

Digital nomading as identity work: Career change shapes what they love about work and life



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Orientation: Leaders must understand how to manage digital nomads in their companies.

Research purpose: This study aimed to explore how digital nomads' experiences shape their understanding of their work and life during the transitional career process.

Motivation for the study: Little research explores why individuals become digital nomads and what they find important in their life and work.

Research approach/design and method: This study employed the concept of working identity and used the open-ended approach of grounded theory. The snowball sampling method was used to recruit the participants, and data were collected using semi-structured interviews with 28 digital nomads.

Main findings: The authors identified five stages related to how digital nomads' experiences shape their views on what matters most to them in work and life: (1) rebelling against established work norms, (2) experimenting with ways of working and living, (3) crystallising personal work and life values, (4) living new work and life scripts and (5) rebelling against a nomadic lifestyle.

Practical/managerial implications: This study provides useful findings for managers who are working in business strategy and policy settings and are seeking to recruit digital nomads. Career counsellors could also use this study's findings to help individuals develop realistic expectations about the lifestyle and careers of digital nomads.

Contribution/value-add: This study builds an understanding of nomadic experiences from a career exploration perspective and offers recommendations for future research on the role of luck in digital career paths and career decisions.

Keywords: digital nomads; working identity; new ways of working; career change; lifestyle.

Introduction

In recent years, a new segment of workers, classified as digital nomads, has emerged (Hall et al., 2019; Hannonen, 2020). These workers have adopted a new way of working that involves doing digital work while simultaneously travelling for their own enjoyment (Nash et al., 2021). A nomadic lifestyle offers possibilities for an attractive work–life balance and combining work with leisure (Reichenberger, 2018; Willment, 2020). The definition of digital nomads in research has been ambivalent; some scholars apply the definition based on the nature of the nomads' work (Nash et al., 2018), and others divide nomads based on their degree of international travel (Hall et al., 2019). Most agree, however, that a digital nomad is someone who has escaped from the traditional location-dependent way of working by using technologies to do their work digitally (Erickson, 2017). Digital nomads are unified in their motivation for freedom, which usually leads them to live a nomadic lifestyle. This is expressed in their sense of adventure and their desire to live and work from anywhere in the world and to escape the 9 to 5 office life and its limited flexibility (Jacobs & Gussekloo, 2016).

Interestingly, while digital nomads changed their careers to create a better work–life balance, research demonstrates that they often face a work–life imbalance while being a digital nomad, as lines between free time and work become blurred (Hensellek & Puchala, 2021; Thompson, 2018). According to Reichenberger (2018), travelling loses its leisurely aspect for digital nomads, as they bring unpleasant work tasks with them while travelling. Research has also shown that digital nomads face downward mobility in financial status, as they often cannot count on having a full-time salary (Thompson, 2018).

While we know a great deal about the ideal life of a digital nomad and the downsides of that life, we know much less about what makes digital nomads adopt this lifestyle and how it consequently shapes their views on what they find important in their life and their work. To address this gap, Ibarra's (2002, 2004) concept of working identity was used to view digital nomad experiences as transitional career experiences. As digital nomads' private lives and careers seem to be intertwined and therefore difficult to see as dichotomous aspects of digital nomadism, it is important to take both into account (Reichenberger, 2018). Therefore, this study addressed the following question:

How do digital nomads use their career change experience to better understand what they love about their work and life?

This study aimed to answer this research question by drawing on a sample of 28 individuals who transitioned from having conventional careers to being digital nomads. By doing so, this study makes two important contributions to the literature on the careers of digital nomads. Firstly, it extends the literature by illustrating that career changes from traditional careers to digital nomadism are not the end of a career journey. Individuals continue searching for their ideal life and work styles even after the transition to becoming a digital nomad. Secondly, this article contributes to the literature suggesting that individuals' images and fantasies about who they want to become are key to career changes (Ibarra, 2002). The authors elaborate more on the stages of digital nomads' career changes and how these stages shape their views on what digital nomads consider important in their life and career. This study is also useful from a practical perspective, as it provides relevant knowledge that can be used by businesses in creating a company culture that aligns with the norms and values of digital nomads. In the context of career coaching, this study provides insights for career counsellors to help individuals gain realistic expectations about the lifestyle and career of a digital nomad before they take actual steps to become one.

Literature review

Definition of digital nomads

The definition of digital nomads offered in the literature seems to vary depending on the perspective of the research. As travel is a significant part of the digital nomadic lifestyle, most of the academic literature comes from the field of tourism (Hall et al., 2019). In this study, digital nomads have been classified as regular tourists or business travellers and remote workers who are at the crossroads of global adventure travel and nomadic work (Nash et al., 2018). Using the flexible work arrangement dimensions identified by Spreitzer et al. (2017), digital nomads are considered to have flexible work times and to be independent of any particular location. They are usually young, single and highly educated professionals originating from wealthy, industrialised nations, with mainly Information and Communications Technology (ICT)-related professions that allow them to conduct their work digitally and remotely (Reichenberger, 2018). Digital nomads envision

a lifestyle where leisure and work are not dichotomous but part of a holistic lifestyle. For example, after each workday, they grab their surfboard and catch some waves for the rest of the day (Thompson, 2018). One of the main motivators for adapting the nomadic lifestyle is escaping the structures of a traditional work style and gaining personal and professional freedom (Reichenberger, 2018).

