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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Does the freelance economy promote creative freedom?

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Abstract

This paper builds on the creation of new ways of organizing work, where the freelance economy specifically targets the increasing number of skilled self-employed individuals collaborating for shared output. Through describing and discussing creativity within the freelance economy, this paper seeks to understand creativity in collaborations among these self-employed individuals. Drawing from a case study conducted in the advertising sector, the paper concludes that creativity within the freelance economy occurs between equal and inherently creative freelancers rather than being the product of individual traits, despite their respective skills. Creativity between individuals arises when processes are appropriately formalized, while the creative output is constrained by individual decisions and styles. The paper contributes to existing research by shedding light on the distinctive characteristics of the freelance economy and its paradoxical organizational nature. By doing so, it offers insights that contrast with prior studies on artistic creativity.

Keywords: advertising sector; collaboration; competencies; creativity; freelance economy

Introduction

The freelance economy has come to characterize how skilled individuals remain self-employed (McKeown & Leighton, 2016; Meager, 2016; Scully-Russ & Torraco, 2020) while organizing themselves for shared output (Bögenhold & Klinglmair, 2016; Damian & Manea, 2019). In comparison to gig and sharing economies (Geissinger, Laurell, Öberg, & Sandström, 2018; Geissinger, Laurell, Öberg, Sandström, & Suseno, 2020), with which the freelance economy is often conflated (Klarin & Suseno, 2021), the *skilled* individuals expect not only to perform predefined tasks but to contribute new ideas. Consequently, *creativity* plays a central role in the freelance economy, particularly with regard to *shared* creative output. Creativity refers to the generation of new and useful ideas (Gohoungodji & Amara, 2023) and is in this paper defined as the skills, processes, and output of combined artistic novelty and usefulness. The shared output would necessitate collaborative efforts, a distinguishing feature of the freelance economy compared to prior research on freelancers (Brems, Temmerman, Graham, & Broersma, 2017). With our understanding of the freelance economy in general, and the collaborative endeavors of its skilled self-employed individuals in particular, remaining limited, this paper aims to, in an explorative manner, *describe and discuss creativity in the freelance economy*. The paper examines creativity in terms of skills, processes, and output while analyzing collaboration from structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998).

Through empirically investigating artistic creativity among collaborative freelancers in the advertising sector, the paper elucidates three defining characteristics of the freelance economy: (1) creativity emerges between equal and inherently creative freelancers rather than being the result of individual traits; (2) such creativity arises when processes are appropriately formalized; and (3) the

creative output is constrained by individual decisions and styles. While the freelance economy is on the tangent to other more well-explored phenomena such as organizing in the creative sector (e.g., Grabher, 2002; Norbäck & Styhre, 2019; Starkey, Barnatt, & Tempest, 2000), freelancers as single-party subcontractors (Norback, 2022; Scully-Russ & Torraco, 2020; Woronkowicz & Noonan, 2019), communities and their organizing (e.g., Öberg & Alexander, 2019), and individuals' creativity supported by organizations (Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, & Herron, 1996), these characteristics challenge intuitive assumptions derived from past research on the organizing of creativity. The defining characteristics are presented as three paradoxical insights into the freelance economy to highlight its differences from other organizational forms and existing knowledge on creativity.

The paper thereby contributes to past research by theorizing about the freelance economy and its defining characteristics related to creativity. These characteristics not only shed light on how the freelance economy is distinctly different from the sharing and gig economies (Geissinger et al., 2018, 2020; Klarin & Suseno, 2021) and solo freelancers (Gandini, 2016; Merkel, 2019; Storey, Salaman, & Platman, 2005) but, with a focus on shared output, also distinguishes it from start-ups that typically network for resources related to individual outputs (Baraldi, Havenvid, Linné, & Öberg, 2019). These distinguishing features provide a basis for approaching the freelance economy as a specific phenomenon, prompting a reevaluation of conventional knowledge on organizing for creativity. This, in turn, underscores how our evolving organizational paradigms may necessitate a reassessment of past knowledge regarding best practices. From a practical perspective, understanding how collaboration affects creativity can assist managers in effectively organizing work and may even influence future decisions regarding collaborative design.

The remaining sections of the paper are structured as follows. After this introduction, the paper proceeds with a discussion of the freelance economy in general, focusing on collaboration among self-employed individuals. This contextualizes the empirical phenomenon and highlights various aspects of collaboration that have been examined in previous research. Subsequently, the concept of creativity is explored in greater detail, providing a comprehensive understanding of its dimensions. The research design is then presented, outlining the methodology employed in the study. This includes the single case study approach that investigates artistic creativity in the context of freelancers' collaboration within the advertising sector. The findings are subsequently presented and discussed. Finally, the paper ends with conclusions, including the main implications for theory and practice.

Collaboration in the freelance economy

The freelance economy encompasses the growing trend of individuals acting as self-employed (Burke & Cowling, 2020; Damian & Manea, 2019). Freelancers are known for their emphasis on utilizing their skills to produce unique ideas or output. They have traditionally been found among artists, writers, and so forth, linking freelancers to creativity in terms of them acting in creative sectors (DCMS, 1998). For example, a freelancer may contribute content to a newspaper, working independently from other journalists and photographers. Research on freelancers has observed how they organize themselves in ways that resemble traditional organizations (Merkel, 2019), and how their identities are reflected in the enterprise self and in their communications (Brems et al., 2017; Gandini, 2016; Storey, Salaman, & Platman, 2005). Connections with other freelancers have been linked to finding work opportunities and shaping professional identity (Grugulis & Stoyanova, 2012), thereby contextualizing other parties rather than seeing them as collaborators. Consequently, existing research on freelancers predominantly focuses on the individual, with the traditional freelancer occupations involving the provision of specific tasks or services to organizations. For instance, a reporter or journalist may deliver ready-to-print articles to a newspaper, functioning as a subcontractor rather than a collaborator within the organization. At most, freelancers are described as working sequentially on the same output or contributing to complementary tasks, such as text and photography for newspapers.

