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LOCKED-DOWN VANLIFE: IDENTITY PROJECTS OF DIGITAL NOMADS AMID THE CHALLENGES OF THE GLOBAL COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

The global COVID-19 pandemic has confronted society and individuals worldwide with sudden and far-reaching challenges. As hypermobile consumers longing for ultimate individual and spatial freedom, digital nomads' mobility projects were particularly challenged by this novel source of insecurity and immobility. This thesis' major objective is, therefore, to investigate how digital nomads negotiate their identity projects in times where extensive (inter-)national travel and contact restrictions impede the opportunities for upholding a mobile lifestyle. Thereby, this thesis concentrates on the phenomenon of vanlife digital nomadism as a lifestyle that offers particular levels of freedom, mobility, and independence (Gretzel & Hardy, 2019). By drawing upon the theoretical conceptualizations of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000), liquid consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017), as well as social and material anchoring (Aufschnaiter et al., 2021), this thesis applies a qualitative research approach based on in-depth interviews to uncover how digital nomads negotiate their identity projects. Thereby, the findings suggest negotiations in the dimensions of (a) the self, (b) social relationships, (c) place and home, as well as (d) consumption and possessions.

Keywords: digital nomadism; vanlife; identity projects; liquid modernity; liminality; pandemic; COVID-19; material anchors; solid consumption; liquid consumption

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cf.	–	confer
e.g.	–	for example
ZMET	–	Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique

1. INTRODUCTION

"What did you name your van?
- Vanguard.
Oh, that is very strong.
- She is."
(Frances McDormand in "Nomadland", 2020, directed by Chloé Zhao)

1.1 Problem Statement

With the sudden appearance of the global COVID-19 pandemic, public life has abruptly been transformed into a state of paralysis. National and international travel restrictions, aimed at preventing an exponential spread of the virus, introduced a new chapter of immobility to the world. Simultaneously, lockdowns and contact restrictions challenged our everyday lives and forced us to decelerate both socially and spatially. The pandemic resulted in habitual daily routines being suddenly confronted to new sources of insecurity, as infection events and political measures appeared to change almost on a daily basis. Especially in an era of advancing globalization and ongoing technological progress, socio-economic developments have allowed for individual lives to be more flexible and fluid (Bauman, 2000). Thus, the crisis has not only challenged the public health sector and the entire global economy, but also the opportunities for individual spatial mobility in an increasingly interconnected society (Benton et al., 2021). It has shaped a novel pandemic reality, that has defined our everyday lives both as modern individuals and also as consumers.

At the same time, newspapers worldwide report on an increasing number of individuals being drawn to a lifestyle in nomadic existence (Hart, 2015; Lufkin, 2021; Pietsch, 2021). Inspired by an inner desire to detach themselves from the limitations of societal constraints, a longing for ultimate individual freedom, and facilitated opportunities of remote working through technological developments, the digital nomad emerged as a social figure on a "quest for holistic freedom" (Reichenberger, 2018: 364; Mancinelli, 2020; van Yperen, 2014). As a phenomenon deeply intertwined with the global nomadic lifestyle, digital nomads seek to combine work and leisure into one entity by an equal juxtaposition of short-term international travel and digital remote working (Hannonen, 2020; Müller, 2016; D'Andrea, 2007). In other

words, the aspiration to maximize the dimensions of professional freedom, spatial freedom, and personal freedom are stemming from the core of the digital nomadic identity (Reichenberger, 2018). Being cosmopolites at heart, they engage in continuous short-term relocation and increasingly disentangle themselves from the locations they roam, both socially and culturally (Bardhi et al., 2012). Thus, they engage in a lifestyle centered around mobility and characterized by liminality, due to which their freedom and location-independency emerges as an "essential component of their possibility for self-expression" (Mancinelli, 2020: 426; Richards, 2015; Paris, 2011; Urry, 2007; Hart, 2015).

Especially the phenomenon of digital nomads engaging in the "vanlife"-culture has experienced an upsurge during the past decade (Gretzel & Hardy, 2019). Vanlife digital nomadism refers to individuals living and working full-time in their own van and, thus, enjoying an ultimate level of freedom (Gretzel & Hardy, 2019; Reichenberger, 2018). Their digital affinity emanates from vanlife digital nomadism being an increasingly prominent phenomenon in contemporary social media pop-culture, reflecting the significance of digital technologies for this lifestyle (Gretzel & Hardy, 2019; Cohen & Gössling, 2015; Hardy et al., 2013).

Due to unrestricted spatial mobility and freedom representing core values of the digital nomadic identity, the crisis situation of the pandemic has introduced new challenges to this hypermobile lifestyle (de Almeida et al., 2021; Ehn et al., 2022). As an "unpredictable instance of change" (p. 1), the disruptive power of the pandemic results in Doyle and Conboy (2020) identifying it as a paragon for liquid modernity. In this context, they refer to Bauman's (2000) sociological conceptualization of contemporary society, in which solid societal structures and traditions increasingly dissolve into flux. Steadily progressing globalization, intensified desires for individualization, and continuous technological developments are progressively liquefying the world we live in, resulting in solid sources of stability to vanish (Bauman, 2000). This leads to individual lives being more fragmented and short-term oriented, as the unpredictability of the socio-economic environment reinforces the need for flexibility and adaptability (Bauman, 2007). Thus, Bauman (2005) identifies contemporary nomadic lifestyle structures as an archetype for the liquid modern era, due to them revolving around living in liminality and navigating through an ever-changing, unstable environment.

Concomitantly, the progressing liquefication of society and individual lifestyles also manifests itself in the dimensions of consumers' consumption behavior and their relationship to the own

possessions (Bardhi et al., 2012; Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). In contrast to Belk's (1988) conservative, solid view of possessions as central identity forming factors, Bardhi et al. (2012) identify an alternative form of consumption, that is characterized by increasing immateriality, flexibility, and an absence of ownership. Thus, the rise of global mobility and digitalized lifestyles shifts the focus away from long-term material ownership to "ephemeral, access-based, and dematerialized" (p. 582) forms of consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). In other words, postmodern, mobile consumers increasingly tend to oscillate between the poles of tangibility and intangibility, as they navigate on a continuum of solid and liquid consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). While dematerialization appears to become more and more important in this negotiation, Aufschnaiter et al. (2021) identify an increasing significance of material and social anchors in a fluid environment. In constantly changing social and spatial environments, mobile consumers are enabled to nourish their need for social stability and bonds through these materialistic possessions as "solid footholds" (Aufschnaiter et al., 2021: 27).

Representing a crucial part of their inner self, these anchors support individuals in negotiating their identity in times of flux (Larsen & Patterson, 2018). As *identity projects*, these negotiations refer to "the creation, enhancement, transformation and maintenance of a sense of identity" (Larsen & Patterson, 2018: 195; Bardhi et al., 2012; Belk, 1988; McCracken, 1986). Especially in times of liminality, the maintenance of a "linear and durable identity that coheres over time and space becomes increasingly difficult" (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017: 591). As mobility and freedom appear as core elements of the digital nomadic identity, the pandemic era of increased immobility constitutes a new challenge for the design of their identity projects (Ehn et al., 2022).

1.2 Research Objective

There has been substantial research on the phenomena of digital nomadism, liquid consumption, and their relation to the concept of liquid modernity (Bardhi et al., 2012; Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017; Aufschnaiter et al., 2021; Thompson, 2021; Bauman, 2000). For example, by referring to digital nomads as "the perfect [citizens] of the liquid society, a stranger in their own land, wandering to find a place for themselves" (Thompson, 2021: 13; Bauman, 2000, 2007), previous studies have contextualized the phenomenon of liquid modernity to the hypermobile consumer segment of the digital nomads. Despite an increased liquefication of

consumption patterns, recent studies have emphasized the significance of solid material anchors as vital stabilizers in changing environments (Aufschnaiter et al., 2021). In addition, the appearance of the global COVID-19 pandemic has been acknowledged as an unprecedented challenge of immobility for predominantly mobile lifestyles, especially in case of digital nomads (de Alemeida et al., 2021; Ehn et al., 2022). However, research on possible challenges for those mobile identities still remains scarce. In particular, digital nomads' identity projects in times of identity-conflicting crises have not been thoroughly investigated. Therefore, this thesis aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do digital nomads negotiate their identity projects in times of immobility?
2. Which role do material anchors play in this negotiation?

By applying a qualitative research approach based on the conduction of in-depth interviews, this thesis expands the understanding of digital nomadism, mobile identities, and contemporary consumer behavior.

1.3 Structure of the Thesis

After illustrating the research background and the purpose of this thesis in the first chapter, the second chapter outlines fundamental theoretical concepts that constitute the basis of this study. Thereby, the following chapter elucidates Bauman's (2000) conceptualization of liquid modernity as a socio-economic perspective on contemporary society, characterized by the phenomena of constant change, permanent movement, and liminality. The chapter further introduces contemporary forms of nomadism as a paragon of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2005; D'Andrea, 2007; Kannisto, 2014). A particular focus is thereby laid on digital nomadism and the vanlife culture as an embodiment of utmost mobility, individual and spatial freedom (Reichenberger, 2018; Gretzel & Hardy, 2019; Müller, 2016). Furthermore, the chapter expounds the continuum of solid and liquid consumption, on which consumers appear to navigate in times of liquid modernity (Bardhi et al., 2012; Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). In this context, the significance of material anchors in the lives of mobile consumers is illuminated (Aufschnaiter et al., 2021). After that, the chapter concludes with an illustration of the different dimensions of identity projects derived from identity theory in order to establish the foundation for interpreting the results of this study (Larsen & Patterson, 2018).

The third chapter describes the applied qualitative research approach of this empirical study more in depth, by focusing on the research design, the research method, the sampling procedure, as well as the processes of data collection and data analysis. Afterwards, chapter four presents the findings based on the gathered qualitative data, which are subsequently discussed in chapter five. Lastly, the sixth chapter concludes this thesis by presenting managerial implications, highlighting the limitations of this study, as well as emphasizing opportunities for future research.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This chapter serves as a theoretical basis for understanding the current state of knowledge within crucial concepts related to the topic of this thesis. It begins by expounding the sociological concept of liquid modernity in order to describe a prominent perspective on current societal developments characterized by constant change and liminality. Thereby, key dimensions of this perspective are outlined and the context to the current COVID-19 pandemic is established. Afterwards, the role of the digital nomad is illuminated as a metaphorical reflection of the beforementioned concept. A special focus is dedicated to the vanlife culture as a crucial manifestation of digital nomadism, that appeared to have undergone an upsurge in recent times. Following is a detailed investigation of consumption patterns in times of change and liminality, with a major focus on liquid consumption and material footholds. Finally, this chapter finishes with a presentation of identity theory and the various dimensions of identity projects. This lays the foundation for understanding the identity negotiation projects of digital nomads, that are investigated by this study.

2.1 Liquid Modernity

> *"Most importantly, unlike our ancestors, we don't have a clear image of a 'destination' towards which we seem to be moving [...], we react to the latest trouble, experimenting, groping in the dark."* Zygmunt Bauman (2012: Foreword)

The concept of liquid modernity was firstly introduced by sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2000, 2003, 2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2012, 2013). As a consequence of the increased speed with which our social environment is constantly changing nowadays, liquidity appears to be an increasing phenomenon in this current society. In Bauman's attempt to describe this postmodern society, he argues that society has moved from a solid to an increasingly liquid form of living. The conditions of our lives are altering more quickly and drastically than ever before, which impedes our possibility to develop certain habits or routines in crucial aspects of our lives (Bauman, 2005). Due to these quick alterations in modern society, individuals are confronted with an omnipresent feeling of uncertainty affecting multiple dimensions of their everyday lives (Bauman, 2005).

Drawing upon the terminology of *solidity* and *liquidity*, Bauman metaphorically compares these concepts to contemporary society by referring to the definitions of the Encyclopedia Britannica. According to these definitions, fluids are floating and variable in their nature (Bauman, 2000). They "cannot sustain a tangential, or shearing, force when at rest [and experience] a continuous change in shape when subjected to such a stress" (Encyclopedia Britannica in Bauman, 2000: 1). Solids, on the other hand, maintain their shape and are stable in their nature (Bauman, 2000; Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.). By referring to this metaphor, Bauman argues that also with regard to the temporal dimension, solids appear to be clearly defined, while liquids undergo processes of transformation, metamorphosis, and flow. These characteristics force liquids to be increasingly time-dependent. Bauman (2000) underlines this analogy by drawing upon the dimension of weight: While the human mind tends to link solids with heaviness, liquids appear to us as rather weightless. He compares this with contemporary society by arguing that this lightness, which he ascribes to current society, enables an increased level of mobility on the one hand, but a life characterized by a large extent of inconsistency on the other hand.

The postmodern society that Bauman describes appears to be confronted with the challenge of insecurity and constant change (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017; Bauman, 2000, 2007a, 2007b). The development of technological devices and the digitalization of basic everyday-tasks, goods, and services decrease the presence of stability and structure in our lives (Rosa, 2013). In addition, the increasing extent of globalization eventuates in a rise of spatial flexibility through facilitating the mobilization of lifestyles (Rosa, 2013). This development impedes the opportunity of individuals to attach to solid social structures over a longer period of time (Bauman, 2007a). Public institutions that provide society with a feeling of security, such as political institutions or concepts of nationality, might as well be affected by constant change as structures that are closer to the individual (Bauman, 2000). As an example, familial relationships might alter due to emergence of modern understandings regarding the concept of family (Eichert, 2015). Likewise, work-related structures might change because of technological advances that allow for opportunities of location-independent working (Van Yperen et al., 2014). As a consequence, this results in an accelerated quest for constant adaption of the postmodern individual (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017; Rosa, 2013; Bauman, 2007a, 2007b).

Tomlinson (2007) and Rosa (2013) emphasize the increased acceleration of these changes. Over time, speed has evolved into a crucial characteristic in liquid modernity. Rapid technological progress has introduced an unprecedented extent of immediacy into cultural life that "[replaced]

the industrial underpinnings of machine speed" (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017: 583; Tomlinson, 2007). For example, new possibilities of digital consumption enable time-independent access to goods and services, as they are always available. Bardhi & Eckhardt (2017) argue that this trend of liquified consumption has resulted in "macro-level social and institutional transformations" (p. 583) centered around a new market logic, which do not only influence global market structures, but also consumers, their consumption habits, and their identity projects. The upsurge of access-based consumption patterns and the sharing economy can be seen as a response to this process of liquefication, as they equip consumers with the opportunity to navigate through these changes (Lawson et al., 2016; Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; Zervas et al., 2017).

On the contrary, Bauman describes the society of the pre-liquid era as one that highly values tradition, depends on involvements and duties within the familial structure, and having obligations to society (Gane, 2001). The design of individual lifestyles and life-choices used to depend on the social collective rather than the individual itself (Bauman, 2000). The social collective often served as an anchor for the individual, as it constituted a "pre-allocated reference [group]" (p. 269) providing guidance, orientation, and stability (Gane, 2001). However, in liquid modernity, individuals are increasingly confronted with the freedom, but also the challenge of reaching their own decisions and following their self-set objectives (Rindfleisch et al., 2009).

2.1.1 Fluidity of the Social Life: Key Dimensions of Liquid Modernity

Based on the conceptualization of Bauman (2000), Gane (2001), and Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017), the characteristics of liquid modernity are visible in various dimensions of social life. Bauman (2000) identifies emancipation, individuality, time and space, work, and community as key dimensions affected by liquefication (Gane, 2001). Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) emphasize the role of instrumental rationality, individualization, risk and uncertainty, and fragmentation of life and identity as core issues of liquid modernity. In the following section, these characteristics will be elaborated and structured by clustering them into (a) consequences for the individual on a micro-level and (b) consequences for the individual on a macro-level.

2.1.1.1 Liquid Modernity on the Micro-Level

In liquid modernity, a high degree of individualization evolved as a consequence of the decreasing dependency on the social collective, traditions and related values (Bauman, 2000; Lee, 2011). In the past, those social institutions used to provide the individual with the opportunity of orientation and comparison. Nowadays, the organization of its social environment as well as the design of its own way of life is increasingly determined by itself (Bauman, 2007b). Due to this absence of reference points, individuals are on a constant quest of identity as their own negotiations with the self are fluid and subject to liquefication as well (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017; Gill & Pratt 2008; Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2014). As a society of emancipated and "individualized consumers free to shop around in the supermarket of identities" (Bauman, 2000: 83), one strategy of coping with this lack of self-referencing is the substitution of these social institutions with marketplace institutions, such as specific brands or goods (Bauman, 2007).

This privatization of modernity is accompanied by phenomenon of instrumental rationality, which is characterized by an individual behavior that has been optimized to achieve personal goals as efficient as possible, both in economic and societal dimensions (Bauman, 2003; Kolodny & Brunero, 2015; Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2016). Manifestations of this instrumental rationality are already visible in social interaction, for example, when individuals engage in interpersonal relationships and conversations with the primary intention to serve their own purposes (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017; Zwick & Bradshaw, 2016). Zwick and Bradshaw (2016) illustrate this development by referring to online communities that are often characterized by purpose-driven interaction, e.g., in case of self-promotion without a real interest in the counterpart.

Additionally, a fast-changing world results in individuals being confronted with the challenge of constant adaption. It impedes the individual from long-term planning and, thus, affects the durability of their identity projects and their lives as they are easily altered (Bauman, 2000, 2007b). This "fragmentation of life and identity" (p. 584) results in an increased necessity for flexibility and aversion for stagnation, as entire life plans can abruptly change (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017, 2012). Depending on the social context, individuals might play different roles in different contexts, to which they need to constantly re-adapt (Powell, 1996). As "liquid life feeds on the self's dissatisfaction with itself" (Bauman, 2005: 11), individuals encounter a

variety of different lifestyles that might fuel confusions about belongingness and the own idealized self-image, in case they interact with different social groups (Gergen, 1992). These developments allow the individual to maintain different identities simultaneously, that might even contradict each other (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Hall, 1994). Thus, desiring stability can be a burden for postmodern individuals (Bauman, 2007b). This might even become apparent in their consumption behavior, as the value of possessions is increasingly substituted by the value of a disposal of the old and an acquisition of the new (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017).

2.1.1.2 Liquid Modernity on the Macro-Level

Bauman (2000) denotes the liquification of lifestyles in current society as a rather negative development, as he emphasizes the perpetual risk and uncertainty in almost every aspect of life. Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) refer to Rindfleisch et al. (2009), who identified that omnipresent existential insecurities strengthen the bond between consumers and the consumed as providers of security. Uncertainty accompanies individuals throughout the entire life-span, as it is present at the increasing pressure to perform at school and later at work (Lee, 2001). It encompasses the private, societal and occupational spheres of the individual due to the increasing ephemerality of tenures, relationships, or employment (Poder, 2013).

In the context of the occupational sphere, the introduction of digital technologies and their continuous development enable new possibilities of designing work and work-life balances (Vuori et al., 2019). This aspect of the liquefication of the work environment allows for time- and location-independent working opportunities, especially in the service- and knowledge-intensive industries (van Yperen et al., 2014). However, these advancements are also accompanied by expected increases in productivity and commitment with effects on the individual and its performance (Vuori et al., 2019). Additionally, liquefication of work can introduce new sources of risk and uncertainty to the individual, as the long-term orientation of employment is increasingly substituted by a short-term orientation of both employers and employees (Bauman, 2012; Kociatkiewicz, 2014). Deregulated working conditions as well as contracts aiming at temporary occupation provide employees with just as little security as the complete absence of employment contracts (Bauman, 2000; Gane, 2001).

Technological advancements also contribute to the liquefication of time and space (Bauman, 2000). While the significance of physical space was key in the previous industrial era due to

the economy depending on large production facilities, space has become more irrelevant in liquid modernity (Gane, 2001; Bauman, 2000). Although Bauman (2000) illustrates that contemporary urban geography has evolved into creating different functional spaces, the increasing irrelevance of space manifests itself in the advancements of information technology. By using these technologies, space can be crossed in a fraction of a second, opening new opportunities of location- and time-independency (Bauman, 2000). Simultaneously, the proportion of space designated for preventing profound human interaction appears to increase. Bauman (2000) and Aubert-Gamet and Cova (1999) refer to these spaces as "non-places" that diminish possibilities for social habitation, e.g., the anonymousness of hotel rooms, airports, or highways. The inhospitable nature of these areas impedes individuals from establishing a sense of home or belonging, yet they "remain inhabited by strangers" (Gane, 2001: 270), which challenges the notion of *home* in liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000).

Despite the liquefication of the concept of home, traditional social collectives and conservative family constellations, Bauman identifies the modern nation-state as a possible source of collectivistic identity based on a "republican model of unity" (Bauman, 2000: 178). Thus, citizenship can be seen as a provider of stability in times of change. Irrespective of location, it equips individuals with certain rights and duties and can thus affect identity and the sense of belonging (Shotter, 1993). According to Bauman (2000), this unity of citizenship bases on the value of negotiation and mediation in contrast to an emphasis of differences and stifling. In this context, Marshall (1950, 1964) and Mackert (2006) emphasize the inclusive and universalistic character of the modern status of citizenship, that provides individuals with the opportunity to liberate themselves from ascribed social collectives. This might accelerate the liquefication of these social collectives on the one hand, but it also introduces new opportunities for individualization on the other hand, e.g., through freedom of religion or freedom of residence (Bauman, 1996).

2.1.2 Liquid Modernity and The Global COVID-19 Pandemic

To conclude, Bauman's concept of liquid modernity is characterized by a largely critical perspective on the developments in postmodern society. His remarks revolve around emphasizing a constant challenge of identity for individuals, who appear to oscillate between the poles of solid footholds and liquid environments. Technological and societal developments, such as the emergence of new digital solutions or the increased flexibility of once solid social

collectives, appear in an unfavourable light, as Bauman tends to generalize the specific case and, thus, seems to omit positive and successful manifestations of liquid modernity in current society (Gane, 2001; Atkinson, 2008). Additionally, Bauman's view on society appears to be influenced by occurrences in the industrialized western hemisphere, where those societal and technological changes occur to a different extent than in other regions of the world (Glänzel et al., 2008).