A career change to digital nomadism: A working identity perspective

The change to a digital nomadic lifestyle can be drastic, not only in terms of an individual's way of living but also in terms of their career or field of work (Nash et al., 2018). At some point in their career, many people start to question whether what they are doing is good for them or whether they should change directions.

Successfully changing careers does not happen in an instant and can seem like a chance occurrence, but there are recognisable patterns among those who do so (Ibarra, 2004). Before leaving the old, familiar career behind, individuals test the waters in the potential new career. Ibarra (2002) described some unconventional ways in which individuals have successfully changed their careers. As digital nomadism can be considered quite unconventional, this theory is the most suitable for understanding how individuals adjust to the nomadic lifestyle and career.

According to Ibarra (2004), our identities are so attached to our work and what we do that changing careers means changing one's identity. It is argued that one's identity consists not of oneself or one's 'inner core', as traditional theories suggest, but of many selves. These possible selves are defined not only by our present activities and our relations with others but also by our hopes and fears regarding the future. Instead of psychological pain as a driver for change, it is argued that a prerequisite for transitioning to a new career is having an alternative identity within reach. Only then can we successfully take the step towards the career that fits our identity by reconfiguring our set of many selves (Ibarra, 2004).

Ibarra (2002) suggested that there are three steps to a successful career change. The change starts from an internal motivation to change and to 'reinvent oneself'. Then, experiments are conducted to test the possible selves that have been neglected in one's old career. Next, there is a need to change networks because one's old network is often invested in staying the same and thus does not often provide much support for change. Shifting connections towards one's desired future career provides not only job leads but also connections with people who can help one see and grow into one's new self. This situation is described as 'between identities'. Finally, Ibarra (2002) observed that by making sense of a sometimes radical and seemingly irrational change, people who have successfully changed careers internalise their life events with meaning, weaving them into a coherent story about who they have become. This process leads to

'deep change' and our competencies, motivations, values and, ultimately, assumptions change. This last component often includes implicit notions about how the world works and what is desirable and possible in our lives.

Woldoff and Litchfield (2021) argued that the digital nomadic lifestyle can be a challenging way of living and constitutes a rather unconventional change. Therefore, to gain a better understanding of how digital nomads use their career change experience to better understand what they love about their work and life, we used the working identity perspective by Ibarra (2002, 2004).

Research method

This section provides a detailed description of the research procedure and methods. It explains how participants were recruited, how the data were collected and how the results were analysed.

Research participants and sampling methods

This research was conducted in Bali, Indonesia and in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. The researcher recruited participants with the help of a research assistant. Snowball sampling was used to recruit the participants. The researcher and research assistant asked participants who were included in the study to nominate other digital nomads who met the participation criteria. The researcher stayed in Bali for a week and went to one coworking space to meet the digital nomads

in person. The research assistant stayed in Amsterdam and approached participants in person and on social media using digital nomadic platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Nomadlist.

This study primarily focused on second- and third-level digital nomads as identified by Reichenberger (2018) and recruited participants based on the criteria of the two levels. Second-level digital nomadism emphasises mobility (i.e. not consistently working in one office space), as this includes the possibility of simultaneously working and travelling. Third-level digital nomadism extends this possibility to include continual full-time travel with no permanent residency. Participants were regarded as digital nomads if they pursued a lifestyle in which they could work anywhere and intended to use this freedom to travel internationally.

The final sample consisted of 28 digital nomads originating from Western industrialised countries. Table 1 provides an overview of the demographic characteristics of the participants, including their gender, nationality, marital status, years of experience as a traditional worker, number of years as a digital nomad and the previous job of the digital nomads. Our sample is in line with the characteristics of digital nomads discussed in the literature. Digital nomads are portrayed in the literature as young single well-educated professionals, with an average income as the majority in Western countries. They live their digital nomadic life in low-cost counties (Chevtava & Denizci-Guillet, 2021; Reichenberger, 2018; Thompson, 2018).

TABLE 1: Demographic characteristics of the participants.