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As the freelance *economy* has evolved, it has emerged as a response to high unemployment rates and the desire of firms to mitigate the risks associated with hiring permanent staff. By contracting freelancers instead of hiring employees, organizations become less vulnerable to economic downturns and potential recruitment errors. Furthermore, it has been a means of selecting the most suitable individuals for specific tasks. Although often mentioned in conjunction with the sharing and gig economies (Klarin & Suseno, 2021), the freelance economy is thus distinct in that it comprises skilled individuals with educational training in their respective fields and the potential non-digital nature of organizing. Today, the freelance economy extends beyond the creative sectors and includes self-employed consultants, emphasizing networked collaboration and shared output (cf. Romero & Molina, 2011).

Most literature on different sorts of collaboration focuses on arrangements among companies. To capture individuals (as part of organizations) in collaboration, the social dimension of interaction has been emphasized, with social capital being a key concept in understanding the value carried by social relationships (Adler & Kwon, 2002). The literature portrays the social aspect of economic exchanges to show how an exchange includes more than purely economic dimensions (Öberg, 2018) and to indicate how the social dimension of exchanges contributes value to the exchange and affects choices made (Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998). Typically, social relations and networks are portrayed as occurring between individuals, while economic exchanges are depicted as taking place between companies (Granovetter, 1985). Consequently, although overlapping and interconnected, the social and economic dimensions operate at different levels.

To provide a vocabulary to capture interactions, Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) separated social capital into structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions (cf. Lee, 2009). The *structural* dimension indicates how individuals are interlinked and points to the centrality, complexity, and density of relations on a network level (Choi & Hong, 2002; Kim, Choi, Yan, & Dooley, 2011). Centrality describes an individual's position in the network, while complexity refers to the number of elements in the network and the potential conflicts among them. Density, on the other hand, represents the number of ties in the network as a ratio of the total possible number of ties. The *relational* dimension focuses on the nature of relationships, such as commitment and trust, which are closely tied to governance. Governance refers to the formalization of the relationship and the extent to which control mechanisms are employed, often considered more necessary in the absence of trust. Finally, the *cognitive* dimension relates to the shared values and goals among individuals involved in the interaction. Studies on social capital within or among firms with a shared output may assume common goals. However, differences in goals and values can arise, potentially causing misalignment (Öberg, Dahlin, & Pesämaa, 2020; Öberg & Shih, 2014).

While representing a vocabulary for social relations, the structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions can also help comprehend economic exchanges, albeit at a different level. Since economic exchanges in the freelance economy involve *collaboration* among self-employed individuals, it is important to consider both the social and economic dimensions at both the individual and collaborative levels.

Creativity as individual and supported and creativity as shared

Research on creativity traditionally ascribes it to individuals and their abilities (Ameen, Sharma, Tarba, Rao, & Chopra, 2022; Daniels, 1974), while investigating how the organizational context enhances the creative output of its members. It has been suggested that less structured contexts (cf. Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998) provide greater opportunities for creativity. Woodman, Sawyer, and Griffin (1993) found that a broad variety of individuals and limited organizational structure are positively related to an individual's creativity. Amabile et al. (1996) highlighted the importance of group support, challenging work, organizational encouragement, freedom, and resource sufficiency in fostering creativity. Additionally, creativity is viewed not only as a skill and output but also as a process (Perry-Smith & Shalley, 2003; Sasser & Koslow, 2008). Perry-Smith and Shalley (2003) demonstrated

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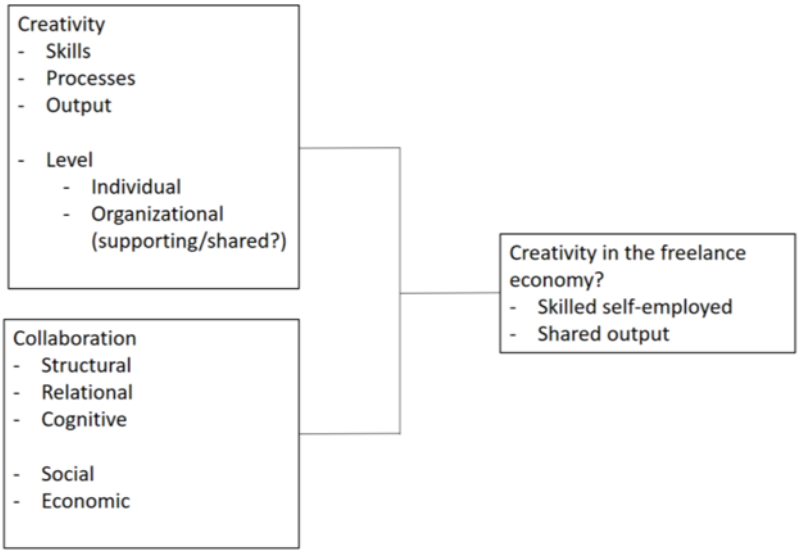

Figure 1. Past research and central concepts of the paper.

the social nature of the creative process, and Woodman, Sawyer, and Griffin (1993) indicated that group creativity exceeds the sum of individual members' creativity. This suggests that creativity can be understood at the organizational or collaborative level, where the output may be individual or a result of group processes (Öberg, 2013, 2016). While the organization indicates a collective level, collaboration is often regarded as limited in time (Jack, Dodd, & Anderson, 2008) and more flexible in its composition of skills, albeit with large variances among various collaborations. Furthermore, when relating the organizational context in previous creativity research to the freelance economy, the organization is depicted as providing support, while the freelance economy emphasizes the active role of self-employed individuals in contributing to shared output (Bögenhold & Klinglmair, 2016; Damian & Manea, 2019).

