An Exploration of the Digital Nomad Lifestyle
in Pandemic Times

Bianca de Loryn

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the College of Arts, Society and Education, James Cook University
Cairns, October 2023

"Spiritually at least we are all travellers"

Zygmunt Bauman

Acknowledgements

Statement of the Contribution of Others, Approvals and Research Publications

Other Publications Based on the Research Data in This Thesis:

de Loryn, B. (2022a). Not necessarily a place: How mobile transnational online workers (digital nomads) construct and experience 'home'. *Global Networks, 22*(1). https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/glob.12333

de Loryn, B. (2022b). Finding a balance between quiet work and being social: Exploring coworking space needs of digital nomads in terms of amenities and community. In T. Chaiechi & J. Wood (Eds.), *Community Empowerment, Sustainable Cities, and Transformative Economies* (pp. 151–166). Springer. https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-981-16-5260-8

Abstract

The digital nomad lifestyle is a way of living that focuses primarily on digital work and increased mobility practices. The COVID-19 pandemic can be seen as a turning point for digital work, and not only from the digital nomad perspective. During the pandemic, clerical workers around the world were suddenly also forced to work outside of the company office and from their own homes. However, at the same time, travel and mobility had become difficult, if impossible, for the majority of people around the world. Currently, limited research has explored how the pandemic shaped digital nomads' views on key concepts, including work, freedom and home.

This qualitative study is based on semi-structured interviews with location-independent online workers (digital nomads) and with staff at coworking spaces (i.e., shared commercial offices). The interviews were conducted on location in Chiang Mai, Thailand as well as online in 2019, then online or as written interviews in 2020 due to pandemic restrictions. The research was rounded off in March 2021—one year after the pandemic was declared—by analysing discussions in four digital nomad groups on Facebook.

The analysis was based on multi-grounded theory as proposed by Goldkuhl and Cronholm in 2003, with Zygmunt Bauman's theories on postmodern consumer society used as a theoretical lens. The results show that digital nomads quickly adapted to working from home, and that they found new income sources when necessary. Furthermore, the digital nomads did not find returning to regular employment an attractive alternative.

As to freedom, the interviewees became aware that they used to be privileged travellers, but they also understood that the partial or total loss of their travel privileges was merely temporary. However, in terms of home, the participants as cosmopolitans found it difficult to choose one home and remain in one place for longer periods—no matter if they returned to their home country or if they decided to remain in place elsewhere. Furthermore, those who did not return to their passport country had to accept that some sedentary privileges, such as access to potentially lifesaving vaccinations, was difficult if impossible to obtain. In terms of Bauman's social theories, the outcomes of the analysis indicate that the digital nomad lifestyle, without its clear boundaries between work and leisure, and home and away, could be seen as the first late-postmodern, 'fluid' way of living and working.

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Introduction

In traditional societies, people were generally not given a choice on how to live their lives. Life choices had been made for them when they were born, and it was custom to follow traditions "handed down" by one's ancestors (Franklin, 2003, p. 206; Giddens, 1991, p. 81). When unexpected events happened, perhaps when people were affected by poverty and hopelessness, it was generally agreed that the event was the will of the gods, or a matter of fate or destiny (Beck, 2000; Giddens, 1991).

Postmodern life in Western countries, but also elsewhere, has mostly lost its connection to tradition. Fate and destiny have been replaced by risk (Beck, 2000), and the guidance of tradition has been replaced by uncertainty. People now have the freedom to decide who they want to be as an individual, by working on their "reflexive project of the self" (Giddens, 1991, p. 5). However, this comes at a cost: Freedom and individualisation are now one's fate (Bauman, 1988; 2000a), and people are not free to choose—they are forced to choose (Bauman, 2007b). This means that people today have the freedom to choose from a variety of *lifestyles*, if they have access to the necessary resources, such as money, or cultural capital (e.g. certain qualifications); it also means that one's life course is not preordained by one's family background anymore (Bauman, 1988; Poder, 2016). In this respect, a *lifestyle* can be defined as "routinised practices, the routines incorporated into habits of dress, eating, modes of acting and favoured milieux for encountering others" (Giddens, 1991, p. 81). One of the lifestyles people are now able to choose is the digital nomad lifestyle that will be explored in this thesis.

In the media, the term *digital nomad* started to emerge in the late 2000s, when *Computerworld* columnist Mike Elgan (2008, paragraph 11) wrote that people were now able to engage in "extreme telecommuting" as digital nomads. Elgan had not coined the term himself. Instead, he was probably inspired by the 1997 book *Digital Nomad*, which was written by Tsugio Makimoto and David Manners. In this book, the authors hypothesised that in the near future, the technological developments would allow some people to work online from almost anywhere in the world. On the *Computerworld* website, Elgan defined the term digital nomad as "someone on the move constantly, travelling the world and finding Internet connectivity where it's available and working from wherever" (Elgan, 2008, paragraph 12). The journalist also explained why one would want to become a digital nomad:

> With conventional, traditional work, you're supposed to spend the best years of your
> life commuting in heavy traffic every day to an ugly building where you slave away at
> a desk under fluorescent lights. Once a year, you get a two or three-week vacation,

where you go somewhere nice and live a little. Later, when you're too old to climb volcanoes, you can retire. (Elgan, 2008)

Although technology-assisted work from home had already been trialled in the United States during the 1980s (Olson, 1983), combined online work and global travel only became technologically and financially viable in the late 2000s. The iPhone, for instance, was introduced in 2007. With its on-screen keyboard, the iPhone revolutionised how people used the internet. Furthermore, affordable, global internet access as well as budget international air travel and budget accommodation booking platforms such as Airbnb are now providing the immobile infrastructure for people to live more mobile lives (Sheller & Urry, 2006).

Even though Elgan's definition of a digital nomad is short and concise, a number of social researchers attempted to establish their own definitions over the years (Bartosik-Purgat, 2018; Hannonen, 2020; Liegl, 2014; Müller, 2016; Reichenberger, 2018). Among these, Reichenberger's definition stands out, as it sees online work as a constant and levels of spatial mobility as a variable (see Figure 1.1, Chapter 1). According to Reichenberger, Level 0 digital nomads "achieve location independence by conducting their work in an online environment", whereas Level 3 digital nomads are fully mobile "to the extent that no permanent residence exists" (Reichenberger, 2018, p. 371).

For the purposes of this research, digital nomads are defined as people who have decided to "simultaneously work and travel" (Reichenberger, 2018, p. 371), which for some may also mean that they may not have a permanent address. This definition is based on Reichenberger's (2018) Level 2 and Level 3 digital nomads. Aside from that, a digital nomad should also travel for longer periods than the minimum amount of annual leave in their passport country.

My research (see Chapter 6), as well as the findings of other investigators (Franks, 2016; Mancinelli, 2020), shows that not all people who live a digital nomad lifestyle feel comfortable with the digital nomad label. Instead, these people generally prefer to call themselves *location independent*. However, as there are also location-independent people who do not conduct digital work, the term 'digital nomad' will be used until a better compromise can be established by other researchers.

As the digital nomad lifestyle focuses on digital work and on travel, other researchers have examined issues around work such as the *gig economy*[1] and precarious work (Larsson & Sabolová, 2019; Sutherland & Jarrahi, 2017; Thompson, 2018) as well as travel and mobility aspects, such as Bali as a preferred digital nomad destination (Prabawa & Pertiwi, 2020; Wiranatha et al., 2020). Researchers have also examined issues around freedom (Liegl, 2014; Reichenberger, 2018), often concluding that although digital nomads are on a quest to find freedom (Mancinelli, 2020), they might find

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[1] Once-off contracts that are usually mediated by an online platform for a fixed fee and without employer benefits.

themselves, as Cook (2020) calls it, in a *freedom trap.* According to Cook, the 'freedom trap' is a situation where people believe they are free, but, from the perspective of researchers like Cook (2020), using self-disciplining measures may indicate that they are not as free as they believe they are.

Other topics that have been discussed are coworking and coliving spaces as places to find social connections (Chevtaeva, 2021; Liegl, 2014; Orel, 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers have also examined digital nomads and their responses to the pandemic, such as misbehaving digital nomads in Bali (Bahri & Widhyharto, 2021) or better-behaving digital nomad creators who were still living a somewhat mobile lifestyle in pandemic times (Ehn et al., 2022).

Some researchers have pointed out that digital nomads stay in their own social bubble, have no interest in the local communities they visit (Chevtaeva 2021) and that as long-stay tourists they may contribute to gentrification in local communities (Bahri & Widhyharto, 2021; McElroy, 2019). Other researchers have found that some digital nomads benefit from global inequalities (e.g., Thompson, 2021), for instance in terms of *geoarbitrage* (geographic arbitrage), where a person earns an income in a high-income country and chooses to live in a lower-income country where cost of living expenses are lower (Haking, 2017; Mancinelli, 2020). As these potential negative aspects of the digital nomad lifestyle have been discussed in-depth by others already, this research does not aim to re-examine these issues.

Even though research that examines this lifestyle has grown exponentially since the late 2010s, there are still under-researched areas and research gaps. These gaps include, for instance, how digital nomads define concepts such as freedom or home, with researchers generally not having asked their participants how they defined these concepts when they were discussing related issues. In addition, previous research has not examined how digital nomads have experienced the loss of certain freedoms or their relationship to home in pandemic times. There has been little research so far as to why people choose to become digital nomads, and what a workday and a workweek outside the typical *nine-to-five* work arrangement looks like. Finally, previous research outputs have discussed this lifestyle from a primarily sedentary[2] perspective when labelling digital nomads as privileged citizens (McElroy, 2019; Orel, 2019; Satterstrom, 2019; Thompson, 2019b). However, previous investigators did not consider the privileges of sedentary people that digital nomads may have to give up when deciding to spend longer timespans away from their home address, or if they have no registered home address at all.

Therefore, the purpose of this study to look primarily at how people who live a digital nomads lifestyle see themselves and their work in contrast to sedentary clerical workers in more

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[2] In this context, sedentary means that people are generally living at a permanent address where they spend most of their lives if not at work or on holidays.

traditional work arrangements. Given that the COVID-19 pandemic has challenged traditional work arrangements and has forced millions of people around the world to work from home and explore new ways of working, the digital nomad lifestyle has the potential to foreshadow how computer-based work might develop within the next decade.

This thesis examines three important concepts of the digital nomad lifestyle, work, freedom and home, from the perspective of those who have chosen to live a digital nomad lifestyle. Work in this context is defined as something that a person does for another person or entity in exchange for payment. Of course, there is also unpaid work, such as work done in the household or volunteer work (Bauman, 2004). However, people who subscribe to the digital nomad lifestyle need access to financial resources to be able to afford this lifestyle, which is why this research is primarily focused on paid labour.

Freedom is a term that has undergone major transformations since the late Middle Ages, when it was said that "free means to be allowed to go anywhere" (Bauman, 1988, p. 9). According to the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, freedom is also "a social fact, socially produced and socially endowed with the meaning it happens to carry at a particular time or place" (Bauman, 1988, p. 28). For the purposes of this research, freedom means *consumer freedom*, a freedom which applies only to those who can afford to choose the lifestyle they desire (Bauman, 2003). However, freedom on a global level also means having access to a privileged, or *powerful passport* as Thompson argues (2021, p. 18). A powerful passport allows its holder to access most countries in the world visa-free or via a visa on arrival, which turns border crossings into a fast and worry-free process.

The digital nomad perspective of home does not necessarily align with the postmodern Western definition that home is a "physical structure or dwelling" for the nuclear family (Mallett, 2004, p. 65). The discussion in Chapter 6 will show that *home*, for a digital nomad, focuses primarily on relationships and less so on certain locations.

Based on the research gaps identified above, the following research questions aim to examine aspects of work, freedom and home before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, between November 2019 and March 2021:

1. How do people understand the shift from a traditional working style to the digital nomad lifestyle
    a. how do they describe the experience of their **work**
    b. and how did the COVID-19 pandemic impact their understandings of their labour?
2. How did location-independent online workers (digital nomads) define and experience **freedom** before and during the COVID-19 pandemic?

3. How do location-independent online workers (digital nomads) define **home**; and how have experiences made during the COVID-19 pandemic shaped their perception of home?

This research project is based on a social constructivist worldview that accepts the individual nature of a postmodern, reflexive "do-it-yourself biography" (Beck, 2000, p. 75), which is based on choices that every individual has to make for themselves. Reality is unique and different for every individual. However, it is also clear that people who share the same lifestyle, such as the digital nomad lifestyle, will share certain beliefs and ideas with their peers. Furthermore, this research is based on multi-grounded theory as proposed by Goldkuhl and Cronholm in 2003. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to enable a 'natural' conversation while keeping in mind the questions that needed to be answered (Beaumont, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic did not only have a major impact on the lives of almost 8 billion people around the world, but also on this research project, as movement was "restricted, schools shut and millions of people [at the time were] experiencing loneliness, isolation, anxiety and depression" due to the pandemic lockdowns (World Health Organization [WHO], 2023, p. 2). The novel virus was first detected in China in late 2019 and rapidly spread around the world. The disease was called COVID-19, and its spread was declared a "public health emergency of international concern" (WHO, 2023, p. 5) on 30 January 2020 and a pandemic on 11 March 2020.

More than three years later, on 4 May 2023, WHO finally announced that the virus ceased to be a global health emergency (WHO, 2023). In early May 2023 the virus globally "claimed a life every three minutes", and thus was still considered a global health threat (WHO, 2023, p. 2). From 2020 to 4 May 2023, 7 million deaths due to COVID-19 had been officially reported, but WHO estimates that at least 20 million people may have died due to the pandemic (WHO, 2023).

According to the research plan set up in mid-2019, I was to conduct fieldwork in popular digital nomad destinations as diverse as Chiang Mai, Thailand, in 2019 and Berlin, Germany, in 2020. Although fieldwork in Thailand was conducted as planned, the pandemic made it impossible to conduct fieldwork in Germany during mid-2020. As such, the course of this research was not dictated by the best approach for this research, but by the best approach based on restrictions of movement that were in place at the time.

Even though the original research plan had to be abandoned, conducting research during a global pandemic provided unique insights into the digital nomad lifestyle at a critical time. This was a time when the freedom to travel around the world was obstructed by border closures, severely restricted air traffic, lockdowns and mandatory hotel quarantine periods. Some of the participants were under lockdown in mid-2020, whereas others were still able to travel to a certain extent.

In response to the constraints dictated by the COVID-19 pandemic, this research has been conducted in the following three phases: 1) pre-COVID fieldwork in Chiang Mai in 2019, 2) catch-up interviews during the COVID-19 pandemic in mid-2020 and 3) social media research in early 2021. The third research phase finished on 31 March 2021, at a time when it was still unclear when unrestricted travel would be possible again.

For the fieldwork phase in Chiang Mai, which was conducted in November and December 2019, potential interviewees were recruited on Facebook and in person in Chiang Mai. I interviewed 18 digital nomads and three coworking hosts (i.e., employees of coworking spaces, also known as shared office spaces) in Chiang Mai. The coworking hosts were in contact with digital nomads but had a different perspective on this lifestyle than the nomads.

As fieldwork in Germany was not possible in 2020 due to Australia's borders being closed and Germany's residents under stay-at-home orders, 13 out of 18 digital nomad participants agreed to return for a second interview, either online or in writing. As coworking spaces were closed in 2020, coworking hosts were not invited for a second interview.

In 2021, public safety measures, including lockdowns and border closures, were still in place, so I followed in the footsteps of other social media researchers (Jarrahi et al., 2019; Nash et al., 2021; Sutherland & Jarrahi, 2017) and turned towards popular Facebook groups such as *Digital Nomads Around the World* and *Female Digital Nomads*[3] for information about how these people experienced life one year after the pandemic had been declared—a time when the majority of the global population was still not vaccinated.

The anonymised interview transcripts and Facebook discussions were analysed with the qualitative analysis software NVivo, based on the principles of multi-grounded theory, which closely relates to grounded theory. Grounded theory aims to develop middle-range theory that is solely based on the data of a given research project. However, if a researcher does not take theory developed by other researchers into account, Goldkuhl and Cronholm argue that "there is a risk for inventing the wheel again" (2003, p. 3). This study therefore draws on the theories provided by Zygmunt Bauman's works in relation to the consumer society, work, freedom and globalisation (Bauman, 1988; see also 1993; 1996b; 1998; 2000a; 2004; 2007b). Furthermore, in the chapter that discusses home (Chapter 6), I have also relied on Agnes Heller's works regarding home and *cosmopolitanism*[4], as she has extensively written about this topic (Heller, 1995; 2009; 2011; 2019). In contrast to Bauman, Heller has discussed home from a less pessimistic point of view.

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[3] Although some people claim to be uncomfortable with the label 'digital nomad', the same people do not seem to feel uncomfortable when it comes to signing up for discussion groups with the same name.

[4] Cosmopolitans are people with "knowledge and openness to other cultures" (Featherstone, 2002, p. 2).

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, digital nomads act within the confines of the consumer society, as theorised by Zygmunt Bauman, with freedom defined as making choices about one's lifestyle and many other details of one's life. Furthermore, Bauman as well as other researchers, such as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, see concepts such as the 'working class' as outdated (Bauman 2007a; 2007b), or even as "zombie categories" (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p.1). These concepts were relevant for an industrial society that was based on men selling life and labour as a commodity in the 'Fordist' factory (i.e., a factory that mass-produces standardised products) or as a soldier in the mass-conscript army, with women instructed to stay at home and take care of their husband and children (Bauman, 2000a; 2004). Postmodern life is different, as it is flexible, reflective and based as much on fear of making the wrong choices (Bauman, 2000a) as it is on the need for trust in a multitude of experts (Giddens, 1991). Undeniably, Bauman's consumer society is still a hierarchy with several tiers. Consumer society is based on the consumer, who is a person with *resources*—which may include financial resources and access to credit, but also *cultural capital* (e.g., certain qualifications)—that enable consumers to purchase the lifestyle they desire (Bauman, 1988; Poder, 2016).

After providing an outline of this study in Chapter 1, I will give an overview of current digital nomad research. I will then explain the methodology for this research in Chapter 2 and present Zygmunt Bauman's theories regarding consumer society and the postmodern consumer hierarchy in Chapter 3. In Chapter 4, I will examine how digital nomads scheduled their own lives in terms of work and leisure, and how the COVID-19 pandemic affected their labour. I then discuss how digital nomads defined freedom before and after they experienced the loss of freedom during the COVID-19 pandemic (Chapter 5). After discussing the concept of home for digital nomads before and during the pandemic in Chapter 6, I will close with my conclusions, as well as the limitations of this research and suggestions for future researchers.

An important aspect of the digital nomad lifestyle is that boundaries between the different aspects of the digital nomad lifestyle are blurred (see for instance Orel, 2019; Reichenberger 2018 and Mouratidis, 2018). As such it should not come as a surprise that the boundaries between some issues discussed in this thesis may also not always be clearcut. For instance, when discussing working from home, the question poses itself if this should be discussed in the Work (Chapter 4) or in the Home chapter (Chapter 6). I have made the decision to discuss this in Chapter 6, as I aimed to avoid discussing issues related to home in the Work chapter; however, some readers may find that this topic would just as well fit in Chapter 4.

Chapter 1
Exploring the Digital Nomad Lifestyle

Before the industrial revolution, tradition (i.e., social customs handed down from previous generations) dictated many aspects of life around the world. When children were born, their social status and the work they would engage in as an adult was usually predetermined based on their family background. When the industrial revolution began in the late 18th century in England, this connection to tradition started to break up, and people were forced into a new lifestyle[5] that was chosen for them. Those who had no other choice but to work in a factory, for instance, automatically became part of the working class. However, with the shift from the industrial age to postmodernity in the late 20th century, the concept of class lost importance, with people in many industrialised countries realising that work was not the defining factor in their lives anymore. Their lifestyle became disconnected from work. The digital nomad lifestyle is one of the many lifestyles available on the seemingly unlimited postmodern 'social menu.' The only limitation in this respect is one's access to resources (Bauman, 1988), which includes, for instance, cultural capital (see Chapter 2), as well access to funds, for instance from one's bank account or credit cards (Bauman, 2002).

The digital nomad lifestyle has been discussed in the press since the early 2000s (e.g., by Elgan, 2008), with researchers being attracted to the topic since the mid-2010s (e.g., Brown, 2015; Liegl, 2014). In the early years, researchers were first and foremost concerned with defining the digital nomad, but they also examined issues around online work and travel, which, after all, are the mainstays of this lifestyle. Since the late 2010s, the number of publications in this field has grown exponentially, and a simple search on Google Scholar in May 2023 produced over 2,000 results. As such, it is near impossible to write an exhaustive literature review in this space. Rather, this literature review will focus on the research outputs that are relevant to the issues that will be discussed in this thesis. In this chapter, I will first examine research outputs that attempted to define the digital nomad lifestyle. Following this, I will review lifestyle mobilities and the (not always) privileged digital nomad, before examining current literature about work and work–life balance issues. The subsequent section examines places for nomadic working and living, such as coworking and coliving, as well as current research about digital nomads and their views of the concept of home.

The last section in this chapter discusses the digital nomad lifestyle during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as potential future developments for remote work in relation to the digital nomad lifestyle. A short conclusion summarises current research and clarifies some of the research gaps.

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[5] A lifestyle consists of "routinised practices, the routines incorporated into habits of dress, eating, modes of acting and favoured milieux for encountering others" (Giddens, 1991, p. 81).

Defining the Digital Nomad Lifestyle

Since the mid-2010s, investigators have attempted to define the digital nomad lifestyle from a variety of theoretical lenses. Definitions sometimes overlap, with each researcher concentrating on marginally different aspects of the lifestyle. Liegl, for instance, explained in his examination of digital nomads and their use of coworking spaces that a digital nomad is "a mobile knowledge worker equipped with digital technologies to work 'anytime, anywhere'" (2014, p. 163). Through Richards' tourism lens, digital nomads are "flashpackers" who use "existing digital and logistic infrastructure to maintain a fluid, individualized lifestyle" (2015, p. 340). In 2016, Müller defined a digital nomad as someone who could "essentially work anywhere … as long as they have their laptop with them and access to a good internet connection" (2016, p. 344). All three researchers, Richards, Liegl and Müller, based their definitions on Makimoto and Manner's book *Digital Nomad* (1997), even though the internet in 1997 relied on the slow and unstable 'dial-up' connection. As such, Makimoto and Manner's book only discussed a potential future and not the reality of the 1990s.

In contrast, Reichenberger (2018) was one of the first investigators who did not rely on Makimoto and Manner's thought experiments and instead based her research on interviews with 22 online freelancers, entrepreneurs and remote workers from Europe and the Americas. Reichenberger's definition (see Figure 1.1 below) assumes that digital nomads are people who work online. At the same time, location independence is categorised into four levels beginning with Level 0: an individual who works online and thus is, theoretically, location independent. The highest level is Level 5, where an individual does not have a permanent address anymore.

It should be pointed out that these categories have been established by Reichenberger based on feedback by self-identified digital nomads. It is arguable if Level 0 digital nomads actually qualify as 'nomads'. After all, 'nomadism' intrinsically implies movement (see Figure 1.1 on the following page). Furthermore, people have worked online, for instance as teleworkers, even before the digital nomad movement began. In this respect, Cangià et al. (2022) define remote work conducted by non-nomadic full-time employees as "rooted digitalism" (p. 1).

Aside from levels of digital nomadism, Reichenberger's (2018) research also shows that digital nomads can be of any age (her interviewees were between 19 and 51 years old) and are not necessarily male, as Makimoto and Manners suggested in 1997. Digital nomads may also have all educational backgrounds, even though it appears that there may be more postgraduate digital nomads than high school leavers taking up this lifestyle (Reichenberger, 2018).

Figure 1.1

Levels of Digital Nomadism

Level 0	achieve location independence by conducting work in an online environment
Level 1	transfer location independence to mobility by not consistently working in one designated space
Level 2	simultaneously work and travel
Level 3	simultaneously work and travel to an extent that no permanent residence exists
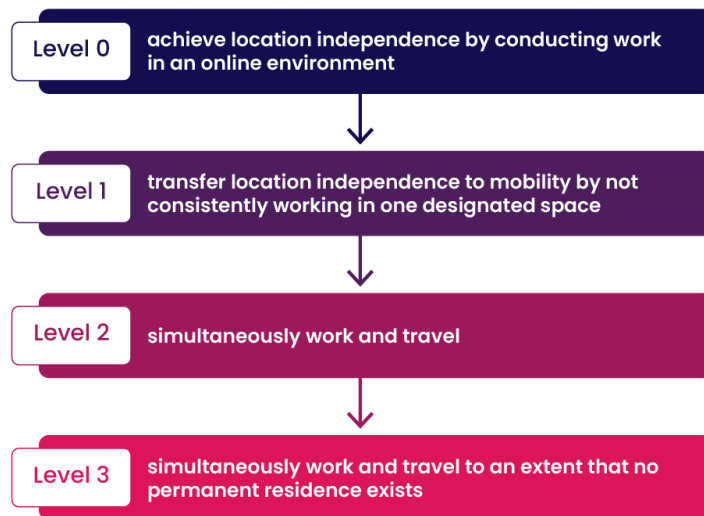
Note. Adapted from "Digital nomads–a quest for holistic freedom in work and leisure" by Ina Reichenberger, 2018, *Annals of Leisure Research*, 364–380. https://doi.org/10.1080/11745398.2017.1358098.

From 2018 onwards, the rapidly increasing number of research outputs is proof of the growing popularity of this field. According to Nash et al. (2018), who analysed data from relevant Reddit and Facebook discussion groups, digital nomadism is a hybrid concept that is based on digital work, *gig work*[6], nomadic work and global travel. This is in line with Bartosik-Purgat's argument that this "lifestyle connects earning money and realizing passion for travelling and being independent" by means of working online (2018, p. 260). Wang et al. add that digital nomadism may be an "economic activity, wherein digital nomads challenge traditional dichotomies such as production/consumption and government/business" (2018, p. 9). According to Hannonen (2020), other important aspects of this lifestyle are "international (semi)perpetual travel, downshifting" (p. 351), but also bonding between people who live the same lifestyle.

Research has shown that even digital nomads have had difficulty establishing a 'definitive definition' of what it means to be a digital nomad (Beaumont, 2019; Chevtaeva & Denizci-Guillet, 2021; Franks, 2016). Aroles et al. (2020), for instance, found that some of their participants regarded a remote worker not as a "full-fledged digital nomad" (p. 120), even though this person might be considered a Level 0 or Level 1 digital nomad from the perspective of Reichenberger's (2018) interviewees. At the same time, researchers were told that their participants "were not travelling frequently enough and were simply living abroad" and as such they did not think they qualified for

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[6] Gig work describes "contingent work arrangements that require digital platforms" (Tran & Sokas, 2017, p. e63). Many gig workers "are highly educated and might previously have been in traditional employer–employee relationships, and [the gig economy] appears to increase their vulnerability to wage theft, independent contractor misclassification, job insecurity, and lack of occupational health protections" (Tran & Sokas, 2017, p. e63). Digital nomads generally generally only engage in work that can be done on a computer, but people working for delivery service platforms, for instance, also qualify as gig workers.

the digital nomad label (Aroles et al., 2020, p. 121). This will be discussed later in this thesis, as some of the interviewees stated during the lockdown periods of the COVID-19 pandemic that they were not digital nomads anymore because they were not able to travel. Instead, they chose to call themselves location independent (for more, see Chapter 6). These findings are also supported by other researchers, who stated that some digital nomads avoided the term 'digital nomad' altogether and preferred to call themselves location independent (Franks, 2016; Mancinelli, 2020). The research participants in these studies did not consider, however, that there are also location independent people who do not engage in online work. For the want of a better term, 'digital nomad' is therefore more specific as it refers only to mobile digital work.

Researchers such as Richter and Richter (2020) have pointed out that this lifestyle for some also comes at a cost, especially when people engage in precarious work (that is, insecure work without access to welfare). Also in 2020, Hermann and Paris came to a similar conclusion, arguing that these people are "beach-bound laptop workers with high levels of self-reliance and minimal constraints", but also subject to "precariousness, high risks, loneliness, and uncertainty" (2020, p. 332).

One of the most recent attempts at defining the digital nomad lifestyle was made by Cook (2023). According to Cook, the pandemic has changed the way people think about digital nomadism, and that it may be necessary to update the definition for post-pandemic times, which, as he argues, should include new digital nomad subcategories such as "experimental" and "armchair digital nomads" (p. 256). Cook also quoted one interviewee who argued that one should "move around" (Cook 2023, p. 258) at least three times per year in order to be called a digital nomad, and that this could not include family visits. This, however, is highly subjective, as the interviewee did not elaborate on what "moving around" meant for him, and how long each of these trips had to be in order to qualify.

As shown in the previous paragraphs, since the early 2010s, researchers have attempted to define this lifestyle from a variety of theoretical lenses, including tourism, lifestyle mobilities and work aspects. In this respect, some researchers were relying on the speculative assumptions that Makimoto and Manners (1997) had published in regard to what a possible digital nomad lifestyle could look like, whereas investigators like Reichenberger (2018) based their research on interviews with digital nomads. Yet, establishing a definitive definition will always be difficult, as the digital nomad lifestyle is not a profession but a lifestyle. It is "a distinctive, hence recognisable, mode of living" (Sobel, 2013, p. 28), that combines aspects of work, business, leisure and travel that are different based on the resources and the work and leisure interests of the individual digital nomad.

The definition used in this thesis is based on Reichenberger's (2018) work. People who follow the digital nomad lifestyle "simultaneously work and travel" (Reichenberger, 2018, p. 371),

with some digital nomads potentially not having a permanent address. This definition is analogue to Reichenberger's Level 2 and Level 3 digital nomads. Furthermore, someone who lives a digital nomad lifestyle should travel for longer periods than the minimum amount of annual leave they would receive in their passport country.

Lifestyle Mobilities and the 'Privileged' Nomad

According to Cohen et al., tourism in the 21st century has evolved into a form of "temporary mobility" with the line between tourism as a temporary location change and migration as a more permanent change of location becoming ever more blurred (2015, p. 158). Cohen et al.'s concept of lifestyle mobilities can be defined as "ongoing semi-permanent moves of varying duration" (2015, p. 158). Pursuing a mobile lifestyle that incorporates travel and tourism, and for some, multiple homes or 'moorings' (Cohen et al., 2015) are some of the mainstays of the digital nomad lifestyle. If seen from Cohen et al.'s perspective, the digital nomad lifestyle finds itself in the centre of the lifestyle mobilities continuum—between temporary mobility (i.e., tourism) at one extreme and migration at the other extreme.

In terms of said temporary moorings, Franks (2016) found that their research participants generally moved to a new destination after one to three months. Whenever they decided to visit a certain location, the participants claimed they were "living" at this "base", and not simply staying somewhere like regular tourists (Franks, 2016, p. 35), although this does not necessarily mean that they had applied for a work visa when they crossed the border of this country. Franks also discussed the effects of perceived excessive mobility, or "nomad burnout" (2016, p. 37), which is not caused by work-related stress but by frequent location changes. However, Franks contended that a mobile lifestyle could provide safety for digital nomads with less privileged backgrounds. Two of her interviewees, for instance, explained they felt safer when travelling outside of their native country, Colombia.

Hall et al. (2019) examined the digital nomad lifestyle based on Hall's own experiences as a digital nomad. The researchers point out that digital nomads are not business travellers, and similar to 'regular' leisure travellers, they do not get paid for travelling. Many digital nomads also use tourist visas when crossing borders, even though they are certainly doing business while they travel. This may be because most countries do not have laws or special visas in place for foreigners who are neither tourists nor migrants, and who do not compete against local workers. Thus, from a lifestyle mobilities perspective, the authorities would only ever regard these people as tourists. Finally, some digital nomads also hide their mobility practices from their sedentary customers as they fear that potential clients may not tolerate this lifestyle (Hall et al., 2019).

Mancinelli found that some of her participants openly rejected sedentarism, especially in respect to "material accumulation and moral stagnation", but at the same time she noticed that they would gravitate towards destinations that offered exactly the same infrastructure they had left behind (2020, p. 428). Therefore, Mancinelli sees these lifestyle choices as an "alleged counter-culture" (2020, p. 434), and she argues that digital nomads only appear to challenge the system, but in reality, merely adapt to the current neoliberal order.

Furthermore, Mancinelli (2020) and Green (2020) also found that digital nomads were not a homogenous group. Mancinelli, for instance, noticed that "older and professionally more established" people preferred to avoid the digital nomad label (Mancinelli, 2020, p. 425), whereas Green (2020) also found multiple points of tension between different groups of foreigners in Chiang Mai, Thailand. This includes location-independent 'veteran' digital nomads who appeared to disapprove of less experienced nomads, the "digital newbies" (Green, 2020, p. 441). Finally, even though there seems to be a certain focus on younger, flashpacker digital nomads (e.g., Richards, 2015), Eager et al. point out that there are also "vehicle-based digital nomads" who are "mature-aged, hypermobile gig worker[s]" (2022, p. 7).

The above research shows that many digital nomads appear to be relatively privileged, but only as long as they hide their mobility practices to avoid potential unpleasant discussions with border authorities and sedentary customers alike. McElroy also appeared to disapprove of this lifestyle, arguing that by using "technologies of gentrification" such as Airbnb, digital nomads contribute to *techno-imperialism* (2019, p. 217). For McElroy, techno-imperialism is "the process in which Silicon Valley penetrates both global and intimate spaces alike to expand its power" (2019, p. 217). McElroy disregards, however, that Airbnb was initially established to help people generate an income by renting out their spare bedroom to budget travellers and not necessarily to digital nomads. On a similar note, Thompson argues that digital nomads "select locations in which their demographic privileges are maximized, along with their hedonistic pleasures" (2019a, p. 33). This means that, according to Thompson, tend to visit countries where cost of living is lower. Yet, by choosing Spain and Portugal as her research sites, Thompson also proves that digital nomads visit places where their demographic privileges are not maximised (2019a, p. 32). Furthermore, by conducting research in Spain and Portugal, Thompson excluded those digital nomads who do not have a powerful passport and thus do not have access to an easy-access tourist visa to Europe's Schengen area.[7]

Thompson (2019) argues that there is generally little interaction between visitors and local residents, which other researchers in this field have also noticed (Chevtaeva, 2021; Chevtaeva & Denizci-Guillet, 2021; MacRae, 2016). On the other hand, not all digital nomads are alike, and

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[7] The Schengen area includes 27 European countries, including Portugal and Spain.

Thompson stresses that especially "digital nomads of color" appear to show more "potential for awareness of social inequalities and cultural exchanges" (2019a, p. 34).

In contrast to research arguing that digital nomads are primarily from privileged backgrounds with powerful passports, several researchers have shown that digital nomads may come from many countries around the world. Al-Hadi and Al-Aufi (2019), for instance, investigated Omani digital nomads who worked and travelled within Oman. In a global context, Omani passport holders have few travel privileges, which is similar to Krivtsova et al.'s (2019) participants who originated in the Russian Federation, Belarus and Turkey. Prabawa and Pertiwi's research sample included digital nomads with privileged Asian or Western passports, and participants from the Russian Federation and China (2020). Frank's (2014) participants were also from Puerto Rico, Brazil and Colombia (p. 74), which are countries with less powerful passports. This is important to note, especially in the context that researchers often focus on privileged digital nomads looking to live a comfortable life in a country where cost of living is lower. The case of the less privileged nomads shows that saving money or 'geo-arbitrage' has less importance at least for those who do not own passports of high-income countries (this will be further explored in Chapter 5).

As digital nomads generally travel as tourists, it will probably remain unclear how many people live a digital nomad lifestyle at any one time, if their numbers are growing and if they are indeed primarily coming from Western countries. Based on the available research, there is a likelihood that digital nomads may be found in most countries around the world, with researchers themselves limiting their potential pool of interviewees by deciding to investigate in a certain location, or when looking for potential candidates on the internet, by looking in English speaking discussion groups only.[8]

To date, no research has focused on the sedentary privileges people may have to forego when choosing a mobile lifestyle that extends beyond a two-week annual holiday. Given that most researchers in this field are sedentary, they are potentially not aware of certain privileges lost when a person is not constantly available at a registered address. Therefore, even if digital nomads are privileged in some settings, it may be worth examining which privileges they have to give up when choosing this lifestyle.

Working in the Gig Economy and Achieving a Work–Life Balance

Digital nomads are freelancers, entrepreneurs and remote workers (Haking, 2017; Reichenberger, 2018), with some also working in the gig economy (Thompson, 2021). Sutherland and Jarrahi define digital nomads as "independent, mobile gig workers" who finance their lifestyle by

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[8] This holds true for internet research, as researchers who publish in English generally conduct their research in English speaking internet discussion groups (e.g., Nash et al., 2018, Hemsley et al., 2020, Mouratidis, 2018).

sourcing their online work from internet-based services (2017, p. 10). The researchers found that, in contrast to regular (full-time or part-time) employees, digital nomad gig workers did not only have to purchase their own (e.g., computers and certain software) for their work, but they also had to engage in additional unpaid work, such as looking for future projects, accounting and self-marketing. Sutherland and Jarrahi did not consider, however, that regular workers also engage in a considerable amount of unpaid work simply by commuting to work every day.

In terms of gig work, Thompson explored how many hours her interviewees would generally work. They found that the four-hour workweek, as advocated by the author and entrepreneur Tim Ferris (2011), remains unachievable for most digital nomads. Instead, the researcher argues that there is a divide between the ideal of freedom that digital nomads seek and the reality of gig work, as gig work "contains a high level of surveillance where each activity is recorded, documented, and becomes a part of their larger record" (Thompson, 2021, p. 44). Surveillance has become increasingly popular in regular employment as well (Stark et al., 2020; Vitak & Zimmer, 2023), so this may simply be an emerging trend in employer–employee relations and not unique to gig work.

Furthermore, Thompson argues that due to the low wages in the gig economy, some digital nomads "struggle even to pay their rent in Thailand with piece-meal digital marketing gigs" (2018, p. 17). Unfortunately, the author does not provide details as to actual income received, and it should be clear that not all digital nomads work in marketing. Thompson (2018) adds that many digital nomads are underinsured and do not have retirement plans. On a more positive note, according to Haking (2017, p. 30), almost 60 per cent or two in three of her research participants reported they worked between 10 and 40 hours per week, which is still below the average for full-time employees (read more about this in Chapter 4). At the same time, around 60 per cent of Haking's (2017) participants also indicated they were earning the same or more income than a location-dependent job, which, at least in part, disagrees with Thompson's findings. As mentioned earlier, digital nomads are a very heterogenous group, so it should not come as a surprise that this also translates to their income.

Work is important to finance the digital nomad lifestyle, but so is finding a balance between work and leisure. However, it appears that leisure on its own, as a central element of this lifestyle, is primarily addressed as a 'by-product' of work. Mouratidis (2018) and Satterstrom (2019), for instance, found that some digital nomads were very aware that a leisure hour is an hour without pay, which can be detrimental when one aims to achieve a better work–life balance. According to Cook (2020), his participants found it difficult to establish a work–life balance, and those serving customers from different time zones felt additional stress. This has also been noticed by Bonneau and Aroles (2022) who contend that "even the most convinced nomads realize that their quest for a leisure-driven lifestyle actually means that they are always working while travelling" (p. 230). The best remedy for this seems to be to travel as a couple (or a family), as Cook (2020) observed that work and leisure

time appeared to be easier to manage by couples. This is also in line with Mouratidis's (2018) observations.

To conclude, scholars so far have thoroughly researched digital nomad work, especially in regard to working in the gig economy but also with respect to work–life balance, and they are highly interested in examining digital nomad gig workers. However, there are also digital nomads who work outside the gig economy (e.g., as remote employees, business owners and as freelancers), and there are still research gaps regarding online work. In terms of work–life balance, researchers appear to have focused on a certain disparity between the leisure time that digital nomads look for and how much leisure time and freedom they allow themselves.

At the same time, there has been little interest so far in examining how the digital nomad workday and workweek differ from the regular nine-to-five week. In addition, researchers have shown little interest in the transition phase from 'regular' to digital nomad worker, or justifications for the transition beyond the desire for more freedom. Other researchers have also not considered how much people were willing to pay, in terms of potential financial risk, when transitioning to this lifestyle, and if it made a difference if someone had a 'digital nomad-friendly' profession before they decided to take up this lifestyle.

Communities for Working and Living: Coworking, Coliving and Other Workspaces

As digital nomads do not have access to a permanent, employer-owned workspace, they need to look for alternative workspaces. Nash et al. (2021) found that their interviewees used different types of workspaces based on the type of work that needed doing. For client meetings, interviewees would seek out workspaces similar to a traditional office. For meetings and socialising with fellow online workers, coworking spaces, conferences and similar events were important. In terms of focus work, which requires a quiet environment, the interviewees preferred private areas or their accommodation, whereas unpaid work, such as reading emails, travel planning and marketing was often done in places "related to transportation" (Nash et al., 2021, p. 277).

I have written elsewhere (de Loryn, 2022b) that my research participants preferred to frequently seek out new workspaces, and coworking spaces generally represented only one of several possible options, such as cafes, hostels or libraries. Those who used coworking spaces extensively, however, explained that it was important for the coworking spaces to offer social activities (de Loryn, 2022b). Liegl (2014) contends that his participants were constantly looking for an ideal work environment, and that they would look for new potential workspaces when they found they were not creative and productive at a certain place anymore. However, Liegl also found that using coworking spaces was beneficial for mental health and general wellbeing simply due to the "physical (co-)presence of others, even when … not directly collaborating" (2014, p. 175). In line with Liegl's

findings, Lee et al. (2019b) state that digital nomads use co-spaces (coworking and coliving spaces) both for social and professional contacts, but also to feel as part of a community. However, Lee et al. (2019a) add that connecting with others may be difficult for introverts, and the coworking experience can be disappointing when there are no social activities on offer.

Orel also looked at the benefits and "motivational factors behind the usage of local coworking spaces" and found that his interviewees felt they were more effective, more innovative and less lonely when using coworking spaces (2019, p. 215). Orel's interviewees added they received emotional support from others, and they felt that "socializing with other users makes their work 'more meaningful'" (2019, p. 222).

In contrast to coworking spaces, coliving (sometimes also spelled 'co-living') spaces are businesses that offer coworking in combination with short-term accommodation. According to von Zumbusch and Lalicic (2020), digital nomads use coliving spaces to connect with people who have shared interests, since these spaces reinforce their self-identity. In this respect, communal spaces, but especially the community manager (i.e., someone who organises social events) help to improve wellbeing (von Zumbusch & Lalicic, 2020). Likewise, Chevtaeva found that some digital nomads are attracted to coworking and coliving for the community, as coworking spaces allow "easy access to meeting people and events" (Chevtaeva, 2021, p. 204). Furthermore, digital nomads look for a "pleasant work environment" and "business advice & place [*sic*] to learn from others" (Chevtaeva, 2021, p. 204).

Chevtaeva also observed that some digital nomads viewed coworking spaces as "a Disneyland experience" (2021, p. 204) that did not motivate them to connect with the local community. Yet, Chevtaeva and Denizci-Guillet (2021) also found that the coworking experience depended on the continent they visited, as digital nomads found it easier to connect with local people in Europe (Europeans also used coworking spaces) and harder to connect in Southeast Asia, where residents generally did not use coworking spaces.

Altogether, recent research in terms of workspace usage shows similar and sometimes overlapping results, as several researchers found that digital nomads preferred to frequently switch their workspaces, reasoning that they were more productive in an unfamiliar environment. Some digital nomads look for community in coworking and coliving spaces even if this community is fluid and temporary. In this respect, von Zumbusch and Lalicic (2020) see digital nomads as a tribe that is not connected by shared family ties, but by a shared lifestyle and shared interests. However, this is not to say that all digital nomads use coworking spaces, as those who are travelling with a partner may not see the need to socialise, whereas others may work from their accommodation and engage in social activities only after their work is done (de Loryn, 2022b).

To conclude, workspace usage has been extensively researched, and it appears that there are few research gaps to fill for now. One under-researched area, however, is the temporal aspect of workspace usage. Given that digital nomads have complete freedom to schedule their work and their leisure hours, there is no research yet that examines if they are using these workspaces during the same nine-to-five timeframe as those in regular employment.

Freedom from the Perspective of a Digital Nomad

Since the early days of the digital nomad lifestyle, freedom has been primarily defined as mobility freedom, or the freedom to travel where one wants to (Richards, 2015; Franks, 2016). Satterstrom also found that this lifestyle promised freedom and global mobility, but her participants found it challenging "to balance motivation to work with desire to travel" (2019, p. 42).

Reichenberger (2018) argued that freedom is a holistic concept that incorporates work and leisure, which is in line with Haking (2017), who sees freedom also as "personal and professional freedom" (p. 4). Mouratidis' (2018) research participants explained that by avoiding the repetitiveness and stagnation of regular full-time employment, they were able to find freedom.

Furthermore, freedom has a time component, with Franks (2016) arguing that for a digital nomad, it means to be free "from the constraints of time" (p. 9) and Mouratidis (2018) contending his participants found it important to have the freedom to decide what to do with their day.

However, there are also critical voices, such as Mancinelli (2020), who found that with freedom comes increased "individual responsibility" (p. 434). Cook (2020) argued in a similar vein that due to the self-discipline that digital nomads need when it comes to work and leisure, they may not actually be free but rather find themselves in a self-created "freedom trap".

In terms of potential research gaps, researchers so far have not examined how digital nomads discuss freedom when it is taken away, such as during a global pandemic.

Feeling at Home in Many Places

People who subscribe to the digital nomad lifestyle engage in mobility practices that are located on a continuum between travel and migration. They engage in online work (but not necessarily in gig work) in order to finance their lifestyle, and they often use a number of different workspaces to do their daily work. But digital nomads are not people without a home. Being neither tourists nor migrants, they have developed a different, more 'fluid' outlook on what home means to them compared to those who subscribe to more sedentary values. I have written elsewhere that home, for a digital nomad, "can be any place in the world where one happens to be" (de Loryn, 2022a, p. 115), but the family home could also be "at worst, a place of regression into a former life" (de Loryn, 2022a, p. 113). Mancinelli, who focused on location independent families, found that her

interviewees strived to create "a home through living and having experiences together", for instance by adhering to certain routines. The participants also created a sense of security and belonging by taking certain objects on their journeys that were of personal value to them (Mancinelli, 2018, p. 11).

When researching the transformation of the definition of home in the 21st century, Bergan et al. analysed the websites of commercial coliving spaces in the United States and found that coliving businesses understand the needs of their clients, with home "marketed as short term and flexible rather than long term and secure" (2021, p. 1213). Home is also presented as an integrated workspace, "a place where economy is lived and produced" (Bergan et al., 2021, p. 1214). Bergan et al. add that coliving spaces, in the form of commercial home-replacements, do not offer privacy but a curated experience that allows them to connect with like-minded nomads—which is also an "elitist exclusive community" (2021, p. 1215). This also confirms Chevtaeva's (2021) previously mentioned observation that coliving could be called a Disneyland experience.

