

Bachelor's Programme in Design

Designing Relationships

What fosters and hinders a successful collaboration with clients in freelance visual communication design from the designers' perspective.

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Abstract

As freelance work becomes increasingly common, early-career designers face opportunities for skill development, as well as challenges related to work insecurity and underdeveloped workers' protections, making the management of client relationships a crucial aspect of professional success.

The thesis investigates what fosters or hinders successful client-designer relationships, how trust is developed and maintained, what communication practices are used, and how such skills are acquired. Research is positioned at this intersection of visual communication design (VCD), freelance employment, and client communication. Within the context of this study, VCD is defined broadly to include work which produces primarily visual outcomes, and freelance is described as independent work without long-term commitment to one employer and includes a spectrum of formality and employment commitment levels.

Through semi-structured interviews with seven VCD professionals, qualitative data is collected, themed and mapped. Findings indicate that relationships are central to both professional satisfaction and project outcomes, built on trust, mutual respect, and clear communication. Motivation to freelance is most often driven by experience and freedom rather than financial gain, and communication skills are primarily developed through direct practice and professional networks. The study aims to provide new insights into the interpersonal dynamics of freelance design work and offer potential guidance for emerging designers.

Keywords Visual Communication Design (VCD), Graphic design, Client communication, Client-designer relationships, Self-employment, Freelance

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1 Introduction

Employment on a freelance basis, and work in the visual communication design (VCD) field, each carry a unique set of challenges. In this thesis, the term VCD is defined through literature as any design work which results in a primarily visual outcome, including but not limited to graphic design, web design, photography, branding and some forms of advertising.

As the popularity of the self-employment work model steadily grows (Burke & Cowling, 2020; ILO, 2003, ILO, 2016; McKeown & Leighton, 2016; Meager, 2016), new design professionals use this opportunity to begin their careers early and establish a foundation for future stable employment (Böheim & Mühlberger, 2009; Hannam, 2012). This may leave them open to potential work insecurity, due to underdeveloped workers' rights regulations (Broughton et al., 2016), blurred lines and grey areas between different freelance work models (ILO, 2016; Kautonen et al., 2010).

Direct experience with clients early on in one's career is recognised as beneficial in existing research (Cortés-Selva & Wandosell-Fernández De Bobadilla, 2018), as well as recommended by design professionals (Hannam, 2012). Communication skills act as useful tools in freelance VCD work, aiding the designer to negotiate and secure themselves, and to clearly communicate ideas and work efficiently in client collaborations.

Furthermore, the importance of relationship building has been proposed as valuable to project outcome and overall work enjoyment (Heller & Vienne, 2015; Lee-Robbins et al., 2024), although not researched in great depth. The author recognises a potential research gap in client-designer relationships, and aims to explore their importance, as well as ways in which relationships thrive and suffer. Therefore, client-designer relationships in a freelance VCD setting are explored, alongside communication as a tool.

The thesis poses a primary research question (RQ): What creates and fosters a successful client-designer relationship in the field of visual communication design, and what hinders its development?

Additionally, three supporting research questions (SRQs) are posed:

- SRQ1: What methods do VCD freelancers use to communicate ideas and the design process to their clients and where do they gain these skills?
- SRQ3: What does trust mean to VCD freelancers in the context of their work, how is it attained and broken?
- SRQ3: What motivates VCD freelancers to choose (and continue choosing) this career?

Rather than creation of new solutions, the primary objective of this thesis is to identify and map the complexities of communication and relationships. Thus, the resulting research may, for instance, act as a basis for future, more targeted research. Alternatively, it could be viewed as, or processed further into guiding material for young designers, as to avoid the identified problems, leading to smoother career start and lowered risk.

The thesis structure and basis are built upon peer-reviewed literature, which defines key terms, contextualises and frames the research questions and areas. Based on the literature review, an interview guide was drafted, and seven VCD freelance professionals of varying years of experience participated in semi-structured interviews. The researcher facilitated in-depth conversations about the everyday activities of VCD freelance work, client communication, relationships and trust.

The completed interviews were transcribed and processed by the researcher, using thematic analysis. Findings were collected, organised into themes, and presented clearly in the resulting codebook. The discussion portion of the thesis assesses the findings in relation to the RQ and SRQs and showcases ways in which the questions have been addressed or answered. Lastly, potential uses of this research are explored, along with limitations and opportunities for future research.

2 Literature review

This literature review establishes the key concepts related to the self-employed designer and their interactions with clients. The research area is situated at the intersection of visual communication design, self-employment, and client communication and relationships (see Figure 1). This section defines and contextualises main terms used throughout the thesis by drawing on relevant academic papers and books. It also clarifies how these concepts are interpreted within the scope of this research. In addition to defining terminology, the literature review aims to build an understanding of existing perspectives and research outcomes within previously published materials, highlight gaps in current research, and provide a theoretical foundation for the analysis and discussion in later chapters.

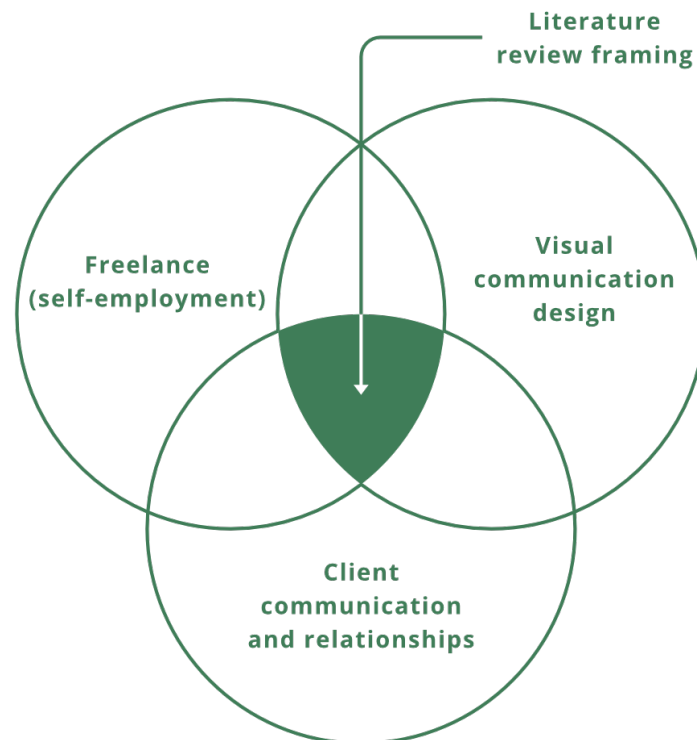


Figure 1. Venn diagram showing the literature review research focus.

2.1 Visual communication design

The foundations of what we now know as “graphic design” are described by Ambrose and Harris (2018) as having developed alongside technological advancements, including but not limited to printing and typesetting techniques. The designers have stood in the intersection of these media and worked to develop ideas into tangible, visual objects. Therefore, the abilities of designers and the scopes of their work have therefore widened, and now often involve branding, creation of promotional materials, web design,

photography, print, computer-generated images, as well as the organisation of these projects and planning (Ambrose & Harris, 2018). In line with this broadening of practice, the term visual communication design (VCD) has increasingly been used in ways overlapping with or even substituting for “graphic design”. Günay (2021) describes graphic design as central within visual communication, and as possessing a foundational role in shaping how visual messages are created and delivered. At the same time, VCD has been identified as an overarching field which extends the long-established principles of graphic design into a wider range of media, contexts, and experiences (Davis & Hunt, 2017).

Therefore, this thesis defines VCD as any design work which primarily results in visual outcomes and aims to communicate a message, service, brand, or other expression through visual means. Throughout the thesis, practitioners of VCD are referred to simply as “designers,” unless otherwise specified. The term “graphic design” is used when referring to work or contexts in which such distinction is necessary.

2.2 Forms of freelance (self-employment)

Some define freelance as self-employment and a lack of significant and long-term commitment towards one single employer (Hannam, 2012). However, scholars suggest that there is no single way to define self-employment and highlight the practice of so-called “dependent self-employment” (Böheim & Mühlberger, 2006; Kautonen et al., 2010). Further forms of non-standard employment are listed and categorised by the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2016), ranging from full-time and part-time commitments, casual work, on-call work, temporary agency work, subcontracting, and dependent self-employment (see Figure 2). Dependent self-employment is defined as work performed under a contract different from a contract of employment, while depending on one client or a small number of clients for their income, and receiving direct guidelines.

