The Sensemaking of Professional Freelancers in the Gig Economy: A Case Study of Production Professionals at a Hong Kong Performing Arts Enterprise

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Abstract

This research investigated the sensemaking of professional freelancers in the gig economy: a case study of production professionals at a Hong Kong performing arts enterprise. Freelancing has become a significant phenomenon in today’s human capital market, creating a dynamic gig economy. In the performing arts industry, it is the norm to engage professionals with specific skills as freelancers on a project basis. However, little is known about how these project-based professional employees make sense of their relationship with employing organisations. This study explores how professional freelancers made sense of their relationship with an employing performing arts enterprise as it transitioned from start-up to a sustainable growth stage. Since identity construction is the root of sensemaking, this study also looks into, as a sub-question, to what extent the identity construction of the professional freelance project team members shifted over time. It was a descriptive single-case study and data were collected from document reviews, semi-structured interviews, and observations. The key findings of this research concluded that (1) intrinsic rewards were more important than pecuniary motivation, (2) high work autonomy, openness and career development opportunities were essential to freelancers, (3) freelancing and loyalty were oxymoronic but a long-term relationship could still be built, (4) freelancers’ roles and identity had reciprocal effects and were influenced by changes in the environment, and (5) consistency in the freelance team composition and the alignment of freelancer and organisational identity resonated with freelancers’ volition and emotional attachment, to become a relational gel between freelancers and the employing organisation. This study has implications for employers of professional freelancers in the performing arts gig economy, as well as organisations that rely heavily on the input of professional freelancers.

Keywords: professional freelancers, gig economy, sensemaking, identity, performing arts
Dedication

This study is dedicated to all the performing arts professional freelancers who have been through thick and thin with me as our various endeavours transitioned from start-up to sustainability. I have been inspired by your passion, dedication and tenacity, and I hope this study somehow gives a voice to a perspective that might have been overlooked. For as long as I have a role to play, I will endeavour to consider your interests more fully. Thank you for your continuous contribution to and impact on performing arts education and the entertainment industry.
Acknowledgments

This dissertation would not have been possible without the guidance, support, and encouragement I received from my supervisor Dr Tova Sanders, and my second reader, Dr Kelly Conn, and for the generous contribution of his time, my external reader, Dr Peter Duffy. Dr Sanders, you helped me overcome my self-doubt with your up-lifting encouragement, and if it was not for your constant reinforcement, I would have definitely dropped out. To Dr Margaret Gorman who changed my topic, thank you very much. I didn’t like it at first, of course, because I had already started the other topic. But you were right. This is a much better and very meaningful topic.

Those who have done it would agree with me that the journey to obtain a doctoral degree is taxing, lonely, and on some days miserable. As I shared with my dissertation coach, Dr Thomas Mowle, to whom I give much credit, I feel that writing a dissertation is like cultivating several acres of land with a small plough. I lost sight of what I was doing so many times, and Thomas kept me on track with his structural master plan of two weeks at a time.

Lots of thanks and appreciation to my dearest friends who knew what I was doing and were constantly cheering me on. Katia, Kate, Carol, Cynthia, Simon, Stephen, Forrest, thank you so much for the many warm and caring conversations; and Hennie who was just ahead of me in her doctoral pursuit and who even helped me find articles.

There are also people who were super supportive but honestly did not understand what I was doing and why – my family. I am the first doctoral scholar in the family, and though they did not understand why I was doing this, especially my mom Jessie, they were diligently supportive. So, thank you very much mom Jessie, Mary, Eric, Edward, Hannah and Timmy. I love you all.
I am an artist. I don’t really dance, and I can’t sing. But like any other artist, I have a lot locked inside my head and my heart that I need to express. I use words, and rhetoric is my art form. Thank you, Northeastern University, for nurturing me.

Last but not least, I am grateful for the generosity of the participants in my study. Thank you for sharing your experiences, thoughts and emotions so unreservedly.

Before I end this, in recognition of my own healing process, I want to tell Ms Chan of Grade 5, the fact that I was a repeater at Grade 5 did not mean that I was worthless, both as a person and academically, as you kept telling all classmates for the entire year.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Freelancing has become a significant phenomenon in today’s human capital market, creating a dynamic gig economy (Kalleberg & Dunn, 2016). In the performing arts and creative industries, it is the norm to engage professionals with specific skills as freelancers on a project or gig basis (Mckinlay & Smith, 2009). However, little is known about how these project-based professional employees make sense of their relationship with employing organisations. When an organisation, especially one in the performing arts industries, is at its start-up stage, it creates exciting and satisfying opportunities for people who have the required professional expertise to join (Bliemel et al., 2016). These professional freelancers are happy to contribute and are even prepared to receive a discounted fee (Hudson, 2001). However, as these start-ups transition into a sustainable stage, even when professional freelancers are paid the normal market fee, the excitement and satisfaction are diluted because of the repetitiveness of the creative environment (Forrier, Sels, & Stynen, 2009). While a lot of research has been done on arts organisation start-ups (French, 2016; Kong, 2012; Morrow, 2018; Varbanova, 2016), little is known about how performing arts freelancers make sense of their relationship with employing organisations, and how such sensemaking may shift as these start-up organisations mature.

As Fleshler (2009) has put it, today’s performing arts are not just about putting on concerts, but putting on shows. The acceptance of performing arts expressions by businesses to achieve business goals has grown in many parts of the world (Stanziola, 2018), and will grow in importance in Hong Kong (Chow & de Kloet, 2015). Performing arts organisations see the opportunities businesses are offering and are grasping these opportunities, engaging performing arts practitioners on a gig-basis to supply the creative input. However, research on performing artists’ sense-making of gig-based employments cannot be found. The lack of relevant studies
leaves burgeoning performing arts organisations with no basis for future strategic planning. Research needs to be conducted to prepare freelance performing arts practitioners and performing arts organisations to aim for best practices.

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore how professional performing arts production freelancers in the gig economy in Hong Kong make sense of their relationship with their employing organisation and how this changes as the employing organisation evolves from start-up to sustainability.

Statement of the Problem

Common Problem

Freelancers are classified as self-employed independent contractors, contracted to do temporary, part-time, project-based, and/or seasonal work, where work opportunities and engagement details are typically self-managed by the freelancers (Burke, 2015). These independent contractors come under the employ of an organisation on a short-term basis but are not regular employees. They usually remain largely autonomous administratively (Barley & Kunda, 2006; Osnowitz, 2010). Freelancers typically work on multiple projects and for multiple organisations simultaneously (Storey, Salaman, & Platman, 2005). Research shows that freelance work may be seen as precarious in that there is no employment security, with employer exploitation and employee disadvantage (Kong, 2011). Some researchers see freelancers as second-class workers with no benefits, job security, or development (Salamon, 2016). Other studies, however, focus on the desirable characteristics of today’s diverse and flexible capitalism of freelancing (Kazi, Yusoff, Khan, & Kazi, 2014). Contingent freelancers can build their own capital network, strike a self-determined work-life balance, keep personal skills and knowledge up-to-date, engage in meaningful and self-fulfilling work by choice, enjoy high work autonomy,
and live a self-determined lifestyle (D. C. Feldman, 2006; Kazi et al., 2014; Marler, Barringer, & Milkovich, 2002). However, precarious or not, freelance human capital is becoming a global phenomenon. Together with technological advancement, the gig economy is emerging in many industries. Economically, freelancing could make sense; reducing fixed-cost commitment and freeing up talents to contribute to various employers, promoting innovation and transference of skills (Ayers, Miller, Park, Schwartz, & Antcliff, 2016). Yet, literature on the understanding of freelancers is sparse, especially within the creative and performing arts industries. There is a gap of knowledge in understanding the relationship between freelancers and project-based employers. Many organisational leaders employing freelancers do not understand the implications of the proliferation of freelance employment; nor do they know the sensemaking process of freelancers. It is important that more studies are done on how the parties involved make sense of the phenomenon.

**Specific Problem - Proécho**

Proécho (a pseudonym), a performing arts enterprise, has been offering short courses in performing arts for over 10 years, and started its performance gig business in 2013. In the performance gig business, it engages performing arts professional production freelancers. As a start-up, Proécho benefited from the freelancers’ strong experience in producing performances. Freelancers also welcomed the opportunities Proécho created. However, after a few years, these freelancers became mobile in the market, bringing with them the knowledge and experience generated from Proécho gigs. Freelancers in general do not have the need to maintain loyalty to employing firms. They also do not have to invest in enhancing the firm’s value so much as focusing on developing their own reputation through the firm’s project (Edstrom & Ladendorf, 2012; George & Chattopadhyay, 2005). Their focus is on building their own reputation (Pongratz
& Günter Voβ, 2003; Syrett, 2015). Hence, the interest in this study is sparked and a need to understand the sensemaking of freelancers emerges.

Moving on to the sustainable growth stage, the general manager of Proécho finds that she does not understand how professional freelancers feel about the work moving forward. It is not clear what these freelancers think about, or how they identify with Proécho now, as their experience gained from working with Proécho has made them more in-demand. As the leader, the general manager wonders whether these professional freelancers are prepared to be a part of Proécho’s future growth; and whether their sense-making has changed since the start-up of Proécho’s performance gig business. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore how professional performing arts production freelancers in the gig economy in Hong Kong make sense of their relationship with their employing organisation and how this has changed as the employing organisation evolved from start-up to sustainability.

**Research Question**

How do professional freelance project-team members make sense of their relationship with an employing performing arts enterprise as it transitions from start-up to a sustainable growth stage?

Since identity construction is the root of sensemaking (Mills, 2003), this study will also explore, as a sub-question, to what extent does the identity construction of the professional freelance project team members shift over time?

**Context and Background**

The general question about sensemaking of freelancers will be addressed through a case study focusing on Proécho (pseudo name), a non-profit performing arts organisation in Hong Kong. In the performing arts industry, worldwide and in Hong Kong, organisations largely
engage professional practitioners to provide artistic input on a freelance basis (Hermes, Koch, Bakhuisen, & Borghuis, 2017). Different performance productions require diversely talented “lPros”, independent self-employed professionals (Burke, 2015), to direct, to choreograph, to manage and to perform; and a gig economy is well-established in the performing arts industry, where employment is project-based or gig-based and employees are freelancers who come together for the gig and disperse when the gig is completed (Throsby & Zednik, 2012). In a gig-economy, there is a “triangular relationship” (Sunshine, 2018, p. 110) among the worker, the end-user client and the intermediary employer. Freelancers’ work is supervised by the employing company in a triangular relationship and subject to validation to meet organisational standards (Rodrigues, 2015).

Since the gig economy does not provide job security or a stable income, many performing arts freelancers work in a day job to secure income, while others who focus on arts-related engagements work for multiple employers (Throsby & Zednik, 2012). This is very common in the performing arts field. There is no fine distinction between educators, performers and producers (Lam, 2018). A typical performing arts practitioner teaches and performs on stage, as well as providing creative input into a production without appearing on stage at all (Frenette, Martin, & Tepper, 2018). Most performing arts practitioners are freelancers and therefore one’s career role is very much determined by the kind of jobs available (Merkel, 2018). An artistic director for a performance gig, for example, may be a performer in another gig, a teacher in a performing arts course, and the accompanist / pianist for a dance degree programme. Such context of this study is exemplified by a Hong Kong performing arts enterprise, Proécho. Professional freelancers, who are teaching and producing gigs for Proécho, form a professional project team who are gig-based independent professional employees. Services they provide to
gigs include artistic design, directing, choreographing, stage, set, lighting, sound and costume design and execution, and music arrangement. Performers in Proécho performance gigs are performing arts students, and are not the focus of this study. The focus of this study are the professional performing arts production freelancers.

**Start-up and Freelance Employment**

Reasons for engaging freelancers instead of full-time employees are heterogeneous. Employing skilful or professional freelancers is favoured by a lot of start-ups, as these businesses can benefit from the strong experience of skilled freelancers (Burke, 2011; Chauradia & Galande, 2015), who can act as “enablers” and “facilitators” (Burke, 2011, p. 131) to help start-up businesses achieve their goals faster and more smoothly. Established firms also choose skilled freelancers because they are cheaper for short-term and irregular projects (Burke, 2012). However, once a project is completed, skilled freelancers become mobile in the market, bringing with them the knowledge and experience generated from the gig (Popiel, 2017). Skilled freelancers seek control, high wages, autonomy and flexibility, and employing firms strive to deliver consistently good quality services to end clients, relying on freelancers. However, as mentioned before, skilled freelancers do not have the need to maintain loyalty to employing firms. Their focus is on developing their own reputation (Pongratz & Günter Voß, 2003; Syrett, 2015).

As these start-up firms transition into a sustainable growth phase, they need to think about the business’ sustainability and possible future growth (Spilsbury, 2016). Growth would involve the development of more clients, leveraging on the expertise of skilled freelancers to provide the technical input, and using the existing full-time administrative team, which is usually
relatively small, to promote and coordinate more business thereby keeping the fixed costs low (Wheatley & Hibbler-Britt, 2019).

**Rationale and Significance**

Academic scholars and policy makers agree in general that after the industrial era, creativity became a driving force for economic development (Florida, 2005; Hartley, 2005). Today’s creative industries include advertising, publishing, design in all areas, software development, photography, architecture, creative music, film and television production, and the performing arts (Hennekam & Bennett, 2016b), and they are a significant part of many developed economies (Hartley, 2005). These industries rely heavily on the input of creative professionals. However, given their considerable significance, there are still very few studies that focus on the business management of the creative industries (Preece, 2011; Schlagwein, 2018).

In Hong Kong, the predominant industries are finance, and logistics and shipping, but these are facing fierce competition from Mainland China and nearby Singapore. Since 2003, the creative and performing arts industries have been recognised as major industries of Hong Kong in the Hong Kong economy (Xhang, 2005).

In the past ten years, Hong Kong has invested in the construction, education and publicizing of the creative and performing arts industries. The West Kowloon Cultural District is being developed as a hub for arts and culture that could link Hong Kong with the nearby regions in China (So & Ip, 2014). However, the government is only providing better infrastructure, and these industries are mainly market-led and self-sustained with minimal support from the government (Lin & Poon, 2017. Nevertheless, being creative in nature, these industries have been growing and thriving.
According to the Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department (2019), between 2007 to 2017, the value added of the performing arts almost doubled from HK$726M to HK$1,382M. Combined with other creative industries, value added increased by over 70% from HK$65,117M to HK$111,766M.

Table 1

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Performing arts</td>
<td>726</td>
<td>876</td>
<td>954</td>
<td>1,196</td>
<td>1,263</td>
<td>1,382</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total creative and performing arts industries</td>
<td>65,117</td>
<td>106,050</td>
<td>109,680</td>
<td>108,920</td>
<td>109,607</td>
<td>111,766</td>
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Note. All figures in million HK$. Data from Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department (2019).

Employment in the performing arts industry, in particular, increased from 3,020 in 2007 to 5,380 in 2017. This represents a 78% increase. This was significantly faster than the total rate of increase in employment in Hong Kong during the same period, which was around 13% (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, 2019).

Nevertheless, operating in one of the freest economies in the world, the Hong Kong Government has no direct involvement in the development of these industries; development relies on market-led initiatives. This study, from the perspective of a performing arts enterprise in Hong Kong, is therefore significant in that it will delve deeper into the sensemaking of performing arts freelance practitioners, providing insight into a very much understudied area.

With the increase in on-demand and freelance work arrangements as mentioned before, there have been numerous studies on freelance workers (Ashford, George, & Blatt, 2007; Barley & Kunda, 2006; Burke, 2015) and the gig economy (Daum, 2005; Farrell & Grieg, 2016 Frenken & Schor, 2017; Kalleberg, 2000, 2003, 2011, Kalleberg & Dunn, 2016; Kalleberg, Reskin, & Hudson, 2000; Pinsof, 2016; Stanford, 2017; Sunshine 2018), but studies on the sensemaking of
freelancers are scarce and research on performing arts practitioners and their employers in gig-based employments cannot be found. Many performing arts companies have grown from very small makeshift operations to sizeable companies. They have seen professional freelancers come and go, but little is known about what is going on in the professional freelancers’ minds, and whether performing arts companies are offering acceptably fair employment terms. This study, therefore, tries to understand how freelancers make sense of their relationship with employing organisations, and how this changes over time as employing organisations evolve to sustainability. Although this is a single case study, findings in this study will benefit freelance workers and employers, and may inspire further research into the freelancing phenomenon in the performing arts gig economy.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study uses Karl Weick’s (1995) theory of sensemaking in organisational studies as a theoretical framework. Sensemaking was first studied by Karl Weick in his seminal work, *The Social Psychology of Organising* (1969). The theory of sensemaking was further solidified in his 1995 book, *Sensemaking in Organisations* (Weick, 1995), which includes the seven properties of sensemaking. The theory of sensemaking will provide a lens for this study to see how freelancers make sense of their relationships with employing organisations, and how this changes over time as employing organisations evolve to sustainability.

Sensemaking attempts to answer the question, “what’s the story here?” (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 410). Stimulating information is acquired, analysed, interpreted and acted upon in connection with the social environment to guide further actions. Meanings are assigned to events for retention, which continues to form a sensemaking loop (Maitlis, 2005; Weick 1995; Weick et al., 2005).
The concept of sensemaking is embedded in everyone’s daily life but this study draws on Weick’s contribution to organisational sensemaking (Weick, 1993, 2011; Weick et al., 2005). Based on the constructivism paradigm, Weick believes individuals actively create and assign meanings to situations that make sense to them, all done within the bigger context of their environment. When sensemaking is examined in relation to an organisational setting, other elements such as power and emotion are added into the mix of analysis. Weick et al. (2005) overtly point out that discussions of sensemaking often use words such as “construct”, “enact”, “generate”, “create”, “invent”, “imaging”, “originate”, and “devise” (p. 417), exaggerating individuals’ freedom to make sense of events independently. In actual fact, sensemaking discussions could well include words such as “react”, “discover”, “detect”, “becoming aware of”, or “comply with”, which indicate that institutionalisation and environmental factors are at play in a person’s sensemaking process, implying people might “internalize and adopt whatever is handed to them” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 417). Although this study does not attempt to analyse the
juxtaposition of sensemaking and institutionalism, it will examine the sensemaking of professional freelancers’ relationship with employing organisations within the larger context of the environment where there is an organisation, there is an employer-employee relational link, there are the emotions of organisational sentiments, and there is the influence and control over cues at play. Power and emotions related to organisational sensemaking will be examined in greater detail in Chapter 2.

Weick (1995) discusses seven properties of organisational sensemaking, namely:

1. Grounded in identity construction
2. Retrospective
3. Enactive of sensible environments
4. Social
5. Ongoing
6. Focused on and by extracted cues, and
7. Driven by plausibility rather than accuracy

These properties are important to organisational sensemaking and each property can contribute to a self-contained set of interview questions to contribute to a holistic understanding of the sensemaking process of the research participants (Weick, 1995, p. 18). The seven properties are summarised below.

**Grounded in Identity Construction**

Identity is fundamental to sensemaking and influences how other properties of sensemaking are conceptualised (Mills, 2003). Identity construction is about someone’s self-identity and self-concept that are established through the process of interaction (Weick, 1995, p. 20). Organisational members are always aware of their environment and are constantly trying to
fit into situations and people around them. Often, they recognise a need to react, they react, and then they understand who they are and what their role in the situation is. A sensemaker is, therefore, continually redefining the self with the environment and deciding which self fits best; and Weick (1995) calls this the “reciprocal influence” (p. 23).

Retrospective

The second property of sensemaking refers to the process of looking back to the past and determining the meaning of what has happened. Weick argues that people can only make sense of an action they have taken after they have done it. Although Gioia and Mehra (1996) posited the significance of prospection in sensemaking, but retrospection is still considered as the predominant means of making sense of experiences. Retrospective sensemaking is reflective, and like identity construction, it is also heavily influenced by the context of the given situation (Weick, 1995, p. 26). Through retrospection, organisational members extract certain cues that would cause the fewest conflicts to construct a reality.

Enactive of Sensible Environments

Enactment is about action and it implies that action is a precondition for sensemaking. An action that one has taken impacts on the current state of one’s environment. In other words, once organisational members take a certain action, they will have to react to the environment they have created as a result of their initial action. In the organisational setting, organisational members often create a certain part of the environment for themselves through their own actions, and such environments in turn constrain their actions (Weick, 1995, p. 31). Quoting Mary Parker Follett (1924), Weick (1995) concludes that “we are neither the master nor the slave of our environment” (p. 32) because of this enactive of sensible environments property of sensemaking.

Social
Making meaning is a socially constructed process and “one’s behaviour is dependent on the behaviour of others” (Weick, 1995, p. 39). That is why sensemaking is often regarded as a collective process (Cornelissen, Mantere & Vaara, 2014; Weick et al., 2005). The thoughts, feelings and behaviour of one person are influenced by the presence of others. That presence could be “actual, imagined or implied” (Weick, 1995, p. 39). Social influence in sensemaking is very significant. Just as individual actions are important in the sensemaking process, so is the influence that others have on sensemakers and their environments.

**On-going Continuous**

Sensemaking does not have a starting or ending point. People are always engaged in something, and trying to make sense of it. In the continuous flow of daily events, organisational members tend to zoom in at certain moments, extract cues, and make sense of what is going on. Therefore, sensemaking is more recognisable and examinable when an ongoing flow is interrupted (Patriotta & Brown, 2011; Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is also charged with feeling and emotions. In addition, retrospect and remembrance bring people’s mood back to an emotion evoked in an event in the past, and this affects the current sensemaking. (Weick, 1995).

**Focused on and by Extracted Cues**

The sensemaking process is often unseen and unknown to others and other people can only observe how sensemakers extract cues. When a sensemaker has extracted certain cues, they are used to form a wider meaning of what is happening (Weick, 1995). Cues that are extracted are often used to make assumptions as if they represent all information. Extracted cues have the capacity to induce action, and organisation leaders often augment cues to motivate organisational members towards certain goals.

**Driven by Plausibility Rather than Accuracy**
Plausibility of sensemaking stresses the fact that sensemaking does not depend on accuracy. “Sensemaking is about plausibility, pragmatics, coherence, reasonableness, creation, invention and instrumentality” (Weick, 1995). In other words, human sensemaking is different from computer programming. This is important for organisational analysis. Most actions taken in organisations are time-sensitive. People usually start to react before the accurate meaning is figured out. With multiple cues, multiple meanings for a multitude of constituents, it would be surprising if an accurate interpretation of meaning was readily available. Sensemaking of an event is, therefore, driven by plausibility rather than accuracy.

**Conclusion**

To put it in a nutshell, sensemaking is the figuring out and structuring of the unknown, concentrating on a stimulus that is situated in a frame of reference, and it is a reasoning process that uses retrospective materials in consideration of one’s environment and situation. Sensemaking evokes actions which seek meaning from the interrupted flow of activities and enact orderliness into the unrest. Subsequently, organisational members adjust their existing game plan, shape and fit into the environment, and select certain cues for sensemaking (Weick et al., 2005). Because of this mix of so many circumstantial factors, sensemakers do not necessarily grasp the full and accurate picture of the story through the sensemaking process. In this study, how professional freelancers make sense is the key. In the performing arts industry, where freelance employment is the norm, the traditional employment relationship between organisation and employees that is based on a hierarchical structure of employer power is replaced by a market-like cooperative partnership (Appelbaum, 2002; Mofidi & Pazour, 2019). Instead of being loyal to an employer and contributing to the growth of the employing organisation, these freelancers are entrepreneurs building their own names. It is important for organisational leaders
in the gig economy to understand, through the lens of Karl Weick’s (1995) sensemaking theory in organisations, how the freelance gig environment is moulding professional freelancers’ sensemaking of their relationship with employing organisations, and how such sensemaking changes over time as the organisation is maturing from start-up to sustainable growth.

**Definitions of Key Terminology**

**performing arts professional freelancers / practitioners:** For the purpose of this study, performing arts professional freelancers or performing arts practitioners refer to a group of performing artists who have developed solid production skills in addition to performing techniques. Actors are also scriptwriters and directors. Dancers are also choreographers. Singers are also composers and music engineers. The group of performing arts professional practitioners also includes sound engineers, lighting specialists, custom designers and experienced stage managers. In this study, Proécho’s performing arts professional freelancers do not include performers. Performers in Proécho gigs are current performing arts students. Professional freelancers in this study are involved in a production input capacity, in roles of artistic directors, music directors, choreographers, lighting/sound/set designers, costume designers and stage managers. These professionals are also properly educated and trained in their specialisation and have at least 10 years of performing and production experience.

**start-up:** A start-up is a newly emerged business venture that aims at developing a viable and financially sustainable business model to meet market needs (Katila, Chen, & Piezunka, 2012). Typically, a start-up business emerges when a solution with a minimally viable product or service is perceived for a problem. Start-ups usually face high uncertainty and in order to minimise risks, they are usually lean with little structure, resources or support.
sustainability: Sustainability is an important concept in strategic management research (Zollo, Cennamo, & Neumann, 2013). It refers to “the specification of a set of actions to be taken by present persons that will not diminish the prospects of future persons to enjoy levels of consumption, wealth, utility, or welfare comparable to those enjoyed by present persons” (Zollo et al., 2013, p. 241). Simply put, in a business organisational context, sustainability is the process of advancing from a chaotic start-up stage to a more stable stage in the enhancement of current and future potentials in a balanced environment with established levels of resources, investments, and technology (J. K. Hall, Daneke, & Lenox, 2010).
Chapter 2. Literature Review

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore how professional performing arts production freelancers in the gig economy in Hong Kong make sense of their relationship with their employing organisation and how this changes as the employing organisation evolves from start-up to sustainability. Literature on understanding and managing freelancers is sparse, especially within the performing arts industry and other creative industries. There is a gap of knowledge in understanding how freelancers make sense of an employing organisation’s transition from start-up to sustainability. Although this study will focus narrowly on one enterprise, Proécho, its findings would be relevant to similar organisations and would inspire further research in the freelancing phenomenon in the gig economy.

This chapter reviews literature that is relevant to this topic. The first part of the literature review focuses on sensemaking, with a summary of Karl Weick’s (1995) theory of sensemaking and how that theory is echoed by other scholars. Two other strands of literature, freelancing in the gig economy, and workers in creative industries, are also included in this chapter. The review is structured to offer readers a deeper understanding of organisational sensemaking, and the backdrop of this study is the gig economy and its players.

Karl Weick’s Sensemaking Theory

This study uses Karl Weick’s (1995) organisational sensemaking as its theoretical lens. Sensemaking focuses on interactions among players, interpretation of experiences, subsequent actions, and how all these have an impact on individual and collective understanding (Werkman, 2010). Sensemaking is an effective tool for organisational analysis when the research addresses aspects of the psychological contract, which is unwritten and sometimes unspoken, especially between employers and employees (De Vos & Freese, 2011). In the context of this study, there is
a high element of psychological contract between the freelancers and Proécho. For example, the freelancers sometimes have to assume that Proécho will continue to engage them for another gig. Likewise, Proécho also has to assume that the freelancers will continue to accept their next gig appointment. Given the subjective nature of psychological contracts between freelancers and employing organisations, sensemaking theory is effective in explaining the underlying mechanism by which freelance employees attach meaning to and make retrospective sense of what occurs in the employment relationship. This section traces the seminal roots of Weick’s (1995) sensemaking theory and the historical development of the theory within the past few decades. It then discusses empirical studies using the theory and describes critiques of Weick’s work.

**Seminal Roots**

Weick states in his seminal work, *Sensemaking in Organizations* (1995) that Follett (1924) influenced his perspective in recognising organisations as continually evolving social processes. In *Sensemaking in Organizations*, Weick frequently cites Follett’s thinking, and posits that to solve organisational problems, organisations need to assume the role of change agent and foster collective sensemaking. As a proponent of collective sensemaking, Follett (1924) believes that when there is a unified purpose, organisational members bring in diverse opinions and views, contributing to a new experience that can lead to innovative solutions to problems. This concept had a big influence on Weick’s seminal work (1995). Also influenced by Follett (1924), Weick (1995) believes that human interaction is the source of creative problem solving in organisations. Based on this communal view of organisation, Weick (1995) developed his seminal concept of sensemaking.
Among organisational literature, especially with the publication of Weick’s (1995) *Sensemaking in Organisations*, there has been a rapidly growing amount of research on organisational sensemaking, especially in areas related to organisational matters such as corporate responsibility (Hanke & Stark, 2009; Onkila & Siltaoja, 2017; Rindova, 1997), organisational changes (Crawford & Mills, 2011; Shaw, 2017; E. Thomas, 2001), innovation (Blackler, Crump, & McDonald, 1999; Shin, Yuan, & Zhou, 2016), and organisational learning (Guiett & Vandenbempt, 2016; Huzzard, 2004). Sensemaking has, therefore, become a key activity for studies in organisations.

**Historical Development of Sensemaking**

The concept of organisational sensemaking was conceived as early as the 19th century (Dewey, 1892; James, 1890). However, it was intentionally developed into a specific focus in organisational literature about half a century ago by Garfinkel (1967) and Weick (1969). Garfinkel (1967) introduced ethnomethodology as a way to study how actors, based on everyday knowledge, interacted with each other and interpreted meaning through their experiences; and termed it as “sense-making” (p 76). In his 1969 book, *The Social Psychology of Organizing*, Weick innovatively discussed how organisational actors realised interruptions, and entered into cycles of enactment in an attempt to reduce ambiguity during changes in the organisational environment. Thereafter, studies that focused on how individuals made sense of their lived experience started to emerge (Heap, 1976; Jordan & Fuller-Semiotica, 1975). There were also more organisational behaviour studies that focused on sensemaking in the 1970s. For example, Salancik (1977a, 1977b) discussed an important issue between employers and employees, commitment, through the lens of sensemaking and how organisational members’ future choices of action are constrained by how they act on their beliefs today. Manis (1978) and Staw and Ross
(1978) also used the theory of sensemaking to understand cognitive dissonance that involved resolving conflicting beliefs in organisational experiences.

In the 1980s, before Weick’s (1995) *Sensemaking in Organizations*, organisational behaviour and strategic management studies had shown more interest in cognitive influence (Walsh, 1995). For example, Louis (1980) looked at how unmet expectations triggered a sensemaking journey. Kiesler and Sproull (1982) investigated how stimuli in the environment were picked up, interpreted and acted upon. Starbuck and Milliken (1988) made inquiry into how some cues became more salient than others. In particular, organisational research in the 1980s began to shift focus on management-led changes to considering how actions taken by organisational members could alter the very environment they tried to make sense of and acted on (Porac, Thomas, & Baden-Fuller, 1989; Weick, 1988).

In the 1990s, interests in organisational sensemaking heightened with deeper and broader research into the topic. For example, in addition to sensemaking during organisational change, there were studies in sensemaking during and after organisational crises (Gephart, 1993; Weick 1993). In his *Collapse of Sensemaking*, Weick (1993) explored why organisations are vulnerable and how they can become more resilient. Weick points out that work, in the 1990s, was increasingly done in small temporary outfits or groups. Communications were fragmented and sudden losses of meaning were probable. People suddenly lost the sense of a rational, orderly system. They became anxious and faced a collapse of sensemaking and structure. Weick suggests that the analytic focus should shift from feelings to social construction, where identity plays a paramount role.

In 1995, Weick’s (1995) seminal book, *Sensemaking in Organizations* was published. It summarised sensemaking studies up to that point, and encapsulated main aspects of sensemaking
in the seven properties. This became a theoretical framework for studying organisational sensemaking. More studies that focused on organisational contexts, such as organisational culture, social influence and strategic change were also burgeoning in the 1990s (Drazin, Glynn, & Kazanjian, 1999; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Ibarra & Andrews, 1993).