In terms of connection to certain places, Beaumont (2019) explored the city of Lisbon as a potential home for digital nomads. The author described feeling at home as a personal experience that was not connected to a specified location. Therefore, Lisbon could indeed be a home for a digital nomad, just like any other place in the world could be home. Some of Beaumont's interviewees "reported that they felt like as though Lisbon had made them feel at home", whereas others felt they connected via their Portuguese ancestors (2019, p. 52). Most participants felt at home in Lisbon simply because they found it easy to connect with other digital nomads who were foreigners in the city—just like themselves. Hannonen et al. (2023) discovered that local businesses on the Spanish island of Gran Canaria were very interested in digital nomad clients. They argued that the locals were willing to "go an extra mile to make sure people feel at home" (p. 8), so that the nomads could feel like "new locals" (p.1) on the island. It should be pointed out here that both in Lisbon and Gran Canaria the income gap and the cultural divide are not as significant between the locals and the visitors as it is, for instance, in Asia, where there is generally less contact between locals and visitors (Thompson, 2021; Korpela, 2006).

Furthermore, digital nomads also discuss *home bases*: temporary homes that are important to them primarily because of the social environment (de Loryn, 2022a), and they are important when digital nomads get tired of travelling (Heicks, 2023). According to Nowicka (2007), the home of the parents can also be a home base.

Overall, research shows that although some digital nomads may be semi-sedentary or non-sedentary, they still create a sense of home and belonging for themselves no matter where they are located at the time. This fluid, non-sedentary concept of home might include several different homes, such as the family home, or one or several temporary home bases, such as a coliving space. In terms

of potential research gaps, the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on digital nomads who were not willing, or able, to return to their home country has not been examined so far, as well as the experiences of those who were not able to leave their home country for long periods during the pandemic. This seems like an inconsequential choice from a sedentary perspective. However, as will be described in Chapter 6, having to choose between one's biological family, who may reside in one country, and a loved one living in a different country during the pandemic, could have major consequences for one's wellbeing.

The Digital Nomad Lifestyle During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond

When COVID-19 was declared a pandemic in March 2020, people around the world were urged to return home, stay at home and work from home if allowed. Some digital nomads returned to their home country, whereas others decided to continue travelling (Ehn et al. 2022a). Ehn et al. focused on digital nomad influencers who published videos on YouTube with topics such as the "Pros and Cons of Location Independence, and Risk Perceptions During [the] Pandemic" (2022a, p. 7). The authors found that the need to "keep moving during the COVID-19 pandemic was driven by the desire to retain the freedom they see as one of their core values" (Ehn et al., 2022, p. 8). Ehn et al. argue that their research subjects regarded negotiating risks as a part of their lifestyle, as they have learned to negotiate risks in their own individual way.

In another paper, Chevtaeva and Denizci-Guillet (2021) interviewed digital nomads during the lockdown phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in May 2020. They also found that some respondents were still living a nomadic life. The majority of their interviewees mentioned that they still preferred working in coworking spaces, with three participants stating that the availability of a coworking space had an influence on their travel planning process.

Travel during the pandemic was not encouraged in the interest of public safety, and wanting to travel in pandemic times may have been seen as selfish behaviour (Holleran & Notting, 2023). Holleran and Notting (2023) found that in response, some digital nomads avoided sharing this aspect of their lifestyle on social media in order to avoid being sanctioned by the public.

During the pandemic, a number of countries allowed tourists to remain within their borders via a visa amnesty, even though not all digital nomads appeared to appreciate the hospitality of their host country. Bahri and Widhyharto (2021), for instance, examined the fallout on the social media site, Twitter (which was renamed to 'X' in 2023), after a female digital nomad influencer had been expelled from Indonesia in the early months of the pandemic. The American was accused of encouraging Western tourists to overstay their visas and allegedly promoted Bali as a LGBT-friendly destination. The researchers warned that encouraging online workers to stay in Bali long term could result in gentrification in Bali, as the resident population had low internet skills and earned

significantly lower wages than foreign digital nomads. Rakhmadi (2021), on the other hand, examined mid-COVID digital nomad tourism in Indonesia and came to a very different conclusion, arguing that Bali and its coworking spaces should be seen as a business case for the post-COVID era. Rakhmadi suggests that other communities in Indonesia could benefit from digital nomad tourism if they offered similar services to Bali.

In terms of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the future of online work, de Almeida et al. (2021, p. 6) found that the pandemic "stimulated interest in experiencing the digital nomadic lifestyle", but only in respect to remote work and not travel. It seems that drawing a line between work and leisure is still important to many workers, even if they work remotely.

In the same vein, Hemsley et al. analysed discussions related to the hashtag (keyword) 'remotework' on Twitter/X. They concluded that "working away from an office will be a trend into the future" (Hemsley et al., 2020, "The future is flexible" section), adding that employers might have to change their mindset towards location-independent employees. This is because "if and when workers evolve into free agents, they will be not only more challenging to manage, but their relationships to their employers … may push against traditional forms of enterprise security organized around a fixed, internalized population" (Hemsley et al., 2020, "The future is flexible" section).

Bozzi, who focused on Instagram posts, had a very positive outlook for the future of online work, as the author anticipated the development of a potentially more inclusive "post-work" society (2020, p. 5). In this respect, Bozzi argues that:

> The notion of 'digital nomad' could be expanded from a privileged and relatively homogenous demographic to a utopian avatar of post-work—a more inclusive figuration that enables the imagination of a future without borders and without work for all humankind. (2020, pp. 13–14)

However, as mentioned earlier, digital nomads are not a homogenous group, and their privileged status may also be debatable, especially if they are citizens of countries with less powerful passports.

Wang et al. also looked at "the future of knowledge work". They regarded the pandemic as a catalyst, as it disrupted the pre-COVID "factory paradigm" of regular nine-to-five clerical employment (2020, p. 1382). The researchers forecasted that a centrally controlled form of "digital Taylorism" with "stable work contracts, paid leave for illness and parenthood, [and] health insurance" on one extreme may be possible (Wang et al., 2020, p. 1384). However, the authors also see a possibility for the "hypermobility paradigm of knowledge work" which could give future "knowmads" control over their work, with online workers having to individually decide (and pay for)

the extent of their social safety nets (Wang et al., 2020, p. 1384). In their conclusion, Wang et al. expect that the future may lie somewhere between these two extremes "in different locales, for different industries, or at different times" (2020, p. 1392).

Altogether, the COVID-19 pandemic can be considered a watershed moment for digital work, as millions of people were forced to participate in an unofficial global trial of remote work in 2020 and 2021. According to data from the United States, this lifestyle has become increasingly popular since the pandemic, with more than 17.3 million workers (or about 11 per cent of the total workforce) in the United States self-identifying as digital nomads (MBO Partners, 2023). However, due to the fact that not all digital nomads are from the United States, that it is unclear what the minimum requirements are to qualify as a digital nomad, and the added challenge that digital nomads often travel on tourist vias in order to avoid conflicts when crossing borders (Kannisto, 2014), it remains unclear how many digital nomads actually exist worldwide.

In terms of research gaps, it is important to remember that most researcher so far has either focused solely on the pre-, mid-, or post-COVID period alone. The pandemic placed digital nomads in an emotional pressure cooker, with almost everything they valued about this lifestyle taken from them. There is no research yet that has analysed how digital nomads experienced work, freedom or home both before and during the pandemic, and what the losses or the privileges they had previously taken for granted meant for this way of living.

Conclusion

The digital nomad lifestyle has been discussed in the popular media since the late 2000s, and in scholarly literature since the mid-2010s. In the beginning, a number of researchers (e.g., Richards, 2015; Franks, 2016; Müller, 2016) attempted to define the digital nomad by primarily relying on Makimoto and Manner's (1997) book *Digital Nomad,* even though it was written at a time when this lifestyle was still science fiction. Reichenberger (2018) was one of the first researchers to establish a definition by interviewing remote employees, freelancers and entrepreneurs who self-identified as digital nomads. On the basis of these interviews, Reichenberger established a definition that regarded online work as a constant, and mobility as a variable with increased mobility practices resulting in a 'higher-level' digital nomad.

Digital nomads also fit well into lifestyle mobilities research, as discussed by Cohen et al. (2015), with the digital nomad lifestyle situated on a continuum between travel and migration. Due to these mobility practices, many researchers regard those who have adopted this lifestyle as relatively privileged. This, however, may be due to some researchers looking for potential interviewees in places that only people with powerful passports can access, while at the same time omitting research that clearly states digital nomads also originate from countries with less powerful passports. Furthermore,

it appears that so far researchers have shown little interest in examining the potential loss of sedentary privileges that people accept when living a nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle.

In terms of digital work, researchers have been more interested in examining novel work arrangements, such as the gig economy, while not considering that digital nomads may also live under less precarious conditions, and that they may receive a more stable income as remote employees, business owners or freelancers outside the gig economy. At the same time, when researching work–life balance issues, some researchers have concluded that the freedom a digital nomad seeks may be an illusion, as some participants appeared to put themselves under pressure in terms of earning an income.

What has been less researched so far, however, is how the digital nomad workday and workweek differs from regular nine-to-five employment, given that digital nomads consider themselves free to work "anytime, anywhere" (Liegl, 2014, p. 163). Coworking and coliving spaces may be a good source to investigate when and how long digital nomads work—especially if compared to people in regular nine-to-five work arrangements.

Another small but well-covered research niche is what constitutes a home for a digital nomad. However, there has been no discussion so far of the impact the COVID-19 pandemic may have had on how digital nomads define home, especially in cases when they decided to return to their passport country, or, alternatively, when they were not able to return to their home country.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has motivated researchers to examine how digital nomads coped with the challenges of living in a pandemic, and they also examined the inappropriate behaviour of single digital nomads that may result in enforcing negative stereotypes for this lifestyle. In terms of the potential future of online work and the digital nomad lifestyle, researchers present divided views regarding whether the future will offer more freedom and more precarity for online workers, or less freedom and more safety in terms of social welfare.

This short conclusion shows that, although the digital nomad lifestyle is a well-researched field with hundreds of research outputs published every year, there are still several research gaps for investigators interested in this lifestyle phenomenon. As this research project started before the pandemic (2019) and ended at a time when all pandemic-induced travel restrictions were removed around the world (2023), there is a focus on the experiences of digital nomads before and during the pandemic. In this respect, my thesis covers several research gaps addressed above. I examine how and when digital nomads worked (in contrast to the regular nine-to-five workweek), how they justified and experienced the transition to this lifestyle, how they defined and experienced freedom, and finally, how the pandemic impacted their fluid definition of home. However, before these issues are addressed, the following chapter will introduce Zygmunt Bauman's social theories that form the theoretical basis of this thesis.

Chapter 2

Zygmunt Bauman: From Heavy Modern Working Class to Liquid Modern Consumer Society

According to some, the Polish sociologist and philosopher, Zygmunt Bauman (1925–2017), was a "pioneer sociologist of the postmodern" (Beilharz, 2017b, p. 3) and a "prophet of postmodernity" (Franklin, 2003, p. 206). Over his lifetime, Bauman wrote 57 books in English (Beilharz, 2017b). In these books, Bauman documented the shift from industrial society in Western countries, which was marked by long-term planning, a strict hierarchy in the factory and a gender-based division of labour in the family, to a postmodern or *liquid* society (Bauman, 2000a; 2004. This is a society without clear authorities, and no reference points, which forces the individual to find their own way through life and make their own choices (Bauman, 2000a). Within the context of postmodernity, Bauman has made important theoretical contributions that cover issues including freedom (1988), globalisation (1998), unequal access to global mobility (2017) and the precarious postmodern workplace (2004)—all of which are issues that matter to the digital nomad lifestyle. This research project consequently follows in the footsteps of Thompson (2021), who also used Bauman's work as a theoretical lens, which is an alternative to the lifestyle mobilities lens that has been applied by various researchers in this space already (e.g. Hermann & Paris, 2020; Hannonen, 2020; Mancinelli, 2020 and Green, 2020).

As will be more thoroughly explained in the following chapter, this research is based on a multi-grounded theory approach. Multi-grounded theory aims to test and critique existing theory and, if this is warranted by the research results, the researcher may attempt to amend or expand the theory under review in order to make it more applicable for the task at hand.

Zygmunt Bauman's social theories discuss the changing social environment in Western countries in postmodern times. The participants of this research have been born into this postmodern society and have little or no recollection of life in industrial society. The digital nomad lifestyle has only been made possible by the societal and technological changes that postmodernity has brought about, and it is only one of many lifestyles that people are now in a position to choose. This is why Bauman's theories are an appropriate theoretical basis for this research.

As an introduction into Bauman's theories, I will now discuss some of the main concepts of the postmodern and liquid consumer society, which is, after all, the same society that people who follow the digital nomad lifestyle have grown up in. The digital nomad lifestyle is only one among the many lifestyles that consumers are able to choose. After a short review of what the industrial age, used to be like from the perspective of Zygmunt Bauman, I will outline the changes that Bauman has

observed since the transition to postmodernity in the late 20th century. This is followed by an overview of Bauman's postmodern consumer hierarchy, beginning with the *financial and social elite* at the top and the *new underclass* at the bottom. From a global perspective, I will then point out some main features of Bauman's global hierarchy of mobility, which examines the travel privileges of the *nomadic elite* at the top of the hierarchy and below them, the *tourist*, the *vagabond* and, finally, the *forever settled*. After discussing the limited options that are available to escape the consumer society, I will briefly introduce two other theoretical lenses that are related to Bauman's theories—the prosumer society and the new mobilities paradigm—before closing with a short conclusion section. Throughout this chapter, I will also include various sources from other influential sociologists who have a similar outlook on postmodern society.

Heavy Modernity, Obedience and the Working Class

During the industrial age, which Bauman calls the "solid and heavy stage of modernity" (2000a, p. 34), heavy modernity (2000a), or simply, modernity (1996a), working class men were primarily producers of goods, with work (men) and home (women) seen as separate spheres (Bauman, 2004). In the early phase of the industrialisation, women's work in the family home was quietly downgraded to non-work, because it was not paid work (Bauman, 2004). Industrial work on the other hand was to be performed by men, with women generally being excluded from paid work after marriage (Beck, 1992; 2000). Men were paid on an hourly rate, which craftsmen who preferred self-directed work "hotly resented" (Bauman, 2000a, p. 147) because industrial work in the factory "seldom varied from day to day" (Sennett, 1998, pp. 15–16).

Western industrial society focused on concepts such as obedience and control, stability, durability and long-term security (Bauman, 1998; 2000a; 2007b), not only when it came to the finished products, but also in terms of the life and career of the working man and his dependent wife and children. The working male was 'forever' tied to the factory as much as he was tied to his wife and children in a system that encouraged marriage for life (Beck, 2000; Giddens, 1999). However, and on the positive side, this also allowed families to think long term and buy and pay for a family home (Sennett 2007).

The adult male worker was the "absolute, uncontested ruler" of the family (Bauman, 2004, p. 18), and children were born into the working class or the middle class in a society where "class and gender were 'facts of nature'" and non-negotiable (Bauman, 2000a, p. 33). The children of the industrial age had no choice but to fit in, with boys expected to "grow into the yoke of the breadwinner role" and couples expected to "want to live under these conditions" (Beck, 1992, p. 120). Life was lived as a "linear narrative" (Sennett, 1998, p. 16). Conformity to one's assigned roles was seen as a virtue, and there was no space for "spontaneity and individual initiative" (Bauman, 2000a, p. 25). The people of the industrial age, such as the Silent Generation (those born between

1925 and 1945), as well as the early Baby Boomers,[9] experienced a "kind of security which tolerated too little freedom in the pursuit of individual happiness", writes Bauman (1997, p. 3). This sounds like life lived with military discipline, and Sennett argues that this was indeed the case: Work and social life were built like a military organisation. Therefore, Sennett did not find it surprising that the "first half of the twentieth century was devoted to war" (2007, p. 33).

According to Giddens, in "medieval Europe, lineage, gender, social status and other attributes relevant to identity were all relatively fixed" (1991, p. 74). Bauman argues that industrial society had a very similar nature, as it was "a hard container in which human actions could feel sensible and secure" (1997, p. 86), with Sennett adding that during the industrial age, people's time was contained in an "iron cage" (1998, p. 16). Industrial society saw employment for every man as a matter of fate. Unemployment was not an acceptable option. Indeed, unemployment was regarded as dangerous, and *masterless* people were seen as dangerous. The unemployed were "masterless people, people out of control—not surveilled, not monitored, not subjected to any regular, sanctions-fortified, routine", Bauman argues (2004, p. 18). As a result, during the early phase of the industrialisation, men and unmarried women were either forced to work or, alternatively, incarcerated in prison-like workhouses (Bauman, 1998; 2004). When it became clear that there were times of unavoidable unemployment, which could be caused by health reasons or short-term economic downturns (Bauman, 1997), welfare measures were introduced by the governments of the industrialised nations. These welfare measures, Bauman writes, were intended as a "collective guarantee of individual dignified survival" (2004, p. 45) for the " 'reserve army' of labour" (2004, p. 52). Yet, even at the height of the welfare era, there were people who argued that the welfare state supported "social waste", Bauman contends (2000a, p. 145).

Postmodern Society and the Freedom to Choose

The concept of consumer freedom (Bauman, 1988), which towards the end of the 20th century has resulted in the current postmodern, "fluid and light" (Bauman, 2000a, p. 34) and liquid modern society (Bauman, 2000a) was originally intended as a compensation for rights lost when the industrialisation began (Bauman, 1988). "Having been evicted from production and communal self-rule, the individual drive to self-assertion found its outlet in the market game", Bauman wrote in this regard (1988, p. 95). In the late 20th century, Bauman observed that Western society was transitioning from focusing on people as producers to people as consumers (Bauman, 1998), and from social services provided by the welfare state to services privately chosen and paid for by the individual (Bauman, 2004). At the same time, the acceleration of globalisation allowed businesses to move their factories to other countries, and the "reserve army of labour", which had been vital to the Fordist factories of the industrial age, was not needed any more (Bauman, 1997, p. 36). In addition, power

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[9] Baby Boomers were born between 1945 and 1964.

transitioned from "managerial to shareholder power" in large companies (Sennett, 2007, p. 37)—or, as Bauman writes, to "people who invest", (Bauman, 1998, p. 9). These people may not be residents of the countries they invested in, and they may not be interested in long-term goals (Sennett, 2007).

This transition prompted Bauman to write in the late 1980s that work had lost its place as a social bond between people, "as capitalism moves into the consumer phase of its history" (1988, p. 74). He stresses that even in a consumer society, people still produce tangible goods (Bauman, 1998). But people are always consumers first and producers second (Bauman, 2007b), as they spend much of their available time either consuming goods and services or researching what they can consume next (Bauman, 2000a). Work still plays a role in postmodern society, but the ultimate objective is to find a job that is an enjoyable and entertaining (Bauman, 2004). According to Bauman (2007b), modern consumers do not want to see monotony, repetition and routine in their lives. The reality for many, unfortunately, is that companies expect a "skilled, flexible and insecure workforce" (James, 2017, p. 6), and contracts need to be "casual, occasional and 'flexible'" (Bauman, 2004, p. 52). This flexibility is intended for the benefit of the business and not for the benefit of the employees, and so work may not always be engaging after all (Bauman, 1998; 2004). This holds especially true when work hours are set by employers without consideration of their employees' needs (see Chapter 4 for more about *time freedom*).

Being a flexible worker in a flexible workplace has consequences when planning for the future. Employers expect flexibility, Bauman argues, and this includes paying for training in a profession today, only to find out that today's learnings may be obsolete tomorrow (Bauman, 1996a; 1997). Sennett argued in 1998 (p. 22), that "a young American with at least two years of college can expect to change jobs at least eleven times in the course of working and change his or her skill base at least three times" during their career. There is competition in the job market, and applicants have to stand out and turn themselves into a marketable product in order to get noticed among other applicants (Bauman, 2007b).

These people have learned to live flexible and fluid lives in the office and away from work (Urry, 2014, p. X). They are free to create their own identities (including gender identities), and as consumers they are free to do whatever and be whoever they want to be—as long as they "remain politically ineffective" (Bauman, 1988, p. 88). Consumers desire the feeling of being in control when it comes to their own choices, but their choices are meaningless and "for the world at least, inconsequential" (Bauman, 1996b, p. 12). Other voices, such as Sennet (2007), also argue in a similar vein that people are not free at all. After all, one is not free to choose, but forced to choose, and only from a limited set of commercially available options (Bauman, 2000a; Rose, 2010). As a result, people have become "individuals by fate" (Bauman, 2002, p. 69) and not because they wanted to be individuals in the first place. In addition, individual consumers are tasked to find "examples, not

leaders" in order to improve themselves (Bauman, 2000a, p. 71), and "experts of the soul" to learn what freedom is supposed to be (Rose, 2010, p. 17). *Experts* are necessary, as they are "holders of skills inaccessible to the lay and untrained public" (Bauman, 2003, p. 106). Bauman calls these people "counsellors" (2000a, p. 64) or "the personal examples currently celebrated" (2007b, p. 131). Bauman did not live to see the 2020s, but if he did, he might have added another term: *influencers*. Influencers are people who have created profitable businesses by demonstrating to others their worth as "examples, not leaders" (Bauman, 2000a, p. 71).

Of course, experts such as magicians and healers have always existed (Giddens, 1991). Their knowledge was often a "jealously guarded monopoly of the few", whereas today, most knowledge is easier to obtain, and not necessarily of an esoteric nature (Giddens, 1991, p. 30).

Feeling pressured to choose can be even more difficult when consumers realise that the available choices are conflicting with each other (Bauman, 2000a). This also applies to online shopping, where people shop for goods, services and even for potential partners (Bauman, 2007b). In the end, Bauman contends, it is difficult for consumers to "gain control over their fate and make the choices they truly desire" (2000a, p. 39). After all, there is always the possibility that one's consumption-based identity project may fail with only one person to blame: oneself (Bauman, 2000a).

The Postmodern Consumer Hierarchy

Postmodern society is just as stratified as traditional society used to be, and only the ranking criteria have changed. Consumers are at the centre of the new social hierarchy, according to Bauman (see Figure 2.1), but "the settled majority is ruled by the nomadic and exterritorial elite" (Bauman, 2000a, p. 13), "the new global and exterritorial elite" (Bauman, 2000a, p. 154) or the *global elite* (Davis, 2008, p. 26). The global elite includes the financial elite, such as managers (Bauman, 1998; 2007b), experts (Bauman, 1988; 1996a; 2003), celebrities (Bauman, 2000a; Poder, 2016) and politicians (Bauman, 2003). At the bottom of the hierarchy are those who want to live like consumers, but do not have the resources to afford this lifestyle. Bauman calls them *flawed consumers* (1988), the new poor or the underclass (2004).

Some of these flawed consumers might find themselves in the 21st century alternatives of industrial-era workhouses: prisons (Bauman, 1998). This shows that even though postmodern society is different from industrial class-based society it does not mean that it is a 'better' society. What is most disconcerting for those who are living in this society is that the boundaries between the different tiers of this hierarchy are fluid (as demonstrated by the gradual shift of colour in Figure 2.1). An expert is only useful as long as they can prove it, and a consumer can quickly turn into a flawed consumer when they cannot afford their chosen lifestyle anymore, such as when they are made

Figure 2.1

Bauman's Social Hierarchy: From the Top to the Bottom
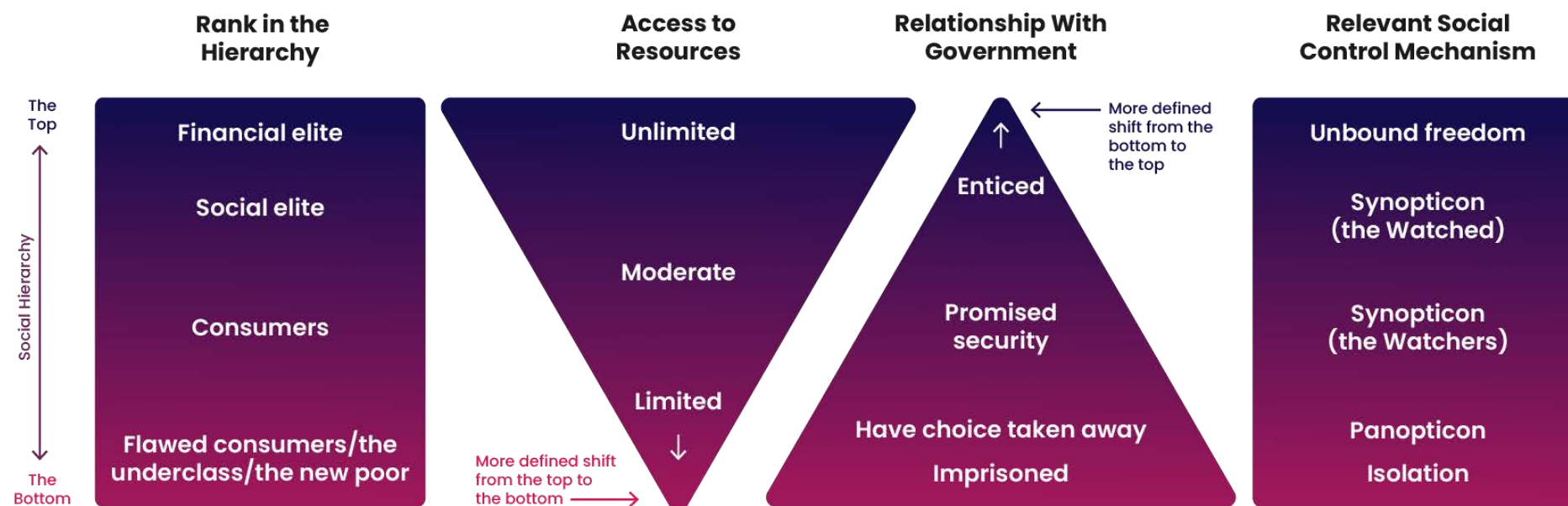
Note. Each person's Rank in the Hierarchy relates to their a) Access to Resources, b) their Relationship with the Government and c) the relevant Social Control Mechanism. For example, the financial elite have 'unlimited' access to resources (a), are 'enticed' by governments around the world (b) and are affiliated with the Social Control Mechanism 'unbound freedom' (c). For more information, see Bauman (1998; 2000a; 2003; 2004).

redundant, or their credit card limit is reached. This is one of the reasons why Bauman also calls the postmodern age *liquid modernity* (Bauman, 2000a).

In the following sections, I will describe the different levels of the liquid or postmodern consumer hierarchy—the financial elite, the social elite (i.e., experts and counsellors), the consumers and the flawed consumers—in more detail. Social control mechanisms, the government's role and access to resources will also be discussed in this chapter.

"Freedom has more to it than the lack of restrictions. To do things, one needs *resources*", Bauman wrote in 1988 (p. 2). Resources include access to money (Bauman, 2002) but also cultural capital (Bauman, 1996b). From Bourdieu's perspective, cultural capital can be summarised as "profits which accrue from membership in a group" (2002, p. 286). As freedom is based on access to resources, more resources result in more freedom, Bauman argues (2000a). Therefore, the financial elite finds itself at the top or close to the top of the hierarchy (Bauman, 2004; 2005). The financial elite consists of "people who invest" (Bauman, 1998, p. 9) or those who work in the "global finance, trade and the information industry" (Bauman, 1998, pp. 67–68). They can live their life in "unbound freedom" (Bauman, 1997, p. 22).

The social elite, on the other hand, is located well below the financial elite but also well above the consumers, and it also includes counsellors (Bauman, 2000a), celebrities (Bauman, 2000a; Poder, 2016) and experts (Bauman, 2003)—or influencers, as mentioned above. Consumers are encouraged to look up to these people, who are well paid for their perceived expertise and for their guidance.

The people who belong to these elites are "those to whom space matters little and distance is not a bother; people of many places but of no one place in particular", Bauman writes (2004, p. 67). They live a "nomadic existence" that does not seem to be obstructed by national borders (Bauman, 2005, p. 3). Of course, the pre-modern nobility has always been able to travel globally, at a time when most people were tied to the land. Compared to the pre-industrial age, postmodern *global mobility* is an entirely different concept, Bauman contends (1998). In pre-industrial times, for instance, travel was slow and cumbersome for the poor and nobility alike. In postmodern times, on the other hand, the speed and comfort of travel is only limited by one's resources (Bauman, 1998). This is why the postmodern elites aim to make global travel for themselves ever easier—at the expense of those further down the social ladder. Bauman (1998, p. 93) argues:

> The pressure to pull down the last remaining barriers to the free movement of money and money-making commodities and information goes hand in hand with the pressure to dig new moats and erect new walls (variously called 'immigration' or 'nationality' laws) barring the movement of those who are uprooted, spiritually or bodily, as a result.

Life is easy for those at the top, Bauman contends, as "orders are local, while the elite and the free market laws it obeys are translocal" (1998, p. 125, see also Sennett, 2007, p. 18). Even more so, "robbing whole nations of their resources is called 'promotion of free trade'; robbing whole families and communities of their livelihood is called 'downsizing' or just 'rationalization'" (Bauman, 1998, p. 123). Even if local governments consider disciplining the global financial elite, Bauman claims, there are always other countries willing to look the other way when it comes to accommodating the wealthy and powerful (1998, p. 125).

On the surface, Bauman's hierarchy seems almost identical to the hierarchy of the industrial age: Rich people rule, poor people are ruled. However, there is a major difference when it comes to the perspective of who is watching and who is watched. In the industrial age, millions of men were forced into factories or mass conscript armies and spent their lives under the supervision of their superiors (Bauman, 2000a; 2004). "Military discipline is the ideal model for the modern capitalist factory", Weber wrote just around the time of World War I (1978, p. 1156). Factory workers and soldiers alike lived in a *panoptical* system where one person would supervise many workers via "total control through total surveillance" (Bauman, 1998, pp. 108–   ). The aim was to keep subordinates in their place—both spatially and socially (Bauman, 2004).

In postmodern or liquid times, however, the tables have turned, and it is the very people who used to be watched who are now the watchers (Bauman, 2000a). Western society has become a *synopticon* where sedentary consumers watch the global social elite (Bauman, 1998; 2000a), even though the financial elite generally evades any scrutiny by escaping beyond reach whenever necessary (Bauman, 2000a).

Unlike the panoptical-style surveillance of the industrial age, there is no threat or force involved in this postmodern version of surveillance, Bauman (2000a) argues, but only seduction. Millions of consumers are watching those higher up in the hierarchy, just as people would watch the "pomp, wealth and splendour" of the nobility of premodern times (Bauman, 1998, p. 51). The postmodern social elite does not rule as the financial elite does—they only guide, which is similar to preachers or angels, Bauman explains (1998; 2000a). However, following the advice given by these self-proclaimed experts can also be interpreted as an indirect kind of control (Bauman, 1988).

More recently, media usage has moved on from tightly controlled print and television media to do-it-yourself, internet-based media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube or TikTok. Some consumers have become famous in the process and have joined the ranks of popular experts and counsellors for a time—as long as they are not replaced by someone else who better meets the zeitgeist (see the discussion of digital nomad influencers such as Johnny FD in Chapter 4). If the expert chosen by the consumer is the best expert available is never certain. Therefore, there is always

an element of fear involved when deciding to follow a certain expert, Bauman (2003) argues. Even politicians have found themselves in this category. As members of the social elite, they have a guiding capacity only (Bauman, 1998). In a democracy, politicians are replaceable "merchants of certainty" who need to be "judged, approved or rejected" (Bauman, 2003, p. 200). In the end, no matter how much one watches those further up in the hierarchy on their favourite (social) media channel, the divide between those who have it all and those who do not is an "abyss hard to bridge", Bauman claims (1998, p. 87).

In a society that primarily consumes and leaves production to machines or to people working for lower wages elsewhere, "a considerable chunk of the population" will not be needed as workers anymore (Bauman, 1998, p. 112). These people may find themselves without employment and almost without assistance, after "years of deregulation and dismantling of the welfare provisions" in Western countries (Bauman, 1997, p. 42; see also Sennett, 2007, p. 2). However, if "life-projects are built around consumer choice rather than work" (Bauman, 2004, p. 1), people's lives lose their meaning if they cannot afford to purchase the identity they desire (Bauman, 2000a). A person who does not have enough resources to purchase the desired consumer lifestyle is a "collective victim of the 'multiple collateral damage' of consumerism" (Bauman, 2007b, p. 128). As mentioned above, Bauman calls these people flawed consumers or the underclass (2000a). A label like 'the underclass' seems to imply a certain homogenous group. But this is not the case according to Bauman (2007b), as these people might be school dropouts, immigrants, single mothers, alcoholics or drug users. All are individuals with different backgrounds, needs and challenges, but they are all classified as "totally useless" (Bauman, 2004, p. 72), for example, by a "filing clerk or his supervisors" (Bauman, 2007b, p. 125).

Flawed consumers are perceived as "unneeded, unwanted, [and] forsaken", Bauman contends (2007b, p. 127). Consumer society treats these people not as victims but as perpetrators, even as parasites that are "harbouring malice and unspeakable dangers for the rest of society" (Bauman, 2007b, p. 125). When flawed consumers seek help, they generally turn to whatever is left of the welfare state. Even though the services of the welfare state have largely been dismantled and replaced by private services to be paid by the individual (Bauman, 1997), there may be some welfare services still available for flawed consumers. However, taxpayers see poverty as a 'bad investment' and as proof of personal incompetence (Bauman, 2007b). This is why welfare-related decisions are generally made by "the state bureaucracy and the various experts it employs for the purpose" and without including those who seek help in the decision-making process (Bauman, 1988, p. 84). At the same time, and in a throwback to the industrial age, the welfare state submits flawed consumers to panoptical surveillance, which amounts to an additional layer of humiliation for those who are already suffering, Bauman writes (2003).

When the inability to consume is regarded as a criminal act, flawed consumers may also be treated as if they were criminals, Bauman contends (1997). This has given prisons a new purpose: During the industrial age, offenders had to go to prison because the authorities believed prisons could help rehabilitate people (Bauman, 1998). In postmodernity, the underclass is locked up in prisons and 'discarded' if there is no option to deport them out of the country (Bauman, 2007b). Bauman (2007b) adds that prisons have become alternative providers for services that once had been offered by the welfare state. From the perspective of a flawed consumer, prisons have become the ultimate expression of immobility, or a synonym for a coffin, Bauman writes, especially when taking into account the high percentage of the population imprisoned at any one time in the United States (1998). In regard to the United States, Bauman adds that flawed consumers have so little value to consumer society that some prisoners have been repurposed as resources themselves; for instance, as involuntary blood or organ donors (1997). Those people who would generally feel outrage or empathy with the poor, Bauman writes, are influenced by the media who argue that the poor are "lax, sinful and devoid of moral standards" and do not deserve empathy (Bauman, 2007b, p. 127). This is a similar development that has led to the holocaust, Bauman (2007b) points out, with the public standing by and doing nothing because they were led to believe that some people were not worthy of their empathy.

In terms of social mobility, Bauman (2007b) argues there is a major difference between poverty in the industrial age and poverty in postmodernity. During the industrial age, there was still a possibility for people to climb up the social ladder. In postmodernity, however, those who are at the very bottom of the hierarchy, in the underclass, may never be able to redeem themselves (Bauman, 2007b). This is even more terrifying for those who understand that the borders between the different tiers of this hierarchy are fluid and that it is much easier to descend than ascend. The looming threat of social descent is "the yarn of which nightmares are woven", since no consumer wants to be an outcast themselves (Bauman, 2007b, p. 124). This is why consumer society is by no means a happy society. Consumer society was meant to offer the freedom to choose for all, but it appears that for many, living the consumer dream is a constant source of worry and angst. This is especially relevant when another round of " 'downsizing' or just 'rationalization' " is announced by one's employer (Bauman, 1998, p. 123), or when relationships break apart and a woman realises that she has become a "welfare mother" (Bauman, 2004, p. 73). Without access to resources—from society's perspective—there is "little chance and no need of readmission" (Bauman, 2007b, p. 123).

The Global Hierarchy of Mobility

"Spiritually at least we are all travellers", Bauman (1998, p. 78) argues, and as consumers we are also tourists as we travel through life and as we physically travel through the world. In contrast to

the postmodern consumer hierarchy in Western societies, it should be made clear that the global

hierarchy applies to all countries, not only to Western countries.

At the top of Bauman's postmodern global hierarchy (see Figure 2.2 below), though, are not

the tourists but the "new global and exterritorial elite" (Bauman, 2000a, p.154), or the "nomadic and

Figure 2.2

Bauman's Global Hierarchy of Mobility
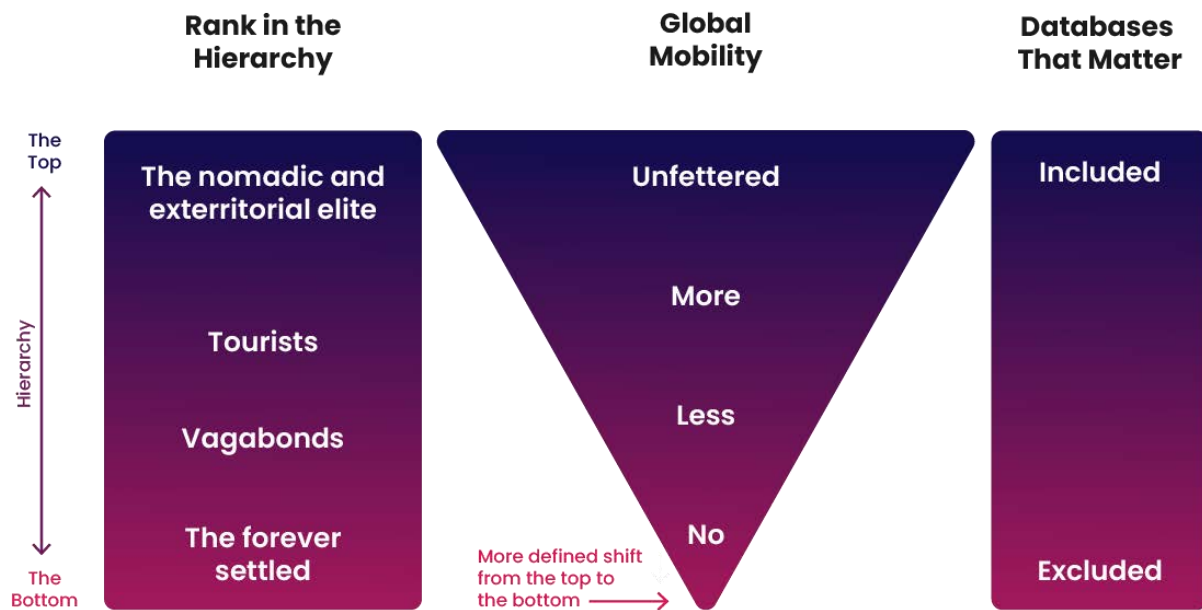
Note. Each person's Rank in the Hierarchy relates to their a) Global Mobility and b) their inclusion in Databases That Matter. For example, the nomadic and exterritorial elite have 'unfettered' global mobility (a) and are 'included' in the databases that matter (b). For more information, see Bauman (1998; 2000a; 2003; 2004).

exterritorial elite" (Bauman, 2000a, p.13). As their power is financial and as such 'bodyless', and they

have the freedom to go wherever they please (Bauman, 1998). The nomadic and exterritorial elite is

generally out of reach when it comes to potential sanctions from local governments (Bauman, 1998),

and in a position to blackmail authorities, if required (Bauman, 2000a).

Bauman does not only place people with limitless access to financial resources at the top of

this hierarchy of global mobility. There are also "global businessmen, global culture managers or

global academics" who are enjoying the freedom to travel globally (1998, p. 89). It is also those who

Bauman calls 'experts', in terms of the consumer hierarchy, who are privileged. This includes "the

increasingly 'transnational' knowledge elite, the ever more assertively and blatantly *extraterritorial* class

of symbol-makers and symbol-manipulators, that stands at the forefront of 'globalization'" (Bauman,

2005, p. 145). Bauman (1998) counts himself and his colleague Agnes Heller (read more about Heller

in Chapter 6) as a part of this elite. The global elite finds itself in the *databases* that matter, as,

according to Bauman, databases are now used as a tool of social control. They are a "vehicle of

mobility, not the fetters keeping people in place" (Bauman, 1998, p. 51). Databases can contain all kinds of information, such as confirmation of one's creditworthiness (Bauman, 1998). However, Bauman points out that "the database's main function is to make sure that no intruder can enter it under false pretences and without proper credentials. The more information about you the database contains, the more freely you can move" (1998, p. 51). Indeed, the database is "an instrument of selection, separation, and exclusion. It keeps the globals in the sieve and washes out the locals" (Bauman, 1998, p. 51). So, contrary to the panoptical surveillance of the past, certain databases are designed to benefit the privileged and not the poor.

Bauman's tourists find themselves in the middle of this global hierarchy of mobility, underneath the nomadic and exterritorial elite. The tourist is a metaphor, but also a literal person that has the freedom to explore the globe and look for new experiences. Tourists, Bauman (1996a) argues, have a home (so they are not as unfettered as the nomadic elite), and from this home they set out to explore the world. The sedentary home is a safe place where one's tourist excursions start and end (Bauman, 1996a; 1997). However, Bauman argues that because travel has become so important for people, it is "less and less clear which one of the visiting places is the home" (1996a, p. 30). At the same time, he contends that consumers understand they need a home, but the postmodern home is "not a particular building, street, landscape or company of people" anymore (Bauman, 1996a, p. 30).

For those who are away, home is a dream (Bauman, 1997), and tourists experience homesickness while they are away, but they also experience unpleasant feelings of home-boundedness (1996a) or even imprisonment when they are not away (Bauman, 1997). Therefore, wherever one happens to be located, it seems that the modern consumer or tourist is somehow always in the wrong place—an issue that will be further explored in Chapter 6.

In postmodern times, Bauman argues, being a tourist gives people a feeling of "freedom, autonomy or independence" (1997, p. 90). This offers one "the gratifying feeling of 'being in control'", even though it is control on a small scale, as this freedom is "the ability to choose where and with what parts of the world to 'interface' and when to switch off the connection" (Bauman, 1997, p. 90). As "fun-loving adventurer[s]", tourists are constantly looking for new experiences, because the feeling of newness wears off quickly and leaves boredom in its place (Bauman, 1998, p. 82).

People feel relatively safe in their tourist 'bubble', Bauman argues, as this world is made for tourists, to take care of their needs (1996a; 1997). The tourists are "welcomed with smiles and open arms" when they visit (Bauman, 1998, p. 89), but they will always remain strangers wherever they go, "being in and out of place at the same time" (Bauman, 1996b, p. 11). This is seen as an advantage, as there are no attachments and no emotional consequences arising out of the choices tourists make

(Bauman, 1997). After all, a tourist is always also a consumer, and "freedom of choice is the tourist's flesh and blood", Bauman writes (1997, p. 93).

Bauman (1998) noticed that over the course of the 1990s, many countries had phased out tourist visas and opted to admit tourists that can produce passports of certain eligible countries. Depending on one's passport nationality, Bauman argues, "some of us enjoy the new freedom of movement *sans papiers*. Some others are not allowed to stay put for the same reason" (1998, p. 87). In this regard, it is important to note that most people around the world are automatically assigned a certain position in the global hierarchy of mobility as soon as they are born into a certain nationality (Bauman, 1998). "All of us are doomed to the life of choices, but not all of us have the means to be choosers", Bauman argues, and this is why not all consumers around the world can journey through postmodernity as privileged tourists (1998, p. 86). Just as the flawed consumer is the 'dark side' of the (regular) consumer, the vagabond is the dark side of the tourist experience in Bauman's social hierarchy (1998). Similar to tourists, Bauman's vagabonds are also on the move, but for entirely different reasons: "tourists travel because they *want to*; the vagabonds—because they have *no other choice*", he contends (1998, p. 93). Indeed, some vagabonds would rather not leave their home, but they are forced to leave and cannot always choose where to go (Bauman, 1998). They are "involuntary tourists" (Bauman, 1998, p. 93), and "if they are on the move, it is because they have been pushed from behind—having been first uprooted by a force too powerful, and often too mysterious, to resist", Bauman writes, hinting at the plight of forced migrants (1997, p. 92).

Everything is more difficult and also more expensive for vagabonds, especially when it comes to crossing international borders. Whereas regular tourists are generally able to book a seat with a budget airline to arrive at their desired destination, vagabonds may find it very difficult or impossible to legally cross certain borders (this includes some digital nomads, as described in Chapter 5). Those who need to make the journey anyway may have to look for costly illegal alternatives, and therefore might be "paying more for the crowded steerage of a stinking unseaworthy boat than others pay for business-class gilded luxuries—and are frowned upon, and if unlucky, arrested and promptly deported, when they arrive", Bauman notes (1998, p. 89). Just like regular tourists, vagabonds are hoping to find "freedom, autonomy, [and] independence" (Bauman, 1997, p. 92). This is because vagabonds do not feel free or in control of their lives, even though they move around in the world like tourists do.

As in the case of the consumer hierarchy, Bauman argues that privileges are fluid, as they are based on access to resources, and especially powerful passports. Someone who was welcomed as a tourist yesterday might very well be turned away as a vagabond tomorrow, or they might turn into "half-tourists/half-vagabonds" when it becomes apparent that they do not have access to the resources they need for the full tourist experience (Bauman, 1998, p. 98). The COVID-19 pandemic,

for instance, has made clear how quickly mobility privileges can be revoked if one is not a part of the financial elite, as will be examined in Chapter 5.

There is a fate that is even worse than that of the vagabond, and that is experienced by those at the bottom of the hierarchy. They are the "'forever settled' residents" (Bauman, 1996a, p. 29) or the locally tied, who are also impacted by global mobility (Bauman, 1998). These people "wake up to find the places (places in the land, places in society and places in life), to which they 'belong', no longer existing or no longer accommodating", Bauman writes (1996a, p. 29). These people know that the ground has been pulled away from under their feet (Bauman, 1998). They are powerless and "bound to bear passively whatever change may be visited on the locality they are tied to" (Bauman, 1998, p. 88). This change, which they have not asked for or chosen, is more often than not brought about by people who are more privileged, and thus more mobile, than they are (Bauman, 1998).

How Digital Nomads fit into Bauman's Postmodern Hierarchies

Even though Bauman's postmodern consumer hierarchy seems to almost match the global hierarchy of mobility, there are certainly differences. Digital nomads are consumers, with considerable cultural capital. Furthermore, all participants had access to financial resources, and they had either been employed or self-employed before they decided to take up this lifestyle. These people were consumers, and thus at the centre the consumer hierarchy (see Figure 2.1).

