The Identity Quest of Digital Nomads

A Conceptual Framework of the Professional Identity Construction Process of Digital Nomads

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to combine existing academic literature streams of professional identity construction with the newly emerging group of independent workers, namely digital nomads. In order to develop a conceptual understanding of the professional identity construction process of digital nomads, a qualitative research approach is guiding this thesis. We conducted 15 interviews with individuals that identify themselves with digital nomadism. This thesis proposes a framework conceptualizing digital nomads' working and living in a constantly changing environment, coined by the absence of organizational boundaries. The analysis of the gathered data shows that digital nomads, driven by their desire for freedom, aim to be their own master in the daily life in relation to both work and non-work-related situations. However, the findings suggest that they simultaneously strive for stability in their lives, which is reflected in the idea of anchoring. Digital nomads anchor to the community they surround themselves by, a home base, or a newly created system. Between and within the two pillars freedom and anchor, tensions arise that influence the individual quest for professional identity. The concurrent desire for both freedom and stability leads to paradoxical tensions, as will be further discussed within the course of the thesis, in which we propose mechanisms to balance these tensions in order to remain active in the digital nomad lifestyle.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction to the Context of Digital Nomadism

We find ourselves in a world coined by unpredictable change (Kraaijenbrink, 2019). Globalization, digitalization and technological innovations, as well as scientific improvements, among other inventions, minimized the physical distance to connect socially with others to no further than the laptop screen. This connectivity is forcing an extreme pace of change in the way people live, socialize, and work (Cascio & Montealegre, 2016). Also, the labor market is largely affected by structural changes. The demographic makeup of who is able to work is radically different than it was a century ago, as well as the type of work individuals fulfill, how they do it and how much they are getting paid (Carreau, 2018).

Furthermore, the mindset of employees has changed over the last century. People nowadays are more flexible and switch jobs more frequently than the previous generation did (Landrum, 2017). Whereas older generations mainly cared about the salary, nowadays, jobseekers seem to be more demanding as they care about personal growth, flexible working approaches, and additional benefits offered by the company (Alton, 2017). A worldwide study has found out that 68% of current jobseekers say that they would be more interested in a company if they offer remote work (Smith, 2018). Remote work is on the rise as the access to a reliable and affordable internet connection and the appearance of smart technologies enable individuals to work from anywhere they want. The emergence and impact of social networks, mobile applications, on-demand services, and the sharing economy simplify remote work even further. People are no longer tied to specific places and it seems like they are "seeking more from their existence than the traditionalized norms of society" (Evolution want us to be Digital Nomads, 2019). In light of the opportunities the world offers, people are no longer satisfied with traditional lifestyles anymore and wonder what life is like elsewhere. Instead of just dreaming about the adventures ahead, many "reclaim their lost nomadic heritage, and are once again on the move" (Evolution want us to be Digital Nomads, 2019). Overall,

advancements in technology, especially the emergence of the internet, as well as diverging life concepts and corresponding mindsets have paved the way for the rise of a new group of workers: the digital nomad. Digital nomads are individuals that work digitally and regard themselves to be location-independent (Saiidi, 2019). In line with the previous definition, Katie, 32 years old, has been working, living, and travelling across the globe for the past six years:

Katie's days start early at around 6.30am, mostly because the roosters start crowing every morning with the rise of the sun. As most Ubudians, Katie takes her time in the morning, lazing in her bed and afterwards doing her daily yoga routine. Ubud, located on the Indonesian island Bali, is not a place to set the alarm to rush out of the door. Instead, the mornings are peaceful and slow. After having breakfast at home, Katie hops on her scooter, never before 9, passes by butterfly's flutter, palm trees and endless tropical rice paddies to reach the bamboo co-working space at the bottom corner of the town. Katie finds a spot to sit, preferably in front of a fan, chats with people crossing by, opens up her laptop and starts working on her daily tasks. She comes home after work, sometimes at 5, sometimes way later, to a big room in a four-bedroom villa in the middle of the rice paddies. The people she lives with are like her family: They go for dinner and drinks, go to the spa after work and sometimes escape the island for weekends or day-long adventures (McKnoulty, n.d.).

Katie is a modern-day nomad; or what most people call a digital nomad. As a nomad of the 21st century, she has exchanged camels and camping equipment for airplanes and laptops. She survives with her digital devices by doing business on her screen, and while finding fertile territorial is not a concern anymore, having a stable WIFI connection is (Shanin, 2018). Travelling the world while doing internet-enabled work seems like an appealing option among traditional workers that is increasingly realized by many. The trend does not slow down, with estimations that 50 per cent of the labor force will be working remotely by 2050 (Hart, 2018). In light of the fact that "today talented people need organizations less than organizations need

talented people", companies are required to recognize and act upon the recent trend of remote work and digital nomadism (Burns, 2017). Due to the global talent shortage, organizations fight for the best talents to work for them. Simultaneously, the workforce gains more power and participates in re-shaping the labor market by demanding more flexibility and independence. This entails a shift in organizations' mindsets from providing a place where they assume people need to work to forming an environment where people want to work (Burns, 2017). In order to prevent employees from leaving, companies are increasingly allowing their employees to work remotely and outsource many of their tasks to freelancers across the globe (Burns, 2017). As the flexible lifestyle of digital nomadism has received increasing exposure of organizations and media alike, scholars started to become interested in the topic. A growing number of academic work on digital nomads leads to the emergence of a completely new research field.

1.2 Focus and Relevance of this Research

Even though digital nomadism becomes increasingly common, it still forms a research topic that has only received limited attention throughout the past years. So far, most research focuses on finding a definition of digital nomadism and aims to establish a broader understanding of the motivations to become engaged in the lifestyle (e.g. Reichenberger, 2018). As underlined in more detail before, the world around us changes in a fast pace and individuals have to deal and process many impressions from the outside world. Especially as digital nomads are continuously on the move, they are exposed to manifold external reference points, such as different cultures, surroundings, and people. For a long time, scholars viewed organizations as one of the main reference points for identification for individuals. As a part of this, the organizational role and the social environment that an individual experiences provide important indicators for individuals on their quest of W*ho am I* and *Who am I becoming* (Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004; Hatch & Schultz, 2002)*.* However, an important characteristic of digital nomadism is that the individuals most often decide to leave the organizational environment to become a digital nomad and to work in a freelance or remote working position. Without the strong relations to the organized and stable organizational

environment, individuals are confronted with different challenges of digital nomadism and ongoing change. Especially with regard to their work-related identification, this influences the self-reflections on their quest for identity. As a result, a new perspective for the discussion of identity emerges: It is questionable whether the professional identity of individuals decoupled from the organizational environment is constructed similarly to individuals working in a stable organizational environment. Until today, the combined topics of professional identity and digital nomadism have not received a lot of attention in academic literature. However, there have been some attempts to study the professional identity of independent workers, thereby opening a new research field (Petriglieri, Ashford & Wrzesniewski, 2018). With the aim of extending the existing state of research, this thesis aims to combine the topics of professional identity and digital nomadism in order to develop a conceptual understanding of the digital nomads' professional identity.

1.3 Research Question and Structure

This leads to the following research question:

How do digital nomads construct their professional identities in the absence of an organizational environment?

The thesis aims to answer the above-stated research question by the means of conducting a qualitative research study. Interviews are conducted with 15 individuals, within a time span of four weeks, who identify themselves with digital nomadism in order for us to achieve a detailed understanding of the main pillars of their professional identity construction process.

The following structure guides this thesis. Subsequent to this *Introduction*, the *Literature Review* aims to provide a state-of-the-art theoretical understanding of the various levels of identity and the general topic of digital nomadism as relevant for this thesis. Thereafter, the *Method and Philosophy of Science* chapter outlines the methodological concepts and strategies used to perform this qualitative research. Additionally, it presents an overview of

the interview partners. Next, the chapter *Findings* reflects on the interviewees' responses collected throughout the interview process and presents a conceptual framework to explain the professional identity construction process of digital nomads. The *Discussion* critically interprets the findings in order to answer the research question and sheds light on the practical and theoretical implications as discovered throughout conducting this research. Moreover, the *Discussion* aggregates a critical reflection on the methodological approach of this thesis and provides an outlook for future research. Finally, the *Conclusion* presents a closing overview of this thesis.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

The following chapter of this thesis serves to frame the theoretical backbone of the chosen topic. First, there will be a topic introduction to overall identity theory and the multiple levels of identity that may be analysed. The aim is to develop a state-of-the-art theoretical understanding of identity, and in particular professional identity, as a guiding theme for the following investigation in relation to the topic. Second, there will be a theoretical introduction to the emergence of a new group of workers, namely digital nomads. For this purpose, a brief presentation of the development of the labour market and workforce is provided, in hindsight of the digitalization and the resulting shift in both the workers' expectations towards work and changing market expectations. Finally, the chapter presents an aggregation of the topics of professional identity and digital nomads, serving as a basis for the following chapters. The relevance of the combination of topics will be further explained.

2.1 Theoretical Understanding of Identity Construction

Identity has been a popular theme in organizations research for several decades. Identity has been found as a central building block to research topics such as "meaning and motivation, loyalty, logics of action and decision-making, stability and change [...]" (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). There are plenty of diverging definitions that aim to point out what exactly

identity can be comprehended as, but until today, no exhaustive definition has emerged. However, the fact that there is no one conceptual definition of identity increases the relevance to further examine the topic. Broadly, identity refers to the meaning that one attaches to the self and others. These self-conceptions are bound to personal and character traits, attributes that are attached to one by others and individual's social roles and group membership (Ibarra, 1999). This can be considered as a relational and subjective construct that is formed through the interactions with others (Hatch & Schultz, 2002). In general, identity serves as a means to answer questions such as *Who am I* (Beijaard et al., 2004). This question cannot only be answered on an individual-level but can be transferred to a multitude of levels. The considered levels for the scope of this thesis are organizational, social, and professional identity (Gioia, Schultz & Corley, 2000; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Reissner, 2010; Ibarra, 1999). In previous literature, scholars focused on the link between the individual's identity embedded in the organizational context and sees organizational identity as a social construct, which is constantly adapting through social interactions (Hatch & Schultz, 1997). In the context of this thesis, identity needs to be reflected on an individual-level, which includes not only professional identity, but also social identification (Ashforth & Mael, 1998; Stets & Burke, 2000). In former research, both constructs were investigated in an organizational context. Our thesis sheds light on professional identity in the absence of an organizational environment. Thus, as a point of departure for this thesis, it is important to understand the dynamics between the different levels of identity.

The topic of identity receives intensified attention as both contemporary private and professional life are coined by change and uncertainty. There are two general assumptions underlying different views on identity: firstly, the assumption of stability in identity processes (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Secondly, the becoming view, which is grounded on a process-based view on identity (Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Schultz & Hernes, 2013). The first stream of research considers identity to be stable over time and only to change slowly in sight of turbulences in the environment. As stated by Albert & Whetten (1985), identity is often taken for granted. This is rooted in the assumption that the question of one's identity is only actively considered when there is an environment of change. The second, more recent stream of

research considers identity to be constantly in the making, dependent on context and relationships, rather than achieving one stable identity construct at any point in time (Rodgers & Scott, 2008). This is emphasized in the statement that "identity formation is conceived as an ongoing process that involves the interpretation and reinterpretation of experiences as one lives through them" (Rodgers & Scott, 2008, p. 736). In line with the second point, one may also consider that there is not only one identity, but there can be a multitude of varying identities on every level, as emphasized by Ashforth and Mael (1998), "individuals have multiple, loosely coupled identities" (p. 35).

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The following sections give a more detailed overview about the state of research on organizational identity, social identity, and an extensive overview of the topic of professional identity.

2.1.1 Organizational Identity

Organizational identity theory promotes a multi-level analysis of identity, moving from an individual-level to a macro perspective. The creation of an organizational identity aims to answer the question of *Who are we as an organization.* Organizational identity consists of what members perceive, feel and think about their organizations (Hatch & Schultz, 1997). It is assumed to be a collective, commonly-shared understanding of the organization's distinctive values and characteristics. Therefore, it can be said that organizational identity largely depends on the identification of individuals towards the organization (Hatch & Schultz, 2002).

In line with the two previously mentioned streams of research, one may distinguish between the scholars that researched stable organizational identity as opposed to research pointing to the identity construction processes. According to Albert and Whetten (1985), organizations need to answer the question of *Who are we,* where the quest for identity becomes particularly salient in unstable times. In essence, their research states that identity is a stable and static construct. In order to consider an organizational identity adequately, it has to fulfil the following three criteria: central, enduring and distinctive. The criterion of centrality emphasizes that organizational features need to mirror characteristics that are at the core of the organization, whereas the criterion of distinctiveness points to features that distinguish an organization when compared to another one. Importantly, the criterion of enduringness points to the assumption of stability over time and is thus an essential differentiating point in comparison to the second stream of research, the becoming view (Albert & Whetten, 1985).

From a becoming point of view, identity not only considers the quest of who one is at the moment, but also who one is becoming. In an unstable world, actors aim to create a sense of order and make sense of the events that occur. Therefore, a process thinking appears appropriate as organizing is seen as an "ongoing accomplishment" (Schultz & Hernes, 2013, p. 1). This reinforces the argument that organizational identity is not static, but a relational construct evolving out of social interactions. Past research pointed out that "actors subconsciously reproduce past experience as a means of moving forward" (Schultz & Hernes,

2013, p. 1), indicating that the process of identity creation does not settle down. In addition, it is important to consider that organizational identity is often seen as subjective, supporting the argument of a becoming view as there can never be one definite way to define what organizational identity is (Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Beijaard et al., 2004).

2.1.2 Social Identity Theory

Social identity can be defined as the classification of people "into various social categories, such as organizational membership, religious affiliation, gender, and age cohort" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 20). In line with the definition of Ashforth and Mael (1989), Stets and Burke (2000) state in their research that individuals engage in self-classification processes in social identity theory. This indicates that "the self is reflexive in that it can take itself as an object and can categorize, classify, or name itself in particular ways in relation to other social categories or classifications" (p. 224). People that appear to be similar to the perceived self are classified as the in-group, whereas perceived dissimilarities lead to the labelling of an out-group. This classification may occur on various levels, such as within society, organizations, family, friends, and work groups (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

Self-classification takes place in order to structure the social environment, which provides the individual with the opportunity to define the surrounding. Individual's classifications can be categorized as highly subjective as they may rely on stereotypes and personal interpretations of the diverging factors in the environment. Another considerable function of social classification is that it "enables the individual to locate or define him- or herself in the social environment" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 21), which can be described as the development of cognitive schemas. Social classification processes drive social identification, which denotes the perception of belongingness to a certain group. As a result, this classification enables the individual to generate a partial response to the question *Who am I.* Research states that the belongingness to a group evolves from the assignment to a particular group, where group identification can be used interchangeably with social identification. There is no need for strong leadership, member interdependence or interaction as an in-group bias almost

certainly occurs (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Stets & Burke, 2000). As one's social self-classification may heavily influence the choice of future work environment, it is important to be taken into account in the context of examining individual professional identity.

2.1.3 Professional Identity

Professional identity is relevant for this study as we aim to shed light on the identity construction of a professional group, namely digital nomads. A professional identity is an important cognitive mechanism that affects employee attitudes and behaviours in their natural work environment and beyond (e.g. Ashforth, Harrison & Corley, 2008; Kreiner, Hollensbe & Sheep, 2006; Pratt, Rockmann & Kaufmann, 2006). The identification with a particular profession enables individuals to enter a certain work-related community, consisting of people with a potentially similar approaches to work (Caza & Creary, 2016).

Understanding the identity phenomenon is very complex, because it involves various concepts, processes and entities. Compared to the number of publications in the field of organizational identity, research has set a relatively small focus on how identities are formed and maintained among professionals (Ibarra, 1999). An individual's professional identity as a social and role-based identity is an important research field as it is considered a key construct to enable individuals to assign meaning to themselves (Siebert & Siebert, 2005). In particular, the way in which individuals define themselves in their professional role becomes an important tool that individuals use to understand and define themselves and their life's purpose more generally. In addition of being a meaning-making device, professional identity can also affect one's psychological well-being (Tajfel, Turner, Austin & Worchel, 1979). Strongly identifying with a role can protect individuals from depression and anxiety (Thoits, 1983, as cited in Stets & Burke, 2000). This may be because individuals often evaluate their worth and competence through the lens of their identities (Cooley, 1902). Due to unique knowledge and skill sets, society often grants professionals higher level of prestige and autonomy than non-professionals (Larson, 1977). However, professional identity is not only important on the individual-level, but its impact can also be seen on a wider, organizational

level. As it shapes individual's work behaviour and attitudes, it has a significant impact on organizational performance and outcomes (Siebert & Siebert, 2005; Bothma, Llyod & Khapova, 2015). Considering the increasing importance of professionals in all types of organizations and the significance of identity in how individuals make sense of themselves and influence organizational performance, research in the field of professional identity is highly relevant (Wallace, 1995; Weick, 1995).

For the purpose of this thesis, we consider professional identities as role-based and social work identities. Role-based identities focus on *doing* as professionals are considered to possess certain skills and knowledge and hence differentiate themselves from others in what they can *do.* Having a particular role identity means acting to fulfil the expectations of the role, negotiating and coordinating interaction with role partners, and manipulating the environment to control resources for which the role has responsibility (Stets & Burke, 2000). However, professional identities are also coined by social identities as the identification with a profession enables individuals to belong to a certain community consisting of individuals who share a common approach to a particular type of work (Van Maanen and Barley, 1984; Caza & Creary, 2016). From this perspective, professionals are tied through social identities to their groups and within those groups through their role identities (Stets & Burke, 2000).

2.1.4 Different Views on Professional Identity

While organizational identities are indicators of where individuals work, professional identities specify the type of work individuals do, and often suggest which type of skills and knowledge one possesses (Pratt et al., 2006). Schein (1978) considers a professional identity to be a "relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives and experiences that people use to define themselves in their professional capacity" (as cited in Ibarra, 1999, p. 764-765). This relative stability can also be seen in the functionalist research paradigm and among other social psychologists, who recognize that even though identities adapt to changing circumstances, some stability is maintained (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003;

Gioia et al., 2000). Thus, for most social psychologists, selves are constructed from a relatively stable set of meanings, which change only gradually (Reissner, 2010).

In recent years, the literature, however, shifted away from essentialist and monolithic views on identity to more disruptive and constructed approaches, where professional identities are seen as "constantly rebuilt, reshaped and renegotiated in social interaction" (Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013, p. 1147) and as a socially constructed process (Bothma et al., 2015). Kondo (1990) notes that especially in times of globalization and rapid change, identity cannot be seen as a fixed thing; rather it is "negotiated, open, shifting, ambiguous, the result of culturally available meaning and the open-ended power of those meanings in everyday situations" (as cited in Sachs, 2001, p. 154). Further, it is claimed that identity is not a fixed attribute of a person, but a relational phenomenon. It can be best seen as an "ongoing process, a process of interpreting oneself as a certain kind of person and being recognized as such in a given context" (Gee, 2001, as cited in Beijaard et al., 2004, p. 108). From this perspective, professional identity construction does not only answer the question of *Who am I* at this moment but also sheds light on the question *Who am I becoming.* This is in line with Ibarra (1999) and Weick (1995), who emphasize that professional identity is an enduring reflection process connecting past, present, and future. Professional identity has been defined as "never fixed or pre-determined but arises out of the relationship between those who interpret and ascribe meaning to action, language, and everyday practice in varied social contexts and circumstances" (Dillabough, 1999, as cited in Beijaard et al., 2004, p. 112). In support of this relational view on professional identity, Coldron and Smith (1999) claim that "professional identity is not fixed or unitary; it is not a stable entity that people have but a way to make sense of themselves in relation to other people and contexts" (as cited in Beijaard et al., 2004, p. 111).

2.1.5 Overview

Besides seeing professional identity as an ongoing, dynamic phenomenon there are a few more assumptions underlying our conceptualization of professional identity. We regard an individual's professional identity as a subjective construct that is influenced by relationships

and interactions individuals have with other people regarding their work. Many studies support the view that individuals learn and accept who they are as a professional by seeing themselves in the eyes of others (Cooley, 1902). By interacting with others, people are receiving insights into role expectations and may try to either adapt or move away from those expectations. In this way, while we consider professional identity as an individual-level construct in this thesis, we acknowledge the fact that it is formed and maintained through social interactions.