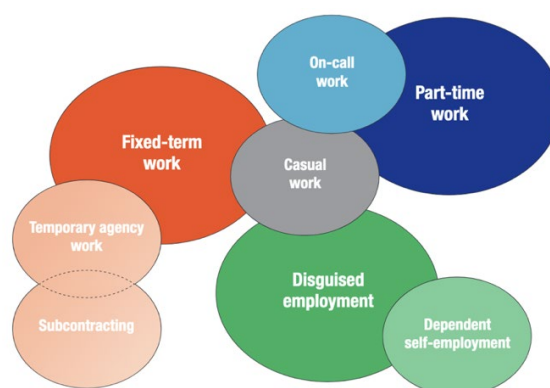


Figure 2. Legal forms of self-employment, or non-standard employment, ILO (2016).

This thesis recognises a spectrum of partial self-employment arrangements and chooses to include this so-called “grey zone” of dependent self-employment (ILO, 2016; Kautonen et al., 2010) as part of the target research group along with individuals relying on pure self-employment. Due to the popularity of blended forms of employment, meaning other gainful employment alongside self-employment (Bögenhold & Klinglmair, 2016; Felfe et al., 2008), such workers are also considered.

Furthermore, the International Labour Organisation recognises the difference between “formal” and “informal” work as ever evolving and outlines their definitions. Formal work encompasses activities (employment or otherwise) covered by established legal structures such as labour laws, tax systems, and social protection systems (ILO, 2013). Informal work and entrepreneurship are characterised by a high degree of vulnerability due to a lack of legal protection, often providing an unstable, irregular or low income. Informal employment groups have their own group rules, arrangements and structures, however it is unclear how such rules observe the fundamental rights of workers and whether adequate protection is provided (ILO, 2002). Unpaid work, such as volunteering or contribution to a family business or enterprise, falls under informal work, although voluntary work is, in some cases, secured by contracts and therefore by worker’s rights (ILO, 2013).

The importance of research into freelance work dynamics is recognised due to its growing popularity as an employment model (Burke & Cowling, 2020; ILO, 2003, ILO, 2016; McKeown & Leighton, 2016; Meager, 2016;) and its common occurrence early on in young designers’ careers (Hannam, 2012). Many new or young professionals gravitate towards self-employment as their first career steps, often treated as a stepping stone towards stable employment (Böheim & Mühlberger, 2009). This strategy is also sometimes recommended (Hannam, 2012), likely due to its non-binding nature and accessibility of the “gig economy” (ILO, 2016).

Flexibility, autonomy, and positive perceptions of job security are among the driving factors for choosing self-employment. Commonly faced risks include longer working hours, diminished rights, such as sick pay, holiday pay, discrimination and a lack of investment in employee training (Broughton et al., 2016). Therefore, inexperienced freelance workers are likely to encounter underdeveloped workers’ rights regulations, leading to financial insecurity, general interpersonal communication issues and mistreatment (Burke & Cowling, 2020; ILO, 2002; ILO, 2003; ILO, 2013; ILO, 2016; McKeown & Leighton, 2016;), or unfair dismissal (Broughton et al., 2016).

Based on the reviewed literature, this thesis uses the terms “freelance” and “self-employment” interchangeably and defines such work as (1) independent work without long-term commitment to one employer, (2) a spectrum

from pure self-employment to dependent self-employment, and (3) a career entry point for young professionals with mixed opportunities and risks.

The thesis also categorises such work as either formal (activities, covered by established legal or institutional frameworks, such as written contracts, verbal agreements, or structured volunteering with contracts or agreements), or informal (activities outside such protections, including unpaid contributions to family or community, undeclared work, arrangements without enforceable contracts).

2.3 Client communication and relationships

Client communication in design projects spans from the initial process of making contact to establishing a shared understanding of goals and expectations. Communication often centres around the expression and negotiation of the clients' wishes and project briefs, which may evolve throughout the design process. Falcão and Almendra (2017) argue that the traditional concept of a "brief" is increasingly inadequate, as design work tends to require ongoing negotiation rather than one-off instructions. At the same time, stakeholder interpretation during design communication is shaped by not only the information provided, but also by own preferences and modes of expression utilised. Visual appeal can influence stakeholder judgement, and similarly, preference and perceived utility can influence evaluation of the design proposal or outcome (Orsborn et al., 2009). This causes communication of design intent to be particularly complex, as messages are filtered through personal biases and expectations. Graff et al. (2020) outline how use of analogies can assist in resolving these gaps and enable shared understanding by linking new or unfamiliar concepts to more familiar ones. Additionally, Self (2019) shows how sketches may act as an interpretive tool, mediating dialogue between designers and clients. Together, these papers suggest communication is an iterative process which involves different forms of interaction and interpretation, and effective design communication depends on choosing clear ways of expressing ideas to minimise ambiguity.

Working with real clients in university or early freelance projects gives designers more realistic experience, helping them build communication skills and professional confidence. Introducing clients in student projects, where stakes are relatively low, not only improves motivation and project outcomes (Cortés-Selva & Wandosell-Fernández De Bobadilla, 2018) but also provides an opportunity to receive honest critique and manage consequences mimicking real freelance work (Hannam, 2012). For many young designers, freelance work offers a way to practice client relationships directly, negotiating briefs, delivering under pressure, and learning through actual client feedback rather than simulated classroom scenarios (Hannam, 2012). In these relationships, trust becomes central: when clients trust a designer's process and

judgement, communication is smoother, expectations are clearer, and both parties feel more invested.

Heller and Vienne (2015) report graphic designers' observations and experiences with client work, among other topics. In this book, designers A. Antonio and M. Bantjes speak of their most enjoyable collaborations and describe how mutual trust plays an important role in such dynamics. Recent literature also shows the ways in which long-term client relationships in freelance and user experience (UX) design contexts provide stability and deep understanding of client needs, thus supporting skill development and allowing designers to contribute more effectively to project outcomes (Lee-Robbins et al., 2024).

3 Methodology

This chapter details the methodological approach used to explore the ways in which freelance designers experience and navigate client communication. A qualitative approach was adopted to capture narrative insights into freelancers' everyday practices, motivations, and professional interactions. The following sections describe the purpose of the study, as well as the rationale for using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis for data collection and analysis. Finally, as part of the ethical considerations section, anonymity, consent, transparency and subjectivity are addressed and discussed.

3.1 Interview participants

For this research, a set of criteria was established in preparation for searching for interview participants. Active practice of self-employment involving VCD, or at least 2 years of experience in part-time or full-time freelance work, was required. Experience with in-house, agency or consultancy work was welcome, under the condition that this work included one-on-one interaction with clients. However, to provide diversity, it was important to seek a pool of participants who vary in their total years of employment, whether freelance or otherwise. Their portfolio should have included some form of visual creation, including graphic design and branding, photography, web design, motion graphics, video production, and other such disciplines. Furthermore, in order to narrow the topic geographically, the study targets professionals currently employed in Finland, or those who have spent a significant portion of their career in Finland, although experience abroad was also accepted. Completed higher education in their field of practice was not necessary, allowing for current students and professionals without formal design education. Overall, the research aims for a balance between experience in freelance and in-house employment, as well as a spectrum of ages and backgrounds, while maintaining a connection through VCD freelance work in Finland.

3.1.1 Participant recruitment

Three participants were identified directly in the researcher's circles and selected based on the researcher's pre-existing knowledge of their background. They were contacted either via verbal invitation or on the messaging platform Telegram, a popular messaging platform for students in Finland. The research topic was introduced prior to the interview, in order to confirm whether their self-identification aligns with the title of "VCD freelancer". These three represent the entire portion of active students interviewed.

The search for the remaining four interviewees was performed by searching the terms "freelancer", "freelance designer", "self-employed designer" and "graphic designer" on the professional networking site LinkedIn. Their profiles were reviewed to assess suitability, as well as diversity, with

consideration of their country and level of education, years of experience, and other relevant work experience. They were then contacted via LinkedIn messages, e-mails or contact forms on portfolio website. The best approach was chosen on a case-by-case basis. In total, 11 individuals were contacted this way, and an invitation message sample can be found in Appendix A. Through message or email exchanges, the researcher confirmed their understanding of the candidate’s career path, experience and interest before booking the interview, and answered any questions the candidates may have had.

