

# The Emergence of the Digital Nomad: A Review and Analysis of the Opportunities and Risks of Digital Nomadism



Simon Hensellek and Natália Puchala

**Abstract** By earning a living through skillful use of location-independent digital technologies while on the move, the concept of digital nomadism has become increasingly popular. Under the influence of digitalization and globalization, people – including entrepreneurs, freelancers, and employees – have started to leave the regular “9-to-5” work structures behind and change their expectations of work, particularly in terms of their balance between work and private life, thereby extending the concept of work-life balance to work-leisure balance. Due to this changing perspective, work is increasingly seen as a part of a lifestyle that encourages workers to choose their environment based on leisure preferences rather than professional circumstances. Within this chapter, we review the existing but still fragmented literature on the phenomenon of digital nomadism, which constitutes an “extreme” form of flexible work. In doing so, we aim to contribute in two ways. First, we provide a comprehensive overview and definition comprising four recurring elements of digital nomadism (i.e., digital work, flexibility, mobility, and identity and community). Second, we analyze the opportunities and risks associated with each of these four elements of digital nomadism in order to spur future research in these directions. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

**Keywords** Flexible work · Digital nomads · Digital nomadism · Review · Opportunities and risks

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## Introduction

Under the influence of digitalization and globalization, new opportunities of digital work have emerged over the past years, enabling people to deliver results, regardless of their physical attendance in an office (Jacobs and Gussekloo Jacobs and Gussekloo 2016). The accessibility of digital data or completely remote office solutions, anywhere at any time, have led to the redundancy of a permanent workplace and supported the rise of flexible work structures, thereby breaking through dominant routines and organizational boundaries (Macgilchrist et al. 2019) and setting new ways of working while using digital technologies (Thompson 2018). Today, information systems and information technology tools contribute to working digitally even in foreign and exotic places (Dal Fiore et al. 2014).

Living independently from locations and regular “9-to-5” work structures by using digital technologies, the so-called digital nomads work while traveling, thereby creating a new form of not only work-life balance but also work-leisure lifestyle (Cook 2020; Orel 2019). The emergence of the “digital nomad” was firstly predicted by Makimoto and Manners (1997) in their eponymous book. Over the past two decades, this lifestyle has become increasingly popular and received repeated attention from the media but also from scholars. Although the phenomenon of digital nomadism has received recurring attention, our knowledge about digital nomadism is still limited. Most of the work to date has been concerned with explaining the phenomenon itself and how technological advancements enhanced its development (e.g., Patokorpi 2006). Similarly, researchers also looked at other factors that may contribute to digital nomadic work, for example, supportive infrastructure such as coworking spaces (e.g., Orel 2019). Other research streams investigated who may become a digital nomad and what their motivations are (e.g., Reichenberger 2018). However, the outcomes of living as a digital nomad, including its opportunities and risks for individuals and the society, have been largely neglected so far.

Therefore, the present chapter reviews extant literature on digital nomadism to provide an overview and comprehensive definition of “digital nomads.” In doing so, we find that the scholarly research is increasing but literature is still rather fragmented across different domains. Across the different research domains, we identify four main elements of digital nomadism (i.e., digital work, flexibility, mobility, and identity and community). Based on that, we analyze the opportunities and risks associated with each of these four elements of digital nomadism. In this way, we aim to contribute an outline on the status quo and hope to spur future research concerning the salient elements of digital nomadism.

The chapter is organized as follows: Next, we explain our methodology and give an overview of our literature review. We then carve out the motivations and recurring elements of digital nomadism to formulate a comprehensive definition of the phenomenon. In the following section, we analyze opportunities and risks associated with the different elements of digital nomadism. The chapter closes with a discussion of the results and limitations of our approach and an outlook for future research.

## Method

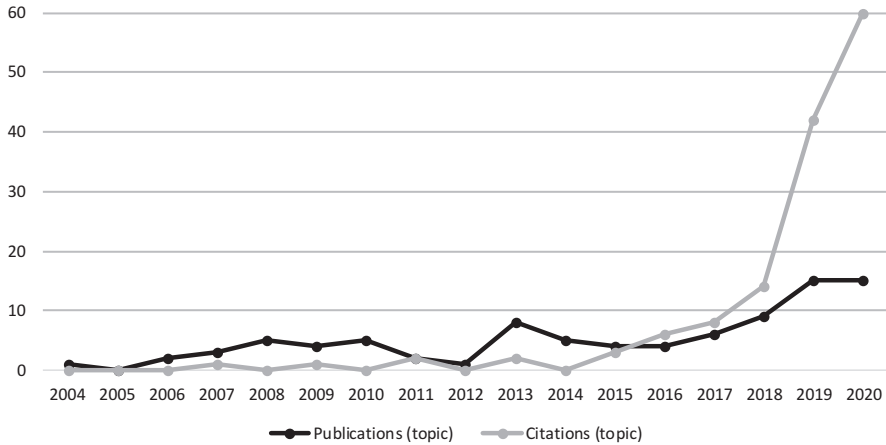
This chapter is based on a literature review. Following prior studies in this relatively young research field (e.g., Jarrahi et al. 2017; Schlagwein 2018), we considered literature from various sources including scientific journals and books but also other digital resources. The literature search was performed using the common databases of Google Scholar, Web of Science, and Scopus (Martín-Martín et al. 2018). We conducted our main search for the focal term “digital nomad\*” to cover all variations including digital nomads, digital nomadism, digital nomad lifestyle, and similar terms. For comparability, we also added results for specific sub-terms such as “digital nomadism” and “digital nomad lifestyle” and for broader terms such as “flexible work” and “digital work.” The results are summarized in Table 1. Consistent with prior research, we found that Google Scholar offered significantly more results due to the inclusion of books, theses, conference/working papers, and other publications (Martín-Martín et al. 2018).