Respondents	Gender	Country of origin	Current location	Years as digital nomads	Age	Marital status	Previous job
1	Female	United States	Malaysia	2.5	29	Single	Event service company
2	Male	United Kingdom	Koh Phangan, Thailand	2.0	36	Single	Web developer
3	Male	Australia	Chiang Mai, Thailand	3.0	37	Married	Copy writer
4	Female	United Kingdom	Bali, Indonesia	0.5	28	Single	Editor
5	Male	Slovakia	Prague	3.0	25	Single	Programmer
6	Male	Netherlands	Singapore	9.0	39	Single	Accountant
7	Male	United States	Bali, Indonesia	4.0	36	Single	Marketing
8	Male	United Kingdom	Bali, Indonesia	2.0	36	Single	Marketing Software
9	Female	Netherlands	Lisbon	1.5	30	Single	Copy Writer
10	Male	Australia	Bali, Indonesia	1.5	29	Single	Software Developer
11	Male	United States	Lisbon	2.5	36	Single	Software Developer
12	Male	Italy	Bali, Indonesia	5.0	39	Single	Programmer
13	Male	United Kingdom	Amsterdam, Netherlands	1.0	35	Single	Programmer
14	Female	India	Thailand	0.5	25	Single	Marketing
15	Male	London	Bali, Indonesia	2.0	27	Single	Marketing
16	Male	United States	Bali, Indonesia	2.5	29	Single	Software Developer
17	Female	Netherlands	Bali and Australia	3.0	25	Single	Dolphin Trainer
18	Male	Bulgaria	Bali, Indonesia	0.5	38	Single	Software Consultant
19	Male	Nigeria	Bali, Indonesia	0.8	34	Single	Web Developer
20	Male	United Kingdom	Bali, Indonesia	1.0	34	Single	Sales & Marketing
21	Female	United Kingdom	Bali, Indonesia	0.5	29	Single	Financial & Investment Consultant
22	Male	France	Bali, Indonesia	4.0	28	Single	Interior Designer
23	Male	Israel	Bali, Indonesia	1.5	31	Single	Sales
24	Female	France	Bali, Indonesia	1.0	30	Single	Marketing
25	Female	United Kingdom	Bali, Indonesia	2.0	29	Single	Programmer
26	Male	Germany	Bali, Indonesia	1.5	34	Single	Web Developer
27	Female	United Kingdom	Bali, Indonesia	2.0	29	Single	Sales
28	Male	Australia	Bali, Indonesia	3.0	30	Single	Online Sales

Data collection methods

Semi-structured interviews that lasted approximately one hour were used to collect data. The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions and follow-up questions (Kallio et al., 2016). The authors interviewed digital nomads, who have undergone the change and are able to reflect on it retrospectively. During the interviews, the authors asked them to describe how different experiences (actions) helped them to realise what they really like about work and life. This realisation can be only offered once the transition has been completed or is at its final stage.

Several measures were taken to ensure the credibility of the data. Firstly, interviewees were assured that their input would remain confidential; this is why the coded names of participants are used in the article. Interviews were recorded and conducted in person, over the phone or through video conferencing (e.g. Skype, WhatsApp video calling, Facebook video chatting) to take cues from non-verbal communication into consideration. However, when the internet connection did not work properly (e.g. when the Wi-Fi connection was unstable), the conversation continued as audio only, but this occurred in only two interviews. Secondly, participants were given the option to end the interview at any time.

Data analysis

The authors familiarised themselves with the data first and then iteratively analysed the qualitative data by reading and re-reading the transcripts to identify themes regarding how digital nomads discover what they love about their work and life (Locke, 2001; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). It is important to note that the authors looked at their data and analysed it in terms of transition stages in line with Ibarra's (2004) theory. The research assistant worked on 13 transcripts manually. The main author used Konch software to transcribe 15 interviews. The analyses were performed in discussion with all authors of this article for all the following three steps.

The following three steps to analyse qualitative data, in line with Pratt et al. (2006) were followed:

Step 1: Create provisional categories and first-order codes. Open coding was utilised to identify interviewees' relevant statements (Locke, 2001), including statements about how the digital nomads had adapted their views about their lives and careers because they decided to leave their conventional career to become a digital nomad. Then, codes were created to categorise all statements. These codes were repeatedly compared to identify newly emerging and overlapping codes to (re)form core codes. For example, there were several statements that seemed to fit in many codes: 'I was changing between jobs' seemed to fit under the codes of 'exploring possibilities', 'engaging with nomadic experiences' and 'understanding work and life preferences'. Then, it was analysed whether there was a sequential order between the codes to continue with this order in the next analyses steps.

Step 2: Integrate first-order codes and create theoretical categories. The authors then moved from open to axial coding by creating categories that are more abstract (Locke, 2001; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). To illustrate, the category 'escaping traditional ways of working' was used to categorise statements that relate to escaping the conventional ways of working, such as 9 to 5 office work.

Step 3: Aggregate theoretical dimensions by merging theoretical categories. Finally, it was discussed how different theoretical categories were connected to one another and we brainstormed how they could be merged with certain themes (Locke, 2001). To create the final themes, the authors were inspired by Ibarra's (2004) theory. This resulted in five main themes, which also identified as stages in the transitional career process. Figure 1 provides an overview of how the data were coded.

After completing all three steps, the data structure (see Figure 1) was organised in a template as suggested by Gioia et al. (2013).