3.1.2 Final interview participants

The final sample comprised seven designers, all residing and working in Finland, and all at least partially educated in Finland, although varied in nationality. Their years of experience in mostly formal freelance, part-time or full-time, range from 3 to 12 years. Apart from graphic design, all seven professionals have also participated in other avenues of employment, such as consulting or as an in-house designer. Their specialisations vary, but all are visual design-oriented, and all have worked professionally in the field of traditional graphic design. Table 1 summarises these characteristics. In this table, their study level is indicated as BA (Bachelor of Arts) or MA (Master of Arts). When asked if they would describe themselves as “a freelance designer” as well as a “visual communication designer”, all responded in the affirmative.

No.	Country of education	Education level	VCD freelance experience
1	Finland	BA student	7 years of informal web design work or hobby, followed by 3–4 years of formal freelance
2	Finland	MA student	3 years of informal photography work or hobby, followed by 4 years of part-time freelance work, mostly formal
3	Finland	MA student	5 years of freelance work, mostly formal and part-time
4	Finland	BA graduate	9 years of freelance and regular employment as graphic designer/consultant, mostly formal
5	Hungary, Finland	BA graduate	6 years of part-time or occasional freelance, followed by 4 years full-time freelance
6	USA, Finland	MA graduate	7 years of freelance work
7	Finland	MA graduate	3 years of informal or occasional freelance work, followed by 8 years of part-time freelance work

Table 1. Interview participants.

Many participants described their experiences with client communication as appearing already while attending high school, taking the form of occasional and unpaid, or low-pay jobs for friends and family. Therefore, it is important to note that the nature of freelance employment is often fluid, and the listed numbers of years may not directly represent the number of jobs completed. Some numbers are estimates declared with uncertainty by the participants and include periods of time with little or no employment and/or blended employment (Bögenhold & Klinglmair, 2016; Felfe et al., 2008), such as freelance employment alongside studies or other design and non-design jobs. This is further complicated by the blurred lines of formality in self-employment, and therefore the thesis does not focus on such numbers in depth.

3.2 Collecting data

According to Lobe et al. (2022), in-person interviews allow for better nonverbal signals, require less probing in comparison with online video interviews. Therefore, meeting in person was preferred when possible. Participants were asked to choose the location of the interview either at their office, if one was available, or in one of Aalto University’s small project rooms. Otherwise, another suitable alternative was used, such as a library’s meeting room. The final interview was performed through an online video chat due to illness. The location, date, and length of each interview can be found in Table 2.

No.	Location	Duration	Date
1	Aalto University, Espoo	35 min	18.11.2024
2	Aalto University, Espoo	33 min	27.11.2024
3	Aalto University, Espoo	37 min	28.11.2024
4	Participant’s office, Helsinki	1 h 2 m	30.01.2025
5	Kallio library, Helsinki	55 min	11.02.2025
6	Aalto University, Espoo	1 h 1 m	25.02.2025
7	Online	1 h 2 m	13.03.2025

Table 2. Interview details.

3.2.1 Purpose

The purpose of the interviews was to gain an understanding of the ways in which designers navigate, build and nurture client relationships, and the role which relationships play in their work. Specifically, the thesis aims to explore freelancers’ means of communication with clients, organisation of collaborations, and establishment of a productive basis for projects. The research also sought to identify common frustrations and challenges, as well as the strategies participants employ to ensure professional safety and maintain positive working relationships. Their current communication skills are explored, and the ways in which they have gained them. Furthermore, the interviews explore the topic of trust in one-on-one client interaction in the context of both long and short-term collaborations. Additionally, in order to gain a holistic

understanding of VCD practitioners under this employment model, the interviews investigate the conditions which motivate freelancers to work independently, aspects of freelancing they find rewarding or unrewarding, and the values they prioritise in their professional practice.

3.2.2 Qualitative research

This thesis adopts a qualitative approach to gather narrative data which provides an insider's perspective on VCD freelancers' experiences and navigation of communication with their clients. By directly focusing on individuals as experts of their own everyday practices, this approach allows for in-depth inquiry into lived experiences, motivations, and behaviours (Ahmad et al., 2019). Qualitative research is particularly suited to contexts in which established theories are lacking and new insights need to be developed (Merriam, 2002). Interviews, the most common technique in qualitative research (Bryman, 2012), were chosen because of their adaptability. This flexibility was especially important for this study, as the interviews could be tailored to each freelancer's unique professional background and communication practices, rendering the discussions more relevant and meaningful. Flick et al. (2004) argue that qualitative research highlights underlying patterns, meanings, and structural aspects of social dynamics. In this case, it enables a deeper understanding of the systemic challenges and interpersonal nuances which freelancers face in their client interactions.

3.2.3 Interview structure

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews combine open-ended and closed-ended questions, allowing for follow-up questions and adjustments to the flow and direction of discussion depending on the participants' answers (Kallio et al., 2016; Ruslin et al., 2022). This method creates a more natural conversation in which participants can freely speak about their experiences, resulting in a collection of rich qualitative data. Through this approach, the research aims not only to understand the effects of communication on freelancers' design processes and professional relationships, but also to reveal perceptions of their employability and work-life experiences.

Although the interviews were guided by a set of themes, the conversations did not need to strictly adhere to them (Kallio et al., 2016). As recommended by Wholey et al. (2004), the first two interviews were used both for data collection and for refining the interview guide from its initial draft. When a question or topic outside the first version showed potential, it was noted down and incorporated into later interviews. For the remaining five interviews, the guide itself structurally remained the same, though minor adjustments in wording, pacing, phrasing, or order were implemented. This

flexibility allowed for tailored questions when appropriate, which can result in richer insights, particularly on unexpectedly emerged topics.

The final interview guide consisted of four parts: a general overview, two sections covering the primary themes, and a closing section. Many questions also included follow-up prompts, used either to probe participants further or to clarify the theme under discussion (Kallio et al., 2016). The full guide is presented in Appendix C, and a sample transcript is included in Appendix D.

3.3 Data analysis

3.3.1 Transcription methods

Sound recordings captured at each interview were initially fed to the AI-powered transcription software MacWhisper (Bruin, J., n.d.). However, the researcher then manually checked and edited its output in accordance with each recording to ensure accuracy to the interviewee's actual statements and wording. At the same time, filler words or repetitions which appear in spoken conversations were edited to improve coherency for further data analysis. Additionally, any sensitive data such as the interviewee's names, employers, and specifics of past projects were censored at this step.

3.3.2 Thematic analysis and codebook

Thematic analysis is a qualitative method used to identify and interpret recurring patterns of meaning in data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It can be applied in descriptive, explanatory, or critical ways, allowing researchers to explore participants' experiences or perspectives from different angles (Lochmiller, 2021). Themes refer to repeated patterns in participants' ways of thinking, feeling, or acting, which are interpreted and made explicit through the researcher's analysis (DeSantis & Ugarriza, 2000). Due to its flexibility, thematic analysis is considered a suitable tool for the wide range of highly qualitative findings collected through semi-structured interviews. Furthermore, this approach is considered an appropriate choice for early and bachelor's-level research, as it does not require the extensive theoretical or methodological expertise demanded by approaches such as grounded theory or discourse analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The steps performed in the thematic analysis were derived from Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines for the six stages of thematic analysis:

1. Familiarising yourself with the data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes:
6. Producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

In practice, for this thesis, thematic analysis began with a rough read-through of all seven transcripts. During this familiarisation step, compelling quotes were highlighted and sorted into preliminary themes. After this, a systematic generation of codes across all transcripts was performed using ATLAS.ti for Mac (version 25.0.1), while better defined themes and groups began to emerge. At this point, the digital whiteboard software Miro (Miro, 2025) was used to visually map connections between the identified themes, codes and sub-codes, solidifying their grouping (see Figure 3). The theme and code naming were revised in accordance with the RQs and codes within were reviewed an additional time. The final codebook presents a structured hierarchy of themes, codes and sub-codes, if necessary, with supporting quotes from the interviews, and a sample can be viewed in Appendix E.

