

Connecting and Disconnecting: How Digital Nomads Manage Work in Absence of a Workplace

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Abstract

This paper examines how connectivity is accomplished in absence of a workplace. Connectivity is a theoretical framework to analyze how people connect and disconnect with each other through technologies. Digital nomads travel while they work, an example of workers who do not belong to a workplace or an organization. This absence of a workplace will affect how they connect and disconnect both within their work and outside work. An interview study with a grounded theory-based analysis found six themes that describe how the digital nomads interviewed connect and disconnect: first to and from a place, second to and from a place, and third two themes on how these patterns are reinforced. This is mobilized by a sociomaterial assemblage encompassed of more than just individuals communicating through technology. Previous research has focused on this, instead of focusing on the situatedness of connectivity. This contributes to research on connecting and disconnecting in connectivity and to research on digital nomads as part of a socio technical system.

Keywords: digital nomads, connectivity, sociomateriality, connecting and disconnecting

1. Introduction

The workplace has always provided several structures that we today take for granted: having a place to go, having hours that you work, having colleagues or a manager, and being able to stay and sustain that work over longer periods of time. Even if the rapid development of technical and digital infrastructure has made remote work possible in whole new ways, a shared place for digital and physical work has been a common denominator. Remote work and telecommuting were not unheard of before 2020 (Boell et al., 2016; Golden & Fromen, 2011; Halford, 2005), it was, however, less common. Studies done on people who worked remotely before the pandemic show that this lessened work-

related interruptions but that working from home still can be full of interruptions (Chen & Karahanna, 2018; Wajcman & Rose, 2011). Similarly, consultants who often work from so-called 'third spaces' (neither work nor home) had become skilled in adapting what they were doing to where they were (Halford, 2005). Technology is necessary to accomplish work in these places, as well as the possibility to connect to and through this technology, which is known as connectivity (Kolb, 2008).

Working remotely on a large scale was sped up during the pandemic (Buchanan et al., 2021; Dunatchick et al., 2021; Wrycza & Maślankowski, 2020), alerting companies and other organizations to the problems and barriers of working from other locations than the workplace for extended periods of time. Suddenly, calling into a meeting was no longer an anomaly, instead most or all meetings were held on zoom/Microsoft teams/bluejeans. Managerial oversight was conducted differently, and some learned just how much they can get done without having to commute. At the same time, many missed the social connections and community felt in a shared workplace.

However, even before that - what is commonly known as digital nomads (Cook, 2020; Orel, 2019; Reichenberger, 2018; Sutherland & Jarrahi, 2017) had been working from remote places for at least 10 years. Digital nomads are people who have a location-independent occupation and travel while they are performing that work (Cook, 2020; Prengler et al., 2021). This can take different forms, such as software engineers or programmers writing code for Western companies from south-east Asia, or a text editor writing articles, copy and blog posts while moving through South America (Chevtaeva & Denizci-Guillet, 2021; Prester & Schlagwein, 2019). What they have in common is the possibility to perform their work independent of where they are located and that they, therefore, choose to continuously change that location. Digital nomads hence do not have a workplace.

Most digital nomads also work independently. They run their own business, perform contract work, or freelance; it could be argued that digital nomads do not have an organization they belong to either. Even so, digital nomads are still parts of kinds of organizations or communities both online and in specific places.

Digital nomads rely on connectivity; here defined as "the mechanisms, processes, systems and relationships that link individuals and collectives (e.g. Groups, organizations, cultures, and societies) by facilitating material, information and/or social exchange" (Kolb, 2008, p. 128), to perform work and stay in touch with their communities. At the same time, what we know about connectivity is based in studies on people within and between organizations and workplaces (Kolb, 2008; Kolb et al., 2020).

In workplaces connectivity leads to interruptions (Wajcman & Rose, 2011), collaboration (Comeau-Vallée & Langley, 2020), and digital behaviors (Leonardi & Treem, 2020) among other things. Even if the workplace is not frequently visited, the space, as well as the organization providing it, lends a material aspect to forming certain social bonds and breaking others (Trefalt, 2013; Venkataramani et al., 2013). As work is currently in a major shift, where the future of work is commonly discussed (Blaising et al., 2019; Choudhury et al., 2021; Spreitzer et al., 2017), the gig economy gains more traction every year (Ashford et al., 2018; Petriglieri et al., 2019), and the pandemic has led to an overall unstable job market (i.e. the great resignation, inflation) it is becoming more apparent that connectivity will become more important, and that understanding how people connect without having a workplace is relevant. Therefore, *this paper seeks to examine how connectivity is accomplished in the absence of a workplace.*

The paper is structured as follows: first an overview of connectivity and the construct's sociomaterial foundation. After that, the gathering and analysis of interview material are discussed (methodology) and the resulting six themes are detailed. These describe how digital nomads connect to and disconnect from work as well as places central to the digital nomads and how connecting to and disconnecting from different aspects can enforce each other. This is discussed in relation to similar studies and what sociomaterial assemblages are mobilized. Last the limitations and possible future research in light of the limitations are mentioned.