However, despite these critical remarks on Bauman's conceptualization of postmodern society, the disruptive nature of the current COVID-19 pandemic has introduced a new, global paragon for liquid modernity to the world (Thompson, 2021; Doyle & Conboy, 2020). As a "complex, intensified, unpredictable instance of change" (Doyle & Conboy, 2020: 1), the crisis situation of the pandemic can be held accountable for initiating sudden changes to the lives of many, encompassing a large share of the everyday world (Thompson, 2021). For example, (inter-) national travel restrictions aimed at decelerating the spread of the virus have challenged spatial mobility and introduced a new source of risk to individuals and whole industries due to increased planning uncertainty (Chinnazi et al., 2020; Rahman et al., 2021). In addition, nationwide lockdowns and interpersonal contact restrictions affected not only the economy, but also social relationships and mental health (Elmer et al., 2020). This fluidity within the social environment of the individual has emphasized the significance of adaptability to sudden changes (Ehn et al., 2022). It also highlighted the increasing importance of digital technologies in order for individuals to navigate through this jungle of uncertainty, as remote teaching and working now played an essential role in pandemic everyday life, and human interaction increasingly occurred digitally (Thompson, 2021; Pratama et al., 2020). In addition, also organizations were suddenly confronted with new challenges, as organizational structures and the work environment were required to adapt to new infection protection laws, e.g., by expanding possibilities for remote working (George et al., 2020).

Consequently, Thompson (2020) identifies the concept of liquid modernity as "a theoretical framework for understanding this socioeconomic shift in our global society" (p. 21). Therefore, for the purpose of this thesis, liquid modernity is used as a theoretical foundation to understand the challenges that were introduced by the pandemic.

2.2 Nomadism in Liquid Modernity

As a consequence of the beforementioned societal developments amid the era of liquid modernity, Bauman (2005) identifies the nomad as an iconic social character in times of liquidity. As "a member of a people who have no fixed residence but move from place to place usually seasonally and within a well-defined territory" and "an individual who roams about" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), the notion of the contemporary nomad diverges into two different schools of thought. With the former definition indicating a nomadic lifestyle characterized by a settler-inspired, traditional connotation of the term, the latter definition emphasizes a process of ongoing spatial mobility without any seasonal or cyclic settlement. Therefore, one may need to distinguish between nomadic lifestyles in a historic-traditional sense, where the decision for settlement largely depends on the local availability of existential resources for livestock, trade, and food supply, and a liquid-modern form of nomadism, where globalization and technological progress allow for any remaining location dependency to dissolve (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.; Bauman, 2000; Bardhi et al., 2012; Salzman, 2002).

This emergence of increasingly liquid nomadic lifestyle structures is emphasized by Bauman (2000), who identifies that contemporary nomadism in the liquid modern era appears to supersede the location-dependent nomadic lifestyles of the solid modern era, which was predominantly shaped by nomadic settlers. According to Bauman, the nomadic lifestyle represents a prime example of individuals able to navigate through times of liminality, as their lifestyle requires them to constantly adapt to new changes. Their "acceptance of disorientation, immunity to vertigo and adaption to a state of dizziness, tolerance for an absence of itinerary and direction, and for an indefinite duration of travel" (p. 4) equips them with essential experiences and capabilities allowing for a maintenance of this lifestyle (Bauman, 2005). Therefore, contemporary nomadism has been used as a symbol for mobility, liminality, and fluidity in an increasingly interconnected world (Richards, 2015).

Despite tendencies of romanticizing and idealizing the nomadic lifestyle (Richards, 2015), the large extent of deterritorialization and constant relocation challenges the presence of fixed points of reference, the concept of nationality, and belongingness (Bardhi et al., 2012; Featherstone, 1995; Hannerz, 1996). Thus, identity projects of contemporary nomads seem to detach from distinct locations (Craig & Douglas, 2006; Featherstone, 1995; Ong, 2007). In contrast to traditional nomadic settlers, contemporary nomadism is a phenomenon that is global

at its core. This *global* nomadism appears to be more in flux, as international borders are constantly being crossed (D'Andrea, 2007). As a consequence of this ongoing deterritorialization, global nomads and their identities are not only increasingly diverging from physical space, but also from the social and cultural practices related to that space (Tomlinson, 1999; Canclini, 2005; Gupta & Ferguson, 1997). Bardhi et al. (2012) denote "cosmopolitan principles of global citizenship rather than state or local loyalties as core values [of global nomads]" (p. 5). Despite this identification of global nomads as global citizens, their sense of belongingness appears to be challenged by the multitude of experienced cultures, which is why Bardhi et al. (2012) underline an adaptive self of the global nomad that alters with location. By being continuously exposed to multiple cultures, liminality emerges as a constant characteristic of the global nomadic lifestyle, which stimulates the development of navigation strategies in order to strengthen the skill of adaptability to these changes (Appau et al., 2020).

While often being referred to as homeless, global nomads are on a constant quest of negotiating between "home and abroad, sedentary and mobile, work and leisure" (p. 2), as their lifestyle does not allow for maintaining close bonds to specific locations (Kannisto, 2014). However, this homelessness in global nomadism is seen as the result of a deliberate choice, as global nomads intend to unchain themselves from their limiting roots, in which they see their country of origin (Kannisto, 2016). This newly gained independence allows them to not only deliberate themselves from those roots, but also from the occupational sphere. As Kannisto (2014) emphasizes, global nomads "enjoy their free time instead of committing themselves to long working contracts or mortgages that tie them down for decades" (p. 3), allowing for a better work-life balance. Instead of pursuing a certain structure in their lives, they prefer to live for the moment and to enjoy every facet of it (Kannisto, 2014). Thus, this understanding of the global nomad emphasizes the role of leisure and enjoyment at the core of contemporary nomadism.

However, advancements in technology and global societal changes in the liquid modern era also laid the foundation for another contemporary nomadic figure to appear, that ideally seeks to combine both work and leisure into one holistic lifestyle: the digital nomad (Reichenberger, 2018). Müller (2016) therefore identifies two major streams in research focusing on different aspects of the current nomadic phenomenon. The first stream focuses mainly on the individual nomads and travelers as well as their personal leisure and mobility quests. In this context, Müller (2016) refers to the appearance of the "flashpacker", which refers to a backpacking

traveler utilizing digital technologies mainly for the purpose of traveling. In contrast to the digital nomad, the flashpacker does not intend to integrate digital technologies for work-related activities during traveling. The second stream focuses on the work-related sphere of digital nomads, in which context Müller (2016) refers to "job nomads" or "flexpatriates", who do not engage in self-determined mobility, but rather follow decisions made by the labor market. Therefore, recent research aimed at combining the two research streams by investigating the link between work and leisure in the lives of digital nomads more in depth, as illustrated in Figure 1 (i.a., Reichenberger, 2018; Hannonen, 2020; Orel, 2019; Thompson, 2019; Mancinelli, 2020).

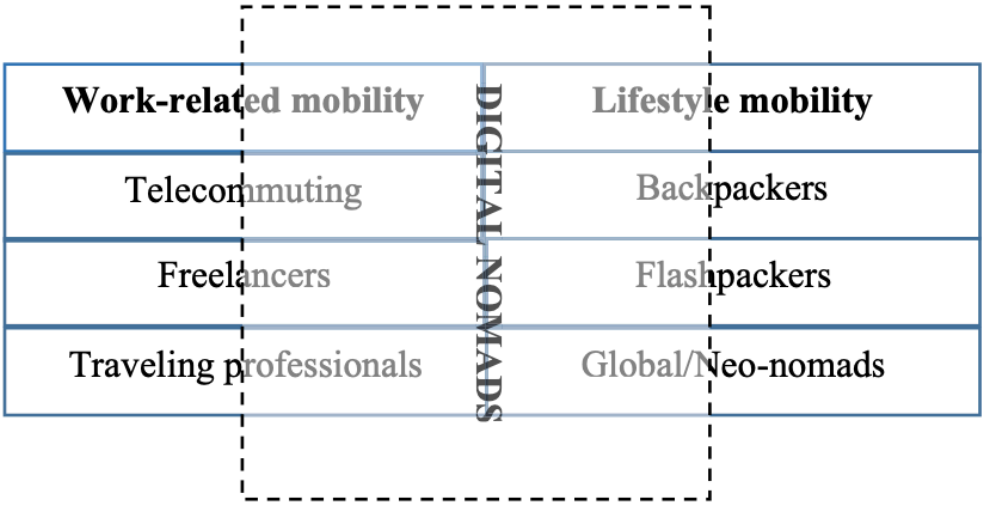

Figure 1. Digital nomadism and its interrelations of work and leisure (Retrieved from: Hannonen, 2020: 5)

2.2.1 Digital Nomads in a Liquid Environment

The term "digital nomad" first appeared in 1997, when Makimoto and Manners predicted a future of work characterized by an increasing extent of location-independency due to advancements in digital technologies, which were expected to enable affordable video-call opportunities and a wireless, real-time exchange of documents and data. The societal and technological developments in the liquid modern era, such as facilitated opportunities for traveling, digitally-based communication, and a stronger urge for self-actualization resulted in a transformation of the digital nomad from the once fictional figure towards a real social figure in the current occupational sphere (Müller, 2016). In particular, recent developments of global markets through globalization and innovative organizational structures, such as blended working opportunities (Van Yperen, 2014), enabled the incorporation of mobility into everyday

lives (Hannonen, 2020). These opportunities resulted in both a national and international increase of mobility-centered lifestyles (Paris, 2011; Urry, 2007; Hart, 2015).

Building on the conceptualization of Müller (2016), who identified the digital nomad in a state between the poles of work and leisure, Reichenberger (2018) emphasizes the inextricable interrelation of professional freedom, spatial freedom, and personal freedom as core motivational factors for digital nomads to successfully maintain their lifestyle. Being independent from a specific location enhances opportunities for an individual design of leisure time and enables the possibility to structure and control the own work environment, which positively stimulates the professional freedom by improving creativity (Reichenberger, 2018).

Striving for the achievement of a holistic state that equally combines these three freedoms, Reichenberger (2018) suggests three levels of digital nomadism depending on the extent of their mobility. First-level digital nomads are characterized by a flexibility regarding their working location, which excludes possibilities for traveling. While second-level digital nomads maintain a permanent residence, they increasingly engage in traveling and combine it with their profession. Lastly, third-level digital nomads relinquish from any kind of permanent residence and holistically combine work and leisure into an entirely mobile life.

This ultimate degree of mobility requires flexibility and a strong dependence on technology in order to ensure successful remote working (Sutherland & Jarrahi, 2017). An important criterion for the selection of a specific occupation is its suitability for a mobile lifestyle (Russell et al., 2009). This requires occupations to be performed entirely online. Thus, a majority of digital nomads is typically employed in the digital sector, for example, as social media managers, bloggers and content creators, or web designers (Thompson, 2019). Besides relying on the own internet connection, Orel (2019) identified an expanding coworking space industry, in order to ensure a stable work environment while being on the move. Orel (2019) further explains that coworking spaces provide digital nomads with a feeling of community, belongingness, as well as a source of innovation and creativity. Simultaneously, a large number of digital nomads prefers to be self-employed as a result of the increasingly popular gig economy (Thompson, 2018, 2019). In this context, online platforms enable self-employed freelance workers to be connected with employers for the duration of a single project (Thompson, 2019). It allows workers to design their own schedules and employers to reduce overhead expenses. This highly demand-dependent working model provides digital nomads with extensive freedom on the one

hand, but confronts them with the threat of insecurity and lacking planning security on the other hand, as they need to organize their social security network entirely by themselves (Thompson, 2018). Despite the intended deliberation from the bonds of a conventional job, the pressure and uncertainty of this working model can then also be perceived as stressful and hindering, as traveling evolves into a "work-like performance" (Kannisto, 2014: 109).

However, based on the freedom that digital nomads seek to experience, Mancinelli (2020) highlights that the aspect of unlimited travel merges with their identity as an "essential component of their possibility for self-expression" (p. 426). The author argues that the value of this freedom consists in the opportunity to disentangle oneself from the limitations and expectations of society and conventional organizational structures. Due to the emphasized restrictive power of sedentarism, mobility allows for a development of the self, an expression of the own personality and individual fulfilment (D'Andrea, 2007). By referring to Giddens (1991), Mancinelli (2020) identifies a transformation of the meaning of travel from a location-dependent pleasure towards a "reflective project of the self" (p. 428), that evolved into a unique characteristic for digital nomads compared to the conventional tourist. Thus, this unique significance of mobility appears at the core of the digital nomadic identity and reflects a material representation of this deliberately chosen lifestyle (Mancinelli, 2020).

Building on Aydogdu (2016), Thompson (2019) further refers to the existence of privilege and inequality in digital nomadism by arguing that due to the constant relocation, the relationship to locations and locals mostly resides on a surface level. By predominantly originating from highly developed countries, digital nomads tend to represent a highly-educated elite (D'Andrea, 2007; Bauman, 2000). Being used to capitalist structures, this elite aims at preferring the maximization of the own economic interest and lifestyle over the support of local communities (Thompson, 2019). Due to this distance to local communities and the left-behind social collective in their country of origin, digital nomads experience a certain extent of loneliness and isolation (Thompson, 2019). The author emphasizes the creation of "nomadic communities" in order for nomads to maintain the communal part of their identity by connecting with like-minded individuals, sharing experiences and collectively overcoming challenges in the host countries.

With the sudden appearance of the global COVID-19 pandemic, political and societal measures to decelerate the outbreak of the virus challenge the digital nomad lifestyle (de Almeida et al.,

2021; Ehn et al., 2022). In particular, extensive mobility and contact restrictions pose a contradiction to the digital nomadic identity that is largely characterized by those freedoms. With its disruptive power, Doyle and Conboy (2020) identify the COVID-19 pandemic as a paragon for liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000). Ehn et al. (2022) conclude that a global crisis situation, such as the pandemic, illustrates the "adaptive superiority" of digital nomads. Due to the increased significance of digital working solutions during the pandemic, de Almeida et al. (2021) argue that the increased possibilities in remote working resulted in digital nomadism being more attractive to newcomers. In addition, the authors discovered that an increased offer of freelance workers on respective online platforms caused an increased competition for jobs in the gig economy. In this context, Wang et al. (2020) propose that the accelerated digital transformation caused by the pandemic will potentially lead to remote digital work being more widely accepted in the future.

However, social distancing and self-isolation appears to challenge the social dimension of the digital nomad identity, as predominantly online-based communication might lead to a digital fatigue and an increased longing for face-to-face contact (de Almeida et al., 2021). Yet, when negotiating about a possible return to the safe space of the home country, digital nomads emphasize the opportunity of self-development offered by the pandemic (Ehn et al., 2022). In this context, the acquisition of new capabilities supports digital nomads in strengthening their skill of adaptability, which enables them to develop new strategies to maintain their nomadic lifestyle in times of limited mobility (Ehn et al., 2022).

2.2.2 #Vanlife: The Ultimate Level of Digital Nomadism?

Although representing a largely unexplored phenomenon, the "vanlife"-culture is a rapidly emerging social movement deeply intertwined within digital nomadism (Gretzel & Hardy, 2019). This nomadic phenomenon revolves around individuals living in and working from a van, which provides them with extensive freedom and independence, as they can freely choose their location as well as their duration of stay (Gretzel & Hardy, 2019). In particular, the authors refer to Reichenberger's (2018) multi-level conceptualization of digital nomadism and argue that especially those digital nomads, who participate in the vanlife-lifestyle, experience individual freedom and spatial mobility on a maximum level.

Despite the scarcity of academic literature focused on the vanlife phenomenon, Gretzel and Hardy (2019) identified significant overlaps between vanlife and digital nomadism. In particular, they describe vanlifers as a "hyper-mobile online tribe" (p. 8) that seeks to deliberate itself from any remaining location-dependency by intentionally existing secluded from mainstream. By full-time living in and working from their van, they are largely independent from typical digital nomad workspaces, such as co-working spaces, which equips them with an additional source of independency (Gretzel & Hardy, 2019; Hardy et al., 2013).

With increasingly appearing to be a social media-based phenomenon, especially in case of Instagram, the importance of digital storytelling within the vanlife culture symbolizes the significance of digital technologies in this lifestyle (Gretzel & Hardy, 2019; Cohen & Gössling, 2015; Hardy et al., 2013). Simultaneously, besides the limited possibilities of storage, this ultimate level of mobility encourages a reduction of material possessions and promotes a minimalist lifestyle (Hardy & Robards, 2015; Gretzel & Hardy, 2019; Bardhi et al., 2012; Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). However, Gretzel and Hardy (2019) argue that due to the active reduction of material possessions, the material and emotional value of the van and the objects within it increases. They connect this argument to the commonly individualized customization of the van design in order to "make it a tiny home on wheels [as a] central [pillar] of #vanlife materiality" (Gretzel & Hardy, 2019: 8).

Therefore, the following section elucidates the concepts of solid and liquid consumption in order to investigate the role of possessions and materialism in the lives of mobile consumers. A particular focus is thereby dedicated towards the increasing value of material anchors in liquid lives (Aufschnaiter et al., 2021; Atanasova & Eckhardt, 2021).

2.3 Navigating between Solid and Liquid Consumption

Bauman's (2000) conceptualization of liquid modernity identifies liquefication processes in various dimensions of contemporary society. An increased focus on individualization, intensified global mobility, as well as the development of novel digital technologies, introduces new opportunities of consumption to the individual that are largely characterized by anti-consumerism tendencies, dematerialization and flexibility (Bardhi et al., 2012; Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017; Binkley, 2008). Thus, the concept of liquid modernity has been widely applied in academic research in order to investigate liquefication processes in consumer behavior. With

the nomad as the paradigmatic embodiment of liquid modernity, Bardhi et al. (2012) explored consumers' relationship to their possessions by drawing on contemporary global nomadism. In contrast to the antecedent research stream that emphasized the significance of solid consumption and material possessions for identity negotiations, the authors propose a new, liquid relationship to possessions (Bardhi et al., 2012; Belk, 1988). By referring to solid consumption as "enduring, ownership-based, and material" (p. 585) and to liquid consumption as "ephemeral, access-based, and dematerialized" (p. 585), Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) further develop their concept of liquid consumption by arguing for the existence of a continuum between both consumption forms. Thus, the following section illustrates the two dimensions of this continuum by investigating both solid and liquid relationships to possessions and their significance for consumer identity.

2.3.1 Solid Relationship to Possessions and the "Extended Self"

In a traditional understanding, materialistic possessions contain an existential meaning for consumers (Belk, 1988; Hawkins & Rome, 2021). As part of an "extended self" (Belk, 1988: 139), our possessions define who we are and what we identify as (Tuan, 1980). In this context, possessions enable consumers not only to maintain a consistent narrative of self-identification by learning about and defining themselves, but also to express their own identity to the outside world as an extension of the self (Belk, 1988). Consumers identify with those possessions throughout their entire course of life. Initially, possessions enable children to compare themselves to others by recognizing similarities and differences. For example, through experienced possession-related jealousy, children distinguish themselves from other children and discover their role in society (Belk, 1988). The author further argues that we tend to collect more possessions with progressing age, leading to a different notion of ownership in later years of life. They increasingly reflect individual experiences, social relationships with others, personal successes and failures, or a specific status which consumers seek to express (Belk, 1988). Even after death, the symbolic power of possessions can portray an entire life history of an individual to its successors and, thus, generate a "sense of immortality after death" (Belk, 1988: 160).

Tian and Belk (2005) expand Belk's (1988) concept of the extended self by investigating the role of possessions in the occupational sphere. Their findings suggest a duality in the work-home relationship depending on the boundary between the two dimensions. While some

individuals tend to personalize their workplace more extensively with material symbols of the self, the boundary between their private and professional spheres becomes blurred. On the contrary, other individuals prefer to eschew any material representation of the self at their workplace, which suggests a more clearly defined home-work boundary. However, these characteristics do not appear to be contradictory in their nature, as they are constantly negotiated (Tian & Belk, 2005). For example, the authors identify changes in personal life projects, social interactions at work or the organizational climate as important influence factors on the home-work boundary. Building on Nippert-Eng (1996), who identified a competitional coexistence of family and profession besides the increasingly blurring work-life boundary, Tian and Belk (2005) emphasize the interrelation of both spheres, for example, through pictures of family and friends at the workplace. According to the authors, self-extending possessions thus carry the opportunity of stimulating mental performance and an intensified identification with the "corporate self".

However, Belk's (1988) conceptualization of the extended self has also been subject to criticism. Ahuvia (2005) describes Belk's distinction between a core and an extended self as misleading. The author denotes the metaphor of the core self as a romanticized dimension of the self, pre-defined through external sources, such as societal or transcendental ones (Campbell, 1987; Gergen, 1991; Giddens, 1991). As this would imply a constant quest of the individual to uncover that core self, this metaphor, according to Ahuvia (2005), fails to account for possible influence factors that are able to transform that core self. In this context, the author identifies the ability of certain "loved items" to not only express the self, but also to re-negotiate and transform it inspired by a desired outcome. Thus, possessions appear to have a differently strong relationship to an individual's identity. As one dimension of identity-shaping possessions, Ahuvia (2005) found that due to their emotional significance, loved items can support the individual in solving their identity conflicts, for example, in case the real and the ideal selves diverge from each other. In addition, loved items also seem to support individuals in harmonizing multiple opposing facets of identity, such as contradictory hobbies and professions (Ahuvia, 2005). In this case, materialistic possessions enhance the feeling of well-being (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002). Especially in case of existential insecurities, such as the inevitableness of death, materialistic possessions can provide consumers with a certain feeling of safety, which can also strengthen their brand relationships (Rindfleisch et al., 2009).

Hawkins and Rome (2021) draw upon the crucial role of possessions in the individual identity-construction process by identifying five predominant functions of possessions with regard to identity projects: (1) internal management, (2) impression management, (3) activity facilitation, (4) personal preferences, and (5) self-communication. In the case of internal management, possessions help consumers to engage in self-reflection, as they can enhance feelings of self-worthiness or support them with emotional assistance. The authors further refer to the role of impression management as possessions can (strategically) alter the way consumers are being perceived by others. In terms of activity facilitation, Hawkins and Rome (2021) emphasize that possessions allow consumers to engage in certain activities that are deeply connected to their identity, such as smartphones enable interpersonal communication. Furthermore, possessions can also reflect certain personal preferences, such as a specific structured object design that aligns with a consumer's passion for structure and order (Hawkins & Rome, 2021). Lastly, the authors suggest that possessions can enable self-communication. For example, photos can provide consumers with a mental picture of lived experiences, while inherited jewelry can reflect the strength of a social relationship to a deceased relative (Hawkins & Rome, 2021).

In context of increased global mobility, Bardhi et al. (2012) refer to prior acculturation research that emphasizes the significance of material possessions for anchoring oneself to the home country that was left behind (Askegaard et al., 2005; Belk, 1992; Joy & Dholakia, 1991; Metha & Belk, 1991; Oswald, 1999; Peñaloza, 1994). According to this acculturation research, international migrants seek to maintain symbolic connections to their locus of nativity in order to preserve the feeling of connectedness to that specific place and the left social relationships. Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) further emphasize that those connective possessions can support migrants in mentally and socially arriving at the new place of residence. Thus, the authors suggest that mobility strengthens consumers' relationships to possessions by evolving into long-lasting and anchoring relationships. However, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) note that this understanding relies on the assumption of a singularly or sparsely occurring mobility, highlighting the significance of territorialization in migrant consumer research, which, in contrast to global nomadism, refers to a linkage of identity to specific locations (e.g., the home country and the host country).