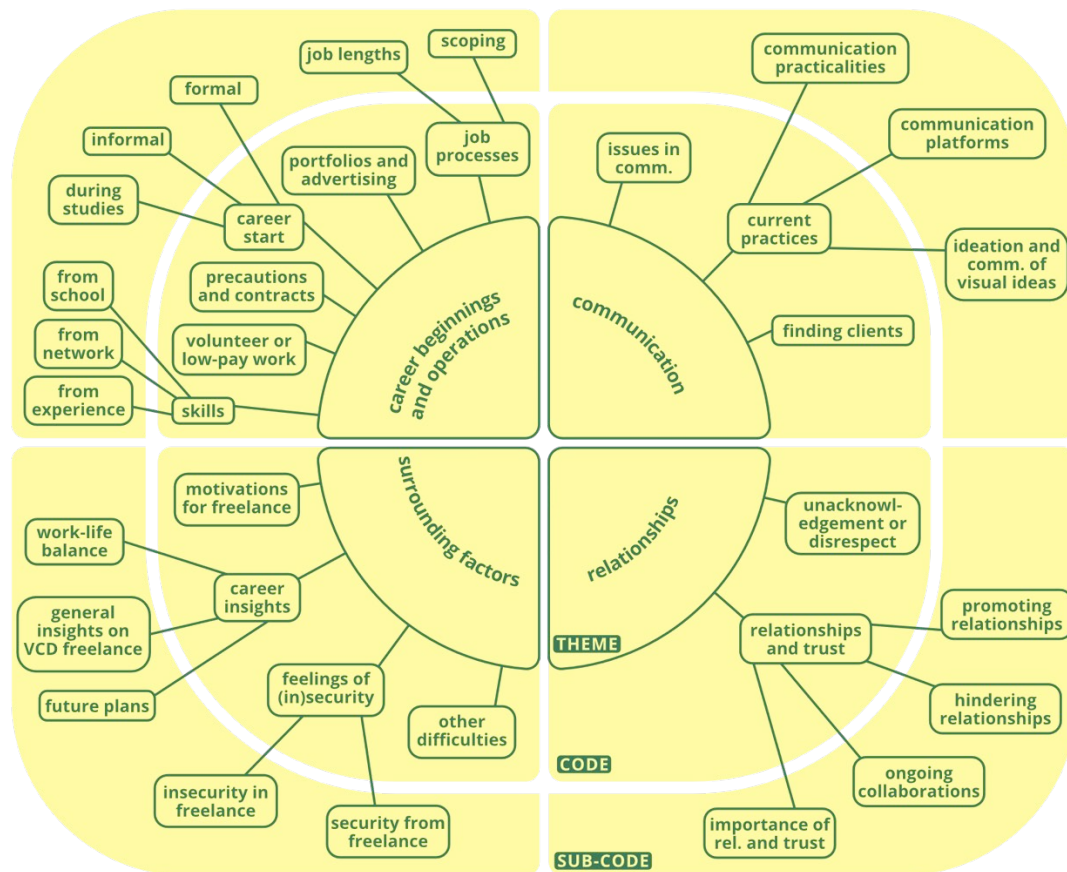


Figure 3. Codebook network consisting of themes, codes, and sub-codes.

3.4 Ethical considerations

3.4.1 Anonymity and consent

Participants were encouraged to speak freely and were assured that any names or identifying characteristics relating to themselves, their clients, or their employers would be anonymised and known only to the researcher and their advisor. Prior to the start of each interview, verbal permission was obtained to display information such as nationality, country of residence, age, and level of education; however, age and nationality were ultimately omitted due to their limited relevance to the research and to reduce the risk of revealing identifiable details. All participants signed an informed consent form (see Appendix B), and they were reminded of their right to withdrawal from the study at any point during the interview process.

3.4.2 Transparency

Participants were informed about the scope and aim of the project. The research question was framed based on the assumed importance of relationships within the freelance work model, with the underlying expectation of communication issues which may arise. Throughout the research process, the author remained aware that, should these assumptions prove incorrect, such findings would need to be carefully evaluated and reported. The researcher also acknowledges their lack of extensive background knowledge in psychology or theories of interpersonal communication.

3.4.3 Subjectivity

The author acknowledges the possibility of personal biases, and consequently, despite efforts to minimise their influence, the framing of interview questions may have been inadvertently shaped by preconceptions. Throughout the research process, transparency was maintained, with the understanding that complete elimination of biases is not realistically achievable.

4 Findings

The collected data builds a wide view of VCD self-employment operations, client communication and client relationships, along with other potential contributing factors. This chapter breaks down these findings in accordance with the codebook themes and codes. Primary sentiments have been identified and detailed, strategically supported by direct interviewee quotes.

4.1 Career beginnings and operations

To build a holistic understanding of the communication practices, client relationships, designer motivations, and other factors shaping freelance VCD work, concrete steps involved in projects and operations are synthesised from the interview data. This chapter lists the necessary processes and practicalities, ways in which designers enter a freelance career, avenues of client communication skill development, as well as a few remarks on volunteer or low-pay work.

4.1.1 Processes and practicalities

Participants detailed the average time span of their projects, along with nuances related to timing, followed by experiences with portfolios and self-advertising. The commission process is broken down into simplified steps, and pivotal moments are highlighted. Lastly, feelings and experiences with precautions put in place to ensure safety, such as contracts, are detailed.

Project length

The typical length of a project or “gig” in VCD freelance depends on the project type, with fields such as photography or minor graphic design tasks taking as little as a week (Interviewee 2 and 7), and larger brand management or strategy projects taking place over up to five or six months. Personal preference and availability of the designer are deciding factors; the part-time workers and students in particular prefer shorter projects as they typically result in quicker payment. Interviewee 3, a full-time master’s level student and entrepreneur, stated: “[a typical gig takes] weeks, ... if it’s longer, I won’t do it”. However, ones participating in self-employment on a full-time basis may enjoy the types of long-term projects, sometimes described as “upkeep”.

Portfolios and self-advertising

Advertising of oneself, including portfolios, websites and social media posts, induces many mixed opinions. Networking and word-of-mouth advertising shows more effectiveness and may outweigh the effort necessary to establish an effective portfolio, which is seen as a daunting task by many, and whose fruitfulness is questioned by some of the interviewees. The networking website LinkedIn is noted as a perhaps surprisingly effective source of advertising in recent years.

Although good recommendations from past clients are seen as among the most effective forms of advertising, lacking a quality and up-to-date portfolio which effectively reflects a designer's identity and skills can result in difficulty controlling client expectations and attracting low-pay or otherwise undesirable projects failing to align with the designer's values or specific field of focus. Reasons to delay creating a portfolio include a scarcity of works of relevance or satisfactory quality (Interviewee 1), and a lack of monetary or other resources (Interviewees 3 and 7).

Processes

The typical process to complete a project as a freelance visual communication designer was often described by the interviewees as a sequence of clear chronological steps: (1) introductions and scoping, (2) ideation, (3) proposals and revision, which may include two or more rounds, (4) delivery, and (5) payment. Nearly every participant presented their workflow in such a way, suggesting an implicit separation between each step, and with it, an inability, or ineffectiveness in backtracking once a step has been completed.

The introductory and scoping phase stands out as a crucial step and described in the most detail, underlining the ability of scoping to set the tone for the entire collaboration, and its importance to the aligning of expectations. Setting the scope can involve sharing examples of the designer's past work (Interviewee 2), pricing range, defining the brief, expected deliverables, timelines, and potential revision round limits. As signalled by some participants' use of the conditional "*if [the collaboration] continues ...*", such conversations may signal to either side whether this collaboration is suitable and whether it should continue, thus preventing potential friction, unsatisfactory results, and saving both parties' time and money.

Contracts and payment

Issuing contracts was uncommon in the early stages of most participants' careers, though a few exceptions exist, and the practice remains divisive today. Some continue to omit this formality, relying instead on email and message exchanges, which they regard as a written agreement. Participants who seldom implement legal contracts either express some uncertainty or regret about this decision. For instance, interviewee 1 expressed: "*I trust them that they will pay me and not disappear, because I don't make contracts.*", followed by a correction "*Actually one time I signed the contract. Yeah, I don't make contracts. I should.*". Those who rely on contracts describe this step as stressful or uncomfortable, despite its commonality. This stress could be attributed to worrying over contract preciseness or conversations about money, although important, being uncomfortable to initiate (Interviewee 4).