In terms of Bauman's global hierarchy of mobility, those participants who originated in North America, the European Union, Japan and Australia, had access to powerful passports and could visit most countries in the world as 'visa free' (generally via a fast and simplified online process). They are privileged 'tourists' (see Figure 2.2). Those participants who originated from outside these countries, however, were less firmly footed in the tourist category. Depending on the country they planned on visiting, they were either welcomed tourists or as kept at arm's length as suspicious vagabonds, as will be explained in more detail in Chapter 5.

Opting Out is Not an Option: No Space for Rebellion or Non-Consumption

When looking into the fate of the forever settled (Bauman, 1996a) or the culturally disempowered 'locals' (Bauman, 1998), it appears as if there is no way out for those who cannot or do not want to consume. An example of this is people with post-materialistic values, or those "who shun the hedonistic pursuits of the consumer experience on the grounds of morality, ethnicity or religious belief" (Davis, 2008, p. 111). Bauman claims that there is indeed the possibility to opt out of the consumer lifestyle, but there is only one alternative and merely the "sight of the alternative" is "horrifying" (Bauman, 2007b, p. 132). The alternative is "putting 'nowork' above work", choosing to be a flawed consumer and thus choosing to be potentially dangerous—that is, a potential criminal

(Bauman, 1997, p. 41). This alternative may lead to "ghettoization and criminalization" and potentially to life in prison, Bauman warns (2007b, p. 132).

Opting to become a flawed consumer is "the only one [option], they are told", Bauman argues (2007b, p. 132). However, in saying so, this implies that there may be other alternatives to the consumer society, but none of these appear to be acceptable for now. Bauman (2007b) also states that whenever people are flawed consumers, the consumers (who are above flawed consumers in the hierarchy) will argue that they have clearly 'chosen' to drop out of society, and that it would be a waste of resources to assist them in any way.

When flawed consumers realise that they are not in control of their lives, however, they might resent others and regard them as "strangers", Bauman states (1997, p. 28). While wealthier consumers who are not financially under pressure might see foreigners in their vicinity as positive, flawed consumers might see the same people as a threat (Bauman, 1997). People who know they are disadvantaged might even become violent when defending their 'territory' from strangers (Bauman, 1997). This is why, according to Bauman, it is so easy to enlist "the powerless in the service of the power-greedy" (1997, p. 30). Things take an even darker turn when Bauman argues that some people feel overwhelmed by making choices, and that they may be quick to give away their freedom without realising the consequences. This may also be an option for those who want to opt out of consumer society entirely, and it could lead to something that may be even less palatable than the current system: a return of totalitarian governments (Bauman, 1997).

The Age of Mobility and the Prosumer? Different Views on Postmodernity

Other sociologists regard postmodern society from a somewhat different perspective. According to Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010), for instance, we are not living in a consumer, but in a *prosumer* society today. Ritzer and Jurgenson argue that people have been performing certain unpaid tasks for decades already, such as filling up their car, using an automated teller machine (ATM) or checking themselves in for flights (Ritzer et al., 2012; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). After all, Alvin Toffler had already discussed the prosumer concept in 1981, when he suggested that future technological developments would bring "the rise of the prosumer—the reintegration of the consumer production", which includes "self-help and do-it-yourself activity" (Toffler, 1981, p. 387). More recently, prosumer activities have come to include people publishing free content on the internet, such as live commenting on current events using Twitter/X (see Ritzer et al., 2012) or creating content for Facebook or YouTube (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). In this respect, Ritzer et al. argue that these prosumers "gain emotionally but they also gain in a wide variety of quite material ways" (2012, p. 387). Some prosumers, for instance, might turn their content-creation hobby into a business, which from Bauman's perspective transforms them into experts who sell their knowledge to other consumers (Bauman, 2003). This shows that, from Bauman's perspective, prosumer behaviour

is not a contradiction, as he clearly states that people are indeed still producers (1998). This society is a consumer society, Bauman reasons, because people are more focused on the consumer aspect of their lives and less so on their roles as producers (Bauman, 2007b). Therefore, someone who acts as a prosumer will always be a regular consumer as well.

In terms of mobility, which Bauman sees from a social and also a spatial (global) perspective, there are other theorists who have examined the mobility of postmodern peoples and societies. Sheller and Urry, for instance, argue that "all the world seems to be on the move", with some people being more mobile than others (2006, p. 207). From the point of view of their new mobilities paradigm, it is not the consumer (as a person), but "issues of 'mobility' [that] are centre stage", with sociology having treated many issues from a *sedentarist* perspective so far (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 208). Sheller and Urry (2006) define *sedentarism* as a perspective that treats stability, meaning and place as normal, and treats distance, change and 'placelessness' as abnormal.

Sheller and Urry present the car as an example for this new mobility that people have come to enjoy since the early 20th century (2006). However, this is not an ideal example, as the researchers overlook that one can only register and insure a car with a registered (sedentary) address.

Sheller and Urry (2006) also discuss the immobile structures (immobilities) that are the basis of mobility, such as airports or mobile phone towers, as well as devices (such as mobile phones) that connect people with information and with each other. Travel in itself has become indispensable, the authors argue, as personal networks are replacing historical communities (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Travel has also become a status-symbol, separating those who have the resources from those who do not (Sheller & Urry, 2006), which is in line with Bauman (1998). For instance, being able to go (or travel) elsewhere may be a "source of status and power", whereas being forced to go somewhere, or not being able to go where one wants to, is problematic (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 11). Finally, and again in line with Bauman (1998) who argued that the database is a sign of privilege, Sheller and Urry explain that in the online space, there are "detection systems" that identify who is to be counted as a stranger or as someone who is familiar (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 222). This shows that Urry's new mobilities paradigm overlaps with some aspects of Bauman's social theories, especially when it comes the global movement of people. The discussions around new mobilities also complement Bauman's theories by pointing out that it is important to have a less sedentary and a more mobile perspective on the issues at hand.

This is only a glimpse at some of the many perspectives on postmodern peoples and societies that have been published in recent years. "Experts themselves frequently disagree over both theories and practical diagnoses", Giddens argues, adding that "even the most reliable authorities can be trusted only 'until further notice'" (1991, p. 84, see also Bauman, 2003, p. 200). Postmodernity is an

age where there is no lack of choice in terms of expert social theorists, all of whom have their own individual social and educational background which has led them to argue in a certain way. It is up to the researchers to identify the theoretical lens that is best suited for the task they need to accomplish.

Conclusion

The era known as heavy modernity (Bauman, 2000a), or the industrial age, is well and truly over. The industrial age was a time when men and women (in that order) engaged in military-style, long-term planning in terms of employment, family and their lives as a whole. This supported long-term endeavours such as buying and paying off a family home, but it also resulted in a century that was defined by two world wars. Therefore, Western industrial society can be summed up by concepts such as obedience and control, stability, durability and long-term security. The main guarantors of a stable society were full-time employment complemented by comprehensive welfare packages, provided by the government and paid for by the taxpayers to always ensure a constant supply of workers to the factories of industrialised nations. Towards the end of the 20th century, however, globalisation, privatisation and advancements in technology transformed Western industrial society. Employers did not require workers for life anymore, and workers realised that there was more to life than paid labour alone. They turned into consumers first and producers second. Employers, on the other hand, are now able to choose among large numbers of qualified job applicants, which, in turn, has led them to favour those who are "casual, occasional and 'flexible'" (Bauman, 2004, p. 52).

As a result of these developments, postmodernity has replaced the industrial age, and with it, the stratification of society has also adapted to the circumstances. According to Bauman, the nomadic and extraterritorial elites (i.e., people with access to money and cultural capital) are placed at the top of this new hierarchy. Following close behind are those who provide expert knowledge and guidance. Consumers find themselves in the middle of this hierarchy. The underclass is comprised of a diverse group of flawed consumers, with some people finding themselves in prisons, not because they are criminals, but because they are poor.

From a global perspective, Bauman's hierarchy of mobility is, again, crowned by the global financial elite. People who originated primarily from Western countries are labelled as 'tourists' from Bauman's perspective. However, those who originated from many other countries around the world may be considered 'vagabonds'. They are not welcome wherever they go, because they lack the resources that regular tourists have access to, such as a passport from a privileged country. Even more powerless than the vagabond—who is after all still mobile to a certain extent—is the forever settled. The forever settled find life exceedingly difficult, as they cannot, for one reason or another, live a mobile life. Instead, they are impacted by the mobility of others, such as a company moving their business to a country where the employees cannot follow.

Not everybody wants to participate in the consumer society, however. According to Bauman, opting out of this society is almost impossible. Of course, people could choose not to consume, which would result in them becoming a part of the underclass. Alternatively, they could support authoritarian regimes that would simply take their choices away by decree—an option which has become increasingly popular in Western countries in recent years. However, for the majority, simply remaining within the boundaries of the current consumer society may be the most desirable option.

In this chapter, I have also discussed two additional voices that have analysed the social reality of the early 21st century. Ritzer and colleagues (2012), for instance, argue that for many decades, we have been living in a prosumer society, and that this trend has intensified since it has become easier for people to create and share new content on the internet. Sheller and Urry (2006), on the other hand, argue that the mobility of people and objects is a central issue of modern society, and that it would be difficult to live a mobile life without certain immobile structures, such as the internet.

Finally, it should be noted that postmodernity is a fluid state, and we are now living in a liquid modern age (Bauman, 2000). The developments within postmodern society outlined in this chapter are still in progress. Ground-breaking disruptions, such as generative artificial intelligence tools, for instance, will revolutionise creative labour as well as many other professions in the coming years. In the following chapter, I will discuss the methodology used for this research before discussing why some of the participants in this research are welcome tourists almost wherever they go, whereas other with less privileged passports may have to limit their travel itineraries in order not to be turned away as unwelcome 'vagabonds'.

Chapter 3
Methodology

This chapter lays out the methodology used for this research. The chapter begins with an overview of the research aims, objectives and questions as well as the theoretical platform used. I will explain the worldview on which this research is based, and the reasons for choosing qualitative research and multi-grounded theory. This is followed by an overview of the research phases as well as an introduction of Chiang Mai as a fieldwork site. I provide details about the data gathering and analysis phase, starting with participant recruitment, the research interview and the transcription process. The issue of insider–outsider researchers as well as the non-interview data that has been used for this research will be discussed, followed by specifics about the analysis process. The final section is dedicated to the research participants and is followed by a short conclusion section.

Research Aims, Objectives and Questions

In 2018, when this research project commenced, the digital nomad lifestyle was still a comparatively unexplored field of research, with a relatively small number of publications. These publications mostly focused on defining the lifestyle (Müller, 2016; Reichenberger, 2018), examining nomadic tourism (Richards, 2015) or analysing certain aspects of digital nomadism and the gig economy. At that time, researchers were discussing if digital nomadism was an entirely new lifestyle (Bartosik-Purgat, 2018) or perhaps nothing more than a buzzword (Müller, 2016; Nash et al., 2018). Based on these publications, this research project started as an exploration of the digital nomad lifestyle, with a focus on how the participants described aspects and values around questions of freedom, work and home. Another objective from the 2018–2019 research plan was to discuss aspects of place. As mentioned in Chapter 1, digital nomadism has either been researched without taking issues around place into account, or alternatively, the research had only been conducted in one place, such as Chiang Mai or Bali. This research project originally aimed to examine the digital nomad lifestyle in Chiang Mai, which is a developing country with a relatively generous tourist visa policy compared to Berlin, which is part of the European Union and the Schengen zone, and as such has a relatively restrictive visa policy.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began in early 2020, fieldwork in Chiang Mai had been completed, and fieldwork in Berlin, which was scheduled for July 2020, had to be cancelled. Instead, the aim of this research project was adjusted to allow for the public health-based restrictions of movement during the pandemic. Although there is still a certain focus on place, as discussed in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6, the focus of this research has shifted to the COVID-19 pandemic and its

influence on the digital nomad lifestyle. As a result, the research questions that guide this study are as follows:

1. How do people understand the shift from a traditional working style to the digital nomad lifestyle
   a. how do they describe the experience of their **work**
   b. and how did the COVID-19 pandemic impact their understandings of their labour?
2. How did location-independent online workers (digital nomads) define and experience **freedom** before and during the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. How do location-independent online workers (digital nomads) define **home**; and how have experiences made during the COVID-19 pandemic shaped their perception of home?

These research questions will be discussed in the following chapters: Work (Chapter 4), Freedom (Chapter 5) and Home (Chapter 6).

Theoretical Platform

A theoretical lens "provides an overall orienting lens for the study of questions", Creswell and Creswell write, and it "guide[s] the researchers as to what issues are important to examine" (2018, p. 106). In this respect, this research project uses Zygmunt Bauman's work on consumer theory as a theoretical lens (see Chapter 2 for a discussion of some of his work). Bauman is a valuable resource when it comes to analysing the digital nomad lifestyle—especially his work about the metaphorical tourists and vagabonds (Bauman, 1996b, 2017)—even though not all of Bauman's theories apply to this phenomenon neatly. After all, the digital nomad lifestyle is only one of many lifestyles that is available for purchase in postmodern times. Bauman has generally looked at home from the perspective of people who do not feel comfortable at home (Bauman, 1997; 1998; 2017). Therefore, when discussing home, I have also relied on Agnes Heller's works. Like Bauman, Heller was born into an Eastern European (Hungarian) Jewish family and is described as an "independent intellectual" who was exiled from her home country (Beilharz, 2017a, p. 52). Furthermore, Heller was one of the "critics of conformism" (Beilharz, 2017a, p. 59). According to Beilharz, Bauman and Heller's theories on postmodernity complement each other well (Beilharz, 2017a, p. 56). While Bauman looked at the darker aspects of postmodernity (he was also known as "the prophet of doom", see Beilharz, 2018, p. 295), Heller saw the brighter side, Beilharz writes, and adds that Heller's theories were "closer to the philosophy of everyday hope" than Bauman's work (Beilharz, 2017a, p. 59). Bauman (1998) has relied on Heller when he discussed issues around home and feelings of homelessness.

Qualitative Research and Multi-Grounded Theory

This research project is based on a social constructivism worldview (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, see also Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Social constructivism focuses on the individual and their

understanding of the world and treating knowledge and truth as a "result of perspective. Knowledge and truth are created, not discovered by mind" (Schwandt, 1994, p. 236). In the context of this research, this means that as the researcher, I accept the statements made by the participants as emerging out of their own social reality and their cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2002). I also understand that my social background as well as the historic period in which this research was conducted had an influence on the outcomes of the research. This is especially important when it comes to discussing the participants' definitions of concept such as freedom (see Chapter 5).

This study examines three important concepts in terms of the digital nomad lifestyle: freedom, work, and home both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Living through a pandemic in the early 2020s, and the unprecedented loss of all that an experienced digital nomad had taken for granted in the 2010s—including the freedom to travel, the permission to go home, as well as changed conditions in accessing work—provided a unique 'sandbox' that allowed me to investigate the influence of a global pandemic on a relatively privileged lifestyle. The best approach to investigating this was via qualitative research methods. In contrast to quantitative research, which focuses on predetermined variables, qualitative research looks at concepts behind the numbers (see Aspers & Corte, 2019, p. 155). This allows the researcher to base their research on interviews with a limited number of participants, for instance, and explore and understand a social problem that may not be clearly defined (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This may involve identifying new variables, new concepts, new phenomena or previously unasked questions (Aspers & Corte, 2019, p. 155)—such as the influence of a global pandemic on a certain lifestyle. Qualitative research may also involve reviewing current definitions of these variables and concepts that may be outdated or not appropriate any more (Aspers & Corte, 2019, p. 155). Finally, qualitative research helps provide "rich descriptions of complex phenomena", which is the intention of this research, as well as "tracking unique or unexpected events", such as surviving a pandemic (Sofaer, 1999, p. 1101).

This research project is based on multi-grounded theory as proposed by Goldkuhl and Cronholm in 2003. Multi-grounded theory is a variation of grounded theory, which has been used in research fields such as sociology, psychology and anthropology (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Grounded theory was developed in the 1960s by Anselm Strauss and Barney Glaser, who argued that before one could test a theory, it was important to first verify it (Birks & Mills, 2015). This could be done by grounding the theory in the data that the researchers had collected (Birks & Mills, 2015). When developing a theory grounded in data, researchers look for generalisable patterns and not for individual actions (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). However, this does not mean that an "aspect of a pre-existing reality 'out there' " is meant to be discovered (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 279). Instead, grounded theory aims to show the reality that people were experiencing at a given point in time.

Some researchers have voiced concerns as to potential preconceived notions that an investigator may bring into a research project. Glaser and Strauss (2012, p. 227), for instance, argue that investigators may bring:

> a working baggage of preconceived formal theory into the field that they end not by discovering much substantive theory but by merely writing footnotes to the imported theory. They are not likely, either, to do very well in the pragmatic test of living by their theory while in the field.

Given that many universities around the world regard PhD proposals with a completed literature review as a prerequisite (e.g., The University of Edinburgh, 2023; UNSW Sydney, 2023), it should be noted that it is virtually impossible to use 'orthodox' grounded theory in such a context. Furthermore, a number of issues may arise with theory that is only grounded in data. Goldkuhl and Cronholm, for instance, argue that ignoring "existing theory means that there is a risk for inventing the wheel again" (2003, p. 3), with the possibility that researchers may develop a theory or theories that have already been extensively discussed in current literature. There is also the risk that investigators over-generalise from case studies if they do not take existing theory into account (Goldkuhl & Cronholm, 2003). In a worst-case scenario, ignoring existing theory might result in a loss of knowledge when researchers overlook certain concepts that might emerge out of their data (Goldkuhl & Cronholm, 2003). Based on these arguments, Goldkuhl and Cronholm (2003) propose a multi-grounded theory that aims to incorporate the advantages and avoid the disadvantages of grounded theory.

Figure 3.1

Theory Generation in Multi-Grounded Theory
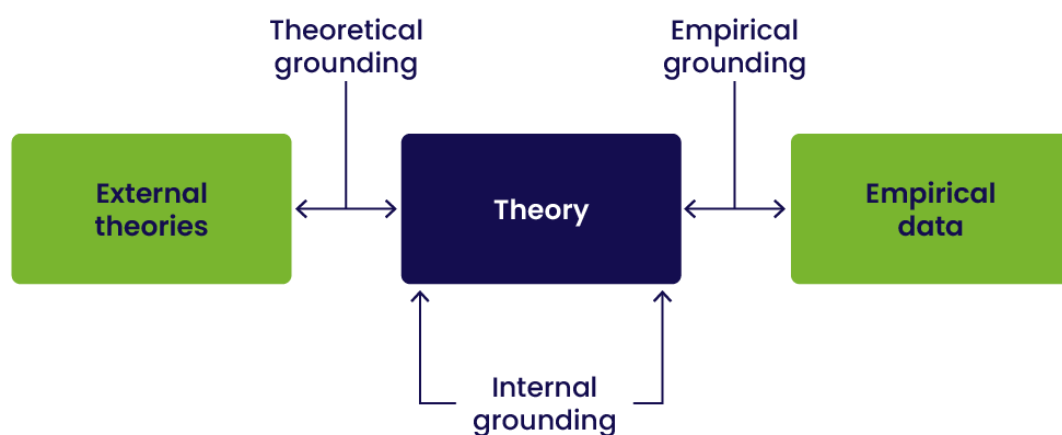
Note. Adapted from "Multi-grounded theory–adding theoretical grounding to grounded theory" by Göran Goldkuhl and Stefan Cronholm, 2003, *2nd European Conference on Research Methodology for Business and Management Studies*, Reading University, Reading, United Kingdom. https://shorturl.at/ixCMN. For more information, see Goldkuhl (1999).

The core feature of multi-grounded theory is that theory generation is not grounded in the data alone (as in grounded theory), but it also relies on external theories which should be related and relevant to the matter at hand (Goldkuhl & Cronholm, 2003, see also Figure 3.1 above). This process of matching theory that emerges out of the data with external theories can result in confirming but also in contradicting existing theories, which can assist in 'evolving' current theory (Goldkuhl & Cronholm, 2003). At the same time, Goldkuhl and Cronholm (2003, p. 12) identify that this process avoids "isolated knowledge development", as it allows to build on the knowledge generated of other researchers, but only if the investigator critically engages with the theories used. The analysis process will be described in more detail in the Data Gathering and Analysis section of this chapter.

Research Stages

This research originally aimed to examine the impact of more than one place, such as Chiang Mai and Berlin, on the digital nomad lifestyle, as most previous research had either concentrated on one site alone, such as Bali (Wiranatha et al., 2020), Chiang Mai (Green, 2020) or Lisbon (Beaumont, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in border closures around the world throughout most of 2020 and 2021, with some locations placed under lockdown conditions, and in some cases, people were not able to leave their accommodation for months. Under pandemic lockdown conditions, this research project had to be adjusted several times based on the then current state of the pandemic. Figure 3.2 provides an overview of the original research plan (left, coloured in black and red) and how the project had to be adjusted due to the COVID-19 pandemic (right).

This research project started with an initial literature review stage in 2019 (Stage 1 in Figure 3.2). The literature review was general in nature and was intended to be revised after the field research phase. The second stage began with on-location fieldwork in Chiang Mai in November and December 2019 (pre-pandemic), and the interviewing started on 20 November 2019. I returned to Australia in late December 2019 and conducted several online interviews with participants I met in Chiang Mai and on Facebook groups, with the last interview scheduled for 27 December 2019. In January 2020, COVID-19 began to be discussed in the media. This put an end to the first round of interviews, as I did not want the developing health emergency to influence the participants. A global pandemic was declared in March 2020. Due to travel restrictions, fieldwork in Germany in 2020 was cancelled.

As COVID-19 had affected billions of people around the world, Stage 3 of this research project was amended to examine the digital nomad lifestyle before and during a global pandemic. Thirteen of the 2019 Chiang Mai group agreed to be interviewed again in mid-2020. Nine participants

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opted for an online interview, and the remaining four preferred to answer questions in writing[10]. Bausell and Rinkus (1979) have compared oral and written interviewing techniques and found that the results are valid and comparable to oral interviews. As this study focuses how the participants experienced the digital nomad lifestyle before and during the pandemic, no additional interviewees were recruited after the pandemic had begun in 2020.

Figure 3.2

Research Stages

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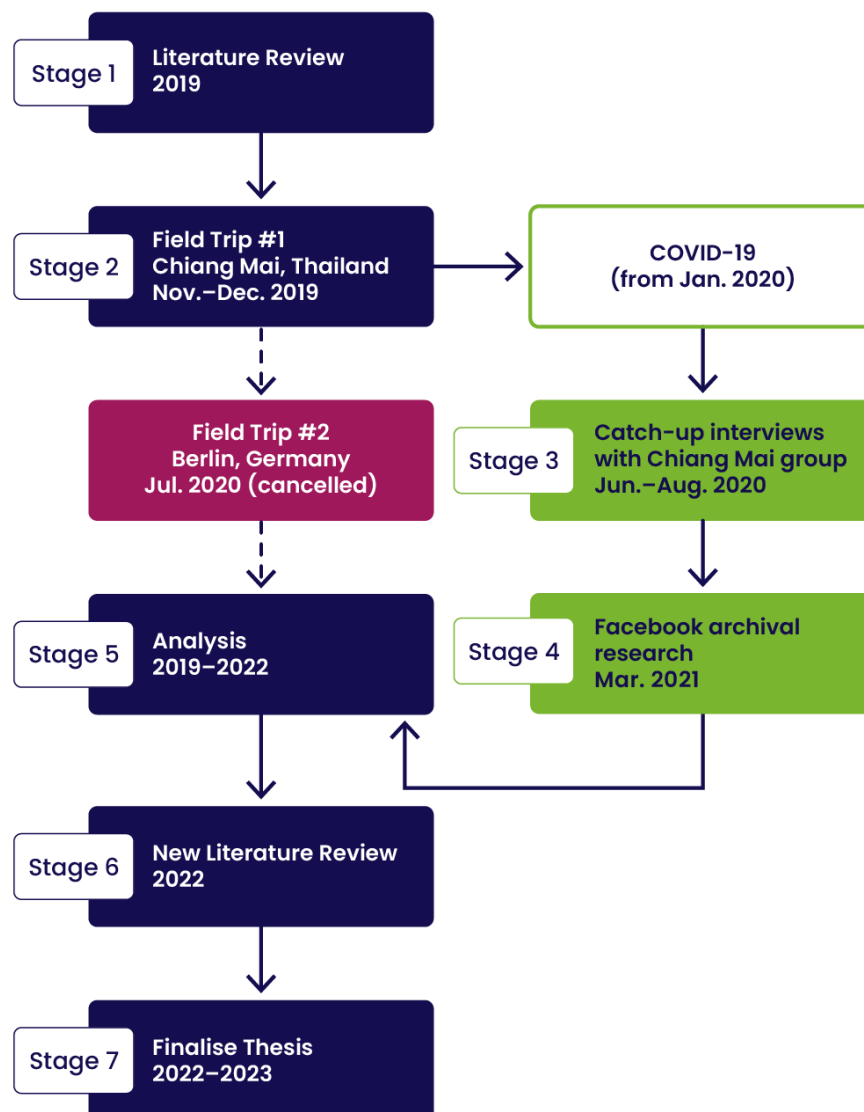
[10] Mouratidis (2018, p. 21) also experienced that his interviewees avoided online interviews and preferred to answer questions in writing.

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March 2021 was the first anniversary of COVID-19 being declared a pandemic. This was a time when vaccinations were becoming more widely available, and it was also a time when many people thought the end of the pandemic was in sight. In Stage 4, archived Facebook posts from the month of March 2021 were collected and analysed in order to obtain additional information in regard to the research questions (this will be discussed in the Data Gathering and Analysis section of this chapter).

The analysis (Stage 5) began during the first interviews in 2019 to find answers to questions such as "What data require further elaboration? What data are surprising or unexpected?", as this allows "nascent interpretations of data to be tested with later interview participants" (Watling et al., 2017, p. 129). An updated literature review was written in 2022 (Stage 6). This replaced the 2019 preliminary literature review. In the final stage, the first versions of the thesis chapters were written in 2022, with final versions completed in mid-2023.

Location Of Fieldwork: Chiang Mai as a Research Site

Since the early 2000s, the Northern Thai city of Chiang Mai has been a popular international tourist destination, as well as a haven for expatriates (long-term residents) and retirees who originate primarily from Western countries, but also from Japan and South Korea (Vogler, 2015). Chiang Mai attracts short-term and long-term international visitors because of its low cost of living, its good restaurants, its medical facilities and a well-connected airport (Vogler, 2015). Chiang Mai does not have a beach like many other tourist destinations in the country. Instead, tourists come to visit historic temples such as Wat Phra That Doi Suthep, Wat Chedi Luang or Wat Phra Singh, as well as nature-based attractions such as Thailand's highest mountain (Doi Inthanon, 2,565 m), rainforests, waterfalls and private elephant nature parks.

After the first coworking space opened in Chiang Mai in 2013 (Hynes, 2016; Punspace, 2021, see also Figure 3.3), Chiang Mai and its surrounds became more attractive for digital nomads. Interest in this space may have increased due to a number of articles published on social media in the mid-2010s (Hynes, 2016) and the "Nomad Summit" conference, which started in a small Chiang Mai hotel in 2015 (NomadSummit.com, 2019).

For years, websites like NomadList.com have ranked places like Chiang Mai and Berlin among the top digital nomad destinations (see Figure 3.4 below). Several researchers have also named Chiang Mai as a popular destination for digital nomads (Green, 2020; Orel, 2019; Thompson, 2018). According to the Chiang Mai Chamber of Commerce (Chiang Mai City Life, 2019), more than 3.2 million international tourists visited the city in 2019. Due to the lack of a digital nomad visa in Thailand, digital nomads would have been counted as tourists in these statistics. Anecdotal evidence

Figure 3.3

The 'Punspace' Coworking Space, Operating in Chiang Mai Since 2013
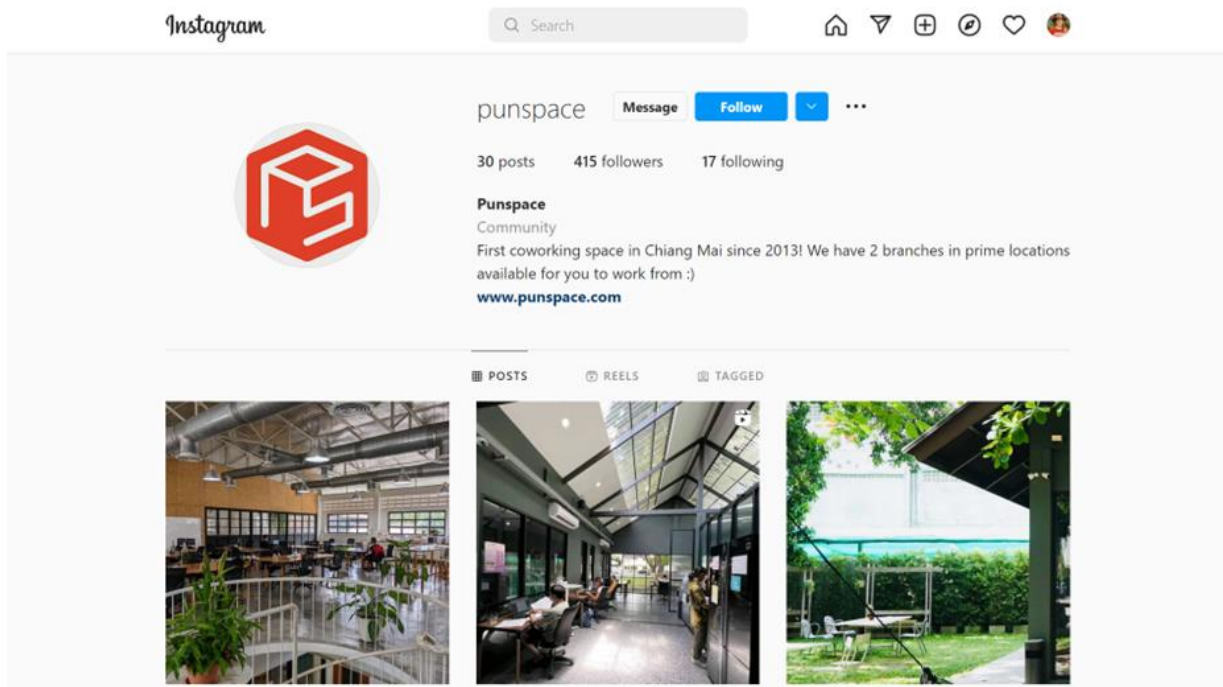
Note. From "Punspace" by Punspace.com, 2022, https://www.instagram.com/punspace.

Figure 3.4

Top 12 Digital Nomad Destinations on NomadList.com as of 13 August 2022
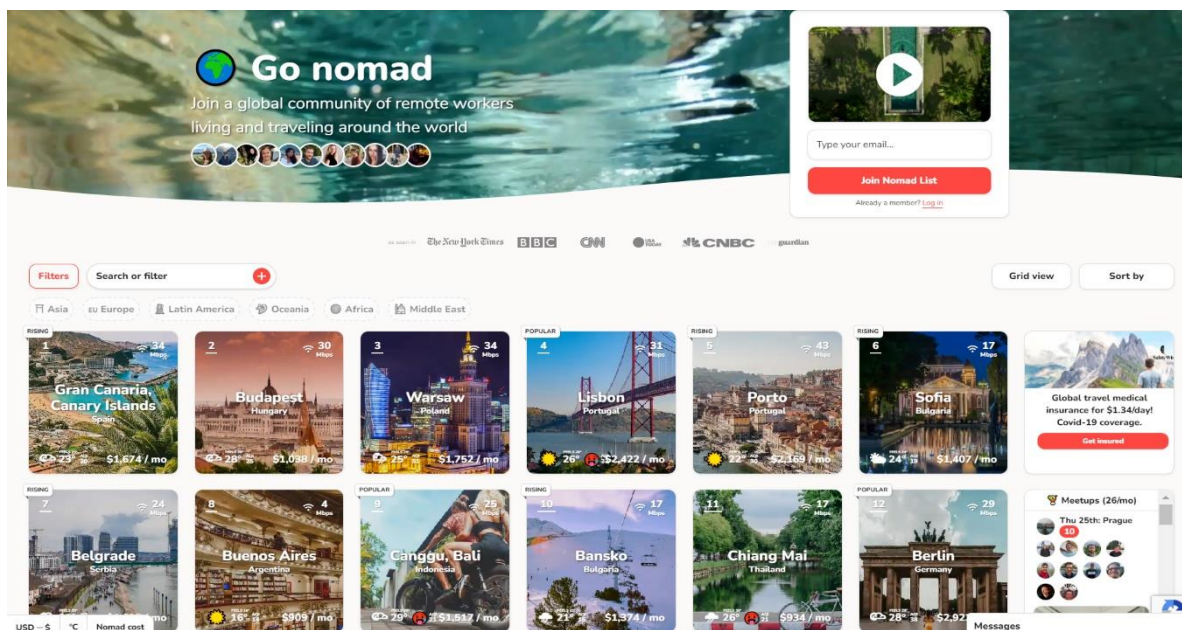
Note. From "Go nomad" by NomadList.com, 2022, https://nomadlist.com

suggests that the number of digital nomads visiting Chiang Mai may amount to several thousand per year. This is a tiny number if compared to the millions of 'regular' international tourists who visit Chiang Mai every year.

Data Gathering and Analysis

Participant Recruitment

The original aim of this research was to collect data in Chiang Mai (with fieldwork completed in 2019) and later in Berlin (which was cancelled due to the pandemic). According to Creswell and Creswell, "talking directly to people and seeing them behave and act within their context is a major characteristic of qualitative research" (2018, p. 257). It would have been ideal to pick interview candidates out of the entire population of digital nomads (Etikan, Musa, et al., 2016). However, due to a lack of access and resources (i.e., time and funding) this was not possible. As an alternative, a non-random sampling method known as convenience sampling (or accidental sampling) was chosen (Etikan, Musa, et al., 2016), which is an accepted method in terms of digital nomad research and in line with other qualitative research conducted in this field (Mouratidis, 2018; Richards & Morrill, 2021; Thompson, 2018). In convenience sampling, people are asked to participate if they "meet certain practical criteria, such as easy accessibility, geographical proximity, [and] availability at a given time" (Etikan, Musa, et al., 2016, p. 2).

The 2019 interview cohort consisted of 21 interviewees and comprised of two groups: 1) people who lived the digital nomad lifestyle (18 interviewees) and 2) coworking hosts (i.e., people who worked in coworking spaces; 3 interviewees). A summary of the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the digital nomad interviewees can be found in Table 3.1 below.

Table 3.1

Summary of Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Digital Nomad Participants in Chiang Mai

Included	Excluded
- adult interviewees - location independent for at least 6 months - stayed in Chiang Mai in 2019 for at least a few days - at least a Level 2 nomad according to Reichenberger (2018; i.e., travel should be a focus in their life).	- worked in location independence for less than 6 months - on a 'gap year' or indicated that they were only trying out this lifestyle for a limited time - did not stay in Chiang Mai in 2019.

The research participants were recruited in person in coworking and coliving spaces, coworking cafes (a café that charges more for their food so patrons can stay for longer periods) and during social activities and digital nomad meetups in Chiang Mai. Participants were also recruited online via Facebook. Furthermore, the snowballing method, which is a non-random sampling method, was used to find additional participants. With snowballing, participants are asked to identify potential future interviewees that meet the criteria set by the researcher (Etikan, Alkassim, et al., 2016). Snowballing is "particularly suitable when the population of interest is hard to reach and compiling a list of the population poses difficulties for the researcher" (Etikan, Alkassim, et al., 2016, p. 1). As digital nomad interviewees are known to be difficult to access (Mouratidis, 2018), snowballing is a popular method in this field (Ehn et al., 2022b; Mancinelli, 2020). For example, von Zumbusch and Lalicic (2020) have explicitly labelled snowballing as more effective than contacting potential participants via Facebook alone.

Coworking hosts were interviewed in order to obtain an additional perspective of the digital nomad lifestyle. The hosts were in regular contact with digital nomads and had the opportunity to observe them as a group over longer periods of time through their daily work. As the focus of this research was on the digital nomad experience, the number of coworking hosts was limited to three interviewees, who each confirmed that they had been working for six months or more at a coworking space or coworking cafe in Chiang Mai at the time of the interview. To recruit coworking host interviewees, I sent emails to two coworking spaces with a request for an interview. The third interviewee was recruited in person at a coworking café. This interviewee was also involved in the above-mentioned snowball recruitment.

Recruitment for the 2020 interviews proved easier than in 2019. As I was still in contact with all but one of the digital nomad participants via social media, I simply asked them if they would be interested in a catch-up interview. As coworking spaces were closed in 2020, coworking hosts were not invited to a second interview.

The Research Interview and Transcription Process

Grounded theory research is commonly based on unstructured interviews, with investigators often starting the interview with a broad question such as "can you tell me more about …" (Linden & Palmieri, 2021, p. 109). Further questions would then seek more detail. This research, however, used multi-grounded theory (Goldkuhl & Cronholm, 2003), which recommends that researchers "think through one's research questions to some depth at a start", while encouraging researchers to remain "open-minded during the research process and let empirical observations and theoretical insights influence the research interest" (Goldkuhl & Cronholm, 2003, p. 5). This is why semi-structured interviews were chosen for this research project, as they comprised several fixed questions that can be answered in any order. Similar to unstructured interviewing, semi-structured interviewing allows for

improvisation, such as "follow-up questions based on participant's responses" (Kallio et al., 2016, p. 2955). Semi-structured interviewing provides the investigator with an opportunity to "gain a rich understanding of the study phenomenon" (Kallio et al., 2016, p. 2955), especially "if the researchers are to understand the way the interviewees perceive the social world under study" (Qu & Dumay, 2011, p. 246). Semi-structured interviewing has been successful in previous research of the digital nomad lifestyle, as for example in Green (2020), Mancinelli (2020) and Mouratidis (2018).

The interview schedule (see Appendix A) for this research project was prepared with the aim to explore the digital nomad lifestyle from a number of different angles, and to receive replies that were "spontaneous, in-depth" and "unique" (Kallio et al., 2016, p. 2960). The interview schedule (2019) was developed based on the research gaps found in the literature review (see Chapter 1). The interview schedule 2020 was developed in order to review themes that were discussed in 2019 and to identify if significant changes that had occurred had during the early pandemic.

All 2019 interviews were conducted in coworking spaces, cafes and restaurants in Chiang Mai, and via video conferencing. These interviews were audio-recorded with prior consent from the interviewees. An information sheet and a consent form were provided (see Appendix B), and signatures collected. Interviews generally started with a warm-up phase. For example, the participant and I would meet in a café, order food or a coffee and chat about our experiences so far in Chiang Mai, in order to create a relaxed environment (Kallio et al., 2016). Then we would discuss the consent form and start the recorded interview.

My mobile phone, which was used to record the audio data, was openly placed on the table during the interview. When conducting online interviews, I showed participants the mobile phone that was used for the recording. During one video interview via Zoom, my participant said she would record the interview herself. She sent me the video file later.

During the interviews, "verbal and non-verbal probing techniques" (Kallio et al., 2016, p. 2960), such as agreeing with the interviewee, or keeping silent in order to give them more time to elaborate, were used. The questions in the interview schedule included open-ended questions to help the participants develop their own responses with minimal interference from the interviewer (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As I speak both German and English, all interviews were conducted either in English or in German, depending on the interviewee's preference. The interviews generally took around 30 minutes. However, there were no time constraints, and some interviewees spoke for more than an hour.

Nine of the 2019 participants agreed to a second interview between 29 June and 6 August 2020, which involved speaking with me personally via video conferencing (e.g., Zoom or Skype). Four participants preferred to answer questions sent to them in a Microsoft Word document. Again,

the interviewees had the option to reply in either English or German. I repeated some of the questions asked six months ago in 2019, such as, "how do you feel about home now?" and I noticed that some of the interviewees still remembered accurately the answer they had given in 2019. The interview schedule was intended as a follow-up and investigated the impact of the developing pandemic on the digital nomad lifestyle.

After each round of interviews, I transcribed the audio recordings over the course of one month in several passes for improved accuracy. Excessive fill words such as multiple 'likes' were removed for easier reading. If the interviewee was a non-English speaker, grammatical errors were not corrected, as I wanted to leave the quotations as authentic as possible. If someone laughed or hesitated, this was added to the transcripts in brackets. The names of all participants have been replaced by pseudonyms in order to respect their privacy (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In a few cases, the professions of the interviewees have been generalised to prevent identification. Sufficient funds for an Australian-based transcription service were unfortunately not available, and affordable non-Australian transcription services were not permitted for this research.

Photo Elicitation

Photographs can be used as "interview stimuli" (Jon Wagner, 1978, as cited in Harper, 2002, p. 13), and they do not simply produce "more information, but … a different kind of information" (Harper, 2002, p. 13). Photo elicitation is a method whereby the participants were asked to take photos of their workplace and to bring them to the interview or send them to me so we could discuss the images during the 2019 interviews. The aim of this method was to discuss not only which workplaces the participants would *generally* use, but also have examples of a workspace that was actually being used by the participants.

Using photographs in interviews is a "valid and useful method for collecting data" (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004, p. 1523). This aims to encourage the researcher and the interviewee to collaboratively search for answers (Harper, 2002), as the photographs are a "medium of communication" (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004, p. 1512). The photographs do not represent reality. Instead, the photographs represent a reality as it was seen and experienced by the person who took the photograph (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004). The photographs were only used as a method to elicit conversation.

As to the contribution to this research, it became apparent that some interviewees took the photos during the interview or sent the images to me afterwards, and discussions about the images were generally short. At the same time, some photographs provided unexpected information, as for instance, one workspace showed a kitten playing by an office chair, which turned the discussion from workspaces to travelling with family and pets.

Insider–Outsider Researchers

Researching and analysing a problem as an insider or an outsider has its advantages and disadvantages. An insider—someone who shares "the characteristic, role, or experience under study with the participants" (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 5)—may have "a superior understanding of the group's culture; the ability to interact naturally with the group and its members; and a previously established, and therefore greater, relational intimacy with the group" (Breen, 2007, p. 163). Research participants may find it easier to accept an 'insider' researcher, and they may find it easier to share more details about the issue at hand (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). On the other hand, insider researchers may be seen as lacking reflexivity and being less objective (Breen, 2007), or they may be accused of being "advocates rather than 'real' or 'legitimate' researchers" (Breen, 2007, p. 169). Outsiders, however, are researchers who are "studying a group to which they are not a member" (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 57). They may be regarded as "independent, unbiased, and objective" (Breen, 2007, p. 171). However, an outsider researcher has also been likened to a seagull "who flies into a community; craps all over everything then leaves the community to tidy up the mess" (Drew, 2006, as cited in Breen, 2007, p. 163).

The divide between insiders and outsiders is not always clearcut, and there is a certain fluidity when it comes to establishing one's insider / outsider status. "Holding membership in a group does not denote complete sameness within that group", Corbin Dwyer and Buckle argue (2009, p. 58). In addition, some researchers may become 'accidental insiders' during the course of their research if they undergo a similar experience by accident (West et al., 2013). Being an insider or outsider does not make one "a better or worse researcher; it just makes me [them] a different type of researcher", Corbin Dwyer and Buckle argue (2009, p. 56). They add that researchers should clarify their position in the research, nevertheless (see West et al., 2013, p. 61).

When it comes to the focus of this research project, the digital nomad lifestyle, I see myself as neither an insider nor an outsider, which is similar to Breen (2007). I have worked as a location-independent freelancer with complete freedom in terms of scheduling my time and choosing my work for most of my career. However, I am also an outsider, as I have never looked for or consciously met other location-independent freelancers before this research project started. Indeed, I had no interest in travelling to Asia, and I was not aware that a digital nomad lifestyle even existed. Before the beginning of this research, I had never been to a coworking space, and I had not visited any digital nomad 'hotspots' such as Chiang Mai or Bali. I see this in-between status as an advantage: By being situated somewhere on the continuum between insider and outsider, I have "maximised the advantages of each while minimising the potential for disadvantages" (Breen, 2007, p. 163).

Social Media Research and Data Pre-Processing

The research participants had not been invited to repeat interviews when they agreed to participate in this research project during 2019. After all, repeat interviews had not been a part of the initial, pre-pandemic version of the research plan. Nonetheless, 13 out of 18 digital nomad participants accepted to participate in a second interview in 2020. Considering the declining number of volunteers, it was expected that the interview pool for a potential third interview in 2021 would be too small to provide meaningful results. To access a larger pool of information which would present a more holistic picture of the digital nomad lifestyle, this research turned towards social media and social networking sites in 2021.

Ethnography on the internet, or *netnography* for short, is a synonym for online content analysis. According to Addeo et al. this method has already been used for topics as diverse as "culture to identity, social relationships and civic empowerment" (2019, p. 9). Online content analysis has a long tradition, and already in the 1990s researchers have become sensitised to the potential of people presenting themselves on the internet (Miller, 1995). Miller, who speaks from the perspective of a psychologist, observed that "the selves presented in Web pages have not seemed to me to be qualitatively different from selves presented in other ways, and their styles of presentation can easily be likened to non-electronic presentations of self" (1995, p. 7). Another advantage of netnography is that researchers are 'invisible' observers, which is impossible in traditional ethnography, where the research subjects are generally aware that they are watched (Addeo et al., 2019).

The digital nomad lifestyle has been extensively reviewed in several studies that used netnography. Major social platforms such as Instagram (Bozzi, 2020; Gretzel & Hardy, 2019), Reddit (Jarrahi et al., 2019; Nash et al., 2018) and Facebook (Jarrahi et al., 2019; Nash et al., 2018) have become popular resources for researchers examining a number of different aspects of the digital nomad lifestyle. Following in the footsteps of Jarrahi et al. (2019) and Nash et al. (2018), I analysed the discussion archives of the following four Facebook groups for the month of March 2021:

- *Digital Nomads Around the World* (141,800 members as of 1 March 2021), a global group
- *Female Digital Nomads* (67,000 members), a global group
- *Chiang Mai Nomad Girls* (10,000 members), a local group
- *Chiang Mai Digital Nomads* (34,800 members), a local group.[11]

In early 2023, Facebook was the largest social media platform in the world, with around 3 billion users. *Digital Nomads Around the World* and *Female Digital Nomads* were chosen as sources as they were among the largest digital nomad discussion groups on Facebook already in early 2021.

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[11] Over the years, these groups have further increased in popularity, with user numbers in April 2023 as follows: *Digital Nomads Around the World* (163,000 members), *Female Digital Nomads* (84,000 members), *Chiang Mai Digital Nomads* (38,000 members), *Chiang Mai Nomad Girls* (13,000 members).

Similarly, *Chiang Mai Digital Nomads* and *Chiang Mai Nomad Girls* were chosen because they were the largest Chiang Mai-related digital nomad groups on Facebook.