Based on the above, we can discuss creativity in terms of individual, shared, or supported aspects related to skills, processes, and output. Additionally, collaboration can be understood as having social and economic dimensions at both the individual and organizational levels, encompassing the structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions (see Fig. 1). Previous literature describes creativity as an individual's skill, with the organization supporting that creativity. The economic dimension is typically associated with the organization, while the social dimension is attributed to individuals, and the structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions are linked to the social, individual aspect. The literature thereby fails to consider certain dimensions that are crucial when discussing creativity in the freelance economy. These dimensions include (1) recognizing that each party is a skilled and creative self-employed individual rather than solely supporting the creativity of others; (2) acknowledging that social and economic ties need to be considered for both individuals and collaborations, occurring at multiple but overlapping levels; and (3) understanding that output is the result of shared efforts. With these dimensions in mind, and to describe and discuss creativity in the freelance economy and how its skilled, creative, self-employed individuals organize themselves for shared output, this paper raises the following question: How can collaborative creativity be understood in the freelance economy? By addressing this question, the focus shifts to what is specific to the freelance economy compared to the sharing and gig economies (Geissinger et al., 2018, 2020; Klarin & Suseno, 2021), the freelancer operating as a subcontractor (Brems et al., 2017; Gandini, 2016; Merkel, 2019; Storey, Salaman, & Platman, 2005), and the organization that supports the creative individual (Amabile et al., 1996; Ameen et al., 2022).

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Research design

The empirical aspect of this paper relies on retrospective and real-time case study research. The choice of using a case study methodology is justified by the paper's intention to theorize about the freelance economy, particularly in relation to freelancers' shared creative outputs and thereby their collaboration. Case studies are well-suited for investigating phenomena that have received limited research attention (Yin, 1994). They also allow for the examination of contextual and interactive factors, which is relevant for studying collaboration (Halinen & Törnroos, 2005). The selection of a case for this study focused on artistic creativity (cf. Alland, 1977; Hirschman, 1980; Midgley & Dowling, 1978) and the collaborations among self-employed individuals in the freelance economy (Bögenhold & Klinglmair, 2016; Damian & Manea, 2019; McKeown & Leighton, 2016; Meager, 2016). The limited existing research on the freelance economy motivated this focus, as did the historical association of freelancing with the creative sectors (DCMS, 1998).

Research context: Notes on the freelance collaboration studied

The studied freelance collaboration worked with advertising as part of the transforming advertising sector, focusing on the integration of advanced web solutions with the more traditional advertising competencies such as graphic design, art directorship, and copy (cf. Öberg & Kollberg, 2021). Four freelancers (see Table 1), all in their early thirties, who possessed complementary skills in graphic design, web design, 3D techniques, and media coordination worked together to provide their shared expertise to customers, including local and national service and consumer goods producers, as well as advertising agencies working with such firms. The graphic designer had prior experience in the traditional advertising sector and had previously worked independently with clients. The other freelancers came from outside the sector, bringing web design and 3D techniques into the collaboration.

Initially, in Phase I of the collaboration as described in the Findings section, the three freelancers with skills in graphic design, web design, and 3D techniques worked together on an ad hoc basis while also maintaining independent collaborations with advertising agencies and customers. Subsequently, when the media coordinator joined the team, the four freelancers transitioned into a more formal collaboration (Phase II). They established a shared interface with customers and agreed to distribute profits equally among all members on an all-for-one and one-for-all basis. Three of the freelancers shared a physical office in a mid-sized Swedish town where they resided, while the fourth freelancer (the media coordinator) remained located in a larger city approximately 300 km away.

Data collection

The studied collaboration included only the four self-employed individuals. This restricted data collection in terms of the number of interviewees, so rather than relying solely on interviews, data collection also comprised observations, week-to-week or bi-weekly interaction, and secondary data (cf. Huber & Power, 1985; Whyte, 1995). A total of 18 interviews were conducted in two rounds, separated by a 2-year interval. The interviewees consisted of the four freelancers, representatives from a marketing agency with whom they collaborated and shared office space during Phase II, and customers of the freelancers and the freelance collaboration in both Phases I and II. The primary focus was on the interviews with the freelancers, and direct quotes from them are included in the Findings section. The additional interviews served to verify and provide complementary perspectives, including insights on creativity. Open-ended questions were used to gather information about the interviewees' backgrounds, reasons for becoming self-employed and joining the collaboration, the development of the collaboration, their perspectives on creativity, style, and changes to the collaboration, as well as their collaborative work practices. Beyond the four self-employed interviewees, the interviews captured experiences of working with the collaboration and the freelancers, including their styles and creativity. Each interview lasted approximately 1 hr. All interviews were conducted in the native language of the author and the interviewees, so direct quotes have been