On the other hand, other interviewees showed a strong reliance on contracts also for clarifying the limitations or boundaries of their services: "*The*

contract is a really important step. Because there's some limits or kind of things you need to do to protect yourself as a freelancer that the client might not always understand. So, if you need to explain why this contract says this, or this is how we should do the project. I think a typical thing for me to write in the contract is that I only provide like two feedback rounds for example, or that this is the final date that this project needs to be ready, or this kind of limit, so that the project doesn't expand too much.” (Interviewee 7).

Other than contracts, designers utilise other measures to ensure the safety of their payment. Several interviewees compensate for the absence of a contract by requesting a non-refundable deposit, typically half of the total fee, prior to committing to the project fully. Similarly, interviewee 4 avoids “free pitching” and does not offer very solid ideas until the collaboration is confirmed and legally binding. Preventative action is stressed by several designers, meaning they tend to employ cautiousness before committing at all.

4.1.2 Career entry

The distinction between formal and informal career entry among freelance visual communication designers is blurrier than initially expected.

While some participants described their early work as clearly formal or informal, most depicted a gradual or organic evolution, often sprouting from creative interests at a young age. Typically, their career then progressed through occasional network-sourced jobs before leading to more structured practices involving advertising, contracts, and defined payment processes. Formal and informal commissions may also appear simultaneously, with no clear evolution from one work model to the other.

Informal career entry is shown to be the most common description of how participants began freelancing, starting with small-scale projects for friends, family, or acquaintances. Descriptions of these beginnings vary greatly in detail but share overarching themes. Interviewees 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6 describe participating in hobbyist activity such as photography, web design, CV layouts and graphic design, and encountering opportunities to perform for friends or family. Interviewee 6 details their experience: *“It was a lot of, like, through friends or then through teachers or through literally anyone who needed any small thing. And even through other students, like creating posters or something like that.”*

Additionally, interviewee 2 underlines the value of early informal and low-threshold client interactions: *“I don't know how official these projects can be considered, like you can also say “Oh you're just doing a favour to a friend and that's not a freelance project.” You know, and that's a valid perspective, but I think it does count, and it has set a foundation for some of the clients I*

have nowadays [...] I would say that it was a significant first contact with being a freelancer.”.

In contrast, few of the designers described the catalyst of their careers as reliant on formal work arrangements, particularly in cases of unpaid projects, and thus carrying relatively low risk. Examples of formal career entry points encompass network-sourced commissions (Interviewee 1), participation in design competitions (Interviewees 5 and 7), or structured voluntary unpaid work, such as for non-profit organisations.

Self-employed students

The findings indicate that many self-employed designers begin developing their careers alongside formal education, most often during university studies, although beginnings in high school are not uncommon. At the time of the interviews, interviewees 1, 2 and 3 were pursuing university degrees, while the remaining four interviewees had participated in freelance work during their now completed studies. Types of work which self-employed students perform can appear in many forms, and no clear pattern has been identified.

4.1.3 How client communication skills are gained

Skills through experience

Each of the participants described direct experiences as integral to their communication skill development. For the fully self-employed, this process is often described as a process of “trial and error”. All experience is perceived as valuable regardless of project outcome, as encountering challenges and uncertainties ultimately leads to skill growth and lessons learned. Freelance designers may engage in projects oriented in design fields different from their preference or specialisation. For instance, interviewee 6 describes how despite feeling indifferent to user interface (UI) design, projects involving it still offer valuable lessons in client relationships.

Interviewees 4 and 5 attributed parts of their current client communication skills to their experience working at design agencies, where they received more initial guidance and structure than when operating as independent freelancers. Interviewee 3, in turn, described experiences in non-design fields, such as restaurant service, instruction, and marketing, as valuable for developing the confidence required in customer-facing work.

Skills through network

Maintaining a supportive network of fellow designers can result in attainment of skills or helpful information. Although this source is not available for everyone in early career days, several designers mention some form of advice received from freelance friends, university peers or designer co-workers, which may have helped avoid risks associated with the “trial and error” method on one or more occasions. Notable advice received by the

participants encompasses budgeting, writing contracts, and other ways of protecting oneself.

Interviewee 2 describes a relationship with their friend, who practices photography freelance work similarly to them: *“It's like having a mentor, even if it's not like hierarchical, a person above you but it's just a friend, that friend can also be your mentor”*. In the case of Interviewee 7, observation of how other, more experienced designers handle their projects has aided in developing their own management and client communication skills.

Education

The topic of communication skill development proved divisive, with some participants expressing strong negative feelings on the topic. For the majority, their design education primarily helped with, as expected, design skills, and lacked in education on practical client-communication arrangements such as budget evaluation, time management, creating contracts, self-advertising and portfolios. Interviewee 2 suggested optional courses on management, which may provide this education, although they have not partaken.

Courses with involvement of real clients are seen as among the most useful, along with portfolio courses. Interestingly, although interviewee 4 describes their education as rich in real client interaction, they do not recall preparatory client communication courses as present on the curriculum. Several interviewees also note the usefulness of presentations, critiques, design reasoning and contextualising practices for building confidence and transitioning to client negotiations (Interviewees 1, 5 and 6).

4.1.4 Volunteering, unpaid or low-pay work

Projects completed on a voluntary basis are described by some interviewees, sometimes describing their first or early projects as unpaid, but acting as a starting point or catalyst for subsequent opportunities and clients (Interviewees 2, 3 and 6). For up-and-coming designers, low-pay work is not usually a conscious choice, but a necessary step for gaining skills and exposure. On the other hand, involvement in unpaid or low-pay collaborations may be as a result of low confidence and feelings of nervousness surrounding money (Interviewees 1 and 4). Additionally, interviewees described paid collaborations in which the compensation was unsatisfactory or not reflective of the amount or quality of work done, particularly when accounting for the time spent communicating (Interviewee 3). This can result in the designer feeling exploited or taken advantage of (Interviewees 4 and 6).

However, designers may accept unpaid or low-pay projects if they deeply care about the cause or see the opportunity as beneficial for their careers or creative skill development (Interviewees 2 and 4). One designer described their boundaries regarding volunteer work as dependent on their emotional

investment in the project: “... if I work on something, I will give my 100% because I want to be satisfied with my work. So nowadays I either do something for free because I want to help because I care about the cause, or I charge full price.” (Interviewee 2).

4.2 Client-designer communication

Maintaining effective communication between the client and designer is a central aspect of freelance work in VCD. Client communication encompasses tasks such as project management, messaging, scheduling and attending meetings, and delivering presentations. These practices also span informal early interactions, online platform-based communication, and meetings for complex discussion.

4.2.1 Communication practices in use

Communication practices in use encompass a range of platforms and practical arrangements. Interviewees spoke of the communication platforms they use in their practice, as well as what methods they use to convey visual ideas and design methods.

Communication platforms and practicalities

Initial contact is typically made via an email or phone interaction, followed by an introductory meeting to clarify the project scope and assess compatibility. Face-to-face or remote meetings are generally regarded as the most effective mode of communication and are popular for the initial steps of the collaborations, as they leave less room for misunderstandings. On the other hand, email supports clearer documentation, follow-up, and structured sharing of information, and is favoured by some designers, especially during feedback rounds (Interviewees 3, 6 and 7).

All in all, communication platforms vary according to preference, with some preferring mobile chat applications such as WhatsApp, and others favouring email. In some cases, clients are the ones to determine the used platform, making it difficult to, if necessary, shift to a more suitable alternative later on, and resulting in fragmented communication (Interviewee 7).

Communicating visual ideas

Communication of visual ideas involves the use of structured ideation practices, often beginning with a strategic foundation such as brand positioning, target audiences, and key brand drivers. Designers commonly utilise tools such as mood boards and sketches, along with digital whiteboards to support the generation and communication of visual concepts. Interestingly, some designers intentionally filter the material presented to clients in order to reduce overwhelm and the number of revision rounds, and to support clearer decision-making (Interviewees 1, 5 and 6).

4.2.2 Commonly faced problems

Participants have experienced a lack of regard for the time and effort necessary in design work. Clients may take weeks to respond, exceed the agreed number of feedback rounds (Interviewees 2 and 3), only to revert to earlier stages of the process, or attempt to expand the project scope by exploiting grey areas in agreements (Interviewees 4 and 6). Designers also noted a difficulty of explaining why certain client choices may be ineffective without undermining the client (Interviewee 5), sometimes resulting in compromises to their own design integrity (Interviewees 1 and 7). Similarly, the aesthetic preferences of the client may differ drastically from those of the designer, which has to be accepted in order to move on (Interviewee 1, 3, 5 and 7).