March 2021 marked the first anniversary of COVID-19 being declared a pandemic, and it was expected that the Facebook users would refer to this anniversary[12]. During this period, almost 1500 Facebook posts were recorded and analysed for this research. It would have been very time consuming to monitor and analyse these Facebook groups over a longer period.

As archival research, all posts were published in these groups within the calendar month of March 2021. They were collected using an Excel spreadsheet, along with the number of responses received during the same month (but not the text of the responses). The entries were pre-coded based on loose categories such as 'job posting' or 'travel advice' before the data was imported into the NVivo analysis software for a more in-depth analysis (more about this in the next section). To respect the anonymity of the participants, the names of the users who wrote the posts were not recorded. All posts were analysed based on the topics raised, and no direct quotations that could point to a particular Facebook user are included[13]. This is in line with other digital nomad-related research that has been conducted on social media so far (Jarrahi et al., 2019; Nash et al., 2021; Sutherland & Jarrahi, 2017).

Analysis Based on Multi-Grounded Theory

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the data analysis is based on multi-grounded theory, a variation of grounded theory, as proposed by Goldkuhl and Cronholm (2003). The computer software NVivo was used to import text and images and attach multiple codes (or labels) to any fraction of a text. As the documents under review—the 2019 interviews, 2020 interviews and 2021 Facebook data—were recorded in different years, they were analysed separately to ensure any changes that occurred over the years would be accounted for.

The multi-grounded analysis process used for this research project is based on five phases, with "research interest reflection and revision" having an influence on all phases of the analysis (Goldkuhl & Cronholm, 2003, p. 7, see also Figure 3.5). In the first 'Inductive coding' phase, the text was broken up into thematic units that were tagged with individual codes based on the topic discussed. In the second 'Conceptual refinement' phase, I critically reflected on the material at hand, especially regarding the fact that all statements by the research participants were "always results of their interpretations" (Goldkuhl & Cronholm, 2003, p. 7). In this phase, it also became apparent that

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[12] Surprisingly, there was no mentioning of this anniversary in the monitored groups. Instead, the participants discussed a number of other issues, as will be examined in the following chapters.

[13] This research was conducted through JCU's ethical practices; approval No. H7858; Thai Foreign researcher registration No. 60/62 [2019].

Zygmunt Bauman's social theories provided a suitable theoretical context to this research. In the third phase, codes with a common theme were grouped together to form a limited number of categories.

In terms of the coding process, it should be noted that the digital nomad lifestyle is based on blurring boundaries between different aspects of life. This is why it is not always possible to code one statement to exactly one concept only, for instance. Given that the interviews were qualitative, and that the interviewees could respond freely outside of pre-conceived categories, it should also not be surprising that some responses fit into multiple categories (see, for instance Table 4.1 in Chapter 4).

In the fourth phase, theories were developed based on the data at hand and by using relevant theoretical literature, which in this case were primarily Zygmunt Bauman's works. In this phase, theoretical matching (i.e., matching emerging theories with existing literature), potentially resulted in confirming or contradicting the existing literature.

Goldkuhl and Cronholm call the fifth and final step 'Theory condensation', as the categories are further reduced to a very limited number of categories. However, unlike in grounded theory, this does not necessarily result in one single remaining category. The theory generated out of this research may, as already mentioned, confirm and condense existing knowledge, but it may also contest or amend existing literature (Goldkuhl & Cronholm, 2003). The results of this process can be found in the second part of the conclusion chapter (Chapter 7: "How 'postmodern' is postmodernity?").

Figure 3.5

Theory Development Using Multi-Grounded Theory
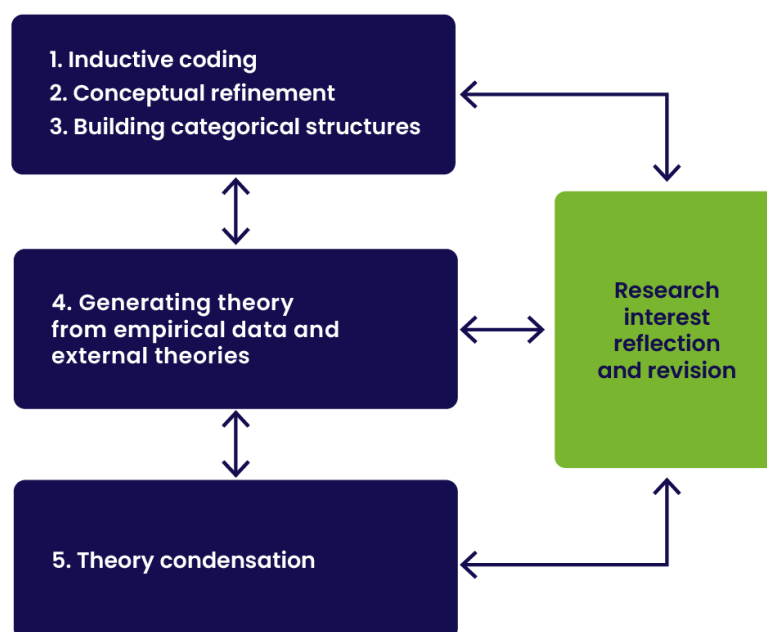
Note. Adapted from "Multi-grounded theory–adding theoretical grounding to grounded theory" by G. Goldkuhl and S. Cronholm, 2003, *2nd European Conference on Research Methodology for Business and Management Studies*, Reading University, Reading, United Kingdom.

The Research Participants

Based on Reichenberger's (2018) definitions, digital nomads do not necessarily need to live without a permanent home address, as described in Figure 1.1 (see Chapter 1). This research project is primarily based on interviews with Level 2 and Level 3 digital nomads, with people who work online and place great importance on travel and location independence. In addition, this research was aimed at exploring the lives of 'successful' digital nomads, identified as location-independent online freelancers and small business owners who had been living the digital nomad lifestyle for at least six months at the time of the first round of interviews (late 2019; see Table 3.1). Ten female and eight male digital nomads as well as three coworking hosts (two men and one woman) were interviewed in late 2019. In 2019, the digital nomad interviewees were between 25 and 49 years old (i.e., Generation X and Millennials born between 1970 and 1995), with an average age of 34 years. The coworking host were in in the same age group.

All interviewees, except for one Thai coworking space host, grew up in countries with societies based on a Christian religion—which will be of import when discussing the workweek in the following chapter. In terms of nationalities, the coworking hosts were from Germany ($n = 1$), Ireland ($n = 1$) and Thailand ($n = 1$). The digital nomad participants held passports from Germany ($n = 4$), Australia ($n = 3$), Italy ($n = 2$), the United States ($n = 2$), Brazil ($n = 1$), Canada ($n = 1$), Finland ($n = 1$), the Philippines ($n = 1$) and the United Kingdom ($n = 1$). One participant was a citizen of the United States and Japan ($n = 1$), and one was citizen of Germany and Poland ($n = 1$).

One of the Australian citizens also had a work visa for the United Kingdom. The Finnish citizen had been a permanent resident in Australia for a time but had to surrender her permanent residency as she had not stayed in the country long enough to be eligible for renewal of her residency. Most of the research participants spoke at least two languages (e.g., English and their native language), and the Italian and Polish participants were fluent in their national language as well as in English and German.

The digital nomad participants had been location independent for a minimum of 11 months and a maximum of seven years in late 2019. One interviewee, Yoshi, mentioned that he had trialled this lifestyle part-time since 2004. Therefore, at the time of the first interview in 2019, Yoshi had been a part-time nomad for around 15 years and a full-time nomad for six years. Eight of the participants were solo travellers, and 10 were in a relationship, with one couple also travelling with their dog. Another couple had adopted two kittens in late 2019. One interviewee was travelling with her son and her partner. In 2020, one of the remaining solo nomads met their partner.

All digital nomad interviewees were online freelancers or small-business owners. However, other research shows that digital nomads may also be remote employees (Reichenberger, 2018), and

several interviewees explained that they would engage in multiple business activities. All interviewees stayed at least "a few weeks"[14] in Chiang Mai in 2019. To my knowledge, none of the 2019 interview participants stopped being location-independent online freelancers or small business owners in 2020, albeit some of them could be considered 'location-bound' at times when border closures and local lockdowns were enforced. However, this was not a choice they had made but a choice the authorities had made for them.

During the pandemic, all participants from Australia found themselves grounded in Australia for almost two years, with one interviewee in Western Australia not able to leave the region she was living in, and two being locked down in Victoria for months (i.e., they were not allowed to leave their residence except for exercising etc.). Two interviewees were impacted by the Thai border closures, with one couple not able to return to Thailand after a visit to Vietnam (where they were also not allowed to leave their hotel at the time of the interview), and the other couple not able to return to Thailand after a visit to Cambodia.

The following sections introduce the 18 digital nomads that were interviewed in 2019, as well as the three coworking space employees. The pseudonyms of the 13 who returned for a second interview in 2020 are underlined below. The participants are sorted based on the time they had been living the digital nomad lifestyle in 2019, beginning with Cara, who has been a digital nomad for about 18 months in late 2019 and finishing with Yoshi, who had been a full-time nomad for six years.

Solo Nomads

Cara from Australia (25 years) had a degree in Media Communications and Public Relations and worked as a freelance photographer and digital content consultant. In 2019, she had been living a nomadic life without a permanent address "on and off", as she said, for four years, and "remote all the time" for 18 months. She had travelled to Australia for her mother's birthday in 2020 just before the government closed the borders. Cara left Australia when the borders reopened in late 2021.

Markus from Germany (38) was a freelance photographer who had studied information science and information management. He had been location independent for two years in 2019. He did not see himself as a 'typical' digital nomad as he still had a permanent address. However, he admitted that he travelled for around 17 weeks per year, and he said he had 25 days of annual leave when he was still a full-time employee. He did not own a car, but he would hire a car depending on the country he visited. During the pandemic, he remained in lockdown in his home base in Eastern Germany. His photography website was still active when research closed in early 2023.

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[14] This is a 2019 quotation from an interviewee who was not sure how long they had been in the city already when we met.

Lola from Brazil (32) was a psychologist who had been living the digital nomad lifestyle for three years in 2019. Lola said she had earned more when she worked as a cleaner and waiter in Ireland than as a manager in Brazil. However, she found the jobs in Ireland unfulfilling. She made a living by offering online consultations to Brazilian expatriates. Lola became a digital nomad after seeing a show by Tony Robbins, a motivational speaker. She left Bali to return to Brazil in mid-2020 when the pandemic made travelling difficult for her. Her website, where she offered services as a psychologist and motivational coach, was still active when research closed in early 2023.

Andreas from Germany (28) was a university dropout who had lived a nomadic lifestyle for three years in 2019. He said he never had a regular nine-to-five job, apart from a short stint in a start-up he had founded with his friends. He generally lived in Cyprus for social and for tax reasons when he was not in Germany or travelling elsewhere. He made a living by selling goods via Fulfillment By Amazon (FBA; Amazon takes care of warehousing and shipping of items produced by an external supplier). Andreas did not discuss if he had a partner.

Sven from Italy (26) was a freelance programmer focusing on "backends for apps and websites", who had lived a nomadic lifestyle for three years in 2019. He did not have a partner, but in late 2019 he was travelling together with Fabiano who also participated in this research. Sven was still living in Thailand in early 2020. He decided to visit his family in Northern Italy in mid-2020, which at that time was considered one of the European 'epicentres' of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Brad from Canada (33) was an ethnic Chinese Canadian. He was a university dropout who had worked his way up from waiter to restaurant manager over nine years when he decided to quit and switch to an internet-based career. In 2019, Chiang Mai was Brad's home base for most of the year, when he was not visiting his family in Canada or travelling elsewhere. He had been living this lifestyle for four years (i.e., since 2015). Brad had started with 'drop shipping', which involved selling arts and crafts kits online from the producer in China, without the need for a local warehouse. In 2019, his business had grown as an importer of these arts and crafts kits with warehouses in the United States. At the time, Brad was still involved in drop shipping other products from China, and he also offered consulting for people with similar business interests. In 2020, Brad moved to Canada temporarily because of the pandemic and due to pressure by his family. His company's online shop was still active when research closed in early 2023.

Yoshi was a dual passport-holding Japanese American who was 49 years old in 2019. He used to work as an architect until 2004 and then moved on to web design and web development. Yoshi had first tried travel and online work in 2004, when it was still difficult and expensive for him to connect with his customers when outside the United States. Over the years, technology improved, and his travels increased in length. In 2019, Yoshi said he had been a full-time nomad for six years.

Exploring the local surroundings with his bicycle was an important aspect of his life. Yoshi was staying in Taiwan when the pandemic started. Due to visa restrictions, he had to leave the country in mid-2020 and decided to visit Japan for a few months. However, returning to the United States was out of the question for him.

Couple Nomads

Jessica was a 42-year-old United States-American and an ethnic Chinese American who had lived the first 10 years of her life in Asia before her family moved to the United States. She used to own an acupuncturist practice in the United States. After her husband developed health problems, the couple decided to travel more and move their home base to Thailand. In 2019, Jessica was one of the least-experienced nomads in this research, as she and her partner had chosen this lifestyle only 11 months ago. In 2019, Jessica taught English out of her home office in the Chiang Mai region. During the pandemic, Jessica and her husband lived in Cambodia and the United States for a while, as their travel options were severely limited due to border restrictions. Their dog passed away in early 2020 and was cremated in a Buddhist temple in Cambodia, which Jessica found very moving.

Katherine from Australia (27) was a travel writer and had been a digital nomad for one year in 2019**.** She used to be a travel agent, and at one point, when she was travelling for leisure, she realised she did not want to go home. Katherine returned to Australia, quit her job and became a digital nomad. During the pandemic, she remained in Australia until the end of the border closures. She was still writing for a variety of travel-related websites when research closed in early 2023.

Marcellina, a dual citizen of Germany and Poland, was 39 years old in 2019. She had left school after Year 10. Marcellina was co-owner of a media company, and she specialised in marketing, whereas her business partner took care of the production side of the media content their business produced. Marcellina had been travelling full-time for two years and as a part-time nomad for approximately six years. Her partner was also a digital nomad. Marcellina's business website was still active when research closed in early 2023.

Daniel, a computer programmer from Australia (37), had lived a nomadic lifestyle for about one and three-quarter years in 2019, but he admitted that he had only earned an income in the last 10 months**.** In 2019, he did not have a partner, and he said that even after this time he was not sure if digital nomadism was for him. In early 2020, Daniel met his Canadian partner, and they flew to Australia together to wait out the pandemic. When he returned for an interview in mid-2020, he admitted that he did not want to go back to full-time employment and preferred to continue working as a freelance programmer.

39-year-old **Sarah** from the Philippines had been a digital nomad for two years in 2019. She adopted a nomadic lifestyle because she did not want to live in the Philippines, and because the

United States Government did not approve a partner visa for her, as her boyfriend was a United States citizen. Sarah had been an established freelance writer already, so the transition to a nomadic lifestyle was uncomplicated for her and her son. Sarah also worked as a virtual assistant for clients in the United States in 2019. In 2020, the couple experienced a prolonged lockdown phase in Vietnam, whereas Sarah's son, who had been visiting family in the Philippines, was not able to return to his mother. Sarah's 2019 business website was offline in 2023, but she did have a travel-related lifestyle video channel on YouTube.

Yasmin from Germany (31) had been a digital nomad for two years in 2019. Being sedentary and working in regular employment had made her unhappy, especially as she still remembered vividly the four years she had spent as a child in Thailand. In 2019, she owned an online shop for fashion accessories produced in Bali, and a co-owner of a tax accountancy. During the pandemic, her online shop had to close, but she continued working as an accountant. In early 2020, Yasmin was staying in Cyprus and found it difficult to leave the island due to repeated flight cancellations. Yasmin and her partner's accountancy website was still active when research closed in early 2023.

Fabiano from Italy (25) was a university dropout and freelance software engineer who had already lived a nomadic lifestyle for two and a half years in 2019. He had a sedentary Russian girlfriend who lived in Bulgaria. In 2020, after spending the winter in Bali, Fabiano returned to Sofia, Bulgaria, where he had rented an apartment, and later travelled on to visit friends in Belgrade, Serbia.

Amanda from Finland (34) was a graphic designer and had been a digital nomad for three and a half years in 2019. Amanda had a sedentary boyfriend who lived in Canada. During the pandemic, she said she had to make the difficult decision to either move back to Finland to her family, or to Canada to her boyfriend. She decided to move in with her boyfriend, even though she resented the city he lived in, while still yearning to see family in Finland. Her business profile was still active when research closed in early 2023.

Emily from the United Kingdom (30) had graduated in sociology and then worked for seven years in marketing as a full-time employee. She had been a digital nomad for four years in 2019. Emily was involved in several businesses, such as selling branded alcohol, podcasting, consulting and selling table tennis equipment via Amazon FBA. She said her husband initially talked her into the digital nomad lifestyle, which she at first found terrifying but later quite comfortable. Due to the pandemic and the ailing health of their relatives, the couple moved to the United Kingdom in 2020 to be closer to the family. Emily and her husband's branded alcohol business website was still active when research closed in early 2023.

Sophie from the United States was 26 years old during the first interview in 2019, and she had been a digital nomad for six years. She worked as a web designer and branding consultant, and

she was travelling with her husband and two kittens. Sophie said she did two years' worth of university courses at high school, which included financial planning. She said that she had intentionally upset her teachers by saying she wanted to become a digital nomad. Sophie started to live in a van only three years later when she was 20 years old. She, her husband and a business partner co-owned an online shop for meditation accessories, with products distributed via Amazon FBA. Their online shop was still active when research closed in early 2023.

39-year-old **Thomas** from Germany was another veteran in terms of the digital nomad lifestyle. In 2019, he had been travelling for seven years. Thomas, a trained architect, worked as a podcaster and event manager in 2019. He said he had always looked for an excuse to travel until he realised that this could be a permanent lifestyle for him. Thomas had a partner who lived a sedentary life in Thailand. Thomas' business website was still active when research closed in early 2023.

Coworking Hosts

Out of the three coworking hosts in this research, two were European (Karsten from Germany and Jack from Ireland) and one was from Thailand (Lamai). All three were in their thirties. Karsten, a trained lawyer, and Jack both had a history of being digital nomads themselves, with Jack still describing himself as a practising digital nomad. Lamai, on the other hand, said that she had studied in Australia, but had never been a digital nomad. The two Europeans spoke from the perspective of the coworking business, but also from a non-Thai perspective. Lamai, who was a Thai citizen, was friendly and reserved, and it was clear that she did not want to say anything negative about her customers. The Europeans appeared to be more frank when it came to discussing issues such as the behaviour of their customers.

Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the methodology used for this research project. The research objectives and questions were based on an understanding that in 2019, when this research project started, the digital nomad lifestyle was still a relatively unexplored field. Therefore, the research questions did not concentrate on certain niche aspects but rather focused more broadly on aspects of place as well as the three mainstays of this lifestyle: work, freedom and home. To discuss these issues in-depth, a qualitative approach was chosen with the 2019 participants recruited on Facebook and on location in Chiang Mai and interviewed mostly on location in Thailand or online in semi-structed interviews. Due to the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic, this research could not continue as planned—that is, with the 2020 fieldwork following the 2019 fieldwork phase. Instead, the planned 2020 fieldwork in Berlin was replaced by repeat interviews with some of the 2019 interviewees, and the interviews also focused on experiences made during the pandemic. All 2020 interviews were conducted online, or, alternatively, the same questions were answered in writing by

the participants. In 2021, the research data consisted entirely of Facebook discussions archived in March 2021.

All interviews were semi-structured, as the conversations should be as free ranging as possible, but also focus on the topics under review (Beaumont, 2019). Photo elicitation was used to motivate the digital nomad interviewees to discuss their workplaces. I transcribed the interviews and imported the data into the qualitative analysis software NVivo. The data was analysed by taking advantage of multi-grounded theory as proposed by Goldkuhl and Cronholm (2003). Multi-grounded theory allows the researcher to generate theory grounded in data while at the same time building on relevant existing theories. In the case of this research, I have relied on Zygmunt Bauman's social theories, which have been described in Chapter 2.

Finally, all interviewees in this research were introduced. Among the participants were people who had been living the digital nomad lifestyle (as defined in Chapter 1) for at least 11 months, as well as people who worked in coworking spaces in Chiang Mai at the time of the fieldwork in 2019. I also outlined my role as both an insider as well as an outsider researcher, which gave me the advantage of better connecting with the participants while asking questions from an outsider perspective. The research participants were introduced based on their relationship status (solo or couple nomads) and the length of time in which they have been self-declared digital nomads. Finally, the three coworking hosts were introduced separately.

In the following chapters, I discuss how digital nomads defined concepts such as work, freedom and home before the COVID-19 pandemic, and how the pandemic shaped their thinking about these issues. I will start with the concept of work, where I will examine, among other issues, the primarily emotional reasons that have motivated the participants to pursue the digital nomad lifestyle.

Chapter 4
Work

People have always needed to work in order to feed themselves. But due to human ingenuity, the number of people required to feed a whole population has rapidly declined over time. During the Middle Ages, for instance, around 85 per cent of the European population was still engaged in farming, or in the production of related agricultural products such as fuel and wool (Bovey, 2015). However, in European towns there were people who engaged in trades organised via a guild system that included apprentices, journeymen and masters (Sennett, 2008). These people were also called *craftsmen*, as the guilds generally did not accept craftswomen (Kowaleski & Bennett, 1989; Sennett, 2008). According to Sennett, craftsmen are different from regular workers as "all craftsmanship is founded on skill developed to a high degree" (Sennett, 2008, p. 20). But there is more to craftsmanship, such as the dedication to doing "good work for its own sake" (Sennett, 2008, p. 20).

The industrial age changed this. Craftsmen of many professions were replaced by machines that could do the same work better and cheaper (Sennett, 2008). At the same time, work was declared a "fate and nature, rather than … choice", and being out of work had to be avoided at all costs, Bauman argues (2000a, p. 137). Engaging in paid work was the "pivot of individual life, [and] social order" during the industrial age (Bauman, 2004, p. 17). Workers were generally employed long term, and employers and the government were aware that workers could be out of work temporarily, either due to sickness or financial downturn (Bauman, 1997). Therefore, a public welfare system was created and funded by the taxpayer in order to secure a continuing supply of able-bodied workers (Bauman, 1997; 2000a).

From the mid-1970s, however, a long-term economic downturn and increasing globalisation began to change the way people worked. During the 1970s and 1980s, it became increasingly clear that mass unemployment may be permanent in Western industrialised countries, and that many employed taxpayers were reluctant to support the unemployed (Bauman, 2004; 2005). Thus, the focus shifted from the working class being collectively employed and provided for by the "welfare state" (Bauman, 2000a, p. 145), to the individual who had to look after themselves, as "it is now individual wit and muscle that must be stretched in the daily struggle for survival and improvement" (Bauman, 1997, p. 39). As a result, and over time, the risk in terms of securing work and welfare transferred from the welfare state to the individual.

From a technology perspective, the increasing automation in the factory and the introduction of computers in the office in the late 20th century brought about major changes in the way people worked, which also contributed to the transition from industrial society to postmodern society. The

increasing use of technology in the workplace demanded "problem-solving capabilities, intuition, creativity, and persuasion" from the employee while abolishing many lower skilled professions (Autor, 2015, p. 12). From the early 1980s, some highly skilled employees in the United States were starting to experiment with remote office work (Olson, 1983), and in the early 1990s, when the first companies in the United States discovered the advantages of electronic messaging, researchers found that electronic discussions encouraged workers irrespective of their rank to contribute their opinions and ideas more openly than face-to-face (Sproull & Kiesler, 1991). This had the potential to make decisions within companies more democratic, Sproull & Kiesler wrote in 1991[15]. Around the same time, however, Richardson (1996) argued that increased use of technology in the workplace also increased the power imbalance between employers and employees, as employees generally had little say as to which technologies would be adopted in the workplace. This had consequences not only in regard to which employees would be soon replaced by technology, but also to the extent of electronic surveillance in the workplace (Richardson, 1996).

To return to the perspective of the employee, the definition of what a 'good job' constitutes, has gone through major changes. During the industrial age, when employment was still "a right and a duty" a good job was a job for life (Bauman, 2004, p. 37). In postmodernity, a good job may be many things, such as a job that is close by, a job that is not stressful or a job where one can "make a difference" (Kalleberg, 2011, p. 8). Some people think about a good job in a similar way as craftsmen do: They find that "a good job is one that a person enjoys or finds interesting, challenging, and fulfilling" (Kalleberg, 2011, p. 8). A few years before Kalleberg, Bauman argued that some people are looking for work that can "generate [a] pleasurable experience", whereas 'boring' jobs are only done by people who have no other choice (2004, p. 33).

People who subscribe to the digital nomad lifestyle are also in need of paid work, as this is the only way they can support their mobile lifestyle (apart from living off their savings, which is euphemistically called "bootstrapping", see Haking, 2017, p. 28). But some digital nomads can also be called craftsmen and craftswomen when it comes to their attitude towards work. In this respect, Chapter 4 aims to answer the following research questions: How do people understand the shift from a traditional working style to the digital nomad lifestyle, a) how do they describe the experience of their work and b) how did the COVID-19 pandemic impact their understandings of their labour?

In this chapter, I will examine the employment backgrounds of the research participants in terms of potential financial risks as well as the justifications that the participants have provided for

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[15] The researchers also found in 1991 that people "tended to express extreme opinions and vented anger more openly in an electronic face-off than when they sat together and talked" (Sproull & Kiesler, 1991, p. 119). This still holds true after more than 30 years, as social media platforms are constantly challenged to manage 'vented anger' by their users.

the transition. Emotional reasons, for instance, such as the desire to travel more or the desire for more rewarding work play a major role in this respect. I will then explore the digital nomad workday in terms of how work and leisure are scheduled, but also how the digital nomad workweek compares to a regular clerical (nine-to-five) workweek. Finally, there will be an analysis of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on labour and income of the participants, which is followed by some conclusions.

Risk And Rewards: Transitioning From Regular Work to a Nomadic Lifestyle

When travelling is an essential part of one's lifestyle, one must have enough funds to support themselves, or have to be able to work while they travel. Whereas some of the participants left full-time employment and potentially rewarding careers behind to start an entirely different career, which could be considered high risk, others had already been engaging in location-independent online work even before they decided to pursue the digital nomad lifestyle. Therefore, their transition, based on their employment background, could be considered low risk.

Ulrich Beck defines risk as "future events that may occur, that threaten us" (2009, p. 9). In addition, "risk is a reflexive notion because it balances benefits against harms and makes the future decidable in the present" (Beck, 2009, p. 19). People have always been exposed to risks, for instance when it comes to feeding themselves and their dependents, but also in relation to other aspects of life, such as health and personal safety. In traditional societies, the uncertainty of future outcomes was the domain of the gods, fate and destiny (Giddens, 1991; 1999). Life was lived based on tradition, and it was dominated by unwritten social conventions (Giddens, 1999). As fate and destiny were decided by higher beings there was a general belief that one was not able to change these outcomes to a larger extent.

Today, many of the risks relating to one's health and one's personal safety have ceased to exist for those who live in developed countries (Giddens, 1991). However, there are now other, human-made global risks, such as the risk of terrorism, pandemics and climate-related extreme weather events (Beck, 2009). Some of these risks may be manageable by the individual depending on their access to knowledge and resources, but some may not be manageable simply because of a person's lack of knowledge to identify and mitigate these risks (Beck, 2009).

Risk, in the context of this research, is defined as the potential loss of income due to the absence of paid work when a person decides to transition to a digital nomad lifestyle. Cara from Australia, Andreas from Germany, Sophie from the United States and Japanese American Yoshi, for instance, had little or no work-related barriers to overcome when they decided to put travel and online work centre stage. Opting for a digital nomad lifestyle was a very low risk endeavour for them, as they had already been working in location-independent professions, such as online retail, web

development or photography. Based on Reichenberger's definition, these people could have been considered Level 0 digital nomads ("individuals who achieve location independence by conducting their work in an online environment", see Reichenberger, 2018, p. 371), even before they had decided to travel more.

Cara from Australia, for instance, said she had worked as a freelance photographer since she was 16 years old. "I've never actually had a 'proper job' in the traditional sense", she said. Sophie from the United States had heard about the digital nomad lifestyle when she was still in high school. She decided to live in a van after graduating from high school. When living and working in their van, Sophie and her partner (later, husband) realised that "we don't have to pay rent [laughs], and especially like US rent, as we were living in the States at the time. And we could travel where we wanted, and we really enjoyed that."

As fate, destiny and tradition have been replaced by the philosophy that some risks are manageable, people living in developed countries have also been taught that "risks are unavoidable" (Beck, 2009, p. 143) and their own responsibility. As a consequence, the individual needs to decide if and how to manage risk in their lives (Bauman, 2000a). However, if something goes wrong, in the absence of the belief in fate and tradition, they can blame only themselves (Bauman, 2000a). This entails that poverty is also seen as individual failure (Bauman, 1997), and if one is not able to achieve what others have before them, "it must be because they are not trying hard enough" (Bauman, 2004, p. 61).

In comparison to experienced online workers like Andreas and Cara, Brad's and Jessica's transitions could be considered high risk, as their employment background (i.e., restaurant manager and acupuncturist, respectively) was not suited for mobile online work. When deciding to become nomads, Brad and Jessica did not only have to learn new skills, but they also needed to find paying clients. Indeed, it appears that Jessica started her digital nomad career without a plan, and learned about online English teaching platforms only by accident:

> I didn't really know about the online teaching thing until I got to Chiang Mai, and
> then I met some other people, and they were teaching online. And they were like, 'it's
> so easy and it's fun and, you know, you get paid a decent amount, and you can keep
> living in Thailand.'

From a sedentary perspective, people like Brad and Jessica gave up everything to pursue the dream of a location-independent lifestyle. After all, Brad had worked his way up to the position of a restaurant manager for years, and Jessica had her own business as an acupuncturist, also for years. In their new careers, however, there was no guarantee that they would succeed in generating an income.

However, even full-time employees cannot rely on a "collective insurance against the risks; the task of coping with the collectively produced risks has been *privatized*", Bauman wrote in the late 1990s (1997, p. 37). The risks Bauman refers to concern all employees, as they are constantly at risk of unemployment. Depending on the contract, employees may also have to accept "dismissal without notice and no right to compensation" (Bauman, 2000a, p. 162). In addition, there are "risks to health and psychological well-being", such as the risk of injury at the workplace if the employer chooses not to maintain their equipment (Beck, 2000, p. 81).

There are several justifications the research participants provided regarding why they decided to take up a digital nomad lifestyle. However, no matter how low or high the potential transition risk was, there was relatively little variation in the participants' reasoning. For example, the high-risk transitions experienced by Brad and Jessica (who had no guaranteed income prospects and no prior experience in their chosen field) and low-risk transitions experienced by Yoshi (who was already a successful freelancer) did not seem to alter their similar justifications for adopting the digital nomad lifestyle. Given that this lifestyle combines online work and travel, wanting to travel more was, not surprisingly, the most frequently named justification, with the travel destinations not chosen by prospects of work, but based on lifestyle considerations (see also Thompson, 2018). This was followed by the desire for more rewarding work, emotional reasons and a small number of other reasons (such as saving taxes, freedom, being warned by a burnt-out employee etc.; see Table 4.1 below). It is also notable that none of the participants decided to adopt a digital nomad lifestyle because they thought they had no other choice (e.g., because they had been unemployed before). The participants either consciously decided to quit their current jobs, if they were in employment, or they adjusted their work so that they could take it on the road.

The Desire to Travel More

All participants (except for Sarah from the Philippines and Emily from the United Kingdom[16]) said they wanted to travel more, or they did not like winter—and, as a result, they wanted to travel elsewhere to avoid winter—or they wanted to combine work and travel. A common theme that emerged during the interviews was that all participants had been experienced travellers already before they decided to become digital nomads. They had lived in or visited foreign countries and knew that crossing borders was easy for them. For people like Marcellina, the memories of going elsewhere count amongst her earliest memories. "Wow, there is something else, other places besides home, wow"—these are the thoughts that Marcellina remembers having as a three-and-a-half-year-old, when she and her mother went for a longer journey to visit her father. Yasmin and Jessica had both lived in Asia when they were children. Katherine had been working as a travel agent in Australia,

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[16] Sarah's and Emily's justifications will be discussed below in the Emotional Reasons section.

booking trips to exotic destinations for her clients, with too little time to travel herself. Markus, finally, explained that the 25 days of paid annual leave he had access to as a full-time employee in Germany were always too short.

Aside from their own travel experience, the desire to travel more was also fuelled by people that the participants did not know personally. Marcellina and Lola, for instance, named the bestselling book *The 4-Hour Workweek: Escape 9–5, Live Anywhere, and Join the New Rich* (Ferriss, 2011) as an inspiration.[17] Lola was motived by Anthony Robbins, a self-improvement coach she saw live in a show when working in an unfulfilling job in the United Kingdom. Sophie said that influencers like *Tropical MBA*, the creators of *The Podcast for Location Independent Entrepreneurs*, Chris Guillebeau, who owns a website called *The Art of Non-Conformity*, and Johnny FD, who calls himself a "location-independent entrepreneur" on his website *JohnnyFD.com* inspired her. Johnny FD was also a major inspiration for Markus—so much so that Markus re-enacted a photograph that showed Johnny FD posing in a swimming pool at an exclusive resort in Chiang Mai (see Figure 4.1) while he was in Chiang Mai himself in 2019. Markus said:

> There was an interview with him [Johnny FD] in *Business Insider*, and it was a very, let's say a bit 'scammy' looking image. He was sitting in a pool with a coconut. And it was like 'okay, I make millions' [laughs] … I thought it's some sort of scam. But he had a free eBook on Amazon, and I downloaded that, because at this moment it was free. And it was super interesting to read his story, because it wasn't just about any business or about making money, but he changed his life, and he also went into transforming his body in a better way. So, he lost a lot of weight, and he was in the gym regularly.

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[17] More about this book later in this chapter.

Table 4.1

Justifications for Taking up the Digital Nomad Lifestyle in Relation to Income-Related Risk Levels

Participants and Frequency	Wanted to travel more, did not like winter in home country or wanted to combine work and travel	Wanted rewarding work or wanted to be their own boss	Other Emotional reasons	Other reasons
Participants	Andreas (a) Cara (a) Sophie (a) Yoshi (a) Lola (b) Fabiano (b) Yasmin (b) Thomas (b) Markus (b) Sven (b) Katherine (c) Daniel (c) Amanda (c) Jessica (d) Brad (d) Marcellina (d)	Cara (a) *(Wanted to be able to choose what kind of work she did)* Lola (b) Markus (b) Daniel (c) **(Wanted to "invest"** *in himself and* **"create something")** Amanda (c) Emily (c) Daniel (c) Jessica (d)	Sarah (a) Yasmin (b) Thomas (b) Emily (c) Jessica (d) Brad (d)	Andreas (a) (Wanted to save taxes) Lola (b) (Wanted freedom) Amanda (c) (Met a burnt-out employee who warned her not to sacrifice her life to an employer) Brad (d) (Wanted a different life than his parents) Marcellina (d) (Had moved frequently and felt overburdened by her possessions)
Frequency	16	7	6	4

Note. Risk levels: a—very low risk (working in the same or a very similar field), b—low risk (slow transition from previous profession to a nomadic lifestyle), c—medium risk (little or no income, but transferrable skills), d—high risk transition (little or no income, no transferrable skills). Participants were able to choose more than one justification.

Figure 4.1

Johnny FD in a Pool in Chiang Mai

Note. Used with permission from Johnny FD.

The diversity of participant replies shows that there is no shortage of 'expert' advice claiming that a career as an online worker combined with travelling more may be a risk, but a manageable risk—and that the benefits by far outweigh the potential costs. The replies also show that the participants relied on different experts for inspiration, albeit all of the influencers were working in a similar field. According to Zygmunt Bauman, in the 20th century during the time of "heavy, Fordist-style capitalism" (Bauman, 2000a, p. 63), there were still "great leaders to tell you what to do and to release you from responsibility for the consequences of your doings" (Bauman, 2000a, p. 30). At work and in life, people were "other-directed" by their teachers and leaders (Bauman, 2000a, p. 64), and women and men had "distinct and regulated social roles" (Urry, 2014, p. 10). The participants in this research, however, have grown up in postmodern times, in a world with few leaders but many experts (Bauman, 2002, see also Chapter 2). The more recent term 'influencer' also applies to the likes of Johnny FD, Tim Ferris, Tony Robbins and others. In contrast to the religious and political leaders of the past, the advice of these influencers has a " 'use by' date", Bauman argues (2000a, p. 72). After all, Johnny FD and Tim Ferriss were not put in place by a higher authority. They needed to be chosen by their followers—by people like Lola or Markus—and they "need to be hired and can be fired" (Bauman, 2000a, p. 64). The advice the aspiring digital nomads obtained from the cohort of self-appointed experts was affordable, though. Either it was offered as a free download (in exchange for personal data, such as Markus' email address when he downloaded Johnny FD's free book), or people would buy a ticket to one of Anthony Robbins's shows, or a book, such as Tim Ferris' *The 4-Hour Workweek*. Furthermore, the participants had the resources (Bauman, 2002) or the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2002) to follow the advice given, especially as most participants had at least started a university education and owned at least one passport from a privileged country.

No matter how the advice was acquired, the participants learned that following in these experts' footsteps could lead to success, and that adopting the digital nomad lifestyle, which allowed them to travel more and work online at the same time, was a manageable risk.

The Desire for More Rewarding Work

The participants did not only want to travel more or work while they travelled, several also mentioned they wanted to do work that was rewarding. They looked for work that mattered to them on a personal level, in contrast to work that was only done in exchange for payment. The participants did not want to bring their "labour-power to market for sale as a commodity" (Marx, 1887, p. 127). Instead, they wanted to do meaningful work, just like one of Sennett's craftsmen (Sennett, 2008). In this respect, Cara had decided that she would only be able to find personally rewarding and enjoyable work if she could take the necessary steps herself:

I wanted to be able to go and photograph the things that I want to photograph. The things that I want to pitch to magazines and stuff. And the only way I could do that is by travelling. I can't sit in my bedroom and say 'oh, I wish I could photograph, you know, Day of the Dead in Mexico, or whatever, and I wished someone would send me.' Like, I have to take myself and do it, you know, and show that initiative and also have that in my portfolio.

Daniel, also from Australia, also mentioned how important meaningful work was to him. When we first met at the kitchen table of a coworking space in Chiang Mai in late 2019, Daniel said that when he was still living in Australia,

it was very difficult to kind of get that financial space to be able to kind of invest in yourself. So, coming to a country with a lower cost of living [like Thailand] kind of facilitated that life, that opportunity to create something and spend the time and invest in yourself. Whereas I couldn't do that in Melbourne. You would get crushed financially very quickly.

So, yeah, I just wanted to make something myself. I am a programmer, so that's, that was my reasoning. I guess, I'm still kind of working it out, deciding whether it is a good decision or not [laughs].

Daniel wanted to invest in himself and make something himself, even though he knew that it would cost him money in the short term as he would not be able to generate the same income that he had as a full-time employee in Australia. Daniel's replies demonstrate the shift in values around work since the end of industrial society. Traditionally, work has functioned as a means of survival, to feed the family and to save oneself or loved ones from starvation. Daniel did not have a family to feed. For him, rewarding work was an essential part of his mobile lifestyle.

Other digital nomad researchers have explained Cara's and Daniel's approaches to work as the expected behaviour of those who have grown up in a neoliberal society, where they have "adapted to the logic of the dominant neoliberal order, with its emphasis on flexibility and entrepreneurialism" (Mancinelli, 2020, p. 434). Bozzi adds that have become "a cultural avatar of contemporary neoliberalism" (2020, p. 1). However, what the researchers overlook is that the participants were not engaging in this work to maximise their income—or because they were made redundant and had no other choice. Instead, they wanted to do work they found rewarding on a personal level, which resulted in some participants deciding to sacrifice their careers and potential higher income (such as Daniel) for this ideal.

Indeed, if seen from the perspective of a craftsman (Sennett, 2008), Cara's and Daniel's replies show a way of thinking that goes back to a pre-industrial, and therefore also a pre-neoliberal, mindset. At the beginning of the industrialisation, previously independent craftsmen working in the 'cottage' (Bauman, 1972) were forced to operate machines in a factory that replicated their work cheaper and faster, which resulted in downgrading and deskilling, that is, the loss of their artisan skills (Bauman, 1972; Sennett, 2008). Alternatively, if the craftsmen declined consent to this, they faced unemployment and poverty (Sennett, 2008). The consequence of this was, according to Bauman, that:

> The prestige of a craft, of skilled work, of creative endeavour bordering on artistry—all these were suddenly depreciated. The products of his work ceased to satisfy the creative needs of the worker not only because he did not feel himself to be their creator but also because their production made no demands on him other than an expenditure of muscular energy. (1972, p. 12)

Since around the 2010s, the machines that are needed in order to be able to engage in online work (e.g., portable computers) have become smaller, lighter and more affordable, and to such a degree that the lifestyle of independent craftspeople working in the 'cottage' (which very well may be located in Berlin or Bangkok) has become possible again. The tools to create electronic products for a postmodern society do not need a heavy industrial factory building any more—they simply fit into one's carry-on luggage. Therefore, the digital nomads of the 21st century may have chosen to join the ranks of craftspeople from 'offline' trades that have survived the industrial age.

Other Emotional Reasons

Deciding to adopt a digital nomad lifestyle is not only a matter of wanting to travel more or looking for more rewarding work. Some participants have given emotion-based reasons as well. Thomas, for instance, said, "I had a personal loss in my direct environment which led me to rethink my life in general." Jessica from the United States also decided to change her life in the face of potential loss. Her husband,

> had a health, kind of like, emergency, where he had some, he had seizures, like out of the blue. He'd never in his whole entire life had them. He was fine, it wasn't too bad. And that moment really made us realise that life, you are not guaranteed to live forever.

> I mean, you don't know what's gonna happen, tomorrow, you know. Like, you could die tomorrow. And we're like, we just need to make it happen. It's our dream. 'Why are we waiting?', basically. You can't wait. Because just have to do it. That was really the trigger that made us think, 'okay, we just have to do it.'

Sarah from the Philippines became a digital nomad for love. First, she became a (sedentary) freelancer because she wanted to take care of her son, as she did not trust the nannies that were available in her hometown. Later, she transformed into a digital nomad because she was not approved for a United States spouse visa. Therefore, Sarah, her teenage son, and her American partner decided to start a new life together outside of their respective home countries.

Putting emotions and relationships before everything else, even in the face of potential loss of their livelihood (for Jessica and Emily) has also been observed by other researchers, with some workers "willing to de-prioritize work" to have more time for their families (James, 2017, p. 33). Bauman, who looked at love from the perspective of the consumer society, might have underestimated the importance of relationships for nomadic couples when he argued that "all love is but 'confluent' love, lasting no longer than the satisfaction derived" (Bauman, 1996b, p. 11). Indeed, for Bauman, love in postmodernity is not much more than another thing people shop for (Bauman, 2000a). Giddens (1991) also argued that the 'pure relationship' only extends as far as when one feels in some way rewarded while being in the presence of another. However, 'shopping' for relationships on the road is hard, as Thompson's (2019) research participants have stressed, especially as nomad couples need each other to create a sense of home while on the road (more about this in Chapter 6).

In terms of emotions, there were also outliers. Brad was an example of this, as his emotions were somewhat outside the experiences of love or loss:

> There is no better, you know, there is no better feeling, then, especially, with the combination of work and travel. Making money when you are sleeping is a significant feeling as well [laughs].

From Bauman's perspective, this can be seen as a reaction to the changes in the postmodern workplace, which is unlike the workplace people knew during the industrial age. Whereas during the industrial age, many workers appear to have developed a certain emotional attachment to their workplace, Bauman (1998) argues that this is discouraged in postmodern society, as employers are not interested in long-term employees anymore. By creating his own business, though, Brad created a new sense of emotional attachment to a profitable occupation he had created for himself.

Financial and Other Reasons

Of course, Brad also explicitly said that he felt good about "making money when you are sleeping", and Andreas mentioned financial reasons for adopting the digital nomad lifestyle. Andreas admitted that he left Germany because he wanted to save taxes, apart from wanting to travel more like most of the other participants. He said:

I was like, hey, I already travel five months a year and I stay seven months a year in
Germany. Why not let's try, why not do it the other way around? Like spend only, I
don't know, maybe three to five months in Germany during summer and the other
time travelling and save some taxes and also see more of the world, like escape the
cold, depressing Berlin winter.

Returning to the potential neoliberal attitudes discussed earlier, this justification indeed
portrays a somewhat neoliberal outlook on business matters, with Andreas following similar tax-
evasion practices that global companies pursue. Albeit a single person with a small business, Andreas
appears to have put himself in the same position as "the new, predominantly global and
extraterritorial, business elite" that Bauman described in 2002 (p. 40). However, this should be seen as
a by-product and certainly not as a focus of the digital nomad lifestyle, as the participants in this
research have clearly emphasised how important craftsmanship and emotional wellbeing was
for them.

After having discussed the reasons for adopting this lifestyle, the next sections will examine
some of the time-related benefits that the participants said they have experienced. In this respect, the
digital nomad workday and workweek will be examined in comparison to the nine-to-five work
arrangement in traditional full-time clerical employment.

Time Freedom: Prioritising Self-Care and Avoiding the 'Tyranny of the Clock'

Time freedom, or the freedom to work when you want and to schedule your own day, was
one of the most discussed aspects of freedom that digital nomads mentioned in 2019 (more about
freedom in Chapter 5). The desire to schedule one's own day in terms of work and life has a long
tradition, Bauman writes, with "impersonal time-schedules hotly resented by the craftsmen herded
into early capitalist factories" (Bauman, 2000a, p. 147). In pre-industrial times, work was not done by
the clock but based on the weather and the seasons (Standing, 2014). At the beginning of the
industrial age, however, time was "colonized" and "domesticated", Bauman argues (2000b, p. 175).
Workers were "disciplined by the clock" (Standing, 2014, p. 197) and had to adjust to the pace of
heavy industrial machinery, which could operate around the clock, without taking the needs of
workers into account. In postmodern times, however, most workers have moved out of the factories
and into the office cubicle. Work hours, however, are still "divided into blocs [*sic*]" and often
based on a nine-to-five schedule that does not respect people's individual body clocks (Standing,
2014, p. 199).

"Control over time is often crucial in struggles for self-determination in work", Conaghan
writes (2006, p. 105), with companies aiming for more time-flexibility in a way that only benefits them
and not their employees. In some settings, for instance, employees are expected to work unpaid and

overtime, with employers controlling when they work overtime and when they are permitted to take time off in compensation (Schultz & Hoffman, 2006). Some employees might not even have a say when their annual leave is scheduled (Schultz & Hoffman, 2006).