In line with many scholars, we assume that an individual can possess more than one professional identity. In a research on teachers' identity, Sachs (2001) recognized that teachers identify themselves with being a primary teacher. However, this can be broken down into further identities such as by year level such as junior, middle or upper school teacher. Rodgers and Scott (2008) also regard identity as multiple and shifting. This is supported by Gee (2001) who notes that the kind of person one is recognized as being can be adjusted through interaction from moment to moment, can change from context to context and is an unstable and ambiguous construct (as cited in Rodgers & Scott, 2008). According to Beech, Gilmore, Cochrane and Greig (2012), identities are not one-way constructs but there may be inputs that direct the identity in different directions, thereby triggering tensions within the identity. They propose that identity work is a way to balance the tensions. Caza, Vough and Puranik (2016) define identity work as the activities that individuals engage in for "forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising their self-meanings in the context of their occupations and organizations" (p. 889). This is also based on the approach that identity work shall be viewed from a process-based viewpoint as individuals may have multiple and shifting identities. A study by Pillen, Den Brok, and Beijaard (2013) specifically investigates the case of tensions in teachers' identities. Here, professional identity tensions are defined as considered to be "internal struggles between aspects relevant to the teacher as a person and the teacher as a professional" (pp. 87-88).

In the following section, we introduce emerging groups of workers that are becoming more common on the labour market. It is expected that these groups of workers construct their

identity differently than researched by scholars focusing on conventional work performed in an organizational set-up (Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Petriglieri et al., 2018). Subsequently, the link between new working models and professional identity is investigated.

2.2 Theoretical Understanding of New Groups of Workers

The rapidly-evolving world confronts both economies and labour markets with new sets of challenges. The nature of work and employment has changed: the traditional setting of an employee sitting at a desk in a fixed physical space does not satisfy neither the employer nor the employee anymore (Burke & Ng, 2006). Organizations are coping with an ever-changing business environment, where the ongoing digitalization provides the world with an overload of information and countless opportunities for development. Thus, there is an increasing need for an adaptive and dynamic workforce. Flexible work models such as project-based work is nowadays one of the most common approaches to meet the before-mentioned challenges (Barley, Bechky & Milliken, 2017). The classical hierarchical structure is increasingly considered to be an obsolete working model and thus, many corporations follow the trend of a flatter organizational structure. Additionally, worker expectations also change in response to a changing labour market. Digitalization has opened numerous opportunities for the individual to determine locations, co-workers, routines and purpose. This has led to the emergence of new groups of workers such as freelancer, gig workers, and digital nomads (Barley et al., 2017; Makimoto & Manner, 1997).

2.2.1 Freelancers

While originally mostly repetitive and simple work was outsourced to low-labour countries, nowadays it is not solely blue-collar work, but also professional and technical work that is being accomplished by people not directly tied to the organization. The on-demand workforce is growing at a constant rate and the dynamics of the labour markets as a whole is undergoing a major shift (Barley, Bechky & Milliken, 2017). Many workers are leaving their corporate jobs in order to become independent workers or are supplementing existing jobs with independent

jobs in this new, changing labour environment. On-demand workers, also called freelancers, are classified as independent contractors. They work on a project basis and generally have short-term employment relationships with a number of different clients. Some freelancers, however, have a series of renewed fixed-term contracts with the same organization, which often turns out to be their former employer, while those regarded as contract workers are often employed by a staffing agency (Kuhn, 2016). According to Born and Witteloostuijn (2013), freelancers can be defined as "skilled professionals providing expert services, conceptualized more as entrepreneurs" (as cited in Kuhn, 2016,p. 158) while Kitching & Smallbone (2012) see them rather as the "smallest of small businesses" (as cited in Kuhn, 2016, p. 158) than as individual workers.

Opposing to these views, activists concerned about the changing environment of the labour market in general tend to view freelancers as vulnerable workers rather than as empowered entrepreneurs (Kuhn, 2016). Drawbacks of being a freelancer include, amongst others, a lack of paid sick days, the fact that they are not covered by anti-discrimination employment legislation and the difficulties of collecting payment from their various clients (Kuhn, 2016). Being aware of these risks, many people, however, believe that the benefits of being a freelancer outweighs the drawbacks and proactively decide to join the growing on-demand workforce. This can also come in the form of part-time freelancing, where people are having a regular waged job plus fulfil on-demand work. For these individuals, freelancing can be a way to reduce economic risk as well as potentially presenting them with psychological benefits such as personal development and increased autonomy (Kuhn, 2016).

2.2.2 Gig Workers and the Gig Economy

Due to rapid technological progression, many freelancers have adapted their way of working to the opportunities and constraints of new technologies. Platforms like Airbnb, Twitter, Uber and countless other new technologies make the world more interconnected and help to manage activities at previously inconceivable scale and speed (Tabcum, 2019). As a result, the concept of a *gig economy* has developed in business and academic discourse as a description

of a professional space which promotes self-employment, micro-entrepreneurship and computer-mediated, peer-like exchanges (Sutherland & Jarrahi, 2017). These exchanges are enabled by a large number of sophisticated digital intermediaries, platforms and applications, which are able to connect workers with employers and thus facilitate fast-paced transactions across industries and markets. On-demand labour platforms are enabling new levels of convenience and flexibility. At the same time, they are undermining well-established notions of work and employment (Gorbis, 2015). The fast-paced development of technologies leads to the formation of a new group of workers: the gig workers. Hence, like all contingent workers, gig workers are part of the spot labour market, however, with technology coming into place, they typically use these online platforms to land a job and "may never meet their employer" (Barley et al., 2017, p. 111).

2.2.3 Gig Workers and Identity

For the gig worker, the concept of having a strong organizational holding environment does not exist to the same extent as for fixed-contract workers. As a result, the individual's identity is not entirely coupled to the organizational boundaries anymore, leading to a need to investigate the factors contributing to one's identity construction (Petriglieri et al., 2018). As soon as individuals choose to leave this organizational holding environment, one loses security, guidance, stability, and the feeling of community that the organization usually provides. The absence of this environment leads potentially to existential and socio-economic concerns, which promotes the need for work as self-expression and self-development. But work is coined by uncertainty as one faces the constant pressure to secure the future work stream. Staying productive is always on one's mind as it is the only source to make a living, at least in tangible terms. Even though the work setting is a personal choice, the gig worker is responsible for the outcome of the work, which may lead to individual-level tensions and emotions, ranging from anxieties to fulfilment. For example, when one perceives oneself as not productive for a certain amount of time, one may experience anxieties and feelings of self-blame. As mentioned earlier, individuals aim to create order in times of turbulence. According to Petriglieri et al. (2018), in order to manage the tension between emotions and productivity,

gig workers try to create a personal holding environment by connecting to places, people, routines and purpose. These connections ultimately help gig workers to consider the situation as a choice rather than a threat. This process, which is not stable or long-lasting, supports the individual to conquer the loss of an organizational environment. Ultimately, the conscious handling of their independent work life enables the individual to follow their new work routines and to embrace their work life (Petriglieri et al., 2018).

2.2.4 Digital Nomads and Digital Nomadism

As an extension of the concept of gig worker, a new classification of independent workers that exhaust digital opportunities and location independence has emerged in the labour market. The accessibility of technology has contributed to the fact that company cultures are shifting from valuing facetime and employees being present in the office to employees often working remotely. They prefer using electronic communication methods such as instant messages, text and company intranets over face-to-face meetings. Due to the fact that most workers do not need to meet their employers in person anymore, mobility is enabled but on the other hand also demanded. Nowadays, employers do not offer huge office spaces anymore and rather hire workers who are highly mobile, accessible on-demand and are able, with the help of digital devices, to complete tasks from various locations. These requests in turn have given rise to a new form of freelancer: the digital nomad (Makimoto & Manner, 1997).

The term digital nomad was first introduced by Makimoto and Manner (1997) and finds its roots in the literature of nomadicity. Digital nomads are characterized as a newly emerging sub-population of nomadic workers, who are motivated by world travel adventures and independent, remote work. More specifically, digital nomads are characterized as professionals who use information and communication technology to achieve location independence and, to a varying extent, combine working and travelling (Müller, 2016). The length of their residence in any given place varies, so does their age and profession (Sutherland & Jarrahi, 2017). Commonly, digital nomads do not have a permanent residence and consider themselves as "wanderlusting internet entrepreneurs" (Sutherland & Jarrahi,

2017, p. 6) who occupy different professions such as designer, journalist, travel agent or independent consultant. They also work remotely from different locations like co-working spaces, coffee shops or other public facilities in for instance Chiang Mai, Bali or Medellin. According to Sutherland and Jarrahi (2017), digital nomads are similar in terms of maintaining productivity, finding work, developing their skills and hunting down WIFI. It is important to note that, according to some scholars, nomadicity is not only limited to situations of working while moving or while travelling, but rather entails the problem of preparing, arranging and maintaining access to resources from changing, inconsistent locations, leading Ciolfi and Carvalho (2014) to describe digital nomadicity as "mobility of resources" (cited in Sutherland & Jarrahi, 2017, p. 6).

The motivation most often associated with a digital nomad's mobile lifestyle is the desire to move freely, make independent professional choices, grow on a personal level and escape the office atmosphere. Thus, self-determination serves as a core motivator for an individual to choose digital nomadism as a life concept (Reichenberger, 2018). As one of the first scholars tapping into the field of digital nomadism, Dal Fiore, Mokhtarian, Salomon, and Singer (2014) (as cited in Sutherlands & Jarrahi, 2017) emphasise the desire for travel adventure and an intentional separation from traditional office work. Due to the desire for a separation, many people refer to digital nomadism as a constant vacation (Müller, 2016). However, as Thomas (2016) argues, the concept of digital nomadism distinguishes itself from previous forms of mobile or nomadic work by combining endless leisure travel with remote work (as cited in Sutherland & Jarrahi, 2017). Reichenberger (2018) supports this point of view by seeing digital nomadism as a more "holistic approach to life where work and leisure are not considered dichotomous through spatial and temporal separation, but where both aspects of life contribute equally to self-actualization, -development and –fulfilment " (p.364). In line with Müller (2016) and coming back to the criticism of being constantly on vacation, it is thus wrong to see digital nomadism as a dropout; in fact, for most digital nomads the value of labour productivity is an important and even necessary aspect while simultaneously being on the move.

Many digital nomads have given up a permanent residence. Hence, the work does not tie those individuals to any specific place (Sutherland & Jarrahi, 2017). However, there are different views of this location independence. Some scholars (e.g. Sutherland & Jarrahi, 2017) particularly emphasize that digital nomads must be travelling, whereas Reichenberger (2018) prefers to talk about mobility instead, referring to the fact that digital nomads may also just switch places domestically. Thus, Reichenberger (2018) regards mobility and travel as two interrelated, yet independent features of what connotes a digital nomad, affirming that a digital nomad may also use location independence only to be mobile within a relatively restricted geographical area such as one's home environment.

Another important characteristic of digital nomads is their utilization of digital devices, tools and platforms. According to Sutherland and Jarrahi (2017), digital nomads can be described as digital workers in the sense that their work primarily involves the utilization of digital knowledge, and requires constant negotiation with digital services, algorithms and protocols. The growth of the population of digital nomads is intertwined with the occurrence of digital gig work that is enabled by online platforms. The digital gig economy has opened up the opportunity for digital nomads to complete their tasks from everywhere in the world by matching online supply and demand activities. Müller (2016) and Reichenberger (2018) support this view by emphasizing that digital nomads are people who no longer work in a conventional office, instead they can decide freely where and when to work, the only requirement is the usage of digital devices and the accessibility of an internet connection.

2.2.5 Digital Nomads and Identity

Sutherland and Jarrahi (2017) introduce the concept of a community identity, where it is stated that individuals considering themselves as digital nomad have a tendency to establish a community identity around them and around the concept of digital nomads. Digital nomads appear to form a community via different events such as conferences and travel programs and community platforms such as Facebook groups. The digital nomad community comes together on many websites that promote resources specifically demanded by this community. Through

all these virtual places where the digital nomads meet, they receive access to a community, but not an organization. Although some diversity among the dimensions of type of digital work, industry, and mobility can be observed, the workers that classify themselves as digital nomad share many similar practices such as a tendency to live in remote places for an undefined period of time. (Sutherland & Jarrahi, 2017)

2.3 Theoretical Point of Departure

In the past decades, new approaches and expectations towards work have become common as described in more detail beforehand. Contingent workers, such as freelancers, gig workers, and digital nomads are by far not uncommon anymore. A well-known similarity of these working models is that employees detach themselves from organizational restrictions and engage in practices that are considered more independent than traditional work roles. For a long time, scholars and students of organizations have assumed that professional identities are tied to the organization that a person is working for (Petriglieri et al., 2018; Hatch & Schultz, 2002). The organizational boundaries enable individuals to develop shared values and working practices as well as a common understanding of what the organization is standing for. As a result, organizational boundaries enable the individual to respond to the questions such as *Who am I* and *Who am I becoming* (Ibarra, 1999). The answer to the above-mentioned question is heavily influenced by the two components of professional identity, namely social and role-based work identity. The social environment in the organization consists of other hired colleagues, out of which the individual chooses its personal in-and out-group, thereby strongly influencing the individual position within the organization. The ascribed role, that the individual receives additionally demands the need for identification. The question that arises in this context is how individuals respond to these questions, if they no longer work in organizations that enable them to identify with these stable factors (Barley, Bechky, & Milliken, 2017).

For a long time, scholars have regarded the organization, its given social environment, and the distributed roles as a main reference point for identity construction – but what happens when

individuals move themselves out of these strong and visible organizational environments? Petrieglieri et al. (2018) have done a first step in researching the connection between identity and gig workers. Nowadays, many workers choose to work independently; as loosely connected, temporary employees. Their research emphasizes that the absence of an organizational holding environment has significant implications for the gig worker as well as for society (Petrieglieri et al., 2018). In different studies, it has been stated that gig workers often pursue their work through platform firms, which are mostly online. Still, there may be a feeling of belonging to the platforms, which may lead to the development of a platform culture, where, similarly to organizations, shared norms and values emerge. This may be an important contributor to identification with a profession and role for gig workers. (Kuhn, 2016)

It is considered extremely relevant to further investigate the observed research gap in the field of identity and digital nomads. Only a limited amount of research has been done to open the field, where there is no concrete research on the potentially different identity construction process of digital nomads as opposed to other gig workers. For the purpose of this thesis, we consider the digital nomad to be location independent in terms of domestic and international mobility and a self-determined digital actor in the labour market. The question that arises is how they construct their professional identities in the absence of an organizational environment. Digital nomads presumably live in a world of constant flux, which substantiates our view on identity, and especially professional identity as a relational construct that is in constant movement. Identity is assumed to be a product of past, present and future, thereby open to develop over time. We expect that the relationship of professional identity changes when the organizational holding environment lacks presence and is substituted by digital devices and communication tools. This is supposedly the case when a person chooses to live a life as a digital nomad, indicating the choice of a self-determined life and to leave the presumably stable and secure organizational environment to a rather extreme state of independence and digitalism. We aim to combine the research on professional identity construction with research on digital nomads in order to gain novel insights in the identity construction process of this group of workers in the labour market.

Chapter 3. Method and Philosophy of Science

The following chapter introduces the reader to the choices performed with regard to the planning of our research strategy. A guiding framework concerning the method development of the thesis is the *research onion* as introduced by Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2009) *(see Figure 1).* The chapter is structured according to the observed levels of the research onion, starting with the outside layer and subsequently proceeding to the inside layers. This chapter explains how the research was designed and evolved through the process of data collection, and analysis. The reader is in detail guided through the layers of philosophy of science, our approach to theory development, research design, methodological strategies, time horizon, and techniques and procedures (in accordance with Saunders et al., 2009). Our individual methodological choices are visualized in *Figure 1.*

Figure 1 - Research Onion
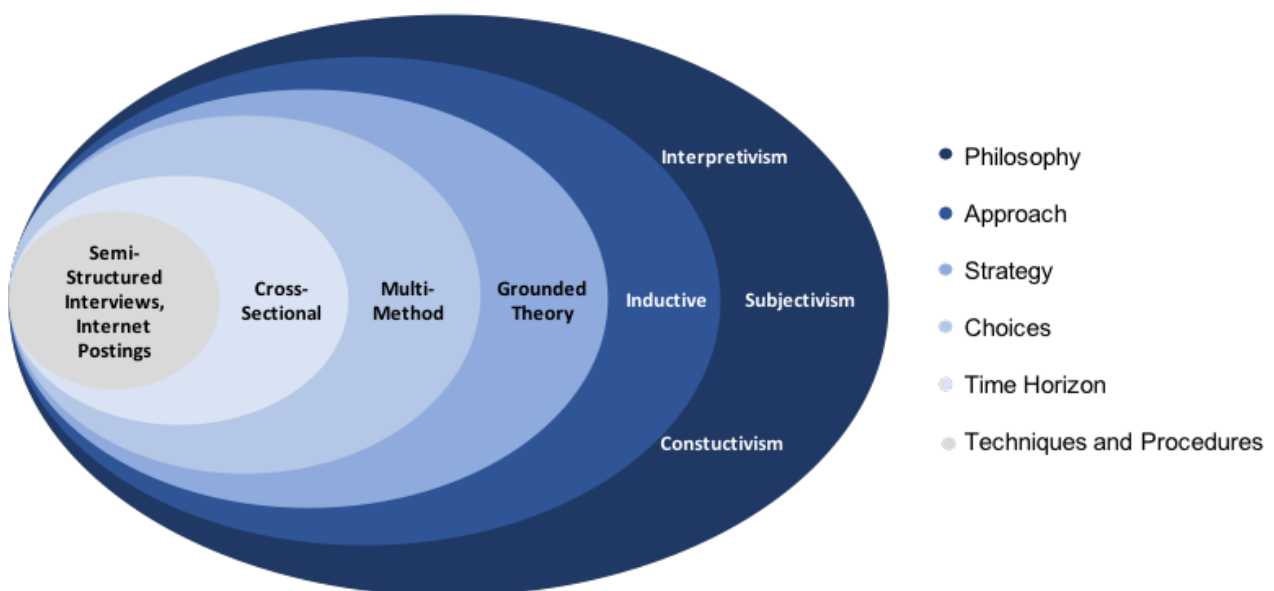
Source: Authors (based on Saunders et al., 2009)

3.1 Philosophy of Science

This section aims to inform about the *philosophy of science* this thesis adopts. The chosen philosophy of science of a research project contains "important assumptions about the way in which you view the world" (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 108), underpinning the research strategy and respective method. The development and nature of knowledge are important considerations when designing the study as researchers need to be aware of the commitments that are made when choosing how to view the world (Saunders et al., 2009). In particular, this section explains "how well we are able to reflect upon our philosophical choices and defend them in relation to the alternatives we could have adopted" (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 108). It is considered useful to scrutinise the taken-for-granted assumptions that humans have about how the world works. There are two well-recognised ways to think about a research philosophy, namely epistemology and ontology (Saunders et al., 2009). The following sections introduces different views on the world and specifically, explain and illustrate the research philosophy guiding our thesis.

3.1.1 Epistemology

Epistemology builds philosophical assumptions mainly concerned which the nature of knowledge, "how we know something, and how knowledge can and (perhaps) must be produced" (Egholm, 2014, p. 28). Epistemology is clustered around the distinction whether objectivity can exist, in line with the question whether there can be truth and untruth. The following presents two contrasting epistemological views that researchers may consider, positivism and interpretivism (Egholm, 2014).

Positivism is a research philosophy commonly adopted when researching in the field of natural science. In social sciences, it deals with observable social realities and research products that "can be law-like generalizations similar to those produced by the physical and natural scientists" (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 113). Within positivism, researchers aim to generate testable hypotheses. Artefacts one observes in the world can be verified through experiments

and logical proof, if not verifiable, there is no proof for existence. In a positivistic world view, objective truth and an absolute reality exists (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Considering these characteristics of a positivistic view on research, we do not consider our research project to be positivistic as the landscape of digital nomads and identity construction is not expected to convey an objective truth and reality.

A contrasting view to positivism is *interpretivism*. This view criticizes a positivistic stance in that the world's complexities cannot be reduced to the generation and analysis of laws, but we must embrace these complexities by highlighting the differences between people and objectives (Saunders et al., 2009). In social science, research appreciates that, through social action and interaction, humans attach subjective meaning to the world (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Specifically, in the landscape of different actors that classify themselves as digital nomads and within the research field of identity theory, it appears feasible to account for the multiple and subjective realities that different actors may have (Bryman & Bell, 2007).