Ethical considerations

Approval to conduct the study was granted by the Board of Ethics Committee of School of Business and Economics, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Written informed consent is not required for this study, and it is in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all individual participants involved in the study, and it is in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

Results

Perception: Rebellious against established working norms

Escaping traditional ways of working

The first step in transitioning to a digital nomadic lifestyle was usually preceded by a desire to escape traditional ways of working. Participants felt that '9 to 5' working hours did not resonate with them. This was sometimes accompanied by the frustration of having the same routine every day:

'I had to work in this corporate job for seven years, and you know it is just the same routine, the same things you know. Monday to Friday, 9 to 5, seeing the same people over and over, and in the States, [it] is very hard.' (R16, 29 years, United States)

The need to escape traditional ways of working also originated from routine work, which limited participants' creativity, although they were enjoying their work. One respondent, who is passionate about her job as a dolphin trainer, mentioned the following:

'So, since I was 16, I started studying animal behaviour, and I really focused on that. And when I was 21, I got offered my dream job as a dolphin trainer, which was amazing for me. But when I was actually doing the job, I was living in the Dominican Republic, and

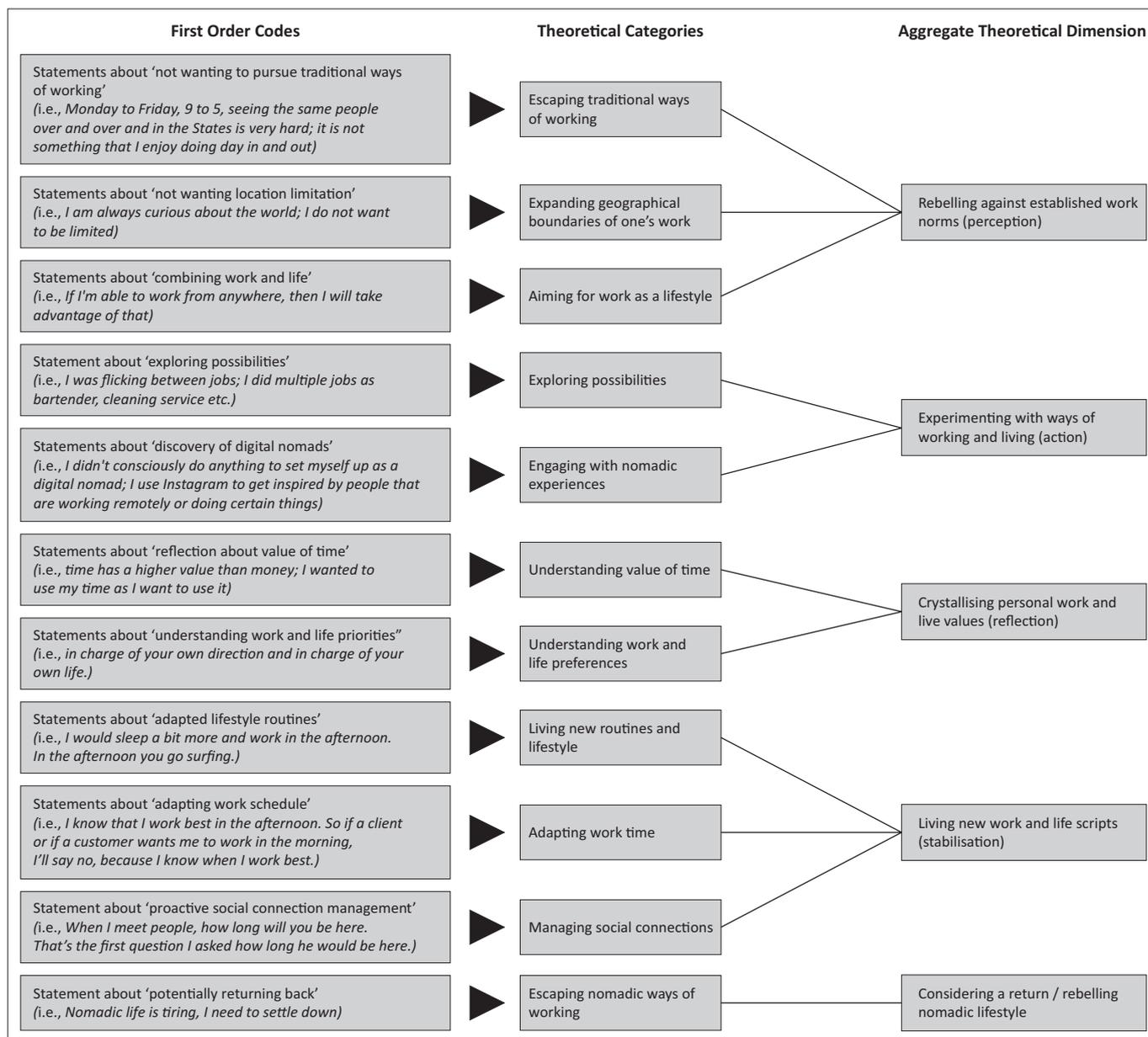


FIGURE 1: Overview Data Analysis.

I realised that I really love the dolphins and they're my passion. But I still miss other things in the work. So, for example, I'm very creative. And I couldn't really express my creativity in a routine work environment.' (R17, 25 years, Netherlands)

Thus, in sum, participants found that traditional ways of working created frustration and limited their opportunities to be creative.