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Table 1. The freelancers

Freelancer	Gender and age (age at 2nd interview round)	Previous experience	Style	Role in Phase I	Role in Phase II
Graphic designer	Female, 36	Subcontracted, self-employed for advertising agencies or direct clients, 4 years of experience	Colorful, more-is-more	Primary contact for customers.	Equal terms with other self-employed individuals
Web designer (male)	Male, 33	Educated and working in the IT sector. Registered as self-employed when becoming part of the collaboration (no previous experience as self-employed)	Minimalistic	Subcontractor to graphic designer and to advertising agencies	Equal terms with other self-employed individuals
3D freelancer (male)	Male, 32	Educated in computer science. Registered as self-employed when becoming part of the collaboration (no previous experience as self-employed or from the advertising sector)	Oriented to technological solutions foremost. More rather than less, attention to trends	Subcontractor to graphic designer in interaction with advertising agencies, while also aimed to do individual work	Equal terms with other self-employed individuals
Media coordinator	Male, 35	Worked in advertising agency that used the Phase I collaboration as subcontractor. Registered as self-employed when becoming part of the collaboration (no previous experience as self-employed, 3 years of experience from advertising sector).	Traditional	N/A	Equal terms with other self-employed individuals, however with a temporal orientation to the collaboration

Table 2. Data collections

Data source	Specification	Number of items
Interviews	Graphic freelancer	2 interviews, 2 years apart
	Web design freelancer	2 interviews, 2 years apart
	3D freelancer	2 interviews, 2 years apart
	Media coordinator freelancer	1 interview (together with second round of interviews with the other freelancers)
	CEO, market coordinator, graphic designer I and II, copy of marketing agency collaborating with the freelancer collaboration and sharing office space with them	7 interviews, 2 with CEO and graphic designer I
	Marketing manager, customer company I, II, III	4 interviews (together with second round of interviews with the freelancers)
Observations/interaction	Author	5 years of weekly/semi-weekly presence at the freelancer collaboration's shared workplace
	Student	6 months' internship at the freelancers' office during 2nd round of interviews
Secondary data	Internal data	Documents: contracts among the freelancers, market plans, annual reports (for freelancers not registered as limited companies)
	Public data	Annual reports (for limited companies), Newspaper items (87 items mentioning the individual freelancers or their collaboration) accessed through *Retriever Business.*

translated. Apart from interviews, the author had extensive interaction with the freelancers during a 5-year period, while conducting consultancy work for the marketing agency they shared office space with. Informal interactions, such as coffee breaks, provided opportunities to engage with the freelancers. Detailed post-meeting notes were taken, which, along with interview transcripts, helped capture the evolution of the collaboration over time. Additionally, a student intern, under the supervision of the author, spent 6 months working with the freelancer collaboration during Phase II and recorded field notes throughout the internship. Secondary data sources were also utilized, including internal documents, newspaper articles, and annual reports. These sources were used to verify the chronology of events and document the formal aspects of the collaboration and its work processes (cf. Huber & Power, 1985). A list of data sources can be found in Table 2.

Data analysis

Within the frames of creativity as skills, processes, and output, and based on collaborations' structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions (see Fig. 1), the data analysis followed a step-wise, systemic combining coding process (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Mantere & Ketokivi, 2013) including initial empirical codes and subsequent axial coding (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). While a single case study usually permits only limited comparisons, this case's two phases allowed comparisons of the organizing and creativity between the two phases within the same freelancer collaboration and context (Gremler, 2004).

Data from the various sources (notes, interview transcripts, and written secondary data) were analyzed using on-sheet codes with code strings reflecting (1) date of occurrence (later synthesized into

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Phases I or II), (2) perspective of the informant, and (3) content of the information. The content codes were compared, and similar codes were merged to reduce their overall number (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013), while maintaining their connection to specific dates and perspectives. Once a preliminary orientation was established, the data were divided into the two phases: Phase I, characterized by early informal and loose arrangements, and Phase II, representing the formalized collaboration. In the axial coding (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013), Nahapiet and Ghoshal's (1998) separation into *structural, relational*, and *cognitive* dimensions was used to characterize the collaboration while providing such codes for the social and economic dimensions on individual and collaboration levels. Creativity was divided into descriptions of *skills, processes*, and *output* while linking it to the individual or the collaboration, respectively. Creative skills were analyzed based on who came up with an idea, the role of the individual, whether the idea was jointly proposed, and whether the collaboration represented a supporting structure or was itself the source of the creative idea. Determining whether the creative process occurred at the individual or collaborative level was based on the degree of shared versus individual effort and the contributions of different individuals to the process. Creative output was operationalized by considering the number of new ideas, their similarities or differences, and the novelty as perceived by customers (cf. West, Kover, & Caruana, 2008). The codes resulting from the axial coding were crosschecked by two research colleagues to ensure consistency and accuracy.

After conducting axial coding, the analysis focused on examining the relationships among different constructs (Jessop, 2005). This involved comparing the dimensions of collaboration and creativity between Phase I and Phase II, exploring how the collaboration influenced creativity, whether creativity was individual or collaborative, and how these aspects related to the structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions of the collaboration. This coding led to the conclusion that formalization helped not only to make the creative process more collective and creative but also to identify how creativity happened between the freelancers (rather than being individual) and more fully exploited their skills, thus emphasizing equal terms. The inherency of skills and the constraints produced by individuals' decisions and styles helped to grasp skills, processes, and output along the various dimensions of collaboration. In the final step of the analysis, the findings were compared to previous research to ensure theoretical contribution. This comparison helped identify three paradoxical insights (cf. Poole & Van de Ven, 1989) described in the Discussion section. These insights challenge conventional notions of creativity and collaboration found in past research and highlight the defining characteristics of creativity in the freelance economy. Figure 2 presents the various steps of the data collection and analysis.