3.1.2 Ontology

In contrast to an epistemological philosophical stance, *ontology* is "concerned with the nature of reality" (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 111). Ontology focuses on how we see the world in our research and how we hold on to different views. There are two contrasting views considered central to ontology, objectivism and subjectivism (Saunders et al., 2009). *Objectivism* assumes that "social entities exist in reality external to social actors" (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 111). Ontological objectivism detaches social entities and social actors. Opposingly, *subjectivism* concerns what meaning individuals attach to a certain social phenomenon. There is no objective state of a situation, but situations are in constant flux. Consequently, whereas within ontological objectivism humans are fitted into a created social world, subjectivism assumes that realities are created from individuals (Bryman & Bell 2007; Saunders et al., 2009).

Deriving from ontological subjectivism, we introduce the philosophical stance of *social constructivism*. This philosophical stance aims to explore "the subjective meanings motivating

the actions of social actors [...] to be able to understand these actions" (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 112). A central feature of social constructivism is that reality is socially constructed. As we aim to investigate the process of professional identity construction of individual digital nomads, it appears reasonable to view the process from a social constructionist perspective. Realities are considered as "multiple, intangible mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific in nature […]" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, pp. 110-111). Social construction implies that the individual reality is subjective, and we need to study specific situations to understand an individual's reality. Phenomena are created in specific contexts and are not necessarily transferable to other contexts (Egholm, 2014). Social order cannot be pre-determined and "social phenomena and categories are not only produced through social interaction, but they are in a constant state of revision" (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p. 23). We investigate the process of how identity is constructed and how meaning becomes attached to situations. As introduced in the literature review, we do not intend to uncover universal causalities but focus on the process of identity by the means of subjective interpretation. This study aims to uncover a variety of individual truths about digital nomadism and professional identity but does not aim to generalize the results to the broader mass of digital nomads.

3.2 Approach to Theory Development

This section explains the link between the theory development and the research design in general. The extent of theory specification when starting the research project has important implications for the design of the research project (Saunders et al., 2009). There are two common approaches to develop theory, namely *deduction* and *induction*. When using a deductive approach, one or more hypotheses are developed and subsequently, a research strategy is designed to either accept or reject these hypotheses (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Ultimately, deduction aims to explain a causal relationship between two or more variables (Saunders et al., 2009). In contrast, an inductive approach to theory development implies that one collects data first and successively engages in the corresponding theory development to

derive theory from the data (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Induction is said to be more flexible in that inductive research allows for change as the research progresses (Saunders et al., 2009).

Our research design makes primarily use of an inductive research design. As stated by Saunders et al. (2009), inductive research is useful when one aims to obtain an understanding of the underlying meanings that humans attach to certain events. Additionally, an inductive approach is particularly useful when conducting a qualitative research study, which applies for this thesis. Originally, induction and deduction are viewed as two separate and rigid concepts. In this context, rigid means that the two approaches to theory development cannot be mixed. However, Saunders et al. (2009) state that it is not only possible to combine induction and deduction, but it is potentially advantageous for the research to do so. In Egholm's (2014) research, it is stated that it is impossible to exclusively engage in either induction or deduction. Therefore, we state that we are not only making use of an inductive approach but are using a mixed approach of induction and deduction, where induction is the primary approach. The literature on digital nomads constitutes a research area where only limited research has been conducted yet. Therefore, it is important to consider the different views of social actors on the emergence of digital nomadism in the context of independent workers. Conducting qualitative research in the form of interviews with a small sample size appears relevant to retrieve insights.

An inductive research approach is largely considered to be a theory-independent, qualitative study. However, different scholars state that induction always includes deductive elements in the research process as well. Mostly, a theoretical background is necessary to derive the research setting (Bryman & Bell, 2007). The process of developing our thesis is coined by a back and forth process between theory and observations to allow for change to ultimately answer our proposed research question. An *iterative* process allowed the authors to select relevant literature for data analysis and to adapt the questionnaire as a result of new insights gained throughout the interview phase (Saunders et al, 2009). Specifically, in the period of data collection, we adapted the focus of the questions according to different responses.

3.3 Research Design

After having introduced the research philosophy and approach, we proceed with the research design, which describes the procedure on how we are planning to answer the research question (Saunders et. al, 2009). This section turns our attention to the methodological strategies applied during the study. After classifying the nature of the data, we examine the time horizon of our study. Subsequently, we outline our methodological choices including data collection techniques and analysis procedures. We close this section by having a detailed look at research credibility and validity as well as ethics of our research design.

3.3.1 Methodological Strategies

Before introducing the methodological strategy applied during this study, we first classify the research purpose as it has a direct influence on the strategy used. One of the most popular classification in research methods literature is the threefold one of *exploratory, descriptive* and *explanatory* (Saunders et al., 2009). These categories are not mutually exclusive, meaning that studies can be classified into multiple categories, which can change over time (Saunders et al., 2009). Bearing the research philosophy and approach in mind, this study can be classified as one of exploratory and descriptive nature. Exploratory studies are helpful for finding out "what is happening; to seek new insights; to ask questions and to assess phenomena in a new light" (Robson, 2002, p. 59). In correspondence with this definition, the study aims to shed light on two previously unconnected fields of research: identity construction and digital nomads. According to Adams and Schvaneveldt (1991), the advantage of exploratory studies comprises their flexible and adaptable nature. The focus of the study is initially broad and progressively narrows down as the research proceeds. Throughout the interview process, a catalogue of many questions was used (*see Appendix A*). Specifically, the focus of the interviews shifted as a result of the content delivered by the interviewee. Often-mentioned topics throughout the first interviews were recognized and specifically addressed in the remaining interview process. As an example, we identified throughout the interviews

that many of the digital nomads need some stability in their lives. Therefore, in the later interviews, we focused on finding the elements that provide the individual with stability.

Simultaneously, this study can also be categorized as descriptive as we aim to "portray an accurate profile of persons, events or situations" (Robson, 2002, p. 59), namely of the identity construction of digital nomads. In line with Saunders et al. (2009), who believe that these descriptions "should be thought of as a means to an end rather than an end in itself" (p. 140), we aim to derive interesting insights, thus going beyond the descriptive nature of our data.

Many research strategies, that are applicable to exploratory and descriptive studies, exist, among which we selected the most relevant one. We affirm that the research contains features of *grounded theory*. Grounded theory is considered to be one of the most significant research strategies for qualitative studies and has proven particularly useful for exploring integral social relationships and the behaviour of groups where there has been little exploration before (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Thus, finding out more about an emerging group of workers and their professional identity construction fits the grounded theory approach. We follow Saunders et al.'s (2009) thoughts on *grounded theory*, who state that it is too simplistic to think of it as an inductive approach only. It is a mixture of induction and deduction, "meaning that the data collection and analysis proceed in tandem, repeatedly referring back to each other" (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 576). We did not start our data collection with an initial framework in mind but developed it as a result of insights derived from conducting interviews and data collected online.

3.3.2 Methodological Choices

The terms *quantitative* and *qualitative* are widely used in research to differentiate data collection as well as data analysis techniques. To find an answer to the proposed research question, and in line with the choices presented in previous sections, we conduct qualitative research in form of interviews and data gathered online. Most of the characteristics essential to quantitative research are opposing to the choices made in our previous methodology

sections, such as that quantitative studies often require numerical data collection. Instead, we regard a qualitative research as appropriate, as "its purpose is to understand and interpret the meaning of human interaction and social phenomena, [...] it involves inductive thinking, [...] reality is constructed by the researcher, [...] it uses in-depth study, often a small number of individuals or settings." (Lichtman, 2014, pp. 12– 13).

Moreover, the term qualitative is predominantly utilized as a synonym for data collection and analysis procedures that use non-numerical data. In line with this definition, we used non-numerical data in form of interviews with digital nomads and information from posts obtained in the Facebook groups *Digital Nomads around the World* (Facebook, 2019a) and *Female Digital Nomads* (Facebook, 2019b). Therefore, we claim to use a *multi-method qualitative study* (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Overall, by conducting qualitative research, we aim to shed light on a complex social phenomenon and contribute meaningful data of reality (Lichtman, 2014; Rasmussen, Østergaard & Beckmann, 2006).

3.3.3 Time Horizon

Considering the research onion introduced by Saunders et al. (2009), it is important to clarify the time horizon of the research design. Researchers differentiate between a *cross-sectional* or *longitudinal* time horizon. While a cross-sectional perspective is rather a snapshot of the current situation, longitudinal studies are mainly concerned about a development and change over time (Saunders et al., 2009). Due to the time-constraint of this project, we follow a cross-sectional research design. The study deals with how digital nomads construct their identity at a certain point in time instead of analysing how construction developed over an extended period of time. We focus on the present and conduct interviews over a short time span of approximately four weeks.

3.4 Techniques and Procedures

Techniques and *procedures,* which are located at the centre of the research onion, deal with the data collection and analysis process (Saunders et al., 2009). As digital nomadism in conjunction with identity constitutes a new research field, primary data is essential. The data provides us with up-to-date information such as interviews and Facebook posts, which were gathered for the purpose of this thesis. While the primary data plays a crucial role in this study, we use secondary data to enrich our research further (Bryman & Bell, 2015). By using secondary data from the field of gig workers, we filter out similarities and differences between those two groups of workers. The literature review is based on secondary sources and presents an overview of previously published articles in the field of identity and digital nomadism.

3.4.1 Primary Data

To find out more about the digital nomad community, their lifestyle and way of working, we made use of interviews. Prior to starting the data collection, we joined the Facebook groups *Digital Nomads around the World* (Facebook, 2019a) and *Female Digital Nomads (*Facebook, 2019b), which are two very large digital nomad community platforms online, considering the member counts of approximately 101.000 and approximately 50.000 people. Out of this group, we randomly selected potential interview partners, stating our interest in the digital nomad community and asking whether they would be available for an interview *(see Table 1).*

An interview is a purposeful discussion between two or more people and helps the researcher to gain reliable and valid data that is relevant for answering the research question (Saunders et al., 2009). In general, interviews can be highly structured and formalized, using a standardized set of questions or take on the form of an unstructured and informal conversation (Saunders et al., 2009). One of the most commonly used typologies in the academic field places interviews on a continuum between *structured* and *unstructured* interviews (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Saunders et al., 2009). Structured interviews make use of

standardized and identical questions for each interview partner, whereas unstructured interviews do not have a predetermined list of questions; the interviewee is given the chance to talk freely about behaviours, beliefs, and events related to a certain topic. In between the ends of the continuum lies the *semi-structured interview*. In a semi-structured interview, which is also often referred to as *qualitative research interview,* where the researcher prepares questions prior to the interview, although these may vary from interview to interview (Saunders et al., 2009). Depending on the flow of the conversation, the order of the questions may vary as well. As we aim to gain deeper insights into what the digital nomads perceive themselves as relevant and important, we made use of the semi-structured interview approach. Thus, before conducting the interviews, we set up an interview guide *(see Appendix A)*. However, the flexibility of the semi-structured interview enabled us to follow up on selected and unexpected responses from the interviewee.

3.4.2 Interview Structure

Prior to conducting the first interview, we prepared "a list of questions on fairly specific topics to be covered, often referred to as an interview guide, but the interview has a great deal of leeway in how to reply" (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 467). Questions were grouped in six different overall topics, namely general information about digital nomads, way of working, community thought, digital aspect, location independence, and self-determination.

A detailed version of the interview guide is provided in *Appendix A*. Most of the questions were asked in form of *open-ended questions*, which enabled us to "follow interesting lines of inquiry and to facilitate an unbroken discussion" (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p. 139). This approach proved to be especially useful as it encouraged "the interviewee to provide an extensive and developmental answer" (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 337) and enabled us to sense attitudes and beliefs.

Table 1 - Overview of Interviewees

Interview #	Interview Type	Nationality	Location	Profession	Age	Gender
#1	Skype Interview	Canadian	Vietnam	Software Engineer, Consultant	27	Male
#2	Skype Interview	Ukrainian	Ukraine	Retail Marketing	32	Female
#3	Skype Interview	US American	USA	Consultant	49	Male
#4	Skype Interview	Australian	Indonesia	Digital Designer, Front-End Developer	25	Female
#5	Skype Interview	Australian	Australia	Coach	32	Female
#6	Skype Interview	German	Guyana	Consultant	28	Male
#7	Skype Interview	UK	Bulgaria	Accountant	32	Male
#8	Skype Interview	Austrian	Austria	Consultant, Social Media Expert	30	Female
#9	Skype Interview	Lithuanian	France	Marketing, Social Media Manager	27	Female
#10	Skype Interview	Norwegian	Norway	Consultant	28	Female
#11	Skype Interview	US American	Morocco	Revenue Management Consultant	37	Female
#12	Skype Interview	UK	Ukraine	Translator	28	Female
#13	Skype Interview	Dutch	Sri Lanka	Affiliate Marketing Services	32	Male
#14	Skype Interview	French	Indonesia	Headhunter	41	Female
#15	Skype Interview	Danish	Vietnam	Teacher, Online Researcher	34	Female

Source: Authors

The interview guide was adjusted and revised several times until a final structure was set up. In the process of conducting the interviews, we added and omitted questions as well as changed the order directly in response to the answers given by the interviewee. Depending on the interviewees and the set time limit, we focused on some topic areas more heavily than on other ones. In line with Bryman and Bell's (2015) semi-structured interview approach, we conducted the interviews in an informal manner but while talking to the digital nomads, we always kept in mind: "what do I [we] need to know to answer […] the research question I am [we are] interested in?" (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p.475). In light of the fact that digital nomads are geographically spread around the world, interviews were conducted via telephone instead of making use of face-to-face interviews. However, limitations of telephone interviews need to be accounted for (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Skype interviews are in general shorter than those that occur in person. However, this limitation posed by Bryman & Bell (2015) did not

encounter any issues, as most of our interviewees were talkative and if otherwise, we were able to convince them to go through the remaining questions. The interviews took between 45 minutes and one hour and were mainly conducted using Skype video function. However, some interviewees were more comfortable talking with audio function only, which did not enable us to observe non-verbal behaviour, such as how the participants reacted to questions in a physical sense (Saunders et al., 2009). Furthermore, the internet connection during the skype calls with the interviewees was not always stable. Therefore, some sections of the interviews were retrospectively excluded due to the poor audio quality.

3.4.3 Data Processing

The conducted interviews were recorded and transcribed with the speech recognition software *Temi*, and subsequently checked for accuracy by both authors. In order to preserve fluency, some improvements concerning grammar and spelling were made. Still, this was only the case if the meaning was vague and thus, falsified. The qualitative data analysis software NVivo was used to code the data. The fact that we audio-recorded all conducted interviews allowed us to re-listen carefully. This process provided unbiased and precise accounts of the conversation and hence, enabled a more detailed examination of the answers. Furthermore, the transcription process allowed the use of direct quotations in the analysis. Before starting the interview, we asked the interviewee for his or her permission to record the interview. The transcription and analysis of the data already started before all the interviews were completed. This enabled the detection of emerging themes and questions that we be included in the remaining interviews.

NVivo Coding Process

In order to gain a detailed understanding of the data collected, NVivo was used. Before creating a coding scheme, we reviewed the 15 detailed transcripts of the interviews in order to familiarize ourselves with the data.

To start the coding process, the categories used in the interview guide were used as themes for the first order codes. To exemplify, these codes were namely general information, way of working, community thoughts, digital, location independence, and self-determination. Subsequently, we started to match the content of the interviews to the codes and started to create several sub-codes, up to fourth order codes. Already in the beginning of the coding process, we realized that it is a highly iterative process. Thus, all of the codes were repeatedly adapted throughout the process. In order to retain the sense of the interviews within the coding scheme, we had to redefine, create, merge and alter the codes to secure that the final coding scheme matches to content of the interviews. Breaking down the first order codes enabled us to gain a detailed understanding of our data (*see Appendix B for the coding book*).

The following section will give a detailed example of our coding process for the category *benefits.* Throughout the interviews, we recognized that many interviewees expressed the advantages of the digital nomadism lifestyle. Consequently, the first order code *benefits* emerged. In relation to this code, buzzwords and phrases such as "freely decide" (#1), "freedom" (e.g. #4, #5), "take my own decision" (#1) led us to the assumption that *taking own decisions* is a crucial benefit of digital nomadism to the individual. Thus, this forms the second order code. The iterative process allowed us to find further categories within the second order code. We noticed that not only freedom in general, but freedom in terms of location, time, and task are relevant for the individual, therefore, third order codes were classified accordingly (*see Appendix B*).

> *"I can also freely decide on where to go on this planet. That is one of the biggest benefits. I don't have to stay in any particular country. If I want to go somewhere, I will be there next month, it's not a problem."* (#1)

This quote represents this thought as the interviewee specifically states his desire for location independence. Therefore, this response is classified within the third order code *location-related* under the second order code *taking own decisions.*

Another third order code identified to the second order code *taking own decisions* was *time-related.* The fact that interviewees regarded time-related freedom as important element of their lifestyle was identified by quotes such as:

"[…] I no longer have to be doing that work for this set of time because, you know, we're not factory workers and as such you don't have the same amount of workload every day." (#3)

Overall, these examples represent how we proceed throughout the coding process. The perception that each interview's core content was captured in our coding scheme led to the end of the coding process. For further reference, the coding book, an exemplary coding table as well as the transcripts are to be found in *Appendix B, C,* and *D*.

Online Data

In addition to using interviews as a data source, we made use of complementary online data. Upon deciding the topic for this thesis, we searched on Facebook for groups we could join in order to get in touch with members and to gain insights into the community. We joined the two Facebook groups *Digital Nomads Around the World* and *Female Digital Nomads.* In order to further support our findings, we searched for relevant content in the Facebook group using buzzwords. For example, searching for the term *home base* led us to a post in which the desire to settle down is discussed and a member of the community asks for input and experiences of others. The post received more than 140 responses, which indicated the importance of having a home base for digital nomads and thus supports our line of argumentation. Thereby, our findings gained credibility.

Additionally, we issued a Facebook post in the group *Female Digital Nomads* concerning the topic of pride. Specifically, we asked members:

"Some inspiration needed: Are you proud to be a digital nomad?"

After posting, the responses were scanned, and the relevant ones selected to support our findings. In this case, respondents stated that they are proud to live the life of a digital nomad and be part of the community. The process in general enables us to match other participants than the interviewees to our research. The members of the Facebook group did not know about our research and therefore, we received unbiased responses to the question.

3.4.4 Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity are extremely important when assessing the quality of the measurement procedure of a quantitative study (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Reliability refers to the extent to which the data collection technique results in constant and stable findings, meaning that other researchers need to be able to perform exactly the same study under the same conditions and come to the same results (Bryman & Bell, 2015). It is a necessary ingredient for determining the overall validity of the scientific study, which is concerned with whether the findings truly represent the phenomenon the researchers are claiming to measure (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Even though the concepts of reliability and validity can also be used in qualitative research, we supported an alternative research stream, which emphasizes that "qualitative studies should be evaluated according to quite different criteria from those used by quantitative researchers" (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 395). This is mainly due to the fact that measurement itself is not considered to be a key preoccupation among qualitative researchers. As stated in the research philosophy, we take on the view that there is no measurable, absolute truth in the social world. Thus, the concepts of reliability and validity need to be adjusted in a qualitative research setting (Bryman & Bell, 2015). To assess the quality of our study we adopted Guba and Lincoln's (1994) proposed criteria of *trustworthiness* and *authenticity*. As the practicality of the authenticity criteria is not yet proven, we focus on the criteria of trustworthiness which includes four sub-criteria, namely *credibility, transferability, dependability,* and *conformability* (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The following paragraphs briefly introduce and explain these.

The significance of multiple accounts of social reality becomes especially relevant in the criteria of *credibility.* If there can be multiple accounts of social reality, "it is the credibility and plausibility of the account that a researcher arrives at that is going to determine its acceptability to others" (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 398). Thus, to reach a certain degree of credibility it is important to both guarantee that the study is conducted according to rules of good practice and that the findings are distributed to and agreed upon by the interviewees to confirm that the interviewer understood their social world (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Due to time constraints of this study, this validation process already took place during the data collection process. If there was the need for clarification, we investigated the topic further by asking follow-up questions.

The collection of rich data provides other researchers with what Guba and Lincoln (1994) refer to as "database for making judgments about the possible *transferability* of findings to other milieux" (as cited in Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 402). By combining the research field of identity and digital nomads, we tapped into a previously underdeveloped research field. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the fact that our findings cannot be easily transferred to other research fields as an exact replication of the study would not be possible, meaning that interviewing the same persons and using the same interview guide would most likely lead to different replies and findings (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Similar to the concept of reliability in quantitative research, Guba and Lincoln (1994) introduce the notion of *dependability* and propose that researchers should adopt an auditing approach in form of keeping a detailed record of the entire research process (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Especially in the ever-changing environment of digital nomads, freezing the social circumstances and conditions, that existed when the interviews were conducted, is impossible. However, by means of keeping records of the problem formulation, selection of interviewees, interview transcripts, and data analysis decisions, we tried to ensure that researchers can retrace the study to some extent.