Expanding the geographical boundaries of one's work

It was found that the transition towards digital nomadism started with a desire for new experiences and cultures. Participants indicated that they were frequently exposed to travel experiences and enjoyed moving from one place to another:

'I think I've always been someone who moved around quite a lot. I like to change things, move as often as possible, kind of see new places, new experiences.' (R2, 26 years, Thailand)

In a similar vein, one respondent, who moved from Europe to Asia as a digital nomad, mentioned that he is enjoying moving to different places because it allows him to experience new cultures and to try to conquer what other people are afraid of:

'So, really, I had this need to discover a new culture. I never felt like I needed to stay in France. And I had a traditional life and a house. I wanted to see more. And now I am in Bali. But tomorrow, I can be in Thailand or anywhere else in the world trying to discover something that most people are too afraid of discovering.' (R22, 31 years, France)

Participants observed that having the freedom to live anywhere in the world is an asset to their career and that they know this is aligned with their 'free spirit':

'I want to be free so that I can create things. I'm really into entrepreneurship or business. You know, I don't want to be limited to where I live.' (R23, 31 years, Israel)

In sum, living in multiple places helped fulfill participants' 'free spirit' and fed their curiosity about the world in which they live.

Aiming to make work a lifestyle

Our participants also mentioned having the desire to combine work and travel; thus, their work had to become their lifestyle:

'I wanted to travel, and I wanted to work, but then I also wanted to save money as well, and a lot of people do not have the option to do all these things together. [...] So, that was my reason why I wanted to travel and find some way to work as well at the same time.' (R2, 26 years, Thailand)

Rebelling against established working norms in this way means that participants' working lives had to fit with their way of living rather than the other way around.

Action: Experimenting with ways of working and living

Exploring possibilities

The transition towards digital nomadism begins with exploring possibilities. Firstly, 'transformative career and life changes' are explored. One of the participants resigned from her previous company and decided to travel to a certain place and start a new company there:

'So, we decided that since June 2019, we had an apartment in the Netherlands, and we actually quit the contract. Also, the apartment. So, we don't own or have a house right now. And we decided to travel. So, my boyfriend quit his job too. Firstly, we went to Singapore and then we went to Bali, and we went to Bali for 2 months because I was working in a local company, a local version.' (R17, 25 years, Netherlands)

Secondly, it was found that our respondents were exploring 'stepwise career and life change[s]'. For one respondent, he previously had jobs that did not require him to be in a certain location, so he was already familiar with a remote working system, although he was still working for a specific company. This type of worker sees himself or herself as performing 'stepwise' exploration – that is, traveling for shorter periods and gradually extending time and distance away from the office until he or she is working completely remotely. This type of action is explained by R2 as follows:

'I became a web designer and started to work in the technology industry about 3 years ago. Then, I took a trip to Cambodia and met my girlfriend, who actually lived in France, and I resided in the UK. I asked my bosses if I could meet her regularly, like every other week or something. My bosses were flexible about the whole situation. So, each time I went over there, I would kind of push it a bit further. Spending two weeks in France and two weeks in London; sometimes 3 weeks in France and a week in London. Then, when in London, I did not go to the office. Now, since February, I have been working remotely in Asia. At the same time, I do things I like here, for example going to beaches and climbing here.' (R2, 26 years, Thailand)

The participants explained that they did not consciously make the choice to become digital nomads. When the idea of escaping traditional work and life emerged, they started exploring possibilities for their desired life by quitting their jobs and working for multiple companies:

'I didn't consciously do anything to set myself up as a digital nomad. If that makes sense. I just decided to package up my services in a way that meant I wasn't working full time for one company. And I could work part time for other companies.' (R8, 36 years, United Kingdom)

Exploring these possibilities allowed our participants to envision a career and life that related to their interests and preferences. They engaged with a whole new way of living, establishing personal and professional freedom and leaving their previous work and life behind:

'Once I left the company, I actually ended up applying for a holiday working visa in Australia, which is available to people between 18 and 32 years old and it is very easy to get. Two months later, after I quit my job, I moved to Australia. And in Australia I wanted to gain experience working in a restaurant and I had several bartender jobs; I worked as a janitor, an au pair – job I would never expect to have done before moving.' (R20, 34 years, United Kingdom)

In sum, the participants explored possibilities but did not consciously make the choice to become a digital nomad or have a clear idea of what their work and life should look like. In this phase, participants fell into a new life and later became familiar with the nomadic lifestyle as they engaged with new nomadic experiences.

Engaging with nomadic experiences

Participants described how they engaged in nomadic experiences as they explored the idea of traveling and working via the internet. Our respondents used YouTube, Instagram and Facebook to perform these online discoveries:

'I actually used YouTube a lot to follow people who are successful in the space [*digital nomad life*]. They show you how they do things. I learned the most from YouTube. So, YouTube plays an important role in my learning process. And I used Instagram to get inspired by people who are working remotely or doing certain things abroad. When I was first interested in travelling, I followed a lot of travel bloggers, who inspired me to travel.' (R23, 31 years, Israel)

Through these extensive online searches, participants could forge new contacts, which allowed them to meet other digital nomads while travelling and becoming acquainted with their new life. For instance, one respondent took a trip to Bali and was inspired by how digital nomads were living and working independently from their location and thought about becoming one himself:

'One of the things is that I came to Bali in 2018 for a week for my holiday while I was doing some work remotely for the company I was working with at the time in Australia. In Bali, I looked for a place to work, and I went to the Dojo, which is another coworking space. I realised that there was a possibility of working from wherever I liked. I realised that I didn't need to be

in a particular location to do a job.’ (R21, 29 years, United Kingdom)

This phase is characterised by a romanticised image of the nomadic lifestyle, which includes ultimate freedom, collaboration with like-minded people and financial advantages.