In addition, with the increasing technological progress and new digital devices entering our daily lives, the concept of the self is confronted to new challenges (Belk, 2013, 2014). For example, the ability to create digital avatars to navigate in an online environment provides

individuals with the opportunity to extend their selves in the digital sphere (Belk, 2014). However, the author argues that besides this rather liquid form of digital representation, also the mere ownership of digital devices that enable such a digital co-creation extend our concept of the self. Smartphones, computers or tablets are essential devices that allow us to collect intangible digital possessions, such as photos we share, music we listen to, or pieces of clothing we equip our digital avatars with. According to Belk (2013), these possessions shape our self similarly to tangible possessions. However, despite the strength of this relationship between digital possessions and the self, tangible possessions still tend to have a stronger influence on our self-identification, as they do not always physically surround us and, thus, are only a limited part of our embodied self (Belk, 2014; Watkins & Molesworth, 2012). According to Belk (2014), the functionality of digital devices still tends to be more valued by consumers than the mere possession of them, which reflects itself in consumers being likely to replace a specific electronic device with an updated version of itself.

2.3.2 Liquid Relationship to Possessions and Liquid Consumption

In liquid modernity, ongoing globalization results in individual identities being increasingly detached from specific locations and, thus, deterritorialized (Bauman, 2000, 2005). Especially in case of contemporary global nomadism, constant relocation prevents those individuals from establishing a deeper relationship with a certain locus. Consequently, their mobility projects are characterized by high levels of ephemerality, flexibility and change (Bardhi et al., 2012). Additionally, the accelerated progression of digitalization in contemporary society appears to shift the focus from materialistic everyday consumption towards an increased consumption of intangible goods and services (Bardhi et al., 2012; Belk, 2013, 2014). In a progressively liquefied society, also consumption patterns are subject to liquefication processes.

While Bardhi et al. (2012) emphasize the importance of solid, material possessions for migrant consumers, their distinct spatial dependence and largely territorialized identity results in an urge for academia to investigate the relationship to possessions in the context of a more deterritorialized consumer group, such as the global nomads. The absence of solidified points of orientation and their lacking sense of belongingness to a certain national background result in global nomads to fluidly navigate between countries (Featherstone, 1995; Hannerz, 1996; D'Andrea, 2007; Tomlinson, 1999). In this context, Bardhi et al. (2012) propose their concept of a liquid relationship to possessions, in which they emphasize the increasing detachment from

material ownership. As the global nomadic lifestyle is largely characterized by a never-ending, international short-term mobility, it does not allow to establish a strong relationship to a specific location (Bardhi et al., 2012).

Bardhi et al. (2012) illustrate that this liquid lifestyle as well as its constant need for adaption is reflected in global nomads' liquid relationship to possessions, which can be characterized by three major dimensions: (1) the situational value, (2) the instrumental use-value, and (3) immateriality. Drawing upon Deleuze and Guattari's (1993) conceptualization of individuals responding to new sociocultural environments by changing their consumption patterns, Bardhi et al. (2012) refer to the situational value of items by emphasizing the distinct location-dependency of certain possessions. In other words, objects with a high situational value lose their significance when moving to another place and experiencing a different culture. Next, in contrast to migrant consumers who rely on the symbolic meaning of certain possessions, the instrumental use-value highlights that global nomads acknowledge a specific functionality of an object, such as the provision of safety or the ensurance of survival. Finally, immaterial objects, such as electronic photos or books, enable global nomads to liberate themselves from any logistical burden connected to transporting certain objects from place to place. Thus, in line with Belk (2014), Bardhi et al. (2012) identify that the functional value of a specific object appears to supersede the mere value of ownership, which illustrates the substitutability of possessions in global nomads' lives.

In addition to their analysis of liquid relationships to possessions, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) further develop their research and introduce the concept of solid and liquid consumption. In the context of Bauman's (2000) liquid modernity, they utilize his metaphor to illustrate the existence of material, enduring, and ownership-based consumption patterns on the one hand, and dematerialized, ephemeral, and access-based consumption patterns on the other hand. With the former referring to solid and the latter referring to liquid consumption, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) argue that although consumption can be either fully liquid or solid, it can also oscillate between the two extremes in form of a combination of both.

In general, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) identify three main characteristics of liquid consumption: (1) ephemerality, (2) access, and (3) dematerialization. Referring to Bauman's (2000) and Rosa's (2013) argumentation of an accelerated liquefication of the socioeconomic sphere, ephemerality in consumption describes the increasingly short-living raison d'être of

consumed goods and services. They merely tend to satisfy a temporal desire before either being substituted with an updated version of themselves or completely abandoned. Secondly, the expanded opportunities of renting, sharing, or borrowing products (e.g., rental cars or Airbnb-apartments) results in a preference of consumption based on access rather than ownership. According to Belk (2007) and Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017), this access-based consumption enables liquid consumers to liberate themselves from the disadvantages of ownership, that contradict their largely mobile identities. Lastly, the upsurge of digital technologies and digitally available products contributes to an increased level of dematerialized consumption (Belk, 2013, 2014; Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017; Magaudda, 2011). According to Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017), this dematerialization of consumption implicates a dominant position of liquid consumption over merely solid possessions. Besides digital consumption, also experiences illustrate a possible dimension of dematerialized consumption due to their immaterial nature (van Boven & Gilovich, 2003; Eckhardt et al., 2015).

In the context of dematerialization, Binkley (2008) utilizes Bauman's (2000) concept of liquid modernity to illustrate that the trend of liquid consumption may explain the increase of anti-consumerist movements. According to the author, those anti-consumerist practices affect consumer identity by promoting the value of decommodification. However, while anti-consumption is predominantly characterized by the desire to refrain from certain forms of consumption as much as possible, dematerialization still acknowledges the sphere of immaterial consumption (Lee & Ahn, 2016).

As the relationship between solid and liquid consumption patterns is by no means contradictory, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) argue that consumers tend to navigate the solid-liquid consumption continuum based on four criterions: (1) consumer identity and the relevance to the self, (2) the nature of social relationships, (3) the accessibility to mobility networks, and (4) the nature of precarity. Firstly, the higher the relevance of the consumed object for the consumer's self-identification, the more likely this object appears to be solid as ownership tends to establish a closer bond between the consumer's self and the consumed object (Belk, 1988; Swaminathan & Dommer, 2012). Secondly, the nature of social relationships refers to the extent of commodification of a consumer society. For example, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) refer to brand communities as "noncommoditized social relationships" (p. 588), where consumption is strongly connected to the self and, thus, rather solid. Thirdly, if consumers are experiencing a facilitated access to mobility, such as global nomads, they rather engage in liquid consumption

in order to allow for that mobile lifestyle. Lastly, the nature of precarity determines if consumption is rather solid or liquid. In this context, the authors argue that while existential economic uncertainties result in consumption to be rather solid, insecurities in the professional sphere, as in case of digital nomadism, allow for consumption to be more liquid.

To illustrate the possible coexistence of solid and liquid consumption, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) refer to smart objects that are solid in their nature, but rely on technological solutions in order to provide the consumer with digital consumption possibilities. Furthermore, Magaudda (2011) identified a renaissance of solid music consumption through vinyl discs in the golden age of streaming, emphasizing a conscious enjoyment of music. In this context, the following section further investigates occurrences on the solid-liquid continuum, by focusing on a recent stream in research that identified a revival of material objects in times of liquid consumption.

2.3.3 Material Anchors in Times of Liminality

Building on the concept of liquid modernity and liquid consumption (Bauman, 2000; Bardhi et al., 2012; Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017), Aufschnaiter et al. (2021) utilized the theoretical background of digital nomadism to investigate the extent of solidity in the lives of mobile, liquid consumers. In particular, the authors identify that despite the previously assumed entirely fluid lifestyle of digital nomads, certain social and material anchors strengthen their capability to navigate through times of constant change and adaption. Against Bauman's (2000) claim that the relationship of solidity and liquidity resembles two opposing extremes in liquid modernity, Aufschnaiter et al. (2021) support Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2017) assertion of a solid-liquid continuum.

By integrating those social and material anchors into their daily, mobile lives, digital nomads are connected to certain feelings, experiences, or memories across time and space (Aufschnaiter et al., 2021). This enables them to nourish their need for social stability and bonds in an ever-changing environment. In particular, the authors identified two dimensions of solid anchors that provide digital nomads with a certain sense of stability in permanent liminality: embodied and imagined anchors. Embodied anchors refer to either physical or virtual "corporeal enactments and experiences" (Aufschnaiter et al., 2021: 29). These types of anchors include physical meetings, virtual contact, or shared experiences. On the other hand, imagined anchors refer to either past- or future-oriented "realities which primarily [take] place in their minds"

(Aufschnaiter et al., 2021: 29). This dimension of anchors may include memories that digital nomads connect to their home or imagined future life goals. According to the authors, both types of anchors can encompass both social and material elements. Irrespective of the material or immaterial nature of these elements, they still appear to be solid, as they are either mentally or physically fixed and, thus, offer a functional value or symbolic meaning (Aufschnaiter et al., 2021).

These results from Aufschnaiter et al. (2021) show similarities to those reported by Atanasova and Eckhardt (2021), who investigated the continuum of liquid and solid consumption by exploring the purpose of materialism. By drawing on liquid modernity, liquid consumption and digital nomadism as a framework, their findings imply a disentanglement of materialism from ownership in the lives of mobile consumers. As in contrast to Belk (1988), the significance of ownership appears to be waning, Atanasova and Eckhardt (2021) identify new forms of materialistic consumption that are less concentrated on ownership. In this context, they introduce the concept of experiential consumption as a form of liquid materialism. According to the authors, consumers intensively strive for collecting special experiences instead of possessions, as experiences are more likely to shape their identity and, thus, contribute to their self-actualization. Moreover, an active reduction of ownership inspired by the upsurge of minimalism and required for maintaining a mobile lifestyle shifts the focus towards those crucial possessions that are left, for example, the van in the vanlife culture (Atanasova & Eckhardt, 2021; Gretzel & Hardy, 2019). The authors argue that instead of focusing on an inventory expansion, digital nomads increasingly consume with a strategic intention, that provides them with "both the instrumental and symbolic value of such consumption" (Atanasova & Eckhardt, 2021: 489). These findings support the claim of Aufschnaiter et al. (2021) by emphasizing the significance of intentionally selected anchors and their value to the individual.

2.4 Identity Theory

„In the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity." (Erik Erikson, German-American psychoanalyst)

In its extensive abstraction, the concept of identity has been investigated by multiple streams in research. In order to define identity, individuals often refer to it as a concept related to "the

qualities that make a person […] different from others" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). This suggests, that parts of an individual's identity depend on ascription, e.g. names, social or ethnic backgrounds (Dion, 1983; Martinez & Dukes, 1997). Besides influencing factors rooted in ascription, however, identity is also related to the self, as it depends on the "character or personality of an individual [as well as one's] psychological identification" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

This differentiation suggests, that a personal concept of identity depends on the individual itself, but also on its social environment. In this sense, *identity negotiation* refers to a process of interaction with both the self and the social environment, through which "individuals […] attempt to assert, define, modify, challenge, and/or support their own and others' desired self-images" (Ting-Toomey, 2005: 217; Swann Jr., 1987, 2005; Swann Jr. et al. 2009). Those identity negotiations manifest themselves in *identity projects*, in which individuals are "actively concerned about the creation, enhancement, transformation and maintenance of a sense of identity" (Larsen & Patterson, 2018: 195; Bardhi et al., 2012; Belk, 1988). Consequently, times of crisis can constitute challenges for those identity projects, as sudden changes in the social environment can hamper an individuals' ability to uphold a certain sense of identity (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017).

The following sections will therefore elucidate the dimensions of the *individual*, the *community*, *place and mobility*, and *materialistic possessions* as crucial elements of identity projects in more detail.

2.4.1 Identity and the Individual

In order to comprehend one's own thoughts, values, and ideas that are connected to experiences with other actors of one's social environment, individuals engage in intrapersonal communication with themselves, by interacting with the self in their own mind (Brooks, 1978). This enables the assessment of those lived experiences and their categorization, from which the individual might be able to derive strategies for comparable events in the future (Honeycutt et al., 1990). According to Honeycutt et al. (1990), humans start to imagine fictional interactions with other important social figures in their minds, which shapes the way they think and behave both in the now and the future, and consequently, also their identity. The interpretations and understandings that humans have about themselves depend on those social imaginaries (Brinkmann, 2008). Rosa (2004) and Brinkmann (2008) introduce a model of self-interpretation

which illustrates, that individuals interpret themselves on both societal and individual levels, as well as on implicit and explicit levels:

A. Societal and explicit self-interpretation: Societal self-descriptions (shared self-understandings expressed in laws, media etc.)
B. Societal and implicit self-interpretation: Social institutions and practices (the tacit understandings embedded in educational, work, and family practices, for example)
C. Individual and explicit self-interpretation: Reflective self-image (persons' self-concepts)
D. Individual and implicit self-interpretation: Pre-reflective sense of self (bodily habits, feelings, habitus).

(Retrieved from: Brinkmann, 2008: 412; cf. Rosa, 2004)

This model suggests, that besides an important role of the society for our own understanding (dimensions A and B), crucial key factors influencing our self-interpretation are also embedded within ourselves (dimensions C and D). By intentionally or implicitly reflecting upon ourselves, our experiences and beliefs, we gain a more comprehensive understanding of our identity through intrapersonal communication and fictional interactions in our minds. This illustrates that the individual itself can be understood as a major influence factor in its own identity shaping process.

2.4.2 Identity and the Community

Besides focusing on the creation of the self, also the role of the collective is crucial for shaping identity (Cerulo, 1997). According to Howard (2000), identity is constructed, adapted, and preserved through interaction with both ourselves and our environment. According to this social identity theory, individuals are enabled to comprehend certain rules and behaviors within a community during social interactions with others, which eventually affects identity creation processes (Marwick & Boyd, 2011).

Mead (1934) and Blumer (1962) argue that individuals ascribe subjective meanings to specific social interactions, objects or behaviors. Their theory of symbolic interactionism illustrates that these subjective meanings are the result of certain symbols, such as language, interactions and their interpretations. We interpret those symbols according to our experiences, and ascribe them meaning, before we then pass them on to others through language (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1962). This view suggests, that our identity – under the view of symbolic interactionism – is influenced by these symbols that are shared within societies via language and interactions.

In contrast to focusing on general interactions with others, social comparison theory is characterized by the comparison of the self to other individuals (Dijkstra et al., 2010). According to this theory, de Vries et al. (2018) suggest that social comparison can be motivational, when the individual perceives the other individual as a role-model, but also demotivational, when the perceived perfection of the other individual might not be easily acquirable for the individual.

Furthermore, socially constructed identity might also be influenced by normative behavior. This theory illustrates that individuals engage in social interaction in a way that is socially desired and accepted. Social norms that the individual believes are present in its community, might therefore affect individual behavior and, thus, also their own sense of identity (Kallgren et al., 2000; Rimal & Real, 2005).

2.4.3 Identity, Place and Mobility

Recent societal, political and economic developments have resulted in an urge for many individuals to give up their prior homes, and forced them to relocate (Hampshire, 2015). Fragile political systems, wars, or poverty are forcing humans to flee and relocate, and confront them with new languages, cultures, and traditions challenging their previously constructed identities. Displacement and diasporas challenge the creation of a shared (national) identity (Sarup, 1994; Agnew, 2005). However, besides forced migration and relocation, individual mobility can also be subject of individual voluntary choices. Globalization and an increased interconnectivity of the world in this postmodern era have resulted in an emergence of new ways of living (Bauman, 1998, 2001; Giddens, 1991). While some individuals might emigrate to another place and settle there, due to work-related reasons, others might decide to live their lives completely location-independently.

Dovey (1985) argues that an individual's spatial identity is influenced by and dependent on its relationship to a specific place, especially the place of home. By tying identity to place, individuals connect feelings, emotions, and experiences to those places (Tuan, 1974; Dovey, 1985). Thus, those places as personified symbolizations of our emotions and experiences serve as stored memories by linking them to a physical environment (Dovey, 1985; Godkin, 1980; Easthope, 2009), as "we feel at home in the places in which our habitus has developed" (Easthope, 2009: 74). Through sharing a specific place as their *home*, humans are also identifying with other individuals that are tied to this same place (Kakar, 1996). On a higher

level, (national) identity is not only shaped by members of the ingroup and their shared values, but also by *significant others* – the outgroup – as it is due to this highlighted differentiation to others, that a concept like (national) identity can exist (Triandafyllidou, 1998).

However, this view of place as a defining influence factor of individual identity has also been criticized as romanticizing. According to Rapport and Dawson (1998), individuals tend to navigate in "a dialectic between movement and fixity" (p. 33), where identities base on both place and mobility. He argues that identity does not solely depend on this fixity and stability, but also on spatial, social, and temporal movement. This suggests that in case an individual is experiencing movement in reality, an "imagination of fixity can influence the experiences of mobility" (Easthope, 2009: 76).

2.4.4 Identity and Materialistic Possessions

The conceptualization of the modern-day individual as a consumer suggests to investigate the role of materialistic possessions for identity construction processes of individuals. While humans are striving to forge "subjective concepts of themselves" (Shrum et al., 2013: 1180; Swann & Bosson, 2010), materialistic consumption embodies those individual identity projects symbolically to the individual itself, but also to its outside world (Belk, 1988; Shrum et al., 2013). Vignoles et al. (2006) present various identity motives, that seem to explain materialistic behavior through a felt need of fulfilling those motives: self-esteem, continuity of identity, distinctiveness from others, sense of belonging, efficacy, and meaning. For example, while owning a piece of clothing branded with the university logo symbolizes a sense of belonging to the social environment of the university, the purchase of a luxurious status symbol might be reasoned in an attempt to underline distinctiveness from others, or to increase self-esteem (cf. Shrum et al., 2013). Those underlying identity motives are not necessarily contradictory, as a specific material possession might be a consequence of various motives simultaneously.

In addition, possessions alter throughout lifetimes. Drawing upon the concept that separates the stages of life into "our years of learning, years of earning, and our years of yearning (for immortality)" (Gentry et al, 1995a: 413; Neal, 1989), Gentry et al. (1995a) illustrate that because identities are constantly reevaluated over time (e.g. for the youth, the mainstream adults, and the elderly), possessions take over a different meaning depending on the lifecycle stage, the individual sees itself belonging to. Younger individuals strive to distinguish themselves from their parents, and use possessions to underline their ability, independence, and

control (Belk, 1988; Gentry et al., 1995a). During adulthood, possessions are more likely to emphasize the fulfillment of certain social roles (Solomon, 1983). In contrast, the role of possessions for the elderly consists in an increased wish for immortality, connections to the past, and symbolizations of their lived lives (Belk, 1991; Unruh, 1983; Heisley et al., 1993; Gentry et al., 1995b).

2.5 Literature Summary

The objective of the preceding chapter is to elucidate fundamental theoretical concepts related to the investigated phenomenon of this thesis. With his widely applied concept of liquid modernity, Bauman (2000) depicts an image of contemporary society from a socio-economic perspective. He describes an era of postmodernity, in which traditional, solid structures increasingly dissolve, accelerated by constant changes on both the micro and macro level. Together with an increased desire for individualization, the steadily progressing trend of globalization and technological development enabled the prosperity of global and digital nomadic lifestyles (Bauman, 2000; Bardhi et al., 2012).

Due to their extreme extent of location-independency, digital nomads are seen as the poster child for liquid modernity (Bauman, 2005; Bardhi et al., 2012). Remote working opportunities allow digital nomads to conflate work and leisure into one, leaving familiar structures behind (Reichenberger, 2018). Constant spatial relocation confronts the digital nomad to ever-changing social and cultural environments. With their ability of quickly adapting to changing situations and steadily adjusting risk perceptions, digital nomads constitute a subject of interest for researchers also in the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic (Ehn et al., 2022). With its disruptive appearance, the pandemic itself is considered a paragon for liquid modernity, as sudden implementations of contact and travel restrictions affected multiple aspects of public life (Doyle & Conboy, 2020; Thompson, 2021). As a largely unresearched form of digital nomadism, the rapidly expanding vanlife culture offers a maximum level of both individual and spatial freedom (Gretzel & Hardy, 2019).

In addition, the socio-economic developments of liquid modernity challenge consumers' relationships to possessions as well as their consumption habits (Bardhi et al., 2012; Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). In particular, Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2017) conceptualization of liquid consumption revolves around increasingly "ephemeral, access-based, and dematerialized" (p.

582) consumption patterns of mobile consumers. In this context of dematerialized consumption, Aufschnaiter et al. (2021) identify an increasing significance of material anchors, that can offer a certain sense of stability in an ever-changing environment.

Furthermore, identity projects depend on various dimensions: (a) the individual itself, (b) its social relationships, (c) place and mobility, and (d) materialistic possessions. In liquid modernity, these dimensions are subject to constant change (Bauman, 2000), wherefore the individual is shifted into a phase of continuous liminality. However, research on consumers' identity negotiation projects in times of liminality remains scarce. Drawing upon the phenomena of vanlife digital nomadism and the pandemic as a paragon of liquid modern consumer culture, this study aims to answer the following questions:

1. How do digital nomads negotiate their identity projects in times of immobility?
2. Which role do material anchors play in this negotiation?

The following sections depict the research approach of this empirical study, encompassing the findings, discussion, managerial implications, and limitations.

3. EMPIRICAL STUDY AND METHODOLOGY

After illustrating the theoretical background that serves as a basis of this empirical study, this chapter intends to illustrate the research design, the methods of investigation, the sampling procedure, as well as the underlying method of data collection and data analysis.

3.1 Research Design

Prior to the actual study itself, researchers may need to develop a comprehensive research design that corresponds their research question. Therefore, the initial step in research design is to clarify if the research problem under investigation is of quantitative or qualitative nature, or if it requires a combined approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Morse, 1991).

This thesis aims at investigating into the phenomenon of identity projects of digital nomads by applying a qualitative-exploratory research design. As identity is a phenomenon with a high level of subjectivity and individuality at its core, it also is strongly influenced by individual experiences, thoughts, or practices. A qualitative-exploratory research design therefore enables the researcher to account for this individuality and subjectivity, because "in order to do justice to the diversity of everyday life, [those] methods are characterized by openness towards their subjects" (Flick, 2009: 15).