Confirmability refers to the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents' and not researcher's motivation or interests. Even though an absolute objectivity cannot be guaranteed in qualitative research, we always strived to act in good faith (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In other words, we were determined not to let personal values or theoretical dispositions influence the research process and findings derived from it.

3.5 Research Ethics

Research ethics provides guidelines for the responsible conduct of scientific research. It is essential to adhere to ethical principles to protect the dignity and rights of research participants. It is often believed that there is a single set of ethical principle that should guide individual behaviour. However, as Bryman and Bell (2015) note, there is no common view in academic literature on what is regarded as ethical or unethical. Therefore, we decided to place our own values at the forefront of our behaviour. During the entire research process, we aimed to act according to Bell & Bryman's (2015) ethical principles, namely *informed consent, transparency, protection of privacy* and *data confidentiality*. To guarantee a fully informed consent of interviewees, we offered a short written and oral introduction to our research. We briefly explained the purpose of our research and emphasized why their insights and experiences add value to our study. Although we did not use the term identity itself in the introduction, we were committed to follow a transparent and credible research process. Data was always treated confidentially. Therefore, names of interviewees were never mentioned in public and to fully ensure their privacy, we decided to anonymize the interview data.

Chapter 4. Findings

The following chapter outlines and analyses the findings of the qualitative data gathered throughout the interview process. In order to answer the research question, we derived a framework that displays the proposed process of professional identity construction for digital nomads (*see Figure 2*). The findings section is structured as follows. First, we provide an extensive overview of the different elements comprising the identity construction process framework. Subsequently, we unpack each element and analyse it in more detail, starting with the motivation leading to the decision to *escape the system*. The next section, *becoming a digital nomad*, examines diverging self-conceptions and definitions interviewees revealed regarding digital nomadism. Next, the main pillars *freedom* and *anchor*, the role of *pride* and potentially resulting *tensions* between the elements will be analysed. The section closes with an examination of the *role of digital devices and connectivity* in the identity process of digital nomads as well as a summary of the main findings.

4.1 Professional Identity Construction of Digital Nomads

The conceptual framework, that guides the following findings section, is displayed in *Figure 2*. The framework focuses on the main pillars the identity construction process of digital nomads is based on. In line with the proposed literature as a backbone to our data analysis, professional identity construction is considered as a continuous process (Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Schultz & Hernes, 2013). Thus, the framework consists of a loop with no clear starting and ending point. In light of the identity construction process, the framework can be seen as twofold. The first part, consisting of the elements *system escape* and *becoming a digital nomad,* symbolizes the shift the interviewees have experienced from their previous life, commonly characterized by being settled and working for an organization, towards their new lifestyle as a digital nomad. In this regard, drivers of the lifestyle as well as the way individuals define digital nomadism are assumed to influence how they make sense of themselves.

Figure 2 – Professional Identity Construction of Digital Nomads
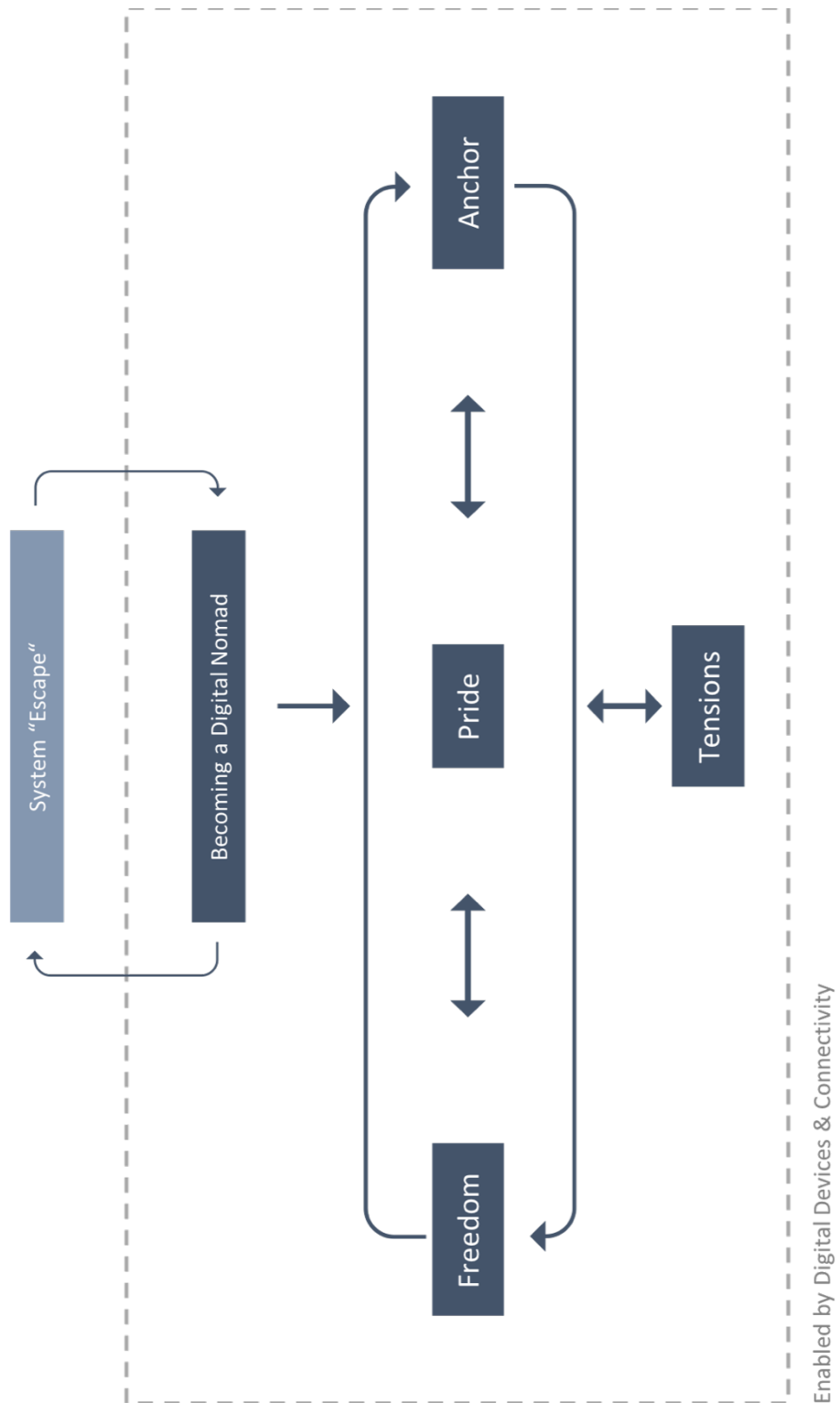
Source: Authors

Once individuals have escaped the system, the second part describes the daily work involved in finding their place in the new environment. We identified two main pillars in the identity construction process, namely *freedom* and *anchor*. In our study, digital nomads' self-concepts were based on being a self-determined individual. However, interviewees indicated seeking for an anchor that provides them with more stability in life. We assume that the counter dynamics of freedom and anchor create emotional tensions digital nomads have to cope with in their daily life, which in turn also influence the way they make sense of themselves. Additionally, the digital nomads we studied revealed pride towards being a self-determined individual as well as to being part of the community, which anchors them to like-minded people. The satisfying effect caused by pride reinforces the importance of freedom and anchoring as integral part of the interviewee's identity. Lastly, digital devices and connectivity were identified as the basic requirement to be able to live the life of a digital nomad. Throughout the process of asking the interviewees whether they identify with being a digital nomad, the answers did not include a reference to the term *digital* once. Thus, we assume, that digital devices and connectivity are the enabler for the lifestyle but only indirectly influence the identity construction process, which is displayed by the dotted line around the elements of the framework.

4.2 System "Escape"

The first element of the introduced framework considers a potential system escape. Here, system refers to the societal system that all people are growing up in, which includes manifold classifications into social groups, wealth categories, societal expectations to the individual, and organizational belongingness (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). As people are moving forward in their lives, there is a constant process of evaluation and re-evaluation, which includes questions such as *Who am I* and *Who am I becoming* (Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004; Ibarra, 1999). Individuals potentially encounter the point where they are not satisfied with the system around them, which may include their perceived position within their social as well as organizational environment (e.g. #14, #10). Realising the dissatisfaction with the system one is a part of, individuals may decide to leave the organizational environment and recognize the

potential that today's globalised and digitalised world offers to them (e.g. #13). In previous research, it was emphasized that the individual identification was not only based on a professional and personal identity, but also largely influenced by the organizational identification.

Hereby, the organization can be seen as a construct where the individual identifies with the collective understanding of other organizational members. As a result, the professional identity is impacted by the organizational identification (Bothma, Llyod & Khapova, 2015; Hatch & Schultz, 1997). An important point for departure is that the individuals deciding to pursue a lifestyle of a digital nomad leave the organizational environment behind. This indicates that there is no organizational system and setting that the individual can continuously rely on, that ascribes a role to be fulfilled to the individual, or that may define the social environment and roles for the individuals around one. Consequently, we explore the elements that are part of the professional identity construction in absence of an organizational environment in more detail. Our interviewees indicated various factors why they have chosen to become a digital nomad. Within the data analysis process, we categorized these into push and pull factors. The following two sections introduce the factors that push an individual away from their known system as well as the factors that pull individuals towards becoming a digital nomad. A summary of the factors is provided in *Table 2*.

Table 2 - Push and Pull Factors leading to Digital Nomadism

Push Factors	Pull Factors
9 to 5 Routine	Freedom of Choice
Societal Expectations	Travelling
Materialistic Lifestyle	Work Ownership

Source: Authors

4.2.1 Push Factors

We identified three factors within the data analysis process that push individuals away from their familiar social and organizational system, namely *9 to 5 routine, societal expectations,* and a *materialistic lifestyle.*

9 to 5 Routine

Throughout the interview process, interviewees were asked how they experienced working in a stable organization. Many of the interviewees expressed their dissatisfaction in this context and pointed to the downsides of working in an organization (e.g. #3, #5, #9). A concern mentioned frequently was that many individuals do not want to have their daily routine be dictated in form of having to work set working hours, as it is most common to work from 9 to 5. As pointed out by one interviewee, "you can feel a bit trapped by set working hours and it can feel like you're wasting time in the office" (#7), emphasizing the desire to design the structure and tasks of every working day himself. Especially in the western world, it is common that one needs to physically be in the office during the main business hours. The habit of going to work every day in between these hours is perceived not valuable by many digital nomads, which can be seen in relation to the factor freedom as a main concern. The individuals prefer to determine their working hours by themselves. One interviewee pointed out that:

> *"I like my freedom a lot. What I found most thrilling about becoming a digital nomad was to have the freedom of choice in every aspect of life. Like I did work in an office, in a corporate, for like three years and every day I hated it. I hated getting up and doing the same thing over and over and over and then coming home and going to bed and knowing that was going to be the rest of my life. So, I think that's why I chose this. Like to be able to see new things, have new experiences all the time."* (#15)

The routine is perceived as monotonous and therefore, individuals look for alternatives in order to escape the non-promising daily routine.

A 9 to 5 routine does not only relate to the business hours where an individual has to work, but often to the obligation to be present at the working space, thereby binding individuals to a specific location. Working in an organization does, most often, not enable the individual to work location independently, which was classified by several interviewees as not particularly desirable, supported by the statement that "[…] obviously there's very little quality of life when you have to be in a certain place five days out of seven" (#5). Even though it appeared that the downsides of working in an organizational environment outweigh the benefits, it was expressed that individuals realised the absence of organizational support and direction. As stated by one interviewee, she desires to have someone to give her performance reviews and motivate her when she is doing something good (#9). These results are similar to outcomes of Petriglieri et al. (2018), who state that "participants noted the lack of organizational direction and support in their current working conditions" (p. 11).

Societal Expectations

Besides the expressed dissatisfaction with the organizational system, a number of interviewees also pointed to another element that one potentially escapes from, which are the perceived high expectations from society, specifically from family and friends. These high expectations are perceived negative and limiting as it ascribes them a certain role and a desired behaviour in their societal environment. It was emphasized that there are many expectations on what one should do and how one should behave, for example, when it is about time to buy a house, get married or settle down in general (e.g. #7, #10, #13, #14). This supports the notion that pursuing a life as a digital nomad appears to be a system escape, as emphasized by one interviewee who had the feeling of "[…] not specifically fitting with the typical society on how we are raised and how we are told that work and life is going to happen" (#14). This statement indicates there is only a limited perceived fit with society and, to some extent, a feeling of difference to other societal actors. In line, another interviewee supported the previous argument by stating that her sister, with whom she perceives herself having a close relationship, does not completely support her choice of lifestyle. This reflects that many digital nomads are continuously confronted with the societal norms' others desire to stick to:

"She thinks, you know, it's childish and I need to grow up and buy a house and get married and have children. And especially a lot of older people judge me for being almost 34, still single with no children and people are still not always completely open to the idea of the different lifestyle." (#15)

Materialistic Lifestyle

A frequently mentioned factor pushing interviewees towards the system escape refers to the refusal to live a materialistically-controlled life. Throughout the analysis of the data, the connection between societal expectations and materialistic lifestyle becomes obvious; the possession of certain status symbols such as houses and cars as well as a high income appear to influence how other people perceive individuals (#7). In line with this argumentation, one respondent stated that "you've got to be, you know, squeezing the biggest amount of time, productivity, profit, whatever it is. You've got to be maximizing everything" (#7), thereby emphasizing the relevance of ownership within the society.

"The most obvious thing why I decided to move, is to escape the – let's say – American lifestyle. What I mean is always spending money and talking about what I'm going to buy, what I earn and so on. It's all about the ownership experience. I was really tired of this materialism. I'm happier with life now, I'm actually very satisfied." (#1),

said one respondent. Materialism is not found to be at the core of a digital nomad lifestyle. Many respondents pointed to their new focus in life, which is not about money and possessions, but about happiness and purpose (e.g. #1, #7, #13).

Overall, the interviewees are expressing that both a dissatisfying organizational experience, perceived high societal expectations as well as the refusal of a materialistic lifestyle appear to trigger the critical re-evaluation of the current situation and may be an important indicator for the consideration of escaping the system and becoming a digital nomad. The pull factors

to become a digital nomad will be further explored in the next section.

4.2.2 Pull Factors

Besides factors that push individuals away from the system, we identified factors that specifically pull individual towards the life as a digital nomad. Namely, these factors are *freedom of choice, travelling,* and *work ownership.*

Freedom of Choice

One of the most outstanding factors that push individuals towards digital nomadism is the pursuit of freedom. All of our interviewees mentioned that the freedom to perform choices for themselves, solely based on the individual ideas, dreams, and values, is not only important, but drives them towards the decision for a lifestyle that enables this. As stated by one interviewee, "what I found most thrilling about becoming a digital nomad was to have the freedom of choice in every aspect of life" (#15). Individuals expressed that they prefer to decide for themselves when to do what and when to be where. They do not like to follow general norms as prescribed by society, their friends and family or their organization. The factor freedom appears to be the main driving force to engage in digital nomadism and consequently, forms one pillar of the professional identity construction process. Therefore, freedom will be analysed in the very detail later on in this findings section.

Travelling

In line with the general notion of a nomad, the responses of the interview process emphasize that the travelling is a frequently-named pull factor when deciding to become a digital nomad. The ones that perceive the lifestyle as a digital nomad appealing, desire to travel the world. For them, digital nomadism creates an opportunity to engage in a full-time travel lifestyle. One interviewee summarized the reasons why she has chosen to be a digital nomad as "[...] I just love to experience living in new places and experience different cultures" (#14). Another interviewee emphasized a similar motivation, as he states that he puts his "[...] own happiness first, which is I [he] want[s] to travel" (#13).

Overall, it appears that the desire to travel is a primary motivation to become a digital nomad.

Work Ownership

Besides a focus on freedom and travelling, work ownership is considered relevant when it comes to the decision to become a digital nomad. Several respondents mentioned that being an independent worker increases the ownership experience. As emphasized by the respondents, when starting to work independently, one starts to invest time and energy in the tasks and topics that one is passionate about. They become involved in something, as "it was more aligned with other things that I wanted to do which was like take more ownership for my work and have a bit more freedom with it all" (#4). Tasks related to the interviewees' own passion were perceived as particularly positive and fulfilling in contrast to tasks they were obliged to perform. (e.g. #6, #15)

Accompanying the increased degree of work ownership, individuals also perceive that digital nomadism provides them with growth opportunities, especially opportunities when one compares working in a stable organization to working independently. This is highlighted by one interviewee who stated "[…] I think if I would have the stability, I wouldn't grow, and I wouldn't learn as many things as I can and as I learn now" (#9), implying that the stable organizational setting impedes the full learning experience and prevents one from growing in skills. Within this line of argumentation, another interviewee stated that "[…] I got bored really quickly and I didn't like to get micromanaged and get my ideas turned down" (#8). This statement supports the former argumentation that many individuals choosing to live the lifestyle of a digital nomad desire to be one's own master instead of relying on the decision-making of colleagues and superiors.

4.2.3 A Life in Constant Change

These different reasons, as analysed above, are considered relevant drivers in the decision for a lifestyle as a digital nomad. In the course of re-evaluating *Who am I and Who am I becoming*, the drivers and motives for the lifestyle play an important role as these guide individuals in their quest for identity. In line with the theoretical backbone introduced formerly in this thesis, professional identity is not assumed to be a stable construct, but to be in constant movement. In the process of identity construction, individuals make sense of their environment, consisting of differing contexts and people (Beijaard et al., 2004). Since digital nomads are mostly location independent, this implies that individuals are constantly moving forward in the world. One respondent put it this way:

> ***#7:*** *"I can see there's definitely parts of it that I've kind of refusing to grow up a little bit in certain areas. A lot of it is difficult to know whether it's, it's hard to know what has come from age, what has come from changes in lifestyle, you know, what has come from other changes you're making in other areas of your life and what has genuinely, you know, what you're actually feeling."* (#7)

> ***Charlotte:*** *"Yes, definitely. I mean, it's probably also a combination of all of it. I mean moving forward in life, but also changing like the boundaries."*

> ***#7:*** *"Yes, exactly. It's all in flux, you know? It's very hard to know. I definitely, I think some of it has got to be attributable to the lifestyle."* (#7)

The social environment of a digital nomad is fluctuating constantly, as not only the individual oneself is moving forward in time and space, but also the other social actors one meets along the way and their environment are in flux. The interpretation and sensemaking of the contexts, relationships, and environments one encounters are manifold, therefore, it is assumed that the individual reality is in constant flux. The desire

to break out the conventional box of societal expectations, the motivation, and finally also the decision to become a digital nomad impacts how one identifies with oneself and others. In order to answer the question *Who am I* and *Who am I becoming*, one may be intending to find a more concrete self-definition and thereby keeping the identity work constantly going (Beech et al., 2012). While asking our interviewees the question whether they consider themselves a digital nomad and what their own understanding of digital nomadism is, it became visible that there are many diverging understandings of what a digital nomad is and whether one identifies with this definition.

In conclusion, the data analysis uncovered the pull and push factors that impact the individual's decision to engage in the digital nomad lifestyle. Still, we recognize that interviewees attach individual meanings to digital nomadism and correspondingly, different bases for identification exist, as investigated in the next section.

4.3 Becoming a Digital Nomad

The re-evaluation process leads to the decision to leave the familiar environment and to live the life of a digital nomad. The specific reasons to come to this decision vary greatly among the individuals. This section does not aim to give a definition of the term digital nomad but to emphasize the various responses to the question of what digital nomadism actually is, reflecting the subjectivism in the identification with the general concept.