Reflection: Crystallising personal work and life values

Understanding the value of time

The participants explained that in this stage, they crystallised the internal changes. They reflected on the value of time, including when and how much time should be spent:

‘I asked [*myself*] what has the biggest value [*for me*]. I discovered it was not money. [...] Can you go back to yesterday? No, you can’t. So, time has a higher value than money. If you lose euros or dollars today, you can earn them back later, maybe because you meet a guy next week who will give you 500 dollars. So [*there is the probability*] that you can get your money back. But you cannot get that time back – you cannot go back to yesterday, for example.’ (R15, 27 years, United Kingdom)

Engaging in the new way of working and living granted our participants the freedom to manage their own time:

‘So, I would say I’ve got a lot more freedom to use my time as I want to use it rather than set time deadlines that someone else is telling me to do.’ (R21, 29 years, United Kingdom)

In sum, living a digital nomadic life made them realise that time is valuable and irreplaceable, as they now have the freedom to manage their time independently.

Understanding work and life preferences

Participants described that having lived a lifestyle in which they were not able to choose their own schedule and location, their new ability to shape their own life as a digital nomad felt empowering to them. They highly valued being able to control and choose their own path and direct their life in the direction that they wanted:

‘Being a digital nomad shows you that you are in charge of your own direction and your own life. So, if you want to make things happen, you can, because you are in control.’ (R8, 36 years, United Kingdom)

Throughout their journey towards digital nomadism, participants defined what success meant to them:

‘Having a choice of doing whatever you like doing. For example, if I wake up today and do not feel like working, I do not have to work. If I feel like going and sitting on the beach, I can go and sit on the beach. That is really my definition of success, having the freedom to do what you want when you want to do it.’ (R7, 36 years, United States)

Respondents also highlighted their perception of money in shaping their path towards a nomadic life:

‘Saving a lot of money and putting that money to work [*gives*] you... a lot of passive income and [*so you*] do not really have to work anymore.’ (R6, 39 years, Singapore)

In sum, our participants described how they shaped their preferred work and lifestyles as digital nomads in the crystallisation stage.

Stabilisation: Living new work and life scripts

Living new routines and lifestyle

It was found that the freedom of choice also transferred to other areas of digital nomads’ lives, such as their control over their own success. They seemed to be very intrinsically motivated to do everything necessary to achieve this success:

‘Basically, having a choice of doing whatever you feel like doing. You know, for example, if I wake up today, and don’t feel like working, I don’t have to work. If I feel like going and sitting on the beach, I can go and sit on the beach; if I feel like, you know, talking to you, whatever, I can do this. And this is really my definition of success, having the freedom to do what you want to do when you want to do it.’ (R1, 29 years, United States)

Our respondent explained that with no supervision or social pressure to practice scheduling and planning, the nomad is responsible for his or her own actions, and digital nomads, thus require discipline and motivation to organise their work and life:

‘Finding the focus to work can be difficult sometimes. So, I think the main challenge is to find the correct place to work and the correct schedule for your day. You have to really be disciplined in the way that you practice that style, [*for example*] when waking up in the morning next to the beach, you can be tempted to [*go there*]. Okay. I would sleep a bit more and work in the afternoon. I’m quite strict with myself, so that’s okay. Yeah, some discipline [*is required*]. It’s not easy every day but it’s possible.’ (R22, 31 years, France)

Adapting work time

The value of work–life balance has gained importance in the lives of digital nomads. This freedom allows nomads to shape their work in a more flexible way than they did previously, but it also shifts this balance more towards work having to fit around their preferred lifestyle rather than adapting their lifestyle around work:

‘So, I know that I work better in the afternoon. If a client or a customer wants me to work in the morning, I’ll say no. And if they’re going to pay me for my time, I want to make sure I am making the best use of my time, my brain and my knowledge and skills. So, they will have to adapt to my standards. And it sounds very selfish. It sounds very picky. But we only have one life, why should we work with rubbish clients and people who are telling us to do things that we don’t want to do?’ (R8, 36 years, United Kingdom)

In a similar vein, it was found that the principle of ‘making the best use of time, brain, knowledge and skills’ is used to achieve optimal work practices:

‘I am a little crazier than a lot of people. I’ll have dinner and then I’ll go back home and then sometimes I would work until 3–4 am. Sometimes I even work until the sun comes out. So, it’s a little extreme, but I love it so much that the more I work, the more it gives me energy. But people ask, do you take breaks? Do you take days

off? For me, I don't have a specific day, like "Sundays I don't work", it's really not like that for me. I just take a break when I feel like it, 'Okay, you have reached a limit. Your body is tired, your mind is tired....' I do not really set the thing like "Saturdays I don't work." Because when inspiration comes and I am really enjoying my work, I don't want to stop working.' (R1, 29 years, United States)

Therefore, paradoxically, for some participants, having the freedom to set their own working hours has resulted in working more than before they became digital nomads.