In contrast to quantitative research, qualitative research does not aim at testing or validating previously formulated hypotheses, but rather at investigating new, complex phenomena (Flick, 2009). In addition, quantitative research methods rely on standardization, and through their approach of quantifying (social) phenomena, their goal is a generalization of universally applicable theories or models of reality (Balvanes & Caputi, 2001; Silverman, 2008; Ryan & Cave, 2005). However, as this requires large representative sample sizes and a structured, systematic data collection process, qualitative data, in contrast, does not allow for a generalization of theory, due to its high dependency on contextualization (Belk et al., 2013). According to Morse (1991), a research problem that requires a qualitative research design shows the following characteristics:

> " (a) the concept is 'immature' due to a conspicuous lack of theory and previous research: (b) a notion that the available theory may be inaccurate, inappropriate, incorrect, or biased; (c) a

> need exists to explore and describe the phenomena and to develop theory; or (d) the nature of the phenomenon may not be suited to quantitative measures" (Morse, 1991: 120).

Prior research on the phenomenon of identity projects of digital nomads during times of crisis remains scarce at this point in time. Furthermore, previous research on liquid consumption indicates both an increasingly liquid relationship to possessions as well as a comeback of certain material anchors (Bardhi et al., 2012; Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017; Aufschnaiter et al., 2021; Atanasova & Eckhardt, 2021). To this point, however, it remains unknown to which extent times of crisis challenge these previous findings. Thus, the need for exploring these phenomena within a new context – the pandemic - is present. In addition, subjective feelings, thoughts, and experiences, which are all part of identity projects, are hardly quantifiable in their nature and require an emphasis on individuality rather than universality (Saunders et al., 2019; Mayring, 2015). Due to this high subjectivity of identity under varying individual, social and cultural backgrounds, the application of a qualitative-exploratory research approach is therefore most suitable for the purpose of this thesis. As the term *exploration* indicates, the exploratory research design allows for openness and flexibility in the research procedure, which is needed to account for the possible variation in the research outcomes (Stebbins, 2001; Flick, 2009).

Furthermore, this thesis applies the approach of grounded theory as an underlying concept for collecting and analyzing data. As an approach dedicated towards "the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967: 2), it allows for gathering data in research areas largely unexplored (Charmaz & Bryant, 2011; 2012; Charmaz, 2009). In its systematic nature, grounded theory aims at collecting and analyzing qualitative data in such a way, that it enables the researcher to generate "explanatory theory that furthers the understanding of social and psychological phenomena" (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986: 3) grounded in the obtained data (Strauss & Corbin, 1994; Glaser, 1978; Khan, 2014). Thus, grounded theory not only acknowledges the existence of variations within the respondents' individual experiences, but also aims at conceptualizing them through constant comparison and an inductive development of theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Locke, 2002; 2003). Thereby, it is not the objective of the researcher to generate a universally valid and representative theory, but rather to explore individual realities (Charmaz, 2003; Khan, 2014).

Therefore, this thesis follows the constructivist paradigm of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2009; 2011; 2012; 2014; 2017a; 2017b; Sebastian, 2019). Similar to interpretive grounded theory, the

researcher analyzes the obtained data through systematic coding and interpretation (Charmaz, 2014). However, this paradigm acknowledges that through the interpretation of the data by the researcher, theory is generated by both the respondents and the researcher simultaneously (Charmaz, 2014; Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012). This is why in constructivist grounded theory, the constructed theory is also dependent on the subjective view of the researcher, as complete neutrality is seen as impossible (Charmaz, 2014; Sebastian, 2019). As this thesis investigates into identity projects of digital nomads through their individual narratives, by contextualizing them to the specific event of the pandemic, this approach is seen as most suitable.

3.2 Research Method

After developing the underlying research design of this thesis, this objective of this section is to expound the application of in-depth interviews as the primary research method for data collection. Thereby, this section also highlights used techniques as well as the overall interview structure.

3.2.1 In-Depth Interviews

In-depth interviews are a widely-used qualitative data collection method (Legard et al., 2003). In contrast to other interview methods, the major advantage of the in-depth interview is its emphasized focus on the narratives of the respondents (Burgess, 1982). It places the individual at the center, which enables the researcher to develop an in-depth understanding of the investigated phenomenon (Kvale, 1983; Johnson, 2002). Due to their lived experiences, the in-depth interview considers the respondents as specialists and encourages them to unveil their thoughts, emotions, and perceptions related to it (Belk et al., 2012). This enables the researcher to gather knowledge about the respondents' subjective reality through a process of normal human interaction (Rorty, 1980; Legard et al., 2003). As identity projects are an integral part of individuality, this focus on the individual facilitates their reflection and retrospection (Belk et al., 2012). Thus, in-depth interviews appear to be lengthy in their nature, as they allow the respondents to take as much time as required to cover all relevant aspects (Belk et al., 2012).

During the interview, the researcher's role is required to be passive in order to avoid possible biases. Interruptions influence the development of the respondents' narratives, as they might

anchor or lead the respondent to a specific direction (Flick, 2009). This also encompasses any evaluative comment by the researcher. However, careful active listening and unobtrusive signaling opens the researcher the opportunity to react to the respondents' narratives without the threat of influencing them (Flick, 2009). In addition, the researcher is allowed to probe into topics that remain unclear or require additional information (Belk et al., 2012).

Legard et al. (2003) emphasize the advantage of the in-depth interview "to combine structure with flexibility" (p. 141). A previously developed interview guideline indicates core topics to be covered in the interview (Legard et al., 2003). Hence, a specific, flexible structure roughly guides the course of the interview and prevents it from digressing. On the other hand, its flexible design equips the researcher with space for probing, in case the initial response resides on a surface level (Legard et al., 2003; Belk et al., 2012). This supports the development of the respondents' narratives, as probing aims at uncovering deeper feelings, opinions, or reasons that the initial response might have excluded (Legard et al., 2003). In such a way, the in-depth interview is interactive in its nature and "furnishes the explanatory evidence that is an important element of qualitative research" (Legard et al., 2003: 141). That is why this semi-structured design of the in-depth interview serves as a basis of the interviews conducted for this thesis.

3.2.2 Projective Techniques and the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET)

Projective techniques are tools that allow the researcher to indirectly uncover deeper meanings or attitudes of the respondents towards certain issues beyond direct questioning (Steinman, 2009). Qualitative research is especially confronted with the challenge of uncovering those intrinsic thought processes, because the respondents themselves might be unaware of them and, thus, do not include them in their narrative (Zober, 1956). Haire (1950) criticizes that the omittance of this attempt results in objective rather than subjective responses, whilst the respondents' behavior truly depends on the latter ones. In an attempt for a "dynamic approach to the study of the personality", Bell (1948) illustrates specific techniques that aim at triggering unconscious associations of the respondents: (1) word association techniques, (2) visual stimulus techniques, (3) expressive movement techniques, and (4) play, drama, and related techniques. As identity projects largely depend on unconscious processes, these techniques are an integral tool of the interviews conducted for this thesis. In particular, this study applied

sentence completion[1] and word association techniques[2], choice ordering[3], as well as visual stimulus and expressive techniques, as the respondents were asked to select and describe images from their Instagram profile and to imagine the creation of a new one (Donoghue, 2000; Kothari, 2004; Bell, 1948).

The researcher further applied specific stages of the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) in order to complement the objectives of the projective techniques. The ZMET method was firstly introduced by Zaltman and Coulter (1995) with the objective to uncover symbolic and metaphorical associations of individuals with regard to specific topics of interest. As the method consists of nine consecutive stages (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995; Hancock & Foster, 2020), this study applied selected stages due to limited resources and the digital setting. These stages included (1) "storytelling", where the respondents were asked to select and reflect on images related to the research topic and posted on their Instagram profile; (2) "missed images", where the respondents were asked if there are any missing pictures; and (3) "the most representative picture", where the respondents select the most representative image and explain their choice. Similar to projective techniques, the objective of this technique was a stimulation of the respondents aiming at uncovering intrinsic associations regarding the research topic.

3.2.3 Interview Structure and Guideline

The semi-structured nature of the conducted interviews requires the development of an initial interview guideline, which is annexed in Appendix B. After providing the respondent with the organizational information regarding the interview procedure, the main part is structured into seven thematic areas, in order to ensure all relevant topics being mentioned during the interview. The different areas are:

i. *Biographical Information*
ii. *Mobility in times of the pandemic*
iii. *Feeling of home in times of liminality*
iv. *Sense of community in times of the pandemic*
v. *Possessions in times of liminality*

[1] e.g., by asking *"In this moment, I felt…"*
[2] e.g., by asking *"Which keywords come first to your mind when thinking about…"*
[3] e.g., by asking *„Please rank your currently most important possessions."*

vi. *ZMET*
vii. *Wrap-up*

Each category is introduced by a grand-tour question to guide the participant towards the specific topic of interest and to stimulate rich narratives. Depending on the participants' responses, additional questions for probing enable the researcher to intensify certain aspects or to ask for further clarification (Flick, 2009). In order to encourage reflective, profound, and in-depth responses, the researcher refrained from asking polar questions and mainly formulated the questions by asking "how" or "what" (Silverman, 2020).

The first category aimed at guiding the participants into the interview setting by asking them to narrate their story of becoming vanlife digital nomads. Thereby, this section also focused on their daily life, present routines and constants. The second category aimed at investigating into their experiences of mobility in times of the pandemic. Thereby, the intention was to uncover how the pandemic-related international travel restrictions challenge the concept of mobility. The following sections focused on the participants' identity projects during the pandemic. In this context, the questions were directed towards the identity-shaping concepts of place and home, community, and possessions. Thereby, the aim was to explore how extensive contact and mobility restrictions challenge the connection to home and to social relationships in general. Additionally, the fifth section aimed at exploring the relevance of possessions in times of liminality. In particular, the researcher intended to uncover the significance of the van in the participants' lives as well as the extent of how the pandemic has challenged their consumption habits in general.

Furthermore, the participants were asked to select images posted on their Instagram profile prior to the interview, that reflect their experiences with "vanlife in times of the pandemic". Thereby, the sixth part of the interview aimed at uncovering intrinsic feelings, attitudes and thoughts by drawing on key elements of the ZMET technique. The interview ended with a wrap-up question, in which the respondents were asked to shortly summarize their associations with "vanlife in times of the pandemic". It has to be noted, that the actual order of the different interview sections depended on individual course of the interview.

3.3 Sampling Procedure

In order to ensure that the interview respondents are relevant for the area of investigation in this thesis, a well-reasoned sampling strategy needs to be developed. For the purpose of this study, a purposive sampling technique will be applied in order to ensure a maximum variation within the respondents (Marshall M. N., 1996). Due to their distinct location-independence and their constant need for relocation, digital nomads are highly global, flexible and mobile (Reichenberger, 2018). Purposive sampling ensures that this spatial independence is reflected among the selected respondents. Furthermore, the concept of identity strongly depends on the individual social and cultural background (Sökefeld, 1999). With being a nonprobability sampling technique, the application of a purposive sampling strategy allows for the consideration of these varied backgrounds, as the researcher is composing the sample by selecting respondents according to their knowledge, experience, and relevance to the study (Etikan et al., 2016). This facilitates generating a better fit to the research goal (Campbell et al., 2020). Besides its drawback of not being able to generate representative data for the larger population, purposive sampling is well-suitable for those research designs, that do not intend to create universally valid theories, as in case of this thesis (Etikan et al., 2016). Moreover, the limited timeframe and resources of this research project further encourage the application of this technique (Etikan et al., 2016).

Due to the exploratory nature of this study and the underlying grounded theory approach, however, the simultaneousness of gathering, coding, and analyzing the interview data resulted in an adaption of the sampling strategy (Coyne, 1997). Being referred to as theoretical sampling, new insights gathered from the interviews suggested to consider further sample characteristics for the following respondents (Glaser, 1978). For example, this was the case when experiences of different respondents seemed to diverge. In that case, the subsequent sampling of respondents was influenced by previous data (Glaser, 1992). Nevertheless, the limited availability of the respondents in combination with the limited time frame of this study resulted in a combination of both approaches. While purposive sampling serves as a suitable starting point for considering a greater variation of respondents, it might need to be complemented by a theoretical sampling strategy in the course of the data collection phase (Glaser, 1978; Chenitz & Swanson, 1986; Coyne, 1997). This enables the researcher to generate a broader image of the investigated phenomenon. Thus, once a theoretical saturation is achieved, the sampling process can be seen

as complete (Glaser, 1992). In particular, this occurs when additional sampling would not lead to the generation of new insights.

Due to the digital nature of digital nomads, as well as the strong presence of the vanlife-culture on social media, possible respondents were contacted primarily via Instagram. An initial study invitation message informing about the purpose of the study and the procedure was sent to them via the direct messaging function if they fulfilled the following criteria: (a) considering themselves as digital nomads, e.g., by using respective hashtags or a reference in their profile description; (b) living full-time in a van, which serves the purpose of a mobile primary location of residence; (c) engaging in constant relocation over time; (d) working remotely from the van. The initial purposive sampling strategy aimed at generating a respondent sample characterized by large variation. With digital nomadism being an international phenomenon, and because of the pandemic-related mobility and contact restrictions differed depending on the current country of residence, the sampling process required a reflection of these variations within the respondents. Additionally, differences in social and cultural backgrounds of the respondents were acknowledged in this study by sampling interviewees of different nationalities, relationship statuses, professions, genders, and age. Furthermore, as the demand for utility vans seemed to have increased during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ritter, 2021), possible respondents were invited depending on how long they have been considering themselves as vanlife digital nomads. This was also done due to an intended comparison of those digital nomads, who have been considering themselves as such already since before the start of the pandemic, and those, who might have started within it. Both types of respondents might have gathered different experiences regarding being a digital nomad during the pandemic, and were thus selected to increase variation in their narratives, as well as allow for comparison.

However, as the initial response rates to the invitation letter remained scarce, possible respondents were also contacted via Facebook. A short information post regarding the study purpose and the procedure was posted in interest groups aimed at vanlife digital nomads, and respondents to that post were checked for fulfilment of the beforementioned sampling criteria. In this context, the researcher refrained from acquiring respondents through the snowball sampling technique. As it bases on recommendations given by previously contacted respondents, snowball sampling might produce biases due to the possible recommendations of acquaintances with similar experiences (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; King et al., 2019).

In total, 36 possible respondents were contacted during the sampling procedure, resulting in nine interviews being executed with a total of ten respondents. With interview lengths varying between 41 and 150 minutes, the interviews resulted in a total length of 11 hours and 10 minutes and an average value of 74 minutes. An overview over both the respondents and the interview lengths is shown below (Table 1).

Respondent Pseudonym	Interview Length	Age	Gender	Nationality	Relationship Status	Job	Highest Educational Qualification
Martin	00:40:55	19	M	Belgium	Single	Freelancer, Content Creator	A-levels
Jessica	00:58:14	29	F	USA	Married	Currently Unemployed	Master's Degree
Rick	02:29:56	32	M	UK	Single	Software Engineer	Bachelor's Degree
Lea	00:53:44	39	F	Germany	Divorced (1 Child)	Web Designer	Diploma
Wiebke	01:02:13	29	F	Germany	Single	Project Manager	Master's Degree
Emma	01:35:34	30	F	Canada	Single	Freelancer, Web Design	Bachelor's Degree
Tessa	01:00:23	33	F	Netherlands	Married	Freelancer, Text Writer	Higher Professional Education
Tim	01:22:11	22	M	UK	Relationship	Freelancer, Photographer	Bachelor's Degree
Sophia	01:06:11	21	F	Germany	Relationship	Web Designer	A-levels
Stefan		21	M			Web Designer	A-levels

Table 1. Sample and Interview Synopsis

In order to guarantee data privacy and confidentiality, the names of the interview respondents were anonymized, and the order of the conducted interviews in Table 1 randomized. The sample fulfills all the beforementioned sampling criteria and is heterogeneous due to varieties in age, gender, nationality, relationship status, profession, education, and the length of subject-related experience.

3.4 Data Collection

After the initial contact phase, the respondents were provided with further detail regarding the technical procedure of the interviews. The current COVID-19 pandemic and the physical distance to the respondents resulted in digitally conducted interviews using the Google Meet tool for web-based video calls. Although communication might be influenced through the physical distance between the researcher and the interviewee, face-to-face communication facilitates the creation of trust in an interview setting compared to voice-based telephone interviews (King et al., 2019). As the interviews strongly focused on individual experiences, thoughts, and feelings, video-based interviews were identified as the best available prerequisite for insightful in-depth interviews, as they allow for direct interaction as well as responses to facial expressions and gesturing (King et al., 2019).

During the entire recruitment and interview process, the researcher provided the respondents only with basic, necessary information about the research topic. By refraining from providing in-depth explanations about the particular research objectives, possible biases caused by the interviewees being anchored to a specific direction were aimed to be minimized, as they might influence their narratives (Flick, 2009; King et al., 2019).

The interviews started with an initial phase of small talk, in order to create a comfortable, trustful atmosphere that was expected to encourage the openness of the interviewees and the richness of their narratives (Legard et al., 2003; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). Additionally, the interviewees were informed about the anonymization of their data and asked for their consent to voice-record the interview.

During the main part of the interview, the interview guideline served as an overall point of orientation for the course of the interview. However, the semi-structured interview style allowed the researcher to react spontaneously to the individual responses of the interviewees, and thus, to develop a common thread (Flick, 2009). In addition, it enabled the researcher to ask for clarification, to intensify certain topics, or to shift the focus carefully back to more relevant topics (Legard et al., 2003). The interview ended with small talk as a “return to the level of everyday social interaction” (p. 146) in order to prevent an abrupt ending and to clarify potential remaining questions (Legard et al., 2003).

3.5 Data Analysis

After the conduction of the interviews, they were transcribed with the support of digital transcription software, such as Otter and Descript. The resulting transcripts were then checked for accuracy and, if necessary, manually edited. Following the transcription process, a systematic analysis of the gathered data through interpretation and coding is crucial in grounded theory research (Flick, 2009; Strauss, 1987). According to Douglas (2003), "coding is oriented around the central concept of [seeking] to represent the interplay of subjects' and researcher's perceptions of the nature and dimensions of phenomena under study" (p. 48). This illustrates the necessity of a structured and systematic coding strategy in order to develop a theory that is grounded in the obtained data.

However, data collection and data analysis should not be seen as two consecutive, linear processes. The constant comparison and interpretation of collected data in grounded theory indicates themes that might need to be investigated in greater detail (Flick, 2009; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Constant comparison contributes to reducing the bias of the researcher, because it encourages them to gather new data that challenges previous obtained data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). This also affects the sampling procedure, as the collected data influences the choice of subsequent respondents and, thus, determines the achievement of theoretical saturation (Glaser, 1992; Flick, 2009).

In grounded theory, the coding process is structured by an interplay of three different stages: (1) open-coding, (2) axial-coding, and (3) selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Like data collection and data analysis, also these stages within the data analysis are dynamic in their nature (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Thus, the different coding stages may be seen as different techniques to code the data, each of them resulting in a different extent of abstraction (Flick, 2009). Cho and Lee (2014) visualize the interplay of these stages as follows:

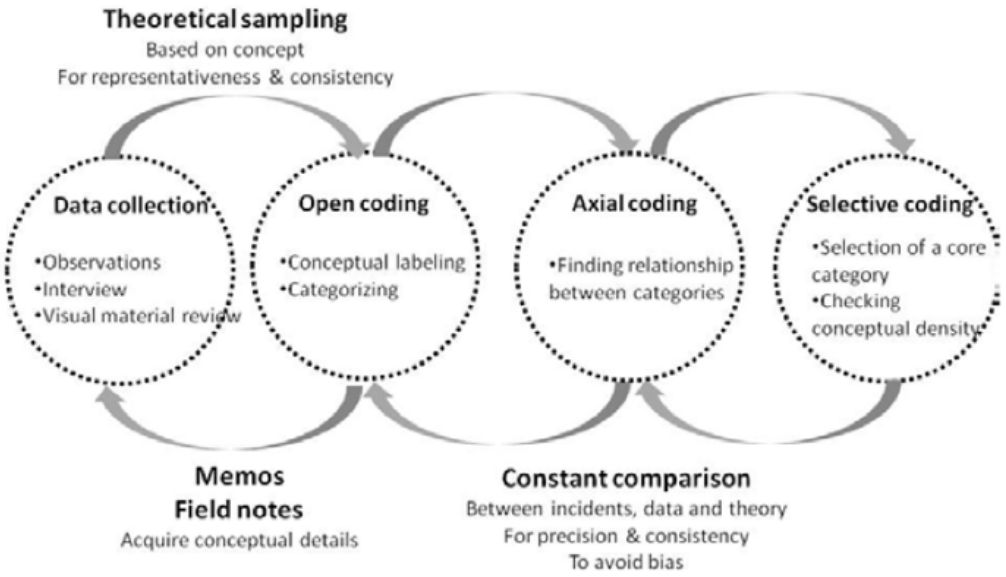

Figure 2. Data analysis in grounded theory (Retrieved from: Cho & Lee, 2014: 9)

After the researcher has familiarized with the transcripts, open coding serves as a first interaction with the obtained data. Due to the narrative nature of the interviewees' responses, the gathered dataset is likely to be extensive. The interviewees' responses are therefore categorized by segmenting them into different broader thematic clusters (Flick, 2009; Williams & Moser, 2019). The objective of this step is to develop first concepts in order to impose a structure upon a large dataset, which helps to identify specific aspects of the researched phenomenon (Flick, 2009). In particular, this structure is achieved by initially designating labels to visible patterns in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Flick, 2009). These labels, that either emerge from previous literature or the interviewees' narratives, are then combined into (sub-)categories, which entail coding descriptions that "represent the content of a category in a striking way" (Flick, 2009: 309). Depending on the research question and the available material, open coding can be conducted in varying detail. As the developed categories entail similar incidents of the researched phenomena, they allow for comparison with each other and, thus, serve as a basis for further abstraction in the following coding step (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

With axial coding, the previously developed categories are increasingly abstracted. By aiming at identifying links and differences between the different categories, the researcher seeks to uncover the relationships between them (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Flick, 2009; Cho & Lee, 2014). This results in the creation of core codes, which "emerge as aggregates of the most closely interrelated (or overlapping) open codes for which supporting evidence is strong"

(Strauss, 1998: 109). Strauss and Corbin (1998) refer to the paradigm model as support for identifying those relationships. According to this model, categories can contain (1) causes for the investigated phenomenon, (2) context or intervening conditions for other categories, (3) consequences of the investigated phenomenon, or (4) strategies related to the phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Flick, 2009). Thus, axial coding results in a selection of those categories that are crucial for understanding the phenomena related to the research question (Flick, 2009).