To gain further insights into the development of research on digital nomadism, we further analyzed the results from Web of Science regarding the development of total publications and citations for the term “digital nomad\*” over the past two decades. Figure 1 shows that only 14.6% of articles have been published before 2010 and that the majority of research has been published within the past 5 years (78.0%). We also found a steep incline in citations since 2018.

The above results show that research on digital nomadism is rising but still in its infancy. An additional analysis of the Web of Science categories further reveals a rather fragmented literature base with 10 articles in the field of leisure/tourism, 8 in IT/computer science, 8 in business/management, and 6 in humanities/social science. The overview and comparison of the most cited works in the Web of Science (Table 2) versus Google Scholar (Table 3) database confirm this picture. However, we see that 10 years after the nonscholarly seminal books by Makimoto and Manners (1997) and Ferriss (2007), scholarly articles are on the rise. Recurring author names with more than one publication in this domain are, among others, C. Nash, W. Sutherland, M. H. Jarrahi, G. Phillips, B. Y. Thompson, and D. Schlagwein (not listed).

**Table 1** Overview of results of the database search

Keywords	Google Scholar (without patents and citations)	Web of Science (all databases; topic/title)	Scopus documents (article title, abstract, keywords)
Digital nomad*	1210	89/41	52
Digital nomadism	465	25/12	24
Digital nomad lifestyle	77	2/0	5
Flexible work	86,800	1386/315	1.435
Digital work	19,500	276/61	528



**Fig. 1** Development of research on “digital nomad\*” (Web of Science)

Against this backdrop, we see the need to review the extant but fragmented literature regarding recurring salient elements of digital nomadism that contribute to a more comprehensive definition of the term and combines the different literature streams to stimulate more interdisciplinary research in this field.

## The Digital Nomad

### *Motivations*

To understand why some people become digital nomads while others do not, scholars started to inquire into individuals’ motivations to follow a digital nomad lifestyle (e.g., Reichenberger 2018). First, the digital work inherent to digital nomadism can be economically profitable. However, digital nomads do not necessarily strive for higher income (Reichenberger 2018) but aim at a sufficient (although not always regular) income, commonly generated through solo self-employment in digital work that provides them with their personal level of economic freedom (Ferriss 2007; Thompson 2018). The “market justifications of digital nomadism” proposed by Schlagwein (2018, p. 4) further concerns rational optimization, which includes cutting costs of living, reduction of possessions, and affordable travels. Besides the technological advantages through digitalization, an important element of most digital work nomads do is that it is result-oriented work, rather than serving a fixed amount of time in an office to receive a paycheck (Jacobs and Gussekloo 2016).

Knowing that the chance to work digitally in a specific work field exists does not simultaneously mean one becomes a digital nomad. Another relevant aspect is the escape from everyday life and office atmosphere (Horton 2017; Ferriss 2007). Hence, the second goal is to have individual freedom. That is to say, more free time

**Table 2** Top 10 most cited works. (Web of Science)

Author(s)	Year	Title	Article type	Citations
Dal Fiore et al.	(2014)	“Nomads at last”? A set of perspectives on how mobile technology may affect travel	Journal Article (Journal of Transport and Geography)	38
Reichenberger	(2018)	Digital nomads – a quest for holistic freedom in work and leisure	Journal Article (Annals of Leisure Research)	19
Richards	(2015)	The new global nomads: Youth travel in a globalizing world	Journal Article (Tourism Recreation Research)	18
Nash et al.	(2018)	Digital nomads beyond the buzzword: Defining digital nomadic work and use of digital technologies	Conference Paper (International Conference on Transforming Digital Worlds, iConference 2018)	10
MacRae	(2016)	Community and cosmopolitanism in the new Ubud	Journal Article (Annals of Tourism Research)	8
Jarrahi et al.	(2019)	Personalization of knowledge, personal knowledge ecology, and digital nomadism	Journal Article (Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology)	7
Orel	(2019)	Coworking environments and digital nomadism: balancing work and leisure while on the move	Journal Article (World Leisure Journal)	6
McElroy	(2019)	Digital nomads in siliconizing Cluj: Material and allegorical double dispossession	Journal Article (Urban Studies)	5
Al-Zobaidi	(2009)	Digital nomads: Between homepages and homelands	Journal Article (Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication)	4
Patokorpi	(2006)	Abductive reasoning and ICT enhanced learning: Toward the epistemology of digital nomads	Book Chapter (The Information Society: Emerging Landscapes)	4

and flexibility in working hours and working structures as provided through gig work (Thompson 2019), presumably enhanced by the urge to travel and explore unknown locations and to do leisure activities.