Managing social connections

Having the freedom to go anywhere in the world, without restrictions, changed the way the participants looked at social connections. As digital nomads moved away from their family and friends, they had to make new friends in new places. However, constantly relocating also challenged nomads to rebuild their social connections in each new place. Social isolation is a risk of a nomadic lifestyle, and thus digital nomads need to learn how to quickly build new relationships:

'I had moments in which the people were staying long term or short term and then left. And you know it when you see new people. So, when you meet people for the first few days or first few weeks you don't really get attached. [...] But it's very true that I've noticed it for me, too, when I meet people; I want to know how long they will stay here. That's the first question I ask: 'How long will he be here?' Yeah, if only for 3 days, then no friends for me. That is how I deal with it.' (R19, 34 years, Nigeria)

Attending digital nomadic conferences or meetups or visiting coworking spaces to connect with digital nomads increased the chances of forming quick bonds, as the participants were often attracted to like-minded individuals. This also provided the chance to make professional connections at the same time:

'Although, you know, most of those people are, like, here temporarily, and it's hard to form, like, lasting relationships that way, but it's still, like, a good time. If I just don't have anyone else to hang out with, I can go and, like, make friends and have a good time at the coworking spaces. ... So, that's what... that's always good, because it's just like a built-in network of friends.' (R11, 36 years, United States)

In sum, digital nomads often need to be open to building new connections that also give them the chance to network for business reasons.

Rebelling against the nomadic lifestyle

Escaping nomadic ways of working

Even though many preferred not to plan too far ahead, all participants had given thought to what their future holds regarding their nomadic lifestyle. When asked about the future, many participants frequently mentioned being tired of travelling:

'Being a digital nomad is a great life, but it can be a tiring life. When you were young, you wanted to explore, but not until your 40s. I want to settle down.' (R22, 31 years, France)

Although travelling would always play an important role in digital nomads' lives, they mentioned planning to stay in one place longer in the future to avoid changing routines too often and to build a community:

'[I] want to settle down in the place with a beach that is small and quiet, relax and will not be moving around. I will travel only to meet my supplier, but I personally do not want to move all the time.... I just could hardly imagine that someone could live like this forever. I think a digital nomad's life is about a personal development journey.' (R16, 29 years, United States)

Career change model of digital nomads: The role of working identity

Figure 2 illustrates our findings and shows that in searching for what mattered most to them in terms of their work and life, the participants started by rebelling against established working norms. Here, we argue that the rebellion phase took place in our participants' minds, as they evaluated their previous working state (i.e. not wanting to work from 9 to 5) and then imagined their working preferences (i.e. wishing to work from anywhere in the world). Their previous work situation frustrated them and limited their creative abilities because everything was determined by their employers. This pushed them to think about what would resonate more with who they were or what they wanted out of life.

Additionally, Figure 2 also shows how rebelling against established working norms led to experimenting with new ways of working and living, crystallising the participants' work and life values and leading to new work and life paths. These three phases show that our participants were fully aware that their careers and private lives were intertwined. Here, it is contended that redesigning one's career also means redesigning one's personal life. When considering a new career and life, one must reflect on whether the new values resonate with their desired work and life preferences before deciding to pursue that new career and life.

To fully live their digital nomadic lives, participants considered rebelling against established working norms to be a digital nomad. Our data suggested that continuing to move around the globe is tiring and is not preferable in the long term. The participants evaluated their current situation as digital nomads and planned to redesign their careers and lives once again.

Finally, similar to Ibarra (2002), it was found that the participants' inner journeys allowed them to reflect on and evaluate their careers, which became the key to redesigning their careers and lives. Furthermore, Similar to Ibarra, it was also observed that not only the inner journey provided the motivation to change but also that it became the basis upon which participants reflected on their personal and work-life values and preferences during the crystallisation phase. Furthermore, the data also show that after adopting and living with new values, digital nomads also engaged in inner journeys to evaluate whether to continue their digital nomadic life or once again to redesign their career and life.