Finally, selective coding intends to abstract the results of the previous step further. As axial coding resulted in the identification of various core codes, selective coding seeks to combine these into *one* central category (Flick, 2009). Flick (2009) refers to this step as the "formulation of the story of the case" (p. 312). As this central category is based on the previously developed subcategories, it identifies themes that enable the researcher to derive theory from (Williams & Moser, 2019; Flick, 2009; Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

To conclude, open coding structures the data into initial open codes, axial coding develops thematic categories out of these codes, and selective coding seeks to summarize these into specific themes (Williams & Moser, 2019). Figure 2 illustrates the flexibility and dynamic of the entire coding process due to constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). At any point, the researcher can return to previous stages in the coding process, for example, when new data indicates the necessity to extend or adapt previously developed codes (Flick, 2009; Cho & Lee, 2014). This interpretive process of coding ends when theoretical saturation has been achieved, i.e., if additional coding or data collection no longer generates new insights (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Flick, 2009).

For this thesis, the conducted interviews were coded with Microsoft Excel, resulting in the codebook annexed in Appendix D. The findings of this analysis are presented in the subsequent chapter.

4. FINDINGS

As the literature review indicates, the socio-economic developments in liquid modernity are characterized by constant change, uncertainty, and flux. The sudden occurrence of a crisis situation – in particular, the global COVID-19 pandemic – further disrupts settled habits, as public life appears to be abruptly forced to decelerate. As hypermobile individuals navigating through this contemporary era of permanent liminality, digital nomads are "on a never-ending identity quest" (Cova, 1997: 305). Thus, this thesis aims at investigating how these mobile individuals negotiate their identity projects in times of crisis. By drawing on concepts of identity theory, the analysis of the in-depth interviews suggests a classification of identity negotiation narratives reflected in the dimensions of: *the self*, *social relationships*, *place and home*, as well as *consumption and possessions*. Please note, that due to the interviews being conducted in both English and German, German verbatim quotes were translated accordingly.

4.1 The Dimension of the Self

A recurrently mentioned motive for adapting a nomadic lifestyle is the desired independence from societal constraints, which enables a disentanglement from social expectations. In her earlier life, Sophia felt increasingly pressurized by societal norms. Especially the predominantly achievement-oriented society in Western culture resulted in a perception of ascribed role expectations. She states:

> *"After leaving school, everyone asks: What do you want to do with your life? And this question is always… Well, I don't know anyone that likes to hear that question. It is always related to the job, like, what do you want to do with your life jobwise. And since we are on our way, and living in the van, and getting to know different cultures, I notice that there is more to life than only: What do you want to do with your life jobwise. And for me, that was an important point to see, that it is good for me to experience that other people appreciate what I am doing. And I am allowed to say goodbye to those, who do not like it. Freedom and happiness is key." (Sophia, 21)*

This freedom of self-actualization appears to be a key motive for negotiating the own identity. Other respondents equally emphasized this desire for individual freedom, as it enables them to design their lives according to their values and interests both privately, but also professionally. Wiebke argues that it is exactly this independence from society that is at the core of vanlife.

This narrative of individual freedom is further expanded by the dimension of spatial freedom. Vanlife digital nomadism has equipped the respondents with the ability to combine both work and leisure on a maximum level of flexibility. In contrast to "traditional" digital nomads, the van diminishes almost any remaining dependence on public infrastructure and accommodation, and allows for a separated coexistence apart from the boundaries of society. Besides Jessica, who emphasizes the value of location-independence, Tim identifies vanlife as a possibility to express his close relationship to nature as part of his identity:

> *"I find living in a house quite hard. I don't like the entrapment of it. I've really liked being in the van and out in nature. […] And when I'm out in nature, especially in the middle of nowhere, I do feel quite at peace with the world." (Tim, 22)*

> *"We've always really been excited about […] the idea that we could just leave at any time [and] not being like tied down to a location." (Jessica, 29)*

However, for some respondents this longing for freedom was threatened by the sudden appearance of the pandemic. Besides travel restrictions complicating or even prohibiting international border crossing, the closure of national public amenities uncovered that a certain degree of dependency still remains. This unexpectedly challenged the desired independency from societal structures that the respondents were initially striving for. Emma points out, that basic everyday activities, such as showering, could not be easily performed during a nationwide lockdown:

> *"There were times where there were no showers. Like, there was nothing open. Like out there. I was literally… I had zero option. I'm in the middle of winter, it's negative 30. Like, you can't shower in the bush, you know, like you can't go outside and make an outdoor shower. You need a legitimate one. Like, rent a hotel, sometimes an Airbnb just to, like, shower." (Emma, 30)*

In a similar way, Tessa describes traveling in times of the pandemic as more difficult than before. She experienced a limitation of her highly valued spatial freedom due to the deceleration of mobility, as she concludes:

> *"It became more difficult to travel. And that's what I don't like. Because that's the part of, yeah, the freedom part is going. It's blocking the freedom part. So, it's… I think that was a really tough thing." (Tessa, 33)*

Other respondents identified similar pandemic-induced challenges with regard to the concept of freedom. However, for a majority of them, these challenges were also accompanied by an emergence of new possibilities. Especially at the start of the pandemic, public life largely came to a halt. This resulted in many respondents to increasingly engage in interaction with themselves. While Rick started to devote more temporal resources to his hobbies of music-making and video production, Tim spent more time in nature and channeled his negative thoughts into photography projects, which symbolizes an enhanced intrapersonal communication (Brooks, 1978). This intrapersonal communication helps individuals to strengthen their own concept of identity, as they are dedicating more time to themselves, which enables them to develop strategies to navigate through times of uncertainty. As both Rick and Tim summarize, the situation of the pandemic enabled them to appreciate other sources of freedom in their lives:

> *"The pandemic probably really brought to light the importance of that freedom. […] It did bring to light that that freedom was quite important for me. Especially mentally as well." (Tim, 22)*

> *"How bizarre is it, that despite Covid having taken a lot of our freedoms away, in terms of, you know, basic, basic things that we were able to do, it also unleashed a whole bunch of freedoms that we didn't have before" (Rick, 32)*

In fact, the respondents' narratives illustrate that the appearance of the pandemic has facilitated the possibilities for self-actualization in various ways. For example, it enabled some of the respondents to actively adapt a digital nomadic lifestyle in the first place, and to leave their old life behind, as a lot of companies suddenly had to shift towards remote working solutions. This laid the foundation for many to be able to take the chance and pursue a long-awaited dream, which they otherwise might never have followed. According to Sophia's experiences, the competition among remote jobs on freelancing platforms increased during the pandemic. Furthermore, despite the initially large extent of mobility restriction, vanlife still enabled the opportunity to escape from everyday life to a certain degree, even if only within borders. Together with an increased social acceptance of remote working, which many respondents identified as a consequence of the pandemic, it resulted in a perceived upsurge of nomadic lifestyles by many. This illustrates the enabling power of a crisis situation, as the respondents begin to actively concentrate on the opportunities that are associated with the challenges. Rick summarizes this enabling power by stating:

"I have to come back to the fact that the pandemic made this possible." (Rick, 32)

The enabling power of the pandemic is also perceived by Tessa, who emphasizes the significance of adaptability for successfully handling challenges. Through the pandemic, she realized that change is often unavoidable. Being initially insecure about her freedom and her ability to travel, she soon realized that she needs to develop a strategy to adapt to the situation. By asking herself how she could live in this changing world, she engaged in intrapersonal communication and adapted an optimistic mindset in order to cope with the situation.

"I think the pandemic, yeah, just opened my eyes about what is, what can happen. What can be changed? And I knew I had to react to: How can I live in this changing world? And yeah, I think it was scary, because you didn't know if you would be able to travel. But it always also made me like: Okay. I think there's always a possibility to travel." (Tessa, 33)

Similarly, Emma identifies her skill of adaptability as a major reason for her not to be negatively impacted by the challenges of the pandemic. She refers to her experiences as a digital nomad and classifies adaptability as a prerequisite for successfully engaging in this lifestyle:

"I honestly feel like this is the biggest reason why the pandemic didn't really affect me in such a negative way compared to like other people […] My entire life is about like adapting, and I kind of look forward to it. Like there was this time when I was in Albania. And I just decided that I wanted to go to Macedonia and there was this one place in Macedonia, and there was no way to get there easily. So I walked. I put on my backpack, and I just walked. And it was like, it wasn't that far. It was like I feel in total, it was like 30 kilometers, but I ended up getting a ride at some point. I was hitchhiking, and I got a ride. And I just like, I just did it with a smile on my face. Because I was like, yeah, like, this is cool. Like, there's no other way to get this done. (Emma, 30)

Besides adaptability being a core element of the respondents' identities, also serenity appears to be a necessary trait for navigating through times of liminality. The respondents' narratives illustrate a large extent of trust in life, characterized by the maxim that there is a solution to any problem. The uncertainty accompanied by the pandemic appears to have reinforced this aspect of the respondents' identity, as Sophia defended her value of serenity even against criticism from her social environment:

"Also with regard to Covid you need to keep a positive mindset. Just do it. Just try. There will be some sort of solution. […] We just try. If it doesn't work out, it doesn't. And if it does, it does. […] We were always easygoing about it. We knew that we travel with Covid, so there's always

the chance that it happens. My god. Many people called me naive, but I have come far with it so far (laughs)." (Sophia, 21)

The interview analysis further identified other personality characteristics of the respondents that appeared to have shaped their strategies of coping with challenges. While Martin's statement illustrates a high degree of spontaneity, Lea expresses the significance of flexibility within the context of the pandemic. Their experiences during the pandemic have confronted them with an increased absence of planning security, as travel regulations were suddenly changed by governments resulting in an unfeasibility of their travel plans.

"I don't really make plans." (Martin, 19)

"During Christmas time we initially wanted to go back to Germany, which ultimately had to be cancelled. But that wasn't dramatic. If you're flexible enough and don't strictly follow your plans, you can be quite relaxed. Everything will be fine. I also wouldn't care if I'd be stuck in a country […] You don't have this pressure to return, because you don't need to be at a certain place in order to work." (Lea, 39)

This flexibility is often accompanied by a certain degree of risk-taking propensity. In order to protect their spatial and individual freedom, some respondents expressed a tendency to take advantage of gray areas regarding pandemic-related regulations. While Martin relies on the occasional breach of laws to preserve his life in a van, Tessa follows a rather moderate approach in her interpretation of compliance. This illustrates an internal negotiation process between the ethical aspect of rule following and the preservation of the value of freedom, often resulting in a fluid judgement.

"But the only thing you need to do is to sometimes just be brave enough to just cross borders, when you don't have everything in order. And sometimes you need to arrange things so that you can do it. […] Yeah, sometimes you just, don't follow every rule, you know, you don't harm anybody." (Tessa, 33)

Besides the beforementioned personality characteristics, the respondents emphasize the importance of integrating specific constants and routines into their mobile lives. Their responses suggest that daily vanlife is largely characterized by an increasing vanishment of structure and consistency. Living a life in flux, the majority of the respondents identified a complete absence of structure as rather negative, which illustrates a contrast to the cherished personality characteristics of spontaneity and flexibility. It exemplifies that the respondents

negotiate between adhering to a certain degree of structure on the one hand, and ensuring enough flexibility on the other hand. Especially with the appearance of the pandemic, many pre-existent routines were melting into air. In her statement, Wiebke delineates that in case of absent structures freedom can sometimes also be arduous.

> *"The greatest difference is that every day is a new adventure. This is not the case in a classic life, where the daily grind results in you doing the same things every day. You don't have that in a van. If you want, you wake up somewhere else every morning. […] This can be slightly negative in vanlife. It can even stress you. Having this freedom every day can be extremely arduous, because you don't have any routines." (Wiebke, 29)*

For this reason, many respondents either increasingly tended to adhere to those routines and constants that were left, or deliberately started to integrate them into their lives. While Jessica defines her van as a constant in an ever-changing environment, Emma and Lea create daily coffee ceremonies in the morning in order to freshly start into their days. Another respondent participates in matutinal mindfulness sessions and compares it to an almost religious routine. Tim summarizes the importance of routines during the pandemic by describing their potential to soothe the mind:

> *"The routines were giving me mental stability. I think, cause what was happening in the world was quite scary when it first happened. [The photography] almost became a little bit of a routine, which gave me stability in my kind of weekly schedule. Cause I knew I was going to be able to go out and take photos." (Tim, 22)*

These strategies seem to allow the respondents to uphold a positive mindset, even when times of crisis challenge a crucial component of their identity. As Figure 3 illustrates, most respondents replied with positively connoted expressions when being asked to describe "vanlife in times of the pandemic" in keywords. With *freedom* representing the most common answer, expressions, such as *happiness*, *trust in life*, or *creativity* illustrate the respondents' strategies to maintain as much freedom as possible. Despite the appearance of negatively connoted keywords like *challenging* or *difficult*, they were usually juxtaposed to an expression of intrinsic motivation to overcome these challenges, which reflects a predominantly positive attitude towards the challenges of the pandemic.

Figure 3. Respondents' main associations with "vanlife in times of the pandemic" (own illustration)

To conclude, individual and spatial freedom appear to be at the core of the digital nomadic identity. As the sudden appearance of the pandemic has challenged those freedoms manifoldly and to various extents, digital nomads seem to increasingly avail themselves of different personal characteristics rooted within their identity. Adaptability, serenity, and flexibility are shown to be important skills for successfully navigating through the challenges of a crisis situation. To maintain and defend their freedom, digital nomads engage in internal negotiation processes, for example with regard to their risk-taking propensity or their trade-off between structure and flexibility. They reflect on their prior experiences with living in permanent liminality, which enables them to derive strategies for coping with challenges by concentrating on the opportunities rather than the restraints.

4.2 The Dimension of Social Relationships

The interaction with other individuals and the maintenance of social relationships shapes our identity as human beings (Cerulo, 1997; Howard, 2000; Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Besides their mobile lifestyle and their desired independence from general societal constraints, the respondents emphasized the significance of social relationships in their life. Especially the regular contact to family members and close friends appears to be highly valued. Jessica identifies the relationship to her husband as a symbolic source of stability. By living and traveling together in their van, Jessica's statement illustrates that social relationships can serve as a root for identity in an ever-changing, liquid environment. This is supported by Rick's statement, who explains that regular contact to family members enhances the mastery of difficult times, even if they are not close by.

> *"I feel like symbolic of us with vanlife is that anywhere we are, we're together. But also kind of this feeling of temporariness, wherever we are, kind of always feels temporary. Like we could just leave any second. But as long as we have each other, you know, that's the constant" (Jessica, 29)*

> *"You know, I've mostly continued the video calls and things with friends and family, like chatting with people and trying to share, like, some stuff on social media and maintain a bit of connection with people back home […] It would have been a lot harder without some family members." (Rick, 32)*

Besides their relationship to family and friends, the respondents often engage in building new relationships along their journey. Sophia describes the contact to locals as an important means to widen the own horizon and to immerse into different cultures. These authentic encounters shape her identity and support her to actively overcoming cultural biases by satisfying her curiosity as a cosmopolitan. In a similar manner, Wiebke describes the unique connectivity within vanlife culture. She emphasizes the close emotional bond to other members of the culture, which highlights the significance of these contacts for the own identity.

> *"That's the advantage of vanlife. You travel differently and get to know the countries more intensively. I always said: If I travel to a country, I want to get to know it authentically. […] Especially because we are from Germany, we heard a lot and we are open-minded, but we also have a lot of prejudices. […] You've adapted a German pattern of thinking, and you can only eliminate them through contact with locals." (Sophia, 21)*

> *"So there is a certain type of person who lives full time in the van. You get along on a different level. You immediately start discussing world problems and stuff. And often the reasons why people move into a van are very deep reasons. And they're touched on very early, and so it's a different level of conversation. That's why I think the relationships are closer." (Wiebke, 29)*

However, in contrast to Wiebke's statement, other respondents argue that their mobile lifestyle often results in experienced loneliness, especially in more desolate areas. Despite solitariness being desired to a certain degree in terms of an escapism of the societal constraints, this experienced loneliness and social isolation is often seen as unfavorable. This reflects an internal negotiation between upholding a deliberate distance to others and, simultaneously, satisfying the need for company. For some, the extensive contact restrictions during the pandemic intensified this feeling of loneliness. Martin's statement exemplifies this sudden appearance of solitude, as he perceived an extensive deceleration within his social life:

"I went maybe from seeing 500 people in a week, to five. Yeah, so that's, yeah, it did. It felt lonely and yeah, really shit. […] Any maybe during the pandemic also a bit lonely, yeah." (Martin, 19)

Likewise, Jessica underlines the difficulties of maintaining crucial social relationships during the time of the pandemic. To her, the risk of contagion and a spreading of the virus affected her social relationships. Her statement illustrates, that she had to negotiate between satisfying her own desires and subordinating her needs to the protection of her social environment, which impacted the design of her leisure time.

"I need to have face to face contact. The pandemic has made that difficult. So, for example, we were all vaccinated and we went to Florida and we went to a football game, American football. Thousands of people, thousands of people. And then we wanted to fly home, but my brother has babies and they're immunocompromised. And so, trying to balance like, okay, well we want to live our life and do what we're comfortable with, but then we also have to be respectful of them and what they're comfortable with." (Jessica, 29)

However, the perceived impact of the pandemic on social relationships appears to be ambivalent. Besides the extensive scope of contact restrictions in many countries, other respondents in other countries followed a rather relaxed approach of social contact. Sophia explains that the local culture and the local mindset shaped her strategy of dealing with physical interaction. This indicates, that present social norms in a community can influence individual behavior and their sense of identity. Similarly, Lea emphasizes that the independence from social infrastructure facilitated the maintenance of social contact, because her lifestyle allowed her to be flexible.

"The people we met… well, they didn't say that Covid doesn't exist or something like that, but in those countries, the people had other problems. Especially in Turkey, we had the most contact with other people. It is such a big part of life, that being together, meeting others, talking together. And that wasn't lost. So, Covid did not really influence that a lot." (Sophia, 21)

"And in terms of contact restrictions: You're in your van anyway, and not in a hotel, where you have to test yourself all the time. That made the whole thing much easier." (Lea, 39)

In addition, other respondents referred to the fact, that their daily lives have been largely depending on virtual contact already before the pandemic, due to them being digital nomads and living a mobile life. In this context, many respondents referred to video-call applications,

smartphones, and social media networks as suitable tools for maintaining social relationships to closely related individuals. Especially in times of perceived solitude, virtual social interaction appears to be an increasingly valued method of coping. As digital nomads, the reliance on technology seems to be deeply rooted within the respondents' identity, as they organize the majority of their lives digitally. Being already accustomed to these technologies, it appears that many respondents did not have to adapt to this new situation of virtual contact in times of the pandemic, in contrast to other individuals. Tessa's statement illustrates this casual way of dealing with digital communication:

> *"You just connect with your friends and family on a different way. You just send them a text and see them sometimes via video calls. But sometimes we don't have enough internet. So then you just call. (Tessa, 33)*

However, the reliance on technology for social interaction creates a new source of dependency on the proper functionality of digital devices. While Stefan expresses worries derived from this dependency, Rick's experiences are characterized by a high degree of reliability on technology. This contrast exemplifies that even within the digital nomadic identity, various levels of trust into technology exist.

> *"Especially since not only our social contact, but also our entire livelihood depends on it, our only source of income, we are completely dependent on it, and that sucks when there is no network and you know that you need a good network by no later than two days." (Stefan, 21)*

> *"I've found that kind of technology as insanely reliable. And although there's certainly risks there, and I'm sure not everyone has access to these things, I was quite surprised actually, how well everything was working." (Rick, 32)*

In this context, many respondents identify an increase of virtual social contact in times of the pandemic, as their families, friends, or co-workers also increasingly become acquainted with digital communication tools. Emma, for example, acknowledges that she had more video-calls with her friends than before the pandemic. Likewise, Rick describes that video conferences have become more common in his company, enabling him to maintain regular contact to his colleagues. This illustrates, that besides the contact-restricting measures of the pandemic on the one hand, social contact appears to have intensified for many on the other hand. Due to the whole society suddenly shifting towards more digital communication, many respondents

perceived a stronger connection to that society, which they initially sought to leave behind. As Rick explains:

> *"But actually, the pandemic did something interesting there, because it forced us to have all of these like zoom meetings, right? Yeah. And so my day would start with like a catch up meeting with the whole team. And I saw more of those people do these daily zoom meetings […] It's kind of a unique scenario for me, because I was doing different hours to everybody else. So it was kind of gonna happen like that. But I found it really cool actually, that I got to talk to everyone, not face to face. But through all these zoom meetings, like every day, and I, I felt pretty connected to, like colleagues, like I still saw them and spoke to them and stuff online." (Rick, 32)*

Similarly, the intensified time that Emma spent with her family during the pandemic, both virtually and physically, made her aware of the value of social anchors, especially in times of crisis. This shows, that despite the progressing individualization tendencies in contemporary society, individual identity projects still largely depend on the importance of social relationships.

> *"The pandemic, like, I think, really taught me the value of personal relationships, like, long term relationships. It's really easy to move to a new city and, like, go to a bar or go to a show or, like, meet people and have those superficial, like, small talk kind of relationships, but not those, like, real supportive ones." (Emma, 30)*

To conclude, the interviews indicate that the dimension of social relationships appears to be a crucial element of digital nomadic identity projects. Digital nomads seem to be negotiating between the deliberate detachment from general society and the maintenance of contact to specific social anchors. In this context, the pandemic-related contact restrictions largely resulted in an emphasized importance of social relationships for their selves. Due to digital nomads being used to digital communication technologies, it enables them to quickly adapt to the challenges of restricted physical contact during the pandemic. Therefore, the findings suggest that digital nomads tend to connect their identity even more to their social anchors in times of crisis.