4.3.1 Diverging Self-Definitions of Digital Nomads

As one interviewee pointed out, "[...] as with any word that anyone decides to use, everyone's got their own exact definition of what it means" (#7), supporting the notion that one cannot generalize what digital nomadism is in the subjective realities of the individual. Digital nomadism as such is open to interpretation (e.g. #1, #13, #15). Whereas for a few individuals it appears clear that it is about moving around and working online, the majority of respondents are focusing on the nomadic part of the concept, in line with the above-

mentioned motivation to travel. As formulated by one interviewee when asked what a digital nomad is for her:

"[…] a person that has a business or a job that let him or her work from anywhere they feel like whenever they feel like, but in that sense, I would like to add that it doesn't necessarily mean to even leave the country. It could imply moving between different cities or within the city. For me it's either a remote worker or an entrepreneur probably. Or a freelancer or self-employed." (#8)

In line with this statement, it becomes visible that there is no narrow and general perception of what a digital nomad has to do in order to identify as being a digital nomad. There are no technical rules where and how often to travel, the essential part is just that one is enabled to work from anywhere. The quote also pinpoints that there are only small differences, from a definition point of view, between remote workers, entrepreneurs, freelancers, and being self-employed. Others mentioned in their perception, a digital nomad is someone who constantly travels, discovers beautiful places, meets new people frequently and seeks inspiration from this lifestyle. (e.g. #1, #8, #13)

Following the general understanding of digital nomadism that the interviewees shared throughout the interviews, a relevant finding for the purpose of this thesis is that there are different anchors for identity construction within the idea of being a digital nomad. Whereas some respondents would consider themselves as a digital nomad without a doubt as supported in the statement that "I kind of consider myself like 100% digital nomad" (#2), other self-definitions differ. An important finding is that many of the respondents identify with the feeling of being location independent and being a remote worker. Partly, this can be derived from the fact that many people, that are not digital nomads themselves, do not know what a digital nomad is and therefore, influence the self-perception of digital nomads (e.g. #1, #11). As a result, other wordings are used in order to describe one's own professional purpose. Thereby, the term location independent is often used to explain the lifestyle. Another way to make sense of the concept is to describe oneself as a perpetual traveller, which specifically

means that an individual uses the globalized world for all its advantages. Hereby, one may place the bank account in a different country than the residency, and the company in a different country as well (#6). Conclusively, one can observe that there are various individual reference points for meaning-making, which implies that individuals make sense of themselves differently.

4.3.2 Digital Nomadism as a Life Concept

In the process of constructing one's professional identity as a digital nomad, it is crucial to question whether digital nomadism is actually a work concept for the individual or whether it can be considered a life concept. Most frequently, interviewees responded to topic-related questions that they consider digital nomadism as a life concept for themselves (e.g. #11, #12, #14). The answer is mostly based on the fact that the daily routine of a digital nomad is not as structured as compared to working in an organization and there are no set working hours where one is obliged to be present. As a result, there is no clear separation between the time when one is working and when one has leisure time. This may also be due to some obligations concerning hours to be present as the time differences may require the individual to be online or available at certain times that are more unusual than conventional working hour. One interviewee stated about the lifestyle as a digital nomad that "it's not only limited to work but it's everything. It's just basically that there is not a real threshold between work and life" (#6). This implies that there are blurring boundaries between what is considered work-related and what is related to their private life. It becomes salient that all these different areas of life are not really separated from each other. This finding is in line with Reichenberger (2018), who states that digital nomads aim for a "more holistic approach to life where work and leisure are not considered dichotomous through spatial and temporal separation, but where both aspects of life contribute equally to self-actualization, -development and -fulfilment" (pp. 364-365).

As a result, most respondents in our interviews came to the conclusion that digital nomadism serves as the guiding concept to their lives. In consequence of this finding, the framework includes several elements that contain not solely professional, but also factors that are

considered more personal. Within our research on the quest for professional identity construction, it is believed that we cannot isolate some elements when assessing the professional identity construction process. When working in an organisation, an individual identifies with role-specific skills and knowledge, such as being an accountant or an expert in a certain area. This role depends largely on the organizational context. In the absence of organizational boundaries, digital nomads no longer have a pre-determined role, but their role is based on their own choice and thus, reflects their self-perception. Hereby, the role is no longer as tightly connected to work-specific skills and knowledge, but to personal characteristics such as being a freedom-seeking and self-determined individual. As stated by Stets and Burke (2000), social work identity is defined via the organizational environment, specifically individuals identify with others who share a common approach to work. In absence of this organizational environment, digital nomads have to replace the given social environment with their own social system to identify with. Blurring boundaries between work and life make it important to consider a professional identity not only as the skills and professional role, but to reflect the social identification processes as well.

The prior section presented the push and pull factors leading to the decision to become a digital nomad as well as examined in detail the diverging self-definitions of digital nomads. Additionally, we outline that digital nomadism functions as a life concept for most of our interviewees. Subsequently, this thesis elaborates further on the relevance of freedom of choice for the individual. As a result of the data analysis, we find freedom of choice to be one main pillar of professional identity construction process, as displayed in *Figure 2.*

4.4 Freedom

Based on the fact that many interviewees referred to freedom of choice as their main driver to become a digital nomad, we assume that the concept of freedom is an essential pillar of their professional identity construction process. In order to investigate this point further, we asked our interviewees more specifically what the main benefits of the lifestyle are and what freedom means to them personally. Participants' answers were not necessarily linked to long-

term freedom per se; many referred to freedom in the context of their daily routine (e.g. #3, #13). What stands out from the data is the fact that almost everyone referred to freedom in the context of choice. Freedom in that sense is regarded as "[…] the ability to choose every day what you want to do yourself" (#13) or the act of "control[ling] what your day should include, you know, whether to work or whether it's something else […]." (#10). Furthermore, data reveals that being one's own boss and disentangling oneself from social expectations strongly connects to the concept of freedom. As one interviewee revealed:

"I guess it's a feeling like I should make the choices I want without the pressure that someone else is putting on me. Like I make the decisions myself whether than the feeling you are supposed to do this or that someone else told me what to do such as a company, family or just like social expectations. For me freedom means making the decisions that make most sense to me". (#4)

The majority of digital nomads we interviewed refer to freedom as deciding on their own what to do in life. This observation is in line with Reichenberger (2018), who proposes that the motivation most often associated with the digital nomad lifestyle is the desire to move freely and make independent professional choices. Taken together, our data suggests that digital nomads regard freedom of choice as key driver of their lifestyle and thus, it forms the foundation on which their identity rests. The collected data regarding freedom is subsequently grouped into three sub-categories, namely location-, time-, and task-related freedom.

4.4.1 Location-Related Freedom

Our analysis suggests that many digital nomads refer to freedom as the choice of determining the location of work. Location in that sense was either mentioned in relation to a geographical setting, so for instance working in the city or country one likes most, or in regard to the work environment, meaning that digital nomads work from various places such as co-working spaces, cafes or hostels (e.g. #4, #5). Reflecting on the meaning of freedom, an interviewee stated:

"I can also freely decide on where to go on this planet. That is one of the biggest benefits. I don't have to stay in any particular country. If I want to go somewhere, I will be there next month, it's not a problem." (#1)

As the quote suggests, freely determining the place of work is essential to digital nomads. This can also be seen by one interviewee summing up the quintessence of digital nomadism as follows:

"[…] the main key of digital nomadism is freedom and you're free to do whatever you want, but it's also connected to moving so you're not settled down and not always in one place." (#2)

This quote underlines that digital nomads desire to work from anywhere they want; they do not want to work in the same office five days a week but rather prefer to change locations on a regular basis. However, some also indicated that they favour to travel in semi-regular time intervals, as travelling can become "very exhausting" (#1). Therefore, many digital nomads create their own routine by staying in one location longer than only one or two days, which helps them to get familiar with the local surroundings (#4). Regardless of their choice to travel on a regular or semi-regular basis, freely moving around gave interviewees the feeling of countless opportunities (#1). Even previously underdeveloped areas like Bali or Columbia become more accessible for the digital nomad community nowadays, as governments are investing in stable WIFI connections (#5). The entire lifestyle is perceived to be independent "in the sense that it doesn't matter where my [the] work is", digital nomads are able to "work from anywhere" (#4). Overall, location independence was a recurrent theme and seen as "main key of digital nomadism" (# 5).

4.4.2 Time-Related Freedom

Time-related flexibility appears to be another important dimension of the individual freedom of digital nomads. In this context, it means that one can freely choose when to work, thus, there are no set working hours. Digital nomads rather decide by themselves when they are most productive and want to complete work-related requests and assignments. Setting specific time parameters for employees was regarded as outdated and often counter-productive, as work should not be about clocking hours, but about accomplishing goals (e.g. #3, #4). When talking about freedom, one interviewee gave a lengthy account on his flexibility to determine his working hours as opposed to a regular 9 to 5 job:

> *"I no longer have to be doing that work for this set of time because, you know, we're not factory workers and as such you don't have the same amount of workload every day. So, some days you may have to work more and then other days less. So, only working eight hours one day when you really need to work ten. And the other days when you only really need to do 4 hours of work that you still have to be working for 8, that really doesn't make sense."* (#3)

Such portraits of freedom arose frequently and without prompting. Working when most productive and determining working hours has been named a key advantage of remote work in general. Many indicated that they wanted to escape the 9 to 5 routine and value the flexibility of determining themselves when to work and when to enjoy leisure time. As one of our interviewees put it:

> *"Like some days I work 12-hour days and I get all my work done for that week already. And then I've got the freedom to do other stuff. I'm not locked into the hours and then I can be really flexible […]."* (#4)

4.4.3 Task-Related Freedom

During the interview process, it became clear that freedom is not only linked to location and time, but also to the task itself. Digital nomads define freedom in terms of deciding on their own, which profession to pursue and which tasks to fulfil. Thus, they can choose which clients to serve and projects to accept. The importance of task-related freedom has emerged in several of our interviews. One interviewee, for instance, indicated that freedom equates to implementing the ideas that he has in mind (#6). This is in line with one interviewee mentioning that freedom means "[…] being able to choose my [her] own jobs when I [she] want[s] them" (#15). Another one even mentioned that completing a set of tasks which has been determined by someone else is like the "antithesis of freedom" (#6). Overall, data reveals that interviewees choose their projects based on their expertise and passion. Therefore, they spend most of their time with tasks they enjoy (#4).

Digital nomads freely decide which life to live, more specifically which profession to pursue, which personal skills to focus on and which clients and projects to accept. Thus, they take on a certain role based on their own preferences which helps to further understand and define themselves. Due to the ever-changing environment of digital nomads, they might take on several roles depending on their tasks, clients and projects. Overall, the data supports our previous assumption that professional identity can also be considered a role-based work identity (Siebert & Siebert, 2005).

Data also supports the argument that the role itself serves as a meaning-making device for digital nomads, as it often affects their psychological well-being (Tajfel, Turner, Austin & Worchel, 1979). When questioning what fulfilment in life means, one interviewee mentioned that "[…] seven days a week I'm getting to see the life around me that I've chosen that makes me happy […]" (#13). Others said that "I feel like I'm really lucky, because I'm on a really great side of life" (#1) or "it's just the way of life and the level of happiness, that digital nomadism brings along" (#9). These quotes underline the fact that self-determination, in the sense of not

being limited by anyone else, helps digital nomads to make sense of themselves as an individual.

4.4.4 Freedom and Identity

Freedom in terms of deciding which projects to accept, from where and when to work, is a central topic in our research and frequently mentioned as main driver by many of our interviewees. The question *Who am I* and *Who am I becoming* is shaped by the idea of being one's own master with regard to where and when to work and which tasks to take over. Throughout the interview process we obtained the impression that interviewees did not only regard themselves as self-determined individuals but felt especially excited and fulfilled about it. This could be noticed not only by the content of the interviews, but also by the tone of their language and facial expressions. Thus, we propose that freedom of choice is an integral part of the interviewee's identity and in turn affects how they perceive themselves.

This section puts attention to the relevance of freedom when engaging in the digital nomad lifestyle. Data reveals that digital nomads not only strive for freedom, but also perceive a need for stability in their lives. Therefore, the next section examines the role of stability in the life of a digital nomad as a counter dynamic to striving for freedom.

4.5 Anchor

As elaborated before, digital nomads are striving for freedom, still, interviews revealed that they sometimes lack stability and security in their lives. A second important pillar of the professional identity construction process that stands out is the idea of having an anchor. This leads to the proposition that having an anchor, which is used as synonym for stability, helps individuals to cope with challenges and expectations the digital nomad lifestyle brings along. Data suggest that an anchor exists in relation to the community, system, and home, which will be further discussed in the following section.

4.5.1 Community

The community around digital nomads is evolving continuously throughout the past years, as pointed out by many of our interviewees (e.g. #8, #6). In general, the lifestyle becomes increasing attention from companies as well as individuals; thus, more people are aware of the concept and can relate to it (#5). Still, compared to individuals working in an organization, the life concept of digital nomadism is relatively rare and has more room to evolve. Rapid digitalisation, spread of new technologies as well as the increase of WIFI coverage, speed and quality lay the foundation for an increasing amount of people working remotely (Burke & Ng, 2006). Additionally, many realize the potential of online business models that enable them to become more or even fully location independent (#6). Our interviewees acknowledged the trend of the digital community "evolving quite a lot" (#1) and some even referred to it as "[…] heading towards a society or a classification that separates people from each other" (#8). The evoked image of a society reveals that digital nomadism is something that separates people from each other; either one belongs to the digital nomad society or not. As a consequence, in- and out-groups are formed. This is in line with the social identity theory and the idea that individual's self-concepts are often derived from a perceived membership in a relevant social group, which in this case is the digital nomad community (Ashforth & Mael, 1998).

Our analysis suggests that the digital community takes on an important role in the lives of our interviewees. In order to see the connection to the identity process, we first shed light on how and why digital nomads interact with the community. All of our interviewees engage, to some extent, via online channels such as Instagram, Facebook groups or LinkedIn with the digital nomad community. Many revealed that they use it mostly as knowledge source, advise giver and "[…] as sort of a more specific Google search" (#1). They know that other digital nomads encounter the same life concerns or administrative issues, such as challenges with taxes or visas and thus seek advice (e.g. #9, #13). Others, however, also indicated to enjoy sharing content on these platforms (e.g. #2, #8). Thus, digital nomads do not only passively engage in those kind of social media groups as silent readers but also like to use it in order to address

dreams, concerns, challenges, and share their experiences with like-minded people. One interviewee said:

"I rely on it a lot. Like Facebook groups have been great to just kind of see what other people are struggling with and just share what's going […]. But also, I've gotten a lot of work through those Facebook groups." (#4)

Besides using the community to receive valuable knowledge, such as finding client contacts, interviewees also mentioned the fact that they enjoy helping out others:

"I feel like it's really nice to communicate with different people, mostly in my case on Instagram but also in different Facebook groups and to answer a lot of questions. I did a lot of research before, so I like to help out others with my knowledge." (#1)

This leads us to assume that the community fulfils a support function, which is further proven by somebody stating that "on a personal level, the community means support to me, because you know, you're not alone" (#10). Receiving the impression that other people have the same mindset and face similar problems creates a feeling of connectedness (#10). Interviewees appear to strive for some contacts in the digital nomad community to receive and share information, where it sounds like it makes the digital nomad life much easier when being entangled with others in the community.

When asking interviewees about what they appreciate about the community, the most-mentioned attribute was that the community offers the individual a sense of belongingness. "People will immediately help each other. And […] that creates like a nice warm feeling of community [...]. You get the impression of really belonging somewhere" (#13), said one interviewee while another one mentioned that the community is a place where you "[…] feel as being part of something bigger and have the opportunity to learn from each other" (#14).

Again, it becomes visible that interviewees rely on the other members of the digital nomad community and perceive them as an important group to belong to (e.g. #10, #13).

It appears that our interviewees are escaping the conventional format of having an employer and a fixed workplace where they go to every day. Therefore, many of our respondents perceive they do not have a social environment that is given to them, but they have to choose themselves who they want to be surrounded by. The community anchors them to like-minded people that appear to serve a similar function as formerly did colleagues and others within the organization. This proposition is supported by Sutherland and Jarrahi's (2017) concept of community identity, which refers to the tendency of digital nomads forming a community via various events, conferences or social media platforms such as Facebook groups. Digital nomads start realizing that they have something in common with others in the same group, therefore, the group creates the feeling of belongingness. One interviewee said that:

"Working in co-working spaces and also staying in places for much longer has helped to rebuild that sense of community. I work at this co-working space in Bali and literally like if I'm sitting in the main area, I can barely get work done because people I know keep flooding in, just stop by and want to have a small chat. So, it's really nice to have that community […]." (#4)

This quote underlines that the sense of community creates a feeling of belonging. When going to familiar places such as co-working spaces and other digital nomad hot spots, the interviewee indicated to find other like-minded people she directly connects to. For her, other digital nomads are *"like family"* (#4). It becomes clear that like-minded people within the community better understand ones concerns as they have most likely gone through the same situations in life (#9). Feeling understood and being perceived by others as one desires to be perceived verifies your sense of self. It assures you that who you believe you are is understandable and justified. Thus, we assume that a feeling of belongingness to the digital nomad community reinforces one's identity.

Interpersonal connections serve a crucial function for digital nomads, especially because many indicated to feel lonely sometimes (e.g. #7, #9). This underlines the importance of building close relationships with like-minded people, who have similar concerns and understand the challenges of the digital nomad lifestyle. The fact that the feeling of belonging to the community vanishes the feeling of loneliness has been supported by one respondent stating:

> *"You're never alone. You never feel lonely. You never feel that you don't have anyone to talk to. Other digital nomads are in the same boat as you because they live the same lifestyle. We help us out by sharing information and experiences." (#2)*

Statements like these underline the key role of the community in tackling loneliness. This is being supported by one interviewee saying that "[...] it can get very lonely doing this on your own. Which is why it's so important to make friends with other digital nomads" (#15).

Still, one needs to recognize that by living a nomadic lifestyle, one does not spend much time in one location and usually has some obligations to work. Building relationships takes time and thus, is not always regarded as an easy process (#8). But it appears that for many of the interviewed digital nomads, connecting to others in a similar situation is very important. The community provides the individuals with a base for new relationships, which gives some stability to the daily life of the digital nomad, even though these relationships are also fluctuating due to frequent location swaps. Many pointed out that they did not have these close relationships with friends and family back home, as most of them chose a different life concept and hence, have a different mindset. One interviewee stated that she "feel[s] much more connected to other digital nomads than to people I [she] know[s] from my [her] childhood" (#2). She continues by stating that:

> *"It will always be easy to find travel mates and spent a nice time, have a nice conversation and be inspired by them, hear incredible stories. I just love their*

company and I love to be surrounded by digital nomads as this is kind of a new

society for me and I don't have that back home unfortunately." (#2)

It appears that many are looking for people that understand their lifestyle, their aspirations, and it seems like they do not find these people necessarily in their old social environment. When asking interviewees what their friends and family back home think about digital nomadism, a central topic comprised that outsiders of the community do not understand why they have chosen to live this lifestyle and find it particularly "strange" (#3). Statements such as "you feel the external expectations of people not like judging the lifestyle but like thinking we should be doing something else" (#4) or "everyone has this cynical laugh and thinks you're crazy" (#13) support this line of argumentation. Another interviewee mentioned to avoid talking with family and friends about his lifestyle because they do not seem to understand it:

"It's kind of funny but I actually try to talk about this community not too much with

the people I know. Because otherwise I feel bad. I feel like most people I know, are

not satisfied with life and cannot get out of it. For them it's pretty hard to

understand what I'm doing." (#1)

A perception that appears to be common among outsiders is that digital nomads are on constant vacation. "Some people see the very shady side of digital nomadism, more into the backpacker direction and imagine a nomad to be someone who is simply doing nothing" (#1), said one interviewee. As many digital nomad hot spots are located in countries where there is warm weather and beautiful environments, the pictures posted on social media only show the good side of the digital nomad lifestyle, such as nice beaches and cafes. Especially in the context of identity construction, it appears that this "misconception of digital nomads" (#8), largely influences their own perception, as emphasized in the following statement:

"I would love to say that I don't care, but it is not true. Because when it is your close

people that matter to you or you know, people who you care about, so of course it

influences. These are people I love and even though I try to somehow ignore their

opinion, I really can't. You're starting to think whether you're doing something

wrong." (#2)

Due to the fact that families and close friends back home often do not seem to understand why digital nomads have chosen this kind of lifestyle, they distance themselves from them, which can be for instance seen by someone saying " […] I feel like the more I grow the less we relate […]" (#5). Overall, our analysis suggests that the absence of like-minded people back home as well as the non, - or misunderstanding about the lifestyle in general reinforces the anchor effect of interviewees to the digital nomad community.