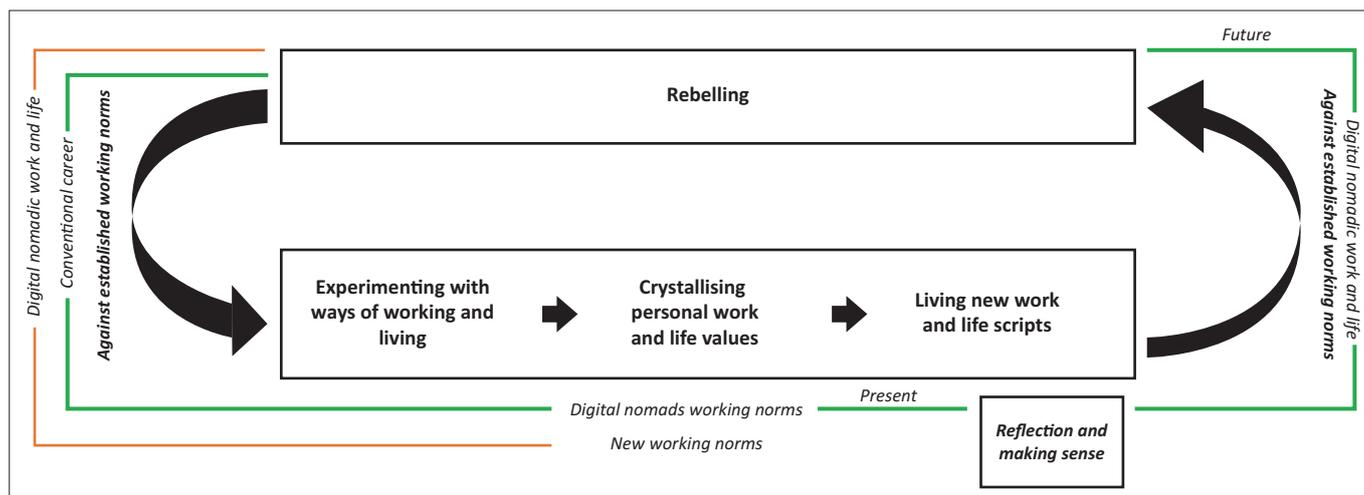


FIGURE 2: Career change process of digital nomads: The role of working identity.

Discussion and conclusion

This article aimed to explore how digital nomads' experiences shape what matters most to them in work and life by employing Ibarra's (2002, 2004) concept of working identity. The analysis of the interviews with 28 digital nomads identified that there were five stages in the transition from a conventional career to the life of a digital nomad. The stages are (1) rebelling against established work norms, (2) experimenting with ways of working and living, (3) crystallising personal work and life values, (4) living new work and lifestyles and (5) rebelling against a nomad lifestyle and considering a return to conventional work arrangements. With these findings, this article makes several contributions to the literature on careers and digital nomads.

Firstly, to the best of the authors' knowledge, this article is the first to study the career of digital nomads with a focus on working identity experience. From the point of view of deciding to change careers, for our participants, changing careers meant redefining their working identity through which they discovered what they love about their work and life. As Ibarra (2002) stated, this is 'because what we are and what we do are tightly connected'. Earlier studies on digital nomads have focused solely on freedom and lifestyle (Jacobs & Gussekloo, 2016; Reichenberger, 2018; Thompson, 2018) without exploring whether experiences with these elements shape digital nomads' work identity. Understanding this new segment of workers is becoming important for business, as virtual work arrangements appeal to both corporations and employees based on the benefits of economic and personal flexibility and autonomy they offer (Mulki et al., 2009).

Next, it was explored that our participants' career changes from conventional careers to digital nomadic work were not a drastic change for all participants. This contrasts with what previous literature has suggested (Nash et al., 2018). Our participants regarded their career change as quite easy and fast because of their familiarity with location-independent ways of working. Furthermore, this may be because of the professional background of the participants, some of whom were already remote workers and therefore did not have to

change their entire career to adjust to their new lifestyle. Future research can investigate any further distinctions among digital nomads and the degree of challenges they face to further discover the downsides of being a digital nomad. For instance, it would be interesting to explore in which of the five stages individuals face the most challenges and how this affects their mental health.

Specifically, the theory of working identities (Ibarra, 2004) provided a suitable framework for career changes in the context of this study, as the respondents' stories began from an internal motivation to change careers. It was found that participants were internally motivated to rebel against established working norms, were in search of an ideal life, or simply wanted to simultaneously combine work and travel. However, throughout the course of their digital nomadic life, some decided to rebel against the digital nomadic life and find another lifestyle that resonated better with their ideal life expectations. Future research can build on our study to examine what such digital nomads do after they abandon the digital nomadic life and what kind of careers and lives they will choose. Marital status can also be an important point to consider, as mostly unmarried digital nomads were interviewed in this study. Questions that can be further examined are as follows: Will digital nomadic life become an option for married couples with children, or will digital nomads stop pursuing such a lifestyle if they decide to build a family? Will stages of the career transition process be different for married women versus men?

Lastly, it was found that participants consciously made the choice to become digital nomads. When they began to think about escaping their traditional work and lifestyle, they started by quitting their jobs and exploring possibilities for achieving their desired lifestyle, which involved combining work and travel. This result supports the research of Mitchell et al. (1999) about 'planned happenstance'. The participants were driven by images or fantasies about what they wanted to become (Ibarra, 2002) and engaged in behaviours that increased their chances of finding that desired outcome and being open to opportunities that come their way (Yates, 2013). Future research can further

explore the role of luck in digital nomads' career paths and career decisions.

Practical implications

Following the onset of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) crisis, a post-COVID workforce of digital nomads began to emerge (Investment Monitor, 2021). For this reason, the findings of this study are useful for those working in business strategy and policy settings and those who are seeking to recruit remote workers, in this case digital nomads, to their companies. They could, for example, use these findings to create a culture that accommodates digital nomads, as they are highly specialised workers (i.e. programmers, marketing) with their own work routines and work styles. Career counsellors could also use these findings to help individuals gain realistic expectations of the lifestyle and careers of digital nomads before deciding to actually become one.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

Y.N.A., S.N.K. and S.E.B. contributed to the design and implementation of the research, to the analysis of the results and to the writing of the manuscript.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, Y.N.A. as the data are not publicly available.

Disclaimer

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