Third, mobility and travel for inspiration or fun seem to be an intrinsic desire of humanity (Makimoto and Manners 1997). The seemingly congenital interest in exploring the world can not only be seen as a motivation but even more as an “inspirational justification of digital nomadism” (Schlagwein 2018, p. 3). By this, Schlagwein (2018) refers to an individual’s worth of the “art of living” (p. 5). This can be mirrored in practicing a hobby bound to geographic conditions intensively, for instance, surfing, hiking, or snowboarding, or through personal growth in experiencing diverse cultures and visit copious countries with beautiful landscapes

**Table 3** Top 10 most cited works. (Google Scholar)

Author(s)	Year	Title	Article type	Citations
Makimoto and Manners	(1997)	Digital nomad	Book	309
Ferriss	(2007)	The 4-hour workweek – Escape 9–5, live anywhere, and join the new rich	Book	224
Müller	(2016)	The digital nomad: Buzzword or research category?	Journal Article (Transnational Social Review)	53
Reichenberger	(2018)	Digital nomads – a quest for holistic freedom in work and leisure	Journal Article (Annals of Leisure Research)	48
Sutherland and Jarrahi	(2017)	The gig economy and information infrastructure: The case of the digital nomad community	Journal Article (Proceedings of the ACM on Human–Computer Interaction)	38
Nash et al.	(2018)	Digital nomads beyond the buzzword: Defining digital nomadic work and use of digital technologies	Conference Paper (International Conference on Transforming Digital Worlds, iConference 2018)	35
Thompson	(2018)	Digital nomads: Employment in the online gig economy	Journal Article (Glocalism: Journal of Culture, Politics, and Innovation)	23
Thompson	(2019)	The digital nomad lifestyle: (Remote) work/leisure balance, privilege, and constructed community	Journal Article (International Journal of the Sociology of Leisure)	23
Jacobs and Gussekloo	(2016)	Digital nomads: how to live, work and play around the world	Book	21
Jarrahi et al.	(2019)	Personalization of knowledge, personal knowledge ecology, and digital nomadism	Journal Article (Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology)	16

(Reichenberger 2018). Traveling, including personal and cultural exploring, feels rewarding and provides indescribable admiration and excitement (Schlagwein 2018). The worth of these experiences is oftentimes valued higher than materialism (Manson 2013). The accompanied boost of self-esteem, confidence (Manson 2013), and creativity (Orel 2019) make the lifestyle so attractive and can evolve to a positive mindset and integrate into their own identity.

Fourth and finally, this leads directly to the third category of identity and community, which grows by interacting with like-minded people. Such interaction and community building are spurred by the growing amount of professional infrastructure that supports nomadic workers such as, for example, online communities via social media or coworking spaces around the world (Orel 2019; Thompson 2019). Being part of an interesting community also displays the “civic justifications of digital nomadism” (Schlagwein 2018, p. 4).

## *Elements and Definition*

When searching for the terms “digital nomad” or “digital nomadism,” one experiences an interesting gap between the still relatively rare scientific work and the large amount of information in the form of news, blogs, videos, and websites. Nevertheless, analyzing the existing work and most common definitions reveals some recurring patterns matching the research fields and motivations mentioned above, namely digital work, flexibility, mobility, and identity and community.

Most academics contain the aspect of digital work in their definitions. Accordingly, they agree that a digital nomad is someone that eludes a regular office environment while *working digitally* using digital technologies (Thompson 2018). Hence, digital nomads find employment mostly in the gig economy (Thompson 2018), for example, as programmers, or web and graphic designers. This is because choosing a location-independent lifestyle typically denies access to factories or larger machines for the physical manufacture of a product, stressing the reliance on ICTs (Nash et al. 2018; Spinuzzi 2012).

At the same time, the definition should include the willingness to explore new places and specifically invest more time in leisure than simply escaping from an office after the regular working hours. To include the *flexibility* that comes with a nomadic lifestyle, scholars described digital nomads as “individuals, who leverage technology to work remotely and live an independent and nomadic lifestyle” (Prester et al. 2019, p. 1). The flexibility of working mobile and autonomously also means relinquishing the amenities of a fixed and organized work space and to provide oneself independently with the needed supplies and resources for successful work (Büscher 2014). Research on the gig economy also showed that digital platforms enhance flexibility by matching demand and supply of clients and independent gig workers (Sutherland and Jarrahi 2017). With regards to their working performance, it is incidental, in which location digital nomads work or how much time they invest, as long as their performance matches the desired results (Jacobs and Gussekloo 2016). Self-reliance and independence can be motivating factors to favor digital working arrangements, selecting unrestrictedly between working on the one side and living and creating an individual balance on the other side (Orel 2019; Reichenberger 2018). To work for material possessions, prestige, and other extrinsic rewards are nowadays oftentimes seen as obsolete values. In fact, some digital nomads even live in a minimalistic manner (Nash et al. 2018). This is because it can be beneficial to minimize one’s belongings to the most necessary, leaving the ability to join spontaneous adventures, explore new cities, and landscapes.