Findings

The four self-employed individuals, namely the graphic designer, web designer, 3D freelancer, and media coordinator, undertook a reorganization of their work as their collaboration progressed. This section is structured around the two primary modes of organizing their collaboration: the informal and loosely coupled arrangements in Phase I and the subsequent formalization in Phase II.

Phase I

Before the collaboration, the graphic designer operated her business independently as a self-employed individual, undertaking project-based tasks for advertising agencies or direct clients. A project in this context referred to a campaign or concept development for a specific customer. The web designer began working for the graphic designer, registering as a self-employed individual in order to do so, while also serving as a subcontractor to advertising agencies. In their interaction, the web designer assumed the role of a sub-supplier, whereby the graphic designer continued to handle customer contacts independently. 'The customers only met with [the graphic designer], and it was she who made the design decisions for the web. I was solely responsible for its technological realization' (Web designer). The graphic and web designers were acquainted with an individual who possessed 3D

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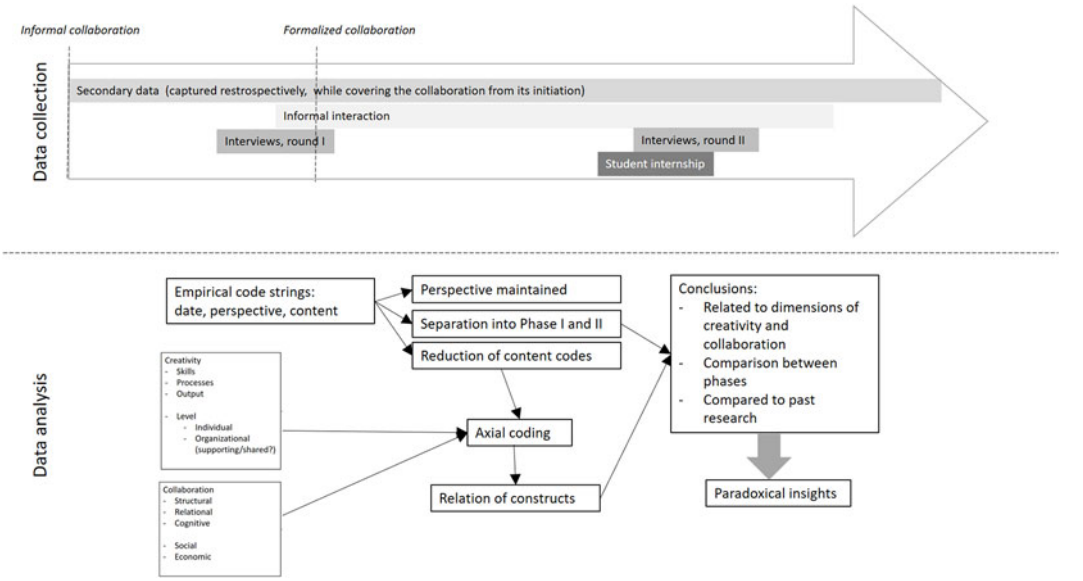

Figure 2. Steps of data collection and analysis.

skills, leading the three of them to decide to collaborate. The third person established a limited liability company to participate in the collaboration and manage income from other clients. 'When the [3D freelancer] joined, he established a proper company name and intended to work for others as well' (Graphic designer).

Initially, the collaboration involved leveraging each partner's skills for individual customer projects. Alternatively, the three or a pair of them would collectively act as subcontractors for various advertising agencies. The existing familiarity among the collaborators meant that the collaboration operated on an informal basis, without the need for formalized contracts or similar arrangements. 'It was a gentle(wo)men's agreement, but it did not mean that we prioritized working together more than working for other firms. Meanwhile, we enjoyed spending our spare time together' (Graphic designer).

The three self-employed individuals had distinct artistic preferences, leading to significant differences in their output styles. '[The web designer's] style was very minimalistic, with an industrial orientation, while [the graphic designer] loved colors' (3D freelancer). When they worked independently, these differences did not pose a problem. However, when the web designer performed work for the graphic designer, coordination was necessary to ensure coherence across channels in a customer's campaign. Although much of this coordination was discussed among the collaborators, the viewpoint of the graphic designer, who served as the interface with customers, typically prevailed. While working directly for advertising agencies, the web designer had more freedom to incorporate his own ideas, albeit within the constraints of the agencies' preferences. 'Being a sub-supplier means that someone else's style takes precedence. However, I occasionally succeeded in introducing my ideas by demonstrating their technological advancements or presenting ideas that they believed were not technically feasible' (Web designer). Rather than solely focusing on the artistic output or the creative process, the web designer and the 3D freelancer directed their creativity toward innovative applications of the technologies they specialized in. As a result, when the full extent of their artistic creative skills was not realized, they utilized their creativity to develop inventive solutions. This approach was confirmed by the feedback received from interviewed customers.