**Key Concepts of Organisational Sensemaking**

There are many definitions of sensemaking, but sensemaking is generally taken to mean the process by which sensemakers seek to plausibly understand ambiguous situations and events (Colville, Brown, & Pye, 2012; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2014; Weick, 1995). In Weick’s *Sensemaking in Organizations* (1995), sensemaking is described as the process of appraising the unknown by framing it in a way that allows comprehension, inference, predictions, and action. As discussed in Chapter 1, Weick describes sensemaking as having seven properties: grounded in identity construction, retrospective, enactive of social environments, social, ongoing, focused on and extracted by cues, and driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (1995). It is a process of creation (an advancement from merely cognitive interpretation), interpretation, and enactment (Colville et al., 2012; Weick, 1995). Individuals explore the environment by extracting cues to create a mental map of an ambiguous situation. They then interpret the situation and take actions based on their knowledge and interpretation. The steps of extracting cues and bracketing, framing the environment in interpretation, and mapping during confusion is echoed by other researchers as important steps in sensemaking (Maitlis, 2005; Weick et al., 2005). Out of the seven properties, identity construction, social construction, and enactive of sensible environments have been most researched and are considered to be the key concepts of organisational sensemaking. These key concepts are discussed in the following subsections.
Identity construction. “Identity construction lies at the root of organisational sensemaking” (Mills, 2003, p. 55). Gililand and Day (2000) consider identity construction to be the basic property that distinguishes Weick’s (1995) sensemaking from basic cognitive psychology. Identity construction is so significant because, according to Weick et al. (2005), “Who we are lies importantly in the hands of others, which means our categories for sensemaking lie in their hands” (p. 416). In the process of organisational sensemaking, our identity or who we think we are in the organisation influences how we act and in turn forms our image for outsiders, or who they think we are, and how they interact with us. In this process of identity construction, our identity or image is “stabilised” or “destabilised” (p. 416). If outsiders think of our image differently, our identity may be destabilised and we are more open to seek new meaning. Along the same lines of identity construction in sensemaking, that identity construction involves a responsive process with outsiders, Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) have injected the notion of “sensegiving” (p. 433) in organisational sensemaking. With Weick’s publication of Sensemaking in Organizations, Gioia and Thomas’ studies (1996) also confirmed the dynamics of interactions with outsiders in organisational sensemaking. Scott (1995) concludes that no organisation can be accurately understood without considering its wider social and cultural context. On the other hand, as sensemaking is so influenced by organisational context, Lounsbury and Glynn (2001) call attention to the notion of socialisation or indoctrination within an organisation. Organisational members’ sensemaking are highly influenced by the expectations of the organisation, and individuals’ independent thinking may be sanctioned or self-sanctioned. Weick et al. (2005) also caution that identity may not be as enduring as one might think and that it is an issue of “plausibility rather than accuracy, just as is the case for many issues that involve organizing and sensemaking” (p. 416).
A social and collective process. Sensemaking is a social process, and this process is influenced by “the actual, imagined or implied presence of others” (Weick, 1995, p. 39). Because of the social nature of sensemaking, networking, discussions, common languages, shared meanings and the interplay of subjectivity and objectivity are important and related references to sensemaking (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Weick, 1995). Sensemaking does not happen in a vacuum. It is a collective process (Boyce, 1995; Dawson & McLean, 2013). In an organisation, people make sense of interruption to the normal flow of events by looking for explanations based on organisational constraints, plans, expectations, what is acceptable, and any inherent culture (Weick et al., 2005). People talk about these things, extract cues, and meanings are edited through such interactions. Sensemaking is therefore about language, talk and communication, and situations are talked into existence (Weick et al., 2005). Talks and symbolic actions are, therefore, frequently used by management to pave the way and set the grounds for impending changes (Gioia, Thomas, Clark, & Chittipeddi, 1994). Because of this social and collective nature of sensemaking, some scholars inject activity theory into the discourse of sensemaking (Blackler et al., 1999; Helms-Mills, 2003). Activity theory provides a lens to analyse activities as a system, such as a group or an organisation. The theory calls for analyses to delve deeper into complex, real-life activities, and to include the environment, and the history, culture, role, and motivation of individuals involved (Engeström, 2000).

Enactive and creative. In Sensemaking in Organizations (1995), Weick summarises different perspectives in sensemaking research into two topics: (1) whether sensemaking involves action, and (2) whether sensemaking is the same as interpretation. Regarding the first topic, some researchers advocate sensemaking as a process of reciprocal interaction involving seeking information, assigning meaning, and taking action (J. B. Thomas, Clark, & Gioia, 1993).
Other researchers, however, argue that sensemaking is purely a mechanism that leads to varying information about an equivocal issue (M. S. Feldman, 1989; Ring & Rands, 1991). Weick (1995) concluded that action is implicit in the sensemaking process, basing it on Festinger’s (1957) sensemaking theory, which focused on cognitive dissonance reduction. Weick (1995) maintained that when someone notices an interruption in a flow of activities, the process of sensemaking leads to action that reduces discrepancy. Regarding the second topic, whether sensemaking is the same as interpretation, Weick (1995) concludes that interpretation is a process of discovery but sensemaking is a creative process that is similar to inventing.

**Various Scholars’ Views on Sensemaking**

In recent literature, sensemaking is very much used as a lens to look at social influence and processes (Maitlis, 2005). Researchers find the lens of sensemaking effective in studying transformational and strategic change in organisations (Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Shaw, 2017; E. Thomas, 2001). With the proliferation of technological advancement, some researchers find it necessary to expand their sensemaking studies to include a broader sociomaterial perspective that look into the connections between technology and communications, in addition to the cognitive perspective of organisational sensemaking (Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2004; Griffith, 1999; Jacobs, Steyaert, & Ueberbacher, 2016). In 2005, ten years after his seminal book, *Sensemaking in Organizations* (Weick, 1995), Weick et al. (2005) went through academic findings in sensemaking and added that power and emotions were significant factors in sensemaking and concluded that further studies are warranted.

The majority of scholars who study organisational sensemaking reverberate Weick’s (1995) seven properties of sensemaking. A person’s identity is influenced by one’s social environment (Mills, Thurlow, & Mills, 2010). As one extracts cues and interacts with the
environment, one’s identity of “self” changes. When a person is trying to figure out how to fit into a situation, the thought process is mixed with how one perceives oneself and what is in it for oneself (Chreim, 2002). In organizations, people consider the outcome of their own actions, whether imagined or likely, and try to understand and make sense of what to do next (Gioia et al., 1994). Sensemaking is ongoing with no starting point or ending point. It is also done consciously and unconsciously (Gioia & Mehra, 1996). Often, making sense is done subtly, swiftly, and can easily be taken for granted (Weick et al., 2005). Because of this nature of sensemaking, that it is an ongoing process and that the conscious processing is mixed with the unconscious, Patriotta and Brown (2011) concur with Weick (1995) that sensemaking is most salient when there is a disruption in the continuous flow of activities. Interruptions disrupt routines, violate expectations, and present cues for further sensemaking.

Sensemaking is also about taking actions that have impacts on one’s environment. One’s environment in turn becomes a platform for sensible actions. Action is a precondition for sensemaking, and sensemaking is retrospective, looking back with hindsight. “People can know what they are doing only after they have done it” (Weick, 1995, p. 24). On the other hand, Gioia and Mehra (1996) posited the significance of prospection in sensemaking. However, in her appreciation of Weick’s work, Gioia refuted prospective sensemaking and declared that “retro sensemaking was the predominant way of understanding how people make sense of experience” (2006, p. 1719).

**Freelancing and the Gig Economy**

This study is done in the context of the global phenomenon of increased workplace flexibility, where emerging new forms of employment contrast with the traditional full-time, continuous, and Fordist form of employment (Rushbrook, Karmel, & Bound, 2014). The Fordist
form of employment focuses on producing standardised, low-cost goods and paying low-skilled workers a decent-enough wage that they are contented to stay (De Grazia, 2005). Freelancing with either professional or unskilled people is one of the emerging new forms of employment. The proliferation of freelancing arrangements in the postmodern economy since the late 20th century highlights the gig economy in which they operate. The increasing number of freelancers working in the gig economy has led to an extensive literature in the area. However, very little of such literature is focused on the creative and performing arts industries. The following section explores literature in freelancing in general in the gig economy, looking at the historical background of the phenomenon, characteristics and types of freelance workers, characteristics and types of gig economies, and the triangular relationship in a gig economy. The section will conclude by looking at the limited number of studies on freelance workers in the creative industries and establish the need for further research.

**Historical Background of Freelancing and the Gig Economy**

Freelancing and self-employment have a significant impact on today’s economies across a broad range of industries, promoting flexibility, agility, entrepreneurialism and innovation (Burke, 2015; Kazi et al., 2014; Marler et al., 2002). However, are freelancing and the gig economy new phenomena, or do they simply manifest the revival of piecemeal work, which has been going on for centuries? Historically, piecemeal work and freelancing were the main form of employment in early capitalism (Deakin, 2000), epitomised in the Marxist theory of exploitative relationships between capital and labour (Fusfeld, 1980). After the second World War, there was sustained growth and prosperity, and labour demand exceeded supply. A new form of employment between businesses and workers emerged, characterised by job security and benefits (Kalleberg, 2009). Stable employment strategies had become the norm and "represent long-term
structural transformations in employment relations” (Kalleberg, 2011, p. 21). However, as labour unions were becoming more and more powerful, employers were crying out for flexibility (Schriesheim, 1978).

In the 1970s, the manufacturing industry begun to be rapidly replaced by the service industry in many parts of the world, ushering global businesses into today’s knowledge society, characterised by a strong service sector (Morris & Western, 1999). The service sector is characterised by flexible scheduling, which contributes a lot to the proliferation of contingent, demand-based work. Furthermore, globalisation and technological advancements are intensifying competition and hastening turnover speed in many industries, beaconing employers to seek flexibility in employment contracts (Bögenhold, Klinglmair, & Kandutsch, 2017).

Postmodern theorists in the 1990s started to study changes in the industrial environment and concluded that although changes are context-specific, there is a general development leaning towards uncertainty in the employment environment (Parker, 1996; Wallace, 1998). Gephart (1996) prophetically posited that commitment and motivation in employment arrangements would be changed into “quasi-contractual commitments to particular projects undertaken by transient work teams composing temporary organizational fiefdoms” (p. 38). V. Smith (2001) also made it clear that it is misleading and inaccurate to simplistically perceive permanent standard jobs as good, and contingent jobs as undesirable. She argued that “uncertainty and unpredictability, and even personal risk, have diffused into a broad range of postindustrial workplaces” (p. 7). Today, the gig economy, or on-demand labour capital typified by freelancing employments is pushing toward the centre stage of human capital arrangement (Stanford, 2017).

Recent studies on freelancers and the gig economy are shifting focus to the equitable treatment of gig workers. Murphy and Carmody (2015) described the large pool of low-skilled,
low-paid digital workers as mass unemployment. Aloisi (2016) also contended that “uncertainty and insecurity are the price for extreme flexibility” (p. 653). He argued that productivity may be increased with lower fixed costs, but “a digital version of Taylorism, i.e. the efficient exploitation (and expropriation) of work at the detriment of security, education, and skill development of workers” was taking place (p. 658). The following subsections will look at two sets of freelancing categories: low-skill or high-skill and contingent or precarious. Another subsection focuses on specific types of freelancers, the IPros (Syrett, 2015) and entreployee (Pongratz & Günter Voß, 2003), which are also the focus of this study.

**Freelancing**

Freelancing has become increasingly common in the past few decades. Since the turn of the century, workplaces have been witnessing a fundamental change in labour supply, changing in tandem with employers’ human resources strategies (Preenen, Vergeer, Kraan, & Dhondt, 2017; Webster, 2016). Due to intensified competition, organisations are finding ways to reduce costs and financial commitment to employees, and to increase flexibility to react to turbulent competitive environments (Burke, 2015). Employees, at the same time, opt to become freelancers for personal entrepreneurial development and to strike a better work-life balance (Cartwright, 2018; Kazi et al., 2014; van den Born & van Witteloostuijn, 2012). Freelancing is expanding as a part of the labour market, and is particularly salient in creative industries, including the performing arts industry (Hermes et al., 2017).

Research shows that freelance work may be seen as precarious in that there is no employment security, with employer exploitation and employee disadvantage (Gold & Mustafa, 2014; Kalleberg et al., 2000). Other studies, however, focus on the desirable characteristics of today’s diverse and flexible capitalism of freelancing, including a self-determined work-life
balance, high work autonomy, and a self-determined lifestyle (D. C. Feldman, 2006; Kazi et al., 2014; Marler et al., 2002).

**Contingent or precarious.** Freelancing, as a form of on-demand work, is largely branded as “contingent” (Brems, Temmerman, Graham, & Broersma, 2017; D. C. Feldman, 2006; Kalleberg, 2000; Kazi et al., 2014; Marler et al., 2002) and “precarious” (Brophy, 2006; Gold & Mustafa, 2014; Hudson, 2001; Kong, 2011; McKeown, 2005). As the word conveys, “precarious” has a negative connotation, implying insecurity and employment being at risk. Discourse of freelancing as precarious work discusses employer exploitation and employee disadvantage. Some researchers see freelancers as second-class workers (Kalleberg et al., 2000), with no benefits, job security, or development (Gold & Mustafa, 2014; Webster, 2016). What freelancers miss out on is “a range of labour conditions that escape the traditionally understood Fordist relationship to labour: a job for life, dependable benefits, steady work rhythms, union protection, a fairly clear separation between work and free time, a social safety net if all else failed” (Brophy, 2006, p. 621).

Other studies on freelancing see them as “contingent” opportunities and focus on the desirable characteristics of freelancing in today’s diverse and flexible capitalism. The contingent freelancers can build their own capital network which can have surprising and beneficial permeability (Brems et al., 2017), strike a self-determined work-life balance (D. C. Feldman, 2006; Kazi et al., 2014), keep personal skills and knowledge up-to-date (Margaryan, 2016), engage in meaningful and self-fulfilling work by choice, enjoy high work autonomy, and live a self-determined lifestyle (Kazi et al., 2014).

Whether freelancing is viewed as contingent, flexible and full of opportunities, or as precarious with negligible job security, both views have merits and they are portraying both sides
of the same coin. As J. K. Rogers (2000) points out, freelance employment “has many faces” (p. 20) and cannot be summarised as all good or all bad. There is, however, agreement that with such heterogeneity, organisational leaders and policy makers need to be better informed about freelance employments (Bögenhold et al., 2017; Burke, 2015; Dam & Zethsen, 2011; Hsieh & Hsieh, 2013; Kazi et al., 2014; Öberg, 2017; Obermaier & Koch, 2015; Rushbrook et al., 2014; van den Born & van Witteloostuijn, 2012; Wright, 2015). In addition, whether precarious or desirable, with the proliferation of freelancing, the traditional employment relationship between organisation and employees that is based on a hierarchical structure of employer power is replaced by market-like cooperative partnership (Appelbaum, 2002; Mofidi & Pazour, 2019). Leaders in organisations that engage freelancers, especially skilled freelancers, need to ensure they get the quality of service they want from freelancers, and therefore, the sensemaking of professional freelancers is an important subject for employing organisations and their managers.

Freelancers

Freelancers are self-employed independent contractors, contracted to do temporary, part-time, project-based, and/or seasonal work, where work opportunities and engagement details are typically self-managed (Ashford et al., 2007; Barley & Kunda, 2006; Burke, 2015; Capelli & Keller, 2003; Kazi et al., 2014; Pfeffer & Baron, 1988). These independent contractors come under the employ of an organisation on a short-term basis but are not regular employees (Burke, 2015; Kazi et al., 2014). They usually remain largely autonomous administratively (Barley & Kunda, 2006; Osnowitz, 2010). Freelancers typically work on multiple projects and for multiple organisations simultaneously (Storey et al., 2005), and are required to supply their own tools and equipment (Kalleberg et al., 2000). As independent contractors, the employment relationship may not fall into the catchment of labour laws in many countries (Pinsof, 2016). The lack of
public policies to protect freelancers is an important topic, but it falls outside the scope of this study.

**Low- or high-skill freelancers.** There are low-skill workers and high-skill workers in the freelance market. Crowdbwork freelancers, for example, are low-skill freelancers (Holloway, 2016), whereas certain industries are known to be using high-skill specialists on a freelance-basis. These industries include information technology, communications, financial services, mining, agriculture (Burke, 2012), and the performing arts industry (Faulkner, 2017), which will be further covered in this study.

According to a Harvard Business Review research on Agile Talent Collaborative (Younger, 2016), reasons for the use of freelancers go well beyond cost efficiency. “Access to difficult-to-find technical or functional expertise, speed, flexibility, and innovation are the top five drivers” (p. 1) for engaging high-skill freelancers or talents outside the employing organisation. Such findings are in agreement with Williamson’s (1979) economic transaction cost model. The model postulates that some organisations may choose to outsource functions that are not unique and can easily be duplicated and supplied by low-skill freelancers; other organisations find it economically viable to externalise certain employment relationships through engaging freelancers when skilled work is too expensive to justify full-time employment costs, including recruitment, training, managing and benefits (Pfeffer & Barron, 1998). Lepak and Snell (1999) further explain that low-skill workers are engaged in “outsourcing” (p. 31), and high-skill workers are engaged in “partnering” (p. 31). The higher the skills of freelancers, the higher is their bargaining power in employment terms (McAndrew & Johnstone, 2016).

In terms of skills development, according to the human capital theory, a freelancer may not engage in skills development unless there is a tangible return that is greater than the cost of
development (Marler et al., 2002). The theory implies that freelancers are likely to stay stagnant with their skills development. However, other studies contend that freelancers may place a higher value on variety and autonomy over pecuniary motives, and are self-motivated in skills development (Bartol & Locke, 2000). Margaryan (2016) finds that many freelancers enjoy the simplicity of being free from organisational politics, bureaucracy and inequities, and are self-motivated to achieve unconventional self-development.

“IPros” and “entreployees”. Freelancers who are high-skilled professionals, which are the focus of this study, have been described in literature as “autonomous economic subjects” (Donzelot, 2008, p. 129), “IBOs” (Independent Business Owners; (Moisander, Groß, & Eräranta, 2018, p. 375), and “self-disciplining subject” (McCabe, 2008, p. 371). Most precisely, freelancers in this study are “IPros” (independent self-employed professionals) (Syrett, 2015, p. 63) or “entreployee” (Pongratz & Günter Voß, 2003, p. 239). IPros have creative minds and are intellectually curious. They often see their work as a calling. Creative freedom and freedom in how work gets done are important to them. Because of their need to be creative and to work with a high degree of autonomy, IPros take up project-based employments by choice (Syrett, 2015).

Entreployees are self-entrepreneurial freelancers. “Entreployee” is translated from the German word Arbeitskraftunternehmer (Pongratz & Günter Voß, 2003, p. 240), referring to a new labour power of project-based workers who build their own portfolio and nurture the “Me Inc.” (p. 240) while being employed in different projects. Instead of building up the reputation of the employing organisation, entreployees put in the same efforts for entrepreneurial development and commercialisation of personal and professional capacities, contributing to the “Me-Inc.” or a personal brand. They regard their own capacities as a commodity, sellable to any organisation requiring their expertise. Entreployees, therefore, self-commercialise their capacities by keeping
up performance, expanding a social and commercial network, and marketing their capacities to potential employers. Once employees have developed a strong personal portfolio, they have stronger bargaining power and a high level of control (Pongratz & Günter Voß, 2003).

The Gig Economy

Stanford (2017) defines the gig economy as an economy where work is performed and compensated on an as-needed basis. It is an economic system characterised by temporary engagements among employers, workers, and end-user customers (Moisander et al., 2018). The gig economy is also referred to as “the sharing economy, collaborating economy, crowdworking, access economy, on-demand economy, freelance economy, …and platform economy” (Kalleberg & Dunn, 2016, p. 10). In the gig economy, freelance workers earn a living by taking up on-demand work engagements. The following subsections describe characteristics of the gig economy, the triangular relationship at its heart, and the specific relationship between employing companies and the type of freelancer called an IPro.

**Characteristics.** A significant characteristic of the gig economy is that it is very project-centric. All work is organised, structured and governed according to a project. Powell (2001) called this “decentralized capitalism” (p. 30), again referring to the focus of human resources being shifted. The labour market is looking away from loyalty or seniority in favour of paying for productivity. In a way, “work” has become “the service or commodity” (Prassl, 2018, p. 3) and employers’ responsibilities to provide job security and training and development can be avoided. Organisational goals can be as narrow as lowering prices for the end-user clients and increasing profits for the intermediary employers (Prassl, 2018). With technological advancement in virtual communication and transmission of data, boundaries of the organisation in the gig economy have also become virtual. Work can be performed at the most convenient
location, be it the worker’s home or the organisation’s premises. Capitalism is greatly decentralised, moving the focus of business management from hierarchies to network. Such networks can be a digital platform (Aloisi, 2016; Frenken & Schor, 2017; Graham, Hjorth, & Lehdonvirta, 2017; B. Rogers, 2016) or a network of freelancers working together (Moisander et al., 2018). All these are posing new challenges for organisational leaders.

Another characteristic of the gig economy is the radical increase in flexibility in the design and planning of human resources strategies, with decreased responsibilities on the part of employers (Kalleberg, 2000, 2003; Kalleberg & Dunn, 2016; Kalleberg et al., 2000; Powell, 2001). “Outsourcing” became the buzz word in the late 20th century (Alderson, 1999; Revenga, 1993) to increase flexibility and minimise costs, and employers were releasing themselves of the responsibilities of employee development and welfare (Lobel, 2017). The 20th century also witnessed a change in management style. Taylorism and scientific management theory were seen as outdated (Walton, 1985). Employees were included in decision-making and engaged in team-based projects (Lincoln & Kalleberg, 1985). As a result of such an empowering management style, employees assumed independence and responsibility for self-development and career advancement, often achieved through seeking alternative employment (Cassel, Thulemark, & Duncan, 2018). Life-long careers and job security seemed to have become things of the past. Employers saw less and less long-term commitment and no longer saw themselves as responsible for developing employees (Cappelli, 1999). When the gig economy picked up its pace in the last two decades, workers were used to thinking of themselves as independent contractors anyway, responsible for their own professional development and prospects.

Teodoro et al. (2014 classified on-demand labour markets along two dimensions: (a) task complexity, ranging from simple to complex, and (b) nature of the task, ranging from virtual
Along those dimensions, some jobs need to be done physically but not at a specific location or workplace, such as crowdsourcing, which connects large groups of workers with micro-tasks that are not complex and combine into a completed bigger end result. An example of this is the preparation of various items in large numbers for a wedding. Other freelance jobs require tasks to be completed at specific locations and at specific times, but they are so amply available that freelancers can turn down jobs according to their own convenience without any significant consequence. Examples in this category include not-complex jobs on TaskRabbit, an online market for household tasks such as cleaning or running errands (Hannák et al. (2017), or more complex jobs such as the Uber taxiing service. Still other freelance jobs can be completed entirely online, such as those listed on Fiverr, an online freelancing market with virtual tasks such as translation or online marketing (Hannák et al., 2017). Many studies define work within the gig economy as involving some form of digital platform to engage and/or deliver work, such as Uber, Airbnb, Etsy and TaskRabbit (Aldrich & Ruef, 2006; Chen, 2016; Donovan, Bradley, & Shimabukuro, 2016; Farrell & Grieg, 2016; Frenken & Schor, 2017; Hill, 2015; Kalleberg & Dunn, 2016; B. Rogers, 2016; Sunshine, 2018). The term “platform economy” in these studies is therefore often used interchangeably with “gig economy”.

Analysing the triangular relationship in the gig economy, Kalleberg and Dunn (2016) introduce a typology of gig economies, classifying them into four broad types: crowdwork, rideshare and transportation, delivery and task, and iPors. Table 1, inspired by Kalleberg and Dunn (2016), sums up the characteristics of these four types of contingent workers.

Table 2

*Characteristics of Four Types of Gig Economies*
Characteristics
Crowdwork
Rideshare / transportation
Delivery / task
Pros

Job duration
Shortest duration
Short duration
Short duration
Relatively long duration and repeat jobs

Location independence
Location independent
Location not independent
Location not independent
Location dependent

Skills
Very low skills
Low skills
Low skills
High skills

Barriers to entry
Lowest barrier to entry
Low barrier to entry
Moderate barrier to entry
High barrier to entry

Job duration refers to the length of the gig or job. Location independence denotes where the work happens and whether the worker is required to be physically present onsite. Skills refer to the specific skills, if any, required to complete work satisfactorily in that gig. Whether new workers can easily join the particular gig market is measured by barrier to entry.

Kalleberg and Dunn (2016) further applied two key attributes, wages and worker control, to differentiate the four types of workers. The authors contend that worker control and wages are significant indicators in assessing how good or desirable the gig is to workers. Gigs that require higher skills and longer duration offer higher worker control and higher wages. On the other hand, a low barrier to entry erodes worker control and wages in a gig. Table 2 sums up the relationship between worker control and wages and characteristics of gigs.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Worker control</th>
<th>Wages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Job duration</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Location</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>Barriers to entry</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 3

*Relationship between Worker Control and Wages and Characteristics of Gigs*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Skills</strong></th>
<th>Skills have significant impact on worker control. The higher the skill requirement, the more control worker has because he is the expert, leading to greater autonomy and flexibility.</th>
<th>Skills have significant impact on wages. Workers with unique skills can ask for very high wages.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Job duration</strong></td>
<td>Usually, gigs with longer duration offer greater control to workers.</td>
<td>The longer the gig, the higher the wages. However, propensity to earn is also taken into consideration in setting wages. If a gig is short, workers have a lower propensity to earn, and wages cannot be set too low. When a gig is long with a higher propensity to earn, the marginal propensity to earn does not increase proportionately. For example, if a 1-day gig is paid $1,000, a 10-day gig may pay $8,000 instead of $10,000.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Location independence</strong></td>
<td>Gigs that include the physical presence have more hierarchies that affect worker control.</td>
<td>Location independence has low impact on wages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Barrier to entry</strong></td>
<td>Where barrier is high, workers have higher control, and gigs with the lowest barrier to entry offer the least worker control.</td>
<td>Barrier to entry is directly related to wages. When barrier is low, workers are willing to take a lower wage for the job opportunity.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The triangular relationship.** A gig economy is often characterised by a “triangular relationship” (Stanford, 2017; Sunshine, 2018, p. 110) among the freelance worker, the end-user client, and the intermediary employer. Freelance workers in different gig economies have different relationships with intermediary employers. In many gig economies, freelance workers have no participation with the intermediary employers in wage negotiation or how work is allocated. These gig economies include crowdwork gigs provided by intermediary platforms such as Amazon Mechanical Turk, rideshare and transportation made popular by intermediaries such as Uber and Lyft, and delivery gigs on TaskRabbit. In these gig economies, freelance
workers rely heavily on a highly managed set of online metrics provided by the intermediary employers (Aloisi, 2017; Kalleberg & Dunn, 2016).

“IPros” (Burke, 2015, p. 63), on the other hand, have much higher negotiation power with intermediary employing companies. They are different from workers in other gig platforms, as they are professionals with specific skills and are high-skill independent contractors (Burke 2015; Pinsof, 2016). Work is usually related to a profession and involves performance of work in an off-line platform. They often have a role in negotiating wages with employing intermediary companies, branded by their portfolios, and have a much higher say in turning down work (Burke 2015; Donovan et al., 2016; Kuhn, 2016). These IPros enjoy high autonomy, high wages and high job security in the triangular relationship (Burke, 2015; Moisander et al., 2018).

Freelance work is often coordinated and supervised by full-time managers who are salaried employees of the intermediary employing organisations (Sunshine, 2018). Intermediary employers take up the role of project managers managing a network of freelancers behaving as independent enterprise units, to form a community to achieve a common goal for the end-user client (Moisander et al., 2018). What is significant to leaders and managers of intermediary employing organisations is that the traditional employment relationship between organisation and employees that is based on a hierarchical structure of employer power is replaced by a market-like cooperative partnership (Appelbaum, 2002; Mofidi & Pazour, 2019).

**IPros and Employing Companies in the Triangular Relationship**

While the gig economy is created by the supply and demand of all three parties in the triangular relationship, the freelance workers and employing companies are directly involved in the human capital arrangement of freelancing and play active roles in fostering the gig economy.
The following subsections looks at IPros and at intermediary employing companies, which are the backdrop of this study.

**Freelance IPros.** In today’s economy, many IPros are freelancers by choice (Mathisen, 2017). IPros are freelancers because unlike permanent / long term employment arrangements, freelance employment in general allows higher autonomy and independence and freelancers can work for different employers at the same time. IPros have high negotiation power and can turn down engagements that are less favourable to them at a given time (Syrett, 2015). They usually maintain a large social network to attract new clients (Born & Witteloostuijn, 2013).

Many studies confirm the perspective that skilful freelancers are, on average, more satisfied and are happier than full-time, long-term employees (Bianchi, 2012; Blanchflower, 2000; Born & Witteloostuijn, 2013; Burke, 2011; Cartwright, 2018; Rushbrook et al., 2014; Storey et al., 2005). Schneck (2014) uses the procedural utility theory to illustrate freelancers’ satisfaction derived from a higher level of autonomy and independence. According to the procedural utility theory, individuals do not derive satisfaction solely from outcomes, but also from the process of achieving outcomes. IPros who are not subjected to stringent hierarchical decision-making, enjoy work processes with greater autonomy, creativity and independence.

In general, IPros enjoy higher work flexibility and are in a better position to maintain a work-life balance. However, without employment security, they are more susceptible to fluctuations in business cycles and have to bear higher environmental risks (Öberg, 2017; Wright, 2015). Research shows that they usually build a tight schedule and tend to work longer hours than the typical nine to five (Wright, 2015). According to Gold and Mustafa (2014, “work always wins in a conflict with domestic commitments” and they call this phenomenon “client
colonisation” (p. 197). Work values and priorities may and often do intrude into freelancers’ private life, dictating the use of time.

**Intermediary employing companies.** The intermediary between the client and the freelance worker functions as a brokerage between the final client who uses the service and the worker who provides it, by connecting the two parties. The intermediary is the official employer handling financial transactions and facilitating the labour exchange (Autor & Dorn, 2013). As discussed above, reasons for engaging freelancers instead of full-time employees are heterogeneous. Employing IPros is favoured by a lot of start-ups, as these businesses can benefit from the strong experience of these skilled freelancers (Burke, 2011). A start-up business has many focuses: management, understanding best practices for operation, and business development. Experienced IPros can act as “enablers” and “facilitators” (Burke, 2011, p. 131) to help start-up businesses achieve their goals faster and more smoothly. Established firms also choose IPros because they are cheaper for short-term and irregular projects (Burke, 2012). However, once a project is completed, IPros become mobile in the market, bringing with them the knowledge and experience generated from the project (Popiel, 2017). IPros are also “entreployees”, self-entrepreneurial freelancers (Pongratz & Günter Voβ, 2003). Their focus is the build up their own portfolio, self-commercialising their capacities to potential employers. They do not have the need to maintain loyalty to employing firms. They also do not have to invest in enhancing the firm’s value so much as focusing on developing their own reputation in the firm’s project (Marler et al., 2002; Pongratz & Günter Voβ, 2003; Syrett, 2015).

While IPros in the triangular relationship seek control, high wages, autonomy and flexibility, intermediaries as employers strive to deliver consistently good quality services to end clients, relying on IPros. Reputable intermediary companies would rather pay higher wages to
engage reliable IPros (Fox et al., 2018). Unlike employers who have direct authority in a traditional employment relationship with full-time workers, gig employers rely on contractual control, and only have a certain amount of control over IPros (Friedman, 2014). The relationship between IPros and intermediary employing organisations is a mutually reliant one, and the balance of power could be interesting.

The more high-skill the gig is, the more IPros and employing intermediary companies share a common goal because brand image and identity are involved (Syrett, 2015). The employment relationship between the employing intermediary company and the IPro is held together by the same stakes shared by both parties. Gigs successfully obtained by the intermediary employing company generate income for both the IPro and the company. While intermediary companies are protective of their own brand, IPros also like to be associated with reputable companies. It is, therefore, to both parties’ interest to deliver services to the satisfaction of the final clients (Fox et al., 2018).

Intermediary companies control IPros through the measures of worker autonomy, flexibility at work, and company policy and procedures. The degree of control differs from intermediary to intermediary (Greenwood, Burtch, & Carnahan, 2017). IPros in high-skilled gigs can demand a lot of autonomy and flexibility (Burke, 2015; Kuhn, 2016; Syrett, 2015). Many reputable intermediary companies have stringent policies on quality of work and measurement of client satisfaction (Burke, 2015; Sunshine, 2018). Some intermediary companies use customer ratings to evaluate IPros and to control their performance. However, Kalleberg and Dunn (2016) contend that customer ratings as a measure of work is problematic because the root of customer dissatisfaction may not be directly related to IPros’ quality of work. Some intermediary companies have policies that restrict communications between IPros and clients (Graham et al.,
In today’s world of techno-communication, however, such a policy cannot absolutely prevent the cutting out of the middleman.

**Freelancers in the Performing Arts Industry**

This study focuses on a particular group of freelancers who are professionals, who are physically required to complete tasks, where such physical presence is the core part of the work, whose engagement contents are very much dictated by the employers, and for whom turning down jobs may hamper future opportunities. They are performing arts practitioners (Hermes et al., 2017). The following subsections look at the performing arts industry and performing arts freelancers, which are the focus of this study. A final subsection will discuss what is known about identity formation among performing arts freelancers.

**The Performing Arts Industry**

Performing arts, to distinguish them from visual and other art forms, refers to an art form where artists or performers use their bodies and voices to convey artistic expressions (McCarthy, 2001). The performing arts industry is defined as an economic sector in which performing arts practitioners work to produce goods and services that have performing arts economic value (Hermes et al., 2017). These goods and services are purchased by end-consumers and businesses for the experience and for the meaning they impart (Flew, 2012). The most commonly known performing arts disciplines are drama, dance, and music. However, technical arts are also important in the performing arts industry. These include stage management, set design, lighting and audio effects, and film and television (Blair, Grey, & Randle, 2001; Caldwell, 2008; Huntington, 2007).