2. Connectivity as a theoretical framework

Connectivity is a concept based in Science and Technology Studies (STS) (Orlikowski, 2010; Suchman, 2007; Wajcman, 2006). STS has grown since the mid 1990s as an interdisciplinary field that centers on the relationship between the technical and the social

by engaging with them as one and the same. This stands in contrast to studies of workplaces, which have centered on theories about the impact of technology on skill and managerial control (Suchman, 2007; Wajcman, 2006). By integrating an STS perspective into workplace studies, it could be possible to address the constitutive part technology has in social life.

Connectivity has been defined as "the mechanisms, processes, systems, and relationships that link individuals and collectives (e.g. groups, organizations, cultures, and societies) by facilitating material, information, and/or social exchange" (Kolb, 2008, p. 128). In his definition Kolb (2008) describes connectivity as a metaphor, which highlights certain aspects of people connecting (complexities, interconnectedness, synchronization). He also discusses connectivity as a duality, where complete states of connecting or disconnecting cannot exist, instead connecting and disconnecting are mutually constitutive activities.

2.1. A sociomaterial construct

Connectivity is a sociomaterial construct (Gherardi, 2010; Scott & Orlikowski, 2013; Symon & Pritchard, 2015; Wajcman & Rose, 2011), meaning that the connecting and disconnecting that make up the connectivity duality are performed by sociomaterial assemblages. These assemblages have according to Kolb (2008) throughout history included tall ships, trade barriers, and transaction costs. Today the assemblage that produces both connecting and disconnecting in workplaces consists of material objects such as office spaces and rooms as well as digital objects such as laptops, smartphones, and virtual workspaces.

Central to connectivity and how to understand its prevalence in work and organizational life is technology-mediated connecting and disconnecting (Kolb et al., 2012). This has so far put an emphasis on understanding the use of technology to facilitate different forms of communication, e.g. how global virtual teams keep in touch and create community (Comeau-Vallée & Langley, 2020) or how telenurses build connections with distant others (Hafermalz & Riemer, 2020).

Mazmanian et al. (2013) have discussed how mobile devices heighten connecting activities of employees by making them more available to connect with others and less able to choose how to connect and when. The changed materiality of a mobile phone compared to an office phone changes both the possibility to connect and disconnect as well as the performance of connecting and disconnecting activities.

As these examples show, the connecting and disconnecting happen through technology-mediated communication, but the assemblage that is mobilized is

more than just individuals communicating through technology. In the setting of work and organization, the workplace as well as other physical and digital spaces will play a part in connecting and disconnecting, as well as other material objects and humans.

2.2. Connectivity in daily work

Connectivity does permeate more or less all parts of social life (Kolb et al., 2020). This construct, focusing on technology-mediated communication, has been essential to describing and theorizing changes in daily work throughout the past 20 years.

In this paper, the connecting and disconnecting that makeup connectivity are in focus. Given that connectivity is a sociomaterial construct, connecting and disconnecting in daily work is mobilized in an assemblage that encompasses more than just the communicating individuals and the technology they use. For example: Hafermalz & Riemer (2020) recognize that specifically, interpersonal connectivity means building connections with others. The telenurses they studied are through their work connecting with the people they speak to but at the same time in need of disconnecting activities to not become too close, which was achieved through a ‘phone voice’.

Another example is both Mazmanian et al.’s (2013) and Wajcman & Rose’s (2011) studies of how mobile devices affect knowledge workers. In Mazmanian et al. (2013) cell phones lead to employees experiencing and engaging more in connecting activities; the participants make themselves available during more time of the day and also work during hours and in places where they did not before. In Wajcman & Rose (2011) the participants describe how having cell phones has led to a higher amount of interruptions. The authors also note that the cell phone has led to a shifting view of what an interruption means and that the participants express more control over when and how they engage with connecting. This means both more connecting and more disconnecting.

In a similar fashion Nurmi & Hinds (2020) discuss how company-wide demands for connectivity, here meaning more connecting with others, often distant, are enacted differently by individuals in the same company. They focus on three types of connectivity: frequent communication, after-hours work, and site visits. In this kind of study connecting and disconnecting is less focused on technology-mediated communication and more focused on how connecting is enacted in different situations.