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Phase II

Three years after their initial contact, the graphic designer, web designer, and 3D freelancer made the decision to establish a more formal collaboration by creating a joint venture with its own distinct name. They agreed to use this name when interacting with customers, advertising agencies, or any other parties, regardless of whether all of them were involved in the specific project. The main objectives of formalizing the joint venture were to improve the management of income and to ensure that all three freelancers were on equal footing when working with customers. Additionally, they believed that formalizing the collaboration would enable them to undertake larger projects than before. 'We should always present ourselves as [the joint venture]. We can now communicate to others that we possess all of our combined skills and represent the entire joint venture in discussions with collaborators and customers' (Graphic designer). 'To me, [the joint venture] meant that I became more significant in our collaboration with third parties' (Web designer).

Around the same time, the media coordinator joined the collaboration. His skills complemented those of the other members, and he registered as self-employed to become part of the joint venture. Prior to joining, he had been employed by an advertising agency that utilized the web and graphic designers as sub-suppliers. 'We had become acquainted when they worked for me. We had a great personal connection, and I felt that being part of this nice group would be more enjoyable than being part of a larger firm' (Media coordinator). Consequently, the joint venture was owned by the legal entities of the four freelancers' firms, while the collaboration itself continued to be based on trust among them. The four self-employed individuals transitioned from working together as the need arose for specific projects or as sub-suppliers, adjusting their styles accordingly, to presenting themselves as a united entity and sharing profits equally. 'We made [the joint venture] as a Robin Hood venture: all for one and one for all' (Web designer). However, the freelancers had differing goals for the formalized collaboration, with the media coordinator considering it a more temporary arrangement, mainly for individual projects. 'They were my sub-suppliers, and to me, they still serve as a temporary option where I can participate in or withdraw from projects' (Media coordinator).

In terms of styles and preferences, the freelancers' differences were highlighted in how they interacted with customers or other collaborating parties as a unit rather than as sub-suppliers to one another (confirmed by customers). This lack of coherence sometimes impacted broader interactions, as advertising agencies and customers would from time to time prefer to engage with only one of the freelancers (as confirmed by interviewed marketing agency representatives). 'So they want [the web designer] and choose or use their own graphic designer. But we would still be there, all of us' (3D freelancer). While less challenging, as the formalization empowered the self-employed individuals in negotiations with others, external collaboration parties still imposed restrictions on the creative process (e.g., desiring to work exclusively with one party), attempted to take a lead, or did not fully understand the technological opportunities of the web and 3D. 'Before, it was us constraining ourselves based on who talked with customers. Now it is more those external parties' (Web designer).

Meanwhile, the joint venture allowed the web designer, 3D freelancer, and media coordinator to fully express their skills and contribute their unique artistic ideas. 'We now have more debates. Our individual styles. No one can claim anymore that "this is what the customer wants" solely based on being the customer's direct contact' (Web designer). 'I try to adapt my style to [the web designer], but I do find industrial gray to be boring' (Graphic designer). Nevertheless, these conflicts became integral to the creative processes, where styles were discussed, and skills were explored to a greater extent. What was evident was how the ad hoc processes of the past had been much more parallel. For instance, the web designer worked on the web solution while the graphic designer focused on the layout of printed media for the same customer. In the formalized collaboration, it became a matter of sharing ideas and creating solutions among the self-employed individuals across their various expertise. This also impacted the output, which was now clearly a shared output with greater variety as various voices came into play during the processes. 'Our portfolio [of completed work] really showed our diversity and how much we could accomplish as one unit' (Media coordinator). 'Through the joint venture,

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we became more structured and less ad-hoc. This led us to leverage all our skills' (Graphic designer). The collaboration started to get noticed and won prizes for its creative output.

Discussion

Table 3 provides a summary of the two phases, outlining the dimensions of collaboration and creativity as depicted in Fig. 1. The case study and comparison of these phases provide intriguing insights into creativity within the freelance economy. The findings can be summarized as three defining characteristics of the freelance economy, each pertaining to creativity as skills, process, and output (Amabile et al., 1996; Koslow, Sasser, & Riordan, 2003), while incorporating collaboration dimensions (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998) within the context of skilled self-employed individuals generating shared output. The three defining characteristics challenge the conventional application of prior research on organizing for creativity (e.g., Amabile et al., 1996) and are, therefore, associated with paradoxical insights (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989), which are further discussed below.

Defining characteristic I: The paradox of the inherently creative individual

The first defining characteristic pertains to creativity as a skill and describes an inherent creativity of the self-employed individuals. As a paradoxical insight, it highlights how constrained creativity can foster (individual) creativity. This was observed in Phase I, where the self-employed individuals whose skills were underutilized (the web designer and 3D freelancer) turned to technological advancements as an innovative outlet for their creativity. In this case, it establishes a connection between two types of creativity: artistic creativity and innovative creativity (Ameen et al., 2022; Chua, Roth, & Lemoine, 2015; Öberg, Adams, & Alexander, 2014). Both types emphasize novelty and usefulness while orienting toward different outputs. It demonstrates how when creative skills are not fully utilized, individuals find alternative uses for their skills and how creative skills in the freelance economy are coupled with a mindset that continually seeks new ways to generate ideas. Previous research has indicated how resource constraints can foster (innovative) creativity, although contrasting arguments have also been made, for instance, by Amabile et al. (1996) in relation to artistic creativity. However, this paradoxical insight does not focus on resource constraints but on how constraints in using creative skills led to creativity in a different domain. This insight underscores the creative inherent nature of self-employed individuals in the freelance economy and highlights the specificity of their creative skills. This is different to the gig and sharing economies where the emphasis is on executing predefined tasks based on demand only (Klarin & Suseno, 2021) and to past research's description on the contextual nature affecting creativity (Amabile et al., 1996; Woodman, Sawyer, & Griffin, 1993).