Because of its creative nature and the humanistic and societal influence the performing arts have, the performing arts industry is often discussed as part of the wider creative industries,
which include, for example, electronic game designers or brand logo designers (De Propris, 2013; Hermes et al., 2017), and the culture industries, which refers to any goods and services that are cultural in nature (Adorno, 2005; Hermes et al., 2017). Additionally, because live performances in front of an audience are a form of entertainment, the performing arts industry is also referred to as part of the entertainment industry (Hughes, 2013; Vogel, 2015). This study focuses on the performing arts industry and the experience of production freelancers in this particular industry.

Unlike many other art forms, performing arts largely require the physical presence of artists to communicate with the audience (Loria, 2015); “largely” because the development of audio and video recording has enabled the consumption of performing arts in a non-live manner (Mould, Vorley, & Liu, 2014). Nevertheless, the experience of live exchange between artists and audience is still at the core of the performing arts and seen as the unique feature of performing arts (Holt, 2010). The live aspect of performing arts makes them unique, but also difficult to economise. The output per man-hour of a violinist, for example, is relatively standard; and a producer cannot reduce the number of performers in a performance of Henry IV, which has big-cast scenes (Throsby, 2010). This potentially creates tension between a performance production company that focuses on economising and the freelancers who are engaged in a performance gig.

**Performing Arts Freelancers**

Historically, being a performing artist was romanticised, and artistic achievement was generally associated with poverty. Performing artists were often impeccunious, and their livelihood depended on income from all sources, including truck driving, lobster fishing, and waiting on tables (Baumol & Bowen, 1965). This phenomenon of taking multiple jobs persists today in the form of freelancing. Financial sustainability has been a challenge for performing arts
practitioners, and in the 1990s, about three-quarters of all performing artists held non-arts jobs (McCarthy, 2001). With the world economy improving in general, entertainment and performances have become an economic driving force and performing arts practitioners are having a fairer chance to develop their professional careers (Bryant & Vorderer, 2013).

A professional performing arts practitioner occupation is different from most other professional occupations. A performing arts career can be compared to one in professional sports. Like athletes, the career life of a dancer, for example, tends to peak early but decline more quickly than in other professions (H. K. Hall & Hill, 2012). The relatively short career life of performing artists, especially dancers, is attributed to the vulnerability to injuries from repeated practice and performance (Brandfonbrener, 2010). Performing artists tend to leave their profession early, many in their mid-30s, because career opportunities decrease (Steiner & Schneider, 2013). Like athletes, few performing artists become famous in their field even though many are inspired by the glamour of stardom (Steiner & Schneider, 2013).

Many performing artists work in a day job to secure income, while others, who focus on arts-related engagements, work for multiple employers (Throsby & Zednik, 2012). In general, today’s performing arts practitioners allocate their work time among three separate labour markets: the creative labour market, arts-related labour market, and non-arts labour market. Creative labour includes work involving preparation, rehearsal, and performances. Arts-related labour refers to work that utilises artists’ expertise, such as teaching an art form or using arts as a tool in education, such as drama in education (D. Davis, 2014). The non-arts labour market refers to any work that does not relate to the artist’s trade but is a means to secure necessary income.

In today’s economic environment, the employment security of performing artists has been replaced by employability, which includes transferrable skills and abilities, and characters
and personalities that are valued by employing companies and the audience (De Vos, De Hauw & Van der Heijden, 2011). Performing artists are expected to be “protean” (Porter, Woo, & Tak, 2016, p. 162), prepared to adapt to diverse work opportunities. Research shows that it is important to prepare performing arts students with various skills beyond artistic expertise if they are to survive and thrive (Bridgestock & Cunningham, 2016). Many performing arts schools and higher education institutions are including the development of generic skills such as communication, marketing and promotion, and problem solving within the curriculum to prepare performing arts freelancers to be truly dynamic and versatile (Johansson, 2012).

**Identity Construction among Performing Arts Freelancers**

As has been established, a performing artist’s employment is fragmented and precarious. In a fragmented labour market, performing artists have to manoeuvre among different jobs, companies and sectors, or even face sudden and involuntary unemployment and possibly a career change. For example, in Hong Kong, a social movement erupted in March 2019, and demonstrations and riots took place continuously. The last large-scale rioting in Hong Kong was the 1967 leftist riots (Duhalde & Huang, 2019). The current generation of performing artists and employers of artists are unfamiliar with operating in such an environment. Many performances had to be cancelled. With changes in the external environment, performing artists have to continuously shape their identities (Gotsi, Andriopoulos, Lewis, & Ingram, 2010). Artists have a deep emotional commitment to their career (Duffy, Dik, & Steger, 2011). They perceive the artist identity as their authentic, personal identity (Costas & Fleming, 2009). Yet, there has been little literature exploring how performing artists make sense of their employment situation and career development. Only recently have human resources management scholars taken an interest in studying the perspectives of creative industry workers and the unique challenges they face in
securing jobs and developing their careers (Bennet & Hennekam, 2018; Hennekam, 2017; Hennekam & Bennett, 2016a, 2016b; Hennekam, Bennett, Macarthur, Hope & Goh, 2019).

These studies show that the creative and performing arts industries have become motivators of economic changes and development (Hennekam & Bennett, 2016b). However, despite efforts of policy makers and the rhetoric that surrounds the creative industries, they have received little attention in business management and organisational behaviour studies (Chaston & Sadler-Smith, 2012). Nor does the human resources management profession pay much attention to the many unique challenges faced by creative industry workers.

In a study of 40 workers in creative industries in the Netherlands (Hennekam & Bennett, 2016a), it was found that many of these workers experience involuntary career change. Workers in the creative industries, especially artists, identified strongly with their artistic occupations and a career change was painful. Those who did not have time to make meaning of the situation experienced grief and loss. Many had to deal with rejection of their transition by significant others and peers, leading to strong feeling of isolation.

In another study, Hennekam and Bennett (2016b) found that three quarters of all creative workers (73%) in the creative industry in the Netherlands took up multiple employments, which meant they had to fulfil several roles concurrently during a given work week. Often, they assumed multiple identities, including artist, teacher, consultant and business owner: “managing multiple selves is one of the most complex tasks facing creative workers” (p. 39). Creative workers employ different strategies to deal with incompatible work-related identities, and their social environment makes a lot of difference (Hennekam, 2017). When friends, families and professional peers are supportive of the worker’s situation in engaging in multiple potentially incompatible jobs, the worker manages to integrate various identities and celebrates the
transferability of skills. However, when the social and immediate environment of the worker is not supportive, the worker experiences stress and resorts to identity separation and dis-identification. These strategies mean that the artist lives with identity dissonance and is unhappy most of the time.

Bennett and Hennekam (2018) described the career decision-making of creative industries workers as a “self-authorship process” (p. 1), which is a complex and non-linear process of career decision-making. The concept of social identity requires individuals to construct a self that is validated by others (Weick, et al. 2005). For creative industry workers, the process of validation is disrupted as workers move in and out of roles. The journey of the repeated self-authorship process is particularly harsh for fresh graduates from creative arts schools and colleges, whose parents are a major and highly influential part of their immediate environment that may or may not validate their career decisions.

Conclusion

It is beneficial to society when its creative people survive and thrive; contribute to the cultural fabric that connects dreams, aspiration, and hope; and express themselves through the arts (Hermes et al., 2017). However, despite sporadic studies providing valuable insights into issues that creative workers face, the subject of sensemaking of workers in the creative industries is very much under-studied. In particular, freelancers, who make up a large part of the labour in the performing arts industry, remain largely under-researched (Mould et al., 2014). More research is needed to determine whether the patterns identified in findings on creative workers in the Netherlands undertaken by Hennekam and Bennett (2016a, 2016b) can be applied to all creative workers. More research with sector-and discipline specific in other national cultures is also needed to identify potential career supports and strategies. This study focuses on the
sensemaking of professional freelancers, or IPros, in the performing arts industry, through the lens of organisational sensemaking (Weick, 1995), and seeks to supplement the existing scant literature on the subject.
Chapter 3: Research Methods

This was a qualitative research study, exploring how professional freelancers engaged in the performing arts industry and associated with a performance arts enterprise in Hong Kong, Proécho, make sense of their relationship with their employing organisation and how this has changed over time as the employing organisation evolved from start-up to sustainability. A comprehensive literature review showed that, despite sporadic studies providing valuable insights into issues faced by freelancers in the creative and performing arts industries, the subject of sensemaking of these freelancers is very much under-studied (Mould et al., 2014). This study focused on the sensemaking of professional freelancers, or IPros (independent professionals), in the performing arts industry, through the lens of organisational sensemaking (Weick, 1995), and sought to supplement the existing scant literature on the subject. Although the number and scope of participants were limited and the study was limited in what could be generalised, findings will be useful to organisations that rely heavily on freelancers’ input and to freelancers themselves. This study may also inspire further research in the freelancing phenomenon in the gig economy, and in particular, in the performing arts and other creative industries.

This chapter describes the research design for this study, including the methodology, design, data collection methods, and process for analysis of the data and developing findings. This chapter also discusses the positionality and role of the researcher.

Qualitative Research

The research questions that guide the inquiry are: How do professional freelance project-team members make sense of their relationship with an employing performing arts enterprise as it transitions from start-up to a sustainable growth stage? To what extent does the identity construction of the professional freelance project team members shift over time? This was a
descriptive case study utilising qualitative methods. Qualitative research was the best approach for answering the research questions because qualitative studies investigate how people make sense of their world and their experience in such a world (Yazan, 2015).

The different assumptions of the quantitative and qualitative paradigms originated in the positivism-idealism debate in the late 19th century (J. K. Smith, 1983). The quantitative paradigm is based on positivism. Ontologically, there is only one truth which is an objective reality that exists independent of human perception. Quantitative researchers believe that empirical research should lead to scientific results, and “all phenomena can be reduced to empirical indicators which represent the truth” (Sale, Lohfeld, & Brazil, 2002, p. 43). Epistemologically, the researcher and participants are independent entities so that the study of a phenomenon is not unduly influenced (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Research methods include highly structured protocols and data are often collected through surveys. Sample sizes are much larger than those used in qualitative research so that statistics of data could validify representation of the sample. (Carey, 1993). Quantitative research focuses on numerical and quantifiable data and is generally considered as more scientific and therefore findings may be more generalisable than those of qualitative methods.

The qualitative paradigm, on the other hand, is based on interpretivism (Altheide & Johnson, 1994) and constructivism (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Ontologically, interpretivism and constructivism believe there are multiple realities or multiple truths based on individual construction. Reality is also socially constructed and is constantly changing. With qualitative research, a researcher interacts with participants within the context of a situation which shapes the inquiry, and researcher and participants mutually reveal findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The emphasis of qualitative research is on process and meanings. Data collection methods
include in-depth focus group discussions, interviews and participant observation. Samples are small and purposeful, drawn from articulate respondents to provide important information and are not meant to represent large populations (Reid, 1996). Validity in a quantitative inquiry means that results correspond to the reality out there in the world, whereas to a qualitative inquiry, “validity refers to an interpretation or description with which one agrees” (J. K. Smith & Heshusius, 1986, p. 8).

The qualitative approach was most suitable for this study because data collected in a natural setting and focusing on the voices of participants provided rich and relevant insight to the study (Creswell, 2007). Rather than seeking generalisation, this study sought to find out how professional freelancers engaged in the performing arts industry perceive and make sense of their relationship with their employing organisations and how this has changed over time as the employing organisation evolved from start-up to sustainability. “Quality refers to the what, how, when, and where of a thing – its essence and ambience. Qualitative research thus refers to the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things.” (Berg, 2007, p. 3). According to this definition, quantity or numerical descriptions and their relationship was not the focus of this study. When in-depth understanding of the thinking process of participants is required, the advantages of qualitative methods far outweigh that offered by detached, statistical analyses of quantitative methods (Sale et al., 2002). Because of the differences in how data were collected and analysed, and what the data and analyses were able to inform the researcher about the participants of this study, the insight gained through qualitative investigations was more informative, richer and able to enhance understanding in this study.

**Paradigm and Role of Researcher**
The epistemology of researchers underlies the conceptualisation and operation of the inquiry they undertake (Yazan, 2015). This qualitative research took a worldview based on constructivism (Creswell, 2007) and followed Merriam’s (1998) approach to case studies. Constructivism views reality as something constructed through the interaction between individuals with their social worlds, and there are multiple interpretations of reality (Ponterotto, 2005). A constructivist research study seeks understanding of the world in which the researcher lives and works, and focuses on how humans make meaning in relation to the interaction between their experiences and their ideas (Merriam, 1998; Ponterotto, 2005). The constructivist approach was appropriate for this study because it aimed to understand the actual sense-making experience of performing arts professional freelancers by engaging them in the study within the bounded case of a performing arts enterprise, Proécho. The inquiry was done with a case study methodology where documents reviewed enriched the context of the study and provided data for triangulation.

A research study also follows paradigms of basic beliefs, including ontology, epistemology, axiology, rhetoric, and methodology (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Ontologically, this study used semi-structured interviews to draw different perspectives from professional freelancers on their sensemaking process. Epistemologically, the researcher was directly involved in the performing arts enterprise, Proécho, and her role as the leader allowed her a deep understanding of the experience of professional freelancers. Axiologically, the researcher’s intimate relationship with Proécho may have rendered her biased. However, being conscious of this danger, stringent data checks and conscientious thematic analysis were done to reduce biases to a minimum. Rhetorically, the study was personal to the researcher as she was the leader of the performing arts enterprise. The positionality of the researcher is discussed in detail in the latter
part of this chapter. Checking and curbing her biases is also discussed. Methodologically, relevant documents were gathered and reviewed, and open-ended questions were asked to ensure a wide perspective from respondents was captured. Data collected was triangulated and analysed, and the researcher also made adjustments as the research developed and unfolded during field work.

**Research Tradition**

This study was a single case study. This study used a case study research methodology to capture participants’ sensemaking as freelance performing arts production professionals within the bounded context of Proécho as an employing organisation from start-up to sustainability. Its objective was to gain hermeneutic insight and it was a single case study (Merriam, 1998). A single case study is suitable when the inquiry seeks to locate an information-rich case, chosen specifically to be insightful, comprehensive, and articulate; with easy access to data (Miles & Hurberman, 1994).

A case study is a story about something unique, special, or interesting. Case studies are appropriate when there is a unique or interesting story to be told (Neale, Thapa, & Boyce, 2006). The story of Proécho, a performing arts enterprise that provides education and training in performing arts, as well as producing performing arts gigs as entertainment, is worth telling. Proécho relies heavily on freelancers in its operation, and the organisation is transitioning to a new phase of sustainability. While this case is unique, Proécho is also representative of similar organisations that rely heavily on freelancers in their operation. This case study told the story of what happened and highlighted the organisation’s success, while bringing attention to the particular challenges it faced. Since the behaviour of those involved in the study could not be manipulated, and contextual conditions were relevant, a case study approach was appropriate (Yin, 2002). Furthermore, case study research also provided more detailed information than what
was available through other methods, such as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) research (Eisenhardt, 1989).

There are three major case study research methodologists, Yin (2002), Merriam (1998), and Stake (1995). This study leant on the general tenets of Merriam’s (1998) approach. Like Stake, Merriam believes the epistemology that should guide qualitative case study is constructivism, as “reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds” (Marriam, 1998, p. 6) and “there are multiple interpretations of reality” (Marriam, 1998, p. 22). On the other hand, although Yin does not explicitly discuss his epistemological orientation in his text (Yin, 2002), through his approaches to and emphases within research and case studies, it seems that his philosophical stance is disposed to the positivistic tradition (Yazan, 2015).

The nature and context of this study also aligned with Merriam’s (1998) definition of case study research. She sees “the case as a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries” (p. 27), “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit” (p. xiii). In terms of designing a case study method, Yin advocates a tight and structured design whereas Stake contends that design should be flexible, allowing researchers to make changes even during the process of research. Merriam combines both Yin and Stake’s approaches and suggests a step by step process to designing qualitative studies. These steps include carrying out a literature review, developing a theoretical framework, establishing a research problem, forming research questions and conducting sampling. Such a process allows flexibility, but is not as flexible as Stake’s rendition (Yazan, 2015). Like Stake, Merriam does not highlight a pilot case study as important. Rather, Merriam (1998) stresses the importance of conducting effective interviews with good questions and probes. Since Merriam (1998) holds the view that reality is multidimensional and
ever-changing (p. 202), she is convinced that it is almost impossible to apply the concepts of validity and reliability into qualitative research (Yazan, 2015). Her idea of validation is that “the qualitative study provides the reader with a depiction in enough details to show that the author’s conclusion ‘makes sense’” (Merriam, 1998, p. 199).

**Participants and Access**

When selecting the site, a purposive sampling approach was utilised, and Proécho was chosen as the research site due to its proximity to the researcher and participants, providing ease of access. More importantly, Proécho is in many ways typical of performing arts organisations that rely heavily on freelancers in their business operation. These organisations rely on freelancers’ expertise while minimising employee commitment to an on-demand basis (Chauradia & Galande, 2015; Wheatley & Hibbler-Britt, 2019). More specifically, Proécho has relied heavily on freelancers from start-up and is now transitioning into sustainability. This study at Proécho will provide useful insights for performing arts organisations in the understanding of how professional freelancers make sense of an engagement relationship that is transitioning from start-up to sustainability.

The researcher was in a leadership role at Proécho and had no problem accessing information and personnel at the research site. Approval from the Chairman and Vice-chairman of the Board of Governors of Proécho to carry out this study and to approach participants in the population was obtained. Although the researcher was in a leadership role at Proécho, participants were still able to voice out freely because they were highly in demand in the market. This is explained in more detail under the section on researcher’s positionality.

**Population**
The target population was freelance performing arts production professionals who form a gig-based project team in Proécho. The exclusive criteria (Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1995; Patton, 1990) stipulated that participants must be individual freelancers and not a contracted company, and that they were production professionals and not performers. This study intended to stay contextualised within a defined setting rather than finding commonality across diverse groups for generalisation. The population, therefore, was psychologically homogeneous (Merriam, 1998) in that participants were selected based on the possession of a particular ability (i.e. providing design input to the production of performing arts gigs).

There are about 30 freelancers in Proécho’s pool of gig-based project team. Services they provide to gigs include artistic design, directing, choreographing, stage management, set, lighting, sound and costume design and execution, and music arrangement. Performers in Proécho performance gigs are performing arts students, who are not the focus of this study. Performing arts production professionals in the gig-based project team do not all have the same working and engagement relationship with Proécho. A few joined and left. Some joined later than the others, and some are more active in taking on Proécho gigs.

**Sample design.** The sample design involved identifying and selecting individuals who were especially experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2002). This was a single case study using an ideographic interview-focused method similar to an IPA. As such, the sample size for participants in semi-structured interview was sufficiently small to identify a “locatable voice” (p. 5) and for intensive analysis of each interview conducted. J. A. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) suggest a guideline of 3 to 16 participants, with the upper end of that spectrum suggested for large scale funded projects. To keep data analysis reasonably manageable (Etikan, 2016), the sample size of interview participants was limited to seven.
Purposive, non-random, sampling was used to ensure relevant interviewees within the population were selected as participants. Based on the researcher’s understanding of the topic in this study, certain categories of individuals may have had a relevant and important perspective on the phenomenon in question, and their presence in the sample was made certain (Mason, 2002). Purposive sampling in this study selected information-rich individuals who were professional production freelancers engaged by Proécho in its performance gig production business and who could provide first-hand detailed experiential information.

As mentioned, the predetermined category was that participants in this study were professional performing arts production freelancers who provide creative or technical input to performance gigs, but are not performers. Selected participants had also (a) been actively involved in Proécho’s gig productions on a freelance basis, and (b) gone through the transition from start-up to sustainability with Proécho. Quota sampling was also applied with the following quota:

1. At least one freelancer from each production function (artistic design, choreography, costume design, music direction and stage management).
2. At least two freelancers with the financial burden of supporting a family, and at least one of these two with the burden of child care.
3. At least three freelancers who were with the Proécho gig production team since the start-up in 2013 and had been engaged in 50% of Proécho gigs.
4. At least one freelancer who had joined and left the Proécho gig production team.

Furthermore, selected participants needed to be available and willing to participate, and possessed the ability to communicate their experiences (Spradley, 1979). The participants’ identity is protected by pseudonyms.
After applying purposive sampling, eligible candidates were narrowed down to 10 from the 30 freelancers in the population. Participants were recruited via invitation. All 10 candidates were invited and the final sample was selected according to the above-mentioned quota.

Once the study was approved by the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board (IRB), eligible candidates were officially approached via an email that described the research and sought their agreement to participate in the study. The research process and protection of the interviewees were communicated to participants. Participation was fully voluntary without any incentive being offered, apart from a nice coffee for the participants during the interview in appreciation of their taking part in the study. Details of the invitation email is included in Appendix A. All participants signed an Informed Consent Form (Appendix B), and received a copy for themselves.

**Data Collection**

Data were collected from multiple sources, including reviewing relevant documents and information, semi-structured interviews, and observations of interactions among professional freelancers with each other and with Proécho full-time production managers during production meetings. In the first phase of data collection, documents such as emails, minutes of meetings, records of conversations, and market research information that were relevant to this new line of business for this enterprise were reviewed and analysed. These included the background and history of the organisation since inception in 2001, how and why the gig production business line happened in 2013, the gig production business at start-up in 2013, including the sentiments and sense-making of the professional performing arts production freelancers, and the gig production business as it moved towards sustainability in 2019, including the sentiments and sense-making
of professional performing arts production freelancers. A formal process for reviewing these documents is recorded in Appendix C.

The next phase of data collection included online, one-on-one semi-structured interviews conducted via the software Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were selected through the sampling methods described in the previous section. Consistent with Merriam’s (1998) approach to case study, special attention was given to semi-structured interviews, ensuring interviews were effective with relevant and good questions, and the use of probes. Questions were semi-structured and left open-ended to capture the full experience of participants from their own perspectives (Baxter & Jack, 2008). A list of questions is included in Appendix D. Interview protocol was piloted on someone who fit into the sample, but who has retired. Interview questions were refined after the pilot.

All interviews were recorded by a Sony Digital Voice Recorder and backed-up in password protected files. Participants spoke in English, with some phrases spoken in the local language, Cantonese. Audio files with Cantonese phrases were translated by a paid confidential person who is a freelance translator. Interview recordings of participants were then transcribed by a recognised online transcribing site.

Since the researcher had intimate understanding of both Proécho as an employing company, as well as the freelancers, she was the interviewer, who could effectively facilitate probes and follow up questions. All interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis, and took place in a location that was comfortable for the participants, such as a non-busy coffee shop. Participants were asked to nominate a date and time. Each interview lasted for approximately 60 to 80 minutes. The possibility of follow-up emails or phone conversation were left open after each interview.
The final phase was observations of interactions among professional freelancers with each other and with Proécho full-time production managers during production meetings. The sensemaking of professional freelancers of the relationship between themselves and the employing organisation rests very much on the personal interactions among freelancers with each other, and with Proécho’s full-time staff. The main purpose of observations was to collect relevant data from another source for triangulation so as to increase the validity of the study. Observations were done during the production of a major summer show production of Proécho that had been postponed to October 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher was the observer, who took notes for accurate reporting. Observation focuses included how meetings were conducted, conversational dynamics, roles being taken up organically, and resolutions to conflicts. Notes were discussed with relevant freelancers involved for member-checking.

**Data Storage**

Original files and copies of interview, transcriptions and coding were stored on the researcher’s computer, protected by a password, and accessible by the researcher alone. These files were saved as back-up files in an external hard disc locked up in the researcher’s filing cabinet to which only the researcher had a key. All files were destroyed upon completion of the research. Since the researcher is the General Manager of Proécho, there was no problem accessing documents. Sensitive information, such as financial figures, collected from document review was kept confidential. Participants’ real names were not listed on interview and transcript documents. Translator and transcriber did not have access to participants’ real names and were not allowed to keep copies of related documents.

**Data Analysis**
The epistemological stances of the researchers, reflecting how they perceive reality and knowledge, have an impact on their data analysis methods in a case study. Yin (2002), for example, disagrees with the bifurcation between qualitative and quantitative research, and defines data analysis as a process of “examining, categorizing, tabulating, testing, or otherwise recombining both quantitative and qualitative evidence to address the initial propositions of a study (p. 109). Merriam (1998), however, defines data analysis as “the process of making sense out of the data… involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read – it is the process of making meaning” (p. 178).

According to Merriam (2002), the case study is an intensive description and analysis of a phenomenon or social unit. The unit of analysis (i.e. the case), instead of the topic of investigation, makes the inquiry a case study. Like other qualitative research methods, in a case study, data analysis is inductive, and is simultaneously done with data collection. “One begins analysing data with the first interview, the first document accessed in the study” (p. 14). This allows the researchers to make adjustments along the way, and to tag and test emerging concepts, themes, and categories against subsequent data. Analysis becomes more intensive as the study progresses, and once all the data are collected (Merriam, 1998).

This study followed the general tenets of Merriam’s (1998, 2002) approach, and data analysis commenced while data were being collected. Data were analysed with an inductive approach, including consolidation, reduction and interpretation, to identify patterns and themes. In an on-going process, data were read carefully to derive codes by first highlighting the exact words from the document or transcript that appear to capture key thoughts or concepts. As the process continued, a coding scheme, or organisation of codes emerged with relevance between codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Codes were then sorted into categories based on how different
codes were related and linked. These emergent categories were used to organise and group codes into meaningful clusters (Patton, 2002). For example, when going through an interview transcript, the researcher would highlight text that appeared to describe a sense-making reaction and apply vivo coding by writing in the margin of the text a keyword or phrase that seems to capture the reaction, using the participant’s words. After such open coding of two to three transcripts, the researcher decided on preliminary codes. She then coded the remaining transcripts using these preliminary codes and added new codes if necessary. Once all transcripts were coded, the researcher examined all data within a particular code. Some codes were combined during the process, and others split into subcategories. Finally, codes and reference to texts were organised in a spreadsheet for easy reference and referral. Placing data in a spreadsheet table format also helped to highlight patterns. The data were then interpreted based on literature and Weick’s (1995) framework. Throughout the process, the researcher bracketed (Ahern, 1999) her own preconceptions. Any ambiguities were clarified. If it was an ambiguity with documents, more documents were checked for cross reference. If it was an ambiguity with interview transcripts, the participant’s clarification was sought.

**Positionality Statement**

Positionality refers to potential researcher biases, especially how a researcher’s background becomes the “marker of relational positions” (Maher & Tetreault, 1993, p. 118). Such relational positions include the power positions between the researcher and the researched (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010).

I, the researcher, was the General Manager of Proécho and my personal views were the main basis of positionality (Briscoe, 2005). Employed there since 2006, I invested a lot of effort into building Proécho and developed a personal attachment to the business. This created both
opportunities and challenges for me (Machi & McEvoy, 2009). Nevertheless, research interests are often sparked by the work environment. Although my subjective perspectives could not be completely removed, they were very conscientiously avoided. The power relation between me, representing the employing organisation, and the participants who were freelancers being employed, was also made as insignificant as possible. This was achievable since the participants in this study were IPros (independent self-employed professionals) (Syrett, 2015). Research shows that IPros are creative people who see work as a calling, and they take on gigs by choice. If they had not been happy with the company, they would have left already. If anything, it was more likely that participants appreciated the opportunity to speak their minds with me. More importantly, due to the image of Proécho and its clients, professional freelancers engaged by Proécho are some of the best in the industry, and as such, they are in high demand. This changes the power balance between employer and employee, tipping more heavily on the side of the employed freelancers.

The reflexive practice of my experience and involvement also contributed to a more complete outcome with my innate understanding of participants. In this respect, scholars have encouraged close involvement of researchers rather than being distant and detached observers (Buckley, 2015; Ellis & Arthur, 2006; Starr, 2010). The advantage is that researchers possess both intimate internal and external perspectives of their research topics (Maydell, 2010) and the opportunity for appropriate data collection is much higher (Palinkas et al., 2015).

As a change agent, I also reported findings to my Board of Governors, the ultimate policy-makers who could, if necessary, improve on policies affecting freelancers.

Overcoming Biases
As a starting point to overcome biases, I acknowledged and understood my positionality at Proécho. Extra efforts were made to prevent biased question-phrasing (Fadnes, Taube & Tylleskär, 2009). Interview questions were designed objectively without any burdening question consisting of any negative bias on my part. Questions were open-ended questions that invited differing perspectives (Riessman, 2008). Participants’ narratives were cross-referenced and compared with the researcher’s opinions recorded before the field work. Research assistants were engaged to balance the inevitable subjectivity and to expose blind spots in the researcher’s positionality. The comments of the research assistants were taken seriously to avoid selective outcome reporting. As Parsons (2008) has stated, it is better to recognise that the researcher’s understandings are always affected by the researcher’s position than to claim to engage in bias-free objective research.

**Trustworthiness and Verification**

As stated earlier, this study was a qualitative inquiry based on constructivism, and thus it was not intended for generalisation. Case studies focus on the cases under review, and their efficacy lies in the fact that each case is unique to its specific context and requires individualised interpretation within that context (George, 2019). External validity that implies a study’s conclusions can be transferred to other studies (Aastrup & Halldorsson, 2013) is, therefore, not a consideration in case study inquiries. Furthermore, constructivism is rooted in the belief that there are multiple versions of reality that results from social construction and the intersubjective making of meaning: Truth is relative and interpretations of meaning are embedded in their situational context (Merriam, 1998). Those conducting qualitative research are interpreting experiences, not determining reality (Yazan, 2015). It is, therefore, not appropriate to apply strict
validity and reliability measures that are rooted in positivism to qualitative studies that are rooted in constructivism (Yazan, 2015).

According to Baxter and Jack (2008), the trustworthiness of a case study is partly achieved by the fact that it relies on multiple sources of data. This study relied on data from document review, semi-structured interviews and observation. Trustworthiness can also be achieved by writing a clear and appropriate research question for a clear and well-structured case setting and ascertaining that the case study method is a suitable method. Purposive sampling should be then be applied to collect unique and meaningful data (Maxwell, 1997). In this study, the case was well-structured and unique enough to provide information that would not be collected as well from another case setting. The research question was clear and specific.

Effectiveness of the interview protocol was tested on a pilot interviewee. Data collected from interviews were translated and transcribed, and then given to participants to review as a member-checking measure that increased validation. (Thompson, 2004). Although some participants may have used Cantonese as their spoken language, all participants were well-versed in English and the translated transcripts for member-checking were effective. Finally, the data were analysed with rigor, as described in a prior section. Rich thick description was developed (Merriam, 2002) so readers can verify the trustworthiness of the researcher’s conclusions from the data analysis.

Hancock and Algozzine (2006) advised that qualitative studies should follow a structured methodological research plan, so that when researchers make assumptions and deductions from data, they are considered to be valid and credible. In this study, a structured methodological research plan was followed, with a meticulous literature review, purposive sampling of case site and participants, triangulation of data, in-depth engagement with participants, translation and transcription of interviews, analysis of data that included member-checking, acknowledgement
of researcher’s positionality and bias, and objective interpretation of findings with reference to literature.

Triangulation, the use of multiple external analysis methods on data from multiple sources (Fusch, Fusch, & Ness, 2018), is important to adding validity. A case study method, where at least two data collection methods are used, is already one form of methodological triangulation (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013). In this study, data were triangulated to increase trustworthiness and reliability. Data collected from interviews were coded and categorised. Emerging patterns were triangulated with data collected from observations to ensure that there was no contradiction of information.

The biggest validity challenge was perhaps the researcher-specific threat, in that the researcher was the general manager of the employing organisation of freelancers who were participants of the research. As explained in the Positionality section, the freelancers participating in this study were IPros with very specific skills who are highly in demand in the market. This greatly diluted the power the researcher may have had in her position. Furthermore, the influence of the researcher was reduced by a statement (incorporated in Appendix A) clarifying that the study was independent from the employing organisation, Proécho, and the researcher’s role in the study was not related to Proécho in any way. To reinforce this point, the researcher used her student email address instead of her work email address for all communications.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

This study conducted one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. To ensure the protection of the human research subjects, this study sought and obtained approval from Northeastern University’s (NEU) Institutional Review Board (IRB) and followed the standards and practices
set out by the NEU IRB. Maintaining confidentiality was important, as participants were freelancers who need to face many other employers. Keeping their identity confidential gave them the freedom to share candidly (Tilley & Woodthorpe, 2011). Prior to data collection, participants were briefed on their involvement in the study and their informed consent was sought (Appendix B). Participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time, without prejudice. This study did not involve vulnerable populations. There were no obvious risks to the participants. The researcher assumed the role of an academic researcher, separated from her work role as the general manager of the research site, Proécho. Furthermore, the researcher was herself only an employee of Proécho, a non-profit organisation. It was not the intention of the researcher to find ways to exploit participating freelancers. Participants participated on a voluntary basis with no incentive or any kind of direct benefits, apart from a nice coffee during the interview in appreciation of their taking part in the study. It was only an opportunity for them to share their experience and have their voices heard.