Challenges in client-designer communication often arise from dysfunctional decision-making structures. On one end of the spectrum, common in larger organisations, an overly democratic decision-making, which can slow processes and obscure responsibility. On the other, small clients or start-ups often rely on highly centralised, preference-driven decisions dominated by a single stakeholder (Interviewees 4, 5 and 7).

Payment-related problems, such as late or missing payments and attempts to negotiate lower prices, are not uncommon (Interviewees 1, 2, 4 and 5). In the more rare and severe cases, designers have encountered disrespectful behaviours, such as clients ignoring final deliverables and failing to implement them (Interviewees 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6) or even physically damaging printed proposals (Interviewee 5). Some interviewees noted certain processes may be lengthier than initially expected, and similarly, clients may underestimate the effort required from the designer's side (Interviewees 2, 3 and 5).

4.2.3 Client design literacy

Self-employed designers typically work independently and are the only individuals in their professional environment familiar with creative processes and visual materials. Their clients are rarely designers themselves, which can create a gap in shared vocabulary and understanding. Many clients struggle to interpret design terminology, methods, or visual thinking, which designers often perceive as a disregard for the theoretical and methodological foundations of visual design in favour of superficial aesthetics (Interviewees 1, 5 and 7). However, clients usually know what they are looking for, they just lack the means of communicating it, and the designer's job includes extrapolating this information, and find ways to align the client's wishes with effective design strategies. Freelancers are hired to manage the entire design process, not only to deliver a final outcome, but the implications of this comprehensive role are also not always understood by clients. This knowledge gap may require designers to explain or even "over-explain" their decisions and contextualise their work with theory and professional reasoning (Interviewees 1 and

7). Nonetheless, designers reported gradual improvement, as concepts such as design thinking are moving towards mainstream recognition. For example, the use of mood boards is now common and widely understood among non-designers (Interviewees 2, 5 and 7).

4.3 Client-designer relationships

Freelance designers find clients primarily through personal and professional networks, previous collaborations, and word-of-mouth referrals. Recommendations are viewed as one of the most reliable ways to acquire new clients, as they tend to inspire more trust than searching for a designer online. Designers verified client relationships are grounded in mutual trust and transparency, which in turn provides a sense of security for their creative work. Maintaining and nurturing existing relationships is also seen as a key aspect of client interactions, with many freelancers viewing long-term connections as essential for sustaining their practice.

4.3.1 Barriers and enablers

Interactions between freelance designers and clients are shaped by a set of factors which either hinder or support productive collaboration. These factors often emerge early in the relationship and can significantly influence whether the partnership continues.

Barriers

A perceived lack of trust or signs of micromanagement from the client may prompt designers to decline or prematurely end collaborations (Interviewees 1, 4 and 5). Attempts at exploitation or obscured transparency undermine trust and create an unstable working relationship (Interviewees 2, 3, 5 and 6). Several designers also noted instances in which misunderstandings about expectations, roles, or the level of commitment at the outset of a project can lead to avoidable friction later on (Interviewees 3, 6 and 7).

Enablers

Clear scoping in advance and an already established relationship are strong enablers of smooth collaboration. Mutual respect and trust and directly contribute to both sides' sense of security, and transparency around pricing and compensation supports open dialogue and reduces the likelihood of conflict. Proactive behaviours, such as delivering early or initiating challenging conversations about scope, pricing, and expectations, can help maintain clarity throughout the project (Interviewees 3 and 6). Finally, reaching a shared vision or establishing good interpersonal chemistry enables more effective cooperation. Due to this, the initial meeting is often deliberately informal, such over a coffee, to assess whether the client and designer are a suitable fit, and to build a positive foundation (Interviewees 5 and 6).

4.3.2 Importance of relationships and ongoing collaborations

Nurturing existing relationships with both clients and colleagues is considered as a highly important aspect of client interaction, although not always prioritised at the start of a designer's career. This trust operates in both directions: designers rely on clients to pay on time, while clients depend on designers to deliver high-quality work within agreed schedules. Interviewee 2 aptly summarised their experience with freelance professional encounters: *“Business is a win-win: it has to be a win-win for both people, and there have been situations where, for the client to win, it would have to be a loss for you, and that's not business.”*

Returning clients tend to become “better clients” who learn to understand the design process. Their better understanding can aid in smoother communication, fewer revision rounds, and overall, more efficient work processes (Interviewee 2). Additionally, ongoing projects offer a connection to the project and the ability to watch and help it evolve (Interviewee 5). Securing projects from existing clients is typically easier than acquiring new ones. Therefore, for many designers', their goal is to find a compatible client with whom they can work comfortably for years (Interviewees 4 and 5). Nonetheless, this comes down to preference, as some enjoy the novelty and fresh opportunities of new collaborations, while others prioritise the safety and continuity of ongoing partnerships.

4.4 Surrounding factors

Freelancing in VCD is shaped not only by client-designer interactions, but also by a variety of surrounding factors, including personal motivations, emotional experiences, feelings of security and work-life balance. Many designers combine freelance work with other forms of employment, such as part-time or full-time jobs, agency work, or studies, which may influence how they navigate and sustain their freelance careers.

4.4.1 Motivations to freelance

Self-employment was rarely described as a preconceived career ambition, instead, it emerged organically as opportunities appeared. Particularly for new designers, freelancing offers space for self-expression and exploration while they are still learning and developing their practice.

The reasons designers choose to continue freelancing vary, but commonly shared motivations include the freedom and flexibility to select clients and projects, as well as the ability to decline work more easily than in traditional employment. VCD is regarded as an inherently expressive and individualistic field, suitable for independent work. Freelancing also provides opportunities for continual skill development and variety in project types. Consequently, the simple joy of a job well done and receiving positive feedback act as major

driving factors and rewards for self-employed designers. Additionally, the professional and personal connections created are an unexpected, but much welcome benefit (Interviewee 2, 4 and 6).

Future career directions vary considerably. While some designers imagine continuing freelance work in some capacity, others view it as a transitional phase. Freelancing is not always seen as a sustainable long-term path, and several interviewees expressed interest in shifting toward other roles or maintaining a blended career model of freelancing alongside stable, full-time employment. Overall, most are satisfied with their freelance work and do not regret taking this route, but at the same time, do not necessarily envision it as their sole long-term career.

4.4.2 (In)Security and work-life balance

Freelancing is widely recognised among the interviewees as unstable and, for many, unsustainable as a sole source of income (Interviewees 1, 2 and 7). Designers may experience fluctuating workloads cycles of having “too much or too little” work, leading to income instability (Interviewees 6 and 7). Pricing also remains a persistent challenge, as many freelancers set their rates too low, influenced by nervousness, inexperience, or preconceptions of clients undervaluing design work. Some interviewees suggest starting a freelance career often requires a level of financial privilege or stability provided by another, supplementary employment (Interviewees 1, 2 and 4). The importance of precautionary practices is underlined here again, taking the form of payment deposits or written contracts which allow the client to be billed if unresponsive while the project is ongoing (Interviewees 3).

Work-life balance instability presents additional difficulties. Freelancers struggle with time management, which may lead them to work on evenings and weekends (Interviewees 4 and 6). The actual time spent on projects may be difficult to predict, and the consequent overtime work is not always reflected in pricing structures (Interviewees 1 and 6). Self-employed workers typically operate out of their home, rather than an office, resulting in primarily solitary work and feelings of isolation. As a result, some designers seek out in-house or other office work alongside their freelance practice to give daily structure and socialisation opportunities (Interviewees 4 and 6).

On the other hand, freelancing can provide a sense of security, especially when combined with studies or other work. Once designers gain confidence in pricing and workflow management, freelance projects can offer satisfactory income, flexible scheduling, and the ability to adjust workload or reject opportunities based on personal circumstances (Interviewees 3, 4 and 5). Some interviewees noted freelancing provides more opportunities for creative exploration and “exciting” projects, creating a sense of professional fulfilment (Interviewees 1, 3 and 4).