Digital nomads are known for their desire for worldwide travels, but there are also less extreme forms of digital nomads. The digital nomad lifestyle has so far been accurately described as “the ability for individuals to work remotely from their laptop and use their freedom from an office to travel the world” (Thompson 2019, p. 27). However, the aspect of having a choice must be emphasized here. Digital nomads can work remotely and use their *mobility* either to travel or to pursue other interests. Yet, the mobility, length, and breadth of travel and destinations can vary

and many different expressions of this freedom can be observed in reality. Mobility does not only consist of geographic independence but also of mobility towards employment (Büscher 2014), for example, by having short-term contracts, where job offers and tasks vary (Czarniawska 2014). Digital nomads thereby escape their known working environment and in most cases their comfort zones, to operate in a free and self-determined way and explore an endless range of possibilities (Ferriss 2007). This kind of extreme flexibility often facilitates to take more chances (Kingma 2019), even though with higher risks (Kalleberg 2009). Uncertainty about how long and far to travel is typical for digital nomads and distinguishes them from all other working structures. A nomadic worker travels *for* work and, in contrary, a digital nomad works *while* traveling (Nash et al. 2018). It can be difficult to predict how long digital nomads might stay in the same place or when to return to a base (Nash et al. 2018). However, a base (e.g., the hometown) is not compulsory owing to the ability of continuous mobility (Richards 2015). Deciding on a location is oftentimes based on personal recreational preferences, rather than the available work positions (Müller 2016) and the interplay of work and leisure create a lifestyle (Reichenberger 2018).

Mobile internet combined with portable devices resulted in such revolutionary lifestyle changes (Dal Fiore et al. 2014; Mascheroni 2007). New organizational and social structures assisted digital nomads to grow into their own *community* (MacRae 2016). By digitalizing sociality, people are able to be connected even when they are geographically apart (Büscher 2014). However, digital nomads do not simply work apart from a company's office but at the same time all digital nomads are "working alone together" (Spinuzzi 2012, p. 433) as a community. Moreover, even if they pursue individual goals and maintain diverse jobs, they still have their digital nomadic lifestyle in common (Sutherland and Jarrahi 2017). Their mutual interest for extreme mobility, including traveling to exotic destinations, and organizational independence (Sutherland and Jarrahi 2017) could lead to joint activities and bonding relationships, instead of endangering them (Maruyama and Tietze 2012; Orel 2019). An important role in the community building of digital nomads plays, among others, coworking spaces that serve as central points of contact for the community (Orel 2019). This community strengthens the feeling of affiliation and contributes to the fact that digital nomadism is incorporated in their *shared identities*. They all go through the same process of trying to maintain belongingness while establishing professional autonomy (Prester et al. 2019).

Recapitulatory, the foundation for a life as a digital nomad is: (1) digital work enabled by technological advancements. Mobile devices and fast internet enable access from anywhere at any time. The second outstanding characteristic of digital nomads is (2) flexibility and the associated personal and professional freedom. As a consequence of individuals' desire for freedom, the idea of nomadism arose. The geographical and temporal independence creates (3) mobility for worldwide travel and leisure. Finally, digital nomads are characterized by their establishment of a new lifestyle, and (4) identity as being part of a larger worldwide community.

Hence, we believe that the following definition combining these four main criteria can be applicable: Digital nomads are individuals who pursue a work-leisure



lifestyle by working remotely leveraging digital technologies whilst on the move, which enables them to work independently from anywhere in the world. They typically perform digital work through flexible work arrangements and place a high value on mobility in order to integrate both traveling/leisure and working. Despite their individuality and mobility, their intrinsic motivations and goals, in turn, create a shared identity and global community with other people that follow the same lifestyle.

## **Opportunities and Risks of Digital Nomadism**

In the following, the opportunities and risks of living as a digital nomad are analyzed based on the four characteristics: digital work, flexibility, mobility, and identity and community.

### ***Opportunities of Digital Nomadism***

#### **Digital Work**

Digital work enabled by innovative internet and communication technologies is one of the main pillars of digital nomadism (Dal Fiore et al. 2014). Due to its independence of location, no other type of work can better combine professional life with personal interests and traveling, thereby increasing individuals' freedom and ability to create their very own balance between work and private life. It is the revolutionary advancement of the worldwide web, which makes it possible to create an individual work-life and even work-leisure balance (Thompson 2019). The benefits of digitalization of the workplace include independence, autonomy, and self-determination (Cook 2020; Gajendran and Harrison 2007). Feeling self-determined and independent is empowering and can build up self-esteem (Macgilchrist et al. 2019). It also opens up avenues for individuals' creativity and overall happiness (Liegl 2014).