**Conclusion**

This study endeavoured to explore how professional performing arts production freelancers in the gig economy in Hong Kong make sense of their relationship with their employing organisation and how this changed as the employing organisation evolved from start-up to sustainability. Qualitative research was the most suitable because qualitative studies are based on interpretivism and constructivism, and qualitative methods are best for investigating how people make sense of their world and their experience in such a world. This study was a single case study because it sought to locate an information-rich case, chosen specifically to be insightful, comprehensive, and articulate; with easy access to data.
The researcher being the leader at the research site was a researcher-specific threat to validity. The threat was mitigated by delineating the separation of the operation of the organisation and the research. More importantly, the organisation is a reputable one, engaging some of the best freelance professionals in the industry, and as such, they are in high demand. This changes the power balance between employer and employee, tipping more heavily on the side of the employed freelancers. Trustworthiness and validity were achieved by the fact that data were collected from multiple sources and triangulated and analysed with rigor. Participants were protected by keeping their identity confidential.
Chapter 4: Report of Research Data

The purpose of this descriptive qualitative case study was to explore how professional performing arts production freelancers in the gig economy in Hong Kong made sense of their relationship with their employing organisation and how this changed as the employing organisation evolved from start-up to sustainability. This research addresses the question: How do professional freelancers make sense of their relationship with the performing arts enterprise that employs them as it transitions from start-up to a sustainable growth stage? Because identity construction is at the root of sensemaking (Mills, 2003), this study also explored, as a sub-question, how the identity construction of these professional freelancers shifted over time.

Proécho (a pseudonym) is a performing arts organisation in Hong Kong. It was set up in 2001 and has been offering short courses in performing arts. In 2013, due to changes in the competitive environment, Proécho started a performance gig production business as an entrepreneurial strategy, diversifying its operations from being an education centre to also being a performing arts gig production enterprise. In the performance gig business, it engages professional performing arts production freelancers. As an entrepreneurial start-up, Proécho benefited from the freelancers’ experiences. The freelancers also welcomed the opportunities Proécho created. As Proécho moved its gig production business into sustainable growth, for which the continued support of freelancers is essential, it is not understood how these professional freelancers make sense of their relationship with Proécho.

The creative industries, such as creative music, film and television production, and the performing arts are a significant part of many developed economies. These industries rely heavily on the input of creative professionals, who are often engaged on demand as freelancers. A case in point, in the performing arts industry, worldwide and in Hong Kong, organisations
largely engage professional practitioners to provide artistic input on a freelance basis (Hermes et al., 2017), forming a gig economy. Studies have shown that there is no security for employees and little guaranteed continuity for employers in the gig economy (Burke, 2011; Chauradia & Galande, 2015; Daum, 2005; Farrell & Grieg, 2016 Frenken & Schor, 2017; Kalleberg, 2000, 2003, 2011, Kalleberg & Dunn, 2016; Kalleberg et al., 2000; Pinsof, 2016; Stanford, 2017; Sunshine 2018). Once a project is completed, skilful freelancers become mobile in the market, bringing with them the knowledge and experience generated from gigs (Popiel, 2017). Many performing arts companies in Hong Kong have grown from very small makeshift operations to sizeable companies. They have seen professional freelancers come and go, but little is known about what is going on in the professional freelancers’ minds. Studies of the sensemaking of freelancers are scarce and research on performing arts practitioners and their employers in gig-based employments cannot be found. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative case study that looked into a performing arts enterprise in Hong Kong was to explore how professional performing arts production freelancers in the gig economy in Hong Kong made sense of their relationship with their employing organisation and how this changed as the employing organisation evolved from start-up to sustainability. This provides insight into an understudied area.

Chapter Organisation

This chapter consists of four sections. The first section presents the results of the document review, which informs the context of the study and provides background for the case. Documents reviewed include minutes of meetings, email communications, periodic and annual reports, course and gig production evaluation reports, corporate and promotional brochures, and website information. The second section introduces the participants in the semi-structured
interviews and presents the themes that emerged from analysis of the semi-structured interviews. The third section presents data from observations of production meetings. The final section triangulates the data obtained from these three sources.

Document Review: Background of the Case

According to official meeting minutes, Proécho was set up in 2001 as the continuing education department (CED) of a higher education institution (HEI) for performing arts in Hong Kong. As a department of the HEI, Proécho was funded by the HEI, which was itself funded by Hong Kong government. In 2003, a task force, the Proécho Working Group (PWG), was set up by the HEI to look into incorporating Proécho, turning it into a self-financed company wholly owned by the HEI. PWG meeting minutes in 2004 recorded that the main purposes of the incorporation were to (a) turn Proécho into a self-financing and self-sustaining company, (b) release the HEI from the financial burden of Proécho, and (c) have Proécho run as a business to generate surplus for the HEI for scholarships or for other worthwhile projects. In 2005, Proécho Ltd. was incorporated as a self-financed, non-profit enterprise specialising in providing interest-based short courses in the performing arts. Incorporation documents were officially filed with the Hong Kong Company Registry in December 2005. It was wholly owned by the HEI and continued to act as a continuing education arm of the HEI. Proécho’s main operation was to offer part-time short courses in performing arts, including dance, drama, music, film and television, and entertainment arts disciplines, with a mission to extend performing arts engagement to the wider community while generating an operational surplus. PWG minutes further stipulated that Proécho should use HEI venues to provide short courses at a market rate rental charged by the HEI. Facilities used by Proécho would also be charged, including administrative office space, photocopying, information technology service, and car parking facilities.
Nontraditional Human Resources Management of Professional Freelancers

The performing arts industry is highly labour intensive and enrolment in interest-based short-courses is very unpredictable. Proécho, therefore, has not employed any full-time performing arts practitioners since its establishment. Proécho’s payroll records showed that it uses the services of professional freelancers, most them alumni of the holding HEI, to teach its courses and to provide creative input for gig productions. Engagements are on a course-by-course, or gig-by-gig basis. This is a common human resources arrangement in the performing arts industry, but it is also a non-traditional way to manage human resources (Opara, Stanton & Wahed, 2019).

During the first decade (2001-2011), Proécho was a course provider. During the second decade (2012-2019), Proécho developed a new business line that focused on show production. These will be expounded upon in detail in the following section. Before the development of the show production business, performing arts professionals were engaged to teach Proécho short courses in performing arts on a freelance basis. These teachers who were performing arts practitioners were graduates of performing arts academies and possessed professional performing arts knowledge and skills. When Proécho started the show production business in 2013, meeting notes showed that it approached these teaching performing arts freelancers and continued to engage some of them to provide services to produce gigs on a project-by-project basis. These professional freelancers form an on-demand professional production project team for Proécho. Services they provide include artistic design and directing; choreographing; stage, set, lighting, sound and costume design and execution; and music arrangement. Performers in the gigs are performing arts students, and the professional production freelancers also trained these performers for specific gigs.
**The First Decade (2001-2011): Before the Entrepreneurial Gig Production Business**

When Proécho was established in 2001, it was an outreach department of the HEI that focused on continuing education programmes. According to PWG minutes, the PWG was set up in 2003 because the HEI, funded by the Hong Kong Government, did not include extramural or continuing education endeavours. Although Proécho generated income and most of its expenditures were covered, there was still a confusion in financial management. The main purpose of the PWG was, therefore, to incorporate Proécho as a self-financed non-profit organisation, wholly owned by the holding HEI. According to documents lodged with the Hong Kong Company Registry, Proécho was incorporated in December 2005 as Proécho Limited, a non-profit limited organisation by guarantee. Among such documents was the establishment of its first Proécho Board of Governors (PBG), with the HEI’s top management members as ex-officio members of this PBG. From the incorporation of Proécho in 2005 to 2019, there were 18 changes of individual members in the PBG from the HEI’s top management members. PBG meets three times a year. The general manager (GM) of Proécho is required to present a comprehensive GM Report at each meeting. PBG meeting minutes and GM Reports were reviewed to provide valuable information for this study.

At the time of incorporation in 2005, a Deed of Transfer of Assets and Liabilities from the HEI to Proécho was drafted by a solicitor firm. The transfer included five full-time staff members: a manager, two executives, and two assistants. From their time as members of an in-house department, Proécho full-time staff members did not have experience with many business concepts such as a bottom line, return on investment, revenue, cost and profit, marketing, customer behaviour or market competition theories.
By the end of 2006, the Proécho financial report recorded a deficit of USD 128,500. The July 2006 financial statement indicated that dance studios at the HEI, which cost USD 120 an hour, had been used as additional office space for almost a month. Course fees had also been set too low to sustain costs. At the same time, in July 2006, the manager of Proécho submitted her resignation. In the exit interview, the manager expressed that she was an arts administrator, not a businessperson, and was not comfortable managing Proécho as a self-financed company.

In September the same year, PBG issued a letter of engagement to a new general manager of Proécho, who possessed a master’s degree in business, and had solid business development experience. That general manager is the researcher of this study, which means that the rest of this history also benefits from the researcher’s own observations. In June 2007, the general manager submitted a business plan to PBG that included repositioning and repricing Proécho’s product offering, expanding potential markets for Proécho’s products and services, and significant cost-control measures. According to financial statements, Proécho’s deficit of USD 128,500 owed to the HEI was fully repaid in two instalments, one in March 2008 and the other in May 2009.

In the 2000s, awareness of the importance of performing arts to education and the educational value of performing arts pedagogies increased in Hong Kong. A framework for radical education reform was published by the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Education Commission (HKSAREC, 1999). In the following year, a specific reform proposal was published in May (HKSAREC, 2000), confirming that experiential learning makes learning personal and meaningful. In response to this suggested paradigm shift, society began to recognise the benefits of experiential learning, which is specific to performing arts education pedagogies. Providers of interest-based performing arts short courses were popping up fast.
By 2010, competition in the performing arts short-course market had increased exponentially, especially courses for children. According to Proécho market research done in 2012, there were a few dozen direct competitors in the same district zone in 2008. By 2012, there were over 200 competing operators in the same district zone. Proécho’s financial statements recorded that its revenue from part-time performing arts short-courses gradually dropped 38%, from USD 1.6M in 2008 to USD 987,179 in 2012. This confirmed Proécho’s need to be entrepreneurial and devise new means to sustain its business. Based on operational email exchanges between the general manager and senior management in the PBG, it was understood that Proécho could not seek donations or endowments as financial support. Any such financial support could only go legitimately to the holding HEI, and Proécho as a self-financed entity had to rely on fee-generating products and services for income. Furthermore, Proécho was expected to use the facilities of the parent HEI, which include large dance studios that cater to over 25 people; the rent for these spaces, which Proécho had to pay to its parent HEI, was high. Economy of scale, such as having one teacher teaching more students, was difficult to achieve because performing arts is labour intensive and the student-to-teacher ratio is very low. For example, a drama or dance teacher can only teach a maximum of 15 students in a class, due to its experiential nature. Musical instruments are often taught in very small classes, and preferably one-on-one.

The only way to enjoy some economy of scale was by diversifying Proécho’s business and economising on the existing full-time team to provide administrative and marketing input to new products and services. Proécho could also leverage its strong connections with performing artists and practitioners, and such connections were its competitive advantage. According to Proécho marketing and promotion materials, a drama-based corporate training line of services
had been developed in 2009, using drama techniques to provide executive training for corporations. Evaluation feedback on such training workshops verified its success and indicated that the drama-based training experience liberated employees to express themselves and encouraged them to come up with their own creative processes.

**The Second Decade: Gig Production, From Entrepreneurial Start-up to Sustainability**

Even with the new drama-based training programmes, the performing arts education industry remained challenging, because it is labour-intensive and cost-heavy. Comparing Proécho’s financial information year-on-year, Proécho faced a “cost disease” (Brooks, 2000, p. 274) where costs were rising faster than prices in the economy in general, and product prices and revenues were increasing slower than the fees demanded by labour. The business of offering performing arts courses per se could not sustain the company in the long run. In the June 2012 GM Report, the general manager recommended to the PBG a solution to further increase economies of scale and product diversity by offering multiple products and services with the same full-time administrative support team. Performance gig production was identified as a new business line because many businesses had become more receptive to using performing arts as a promotional tool or to enhance their corporate image. In December 2013, a new business line in the production of performing arts gigs was kicked off by a 100-person Christmas flash-mob dance produced for the Hong Kong International Airport. It is this new line of performance gig production business that this research focused on.

**Start-up phase of the performance production business.** Traditionally, arts and business do not mix because the two systems seem to have very different purposes. Business is about selling, and arts is about expanding the human soul, conveying ideology and the self-expression of the artist (Varnedoe, 1991). Within the past few decades, however, more and more
studies have confirmed the value of arts experience for businesses (Carlucci & Schiuma, 2018; Ellmeier, 2003; Taylor & Hansen, 2005; Taylor & Ladkin, 2009). Macro factors such as globalisation and technological advancement are shaping the 21st century competitive environment in new ways. A short promotional video clip with performance elements on social media, for example, can cut through geographical boundaries and speak volumes to viewers. Such changes are forcing organisations to develop new behaviours to create organisation values. Performing arts is recognised as an effective business tool that can be used “to deal with or solve a business/organisational issue” (Carlucci & Schiuma, 2018, p. 345). Since December 2013, Proécho has been producing short-and-sweet performance gigs for organisations to promote the launch of new products or for organisations to offer free entertainment in order to fulfil social corporate responsibility in developing arts and culture. These new initiatives have been well received, disrupting the dichotomy between arts and business.

At the start-up stage, only one Proécho full-time assistant was allocated to provide administrative support, and she was very inexperienced. Email exchanges indicated that there were times when needed equipment was not available, and miscommunications happened because of lack of support, resulting in freelancers having to find alternative ways to solve administrative problems. For example, at one gig, a freelancer, Felix, had to source 5 sets of walkie-talkie gadgets from somewhere else for a Proécho gig. From communication records at that incident, it was apparent that Felix was happy to help and was excited that Proécho was venturing into new turf. At the same time, meeting notes and email exchanges also indicated that the general manager herself did all the liaison on contract negotiation and creative idea generation, and was very involved in the production process. Emails were promptly replied with a lot of appreciative comments, and creative ideas flew voluntarily and constructively.
Communications were very informal, and there was no trace of hierarchy. The coordination process seemed to be very smooth. However, it was also evident that during the start-up stage of the business, work process documents were not kept systematically. There was no progress report, very few internal evaluation reports, and some standard operational forms were never filled in.

Freelancers’ engagement contracts showed that about a dozen professional freelancers had been engaged in Proécho gigs since the start-up of the business and they had been working together for six years, building a relatively long-term relationship with Proécho. However, in one of the GM’s Reports, it was recorded that a freelancer tried to poach one of Proécho’s main clients. That freelancer was blacklisted for rehire. Apart from that incident, end-client evaluations and the large number of repeat gigs indicated that freelancers who had been working together since the start-up worked very well together and produced good production outcomes. The lack of instructional documents also indicated that these professional freelancers were skilled in their specific areas and they could work independently with relatively minimal administrative support. Email communications recorded how a gig production team worked. Freelancers attended initial production meetings and received briefings about the specific requirements of a particular gig. Once freelancers had agreed on the artistic directions with full-time administrative managers, these freelancers worked independently. Many structural and hierarchical characteristics of organisations are not applicable to professional freelancers working for Proécho. For example, especially at the start-up stage, freelancers did not usually give progress reports or volunteer to submit to any evaluation process. Emails from full-time administrative staff members indicated that some professional freelancers disliked scrutiny and monitoring. Thus, as described by O’Neill (2004), a new type of labour power emerged, posing
new challenges for managers. The general manager of Proécho maintains control over freelancers’ pay rate and the assignment of jobs.

**Sustainability.** Financial documents showed that from its start-up in 2013 to sustainability in 2019, Proécho’s performing arts gig production business grew 500%. According to chronological GM Reports, Proécho managed to develop a few big corporate clients who were loyal and engaged Proécho for repeat annual productions. When the business turned sustainable, gigs were relatively large-scale performances and the freelancers involved were paid higher fees than at the start-up stage of the business. Purchase requisition documents indicate that since 2017, profits generated from performance gigs were invested in acquiring necessary production and communication equipment. A project manager was also added to the full-time administrative team in 2017, and together with a full-time assistant, more administrative manpower provided support to gigs. Policies and procedures were also refined, with adequate interim progress reports, to ensure the quality of each gig. However, from 2017 to 2019, the project manager position turned over four times.

With the loyal corporate clients, Proécho’s performance gig business was able to develop quickly from a start-up to sustainability. By 2018, Proécho started the process to advance from a chaotic start-up stage to a more stable and sustainable stage through the development of more ad-hoc clients, supported by established levels of resources and technology. However, client contracts also showed that within the year 2018 and 2019, no loyal relationship was developed with new clients. New clients developed during these two years were one-off clients.

As Proécho’s gig production business consolidated and moved into a sustainable stage, payroll reports show that fee payments to professional production freelancers had also increased. The original enthusiasm and aspiration of the professional freelancers were assumed, but
incidents had happened that contradict this assumption. Freelancers did not seem to be more satisfied with the increase in fee payments. They complained through emails about the additional work involved in new procedures, such as the filling out of periodical progress reports. Proécho’s internal audit reports indicate that some professional freelancers filed claims for lunch expenses during early gigs. Such claims were eventually rejected as Proécho tightened its operation procedures and regulations. Shortened rehearsal hours for recent gigs were found in rehearsal room usage records; this was interpreted by Proécho as an indication of complacency on the part of production freelancers. Reports from Proécho full-time managers also recorded that freelancers were not willing to take on very simple extra tasks or to walk the extra mile. There were rumours that certain production freelancers who had been working on gigs for years were no longer happy. Freelancers turned down Proécho gigs at the very last minute.

**Prompts for this Research from Start-up to Sustainability**

The main aims for starting up this new line of business were to develop a viable and financially sustainable business line to meet changing market needs and to redirect Proécho’s reliance on income from short courses. Internal communication records showed that at the start-up stage of the gig production business, there were few resources dedicated to support gig production projects, and coordination among various freelancers in the same gig was chaotic at times.

During the start-up of the gig production business, detailed discussions were conducted with the gig production freelancers to find out how they felt about the start-up. They were enthusiastic about participating in the start-up of this production business, as evidenced in some of the email exchanges. One of the gig production freelancers wrote to the general manager of Proécho and expressed that teaching interest-based short courses was a means of subsidising his
livelihood, but as a professional performing arts practitioner, he did not derive a lot of satisfaction from teaching short courses. In a gig production, he would have the opportunity to create something to meet a client’s brief and could derive great satisfaction when his creation was appreciated. He also wrote that, as an individual freelancer, it was difficult for him to find clients and Proécho could perform that role of an agent. He expressed that he and other gig production freelancers would very much appreciate the opportunities. Thus, despite insufficient support at the start-up stage, gig coordination emails indicated that professional freelancers were happy to walk the extra mile.

As a start-up, Proécho benefited from the freelancers’ strong experience in performing arts. The freelancers also welcomed the opportunities Proécho created. However, after six years, the freelancers had become mobile in the market, bringing with them the knowledge and experience generated from Proécho gigs. These freelancers did not have any obligation to be loyal to Proécho, nor was it their responsibility to enhance Proécho’s corporate values as much as developing their own reputation via Proécho’s projects.

Moving on to the sustainable growth phase, Proécho has to rely even more on these production freelancers, but it finds that it does not understand how the professional freelancers feel about the moving forward. It is not clear what these freelancers think, or how they identify with Proécho now, as their experience gained from working with Proécho has made them more in-demand. Proécho believes that performing arts enterprises need to understand the mindset of these entrepreneurial freelancers who are typically multiskilled, versatile, self-governing and unattached, in order to devise fitting human resources strategies for such a unique market. However, financial pitfalls for arts enterprises are also numerous and many such enterprises do fail. Research that contributes to the best practice for arts enterprises to develop and grow with
performing arts practitioners is needed to help arts enterprises to be financially viable, for arts and culture to continue to grow in Hong Kong, and for individual budding arts practitioners to maintain a sustainable career. The remainder of this chapter reports on data collected from semi-structured interviews with Proécho’s professional freelancers, and observations gleaned from two production meetings.

Data from Semi-structured Interviews with Professional Freelancers

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore how professional performing arts production freelancers in the gig economy in Hong Kong make sense of their relationship with their employing organisation and how this changed as the employing organisation evolved from start-up to sustainability. First is a brief introduction of the seven participants in the semi-structured interviews in this study. Pseudonyms are used instead of participants’ real names.

Participants

Chris. Chris, in his 40s, is a graduate of Proécho’s holding institution. He taught Proécho performing arts courses before joining Proécho’s gig production freelance team. Chris had been involved in Proécho’s gig production business since the first gig in 2013. He was one of the most active freelancers, having been engaged in more than 50% of Proécho gigs. Chris’s main roles were in artistic design and directing, music direction and music engineering. He had a family with two very young children, and has the burden of childcare. Chris’ wife had a stable and well-paid job, and Chris’ financial burden was relatively light.

Hugo. Hugo, in his 40s, was a classmate of Chris, and a graduate of Proécho’s holding institution. Hugo was a choreographer who had been teaching Proécho dance courses since 2001. He had been involved in Proécho’s gig production business since the first gig in 2013. Hugo was
one of the most active freelancers, having been engaged in more than 50% of Proécho gigs. He was single, lived with his parents, and contributed to supporting his parents financially.

**Mildred.** Mildred, in her 50s, was a British choreographer who came to live in Hong Kong in the 1980s. She had gone from being a freelancer to a full-time employee and then back to a freelancer. However, when she was in full-time employment, she was doing freelance work on a volunteer basis to maintain the connections. Mildred was a freelance musical director and a choreographer, specialising in jazz and tap dance. She was also a teacher in Proécho dance courses. Mildred started participating in Proécho’s gig productions in 2017, and she witnessed Proécho’s transition from administratively weak to providing systematic support. Mildred had been involved in about 30% of Proécho gigs. She was the main breadwinner for a family of 5, although one of her children had just entered the workforce.

**Felix.** Felix, in his early 30s, graduated from Proécho’s holding institution and was trained in stage management. He had been involved in Proécho’s gig production business from its start-up in 2013 as a stage manager, and was one of the most active freelancers who was engaged in more than 50% of Proécho gigs. Felix had just got married, and his wife had a stable job in full-time employment.

**Malcolm.** Malcolm, an Australian-born Chinese, in his 30s, was one of the most all-round, triple-threat performing arts freelancers, who was strong in all three areas of music, acting and dance. He came to Hong Kong in 2010, had been teaching Proécho courses, and joined Proécho’s gig production freelance team in 2016, when the business was partly chaotic, but mostly stabilised. Malcolm’s main roles included artistic design, directing, choreography, music direction and music engineering. He was engaged in about 40% of Proécho gig productions.
Malcolm was single, and his parents were comfortably retired in Australia; Malcolm did not have to support them financially.

**Mona.** Mona, in her 40s, was a graduate of Proécho’s holding institution, majoring in costume design for stage performance. She joined Proécho’s gig production freelance team in 2014 as costume designer when the business was still in its start-up stage. Mona was engaged in over 50% of Proécho gig productions. She was married with no children. Her husband was also a freelancer.

**Ambros.** Ambros is a Filipino in his 40s. He was musically trained in the Philippines and had produced a few gigs for Proécho during its start-up stage in 2013 and 2014. His main roles were artistic design and directing, music direction and music scoring. Ambros had stopped taking Proécho jobs since 2015. He was married with two young children. His wife was a performing arts administrator engaged in full-time employment.

**Themes and Subthemes**

Interviews of participants were conducted according to Interview Protocol after a pilot was done. Audio files of interviews were turned into transcripts by gotranscript.com. After highlighting key words that captured key thoughts and concepts in each interview transcripts, and three rounds of coding that involved consolidating, reducing and interpreting what participants said, themes emerged. Individual interview transcripts were re-examined and comparisons across all transcripts were made. The emergent themes were further organised into nine main themes: (a) freelancers’ financial considerations in the gig-employment relationship, (b) autonomy and openness facilitating a positive relationship, (c) freelancers obtaining employment and gained career advancement opportunities from gig employers, (d) efficiency, connections and ambition to do something new mattering more than long-term relationships, (e)
a long-term relationship as a natural outcome of having trust, respect, gratitude, care and mutual benefits, (f) roles and identity being closely related and influencing each other, (g) operational changes creating distance in the gig-employment relationship, and (h) business growth shifting identity saliency, and (i) consistency and alignment of identity and the employing organisation. Themes were presented in a story-telling manner with details to enhance clarity and understanding. Main themes, subthemes, and summaries of themes are presented in Table 1, and elaborated in the following sub-section.

Table 4

*Main Themes and Subthemes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes and subthemes</th>
<th>Summary</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial reward was not a primary factor in the gig-employment relationship</td>
<td>Money had a practical and psychological impact on freelancers and their individual relationship with Proécho. However, money was not the sole or main consideration for these professional freelancers. Apart from money, freelancers looked for, in a gig-employment relationship, trust, respect for their professional input, meaningfulness of a gig, reputation and the sense of mission of the gig employer, the assembly of the freelance team, and whether the working environment was a happy place. Mildred was the outlier, and her financial worries had affected her working relationships with others. Fees being offered in a gig had certain degree of influence on whether a freelancer would take a gig employment offer; but in general, fees offered were, perhaps contrary to common belief, often not the main consideration.</td>
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<td>Subthemes: Most freelancers had financial security Freelancers valued trust and respect and meaningfulness of a gig more than financial reward Autonomy and openness facilitated a positive relationship Employment and advancement opportunities from gig employers</td>
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<td>Freelancers found it very important to have autonomy and openness in a gig-employment relationship. They emphasised the importance of professional autonomy, and they did not like working with employers who were controlling or lacked trust. Freelancers appreciated their relationship with Proécho because Proécho created employment and career advancement opportunities for them. The opportunity Proécho created as an intermediary employer gave freelancers a different role in their teaching career that augmented their professional standing in the industry.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Themes and subthemes</td>
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<td>Long-term relationships mattered less than efficiency, connections and ambition to innovate</td>
<td>Freelancers did not think of gig-employment relationships in terms of duration. Rather than seeking longevity in a gig-employment relationship, freelancers looked for efficiency or ease of the gig, future connections, and whether the employing organisation had the ambition to do something new. Mildred was an outlier in that she enjoyed long-term relationships because that was part of her personality, and because that made gig employers always think about her first with new jobs.</td>
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<td>Team camaraderie, solidarity and mutual benefits contributed to a long-term relationship</td>
<td>Although freelancers did not expect gig-employment relationships to be long-term, when there were trust, respect, gratitude, care and mutual benefits in a gig-employment relationship, the relationship would naturally become long-term. Freelancers also recounted that trust-breaching acts, such as client-poaching, would destroy a relationship.</td>
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<td>Professional roles gave freelancers satisfaction and influenced positively on their self-identity</td>
<td>Freelancers found satisfaction in their relationship with Proécho as they took on the roles of teachers and show producers. They believed the roles they played influenced how they were perceived by others, thus forming their identity. They also believed that as they interacted with people around them, they made adjustments to fit in, and such interactions also influenced how they played their roles. There were inter-related dynamics among roles, identity, how one conducted oneself, and what was allowed in the gig setting. Mildred had experienced alienation from her relationship with Proécho when Proécho’s holding institution made her work more difficult and caused confusions to her roles and identity.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Operational changes created distance</td>
<td>As Proécho’s business transitioned from start-up to sustainable growth, more full-time administrative staff members were hired, and freelancers had less time to interact with the general manager, affecting the close relationship with Proécho. The overall relationship became less personal and more at arm’s length. Some new clients also required more time to adapt to. Changes in top management in Proécho’s holding institution also posed challenges to freelancers’ relationship satisfaction with Proécho.</td>
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<td>Themes and subthemes</td>
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<td>Business growth shifted identity saliency</td>
<td>Business growth and the changes that came with it, together with the organisational performance of Proécho, as perceived by the freelancers, shifted freelancers’ identity saliency, which influenced their satisfaction with their relationship with Proécho. Hugo complained about additional procedural reports and had turned down Proécho gigs. Some freelancers identified themselves more as independent professionals and less as members of the Proécho family, and thus were less willing to contribute beyond what they were engaged to do. Others found that Proécho’s business growth had prompted them to expand their network and diversify their professional identity.</td>
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<td>Consistency of freelance composition and alignment of freelancer and organisational identity led to relationship satisfaction</td>
<td>Freelancers cared about their self-identity and the identity of Proécho. They perceived that aligning personal and organisational identities was made possible by engaging the same freelancers and that familiarity could lead to new ideas and knowledge. As Proécho was growing from infancy to sustainability, consistency and alignment of identity were important. However, such alignment was not always possible, and communication, understanding and adjustment could facilitate better alignment of identities.</td>
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In the following subsection, themes and subthemes are elaborated on and supported by quotes from participants.

**Freelancers’ financial considerations in a gig-employment relationship.** A common theme among all seven professional freelancers interviewed was the financial consideration in a gig-employment relationship. Financial considerations refer to the practical and psychological impact money has on freelancers, and the way freelancers have to consider and manage them. Freelancers’ main financial considerations revolved around the subthemes of Financial security, and The importance of money in the gig-employment relationship.

**Financial security.** Financial security refers to a person’s sense of control in maintaining one’s livelihood in relation to one’s income. All the participants except Mildred had financial security and they did not worry about their livelihood. Mildred was the outlier because she was
the main breadwinner for a family of five. The freelancers’ level of financial security had a direct impact on their individual relationship with Proécho. Ambros, for example, had stopped taking Proécho gigs because Proécho was not offering high enough fees for him to support his family. Other freelancers had some level of support from family members, and they were happy working with Proécho. Mildred found that her sense of financial burden was affecting her relationship with others in general.

Hugo explained why he was not worried about his livelihood, despite the insecure nature of freelance employment, and how the cancellation of gigs due to COVID-19 did not affect his relationship with Proécho.

Yes, it’s true that we do not really have secure jobs. There are ups and downs. Especially in times like now [referring to the COVID-19 pandemic causing a lot of gigs to be cancelled]. But apart from the income source, a professional freelancer should be very good in financial management. I am lucky that I don’t have financial burdens. I live with my parents and in Hong Kong, once accommodation is taken care of, there is not a whole lot of financial burden. That’s why I don’t mind about Proécho’s recent cancellations.

For Chris, financial security was also a non-issue, despite having two very young children. He managed his own finances so that he could enjoy working on every gig.

My wife is a paediatrician with a well-paid full-time job. This is helpful. In a way, most employers are fair in the freelance market. My hourly rate is much higher than that of a full-time person doing the same thing. Well, we can’t have it all. The good thing is, under normal circumstances, there are always enough gigs to go around. And I have investments. So, that’s already part of my secure income. We must manage our own
finances well so that we don’t have to worry. Gigs are my major income, but they are not everything. If they were, I wouldn’t be able to fully enjoy doing it.

Malcolm, who had earned a Bachelor of Business Administration Degree and worked in a bank before, explained he had a good sense of financial security. Because of that, he was able to work with a good attitude on every gig, not being calculative, and build good relationships with gig bosses.

I had financial support from my parents and relatives, when I first came to Hong Kong; I did. When I was working in Australia, I also saved up some money. I had a car and everything. When I came to Hong Kong, I sold all that and took as much money as I could to Hong Kong. If I was ever in need of money, I have the support from my parents. When I first came, I stayed with relatives without rent. That definitely helped. And as a freelancer, knowing that you do have some sort of a safety net helps a lot; psychologically. Sometimes we can worry about the finances, and I’m not making as much as I was before, but at the same time, someone in a full-time job can lose it if the market is down. No, I don’t worry. I have chosen performing arts. I chose to be a freelancer. I have counted the cost. If I had to worry about every penny, I wouldn’t have done it and I wouldn’t be able to appreciate every gig, to put in my best, to not being calculative; you know that kind of a positive attitude? I guess that’s why all my gig bosses find me very easy-going.

Felix’s family were indigenous to Hong Kong and they have land. In a way, Felix was inheriting material benefits from his family, and that helped with his financial security. Consequently, Felix did not feel the need to fight for his fees, which might hurt his gig-employment relationship.
I did seriously think about going full-time, for security. But I am doing fine for now. I have enough jobs, and I never felt the need to fight for my fees. If I had to do that, it might hurt my relationship with gig employers. But I have less burden than other freelancers because my parents have a house for me and my wife. So, I can go full-time later if I have to; maybe wait until we have children. I still give money to my parents though. You know, we are a very traditional Chinese family. My ancestors were indigenous to Hong Kong. My parents have properties. I still have to manage them to ensure they have good rentable values.

Mona and her husband were both freelancers. They were living in an apartment that belongs to her parents. She also did not let gig fees become a contentious point in her relationship with gig employers.

We are staying there rent-free. You know, on average, people spend at least one third of their monthly income on rent; at least! Some people I know spend 65% of their monthly income on rent. I wouldn’t be able to sleep at night if that was me. My parents’ help makes my freelancer life a lot easier. We have offered to pay rent to my parents, but they insist that they don’t want it. That’s why people say I am a romantic freelancer [laughed]. I do not have to worry about finances, and I am always happy.