5 Discussion

The discussion chapter summarises the overall sentiments which emerged from the findings and situates them in relation to the literature review and research question (RQ) and supporting research questions (SRQs). This section compares the perspectives identified in previous research with the interview findings, addressing how these align with or diverge from the RQ and SRQs, and attempts to answer each question with its corresponding findings section (see Figure 4). Overall, the findings offer an in-depth view of designers' experiences from a close and personal perspective, highlighting how their feelings and reflections are closely connected to their career decisions. The study suggests that both VCD and freelance work require, and benefit from a personal connection, which in turn leaves a noticeable impact on designers' professional practices and personal lives.

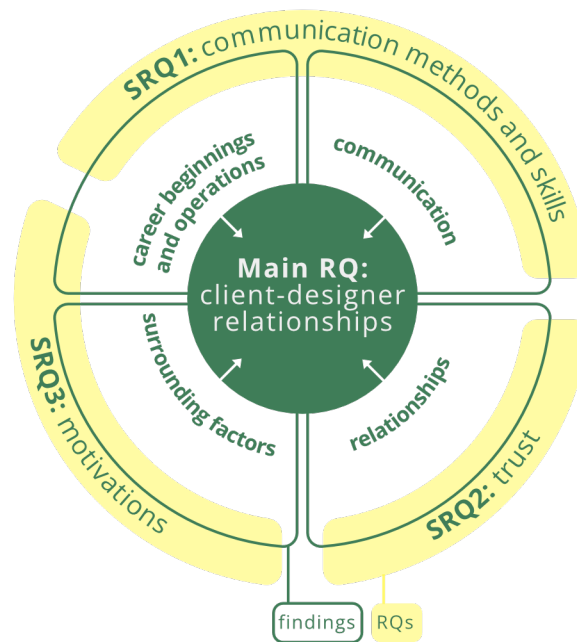


Figure 4. Relationship between RQ's and categories of findings.

5.1 Main RQ: Client-designer relationships

RQ: What creates and fosters a successful client-designer relationship in the field of visual communication design, and what hinders its development?

The findings clearly validate the importance of client-designer relationships, as participants frequently emphasised their significance. These relationships were repeatedly described as closely connected to both the quality of the work produced and the designers' enjoyment of their work, a sentiment previously acknowledged in literature by Heller and Vienne (2015), and Lee-Robbins et al. (2024).

The interviews suggest relationships rely heavily on communication as a tool. This includes not only practical aspects such as workflows, expectations and job processes, but also interpersonal nuances. In the paper by Orsborn et al. (2009), the impact of biases surrounding visual appeal and perceived utility is discussed, however this thesis argues that in addition, relational aspects such as first impressions or reputation may also influence stakeholder judgement. Contributing factors to successful relationships can be summarised as trust, mutual understanding and respect. At the same time, the findings indicate there may be limits to how much designers can influence the relationship, as much of the responsibility lies with the other client, and certain personality differences may be unavoidable. Despite this, collaborations can still lead to positive outcomes if a baseline of mutual respect and understanding is maintained. Additionally, ongoing collaborations were viewed as particularly desirable, as they remove the need to establish a new relationship from scratch, and allow trust and understanding to develop over time.

Although extreme cases of mistreatment were reported, they appear too uncommon to be considered major pain points within this sample. Interviewees with such negative experiences have used them as learning opportunities, ultimately teaching them to protect themselves in the future. However, the risks associated can be major (Broughton et al., 2016; Burke & Cowling, 2020), and inexperienced designers likely remain unequipped to protect themselves against mistreatment. As a result, the researcher suggests negatively affected designers may get discouraged from self-employment and therefore would likely not have found themselves in this interview sample.

5.2 Communication methods and skills

SRQ1: What methods do VCD freelancers use to communicate ideas and the design process to their clients and where do they gain these skills?

The thesis identified methods which VCD freelancers use to communicate ideas processes to their clients, and where these skills are gained. A range of tools and techniques were acknowledged, most notably mood boards and sketches. However, the author suggests that identifying specific methods may be of limited importance in the context of client relationships. Instead, the tone and clarity of communication appear to overshadow choice of method. Designers place emphasis on being clear and structured in their communication, often through setting boundaries, defining processes and drawing on design theory to justify decisions.

Client communication skills are reported to be gained primarily through experience, and occasionally through professional networks if available. Participants expressed a desire for more education on client communication within design schools, particularly as many freelancers begin working while still

studying. Such early career beginnings are also described and recommended in some reviewed literature (Hannam, 2012). Along with the study by Cortés-Selva and Wandosell-Fernández de Bobadilla (2018), this suggests client communication should be considered further in design education.

Education-related findings collected in this thesis are limited, as experiences vary significantly between universities and countries, and all interviewed designers have pursued at least a portion of their education in Finland. Participants suggested universities of applied sciences may place greater emphasis on communication practicalities compared to more academically oriented institutions. Additionally, one interviewee, who reported satisfactory education on client communication abroad, encountered initial difficulties when adapting to Finnish clients. This suggests the role of cultural context in communication practices is relevant but falls outside the thesis scope.

5.3 Trust

SRQ2: What does trust mean to VCD freelancers in the context of their work, how is it attained and broken?

While participants often discussed relationships as a whole, trust was treated as a key concept and functioned as a tangible measure of the legitimacy of client-designer relationships. Although a portion of the interview structure revolved around this topic, in several cases, trust was introduced by participants before being raised by the interviewer. The interviewed designers stressed that for trust to be considered meaningful, it must be mutual. In practice, this means the client trusts the designer to perform competently, add value to the client's organisation or initiative, and deliver work on time, while the designer trusts the client will respect their expertise, communicate, cooperate, and provide appropriate compensation.

Some participants challenged the idea of trust being pre-established and then broken. Instead, they suggested that trust is often absent at the start and must be built up gradually through repeated interactions and successful collaboration. This sentiment supports the idea of client-commissioned design projects requiring ongoing negotiation and interpersonal iteration, rather than following a simple linear progression from a design brief to realised outcomes (Falcão and Almendra, 2017).

5.4 Motivations

SRQ3: What motivates VCD freelancers to choose (and continue choosing) this career?

An understanding of the circumstances which lead designers towards freelance work builds on the previously reviewed discussions of dependent self-employment (Böheim & Mühlberger, 2006; ILO, 2016; Kautonen et al.,

2010) and the blurred boundaries between formal and informal employment (ILO, 2002; ILO, 2013). Findings of this thesis suggest that freelance work is rarely an intentional career goal. Instead, it often develops organically, often out of necessity to gain practical experience or supplement income.

Freelance work is commonly perceived as temporary, serving as a means to build a portfolio, develop skills and expand professional networks before transitioning to other career opportunities, a perspective which is supported by Böheim and Mühlberger (2009), and Hannam (2012). Despite this, many designers described the work itself as rewarding, which motivates them to continue freelancing. This satisfaction stems from the relative freedom to choose projects and, to some extent, clients, as well as the variety and novelty which freelance work can offer in contrast to potentially more monotonous in-house roles. Overall, the findings indicate that designers tend to value the experience and learning opportunities offered by freelance work over the resulting finances, or in some cases, despite them.

6 Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore client-designer relationships within the field of visual communication design freelance work by combining a literature review with qualitative interviews and thematic analysis. The findings and discussion provide an overview of how VCD freelancers operate in practice, with particular attention to communication, relationships, and the surrounding factors which shape everyday work. Overall, the study highlights the central role of client relationships and communication in freelance design, and their connections to the designers' working processes, motivations and career decisions.

6.1 Main limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the scope of the study and the interview guide were relatively broad, which limited the ability to obtain highly targeted insights. A considerable portion of the interviews was spent establishing a general understanding of the VCD freelance context. This was partly due to the limited amount of existing research approaching the topic from a relationship-focused perspective, which made it challenging to scope and narrow the research focus at an earlier stage.

Secondly, it was observed that participants likely do not experience communication and design work as two clearly separable aspects of their practice. This resulted in data which was difficult to categorise and led to overlap between discussions of design skills and communication skills. The participant sample further limits the diversity of findings. All interviewees had relatively extensive experience, with three or more years of freelance work, and no true beginners were represented. Moreover, all participants were at least partially educated and currently located in Finland, and as an extension, Finland's worker's rights, social security system, and the nation's attitude toward visual communication design work. Such contextual factors influence the experiences described and limit the transferability of the findings to other contexts.

Lastly, studies surrounding interpersonal relationships such as this one would likely benefit from a stronger humanities' perspective, such as the incorporation of psychological approaches.