4.5.2 Home

Despite finding stability within the digital nomad community, some of our interviewees indicated that they desire a place to settle down. That means that they do not give up a home to come back to completely, but they have some kind of a base where they can store their belongings and can come back to and start their travels from (#7). As one interviewee said "I like having a place to sort of come back, reassess everything and then go" (#15), while another one confirms the wish for a home base by stating that "I want to be the kind of nomad with an anchor, that's the term which resonates with me. I want to have my base […]" (#7). Despite the evidence discovered in our own interviews, a post in the Facebook group *Female Digital Nomads* backs our argument. The following post emphasizes, on the one hand, the great desire of a woman to engage in digital nomadism, but on the other hand, the strong desire for a base:

"Ladies, after years of fantasizing about being a monad, I don't much like it. I want

an actual home base. I hate packing and unpacking. I strongly dislike the monthly

bill from the public storage unit. […]. I am bothered by the uncertainty of when to

splurge and when not to. When I'm in a cool place and the weather is fine I try to

get out and enjoy. […]. I say that because I realize the irony, when sitting in a shit

commute in USA to listen to a halfwit manager at a job, I would have killed the manager for this life." (Female Digital Nomads, 2019a)

The post received a considerable amount of responses, about 140, which almost all support her point of view. The difficulties of the digital nomad lifestyle become particularly visible when one already decided to engage in it, as outsiders often beautify the daily life of a digital nomad. As emphasized within the post, there are many factors about constant travelling that make it more challenging than originally anticipated. It appears that many of our interviewees strive for, at least, some continuity and stability, as giving up a place to come back to leaves one with lots of uncertainty. There are many opportunities to balance the multiple forces of digital nomadism. Most importantly, one needs to identify for oneself with the life concept one is choosing. One response to the post proposes that

"For me freelancing is the ideal middle ground between a home base and being able to travel whenever I want. I have freedom of choice, I'm somewhere in the middle and I think a little bit of the best of both worlds." (Female Digital Nomads, 2019a)

The statement reveals that the uncertainty of independent working can be balanced when having a home base to anchor to and keeping the possibility to travel, thereby living a lifestyle we would refer to as a lighter version of digital nomadism. When using the search function within the before-mentioned Facebook group, there are numerous posts that discuss whether it is favourable to have a home base, how other digital nomads handle this situation, and frequently, it is asked for the opinion of others to specific personal stories. This shows that our finding addresses a topic of concern for many digital nomads.

Most interviewees agreed that constant travels are not something they want to continue for their entire life. One said that she is striving for a "[…] fixed base at one point in time" (#5) and another interviewee supports this view by stating that "I decided to settle down, maybe like one, two months at one single place. This is how I'm basically taking a break" (#1). Even though

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having a base was a recurrent theme in our interviews, it becomes visible that it was interpreted in various ways ranging from having one single place to various places to return to. One interviewee concluded that:

"I don't want to travel all the time, maybe just for some more years and then do much less travel. I'll probably agree on four, five places where I stay two, three, four months and it's probably *close to where friends and family live."* (#6)

Despite the fact that some of our interviewees indicated that they cannot imagine to settle down at the moment (e.g. #14, #5), the majority revealed the desire to find a set home base in the future (e.g. #6, #1, #10). Overall, the interviews reinforce the impression that the balance between location independence and a settled home base are important elements to the professional identity construction as it influences the individuals' overall feeling of comfort and belonging.

4.5.3 System

Society nowadays has defined many rules and regulations on what is expected and what is considered normal. Due to the fact that many interviewees reported that they do not consent with these expectations, they came to the conscious decision to leave the system and start a life as digital nomad (#4). Pieter Levels, the founder of Nomad List stated in this context the following:

"One of the biggest challenges of digital nomadism is the social and community aspect, he says. Most people create their social network in high school, university and work, all in a particular place. Nomads consciously leave that place to travel the world and live in places where they do not have that background. Science tells us making friends takes proximity (being physically near someone) and repetition (meeting repeatedly)." (Frary, 2018)

Even though individuals decide to leave their own build social system behind, this does not necessarily mean that digital nomads remain without any system in place. As a result of our interviews, we propose that digital nomads create their own system, consisting of a patterned series of interrelationships, rules, practices and the infrastructure around them. The digital nomad community, several online platforms, and forums appear to replace the given social environment experienced before becoming a digital nomad. As a result, the individual still builds one's own in and out group but depending on other classifications than the organization itself (Ashforth & Mael, 1998).

The system digital nomads create for themselves includes any relationships and connections to other people in their surroundings. Among our interviewees, the trend of them having difficulties to establish close social contact with people from their former stages of life stands out from our data. Many stated that their old life brought along negative feelings ranging from unhappiness to mental and physical sickness. Statements such as "I felt more depressed the past two years prior travelling, I just didn't feel very motivated" (#1) or "I got really sick. My thyroid stopped working [...], like everything shut down because I just didn't want to be there" (#5), indicate that interviewees were in general very unsatisfied with their current life situation and "[...] needed to escape this life as soon as somehow possible" (#5). When recalling her life prior to the decision to become a digital nomad, one interviewee mentioned:

> "I felt that I don't really fit into the system. I was so different than anyone else around me, you know. Realizing this, made it hard for me to find good friends or social connections in general. I started to feel lonely and depressed at one point. I saw digital nomadism as a chance to cure my soul and find new connections." (#5)

This statement leads to the assumption that, without a sense of belonging, digital nomads cannot clearly identify with themselves, thus having difficulties communicating and relating to the actors in their surroundings. Having a sense of belongingness is a feeling almost everybody is striving for as it is important in seeing the value in life. Aiming to regain this feeling, people escaped from their old life and searched for like-minded people that are

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pursuing the same passions and desires. Strengthening webs of interaction to like-minded people leads to digital nomads form their own community, which in turn anchors them and gives them the feeling of belongingness and stability.

Our analysis suggest that the community is an important part of the system digital nomads create around themselves. However, there were more elements, which proved to serve as an anchor to our interviewees. Social infrastructure, in form of living and working places, seems to provide the feeling of stability. One of our interviewees stated that, when he arrives in a new city, he knows exactly which places to go to in order to meet other digital nomads (#1). Interviewees mentioned that "[…] co-working spaces and hostels are great. You'll always meet other people there, which are facing the same obstacles in life as you do. It's just great having a chat with them" (#14) and that these places "feel like home" (#14). Statements like these emphasize that interviewees regard places where they meet other digital nomads as a form of resting place; a shelter which they can always return to and feel safe, as they are surrounded by like-minded people who share the same aspirations and concerns in life.

Additionally, we found out that routines and procedures are part of the system digital nomads create around themselves and reinforce the function of an anchor. Even though, to others, life as a digital nomad often seems chaotic with no set structure in place, data shows that digital nomads often aim for some degree of consistency in life. This can often be found in form of executing recurring administrative tasks, such as applying for visas, solving tax issues or searching for a place to stay. One interviewee put is as follows:

"[…] once I plan to go to other places I always stick to the same procedure. I first try to figure out visa-related stuff such as do I have to apply for one and how much does it cost. Then I need to figure out how to get there and where to stay." (#5)

Overall, it is important to say that the system is not predetermined by society but can be chosen by any individual. Hence, we regard this system as one that everyone creates based on their own preferences, which in turn strengthens the feeling of being a self-determined

individual. Additionally, it is important to mention that the system, especially the community, creates the feeling of belongingness and contributes to digital nomads having a higher degree of stability in life. Almost every interviewee mentioned the importance of the community, which lead us to assume that our interviewees' self-concepts are based on their membership in the digital nomad community.

4.6 Pride

Data reveals that our interviewees are proud to be part of the digital nomad community and proud to have chosen the lifestyle they are currently living. In this context, perceiving a feeling of pride does not simply mean accepting one's identity, but to embrace it. Individuals appear to desire to share that they are digital nomads as they do not feel they have anything to be ashamed of. Thus, identity refers to socially distinguishing features that a person takes pride in. A satisfying effect caused by the realization of being a self-determined individual and finding an anchor in the digital nomad community hence reinforces the importance of freedom and anchoring in the identity construction process of digital nomads. In the following, we examine the relation between pride, freedom, and anchoring further.

4.6.1 Pride in Relation to Freedom

In relation to the former mentioned importance of freedom for the individual, interviewees expressed that they are proud to be a digital nomad because engaging in the lifestyle is based on their own decision. They mentioned they are proud to live the life that they want to live, thus, the decision is a result of their own will. In that course, it is stated that it is not necessarily being a digital nomad that the individuals are proud of. Rather, they are proud to be able to decide for themselves and for not letting anyone external decide on how they should live one's life. If digital nomadism is what makes one happy, then this appears to be the right decision and that is something to be proud of in today's society. Several statements express a similar thought, as can be seen in the following:

"I'm proud that I live the life that I want to live. I'm proud that I made this choice for myself." (#2)

"I'm proud to live the life that I live, so I guess that would imply that I'm also proud to be a digital nomad." (#11)

"And I think I'm prouder that I live the lifestyle that I chose, this one on or another one. When I wasn't settled for many years, I worked for an amazing company. I was, you know, typical lifestyle from nine to five or I should say seven to ten and I was proud of it. I think it's just so proud of the life I decide for myself, doesn't need to be this one or another one." (#14)

When posting a comparable question into the Facebook Group *Female Digital Nomads*, the responses reflected a similar sense of pride. The responses included a link to the element of freedom, as can be seen in the following statements: "It's not always rainbows and sunshine but it's the life I chose, and I get to be free. Meet people. Have experiences and create memories" (Female Digital Nomads, 2019b) and "Completely! I love the unconventionality and freedom of it" (Female Digital Nomads, 2019b). Again, the responses display that digital nomadism enables the individuals to experience new environments, meet new people and it is about choosing it, not imposed by anyone or anything externally.

4.6.2 Pride in Relation to Anchoring

Additionally, a link of pride to the concept of anchoring was observed. Even though not mentioned as frequently, individuals expressed that they are proud to be part of the digital nomad community. Within this community, and the uncountable small sub-groups, it appears common to be very responsive to one another, inspire and complement each other. As pointed out by one interviewee, she is proud that she can always post into an online forum, for example, and one can count on having someone contact you and at least attempting to help and not leaving one alone with worries or challenges (#9). Again, this reflects that there

is a need for many digital nomads to be anchored to the community and to experience stability in the sense that they can always count on the support of others in the community. The same interviewee summarized the feeling as "[...] they all are helping you out, they all reply, they are all sharing experiences, they all give you advices. So, yes, I'm kind of proud that I'm in this good group" (#9), where it is emphasized that one gets a lot out of the group interactions, being online or offline, and therefore, the group membership becomes certainly valuable and indispensable to the individual.

Referring to the interrelation between pride and freedom as well as pride and anchoring, these relationships are not assumed to be one-directional, but in line with the process view of this thesis, they are assumed to be in constant movement. Thus, we propose that anchoring and freedom do not only impact the feeling for pride, but also pride reinforces its effect on freedom and anchor over time. As it becomes visible throughout this findings section, the two pillars of professional identity construction freedom and anchoring are not only in constant movement, but they also appear to be contradicting to a certain and varying extent. Therefore, we assume that certain tensions exist in the identity construction process. The next section examines these dynamics further.

4.7 Resulting Tensions

In the framework as well as in the detailed analysis before, it becomes visible that there are two main pillars in the identity construction process of digital nomads; namely freedom and anchoring. In line with the proposition of Reichenberger (2018), we found that the desire for freedom serves as a key motivator and driver for the digital nomad lifestyle. The idea of anchoring to the community, a home as well as a system displays the balance to the original idea of complete independence in digital nomadism. As mentioned in the literature review, tensions as such have been elaborated much within identity research in the context of teachers, where it was defined as the internal struggle of the individual between the professional and the personal self (Pillen et al., 2013). In line with this thought, we found that there are also internal tensions to be discovered for many of the interviewees of this study. In

contrast to the teacher's identity tensions as described earlier, the digital nomad professional identity tensions result from tensions between and within the two most outstanding identity pillars. Throughout the data analysis, it became visible that, even though freedom appears to be one of the main drivers to choose digital nomadism as a personal lifestyle, digital nomads strive to anchor themselves to a certain extent to secure stability for themselves. As emphasized earlier, we propose that digital nomads strive for freedom in relation to location, time and tasks. One of the interviewees verbalised her perception of her freedom the following way:

"Not having to answer to anyone. Just knowing that at any time I can do anything I want. I can stay somewhere; I can go somewhere else. That's why I travel alone. It's the freedom of, you know, seeing the sights that I want to see rather than having to fit in with other people. I guess it's, for me, my freedom is kind of, its selfishness-based. I like doing what I want to do when I want to do it." (#15)

Especially the last sentence within the former statement expresses, that the interviewee perceives her current lifestyle as particularly free and self-determined. The question that arises out of this context is whether this perceived freedom is opposed to the desire to have a feeling of being anchored somewhere. One interviewee stated that he thinks "[…] it's more the flexibility in terms of where I can do things […]. I don't have complete freedom over the time of day that I work but I have a high degree of freedom" (#3). Here, it is highlighted that even though interviewees perceive digital nomadism as a particularly freedom-giving lifestyle, there are limitations to this perceived freedom. In the following, we analyse these tensions in relation to three formerly mentioned sub-categories of freedom, namely location-, time-, task-related.

4.7.1 Location-*Related*

One of the most outstanding findings of this thesis is that location independence and the factor travelling overall is one of the greatest motivations and benefits to digital nomadism.

Generally, digital nomads are free to decide where to move in the world and in what frequency they are moving forward. Nomadism in that sense does not set limits to how this lifestyle is realised. One interviewee stated that she "think[s] it's independent in the sense that it doesn't matter where my [her] work is, I [she] can work from anywhere" (#4), which is related to frequent answers of other interviewees. It is about taking your work wherever one desires to move. Another interviewee stated that "the transition to me [her] being back self-employed was specifically so I [she] could work and travel full time" (#11), again emphasizing the main point of our findings. Even though that many digital nomads expect others to think that they desire to travel forever, it was frequently expressed that digital nomads experience exhaustion from travelling, which was also referred to as "motion sickness" (#1) by one respondent. One interviewee indicated that "I was really getting overstimulated and that is when I decided to move slower […]." (#13). As pointed out earlier, after a period of extensive travelling and potentially short stays at the same location, many interviewees emphasized their desire to have an anchor to a physical place, a community or their new system. It appears that in response to insecurities and shorter-termed relationships, the individuals seek to experience more stability and recurrence in their daily life.

> *"I mean it's nice to be back home too, maybe to have a quiet life and bring yourself in a stable emotional state. Maybe it's to stabilize your emotional, how do I say? Emotional mindset maybe, because travelling long time, it can be stressful at times and maybe bit, sometimes too much."* (#2)

> *"I'm already thinking about being in Harvey Bay and getting a base by the beach. That's mostly motivated by the fact that I have family up there who I know are like very loving and very kind […] people that I should be around a lot of the time. So instead of permanently travelling and having no base I'm going to have one base and then I will continue to travel as much as I like."* (#5)

"I want to be the kind of nomad with an anchor […]. I want to get a base so I'm going to get this base in Bulgaria sorted. I want to get my belongings moved across here and I want to get my clients kind of tightened up a little bit […]" (#7)

As emphasized within these three statements, tensions evolve between being nomadic and feeling like a digital nomad on the one hand, but on the other hand, having the desire to build a base and pursue the nomadic lifestyle in a lighter version by always coming back to where one knows how things work. Opposing to the former observation that one simply desires to escape the system when deciding to engage in digital nomadism, it appears that there is an underlying desire for stability in one's life. It may be possible that the desire for stability consciously emerges once the isolation from the former societal system is fulfilled and the digital nomad spend some time travelling.

4.7.2 Time-Related

In relation to time, it was observed that there are many contradicting thoughts about it. There is a common desire for a great flexibility when it comes to the daily schedule of digital nomads. One interviewee stated that he does not have to set times where he has to finish up something specifically, but it is up to his own schedule. Especially with reference to the time consumption, it is stated that exactly the time needed is spend on the task. In turn, this implies that the working time per day varies continuously (#3). As expressed here, it is the general expectation that one may decide how many hours to work per day and when to work these hours, finishing work in one's own rhythm. Individuals seek for flexibility in terms of deciding when to work and when to be most productive. As stated by one interviewee, "I might work two hours a day. I might work four hours a day, but I never worked full days. And if there were some days I didn't want to work, I just didn't" (#12). The arising question is whether one is able to finish the tasks if only working when feeling like it. Another argument is that one may not always be completely independent of office hours, such as when working with customers or with a firm for a project. In that case, one might still be dependent on externally controlled

hours, undermining the feeling of complete freedom when it comes to scheduling working hours.

4.7.3 Task-Related

On one hand, digital nomadism, and in particular the fact that many digital nomads work independent of an organization, gives the individual more opportunities to freely choose the tasks one wants to fulfil. As stated by the interviewees, "but the freedom of living where I want, when I want and under the conditions that I've decided are priceless" (#14), "I can take my own decision [...]. So, I can decide to agree to some contracts and to others I won't, especially when I'm not interested in the job" (#13). The diverging perceptions of freedom appear to be outweighed by the fact that one still needs to deliver results when taking on a job, and in case of a shortage of offers, one may also need to take on jobs that do not fit the desired conditions. Ultimately, the financial outcome still counts, as the individual has costs to cover and needs to pay the bills. This view has been supported by the respondents as becomes visible in statements such as "however, it can be very challenging to find work. When you actually start as a digital nomad, you first need to find a job and prove yourself" (#1), and "I mean there is some pressure and you have to obviously always deliver because at the end of the day, no one else has your back. It's just you. So, there's pressure in that" (#15). In order to secure the travel lifestyle, one has to secure an adequate amount of financial resources.

In line with this thought, it appears to be surprising for some individuals that the life as a digital nomad is not just about an exciting, fun, self-determined life. Frequently, interviewees stated that, in relation to work, they have more responsibility as compared to times where they were employed by an organization:

> *"When you are on your own, you always do things that you do not enjoy. And that's the thing with, with co-working spaces, you know, often they provide you with a little bit of a structure depending on, you know, what you sign up for. I never did it, but I do believe that the structure can allow you to go further into your own*

personal skills. What I would say is, I am okay with being on my own and taking care of everything. But I would not say enjoy it in that sense. And there are a lot of things that come that are not fun." (#14)

Ultimately, it becomes visible that independently working does not only come with its benefits but brings challenges to the individual as well. Whereas many interviewees explained that they are basically living the dream, only doing what and when they want to, there also come tasks with it that are undesirable and simply have to be performed. This limits the perceived freedom.

In summary, it becomes visible that digital nomads do not only strive for complete freedom and self-determination, even though it is an important part of their identity. There are emerging tensions when it comes to complete disentanglement from the society one grew up in. These tensions are subjective, and their effects may be reinforced more for one than the other. One interviewee, for example, grew up in a nomadic family moving around several countries and therefore, her reality when growing up does not diverge much from her lived out reality nowadays.

4.8 Digitalism and Connectivity as Part of Identity

With reference to the framework as displayed before (see *Figure 2*), the dotted line serves to represents the enablement of the lifestyle by digital devices and connectivity. The term digital nomad indicates that there is a focus on living a life as a nomad, but also a focus on the factor digital. In the following, it is elaborated in more detail how the digital enablement influences different elements of the presented framework. The lifestyle of a digital nomad can only be lived if there are certain conditions met; digital nomads are working online or at least deliver their work content to the client via online services. As stated by Müller (2016), "digital nomads also use these technologies to pursue their daily professional activities" (p. 345). Therefore, it is a basic requirement to have access to devices that enable to work online, such as a laptop

or a phone. This forms the basic requirement to have the possibility to choose this lifestyle for oneself.

"I think the term digital nomad was the best way to describe people that want to keep working but have the ability to do it just with an Internet connection or with digital tools. I know somebody that's a digital nomad that's building video games. So, he needs his digital equipment to do his work, but he can do it from any location. I guess digital nomad is just a term that describes people that work electronically from wherever they want in the world on their own terms." (#14)

Throughout the process of asking the interviewees whether they identify with being a digital nomad, the answers did not include a reference to the term *digital* once. Only when specifically posing a question pointing towards the role of digitalism, a reference to the term *digital* was made. Frequently, the respondents highlighted that digital devices and connectivity are considered as an enabler to digital nomadism. This is supported, for instance, in the following statements: "[…] on a practical level, obviously without a computer, without working with my computer, I wouldn't be able to work anywhere except one place" (#10) and "I really, really need the technology and also there is another thing: in terms of internet, it's evolving so fast in many countries. Sometimes there are places where 3 years ago I couldn't go" (#1).

In particular, we propose that digital technologies are a significant enabler for digital nomadism. If portable technology would not exist, one would be bound to a physical office and therefore, freedom of choice in relation to location, time and tasks would be more difficult to achieve.