Ambros’ wife was in full-time employment, and they had two young children. He had stopped taking Proécho gigs and was doing high-paying gigs of celebrity concerts. He explained that by maintaining a good relationship with gig employers, he continued to received gigs and he had financial security.

Raising young children in Hong Kong is very expensive; you have no idea! That’s why I stopped taking Proécho gigs. Honestly, the fees were good and fair, but the gigs I am
taking now from big production houses are paying serious money. We are doing celebrity concerts with deep-pocket sponsors. It’s a totally different ball game. It’s all about connections, man! And you just have to manage your financial needs with what is available out there. I am thankful that I have developed a very good reputation and relationship with these celebrity gigs, and they keep coming, one leads to another then another; gives me a sense of security. I have to travel with them though. But that’s okay. Everybody makes adjustments for their jobs.

Mildred was an outlier in that she had a lower sense of financial security. She was the main breadwinner for a family of five, although one of her sons had just entered the workforce and was working as a freelance performer in London. Her husband, a freelance sound operator, had basically retired, with very occasional gigs every now and then. When talking about financial considerations, her comment was, “Generally, oh I hate to say this, I’m in it for the money. It’s very insecure but people go into this profession knowing it’s insecure”. Mildred compared the days when she had a full-time salary to being a full-on freelancer, and how the financial burden had changed her and her relationship with people working with her.

I don’t worry for now. There are enough one-off jobs, even with this bloody virus. Jobs are smaller and shorter, but people know me. They seek me out to do something for them. But I am not young any more. Sometimes I worry what will happen in a few years’ time. I guess that little nagging worry is sometimes affecting my relationship with people at work. I can sense it. At one time in my work life, I had a full-time job. At that time, people always said to me, “Mildred, you have no business sense whatsoever”. Because at that time, I went around doing volunteer work for the theatres and because I had a full-time salary, I could totally enjoy the volunteer work. People I worked with adored me.
Since I became a full-time freelancer, haha, if there is such a term, I find myself more whiny, less happy; and I was told by gig members that I was argumentative. At first, I thought, “Really? Me?” But then after it has happened a few times, I started to think, “Is the financial burden getting to me?”

In summary, all participants talked in length about their financial security as freelancers. Apart from Mildred, the insecure nature of freelance employment had no impact on participants’ financial security in that they did not worry about their livelihood, even during the COVID-19 pandemic. Five of the seven participants had some sort of support from family members, either from their parents or from their spouses. Most freelancers did not have to worry about their finances, they were able to fully enjoy their work, which contributed greatly to a good relationship with Proécho. Mildred as the outlier, on the other hand, did worry about her finances. Such worries had caused her attitude to change and affected her relationship with people she worked with. She used to have a full-time job and without financial worries, she did volunteer work and was well-liked. After she became a freelancer, she was found to be more argumentative.

**The importance of money in the gig-employment relationship.** All participants agreed that money ascribed values to things, enabled autonomy in many ways, and that it provided security to one’s livelihood. However, money alone, or the fees a gig was paying, did not determine how important a relationship was to these professional freelancers.

Mildred admitted that although the monetary value of fees “speaks quite loud” to her, there were other factors, including respect and appreciation, that were more important in a gig-employment relationship.
Generally, if they pay me enough, whoever it is, then I will do the gig. But money is not everything. I have been known to clash with clients because they won't give me the respect and the quality assurance. They're not setting things at the level that I would like. It's not that I don't do the job, I will do the job, but I won't be happy. It's more about quality control for me more than anything. I hate it sometimes when a client says, ‘Well, I want you on now, do it. I’m paying you. You’ve got to do whatever I say.’ That’s such a lack of respect. No. Mutual respect is very important. I feel now that I have proved my worth and I think certain people appreciate that and respect that, and that is a relationship I want to keep.

Chris started to talk about his seemingly mercenary perspective in his freelancing career. Very important! Money plays a very, very high element when it comes to getting or agreeing to a job. It’s very, very important. If the money is not good, then there’s no reason to do it. You know why? Because money is status. With that security [referring to his wife’s stable income], I am able to advance my career. Five years ago, I was at HK$1,000 per hour. Every year, I was increasing my own salary, which is up-levelling my status. I was actually promoting myself. In the freelance world, there is nothing called “somebody is going to promote you.” If you are in a company, your boss may promote you if you do a good job. Promotion means more money and higher status. In the freelance world, there’s no such thing. You need to promote yourself.

Chris further explained, however, that the highest-paying gig employer did not mean that was the most important relationship to him. He considered his relationship with Proécho important to him because of its brand image, and because Proécho had assembled a very effective freelance team.
My relationship with Proécho is what I call a good, stable freelance relationship, and it’s important to me. Very simple. Proécho carries the brand of the parent institution. When I put that on my CV, people have confidence in me. Besides, Proécho has a core group of freelancers and we are so familiar with each other. Big companies talk about team work, team work. For us freelancers, that means something else. In a production team, individuals have bits and pieces of different strengths. Assembling the right people is very, very important to guarantee smoothness and quality. With the Proécho team, it’s all there.

For Hugo, money was only a means to an end, and if he put too much emphasis on money, he would lose his freedom to choose. In his story, he explained why he chose to work with Proécho, and because of such volition he has a good relationship with Proécho.

I am not married. My girlfriend and I have been in a stable relationship for 20 years now. It’s okay. We don’t have to get married. That’s a worldly thing. And I don’t believe in having children and labouring all your life to support them. No. I’d rather choose financial freedom. When I am not enslaved to money, I have real freedom to choose.

Proécho is not a private company and it’s a non-profit organisation. The profit they make goes back to the community through the holding institution. So, even though Proécho is not the highest paying organisation, I still have a very good working relationship with Proécho. I believe in its mission. I’d rather only work for organisations like this, and I form meaningful relationships with these organisations that are adding value to society. I don’t take on private students and I never work for a sole proprietor. That’s not my calling.
Ambros tended to pick high-paying gig employers but there were other elements in an employment relationship that he valued. He explained that even though he did not take Proécho gigs any more, he still respected the relationship, which was more of a friendship.

I only took a handful of Proécho gigs when it first started gig productions. But if you ask me, my relationships with companies are always a mix of many things. Personal interest is a big part of it. Love is another. You guys were awesome to work with, and I love you guys. You are my friends now, although my personal interest is calling me to do something else. But, if you say to me one day, “Look! I have this gig. There is not a whole lot of money in it. But you are the best person to do it. Will you help me?” I would say yes if I could juggle the time. You see, if an employer is a jerk but pays a lot of money and I keep on taking his gig, am I loyal to him? Maybe not. Do you know why? Because one day when he does not have the money, I’ll be the first one to leave him.

Malcolm also shared that money was not everything in a gig-employment relationship. He would consider “the whole package,” which included whether the gig employer was good to work with, whether it was worthwhile to develop that relationship, whether there were learning opportunities, and whether the gig employer trusted and appreciated his professional input.

Money is definitely not the main factor, although [chuckled] …yeah, it’s quite important too. But I am not a big spender. I’m not someone who chases consumerism. Money should serve me, my aspiration; let me do what I love doing. Not the other way round. If I wanted a high-paying job, I wouldn’t have chosen this path. So, when considering a gig, I look at the whole package: have I worked with them before? What was it like? Do I want to further develop with this client? If it was a new client, I would consider if the gig itself provides learning opportunities for me to develop myself. I’ve worked with clients before
who paid me a lot of money, but I didn’t feel they trusted me, or my professional input.
That was demoralising and I wouldn’t keep my relationship with them.
Felix said something similar to what Malcolm had said. Money alone did not determine how important a gig-employment relationship was to him. He looked for meaning in a relationship with gig employers. If a gig was meaningful, such as contributing to society, he would treasure that relationship with the gig employer.
There are a lot of important things in life: love and respect, family, charity. Money should facilitate important things in life. Money is often not my first priority. What is most important for me is whether a gig is meaningful. For example, I once worked on a gig for handicapped people. I didn’t ask about my fees until almost towards the end of the project. Well, now that I am married, it’s a bit different, but still, money is more important but not most important. I like working with Proécho because its main calling is to develop artists. That is a meaning I identify with.
To Mona, money could not buy her happiness, and a gig relationship that gave her a happy working environment was important to her.
You’ve heard people said, ‘money can’t buy you happiness’. That’s what I think about money. To me, happiness is most important thing in a work relationship. That’s why I keep on working with Proécho. It’s a happy place. My other jobs are mostly with schools. Schools are happy places. I don’t have big clients who pay big money. No. I don’t want the stress that comes with that. I don’t need the stress. Some people, I mean costume designers, look for big gigs to build their portfolio. I don’t even have a portfolio. People I work with know what I can do. That’s good enough for me. I am happy.
In summary, money, or the fees being offered, alone did not determine how important a gig-employment relationship was to freelancers. Apart from money, freelancers looked for, in a gig-employment relationship, trust, respect of their professional input, meaningfulness of a gig, reputation and the sense of mission of the gig employer, the assembly of the freelance team, and whether the working environment was a happy place. Regardless of a freelancer’s personal financial situation, it was found that fees being offered in a gig had certain degree of influence on whether a freelancer would take the job or not; but fees offered were, perhaps contrary to common belief, often not the main consideration.

**Autonomy and openness facilitated a positive relationship.** Freelancers highly appreciated the autonomy Proécho provided as they worked on Proécho gigs. Proécho was also open to freelancers’ suggestions. Such autonomy and openness allowed them to bring their creative ideas to life. Freelancers also believed that autonomy had to be built on trust. When freelancers were committed to gigs, a trusting relationship developed and autonomy would further facilitate better outcomes.

Hugo made it plain that, as a professional freelancer, he needed work autonomy, and when there was autonomy, he also took ownership of the gig. Hugo appreciated the freedom Proécho gave him, and that contributed to his relationship satisfaction with Proécho.

This freelance life is my choice. I need that freedom to do what I want to do. It is professionally satisfying to work on something that I find meaningful, not just because I am paid to. I can never understand the concept of “I pay you full-time that’s why you have to be here nine to five.” When I am in a production, I have to do what the artistic director decides, but I also have my say in that decision. In that sense, the production is mine as well. Nobody, not even the end-paying client, could ruthlessly dictate how I put
things together. I am happy to explain why I do something a certain way, of course, but I need to have that autonomy. In that sense, you give me a lot of freedom because we have been working together for so long. With new gig employers, there is usually less autonomy and we have to do everything the client says.

Hugo also appreciated Proécho being open and reasonable and fair in solving problems. These were also important to his relationship with gig employers.

When I work with Proécho, I find that Proécho is very open to negotiation and discussion. Other gig employers may resolve problems with a simple solution, that is based on economic advantage. With Proécho, we can always discuss things and try to find a creative way, the best way, to solve problems, even if that means Proécho would have to spend a bit more.

Chris appreciated Proécho being open and allowing autonomy for him to bring his creative ideas to life. He called that “empowered autonomy”, which had also made his dream of producing a Michael Jackson show come true. Because of that, Chris had maintained a continuous relationship with Proécho since 2009.

Autonomy is a big part of my freelance life; very, very important. I discuss with Proécho and the client, of course, but I am useful to you guys because I always have a lot of ideas. I can offer my creativity and ideas, they got accepted, and I can follow through and make my ideas a live creation. That, to me, is empowered autonomy. And I live and breathe that. My dream to put a Michael Jackson show on stage was a very good example. We started working together in 2009, and when I first sold the idea to you in 2011, remember? You were so open and turned it into a Proécho 10th Anniversary celebratory
production. Proécho made my dream come true, and that meant a lot to me. And that’s why our relationship never ends. That empowered autonomy; very, very important.

Malcolm also highlighted the importance of professional autonomy and openness to new ideas in his relationship with Proécho.

When I first started producing shows for Proécho, I was surprised how much freedom I was given and how my suggestions were considered seriously. What I really like about Proécho is that it is very proactive and is actually open to ideas. Just like turning the musical theatre courses online so that we could still continue during COVID-19, I really appreciate that.

On top of professional autonomy, Mona also wanted to have autonomy in life where she could have more say in scheduling work.

I only live once. I need the freedom to take holidays, to avoid rush hours and routines, and to work when I feel like it; well, relatively speaking. To me, that is autonomy in life. Work is a part of my lifestyle, and I am glad that I do not have to be a work slave. My husband is also a freelancer. Sometimes he has an overnight gig, and I want to work on my costume design at night and wait for him to come home. I really enjoy that freedom.

Mildred shared her experience with controlling clients and how she did not appreciate the relationship. She said that when clients were controlling or constantly making changes, she would not work with that client again.

I don't like a client that thinks they know better than I do when they have no understanding of the performing arts at all. I understand that they have a brief and if I keep to that brief, then that's what I'm being paid to do. But if you are paying for my expertise, you need to give me the autonomy to make it work. If you keep making
changes and demanding more, I would not work with you again in the future. That’s how I feel about that.

Felix related work autonomy to trust and explained why that was important in a freelance relationship. He explained that autonomy was based on trust, and when there was trust in a gig-employment relationship, he would be passionate about the gig.

As the SM [stage manager] I need that sense of control to contribute to a good show. Some people think a SM just implements what the show director says. But it’s not that. We, as professional SMs, need to care about the entire show, and voice out when necessary. But not all gig employers understand this. In some productions, SMs are treated as casual hands. I have to ask for permission to buy small items like gaffer [duct tape]. I really don’t get that. If you engage me, you need to trust me. In a way, I am an artist too. If you don’t trust me, my passion for the job is affected. I am not talking about Proécho. Don’t misunderstand. With Proécho, I sit in every production meeting, and I am given a material and props budget to work with. I appreciate that.

In summary, participants emphasised the importance of autonomy and openness in a gig-employment relationship. They talked about life autonomy to choose when to work and professional autonomy, and they did not like working with employers who were controlling or lacked trust. The autonomy Proécho allowed was referred to as “empowered autonomy” with which freelancers could fully exercise their creativity.

**Employment and advancement opportunities from gig employers.** One of the themes that highlighted freelancers’ appreciation for their relationship with Proécho centred around how Proécho created employment and career advancement opportunities for freelancers. The
opportunity Proécho created as an intermediary employer gave freelancers a different role in their teaching career that augmented their identity in the industry.

Hugo opined that Proécho, as a freelance employer, was providing the most important planform for performing artists with a very good working environment. He also appreciated how Proécho had been fulfilling its role in the gig employment relationship as a mediator between end-user clients and freelancers.

Good opportunities to continue my professional development of my craft as a choreographer in a very good working environment. I can’t ask for more. I’d say it’s the most important platform for performing artists. Especially with the start of the gig production business. In the past, before Proécho started its gig production business, I had worked directly with clients. But I would prefer working with Proécho instead of working directly with the client. A lot of clients do not understand the production process and when we cannot comply, they could take it personally. Proécho acts very well as a mediator. And because Proécho and I have a very good relationship, I am more willing to comply with whatever Proécho asks me to do.

Hugo was particularly appreciative of the opportunities generated by Proécho’s gig production business.

I am a performing arts professional and a performing arts professional should produce gigs. That’s the pinnacle of a performing artist’s career. I should not just be teaching and performing, but involved in gig production. I was so excited that Proécho was going down that road and I would be a part of it. I was grateful for the opportunity and was very happy for myself as a professional artist.
Chris, who was very pragmatic, saw his relationship with Proécho as a conducive channel for career development opportunities. His career development goal was to cut back on teaching jobs and to do more gig productions. His relationship with Proécho had opened doors for him and helped him achieve that goal.

Networking is my most important strategy. It’s all about good contacts. I always think about what I want to do and who can bring me there. You look at my Facebook. I don’t socialise. I build career. So far, Proécho has been my valued partner in developing my career. I was teaching part-time for Proécho, and then we developed more programmes, and then we started gig productions. Teaching and producing gigs are not too different in terms of the work I put in. But they carry very different status and give very different levels of satisfaction. My working relationship with Proécho has helped strengthen my network. Now I am able to cut down my teaching jobs to about 30%. I am now doing gig productions 70% of my time. That is the career advancement direction that I want to achieve.

Felix described how Proécho gave him the first opportunities in his career as a professional freelance and how every gig added to his repertoire of experience. Because of those opportunities for growth, the relationship with Proécho meant a lot to Felix.

When I first worked with Proécho, I felt insignificant. Proécho is a reputable organization and I was a fresh starter. I felt like a small potato in a big show. I was very grateful for the opportunity to learn and grow. I remember when I first started in Proécho gigs, they were in-house gigs within the institution. Then there were corporate clients and we were performing at different venues, including shopping malls. That really added to my repertoire of experience. You know me. My values are very traditional. As the Chinese
say, “when you drink the water, remember the source”. That’s why Proécho is not just another employer to me.

Malcolm talked about how a freelancer’s career was moulded by market demands and that Proécho provided the necessary market demand for him. He believed he had a dynamic relationship with Proécho in which both sides were creating value for each other.

In the freelance market, I'm just going to wherever the job is. If there's no job in an area that I want, there's no job. So, the job market moulds us. When I think this way, I am grateful for the opportunities, a market demand, that Proécho is providing for my trade. I’d like to believe that you gave me the jobs not because I studied with you guys. I believe you see my contribution and how I work, and that’s why you have referred other jobs to me too. So, definitely. I have a very dynamic relationship with Proécho. It’s definitely more than “you pay me, I do the job”. I’d like to believe that we are creating values for each other.

Mildred shared how her relationship with Proécho had entered into a different dimension when Proécho started to produce gigs and involved her in gig productions. She explained that the relationship with Proécho had opened doors for her to other paid gigs.

I was really excited that Proécho had started the gig production business. It took our relationship to another dimension, where I am more fulfilled, and my expertise in providing artistic direction has gained a foothold in the industry. I love working with students. It doesn’t matter whether they’re doing a course or performing in a gig. But I must say, producing Proécho gigs in recent years gives me more satisfaction. Teaching is satisfying too, but a teacher’s job is never done. With some teaching jobs, I got paid for the whole academic year, so there’s a bit of security there. But dollar for the hour, gig
productions pay a lot better. It’s interesting that now, more gig employers who actual pay for my work know me. In the past, only small independent theatre operators knew me and they often asked me to do volunteer work.

In summary, freelancers appreciated Proécho’s role in creating employment opportunities for them. Through the relationship with Proécho, freelancers also expanded their network. The opportunity Proécho created as an intermediary employer had open doors for freelancers to other gig employers and that had augmented their professional standing in the industry.

**Long-term relationship not the main focus.** Freelancers did not think of gig-employment relationships in terms of duration. Rather than seeking longevity in a gig-employment relationship, freelancers looked for efficiency or ease of the gig, future connections, and whether the employing organisation had the ambition to do something new. Mildred was the outlier in that she liked to stay with an organisation when a good relationship had been built. She explained that it was her personality to stay with people she knew. This could also be attributed to the fact that she was less secure financially, and by staying with familiar organisations, she would be remembered and allocated new gigs.

Hugo said that although freelancers were committed to do a good job for every gig, they did not think in terms of a long-term relationship.

Freelancers do not think in terms of loyalty. Preferred organisations, yes. But once we take on a gig, we are committed to it, although we still have that “freedom” [using the quotation-mark hand sign] to walk away without dire consequences. But a respectable freelancer does not do that. Also, you can only do that once, really. Once you have done that, nobody will employ you again.
Hugo considered Proécho to be a preferred organisation to work with. One of the reasons why he had stayed with Proécho for so long was Proécho’s ambitions to do something new. Hugo encouraged Proécho to keep innovating and create value for freelancers as a means to retain talent.

I see myself continuing to work with Proécho. The good thing is, our relationship has not been stagnant. If we always do the same thing, we could not have worked together for so long. Artists need to create, break new ground. So, it’s not a matter of whether freelancers are loyal but whether an organisation can retain good talents. Proécho has something new every few years, and that is exciting and that’s why we stay with Proécho. Going forward, Proécho can augment its brand. For example, it can leverage on the Hong Kong International Airport annual projects to take things to the next level. Look at Battery Park [now, The Battery (Manhattan)]. Or Art Basel. Why do people flock to these performances, even before they know exactly what is on show? The holding institution and the Airport are great brands. Proécho should try to brand the joint venture. Turn it into a platform where freelancers really desire to work with you guys.

Chris said that freelancing and long-term relationship were “oxymorons” because in a gig-employment relationship, employers did not offer commitment to freelancers either.

Look, a freelance relationship is a freelance relationship. Freelancing and loyalty are oxymorons. In a freelance relationship, the concept of loyalty and commitment is not applicable, because a freelance relationship looks at other things. Don’t forget, employing companies are not giving freelancers any commitment. So, in a give-and-take relationship, what is not given could not be required to be given in return.
Chris explained that instead of a long-term relationship, gig-employment relationships were quid-pro-quo relationships that were mainly transactional. He also shared how he, as a freelancer, made decisions on which offer to take. His decision was largely based on cost and benefits. If an employing organisation was likely to give him more connections and would lead to other job opportunities, he would accept an offer from that organisation.

In a freelance relationship, every gig is based on quid pro quo. If the fees are good, I will take it. If the fees are not too good but there are future opportunities, I will take it. I believe it is like that for the employing companies too. At the beginning, Proécho was taking a risk with me, but then the fees it offered at that time were not as high as the current fees. I believe all parties in a freelance relationship are always thinking about “What’s in it for me?” Again, for example, two companies offering me same amount of money. Now, when I'm making a decision about which one I'm taking, it depends on the time. If I cannot have two at the same time, which is really rare, I’ll go for the easier one. I also consider if the new company is going to bring me more projects. If I sense that the new company is just a one-off thing, I'd rather go back to the old one because the existing one has been working with me for a long time. If the new company has more connections with potential to open to more doors, I would say no to the old company. That's my straight answer.

Chris explained that one reason why he had a long-term relationship with Proécho was because of the established understanding between him and Proécho, which made work efficient and easy for him.

I wouldn't say I am loyal to Proécho. But when I am working for a company that I’ve been working for a long time, for me, I save a lot of time to understand the culture of the
company, the people that I am working with, or having to negotiate. It's very, very easy.

So, I would prefer to work for an existing company over a new company.

Malcolm also agreed that freelancers did not think in terms of short-term or long-term relationships. However, he found it important to demonstrate his employability, and to strive for a harmonious working relationship because they could lead to opportunities that went beyond geographical boundaries.

When I work with a client, I don’t think about long-term or short-term. I think about employability, and a harmonious working relationship. I need to demonstrate what I can do. That is very important; my employability. Instead of being loyal, we need to be very careful how to respect each employer. I'm very careful as well. I can't be tricking Proécho by doing something sneaky on the side because that's very unprofessional. In the short run, I might have some benefits, but I'd be really building that relationship on its edges. It could break at any moment. And it takes both sides to maintain a good relationship. Like in a marriage. Or not like a marriage, because as freelancers, we don’t belong to any organisation. But the thing is, when I have good relationships with my employers, that can lead to many, many opportunities. I have now developed clients in Malaysia, Singapore, Australia. And I did a jukebox gig in Birmingham for a referral.

Unlike other freelancers, Mildred shared that once she built a good relationship with a gig employer, it was her personality to stay with that employer for as long as possible. She also realised that always making herself available to a few employers made them think about her first and that led to guaranteed jobs.

I'm not a sort of person that jumps from job to job. I like the loyalty and commitment that is obviously part of my personality. I would prefer to stay with people I know and enjoy
working with rather than jumping all over the place and saying, "Yes, I'll put that on my CV." That's not the way I work. I'm sure there's plenty of people that would say that I am just being silly. If I were looking at it as a career advancement, then yes, it’s silly. But it's not a career advancement. That’s my choice. I'm not necessarily one that wants to climb the ladder. Whether that's stupid or not, I don't know. Besides, I find that when I am always available, in a sense loyal, to a few employers, that makes them think about you first. When they always think about me first, that means guaranteed jobs for me, in a way.

In summary, freelancers believed commitment to a gig was important to a good relationship with gig employers. Once a freelancer took on a gig, commitment should be applied to see it through until completion. However, freelancers did not look for longevity in relationships with gig employers, except for Mildred who enjoyed long-term relationships because that was part of her personality, and because that made gig employers always think about her first with new jobs. In a gig employment relationship, freelancers looked for efficiency or how easy the gig was, whether it would lead to further connections and employment opportunities, and whether the employing organisation was ambitious to innovate.

**Elements contributed to a long-term relationship.** Although freelancers did not expect gig-employment relationships to be long-term, as professionals, they treated each relationship with respect. Chris described every gig as a window of opportunity to inject positive input into a relationship. Consequently, when there were trust, respect, gratitude, care and mutual benefits in a gig-employment relationship, the relationship would naturally become long-term. Freelancers recounted, however, how some freelancers destroyed a relationship with trust-breaching arts, such as client-poaching.
Chris described a gig-employment relationship as an open relationship that needed to be treated with respect and generosity.

I would not call it a long-term relationship. I’d call it an open relationship. In these relationships, the finished product is most important. No employer would consider me for the next gig just because my name is Chris. From the start of a gig to the finish of the gig, that is my window to inject good things into the relationship. Things like respect. Things like not being calculative. Things even like sharing my connections to help. At the end of the day, if I deliver a good outcome, exceeding expectations even, I can guarantee that person will think of me first for the next gig.

Felix gave Proécho gigs a very high priority. He liked Team Proécho because there was trust and respect in the relationship.

Definitely! I have a very good relationship with Proécho. I don’t know how to quantify it, but I put Proécho gigs on a high priority. Yes, there were difficulties, especially when we first started to produce gigs. Venues were booked wrongly, and admin staff forgot things. But you have always respected me, I also respect you and very much like to work with you. So, I helped Proécho educate the admin staff. That is not my job, but I felt very early on that I belong to Team Proécho. And through the years, I find the Team Proécho relationship very unique. I think it’s the trust. The trust with Proécho management and the trust among freelancers. Without that trust, we cannot openly discuss issues and solve problems. And because of all those things, trust, respect, care, all those, we can continue to make things better. It is not just a one-off gig. I want to work in the next and the next Proécho gigs. If I do not recommend ways to make improvements, I am not helping myself. But if Proécho does not take my recommendation, it does not work either.
Apart from a respectful and trusting relationship, Felix found his relationship with Proécho was like a family. He was also grateful for Proécho giving him his first job. That gratitude contributed to his dedication to Proécho.

To freelancers, all employing companies are employers. But for me, Proécho is my first employer, and it is like a family to me. I am actually grateful for the relationship. Proécho has given me the opportunities to grow and to learn and to develop. My professional standing today has been built on the opportunities and gigs that Proécho offered me. I always seek fulfilment and for a smooth process of doing work that is meaningful. For me, it’s the camaraderie more than my personal fame. So, yes. When I meet a good employer, I treasure the relationship and those relationships usually last for a long time. It all seems very natural.

Malcolm was appreciative of Proécho’s caring behaviour as he described Proécho’s sincere interest in the well-being of the people working together. That caring characteristic had contributed to relationship satisfaction between Malcolm and Proécho, and Malcolm was happy to stay with Proécho as long as there were gigs.

I most appreciate the caring climate I experience in Proécho gigs. Maybe it’s because they are not purely commercial gigs. Clients who give Proécho jobs know that we are using students as performers, and many of them do this not just because it’s cheaper. They buy our mission to develop young artists. So, the whole setting to start with is different. I can feel that Proécho always considers the interests of the students and crew. Like this virus thing, you guys convinced the clients to cancel some of the shows when infection risk was high. And you still paid us and the students. That’s a caring
organisation. When I am a part of that team, I feel satisfied and appreciated, proud even.

So, yeah. I’m here to stay.

Mildred saw mutual benefits in her relationship with Proécho, including the social value and the opportunities for development. It was like a family to her, and she was happy to continue to work with Proécho.

Even if I looked at it objectively, I have gained. It’s a great relationship and that’s why I’m happy to work with Proécho for as long as we could work together. The team I get to work with, I enjoy working with the team. It's like a family. I don't have much of a social life, I'll be honest. It all revolves around my work and if I'm comfortable in that relationship, and then we can go for a drink or a coffee afterwards. My life is my work, my work is my life. Yes, that's the way it is for me. And freedom to develop my own profession. There's a few things that I have been given, the tools and the chance by Proécho to extend myself. In some situations where I probably would have just sat back and done things the way I've done them forever. There have been opportunities where I can take on some different learning experiences. Proécho has provided me with those opportunities. I perhaps didn't appreciate it at the time, but now further on, that was a good move.

Mona also planned to continue taking Proécho gigs because she had been enjoying the relationship.

You know I always stay with Proécho. Why? I guess we have a very good working relationship. Proécho trusts me, and I respect them, and we appreciate one another. The celebration dinner at the end of each gig is the happiest time. Why would I go anywhere?
Mona further opined that a good gig-employment relationship was not just about staying with one company. She recounted a freelancer trying to poach Proécho’s clients. To Mona, that was a breach of trust and unethical and was harmful to any relationship.

But to me, staying with Proécho and putting Proécho gigs first is one thing. But when you talk about loyalty, remember what Jeffrey [pseudonym] did? I think one aspect of loyalty is about staying or going. There is no ethical implication in there. As the Chinese say, “now that you have feathers and wings, you just fly away”. That may be ungrateful or not very nice, but not unethical. But what Jeffrey did, that he went behind your back and asked your client to give your gigs to his friend’s company, that was really bad. That is a total breach of trust. No wonder Proécho does not use him any more. I cannot get over that. But freelancers are known to do that, I am afraid; giving us a bad name.

In summary, participants had identified some important elements of a good gig-employment relationship. When there were trust, respect, gratitude, care and mutual benefits in a relationship, there would be camaraderie and a long-term relationship would naturally happen as long as there were gigs. Both Mildred and Felix used the word “family” to describe their relationship with Proécho. This further expounded the nature of a good gig-employment relationship: having trust, respect, gratitude, care and mutual benefits, like in a family. Mona added that if a freelancer leveraged the connections he had made via Proécho employment for his own benefits and at the expense of Proécho, that was a breach of trust and unethical, and the relationship would not last.

Roles and identity influencing each other. Freelancers talked about the different roles in their relationship with Proécho, including teaching Proécho courses and producing
performances on behalf of Proécho. They found that the roles that they played and their professional identity were closely related and they influenced each other.

Chris compared his role as a performing arts teacher to that of a show producer, and described how roles were related to, and had an influence on, his identity. He talked from an external perceptive: how others perceive him. He explained that in term of role activities, there was not much difference between teaching and producing shows. However, the identity that each of those roles carried was very different, and other people ascribed higher status to the role of an artistic director. His satisfaction derived from show production also increased his relationship satisfaction with Proécho.

I like producing shows for Proécho a lot more than I like teaching. The difference is not very obvious, although emotionally, it’s very different. But in terms of the actual work, task-wise, it wasn't a huge change. For example, teaching at Proécho is providing a service to students. When producing a gig, I am serving clients. I'm still providing the same thing - service. You just switch the direction. The content is different, but I'm still providing the service. Technically it wasn't a very huge change from the task point of view. But identity-wise, there was a huge difference. As a tutor, your audience is your students. As a show producer, the client is my audience. From this point of view, it's very different. The task is not much different, but the responsibility is greater, because for the students, if you make a little bit of a mistake, we always can solve it internally. But with the client, I bear a greater responsibility. I may even affect Proécho’s business if the client was not happy with me. And the sense of the status as artistic director of a show is much higher. Apart from status, respect, autonomy and control come with the identity of artistic director. I am happier and more fulfilled being an artistic director in my
relationship with Proécho. These are emotional things. I guess I feel that way because that is how others see me too. When I am a tutor, people see me as just a tutor. But when I am directing a show, I am the “wow-artistic director”.

Hugo derived the same satisfaction in both teaching and show production roles in his relationship with Proécho. He explained that his identity represented who he was as a person and who he was as a person was manifested in how he played his roles. When he was among students or an audience, their reactions in turn influenced how he played his role. Hugo did not rank either role above the other.

Gig production seems more professional. We have to hone our craft to the best possible state. The audience is the client and the general public. They can be very critical, not the biased students who think I am the dance master. But if you think about it, teaching is also a profession. Although students may not be able to work with me on the most refined choreography, it is my professional requirement to develop them. In a gig, there is limited connection and exchange with the audience. But in a teaching studio, I can connect with students in a deeper level, and we can learn from one another. Yes, I learn from them too. The reaction I get from the audience, students or anyone else, that reaction can influence me on how I play my role. So, I play a role. They play a role. And we influence each other. My identity is not just what I do. It’s not just about being a dance tutor or being a show choreographer. That is a superficial way of understanding identity. To me, my identity carries a bit of my soul, who I am as a person, and that bit translates into my roles as a dance tutor or as a show choreographer.

Malcolm found satisfaction in his roles and identity within the relationship with Proécho. To him, roles, identity, how he conducted himself, and what was allowed in the gig setting: these
were all interrelated and these elements influenced each other. Malcolm made adjustments to fit into situations all the time, and he considered such adjustments positive and helpful in his own personal growth.