In sum, the examples show that studying connectivity is a study of situated actions (Suchman, 2007). These actions are situated within an organization and a workplace (both physical and virtual). What is still lacking is a wider understanding of connectivity in daily

work. In this paper this understanding is approached by studying an unconventional case (Bamberger & Pratt, 2010): digital nomads that have no stable physical workspaces, and travel while they keep up their location-independent work.

3. Method

To understand how connectivity is accomplished in absence of a workplace it is relevant to inquire how people without workplaces think about this fact and how they accommodate this lack in their working life. Since the inquiry is of an exploratory and inductive kind (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009), I chose to perform a qualitative interview study (Bryman & Cassell, 2006) with self-identified digital nomads. During two weeks in October 2019, 14 respondents were recruited and interviewed. Details about the respondents are found in Table 1, where they are listed with their names anonymized. Slightly more women (8) participated compared to men (6) and there is an even distribution between the form of work: own company (5), projects (5), and employed (4). The respondents had also spent a varying amount of time as nomads: six (6) had just begun with less or little over two years of traveling, and seven (7) had spent at least three years. The longest was Evie, who had traveled for just over seven years. In addition, the respondents mainly come from European countries (11) and then one each from Southeast Asia, southern Africa, and northern America. To keep the respondents anonymous this has not been indicated in the table.

Table 1. Overview of respondents

| Who | What do you do? | Form of work | Years nomad |
|----------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------|
| Albert | E-commerce | Own company | <2 years |
| Bee | Course designer | Project | <1 year |
| Cedric | Web/graphics designer | Own company | 5+ years |
| David | Business control manager | Employed | <1 year |
| Evie | Online marketing manager | Project | 7+ years |
| Frida | Software support | Employed | 1+ year |
| Gisela | Graphic designer | Own company | 4+ years |
| Herman | Financial analyst | Own company | 1,5 years |
| Ian | programmer | Employed | <1 year |
| Janine | Marketing agency | Own company | 5+ years |
| Kathleen | Mobile development | Project | 2+ years |
| Lana | Content writer | Project | 5+ years |
| Manuel | marketing | Project | 3+ years |
| Nathalie | Affiliate marketing | Employed (limited)/ project | 3+ years |

Respondents were recruited in two ways: nomads using a co-working space were asked to partake in the study (11) and nomads using a Facebook group for digital nomads based in Canggu were asked through a post in the group (3). The sample was small, however in situ comparisons between respondents showed strong overlap in patterns and categories of what respondents said, indicating saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The interviews were semi-structured and followed a protocol consisting of five major areas; general information about the respondent, organization of workdays, work history and reasons to choose digital nomadism, the technology necessary for accomplishing work, and good and bad experiences with being a digital nomad. Given the semi-structured approach to interviewing, the respondents were prompted to describe for example their workday, and then encouraging follow-up questions were asked (“tell me more”, “can you describe further”, “can you give an example”, “how did that work”, “how did this feel”). The interviews were between 30 and 75 minutes, with a mean of about 45 min.

All interviews were transcribed and subsequently analyzed according to a grounded theory-based method of coding, aimed at qualitative analysis (Williams & Moser, 2019). This allows for a flexible and pluralist coding method; while still providing structure for how codes are developed and categorized. All analysis was done by a single, human coder.

The transcripts were read by the author and categorized in open codes where answers were summarized and gathered based on shared topics between the respondents. Some codes were: “enjoys work”, “enjoys flexibility”, “balance me/people time”, “keeping connected over social media” “separating”, “idea of home”, and “clients”. These codes were summaries of answers or narratives told by the respondents. There was no effort to generate a certain number of open codes, they kept as close to the text excerpts as possible. In total over 30 open codes were generated during this coding phase. These open codes were then transferred onto post-it notes.

Once the open coding was finished these codes, together with the excerpts that generated them were compared and gathered in larger concepts, the axial codes. This was done in two steps: first, the post-its were clustered based on their contents and second these clusters were given names; the axial codes. This aligns with the constant comparison method (Williams & Moser, 2019). For example, the open codes “being with other humans”, “country/city”, “why co-working space”, and “surrounding or being with people” were clustered and given the code “being somewhere”. In total 13 axial codes were generated, as seen in Figure 1.