In relation to location independence, it becomes visible that without digital enablement, a digital nomad could not achieve the same degree of independence. By using digital technology, one is free to choose a location and move continuously around. One interviewee stated that she is "[…] pretty reliant on the technology and the WIFI to be able to have my

[her] career and at the same time being able to be in whatever place I [she] want[s] to be in"
(#12), clearly pinpointing the importance of technologies and connectivity in order to realise
a travel and work lifestyle. In line with location independence, individuals also become time
independent as the opportunity to work anywhere is closely related to work any time during
the day. Most individuals are working independently of a 9 to 5 schedule, therefore the
possibility to bring one's devices anywhere enables one simultaneously to work on a flexible
schedule. In conclusion, one is enabled to dictate own routines and daily rhythms, therefore
satisfying the main demands of digital nomads as analysed earlier:

> "I was able to grow in my career and all of that taught me how to become
> independent and become a digital nomad and basically living from my computer
> or my phone, my WIFI, and do my work from wherever I am at any time." (#14)

Digital nomads appear to have a need to anchor, to a certain extent, to stable elements in
their lives. As mentioned earlier, the continuous travelling, even though the frequency
remains individual, impedes to build physical proximity and complicates repetition in the
sense that it is difficult to establish long-lasting and close relationships. To reinforce the
anchor effect, it appears that the interviewees use online communities and forums to build
up virtual relationships and enable to have proximity and repetition with other digital nomads,
may it be for social reasons, to exchange ideas, experience inspiration or receive support.
Some digital nomads decide to travel more infrequently. These individuals are enabled to stay
connected to the community, even though they are anchored to their home. By being digitally
connected to the community, they feel included in the community just as much as highly
nomadic individuals. Additionally, administrative tasks, such as the travel planning, visa
applications, and tax declarations are performed online. Without digital devices and
connectivity, organizing and structuring the digital nomad life is expected to be impossible.

In relation to tasks, digital devices and connectivity enable the individual not only to deliver
results, but also to acquire new clients and make use of the unlimited online tools to meet the
requirements of clients. Being an independent worker and part of the digital nomad

community facilitates many different opportunities for job sourcing online, connecting with like-minded people and compiling a new network to fall back on. As an independent worker and without a narrow job description of what one's particular role is, the skill set to be developed and consequently, the range of jobs one may take over is broader.

In terms of internet connection, many interviewees stated the need for a stable connection and that their choice of location is dependent on the expected WIFI quality. Interviewees stated that they "really need the technology" (#1), and " […] I have to go to a country where there's good WIFI" (#13), and "WIFI is pretty much the only requirement for me" (#1). Only locations with a stable internet connection are expected to qualify as potential hot spot to gather many digital nomads, thereby limiting the choice of potential locations. There are places such as Bali, Chiang Mai, or Medellin that are considered to be the perfect location for many digital nomads. There is not only the guarantee of good weather and good company, but they can also secure their daily work.

In conclusion, it can be said that a digital nomad lifestyle cannot be pursued if the prerequisite of digital technology, such as the possession of digital devices and connectivity to the internet, is not fulfilled. As indicated in the findings section, digital devices and connectivity indirectly influence the self-identification process of digital nomads and can be seen as enabler for the entire lifestyle. Moreover, it appears that digital nomadism is only available to individuals that are digitally savvy enough in order to engage in the lifestyle successfully.

4.9 Overview of Main Findings

In the following, we present an overview of our main findings (for further reference see *Table 3*). In our context, an individual's professional identity is regarded as a subjective construct influenced by the many relationships and interactions digital nomads engage in with other people concerning their work and lifestyle. The first finding implies that the decision to become a digital nomad is sustained by the desire to leave one's familiar environment and social system behind. The decision is triggered by the desire to live a lifestyle where there is

more freedom of choice, which cannot be experienced while being settled down. As described earlier, the main reasons for engaging in digital nomadism is driven by the desire to leave the materialistically-controlled society behind, discontinue to have a monotonous 9 to 5 routine, be able to achieve more ownership in the work, and most importantly, to travel the world. The downsides that come along working in a stable organization as well as the perceived high expectations of society contribute to the wish to live a different life outside of this system. Still, many interviewees expressed their desire for stability. In line with this thought, the main pillars of the identity construction process of digital nomads are based on the desire for freedom and the concept of anchoring. The quest for identity puts the individuals continuously in the position to answer the question *Who am I* and *Who am I becoming.* Digital nomads encounter many diverging contexts, relationships and find themselves in a life coined by constant change. Consequently, their identity is in constant flux and cannot be seen as a stable construct. Within the frame of this research, we uncovered the diverging self-definitions that individual digital nomads have about themselves. This underlines the subjectivity in the reality of each individual.

When engaging in digital nomadism, it appears common that the boundaries between work-related and leisure-related components start to blur. In line with this finding, we propose that digital nomadism is perceived as a life concept for the sample of our interviewees. Thus, there is no clear separation between these elements. Another finding concerns that digital nomadism is enabled by digital devices and connectivity. This means specifically that digital nomads need the devices and the infrastructure of the internet to live out the lifestyle and to fulfil their work-related obligations.

A main pillar for digital nomadism, as analysed in detail above, is the desire to achieve freedom of choice. We found that especially freedom in the choice of location, tasks and time are relevant to the individuals. In contrast to this substantial desire for freedom, an opposing finding emphasizes the desire for stability in the digital nomad life. In line with this finding, this research pinpoints the concept of anchoring, which means that digital nomads strive to find some kind of anchor to stable constructs such as the community, a home base or a new

system. These two main findings are reinforced by the emerging feeling of pride of our interviewees, who stated that they are very proud to have chosen the life they are currently living. Moreover, it was mentioned that they are proud to be part of the community, thereby giving additional credibility to the concept of anchoring to the community.

As a response mechanism to the opposing forces of the desire for freedom and the desire for stability, several tensions may emerge from the main pillars of identity. Many interviewees stated their desire to be location independent and to be able to move around freely. But at the same time, they appear to limit their own freedom by the desire to find some stability. This stability is mostly found in the creation of a home base, which enables them to return to a fixed place to calm down. Additionally, as travelling appears to exhaust most of our interviewees after a certain amount of time, a place to recharge supports them to sustain the lifestyle. In relation to time, interviewees stated their desire to be their own master in flexibly deciding when to work and for how long. However, this is limited by the need to please their clients, which potentially leads them to compromise their working hours, schedules, also as a result of the time difference, as for some tasks online presence may be requested. Moreover, digital nomads aim to choose their clients and projects according to their own preferences. But still, they need to secure their financial resources, which may limit the freedom to a certain extent because many also take over projects that are lucrative even though they may not reflect one's main interest or passion content wise.

Table 3 - Summary of Findings

Component	Finding
Escape the "System"	Digital nomads leave their former social and organizational environment. Dissatisfaction with working in an organization and high societal expectations contribute to the desire to escape.
Subjective Realities	Diverging self-definitions of digital nomads emphasize the subjective reality of every individual.
Digital Nomadism as a Life Concept	Blurring boundaries between work and life components exist, resulting in a perception of digital nomadism as a life concept.
Freedom	Digital nomads strive for freedom, in relation to location, time and task.
Anchoring	Digital nomads strive for stability in their lives, which they appear to find by anchoring to the community, home or system.
Pride	Digital nomads are proud to be part of the community and proud to have chosen the life they live.
Digital Devices & Connectivity	Digital devices and connectivity enable the lifestyle of digital nomadism.
Tensions — **Location Independence versus Home Base**	The perceived location independence is limited by the desire for a place to return to as well as exhaustion of travelling.
Tensions — **Freedom of Choosing Business Hours versus Adapting to Outside Needs**	Digital nomads choose the lifestyle to be able to decide for themselves when and how much to work per day, according to their own routines. However, they also need to adjust to client expectation.
Tensions — **Freedom of Choosing Tasks versus the Need to Secure Financial Resources**	Digital nomads desire to pick their clients and projects according to their own preferences. Still, they need to secure their financial resources, thereby limiting their freedom in choice.

Source: Authors

Chapter 5. Discussion

Following the previous chapter that analysed the findings of the qualitative research carried out, this chapter aims to combine the findings with theoretical explanations and discusses their implications for both practice and theory. The following structure guides this chapter. First, the next section aims to link the research question to the findings presented in the previous section and critically reflects upon them. A brief review of the research will be presented and subsequently discussed. Second, we point out several practical as well as theoretical implications that we discern from taking a closer look at the professional identity construction process of digital nomads. The chapter closes with pointing out potential limitations of this thesis as well as giving an outlook for future research.

5.1 Reflections on Findings

This research unravels the question of how digital nomads construct their professional identity, which is formalized in the research question as introduced in the first chapter:

How do digital nomads construct their professional identities in the absence of an

organizational environment?

Prior academic literature gives broad insights into the professional identity construction process of employees working in a stable organization. In contrast, the overall aim of this thesis is to find out whether the professional identity construction process of digital nomads differs to the process in the presence of an organizational environment. In summary, our interviewees did not appear to identify themselves strongly with a specific profession, but they identified themselves with the life concept of digital nomadism. We propose that the elements system escape and becoming a digital nomad influence the professional identity construction process as these drive the decision for digital nomadism. In line with the process-based view, the conceptual framework proposes that the professional identity construction is mainly steered by the desire for freedom and the simultaneous desire for stability. The

interrelation between freedom and anchoring appears to be contradictory, resulting in paradoxical tensions for the individual as captured by the framework. The identified tensions keep the identity work in constant movement and therefore, form an integral part of the ongoing identity construction process. In line with this thought, it becomes visible that pride contributes to how digital nomads view their own identity. Pride constantly reinforces the question whether they succeeded in living a self-determined life according to their own choice and whether they perceive to belong to the social environment as desired. The next paragraphs reflect on the findings of our research in reference to the aforementioned research question.

Whereas employees in an organization experience a given environment when it comes to social contacts, digital nomads lack this predetermined social environment. Organizations offer their employees work within the boundaries of a specific role as well as within specific teams or departments, which forms the social environment at work. Hereby, the frame of a social classification is given to the employees, who form their own in-and out groups in this environment. In contrast, digital nomads are their own master when it comes to structuring the social environment. They decide who they surround themselves by and most digital nomads appear to decide consciously to take part in the community. This argument is reinforced by our data that implies the anchor effect to appear strongest between the individual and the community. It appears that digital nomads create their own social environment, wherein the social classification process takes place. This argumentation gives more credibility to the former findings which place high relevance on the idea of anchoring. Even though we propose that the anchor effect to the community is strong, the overall argument of anchoring to community, home, and system seems relevant for digital nomads as they do not aim to be by themselves, but again, digital nomads strive to take active part in shifting their social base.

Data reveals that our interviewees see themselves mostly as self-determined individuals. However, at the same time, digital nomads attempt to retain stability in their lives. Thus, the decision to become a digital nomad releases emotional tensions encompassing both the

fulfilment of being free and the anxiety of not finding stability in life. These tensions between freedom and anchoring are highly individual as each single digital nomad may attach a different meaning to freedom and find their anchor in different elements, such as the community, their home or the system. Throughout the analysis, we identified dynamics between the main pillars of professional identity construction process. As individuals decide to become a digital nomad in order to experience more freedom, the counter dynamics are that digital nomads, once engaging in the lifestyle, appear to strive for more stability in their lives. The more settled a digital nomad is, the more one desires to be free, but if one feels too disentangled, one strives for more stability again. This reflects the mutual reinforcement between the main pillars as shown in the framework. Pride impacts the two identified main pillars as individuals were found to be proud to be part of the community, which strengthens their involvement and engagement. Additionally, interviewees stated their pride towards choosing digital nomadism for themselves and being their own master, underlining once again the importance of freedom in their professional identity construction process. Data shows that digital technology and connectivity is the main enabler for digital nomadism, offering the frame for the existence of the entire lifestyle as it would not be possible to live the life without it.

Building on the pillars mentioned, we find that digital nomads strongly identify with the community around them, which they have chosen to be part of, both physically and digitally. Therefore, the social environment that individuals experienced while working in an organization is replaced by a new social environment evolving out of taking part in the community and building one's own system. The role is no longer only pre-defined by an imposed job but evolves out of the social role in the community as well as the skills and knowledge that one develops. Therefore, role-based identity is not only reflecting work-specific components, but also personal characteristics. This implies that interviewees did not solely refer to themselves as being, for example, a consultant, accountant, or teacher. They mainly view themselves as self-determined, open-minded and freely-moving individuals, that work while travelling. As life and work concept cannot be fully separated by the individual,

within the professional identity work-related and personal factors are merging. Digital nomadism is not only a profession, but a relevant life concept for the individual.

5.2 Practical Implications

Especially in light of current media exposure, digital nomadism is positioned as a promising and fulfilling lifestyle for individuals who are not in favour of how the organizational system limits them in their work aspirations and how materialistic mindsets dominate society. But, as emphasized in the prior findings section, there are not only the bright sides to digital nomadism, there are conflicting parts to it as well, as emphasized in the statement "basically, there is no perfect way to live. By becoming a digital nomad, you simply trade one set of problems for a completely different kind" (Karsten, 2019). Within the framework, we direct attention towards potential tensions and paradoxical reference points throughout the professional identity construction process. The following section discusses the tensions in more detail in order to address the implications for digital nomads in their everyday life. Furthermore, we propose potential coping mechanisms to ultimately enable digital nomads to live the lifestyle in the presence of the tensions.

The concept of paradoxes has been coined by Smith (2000), who define a paradox as denoting "contradictory yet interrelated elements – elements that seem logical in isolation but absurd and irrational when appearing simultaneously" (p. 760). The general logic of a paradox applies to the tensions as presented within this thesis. The pillars of the identity construction process as introduced in the finding's section all appear to be logical when they are considered in isolation, but when viewing these in light of their interrelations, they appear to be contradictory to a varying extent. It has been recognized that according to theory, one should not adopt a defensive and denying behaviour in dealing with paradoxes. Instead, one may consider the tensions as a "trigger for change" (Smith, 2000, p. 763) and use the existence of tensions to recognize and rethink problematic interrelationships. Creating capacity to fight the self-defences, such as the desire to oversimplify and overrationalize recognized tensions may be replaced by engaging in a more active coping strategy (Smith, 2000). Smith and Lewis

(2011) propose that one should aim to engage in one of the following coping mechanisms; either to accept or to resolve tensions. Acceptance refers to a behaviour encouraging to live with the situation, which may occur either proactively or passively (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Engaging in a resolution strategy, on the other side, aims to find "a means of meeting competing demands or considering divergent ideas simultaneously" (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 386). Smith and Lewis (2011) introduce several categorizations of organizational tensions, including the *belonging paradox,* which appears most relevant to this thesis. The belonging paradox describes the arising tensions "between the individual and the collective as individuals and groups seek both homogeneity and distinction" (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 383). In detail, this means that environmental complexity and pluralism drive identity tensions, which in turn surfaces conflicting values, and roles.

5.2.1 Underlying Tension of Digital Nomadism: Freedom versus Stability

In the course of deciding to become a digital nomad, individuals repeatedly stated that the main driver for the lifestyle is the desire for freedom. Few interviewees expressed to be particularly conscious about the fact that one potentially has to sacrifice one's own stability in order to achieve this desired freedom. Still, it became visible that as soon as individuals are digital nomads and experience the freedom associated with it, they start to lack the stability that they experienced when still having a place to return to and when still being fully entangled with the societal system. In that sense, it appears from our data that an individual cannot achieve both freedom and stability simultaneously. In line with the belonging paradox, it appears difficult for digital nomads to know where they belong. By making the decision to become a digital nomad, individuals are sacrificing on one of both sides. For example, one may trade off a portion of stability, which is especially true for digital nomads that live a very nomadic life, work with varying clients and secure only little or no passive income. Passive income implies that one earns money without great daily effort (Rose, 2019), for example when renting out a room on AirBnb or like one interviewee (#13) described, by engaging in affiliate marketing. As described by a digital nomad:

"Every lifestyle involves sacrifices. And this one, for all it gives me, does lack in some things I've grown to feel the absence of — the comforts of a routine, the depth of long term friendships and relationships, the stability of regular employment, a place to call home, a sense of balance" (Grassin, 2018)

In line with this statement and as proposed in the findings section, the tension between seeking freedom and stability may be addressed in scaling down the frequency of travelling, by setting up a place serving as a home base and by being integrated in the community, thereby creating a system for oneself that makes one feel more stable. When the decision for digital nomadism is made, one should be conscious about the effects of this choice. It is assumed that the tension cannot be fully eliminated in itself as neither the desire for freedom nor the desire for stability can be crossed out of one's life, if the goal is to remain a digital nomad. In line with this argument, there are two ways in order to cope with the paradoxical tension: Either a digital nomad starts to embrace these tensions and balances the two forces in a suitable way, or a digital nomad totally resigns from the lifestyle. In order to start or continue the life as a digital nomad, it seems recommendable to engage in a resolution strategy to cope with the competing forces of freedom and stability, as otherwise, the lifestyle is not accessible. A similar reflection is also expressed on a digital nomad's online blog, where it is stated that "when you make the decision to become a digital nomad, you knowingly sacrifice stability for freedom. Finding a balance of both is the holy grail of digital nomadism [...]" (Logue, 2017). We propose throughout the findings section that it seems important for many of the interviewed digital nomads to balance the two forces and thereby, find an adjusted solution. Anchoring that reinforces a feeling of stability seems to be a reasonable reference point for digital nomads in order to continue the lifestyle. This process appears to be ongoing and leaves the individual in a permanent identity quest to find out who they are and where they belong.

5.2.2 Paradoxical Tensions

The following sections shed light on the more specific tensions as mentioned in the findings section and the implications for the daily life of a digital nomad. The plurality and ambiguity of meaning in the life concept of digital nomadism attaches greater importance to the ability to actively cope with the tensions.

Tension 1: Location Independence versus Home Base

Digital nomads, as discussed throughout this thesis, strive to be self-determined and location independent, but at the same time, they strive for stability in their location, social environment and systems. In this context, many of our interviewees mentioned that they desire to have a place to return to in form of a tangible home base. For individuals, anchoring to a home base means that they trade off some of their freedom when it comes to the choice of location, but it enables them to experience a certain degree of stability, while still remaining flexible with regard to potential travel activities. Therefore, the consciousness about the two opposing forces and the active resolution supports balancing the feelings of being in the middle of two things that can hardly be combined. Reflecting the factor of anchoring, many interviewees also stated that they become exhausted of travelling; they experience "motion sickness" (#1) and desire to stay at least temporarily at one place. Consequently, in order to resolve the two opposing forces and to enable individuals to continue to engage in digital nomadism, we propose slow travelling to prevent travel exhaustion. Slow travelling implies that digital nomads may not travel just for the sake of travelling, but to stay for some time at one destination, get acquainted with the local culture, and achieve a connection to a place (Jake and Dannie, 2017). Alternatively, the set-up of a home base as well as anchoring to the community may help to balance the forces for the individual. Still, one needs to consider that many digital nomads appear to decide for the lifestyle to detach from the general system that a settled-down individual lives in. By setting-up, for example, a home base, an individual has to take into account potential administrative efforts. As mentioned before, many digital nomads have only little or no passive income and within the digital nomad lifestyle, there are only limited fixed costs for the individual. However, when setting up a home base, one has to

pay rent and corresponding maintenance costs. As one potentially aims to minimize the costs, one may want to sub-rent the housing while travelling, but that not only increases cash reserves; digital nomads need to be aware of increasing administrative efforts, which may be hard to handle when not being physically present all the time.

Tension 2: Freedom of Choosing Business Hours versus Adapting to Outside Needs

Another potential tension that a digital nomad is confronted with is that one only has to work the hours per day that one feels like working. As pointed out by one of our interviewees, she would not work a full day and generally, she only works the hours that she feels suit the overall plan for her day (#12). It is emphasized by many interviewees that it is important to be in a productive mood when working, otherwise it does not make sense to engage in work (e.g. #1, #4, #11). Therefore, we propose that digital nomads highly value the flexibility of being the master when it comes to setting the business hours. Still, many interviewees mentioned that they have to fulfil their changing client expectations, which also include to deliver results at the agreed points in time (e.g. #7, #10, #14). The time differences that may separate the digital nomad and the client are another factor of concern; it may be difficult to communicate with each other as time differences may be large. Here, the interrelation between time and location independence becomes visible. Complete freedom appears especially difficult to achieve as soon as more than one party is involved in the achievement of freedom. Therefore, the argument again entails that digital nomads have to compromise their desires for freedom to a certain extent in order to satisfy their client needs. A possible resolving mechanism appears to be the set-up of a daily schedule that can be individually adjusted to personal demands. This may take place, for instance, by the set-up of certain fixed business hours, where clients can reach the nomadic contractor, leading to a better cooperation between the two parties. This proposal does not indicate that the digital nomad needs to readopt a 9 to 5 routine but creating a broader schedule may simplify the integration of client needs and a feeling of planning security. This may limit the freedom of the digital nomad in planning the business hours but may be a reasonable mechanism to balance one's own and the demands of others.

