informal brand ambassadors.

Second, it highlights how the visible quality of workmanship functions as an informal branding mechanism for self-employed construction workers without formal credentials or marketing platforms. The study demonstrates that completed projects serve as practical, community-embedded portfolios and shape client perceptions of trust, credibility, and professionalism—key attributes in relationship-based service markets.

Third, it emphasizes interpersonal interaction as a core branding and client retention mechanism for self-employed construction workers in informal markets.

Fourth, it highlights specialization as an informal yet effective branding and differentiation strategy among self-employed construction workers, particularly in contexts lacking formal marketing and certification systems.

Lastly, it is recommended that local government units (LGUs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) help self-employed construction workers document their work with simple photo portfolios or signage, boosting their professional image and reach. Training needs to include customer service, marketing, quality, and soft skills such as communication. Policymakers can encourage formal training and qualifications, including recognizing prior learning, to standardize skills. Policymakers can also create digital literacy initiatives for mobile users and a national skills framework for construction. Promoting niche skills and public skills registers will facilitate branding and job matching. Policymakers can promote written contracts and feedback mechanisms for a more stable informal sector. They can create community-based certifications for transparent quality standards. Introducing apprenticeship programs combining theory and practice and investigating policies on collective bargaining for labor prices will further incorporate workers into economic progress.

4.2 Implications

The respondents find word-of-mouth marketing both reachable and powerful, yet this method exposes their reputation to potential harm. The absence of formal feedback systems and client agreements makes it possible for one negative client experience to cause significant damage to the respondent's brand. Basic mechanisms that promote clear client-worker communication and feedback systems are essential for maintaining brand reputation.

The respondents used personal behavior together with reliability as their fundamental branding and marketing tools. Their lack of formal communication channels means they establish trust and loyalty through their ability to deliver client needs and fulfil commitments. Interpersonal skills and consistent dependability are important to bonuses because they determine repeat business and essential word-of-mouth referrals that sustain their long-term economic stability and market competitiveness.

Specialization helped the respondents get referrals, but formal training and objective certification limited its advantages. When workers acquire their skills through informal education, they develop uneven abilities, creating a "halo effect" that makes their expertise unclear. The informal system does not meet global standards, which restricts workers from reaching their full potential and maintaining their competitive advantage over time. A formal process must be established to develop skills and recognize achievements for specialized laborers because industry standards require consistent quality and ongoing adaptation to changes.

Quality work is a benefit to respondents, but a benefit that may not be consistent. What the respondents define as "quality" tends to vary from their clients' expectations, resulting in miscommunication and dissatisfaction. It implies that without a standardized definition or formal quality checks, relying only on visible outcomes means workers struggle to satisfy all clients or get fair pay consistently, leaving their branding vulnerable and their income potentially undervalued.

The findings consistently highlight the reliance on subjective skill assessment, informal training, and a lack of standardized quality definitions among self-employed workers. This implies that policymakers should prioritize the development and implementation of an accessible national framework for informal skill validation (e.g., Recognition of Prior Learning for experienced workers) and the establishment of basic, mutually understood quality standards for various trades. Such a policy would enhance worker credibility, reduce client-worker quality perception gaps, and enable informal workers to compete more effectively and transparently, potentially accessing higher-value projects.

The research revealed that despite the effectiveness of word-of-mouth, its limitations in market reach and vulnerability to negative reputation are significant. This implies that policy should focus on creating or supporting low-cost, easy-to-use digital platforms (e.g., community-based online directories, simple mobile apps for showcasing work and collecting reviews) and promoting digital literacy among informal workers. Concurrently, policies should encourage or facilitate the adoption of basic client agreement templates and feedback mechanisms to professionalize client interactions, mitigate reputational risks, and foster long-term client relationships.

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