My research participants were aware of how important control over their time was for their wellbeing, especially in terms of scheduling one's workday. Several of the participants discussed self-care in the morning simply in the context of getting up when they wake up, and not when the alarm clock rang. Wake-up time for them was anywhere between 9 am and 12 pm, followed by a workday that generally lasted until dinner time.

Sleeping in, or living a life based on one's body clock, is a form of self-care, as it can increase happiness and a general sense of wellbeing (Chow, 2020). In this respect, several interviewees explained that they felt more productive if they could wake up at a time of their own choosing. This means that even those who started the day by engaging in paid work passively prioritised their wellbeing if they woke up at a time dictated by their body clock. They also made a conscious decision to create quality time (Standing, 2014) for themselves, which was always in the morning, no matter if these hours were used for meditation, sports or simply for sleeping in. Yasmin and Markus, for instance, said that the morning was the most valuable part of the day. They wanted to use these important hours for self-care measures such as meditation, yoga, sports and for writing in their gratitude journals. This was Yasmin's morning in Chiang Mai in late 2019:

> Well, I usually get up in the morning—if I can get myself to do it—before sunrise and watch the sunrise while I meditate. That's great here, as we have an east-facing apartment.
>
> And then, I have my morning ritual, if you want to call it like that. I meditate a bit, then I do sports, either at home, or I go to do yoga elsewhere. I think the time in the morning is the most valuable, it's when you're the most productive. Why should I waste this for work? Of course, 'waste' in quotation marks.
>
> I invest the time in myself. I also have my gratitude journal, and I write in it in the morning. I plan my day in the morning, or I do, I mostly do personal things in the morning. Because I think, because that's when I'm, let's say, most focused. Then I usually start work from around ten or eleven.

According to Hilbrecht, Generation X and Millennial workers—such as Yasmin and Markus—place more importance on leisure and a work–life balance than previous generations, with leisure acting as a means to "moderate stress and improve wellbeing" (Hilbrecht, 2007, p. 371). However, digital nomads are by no means 'dropouts', i.e., people who want to live a "self-determined

life" and who try to avoid working (Müller, 2016, p. 345). In contrast to dropouts, Müller says, "the value of labor productivity is an important feature in the lifestyle of digital nomads" (2016, p. 345). Yasmin's statement above demonstrates that even though self-care is important, work still takes up an important part her day. Bauman argues that wanting to engage in paid work is an integral part of capitalist society, and that this has been the case since "the first part of capitalist history", when "moral disrepute was attached … to refraining from work—denigrated and reviled as idleness, loafing, insolence or sloth" (1988, p. 71).

A mindset that incorporates paid work as a 'moral' pillar of one's life is certainly noticeable when it comes to the participants. However, Bauman (1988) also mentions that during early capitalist times, people expected life-long careers which they regarded as a framework of their lives. This is certainly not the case anymore in postmodern society. Instead, work has been replaced by other concepts, argues Bauman (1988), such as autonomy and freedom.

Among those digital nomads who did not travel solo was Sarah from the Philippines, the only 'digital nomad mother' in this research. Her workday included self-care as well as parenting duties:

> Monday to Friday, I wake up at four thirty. My partner and I meditate together. By six o'clock I'll be making my smoothie and then I'll be at my desk by six thirty and then I'll be working until 12 noon and then make lunch. And then help my son with his schoolwork, because he is home-schooled, so he is kind of a 'little nomad kid.' He is due to study right after this [interview] on this computer. And then afternoon, when the weather permits, my partner and I go on a motorcycle ride, you know, nearby [laughs].

Sarah's statement shows that she (but also most of the other participants) generally adhered to the conventions of the 'Western workweek' (i.e., a Monday-to-Friday workweek). Sarah's example also shows that the gender roles in her relationship remain fairly traditional. Thompson has noticed this as well, arguing that "with each shifting new context of technological or lifestyle development, there is a hope … for gender equality, yet … gender norms continue to be entrenched in new ways" (2019, p. 75).

Returning to the digital nomad workweek, the research participants said they would generally only work on the weekends when deadlines needed to be met (Yoshi), when Christmas gifts had to be budgeted for (Sarah), when clients wanted to see work finished before major holidays (Cara) or when the participants admitted to "procrastinating" during the week (Cara). Furthermore, it could be argued that English tutor Jessica did not have as much agency over her time as the other participants. However, as a gig-working freelancer, Jessica was able to choose the companies she wanted to work with. "There's like a booking system, and the parents just pick you as their teacher, and if the kid likes

you then they become a regular student of yours," she explained. The booking system allowed her to define on which days and hours she was available, so she still had a final say over when she wanted to work.

The coworking spaces (but not the coworking café) were open 24 hours per day for members via an access pass system. According to the three coworking hosts in Chiang Mai, their customers, who were mostly international digital nomads, worked mostly during the day on weekdays. Coworking host Jack said their coworking space was busiest over the six hours from 10 am to 4 pm, and Karsten stated that most people were in his coworking café over the four hours between 10 am and 2 pm. Lamai said the coworking space she worked for was busiest at around 2 pm. Jack added that "most have the freedom to work when they want. A lot of people try and stick to the Monday-to-Friday constraint." He suggested that this was a way of self-preservation, "just because of the ways work can drip feed into your entire life."

As previously mentioned, the participants demonstrated conscious efforts to apportion a part of the day—generally the morning—to look after their own wellbeing. Bauman sees this blurring of work–life boundaries positively, arguing that:

> The trick is *no longer* [emphasis added] to limit work time to the bare minimum, so vacating more space for leisure, but on the contrary to efface altogether the line dividing vocation from avocation, job from hobby, work from recreation; to lift work itself to the rank of supreme and most satisfying entertainment. (Bauman, 2004, p. 34)

Given that Bauman wrote this a few years before the digital nomad lifestyle became popular, he certainly put the motivations of many digital nomads into words. However, contrary to Bauman, it should be noted that some digital nomads strive to limit work time (more about this in the next section). Cook, on the other hand, sees this attitude towards work as a 'freedom trap', as the participants were openly talking about freedom while at the same time living a lifestyle "that requires high levels of discipline and self-discipline" (2020, p. 1), as shown by their daily schedules. However, from the perspective of the participants, it appears that they did not feel trapped but empowered.

The next section follows this discussion of general scheduling strategies by examining how many hours the participants professed to working per week.

The Digital Nomad Workweek

As discussed in the previous section, the participants in this research generally followed the Western Monday-to-Friday workweek, even though the actual work hours were generally moved forward and away from the early morning hours, with the morning hours being used for self-care

measures. This kind of time management had its challenges for the researcher, as the participants found it difficult to provide 'hard data' in terms of actual hours worked per week.

However, there is certainly an 'ideal' of the digital nomad workweek as some participants were inspired by the aforementioned book, *The 4-Hour Workweek: Escape 9–5, Live Anywhere, and Join the New Rich* written by Timothy Ferris. Ferris's book provided suggestions for more efficient work practices, and it recommended automating or outsourcing certain tasks to remote workers in countries with lower wages. This would result in fewer work hours and more spare time for extended holidays, which Ferriss called "mini-retirements" (Ferriss, 2011, p. 251).

Just as Beck wrote in *The Brave New World of Work* (2000, p. 126), Ferriss encouraged his readers to use the additional free time for activities that enriched their lives, such as engaging in volunteering (Ferriss, 2011, p. 297). Andreas from Germany was one of the participants who felt inspired by the book, and he said that the book marked the first time he heard about the digital nomad lifestyle. He said,

> the book was important … I didn't read it when it first came out, but even before I read it, I just heard about it, and, like, the digital nomad thing, or geoarbitrage, or whatever you wanna call it. [He stopped talking for a moment to search for information about the book on his mobile phone.] It was published in April 2007. You would get the idea even without reading it. Like only by hearing about it.

Schlagwein argues that *The 4-Hour Workweek* is the 'bible' of the digital nomad lifestyle, which aligns with other researchers' findings (Mancinelli, 2018; Schlagwein, 2018; Thompson, 2021). By spreading the core ideas of the *4-Hour Workweek,* Tim Ferriss seemed to have provided a failsafe recipe for online workers to "join the new rich" (Ferriss, 2011, p.1) and only work a few hours per week. Yet, research undertaken by Julia Haking found that the 59 digital nomads who participated in her study worked an average of about 33 hours per week (Haking, 2017). Thompson also found that none of her participants were able to "survive on a four-hour workweek" (2021, p. 44).

Paid Work

As demonstrated earlier in this chapter, the participants generally followed a task-based schedule over the day, but they did not start or stop at a fixed time. A workweek that is not based on a fixed timetable makes it difficult to calculate the exact hours worked, as these might vary week-by-week. Web designer and developer Yoshi, for instance, said, "per week? It varies, depending on some deadlines. It could be anywhere from 10 hours, if it's a slow week, and maybe 50 hours, if I really press for a deadline."

Overall, more than half of the group (11 out of 18 interviewees) explained that their workweek generally remained under 40 hours (see Figure 4.2 below). Three participants estimated their workweek was around 40 hours, and two reported fluctuating workweeks between 10 to 50 hours. Emily from the United Kingdom, for instance, said that in December 2019, she worked "way fewer [than 40 hrs], yeah. I think, average, a couple of hours a day." Markus from Germany also mentioned that, in November and December 2019, he was consciously only working around three hours per day to make up for having worked 40-hour weeks earlier that year.

Figure 4.2

The Digital Nomad Workweek
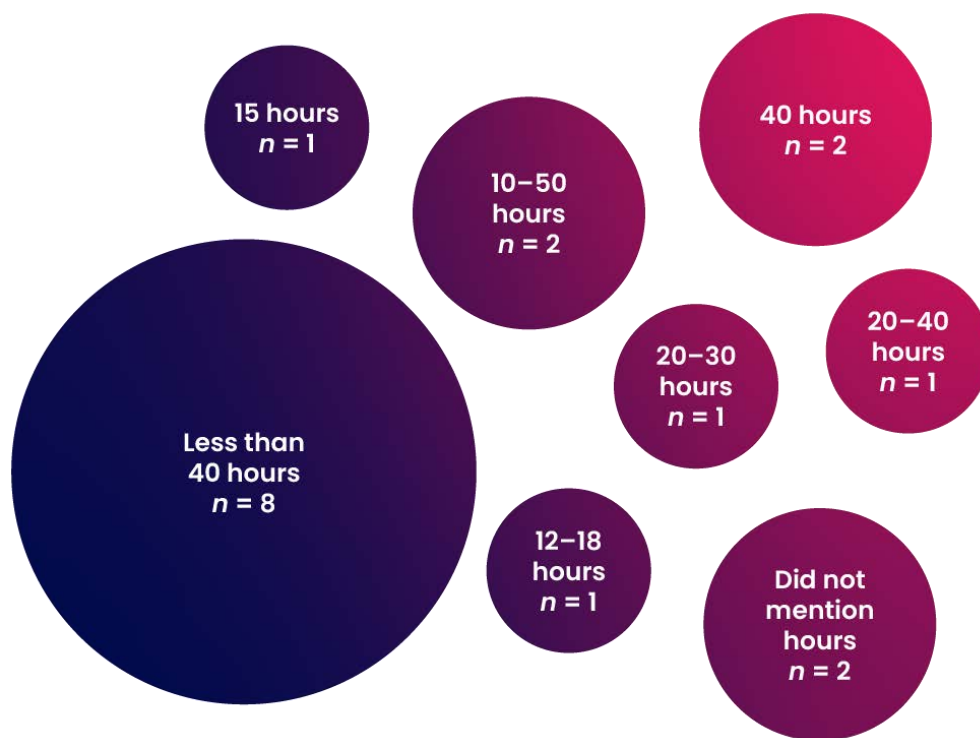
Note. Number of hours interview participants worked per week in 2019 (*N* = 18).

The digital nomad workweek is a fluctuating construct that may look different from week to week, and again different before major public holidays (when money for gifts had to be earned or projects finished), and Figure 4.2 (above) shows that even those who worked the lowest number of hours did not come anywhere near the ideal of the four-hour workweek. None of the participants would probably ever be eligible to join the ranks of Ferris' so-called elite or new rich people, as advertised by his book. From a traditional, full-time-based perspective, Markus' temporary 15-hour workweek might even be regarded as underemployment or work under precarious circumstances (Standing, 2014), had he not explicitly chosen to work less in compensation for the additional hours he had worked earlier in the year.

An important outcome of this is that most participants indeed appeared to work fewer than 40 hours per week, which is in line with Haking's (2017) findings. Based on the narratives of self-care discussed earlier in this chapter, it appears that most of the participants may have indeed achieved a certain work–life balance that was, even if not based on Ferris' elusive ideal of a four-hour workweek, based on a workweek that is often deliberately shorter than regular full-time employment.

In regard to the length of the ideal workweek, Ulrich Beck (2000) noticed in the 1990s that a shorter workweek appealed especially to younger people. According to Beck, working fewer hours made it "possible to achieve greater time-autonomy and a new and better coordination of paid labour and domestic labour, of work and life" (Beck, 2000, p. 81). In addition, research shows that not working overtime is a way of taking care of one's health (Virtanen et al., 2010), and that people do not need to be full-time employees in order to achieve satisfaction and wellbeing from paid work (Kamerāde et al., 2019). Returning to the self-care discussion in the previous section, according to Standing (2014, p. 269), it is important to have time to oneself, as:

> proper education and 'quality time' are the way to help people make their own decisions. Contrary to what libertarian paternalists say, most people do not make sub-optimal decisions because they are overwhelmed by information; they make them because they do not have the time or energy to sift the relevant information, do not have access to affordable expert advice and do not have Voice to exercise their choices.

In this respect, by making the conscious decision to work fewer hours per week, the participants may forgo potential paid work hours, but in return, they have given themselves the time to make better decisions about their lives.

Unpaid Work

When discussing the numbers of hours worked, the question regarding where to draw the line between work and leisure should be asked. In other words, where does work "drip feed" into leisure time? (Quotation from coworking host Jack) According to beliefs formed in the early 20th century, work hours could only be counted if they had an "exchange value" (Standing, 2014, p. 201). This also implies that any work done in the home was only worth counting if it was done by a paid employee and not by a family member (Standing, 2014).

In line with this philosophy, some of the research participants only regarded activities as work that were directly rewarded with money. Looking for new clients, for example—a concept that Standing calls "uncompensated work-for-labour outside their paid hours" (Standing, 2014, p. 26)—was generally overlooked, whereas the participants were more sensitive when it came to other work-related issues. Fabiano from Italy said, for instance:

The thing is, you have to be very careful as a nomad, to not, to keep this separation, kind of, intact. Because often my life and work kind of is one thing. So, I am sitting at a café, for example. I have breakfast, I enjoy having coffee and just hanging out. Maybe read an article that I would read in my spare time. But at the same time, I am also working.

So, it can easily happen to you that you work all day. But you actually don't work all day. You basically just drag your entire work out for as much time as you have. And then, because you don't have this separation of 'now I'm going to the office and now I'm home', like, it's basically always work with you.

Markus from Germany adds a similar thought in the following quotation:

There is the question, when is something work and when it isn't. And I made the decision not to treat it like 40 hours of work a week, but choose to do what I want to do, and to treat it as one life.

The thinking behind Markus' statement may be one of the reasons why the participants found it so hard to estimate how many hours they actually worked per week.

Not only digital nomads, but regular employees also engage in time-consuming unpaid labour almost every day, as they commute to work, attend networking functions, read work-related paperwork after hours, search and apply for jobs or spend time negotiating the welfare bureaucracy (Standing, 2014). This suggests that there is less of an 'added load' on the digital nomad side, and more of a shift in the nature of unpaid work to other tasks, when comparing unpaid work performed by freelancing digital nomads with unpaid work performed by regular employees. However, there are also certain aspects of unpaid work that digital nomads and employees share. These include social events or "work-related leisure" that could also be counted as professional networking, Hilbrecht writes (2007, p. 375). Markus from Germany, for instance, explained that he had also worked unpaid hours while he was still a full-time worker:

I am very interested in SEO [search engine optimisation], and in that agency [his former employer], it's like an eight- or nine-hour day. And when, when it's over, it doesn't stop for me, because I am still interested in reading blogs, reading Twitter. And especially going to conferences.

So, there was this moment, when I was nine hours in the office, and after that I drove off to some conference, and there was the question, is this now still

work? But I would also go there if I wouldn't be able to write this [the trip to the conference] down as work hours or so. Because I am just interested in that.

From Bauman's (2004) perspective, work that people enjoy doing is a privilege, especially when they cannot say anymore where the boundary between work and leisure lies. However, Markus' responses shows that it was only a privilege, as Bauman wrote, when he worked for himself and not for an employer. After all, when working for himself, Markus was free to decide which networking functions he wanted to attend.

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Nomadic Online Work

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a revolution in terms of online work, as millions of clerical workers around the globe were forced to stay at home and work online. At the same time, those who could not work online, such as people in "healthcare, first responders, [and] the food and agriculture sector" were risking their lives to care for the stay-at-home online workers and their families (Gostin & Wiley, 2020, p. 2137). Some businesses had to close, such as "bars, restaurants, theaters, gyms, [and] shopping malls" (Gostin & Wiley, 2020, p. 2137), whereas for others, the pandemic was a boon. Oxfam reported, for instance, that the pandemic had cost 400 million jobs worldwide, but at the same time, online shopping had been so profitable that Amazon boss "Jeff Bezos could pay each of Amazon's 876,000 employees a $105,000 bonus and still be as wealthy as he was at the onset of the pandemic" (Gneiting et al., 2021, p. 22).

While regular workers who lived a nine-to-five lifestyle suddenly had to learn how to work remotely, there was no transition necessary for digital nomads, as working outside a company office is one of the mainstays of this lifestyle. From a business perspective, the pandemic influenced the research participants' lives in different ways (see Table 4.2 below). Most of the 13 who had returned for a second interview between 29 June and 6 August 2020 via video conference or in writing, reported that their business had either not been affected or that access to paid work had fluctuated in the early months of the pandemic before it went back to pre-pandemic levels. Even if the participants' businesses were affected for a time, this was not always seen as problematic, as Katherine wrote:

> As I'm a travel writer, I was expecting to be completely out of work. However, one
> of my clients kept me on and just reduced my contract to three days a week. I actually
> enjoyed going down to 3 days with them as it freed up time to focus on other
> personal projects and think about pivoting into other industries (I'd also like to write
> in the environment and sustainability spaces). Another client also contacted me with
> a new project, so I've still been busy.

Table 4.2

Financial Situation in Mid-2020

Chose not to work	Experienced financial pressure	Fluctuating demand (old opportunities replaced by new ones)	No change	Profited from the pandemic
Sven (Did not work in the beginning of the pandemic due to mental health reasons)	Sarah (Locked out of Thailand and needed to find more work to pay rent in Thailand and Vietnam) Jessica (Lost customers because she decided to take a leave of absence and visit her family)	Emily (From business-to-business sales to retail sales, and started crypto trading) Markus (Lost customers as they worried about financial security; won customers who were looking for indoor activities during lockdown) Amanda (As a graphics designer, first more pandemic-related work, then a slump in demand; back to normal in summer 2020) Yasmin (Lost one business, one business remained but with very few clients; later found remote employment with another tax accountancy) Cara (First lost all jobs, then found new customers and retrieved some old customers) Katherine (Lost some clients and found a new one)	Daniel (Computer programmer) Fabiano (Software engineer) Yoshi (Web design and development)	Brad (Some arts and crafts products sold out)

Katherine's remark is also in line with Sven's response, as he said he consciously decided not to take on work in early 2020: "Honestly, I didn't feel like working during those months, I took a break from everything", he wrote. Staying true to their pre-pandemic lifestyle, Sven and Katherine also prioritised wellbeing over financial aspects during pandemic times. After all, the pandemic had a huge mental health toll even on those who did not fall sick (Abbas et al., 2021).

Among the returning interviewees, Jessica from the United States was the only participant who openly admitted that she did not have enough income to support herself in mid-2020. Jessica said she had lost all but "two or three" of her online English language students. This was not due to

the pandemic, though, but simply because she wanted to take two weeks off to give herself time to travel from Cambodia to the United States to see her family. Jessica could be considered a classic gig worker, as she engaged in "online, piecemeal employment" (Thompson, 2018, p. 1, see also Chapter 1 for a definition).

Jessica's choice to teach English had turned her skills into an easily replaceable commodity, especially as emotional connections between Jessica and her students did not appear to exist. Once she had decided to go on leave, her clients would simply look for someone else who would be available in the same time slots. Even though there are upsides to the gig economy, such as when online workers can "exercise a higher degree of agency in arranging and aligning multiple digital platforms to support relevant work practices" (Sutherland & Jarrahi, 2017, p. 1), it is clear that Jessica's individual choices had resulted in her losing income. However, Jessica explained that her colleagues had warned her beforehand that she would lose students if she allowed herself a holiday. Nevertheless, seeing her family was more important to her than generating an income, so she willingly accepted the financial risk and the resulting consequences. At the time of the online interview, Jessica was slowly rebuilding her customer base, saying that, "now it's starting to pick back up again, a little bit. So, that's good, but yeah … [hesitates]"

One participant could be considered a 'winner' of the pandemic, although certainly on a smaller scale than Amazon's record sales during the height of the pandemic. Brad from Canada said that some of the arts and crafts kits his online shop sourced from China sold out in 2020. The products in his shop were ideally suited to entertain people in lockdown, and Brad was visibly happy when discussing business in mid-2020. At the same time, he was also feeling somewhat embarrassed about his success. After all, the pandemic had been bad for the world but good for his business:

> I know, it's been a big, it's been a good, I mean [laughs], it *hasn't* been a good year, but it's been a *good* year, a building block, for building our specialty … Nothing too much has changed in terms of business model or anything like that. But things are going. Yeah.

When comparing Brad's job during the pandemic (selling arts and crafts supplies online) with the job that Brad had before he decided to pursue the digital nomad lifestyle (restaurant management), it is clear that this choice had been a good choice for him and his career. Given that restaurants were closed over the pandemic, Brad would probably have lost his job. A similar fate would have applied to Jessica as well. She used to work in her own acupuncturist practice in the United States, which also would have been closed during the pandemic. In this respect, even though Jessica faced temporary hardship as an English tutor on unpaid leave, she also would have faced financial hardship had she chosen to keep working in her acupuncturist practice.

Although the interviewee pool consisted of only 13 participants in 2020, their financial fates still covered a wide range of hardship and success. All participants were online workers, but they were also highly specialised individuals who had found their niches. At the same time, they were flexible enough to look for alternatives when under financial pressure, such as Yasmin taking on remote work with an accountant in Germany, or Emily and her partner taking up crypto trading during 2020. In 1996, long before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Bauman wrote that:

> In this world, not only have jobs-for-life disappeared, but trades and professions which have acquired the confusing habit of appearing from nowhere and vanishing without notice can hardly be lived as Weberian 'vocations' - and to rub salt into the wound, the demand for the skills needed to practise such professions seldom lasts as long as the time needed to acquire them. Jobs are no longer protected, and most certainly no better than the stability of places where they are practised. (Bauman, 1996a, p. 24)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the participants were certainly very aware of the how insecure their income sources were and, consequently, they were looking for new opportunities. In this respect, Sarah from the Philippines, who had previously been a teacher, remarked that going back to being a teacher had crossed her mind. After all, during 2020, she and her partner had to pay rent for an apartment in Thailand as well as a hotel room in Vietnam—due to Thailand's borders being closed while they were on a trip to Vietnam. Sarah said that working as a teacher, "that's more stable. But, I don't know, I think am not really there yet." At the time of the interview, Sarah was instead applying for a VA (virtual assistant) position as an additional income source, while she and her partner were waiting for the Thai borders to reopen.

The remaining interviewees pointed out that they would not go back to a nine-to-five job under any circumstances. "There's no chance of that, ever again in life", Brad said. Markus, the photographer, put it like this:

> No way [laughs]. I still can't imagine that. I think for my part, if my current business would continue to go downhill then I would rather look to building something new. And I wouldn't have a problem living on unemployment benefits for a few months either … start my own business again.
>
> I find this aspect, that is, being able to organise your own time and work on something that is important to yourself much more appealing than going into nine-to-five for the sake of supposed financial security.

Workplaces had already been insecure since around the 1990s (as described in Chapter 2), and the pandemic has added another risk to the existing catalogue of risks. The response of the participants was to take time off, or to adjust and look for new opportunities while prioritising their wellbeing. However, many employers during the pandemic allowed staff to work from home, so the participants could have looked for regular employment contracts, if they wanted to. However, the participants made clear that being able to travel and work, and being able to schedule their time was still seen as a positive incentive, even if they some of them may have suffered short-term financial losses.

Returning to the risk-related discussion in the beginning of this chapter, the biggest 'winner' during the pandemic was indeed the person who had accepted the greatest risk when deciding to transition to the digital nomad lifestyle. Brad, the former restaurant manager, would have been unemployed had he not become a digital nomad. As a business owner selling arts and crafts kits that helped Americans stay occupied with an enjoyable hobby during the pandemic, Brad certainly received a substantial financial reward for the risk that he had accepted when he became a digital nomad in 2015. This was in addition to the pride he felt when talking about his business.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the following research questions: How do people understand the shift from a traditional working style to the digital nomad lifestyle, a) how do they describe the experience of their work and b) how did the COVID-19 pandemic impact on their understandings of their labour?

When examining the digital nomad lifestyle and the employment background of the participants in this research, it is clear that some found it easy to transition to this lifestyle, as their professions could be considered location independent even before they made a conscious decision to travel more. Some participants, for instance, were already working as freelance photographers or web designers. Others had to learn entirely new skills because either their previous profession was not online ready (such as an acupuncturist), or because they wanted to embark on a different career (such as from restaurant manager to online retailer).

In terms of the justifications given for the transition to this new lifestyle, almost all participants named emotional reasons, such as the desire to travel more, the desire for more rewarding work, or the experience or the possibility of emotional loss. Emotional wellbeing was regarded as more important than potential loss of income.

Some participants were still at a higher risk of not earning an income, which they willingly accepted. This risk is certainly bigger for these people than for a sedentary person looking for regular employment, as this chapter has shown. The financial risk, however, was offset by a perceived lower

risk due to the large number of experts (or influencers) that encouraged the participants to be confident with their chances of success.

In terms of how digital nomads scheduled their workday and workweek, the Western Monday-to-Friday office week was generally followed by digital nomads as well. However, the early mornings were used for self-care measures, which for some meant passive self-care such as sleeping in, and for others, actively engaging in sports, meditation or writing in gratitude journals. It was more difficult to determine the actual number of hours worked per week, as hours worked could fluctuate week-by-week, and there were also unpaid work activities that sometimes had a leisure component. This was intentional, though, as the participants had consciously chosen to leave nine-to-five office hours behind, accept the unclear boundaries between work and leisure and "treat it as one life", as Markus from Germany said. In general, however, it appears that the participants were aiming at working fewer than 40 hours per week, and they generally aimed at not working from home full-time.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the participants to different degrees, based on their individually chosen professions. For some, the pandemic had no effect at all, whereas others were able to find new income sources. The example of Jessica, who could be classified as a gig worker, as she chose to teach English online, also shows that the COVID-19 pandemic is not the only source of insecurity that online workers face. Jessica's wish to take personal leave for a few weeks had impacted her income and was unrelated to the pandemic. No matter how the financial fallout was experienced by the individual participant, the pandemic had not convinced any of them to give up this lifestyle, even though lockdowns and local restrictions made travel difficult in many places around the world for most of 2020 and 2021.

This chapter showed that the participants were committed workers with schedules and routines in place. They valued non-monetary rewards such as engaging in a meaningful craft, and having control over their time mattered to them more than the "supposed financial security" (Markus) that regular employment provided. The following chapter will examine how people who follow the digital nomad lifestyle define freedom, and how the restrictions in place during the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their views on freedom.

Chapter 5

Freedom

Freedom (or liberty) is a concept that has different meanings for different people, based on the place and time they were born. Freedom can be defined simply as *location freedom*. "Free means to be allowed to go anywhere" is a definition that, according to Bauman, goes back to the year 1483 (Bauman, 1988, p. 9). A discussion about other definitions of freedom, made by politicians, philosophers and social scientists alike could fill books (Bauman, 2008; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2009; Berlin, 1969; Smith, 1776). However, there is limited research regarding how digital nomads, whose lifestyle is based on the freedom to live and work where they want, experienced the loss of the very privilege on which their mode of living is based. Therefore, the research question that this chapter aims to answer is: "How did location-independent online workers (digital nomads) define and experience freedom before and during the COVID-19 pandemic?"

Of course, it would be unethical to confine people to their homes (or their temporary accommodation) for weeks, sometimes months on end, for the purposes of research. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021), lockdowns and stay-at-home orders became the new normal around the world, and people began to rethink freedoms previously taken for granted. These freedoms did not only include the privilege to travel internationally, but also more basic freedoms such as simply leaving one's residence to go out for a coffee with someone else. In this regard, Chapter 5 first examines the connection between nationality and mobility, and provides an overview of how digital nomads experienced location independence in the 2010s. I will then investigate how digital nomads experienced and evaluated freedom in mid-2020, when lockdowns and stay-at-home orders were enforced in households around the world. This is followed by an analysis of the sentiment in the digital nomad community with respect to location independence, and the balance of freedom versus security in March 2021, the first anniversary of COVID-19 being declared a pandemic. This chapter will finish with my conclusions as to the changing nature of freedom for digital nomads before and during pandemic times.

Travel Freedom as a Privilege

Freedom has been a popular topic since the early days of digital nomad research, when investigators became aware that "the laptop and Wi-Fi have been mainly characterized as enablers of freedom" (Liegl, 2014, p. 175), and when some online freelancers discovered "Freedom of Movement" (Brown, 2015, p. 38) or "freedom of mobility" (Richards, 2015, p. 350) and the "freedom to work anywhere they can connect to the Internet" (Richards, 2015, p. 343). Some researchers

stressed that the prospect of freedom was an important pull factor for people to live a nomadic lifestyle (Franks, 2016). Just before the COVID-19 pandemic, scholars in this field discussed freedom and flexibility in terms of work (Al-Hadi & Al-Aufi, 2019), as well as "optimal temporal and spatial freedom" for those who wanted to be "their own boss" in order to "escape from the rigid structures of everyday life … towards a lifestyle of 'true freedom' " (Beaumont, 2019, p. 6). However, researchers have generally avoided asking their participants how they would define freedom, and it appears that, so far, there has not been an examination of how their definition of freedom has been influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

From Zygmunt Bauman's perspective, "freedom was born as a privilege and has remained so ever since. Freedom divides and separates. It sets the best apart from the rest" (Bauman, 1988, p. 9). Freedom is also a relatively new concept which is "closely connected with the advent of modernity and capitalism" (Bauman, 1988, p. 7) as well as with individualism (Bauman, 1988). In the context of this research, freedom in Western society is seen from Bauman's perspective as consumer freedom, the freedom to consume a wide range of goods and services, which also include travel services (Bauman, 1988). Just as Bauman divides postmodern society into two main groups, those who have the resources to qualify as consumers and those who do not (Bauman, 1988, see also Chapter 2), Bauman also uses the terms tourists and vagabonds to describe levels of global mobility. From Bauman's theoretical perspective, tourists are people who can travel (almost) wherever and whenever they want to (Bauman, 1997; 1998), whereas vagabonds are generally not granted these privileges. There is a great divide between tourists and vagabonds, Bauman argues, as:

> the vagabond is the tourist's *alter ego*—just as the destitute is the *alter ego* of the rich, the savage the *alter ego* of the civilized, or the stranger the *alter ego* of the native. Being an *alter ego* means to serve as a rubbish bin into which all ineffable premonitions, unspoken fears, secret self-deprecations and guilts too awesome to be thought of are dumped; to be an *alter ego* means to serve as … an inner demon to be publicly exorcized. (1997, p. 93)

Thus, vagabonds are people without resources and without privileges (Bauman, 1998). The passport, as proof of nationality, has been a tangible symbol of privilege ever since the bearer of a passport was seen as protected by their "king, bishop, council, government, state and so on" in pre-industrial times (Keshavarz, 2015, p. 99). However, only in 1914 at the onset of World War I, were passports made mandatory for everyone with the intention to cross the border of a nation-state (Torpey, 2001). From mid-1916, those who crossed Germany's borders had to show a *Sichtvermerk*, which is today known as a visa, that permitted them to enter or leave the empire or its occupied territories (Torpey, 2001). Foreigners seeking entry were suddenly viewed with "suspicion and

mistrust", whereas military recruits were deterred from leaving the country without permission of their commanding officers (Torpey, 2001, p. 257). Even though mandatory passports were seen as a temporary measure at the time (Torpey, 2001), they have been used ever since to control human flows in and out of countries around the world, and thus as a measure to control the travel freedoms of their own citizens as well as of foreign passport holders.

Physical visas that accompanied a passport as access permission to a certain country, were beginning to be phased out in the 1990s (Bauman, 1998) and replaced by simplified alternatives which include 'visa on arrival' in Thailand, or electronic visas such as 'electronic Visa on Arrival (e-VOA)' in Indonesia or 'Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA)' in the United States. Participating countries are generally described as "visa free access destinations" (Henley & Partners, 2022, "My Passport" section), but this applies only to those who have the privilege to be eligible for such a visa. The electronic visa process has made international travel easier and faster for those who find themselves on the top, and harder for those who find themselves at the very bottom of the global social ladder, Bauman (1998) argues. He adds that, as a result, the world is now divided into "the world of the globally mobile", which includes tourists and, to a limited extent, also vagabonds, and "the world of the 'locally tied'" (Bauman, 1988, p. 88).

The location-independent online workers in this research would probably not agree with Bauman calling them tourists, as they generally consider themselves as something other than tourists. Contrary to regular tourists, for instance, digital nomads do not aim to "take uncertainty out" of their lives (Bauman, 1997, p. 91). Instead, they "like to think of themselves as 'world-citizens,' or 'travelers,' or indeed, nomads, freedom-seekers", as Thompson aptly describes (2021, p. 3). At the same time, Thompson stresses that some digital nomads do visit popular tourist destinations and may also behave like regular tourists (Thompson, 2019b). They also have the choice to travel or remain in place, Bauman (1997) argues, which is in stark contrast to vagabonds, who have very limited travel choices. Having the same choices as a regular tourist but wanting to be different is a sentiment that digital nomads share with lifestyle migrants, who often also try to distinguish themselves from "ordinary tourist[s]", Korpela argues (2006, p. 8). This goes back as far as the self-justification of travellers in colonial times who also did not consider themselves as regular tourists, Korpela argues (2006).

Most of the participants in this research have at least one passport from a Western country. This, by accident of birth, has provided them with the freedom to visit the majority of countries around the world. Their passports mark their position in the global hierarchy of mobility, but also how they stand in relation to the other research participants. Passport-based travel privileges have been measured since the 1990s by Henley and Partners, an international company who advises governments around the world—including Australia, the United Kingdom and Canada—on visa

matters (Henley & Partners, 2021). Table 5.1 (below) is based on the Henley & Partners Passport Index (2022), and it shows that digital nomads who originated in North America, Europe or Australia have visa free access to at least 185 countries around the world.

Table 5.1

A Closer Look at the Global Hierarchy of Mobility

Pseudonym	Nationality	Global passport ranking	Easy access to no. of countries in 2022
Yoshi	United States & Japan	1 (Japan)	193
Yasmin	Germany	3	190
Andreas	Germany	3	190
Markus	Germany	3	190
Thomas	Germany	3	190
Marcellina	Germany & Poland	3 (Germany)	190
Amanda	Finland	4	189
Fabiano	Italy	4	189
Sven	Italy	4	189
Emily	United Kingdom	6	187
Jessica	United States	7	186
Sophie	United States	7	186
Cara	Australia	8	185
Katherine	Australia	8	185
Daniel	Australia	8	185
Brad	Canada	8	185
Lola	*Brazil*	*19*	*170*
Sarah	*Philippines*	*80*	*67*

Note. Ranking based on the Henley & Partners Passport Index (Henley & Partners, 2022). The table shows that Lola and Sarah (formatted in bold italics), as citizens of Brazil and the Philippines, respectively, have fewer travel privileges compared to the other participants.

In terms the freedom to travel, Figure 5.1 shows a virtually borderless world for Yoshi, a United States-American citizen who, due to his ancestry, also holds a Japanese passport. Thanks to his Japanese passport, Yoshi is bestowed with a higher degree of mobility freedom than those who may have a less privileged passport. In this respect, Yoshi has the freedom to visit the entire American content, Europe, more than half of the African continent, as well as most Asian countries, Australia and New Zealand without a lengthy and expensive manual visa application process. From Bauman's perspective, Yoshi is the personification of Bauman's tourist—and it should be pointed out here that the most powerful passport is not from a Western country.

Figure 5.1

Visa-Free Access for Japanese Travellers for the Period Before March 2020 and From 2022
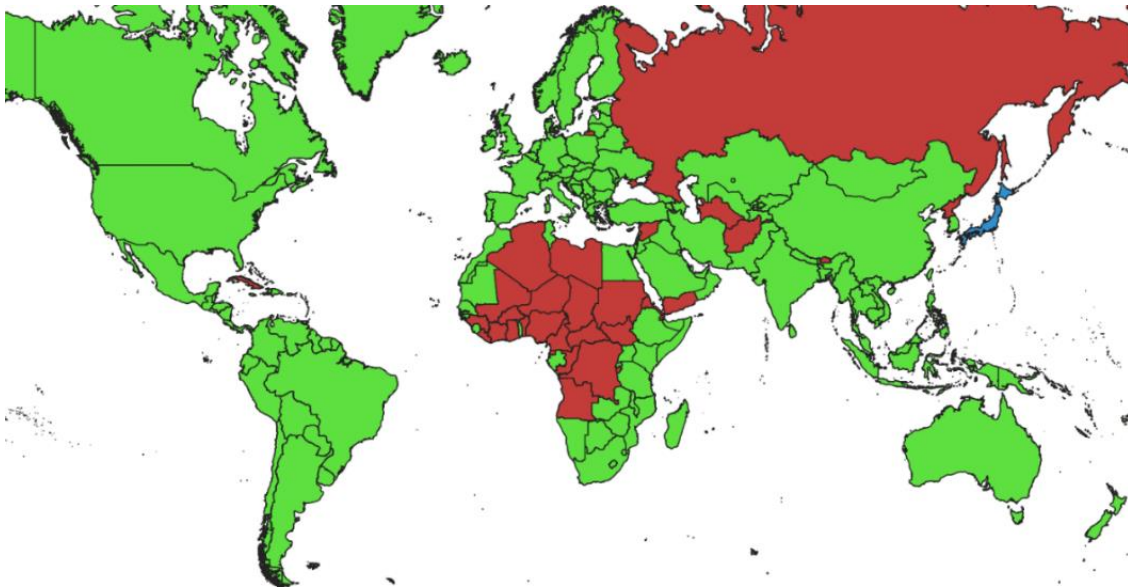
Note. All countries that offer easy access (e.g., via 'visa on arrival' or an electronic visa for Japanese citizens) are coloured in green. Countries that do not allow Japanese citizens to travel visa-free are coloured red. Japan is marked in blue on this map. Ranking is based on the Henley & Partners Passport Index (2022). Image created with QGIS (see www.qgis.org).

Figure 5.2

Visa-Free Access for Travellers from Brazil for the Period Before March 2020 and From 2022
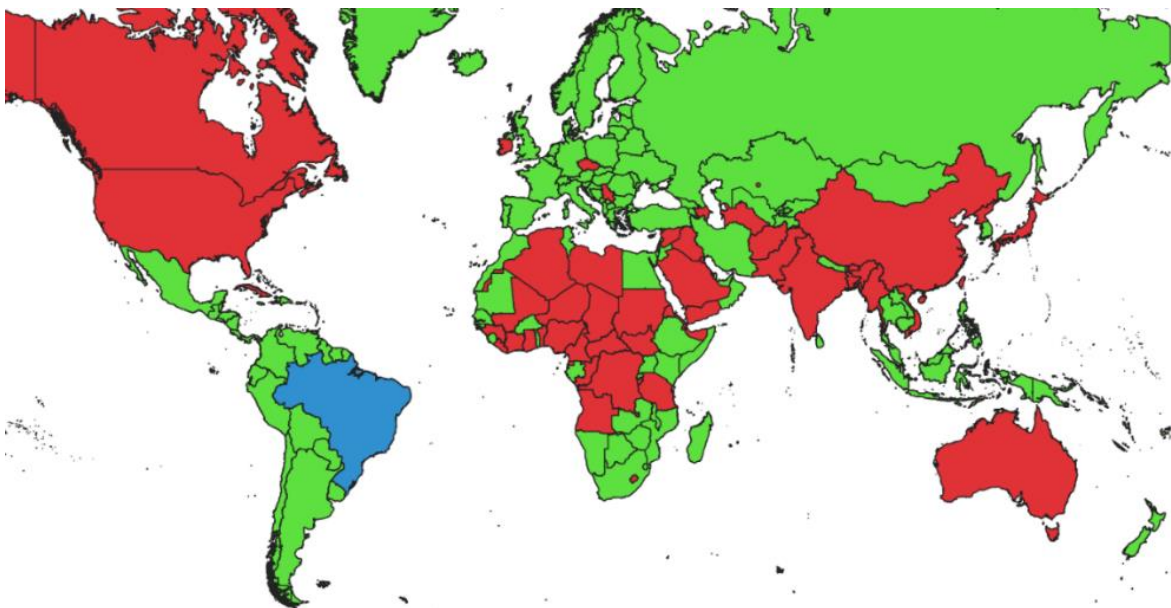
Note. All countries that offer easy access (e.g., via 'visa on arrival' or an electronic visa for citizens of Brazil) are coloured in green. Countries that do not allow Brazilian citizens to travel visa-free are coloured red. Brazil is coloured blue. Ranking is based on the Henley & Partners Passport Index (2022). Image created with QGIS (see www.qgis.org).

The world does not treat all digital nomads in the same way as it treats Yoshi from Japan. Lola from Brazil, for example, does not get visa-free access to North America or Australia (see Figure 5.2). In order to obtain a B2 tourist visa to visit the United States, for instance, Lola would have to go to a United States consulate for an interview as a prerequisite for government officials considering her individual case (U.S. Department of State, 2023). In terms of Bauman's global hierarchy of mobility (see Figure 2.2), the United States government considers Lola as a 'vagabond'—i.e. someone who is not someone automatically be welcomed as a tourist— whereas, at the same time, the Thai government regarded her as a welcome 'tourist' when visited Chiang Mai in 2019.

As can be seen in Figure 5.2, there are still many countries that welcome Lola from Brazil. However, for Sarah from the Philippines, the world is, again, substantially smaller than for anyone else in this research cohort (see Figure 5.3). Sarah has visa-free access to only a small number of countries in the world. She could, from a certain perspective, be called 'less free', because many countries are closed to her. Most of the countries she is free to travel to are located in Asia, South America and Africa. This means that the United States—the passport country of Sarah's partner—is not a destination she is allowed to travel to visa-free. On the plus side, Sarah is welcome in digital nomad hotspots such as Chiang Mai or Bali.

Figure 5.3

Visa-Free Access for Travellers from the Philippines, for the Period Before March 2020 and From 2022
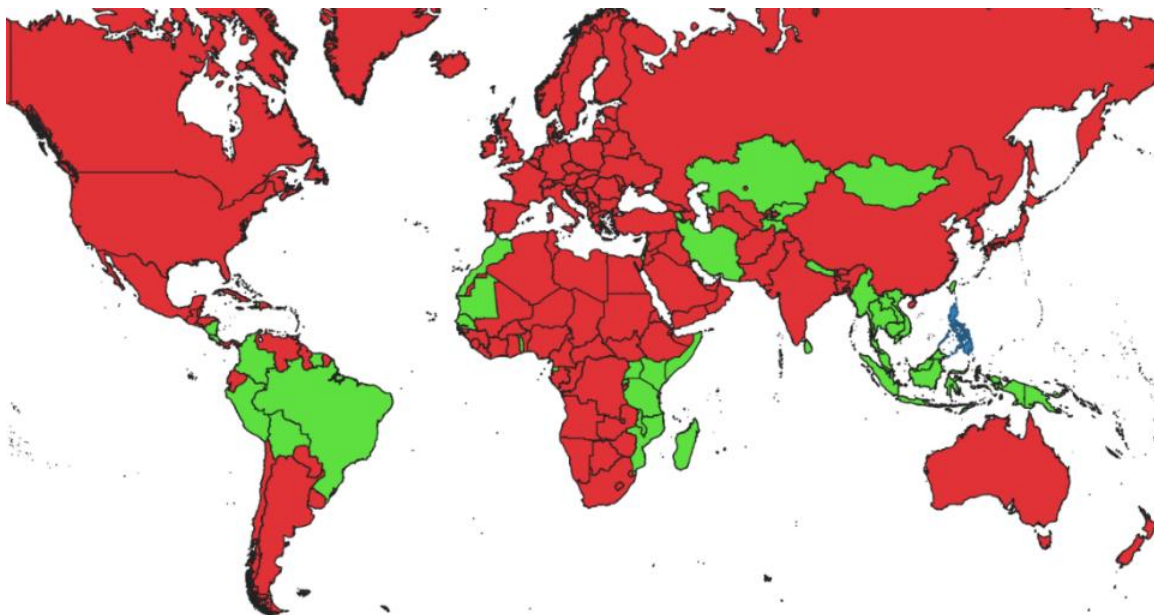
Note. All countries that offer a 'visa on arrival' or an electronic eTA visa for citizens of the Philippines are coloured in green. Countries that do not allow Philippines citizens to travel visa-free are coloured red. The Philippines is coloured blue. Ranking is based on the Henley & Partners Passport Index (Henley & Partners, 2022). Image created with QGIS (see www.qgis.org).

Thailand: Separating the Tourists From the Vagabonds

        Governments choose which countries they deem eligible for visa exemptions, based on factors such as economic ties or historic and colonial ties (Benson & O'Reilly, 2018). As this research focuses on interviews with digital nomads who visited Chiang Mai in 2019, I will use the Visa Exemption policy of Thailand as an example. The Thai tourist visa exemption scheme includes 56 out of a total of 193 states (Royal Thai Embassy Wellington, 2023). Most of the eligible countries are in the Americas, Europe and Southeast Asia. Citizens of all but one African country (i.e., South Africa), as well as most Middle Eastern, and most former Soviet states are not eligible for a free tourist visa (see Figure 5.4 below).