I teach, and I lead shows. I love doing all these with Proécho, and I don’t want to give up any one of those at this stage in my life. The roles that I play also reflect who I am, although I adjust my behaviours in different settings. Sometimes I want to do certain things but because of Proécho’s or clients’ rules and regulations, I cannot do them. For example, Danny in *Grease* should be smoking. But it’s not allowed. So, I need to make adjustments to my roles, and even my identity as serious director. Roles, identity, how I conduct myself, what is allowed in the gig setting. They are all related. It's been very interesting to see that journey for myself with Proécho, one that pushed me to improve all the time and to fit in all the time, in a positive and good way. It’s been a heck of a learning process. I am very happy with the journey.

Mildred talked about her different roles and how Proécho’s holding institution hindered her from playing her role effectively. That had made her want to distance herself from Proécho.

See! This is an area that I feel very conflicting. I teach for Proécho and I also lead or choreograph for Proécho shows. I love both. In my teaching role, parents of children courses looked up to me, and they refer to me as Proécho’s teacher. I said ‘conflicting’ because, as I have ranted earlier, in the big picture as part of the holding institution, Proécho is treated as an outsider. I have professional pride in what I do. But because of the bureaucracy within, I am made to look bad in front of clients, and I don’t like that. So, sometimes I try to distance myself from Proécho and emphasise that I am an independent freelancer. But I do that out of frustration rather than not happy being a part of Proécho.
In summary, freelancers found satisfaction in their relationship with Proécho as they took on the roles as teachers and show producers. They believed the roles they played influenced how they were perceived by others, thus forming their identity. They also believed that as they interacted with people around them, such interactions also influenced how they played their roles, and there was inter-related dynamics among roles, identity, how one conducted oneself, and what was allowed in the gig setting. Mildred had another perspective. She had experienced alienation from her relationship with Proécho when Proécho’s holding institution made her work more difficult.

**Operational changes created distance.** Freelancers were very aware of operational changes as Proécho’s business transitioned from start-up to sustainable growth, and how such changes influenced their relationship with Proécho. Most of them saw a distance being created, except Malcolm, who resorted to an effective adaptive mechanism.

Hugo commented on how he enjoyed the personalised operational environment during the start-up phase of Proécho’s gig production business, and how that had changed. He found communications a lot more personalised at the start-up stage, but his relationship with Proécho had become more “at arm’s length”, especially with more new full-time staff members working at Proécho.

The best time was the beginning. You call that the start-up period, right? At that time there was no Proécho admin staff. We worked directly with you. Everything was so tight and we had such understanding among us. You, me, Chris, Felix. Remember? The personal touch, and the personal follow up. Our communications were very personalised. We would go to Repulse Bay and jam creative ideas, remember? And we had such frequent contact. If I thought of something in the middle of the night, you know me, I am
a night owl, I could just whatsapp you guys and we might even start a communication log there. And you were sensitive to our concerns. You always gave us encouragement, praise, or cleared the air when there was misunderstanding. Yeah…. that was good. I liked those days and that working environment. Now? It’s just too corporate. Some of your admin staff would not pick up calls after 6pm. I’m not complaining; just saying. It’s a bit different now. It’s not dysfunctional. Don’t get me wrong. We still work things out among freelancers, but our relationship with Proécho is not the same. More arms-length now. To be honest, I don’t like the changes in recent years where there is a lot of procedures and reports. It’s too corporate. Yes, we now have better support and working with your staff is more organised. But I always believe in the “red pants” way [referring to the apprenticeship way]. An artist grows best by shadowing his master and interacting with other artists. That’s the work relationship I like most.

Chris also found that operational changes had created distance in his relationship with Proécho because more work was picked up by full-time administrative staff, and there was less time for him to interact with the general manager. Consequently, the close relationship with Proécho was affected.

Yes! Things have changed. It’s different. I need to spend more time on new reports and stuff, and I have to repeat myself many times to many of your new staff. But that’s okay. I don’t let anything bother me. Unless, one day, you yourself tell me something is wrong, or that you don’t want to work with me, I won’t let anything else affect me. But the problem is, you and I are seeing each other less or talking to each other less. A lot of good ideas we had in the past were generated over casual lunches or a drink after work.
It’s good that we have a strong foundation of trust, but still, nothing can replace the time spent with connecting with each other. And in that sense, we are not as close as before.

Mildred talked about the disruptions caused by frequent changes in full-time staff at Proécho. She opined that as the business grew, more people had to be hired and division of labour was finer. Such changes made her work more difficult.

I understand that as the business grows, we need more staff, and we need to switch people’s responsibilities around. But some of the new full-time staff don’t understand our relationship. I mean my relationship with Proécho. And they treat us as just a part-time staff, with a hint of bossiness. Like the other day I asked the new admin assistant to help, can’t even remember with what, and she just said, “oh, we don’t do that.” Of course, you do! I’m not new here. You are. In the past, we worked with Kenneth, or Danny [pseudonyms of ex-staff members]. They seemed to know everything and it was easy for me because I could just grab hold of Kenneth, tell him my needs, and things got done. Now, I talk to this person, and she says it’s not my area and I have to go to another person. I go to another person and she says “but this little part belongs to the previous person”. Oh, for Pete’s sake! The new girls also seem to have too much independent thinking but not a whole lot of knowledge, if you know what I mean. They tend to argue with me. Or not argue. Argue is a strong word. They try to negotiate a lot when I ask them to do something. Whether that is typical of their generation, I don’t know.

Mildred also found some of the new clients difficult to adapt to and work with, and wondered if changes were happening too fast.

I feel that some big clients nowadays are not very professional. I lose my patience now I’m older. It seems weird, you think I’d be calmer as I got older, but I think I now am a
recognised professional in the industry with a reputation, my identity if you would, and I have my bar line. I have a bar line and if people are not meeting that bar line, you know. I'm going the extra mile, if you can't go the extra mile with me, I don't like it. Respect is a two-way street, and if you don't respect that I know my craft, then why do you employ me in the first place? I'm not perfect. nobody's perfect. But you employed me to do this job, and I said I would do this job. The fact that you keep - not you, the client - keeps changing the goalposts, it's not my problem. And I won’t keep quiet and take whatever I am told. I know it’s difficult for Proécho to manage the clients. The client is always right, especially when they are new and you want their business. But this is my experience. Maybe things are moving a bit too fast, perhaps?

Felix felt frustration created by Proécho’s holding institution as he compared the earlier years with now. He had witnessed changes in the institution’s top management and each time when there was a change, Proécho’s operations were affected in one way or another. Felix found the institution caring less and less about the wellbeing of Proécho, and that made him a little less happy working with Proécho.

In terms of smooth sailing, I would say it has always been not easy. There are a lot of things, especially props and set items, that Proécho does not have. But it is becoming harder and harder to ask the holding institution for help. When Jack [pseudonym, ex-props manager at the holding institution] was there, I could often figure something out with him; as long as we paid for the transportation and guaranteed that all borrowed items would be returned in good condition. Not anymore. I know there have been changes in senior staff members at the institution, but what is most detrimental is that the current top management does not appreciate what Proécho is doing. That “I won’t help you”
mentality is clearly seen triggered down to deans and department heads. I have witnessed a few changes in the institution’s top management, and every time, because of what top management likes or dislikes, we have to change our operation to suit. That is frustrating. But we can always figure something out. There is rarely anything unsolvable by the SM [stage manager.] But I have to admit it is frustrating that the institution is caring less and less and making our work harder; perhaps unnecessarily. All these complications make me a little less happy working with Proécho.

Malcolm also acknowledged operational changes but he was determined to maintain the relationship with Proécho through adaptation and creative problem-solving.

When I first worked with Proécho, I was frustrated for whatever reason. About the support, for example. With time, I understand that they have difficulties as well, and then I position myself to understand the difficulties and communicate more with internal staff, and then I also open doors for myself to renegotiate certain things. That's a skill set I've really learned by my continued relationship with Proécho. In the early days, I communicated directly with the general manager. Now, I talk to her staff more. Staff always first think about what is easiest for themselves. But the way I see it is, it is even more important to communicate or negotiate rather than just taking what they say. If I was getting nowhere, I would go to the general manager with my suggestions. It is a matter of adapting to the changes. If I am determined to nurture this relationship, I work even harder to adapt and find ways to make things work.

In summary, freelancers found that operational changes had created a distance in the relationship with Proécho. In general, since the business was growing, more full-time staff members had to be engaged, and division of labour and responsibilities had become finer. As a
result, freelancers might have to liaise with a few full-time staff members at Proécho to get something done. Freelancers also had less time to interact with the general manager, affecting the close relationship with Proécho. The overall relationship between freelancers and Proécho had become less personal and more at arm’s length. Freelancers also found Proécho’s holding institution unhelpful and unsupportive, and that had indirectly affected their relationship with Proécho. Malcolm was the outlier in that he felt that it was his responsibility to adapt to changes and make behavioural adjustments to maintain a good relationship with Proécho.

**Business growth shifted identity saliency.** Business growth and the changes that came with it had shifted freelancers’ identity saliency, which also influenced their relationship satisfaction with Proécho.

Hugo remembered adopting the identity of a friend when Proécho first started its gig production business. As such, he was prepared to apply friendship to the relationship with Proécho and to make the endeavour a success.

When you first approached me with this new initiative, I was very excited and I was 100% in to make it work and to make it successful. If you had asked me then, I would have said my identity was “a friend” who was in it with you. A friend with a “very particular set of skills” [laughed, thinking about the line ‘a very particular set of skills’ from a movie]. And I was very willing to use my skills to help you; that’s it. I didn’t care about what the fees were. I just wanted it to be successful. I was excited for myself too because this is a whole new advancement opportunity in my career. But at that time, the “friend” thing spoke louder; for sure.

Hugo recalled how his relationship with Proécho was affected when business growth led to more procedural reports. He became unhappy. His self-identity as a professional artist, instead
of his relational identity with Proécho, became more salient. At one point, he did not care if a
Proécho gig needed him. He just turned it down.

Forget about procedures and systems. Those are management stuff. We are artists. I was
most unhappy two years ago when I felt your then programme manager, Ellen
[pseudonym], was picking on me with all those new procedures and reports. I did a good
show, didn’t I? Clients were happy, weren’t they? That’s my responsibility; my
professional responsibility and my professional identity. When Ellen kept chasing me for
reports, quite aggressively, she alienated me from that close relationship with Proécho. I
ignored her. That’s why I did not take your summer musical production that year. We’ve
known each other and worked together for 13 years! But at that point [referring to the
tightening of procedures], our friendship did not come to the forefront. I was offended.
Suddenly, I felt 100% a professional artist; not your friend, not part of the Proécho
family. I didn’t care if the summer musical needed me. I didn’t like it. I didn’t do it.

When Hugo compared his experience with Proécho at the start-up stage with the
sustainable stage of the gig production business, he brought his perception of the organisational
performance of Proécho into the context. He perceived that Proécho was growing and he was
expecting Proécho’s full-time staff members to do more than just administrative work. He was
less willing to play his role as a friend in the relationship or to contribute extra input.

At the beginning, everything was so exciting. The whole experience was new, and I was
very excited to see Proécho stepping out of the realms of a course provider. Things were
chaotic, but there was romance in chaos. The way that we faced a problem and worried
together, and summoned our courage together, went out of our way to find solutions
together; those were very romantic times. Now, Proécho’s business is growing. More
infrastructure is in place. Everything is more corporately sound. But things are also becoming, eh, stale. Especially on the creative front. Since we have a bunch of repeat clients, and Proécho is using more or less the same creative people, we are not giving clients new things or exciting them with new ideas. Client management is Proécho’s business and I would expect the Proécho full-time managers to do more research online to expand Proécho’s and the clients’ horizons. They should also work harder to source freelancers. Those things are not my job. I can’t do extra forever on a friendly basis. I am engaged by Proécho as the Choreographer for a specific gig; that’s it. When you didn’t have the resources or manpower, I was willing to do more. Now, they should do their parts.

Mildred also felt that the increase in Proécho’s gig business had led to changes that affected her relationship satisfaction with Proécho. When newer full-time staff members did not recognise her or were not as helpful as she had expected, she became less willing to give more to the relationship.

These days, I can’t recognise all your girls. There are new replacements, and there are new hires. Tasks are very divided. Different people are responsible for different things. Little things like when your new staff does not even know me, or when they are not as helpful as I expected, I was offended and I felt I had to go “Do you know who I am? Even your boss treats me with respect.” Of course, I didn’t say that, but I became very defensive. They hurt my self-esteem, my identity if you will, and for a second, I did think, “Am I really just an insignificant part-time person whose ego is inflated?” In any employment relationship, I always want to give more. But when I am not treated with that respect, then I would think, “Why should I give more?”
Malcolm found that his relationship with Proécho was like iron sharpening iron. He always took an open attitude to new changes and new clients. As Proécho’s gig production business was growing, he was also challenged to improve himself. He saw that as a positive thing, and he had become a stronger independent professional artist.

Every time I work with a Proécho client, especially for the first time for me, I have to be a big open book. My identity is only as good as what I can bring to the table. Unlike teaching, a gig is always a collaboration, and I have to wear my hat of a professional artist. Even old clients have the right to change. And being open is very important. I need to be listening and see how I can work my expertise to help make things really awesome. So, I would say, changes can be helpful for an artist’s personal growth. With Proécho’s newer clients, I do feel challenged, and it’s a good thing. I have learned to be an important representative of whomever is employing me, whether it’s Proécho or another organisation. And I am growing stronger and stronger as an independent professional artist. I do not just take clients’ briefs. I also give my professional advice. So, yeah. My relationship with Proécho is like iron sharpening iron. I am definitely growing with Proécho.

Chris shared that when Proécho started the gig production business, it was chaotic and he felt lost. Even so, he learned to adjust, and assumed the identity of a “trump card” of gigs.

Everybody was very excited at the beginning [referring to the start-up stage]. But to be honest, it was very chaotic. Proécho has a lot of team members. Other team members from freelance projects, or full-time people. Sometimes I saw everybody wanting to take ownership and obligations. At other times, especially when freelancers were too busy doing several projects at the same time, then there were things that nobody cared about.
There were some moments I felt lost. It’s not as clear cut as “these are the job descriptions of the artistic director”. But I was building my professional name, a track history, so I needed to feel it and adapt. Sometimes I needed to step back and other times I needed to step in. That was at the beginning. I assumed the identity of a show trump card. Put me anywhere and I would make it work.

As business was growing and things were changing in Proécho, Chris decided to be less attached to Proécho, and to make changes to further enhance his own identity by diversifying and expanding his scope as a professional freelancer.

Now, things are quite different in Proécho. People are different. Ways of doing things are different. It just hit me that I need to diversify. There was no one thing that made me think that. It’s changes, changes, changes, and suddenly I lightbulb and thought, yeah, I need to diversify. If there was no change in Proécho, I might fall into a daze or a comfort zone, and didn’t realise I need to change too. For some years, around 2013 to 2017, I was very attached to Proécho. I was very, very happy. But then, my portfolio was already built up and I felt I need to stop being too attached with Proécho because it’s very dangerous. It’s not good for Proécho and not good for a freelancer because if I was too attached with the Proécho all the time, that means I wouldn't be able to have time to contribute myself for some other more interesting projects and promote my own growth. That means Proécho won't be able to see my value. I will have less bargaining power. If I expand my scope as a professional freelancer, I can actually bring more value to Proécho as well. It's a win-win situation. I need to glam up my identity.

Felix told an interesting story of identity dissonance when he first started working on Proécho gigs; a dissonance between the inside group of Proécho and his peers in the freelance
outer circle. In the wider freelance world, some people saw institutional practice as not practical and unnecessary. There was a psychological segregation between graduates of the institution and non-graduates. However, as Proécho’s business grew and made improvements in operation systems, Felix fully believed the institution’s practice was superior and his identify dissonance was resolved.

When I first started, Proécho was my first employer. I had an identity crisis. Was I a part of the inner circle of Proécho and the institution, or was I a part of the freelance world? My peers, in my freelance world, some of them teased me and said, “Oh, you’re going back to the institution. Go find a real gig!” So, on one hand, I was happy to work with Proécho, but on the other hand, I didn’t like how people stereotyped me as if I couldn’t survive without the institution. Then in recent years, Proécho has added more procedures; forms and reports and production sketches, and meeting minutes and everything else. I know some freelancers rejected it. But I am happy about the changes. I was properly trained by the institution. There should be forms, and reports, and evaluations, and all that. And I was thinking, those people who teased me before, who were kind of saying that we who graduated from the institution and work for the institution are escaping in our little world, they are the narrow-minded ones. I am happy, and I am proud, that I was a graduate of the institution and I am proud that I am still working with Proécho, and that Proécho has become a very systematic, proper organisation, with best production practice.

In summary, as the gig production business of Proécho grew, there were new clients, changes in full-time staff members, and changes in work operational systems. Freelancers found that identity saliency changed with these changes in the environment, which also had an impact
on freelancers’ relationship satisfaction with Proécho. Hugo and Chris were identifying themselves more as independent professionals and less as members of the Proécho family. Mildred was also less willing to give more into the relationship because of the distance she felt with business growth. For Malcolm, the saliency of his identity as an independent professional had also increased but he was not feeling the distance with Proécho. Rather, he felt that he was growing together with Proécho. Felix found the changes in Proécho’s business growth helped him resolve his identity dissonance. Furthermore, freelancers’ identity saliency had changed as they perceived changes in Proécho’s organisational performance. This was best illustrated by the changes experienced by Hugo. He perceived the advancement in Proécho’s organisational performance and, unlike a friend, he was less willing to contribute beyond what he was engaged to do. He expected Proécho, which was a stronger organisation now with more resources, to do more instead of requiring freelancers to contribute more.

**Consistency and alignment of identity.** Freelancers talked about their own identity and the connections between their identity and that of Proécho’s. They perceived the importance and the benefit in aligning identities. However, such alignment was not always possible. Confusions in the identities between Proécho and the holding institution were experienced and that had an impact on the relationship satisfaction between freelancers and Proécho.

Hugo attributed Proécho’s success to engaging the same freelancers in most gigs. He believed that when the same people worked frequently together and served the same clients, in time, they created new knowledge, shared such knowledge with Proécho, and the identity of freelancers and Proécho became more aligned. Consequently, relationships between Proécho and freelancers were closer with a meeting of minds.
Using the same people in all your gigs is good and bad. The bad thing is these people think too much alike and they may fail to think outside the box and become complacent. However, the good thing about this is, we are becoming very close and committed. I am sure you don’t feel any difference working with us or working with your full-time team. The AA [one of Proécho’s long-term clients] is not just your client but our client too. We’ve come to know them intimately. We know what they like and what they don’t like. And I am sure the AA doesn’t see us as freelancers and you as Proécho. Through every AA project, we create new ways to serve this client the best we can. And as we share these new ideas and new knowledge with you, they become Proécho’s knowledge or SOPs [standard operating procedures]. I think that is very significant to our relationship and even to Proécho’s success. There is definitely value in that closeness and meeting of minds.

Malcolm also believed in the importance in aligning his identity with Proécho’s identity. He explained that he did this through open communications and adjustments.

When I first came into working for Proécho I had certain expectations and I would say that some things were not fair. Throughout the years of working and understanding some of the logistics and what Proécho goes through, I understand more the barriers that Proécho has with the holding institution as well as other laws and regulations that Proécho needs to fall under. Communication is very important. When we communicate, we have better understanding. Then we adjust. Every organisation has its own culture and boundaries. When I am working with Company A, I am a part of Company A. I am not going in to change their culture or how they do things. I just need to make the gig work. I
believe a true professional artist will not give the impression that “I am just a freelancer” to the client. In front of the client, I am Proécho.

Mildred talked about the confusion in corporate identity between Proécho and its holding institution and how that confusion was decreasing her relationship satisfaction with Proécho.

Both my own identity or reputation and that of the employing company are important to me. It’s important because such things are intangible assets, both for me, and for Proécho. However, sometimes it is not up to us. It is frustrating because people want the institution’s label because it's ranked first in Asia and all that stuff, all those rankings and statistics. When it comes to a function, it looks good to have the institution’s director there, but actually he has nothing to do with Proécho at all. That is confusing. I know it, I'm very clear about it all, but then for anybody else, I think it's very, very confusing.

Credit where credit's due, you know; but it’s not! I'm clutching at straws, but I think the institution has a responsibility to create a fair and equitable environment. Within Proécho, we're working so hard and then the credit goes to the other side. That I find frustrating and a difficult bridge to cross. On one hand, I am proud of what I do, of Proécho, but on the other hand, … I don’t know. If the institution understood the benefits they are reaping from Proécho and became more appreciative and helpful, I would be happier, I believe.

Mildred recalled how the holding institution was more generous with support in the past. She explained why the lack of support from the holding institution was causing complications in her self-identity and the identity of Proécho.

In the past, when Proécho first started its gig production business, the holding institution did not have all those summer programmes and extracurricular programmes. In those
days, they were more generous in providing support to Proécho; mainly in terms of rented space. At least when a dance studio was needed, it could be rented. Now, I get clients complaining to me about things they thought I could easily make a change, but the institution is not listening and helping. I think that's very, very difficult for employees, and I'm talking about admin employees and other artistic employees. The holding institution wants Proécho to branch out. Do more. Make more profits. Now Proécho is doing it, and the institution is giving less and less support to Proécho. The fact that the institution itself uses the profits that Proécho generates to improve things for their students, to go on tour or whatever it may be, I feel angry. I have professional pride in what I do; that’s my self-identity. But because of the bureaucracy within, I am made to look bad in front of clients. It’s just adding a lot of complications into my professional identity, the identity of Proécho and that of the institution. Ideally, Proécho should be able to be genuinely proud of the institution and that we should be able to feel happy and proud being a part of Proécho and a part of the institution.

In summary, freelancers cared about their self-identity and the identity of Proécho or the organisations that employed them. They perceived identity as an intangible asset. They also saw the benefits of alignment of their self-identity with Proécho’s identity. Freelancers found the consistency in gig-employment relationships helped to align stakeholders’ thinking and new knowledge could be created as Proécho developed from infancy to sustainability. However, Proécho’s holding institution caused identity confusions at times. Communications, understanding and adjustment could facilitate better alignment of identities.

**Conclusion of Data Collected from Semi-structured Interviews**
This study used a case study research methodology to capture participants’ sensemaking as freelance performing arts production professionals within the bounded context of Proécho as an employing organisation from start-up to sustainability. It was a single-case study based on the general tenets of Merriam’s (1998) approach and provided “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon” (Merriam, 1998, p. xiii). The objective was to gain hermeneutic insight into the case. Data were collected from multiple sources, including reviewing relevant documents and information, and semi-structured interviews. Data analysis also followed Merriam’s (1998, 2002) approach. In an on-going process, data were read carefully to derive codes by first highlighting the exact words from documents and transcripts that appeared to capture key thoughts and concepts. After three rounds of coding that involved consolidating, reducing and interpreting what participants had said, codes were sorted into categories. Individual interview transcripts were re-examined and comparisons across all transcripts were made. At this stage, themes emerged.

Nine emergent themes were presented in a story-telling format. They were: (a) freelancers’ financial consideration in the gig-employment relationship, (b) autonomy and openness facilitating a positive relationship, (c) freelancers obtaining employment and gaining career advancement opportunities from gig employers, (d) efficiency, connections and the ambition to do something new mattering more than long-term relationships, (e) a long-term relationship being a natural outcome of having trust, respect, gratitude, care and mutual benefits, (f) roles and identity being closely related and influencing each other, (g) operational changes creating distance in the gig-employment relationship, (h) business growth shifting identity saliency, and (i) consistency and alignment of identity and the employing organisation.
The first theme, *Freelancers' financial consideration in the gig-employment relationship*, pointed out that money was not the sole or main consideration for these professional freelancers. Apart from money, freelancers looked for other things in a gig-employment relationship, such as trust, respect of their professional input, meaningfulness of a gig, reputation and the sense of mission of the gig employer, the assembly of the freelance team, and whether the working environment was a happy place. Fees being offered in a gig had certain degree of influence on whether a freelancer would take a gig employment offer or not; but fees offered were, perhaps contrary to common belief, often not the main consideration.

The other eight themes further illustrated and summed up what were important to professional freelancers in their relationship with Proécho as a gig employer. Ingredients in a gig-employment relationship that were important to professional freelancers included autonomy, openness with gig employers, potential to expand freelancers’ network, and career advancement opportunities in terms of playing new career roles. Professional autonomy was highlighted as the most important element in a gig-employment relationship.

The themes *Efficiency, connections and ambition to innovate mattering more than long-term relationships* and *A long-term relationship being a natural outcome of having trust, respect, gratitude, care and mutual benefits* further pointed out that professional freelancers did not seek a long-term gig-employment relationship. As Proécho’s gig production business transitioned to sustainable growth, a long-term gig-employment relationship became a natural outcome, attributed to essential elements such as trust, respect, gratitude, care and mutual benefits. When professional freelancers chose gigs, they looked for efficiency or ease of the gig, future connections, and whether the employing organisation had the ambition to do something new. Mildred was the outlier in that she was happy staying with a familiar gig employer because that
was part of her personality, and because that made gig employers always think about her first for new jobs. This might also be due to the fact that Mildred was less financially secure than the other professional freelancers.

While they were in employment with Proécho, freelancers played their roles and found satisfaction in their employment relationship. As they played their roles and interacted with other people, they tried to fit into the different situations, and their identity was formed. Freelancers found that roles and identity were closely related and they influenced each other. It was brought up that Proécho’s holding institution treated Proécho personnel as outsiders and that confused freelancers’ perceived identity and affected their relationship satisfaction.

The themes also illustrated changes as Proécho’s gig production business transitioned from start-up to sustainable growth. Operational changes were challenging to professional freelancers and had created distance in the gig-employment relationship. Proécho’s business growth had also shifted identity saliency in professional freelancers, which also influenced their relationship satisfaction with Proécho. Some professional freelancers were identifying themselves more as independent professionals and less as members of the Proécho family. Consequently, they were less willing to contribute beyond what they were engaged to do. However, consistency and alignment of freelancers’ identity with Proécho’s could enhance cohesiveness and knowledge generation and in turn strengthen the gig-employment relationship.

Data from Observations

The sensemaking of professional freelancers of the relationship between themselves and Proécho as the employing organisation rests very much on the personal interactions freelancers have with each other and with Proécho’s full-time staff. The final phase of data collection was to observe such interactions. The main purpose of observations was to collect relevant data from
another source to increase the validity of the study through triangulation. Observation took place at two consecutive production meetings of one of Proécho’s summer performance productions, which had been postponed to October 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These production meetings were attended by two Proécho full-time staff members, project manager Elisa (a pseudonym), who had been with Proécho for one and a half months, and assistant Susan (a pseudonym), who had been working at Proécho for one year; and a team of professional freelancers involved in the production that included five of the interview participants: artistic director Chris, choreographer Hugo, music director Malcolm, stage manager Felix, and costume designer Mona.

The researcher was the observer at these two production meetings, and she did not take part as a member of the production team. Notes of phenomena observed during the production meetings were taken as a record of direct observations. Descriptive notes were also made to record body language, gestures and nuance observed at these meetings.

**Description of the Meetings**

The production meetings were hosted online via the virtual platform, Zoom. The first production meeting started with everybody logging in on time except the costume designer, Mona, who was 5 minutes late. While waiting for Mona, freelancers chatted about what they had been doing recently as most show productions were cancelled. Malcolm mentioned that one of high schools that he knew was looking for a Choreographer for their annual musical production and asked if Hugo was interested. Hugo seemed to be very enthusiastic, said, “Oh! Yes!” and thanked Malcolm for the referral. Proécho full-time staff members were not involved in the chit-chat.
As an established culture, Proécho production meetings are non-hierarchical. Members can talk freely. The artistic director usually takes the lead to cover all items that the production team needs to attend to. At the start of the first production meeting, Elisa, being the project manager and new to Proécho’s full-time team, tried to assumed leadership. This was clearly unwelcome to the rest of the team of freelancers. Very soon, Elisa recognised the supportive role expected of her and did not rush to comment.

When dealing with ambiguity and incomplete information, freelancers quickly looked to Proécho full-time members Elisa and Susan. For example, when the team discussed rehearsal schedules, freelancers expected Elisa and Susan to have sorted it out, but Proécho full-time staff members thought freelancers would sort that out among themselves. There appeared to be a gap between what Proécho full-time staff thought they should do and what freelancers expected them to do.

The artistic director, Chris, and the choreographer, Hugo, were most active in coming up with creative ideas. The rest of the freelance team also actively participated in the creative idea generation process. All comments were amiably acknowledged by all team members. There was no conflict during the idea generation process.

Conflicts arose during the discussion over the results of performer auditions. While Hugo wanted to select performers who were better dancers, Chris wanted to pick those who were better singers. Malcolm weighed in with his opinion and invited everybody to talk more about how they felt. Audition candidates were reviewed again and the conflict was resolved without any hard feeling.

During the first production meeting, it was the stage manager, Felix, who was best at time management and kept reminding everyone what needed to be done. Nobody was taking minutes.
Individuals seemed to be writing down what they thought as their own actionable items. The next meeting was scheduled for a week later.

At the second production meeting, Chris was obviously annoyed by the lack of action on the part of Proécho full-time staff members. Since the last meeting, Proécho full-time staff members were expected to have informed selected performers and confirmed rehearsal venues. This had not happened. The full-time assistant, Susan, showed her unhappiness about Chris pointing out her lack of action. At the same meeting, the costume designer, Mona, also had not come up with design sketches. She explained that she had another project going on, so she ran out of time to do the sketches. The freelance team then went online together to source suitable costume ideas.

Elisa informed the team that the client had asked to change the performance schedule from six 30-minute shows a day to seven 20-minute shows a day. Chris and Felix rejected the idea, stating the change would over-stretch performers’ physical endurance, even though each show would be shorter. The discussion went on for over 20 minutes, with Elisa emphasising the client’s right to make such decisions, and Chris and Felix disagreeing on behalf of performers. Elisa finally backed down and agreed to further negotiate with the client.

Analysis of the Meetings

In summary, freelancers and Proécho full-time staff members identified themselves closely with their own subgroup. While they were waiting for the meeting to start, chit-chats only happened among freelancers. The two full-time staff members involved were relatively new to Proécho and a close working relationship had not yet been built up. When full-time staff Elisa tried to facilitate the meeting and emerged as a leader, freelancers diverted away from the subject she suggested they talk about. It was apparent that freelancers did not like the structure that Elisa
introduced. Expectations and mutual understanding between freelancers and Proécho full-time staff were also not well developed.

There was a lot of connection and like-mindedness among freelancers, and they tended to see things eye-to-eye. Before the meeting started, Malcolm gave Hugo a referral, which was very much appreciated, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when gigs were few. During the meeting, there was no problem with Chris taking the lead most of the time, and freelancers were very good at acknowledging each other’s ideas and comments even though they were not in full agreement. They were also very clear of their individual roles, with Chris, Hugo and Malcolm concentrating on creative matters and Felix managing time and schedules. When there was disagreement on performer selection, freelancers were very willing to evaluate pros and cons and resolved issues in a logical and matured manner.

The freelancers were very accepting when Mona failed to come up with design sketches for the second production meeting. However, when Proécho full-time staff members failed to do their parts, Chris was annoyed. However, besides displaying some emotional reactions, nobody pointed out that the main problem was a lack of structure with nobody taking minutes or wrapping the meeting up with everybody’s action items.

The major conflict happened at the second production meeting and it was between freelancers and Proécho full-time staff members on changing performance schedules. Both sides took a very different stance. Proécho full-time staff members were thinking from the client’s perspective while freelancers were thinking on behalf of the performers. After over 20 minutes’ arguing, both sides refused to adopt the other’s point of view and there was a lack of willingness to negotiate.

**Triangulation and Conclusion**
The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how professional performing arts production freelancers in the gig economy in Hong Kong made sense of their relationship with their employing organisation and how this changed as the employing organisation evolved from start-up to sustainability. Data were collected from multiple sources, including reviewing relevant documents and information, semi-structured interviews, and observation.

Nine themes emerged from data collection, and data were triangulated. Apart from confirming themes, triangulation also provided perspectives from different dimensions of the Proécho-freelancer relationship, and gave a richer and more complete picture of freelancers’ sensemaking (Adami & Kiger, 2005). Data relevant to each theme and collected from different sources are presented in the following tables, one table for each theme. After each table, a conclusion is drawn for each theme.