Because of universal access for all, and at the same time fewer barriers, it is also said to create more equal opportunities for everybody (Green et al. 2018). By profiting from new technological possibilities, workers can find an endless variety of jobs and firms easily find reachable affordable digital workers that perform tasks on demand (Durward et al. 2016). The flexibility of economically independent arrangements and working time (Durward et al. 2016) leads to a less traditional hierarchically-organized working environment (Colbert et al. 2016). Additionally, digitalization spurs entrepreneurship among digital nomads. Such entrepreneurial endeavors include, for example, typical freelance jobs such as software developers, web and graphic designers, photographers, artists, or authors but also rather new

types of professions such as social media influencer or drop-shipper and affiliate marketers (Sutherland and Jarrahi 2017).

Besides the hard- and software needed for working digitally, it reduces the consumption of paper and other materials, which might be a positive environmental aspect (Green et al. 2018). Moreover, digital work has the ability to decrease traffic congestions as the number of commuters could decline. This would not only have a positive effect on the environment (e.g., less CO<sub>2</sub> emissions), but would also save time and increase individuals' productivity and well-being (Messenger et al. 2017).

## Flexibility

Flexibility plays a big role in digital nomadism, since resisting routines facilitates changing working structures and schedules (Wang et al. 2019). This kind of freedom has changed the value of time and money (Reichenberger 2018). Before the twenty-first century, the possibility to work self-determined and live rather light-hearted was only reserved for people living in wealth (Makimoto and Manners 1997). Nowadays, digital nomads can profit from freedom that digital work entails, throughout all classes of wage and age. Additionally, short-term contracts and gig-wise work allow experimenting with different jobs and careers (Sutherland and Jarrahi 2017). Flexibility is also given through various work arrangements such as home office, job sharing, or fully digital remote work as inherent to digital nomadism. Combining personal and professional life can be more comfortable, by complying with deadlines on the professional scale without neglecting family responsibility or personal interests. A flexible adaption to goals and needs can again simplify trade-offs in the work-life relationship (Allen et al. 2013). Both personal as well as professional long-distance relationships were never easier to master than with technology that provides asynchronous but also real-time face-to-face communication (Liegl 2014).

Furthermore, the sharing economy supports the personal and professional life with significant cost and time savings (Dillahunt and Malone 2015). On-demand infrastructures like car-sharing, Airbnb, or office sharing (Reichenberger 2018; Prester et al. 2019) fit into the flexible life design. A popular workplace among gig workers and digital nomads are coworking spaces because they provide an on-demand professional work environment, which not only fulfills the technological but also social needs of their users (Orel 2019). Moreover, users report higher productivity (Orel 2019) due to a less stressful environment and higher independence (Liegl 2014). Also, finding an individual work-life balance results in positive mental health (Cook 2020). An abundance of options exists to support personal time management, for example, by integrating meditation and sports into the working schedule. This makes it possible to create a healthy and customized routine (Jacobs and Gussekloo 2016). Whoever has the ability to take responsibility and is disciplined enough for self-organization, will profit from the flexibility that digital work entails and will potentially have a better work-life balance (Messenger et al. 2017). From an economical perspective, with growing supplies offered in the sharing economy

and people working from home, cafes, or coworking spaces, not only costs can be reduced but also the overall amount of office spaces, thereby freeing those spaces for other public purposes (e.g., parks for recreational use). Working from home or in coworking places, can reduce vehicle emission, save money, and increase sustainability (Green et al. 2018), thereby enhancing the overall livability of local areas.

## **Mobility**

Mobility and travel are often used interchangeably in this context and constitute an important element of digital nomadism because this lifestyle will eventually not get paid off with a high income, but with exploring and practicing something meaningful and helpful (Hall et al. 2019). The selection of a location is based on hedonistic passions and maximum demographic privileges (Thompson 2019). Therefore, the motives behind a preference for mobility may also differ between different age groups. For instance, millennials often seek adventures and have the willingness to explore the unknown and work occasionally in their spare time, while older people may also consider family aspects or even want to take a mid-career break. Living as a digital nomad incites an increase in potentially new and more intense and lasting experiences compared to a simple vacation. Having the option to stay in different places enriches life with experiences, creating a higher quality of life.

Furthermore, being on the move boosts creativity and gives people positive psychological feelings of relief (Liegl 2014). An open-minded personality resulting from diverse travel experiences also eases the ability to adapt to new situations by growing a higher tolerance of ambiguity and reducing prejudices. The foreign culture and multiplicity can be embraced, rather than just accepted (Blackshaw 2018). Moreover, being open-minded helps finding a job anywhere and getting along with new or even difficult coworkers or clients (Czarniawska 2014). Overall, those who are able to organize and combine work and leisure in a lifestyle, enrich their private life and benefit their health and well-being (Schwarzenberger 2017).

In addition, escaping to cheaper countries can raise the standard of living (Czarniawska 2014), when workers profit from “geographical arbitrage” (Ferriss 2007, p. 11). Meaning, getting wages, for example, in US dollars or Euros from international companies, while having expenses in countries with lower costs of living.