6.2 Future research

The thesis can serve as a foundation for more narrowly scoped future research on client-designer relationships in visual communication design. The identified limitations also point towards potential research gaps. Future studies could focus in greater depth on specific aspects of client-designer relationships, such as trust or scoping processes, allowing for more targeted analysis and potentially broader or more diverse participant samples.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview invitation message sample

Appendix B: Example of informed consent form

Appendix C: Interview guide and questions

Appendix D: Transcript sample

Appendix E: Codebook sample

A. Interview invitation message sample

Hi [First Name],

I'm a design student at Aalto University, performing research for my bachelor's thesis, and I am reaching out wondering if you would be open to participating in an interview?

My research topic is about the communication between visual design/graphic design freelancers and their clients. The focus is on designers new to freelancing, and particularly any 'practicalities' and areas of misunderstanding that arise and what pattern they may create.

I am reaching out to you specifically because according to your LinkedIn, you have some experience in Freelance, and both short-term and long-term work for companies. I think you may be able to provide some valuable insights. :)

If you think my topic is relevant to your work, and would be available for an interview in the upcoming weeks, please get back to me! It would take 45 minutes to 1 hour, and we could meet either on Aalto campus or in your office. I understand that your schedule may be packed, so an interview via Zoom would also work.

Absolutely no pressure to commit to this! :) Let me know if you have any questions.

Best regards,
Laura Jelínková
Design BA student
Aalto University

B. Example of informed consent form



Research on Visual designer-Client
Communication in a freelance environment
Consent to Participate
Researcher Copy

Consent to Participate in a Research on Visual designer-Client Communication in a freelance environment.

I, _____, have been clearly informed on the purpose and procedures of the research led by Laura Jelinková at Aalto University School of Arts, Design and Architecture, Espoo, Bachelor's Programme in Design and have shown interest in participation in the studies developed by the student cited above. I am aware and understand the contents of the research and how my participation will occur.

This research includes:

interview

I agree to participate I do not agree to participate

25.2.25 Espoo
Date and Place

Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Signature of Researcher

Contact Information
Laura Jelinková
laura.jelinkova@aalto.fi
Tel. _____

I volunteer to participate in the studies. I may choose to rescind or abort my participation in the studies at any time during the studies, by informing the student cited above. Rescinding or aborting my participation will not affect my position at any point in time. I may also revoke this consent to participate in the study, in which case information pertaining to me will not be used in the studies. Research results pertaining to me may be used in scientific reporting (e.g. publications). This study follows the responsible conduct of research, legislation and guidelines available at <http://www.tenk.fi/en/responsible-conduct-research-guidelines>

Aalto University
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Postal address
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T: _____

Laura Jelinková
laura.jelinkova@aalto.fi
Bachelor's Student

C. Interview guide and questions

Before the interview

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview! As I have described before, I am researching You have been invited because of your field of work and experience in communication with clients in consulting. It should take roughly 30-45 minutes, and if it is okay with you, I would like to record the audio and later transcribe it. The recording and transcript will only be seen by me. Your name, and any names of employers that may make you identifiable will be censored, but I will collect data such as age, nationality, and country of education and work. Transcripts will be created using AI tools, specifically MacWhisper.

If all of this is okay with you, then before we begin, I will ask you to sign this informed consent form.

Guiding questions

Small disclaimer: You are the expert in this situation, and it is important that we are on the same page. Please let me know if you find something irrelevant or otherwise not relatable, so we can find the right angle together.

1. General overview

Can you first please introduce yourself and tell me a little about yourself?

- ◇ Age?
- ◇ Education country, level, field?

Can you briefly describe the extent of your experience in visual design client work?

- ◇ What experience in freelance and/or one-on-one interactions with clients?
- ◇ How long?
- ◇ How did you get started?
- ◇ What was your first project, or a project that has been significant for your career so far?

Can you describe the steps and process of a typical job/freelance gig briefly from start to finish? Before, during and after?

- ◇ How did you learn/attain your current communication skills?
- ◇ How long does a typical gig take? (weeks, months)

Did you consider other ways of working in design? Why did you make this choice?

- ◇ How do you usually find clients / how do they find you?

2. Experiences – good and bad

What is a communication related issue that you have encountered when working with clients as a visual designer?

- ◇ Describe a difficult scenario/experience → How did you (try to) solve it?

- ◇ Also non-communication related? Practicalities?
- ◇ If applicable: Do you include time spent on communication in your pricing?

What are some successes that you have encountered when working with clients as a visual designer? Communication-related or not?

- ◇ Describe a successful scenario/experience → What aspects do you think promoted the success?

When you started your work in visual design client work and/or freelance, did you feel prepared to communicate with your clients?

- ◇ What helped this / hindered this?
- ◇ Is this an area where you expected problems?

What are some key differences that you see between pure freelance and your current work under a consultancy?

If not answered + if relevant: What role has university education played in your preparedness for client work?

In your own words and interpretation: could you give me a few themes, for example as keywords, that you think are relevant or recurring in visual design client work?

3. Trust

What does trust mean to you in the context of client work? How would you describe its importance?

What, in your own words, promotes trust in a client-designer relationship?

- ◇ Have you experienced a lack of trust in a client? Can you describe it?

What steps do you usually take to attain mutual trust with a client?

4. Wrap-up

What is something unexpected that you have encountered in your career (particularly when freelancing)?

Is there anything else important that comes to mind that you think we didn't cover, or something you would like to add?

Thank you again for your participation!

- ◇ If you want to add or redact something, you can always email me.
- ◇ Lastly, for my future research, do you have any tips for what to look into or who to speak with next?

D. Transcript sample

Interview #7, censored

LJ (Laura Jelínková)

Okay, I think it's recording. I'll also record on my phone just in case. Okay. Yes, so my interview, sorry, my research topic is about communication between visual communication designers and their clients and specifically freelance, but any work where you talk to your clients one-on-one is relevant in this regard, but especially in freelance. So that's why you were invited, and from what I saw on LinkedIn, it seemed like you would probably relate to this a little bit.

Interviewee 7

Yes.

LJ

Yeah, it should take only about, well, I think like 30 to an hour. And no one will hear the recording after this except for me. I will transcribe it and no one else will see the full transcription except for me, but some of the quotes will be in the thesis. I will use some AI tools for the transcribing, not generative AI. I'll use a transcription AI called MacWhisper. I will not show your name and I will censor any details about your clients or employers, stuff like that, stuff that could like easily identify you, but I would like to collect things like age, nationality, education level, education country, if that's okay with you.

Interviewee 7

Or if you need to have recorded consent, yes, that is okay.

LJ

Yes, that's better. Thank you. Great. So you have the informed consent form. You can sign it whenever you're ready and send it back to me. And that's kind of everything that I think you needed to know. Great.

LJ

Yeah, so this is like a very open conversation. So you can always go off topic if you think that, you know, I don't know, whatever pops to your mind. Okay, but to just get started, could you kind of tell me about yourself as like a person, as a professional? Who are you?

Interviewee 7

Yes. So my name is [Interviewee name]. I started actually studying visual communication design already secondary level like back in 2010. So it's been kind of a long term thing. After that, I continued in a higher level and graduated in 2018. Since I have been working, like as a visual designer in agency,

in freelance and in-house. So kind of overall experience in the field. But since I've been also further specialised in design for sustainability in master's level, and I work in digital printed moving image, especially animation and video. And also currently, I'm exploring more innovative forms of special sustainability communications like features prototyping or kind of also these like non-traditional forms of visual communication.

LJ

Okay, that's great. And you studied in Finland?

Interviewee 7

Yes, I've been studying in Finland.

LJ

Are you still studying?

Interviewee 7

No, just graduated.

LJ

Nice, congrats.

Interviewee 7

Thank you.

LJ

Okay, and do you mind telling me your age?

Interviewee 7

[Interviewee age]

LJ

Okay, great. Then could you give me an overview of your work in freelance? Like when did you start? How, I don't know, just give me an overview to begin with and we can go from there.

Interviewee 7

Yes, my work in freelance, it's been, it's been, how to explain it.... Like I really, first time started as a freelancer doing like one gig there and there, maybe 2013. And there's been like clients from really various fields. But then I've been also kind of in a continuous freelance contract for kind of for in-house design. So it's been kind of this relationship between like, employee but still in freelance. Yeah, can you elaborate a little bit what could I tell about?

E. Codebook sample