Tension 3: Freedom of Choosing Tasks versus the Need to Secure Financial Resources

In line with the previous point, we emphasize the importance of reliability in the communication and delivery of results to the client, as the sourcing of work for the digital nomad, especially if one works as a freelancer, may not be particularly easy. Therefore, the digital nomad has to build up a reputation of being reliable in order to retain maximum freedom for him or herself. Generally, this comprises another important factor: to freely choose which tasks, projects, and clients to accept and work for. As the digital nomads' professions and roles are often not tightly bound to certain tasks, they desire to only accept jobs they really enjoy. Many interviewees stated, that they only take on tasks that fit them personally as they prefer to determine in a self-imposed manner what they have to do (e.g. #1, #5, #8). In contrast to this strong desire for autonomy, it becomes visible that it remains challenging for the individual to stick to this attitude. As mentioned previously, fixed costs are supposedly decreasing with engaging in digital nomadism, of course individually varying. However, digital nomads still need to secure their financial resources, and this is assumed to play a role in the decision whether to accept or reject a certain job. If there is a financially-motivated need for a job, the job will most likely still be accepted in order to sustain the travel and work lifestyle. As a result, the digital nomad may have to partially trade off the freedom in choosing the task or the job in order to be able to remain a digital nomad. Therefore, we propose that digital nomads may have to achieve a balanced portfolio of tasks and projects. It may limit the individual freedom to take on tasks that one is not particularly interested in, but it appears to be quite illusionary to exclude jobs that are out of the potential narrow area of interest. In light of the fact that also digital nomads need to secure their financial position, it appears suitable to find a balance between the jobs that are solely taken on in order to secure financial resources and tasks that one is truly passionate about.

In conclusion, this section aimed to highlight the need for digital nomads to cope with the paradoxical tensions and to deliver specific recommendations on how to achieve this. Many digital nomads appear to enter the lifestyle without having a specific purpose, goals or plan in mind on how to pursue it. In response to this perceived uncertainty, it may be especially difficult to balance freedom and stability, thereby potentially leading to resignation from the

lifestyle and deciding to strive for more stability again. The main point of this discussion section aims to emphasize that an individual needs to balance the forces and start to create a purpose and a specific plan how one can embrace the tensions that are arising. Importantly, the creation of synergies may be an important mechanism in order to resolve tensions. Resolution may be achieved "by finding synergies that accommodate opposing poles" (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 392). For example, in order to balance the freedom and desire for stability, a digital nomad may engage in a lighter version of digital nomadism. This implies that they travel but also have a base where they can return to, thus, generating the best out of both opposing poles. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to this, but consciousness about what one desires to achieve and what one desires to get out of the lifestyle may help immensely in the process of answering the question of *Who Am I, Who am I becoming*, and *Where do I belong*.

5.3 Theoretical Implications

This study makes important contribution to the existing literature on identity and an emerging group of workers, namely digital nomads. The following sections demonstrate how the findings fit with existing knowledge and elaborate on new insights they contribute. The elements of the proposed framework serve as a structural guidance for the following sections.

5.3.1 Identity Construction

We contribute to the identity literature by investigating the identity construction process in the absence of an organizational context. Even though Petriglieri et al. (2018) have investigated the unfolding of identity work in regard to independent workers, we are one of the first ones who connect the two research fields of identity and digital nomadism. The conceptual framework introduced in the findings section serves as a first attempt towards a better understanding of the professional identity construction process of digital nomads. By deriving a framework in the form of a loop without a clear starting and ending point, this thesis builds upon the view of identity as an ongoing process (Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Schultz & Hernes, 2013). In line with Rodger & Scott (2008), we regard the identity process as flow rather

than a stable construct. Due to the fact that identity is in constant flux, as for the people in our study, the important question is on which main pillars the identity rests upon. We tackle this question by examining how digital nomads define themselves and give answers to the question *Who am I* and *Who am I becoming*. Similar studies have been conducted by taking a closer look on independent workers. In their study, Petriglieri et al. (2018) focus on how independent workers attain and sustain a stable work identity and shed light on the factors that keep the self bound to work. In contrast, this study reveals that the professional identity of digital nomads is not necessarily only linked to work-related components (as explained below), thus contributing to existing literature by broadening the definition of professional identity (Stets & Burke, 2000; Van Maanen & Barley, 1984).

Our research is in line with observations that independent work, while potentially perceived as more fulfilling, can also be more consuming (Barley & Kunda, 2004). Independent workers tend to work more (Barley & Kunda, 2004), and working conditions which are supposed to free individuals often end up accelerating the interference of work into their personal lives (Mazmanian, Orlikowski & Yates, 2013). In line with this argument, our interviewees did not perceive a clear cut between their work and private life, which leads us to take on a more holistic approach to life where work and leisure are not considered dichotomous. Data suggests that professional identity for digital nomads is no longer only defined by its role, knowledge or skills. In line with Sutherland & Jarrahi (2017), we propose that the professional identity of digital nomads is not solely oriented along professional and organizational lines, but also based on personal concepts such as freedom and anchoring. Building on the finding that digital nomadism appears to be more of a life concept as opposed to being solely a work-related concept, we propose to question whether the term *professional identity* still captures the scope of identity for digital nomadism. This finding implies for theory that the concept of professional identity may have to be extended in order to function as a suitable theoretical construct when it comes to increasingly common alternative work arrangements.

5.3.2 Escaping the System and Becoming a Digital Nomad

As a growing community of location independent workers, digital nomads have received relatively little attention from academic research (Sutherland & Jarrahi, 2017). Our findings respond to recent calls for richer accounts of, and theorizing on, the lives of digital nomads (Reichenberger, 2018).

In line with research in the field of digital nomadism, we identified several factors pulling individuals towards the life of a digital nomad, namely freedom of choice, travelling and work ownership. Digital nomads aim to create a holistic lifestyle characterized by the feeling of freedom (Reichenberger, 2018). The self-determined life of a digital nomad also brings more work-related responsibilities as many of them either have their own business or work as freelancers, thus being directly responsible for their work and the results they bring to clients (Reichenberger, 2018). Although many indicated that travelling is one of the key motivators for choosing this lifestyle, our research agrees with Reichenberger (2018) and Sutherland and Jarrahi (2017), who both point towards the personal challenges constant travelling brings along.

In line with Petriglieri et al. (2018), this thesis clearly identifies dissatisfaction with non-self-imposed restrictions relating to work structures as the underlying motivation to escape the system. Even though our findings concerning factors pushing people away from their previous life, confirm the desire to escape the structures of a traditional location-dependent working style, findings are not only linked to an organizational context. A frequently mentioned factor pushing interviewees towards a system escape refers to refusing a materialistically-controlled life as well as societal expectations, which ascribe individuals a certain role and a desired behaviour. Compared to Petriglieri et al (2018), the findings thus not only focus on dissatisfaction in regard to the organizational context but add two new dimensions, namely materialistic lifestyle and societal expectations.

5.3.3 Freedom

Besides the desire to escape constraining structures of a traditional, location-dependent working existence, the findings support the importance of freedom for digital nomads. Similar to Reichenberger's (2018) study, all interviewees used the word freedom or synonymous concepts to illustrate their individual reasons behind the decision to become a digital nomad. Reichenberger (2018) proposes freedom to be a synthesis consisting of *professiona*l, *spatial* and *personal freedom*. The findings support the relevance of professional and spatial freedom. Reichenberger (2018) notes that digital nomads desire to select and structure work-related tasks in a self-imposed manner, which is referred to as professional freedom. This corresponds to our element of task-related freedom. Digital nomads define freedom in terms of deciding on their own which profession to pursue and which tasks to fulfil. Being one's own master allows the interviewees to have more autonomy over their work. The existence and importance of spatial freedom, in form of location independence, has also been indicated by data. Location-related freedom, which refers to the motivation to live and work in a variety of places, seems to be crucial for digital nomads and forms part of their identity. Additionally, Reichenberger (2018) found a third form of freedom, namely personal freedom, which she defines as the result of location independence and professional freedom. In our study, we refer to personal freedom in terms of being a self-determined individual. Our findings demonstrate that freedom consists of tasks, location and time-related components. Time-related freedom hereby denotes the fact that digital nomads want to decide in a self-determined way when to fulfil work-related task. Thus, they are not bound to a 9 to 5 routine, but have more flexibility in terms of their daily schedule. We contribute to the existing literature of digital nomadism by adding another category of time-related freedom and referring to freedom as a construct consisting of task, location and time-related components.

5.3.4 Pride

Throughout the interview process, it was recognized that digital nomads perceive work-related tasks as primarily positive as their profession and daily tasks often corresponds with

their individual interests, passion and skills. Many of our interviewees emphasized the positive aspect of being able to switch between work and leisure based on situational preferences. Whereas these findings confirm Reichenberger's (2018) observation of digital nomads having a positive attitude towards work, we add to these findings by not only shedding light on the emotional state of satisfaction but also pride. Interviewees indicated their pride towards being a self-determined individual, who has freely decided to live the life of a digital nomad. Furthermore, the word pride was mentioned several times in relation to being part of the digital nomad community. Pride reinforces the importance of freedom and anchoring being the two main pillars of the identity construction process of digital nomads.

5.3.5 Anchor

This study enriches theoretical conceptualizations of holding environments at work and of their role in identity development process (Petriglieri et al., 2018). The findings are in line with Petriglieri et al. (2018), who state that in the absence of an organizational setting, workers face the necessity of creating their own system. It is thus important to mention, that even though the setting of our study appears in absence of organization, the study also features the idea of organizing. It is organizing and assembling their own system that let digital nomads create the space they need to complete their work and express themselves. While Petriglieri et al. (2018) focus on independent workers, we specify their results by shedding light on a specific group of independent workers, namely digital nomads. Furthermore, the findings emphasize that digital nomads build up their own environment; thereby not only anchoring to the system and the community, as proposed by Petriglieri et al. (2018), but also to have a place to settle down. To our knowledge, this research is the first to detect the digital nomads' struggle between being a self-determined individual but also seeking an anchor in form of a place called home.

Findings reveal that the digital nomad community takes on an important role in the lives of our interviewees. Connections occurred through digital platforms, which allowed for direct interaction such as Facebook, LinkedIn or internet forums. Through these virtual places, digital

nomads receive access to a diverse community of like-minded people. We agree with Sutherland and Jarrahi's (2017) findings, who state that digital nomads turn to the community for help on work-related problems and broader professional topics. However, we extend these findings further and propose that digital nomads do not only connect to these like-minded people on a professional but also on a personal level. In our study, digital nomads turned to the community for help, addressing dreams, concerns, challenges and sharing their experiences with them. This observation can be further explained by social identity theory. As stated in the literature review, self-classification takes place to structure the social environment, which is a highly subjective process, relying on different preconceptions of the people one is surrounded by (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Stets and Burke; 2000). Thus, social classification processes drive social identification. Often, as stated in previous research, social classification processes are greatly influenced by the organizational environment (Petriglieri et al., 2010). In absence of this organizational environment, we assume that the community takes on a similar role for the individual. The argument of strongly connecting to the community is in line with Sutherland & Jarrahi's (2017) findings on digital nomads forming a community identity. Digital nomads appear to identify strongly with the community around them and rely on their input in order to make the lifestyle work for them. Even though the community anchor has been identified as the strongest one, finding stability in form of a settled home base and the system overall should not be neglected in this regard, and further add to existing literature.

5.3.6 Tensions

Tensions and paradoxes receive increasing attention in organizational studies, often to describe conflicting demands, opposing perspectives and seemingly illogical findings (Lewis, 2000). Rapid technological change, such as the emergence of information and communication technologies (ICT), reveal and intensify the existence of these paradoxes (Lewis, 2000). Mazmanian and Yates (2013) support this argument and suggest that the increased usage of mobile communication technologies often lead to so called *autonomy paradoxes*. Technologies such as phone and laptops, may allow individuals increased flexibility in where,

when and how they work. This flexibility and control over interactions in the short term automatically intensified collective expectations of their availability, escalating their engagement and thus reduces their ability to disconnect from work.

Although our findings highlight the existence of stark paradoxical tensions in relation to a technology-based lifestyle, our study differs in that regard that workers are no longer bound to the organization. Paradoxes have mostly been discussed in organizational studies; a recent study, however, confirms that in the absence of organizational boundaries, workers experience emotional tensions encompassing both the anxiety and fulfilment of working in a self-imposed working environment (Petriglieri et al., 2018). Thus, the findings concerning tensions provide empirical evidence for arguments that such tensions are frequent and persistent not only for individuals employed by a certain company but also for workers lacking strong attachments to organizations. However, compared to Petriglieri et al.'s (2018) research, the findings reveal different sources of paradoxical tensions. The resulting tensions of seeking freedom on the on the hand side and striving for stability in form of having an anchor on the other hand side are unique findings and shed light on the life of a digital nomad from a different perspective. Digital nomads encounter a paradox between being a freedom seeking individual and striving for stability in life. Thus, our study supports research pointing towards the challenging side of digital nomadism (Reichenberger, 2018; Sutherland & Jarrahi, 2017) and reveals that even individuals which seem to be restless at first sight need constants in life.

5.3.7 Digitalism and Connectivity

With regard to the role of digital devices, the findings support Sutherland and Jarrahi's (2017) observation of technologies being essential and omnipresent for the entire lifestyle. Digital nomads' ability to find work, communicate with others, and complete projects is dependent on their ability to access these technologies on demand, from co-working spaces, coffee shops, hostels or elsewhere. In contrast to other studies in the field of digital nomadism, it was investigated if digital devices are part of the identity construction process itself.

Nevertheless, throughout the interview process it became visible that digital nomads did not refer to the role of digital devices in their life; only when specifically asking them about it, they highlighted the fact that laptops and phones are the requirements for a life as a digital nomad. Hence, we assume that digital devices enable the existence of digital nomadism but only indirectly influence the identity process itself.

5.4 Critical Reflections

The preceding analysis and discussion of the findings of this thesis underlined the relevance and usefulness of researching the combined topic of digital nomadism and professional identity construction. This section aims to critically reflect on the research process and point out potential limitations of the research design.

5.4.1 Research Philosophy

As this thesis aims to explore the professional identity construction process of digital nomads, the philosophical stance of social constructivism appears most suitable in order to do so. Throughout this research, we pointed out that the core of this research focuses on the individual interpretations and realities of digital nomads, indicating that the research interest focuses not on the broader mass of digital nomads, but on their individual truths (Egholm, 2014; Bryman & Bell, 2015). The choice of research philosophy has important implications and limitations for our study, to be reflected here. As the focus of the study is on the individual experience, it is important to mention that the research aim is not to generalize the findings to the overall group of individuals that identify as digital nomads, but the goal is to develop a conceptual understanding based on the findings of our sample. Conceptual understanding in this context means to acknowledge that we cannot capture each individual experience in a model, but instead, we produce a conceptual framework that is built on the abstractions of individual experiences. Ultimately, we aim to support digital nomads themselves and others to understand and be better understood.

It appears suitable to mention that the pillars of the proposed identity construction process cannot be considered exhaustive. In line with the choice of research philosophy, it is not aimed to provide an exhaustive discussion of pillars of identity construction to generalize to all digital nomads. Therefore, a research based on a different sample might have drawn additional conclusions.

5.4.2 Selection and Demographics

Interviewees were contacted through the two Facebook groups *Digital Nomads around the World* and *Female Digital Nomads.* The participation in the Facebook group is based on the self-identification as digital nomad, indicating that individuals not identifying with the term digital nomad may not take part in the online community on Facebook. This implies that digital nomads not taking part in one of these two groups were systematically excluded from being chosen to take part in our research. Therefore, the study is limited to interviewees that identified themselves with digital nomadism and were motivated to take part in the Facebook community. In line with our social constructivist research, a relatively small sample size is adequate as the goal of this research is to conceptualise the individual experience. The sample of interviewees underlying this research comprised of 15 individuals. In general, there exists the possibility to segment these interviewees according to their demographic features. But, in our case, the group of interviewees was not built naturally but was chosen unsystematically based on who replied to our interview request. Our sample is comprised mainly of females *(see Table 1)*, where it may be that a more balanced sample in relation to gender would have led to different findings. Additionally, most of the interviewees have a cultural background rooted in Western society. This may be reflected in the findings of this research as individuals with other cultural viewpoints are excluded. While analysing the data collected throughout the research process, we did not segment the data according to demographic characteristics. Therefore, we did not identify clear differences amongst our interviewees in relation to their demographics. Additionally, we did not segment the individuals according to the length of their nomadic experience. However, we assume that digital nomads who travel for a longer time span may reflect more critically on the benefits and downsides of digital nomads. In line

with this, they may also perceive a stronger desire to find more stability in their lives, as reflected in the idea of anchoring to a community, home, or system. These factors may have had an influence on the findings of this research and therefore, it appears suitable to appreciate these limits here.

5.4.3 Timing

The research comprising this thesis is carried out within a limited time span of approximately four weeks for the data collection. Therefore, we were able to gain insights from our interviewees at one point in time. It is recommended for future research to conduct the interviews over a longer period of time in order to be able to capture the personal and professional development as well as other dissolutions in relation to our proposed framework. This change in research process may enable the researcher to gain additional valuable insights.

5.4.4 Biases

As stated in the description of method previously in this thesis, we aimed to maximize the trustworthiness of this qualitative research, which includes four sub-criteria, *credibility, transferability, dependability* and *conformability* (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Still, we acknowledge that by familiarising ourselves with existing literature, the interview guide and also the findings may partly be based on a gained preconception of digital nomadism.

5.5 Future Research

Our thesis points to various further research opportunities, which will be discussed in the following. A question previously raised is whether the term professional identity is applicable for digital nomads overall. Researchers might draw their attention to the definition of professional identity in light of digital nomadism and investigate whether the term itself needs to be redefined or adjusted to any extent. Additionally, future research might further

strengthen our framework by investigating the distinction among its various elements as well as their relations. For instance, it became visible that the element of pride reinforces the importance of freedom and anchoring in the identity construction process of digital nomads. The connection between pride and identity and its subsequent consequences on how digital nomads define themselves, however, requires more detailed investigation. Furthermore, the element of anchoring and their role in identity construction process should be explored in future studies. We investigated that the community anchor was particularly strong compared to factors such as home and system. In order to increase the trustworthiness of the research, it would be helpful to explore if this trend is recognized when using a different sample (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Last, but not least, previous research points towards tensions as being not always dysfunctional but the source of personal growth (Petriglieri et al., 2018). Even though tensions seem to emerge due to a contradictory desire for freedom and anchoring, our exploratory study has not been able to demonstrate how digital nomads handle and proceed with the existence of these tensions. Thus, more work remains to be done in conducting studies focusing on digital nomads' coping strategies of paradoxical tensions and how these strategies influence their quest for identity.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

This thesis investigates how digital nomads construct their professional identity in the absence of an organizational environment and thus, theoretically contributes to the research on the relationship between two previously unconnected literature streams. Data consists of interviews with 15 individuals, located in different countries around the world. This thesis aims to provide a departure point for a better conceptual understanding of the digital nomads' quest for identity, for both digital nomads themselves and outsiders of the digital nomad community. From our data, a conceptual framework emerges, which proposes the main pillars of professional identity that guide the construction process. Findings indicate that digital nomads' self-concept is strongly connected to the idea of living a self-determined life. When they decide to leave their previous lives controlled by societal expectations, materialism, and

organizational regulations, they strive for freedom in relation to location-, time-, and task-components, implying that they want to decide in a self-imposed manner where, when and how to work. As opposed to the idea of freedom, findings also reveal that digital nomads desire more stability in life, which they find by anchoring to the community, a home base, or a newly created system. In connection to these findings, digital nomads in our study express a feeling of pride towards being a self-determined individual as well as being anchored to the community. The satisfying effect caused by pride reinforces the importance of freedom and anchoring as integral part of the interviewees' identity. Furthermore, data reveals that digital devices and connectivity are the enabler of the entire lifestyle; however, they did not seem to be strongly connected to how digital nomads define themselves, therefore only indirectly influencing the professional identity construction process. Lastly, we propose that the concurrent desire for freedom and stability may lead to the emergence of paradoxical tensions. As discussed within the practical implications, we see a need for individuals to embrace these tensions and try to balance the two opposing forces in a suitable way in order to remain a digital nomad and to create a sustainable lifestyle.

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