## **Identity and Community**

Since community gives identity (Müller 2016), opportunities can be seen on both the individual and communal levels (MacRae 2016). Continuously building new friendships, finding work companions, and being surrounded by like-minded people might foster self-esteem on a personal basis, which in turn reinforces self-confidence (MacRae 2016; Prester et al. 2019). Digital nomads go through similar experiences and profit from exchanging information among themselves either face-to-face or

online via social media groups or forums. By staying updated on the latest technology trends, startup news, and more (Sutherland and Jarrahi 2017), they interact beneficially with each other, enhance their personal knowledge and foster the community (Jarrahi et al. 2019).

The feeling of membership has a strong potential to affect the identity of the individuals in this group, creating strong in-group cohesion (Prester et al. 2019). Reciprocity and social sharing within the group also make it profitable for individuals to be part of the local and global digital nomad community (Dillahunt and Malone 2015; Jarrahi et al. 2019). Online networking with friends and community members not only eases staying in touch to reduce loneliness but also builds new relationships even before one arrives at a new place (Jarrahi et al. 2019).

Moreover, living the life of a digital nomad can also be a significant opportunity to shape individual's personal and cultural identity (Blackshaw 2018). Embracing the variety of people and cultures helps individuals understand biased opinions and can be beneficial in various occasions. The learnings from traveling and adapting to a new environment can be applied to the everyday life, where one is exposed to unknown situations and result in accepting and valuing diversity (Kong et al. 2019).

## *Risks of Digital Nomadism*

### **Digital Work**

Despite the many advantages of digital work mentioned above, there are also several risks associated with it. First, working digitally means a high consumption of information and media on a daily basis, which entails mental and even physical risks. One important psychological risk is stress due to the permanent state of availability (Messenger et al. 2017). The personal life suffers because digital workers feel an obligation to be available around the clock and feel guilty if they are not. In order to protect themselves from such feelings and imbalance of work and private life, they should draw clear borders between both roles or try to follow schedules to prevent overworking (Cook 2020). Additionally, working on a computer all day can lead to strained necks and shoulders and create back pain (Jacobs and Gussekloo 2016).

The second category of risks concerns the modalities of digital work arrangements, which are often designed as freelancing or self-employed entrepreneurial activities (Thompson 2018, 2019; Stewart and Stanford 2017). While entrepreneurship is generally associated with high uncertainty and risks (Alvarez and Barney 2005), many of the freelancing jobs digital nomads accept are rather precarious, studies found (Kalleberg 2009; Thompson 2019). It can be laborious and unsatisfying jobs, which can result in low hourly payments due to fixed contracts only paying for the end result (Thompson 2018). In addition to the constant uncertainty of finding the next job, it is challenging for digital nomads to save earnings for health care, retirement plans, and tax liabilities (Morad 2016). The high amount of competition

represents another risk with entering a global pool of workers or entrepreneurs with oftentimes similar business models, most prominent being drop shipping, online marketing/consulting, or social media influencer (Thompson 2019). This can lead to high failure rates among digital nomads' businesses (Morad 2016).

Finally, working digitally might save resources such as paper, pencils, or printer ink, etc. However, the necessary hardware for this work can also have tremendous economic footprints due to the rare earths included in electronic devices and ever-shorter product lifetime cycles (Resende and Morais 2010). Additionally, the transfer of online data consumes significant amounts of energy today, thereby increasing the carbon footprint of digital nomadic work (Baliga et al. 2009).

## Flexibility

Flexibility, especially in terms of flexible work arrangements as a freelancer, may also bring about less stability and generally more insecurity. This feeling of continuous change and instability can lead to enormous pressure or even anxiety. This can be triggered by uncertainty about the time period of a job, the regularity of income, doubts in terms of retirement pensions, or simply building financial buffers (Czarniawska 2014). Those fears can have a negative impact on an individual's personal life and mental health (Cook 2020). The private time suffers from always being approachable, when flexible work structures aggravate a clear separation of private and professional life (Reichenberger 2018). The professional life might lack desired success, since procrastination often harms productivity. A high level of self-discipline and reflection is required to retain work-related routines and remove possible distraction, for example, to meet the deadlines (Jarrahi et al. 2019).

The sustainability aspect is also called into question here, since economies of scale may not be applicable for remote workers and own purchases of hard- and software could increase. This could also result in a financial risk that gig workers, more specifically digital nomads, are taking (Lobel 2017). Moreover, what one perceives as freedom, might feel like drowning to another (Büscher 2014). Perpetually searching for a place to stay, work, or do extraordinary leisure activities, puts the mind in stress and lead to "decentered selves" (Schultze and Boland 2000, p. 191). As a matter of fact, liabilities tend to be higher, since digital nomads cannot rely on employers' safety plans. Firms, on the other hand, profit from losing their responsibility for payments in health insurance or other benefits and protections (Nash et al. 2018). Without those benefits, workers are left in increasing insecurity. Dealing with anxiety and pressure that comes with those circumstances, might pose a challenge to physical and mental health (Messenger et al. 2017).