Table 5

Triangulation of the First Theme (Financial Considerations)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of data</th>
<th>Summary of data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Document review</td>
<td>Payroll reports showed that as Proécho’s gig production business consolidated and moved into a sustainable stage, payments to professional production freelancers had increased. However, rather than being more satisfied, emails recorded freelancers’ complaints about additional work involved in new procedures. Shortened rehearsal hours indicated freelancer complacency. Freelancers also turned down Proécho gigs at the very last minute.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Money was not the sole or main consideration for professional freelancers. Apart from money, freelancers looked, in a gig-employment relationship, for trust, respect of their professional input, meaningfulness of a gig, reputation and the sense of mission of the gig employer, the assembly of the freelance team, and whether the working environment was a happy place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation at production meetings</td>
<td>Freelancers would not automatically cooperate with Proécho’s full-time staff members just because they represented the employing company. Rather, freelancers’ respect and cooperation had to be earned.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Concluding from all three sources of data under the theme *Financial consideration*, money was important to freelancers for the sustenance of livelihood. However, when they were considering their relationships with gig-employers, money was not the sole or main consideration. Regardless of a freelancer’s personal financial situation, fees being offered in a gig had certain degree of influence on whether a freelancer would take the job or not; but fees offered were, perhaps contrary to common belief, often not the main consideration. This could be because participants in this study were well connected in the industry and there were enough gigs to go around, so much so that they had a good sense of financial security. One out of seven participants had some worries about finances, but she was also getting by being a freelancer.

### Table 6

*Triangulation of the Second Theme (Autonomy and Openness)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of data</th>
<th>Summary of data</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Document review</td>
<td>The lack of instructional documentation indicated that professional freelancers were skilled in their specific areas and they could work independently with relatively minimal administrative support. Email communications verified that after a few initial production meetings, freelancers basically work on their own. Client evaluation reports indicated good production outcomes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Freelancers emphasised the importance of autonomy and openness in a gig-employment relationship. The autonomy they experienced in Proécho’s gigs was referred to as “empowered autonomy” within which freelancers could fully exercise their creativity. They did not like to work with employers who were controlling or lacked trust.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation at production meetings</td>
<td>During the production meetings being observed, the freelancers knew their roles, and functioned very smoothly together. It was also apparent that the freelancers would not accept Proécho full-time staff members trying to lead the meetings.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Apart from trust, respect, meaningfulness, reputation of the gig employer, the assembly of the freelance team, and a happy environment, freelancers emphasised that autonomy at work,
and the openness of the gig-employer were highly important in a gig-employment relationship. They perceived working independently as “empowered autonomy”, within which they could exercise their creativity fully and in turn derive job satisfaction. Satisfactory outcomes of professional autonomy on the part of freelancers were evidenced in clients’ favourable evaluation reports. When freelancers felt that their autonomy was infringed upon, they would react with resistance.

Table 7

**Triangulation of the Third Theme (Employment and Career Advancement Opportunities)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of data</th>
<th>Summary of data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Document review</td>
<td>Email records showed that when the freelancers were first invited to take part in the gig production business, they were enthusiastic and anticipated that gig-production would give them more satisfaction than teaching short courses. They also admitted that as individual freelancers, it was difficult for them to find clients, and they very much appreciated opportunities created by Proécho.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>The opportunity Proécho created as an intermediary employer gave freelancers a different role from their teaching career that augmented their professional standing in the industry. Freelancers referred to gig production as “the pinnacle of a performing artist’s career”. Proécho gigs also opened doors for freelancers and expanded their connections.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation at production meetings</td>
<td>This was not further brought up at the production meetings being observed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rather than looking at a gig-employment as a one-off job, freelancers wanted gig employers to create advancement opportunities for them. For example, Proécho created a different role from freelancers’ teaching career that augmented their professional standing in the industry. Freelancers also expected every gig employment to lead to wider connections and networks for them.
Table 8

Triangulation of the Fourth Theme (Long-term Relationship Not the Main Focus)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of data</th>
<th>Summary of data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Document review</td>
<td>Emails recorded that the freelancers had complained about additional paperwork at the sustainable stage of Proêcho’s production business, and the document review also revealed that work process documents were not kept systematically. This showed that the freelancers looked for efficient gigs and were not prepared to comply even when paperwork was required by a gig-employer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Rather than seeking longevity in a gig-employment relationship, the freelancers looked for efficiency or ease of the gig, future connections, and whether the employing organisation had the ambition to do something new. However, the freelancers believed that once accepted, commitment to a gig to see it through to completion was important. Mildred was an outlier in that she enjoyed long-term relationships because that made gig employers always think about her first with new jobs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation at production meetings</td>
<td>At a production meeting being observed, a referral was passed on from Malcolm to Hugo, which was received with gratitude.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The freelancers believed commitment to a gig was important for a good relationship with gig employers. Once a freelancer took on a gig, commitment had to be applied to see it through until completion. However, freelancers did not look for longevity in relationships with gig employers. In a gig employment relationship, freelancers looked for efficiency or how easy the gig was. They perceived that excessive paperwork was inefficient and they would resist it. They would not willingly comply even when compliance might lead to a long-term relationship with a gig employer. Freelancers would also choose gigs that would bring further connections and employment opportunities, and where the employing organisation was ambitious to innovate, rather than just because of a pre-existing relationship with the gig employer. When Hugo gratefully accepted a referral from Malcolm at a production meeting, it confirmed that
freelancers very much valued the connections they could generate from gig-employment.

Mildred was the outlier who enjoyed long-term relationships because that was part of her personality, and because that made gig employers always think about her first with new jobs. This difference in attitude and behaviour in Mildred and other freelancers might be attributed to her lower sense of financial security as compared to other freelancers.

**Table 9**

*Triangulation of the Fifth Theme (Elements Contributing to a Long-term Relationship)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of data</th>
<th>Summary of data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Document review</td>
<td>Freelancers’ engagement contracts showed that about a dozen professional freelancers had been engaged in Proécho gigs since the start-up of the business and they had built a relatively long-term relationship with Proécho. GM reports recorded an incident of a freelancer poaching Proécho’s client, and that freelancer was blacklisted for rehire.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Although freelancers did not expect gig-employment relationships to be long-term, when there were trust, respect, gratitude, care and mutual benefits in a gig-employment relationship, the relationship would naturally become long-term. Freelancers also recounted that trust-breaching acts, such as client-poaching, would destroy a relationship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation at production meetings</td>
<td>At the production meetings, freelancers worked very well together and were supportive of one another. Such well-established relationships were contrasted by the presence of Proécho’s full-time staff members, who had a relatively short history working at Proécho. Freelancers were less willing to cooperate with Proécho full-time staff members.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Four out of seven participants had been working in Proécho’s gig production business since the start-up. Two others had also been engaged for four to five years. Those were considerable periods of time. On the whole, the freelancers did not think long-term in any gig-employment relationships. However, when there were elements in a gig-employment relationship worth cherishing, the relationship would naturally last long. Elements that contributed to a long-
lasting gig-employment relationship included trust, respect, gratitude, care and mutual benefits in a gig-employment relationship, resulting in the relationship naturally becoming long-term. On the other hand, trust-breaching acts, such as client-poaching, would destroy a relationship.

**Table 10**

*Triangulation of the Sixth Theme (Roles and Identity Influencing Each Other)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of data</th>
<th>Summary of data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Document review</td>
<td>Email exchanges recorded the excitement of freelancers when they were first invited to play the roles of show producers on top of their roles as teachers. Small mishaps, such as making claims for personal expenses, were found by Proécho’s internal audit. There was also evidence that suggested some freelancers had become complacent as Proécho’s business transitioned to sustainability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>The freelancers found satisfaction in their relationship with Proécho as they took on the roles of teachers and show producers. Their interactions with others in their roles influenced how they fitted in and how others perceived their identity. The freelancers found inter-related dynamics among roles, identity, how one conducted oneself, and what was allowed in the gig setting. Mildred had experienced alienation from her relationship with Proécho when Proécho’s holding institution made her work more difficult and caused confusion to her roles and identity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation at production meetings</td>
<td>Freelancers demonstrated a high awareness of their roles, responsibilities and identity and worked very well together.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When document review data, interview data, and observation results were put together, it was evidenced that the freelancers derived satisfaction in their employment with Proécho through their show production roles. As they interacted with others in their roles, they adjusted their behaviours to fit into situations and developed a reputation with a self-identity they were pleased with. There might have been small mishaps here and there, such as minimal claims of personal expenses being made by the freelancers, but they were aware of how they should play the roles which had a direct impact on their identity. At times, when the freelancers perceived
Proécho’s holding institution as an obstacle, confusing their roles and identity, they felt alienated in their relationship with Proécho. There were inter-related dynamics among roles, identity, how one conducted oneself, and what was allowed in the gig setting.

Table 11

*Triangulation of the Seventh Theme (Operational Changes Created Distance)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of data</th>
<th>Summary of data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Document review</td>
<td>Since incorporation of Proécho Limited in 2005, the board of governors registrations recorded 18 changes of individual members in the Proécho Board of Governors (PBG), who were also top management members of the holding institution. Furthermore, Proécho’s full-time staff record also showed that the full-time project manager turned over four times from 2017 to 2019. Meeting notes and email exchanges indicated that the general manager herself was highly involved at the start-up of the gig production business. Emails were promptly replied to with a lot of appreciative comments, and creative ideas flew voluntarily and constructively. The coordination process seemed to be very smooth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>As Proécho’s business transitioned from start-up to sustainable growth, the overall relationship became less personal and more at arm’s length. More full-time administrative staff members were hired and freelancers had less time to interact with the general manager, affecting the close relationship with Proécho. Changes in top management in Proécho’s holding institution also posed challenges to freelancers’ relationship satisfaction with Proécho. Some new clients required more time to adapt to.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation at</td>
<td>At the production meetings, freelancers were more easily annoyed and argumentative when they were dealing with Proécho full-time staff members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>production</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>meetings</td>
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</table>

As Proécho’s gig production business transitioned from start-up to sustainable growth, operational changes created distance in the gig-employment relationship. Top management in Proécho’s board of governors recorded 18 changes of individual members, as well as changes and new hires in full-time administrative staff members. The once close-knit relationship between Proécho’s general manager and the freelancers had become more at arm’s length. It was
very obvious that the freelancers worked well among themselves, but the relationship between Proécho and freelancers was challenged by constant changes.

Table 12

Triangulation of the Eighth Theme (Business Growth Shifted Identity Saliency)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of data</th>
<th>Summary of data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Document review</td>
<td>Documents recorded that as Proécho’s gig production business transitioned to sustainability, more equipment was acquired and more full-time staff members were hired to provide better support to freelancers. Procedures and policies were tightened. Freelancers complained about new procedures and policies. Proécho gigs were turned down by freelancers at the very last minute. Compared to the start-up stage, they were less willing to walk the extra mile.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Business growth and the changes that came with it, together with Proécho’s organisational performance as perceived by the freelancers; all these shifted their identity saliency. Some freelancers were not happy with the additional procedural reports and turned down Proécho gigs. Some freelancers identified themselves more as independent professionals and less as members of the Proécho family, and thus were less willing to contribute beyond what they were engaged to do. Others found that Proécho’s business growth had prompted them to expand their network and diversify their professional identities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation at production meetings</td>
<td>At production meetings, freelancers did not bother to take any minutes although they had been asked to do so. When Proécho full-time staff members failed to follow up on certain issues, freelancers were annoyed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Triangulation of data showed that Proécho’s business growth shifted the identity saliency of the freelancers. As they perceived the organisational performance of Proécho had improved, they were expecting more from Proécho full-time staff members. Some freelancers identified themselves more as independent professionals and less as members of the Proécho family, and thus were less willing to contribute beyond what they were engaged to do or to walk the extra
mile. Others found that Proécho’s business growth had prompted them to expand their network and diversify their professional identity.

Table 13

**Triangulation of the Ninth Theme (Consistency and Alignment of Identity)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of data</th>
<th>Summary of data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Document review</td>
<td>Relevant data from documents included Proécho as a non-profit organisation as recorded in incorporation documents, a consistency in engaging the same group of professional freelancers in gigs as recorded in engagement contracts, and freelancers that had been working very well together and brought about good production outcomes as stated in clients’ evaluation reports.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Freelancers cared about their self-identity and the identity of Proécho. Some freelancers felt a calling and only worked with non-profit organisations. Freelancers perceived that aligning personal and organisational identities was made possible by the consistency in engaging the same freelancers and the familiarity could lead to new ideas and knowledge. Proécho’s holding institution was seen to be causing identity confusion at times.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation at production meetings</td>
<td>At the production meetings, Proécho full-time staff members did not join in the freelancers’ chit-chat.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Throughout their journey working with Proécho, the freelancers cared about their self-identity and the identity of Proécho. They perceived identity as an intangible asset, and some freelancers only worked with non-profit organisations such as Proécho. The freelancers found the consistency in gig-employment relationships helped to align stakeholders’ thinking and new knowledge could be created as Proécho developed from infancy to sustainability. It was apparent that the freelancers fully understood their own identity and that of Proécho’s. It was Proécho’s full-time staff members, who were relatively new, who were the strangers in the relationship, and in that area, consistency was lacking.
Chapter 5. Research Findings, Implications and Recommendations

Freelancing has become a significant phenomenon in today’s human capital market, creating a dynamic gig economy (Kalleberg & Dunn, 2016). In the performing arts and creative industries, it is the norm to engage professionals with specific skills as freelancers on a project or gig basis (Mckinlay & Smith, 2009). However, little is known about how these project-based professional employees make sense of their relationship with employing organisations. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how professional performing arts production freelancers in the gig economy in Hong Kong made sense of their relationship with their employing organisation and how this changed as the employing organisation evolved from start-up to sustainability. This study aimed to answer the following research questions:

How do professional freelance project-team members make sense of their relationship with an employing performing arts enterprise as it transitions from start-up to a sustainable growth stage? Because identity construction is the root of sensemaking (Mills, 2003), this study explored, as a sub-question, to what extent does the identity construction of the professional freelance project team members shift over time?

Data were collected from three sources: document review, seven semi-structured interviews and two observations at production meetings. Data were cross-referenced among various sources and nine themes emerged, as reported in Chapter 4. Upon further analysis, the themes were reduced to five key findings, as presented in Table 14 below.

Key Findings

This chapter presents key findings and synthesises them with the literature and the theoretical framework to answer the research questions. Based on the findings, this chapter also
provides implications and recommendations for practice. The final section of this chapter states the limitations of this study and offers suggestions for further studies.

**Table 14**

*Concluding Key Findings*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes and subthemes</th>
<th>Concluding findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freelancers’ financial consideration in a gig-employment relationship</td>
<td>Intrinsic rewards are more important than pecuniary motivation in professional freelancers’ employment relationship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-themes: Financial security The importance of money in the gig-employment relationship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy and openness facilitated a positive relationship Employment and advancement opportunities from gig employers</td>
<td>High work autonomy, openness, and career development opportunities are essential foundations of relationship satisfaction for professional freelancers in a gig-employment relationship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-term relationships mattered less than efficiency, connections and ambition to innovate</td>
<td>Freelancing and loyalty are oxymoronic, but the work relationship between professional freelancers and the employing organisation could be long-term.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elements contributed to a long-term relationship Roles and identity influencing each other</td>
<td>Freelancers’ roles and identity have reciprocal effect and are also influenced by changes in the macro and micro environment, which in turn bears upon their relationship satisfaction with employing organisations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operational changes created distance Business growth shifted identity saliency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistency and alignment of identity</td>
<td>Consistency in freelance team composition and alignment of freelancer and organisational identity resonate with freelancers’ volition and emotional attachment to become a relational gel between freelancers and the employing organisation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Intrinsic Rewards Are More Important Than Pecuniary Motivation

The first finding is that pecuniary motivation was not a top priority in these professional freelancers’ employment relationship. The freelancers emphasised the importance of other intrinsic rewards such as trust, respect of freelancers’ professional input, meaningfulness of a gig, the reputation and sense of mission of the gig employer, the assembly of the freelance team, and whether the working environment was happy. The employment relationship between Proécho and professional production freelancers would not sustain the freelancers’ livelihood in a sufficient and secured manner. Proécho, who designs this human capital strategy, knows this. Freelancers, who choose this engagement relationship, know this. As Mildred said, “It’s very insecure but people go into this profession knowing it’s insecure”. To make ends meet, these professional freelancers stay active in the gig production market and earn a sustainable income through various employers. Most freelancers had some level of support from family members and were engaged in financial management tools, such as investments. These freelancers also taught to supplement their income. Proécho as an employing organisation provided dual income sources for the freelancers. During the unprecedented and extreme situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic where most gigs were cancelled, freelancers were thankful that Proécho turned some courses into an online mode to keep their fee income going. Therefore, within this bounded context, pecuniary motivation was not the freelancers’ top priority.

This, however, does not mean pecuniary motivation has no importance in this gig economy. Mildred, for example, is an outlier who worries about her financial income. Chris also claims that “Money plays a very, very high element when it comes to getting or agreeing with a job.” Money is important and pecuniary motivation is effective, but the other intrinsic motivators are even more important. Freelancers might take a gig for the money, but if these other intrinsic
motivators were lacking, freelancers would abandon such a gig employer in the first available instance.

**Relating to literature.** Many studies on freelancers and the gig economy focus on the precarious nature of freelancing and the importance of earning a sustainable income (Cohen, 2015; Gold & Mustafa, 2014; Kong, 2011; Salamon, 2016, 2020; Webster, 2016). Nevertheless, freelancers are not homogeneous and not all freelancers experience precariousness in freelance employment. Other studies highlight the fact that freelancers on project-based contracts are not invariably disadvantaged or less satisfied than full-time employees (Clinton et al., 2011; Wilkin, 2013). Freelancers who choose autonomy and control over their time have been found to be happier with their overall life as well as their work life (S. N. Davis, Shevchuk & Strebkov, 2014). Highly skilled freelancers enter this work mode out of volition and can usually draw high wages (Kalleberg & Dunn, 2016). Financial security is usually not a major issue (Cascio & Boudreau, 2015). They focus on other intrinsic rewards in a gig-employment relationship (Hoag & Grzeslo, 2019; Nemkova, Demirel, & Baines, 2019; Peters, Blomme, de Jager, & van der Heijden, 2020; Shevchuk & Strebkov, 2016). These highly skilled freelancers have the freedom to enjoy the simplicity of being free from organisational politics, bureaucracy and inequities, and they are largely happier than full-time salaried staff (Margaryan, 2016). This study found that professional production freelancing is not a precarious, inferior option of employment. Gig production specialists become freelancers out of volition. They enjoy important intrinsic rewards in their gig-employment relationship, such as trust, respect for their professional input, the meaningfulness of a gig, the reputation and sense of mission of the gig employer, the assembly of the freelance team, and a happy working environment.
Relating to framework. Sensemaking is about the reciprocity between action and interpretation. It is about presumption, is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (Weick, 1995), and is not necessarily about the impact of evaluation on choice (Weick et al., 2005). The finding that pecuniary motivation is not of top priority in professional freelancers’ employment relationships does not necessarily imply that pecuniary motivation is not important at all. As a matter of fact, Ambros had stopped taking Proécho gigs and was engaged in much higher paid gigs. Mildred did worry about her financial security, but even she admitted that “money is not everything”. More importantly, in the freelancers’ sensemaking process, was how they interpreted each gig experience, considered the social context, picked up favourable cues, and determined what was important to them. Whenever the freelancers experienced trust and respect, or when they interpreted a gig as meaningful and identified with the employer’s mission or when they experienced camaraderie among freelancers, they interpreted these as valuable factors in a gig-employment relationship. However, the freelancers drew the conclusion that intrinsic rewards were more important because there had been enough gigs, and it was just a difference of high pay or lower pay. Should the interview be conducted in late 2020 with the full-blown effect of the coronavirus COVID-19, these freelancers may give a different perspective. Therefore, the conclusion that intrinsic rewards were more important was plausible rather than accurate, and not necessarily a golden rule to be applied to freelancers taking gigs. Fees from a gig were materialistically important and even though Mildred has clashed with some clients, she would probably continue to take gigs from those clients. It is therefore less about the impact of evaluation on choice, but more about the intrinsic values that were treasured by these freelancers: trust, respect for freelancers’ professional input, meaningfulness of a gig, reputation and sense of
mission of the gig employer, the assembly of the freelance team, and whether the working environment was happy.

**Autonomy, Openness, and Career Development Opportunities Are Essential**

The second finding of the study is that out of everything that contributed to gig-employment relationship satisfaction, work autonomy, openness to freelancers’ suggestions, and career development opportunities were considered essential. When a gig employer was open to the freelancers’ ideas and allowed autonomy, such ideas became a live creation. Chris called it “empowered autonomy”. He said he “lives and breathes it”. Hugo used the word “need” to describe the importance of work autonomy to him. Freelancers tended to tie work autonomy with their volition to take up freelancing as a career; as if they were saying, “there are disadvantages in freelancing, but the work autonomy that comes with it outweighs the disadvantages”. Freelancers were also very appreciative of the employment and career advancement opportunities Proécho had created for them. With the gig production business, Proécho did not just provide a different role in their teaching career, but also elevated their status in the industry as gig-production specialists. Hugo called gig production “the pinnacle of a performing artist’s career”. In the gig-employment relationship, Proécho also spread the names of the freelancers to the wider industrial network. Chris admitted that Proécho was his “valued partner in developing his career” and that his working relationship with Proécho “has helped strengthen his network”. Felix said working in Proécho gigs “added to his repertoire of experience” and Mildred acknowledged that her “expertise in providing artistic direction has gained a foothold in the industry”. The freelancers in this study were people who did not jump onto the freelancing bandwagon because of a lack of alternatives. They became professional freelancers out of volition and knowing full well that they could expect work autonomy which was important to
their creative profession, and they knew how to play the game right in order to build bigger networks for more gig opportunities.

**Relating to literature.** Other studies on freelancers and the gig economy have also found that highly skilled freelancers, such as the professional production freelancers in this study, place a very high value on work autonomy (Bartol & Locke, 2000; Davis et al., 2014; Nawaz, Mansoor, & Ilmudeen, 2019). It is important for skilled freelancers to enjoy high work autonomy in meaningful and self-fulfilling work by choice and to live a self-determined lifestyle (Kazi et al., 2014). In particular, participants in this study fit Syrett’s (2015) description of IPros: independent self-employed professionals who have creative minds and often see their work as a calling. This sense of mission and self-expression forms a big part of their identity and contributes to their happiness and contentment. Because what they do is a calling, creative freedom and freedom in how work gets done are very important to them. They need to be creative and to work with a high degree of autonomy, and that is why they choose to take up project-based employments.

Schneck (2013) uses the procedural utility theory to illustrate freelancers’ satisfaction derived from a higher level of autonomy and independence. According to the procedural utility theory, individuals do not derive satisfaction solely from outcomes, but also from the process of achieving outcomes. IPros who are not subjected to stringent hierarchical decision-making enjoy work processes with greater autonomy, creativity and independence. Cascio and Boudreau (2015) and Mathisen (2017) also find that volition, autonomy and the freelancer’s happiness are highly correlated. Furthermore, in the gig economy, capitalism is greatly decentralised, moving the focus of business management from hierarchies to network (Moisander et al., 2018). It is within the industrial network that professional freelancers see their relationship with gig
employers as “partnering” (Lepak & Snell, 1999, p. 31) where they have relatively high negotiation power. The freelance mode of work, precarious as it may be in some ways, allows freelancers to build their own capital network which can have surprising and beneficial permeability (Brems et al., 2017). As participant Chris said, “Networking is my most important strategy. It’s all about good contacts”, research studies confirm the importance of networking well for freelancer success (Garner, 2017; van den Born & van Witteloostuijn, 2012). In the latest research on the subject of a beneficial relationship between freelancers and their hiring organisation, Barlage, van den Born, & van Witteloostuijn (2019) contend that “antagonists reason that freelancers are only hired as one-trick ponies on a transactional basis, where knowledge is neither created nor shared” (p. 1). However, in their study, they look at the entire network of the freelance market and the flow of synergistic benefits in the system. They argue that freelancers are not only hired for their expertise, but gigs also provide further development and career advancement opportunities for freelancers. This sums up what participants in this study put emphasis on: the career development opportunities a gig employer could provide.

**Relating to framework.** Weick’s (1995) sensemaking framework depicts a process of trying to answer the question, “what’s the story?” by searching through ongoing experiences and drawing conclusions retrospectively. Weick (1995) argues that people can only make sense of an action they have taken after they have done it. Looking at these professional freelancers’ experiences, especially at the early stage of their freelancing career, a freelancer accepted a gig based on how much it was paying. The act of commitment had no specific meaning other than that the freelancer would get paid. In the process of gig production, however, the freelancers bracketed some parts of the circumstances and labelled them as empowered autonomy, or fulfilling, or a creation, or an opportunity, and drew the conclusion that high work autonomy,
openness and career advancement opportunity were fulfilling and satisfying, and were desirable factors in a gig-employment relationship. After a while, when such conclusions kept reinforcing themselves, the freelancers further concluded that these were not just desirable factors, but essential factors that were of very high importance. Now, as these freelancers are well established in the industry, Chris summarised his decision-making process succinctly:

For example, two companies offering me same amount of money. Now, when I'm making a decision of which one I'm taking, I consider if the new company is going to bring me more projects. If I sense that the new company is just a one-off thing, I'd rather go back to the old one because the existing one has been working with me for a long time. If the new company has more connections with potential to open to more doors, I would say no to the old company.

By the same token, according to the Weick’s (1995) property of *enactive of sensible environments*, sensemakers resort to cognitive dissonance reduction. In the gig production process, freelancers also bracketed unpleasant disruptions such as a controlling client, and resorted to action that reduced discrepancy, as Mildred explained how and why she clashed with clients.

**Freelancing, Loyalty, and Long-term Relationships**

The third finding of the study is that freelancing and loyalty are oxymoronic, but the work relationship between professional freelancers and an employing organisation could be long-term. Where there are perceived trust, respect, gratitude, care, and mutual benefits in a relationship, there would be camaraderie; thus, a long-term relationship would naturally happen as long as there are gigs. This finding has three facets: commitment, loyalty, and long-term relationship. Participants agreed that, as professionals, they had commitment to a gig. Once they
accepted it, they would see to its satisfactory completion. They were not loyal to any employing organisation in the sense that they would stay with an organisation if they received a less-than-comparable return. When there was a comparable level of return or benefits, however, the relationship could be long-term.

Chris said that “freelancing and loyalty are oxymorons.” The freelancers did not think of gig-employment relationships in terms of duration. The gig-employment relationship was described by participants as “quid pro quo”, “transactional” and “what’s in it for me?” Some freelancers might think very short term and engage in unprofessional acts such as client-poaching. That would end a relationship immediately. Rather than seeking longevity in a gig-employment relationship, Malcolm pointed out something more important: demonstrating “employability” at all times. Freelancers also looked for other things such as efficiency, the ease of a gig, future connections, and whether the employing organisation has the ambition to do something new.

In this study, Proécho was referred to as a “preferred organisation” in an “open relationship” in which both Proécho and freelancers actively injected positive elements to keep the relationship going. Felix and Mildred called Team Proécho “a family.” This study finds that when there are trust, respect, gratitude, care and mutual benefits in a relationship, there would be camaraderie and a long-term relationship would naturally happen as long as there are gigs.

Relating to literature. A broad trend of human resources management is to focus less on long-term employment and more on flexibility. As long ago as 2000, Auer and Cazes (2000) asserted that “long-term jobs with a single employer are a thing of the past: job stability has gone and is not going to return” (p. 379). Gephart (1996) prophetically posited that commitment and motivation in employment arrangements would be changed into “quasi-contractual commitments
to particular projects undertaken by transient work teams composing temporary organizational fiefdoms” (p. 38). In other words, concepts such as loyalty and long-term commitment need re-examination. In particular, freelancers in the gig economy do not belong to any organisation. They are their own bosses and they are loyal to themselves.

Highly skilled professional freelancers have been described in literature as “autonomous economic subjects” (Donzelot, 2008, p. 129), “IBOs” (Independent Business Owners) (Moisander et al., 2018, p. 375), and “self-disciplining subject” (McCabe, 2008 p. 371). Pongratz & Günter Voß (2003) coin the term “entreployee” to describe self-entrepreneurial freelancers. “Entreployee” is translated from the German word Arbeitskraftunternehmer (p. 240), referring to a new labour power of project-based workers who build their own portfolio and nurture the “Me Inc.” (p. 240) while being employed in different projects. Instead of building up the brand of any employing organisation, entreployees put in the same efforts for entrepreneurial development and commercialisation of personal and professional capacities, contributing to the “Me-Inc.” or a personal brand. They regard their own capacities as a commodity, sellable to any organisations requiring their expertise. Entreployees, therefore, self-commercialise their capacities by keeping up performance, expanding a social and commercial network, and marketing their capacities to potential employers. Once entreployees have developed a strong personal portfolio, they have stronger bargaining power and a high level of control (Pongratz & Günter Voß, 2003). These descriptions of professional freelancers tally with the findings in this study that freelancing and loyalty to the employing organisation is oxymoronic. As Chris said, the employing organisation is not giving freelancers any security on long-term employment, freelancers are not giving any guarantee of long-term service either. It is a quid-pro-quo relationship.
Research distinguishes the difference between job stability and job security. While job stability correlates with long-term employment, which is becoming more a notion of the past, job security correlates to the quality of employment and the employability of workers (Auer & Cazes, 2000). Malcolm mentioned, and other studies agree, that employment security of performing artists rest largely on employability, which includes transferrable skills and abilities, and characters and personalities that are valued by employing companies and the audience (de Vos et al., 2011). Performing artists are expected to be “protean” (Porter et al., 2016, p. 162). They are entrepreneurs who are “in a constant state of employability” (Auer & Cazes, 2000). It is even more the case as the vulnerability of freelancers has increased due to changes in the general macroeconomic environment such as the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Even though loyalty is not a consideration in the gig economy, the relationship between individual freelancers and employing organisations could still last a long time. Participants in this study had been working with Proécho gig productions for three to six years and had been freelance teachers for even longer periods of time. Rather than a narrow sense of loyalty, this study finds that where there were perceived trust, respect, gratitude, care and mutual benefits in a relationship, there would be camaraderie, and a long-term relationship, or job stability, would naturally happen as long as there are gigs. These are more important relational qualities than loyalty in gig-employment relationships. A long-term relationship is not just important for gig-employers to ensure continuous supply of services, but to freelancers as well. Norbäck and Styhre (2019) stress that successful freelancers manage to stay employable and build long-standing relationships with employing organisations to ensure long-term work engagement and a continuous income. When the macroeconomic environment is unfavourable, job security relies on employing organisations’ ability to create jobs and freelancers’ employability.
Relating to framework. The realisation that a long-term relationship with a gig employer is not based on loyalty matches with the sensemaking process that attempts to answer the question, “what’s the story here?” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 410). A sensemaker extracts certain cues and use them to form a wider meaning of what is happening. When a professional production freelancer meets the crew and cast on the first day of production, he does not know what to expect and he wants to find out “what’s the story here?” Stimulating information is acquired, analysed, interpreted against prior knowledge and a mental model, and acted upon in connection with the social environment to guide further actions. (Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). The sensemaking process is often unseen and unknown to others. Sensemaking is also charged with feeling and emotions. Retrospect and remembrance bring people’s mood back to an emotion evoked in an event in the past, and this affects the current sensemaking. (Weick, 1995). During the production process, stimulating information such as a trusting or caring act is noticed and freelancers became aware of it so that it might mean something to them. The process is unseen and unknown to others. If not because of the semi-structured interviews, such sensemaking would not have been vocalised. Freelancers bracketed cues for closer attention and interpretation. At that point in time, the bracketed cues did not yet have a name. Weick et al. (2005) explained that such realisation and bracketing is “an incipient state of sensemaking” (p. 411). For example, Felix was given a props budget to manage independently. His immediate response was “okay”. Nobody knew what was going through Felix’s mind. Some combination of pre-existing mental models and salient cues caused him to label this as “trust”, which has affective meaning with feelings and emotions evoked in an event in the past, perhaps an experience with his family, and he drew the conclusion that his relationship with Proécho was a trusting one, like a family. Another freelancer might assess the
production brief, bracket it as something he could take on without the intermediate employing company, enmesh this idea with his prior mental models and decide to poach the client. Therefore, a freelancer picks up cues from the experiential process, links them with pre-existing mental models, interpret these cues and draws a conclusion to direct further actions.

When a freelancer’s sensemaking calls him to value a trusting and caring relationship, such a conclusion is also mapped to wider meaning of what is happening in the environment, i.e. a gig economy without guaranteed employment from any single employer. That is why freelancers do not adopt the concept of loyalty. If the sensemaking process was dramatised, it might sound like this: A freelancer really appreciates the trust and camaraderie with a gig employer. He had such experiences before and they were always good for the working relationship. He would like to continue working with this employer. However, he cannot be passively loyal to the company because he is engaged as a freelancer in a gig and there is no future job guarantee. He needs to work for other employers to make up a sustainable income. But since this employer has all these things that make the freelancer feel good and emotionally satisfied, the freelancer is happy to continue to work for the company for a long time as long as they have gigs. As Weick et al. (2005) say, “once bracketing occurs, the world is simplified” (p. 411).

Roles, Identity, and Changes in the Environment

The fourth finding is that freelancers’ roles and identity have reciprocal effects and are also influenced by changes in the macro and micro environment, which in turn bears upon their relationship satisfaction with their employing organisation. Freelancers in this study confirmed that how they played their roles influenced how others saw them and how they saw themselves, and in turn also influenced how they played their roles. Within such reciprocal interactions,
freelancers also let their personal values and aspirations be manifested in their professional roles and identity. Hugo said, “My identity carries a bit of my soul… that translates into my roles.”