Defining characteristic II: The paradox of creative processes happening between individuals while being constrained by other parties

The second defining characteristic describes how the creative process happens *between* the skilled freelancers, rather than them each acting individually. While the first defining characteristic and paradoxical insight target the individual, this characteristic shifts the attention to the achievement of shared output and creative processes on equal terms. The idea that creativity happens between individuals suggests that collaborative creativity can surpass the creative abilities of each individual alone and emphasizes the collaboration itself as the creative entity. Simultaneously, as a paradoxical insight, it highlights how external parties – outside the creative entity – constrained the creative process. Customers and external collaboration parties limited the freelancers' creative process, where this paradoxical insight thereby suggests that being open to others (Öberg & Alexander, 2019) can actually impede creativity. In addition to challenging the prevailing notion that the organization (or context) supports individual creativity (Amabile et al., 1996; Oldham & Cummings, 1996), this characteristic

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Table 3. Case summary

	Phase I: Informal, ad hoc collaboration	Phase II: Formalized collaboration
Description - *The collaboration*	3 freelancers with complementary skills working together on ad hoc basis Social and economic dimensions at level of individuals	Formalized collaboration of 4 freelancers Social dimensions at individual level, economic dimension at individual and collaboration level
Collaboration		
- *Structural dimension*	Graphic designer the central party. Not complex. Interactions among all parties	All parties 'equally' central. Increased complexity. Interactions among all parties
- *Relational dimension*	Pre-existing trust among the individuals. Low level of governance	Pre-existing trust among the individuals. Increased formalization
- *Cognitive dimension*	Differences in preferences. Shared goals	Differences in preferences and partly in goals
Creativity		
- *Skill*	Complementary skills of individuals	Complementary skills of individuals. Added skills
- *Process*	Process largely decided by graphic designer. Creativity of others not fully utilized	Shared process. Increased creativity in interaction but also more conflicts
- *Output*	Artistic streamlining to graphic designer	Increased diversity but still restricted by external parties
Connection between collaboration and creativity	*Non-used creativity was practiced elsewhere or as innovative creativity (cognitive dimension/skills)* (Characteristic I). Captured as the web designer and 3D freelancer could not use their creativity fully as subcontractors to the graphic designer and instead practiced their creativity elsewhere and in innovative terms *Central node inhibited creativity of others in process and output (structural dimension/process and output)* (Characteristic II and III) Captured as the graphic designer's role created parallel processes rather than collaborations and her decisions rather than shared processes	*Equal terms fostered creativity (structural dimension/process)* (Characteristic II) Captured as increased interplay on equal terms making better use of the individuals' creativity (comparison between Phases I and II). Debates on disagreements forming the creative process as a process between individuals, while before being led by one party (the graphic designer) *External parties inhibited creativity (structural dimension/process)* (Characteristic II). This is evident in the role of subcontractors and how customers' and external collaborators' preferences and negotiations affected novelty (often due to a lack of understanding of technology or external collaborators wanting their style) or impacted the collaborative process by favoring work with a single individual. In the collaboration with the marketing agency, the creativity of the joint venture was suppressed to align with the agency's ideas *Formalization brought differences in goals to front while fostering creativity (relational and cognitive dimensions/output)* (Characteristic III) Formalization brought all's competences to the front and led to more variety in output. Captured as variety in output and following from the collaborative process across expertise areas

deviates from the conventional focus solely on freelancers (Brems et al., 2017; Gandini, 2016; Storey, Salaman, & Platman, 2005), and the sequential developments often seen in digital-platform-based community contexts (e.g., Öberg & Alexander, 2019).

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Defining characteristic III: The paradox of formalization bringing creative output variety to the forefront while individual variety constrains the creative output

The third defining characteristic pertains to the shared output and its variety. As a paradoxical insight, it highlights how formalization brings forth creative variety while individual variety can constrain creative output on the collaborative level. Previous research on creativity has suggested that freedom and limited structure enhance individual creativity (Amabile et al., 1996; Woodman, Sawyer, & Griffin, 1993). However, the case at hand indicates that increased formalization in Phase II brought out the variety of creativity among the self-employed individuals. The formalization arose from the individuals' need to organize for creativity and work with third parties (customers and other collaborating parties) in the economic dimension. It occurred despite the pre-existing trust among the parties, indicating that formalization as governance and trust (relational dimension) are separate issues. This distinction between the economic and social dimensions is noteworthy, although they overlapped to some extent in the more formalized collaboration. The formalization increased the density (structural dimension, Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998) and resulted in a 'thickness' and rigidity among the parties, which, contrary to expectations, thus actually increased the creative variety of output. While the formalization manifested collaboration-level goal coherence in the cognitive dimension, it also highlighted certain goal conflicts among the freelancers (cf. Öberg, Dahlin, & Pesämaa, 2020; Öberg & Shih, 2014). The formalization intensified discussions on creativity, indicating that it did not bring about coherence but rather variety. Meanwhile, as observed in Phase I, the ad hoc organization neither fully explored the potential of individual freelancers (cf. the inherent creativity leading to a focus on other forms of creativity beyond shared output) nor facilitated the processes where creativity happened between equals. Rather, the individual styles constrained the creativity as a process for shared output during the ad hoc organizing.