Digital nomads must accept that flexible working structures also reflect difficulties outside of their own area of control (Lobel 2017). For example, they rely on a suitable infrastructure provided by their designated area of residence, which are oftentimes exotic and maybe underdeveloped countries. Hence, from a public point of view, this also poses problems for these areas due to the increased number of long-time tourists that not only want to spend their holidays but also want a

professional work environment. While this might foster economic development on the one hand, it may also harm local nature and culture.

## Mobility

Although mobility has become significantly more accessible and affordable over the past decades, there are still significant direct and indirect costs associated with traveling. For some, even the direct costs might be hardly affordable as they are just entering the working world or will have to travel on a tight budget. The indirect costs may further increase with age, since insurance and medical services as well as a certain level of amenities gain on priority (Clark 2019). Working in a large company, in a safe position might be a more attractive choice to a lot of people to enjoy the benefits of safety nets and lay the foundation for settlement in a specific area (Korver 2019). Also, a fixed address for formality reasons may ease bureaucratic matters. An important decision is also whether or not to stay registered in one's home country in order to maintain potential social benefits and have a safe haven to return to if needed.

Mobility does not imply more free time, as digital nomads work nonstop and inexhaustible (Korver 2019). Essentially, remote work is possible around the globe, but can require willpower and not only personal time management but also time zone management (Prester et al. 2019). Getting up at 3 a.m. to make a call to a different time zone can make in-time communication as well as staying accountable difficult to combine with a healthy lifestyle (Kong et al. 2019). Frequently changing work arrangements also hamper forming bonds between companies and workers and with coworkers or clients. As a consequence, loyalty declines with less attention to company values or clients' needs (Aguinis and Lawal 2013). This could additionally lead to less effort while doing the job, finally leading to a vicious circle of less performance and success. Finding committed and trustful workers is essential for a company to prevent one-sided opportunism (Boschma 2005).

Another risk for digital nomads who are always on the move is social isolation (Orel 2019). It is hard to prevent loneliness without a fixed office and regular interaction with colleagues or clients (Spinuzzi 2012) or social environment in general. Moreover, finding a suitable working place might be challenging due to the lack of safe internet connections but privacy and attentiveness are necessary while sharing content in public places like cafes (Sutherland and Jarrahi 2017). The growing amount of coworking spaces is sure helpful but searching and using them can still be expensive and time-consuming.

Traveling and restlessness can have an impact on physical and mental health (Lieg 2014). Therefore, costs for and especially the quality of health insurance and medical care also vary in different locations and might not meet the known or expected standard but access to such public support services are important (Hall et al. 2019). While moving from place to place, it is always up to the digital nomad's own responsibility to stay familiar with the public health but also finance/tax system of the respective country. Otherwise, they might encounter unexpected payment

obligations. Although digital nomads can make use of “geographical arbitrage” (Ferriss 2007, p. 11), for example, by performing digital work for companies in high-wage countries and living in low-wage countries, this entails legal and tax-related risks. Sometimes, it is not clear where a digital nomad has to pay income or sales tax or in which country they might enjoy social benefits and earn retirement payments.

Lastly, due to the amount and extent of journeys around the globe, most notably by plane, the own environmental footprint increases through CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (Green et al. 2018). With the ever-increasing attention paid to the environment, travel could even become a guilty pleasure instead of a part of a sustainable lifestyle.

## **Identity and Community**

The challenges for identity and community building start with getting to know people in the first place (Czarniawska 2014). This might be particularly difficult for introverts, who have a rather hard time when trying to make social contacts, as opposed to extroverts (Thompson 2019). The number one reason why the digital nomad lifestyle challenges the happiness of many nomads is the feeling of loneliness despite a worldwide community (And.co from Fiverr 2018). Although they are connected, relationships among digital nomads often remain superficial and individuals feel isolated (Spinuzzi 2012). On top of that, group dynamics may also build up pressure through idealized images of a few famous success stories or by social influencers, who more often than not aim at their personal profit.

Against this backdrop, it is argued that the online presented personalities and images of both the lifestyle itself and successful people living it do not always match reality (Hall et al. 2019). For inexperienced newcomers, this poses risks of fraud and exploitation and constant travels further increase the difficulty of building trustful private and business relationships. Therefore, the growing community of digital nomads gets inventive by creating a multitude of support programs such as online classes, inter alia, about how to become a digital nomad and build profitable businesses from anywhere in the world. However, many of these “master classes” or best practices are not made out of philanthropy but out of opportunistic reasons to gain profit from the increasing interest in the digital nomad lifestyle. This may leave newcomers disillusioned and with empty pockets.

## ***Limitations and Application of Findings***

Although we were able to find recurring elements and provide a comprehensive definition that combines the different research domains of digital nomadism, our approach to draw these theoretical findings from a literature review is not without limitations. In particular, we were not able to validate our findings through data from interviews or empirical surveys of digital nomads. To alleviate this limitation,

we will apply our findings with the help of statistical data from the recent And.co from Fiverr (2018) remote work and digital nomads survey with 3755 respondents.