Figure 5.4

Thailand: Countries and Territories Entitled for Visa Exemption, for the Period Before March 2020 and From 2022
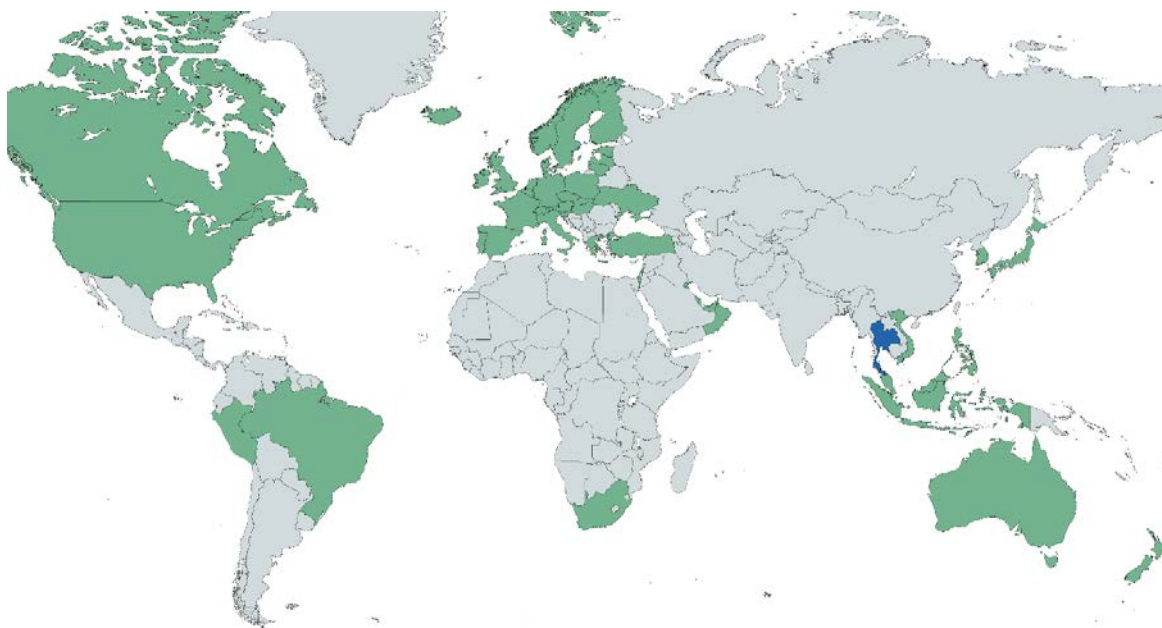
Note. Thailand is marked in blue on the map. "Passport holders of the countries … [marked in green] are not required to obtain a visa when entering Thailand for *tourism* [emphasis added] and will be permitted to stay in Thailand for a period not exceeding 30 days each visit." (Royal Thai Embassy Wellington, 2023, paragraph 5). Image created with MapChart (see www.mapchart.net).

        The map above (Figure 5.4) shows that only citizens of the 'green' countries have the freedom to visit Thailand as tourists (as of 2021). People with passports of all other nations are not welcome. From Bauman's perspective, they are vagabonds—people who need to manually apply for a visa, without a guarantee that the visa is granted at all. Thailand acts as a gatekeeper that actively chooses which nationalities they would like to invite as visa-free tourists. A similar strategy is also used by other developing countries, including Malaysia or Panama. Malaysia and Panama seek to

invite "those with relative affluence, consumer power, and economic capital" (Benson & O'Reilly, 2018, p. 119). No matter if people from these nations are short-term tourists or long-term lifestyle migrants, they are 'desirables' who have the 'consumer power' these countries are looking for. It should be noted that visitors in these countries (Thailand, Malaysia and Panama) are not invited to visit and earn, but to visit and spend money within the national borders (Benson & O'Reilly, 2018). Visitors are seen as a financial asset to be expelled as soon as the visa expires.

The 'Western Only' Nomad—Myth and Reality

The visa policies of nation-states have major consequences for everyone who crosses their borders, including tourists, legal and illegal migrants, business visitors and of course, those who identify with the digital nomad lifestyle. As mentioned above, Thailand is an active gatekeeper that deters citizens from many Asian countries and from most African countries (see Figure 5.4), and thus has an impact on the location freedom of international travellers and digital nomads alike. For me, as a researcher who was looking for potential interviewees who had stayed in Thailand in 2019, this means that I would never have found any research participants from countries like the Russian Federation, Oman or India, for example. I was not aware of these restrictions when I started this research, and it is clear that other investigators, who conducted research in countries that have an even more restrictive policy, such as Spain (Thompson, 2021) or Portugal (Beaumont, 2019), were equally unaware of this fact, as many seem to agree that digital nomads primarily originate from Western countries.

A lack of awareness of one's privileges is not the sole domain of Western investigators. Single Western digital nomads who own passports of more privileged countries are often not aware how 'lucky' they are in terms of their travel freedoms (Thompson, 2019b). This was different when it came to those in a mixed nationality relationship. An example would be research participant Fabiano from Italy, who was aware of the obstacles that came with a less powerful passport:

A European Union passport, especially an Italian passport, is pretty nice for travelling. And I never in my life actually thought about this too much.

But now [in 2019] my girlfriend has a Russian passport and that kind of showed me how, what a lucky guy [laughs] I am to have an Italian passport. Because there I really saw how, how it's not only, it's so hard to travel anywhere with a like, let's say 'worse' passport and [hesitates], but also expensive. Like, visas are pretty expensive for certain nationalities, and that's what actually made me really realise, wow this is, it's not easy to [hesitates], you actually have to, for the majority of the trips, sometimes can be just a visa. And I never thought about this.

From Bauman's perspective, Fabiano's (sedentary) Russian girlfriend could be considered a vagabond, or the unwanted "alter ego" of the tourist (Bauman, 1998, p. 94), because she lacked the privilege to get visa-free access to Thailand simply because she only had access to a Russian passport. Privileges are arbitrary, they are agreed upon and stored in the databases of the world (Bauman, 1998), such as the databases of border control authorities. Bauman sees these databases as records of those who are privileged, whereas for "certain others it [the database] deprives of passports and transit visas and stops from roaming the places reserved for the residents of cyberspace" (Bauman, 1998, p. 51). Bauman goes even further to say that "unlike the Panopticon, the database is a vehicle of *mobility* [emphasis added], not the *fetters* [emphasis added] keeping people in place" (Bauman, 1998, p. 51). This is because the database 'knows', for example, which passport holders are welcome visitors to a country, and which are not.

It should not be overlooked that the lack of freedom to travel to certain countries will have a major influence on the recruitment of participants and on the research results. This is reinforced by research stating that the "top three representatives [countries] are the United States, Germany and the Netherlands" (Haking, 2017, p. 27), along with evidence of research samples that are mostly from the Americas, Europe and Australia (Mouratidis, 2018), mostly from the Americas and Europe (Reichenberger, 2018) and mostly from North America, Europe and Australia (Thompson, 2021). The above discussion shows that some potential research candidates may be 'invisible' to researchers in this field as they may not be permitted to visit the same countries as the researchers, or are not fluent in English.

But there is, of course, more to freedom than visa-free access to a longer or shorter list of potential travel destinations. There are also implicit, subjective freedoms that people experience. These freedoms were to some extent recalibrated in 2020 and 2021 based on the experiences made during the early COVID-19 pandemic. This will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Enjoying Pre-COVID Freedoms and a Location-Independent Life in 2019

Mobility/Travel Freedom

When interviewing people who lived a digital nomad lifestyle before the pandemic, the two most discussed aspects of freedom were time freedom (to work when you want and schedule your own day), which is covered in Chapter 4, as well as location independence, in the sense that one is free to choose where to live, work and travel. As discussed above, location independence also entails the awareness that one is free to travel almost anywhere in the world without a lengthy and expensive visa process. In this respect, other researchers have found that some digital nomads may take advantage of the possibility to stay longer in a certain country via so-called *visa runs*, where tourists leave the country for short periods before returning on a new tourist visa (see Thompson, 2021;

Hannonen 2020). However, the participants in this research either explained to me they would move on to visit a different country (such as Markus from Germany) before a visa run would become necessary, or they had taken steps to stay longer in Thailand on an educational visa (such as Jessica from the United States).

Being able to visit a country on a tourist visa that may be repeatedly issued at the discretion of the local authorities is a privilege granted at birth to all but two of my research participants. However, even Lola from Brazil and Sarah from the Philippines, who had relatively limited travel privileges, felt they were location independent. Lola from Brazil, for instance, was aware that her passport from Brazil gave her the privilege of a free 90-day visa to Thailand, whereas tourists from most other countries generally receive a 30-day visa (Royal Thai Embassy Wellington, 2023). In 2019, Lola focused on the freedoms the digital nomad lifestyle gave her, compared with her sedentary life in Brazil:

> What wasn't freedom: Be in a place that I do not wanna be for money. Be in a city
> that I grow up because I need to feel as [if] I belong there, because it's where I was
> born. So, this wasn't freedom. So, when I say freedom, [it] is [this]: be wherever I
> want to go, and go whenever I want to go, and do whatever I want to do. So that's
> freedom for me.

Location freedom matters to Lola, and she felt liberated when she decided to adopt the digital nomad lifestyle. This decision overshadowed everything else, including the connection to her hometown (see the discussion of home in Chapter 6). In line with this, Sarah from the Philippines, who also had relatively few travel privileges, explained in 2019 that "I feel freedom is being able to live wherever you want."

Sarah only acknowledged her lack of travel privileges after she was specifically asked about it, which suggests that they were of minor importance for her:

> The Philippines passport is just very restricted. I think, we are only allowed to go to, I
> do not know, less than a hundred countries without a visa. But I would love to visit
> Germany, France, especially Switzerland. But I do not think I can afford it right now.

Furthermore, Sarah mentioned that even though she had an American partner, "I never got approved of a US spouse visa." Contrary to Bauman's statements that associate Sarah with the less privileged vagabond from the perspective of certain nation-states, Sarah felt that she was free. She focused on the travel privileges that she had, such as easy access to India and Bali, and not on what was out of her reach. Statements from Lola and Sarah highlight that freedom is certainly measurable

(as explained earlier), but also a subjective, positive experience that is exceptionally important to them.

In contrast to Lola and Sarah, Japanese American Yoshi was unsurpassed in terms of privileges: 193 out of a potential "227 visa-free destinations"[18] invited Yoshi and his fellow Japanese citizens for a visa-free visit. This makes Japan the number-one citizenship to have in the world (Henley & Partners, 2022, The Henley Passport Index section). Yoshi had been a part-time nomad since 2004, and a full-time nomad since 2014. In 2019, he rode his bicycle through Vietnam before visiting Chiang Mai, Thailand, and then moving on to Taipei, Taiwan. Over the years, Yoshi came to take his location-independent lifestyle for granted. He was unaware of his privileged status. This is likely why it did not even occur to the 49-year-old to explicitly mention location independence when he was asked to define what freedom meant to him in 2019. Seen through the lens of his travel privileges, Yoshi is one of those people who could "travel through life by their heart's desire and pick and choose their destination according to the joys they offer" (Bauman, 1998, p. 86). For someone like Yoshi, travel is enjoyable, and he is "welcomed with smiles and open arms" (Bauman, 1998, p. 89) wherever he goes—unlike Lola and Sarah, whose travel privileges are limited. This was Yoshi's personal definition of freedom before the pandemic:

> Freedom. I guess, live my life on my terms, and my decisions. And not have to rely
> on others. I mean it's also, if there's any problems or mistakes, I only have myself to
> blame, too. So, I think, I think, with freedom comes responsibility. But it also gives
> you the luxury of making the decisions and actually implementing them the way you
> want to.

Decision Freedom

This perception of *decision freedom*—the freedom to make your own decisions and accept the consequences—is an implicit freedom mentioned by most of the other research participants. According to Beck, the changing nature of employment, the 'chopping' up of employment "both contractually and temporally" (that is, there are other options now aside from permanent full-time employment), has resulted in people having gained new freedoms to "shape and coordinate one's 'own' work and one's 'own' life", but it has also made life riskier for workers (Beck, 2000, p. 53). The research participants have grown up in *The Brave New World of Work* (Beck, 2000,) and know no different way of life. This is why it is not surprising that they do not see this kind of freedom as a disadvantage. Yasmin from Germany, for instance, who had been a digital nomad for two years in

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[18] This includes nations and territories that are not recognised as countries, such as Kosovo or Hong Kong.

2019, explained that having more decision freedom resulted in her being happier, even to a degree of mindfulness:

> Yes, freedom means for me that I can get up in the morning and can actually do what I want. That I, that I can live a self-determined life and not have to fit in somewhere. Yes, and just my life as a whole and my everyday life. It already starts with the small things, in my everyday life, it begins, that I can schedule my own day. This of course also refers to a week, a month, a year, my whole life. That is freedom for me anyway.
>
> … I have the feeling, that I have a wider perspective, also for other issues, such as mindfulness and gratitude. So, things that one probably does not think about too much, when one is enveloped in their routine, one's hams … [hesitates], when one finds oneself in one's personal hamster wheel. If one doesn't look to the left, and not to the right. Because it is not necessary, because everything in this respect is taken over by someone else, so [laughs].

When talking about having to "fit in somewhere", Yasmin echoed the arguments of lifestyle migrants who "often criticise their home societies for repressing their individual freedom" (Korpela, 2014, p. 38). Furthermore, Yasmin's remark also ties in with the discussion about 'masterless' work (see Chapter 2), which refers to those who were not in regular employment during the industrial age. Yasmin is a masterless worker, she is "not surveilled, not monitored, not subjected to any regular, sanctions-fortified, routine" (Bauman 2004, p. 18), and she is very comfortable with putting herself first and work second.

Other interviewees also showed strong emotions when it came to decision freedom, with interviewees stressing that "you should do whatever you want from the bottom of your heart" (Lola) and "being able to do what I love" (Cara). However, having to make decisions constantly can also have its downsides, as Thomas from Germany said:

> Freedom has two sides: the very positive side of creating your life from scratch. You can decide what you want to do with your life. It's like, a blank canvas. But at the same time there is the big danger of being lost. The ability to, like you have to make more decisions. And there is only a certain amount [*sic*] of decisions a person can make per day. So, the decision amount is often already gone, but yeah. As a digital nomad you probably just have to make much more decisions all the time.

Thomas reflected on the conditions under which all people, not only digital nomads, live in postmodernity. In times past, tradition and higher beings used to create structures in people's lives, writes Giddens, but more recently as "tradition and nature dissolve", people are forced to make

decisions "in areas which were not 'decisionable' before" and face the consequences, such as "new problems and anxieties" (1996, pp. 368–369). In contrast to many other people of his generation, and by choosing to live the digital nomad lifestyle, Thomas actively went one step further: he embraced making more decisions and accepted the consequences of his decisions.

Financial Freedom

As to the issue of planning for the future, feeling secure or insecure also depends on what one has saved up in their bank accounts. In this context, several interviewees explained that *financial freedom* was also important. Resources (including money) are the basis of today's consumer society, and Bauman points out that "freedom has more to it than the lack of restrictions. To do things, one needs resources" (1988, p. 2). Financial freedom was discussed by several interviewees, such as Sven from Italy, who said that "you can only be free if you are not financially dependent on someone else … you have to take care about that, too." Sarah from the Philippines added that "the income peace is there. I can make more if I take in more jobs." For Sarah, freedom was about "making as much as you want, or less, and then some", which shows that she felt she had agency when it came to her actual income.

Only one interviewee in 2019, Marcellina, a citizen of Germany and Poland, replied to my question about freedom in a less positive manner. Marcellina stated that "I'm not a big fan of the expression 'freedom', because in the end we're not that free at all. We have, well, the responsibilities merely shift." Nobody else in this research has offered this kind of reply. In "Lifestyle of Freedom?", where Mari Korpela examines the stance of lifestyle migrants towards freedom, she also mentions that the "ethos of freedom is in fact a myth of freedom", and that "one can obviously question whether 'real' freedom can ever be reached" (Korpela, 2014, p. 41). This is also in line with Bauman, who writes that the kind of freedom we enjoy as consumers has limitation, as we can only choose between options that are commercially available and we are not encouraged to get creative and choose something that is outside the market (Bauman, 2000a). Finally, Bauman contends, there is no guidance anymore. Instead, there is always the risk that whatever path we choose for our lives may well be the wrong one, which leaves people in a constant state of uncertainty and anxiety (Bauman, 2003). Bauman adds that "freedom of choice is bound to come together with uncounted and uncountable risks of failure" (Bauman, 2007b, p. 141), and once people realise that they have failed, they know that they can blame no one but themselves (Bauman, 2000a; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). This is a large burden to bear, but it seemed that the participants were confident they had made the right choices. After all, none of my interviewees ever shared with me the thought that they might have had made the wrong decision in terms of choosing to follow a digital nomad lifestyle.

Freedom During the Early COVID-19 Pandemic in 2020

"Individual freedom cannot and should not be taken for granted, as it appears (and perhaps disappears) together with a particular kind of society—that is modern Western capitalist society", Bauman wrote in 1998 (p. 7). Indeed, according to Bauman, "freedom (the reality of it, if not the ideal) is a privilege, but a privilege hotly contested and bound to be contested" (Bauman, 1993; 2017, p. 91). This became a reality in March 2020, when borders closed around the world and "global human mobility and migration [had come] almost at a standstill" (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2021, p. 2). Formerly taken-for-granted freedoms such as the initially discussed visa-free travel privileges, but even more so, the freedom to enter or leave one's residence was suspended for millions of people around the world without prior warning, sometimes within hours, as in the case of Australia (Prime Minister of Australia, 2020). In May 2020, 221 countries "had announced COVID-19 related travel measures", the IOM reported (2021, p. 3). These restrictions were still in place when some of my 2019 research participants agreed to return for a second round of interviews between June and August 2020. It is also worth noting that even internal borders within the formerly 'borderless' Schengen countries of the European Union were closed at times. Citizens were also not able to cross the borders between the provinces of Canada or the States of Australia, and finally, there were even artificial borders newly created between different regions in the State of Western Australia.

At the time of the interviews, during the (Northern Hemisphere) summer of 2020, the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic was considered under control (Safi, 2020). Most of the research participants I had interviewed before the pandemic had left Thailand by that time. Some of those who were in Australia in the summer of 2020 were not allowed to leave their accommodation for months, whereas those who were staying in Taiwan (a country that counted few cases in 2020, see Summers et al., 2020) or in the United States (a country that counted an alarming number of cases) experienced few or no restrictions of movement within their national borders.

In mid-2020, the most discussed aspect of freedom for my research participants was the loss of location freedom, that is, the loss of freedom to travel wherever they wanted, whenever they wanted. This was also a time when Japanese American Yoshi had become aware of how important location freedom was for him:

> Freedom, I guess, for me it means freedom to just pick up my bags and go live
> anywhere in the world. That's I guess is the most immediate meaning of freedom …
> the coronavirus hasn't dictated that I change my MO [modus operandi]. It [the virus]
> has dictated where I can go. I do not think that that has affected me yet that much in
> a way where I feel that my freedom has been inhibited in that way.

At the time of this interview, Yoshi was living in Taiwan, and did not appear to be much affected by local restrictions due to the low number of cases in the country (Summers et al., 2020). In contrast to his definition of freedom in 2019, Yoshi stressed his agency to travel wherever he wanted, and also that he only owned his bags (apart from his bicycle). Back in 2019, location freedom had been a given for Yoshi, so that he had not even mentioned it. By pure luck, Yoshi's choice to move to Taiwan in early 2020 had resulted in him still enjoying location independence, at least while he remained within the borders of the country. Still, the restrictions in other countries had made Yoshi aware of how important location freedom was for him.

In an interesting twist, Markus, who was born in the socialist German Democratic Republic (GDR) in 1980, reminisced about his childhood in the GDR in the 1980s:

> Even if you were only able to travel on a limited scale, you were able to make the best of the situation. And that is exactly what I did over the last months in regard to [my passion for] photography.

Markus added that the travel restrictions in place at the time of the interview gave him the opportunity to explore his own backyard. Even though he could travel within Germany to a certain extent, Markus admitted that he was longing to travel internationally again, and that he was missing the location freedom that he had only a few months ago:

> I do realise that there is something working inside me, that I am trying to use the opportunities to at least travel within Germany. Yes, this whole [pandemic] situation has made me even more aware that at other times we have the freedom to travel [wherever we want].

Whereas Markus was at least able to travel within Germany in mid-2020, Cara from Australia was not even allowed to leave her temporary residence in Victoria, Australia, for months. Like Markus, Cara was yearning to travel again, saying that, "I do struggle sometimes with the idea of like, especially with the idea of being trapped, and not being able to just like pack up and leave." However, unlike Markus, Cara felt that the forced sedentariness during the pandemic made her unhappy:

> … something I was very mindful about [when] renting again [during lockdown in Australia]. Cause I have never rented like on a lease for like two years. And also needing, I needed to buy some stuff as well. I mean like a bed and other bits and pieces. So, I was very like, particular with what I bought.
>
> But also, I kind of knew that, well, anything I buy, I could just pop at Mum and Dad's, cause they are not too far away. Whereas when I was in London [where I

lived before], that was a lot harder, because I couldn't, like, I'd have to sell things and I couldn't just leave them there. I felt like I had more things kind of tying me down. So, I think that's more of an issue for me rather than the government being like, 'you can't do anything right now' [laughs].

From Cara's perspective, she felt unfree, or "trapped", not only because she was not allowed to leave Australia, but also because she was forced to sign a rental agreement and buy a bed and other furniture, even though it was only until the date she would be permitted to leave the country again. The only thing that lessened the pain for her was knowing that her sedentary parents would take care of her furniture once the travel restrictions were revoked.

It is not surprising that digital nomads, whose lifestyle is based on travel, after all, were feeling uncomfortable when tied to one residence or one country alone. According to Bauman scholar Mark Davis, their privileges had provided them with the freedom "to stay or move at their heart's desire, abandoning their current location when new, more exciting opportunities beckon elsewhere", while adding that they would "move because they find the world within their reach irresistibly attractive" (Davis, 2008, p. 144). Thus, before the pandemic, digital nomads enjoyed travel privileges similar to those of Bauman's "new global elite" (Bauman, 1998, p. 125), "the unbound freedom granted to capital and finance at the expense of all other freedoms" (Bauman, 1997, p. 22). The only difference was that digital nomads did not have access to the capital that the financial elite possessed, and, compared to the unlimited resources of the financial elite, they were living this lifestyle on a limited budget. However, with the beginning of the pandemic, everything changed. The revocation of travel privileges put digital nomads in their place, in a literal sense. At the same time, and as foretold by Bauman in 1998, the new global elite was not affected by local laws. Those with resources were still able to avoid restrictions at will, as the global media was keen to point out.[19] They would find refuge in places with little or no restrictions (Albeck-Ripka, 2021) before moving on. "It is now the 'access to global mobility' which has been raised to the topmost rank among the stratifying factors", Bauman wrote in 1998 (p. 87), and this was even more obvious in 2020 than it was in 1998. In 2020, the only thing that digital nomads, who were just as powerless as almost everybody else, could do was to wait for better times and hope that their travel privileges would be reinstated soon.

The Prospect of Freedoms to be Regained Soon

One thing that the participants did not lose in 2020, however, was the awareness that the loss of mobility was only temporary. As discussed above, Cara had explained that having too many belongings was "more of an issue for me rather than the government being like, 'you can't do

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[19] For instance, some Hollywood actors (Albeck-Ripka, 2020) as well as some business travellers were permitted to travel in and out of Australia in 2020 (Smee & Remeikis, 2021).

anything *right now'* [emphasis added]." Cara had said this in mid-2020, when she was going through "one of the world's longest and most severe lockdowns" in Australia, which lasted a total of 111 days in 2020 alone (Yan Zhuang, 2021). The phrase "right now" is also important when it comes to the expectations of the other research participants: None of my interviewees criticised any of the public health measures they had to endure in 2020. They knew that their loss of location freedom was temporary. Katherine, for instance, said,

> of course, some freedoms have been taken away, like I can't leave the state [Western Australia], but I know that these will eventually be lifted, so it doesn't bother me.

The research participants were aware of the privileges they used to have, and they knew that they had not permanently lost their location freedom. They viewed their privileges as 'on hold' or as suspended for a limited time. From Bauman's perspective, their experience of being temporarily confined to their residence for public health reasons was an entirely different matter than having one's rights permanently revoked. After all, some prisons were built to permanently exclude people from society, to keep them separate from society forever, similar to a coffin (Bauman 1998). Indeed, in the past, people had been subjected to a never-ending "oppressive supervision by the agencies of the state" (Bauman, 2003, p. 163) or were under the rule of an "over-ambitious and over-protective" communist state (Bauman, 2003, p. 180). Such conditions were constructed to be permanent, with no end in sight. Those who participated in this research, however, knew their suffering was temporary, which made waiting out the pandemic easier to deal with compared to enduring an unfree life without the hope of better times to come. Still, living in "enforced immobility, the condition of being tied to a place and not allowed to move elsewhere, seems a most abominable, cruel and repulsive state", Bauman argues (1998, p. 21). This was especially true for a pandemic that did not have a clear end date, and it was clear that some of the participants were suffering after being in lockdown for prolonged periods.

Reflection on the Preciousness of Freedom

The second most discussed topic in relation to freedom in 2020 was the realisation that participants had been taking their freedoms as a given before the pandemic. Emily from the United Kingdom, for instance, told me the following story from early 2020, when she was in lockdown at an Airbnb apartment in London:

> There was a post on the *Digital Nomads Around the World* Facebook group in the middle of the lockdown which said, 'what's the thing that you are missing in lockdown being a digital nomad.' And I said, 'the freedom to travel.' So, I think, yeah, I think that's the key thing there. People won't take that for granted any more. Because it was such a, such an amazing thing.

Yasmin from Germany also spent some time in lockdown. She was staying in Cyprus in early 2020:

> If someone had told us that the world would stay still for several weeks [in early 2020] and a virus was the cause, we would not have believed it. Being under lockdown was a strange feeling. In moments like these we are becoming all the more aware of what we had been taking for granted and how much we are now feeling restricted in our freedoms. Yes, we had to stay at home [a hotel in Cyprus], but we are glad that we have a home. In times like these we should be grateful for what we have because nothing can be taken for granted any more.

To put this into perspective, both Emily and Yasmin had been travelling full-time without a permanent address before the pandemic began. The pandemic took the freedom to travel away from them, temporarily detaining them in a more or less random location. They were aware that their location freedom was on hold and not permanently revoked.

There is also another aspect that comes into play: As digital nomads, both Emily and Yasmin were used to living in a constant state of insecurity, and it was no cause for concern for them. After becoming location independent more than two years ago (Yasmin) and more than four years ago (Emily), they had left behind much of the perceived security that sedentary full-time employees with health and welfare packages could rely on. Simply by growing up in postmodern society, Emily and Yasmin had already been taught to live "under conditions of painful yet incurable uncertainty" (Bauman, 2005, p. 119), with "uncertainty wrapping every choice, risks attached to every decision being the most prominent, but not the only ones among them." (Bauman, 1998, p. 98). Bauman adds that:

> Without a second line of trenches, few people other than dare-devil adventurers can muster enough courage to face the risks of an unknown and unsecured future, and without a safety net most people will refuse to dance along the tightrope and will feel utterly unhappy if they are forced to do so against their will. (2005, p. 36)

So, by opting to pursue a nomadic lifestyle, the research participants transformed themselves into a kind of "dare-devil adventurers" who had given up on the hunt for perceived safety (e.g., the "second line of trenches"), and they had given up on the constant race to not be "left behind" (Bauman, 2005, p. 119). Instead, they actively chose to face the future on their own terms and distance themselves from the sedentary values they had grown up with. The pandemic was simply another risk added to a list of risks and uncertainties that they needed to cope with on a daily basis. It could be argued that their experience in negotiating uncertainty and risk was the reason why the

research participants decided to focus on positivity, such as being thankful for what they used to have, instead of being critical, such as complaining about the public health measures that they could not change anyway.

During the 2020 interviews, the research participants did not only discuss the loss of location freedom and a new appreciation of former freedoms lost, but other aspects of freedom that they had discussed already in 2019. For instance, issues around time freedom, decision freedom and financial freedom were mentioned again, though to a lesser degree. This does not mean that time freedom, decision freedom and financial freedom did not matter that much anymore during the pandemic. Instead, I would argue, this was due to that fact that in times of great upheaval to global life, the research participants focused more on the issues that had changed, such as freedom of movement, and less so on matters that had remained the same for them.

Claiming Location Freedom in 2021

In March 2021, one year after the COVID-19 pandemic had been declared, at least 116 million people had fallen ill, and at least 2.5 million had died due to the virus (IOM, 2021). At the same time, vaccines were being administered around the world, with 350 million people vaccinated as of 8 March 2021 (IOM, 2021). This was still a minuscule number compared to a global population of more than 7 billion at the time. As a result, border closures and other public health measures such as local lockdowns were still in place in many countries around the world, and regular tourists were still not welcome in former popular tourism destinations such as Thailand (TAT Newsroom, 2021), Bali (Ministry of Tourism, Republic of Indonesia, 2022), or Canada (Government of Canada, 2021). In addition, travellers from the United States continued "to be barred from many places, including much of Europe" due to high case numbers (Schwartz, 2021, paragraph 6). Some of the digital nomads that I had interviewed in 2019 and 2020 had never stopped travelling during the pandemic, such as Japanese American Yoshi. Others had been confined to a certain country or region for long periods and were making plans to travel again. Facebook discussion groups such as *Digital Nomads Around the World* (a global group), *Female Digital Nomads* (a global group), *Chiang Mai Nomad Girls* (a local group) and *Chiang Mai Digital Nomads* (a local group) provided a wealth of information for current and potential location-independent online workers.[20] Even though freedom was not explicitly discussed in the Facebook groups under review, one can infer from the discussions how people who lived this lifestyle thought about the different meanings of freedom in 2021. As explained earlier, my interviewees have defined freedom especially from a mobility perspective, and as such, discussions around travel were among the most popular topics in both global Facebook groups, and especially so

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[20] For ease of reading, these groups will be called *Facebook groups* from now on, and the people who participated in these discussion groups will be called *Facebook users*.

in *Digital Nomads Around the World*, where travel was the number one topic in March 2021, with more than 55 per cent of all posts (such as questions, statements or other discussion starters) related to travel (see Table 5.2). The travel-related posts discussed potential destinations and included pandemic-related matters such as vaccinations, quarantine and restrictions in certain destinations. Issues like crime, fear, safety and security, on the other hand—which Bauman claims is a defining feature of postmodern society (Bauman, 1997; 1998)—were hardly ever mentioned, as they were overshadowed by broader, generally pandemic-related topics. These issues will be covered later in this chapter. As the Chiang Mai Nomad Girls was a local group, the discussions in this group generally revolved around 1) buy/sell posts (98 posts), and 2) advertising, for instance for local events (94 posts) and 3) travel-related posts (42 posts). The top 3 topics in the Chiang Mai Digital Nomads group were 1) Travel (27 posts), 2) jobs (26 posts) and 3) general work-related questions (12 posts).

Table 5.2

Popular Discussion Topics in Facebook Groups During March 2021

Concepts dicussed	Female Digital Nomads (global group)	Digital Nomads Around the World (global group)	Chiang Mai Nomad Girls (local group)	Chiang Mai Digital Nomads (local group)	Total number of counted references related to this topic
	n	*n*	*n*	*n*	*n*
Travel-related references	136	249	42	18	445
COVD-19 pandemic (incl. vaccines, tests, quarantine, border closures etc.)	60	100	22	25	207
Crime, fear and safety/security	22	19	7	1	49
Total number of posts	490	471	401	131	

Note. As mentioned in the Methodology chapter (chapter 3), some discussion topics may be overlapping. Travel-related posts, for instance, often also referred to the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the 2020 interviews, my research participants appeared to accept and support public health measures that resulted in the temporary loss of their travel privileges. At the same time, they openly admitted that they never lost the desire to travel. In 2021, however, with vaccinations becoming more widely available, it appears that digital nomads were reclaiming location freedom by learning as much as they could about new structures as well as written and unwritten rules and regulations, which had not been in place before the pandemic, and which were changing by the day (IOM, 2021). Digital nomads were turning to fellow nomads with recent travel experience for advice, with discussions mainly focused on visa issues and border closures. To give some examples,

Facebook users tried to find out what had happened in countries as diverse as Canada (for example, asking for information when Canada would be open for tourism again), Ethiopia (asking for general information about COVID-19 in Ethiopia) or Vietnam (asking if anybody had access to recent information about Vietnam, which was closed to tourists at the time). There were also questions and discussions about general restrictions of freedoms, especially in terms of travel privileges that they had previously taken for granted. This mirrors the discussion with the digital nomad interviewees in mid-2020 (as mentioned earlier in this chapter). Facebook users, for instance, asked about local restrictions in Türkiye, Mexico or Colombia, with several explicitly asking for a list of countries with the smallest extent of COVID-19 restrictions. In fact, in early 2021, the severity of restrictions in a certain country had become a new push–pull factor when it came to deciding where to travel next.

Facebook users with United States passports discussed their limited travel options, as they were aware that they were not welcome in many countries around the world, due to the United States being one of the worst affected nations by the pandemic in 2021. As already mentioned in this chapter, before the pandemic, Western-born digital nomads could generally be classified as tourists in relation to Bauman's theories, as they had been privileged enough to constantly "be on the move, not to arrive" (Bauman, 1996b, p. 12). Indeed, according to Bauman, "this ability the tourists call freedom, autonomy or independence … they cherish it more than anything else, since it is the *conditio sine qua non* of everything else that their hearts desire" (1996b, p. 12). This quotation was certainly true before the pandemic, when many digital nomads were free to visit a long list of countries around the world. After the pandemic was declared, however, governments decided they needed to provide safety, or at least a semblance of safety, for their residents. Governments tackled the pandemic—a health-related challenge—in the same way that Bauman describes their response to a crime-related challenge: In times of crises, governments needed to be "doing something, or being seen to be doing something", Bauman contends—last but not least in order to improve their chances at future elections (1998, p. 118). Even though Bauman observed this behaviour well before the COVID-19 pandemic, governments still appear to react to major crises in a similar way.

The loss of their 'tourist' status (in Bauman's terms), and with it, the loss of location freedom, had real-life consequences for many formerly (relatively) privileged digital nomads. They had suddenly become unwanted vagabonds. For example, some Facebook users reported travelling within Europe in March 2021. They were not able to extend their tourist visa, but they also did not know which non-European country they were allowed to go next. Although they would have been welcome tourists before the pandemic, they were practically illegal immigrants in Europe during March 2021. These issues were not only reported by digital nomads in Europe. One of the few Facebook users who openly lamented that they found it hard to plan ahead in pandemic times explained they were on a visa amnesty in India, and worried that they might have to leave the country at short notice. They

were worried that the Indian visa amnesty, which extended tourist visas beyond the due date, might be revoked at any time.

These experiences show how fragile some privileges are, and especially travel privileges, which has also been confirmed by Holleran and Notting's (2023) research[21]. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that travel privileges can be granted and denied by governments around the world at will. So although some Western digital nomads (or Western consumers in general) might feel privileged due to the power of their passport, global mobility is certainly not an enduring privilege. It is a precarious privilege which may be revoked at any time when a government responds to a potential crisis that might endanger those who stay within the safety of the national borders.

Freedom, Safety and Security

There is more to freedom though, than being allowed to go anywhere at will (Bauman, 1988, p. 9). From Bauman's perspective, freedom is seen as "insecurity, as choice, and as privilege", Mark Davis writes (2017, p. 109). Unlimited freedom and unlimited (physical) safety at the same time are not achievable, one will always lose on the one side while gaining on the other (Bauman, 2005). Different societies have thus dealt with matters of freedom, safety and security in different ways. In communism, for instance, people did not have many freedoms, and certainly not the freedom to leave the "iron cage" of their home country at will (Bauman, 2003, p. 163).

When interviewing digital nomads in 2019 and 2020, none of the interviewees brought up any worries about crime and safety issues, which is also in line with Ehn et al. (2022), who analysed YouTube videos published by digital nomad. The Facebook discussions archived in March 2021 show a similar disinterest in terms of talking about personal safety and security, whereas access to COVID-19 vaccinations was discussed in depth (see Chapter 6). Out of a total of 1,475 posts, only 31 Facebook posts mentioned issues related to crime and fear as well as safety and security. This accounts for a mere two per cent of all posts under review. Whereas male Facebook users seemed to have little interest to address crime and fear as well as safety and security issues, women appeared to be marginally more interested in these topics. They discussed the safety of a certain place before they decided to travel there, sometimes with respect to their own safety and sometimes in regard to the safety of their children travelling with them. Other issues that female Facebook users mentioned included the safety of their belongings and animals, (i.e., their own pets and wild animals). It is notable that the female Facebook users did not share unfocused fears, but instead always aimed to solve a problem, which has also been confirmed by Ehn et al., 2022. For

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[21] At the time when Holleran and Notting (2023) spoke with their interviewees, i.e., in mid-2021, governments around the world were slowly opening their borders again. Their research participants were able to travel more freely again, which was in contrast to my interviewees who had been directly impacted by border closures, lockdowns and curfews in early and mid-2020.

instance, they asked for strategies on how to feel safer while travelling, such as wearing a fake wedding ring, or what to do when encountering a wild animal. Only one person mentioned having been followed once and feeling distressed by this. There were no posts that reported someone had been a victim of a crime.

Both freedom and security "are indispensable for a dignified and happy life" Bauman writes (2005, p. 35). Freedom in postmodern capitalist societies also comes at a cost, as many people are not feeling safe anymore in their own homes and instead look for the "safety of tightly locked private fortresses", says Davis (2017, p. 150). Travelling around the world with a suitcase and a laptop bag is the opposite of finding safety and security in one's personal fortress. However, it is clear from the Facebook posts discussed above that the users were trying to minimise risks by educating themselves before they travelled to a certain place. Accepting that risk and insecurity comes with non-sedentary and long-term travelling has a long tradition, writes Kannisto (2014), and even the early (male) drifters accepted the risks when travelling around the world in the 1960s (Cohen, 1973). "While the mass tourist looked for familiarity, prior planning, safety, dependency, and minimal choices, the drifter valued novelty, spontaneity, risk, independence, and having a multitude of options", Kannisto writes (2014, p. 10). This was, according to Kannisto, the "result of his [the drifter's] alienation from his home country" (Kannisto, 2014, p. 10). The original drifters of the 1960s were "unwelcome, intimidated, ostracised or barred" (Cohen, 1973, p. 103), whereas today's digital nomads are generally seen as welcome visitors—at least outside of pandemic restrictions. The lack of interest in regard to issues around safety and security shows that digital nomads are not worried about the path they have chosen, and there is no need to "take uncertainty out" of their lives (Bauman, 1997, p. 91), as they are quite comfortable with it. Digital nomads accept that, in exchange for more freedom, they have to negotiate less security as well. But instead of worrying about these issues, they plan ahead to manage potential risks, as posts by female Facebook users show. In terms of the continuum between regular tourists and Cohen's drifters, this behaviour places digital nomads in the centre between these two groups.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the following research question: How did location-independent online workers (digital nomads) define and experience freedom before and during the COVID-19 pandemic? I have explained that, even outside of pandemic restrictions, location independence, or the freedom to be "allowed to go anywhere" (Bauman, 1988, p. 9) is a privilege that is not distributed equally around the globe. In today's consumer society, privileged and affluent consumers from a relatively small number of countries can be seen as synonyms for Zygmunt Bauman's globally mobile tourists, whereas those who do not have the resources (such as travel privileges or access to money) could be called vagabonds (Bauman, 1988). Most digital nomads

who were interviewed for this research project qualify as consumers or tourists, but there are also some who have experienced being welcomed as tourists in some countries and turned away as unwanted vagabonds in others. However, even though these nomads were aware that they were less privileged in terms of travel choices, their responses made clear that they simply arranged their lives differently and felt no less free than others with more travel privileges. Aside from that, freedom for a digital nomad also means decision freedom, or the freedom to independently choose certain aspects of one's life, which also includes the freedom to be masterless, and not having to "fit in somewhere", as interviewee Yasmin pointed out. However, it was also pointed out that having to make too many decisions can be exhausting. Finally, financial freedom was also mentioned, as this was the basis to live a location-independent life and to make one's own decisions.

After the COVID-19 pandemic was declared in March 2020, borders were slammed shut around the world within hours and millions of people were confined to wherever they were residing at the time. Travel privileges were put on hold, even for people with passports seen as 'privileged' or 'powerful' before the pandemic. This was also a time when digital nomads started to reflect on what freedom meant to them. The interviewees said that they felt limited in their travel choices, with Cara even pointing out she felt "trapped." The participants realised the preciousness of the freedoms that they had taken for granted, and they saw the freedoms they had previously enjoyed with a new appreciation.

In March 2021, one year into the pandemic, Facebook discussions still mostly revolved around travel. However, during these pandemic times people never lost sight of the restrictions around the world, which included restricted access to some countries, but also local lockdowns and other freedom of movement restrictions. Some digital nomads even enquired about countries with the least restrictions, thus introducing an additional (albeit temporary) variable in terms of digital nomad travel.

As to finding a balance between freedom and security, only a small number of female nomads asked for insight on countries that others deemed safe for women or children, or for tips on how to travel safely as a single woman. These discussions were few and far between, and they showed that digital nomads accept the risks of being a constant traveller, reinforcing what Cohen noticed in some long-term travellers during the 1970s (Cohen, 1973). Nonetheless, it was apparent that digital nomads accept the added risks, also in times of the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, the participants were very much aware that pandemic restrictions are exceptions and not the norm. All restrictions they had to endure were for a limited time only, and the participants were hoping to regain their freedoms in the near future when public health restrictions would ease, and travel would be safe again.

Chapter 6
Home

In Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, I discussed freedom and work from the digital nomad perspective. In this chapter, I examine the research question: How do location-independent online workers (digital nomads) define home, and how have experiences made during the COVID-19 pandemic shaped their perception of home? As outlined in the literature review (Chapter 1), the digital nomad experience of home during the COVID-19 pandemic so far has been an underexplored topic from a scholarly perspective. Zygmunt Bauman, whose social theories have been discussed in Chapter 2, has also had little regard for the concept of home. Bauman saw home primarily in a negative emotional context of (metaphorical) homelessness, which he described as the yearning for home when away and yearning to be away when at home (Bauman, 1996b; 1997). The Hungarian-born philosopher and political theorist Agnes Heller, on the other hand, focuses on the concept of home in a more positive emotional context than Bauman, such as in conjunction with cosmopolitanism (Heller, 1995; 2019; more about cosmopolitanism later in this chapter). This is why I will rely primarily on Heller's theories in this chapter. Heller argues, for instance, that:

> Where we are at home we share stories with our family members, friends, and we
> share the historical narrative with our people and nation. We have a shared past,
> better to say, it is through our shared stories that we share memories and by sharing
> memories we share the past. (Heller, 2019, p. 48)

Heller's comment shows the intensely personal nature of home. In this respect, Heller's defines home as different for everybody, depending on one's social background and the country and the time one grew up in. Home is not a place; it is something that we construct within ourselves. Or, to quote Heller scholar Katie Terezakis: where we are at home is "up to us" (2022; second last paragraph).

Indeed, the notion of home as walled space with a roof, or a place of refuge for the nuclear family, has only been introduced in Western societies at the beginning of the industrial age. Before the industrial age, a walled space often did not only house a multi-generational family, it was often also a business as well as a space where "non-kin workers and boarders" would live (Mallett, 2004, p. 71), perhaps with a shop or a workshop on the ground floor and a living space on the floor (or floors) above. Work and leisure were all under one roof.

During the early industrialisation, thousands of women and men left these combined living and working arrangements behind and found work in factories, often from childhood. Consequently,

these women did not have the opportunity to learn how to look after a household and care for their husbands and children, who were, after all, the current and future industrial workers (Bauman, 1972). The factory was therefore declared the domain of adult males (Mallett, 2004). Children were sent to school, and married women were convinced it was their duty to look after the family home (Mallett, 2004), which was supposed to provide security and privacy (Jackson, 2000, see also Figure 6.1). But, of course, this was not always the case, and women could also experience "oppression, tyranny and persecution" inside their own home (Mallett, 2004, p. 84).

Figure 6.1

A Search Result for 'Home' on Shutterstock.com

Note. Image by photo contributor BM_27/ Shutterstock. Image title: "Beautiful exterior of newly built luxury home. Yard with green grass and walkway lead to ornately designed covered porch and front entrance." In 2022, Shutterstock referred to this image as a "popular asset, loved by all. The Shutterstock community loves this asset!" (Description underneath the image, see BM_27, n.d.).

Figure 6.2

The Tanami Desert—Also a Home for Some

Note. Image by photo contributor Jack Kinny/ Shutterstock. Image title: "The Tanami." In 2022, Shutterstock remarked on this asset: "Be the pioneer! Almost never licenced, high potential" (description underneath the image, see Kinny, 2022).

However, even within Western countries, there are still minorities who have different ideas about home, such as travelling circus artists who feel at home while constantly moving from place to place (Terranova-Webb, 2010). For some members of the Warlpiri people of Australia's Tanami desert, for example, walls and roofs are uncomfortable and "just like a big jail" (Jackson, 2000, p. 84). Instead, the Warlpiri see home as "a central place to which you or your thoughts constantly return" and a "group of people without whom your life would cease to have meaning" (Jackson, 2000, p. 66, see also Figure 6.2).

The home, when a geographically fixed place, is also closely related to concepts of movement and mobility. Before the industrialisation, only the nobility could afford to travel for leisure, whereas almost everyone else was tied to the land (Bauman, 2000a, p. 142) and generally not able to travel for "culture, education, and pleasure" (Towner, 1985, p. 298). In pre-industrial times, if ordinary people did not spatially and socially remain in their "preordained" place (Bauman, 2003, p. 4), they could potentially be accused of being "beggars, conmen, and criminals who rather begged and stole than condescended to labour" (Kannisto, 2014, p. 127). Of course, it could be argued that since the introduction of the steam engine in the 19th century, and the mass-production of cars in the 20th century, people have become more mobile (Cresswell, 2006; Urry, 2000). However, this is short-term mobility designed for sedentary people that will always start and end at one's registered home address (Bauman, 1996a).

Many of those who pursue the digital nomad lifestyle have extended their mobility practices far beyond this limited, sedentary perspective of mobility. They fit well into the boundaries of the *cosmopolitan* definition:—people with "knowledge and openness to other cultures" (Featherstone, 2002, p. 2). Cosmopolitans have been defined from a number of perspectives ranging from the overtly positive to negative in the extreme. For some, a cosmopolitan person may be a "highly mobile, curious, open and reflexive subject who delights in and desires to consume difference" (Germann Molz, 2005, p. 519). For others, a cosmopolitan may be a "voyeur, parasite, or some sort of cultural tourist … [who displays an] incapacity to form lasting attachments and commitments to place and others" (Featherstone, 2002, p. 1). Agnes Heller sees cosmopolitans in a more positive light: When cosmopolitans meet, she writes, they can "understand each other without 'footnotes'" due to shared knowledge, such as a shared profession or a shared hobby, even if they have never met before, or if they do not speak the same native language (Heller, 2019, p. 51). Cosmopolitans may be members of "the elite of the society—businessmen, professionals, academics", according to Erkmen (2015, p. 26), but they may also be "working-class cosmopolitan migrants" with an extensive knowledge of the society they originate from and the society they are currently living in (Featherstone, 2002, p. 2).