The freelancers’ identity saliency shifted as Proécho’s gig production business transitioned from start-up to sustainability. Operational changes created distance between freelancers and Proécho, making the relationship less personal and more at arm’s length. The freelancers’ initial relational identity as friends and members of the Proécho family was becoming less relevant and conspicuous. As the freelancers perceived progress in Proécho’s organisational performance, their professional identity as independent freelancers became more salient compared to the relational identity as a friend, and they were less willing to contribute outside their required scope. Proécho’s holding institution was also found to be increasingly unhelpful and unsupportive. Such changes in the broader environment had additional impacts on the freelancers’ identity, role-playing and relationship satisfaction with Proécho.

**Relating to literature.** Studies on freelancers’ roles and identity have focused on their entrepreneurialism and its function in the economy (Burke, 2011, 2012, 2015; Chauradia & Galande, 2015; Gans, Stern, & Wu, 2019; Syrett, 2015). This study, however, looked at how freelancers make sense of their relationship with employing organisations through investigation of the role freelancers played in the gig production process and the identity they derived from it. Moore (2019) finds that values guide attitudes and behaviour, and an individual’s value system is manifested in how one plays one’s role. Similarly, this study finds that freelancers’ personal values were exhibited in how they played their role.

Furthermore, identity saliency shifts with changes. Role identity theory indicates that role-playing and interaction within a social and work setting, such as a friend, or partner, or co-worker, give rise to a sense of self and meaning to individuals (Ma, Ganegoda, Chan, Jiang, &
Dong, 2020). This finding agrees with the literature that role and identity have a cyclical effect on each other. Identities motivate individuals to keep role-consistent behaviours and identities and roles could be relatively stable until there are changes (Farmer, Tierney, & Kung-McIntyre, 2003). When the component or process of the social environment changes, identity saliency also shifts. This study also finds that freelancers’ identity shifted as Proécho’s gig production business transitioned from start-up to sustainability with operational and relational changes.

In addition, Ma et al. (2020) find that top management could contribute to favourable social interactions and thus help develop and maintain positive worker identities when top management is willing to listen and appreciate the work of employees. Conversely, when top management is perceived to be unhelpful and unsupportive in a progressive manner, such changes in the wider environment, as found in this study, had negative effects on freelancers’ identity and bore upon their relationship satisfaction with employing organisation.

**Relating to framework.** Based on Weick’s (1995) sensemaking framework, in times of change, sensemaking is about labelling and organising the streaming of experiences in order to bring things to a “functional development” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 411). To enter into a functional development means putting labels on interrelated and interdependent circumstances to devise plausible ways to relate, manage and coordinate. In this study, freelancers played their role and derived an identity that defined their role. When things started to change, for example, when the freelancers felt that the relationship with Proécho was becoming more at arms’ length, they labelled and organised the streaming of experiences to bring things to a functional development with which they could relate, manage, and coordinate. In the process, the identity of a friend became inconspicuous. The identity of an independent freelancer became more salient. In a way, the freelancers were also acting as sense-givers as they began to relate differently to
Proécho, and in response, Proécho would start another sensemaking process (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Weick, 1995).

Weick’s (1995) sensemaking framework also highlights the social and systemic aspects of the process. The freelancers’ sensemaking was influenced by a host of social factors. Such social factors include their social interactions within one gig production process, and outside and across other gig production processes. When changes unfold gradually, they permeate to the wider system. For example, when production A started to require interim progress reports, freelancers in production A would talk to freelancers in production B. They shared their views and they talked about their identity as production professionals and discussed whether they should be asked to write reports. The freelancers also reviewed the wider system, concluded that Proécho was developing in organisational performance, and brought this factor into their sensemaking. As the freelancers talked among themselves, they made sense individually as well as collectively. Changes were assigned stronger or weaker significance by inter-related freelancers. How individual freelancers label changes has effects on other members in the system.

**Consistency and Identity Alignment Resonates with Freelancers’ Volition**

The fifth and final finding of this study is that consistency in freelance team composition and the alignment of freelancer and organisational identity resonate with freelancers’ volition and emotional attachment to become a relational gel between freelancers and the employing organisation. The freelancers believed part of the reason for Proécho’s success was that it consistently engaged the same freelancers in most gigs. Such consistency is conducive for the accumulation of experience, creation of new knowledge, and alignment of identities. The effectiveness of working with familiar people was clearly observed at production meetings.
The freelancers believed in aligning their identity with Proécho’s and made efforts to do so through open communication and adjustments. Being freelancers in the creative industry, volition was very important to them. When the freelancers’ identity was aligned with Proécho’s, their sense of volition was not violated. Alignment of identity contributed to freelancers’ happiness and emotional attachment, and the meeting of minds supported the closeness of the relationship. However, the bureaucracy and lack of support from Proécho’s holding institution was seen to cause confusion in identity.

**Relating to literature.** Alignment of freelancer and organisational identity is important to relationship satisfaction because it meshes the external (organisational identity) with the internal (freelancer’s self). Ibarra (2003) explains that one’s working identity is made up of elements of one’s self, such as what one does, the company one works with, and one’s desires and dreams. Rushbrook et al. (2014) stressed that freelancers do not learn or create new knowledge away from their operational environment and that the alignment of freelancer and organisational identity is significant to project-based work success.

Another reason why the alignment of freelancer and organisational identity is so important is because such alignment resonates with freelancers’ sense of volition. Participants had talked with pride that what they did as professionals was a calling. They chose their career path and they chose their gig employer. This supports what Salancik wrote: “Volition is essential to all commitment. It is the cement that binds the action to the person and that motivates him to accept the implications of his acts.” (1997b, p. 68). When freelancers have a strong sense of self that aligns with the employing organisation, there is a “professional-project fit” (Barlage et al., 2019, p. 10) and freelancers experience a stronger sense of partnership and solidarity. It is hard enough for freelancers to be constantly trying to secure gigs and adjusting to different work
environments. When freelancers find their place in a “social Darwinian world of fit” (Rushbrook et al., 2014, p. 417), they appreciate the employment relationship and they thrive.

When a production company assembles a team for a gig, it may not consider the consistency of using the same people to be important. However, consistency in freelance team composition does contribute to relationship satisfaction. Hugo clearly pointed out that the same team of freelancers was more conducive for new ideas and new knowledge generation.

Freelancers know each other well, work smoothly together and can serve clients better. Van den Born and van Witteloostuijn (2012) discuss the career framework of professional freelancers with three variables of knowing: “knowing why”, “knowing how” and “knowing whom” (p. 26). The “knowing why” refers to understanding one’s identity, including one’s motivation, one’s meaning, and one’s personality, and consistency in the work environment reduces or eliminates identity dissonance.

Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann (2006) discussed “work-identity integrity violation” (p. 235). When the freelancers experienced the unhelpfulness of Proécho’s holding institution, what they were experiencing was the “what I do” contradicting with the “who I am”, and that was a “work-identity integrity violation”, causing freelancers to feel confused and alienated. Self-identity and work-identity reinforce each other, and alignment is favourable to relationship satisfaction.

**Relating to framework.** According to Weick’s (1995) sensemaking framework, sensemaking operates in a social system and is regarded as a collective process (Cornelissen et al., 2014; Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). Thoughts, feelings and behaviour of one person are influenced by the presence of others. That presence could be “actual, imagined or implied” (Weick, 1995, p. 39). Freelancers in the creative industries consciously or unconsciously look for
a true identity that resides well with employing organisations. Organisational identity answers the question “who are we?”. Proécho has unique background, values and cultures that are congruent with the freelancers’ identity. Although experienced by individual freelancers at the personal level, the mix of multifaceted social interactions drove a collectively shared identity among freelancers which was also rooted in Proécho (Buckingham, 2008). The alignment of freelancer and organisational identity, therefore, gives a strong sense of collective solidarity.

When freelancers sensed the unhelpfulness of Proécho’s holding institution, “actual, imagined or implied” (Weick, 1995, p. 39), the sense of collective solidarity was fractured and the collective identity was disturbed. In times of confusion, the freelancers resorted back to their inherent volition to work in a trusting and respectful environment. When trust and respect were retained, the Proécho-freelancer relationship could still be maintained.

Consistency in the component of a freelance team helps relationship satisfaction. Sensemaking is about the focus on equivocality and coping with uncertainty and disconfirmation (Weick et al., 2005). In other words, sensemaking starts with the question, “same or different?” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 414). When differences are perceived, it means discrepancy. Sensemaking is activated, and the sensemaker tries to construct a plausible account of what is going on, and to normalise the discrepancy, reinstate the expected state of affairs, and facilitate continuity. This also explains why Hugo experienced comfort and ease with continuity, and confidence in familiarity and consistency.

It is also found that consistency facilitates process improvement and the generation of new knowledge. Hugo explained, as he and the consistent team of freelancers knew Proécho’s long-term clients intimately, they could come up with new ways to serve these clients better. One of Weick’s (1995) properties of sensemaking is enactive of sensible environments. It is about
action taken in a changing environment. When there are changes, actors kick start “adaptive 
sensemaking” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 412), simultaneously interpreting past knowledge and 
questioning such knowledge at the same time because as situations develop, what seemed correct 
in the past may become incorrect in the present (Weick et al., 2005). When expected continuity 
is shaken up, new players may come into the scene and instigate a new sensegiving process 
(Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). This takes time, energy and effort. When time, energy and effort are 
expended on making sense of the unfamiliar, they can not be used in knowledge generation or 
innovation.

**Conclusion**

An increasing number of people are working as freelancers in many parts of the world, 
and many of them are professionals. In the performing arts and creative industries, it is common 
to engage professionals with specific skills as freelancers on project or gig basis. However, little 
is known about how these project-based professional employees make sense of their relationship 
with employing organisations. To gain a better understanding of this trend and its impact on 
freelancers and employing organisations, it was necessary to zoom in at a micro level on 
individual freelancers and their perception of their relationship with the employing organisations. 
This appears to be the first study in Hong Kong that empirically analysed freelancers’ 
sensemaking to form a foundation for effective human resources management in the gig 
economy of the performing arts industry.

This study endeavoured to answer the research question: How do professional freelance 
project-team members make sense of their relationship with an employing performing arts 
enterprise as it transitions from start-up to a sustainable growth stage? Because identity 
construction is the root of sensemaking (Mills, 2003), this study explored, as a sub-question, to
what extent does the identity construction of professional freelance project team members shift over time? This concluding section offers some implications and recommendations for practice drawn from the study findings. It also notes some limitations of the study and makes recommendations for future research.

**Implications for Practice**

The overarching implication of this study is that professional freelancers should not be engaged haphazardly. By gaining a deeper understanding of freelancers’ affective considerations in their sensemaking process, employing organisations can better attract and retain professional freelancers. Findings in the study imply that the motivation mechanism of freelancers is quite different from full-time employees and that concepts such as loyalty and long-term commitment need re-examination in a gig economy. The close relationship between role and identity implies that freelancers draw relational conclusions from their experience in the work process. The alignment of freelancer and organisation identity leads to solidarity and it implies that there is much to be gained in such alignments.

**Freelancer values and intrinsic rewards.** As found in this study, identifying freelancers’ perceived values is the first step towards understanding the organisation-freelancer relationship. Professional freelancers have a distinct set of work values. They do not put financial security in the forefront, but actively seek latent values and intrinsic rewards. Freelancers in this study did not cite monetary rewards as their strongest motivator. They were looking for intrinsic rewards such as team camaraderie, work autonomy, and openness, fairness, and a caring attitude on the part of the employing organisation. They also looked for efficiency and effectiveness in the work process. Professional freelancers conceptualise monetary reward in the form of network and connections that lead to other employment opportunities. These freelancer values imply that
professional freelancers’ motivation mechanism is quite different from full-time employees and the relationship between employing organisations and freelancers should be managed quite differently.

**Loyalty versus long-term relationship.** The finding that professional freelancers highly value work autonomy, team camaraderie, solidarity and meaning at work can be understood with the importance they attach to their volition of career choice. They choose to be performing arts practitioners, knowing full well that practitioners in the industry are largely engaged on a freelance basis. Volition reflects freelancers’ preference for control. They are their own bosses and behave like “entreemployees” (Pongratz & Günter Voβ, 2003), building the “Me Inc” while being employed in different projects. Implication for practice is that concepts such as loyalty and long-term commitment need re-examination in a gig economy. This study finds that where there are perceived trust, respect, gratitude, care and mutual benefits in a relationship, there would be camaraderie and a long-term relationship, resembling affective organisational dedication, would naturally happen as long as there are gigs. Findings in this study, therefore, distinguish the concept of loyalty from long-term relationship.

**Roles and identity through employment experience.** The finding that roles and identity have reciprocal effects on each other signifies important meaning-creation opportunities in freelancers’ sensemaking process. Professional freelancers perceive their own identity as business owners and as such, they are keepers and developers of their careers. In such a capacity, they expect to assume work roles that are highly involved in the production process, and to contribute intelligent solutions to production problems, instead of simply implementing given tasks. They welcome roles that push them towards self-development, and they need to take up challenging projects that stretch their capabilities from time to time. This implies that freelancers
are attracted to projects with a certain degree of novelty, and that gig employers can work at attracting and retaining freelance talents for gig productions. Furthermore, roles and identity come to existence through experiences. This implies that freelancers draw relational conclusions from their experience in the work process. All decisions and actions of gig employers, everything that is said or not said, especially during times of change and transitions, have an impact on freelancers’ experience and subsequently influence freelancers’ role and identity.

**Identity alignment and solidarity.** This study also found that the freelancers’ identity shifted as Proécho’s gig production business transitioned from start-up to sustainability with operational and relational changes. This finding implies that the simple concept of hiring freelancers for ad hoc projects with maximum expertise and minimum cost commitment is void of relationship management. An organisation is a living social entity made up of various identity-bearing members, full-time or freelance. As an organisation communicates “Who are we?” through its identity, individual members also communicate “Who am I?” through individual identities. When the “Who are we?” of an organisation is aligned with the “Who am I?” of individual members, a collective solidarity results and contributes to relationship satisfaction. However, as an organisation transitions from start-up to sustainability, operational changes and changes in full-time staff members who may not be sensitive to freelancers’ identity, detract the satisfaction for freelancers, causing them to feel distanced and alienated. This implies that identity is not just a perception. It is also a function in the human resources management of freelancers.

**Recommendations for Practice**

The findings and implications of this study inform gig employers that professional freelancers are more than tools for an end. If they are not managed properly, not only might the
work relationship end but clients may be poached. On the other hand, if gig employers leverage traditional human resources management theories, and creatively foster job satisfaction, motivation and development, and affective organisational dedication, the engagement of professional freelancers does bring in capabilities the organisation lacks. When a solid relationship with freelancers is developed and maintained, it could become a core competence for the gig employer.

**Freelancer-gig-fit hiring.** For performing arts organisations that rely heavily on the services of professional freelancers, a well-managed relationship with freelancers is instrumental to success. Strategic management of professional freelancers starts with hiring. A good hire starts with selection and matching to ensure a freelancer-gig fit. It is recommended that gig employers select people who are adaptable and are prepared to integrate into the existing organisational system and culture. Furthermore, the freelancer–gig fit does determine the success of a gig. Gig employers should try to understand what freelancers are looking for at a given point in time. For example, for less complicated gigs that may not contribute much to a professional freelancer’s portfolio, it would be more suitable to hire a freelancer who does not mind the insignificance of the gig, rather than engaging a highly driven, career-focused freelancer.

**Develop intrinsic rewards according to freelancer values.** Findings and implications for practice indicate that the hiring and management of freelancers could be strategically done, considering not just freelancers’ skillsets but also their personal values and aspirations. Although knowledge, expertise and skills are the main bases for hiring freelancers, gig employers must consider a wider scope of freelancer values above and beyond what a freelancer can do. The management of freelancer relationships may require a mindset change. Employers of professional freelancers need to reconsider relying on traditional organisational and human
resources management theories that are largely based on the concept of long-term full-time employment. When dealing with a heterogeneous work team of freelancers, managers need to carefully consider the power of heterogeneous rewards, be they latent and intrinsic, and be sensitive to individual differences. Although providing higher monetary rewards is probably easier to manage, increasing freelancer income or any attempt to suggest job security are not the most important aspects of the management of freelancers in the performing arts industry. Gig employers should develop intrinsic rewards for freelancers as if they are developing a remuneration package for full-time employees. Astute gig employers prioritise and foster intangible intrinsic rewards such as trust, respect, gratitude, care and intangible future benefits. This does not mean that monetary rewards are unimportant. It is worth gig employers’ while to keep in touch with what competitors are paying to ensure fair and equitable fees are offered to freelancers. Freelancers also look for projects that have a certain degree of novelty so that their capabilities could be stretched. Gig employers should be innovative in their business strategies and keep the interests of freelancers in mind so that any new development would be beneficial to both the organisation and freelancers.

**Controlled autonomy through engagement.** While engaged in a gig, professional freelancers need to have a high level of work autonomy. Gig employers are required to negotiate a balance between freelancer autonomy and quality control. Engagement is the key. Professional freelancers should be highly involved and the production process has to be managed in a cooperative manner with a cocreation approach so professional freelancers feel they are significantly in charge. Gig employers need to have the right full-time personnel who have a good understanding of the employment relationship with freelancers to get involved, conduct dialogues and discussions, share understanding, and reach for consensus. Full-time managers of
the employing organisation need to respect the expertise of professional freelancers and allow a sense of ownership from the freelancers’ perspective to emerge.

**Manage role and identity through positive experiences.** Based on this study’s findings, gig employers should also consider the reciprocal effects of role and identity. When professional freelancers make sense of their relationships with gig employers, it is all about the experience. Respect for role identity, pleasant interactions, sufficient support, and mutual appreciation create positive images and emotions in freelancers’ sensemaking process and increase affective organisational dedication. Gig employers should therefore pay attention to freelancers’ work process. Get involved but refrain from being despotic. At the same time, based on the Proécho experience, a preferred gig employer should care, be open to negotiation, execute payment in a timely manner, and offer fair transactions such as cancellation compensation. When the overall experience with a gig employer is satisfying, freelancers take pride in their work role and feel gratified with their identity. Gig employers should also consider developing freelancers in the formulation of their business strategy in order to create roles for freelancers to extend their capabilities and grow with the organisation.

**Bond with identity alignment.** The alignment of freelancer and organisational identity could also strengthen the gig–employment relationship and lead to affective organisational dedication. Gig employers should take freelancer identity into consideration as they manage their organisational identity. When organisational identity is aligned with professional freelancers’ personal values and aspirations, a sense of solidarity emerges and the relational bond between freelancers and organisation is strengthened. This could be achieved through the articulation and communication of community, camaraderie and friendship to enhance a sense of belonging and unity. It also means that organisational identity management for gig employers should take the
freelance community into consideration and find common grounds, fostering social closeness and solidarity. Realistically, an organisation cannot develop its identity around freelancers’.

However, gig employers should be aware of the benefits of such alignments, and highlight compatibilities to create a general image for freelancers to adopt into their sensemaking process. Such a general image could become an unwritten clause in the psychological contract to attract self-determined freelancers and influence their desire to stay.

**Handle changes with care to during transition from start-up to sustainability.** In times of organisational changes, it is easy for gig employers to neglect the experience of professional freelancers. However, changes shift identity saliency, and this also applies to freelancers. As an organisation transitions from start-up to sustainability, careful handling is required to help all members, freelancers included, adjust. Any changes such as internal changes in full-time staff members, company policies, operational procedures and even top management affect peripheral relationships with freelancers as well. All such changes should be communicated to professional freelancers, treating them as valued partners. At the same time, changes in freelance team composition pose adaptation challenges. Gig employers should not upset team consistency lightly, and should plan carefully before changing team mix. Always ensure there are suitable full-time staff members with sensitivity and understanding to co-work with freelancers. All changes should be handled with care and ample communications.

**Building a long-term freelance relationship.** Finally, it is recommended that gig employers should not write off the possibility of a long-term relationship with individual freelancers even though they do not think in terms of loyalty. Gig employers should focus on maintaining relationship and consistency, not through fostering the traditional concept of loyalty, but through paying attention to freelancers’ work experience and meeting their intrinsic wants.
and needs. Always find opportunities to develop them, even though they are not committed employees in the traditional sense. The gig employment relationship is not purely quid pro quo and transactional after all. A freelancer-employer bond could be developed. Sustaining valuable freelancers in the organisation’s gig ecosystem has direct benefits in client satisfaction and the organisation’s competitive advantage.

**Limitations and Further Research**

This research has several limitations that might inspire opportunities for further research. First, this is a single-case study that followed Merriam’s (1998) approach to case studies. It sought to understand the world in which the participants lived and worked and focused on how participants made meaning in relation to the interaction between their experiences and their ideas (Merriam, 1998; Ponterotto, 2005). The study is limited by the nature of the site, a self-financed continuing education subsidiary of a higher education institution. A study of a different site—a government-funded theatre company in Hong Kong, for example—may yield different findings. There are also limitations in data. Documents for the past 20 years were reviewed and participants shared their experiences with Proécho within the past decade. Observations were only based on two snapshots of production meetings on one single project that happened within two weeks. The participants in this research consist of seven professional freelancers in the performing arts industry in Hong Kong, who were analysed through the lens of one employing organisation. The participants may not be representative of the diverse experiences of other professional freelancers working in Hong Kong. Participants are also restricted to employed freelancers, which limits the voice of the unemployed or performing artists who have exited the industry’s labour market. The findings, therefore, cannot simply be generalised to other samples
or industries. Different characteristics might emerge in a different creative industry or in a different geographic environment.

Second, this is a case study of a bounded time period. The performing arts industry in Hong Kong is developing and evolution is still taking place. The relationship between professional freelancers and gig employers are still changing. In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic is imposing a new normal on the performance industry. A case in point, before the COVID-19 pandemic, Proécho’s contracts with freelancers did not provide any compensation for cancellation because cancellation almost never happened. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, all Proécho contracts include a cancellation clause with compensation. Such a clause is still not commonly included by other production companies. More longitudinal studies would present a more comprehensive description of the performing arts freelance scene in Hong Kong.

Third, this is an inductive case study research. Other researchers might want to utilise the findings in this research to conduct hypothesis-testing research with a larger sample size and richer insights into the relationship between professional freelancers and gig employers might be gained.

Fourth, this study utilises Weick’s (1995) organisation sensemaking theory to delve into the psyche of professional freelancers. Other researchers might want to map professional freelancers’ thinking and behaviours with other theories, such as the reinforcement theory (Skinner, 1969), which indicates the vital importance of monetary motivation, or the equity theory (J. S. Adams, 1965), which discusses perceived equity or inequity on trust and subsequent relational behaviours. Apart from studying the cognitions and attitudes of freelancers, researchers might want to conduct in-depth studies based on process theory (Forbus, 1984) to analyse processes and outcomes and how changes in processes might lead to different attitudes.
A final limitation is the researcher-specific threat, in that the researcher is the general manager of the employing organisation of freelancers, which may have led to interpretation bias. The validity of data is, therefore, based on “enough details to show that the author’s conclusion ‘makes sense’” (Merriam, 1998, p. 199), rather than an external validity where conclusions could be transferred to other studies. There is much that other researchers could learn about the cognitions, attitudes, and satisfaction of freelancers and the sustainability of the significant role they play in the industry; these aspects are still largely unexamined. Social scientists are concerned with individual or collective behaviours and the need for more thorough understanding of freelancers’ behavioural effects in the gig-employment relationship is still calling for attention.

**Summary and Reflection**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how professional performing arts production freelancers in the gig economy in Hong Kong made sense of their relationship with their employing organisation and how this changed as the employing organisation evolved from start-up to sustainability. The study finds that because freelance gig-based employment is different from full-time employment, professional freelancers have different orientation when manoeuvring their relationships with employing organisations. Professional freelancers in the performing arts industry put much emphasis on the volition of their career choice. They know that there is no job guarantee in the gig economy and value networking opportunities that may lead to further gig employments. Instead of job security, they are motivated by intrinsic rewards and prioritise work autonomy and solidarity. Professional freelancers are also proud of their identity. When the identities of freelancers and the employing organisation are aligned, there is professional-gig-fit and freelancers experience a stronger sense of partnership and solidarity.
However, there are inter-related dynamics among roles, identities, mutual expectations, and what is allowed in the gig setting. These inter-related factors are affected by personal changes in professional freelancers’ lives and operational changes in gig employers’ organisations, shifting identity saliency. As this study highlights, when an employing organisation transitions from start-up to sustainability, organisational members, including freelancers’ identity saliency shift. Freelancers who were enthusiastic and assumed the identity of helpful friends at the start-up stage see their identity shifted to independent entrepreneurial individuals during the transition. What has been perceived as rewarding and satisfying at one point in time may change as freelancers’ personal and environmental situations change. Although this case study was bounded within one organisation and could not be generalised, the study has made contributions to the management of professional freelancers in the performing arts gig economy. As freelance engagement has already become a trend in many industries, it is calling for a focus shift on the parts of human resources management theories. This study has also suggested some potential future study opportunities.

On a personal note, the researcher has gained invaluable insight as a hirer of professional freelancers in the performing arts industry. The study has forced her to step out of her own shoes and into the shoes of professional freelancers. When a situation is looked at from the other side, it does look different. The research process also brought the researcher to re-examine assumptions such as loyalty and the motivational effects of high pay rates. Little things that have slipped the researcher’s attention due to everyday busyness, such as communicating more and with a personal touch or keeping freelancers in the loop of management changes, have now re-established their significance and importance.
Last, but not least, the writing of a thesis has improved the communication skills of the researcher. The key is to state the obvious. In the communication process, what is obvious in the coder’s mind may not be obvious in the decoder’s mind and, often, failing to state the obvious causes missing links in effective communication.
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Appendix A: Invitation to Participate

The Sensemaking of Professional Freelancers: A Qualitative Case Study Exploring the Sensemaking of Professional Freelancers in the Performing Arts Gig Economy as Perceived by a Performing Arts Enterprise in Hong Kong

<DATE>

Dear <NAME>,

As you probably know, I have been working as the general manager for the past 13 years at a performing arts organization that will be called by the pseudonym Proécho to protect our confidentiality. I am also a doctoral candidate at Northeastern University pursuing a Doctor in Education degree in Organizational Leadership Studies. In this doctoral programme, I am required to conduct research and write a thesis paper. The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore how professional performing arts production freelancers in the gig economy in Hong Kong made sense of their relationship with their employing organisation and how this changed as the employing organisation evolved from start-up to sustainability. Because identity construction is at the root of sensemaking, this study will also explore, as a sub-question, to what extent does the identity construction of the professional freelance project team members shift over time. You are invited to participate in my research as one of the interviewees. The following information is provided to you so that you can make an informed decision about your willingness to participate in this research.

The data for this project will be collected in three phases. The first phase will be document review. Documents such as emails, minutes of meetings, records of conversations, market research information, and project reports that are relevant to the new line of Proécho’s
gig production business will be reviewed and analysed. The second phase will be one-on-one interviews. As part of this process, I would like to highlight a few important points:

- There is no incentive offered for participation, apart from a nice coffee during the interview in appreciation of your taking part in the study.
- There are no known risks associated with participation.
- Responses will be kept confidential.
- Your participation is completely voluntary and you can decline participation at any time.
- If you are being interviewed, you will be given the transcripts to review.
- Your name will not be associated with any of the research or results.
- This study is entirely independent from the organisation, Proécho. Whatever you share in the interview will have no impact on the engagement relationship between you and this organisation. Nevertheless, findings will be shared with Proécho’s Board of Governors so that policies affecting freelancers could be changed if necessary. Your personal identity will never be revealed.

The last and final phase of the study will be observations of interactions among professional freelancers with each other and with Proécho full-time production managers during production meetings and the production process.

Please feel free to ask me any question before, during, or after the research process. I can be reached at 9772 1778; tassieavk@gmail.com.

Please indicate your consent by signing the below consent. You will be provided with a copy of your signed form for your record.

Thank you very much.

Alice
### Appendix B: Informed Consent

The Sensemaking of Professional Freelancers: A Qualitative Case Study Exploring the Sensemaking of Professional Freelancers in the Performing Arts Gig Economy as Perceived by a Performing Arts Enterprise in Hong Kong

Consent:

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<td>1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information on this research study on (date) ______________ for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.</td>
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<td>2. I understand that my participation in this research study is voluntary. If for any reason I wish to withdraw, I am free to do so without providing any reason.</td>
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<td>3. I understand that I have 4 weeks to withdraw from the study after my interview has taken place.</td>
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<td>4. I consent to the interview being audio recorded.</td>
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<td>5. I understand that the information I provide will be used for a Doctor in Education research project and the combined results of the project may be published, but my identity will be kept confidential at all times.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. I agree to take part in the above study.</td>
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**Name of Participant:**

Signature

Date
Appendix C: Document Review Process

There were four segments of document review to provide as complete a picture as possible to the case study of how professional production freelancers engaged in the performing arts industry and associated with a performance arts enterprise in Hong Kong, Proécho, made sense of their relationship with their employing organisations and how this had changed over time as employing organisations evolved from start-up to sustainability. The four segments of document review contributed to the following:

1. The background and history of Proécho since inception in 2001.
2. How and why did the gig production business line happen in 2013.
3. The gig production business at start-up in 2013, including sentiment and sense-making of professional performing arts production freelancers
4. The gig production business as it moved towards sustainability in 2019, including sentiment and sense-making of professional performing arts production freelancers

For each segment, documents reviewed included:

- Annual reports
- Audited financial reports
- Corporate brochure and corporate videos
- Website content
- Board meeting minutes
- Payroll summary
- Prospectuses
- Market research data
- Proécho SWOT analysis
The above-mentioned documents were reviewed to form an as-complete-as-possible story of each stage. As the researcher was the General Manager of Proécho, she had access to all relevant documents, and she was responsible for collecting and reviewing data. Data in the stories were discussed with Proécho’s senior management for permission to include in the study. The stories were reviewed and indications on how professional production freelancers made sense of their relationship with Proécho and how this had changed over time as employing organisations evolved from start-up to sustainability were highlighted. Highlighted sections helped inform the fine-tuning of interview questions. A summary of history was included in Chapter 4. Data were used to triangulate with interviews of participants.
Appendix D: Professional Freelancer Interview Protocol

Part I: Introduction

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this study. As discussed earlier, I will be interviewing you as a researcher of this study, not as a manager of Proécho <the original name of the organisation will be mentioned with the participants>. Whatever you share will not affect our working relationship at Proécho.

Thank you very much for signing the Informed Consent Form earlier. Here is a copy for your safe-keeping. The interview will take about 80 minutes. Does that still work for your schedule today? Before we get started, I would like to ask if you have any questions about the study. If you don’t have any more questions and you feel ready, I would like to begin the interview, and it will be audio-recorded as I have mentioned in my invitation to you to participate. All audio files will be kept in a secured server that is only accessible by me.

Part II: Setting the Stage

I am going to start by asking some questions that will help me understand your background of becoming a professional freelancer, and what have been your experiences so far. Later, I will ask you questions specifically related to your experience with Proécho.

1. Tell me about how has your journey of becoming a professional freelancer been like.
   a. Probe: what has been the challenges or difficulties?

2. What performing-arts-related, and non-performing-arts-related work are you currently engaged in?
Part III: Core Interview Questions

Now, I will turn our attention to your specific relationship with Proécho.

3. Let’s go back to when you first joined Proécho’s performance gig production team. What was your experience as a professional freelancer producing gigs for Proécho?
   a. Probe: How did gig production fit in with your role as a part-time teacher of Proécho?
      b. Probe: How would you compare the two roles, as a part-time teacher, and as a gig production professional freelancer?

4. Please walk me through your experience with Proécho in those early years.
   a. Probe: What are the factors that make you feel “I like working with Proécho”?
      b. Probe: How does being a part of Proécho’s gig production team make you feel?

5. Without naming names, how would you compare your relationship with Proécho and other gig employers?
   a. Probe: Can you give examples of any Proécho gigs clashing with other employers’ gigs?
   b. Probe: Would you give priorities to Proécho gigs? Why?

6. Would you put Proécho as an employer in your curriculum vitae?
   a. Probe: Would you just put the names of the end-user clients in your curriculum vitae?
   b. Probe: How much does the nature/identity of the end-user client mean to you?
7. Please compare your professional network before joining the Proécho gig production team with your professional network now.

8. Comparing the current stage to when you first started producing gigs for Proécho, can you describe to me the changes in your relationship with Proécho.
   a. Probe: The satisfaction you derive from the creative process
   b. Probe: The smoothness working with Proécho
   c. Probe: Proécho’s appreciation of your contribution
   d. Probe: Your relationship with Proécho
   e. Probe: Your sense of fulfilment
   f. Probe: Your sense of identity

9. How do you feel about applying concepts of loyalty and commitment to a freelance employment relationship between a professional freelancer and the intermediary employing organisation?