Conclusions

This paper has described and discussed creativity in the freelance economy. It did so through analyzing various dimensions of creativity and collaboration among self-employed individuals. The theory section posed the question: How can collaborative creativity be understood in the freelance economy? The paper highlights that collaborative creativity in the freelance economy emerges from a focus on shared outputs and occurs between inherently creative freelancers who participate on equal terms, rather than being solely attributed to individual traits. It is facilitated by formalization, contrasting with ad hoc organizing, and exhibits distinct characteristics that differ from those identified in previous research on organizing for creativity (e.g., Amabile et al., 1996; Ameen et al., 2022). In contrast to studies that primarily focus on the individual freelancer as the unit of analysis (Brems et al., 2017; Gandini, 2016; Storey, Salaman, & Platman, 2005), the freelance economy recognizes the skilled self-employed individual as a participant in a social and economic system, shifting the emphasis from the 'self' in self-employed (Grugulis & Stoyanova, 2012).

Theoretical contributions

The paper's primary contribution lies in highlighting the notion of creativity in the freelance economy and thereby offerings insights into the freelance economy as a specific phenomenon. Despite its growing presence and the increasing adoption of networked organizing, research on the freelance economy remains limited. With self-organized collaboration among skilled, creative, self-employed individuals for shared output characterizing the freelance economy, the paper demonstrates how such organizing challenges established knowledge on organizing for creativity (Amabile et al., 1996; Ameen et al., 2022). As creativity occurs between equal and inherently creative freelancers when processes are appropriately formalized, past notions of creative individuals supported by organizations and formalization inhibiting creativity are questioned when applied to the freelance economy. The three paradoxes of (1) constrained creativity fostering (individual) creativity; (2) creativity happening

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between individuals while being constrained by external parties; and (3) formalization bringing creative output variety to the forefront while individual variety constrains the creative output, highlight these differences and present characteristics specific to the freelance economy.

Returning to the related areas mentioned in the introduction – organizing within the creative sector, freelancers, communities, and the supported creativity – the paper offers the following insights: Regarding organizing in the creative sector (including advertising), the paper highlights that organizing for creativity involves active participation by all parties in the freelance economy. Through its focus on creativity and formalization, the paper complements previous descriptions related to efficiency and latent/temporary teams (Norbäck & Styhre, 2019; Starkey, Barnatt, & Tempest, 2000). Concerning freelancers, the paper emphasizes the collaborative level as the primary unit, rather than focusing solely on individual freelancers, their self-identities, organizing practices, and work opportunities (Norback, 2022; Scully-Russ & Torraco, 2020; Woronkowicz & Noonan, 2019). Related to organizing in communities (Öberg & Alexander, 2019), the paper underscores the importance of shared, equal-term processes, thus moving beyond the exploration of digitally intermediated, sequential developments focused on innovative creativity. Lastly, concerning the role of organizations in supporting individuals' creativity (Amabile et al., 1996), the paper thus reveals how contextual factors can inhibit creativity within the creative unit. It underscores creativity as a collaborative phenomenon and how formalization shifts creativity from being based on individual traits to becoming processes where parties extend their creativity beyond individual expert areas.

In its theorizing ambition, the paper develops notions of *inherent creativity, equal terms*, and *constraining contexts* as theoretical frameworks to understand creativity in the freelance economy. These frameworks connect dimensions of creativity as skills, processes, and output with collaborations across social and economic levels, including structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions and enable a deeper comprehension of the freelance economy. In a society with an increased focus on self-employment, which also continually explores new ways of organizing, it is imperative to understand that these new organizational approaches may not align with past notions on how to achieve optimal results. Instead, they may necessitate a reevaluation of established assumptions. Amidst the myriad of new organizational approaches, this paper contributes to past research by highlighting characteristics that distinguish the freelance economy from other accepted and emerging phenomena, thereby establishing the freelance economy as a distinct research phenomenon.

Managerial implications

In practical terms, the paper argues that some level of formalization is beneficial to leverage the creativity of freelancers, rather than complete freedom in the flow of knowledge, ideas, and creativity. However, it emphasizes a democratized approach rather than a hierarchical one. The case presented in this paper illustrates that collaboration between individuals on equal terms, rather than individual creativity or reliance on a single party's preferences, leads to better creativity outcomes. It is crucial to establish equal terms in the interactions between freelancers and clients as well. Exploring how to realize such equal terms becomes essential when organizing in the freelance economy. Furthermore, it is important to minimize the potential inhibiting effect of others' involvement while embracing their participation in the usefulness dimension of creativity, when appropriate. Finding the optimal creative fit among freelancers during collaborations and acknowledging how social and economic ties can influence one another are key considerations to take into account.

Limitations and further research

This study has several limitations that need to be acknowledged. Firstly, it relies on a single case, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, the studied collaboration involved a limited number of self-employed individuals, raising the possibility that the positive effects observed in this study could be influenced by the specific characteristics of this particular group. It is possible to

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speculate that an excessive number of individuals contributing could potentially disrupt the positive effects of collaborations, or that collaborations involving different sets of self-employed individuals could yield different outcomes. Therefore, it is highly recommended to conduct additional studies that aim to validate or quantitatively test the findings presented in this paper. Furthermore, these studies could explore complementary contexts and collaborations to provide a more comprehensive understanding. Additionally, future research could investigate collaborations formed without pre-existing trust among the participants, as well as collaborations involving freelancers with competing skills. Overall, considering the limited research on the freelance economy, which is frequently intermixed with the gig and sharing economies (Klarin & Suseno, 2021), it is crucial to conduct research that continues to elucidate the specifics of the freelance economy.

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