In this context, it is important to note that the participants in this research, as cosmopolitans, are not necessarily people who do not have a home. Indeed, "transnationalization and rootedness can coexist and … mobility does not automatically mean 'uprooting'" (Erkmen, 2015, p. 28). This will be discussed in more detail below. In this chapter, I will begin with how the participants described home in 2019, before examining how they experienced the lockdowns and travel bans in the first months of the pandemic during 2020. I will then examine the continuing difficulties that digital nomads experienced in 2021 with regard to home.

Home vs Work practices

Before the COVID-19 pandemic began, the research participants discussed home primarily with respect to home and work, positive and negative and negative emotions around the home, the importance of social contacts and community and the home base—a place to call home—even if it was only for a short period of time (see Table 6.1). Home and work were generally discussed in the context that home (for instance, the current accommodation they were staying at) could also serve as a workplace. Only two participants (Yoshi and Sarah), however, explained that they exclusively worked from home, whereas most of the others would move between different types of workplaces, such as their accommodation, cafés or coworking spaces (see also de Loryn, 2022b). Yoshi, for instance, said that whenever he would go to a new place, he would specifically look for an apartment "with enough space for a desk or an office", and Sarah similarly described her workplace at home, which could be in Thailand, Vietnam or elsewhere:

> I really prefer home. I like to be in a quiet place. I find it hard to think when there's
> lots of people moving around, music playing, so I'm kind of picky like that. So, I
> prefer to work at home.

Lola said she also worked from home (i.e., her temporary accommodation), but not exclusively. "I try to get a balance. So, during the day —because I work like night hours with them [clients] —so during the day, I try to spend as much time as a can outside. And at night I work from home."

One attribute of the digital nomad lifestyle is that people transfer their location "independence to mobility by not consistently working in one designated personal office space" (Reichenberger, 2018, p. 371). Rather than spending the better part of the day at an office space assigned by an employer—which may very well be a noisy office, as Sarah has mentioned—all participants took control and actively decided where they wanted to work. As discussed in Chapter 4, wellbeing plays a part in these considerations. After all, it has been known for decades that even "low-intensity office noise can produce physiological and motivational indices of stress", but also long-term physical consequences such as "musculoskeletal disorders" and a higher risk of heart

disease (Evans & Johnson, 2000, p. 782). Toffler envisioned in the early 1980s, that people would be able to do electronic work from home, in an advanced version of the pre-industrial "cottage industry" called the "electronic cottage" (Toffler, 1981, p. 194). From Toffler's perspective, the industrial age, which had started only three hundred years ago, was an aberration, whereas working at the same place where one was living, and blurring the division between home and work, was a tradition that had lasted for thousands of years, and it would soon make its comeback (Toffler, 1981).

Sarah and Yoshi also preferred working from home because they did not need social contacts during work hours. Sarah had a partner and a son, and Yoshi had a habit of delegating his social life to the evenings. However, other participants such as Sven from Italy, generally travelled alone and stressed that it was important for their mental health to generally not work from home, except for certain types of work that demanded a quiet environment. Sven said that,

> I initially thought, okay, working from home perfectly fine. Doesn't cost anything. I have anything I need at home. I just buy some stuff from the supermarket, you know. And I do my work, and after work I see my friends, and everything [is] fine. And then at some point I figured out, wow, that really sucks. Sorry to say that … you get extremely lonely.
>
> First that, and second thing is also, like, motivation wise. You see the nice weather outside, and you think I am sitting here and so it's not a good place to be, I think.
>
> … if you have meetings, which require a silent environment, sometimes the home is the only place where you actually can really do it. Also, you probably have a reliable internet at home, so that's that. But, yeah, that's about working at home.

Sven's reply shows that he sees home as a potential workplace, but he prefers to work elsewhere. It is important to stress here that Sven did not avoid working from home because he wanted a clear separation between work and home. Sven was a solo traveller, and he was simply looking for community, which he found in cafes and coworking spaces (this will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter).

Amanda from Finland has made a similar experience. "Sometimes I just work from bed, but I think people are less productive when they do that because there's no definition between home life and work life", she said. However, would still work from "whatever is home is", she said. "[I] either go directly to a coffee shop . . . Or I have some breakfast and then work from home a bit." Besides, working exclusively from home created "cabin fever", she said, which aligns what Sven hat said before.

Sven and Amanda are not alone in this respect. According to Bergan et al. (2021), people who follow a digital nomad lifestyle and are looking for a desk, a bed and an instant social environment, have been increasingly targeted by commercial ventures offering combined coliving housing (i.e., shared housing with shared workspaces). Coliving offers a blurring of workspaces and living spaces, but also a possibility for people to connect. With the increasing popularity of this lifestyle, it is not a surprise that the market adapts and offers coliving to digital nomads who are, after all, also consumers who crave the same amenities as sedentary people, albeit without giving up their autonomy (von Zumbusch & Lalicic, 2020, p. 450).

Home—an emotional topic

"'Home' seems to be one of the few constants of the human condition", Heller writes (1995, p. 2). Although the participants in this research originated from different countries around the globe, Sven from Italy, Lola from Brazil, Yasmin and Marta from Germany, Jessica from the United States and Sarah from the Philippines all agreed that home for them meant feeling connected with people close by, instead of feeling attached to a certain location. All of these participants were seasoned international travellers and cosmopolitans, thus the presence of others who shared their lifestyle and their interests created a feeling of home for them, no matter if they found themselves in Chiang Mai, Berlin or Medellin. Even those who originated from non-English backgrounds connected quickly and easily with their peers who perhaps grew up on different continents. For these people, "mutual understanding is possible without knowing the others' backgrounds, where no one is a stranger" (Heller, 2019, p. 51).

Not all research participants were single travellers without longer-term emotional attachments. Amanda from Finland and Thomas from Germany, for instance, both stressed that there were significant others waiting for them in Canada or Thailand, respectively. Amanda and Thomas did not feel attached to the places where their partners lived—only to the people that awaited them there. In this respect, Amanda stressed that the only reason for her to travel to Canada was her boyfriend ("the city my partner lives in, I don't like it at all. But I go there because I like him"). According to Agnes Heller, there is no more:

> 'till death do us part' in matters of 'being at home.' This is not simply a metaphor. Where my family is, there is my home. When, at the first sign of discomfort, marriages break down, a home is lost without much ado. (Heller, 1995, pp. 16–17)

This sums up Amanda's relationship with the hometown of her partner. Canada is home for Amanda as long as their relationship lasts.

When discussing home, as in hometown, home country or the family home, the majority of research participants did not feel like they belonged. Amanda explained that she had experienced a "reverse culture shock" in her native country after working in Australia for three years. This experience was also one of the deciding factors for her to become nomadic.[22] Heller argues that "familiarity is the most decisive constituent of the feeling of being-at-home", not only in terms of emotions but also in practicalities such as other people speaking one's mother language, or following certain customs (Heller, 1995, p. 5). Amanda had clearly expected to experience this familiarity when returning to Finland, but she was disappointed. According to Burkitt, "a person's self-identity is still constructed in their relations to others in many important ways, [such as] in families, through friendships, [and] workplace relations" (Burkitt, 2012, p. 460). Amanda's example shows that by leaving Finland for a longer period, and by finding new friends and new colleagues in Australia, her identity had evolved, and she did not feel at home anymore in Finland. Holmes (2010) adds that people tend to compare themselves with others to find meaning in their lives. As there appeared to be few points of comparison between Amanda and the people that she had returned to in Finland, she felt like she did not belong.

Fabiano from Italy, a computer programmer, also found it difficult to put into words how he felt about the home he grew up in. Fabiano's home was located in the mountains of Northern Italy where, from his perspective, nothing much happened. Over the years, while he had been studying and working away from native soil, things had changed within his family. When he went home, Fabiano described a realisation that "the feeling is not the same anymore." This was also echoed by Katherine from Australia, who did not feel at home any more after her parents sold the family home:

> Sometimes I feel sad because I don't know if I really have a home. I would have said my home is my childhood home, but my parents recently sold it and moved. Because they are retiring. So now when I go to them in their new house, then I'm like, well it's home because my family is here. But I don't know that house, I don't know that place. So, it's interesting.
>
> I guess, I still think of home as my hometown, but I don't want to live there, so I don't know [laughs]. I don't know. I think home for me is Australia. It always will be. But I don't have a very specific place, yet. Perhaps one day, though.

According to Heller, it is sometimes the small changes that make people feel like they are not at home, in the sense of " 'something is not in order,' or 'something is wrong ' " (Heller, 2011, p. 17). This makes it hard for former residents-turned-visitors to feel at home again in the place where they

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[22] Amanda also said that a former Nokia worker who experienced burnout had warned her not to follow in his footsteps (see also Table 4.1).

were born. Bauman adds that "modern culture has a 'uniquely tragic—or is it schizophrenic?—character', it 'feels truly at home only in its homelessness'" (Bauman, 1997, p. 77). Given that things may change quickly in a few years, not only in Katherine's case, but also in Amanda's case (as discussed above), Bauman's statement certainly rings true.

The quick pace of change in all aspects of life is something that is unique to postmodernity, especially when compared to what life was like before. "When the son returned home from his wanderings, he could find everything at its old place, even if their historical lustre was sometimes gone", Heller writes (1995, p. 15).[23] In postmodern times, everything changes so quickly that it is hard to keep pace, starting with the fact that women are not leaving the parental home anymore only to get married or to "form attachments" (Giddens, 2013, p. 53), but they also go wandering, just like the men (Heller, 1995).

For the female participants in this research, returning to the family home was not always experienced positively (see also de Loryn, 2022a). In this respect Cara, a 25-year-old photographer, declared that "my parents are really protective. So, my mum is always like 'oh, here's this great job in Sydney', 'here's the great job in New Zealand. It's much more accessible for us', you know." Fellow Australian Katherine, who was 27 years old in 2019, also explained that when away from home, she was "a lot calmer and happier, and more of a risk-taker." Going back home to the family changed her, and not for the better:

> I can feel that change as soon as I go back home to Australia. I can feel that change happening within a few weeks, of me regressing back, to like who I am in a different world, if that makes sense? I think because once I am back in Australia, and around friends and family, who are living a more traditional lifestyle, you start to feel that pressure again. Oh, am I being responsible, should I get just a normal job, you know. You start thinking about money again. And then, when I'm travelling, I don't care about any of these things.

It is not easy to go back home, writes Bauman, as "in its solid, brick-and-mortar embodiment, 'home' breeds resentment and rebellion" (Bauman, 1998, p. 122). Home also has the potential to turn into a jail (Bauman, 1998), and, when being away for long enough, "home recedes in the past and perhaps vanishes altogether" (Bauman, 1990, p. 150).

The research participants returned to the family home as visitors, not as residents, and they knew they had the choice and the financial resources to leave whenever they wanted to. They had the

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[23] As travelling for leisure used to be reserved for the upper classes, these 'wanderings' were probably related to looking for work outside the hometown.

best of both worlds: access to the resources that allowed them to choose a lifestyle that suited them, but also a place they could call home when they felt they needed it (Bauman, 1997; 1998). Bauman argues that:

> [The] decision to leave the home behind in order to explore foreign parts is all the
> easier to make for the comforting feeling that one can always return, if need be … it
> is gratifying and consoling to remember that there is a home—somewhere—a retreat
> from the hurly-burly where one could shelter. (Bauman, 1997, p. 92)

However, not all people who follow the digital nomad lifestyle are in a financial position to be able to travel home at any time, such as my research participants. Other digital nomad researchers have pointed out that digital nomadism may entail precarious work and living along the poverty line (Hall et al., 2019; Sutherland & Jarrahi, 2017; Thompson, 2018). Emily from the United Kingdom made clear that she worried about those who did not have the option to go home in times of need. She said that:

> You don't have enough money to get your flight home and you haven't, I don't
> know, a deposit for a flat if you do go home. And, what if, I don't know, you had an
> accident, and you needed to pay, say, £ 10,000 pounds for the hospital upfront. I
> haven't met that many people that have that [kind of savings]. But actually, the
> money side and the mental health side are two things I do try and talk to people
> about, that I care about a lot.

Emily said this in December 2019, around the same time when a flu-like virus was already becoming an epidemic inside of China, and only three months before a global pandemic was declared, borders slammed shut around the world and 'going home' became impossible for Australian and New Zealand citizens (and others around the world).

The importance of community and social contacts

As described in the previous section, the family home is not always a place that the participants enjoyed returning to. Instead, many participants explained they could feel at home anywhere if only they would find meaningful social contacts there. Yoshi from Japan, for instance, pointed out that connecting to people was one of priorities when arriving at a new location. He pointed out that he would look for "a network of people socially, as quick as possible. And I say as quick as possible, because you only gonna have a minimum amount of time in these locations." The importance of community, not only online via Facebook, but also in the sense of meeting people face to face, has also been discussed by Mancinelli (2020) and Thompson (2019a), for instance.

On the other hand, a constant lack of social contacts might cause digital nomads to give up nomading altogether, Sven from Italy says:

> I think that's why we all stop, it's the social environment . . . at some point, you
> wanna have civil life. It's just, it's just in his nature wanting to have a home and have
> your usual surroundings, being part of a society and, and having friends and stuff.

Loneliness was also identified as a challenge by Nash et al. (2018) and Thompson (2019a). Miguel (2023) also explained that loneliness is "highly contextual" (p. 4634), i.e., if someone felt lonely may be due to one's personality, location or a variety of other factors. For Sven himself, however, talking about loneliness and giving up was simply a thought experiment, as he was still living the digital nomad lifestyle when he returned for an interview in 2020.

The Home Base: A Temporary Home for the Digital Nomad

An adventurer needs a home, and even a sedentary person craves adventure, Heller (2009) contends. This is also what digital nomads shared with me during the 2019 interviews. Apart from Markus from Germany, who was the only research participant still registered as a resident in the country where he was born, most of the research participants were either looking to set up a medium-term home, otherwise called a home base, or they had already experimented with home bases in a country of their choice. Home base is a somewhat ambiguous term, as it points to a more permanent location, a "focal point" or a "point of stability" (Nowicka, 2007, p. 77). At the same time, it is also a point of departure or a base for excursions to other places, which Heller (2009) calls adventures. In contrast, Nash et al (2018) argued that "what makes digital nomads distinct is their length of travel and decision not to have a home base", which was amended later by Nash et al (2021) to "no home bases in most cases". This may be due to the fact that Nash et al. potentially define digital nomads primarily as non-sedentary individuals.

An example of a home base may be an apartment leased for a few months—a contrast to the short-term coliving accommodation options discussed earlier in this chapter. Sarah from the Philippines and Jessica from the United States, for instance, rented apartments for themselves and their significant others in the Chiang Mai region during 2019, even though neither participant was a permanent resident in Thailand. They were visitors on non-resident visas, and thus did not have the same rights as Thai residents or citizens—something which would have serious consequences for them and their loved ones after the pandemic was declared in early 2020 (more about this later). Andreas from Germany even bought a share in an apartment in Cyprus with his friends. He said that:

> For a long time I thought I don't really need … my own place. Even when I was still
> living in Berlin there was a long time when I did not have my own place … But

over time, I really realised that I really need a place *or places* [emphasis added] to call
home …

So, I am very glad to have my home base in Cyprus where I can just come
back to, even after months [of] not being there, everything is how I like it. I have like
my perfect bed, I have my perfect office chair, everything how I like it. And that's
really nice to have … *And I would love to have that in more places* [emphasis added].

Looking at Andreas' backstory, it is important to point out that Cyprus was not his first home
base. He had initially moved to Malta where he had no personal or family connections. Both Cyprus
and Malta are known as 'tax havens' for foreign income earners. Andreas found that he did indeed
save taxes in Malta as planned, but he was unable to find friends on the island. So even though saving
taxes had been the primary reason why he moved to Malta, he quickly realised that money alone was
not a long-term motivator.

"We are afraid of the absolutely unknown", writes Heller, and "if we should find ourselves in
a totally unknown environment in which we encounter absolutely no base … for feeling", one needs
to "to seek bases, to link up with 'preservation'" (Heller, 2009, p. 37). Other digital nomad
researchers (Orel, 2019; Thompson, 2019b) have also noted that loneliness and isolation is an issue
that especially solo-travelling digital nomads need to take care of. Finding a temporary home base is
one of the possible options to alleviate this.[24] In fact, Andreas felt significantly better after he had
moved to Cyprus, where he was also able to save on his income tax. A friend had recommended
moving to Cyprus and pointed out to him how easy it was to connect with like-minded people there.
In Cyprus, Andreas was able to share the community spirit and a "temporal home experience" with
like-minded others (Heller, 1995, p. 7), while also alleviating his loneliness. Finally, recent research
(Hannonen et al., 2023) confirms that some digital nomads are accepted in local communities and can
become new locals. In the case of the Spanish island of Gran Canaria, for instance, Hannonen et al.'s
research participants said that digital nomads "look like locals. They live as locals" (2023, p. 9).
Knowing that one is accepted by the local community, even if it is on a superficial level, can certainly
make it easier to feel at home—even if it is only a temporary home, and it can also be a remedy for
being burnt out from constantly travelling (Mouratidis, 2018).

The 2010s gave those who had the resources—such as money and a powerful passport—
almost unlimited choices in terms of feeling at home around world, no matter if home was a short-
term accommodation in a popular tourist destination, an apartment in one's chosen home base or

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[24] Loneliness is not a digital nomad-specific issue. According to Williams and Braun (2019), there was widespread
loneliness in the United States population in 2018, with 48.3 per cent of 18–22-year-olds and 45.3 per cent of 23–27-
years-olds stating they felt lonely.

visiting family back in the hometown. However, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, it became clear that feeling at home in the world was suddenly not so easy anymore, as the access to the world, for some, was suddenly out of reach.

Home and Homelessness in Pandemic Times (2020)

Earlier in this chapter, Emily from the United Kingdom had pointed out that digital nomads could find themselves in dire straits if they could not return home to their families in times of need. Emily's worst-case scenario turned into reality only three months after she said this, when a global pandemic was declared on 11 March 2020. For much of 2020, 91 per cent of the world's population, or more than 7 billion people, lived in nation-states that restricted access to non-residents (Connor, 2020). Globalisation had ground to a halt, even within Europe, where most countries had started to enforce internal border controls again (Opiłowska, 2021). With airplanes on the ground and ships idling in international waters, as they were not allowed to cross national borders (De Beukelaer, 2021), and with cars mothballed in private garages due to long-term lockdowns, the world had become immobile again. "Distance, change, and placelessness" had become "abnormal" again without prior warning for billions of people who had grown up with the privilege of free movement and constant mobility (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 208). People remained home and were tied to a place as a throwback to earlier times (Bauman, 1972; 2000a). At the same time, thousands of formerly privileged travellers of all persuasions, such as tourists, transnational knowledge workers (Colic-Peisker, 2010), global nomads (D'Andrea, 2007; Kannisto, 2014) or digital nomads, had suddenly found themselves at the mercy of nation-state bureaucracies around the world. Suddenly, non-resident visitors had been demoted from welcome guests to unwelcome public health hazards (Connor, 2020). For people who followed a location-independent lifestyle, the first months of the pandemic was decision time: Did they dare to remain where they were—in a country where most did not have the right to stay, and where they were dependent on governments offering visa amnesties (Bangkok Post, 2020)? Or would they go back home, to places that many participants said they would rather avoid, given the emotional toll the family home was demanding of them?

When some of my research participants returned for a catch-up interview in mid-2020, some of the topics they discussed were the same as in 2019, such as home and work or emotions around the home. However, adapting to life in pandemic times was also a major issue they discussed, as Table 6.2 below shows.

Table 6.1

Home in 2019: A Thematic Analysis

Codes	Frequency (no. of references)
Home and work	35
Home: Emotions, positive and negative	27
The importance of social contacts / community	27
Home base	18
Home country	15
Home = partner, family or significant others	13
Certain objects	5
Home is wherever I am	3
Home means establishing certain routines	3

Table 6.2

Home in 2020: A Thematic Analysis

Codes	Frequency (no. of references)
Home and work	29
Home: Emotions, positive and negative	18
Home in times of the pandemic	14
Home as a refuge, a safe haven	13
Family / childhood home	12
Home base	6
Home country	5
Home: A place to store one's belongings	3
Home is wherever I am	3

Note. As mentioned in the Methodology chapter (Chapter 3), some discussion topics in Tables 6.1 and 6.2 may be overlapping. For instance, people might have positive or negative emotions in regard to their partner's or the family home.

As discussed earlier in the chapter, the interviewees had declared in 2019 that home was mainly a matter of relationships, and where like-minded people mattered more than certain locations. Remaining in contact with the family was important for the interviewees, but they generally preferred to stay in contact at a distance and visit home only as short-term tourists (see also de Loryn, 2022a). In 2020, however, decisions had to be made regarding where to wait out the pandemic, as travel and border crossings had become increasingly difficult. On 30 March 2020, a new term had been devised for this purpose: *non-essential travel* (European Commission, 2020). Non-essential travel meant travel for personal reasons. Non-essential travel was prohibited in most countries around the world from March 2020.

In early 2020, some of my research participants had 'accidentally' returned to their families because of pre-planned commitments and were thus able to avoid issues around the prohibition of non-essential travel. Thirty-year-old Emily from the United Kingdom, for instance, had already mentioned in December 2019 that she considered visiting family in the United Kingdom during February, and 25-year-old Cara had travelled to Australia to attend a birthday, also in February 2020.[25] Brad, a 33-year-old Canadian, however, stressed that he only travelled to Canada in March 2020 because of family pressures:

> Actually, it was a pretty tough decision to come back. Because, I was, I was actually in Bali when all of this started to go down.[26] And we were in the middle of a vacation and ended up having to make the decision to come back. A lot of family pressure, of course, over here, to get back.
>
> But still, actually, most of my friends ended up staying in Thailand, actually. So, they are still there [as of mid-2020]. One friend is actually still, actually, a few friends are still in Bali as well.

Brad's reaction shows that, even though he was away from his family for most of the year, he still chose his parents over his friends when deciding to return home to Canada. His reaction shows that not having a registered home address does not necessarily mean that one is homeless, as Kannisto (2016) has noted. Kannisto's global nomad research participants also argued that, even though they did not "really have a home", home was also where their family was (2016, p. 225). Brad's response shows that in good times, one can feel at home in many places around the globe, and in bad times, such as during a pandemic, the family home substantially gains in importance.

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[25] All Australian participants in this research had, for some reason or another, returned to Australia before international borders were closed to all tourists, returning residents and citizens. This proved to be a wise decision, as Australia's national borders remained closed between 20 March 2020 and 15 December 2021.

[26] COVID-19 was declared a worldwide pandemic by WHO on 11 March 2020.

Unsurprisingly, some of the research participants who had chosen not to return to their family home at the beginning of the pandemic realised that feeling at home in the world was suddenly not so easy anymore, when one was dependent on visa amnesties such as those provided by the Thai government (Bangkok Post, 2020). The participants had to negotiate emotional consequences, which were connected with residency and visa issues. Amanda from Finland, for instance, realised that she had to choose between living with her sedentary partner in Canada and her sedentary family in Finland. She called herself lucky that she had already been in Canada when the country had closed its borders (for all non-residents, with the exception of United States citizens) on 18 March 2020. Even though Amanda did not mind sharing an apartment long term with her sedentary partner, she did not enjoy living in Canada. She also yearned to see her family in Finland, but she knew that visiting her family in Finland would result in her not being allowed back into Canada until tourist visas were issued again.[27]

Compared to the fate of some of the other interviewees in this research, Amanda was relatively lucky to live with her sedentary partner in Canada. For Sarah from the Philippines, returning to her native country was out of the question, because she believed she would not feel at home there. "Home is where you feel free to be yourself, without apology or doubt", Jackson wrote (2000, p. 47), and Sarah had made sufficiently clear already in 2019 that the Philippines was not such a place for her. However, Sarah had the bad luck to be locked out of her chosen home base. In March 2020, she rented an apartment in the Chiang Mai region with her American partner and her son. The couple had decided to go for a short trip to Vietnam while Sarah's teenage son was visiting relatives in the Philippines. In pre-pandemic times, this would have meant two easy international border crossings. However, in pandemic times, these decisions had devastating consequences: Vietnam closed its borders on 22 March 2020, and Thailand on 25 March. The family was on a non-resident Thai education visa, and so they were not allowed to return to Thailand. Finally, the couple were caught in a lockdown in Vietnam during early April 2020, so they were not even allowed to leave their hotel room. At the time of the interview (July 2020), Sarah and her partner had to make home in a place they did not want to be (Vietnam) while Sarah's son, whom she had not seen for months, had to remain at home in the Philippines with relatives. When discussing home in an emotionally charged situation like this, Sarah said:

> I think I said before that home is anywhere where I feel at peace. That's what I said
> last time, right? Well, for me, our home in Thailand is our home. Although we've

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[27] Canada opened its borders for double-vaccinated international travellers on 7 September 2021 (Government of Canada, 2021).

been here [in Vietnam] for four and a half months already. It's not that it's bad here. But, you know, we get used to where we are more settled.

You know, we have an actual house there [in Thailand], although we don't own it. We are just renting. But it's just more comfortable. We have, we can cook there. Here [in Vietnam] we cannot cook because we don't have a proper kitchen.

I think, slowly, Thailand is becoming home to me.

In Sarah's chosen home base in Thailand (where she was not allowed to be at the time of the interview), she felt at home. In Vietnam (which she could not leave at the time of the interview), Sarah experienced emotional homelessness. Bauman (1998) wrote that when his colleague, Agnes Heller, met a female traveller on an airplane who was free to go wherever she wanted to. This traveller was described as having an "imaginary home she does not *need* [emphasis added]" (Bauman, 1998, p. 92). Sarah, however, was not free to come and go anymore. It had been her choice to travel to Vietnam, but as soon as she left Thailand, she had no choice but to stay. Bauman argues that a life is only worth living if people are able to choose, and freedom is "the difference between the action dependent on the will of others and action dependent on one's own will" (Bauman, 1988, p. 9). Even though Sarah was relatively calm about the imposed lockdown in Vietnam, and the lack of permission to return to Thailand, she did not conceal that she wanted her son to join the family and return with the entire family to their chosen home base as soon as possible.

Even Emily from the United Kingdom, the 'oracle' who had foreseen that digital nomads could find themselves in trouble if they did not have the funds to go back home, found that she was in a crisis situation in early 2020. Emily told me in December 2019 that she and her husband had considered visiting family in the United Kingdom during February 2020 because some family members were not in good health. The couple had been reluctant to go because they said they did not like the English weather in February, but they did go because of the pandemic. In Emily's words:

We were really nervous about flying back from Thailand to the UK … that was really tough … It was really scary being in an Airbnb [in London] and not knowing when we were ever able to leave. Because, when we were in the Airbnb, it became illegal in the UK to stay in Airbnb's. So, then we had to do a deal privately with our landlord and pay him.

And things like … paying the money over bank transfer. It got blocked by our banks because there were so many scams at that time, of people falsely asking for different bank account details for rent. So, it flagged it really, as really fraudulent. So, things like that were really scary. So, we were like, 'well, we might actually be homeless.'

In this respect, after more than four years of travelling around the world as a digital nomad and choosing to feel at home wherever she wanted, Emily was worried about becoming homeless. Homelessness for Emily in this case was defined as not having a roof over her head when she needed it most, or when she needed shelter from the harsh English winter and from the pandemic. Again, and like Sarah's case, Emily had lost the privilege to choose (but in this case, to choose her accommodation) and this was what frightened her more than anything else.

In 2020, when countries around the world closed their borders and confined people into their homes for weeks (e.g., Vietnam) or months (e.g., Australia) in the hope to eradicate the virus from home soil, many digital nomads were caught up in a new way of life that was static and immobile, which is the opposite of Sheller and Urry's (2006) globalised and mobile pre-pandemic ideal. But how does enforced immobility affect the mindset of a location-independent person who had thrived on the privilege of choosing to feel at home in almost any place around the world? Looking back at the recruiting process for this research project in late 2019, several people had agreed to be interviewed and thus self-identified as digital nomads. During the interviews, however, some participants corrected me and pointed out that they did not feel comfortable with being called a digital nomad, even though most of them were members of popular digital nomad discussion groups on Facebook. For them, a digital nomad was a constant traveller who would quickly skip from one place to the next—similar to one of Kannisto's (2014) global nomads. Several interviewees admitted that they indeed changed locations often, but had slowed down over time as they found this way of life too exhausting. Sven from Italy stated:

> I see myself more and more as a location-independent freelancer. When I started working remotely, I got excited about being able to travel all the time. But over time I figured that changing location just for the sake of being in a new location isn't my thing and I prefer to go with the flow and just be grateful that I can go to another place if I like.

Reichenberger distinguishes Level 2 digital nomads with a permanent residence from Level 3 nomads without any residence (Reichenberger, 2018, see Figure 1.1). However, my research sample shows it is fairly common that those who follow this lifestyle are looking for a semi-permanent home at least for some time of the year. The question on how much one had to travel in order to be considered a 'real' digital nomad seemed to be very much on the minds of the participants, especially during the enforced immobility of the pandemic lockdowns. This resulted in more interviewees feeling uncomfortable with their personal definition of digital nomad in 2020 than in 2019. The majority of the interviewees in 2020 declared they were location independent or 'location-

independent freelancers.' Yasmin from Germany, for example, experienced a prolonged lockdown situation in Cyprus. From her perspective,

> I wouldn't say that I am a digital nomad at the moment. Digital yes, but nomad no, because travelling is impossible. This is why I'd rather say, 'location-independent freelancer.' I have been in Cyprus for five months [as of July 2020], and not even on the island I have travelled a lot.

What is interesting in this respect is that Yasmin, at the time of the interview, was not living in her home country, and did not have a registered address anywhere. Instead, she was staying as a tourist in Cyprus. Emily from the United Kingdom, who had worried that she would become homeless in early 2020, had managed to find a place to stay long term by July 2020, when we met online for the interview. She said in this respect that:

> Moving back to feels very much like we are not digital nomads anymore. This being, we are in a furnished apartment, we've got a car now. It feels like we have gone back to being non-digital nomads. But, in terms of the work, the work is still the same. Still working online.

Just like Yasmin, Emily had to abandon her travel plan, as there were also lockdowns in the United Kingdom. As a consequence, Emily felt she did not deserve the digital nomad title anymore, at least in 2020. Another interesting issue in this respect was that living in a furnished apartment and owning a car felt different to Emily than to sedentary people. Whereas a sedentary person would claim that owning a car was a key to mobility (Urry, 2007), Emily saw having a rental contract and owning a car as something that made her life more static and less mobile.

No matter how the research participants were feeling about their perceived nomad—or non-nomad status in mid-2020, none of them had given up doing location-independent work. Even though the majority of the participants had been placed in a position where they were location-bound, and where they did not have the privilege to live and work where they wanted, their mindset did not shift to choosing or consuming a different lifestyle (Bauman 2007b). This was because they had not chosen the digital nomad lifestyle as a matter of convenience but because they believed in it. After all, pursuing a certain lifestyle is a "necessary condition of human dignity and self-esteem" in postmodern times (Bauman, 2007b, p. 130). As Yasmin said, they were still doing digital work, and only the nomadic element had been suspended for a time due to outside circumstances. As such, the participants were simply nomadic people enacting sedentary life for the time being, while at the same time yearning to travel again once the pandemic was over.

The Metamorphosis of the Home: From Loneliness at Home to Home as Refuge and Safe Haven

> Where are we at home? … There are, perhaps, no two people who would give exactly the same answer to the question. The density of our sensual home-experience varies from home to home. One home is closer to the logic of the heart, the other to the logic of reason. (Heller, 1995)

Surely, 2020 was the year when not only digital nomads realised the home that was "closer to the logic of reason" (Heller, 1995, p. 17) was a priority, whereas the home that the heart was yearning for had to wait. This is also why fighting loneliness had ceased to be a topic in the 2020 interviews, when people around the world were confined to their homes or perhaps locked out of their native country in the interest of public health, as was the case for Australia and New Zealand residents.[28] Some of the interviewees were in lockdown when they talked to me via Zoom or other video conferencing channels in mid-2020. Not one lamented that they were lonely or looking for community. Instead, the discussions generally revolved around people feeling relieved that, so far, they had not been affected by the pandemic.

Life is difficult in the liquid modern world, Bauman explains, and this is important when it comes to laws and policies being made by those on top of the postmodern consumer hierarchy, and seemingly for the benefit for of the entire population (Bauman, 2000a; 2004). This is even harder to accept when exceptions are made for billionaires and celebrities (Corlett, 2021; Mao, 2021), or when elected leaders flout public health regulations they have imposed on others (Marsh, 2021), while those further down Bauman's power pyramid (such as some of my interviewees) were not able to travel at all.

When it comes to feedback from digital nomads in the early pandemic, there was a general sense of thankfulness that they were healthy, that they were able to work from where they were at the moment (their temporary home) and that they could still do location-independent online work. "That's what the pandemic taught me. Just to be grateful for what I have, and not to dwell on things that I do not have", said Sarah from the Philippines about this—even though her son was thousands of miles away in a different country at the time of the interview. In contrast to those who had grown up knowing they would never be regular consumers (i.e., able to afford the choices they desired), Sarah knew that, for a time, her son was safe at home with her family, and that she would eventually be able to choose where to go again.

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[28] In 2020 alone, the city of Melbourne, Australia, was in lockdown for a total of 154 days, or 22 weeks (Lockdown Stats Melbourne, 2021).

Unlike actual prisoners, Sarah was not permanently excluded from society (Bauman, 1998), although she was unsure at the time when she would be able to travel and see her son again.

Discussing Home in 2021: Just One More Challenge

For those who pursued the digital nomad lifestyle, 2020 had been a difficult year, with some interviewees wondering if they were still eligible to hold the digital nomad title and others confronted with the possibility of becoming (physically, not metaphorically) homeless. The second year of the pandemic (2021) continued to be a challenge. On a global scale, vaccinations had become available in December 2020, and many Northern Hemisphere countries had started offering vaccinations to their citizens and residents. At the same time, stay-at-home orders were still being enforced to a larger extent in some countries (e.g., Australia) and not so much in others (e.g., Mexico, see Straulino-Rodriguez, 2021). In March 2021, current journeys and future travel plans were discussed in digital nomad groups on Facebook, with conversations about travel destinations surpassing the popularity of all other topics.

The Facebook users did not philosophise about what home meant to them; instead, some of those who did not have a residential address in their passport country discussed the clerical roadblocks that they had to overcome to complete tasks as straightforward as getting vaccinated, doing online banking and renewing their driver license—to name just a few. Other popular discussions regarding home picked up topics that my research participants had also mentioned in 2019 and 2020, such as potential home bases or how they felt about going back to their home country after having been away for a long time.

COVID-19 Vaccinations—How Hard can it be Without a Home Address?

After the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, digital nomads had to face new health-related challenges that could very well decide over life and death. Obtaining the COVID-19 vaccinations (available from 2021) was recommended as the best public health measure for surviving the pandemic, with "infection and hospitalization rates among unvaccinated persons … 29.2 times" higher than compared to fully vaccinated people (Griffin et al., 2021).

It quickly became clear that those who had returned to their home country during the pandemic had a distinct advantage in terms of preserving their health. How to obtain a COVID-19 vaccination as a non-sedentary person, on the other hand, was one of the challenges that some digital nomads faced, especially when they were not able to return to their home country. After all, border closures, flight cancellations, higher costs for flights and for hotel quarantine periods were making international travel difficult and expensive compared to pre-pandemic times.

COVID-19 vaccinations were an important discussion topic on Facebook. The Facebook users that discussed vaccinations could be grouped into those who said they were already vaccinated,

those who said they would get vaccinated because they knew they would be eligible soon in their home country and those who wanted to get vaccinated but were unsure about where this would be possible for them. This also aligns with Kitro et al. (2021) who found that expats in Chiang Mai expressed a greater interest in COVID-19 vaccinations in comparison to the local population.

The group of those who were unsure about where to get vaccinated included people who had no legal home (i.e., a sedentary address in their home country) but who still wanted to protect their health by getting vaccinated. They were, for instance, trying to find out if they could pay for a vaccination in a country in which they were not residents, such as Thailand or Mexico. One Facebook user considered a trip to a country in Eastern Europe, solely to get vaccinated, and they asked how much time they should factor in, and if the process would be difficult if one had no local language skills. To take matters further, another Facebook user looked for 'any' country that would allow them to get vaccinated as a non-resident foreigner. They said they did not want to stay in their home country (which they said they loathed) for the waiting period between the two doses and thus were looking for alternative options. Finally, another Facebook user mentioned that they had not been a resident in any country of the world for years, and that they worried that they would not be eligible to get vaccinated anywhere. These examples are in contrast to Holleran (2022) who pointed out that digital nomads appear to return to their home country in times of need primarily to take advantage of the welfare benefits that their passport countries provided (such as COVID-19 vaccinations, for instance).

The challenges in obtaining a COVID-19 vaccination were exacerbated by the fact that from 2021, many countries only allowed double-vaccinated travellers to cross their borders (Henly, 2021). The Facebook users were very aware of this. They were trying to stay up to date in terms of public safety-related border regimes, for instance by asking for advice when Canada or Greece would allow vaccinated non-essential travellers again.

Postal Address and Residency: Being Summoned by the Authorities

Bauman writes that life as a global tourist offers people "the gratifying feeling of 'being in control'" (1997, p. 90). In pandemic times, however, many digital nomads had to realise that control was taken out of their hands in terms of access to vaccinations, but also regarding services that, before the pandemic, had been only a budget flight away.

Simple privileges that are available to everyone with a registered address, such as access to home banking, but also passports and driver licenses, are privileges with an inbuilt expiry date. Once people are not physically present in their home country, and not able to walk into a local bank or government branch at short notice when called in, life can get difficult in ways that might appear outlandish for sedentary people. According to Thompson (2019), one of her research participants, for

instance, was confronted with the problem that she was not able to get divorced without a home address—and that was before the COVID-19 pandemic. Thompson writes that "Mariza had to quickly establish residency in the state of Nevada in order to complete the divorce proceedings" (Thompson, 2019a, p. 84). Having a registered home address provided her with the privileges and power that she needed to get divorced.

This powerlessness had been exacerbated after the beginning of the pandemic when international travel became more difficult and more expensive for people around the world. For an Australian Facebook user, the simple act of renewing their driver license—a prerequisite for driving a car in most countries around the world—turned into an difficult logistical problem: They were asked to travel to a government office for an eye test and to have their photograph taken.[29] As Australia's borders were closed for most of 2020 and 2021, the person in question would have to first request a travel exemption from the Australian government, then book a costly flight to Australia and, finally, pay for 14 days of hotel quarantine, before being allowed to go to said government office, but only if the city in question was not in lockdown at the time. In pandemic times, renewing the privilege of a driver license was suddenly almost unachievable for those who were not at home in "Fortress Australia" (Bhatia, 2021, p. 1. See also Department of Health, 2021; Prime Minister of Australia, 2020). According to Bauman, "practical freedom of choice is a privilege" (Bauman, 1997, p. 197). From 19 to 20 March 2020, citizens and residents of New Zealand and Australia, who found themselves outside the borders of their home country, suddenly had to come to terms with the fact that what they had deemed as their right—that is, the right to go back home when they wanted to— was in reality a privilege that had been revoked without prior notice and for an unknown period of time (New Zealand Immigration, 2022; Prime Minister of Australia, 2020; Roy, 2020). Before the pandemic, people around the world had believed that going back home whenever they wanted was an inalienable right for every citizen of a nation-state. But this right had been taken away by two democratically elected governments without warning. The border closures remained in place for almost two years for both Australia (until 23 December 2021, see Department of Health, 2021) and New Zealand (until 27 February 2022, see New Zealand Immigration, 2022). The loss of the right to go home suddenly turned thousands of people, not only digital nomads, into people who were truly homeless (Visontay, 2021).

When Home and Heart Travel on Different Paths: Emotions Around the Home in 2021

Obtaining access to vaccines and to other privileges reserved only for sedentary people are issues that digital nomads had to negotiate when they were outside their home countries in 2021.

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[29] In the Australian state of New South Wales, for example, "if you hold a full licence, you can only use a photo-kit form for renewal once … The next time you need to renew, you'll have to visit a Service NSW Centre" (Service NSW, 2021, paragraph 3); also note the title of the page: "Renew a driver licence while *temporarily* [emphasis added] interstate or overseas"

However, among the Facebook users there were also digital nomads who had decided to return to their home country for the duration of the pandemic, just as Brad from Canada had done. In this respect, most of the discussions focused on emotions that these people experienced either when they were planning to go back home, or when they had already spent some time there. They were culture shocked in their own home countries, similar to Amanda from Finland, who had already explained in 2019 that she felt out of place in Finland after having lived in Australia in the early 2010s. After choosing and living the digital nomad lifestyle, transitioning back to a sedentary life was hard for these digital nomads, as the sedentary values that the people around them cherished (which included discussing matters such as mortgages and luxury goods) were meaningless to them. The place they previously called home had also lost its meaning because the interactions with the people around them had become meaningless.

For these digital nomads, the home in their passport country was not a "home as the primary center of identity, work, or community" anymore (Williams & McIntyre, 2001, p. 392). Their cosmopolitan life had shifted elsewhere, and they only returned to their home country to find refuge, not because they felt they belonged. However, the novel experience of being a stranger in their own home country, for some, was hard to accept, especially as they had not returned as tourists (as described earlier in this chapter) but as residents. Due to the pandemic, these people felt they were not able to live at the "self-appointed place" where they wanted to live (Heller, 1995, p. 4), which resulted in unhappiness—especially when they compared their lives and values with others and realised that they shared few values (Holmes, 2010). At the same time, the digital nomads shared a feeling of disconnect with their home country that was similar to the experiences of many expat children, and especially so when they were forced to return 'home', not because they wanted to, but because they had to (Eakin, 1996).

Digital nomads who had already been in their home countries for some time expressed on Facebook a feeling of *Fernweh*, or *far sickness,* in relation to their favourite places in distant countries. They said that they missed friends they would usually visit in these places, but they also missed the freedom to go to cafes and do other ordinary things they were used to doing before the pandemic. These people had given up the idea of having a single home. Instead, they explained that home was the people that mattered to them, each of them living in different parts of the world. Only by meeting these people on a regular basis would they truly feel at home. As already argued by Williams and McIntyre, "the forces of modernization and globalization … tend to dislodge one's heart (identity) from singular roots and redistribute it across space like so many rhizomes" (2001, p. 400). Unfortunately, globalisation also helped to spread the COVID-19 pandemic around the world in a matter of weeks, and people were suddenly forced to make choices regarding homes that were location-based and not emotion-based.

Conclusion: At Home in the World, but not Welcome in Their Home Country

In this chapter, I have investigated the research question: How do location-independent online workers (digital nomads) define home; and how have experiences made during the COVID-19 pandemic shaped their perception of home? The results show that the concept of home, which was already a multi-faceted topic before the COVID-19 pandemic, has received a few darker shades during the pandemic. Home and issues around home were difficult for digital nomads to navigate even before the pandemic. Lockdowns and border closures have shown how difficult life can become if one's definition of home is not tied to a place, but to people one feels connected to—especially if they are scattered around the world and locked away behind closed borders.

Before the pandemic, home for a digital nomad had a multitude of positive and negative facets. For once, home was for most participants also a workplace. They either worked from home— that is, their current accommodation—exclusively or more often, or they chose home as one of several potential workplaces. Working from home can create loneliness and isolation if one does not look for social contacts in the outside world. Most importantly, home for the participants was not a place but an abstract space of shared emotions, where one felt connected with people close by, such as one's partner or other like-minded and cosmopolitan-minded friends. The interviewees explained that home for them was also the place where they grew up. As this place was changing and evolving in their absence, some of the participants pointed out that it was difficult for them to feel at home when they returned to visit family. At the same time, some of the participants explained that the relationships within their family had not necessarily changed for the better during their absence, which made fitting into established family structures uncomfortable. Given these circumstances, some of the participants explained that they preferred to go home only for brief visits, if at all, and instead chose to establish their own temporary home bases in places where they knew they would find like-minded people. Even interviewees like Andreas, who had chosen a home base in a tax haven, quickly found out that meaningful connections to others are even more important for him.

When the pandemic forced millions of people around the world to stay indoors for most of 2020 and 2021, discussions around home adapted to the new way of living. Instead of discussing loneliness, some of the participants spoke about the difficult decisions they had to make in the early pandemic. Some research participants, for instance, decided to return home to where their family lived. For others, not returning to their home country resulted in families divided or people being barred from returning to their temporary home base due to closed national borders. The lockdowns also encouraged some of the participants to reflect on their lives, and leaving them wondering if forced immobility meant they were not officially digital nomads anymore, even though their work arrangements had not changed. The intent to travel, however, had not waned, and the participants

decided to wait out the pandemic for as long as necessary while knowing that the loss of travel privileges was only temporary.

In 2021, the pandemic was still in full swing, and digital nomads shared their stories about their struggles with the authorities at home (in their passport country) while on Facebook, especially in regard to managing money from outside their home country. With borders of some countries closed, matters that used to be simple before the pandemic, such as renewing one's driver license, were suddenly almost impossible. Finally, some Facebook users reported that they found it difficult to access potentially lifesaving COVID-19 vaccinations.

Home is not simply a legal address, it is also tied to strong emotions, and the pandemic also had a major influence on emotions around the home. As mentioned by one interviewee in 2019, some digital nomads on Facebook realised, after returning home to the place they originated from, that they did not belong there anymore. Choosing to live a digital nomad lifestyle had changed them and their values in ways different from other people, so much so that they found it difficult to connect with those back home. The home they grew up in was not home any more, because there were no like-minded people around them.

Before the pandemic, being "at home in many places but in no one place in particular" (Bauman, 2005, p. 3) had been a taken-for-granted privilege of those who pursued the digital lifestyle. During the pandemic, this privilege had been revoked without further notice. Given that digital nomad researchers (Green, 2020; Mancinelli, 2020; Thompson, 2019b) have often pointed out that digital nomads were privileged compared to the sedentary population the experiences made during the pandemic demonstrate that, at least in pandemic times, non-sedentary digital nomads had considerably fewer privileges than sedentary people. However, even if they chose to return home during the pandemic, this was not a guarantee that they would feel at home among people who did not understand the experiences they had made when living a global lifestyle as digital nomads.

This discussion mirrors the findings in the previous chapter, where I explained that during the pandemic, digital nomads had become unwelcome vagabonds in some cases and thus had been demoted to the lowest rung in Bauman's postmodern hierarchy. In relation to home, the participants experienced additional emotional consequences: the understanding that home might not be in the place where they grew up after all and that shared emotions, and a shared cosmopolitan lifestyle, may matter more than a shared past and shared biological family bonds.