4.3 The Dimension of Place and Home

4.3.1 Place

Due to digital nomads intrinsically longing for spatial independence and continuous relocation, mobility is a core part of their identity (D'Andrea, 2007). Bardhi et. al (2012) argue that this steady deterritorialization results in a development of an adaptive self that changes depending on the location, implying that mobility and place affect nomadic self-interpretation. This implies a negotiation between increasing spatial mobility on the one hand and attachment to specific places on the other hand. The respondents' narratives suggest that their selection criteria for spatial relocation are predominantly characterized by spontaneity and instinctiveness. For example, Lea identifies temperature and weather as a major selection criterion, whereas a definitive country or region remains subordinate. In a similar manner, Tessa prefers to spontaneously choosing locations based on the anticipated experience. This expresses an increasingly detached relationship to place for many respondents. Jessica's statement exemplarily summarizes this liquefication of place:

> *"I don't know, we just kind of set like a generic destination. And then we'll stop along the way. We don't put much thought into it." (Jessica, 29)*

However, unlimited mobility is sometimes also perceived as stressful. Constant changes in the environment and the omnipresent pressure to find new parking spaces for his van resulted in Rick occasionally developing a certain sense of travel-weariness. This illustrates that besides mobility being a core part of the digital nomadic identity, they sometimes appear to trade it off against intentional moments of immobility:

> *"But equally, there's times where I actually just need to sit and do my job. And not think about the fact that I'm in a van. And that I need to be anywhere. I just need to sit still and actually do some jobs, like, catch up on some things or, like, make a video or whatever it might be (Rick, 32)*

Especially at the start of the pandemic, many respondents experienced the need to adapt intended travel plans, as the often suddenly changing travel restrictions resulted in many borders being closed without further notice. Stefan explained that while this appeared to be challenging at first, he was quickly able to adapt to these challenges. Lea described similar

experiences, as she intentionally decided to travel to countries, in which pandemic-related restrictions were kept on a comparably low level.

> *"We wanted to go to Greece, but they introduced a lockdown two days before our departure. At that point, we didn't know where to go. So we went to Italy, and there they had a zoning regulation, through which the different regions were divided into zones. Therefore, we often deliberately changed the zones and looked where it was okay to travel to, and where not." (Stefan, 21)*

> *"Basically, we didn't experience any particularly limiting restrictions. We chose the countries in such a way that there were no severe restrictions. For example, we were in Croatia, where the freedoms were quite extensive. Last winter in Greece it was also okay, they have just recently tightened the rules again. It all worked out." (Lea, 39)*

These examples suggest, that their detachment from specific places enables the participants to quickly adapt to the mobility-restricting challenges of the pandemic. By deliberately choosing not to establish an emotional bond to a certain location, they develop strategies to protect a crucial part of their identity: mobility and freedom.

In fact, due to the often-perceived difficulties of traveling at the beginning of the pandemic, many respondents expected mobility to be more difficult to maintain during it. According to Wiebke's experience, border checks were often not thoroughly executed, which enabled her to travel on an almost pre-pandemic level. In contrast, Sophia's statement expresses an increased bureaucratic effort during the pandemic, as border checks were more common in her case. These opposing experiences showcase that the perceived freedom of travel still remains location-dependent to a certain degree.

> *"So, basically I expected it to be more difficult to travel in pandemic times. But still the borders are not controlled that much, nobody cares if you are vaccinated or not, so that was not a problem." (Wiebke, 29)*

> *"Well, of course, driving across borders is a bit more time-consuming than it used to be, with the testing and everything you need." (Sophia, 21)*

In general, many respondents connect traveling in pandemic times to a higher bureaucratic effort. As in some regions, restrictions are kept on a rather low level, they appear more convoluted in other countries. In particular, mandatory quarantines after entering a country were initially seen as a challenge by some, as they interpreted the imminent period of self-isolation in the van as a possible source of insecurity. For example, Tessa expressed worries about the execution of regular daily tasks, such as walking her dog or securing her food supply, while being in quarantine. However, even after initial worries, most respondents appeared to quickly adapt to these novel sources of insecurity, which illustrates again, that adaptability and serenity have evolved to be crucial digital nomadic characteristics for cushioning the challenging effects of a crisis situation. Maintaining a certain degree of trust in life and being open to change ensured the respondents, that additional efforts are not likely to transform into existential worries.

4.3.2 Home

"My mom says that you're homeless. Is that true?
- No, I'm not homeless. I'm just houseless. Not the same thing, right?"
(Frances McDormand in "Nomadland", 2020, directed by Chloé Zhao)

As mentioned before, digital nomads engage in constant spatial relocation. This challenges their perceived attachment to specific places. Despite the interview analysis having shown that the respondents still tend to strongly depend on social ties to their home country – especially in times of crisis – their understanding of *home* as a concept appears to be increasingly liquid. Most respondents refer to home as a concept independent from location. While Tessa's cosmopolitan mindset results in her identifying the world as her home, Rick expresses a dynamic interpretation of the term, arguing that his feeling of home increasingly detaches from his hometown with growing spatial and temporal distance.

> *"So you slowly start to lose this feeling that this is home, I guess, when you spend a lot of time away from it. […] I just feel like, the concept of home ought to be dynamic, right? It's got to be changeable." (Rick, 32)*

This liquid and dynamic conceptualization of home illustrates, that an individual interpretation of home appears to be an ongoing internal negotiation process. However, many respondents

identify a community-related sense of home as a constant element in this dynamic. To them, a crucial element of their home concept is connected to significant relationships in their lives, such as family and friends. Sophia detaches this specific feeling of connectedness from its location, and rather relates home to the interpersonal sphere. In addition, Tim's statement demonstrates an emotion-related sense of home, that, similar to Sophia, largely depends on a specific sentimentality:

> *"It's the people who shape it, or the feeling […] So it's not connected to that particular location, but rather to the people there or the feeling that you have there." (Sophia, 21)*

> *"Home is where the heart is, man!" (Tim, 22)*

Additionally, as the van has evolved to be their predominant locale of residence, it reflects an object-related sense of home in the lives of the respondents. By not having a specific building to live in, the van exemplifies a constant element in their dynamic understanding of home. Tim's statement illustrates, that despite the van being a physical place, its provision of a homey feeling is independent from the environment around it. Furthermore, Rick emphasizes that he actively engaged in practices to make the van cozier and more individual, which facilitates referring to it as home.

> *"I feel really at home in the van. So when you pop off at night and you close the curtains and it, you know, you could be parked up on an industrial state in the city, or you could be parked up on a cliff at the edge of Scotland. When it's dark and you put your curtains closed, you wouldn't know where you are." (Tim, 22)*

> *"I mean, my van is definitely my home. It's my house. I mean, if I say to someone I'm going back to the van, that's what I say I'm going to. The van, I've never called it my home. But it is. So there's some like weird terminology thing going on there. But I've very much made it homey. And a lot of people. A lot of people see the van and they say, oh, this is so homey." (Rick, 32)*

However, living a nomadic life in a van also challenges the concept of home for some respondents. Experiencing an omnipresence of liminality in their lives challenges their ability to tie themselves to a certain entity of home. This leads to Jessica increasingly questioning her imagined construct of home, as she seems to struggle in linking her identity to something

intangible. Similarly, Emma identifies herself as homeless, which, according to her, distinguishes her nomadic identity from that of regular travelers.

> *"Yeah, I guess lately I've been kind of having conflicted feelings about, like, homelessness. Like I don't have a home at all." (Jessica, 29)*

> *"Like, I now identify as somebody who's homeless, whereas I think before, I just was like: Oh, I'm a traveler. I'm like a gypsy, you know, like, it's fun." (Emma, 30)*

Thus, the findings illustrate that the respondents' concept of home depends on a variety of different elements, such as relationships, objects, and emotions. With home representing a liquid entity in their lives, also in pre-pandemic times, the pandemic itself did not specifically challenge their notion of home. However, the findings suggest that with a perceived intensification of social relationships during the pandemic, the community-related sense of home appears to have gained an increased meaning.

To conclude, the interview analysis suggests that mobility appears to be one of the core dimensions of the digital nomadic identity, as it is strongly tied to their longing for freedom. For many, especially the initial phase of the pandemic has imposed certain threats towards the desire for unrestricted mobility, e.g., through closed borders, mandatory quarantines, or increased bureaucracy. However, due to the digital nomadic skill of adaptability, their quickly developed strategies for maintaining their spatial freedom enabled them to offer opposition to the pandemic-related challenge of increased immobility. Simultaneously, the interview analysis illustrates that due to their hypermobile identity, the concept of home as part of the digital nomadic identity appears to be fluid. In this context, four components of their dynamic concept of home could be identified: a *location-related sense of* home, referring to home being connected to the geographic sphere of a specific place, a *community-related sense of home,* referring to home being connected to specific individuals, an *emotion-related sense of home*, referring to home being connected to specific feelings, as well as an *object-related sense of home*, referring to home being connected to a specific object. While the location-related sense of home tends to become more irrelevant, the other notions of home carry an increasing meaning for digital nomads in times of crisis, as they provide them with emotional support.

4.4 The Dimension of Consumption and Possessions

The socio-economic developments in liquid modernity have accelerated the contemporary emergence of liquid relationships to possessions and liquified consumption patterns, especially in case of hypermobile consumers, such as digital nomads (Bardhi et al., 2012; Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). In order to maintain their spatial flexibility, they increasingly tend to rely on immaterial resources in order to organize their daily lives. With the physical dimension of the van limiting the possibilities for a spatial storage of material items, most respondents described a necessity for the adaption of a minimalistic mindset. The inception of their vanlife existence confronted many respondents with activated awareness of their previous consumption habits, resulting in them reflecting on the importance of material consumption. Tessa's statement illustrates this increased focus on a more conscious consumption:

> *"I think when you live in a van, you always have to be minimalistic. Living, like, minimalism. You can't take everything with you. So I think it's really beautiful. Because it makes you think, okay, I don't need everything." (Tessa, 33)*

This minimalistic identity appears to be largely motivated by a space-related negotiation of consumption. Wiebke describes that she used to collect large quantities of decorative items in her pre-nomadic life, arguing that this was not feasible anymore after moving into her van. In addition to a space-related motivation for minimalism, Lea negotiates the acquisition of a new material item based on a reflection on the added value that it can deliver to her daily life. After starting with vanlife, she began to question the purpose of her previous inventory and actively sorted out those items that did not offer any benefit. Consequently, this also shaped her subsequent consumption behavior, as she started to apply this maxim of added value also to her future purchasing decisions.

> *"So first of all, the whole vanlife has changed my consumption behavior. I no longer buy stuff, not like before, where I bought a lot of decoration, et cetera. I simply have no more space, quite simply due to this reason." (Wiebke, 29)*

> *"So that's when I started to buy less, and that I questioned purchases more often, whether I really needed something or not." (Lea, 39)*

Besides a space- and benefit-related negotiation of consumption, the respondents draw a picture of a vanlife community, in which cooperativeness and sustainability appear to be further components of the nomadic identity. Instead of an extensive material ownership, Lea trusts in the sharing willingness of other vanlifers in case of an emergency. This illustrates an increased tendency towards a dematerialized, access-based consumption in contrast to an ownership-based, material consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). In the latter sense, Emma's ecoconscious mindset emphasizes that those essential material objects, that she still consumes, are required to be durable. This dichotomy exemplifies Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2017) conceptualization of a solid-liquid continuum, on which consumers tend to oscillate.

> *"Well, many things I just do not have, I just trust... So if we get stuck, for example, then I hope that someone comes along and has something, wheel chocks or so, to help me. Or I trust that in case something is wrong, that someone has it and I don't have to have it myself, e.g. tools or something. (Lea, 39)*

> *"But I also just don't like how we continuously use and throw things away. […] If I were to only have one jacket, I would need it to be, like, the best jacket. So I also tend to buy, like, either thrift store or, like, premium top of the line. Because it needs to be durable. So not that you throw it away the next season, but, like, that you actually can make the most use out of it. Like, the one jacket I'm referring to, I'm trying to replace right now. Because I've used it for 10 years, like, time." (Emma, 30)*

During the pandemic, many countries limited the possibilities of consumption by either closing stores completely, or by regulating access to them. This resulted in Martin to even further reduce his material consumption, as he rarely experienced a chance to switch to the alternative of online shopping, due to his mobile lifestyle and the related problematic of delivery. Simultaneously, Stefan's statement suggests that the value of consuming experiences has intensified during the pandemic. This indicates, that for some respondents, times of crisis can initiate an increased appreciation of identity-defining experiences, to which they bind themselves more strongly.

> *"Well actually during the pandemic itself, I almost, well, I didn't go shopping for clothes. Yeah. Never. Like in two years, I did not buy one item. The only thing I spend money on was gas for my van." (Martin, 19)*

> *"Because I have little connection to material things, I see which experiences I have made while traveling... There are very influential experiences, that enable you to really take something away with you. That has become even more important now with the pandemic. (Stefan, 21)*

In addition to that, the pandemic has increased the respondents' reliance on digital consumption. As mentioned earlier, digital communication services have experienced an upsurge in pandemic times. They enabled interpersonal communication in a scenario, in which personal contact was largely impeded, resulting in the whole society suddenly starting to meet digitally. This laid the foundation also for non-nomadic consumers to increasingly normalize digital communication, leading to their nomadic counterparts being increasingly able to connect with them, which is summarized by Rick's statement below:

> *"I mean, I remember thinking about Zoom, and, like, Zoom as a company must have been, like: Holy shit. Yeah. Suddenly everyone on the planet is using our platform. And I just found it fascinating that with a flick of the switch, we could do that. And it worked. And there weren't any issues, it's like the world was ready for it." (Rick, 32)*

Besides this increase in digital consumption tendencies, the interview analysis suggests that most respondents primarily ascribe a functional value to their remaining tangible possessions in the van. They predominantly identify pieces of clothing, kitchen equipment, or electronic devices as their most important material possessions, which exemplifies a strong use-value orientation in terms of their inventory design. As a consequence thereof, most respondents are experiencing little attachment to these possessions, which illustrates that their inventory does not tend to serve the purpose of an expression of the self (cf. Belk, 1988). Despite enabling the respondents to perform their daily tasks, their narratives suggest that those items are highly replaceable. Lea explains that a sudden loss of all her possessions in the van would not be a dramatic occurrence. This is supported by Tim's statement, in which he characterizes the functional relationship to his possessions:

> *"So, I guess the importance of a material object is that it has a purpose and can provide me, you know, allow me to do a task goal, you know, like I've got a toolbox, which is really handy if I need to fix something." (Tim, 22)*

On the contrary, many respondents identified possessions with an emphasized emotional value. According to their narratives, those possessions carry a deeper sentimental meaning to them, as

they often symbolically reflect certain feelings, memories, or emotional ties. Those possessions offer a higher value to the respondents, as they appear to be more deeply attached to them. For example, Emma refers to her passport as a tool that allows her to express her cosmopolitan identity and to gain new experiences. Wiebke, on the other hand, stores her emotions and experiences, that she collects during her nomadic journey, in her journal. She refers to this journal as a metaphor of her own identity, which indicates an individual significance of this possession beyond any functional value. In a similar way, Rick refers to his instruments as a part of his identity, which again exemplifies the emotionally anchoring power of certain possessions in nomadic lives:

> *"And you know, the one main thing I like to do in making music, like, it is who I am. […] I guess it's part of my identity. And it's one of the things that makes me happy. […] it's just one of those things that makes me who I am […] I can't give it up. I mean, to not have my instruments with me would be like to leave a part of me behind in a way." (Rick, 32)*

Some respondents also referred to photographs as an embodied manifestation of lived experiences and memories. Similar to Rick's instruments, those pictures reflect a crucial element of Tessa's identity, as they provide her with a feeling of comfort. When looking at them, she is immediately reminded of her family, which evokes a feeling of home in an ever-changing environment outside her van. She states:

> *"So yeah, I will miss that. My pictures of family that I carry with me. (…) The pictures make me feel home maybe and make me feel comfortable. Yeah, I can always look at the pictures and think about them. Yeah. Makes me happy." (Tessa, 33)*

During the pandemic, this emotional relationship to certain possessions appears to have intensified for many respondents. For example, Tim's camera enabled him to cope with the challenge of isolation during the lockdown. He used his photography to express his feelings, which provided him with a source of mental stability and the opportunity to escape reality.

> *"I think that during the pandemic, and especially in the winter lockdown, I really began using my photography as almost like a therapy, sort of a way of just mentally leaving the kind of crazy world that was going on around me. […] And I think that I really appreciated the value of my photography and my art far more because of the pandemic, and because of what it was giving back to me in a kind of emotional, mental kind of state. […] It was just a really good way for me*

to kind of escape what was actually happening in the world. […] It was primarily for me as a coping mechanism." (Tim, 22)

This illustrates that times of crisis can lead to individuals binding their identity even more to certain possessions, to which they uphold a special emotional relationship. In this context, the interview analysis indicates a particularly strong emotional bond between the respondents and their van. To them, the van is not merely a tool for enabling transportation from one place to another. As Martin's statement illustrates, it offers an ultimate level of freedom and independence by combining the dimensions of living, working, and traveling into one material object.

"It's my freedom. It's my, it's my way out of a regular life for me. It's really what makes it possible. You can say this about any car, but the van is even more, it's… When I imagine something like I want to go there, I have the freedom to just go there." (Martin, 19)

Thus, the van metaphorically reflects the core identity of the digital nomadic lifestyle. As cosmopolite individuals, who do not feel deeply tied to a specific locale, the van serves as a constant in an ever-changing environment, and embodies a feeling of home. As Tim describes, the van provides him with stability in unfamiliar regions during his nomadic journey:

"It's just always there and it's, it's a real comforting feeling, especially when you're traveling somewhere unfamiliar. And it's just, I just love the fact that I'm just taking my home everywhere. It's just really comforting, really." (Tim, 22)

By mostly developing and building the interior design of the van entirely on their own, the van resembles an individualized and materialized expression of the self, carrying core manifestations of identity in almost every part of it. This argument of a reflected identity is supported by Rick's description of the hard work, that he has put into the design of his van:

"I like coming back to the identity discussion, because I've spent so much time on this thing, and some people would think that's crazy, like an old van that costs 800 pounds and would have otherwise gone to the scrap yard. I have chosen to put a lot of time and money into it and yeah, like not so much the outside, but the inside. It reflects me and kind of what I can envision and somehow put into reality. That's always a weird way of thinking about it. Like this van is so

> *unique, like, everything was made by hand and it doesn't exist anywhere else, and I kinda like to make the point that this is just the product of me." (Rick, 32)*

This special bond between the respondents and their van is further expressed by their tendency to personify it. With intentionally naming their van, many respondents ceased from referring to it as only an object, which is also underlined by the utilization of personal pronouns when talking about the van in the interviews. This illustrates, that the materialistic nature of the van has metamorphosed into a living entity, as it resembles a friend, a travel buddy, or a close relative. In Emma's case, her van embodies her close relationship to her grandfather, as she named it after him. She channels her interhuman relationship with him into her relationship with the van:

> *"So my van has a name, his name is Grandpa. And he's named grandpa because when I mentioned that after China, I had to come back to Canada for an emergency. That emergency was my grandpa passing away. [..] And my grandpa used to have like a very old truck and like he would have loved this van. Like he would love this van […] So to me, this van isn't just a van. It's like, almost like… Well, it's obviously not my grandpa, I know that, but there's like… […] I used to have a giant sunflower mural that I painted in here. Because that reminded me of my grandparents, like there's lots of family love that I feel like I channeled into this van." (Emma, 30)*

Sophia emphasizes that the perceived value of the van has even further increased during the pandemic. She refers to her perception of the van enabling her to still uphold a large extent of freedom, even in times where general society and the public life were increasingly dominated by immobility. As mentioned earlier, the respondents identified constants as an important source of stability in liminal conditions. Especially in times of the pandemic, the van emerges to be one of the primary constant companions in the respondents' lives, resulting in them to bind their identity even more onto their van. Sophia states:

> *"Especially in comparison to those who sat at home all the time and had no freedom at all due to the restrictions, and we just experienced ultimate freedom because of the van." (Sophia, 21)*

However, this intensified connection with their van also leads to the formation of a new source of dependency. With the van being at the center of their lives, many respondents express increasingly existential worries related to a possible damaging or disappearance of this material

anchor. It indicates, that due to the van having evolved to be such an integral part of their identity, any possible harm to it can resemble an attack to the own person. This existential dependency is illustrated by the occurrence of van-related nightmares in Rick's life:

> *"I think everyone worries about it being stolen. Like, that's a possibility. And that would be the worst thing that could probably happen in my life right now. […] I had those dreams as well. I mean, it must play on your mind to a certain degree that I've had dreams that my van has disappeared, which probably comes along with it I think. Yeah, those are like nightmares. Like it's the worst thing ever. And I wake up and I'm in such relief that it was a dream because it, yeah, like, makes you feel so vulnerable that if this were to disappear, like, I don't have anything." (Rick, 32)*

To conclude, vanlife digital nomads negotiate between an increasingly detached relationship from their possessions on the one hand, and an increased significance of certain material anchors on the other hand. The restricted availability of space in their van, in combination with a largely minimalistic mindset, results in a relationship to their material possessions based on the offered functionality. Especially during the pandemic, digital consumption has become even more important to them, as it enables them to stay in contact with valued individuals. Simultaneously, they tend to bind their identity increasingly to possessions with a deeper emotional meaning for them. Those material anchors provide them with a feeling of stability and support. Thus, they appear to evolve as more relevant in times of crisis. A particularly important anchor seems to be the van as a material personification of their own identity: it contains a meaning of home, it enables them to maintain their freedom and mobility, and it embodies an important travel companion.

5. DISCUSSION

This study augments existing research on contemporary nomadism, its relations to the vanlife culture, and consumer behavior by providing new insights into identity projects of digital nomads in times of crisis. It conceptualizes identity negotiation processes based on four dimensions: the self, its social relationships, the concepts of place and home, as well as consumption practices and relationship to material possessions.

As hypermobile cosmopolitan individuals, unlimited spatial freedom and mobility are at the core of the digital nomadic identity. As a period characterized by increased immobility and restricted freedom, the sudden appearance of the pandemic has shown to impact the digital nomadic lifestyle in the aforementioned dimensions. Thus, this study follows Reichenberger's (2018) call for analyzing digital nomadic identity projects within novel, lifestyle-challenging circumstances. It underlines the author's emphasis of their intrinsic longing for holistic freedom by showing, that digital nomads have enhanced certain personal characteristics, which allow them to develop strategies for maintaining their freedom in times it is at risk. In this context, digital nomads draw on their distinct skills of adaptability, serenity, and flexibility in order to cope with challenges in times of crisis. This supports Bauman's (2005) identification of contemporary nomadism as a lifestyle, in which individuals draw on their experiences and capabilities to develop an "acceptance of disorientation [and an] immunity to vertigo" (p. 4), allowing them to uphold their freedom. Therefore, this study supports Ehn et al.'s (2022) argumentation of an "adaptive superiority" of digital nomads, which allows them to develop skills and strategies to maintain a mobile lifestyle in times of increased immobility.