Overall, *digital work* enables remote work and autonomous living and working but self-discipline and self-management are still vital for its success. Otherwise, the risk of overworking (28%) exists, since people can put themselves under a lot of pressure following an “always on” mentality. Furthermore, missing career advancement (24%) and the lack of promotions from supervisors can hold back individual success.

Second, *flexibility* can be considered more as an opportunity than a risk. By far, the biggest opportunity for the study participants is flexible working hours (58%). Followed by the freedom of autonomous decisions (18%). In contrast, the lack of motivation (13%) is the most likely risk as a result of flexibility.

However, flexibility in combination with *mobility* represents a great chance to explore the world. Of the respondents, 55% were fully and 43% partially remote, while 23% of the organizations they worked for were fully distributed. Around 17% said they travel to more than five countries a year and for 9% the main reason to become a remote worker was their desire to travel.

Finally, even though many online *communities* exist, the lack of community poses challenges for 30% in the survey and prohibits happiness while working remotely. Therefore, feeling lonely and isolated is the number one risk of the digital nomad lifestyle but decreases over time. This is even more interesting, since 73% are still rather new to remote work and may have not yet gained a large network. With regard to a shared *identity*, nearly 80% want to work remotely as long as possible and one fourth (24%) already described themselves as a digital nomad.

## Discussion and Outlook

When reviewing the literature and trying to identify the “classic” digital nomad, we found that it cannot be narrowed down to one type of person. Instead, research on digital nomadism exists in a variety of fields including leisure/tourism, IT/computer science, business/management, and humanities/social science. Although it is still a young but emerging area of inquiry, these findings point at the need for an interdisciplinary approach to research on digital nomadism. Hence, in this chapter, we showed that digital nomadism can be defined along with the four main elements: digital work, flexibility, mobility, and identity and community drawn from the fields mentioned above.

Against this backdrop, the opportunities and risks of working and living as a digital nomad were illustrated and can be summarized as follows. The opportunities evidently include independent remote work from anywhere at any time while simultaneously saving costs and having flexibility to shape an individual work and leisure routine. Especially professions in technologically advanced areas (e.g., web/graphic designers, translators, customer service agents, etc.) tend to profit most from flexible digital working structures and increase peoples’ ability to integrate working and



traveling into a digital nomadic lifestyle. The opportunity of global travel enriches personal and cultural experiences over monetary values. By having the power to leave the everyday life when feeling stuck, there is the advantage of mobility as well as the feeling of freedom (Czarniawska 2014).

Naming important risks, the fascination for digital nomadism may fade when considering its long-term implications (Manson 2013). Loneliness is a common factor, since places and people become interchangeable and personal relations might remain superficial (Manson 2013). Furthermore, solo self-employed digital nomads take higher risks, whether financially or in terms of their own state of health, especially in the long run when it comes to health insurance/issues or retirement payments (Lobel 2017). Emerging questions relating to these facets and opportunities and risks of digital nomadism create potential for future research.

Such questions may concern how the length and distance of travels influence the experience of the digital nomadic lifestyle. Related to that, scholars not only investigate the frequency of changes in the locations of digital nomads (i.e., moving forth within a certain country and moving forth across different countries) but also the nature of jobs they do (i.e., fully digital work vs. analogue or hybrid work arrangements via digital platforms).

Second, dedicating research to psychological or personality-specific motives why people join the digital nomad lifestyle could reveal interesting insights. Individuals might make the decision to work remotely due to psychological or personal motives, out of chances for a higher life quality or satisfaction, or to overcome experienced inequality or unemployment at home. Besides, it might be of interest to conduct empirical studies, including the motives, aspirations, and routines of digital nomads. Related research questions could also concern personal-level outcomes in terms of individuals' well-being. For example, why many people experience loneliness or a constant feeling of having to spend every spare minute being productive (Cook 2020). Not wanting to "waste" any time comes with unnecessary stress, which many digital nomads tried to decrease through their lifestyle in the first place.

Third, studies may also adopt a long-term perspective and look at people who return from a digital nomad's lifestyle to an ordinary working construct. Will they be accepted by employers and will the nomads themselves be able to return "back to normal"? Or will it perhaps become a vicious circle of constantly seeking ways to feel balanced and happy? It is also of interest what the long-term consequences might be in terms of their financial and personal wealth but also in a broader societal view. Eventually, the number of digital nomads might increase even more and leave governments no chance but to adapt. For instance, implementing an unconditional basic income could be potential reactions (Green et al. 2018). Authors can also address the danger of a shrinking middle class (Noyes 2004), since freelancers from wealthy countries work in poorer countries and push their careers away from a middle class.

Overall, due to its novelty, not only digital nomadism but remote work in general leaves plenty of room for future research. There are probably more innovations to come that support not just life as a digital nomad but will also contribute to broader changes in the balance between work and private life in general.

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