Chapter 7
Conclusion

Looking back at the early 21st century, future historians may see the COVID-19 pandemic as a defining moment in social history, as over the course of more than two years (2020–2022[30]), nation-states around the world closed their borders to non-essential travellers and sometimes even to their own citizens. Basic rights, such as freedom of movement, were revoked by authoritarian and democratically elected governments alike, without initially providing a date when these rights would be reinstated. In the absence of a cure or a vaccination, people feared for their lives, and according to WHO (2023), more than 7 million people have died due to COVID-19, but WHO estimates that COVID-19 may have taken as much as 20 million lives, with many deaths not reported due to various reasons. The pandemic has also been a watershed moment in terms of online work, with millions of students and clerical workers forced to learn and work remotely. While confined to their homes, these people had time to reflect on the benefits and disadvantages of remote work. This research project, which began in 2019, has also been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and I have been changed by the pandemic just like those who participated in this research.

In this research project, I examined how people who live a digital nomad lifestyle define concepts such as work, freedom and home, and how the early pandemic shaped their thoughts on these concepts. These were the research questions examined in this thesis:

1. How do people understand the shift from regular employment to the digital nomad lifestyle
   a. how do they describe the experience of their **work**
   b. and how did the COVID-19 pandemic impact their understandings of their labour?
2. How did location-independent online workers (digital nomads) define and experience **freedom** before and during the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. How do location-independent online workers (digital nomads) define **home**; and how have experiences made during the COVID-19 pandemic shaped their perception of home?

For the analysis of the research questions, I primarily relied on the works of the social theorist Zygmunt Bauman (see also Chapter 2), who has extensively written on the transition from traditional society to the industrial age and from the industrial age to the current postmodern age, which Bauman also calls liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000a). Furthermore, this chapter also aims to show that the current postmodern way of living and working, which is based on a sedentary consumer society, is not as 'liquid' as Bauman theorised, and still has much in common with

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[30] Japan was one of the last countries to open up international travellers on 11 October 2022.

industrial society. After the end of the pandemic restrictions, for instance, many workplaces have called their clerical workers back to the corporate desks (Gonzales, 2023), and for many formerly remote workers, the line between the home and the workplace has hardened again. This is in contrast to the digital nomad lifestyle, which could be regarded as one of the first truly postmodern ways of life, or perhaps the first late-postmodern, fluid lifestyle, depending on the perspective.

In this conclusion chapter, I will now provide an overview of the methods used in this research and the theoretical basis for this research, followed by a short overview of how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted this research project. I will then answer the research questions and describe the results from the perspective of Zygmunt Bauman's social theories. Finally, I will close with the limitations of this study and some suggestions for future research.

Researching a Location-Independent Lifestyle in Pandemic Times

This research project began in 2018, when location-independent online work was still a relatively underexplored field, with investigators generally focusing on defining the lifestyle (Bartosik-Purgat, 2018; Müller, 2016; Nash et al., 2018), examining aspects of travel (Richards, 2015) or working in the gig economy (Liegl, 2014; Sutherland & Jarrahi, 2017, see also my literature review in Chapter 1). In this respect, an explorative study of general issues such as when and how digital nomads work outside the constraints of an organisation, and how they define concepts such as home and freedom, appeared to be a suitable approach—especially if combined with aspects of place and space in locations as diverse as Chiang Mai and Berlin.

Qualitative interviews were conducted in Chiang Mai and via video conferencing with 18 digital nomads and three coworking hosts in November and December 2019. The participants had been recruited in relevant Facebook groups and on location in Chiang Mai. The qualitative interview schedule was semi-structured, which allowed to focus on certain aspects of interest while giving interviewees as much freedom in their replies as possible. In December 2019, the COVID-19 virus had already emerged, but the news had not yet been shared with the media. As such, the 2019 interviews can still be regarded as pre-COVID interviews. A few months later, the travel restrictions in the early pandemic made the scheduled fieldwork in Berlin in 2020 impossible, and a decision had to be made if this research project was to be abandoned or adjusted to what was possible in pandemic times.

Thanks to the cooperation of many of my 2019 research participants, this study was modified to discuss how people experienced this lifestyle before and during the pandemic. Therefore, from 29 June to 6 August 2020, 13 participants were interviewed again. Given that 2020 was the first year of the pandemic, when millions of people around the world struggled with curfews and lockdowns, health and mental health issues, it was especially important to respect the needs of the participants.

The participants were free to choose if they wanted to meet me online for a second interview, or if they wanted to contribute to this study via a written interview comprising of the same questions. As all of the 2020 interviewees were the same as in 2019, they were aware of the context of this research, so it was not necessary to explain this research to them again. Furthermore, the 2020 questions focused on the same discussion topics as the 2019 interviews. The three coworking hosts were not invited again, as coworking spaces were closed in 2020 due to pandemic public health measures. Finally, archival research on Facebook in March 2021 completed the dataset for this study.

The transcribed interviews and the Facebook data were imported into the qualitative analysis software NVivo and analysed by taking advantage of multi-grounded theory as proposed by Goldkuhl and Cronholm in 2003 (see Chapter 3 for details about the methodology). The main difference between grounded theory and multi-grounded theory is that the latter is not based in the data alone, but that it also draws on existing theory that is relevant to the issue under research. In multi-grounded theory, the researcher compares the research results with the selected theory and, potentially, may help advance the theory at hand or, alternatively, may be able to point out shortfalls of a given theory.

As the people who decided to adopt a digital nomad lifestyle have lived their entire lives in a postmodern consumer society, Zygmunt Bauman's social theories were chosen as a basis for the data analysis. From Bauman's perspective, in consumer society, class is not relevant anymore and has been replaced by access to resources, which may be translated primarily as access to money or credit (Bauman, 1988). Moreover, according to Bauman (1988), individual freedom in postmodern society primarily means the freedom of the consumer to choose between different products and lifestyles that they can afford (see Chapter 2 for more details about Bauman's theories). Bauman has also written extensively about the changing nature of work from the industrial age, which lasted from the late 18th to the late 20th century, to the current postmodern age (Bauman, 1998; 2000a; 2004). Finally, home has also been of interest to Bauman (1998), albeit to a lesser extent. This is why Chapter 6, which discusses home, also relies on Agnes Heller's works (1992; 1995; 2009). Like Bauman, Heller was a postmodern sociologist, but her view on postmodern society is generally seen as more optimistic compared to Bauman (Beilharz, 2017a). However, before going into more detail regarding the validity of Bauman's social theories for the 2020s, I will now proceed to answer the research questions beginning with work before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Work and the Digital Nomad Lifestyle

This study examined how people understand their shift from regular employment to the digital nomad lifestyle, how they described the experience of their work and how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their understandings of their labour (Research Question 1).

For some interviewees, the transition to the digital nomad lifestyle was associated with a high risk of potentially not earning an income, especially if they had to learn a profession that was entirely new to them. The risk to potentially not earn an income did not appear to have an influence on participants' decision-making processes. Instead, the focus was primarily on non-monetary benefits, such as being with a loved one or finding rewarding work (see also Sennett, 2008). Given that digital nomads are often framed as prime examples of neoliberal thinking (Mancinelli, 2020), this shows that even though digital nomads are forced to live in a neoliberal context, other values may be even more important to them.

For the digital nomads—or location-independent online workers—working when and where they wanted was an important aspect of the freedom that they were looking for (see also Reichenberger, 2018). In the context of work, freedom is understood as time freedom, or the freedom to choose when to start and finish one's workday and one's workweek, even though the digital nomad working week appeared to be still primarily based on the Western Monday-to-Friday model of clerical work. However, work was moved to the later hours of the day, with the early mornings dedicated to active (e.g., sports or writing a journal) or passive self-care (e.g., sleeping in). The participants confirmed that they aimed to work shorter hours than regular nine-to-five employees, but they also admitted that actual hours worked could fluctuate, for instance, when deadlines were due, and gifts had to be bought.

Both digital nomads and employees in traditional work arrangements engage in unpaid work-related activities. While regular employees are not paid for activities like commuting to work, for researching and applying for employment, or for welfare-related activities, digital nomads engage in different unpaid work. They may choose to read work-related articles during mealtimes, engage in self-promotion on social media while waiting for a bus or airplane or visit in-person networking events after work, which may result in building personal connections or acquiring new business opportunities. The research participants, who were all self-employed or freelancers, selling tangible or digital products or offering personal services such as English lessons or psychology consultations, explained that the boundaries between work and leisure were often unclear for them. Some of the participants made clear that they did not compartmentalise the different aspects of their life, such as worktime and leisure time, or home (which could also serve as a workplace) and travel (where one could engage in work, too).

Even though work and leisure may be blurred to a higher or lesser degree, depending on the individual, the participants in this research described in detail how important self-care was to them, and that especially the mornings were dedicated to leisure activities that benefitted their mental health. These findings are in contrast to researchers who argue that the pressure to earn an income may severely impact one's leisure time (see Mouratidis, 2018; Satterstrom, 2019). This apparent

discrepancy may be due to the fact that more experienced digital nomads who are financially more stable have better systems in place to take care of their mental health, while, at the same time, they are under less pressure to earn an income.

It should be noted that some participants appeared to prefer a less fluid division between work and leisure, for instance by mostly working outside their temporary home. However, this may not be as easy to turn into reality as in a traditional work context, as especially solo nomads were also dealing with loneliness and would thus engage in social activities with other nomads who themselves could be potential work-related contacts. It can be argued that the digital nomad lifestyle does not lend itself to a strict division between different aspects of life. This can be much easier managed by a sedentary individual with a fixed home address, a fixed work address and one a nine-to-five schedule.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced millions of clerical workers around the world to engage in remote work. As people who subscribed to the digital nomad lifestyle were working outside a fixed-address company office already, they did not have to adjust to remote work. Working in different places was not possible anymore, however, and their work had to be conducted from home; this time not by choice but by public health orders.

How the participants fared financially during the early pandemic was based on the profession they had chosen when they started their businesses (before the pandemic). This resulted in some having to look for new income sources, whereas others could be regarded as unaffected by the pandemic. One participant emerged as an accidental 'winner' of the pandemic, if seen from a financial perspective. His products were in high demand, as they were well suited for people who were isolating at home. The participant who had fared worst from a financial perspective, however, had lost income not because of the pandemic, but because she had chosen to offer English lessons via a gig-economy platform. She has been aware that she would potentially lose income if she chose to take time out from work, and she accepted this risk because seeing her family was more important to her than the potential loss of customers. For her this meant that her personal choices had a greater impact on her financial security than the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused some of the participants to briefly consider if they should go back to traditional nine-to-five employment. In the end, though, all participants said they wanted to continue this lifestyle, as they either did not believe that regular employment provided more financial security than their current way of working, or they did not want to give up the freedom to choose their work as well as the time freedom that this way of working provided them. This has also been confirmed by Ehn et al. (2022) who argued that digital nomad content creators in YouTube made it clear that they had no intention to give up this lifestyle. Instead, they simply adjusted their lives to the changed conditions.

Freedom and the Digital Nomad Lifestyle

In a second research question, this study examined how location-independent online workers, also known as digital nomads, defined and experienced freedom before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. As mentioned in the previous section, freedom means first and foremost time freedom. But the participants also value location freedom: the freedom to go where one wants to go when they want to. Most participants in this study could be seen as relatively privileged, as they had visa-free access to most countries in the world. However, two participants originated in Brazil and the Philippines, which resulted in them having access to fewer countries than their fellow nomads from Europe, for instance. Both participants declared that life outside their home countries was more desirable and made them feel free. Moreover, they explained that their freedom was not lessened by the inability to visit certain countries.

The interviewees did not define freedom as location freedom alone, they also discussed decision freedom, or the freedom to take control of one's life. This included the freedom to "live a self-determined life and not having to fit in somewhere" (Yasmin from Germany), and "being able to do what I love" (Cara from Australia), which again ties into the work discussion from Chapter 4. Digital nomads can be considered 'masterless' people (see Bauman 2004), and they take pride in deciding what is best for them, during and outside of work hours.

However, other participants critically reflected on what freedom meant to them. Whereas some argued that constantly having to make decisions can be a burden, and others pointed out that no one is completely free, as there are still restrictions when one lives a different lifestyle. Finally, financial freedom was also mentioned, as it provides the basis to enjoy all other freedoms mentioned above. In line with what has been discussed so far, it should be clear that financial aspects are important, but that the digital nomad lifestyle was not chosen because of the income perspectives, but because the participants were primarily driven by non-monetary values.

The pandemic severely impacted the freedoms of most people globally, including those who lived a digital nomad lifestyle. In mid-2020, when most of my interviewees found it difficult to travel, and with some living under lockdown conditions over weeks or even months, location freedom was at the forefront of their minds. Even those who had not discussed location freedom in the pre-COVID interview were talking about how they had become more aware of the freedoms they had previously taken for granted, and some mentioned feeling 'trapped.' However, it was clear that all interviewees saw the loss of location freedom as temporary only and that their travel privileges would be regained in the near future.

As digital nomads generally travel on tourist visas, and as tourism (or non-essential travel, as it was called then) was still not encouraged in 2021, the discussions on Facebook in March 2021

showed that especially United States citizens were painfully aware they were not welcome in most countries, given that the United States was still considered a COVID-19 hotspot (Schwartz, 2021). But it was not only United States citizens who lost travel privileges and who transformed from welcome tourists into undesirable vagabonds, if seen from Bauman's (1996b) perspective. Digital nomads who were travelling in Europe and India, for instance, considered overstaying their visas because they did not know which countries would allow them in next. This demonstrates that location freedom is indeed a privilege, but also a precarious privilege for those who are not a part of Bauman's global financial elite, who generally found it easy to declare that all their travels were essential (Hamilton and Hamilton, 2022). The pandemic made obvious that one's passport privileges can be revoked by governments around the world at any moment without prior notice. However, the digital nomads' reactions also show that safety and security challenges during the pandemic were perceived as a natural, and manageable, part of their lifestyle.

Home and the Digital Nomad Lifestyle

When considering how location-independent online workers define home; and how experiences made during the COVID-19 pandemic have shaped their perception of home (Research Question 3), the research results show that home for a digital nomad may be many things, not only a potential workplace but also the place where participants originated from, even though their emotions expressed towards the family home were not always entirely positive. Some described the family home as a place where (especially women) felt they had less agency over their lives, as ingrained power dynamics within the family started to re-emerge as soon as the participants had returned home (see also de Loryn, 2022a). For others, home had changed since the time they had been away, perhaps because the parents had moved to an unfamiliar place. However, home for a digital nomad could also be a place where they just wanted to feel at home for a little while. This could be a home base: a temporary home where the participants knew they would be welcomed by people who mattered to them, and who were not necessarily their relatives.

After the beginning of the pandemic, non-essential travel had become difficult or impossible, depending on one's current location, and the research participants were forced to choose only one home base for a much longer period than usual. From the perspective of a nation-state, home is equal to one's registered residential address. During the pandemic, citizens were urged to return to their passport countries, remain in isolation at their registered address and wait for further guidance from the governments as to when travel would be safe again (Gibson & Moran, 2020; Wong, 2020). Those digital nomads who did not heed this call were impacted by the loss of certain privileges that sedentary people usually take for granted. These included difficulties ranging from accessing internet banking to replacing driver licenses (which in some countries serve as identification documents), but also accessing potentially lifesaving COVID-19 vaccinations.

Forcing a digital nomad to prioritise one home, or one home base, over others also had emotional consequences—no matter if one decided to stay in or outside their passport countries. One interviewee, for instance, was forced to choose between her partner, who was living on one continent, and her biological family, who was living on another continent. In another case, a child was separated from his mother due to government-imposed, long-term border closures.

In this respect it is important to point out that even when it came to accessing potentially lifesaving COVID-19 vaccinations, many digital nomads decided not to return to their home countries, and they also did not express feelings of homesickness, in contrast to findings by Miguel et al. (2023). Furthermore, according to Miguel et al. (2023), digital nomads may experience 'fear of missing out' feelings when using social media. However, my research shows that during the COVID-19 pandemic, social media was an important tool to connect with other nomads and to research pandemic-related issues. This included, for instance, identifying countries that accepted non-essential travellers or researching countries that would provide access to COVID-19 vaccinations for non-residents.

The reluctance of some to go home even during a global pandemic shows the degree of detachment of some digital nomads from their 'national' home. Being a part of a community—even if it is virtual—appears to be very important, on the other hand. When looking at the experiences of other globally mobile people, Richardson and McKenna (2006), for instance, found that expats often felt as outsiders in their chosen countries while trying to maintain close ties to friends and family in their home countries, and Osbaldiston et al. (2020) noticed that lifestyle migrants who had moved to a different continent experienced feelings of homesickness to the country they thought had left behind forever. Digital nomads also stayed connected with their families, for instance via social media, but they appeared rather detached from their home countries. In line with Heller (2019), these digital nomads saw themselves as cosmopolitans, disconnected from the culture and traditions of their former home country, but at the same time connected to other cosmopolitan digital nomads who had a similar outlook on life in the 2020s as they did.

Finally, even those who had returned home to their passport country felt there was an emotional toll to pay, as the same issues reemerged that had already been discussed before the pandemic, such as not being able to connect with those around them anymore, as living a digital nomad lifestyle had changed them in different ways compared to their sedentary counterparts. This is an experience that the participants shared with children of expat families, who were almost permanently living outside their home countries, and who found it hard to adjust when having to move back home with their parents (Eakin, 1996).

In conclusion, the pandemic had only a minor influence on how and where digital nomads worked, and the pandemic also provided no incentive to take up regular employment. In terms of freedom, the pandemic had made the participants well aware of the location freedom they had lost, but they were also aware that their location freedom would eventually be reinstated. However, having to choose one home over others proved very difficult for those who had adopted a location-independent lifestyle, especially when home was a mosaic of friends and family who lived in different places scattered around the world. This is a fate that digital nomads shared, for a time, with millions of voluntary and involuntary migrants around the world.

In the following section, I will return to Zygmunt Bauman's theories about postmodernity and explain why the digital nomad lifestyle could be considered the first 'true' postmodern way of life, or perhaps the first advanced postmodern or late postmodern lifestyle, as this lifestyle innovatively combines pre-industrial conceptions around work and life with the technological advances of the 21st century to create a truly fluid lifestyle.

How 'Postmodern' is Postmodernity?

When discussing postmodernity, and especially the postmodern workplace, Zygmunt Bauman, who passed away in 2017, primarily focused on the differences between industrial and postmodern work. However, Bauman seemed to have been less interested in examining how much the postmodern office workplace and the factory of the industrial age still have in common. This becomes especially apparent if one compares regular nine-to-five employment in an open-plan office to pre-industrial life, which was marked by the lack of a distinct division between the home and the workplace.

According to Zygmunt Bauman (1988), postmodern society is a society where freedom is primarily defined by the freedom to choose what to consume next, which, on the positive side, allows people to choose from a wide variety of potential lifestyles instead of being limited by one's social class or forced to follow the example of their ancestors. In this society, Bauman argues, it does not matter where one's resources come from as long as one can afford to pay for whatever one wishes for (Bauman, 2000a; 2007b). However, those who do not have the necessary funds or credit available are considered flawed consumers, and therefore are placed at the bottom of the consumer hierarchy (1988, see also Figure 2.1). This is why most people—with the exception of the global elites—engage in paid labour, so they can afford what they desire and avoid being seen as flawed consumers who have to rely on the underfunded welfare system in their country of residence (Bauman, 1997; 1998).

When it comes to describing the postmodern workplace, Bauman focuses on the differences to factory work in the industrial age. For instance, Bauman argues that postmodern employees are not employed long term or for life anymore, but generally for short periods only, with work contracts

often being "casual, occasional and 'flexible'" (2004, p. 52), and at the same time, there is no "continuity" or long-term planning in their careers (2000a, p. 137). Furthermore, only very few "panoptical institutions" have remained, and people cannot be forced to work anymore, Bauman argues (2000a; 2004, p. 24).

Bauman, however, seemed to have little interest in examining how many aspects of factory work have been carried over into the postmodern clerical workplace. Indeed, it could be argued that in many respects the postmodern workplace has simply moved on from the factory into an air-conditioned, open-plan office and otherwise remained mostly unchanged.

Table 7.1

Similarities and Differences From Premodern Work to Late Postmodern Digital Nomad Work

Concept	Premodern times	Industrial Age	Postmodernity	Digital Nomad Lifestyle
Outlook on the future	God / tradition decided **on one's future**	Long-term planning by the individual; career determined **by one's class**	*Short-term planning by the individual*	*Short-term planning by the individual*
Mode of supervision	*Self-regulation / the head of the household*	Panoptical surveillance (one vs. many)	Post-panoptical surveillance (e.g., via cameras, software)	*Self-regulation / self-disciplining*
Tools owned	*By the individual*	By the business	By the business	*By the individual*
Who works	The entire family to a different extent	Before mid-1850s: the entire family. Later: adult males, unmarried women.	*Most adults*	*Most adults*
What is sold	*The products of **one's** labour*	Primarily labour only	Primarily labour only	**Labour, products of one's** labour or of the labour of others (depending on chosen profession)
Who decides timing of work	*The individual (craftsman), based on available daylight / body clock*	The employer	The employer	*The individual (who may also decide to take on clock-based work, depending on their chosen profession)*
Location of work	Workshop attached to residence, workshop, farm (close to residence)	The factory, as decided by the employer	A location chosen by the employer, generally a company office	Chosen by the individual, may be almost anywhere in the world.
Welfare	The family looked after their family members	Limited government welfare in 1800s, comprehensive welfare in 1900s	*Limited government welfare*	*The individual decides on their own welfare; may have access to limited government welfare based on passport country.*

Note. Based on Bauman (1988, 2000, 2004). Sennett (1998, 2008). Similarities between the different eras and digital nomad work are formatted in bold italics.

At this point, it is important to recall what the pre-industrial workplace was like. Before the emergence of the factory, the large majority of people around the world—women, men and children—were engaged in agricultural work. Or, to a smaller extent, they worked in a trade that operated inside their place of residence, and which was owned by the head of the family (Bauman, 1972). A workshop or a shop was often attached to the living quarters, and external workers lived with the family, with businesses generally small and containing only a limited number of workers, or "at most a few dozen people" (Sennett, 2008, p. 53). Due to the absence of affordable artificial light, the length of a workday was based on the seasons and the available daylight, which resulted in people generally working long hours in summer and fewer hours in winter. Furthermore, people generally owned the tools, controlled the outcomes of their labour and sold produce grown or products manufactured by their business (see also Table 7.1 above for an overview).[31]

How Industrialisation Changed the Nature of Work

Industrialisation started in England in the late 1800s and led to a revolution in how, where and when work was performed. Industrial machinery was bulky and expensive and needed to be housed in purpose-built factories, with large numbers of generally low-skilled labourers necessary to operate the machines (Bauman, 2000a). In the factories, workers sold their labour (with the stipulation that they be physically present in a certain location within a fixed timeframe) and not the products of their work. The work was to be done with tools owned by the employer. As a result, "on the factory floor all differences in degree of craftsmanship, diligence and creative zeal were flattened out" (Bauman, 1972, p. 12). Similar to the workers in Fritz Lang's 1927 movie *Metropolis*, workers were considered as nothing more than replaceable parts of a machine.

During the industrial age, it was generally assumed that workers were lazy and not willing to work if not forced and supervised. Even though the panopticon had originally been created as a model for an ideal prison, it also served as a model for the industrial workplace (Bauman, 1988), and the manager had power over the when (time) and the where (location) a worker performed his work (Bauman, 2000a). In postmodern times, people still work in factories or factory-style settings, with companies like Foxconn (China), Walmart and Amazon (United States of America) among the biggest employers in the world, employing both labourers and clerical workers (Statista, 2023).

Although the postmodern clerical workplace may look different from the factory, and with long-term work replaced by short-term thinking and general insecurity, there are still many similarities between traditional factory work and postmodern office work. For one, many employers still force their employees to work in large open-plan, factory-style offices. They need to be physically present

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[31] Depending on the country—such as Russia, but also in other countries—agricultural workers may have been free or unfree (i.e., regarded as a part of the property they worked on). In this thesis, I focus on work in Western Europe.

in a certain location during a fixed timeframe that is not of the worker's choosing. Furthermore, many employees in clerical workplaces do not have agency over their time, neither in terms of their workday nor in terms of planning their holidays (Schultz & Hoffman, 2006), and the tools to do their work are owned by their employers. Finally, panoptical surveillance is still being used in workplace settings, even though the surveillance is generally undertaken by advanced technology such as cameras and tracking software, and is especially prevalent in the United States (Stark et al., 2020; Vitak & Zimmer, 2023). Workers are not trusted to engage in work without supervision. The fear of the apparently lazy, masterless worker is still as present in postmodern society as it was during the industrial age. These are all issues that Bauman does not seem to have considered in his works about the postmodern workplace.

The Digital Nomad Lifestyle—Blurring the Boundaries

In many respects, the digital nomad lifestyle has advanced beyond the industrial and postmodern workplace, but also returned to something that could be compared to the pre-industrial way of working and thinking about work, similar to Sennet's (2008) traditional craftsmen (or craftspersons). For instance, some digital nomads have chosen to explicitly reject some of the most iconic remnants of industrial society by consciously deciding to schedule their day based on their personal wellbeing. They decided to **live by their body clock**, and not to base their life on an arbitrary nine-to-five division of time set by their employers (see Figure 7.1). This, of course, depends on the kind of work that the individual chose to engage in. Those digital nomads who are not freelancers or self-employed but work as remote employees may indeed be tied to certain work hours[32]. But even those who directly engaged with their clients via video conferencing, for instance, pointed out that they chose the time frames in which their clients could book their services. So, even under these circumstances, the digital nomads had the last say about their work hours.

As to **workspaces**, digital nomads work in a place of their choosing instead of commuting to a workplace selected by the employer, which after all, may result in many hours of unpaid work per week. The workspaces used depend on personal preferences and the nature of work that needs to be done, and can be anywhere from one's bed to a commercial coworking or coliving space. Of course, it could be argued that the same also applies to regular (i.e., sedentary) freelancers or business owners. The difference between 'regular' self-employment / freelancing and digital nomadism is the aspect of mobility: digital nomads combine work and mobility, and their workspace could be anywhere in the world (see Table 7.1)[33].

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[32] Note that none of the participants in this research project were remote employees.

[33] As has been pointed out before, there is as yet no generally accepted definition of a digital nomad. As such it should be noted that there are no clear boundaries between the concept of a sedentary freelancer who enjoys travelling and a digital nomad who may choose to live at a permanent address. See also Cook (2023) for a discussion about how much one has to travel in order to deserve the title 'digital nomad'.

From a purely infrastructure-related viewpoint, computer-based work can be done anytime and anywhere if power, internet and the necessary software to do one's work are available. This also implies that it shouldn't be necessary to force clerical workers to long commutes to the inner-city open-plan office and work on nine-to-five schedules. Research has shown that employers tend to argue that "culture, collaboration, and innovation" (Gibson et al.2023, p. 10) can only thrive when workers are present in the company office. However, there is ample proof that clerical workers are also efficient when working elsewhere (Baudot & Kelly, 2020; George et al., 2022).

Many digital nomads have also abolished the strict division between **work and leisure**, which was another cornerstone of industrial society. This blurring of boundaries between work and leisure has also been observed by Orel (2019), Reichenberger (2018) and Mouratidis (2018). After all, the strict division between these different aspects of life was only necessary due to the immobile heavy industrial machinery that demanded workers be at a certain location at a certain time. The participants of this research have also experienced the consequences of work blurring into leisure and leisure blurring into work, and Cook (2020) has found that this blurring of boundaries may very well be at the expense of leisure. The participants of this research have reflected on this, with some gladly accepting the fluidity of this situation, and others choosing to rise up to the challenge, for instance by choosing to primarily not work from their temporary home.

The blurring of boundaries also has consequences when it comes to **home and travel**. There is certainly a shift from a sedentary home that is defined by the location of important family members to the possibility of several home bases in different places around the world that may gain or lose in importance depending on one's social needs. In this respect, it is not necessarily geoarbitrage (the race for the most affordable sunny location on the planet) that motivates digital nomads to establish new home bases, but more so the need to find meaningful connections, which is especially important for the many digital nomads that don't travel with a partner or a family (Mouratidis, 2018).

### The Digital Nomad as Postmodern Craftsperson

Digital nomads could arguably be considered as among the first truly postmodern clerical workers, or perhaps, among the first late postmodern clerical workers. Their holistic and fluid outlook on work, leisure, home and travel is progressing beyond the status quo of the postmodern clerical workplace and at the same time reconnecting in some respects with the craftsman (craftsperson) tradition that has characterised skilled work for thousands of years.

Looking forward into late postmodernity, the COVID-19 pandemic changed beliefs regarding the perfect location of the clerical workplace that had previously been taken for granted, as government restrictions forced millions of people around the world to work from home as remote workers, or Level 0 digital nomads (Reichenberger, 2018) for almost two years. At the same time,

children received online schooling and students studied at universities online, with many universities continuing to offer remote education even after the pandemic. Over the pandemic years, the current and future generation of clerical workers have had ample time to learn what it means to work remotely, often also outside the constrains of nine-to-five schedules, and to individually decide if this style of managing workspaces and work hours agrees with their lifestyle choices.

Figure 7.1

The Digital Nomad Lifestyle in Comparison to Regular Office Work
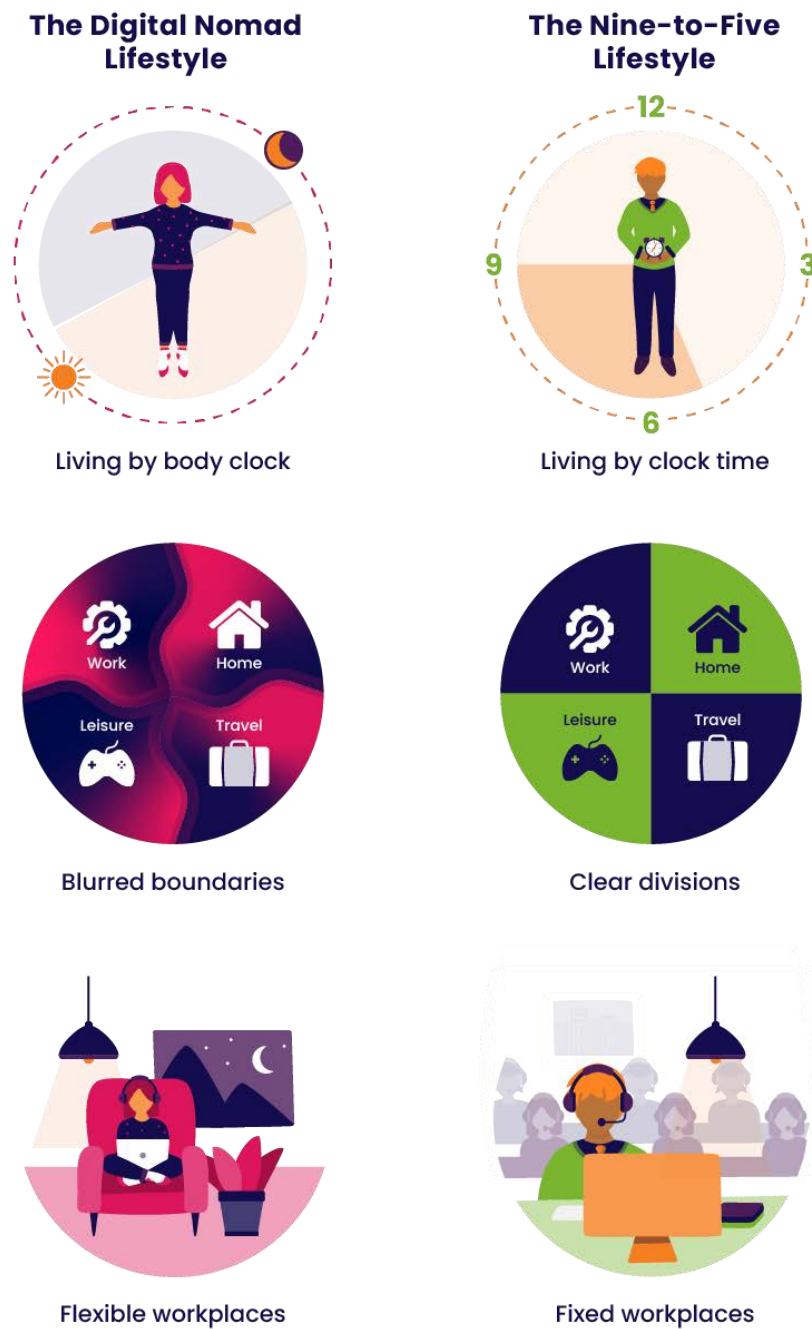
Thus, it should not come as a surprise if many of those who have been trained in, and successfully engaged in, online remote work, and who have experienced the downsides as well as the benefits, will expect employment that is tailored towards their needs. Employment arrangements could include flexible workplaces, remote work and work hours based on each employee's body clock. More traditional office workers and independent professionals may have started to consider taking up the digital nomad lifestyle (de Almeida et al., 2021). However, this does not necessarily suggest that all future remote workers will find international travel as important as the participants in my study. But it is clear that being able to choose one's work hours and one's workplace (or workplaces) will grow in importance for clerical workers in the years to come, given that they have now first-hand experience to draw on.

Finally, the question remains if another defining aspect of industrial society, panoptical surveillance in the workplace, will gain or lose importance. This kind of surveillance has become ever easier to carry out. There is an increasing number of surveillance hardware and software that can track sedentary workers in a company office in Sydney, Australia, just as well as their remote colleagues working in a café in Chiang Mai. This kind of technology allows panoptical surveillance of individual workers in a way that factory owners at the height of the industrial age would have never dared to dream of.

Limitations of This Research and Suggestions for Further Research

Freedom and privilege have played a major role in this research; and as I have pointed out throughout this thesis, many of those who have decided to take up the digital nomad lifestyle are in a position to take advantage of the global divide between the developed and the developing world, if they choose to do so. One aspect of this is geoarbitrage (Mancinelli, 2020) which is also popular with primarily Western (Hayes, 2018) but also Japanese (Ono, 2008) retirement migrants who live in developing countries to take advantage of the lower cost of living expenses in these countries. Some of the participants in this research may not be sensitised to the potential negative consequences of foreigners living on a Western wage in developing countries. However, this is certainly not the case for those of my participants who originated in developing countries themselves (such as Brazil and the Philippines), or who had a partner who originated in a developing country (see Chapter 5).

Researchers such as Mancinelli (2020) and Thompson (2019a, 2021) have already examined this lifestyle from a critical perspective, pointing out inequalities between digital nomads and the sedentary local population in certain countries. The potential negative impact of digital nomads on local communities in developing countries has been discussed by Bahri and Widhyharto (2021) and by McElroy (2019) already. Life in the digital nomad 'bubble' was examined by Chevtaeva (2021).

This research, however, intentionally focused on trying to explain the digital nomad lifestyle as a type of mobility in the liquid modern world. As such, I did not examine, for instance, the social or economic impact on local communities in preferred digital nomad destinations such as Chiang Mai. While this could be seen as a limitation of this research, it is also a strength, as I have concentrated on how digital nomads see their own life in terms of work, freedom and home before and during an exceptional period in the 21st century: the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach allowed me to examine how digital nomads reflected upon and engaged with significant interruptions to their way of living. To focus on geoarbitrage or other types of sociological inequalities for local communities would have taken away from this unique opportunity. However, it is worth recognising that this is indeed something that may deserve further study.

Another limitation to this research is that the participants in this study were people who lived the digital nomad lifestyle and who travelled to Thailand in 2019. This unintentionally excluded potential interviewees with passports that were not eligible for a tourist visa for Thailand.

In terms of other potential research opportunities, future investigators might want to examine more in-depth the difficulties that people from countries with less powerful passports face when taking up the digital nomad lifestyle. In this study, for instance, Sarah from the Philippines had severely limited travel choices. In addition to this, Haking's study (2017) included a participant from Colombia who indicated that she felt safer outside than inside her home country. Therefore, people with less powerful passports may be able to give new and different insights into this lifestyle.

Furthermore, this research has focused on 'successful' digital nomads who managed to generate an income over a longer period. Future investigators might want to discuss the expectations of people who have just adopted the digital nomad lifestyle, with repeat interviews after a certain time to examine success and failure experiences.

Finally, future investigators might want to examine the impact of generative artificial intelligence on digital work. As tools like ChatGPT, for instance, can create computer code as well as other written outputs within seconds, it is still unclear if this will impact remote work in a positive or in a negative way.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this research contributes to the current body of knowledge by providing unique insights into the digital nomad lifestyle at a time when global mobility was put to a halt. In 2020 and 2021, two pillars of the digital nomad lifestyle—to travel when and where one wants to, and to work at a freely chosen workspace—had become almost impossible. This period provided a unique sandbox to discuss issues around work, freedom and home, when privileges that were previously taken for granted had been revoked for an unspecified time.

     This study shows that even in these difficult times, in which the financial security of the research participants was even less certain than outside of pandemic times, the location-independent online workers, also known as digital nomads, decided not to give up this lifestyle. At a time when actual travel was replaced by dreaming about future journeys, digital nomads were still in a position to decide when they wanted to work and what kind of work they wanted to do. They made clear that they had no desire to return to the constraints of traditional employment structures, and they felt rewarded for doing good work for its own sake, which they had not experienced as employees. This points to the conclusion that finding fulfilment through masterless, paid work (see Bauman 2004) that allows them to put aspects of mental health first may have a higher value for a digital nomad than the privilege to travel around the world. It can also be concluded that the digital nomad lifestyle will certainly grow in popularity in the near future (see MBO Partners, 2023) and that employers cannot ask flexibility of their employees (Bauman, 2004) if they are not becoming more flexible themselves in terms of workspaces and work hours.

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Appendix A

Interview Schedules

Interview Schedule 2019: Digital Nomad Interviewees

Nationality on Passport(s):

Age:

Gender:

Been a digital nomad since:

Place visited before coming to Chiang Mai:

Lived in Chiang Mai since:

Expecting to be in Chiang Mai until:

Internal and External Structures

Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?

What is the main reason you became a digital nomad and was there a particular moment that helped you make that decision to go?

Do you think your passport from [country] has made it easier or harder for you to live as a digital nomad in Thailand? Why / Why not?

How important do you think it is to be fluent in English to live this lifestyle?

Do you think it makes a difference in Thailand that you are (male / female / transgender etc.)? Please explain why.

Have you ever decided not to go to a certain city or country because you heard that the internet connection is bad?

What does freedom mean to you? Have you already seen a change in yourself since you have become a digital nomad?

What does home mean to you?

Are you still in contact with your family back home? If so, how?

The Workplace / Photovoice

Did you bring an image of the place where you currently work with you?

Is this your typical workplace—do you always work in a *(hotel, cafe, coworking space)*?

If not, what makes this one different?

What is a typical day for you like? *(NB: make sure to find out numbers of hours worked)*

How do you find work?

How does your life now compare with what you did at home?

What sort of work–life balance do you have at the moment? Is this something you were looking for when you become a digital nomad?

Communities of Practice

When and how did you first hear about the digital nomad lifestyle?

How important are online forums or specific websites for you as a digital nomad?

How did you find out about Chiang Mai, and what made you decide to come here?

How do you generally meet new people when you move to a new place and is this something that is important for you?

How important are coworking spaces for you? If so, how often do you use them?

What is the most important thing about a coworking space for you?

The Future

Where are you planning to go next? When?

How long do think will you live and travel as a digital nomad?

Do you already have any plans for life after that?

Have you been to Berlin already or are you planning to go there anytime soon? If yes, why?

What would you recommend to someone who is planning to start life as a digital nomad?

Interview Schedule 2019: Coworking Space Interviewees (Coworking Hosts)

About Coworking Spaces and Their Customers

What is the most important thing about a coworking space for you?

(this question will also be asked to digital nomads)

What makes your coworking space special?

How long has your coworking space been operating?

How many customers do you generally have per week?

When is your busiest time during the year? And at the moment during the day?

How many of your customers are digital nomads?

Of the digital nomads you see, which nationalities do you see mostly? *(Only if Thai people are not mentioned:)* Do you also see digital nomads from Thailand?

Among the digital nomads, would you say you see more men than women?

Are digital nomads different from tourists? How?

How would you evaluate the behaviour of the digital nomads, towards other nomads and towards the staff here at the coworking space?

Has anything happened with regards to digital nomads that has really surprised you?

How do you see the future for digital nomads here in Chiang Mai?

Questions That Mirror the Digital Nomad Questionnaire

Have you been a digital nomad yourself? If so, please tell me about it.

Only if former digital nomad:

How have you found out about Chiang Mai, and what made you decide to come here?

What is the main reason why people become digital nomads?

Why do you think digital nomads come to Chiang Mai?

Do you think it makes a difference here in Thailand if digital nomads are male, female or transgender?

What would you recommend to someone who is planning to start life as a digital nomad?

Interview Schedule 2020 (Digital Nomads Only)

Past

1. Did you go back to [insert home country here] when countries start to close their borders earlier this

year?

a) If yes: What challenges did you did you face when you arrived in your home country? Did you stay with your parents? (No matter if stayed with parents or not) What was it like?

b) If no: Where did you go instead and why? What challenges did you face when you stayed in [country x]?

2. How has your business coped over the last couple of months? Was it easy for you to adjust? Have you found new income sources?

3. What is the biggest lesson you have learned in the last couple of months?

4. In the last couple of months, have you ever thought about giving up digital nomadism, perhaps thinking about going back to a full-time eight-to-five job? From a business perspective, do you still see an advantage in being a digital nomad?

5. In case travel restrictions are not in place any more at the time of the interview: Where did you go first after the travel restrictions relaxed? Why? How did it feel?

Present

6. How do you feel about home now? Does 'home' have a different meaning for you now, after what happened in the last couple of months? If so, what has changed for you?

7. What does freedom mean to you now, in light of the travel restrictions of the last couple of months?

8. Only if interviewee has a partner: Is your partner still (not) travelling with you? Or has this changed because of the recent events?

[NB: Some digital nomads (DNs) have partners who travel with them, others have sedentary partners.]

Future

9. What impact do you think will the COVID-19 pandemic have on online work in general?

10. What impact will the COVID-19 pandemic have on people that are thinking about becoming digital nomads?

11. In case travel restrictions are still in place at the time of the interview: Have you already thought about which places you would like to visit next? Why? What will it feel like when you are able to travel again?

12. Based on your experiences over the last couple of months, are there any countries that you would definitely like to visit - or perhaps not visit any time soon?

13. Do you think that digital nomads will think differently about location independence now? Please explain.

14. How do you think COVID-19 might have changed typical digital nomad destinations such as Thailand or Bali? Do you think the people there might be less inviting to tourists in future?

Finishing on a positive note …

15. People generally don't have a lot of good things to say about the pandemic. Has something happened to you that has surprised you in a positive way?

Appendix B
Information Sheet and Consent Form

Information Sheet 2019

JAMES COOK
UNIVERSITY
AUSTRALIA

INFORMATION SHEET

PROJECT TITLE: " **Digital Nomads** "

You are invited to take part in a research project about how digital nomads live and work.

The study is being conducted by **Bianca de Loryn** and will contribute to the **degree** in **PhD in Sociology** at James Cook University.

If you agree to be involved in the study, you will be invited to be interviewed about how you live and work as a digital nomad.

The interview, with your consent, will be audio recorded, and should only take approximately 1 hour of your time.

The interview will be conducted at a venue of your choice.

Taking part in this study is completely voluntary and you can stop taking part in the study at any time without explanation or prejudice.

If you know of others that might be interested in this study, can you please pass on this information sheet to them so they may contact me to volunteer for the study.

Your responses will be anonymised and your contact details will be kept confidential. The data from the study will be used in my PhD thesis, and may be used in articles for scientific journals and a non-fiction book about digital nomads. You will not be identified in any way in these publications.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact me at **bianca.deloryn@my.jcu.edu.au**

Principal Investigator:
Bianca de Loryn
College: College of Arts, Society and Education
James Cook University

Email: bianca.deloryn@my.jcu.edu.au

Supervisor:
Name: Nick Osbaldiston
College: College of Arts, Society and Education
James Cook University (or other institution)
Phone:
Email: nick.osbaldiston@jcu.edu.au

If you have any concerns regarding the ethical conduct of the study, please contact:
Human Ethics, Research Office
James Cook University, Townsville, Qld, 4811
Phone: (07) 4781 5011 (ethics@jcu.edu.au)

Cairns - Townsville - Brisbane – Singapore
CRICOS Provider Code 00117J

Informed Consent Form 2019

This administrative form
has been removed

Information Sheet 2020

INFORMATION SHEET

PROJECT TITLE: "Digital Nomads"

You are invited to take part in a research project about how digital nomads live and work.

The study is being conducted by Bianca de Loryn and will contribute to the degree of PhD in Sociology at James Cook University. The study is also being supervised by Dr Nick Osbaldiston and Dr Anna Hayes from James Cook University.

If you agree to be involved in the study, you will be invited to be interviewed about how you live and work as a digital nomad. This interview will be a follow up to the Chiang Mai interview in 2019.

The aim of the study is to understand further some of the motivations for living the digital nomadic lifestyle and also some of the benefits/challenges associated with it during the COivd-19 pandemic. The interview, with your consent, will be audio recorded, and should only take approximately 1 hour of your time.

If you agree to participate in this interview, we will arrange a time and place at your convenience.

Taking part in this study is completely voluntary and you can stop taking part in the study at any time without explanation or prejudice.

If you are in Australia and would like to discuss everything with a qualified expert after our interview, please feel free to contact the following free counselling services:

> Beyond Blue (1300 22 4636)
> Lifeline (13 11 14)
> Mensline (1300 78 99 78)
>
> For people who cannot access Australian phone numbers or who prefer to use online services, MindSpot is a free digital mental health service: https://mindspot.org.au/coronavirus

If you know of others that might be interested in this study, please feel free to pass this information sheet on to them, or to others who might know people who could be interested in participating.

Your responses and contact details will be strictly confidential and anonymised. The data from the study will be used in my PhD thesis, as well as in articles for scientific journals. I might also use the data for a book about digital nomads. You will not be identified in any way in these publications.

If you have any questions or concerns about the study you can contact myself or my supervisor on the below contact numbers.

Principal Investigator:	**Supervisor:**
Bianca de Loryn	**Name: Dr Nick Osbaldiston**
College: College of Arts, Society and Education	**College: College of Arts, Society and Education**
James Cook University	**James Cook University (or other institution)**
	Phone:
Email: bianca.deloryn@my.jcu.edu.au	**Email: nick.osbaldiston@jcu.edu.au**

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Informed Consent Form 2020

This administrative form
has been removed