Mancinelli (2020) identifies unlimited travel and mobility as an opportunity of self-expression for digital nomads. In this context, this study indicates that digital nomads increasingly negotiate between maintaining as much spatial flexibility as possible on the one hand, and desiring a certain degree of structure in their daily lives on the other hand. Especially in times of crisis, they tend to adhere to certain daily structures, rituals, and constants as a source of stability in a fluid environment. They also try to deliberately integrate those constants into their daily lives, which emphasizes that constants can help to anchor a fluid identity to a certain rigid entity. Especially in case of the investigated vanlife digital nomads, the van appeared to be a

major constant. These findings challenge Reichenberger's (2018) and Mancinelli's (2020) argumentation, that digital nomads willingly detach from sources of structure and stability, as they appear to regain importance in periods of high uncertainty and risk.

Besides the van symbolizing a constant in their lives, it also creates a new source of mobility-related dependency. Gretzel and Hardy (2019) refer to Reichenberger's (2018) multi-level conceptualization of digital nomadism and argue that vanlife digital nomads represent an ultimate degree of both personal and spatial freedom, as they do not depend on accommodation, public transport, or co-working spaces. In this regard, this study introduced an understanding of the van as a new source of dependency, tying the freedom of mobility to the availability of an adequate parking space or the technical intactness of the van.

In the context of mobility, Bardhi et al. (2012) argue that contemporary nomads understand themselves as global citizens. Due to their continuous relocation and exposure to various cultures, the authors characterize the relationship between the nomad and its local environment as detached and distant. Living a life in permanent liminality, the principle of mobility appears to dominate the intention to acculturate (Bardhi et al., 2012; Kannisto, 2014) As the findings of this study largely support this argument, individual cases, however, showcased a tendency of digital nomads to connect to local culture as a means to widen the own cultural horizon.

In addition, the findings illustrate that accelerated mobility caused by constant short-term relocation can sometimes be perceived as stressful. The study has shown that especially vanlife digital nomads can feel pressured by the constant quest of finding new locations to stay. Thus, they tend to integrate intentional phases of standstill into their negotiation of mobility. This supports Kannisto's (2014) identification of increasingly adapted slow travel practices within the digital nomadic lifestyle, in contrast to the previous perspective, which emphasized the increased ephemerality and acceleration of nomadic settlement (D'Andrea, 2007; Bardhi et al., 2012). On the other hand, this study discovered an increased value of mobility during the time of the pandemic. Nomadic lifestyles, especially in terms of vanlife, appear to have become increasingly attractive. As possibilities of traveling were limited to a large share of society, digital nomads acknowledge their privilege of mobility during the pandemic. This adds a new dimension of privilege to Thompson's (2019) understanding of digital nomadism, which she characterizes as a lifestyle consisting of highly-educated individuals originating from highly developed countries (D'Andrea, 2007; Bauman, 2000).

Due to their deliberate choice of escaping societal constraints, Kannisto (2014, 2016) argues that contemporary nomads increasingly unchain themselves from existing roots in their place of origin. Thereby, the author concludes that digital nomads' connection to *home* as a physical and social entity becomes weaker. In this context, this study has identified the notion of home for digital nomads to be fluid. Home itself is not restricted to a uniform definition, but rather a complex construct consisting of various associations. As a result of the interviews, Figure 4 illustrates the different dimensions of the concept of home, that were derived from the narratives of the participants:

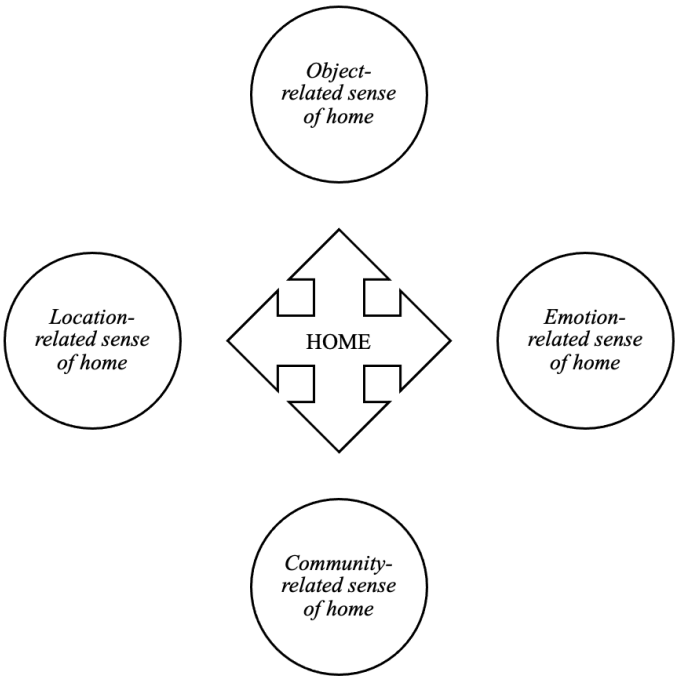

Figure 4. Fluidity of home (own illustration)

The fluid concept of home is characterized by four predominant dimensions: the *location-related sense of home*, the *community-related sense of home*, the *emotion-related sense of home*, as well as the *object-related sense of home*. The study supports Kannisto's (2014, 2016) argument, that digital nomads tend to part with a *location-based sense of home*, that is connected to the physical sphere of the homeland, e.g., geographical features. However, this study identified that digital nomads still tend to maintain a sentimental connection to home, especially in times of crisis. The *community-related sense of home* is characterized by the social relationships to important individuals, the digital nomad feels sentimentally connected to. For example, family and friends reflect a source of stability in difficult times. On the other hand, the *emotion-related sense of home* is rather connected to specific emotions, that the digital

nomad feels when thinking of home, or when being at that particular place. That can be, for example, a feeling of comfort or safety. Lastly, the *object-related sense of home* refers to a specific material representation, that the digital nomad connects to home. For example, the van often delivered a sentiment of home, as it constitutes the main location of residence for the vanlife digital nomads. Especially in times of crisis, digital nomads tend to intensify their emotional relationship to the social dimension of home as a source of emotional stability. Bardhi et al. (2012) argue that deterritorialization challenges the presence of fixed points of reference and belongingness. However, this study illustrates that by upholding an emotional connection to home, the disappearance of these reference points can be substituted in times of crisis. However, as the notion of home appears to be fluid in its nature, it can constantly change. For example, the van can feel like home while the digital nomad is living in it. On the other hand, this object-related sense of home might decrease, when the digital nomad is spending more time away from it. This also suggests, that the different dimensions do not exclude, but rather complement each other, as, for example, both the van and the family can constitute a feeling of home simultaneously.

Referring to Haythornthwaite and Wellman (2002) and Papacharissi (2010), Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) argue that progressively digitalized social interaction results in a shift from having close relationships to family and friends towards an ephemeral and "flexible sociality" (p. 591). This study challenges the authors' claim of a decreasing importance of long-term social relationships. While the findings indicate an increase in digital communication practices during the pandemic, this increase mainly occurred due to respondents intensifying their relationships to those crucial social anchors. Thus, despite an internal negotiation between a desired distance from society and a longing for social companionship (Thompson, 2019), social relationships appear to be an integral part of the digital nomadic identity. In this context, the findings also support Thompson's (2019) emphasis of emerging nomadic communities as a means to connect with like-minded individuals. Especially in times of crisis, vanlife digital nomads tend to connect with other vanlifers by sharing experiences and supporting each other. Therefore, this study discovered that digital nomads tend to connect their identity even more to their social anchors in times of crisis.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the theory of solid and liquid consumption by investigating the role of material possessions in identity negotiation projects of digital nomads. Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) suggest that consumers navigate on a continuum between solidity

and liquidity, characterized by an increasingly detached relationship to their material possessions (Bardhi et al., 2012). The findings of this study illustrate, that digital nomads ascribe little importance to their tangible inventory. Especially in the investigated case of vanlife digital nomads, their possessions predominantly serve a purely functional purpose with increased replaceability, which supports Bardhi et al.'s (2012) argument of a progressing substitutability of possessions in nomadic consumers' lives. Together with their tendency for a minimalistic mindset and limited spatial availabilities in the van, vanlife digital nomads also consume more consciously. In addition, as a consequence of the pandemic, digital nomads increasingly utilize digital solutions to uphold contact to their social anchors, as well as they emphasize the value of experiential consumption (Atanasova & Eckhardt, 2021). These findings illustrate a tendency towards the liquid side of the consumption continuum and demonstrate an emphasis on dematerialization (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017; Lee & Ahn, 2016; van Boven & Gilovich, 2003; Eckhardt et al., 2005).

However, this study also indicates an emphasized significance of specific material possessions, such as pictures of family members or a personal diary. These possessions are characterized by embodying a deeper emotional meaning to the digital nomads, providing them with emotional and mental support. In this context, this study supports Aufschnaiter et al.'s (2021) identification of increasingly significant material anchors that exist on the solid-liquid consumption continuum. While ownership appears to become more and more irrelevant to digital nomads, the mere possession of those material anchors equips them with a source of stability in an ever-changing environment, as it provides them with feelings of home and comfort. As Burroughs and Rindfleisch (2002) and Ahuvia (2005) illustrate, those material anchors can support consumers in solving identity conflicts and, thus, enhancing the feeling of well-being. The study supports this claim, as it identifies that certain material objects enable consumers to engage in activities of desired self-expression, such as music-making or photography projects. Especially in times of crisis, these material anchors become more important, as they allow the digital nomads to cope with novel sources of insecurity.

Therefore, this study suggests that digital nomads negotiate between a detachment from possessions on the one hand, and an increasing reliance on material anchors on the other hand, which reflects the tension within the solid-liquid continuum. By investigating this negotiation, this study follows the call from Aufschnaiter et al. (2021) and proposes, that especially in times of crisis, digital nomads tend to bind their identity even more to these material anchors. In this

context, the findings illustrate the particular significance of the van as a material anchor and reflection of the self (Belk, 1988). The van reflects an entity that combines multiple elements of the digital nomadic identity: mobility, freedom, and home. It enables them to stay mobile during times of immobility, and simultaneously serves as a constant. The special bond between the consumers and the object is expressed by their efforts to individualize the appearance of the van according to their self-image, as well as through an increased personification of the item. Therefore, as a material object deeply intertwined with the own identity, this finding complements Aufschnaiter et al.'s (2021) concept of material anchoring by suggesting a dimension of identity-reflecting material anchors in addition to their previously defined embodied and imagined anchors.

6. CONCLUSION

The objective of this thesis was to explore the negotiation of digital nomadic identity projects during times of crisis. In particular, with the contextualization to the global COVID-19 pandemic, the thesis aimed at contributing to the understanding of how nomadic consumers' identities are challenged by restricted opportunities for mobility, and how they respond to these challenges. In this context, the study drew upon the theoretical conceptualizations of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000), contemporary nomadism, liquid consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017), and material anchoring (Aufschnaiter et al., 2021).

The findings illustrate that digital nomadic identity projects depend on multiple dimensions. Firstly, the *self* refers to the dimension of internal personal characteristics. Their distinct skills of adaptability, serenity, and flexibility enable digital nomads to quickly develop strategies that allow them to cushion challenging effects of a crisis. Despite the pandemic-related restrictions of mobility, their strategies enabled them to maintain a large degree of freedom. As freedom represents a core value rooted within their identity, its significance increases in times it is at risk. However, the study has also shown that digital nomads increasingly negotiate between upholding this freedom on the one hand, and desiring sources of stability in times of crisis on the other hand.

Secondly, digital nomads increasingly value the dimension of *social relationships* in times of crisis. The study has shown that their engagement with other individuals has intensified during the pandemic, especially in terms of virtual contact with important social anchors. This illustrates, that despite the digital nomadic lifestyle being characterized by an intended detachment from social communities and related constraints, digital nomads negotiate between social independence and social reconnection as a source of stability.

Thirdly, *place and home* determine the third dimension of digital nomadic identity projects. Due to being hypermobile individuals, digital nomads engage in constant relocation. This results in a largely superficial relationship to place, characterized by an increased emotional detachment from those places. In the context of this liquidity of place, this study identified that digital nomads' notion of home is increasingly fluid. With their location-related sense of home

having decreased over time, especially their community-related and emotion-related sense of home have intensified during times of crisis, as those social anchors provide them with stability. Simultaneously, also the object-related sense of home plays an important role in this negotiation process, especially within the vanlife culture, as it reflects a constant in a fluid environment.

Lastly, digital nomads negotiate their identity also in the dimension of *consumption and possessions*. This study has shown that besides dematerialization and liquid consumption increasingly characterizing the digital nomads' relationship to their possessions, the importance of specific material anchors intensifies during times of crisis. Those material anchors can either enable them to engage in identity-defining experiences or embody certain memories, feelings, or relationships. In particular, the van was identified as a crucial material anchor, because it reflects the nomads' identity as a personified materialization of the self. In times of crisis, this study indicates that digital nomads increasingly bind their identity to these identity-reflecting material anchors as a provider of emotional and mental stability.

6.1 Managerial Implications

The findings of this study suggest, that mobile consumers bind their identity even more to certain material possessions in times of crisis. By individualizing and personifying those items, they evolve into a materialized reflection of the self and provide the consumers with a source of stability. Therefore, marketers could focus on developing products that entail possibilities for individualization. Those individualization features could enable consumers to express their personality and, thus, could lead to an increased sentimental identification with the product.

Furthermore, the study indicates that mobile consumers also intensify their relationships to social anchors in times of crisis. In this regard, the emotional bond to close acquaintances appears to be a further source of security. Marketing activities could emphasize the role of these social anchors, for example in advertising campaigns directed towards mobile target groups. Therefore, marketers may need to increasingly engage in market research, in order to understand possible sources of uncertainty within their targeted consumer segment. In addition, they could equip their products with features that enable consumers to uphold social contact more easily, for example, through cooperation with social media platforms.

The study has further identified materialistic items as important providers for mental stability, in case they allow consumers to collect sentimental memories and experiences, or to engage in identity-expressing activities. As mobile consumers, digital nomads tend to value experiential and immaterial consumption more than a solid product itself. Marketers could therefore emphasize the experiences, that their consumers are able to collect with their products, rather than focusing on the tangible product itself.

Additionally, the study illustrated that digital nomads tend to carry a liquid understanding of home. Depending on the individual itself, home can be connected to a place, a feeling, other persons, or a specific object, such as a van. Therefore, marketers need to be aware that different notions of home exist. Especially when targeting mobile consumers, the acknowledgement of various understandings of home might be necessary for marketing activities.

Lastly, the findings suggest that freedom and mobility are crucial components of the digital nomadic identity. Even in times, when spatial freedom is challenged, digital nomads develop strategies to maintain as much freedom as possible. Therefore, marketers could emphasize the narrative of freedom and mobility in marketing campaigns when addressing digital nomads and other mobile consumers.

6.2 Limitations and Further Research

As any empirical research project, also this study is subject to various limitations. Firstly, by concentrating on digital nomads belonging to the vanlife culture, this study focused on participants, who already have a significant material possession in their lives. As this study investigated the role of material anchors in digital nomads' identity projects, the pre-existence of such an important material possession might bias the findings to a certain extent. Therefore, future research should investigate identity projects of digital nomads, who do not have such a significant material constant.

Secondly, the findings of this study might be further biased by differences in local Infection Protection Acts. National restrictions for preventing a rapid spread of the virus significantly depend on the specific region. Therefore, the perceived extent of freedom of the respondents might as well be shaped by the strength of local regulations. In a similar context, despite the

intention to include participants of different nationalities, the sample itself is predominantly characterized by respondents of a Western-societal background. With culture constituting a significant element of identity, the respondents' cultural background may further bias the findings of this study, as it limits the possibility for a generalization of the findings. Thus, future research should include participants of various social and cultural backgrounds in order to generate a broader image of the topic under investigation.

Similar to differences in local regulations, individual risk perceptions regarding the virus might influence the extent of perceived freedom. For example, vaccination decisions can affect the opportunities for border crossings, interpersonal contact, or access to public infrastructure. In this context, individual protection measures can have an effect on the freedom of movement. Therefore, future studies could address this issue by investigating the entanglements of freedom, risk perception and individual protection measures for mobile consumers.

Furthermore, the participants of this study were predominantly sampled based on their self-identification as vanlife digital nomads. Even though digital nomads with various temporal experiences in vanlife were included in the study, a large part of the respondents started with this lifestyle either shortly before or during the pandemic. To better comprehend the challenges of pandemic-related restrictions on mobile identities, future studies could focus on digital nomads with more long-term experiences in the vanlife culture, for example, in terms of a longitudinal study. Simultaneously, as the pandemic resulted in many individuals actively starting their transition towards a digital nomadic existence (Pietsch, 2021), future studies could also investigate individual motivations of lifestyle changes during times of crisis.

Lastly, this study investigated identity projects in times of crisis by drawing on the example of the global COVID-19 pandemic. However, as there might be a large variety of critical incidents for individuals, besides the pandemic itself, future studies could investigate the negotiation of identity projects during other situations of crisis.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Study Invitation Letter

Hi [Name]!

I am Christian and I am a master student of Strategic Management at the University of Innsbruck in Austria. Right now, I am writing my master thesis about digital nomads and vanlife during the pandemic, and I am looking for possible interview partners that would like to help me out with my study by participating in a short interview (ca. 30-60 min – depending on your availability, via FaceTime/GoogleMeet/etc.).
I have seen on your profile that you consider yourself as a vanlife digital nomad – that's why you would fit perfectly into my target group! The interview would be all about your experiences as a vanlife digital nomad in times of the current pandemic. I would be more than happy, if you could help me out in my research, as it is currently not very easy to find interview partners belonging to my particular target group. In case you are interested, feel free to contact me and I can provide you with more details. In case you have any questions upfront, feel free to reach out and I'd be happy to answer them!

Thanks a lot already and all the best from Innsbruck,

Christian

Appendix B: Interview Guideline

[Introducing Small Talk]
Again, thank you very much for your willingness to support me by participating in my study. As I already told you before, the interview is all about you, your views and your experiences. Feel free to answer as detailed as you want. Also in case you do not want to answer a question – that is totally fine! The interview itself will last about one hour, depending on how much time you have and how much insights you want to share with me. Needless to say, everything you say will be completely anonymized and treated confidentially. For documentation purposes and a further analysis of this interview, I would also like to ask you for your consent to record this interview. [Waiting for consent; Only proceed if consent is given]
Are there any open questions that you have before we start with the main part of the interview?

1. Biographical Information[1]

Grand Tour: So, in order to start the interview, maybe you can tell me your story of becoming a vanlife digital nomad.

Probing:

- What were the personal reasons for you to start living in a van?
- Which differences do you see to your life before?
- To which extent are routines present in your daily life?
- How does your usual daily routine look like in your van?
- Which role do rituals play in your life?
- Which role do constants play in your life? How was this affected by the pandemic?

2. Mobility

Grand Tour: Please tell me about your experiences of traveling in times of the pandemic.

Probing:

- In which way did travel restrictions affect your traveling plans?
- Did you need to adapt your travel plans because of the pandemic? If yes, can you describe how?
- How does, according to you, traveling during times of the pandemic differ from traveling before the pandemic?
- What are your reasons for driving to a new place?
- On which criteria do you choose your next locations?

[1]Please note, that the order of the interview depended on the course of the particular interview

3. Feeling of Home in Times of Liminality

Grand Tour: What does *home* mean to you? How was it affected by the pandemic?

Probing:

- Please complete the sentence: Home is to me ...
- What comes to your mind when hearing *home*?
- Which meaning does the van have to you in your current situation?
- Where is *home* for you?
- How did you deal with the risk of catching Covid yourself while being away from your home country?
- How did you deal with the possibility of a quarantine period inside your van? Can you describe your experiences?
- How does your relationship to home look like?
- Do you sometimes have the feeling of "missing home"? If yes, can you describe the feeling?
- If you reflect on the time before the pandemic: Did the meaning of home change? If yes, can you describe how?

4. Sense of Community in Times of the Pandemic

Grand Tour: Which role do social relationships play in your life and how were they affected by the pandemic?

Probing:

- How did the contact restrictions affect your social life?
- How important is it to you to get in contact with new people at your different locations?
- How did you get to know new people at the different locations during the pandemic?
- How important is it to you to stay in contact with your family and your close friends? Did that change during the pandemic? If yes, in which way?
- How do you stay in contact with family or friends? Did that change during the pandemic? If yes, in which way?

5. Possessions in Times of Liminality

Grand Tour: Please describe your current inventory. Which meaning does it have to you?

Probing:

- Which items do you have in your van? Why?
- Which items did you not decide to have in your van?
- Which are your most important possessions right now? Why?
- Please rank your most important possessions, beginning with the most important one. Can you explain that order?
- Can you describe the meaning, the van has to you right now? Did this meaning change over time? If yes, can you explain in which way?
- Which of your possessions have a special meaning to you? Can you describe this meaning?
- Which of your possessions have an emotional meaning to you? Can you describe this meaning?
- Which were your most important possessions before the pandemic?
- When you think about your current inventory, how does that make you feel?
- Is there anything you own, that became more important to you after the start of the pandemic / during the pandemic? Can you describe in which way?
- Please complete the sentence: I can't live without … – Can you explain why?
- Which were your most important possessions before becoming a nomad? Why?
- Which things do you need in your everyday life in the van?
- How would you decide: e-Book or printed book? Can you explain your decision?
- How did vanlife affect your consumption choices?
- Do you share items with other people/vanlifers? If yes, can you explain which items these are?
- Do you own any things that you would refer to as unnecessary? Why?
- Is there anything in your van that makes you feel like home? If yes, what? Why?
- In times of the pandemic, especially at the beginning, many stores were closed due to legal restrictions. How did you react to those stores being suddenly unavailable?

6. ZMET

Grand Tour: Please let us now talk about the posts you chose from your Instagram profile. Can you describe the pictures and tell me why you chose them?

Probing:

- In which way do these pictures reflect your associations with "vanlife in times of the pandemic"?
- If you had to decide for one of these pictures, that represents your associations with "vanlife in times of the pandemic" best – which picture would that be? Why?
- Is there anything missing on these pictures?
- Please complete this sentence: When reminiscing about that moment, I feel …

- How do you feel about these pictures now? Is it a different feeling? If yes, can you describe how it differs?
- If I would ask you to post an image of your situation right now - what would that picture look like? Would it look different? If yes, can you describe how?

If no picture was chosen prior to the interview:

- Imagine you had to create a post, in which you want to express vanlife in times of the pandemic. How would that picture look like? Which hashtags would you connect it with?

7. Wrap-Up

In your own understanding, what would be the most important keywords to describe vanlife in times of the pandemic?

That would be all my questions. Is there anything of importance to you that we have not covered? Do you have any remaining questions?

[Conclusory Small Talk]

Okay, then again, thank you very much for your participation!

8. Demographic Information[1]

Job
Age
Gender
Nationality
Marital Status
Number of Children
Highest Educational Degree

[1]Was sent to the respondents after the conduction of the interview

Appendix C: Declaration of Consent

I hereby give my consent to participating in the research project of Christian Fiedler within the context of his Master's thesis at the University of Innsbruck, Austria.
I am aware that that my participation is entirely voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time. I agree that the interview will be recorded and stored by the researcher for data analysis purposes, and I understand that all data collected will be anonymized and accessible only to the researcher and his supervisor. I also acknowledge that the researcher has provided me with all necessary information about the organization and procedure prior to the interview.

With my signature, I confirm to have no further questions and that I have read and understood the beforementioned conditions of participation.

_____

Name, Signature

Hiermit erkläre ich mich bereit, am Forschungsprojekt von Christian Fiedler im Rahmen seiner Masterarbeit an der Universität Innsbruck teilzunehmen.
Mir ist bewusst, dass meine Teilnahme völlig freiwillig ist und jederzeit widerrufen werden kann. Ich bin damit einverstanden, dass das Interview aufgezeichnet und vom Forscher zum Zweck der Datenanalyse gespeichert wird. Mir ist bewusst, dass alle erhobenen Daten anonymisiert werden und nur dem Forscher und seiner Betreuerin zugänglich sind. Ich bestätige außerdem, dass der Forscher mich vor dem Interview mit allen notwendigen Informationen über die Organisation und das Verfahren aufgeklärt hat.

Mit meiner Unterschrift bestätige ich, dass ich keine weiteren Fragen habe und dass ich die oben genannten Teilnahmebedingungen gelesen und verstanden habe.

_____

Name, Unterschrift

Appendix D: Interview Codebook

Main Category	Description	Sub-Category	Data Example
Individual Characteristics	Statements that illustrate individual characteristics of the respondents	Adaptability	*I honestly feel like this is the biggest reason why the pandemic didn't really affect me in such a negative way compared to like other people (...) So to what extent I guess like, like, it's like my entire, my entire life is about like adapting like, and I kind of look forward to it. Like there was this time when I was in Albania. And I just decided that I wanted to go to Macedonia and there was this one place in Macedonia, and there was no way to get there easily. So I walked. I put on my backpack, and I just walked. And it was like it wasn't that far. It was like I feel like in total, it was like 30 kilometers, but I ended up getting a ride at some point. I was hitchhiking, and I got a ride. And I just like, I just did it with a smile on my face. Because I was like, yeah, like, this is cool. Like, there's no other way to get this done. (Emma, 30)*
		Goal-orientation	*So to me, it feels like I get like these little mini victories, kind of, like, you know, how you're working towards this like thesis. And it's like taking you a long time. But like, in the meantime, it's good to have little like milestones. So to me, I treat these like challenges as like, little milestones to like, some bigger success. (Emma, 30)*
		Curiosity	*And a lot of things changed. And a lot of things happened. But at this, at that point, I was kind of oblivious to what laid out ahead of me, and more just excited and curious about what was about to happen. (Rick, 32)*
		Serenity	*Aber auch in bezug auf corona braucht man so eine positive einstellung. Einfach machen. Mal probieren. Es wird schon irgendeine lösung kommen. (...) wir probieren es einfach. Wenn es nicht klappt, dann nicht. Und wenn es klappt, dann schon. (Sohpia, 21)*
		Risk-Taking Propensity	*In terms of restrictions. So you had to break some laws, if you want to live in a van. (Martin, 19)*

		Spontaneity	*And we really like to be spontaneous. And we don't know where we are the next few days. So we just want to leave it open. (Tessa, 33)*
		Flexibility	*Und dann an weihnachten, wo wir ursprünglich nach deutschland zurückwollten, das ist dann ausgefallen. Das war dann aber auch nicht dramatisch. Wenn man da flexibel ist und nicht so starr einen plan verfolgt, dann ließ sich das echt ganz gemütlich machen.Das wird schon irgendwie. Es wäre mir auch egal gewesen, ob ich in einem Land feststecke. Wenn ich zB in Griechenland feststecken würde. Man hat ja nicht diesen Zwang zurückzumüssen, weil man irgendwo zur arbeit muss. Ich arbeite ja von da wo ich bin, daher hat man diesen stress überhaupt nicht. (Lea, 39)*
		Creativity	*You have to be creative. Creative around situations with everything, because a lot of things were closed. (Martin, 19)*
		Pandemic Enablement	*How bizarre is it that despite COVID, having taken a lot of our freedoms away, in terms of, you know, basic, basic things that we were able to do. Yeah. It also unleashed a whole bunch of freedoms that we didn't have before. (Rick, 32)*
Worries of Infection	Statements in which the respondents express worries regarding an infection with COVID-19	Fear of Self-Infection	*So yeah, we're a bit sometimes scared about it. You know, we don't want to get sick. Yeah. Also, because I know okay, if I get sick, I can't work if I really feel terrible. I can't work. As that's my income. (Tessa, 33)*
		Fear of Spreading	*So my dad has COPD. I don't know. Yeah. Yeah, so he and he's 67. So he's like, the pinnacle of at risk. So mostly, it was like, if I socialize, I could pick it up and I could pass it to him, or like at the grocery store, I could still like pick it up and like, pass it to him because my parents are very much in my like, bubble. Yeah, that's what we called it. So I had them too. And then my best friends here. And one of my friends is quite like, at the beginning, he was really quite anxious about the whole thing as well. So I wanted to be respectful and just not spread it (Emma, 30)*

Structure and Consistency	Statements in which the respondents express the importance of structure and consistency in their life	Constants	*And I think it's because the van is constant, no matter what is happening outside, like we talked about home, you know, the van is home and a support. (Jessica, 29)*
		Rituals	*Auch meine kleine Morgenroutine, meine Arbeit… Ich journal total viel. Das sind meine rituale jeden tag um mir eine pause zu gönnen und eine immerhin kleine struktur zu haben. (Wiebke, 29)*
		Routines	*The routines were giving me mental stability. I think, cause I guess what was happening in the world was quite scary when it first happened (Tim, 22)*
		Absence of Stucture	*Das ist eine sache die leicht negativ sein kann im vanlife. Das kann einen sogar stressen. Die Freiheit jeden Tag kann auch total anstrengend sein, weil man eben kenie Routinen hat. (Wiebke, 29)*
Nomadic Lifestyle and Nomadic Values	Statements in which the respondents refer to nomadic values and perceived (dis-)advantages of the nomadic lifestyle	Spatial Freedom	*And just the freedom of being able to park my home up wherever I go, it's really kind of liberating. (Tim, 22)*
		Individual Freedom	*Das ist der witz am vanlife, dass man raus aus der gesellschaft ist und den gesellschaftlichen entwicklungen ncith so unterlegen ist. (Wiebke, 29)*
			The pandemic probably really brought to light the importance of that freedom. (…) It did bring to light that that freedom was quite important for me. Especially mentally as well. (Tim, 22)
		Pandemic-Related Upsurge	*Was mir am meisten aufgefallen ist – es sind jetzt viel mehr vans unterwegs! (Lea, 39)*
		Environmentalism	*And when I'm out in nature, especially in the middle of nowhere I do feel quite at peace with the world. (Tim, 22)*
		Disadvantages of the Nomadic Lifestyle	*Sometimes I have the feeling of like, oh, it would be so nice to have a home in Utah, near my parents. And then I would feel settled and safe and I don't know, secure. (Jessica, 29)*

		Counter-Romanticizing	*Man muss sich auf jeden fall davon verabschieden, dass alles nur lichterketten, traumfänger und tolle aussichten sind. Man muss mit einem basic lebensstil klarkommen. Man muss sein klo ausleeren, was nicht so romantisch ist. Man muss sehen wo man duscht, duscht vielleicht ein paar tage nicht, und muss damit klarkommen. Man hat keine große Küche, isst eher basic, und ja, auch die stellplatzsuche kann anstrengend sein und man findet nichts. Dann muss man sich damit abfinden, was man findet. Also man muss flexibel sein und seine erwartungen irgendwie herunterschrauben. Man muss ohne luxus klarkommen. (Wiebke, 29)*
Mobility	Statements that relate to experienced or perceived opportunities of spatial mobility	Travel Restrictions	*So during the pandemic, it was, it was relatively hard to be mobile because it was made illegal. I do know of people that were living in vans during the pandemic. And I know that in some parts of the UK, there were some real issues with it, with the police and council, really not being very nice. (Tim, 22)*
		Relocation Motivation	*I don't know, we just kind of set like a generic destination. And then we'll just stop along the way. We don't put too much thought into it. (Jessica, 29)*
		Immobility During the Pandemic	*It became more difficult to travel. And that's what I don't like. Because that's the part of, yeah, the freedom part is going. it's blocking the freedom part. So it's, I think that was a really tough thing. (Tessa, 33)*
		Quarantine	*The first thing that worried me was like, okay we want to go from Greece to Italy. And when in the beginning, we knew we had to be in quarantine, when we arrived to Italy, and that was worrying because we have a dog, so how can I manage it? You know, I can do grocery shopping and I can have everything in my van. We don't need to leave it, but you have to leave it at some point. You know, sometimes you have to do stuff outside. Am I allowed to do those? You know, things like you need to do your toilets? So I need to walk my dog. I need to maybe have some groceries, you know, some trash that I need to get rid of. So yeah, that was worrying me. (Tessa, 33)*

		Increased Bureaucracy	*Na. Klar, über grenzen zu fahren ist etwas aufwändiger als früher, mit dem testen und was man alles braucht. (Sophia, 21)*
		Mobility During the Pandemic	*Also grundsätzlich habe ich erwartet, dass es schwieriger ist in Pandemiezeiten zu reisen. Aber nach wie vor werden die Grenzen nicht so stark kontrolliert, keinen Menschen interessiert es ob du geimpft bist oder nicht, also das war kein Problem. (Wiebke, 29)*
		Strategies for Upholding Mobility	*wir konnten unseren ort ja aussuchen, deswegen haben wir oft mal gesagt: hier wird es brenzlig, hier kommt gleich ein lockdown, dann fahren wir doch ins nächste land um dem aus dem weg zu gehen (Stefan, 21)*
Notion of Home	Statements in which the respondents express their understanding of "home"	Location-Dependent Sense of Home	*Ich bin in deutschland, schweden und amerika groß geworden, bin viel umgezogen und habe mich in deutschland nie zuhause gefühlt. (Wiebke, 29)*
		Community-Related Sense of Home	*my first thought is home is where my family is. Regardless of like the domicile I'm actually in, but then the times that I've actually thought, oh, I feel like I'm home. (Jessica, 29)*
		Object-Related Sense of Home	*So home in a lot of ways, home is the van because that's mine more than anything else. (Jessica, 29)*
		Emotion-Related Sense of Home	*Home is where the heart is, man! (Tim, 22)*
		Absence of Home	*Yeah, I guess lately I've been kind of having like conflicted feelings about like homelessness. Like I, like, I don't have a home at all. (Jessica, 29)*
		Liquidity of Home	*I just feel like, the concept of home ought to be like dynamic, right? It's got to be changeable. (Rick, 32)*
			I find has to do more with like the length of time. ... so sometimes the van feels like home. Like I've been shopping all day, I get back to the van. I go inside and it's home. Cause it's like my comfortable place. But then sometimes it doesn't feel that way of course. So I guess, I don't know, like really home is kind of fluid. (Jessica, 29)
		Longing for Home	*And then I do have, I do have a homesickness in the sense, but more of like familial, like, like I miss my family I'm homesick and I miss those people more than a location. (Jessica, 29)*

Social Relationships	Statements in which the respondents illustrate the significance of social relationships	Family and Friends	*Aber ja es ist schon wichtig. Ich versuche schon einmal die Woche meine mama anzurufen, meine beste freundin, meine schwester und so weiter. Das versuche ich schon. (Wiebke, 29)*
		Building New Relationships	*Zu den anderen vanlifern auch. Immer mal hallo sagen, häufig abends ein lagerfeuer, pizza bestellen oder so. immer irgendwie in kontakt getreten. Das ist wichtig. (Stefan, 21)*
		Contact Restrictions	*I went maybe from seeing 500 people in a week to a, to five. Yeah. So that's yeah, it did. It felt lonely and yeah, really shit. (Martin, 19)*
		Intensification of Social Relationships	*the pandemic like I think really taught me like the value of personal relationships, like long term relationships, it's really easy to move to a new city and like, go to a bar or go to a show or like meet people and have those like superficial, like, small talk kind of relationships, but not those like real supportive ones. (Emma, 30)*
		Vanlife Community	*Also es ist ja ein gewisser typ mensch der vollzeit im van lebt. Man versteht sich auf eine andere ebene. Man fängt sofort an über Weltprobleme zu diskutieren und so. Und oft sind gründe, warum leute in einen van gezogen sind, sehr tiefe gründe. Und die werden sehr früh angeschnitten, und daher ist es eine andere ebene auf der man sich unterhält. Daher sind die beziehungen glaube ich auch enger. (Wiebke, 29)*
		Loneliness	*And although there's the odd day where you feel a little bit lonely and that you'd like some company. (Rick, 32)*
		Desired Solitariness	*I think lots of people that live kind of nomadically are also people that have kind of dropped out of the system. You might want to say kind of live off grid. Lots of people kind of just don't want to participate in the society that is happening kind of around us. And I think that's what van life kind of offers as well. It offers a chance for people to kind of escape the kind of, you know, I mean, Americans would say the rat race and live a life that is simpler and more connected to nature. And it's just a bit of a slower pace.(Tim, 22)*

Consumption Behavior	Statements that illustrate the respondents' consumption behavior	Minimalism	*I think when you live in a van, you always have to be like minimalistic. Living like minimalism. You can't take everything with you. So I think it's really beautiful. Because it makes you think, okay, I don't need everything (Tessa, 33)*
		Sustainability	*Ich schmeiße nicht gern weg, ich bin dafür dinge lange zu benutzen, solang sie nutzbar sind. Auch wegen des Nachhaltigkeitsaspekts. (Wiebke, 29)*
		Immaterial and Experiential Consumption	*The objects, which allow me to experience things mean something to me because they are a tool for me to, to have an experience. (Tim, 22)*
			Like what's the most important family photo or, you know, I have all these photos on my phone, so I don't have to have them physically. (Jessica, 29)
		Liquefication of Ownership	*So it's, it's an interesting point, because as much as I rely on I mean, I'm on a MacBook right now, and I've got a Dell laptop, but neither of them are mine. They belong to work, okay. And I've been a little bit cheeky in that I've been able to actually move into the van and not have any of my own tech in terms of laptops and stuff at all, but it all belongs to work. (Rick, 32)*
		Sharing Tendencies	*Gut, viele sachen hab ich einfach nicht, da vertraue ich einfach drauf… also wenn wir uns festfahren zB, dann hoffe ich darauf dass jemand vorbeikommt und etwas dabei hat, unterlegkeile oder so, um mir dann zu helfen. Oder ich vertraue dass wenn was ist, das jemand das hat, und ich das nicht selbst besitzen muss, zB auch bei werkzeug oder so. (Lea, 39)*
		Space-Related Negotiation of Consumption	*And that's also a nice thing about the van because the van makes you think about what you are going to carry because you only have so much place. Yep. So yeah, you have to choose between let's say bringing my climbing gear and bringing another wetsuit, you know. (Martin, 19)*
		Pandemic-Related Reduction of Consumption	*Well actually during the pandemic itself, I almost, well, I didn't go shopping for clothes. Yeah. Never. Like in two years, I did not buy one item. (…) the only thing I spend money on was gas for my car. (Martin, 19)*

		Conscious Consumption	*Also da fing das schon an, dass ich weniger gekauft hab, und dass ich öfter käufe hinterfragt hab, ob ich etwas wirklich brauche oder nicht (Lea, 39)*
Relationship to Possessions	Statements in which the respondents describe their relationship to their (material) possessions	Functional Value of Possessions	*Klar die praktischen dinge, um zB essen zu machen, die brauche ich, aber an den hänge ich nicht sehr. (Wiebke, 29)*
		Emotional Value of Possessions	*I think that the pandemic and especially in the winter lock down, I really began using my photography as a way almost like a therapy, sort of a way of just mentally leaving the kind of crazy world that was, that was going on around me. And sort of just take the camera out. I live quite close to a national park and during that winter lock down, I went and did lots of long walks and took loads of photos and it was a really a good way for me, just to kind of completely forget that this stuff was happening. And I think that I really appreciated the value of my photography and my art far more because of the pandemic and because of what it was giving back to me in a kind of emotional, mental kind of state. (...) It was just a really good way for me to kind of escape what was actually happening in the world. (...) It was primarily for me as a coping mechanism. (Tim, 22)*
		Symbolic Value of Possessions	*Oder wenn ich aus meiner tasse trinke, dann weiß ich alles ist gut, dann fühlt sich das auch nach Zuhause an. Also wenn man das eigene geschirr hat und nicht in einer ferienwohnung oder so ist. (Lea, 39)*
		Embodied Anchoring	*Ich schreibe in das Journal täglich rein was ich mache, teilweise auch kurz. Was ich gemacht habe, wo ich gerade bin. Das ist einfach… Man erlebt so wahnsinnig viel, man kann sich nicht an alles erinnern. Aber wenn man dann zurückblättert und sieht, ah vor 6 monaten war ich da.. und wenn man das dann mit fotos auf dem handy von diesem datum vergleicht kann man da ganz tolle erinnerungen rekreieren. Dann weiß man auch was man in dem moment gefühlt hat, was man gedacht hat und alles. Das finde ich ist viel wertvoller als irgendwelche*

			materiellen geschichten. (Wiebke, 29)
		Individualization of Possessions	*It I like I like coming back to the identity discussion, because I've spent so much time on this thing and some people would think that's crazy, like an old van that cost 800 pounds and would have otherwise gone to the scrap yard. I have chosen to put a lot of time and money into it and yeah, like not so much the outside but the inside. It reflects me and kind of what I can envision and somehow put into reality. That's always a weird a weird way of thinking about it. Like this van is so unique, like, everything was made by hand and it doesn't exist anywhere else and I kinda like to make a point of it that this is just the product of me during the pandemic (Rick, 32)*
		Special Significance of the Van	*It's my freedom. It's my, it's my way out of a regular life for me. It's really what makes it possible. You can say it's with any car, but the van is even more, it's when I imagine something like I want to go there, I have the freedom to just go there. (Martin, 19)*
		Personification of Possessions	*Man fängt an, seinen van zu personalisieren und zu vermenschlichen. Alle unsere vans haben Namen, wir reden mit unseren vans und das ist irgendwie der Reisebuddy. Das ist total verrückt, ich versuche selbst immer mal zu reflektieren und frage mich wie ich so an einem fahrzeug hängen kann, aber man entwickelt eine so krasse beziehung zu seinem Van. Das hätt ich nie gedacht. (Wiebke, 29)*
		Dependence on Possessions	*But in terms of other things, I mean, I think everyone worries about it being stolen. Like, that's a possibility. And that would be like the worst thing that could probably happen in my life right now. (Rick, 32)*

Remote working	Statements in which the respondents describe their experiences with remote working	Pandemic-Related Upsurge	*Anyway, with this new job, I started to realize that that might not be a problem. Because I was already working remotely, that was working fine. And that's a permanent thing. Now. Our company actually downsized the office and everything, like they got rid of the old office. And there was like not, there was no obligation to like go to an office (Rick, 32)*
		Working from the Van	*I always work from the van. I think because I need my concentration. And I think if I'm somewhere else, I'm gonna be distracted by everything. (Tessa, 33)*
		Digital Nomadic Workplaces	*Mit coworking-spaces, die ja auch immer in der stadt sind, ist das ja super umständlich. Dann muss man ja das kind auch irgendwo unterbringen. Da ist es einfacher wenn man in der natur steht und man dann ganz gemütlich arbeiten kann. (Lea, 39)*
		Social Acceptance	*I think before the pandemic, what I do, which is working from home, like working online, was, like, people didn't understand it. They just, I think, assumed that I made like fake internet money. I've had that comment before, my friend was like, you make fake internet money? I'm like, Well, no, I spent it at the store. So it's real money. Or they would like, for example, I might be like, at a friend's house. And I'd have to work and like, they might not understand why. Like, I'm not visiting with them and like, why I'm like working. Whereas now, I don't have to explain it to anybody. It's just like, I'm like, Oh, I have to work. I work from home. And that's it. Like, it's really easy. Yeah. So that part is nice. Because I don't feel like I have to explain myself. quite so much. (Emma, 30)*
		Gig-Economy and Freelancing	*Also wir hatten diese freelancer plattformen, da hatten wir so ein bisschen unseren fokus drauf gelegt und uns drauf verlassen, weil auch viele andere vanlifer da mitmachen. Also wir machen web- und grafikdesign, und vor allem durch corona ist eine krasse konkurrenz auf dieser plattform entstanden. Weil auch viele studenten auf dieser plattform angefangen haben. Das hat gar nicht so funktioniert,*

			wie wir uns das vorgestellt hatten. (Sophia, 29)
		Digital Fatigue	*Und ich merk schon auch dass mir das teilweise schon fehlt. Also ich könnte jetzt nicth 24/7 im büro sitzen und die ganze zeit kontakt haben. Aber es macht schon auch spaß sich in person auszutauschen in meetings, als nur digital. Und das merke ich fehlt schon im digital nomadism. Man wird bildschirmmüde (Stefan, 21)*
Technology	Statements in which the respondents describe their relationship to (digital) technology	Reliability	*I've found that kind of technology as insanely reliable. And although there's certainly risks there and I'm sure not everyone has access to, to these things. I was quite surprised actually, how well everything was working. (Rick, 32)*
		Dependence on Technology	*If I don't have my laptop I can't work without it. So it's really important to me. (Tessa, 33)*
		Virtual Social Connection	*I've had more zoom calls with friends than I would have before the pandemic. (Emma, 30)*
			I mean, I remember thinking about zoom, and like zoom as a company must have been like, holy shit. Yeah. Suddenly everyone on the planet is using our platform. And, and I just found it fascinating that with like a flick of the switch, we could do that. And it worked. And there weren't any issues like it's like the world was ready for it. (Rick, 32)

Affidavit

I hereby declare that this Master's thesis has been written only by the undersigned and without any assistance from third parties. I confirm that no sources have been used in the preparation of this thesis other than those indicated in the thesis itself.

This Master's thesis has heretofore not been submitted or published elsewhere, neither in its present form, nor in a similar version.

Innsbruck, 31.05.2022

Place, Date *Signature*