Last, the axial codes were examined for their relation to each other and to the theoretical understanding of connectivity, resulting in six selective codes as seen in Figure 1. This phase of coding is reflected in the Findings. As creating selective codes is part of creating meaning in the data and the theoretical constructs (Williams & Moser, 2019) the presentation of findings examines how the axial codes build each selective and then how these fit together.

The limitations of the study are discussed later, methodological included. Transparency of the work leading up to this paper, i.e., a thorough methods descriptions ensure trustworthiness (validity), and the soundness of explaining the conclusions using presented findings ensures that the work is reliable. The author has aimed to explain the process of gathering and analyzing material in a transparent and detailed way and aims to explain how they reached their conclusion in the same manner.

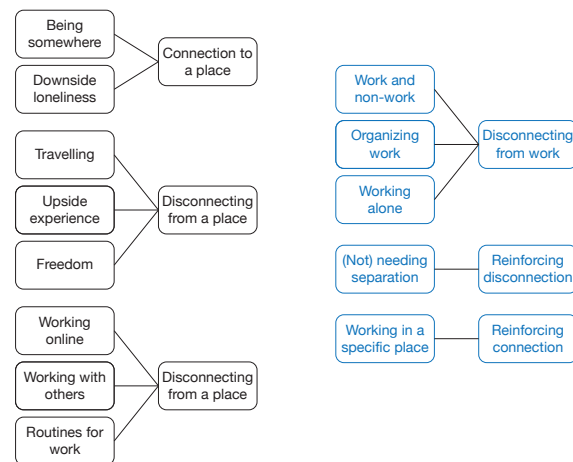


Figure 1. Axial codes to selective codes

4. Findings

The analysis of the interviews has resulted in six distinct patterns describing work-life connectivity in absence of a workplace, which will be detailed as separate themes. However, the activities described are often overlapping and practiced simultaneously.

4.1. Connecting to a place

The first theme described here is connecting to a place. The respondents all discussed the importance of “being somewhere” where being in a place meant not just visiting or traveling through but making connections with people in that same place. Connecting to others in a place was also important to combat loneliness for the respondents.

Connecting to a place would begin before coming to a new place. This would entail researching a place to go and traveling there. All the respondents had chosen to come to Bali because of this prior research; they had looked up information online, asked around in forums such as Facebook, and lastly, a few had spoken to friends who had been to Bali before.

Manuel describes being and connecting with others as the difference between feeling like a tourist and like you belong. When he traveled through parts of Russia, he was not able to connect with people; partly because of the language barrier and partly because he did not feel he could have a place to go for work. He traveled through cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg without these connections.

Cedric explained that this was the fourth European winter he came to Bali since 2017. He explains why he has been coming back:

“The food is awesome, and the people are nice, it's everything here. If you come from Europe, you know, okay it's very structured in most of the countries, and here if you go out of the streets it's chaos.”

This was common among the respondents, they all explained that they had come to Bali because of the existing digital nomad community and the reliable infrastructure; internet connections, co-working spaces, cafés, and places to live, but also because they connected with the place, through the people they found there.

All but two of the respondents used a co-working space to be able to connect with others and to connect with the place they were in. The two that did not use the co-working space chose not to because they found it too expensive.

The co-working space was somewhere for the respondents to meet like-minded people and to have a place to go for work. A few of them: Herman, Lana, and David, mentioned that they had chosen the co-working space specifically to connect with other digital nomads. Both Herman and Lana expressed that they wanted to “meet others like me”.

Nathalie came to Bali and used a co-working space to meet people and find people to hang out with, she said *“it's nice if someone notices if you're missing one morning”*. She and the friends she had made here would sit together and work, they would check up on each other, have meals together, and go on excursions.

The process of connecting to a place can be longer; when asked if Kathleen liked Bali she said:

“Yes, I do like it. First time I didn't like, then I came back just because I needed a place to concentrate and know the touristic stuff and I can just go to co-working work and go to sleep. Second time I loved it, third time is just to check out if I was right or wrong.”

The respondents connected to this place by connecting to people. Connecting to a place is here

illustrated as activities to combat loneliness, as Manuel exemplified by feeling like you belonged – he felt like a tourist when he was not able to talk to people. Connecting to a place is here also illustrated by the respondents wanting a feeling of “being somewhere”. This could mean connecting with other like-minded people in a co-working space, as well as staying in Bali long enough to be recognized and make connections with others, thereby not going unnoticed. Connecting to a place is here a process that is ongoing over time, not an instantaneous event.

4.2. Disconnecting from a place

The second theme is disconnecting from a place. Disconnecting activities in this case were those that distanced the digital nomads from the place they were in, either through physical travel or by them being constantly on the move. The respondents have described this through the topics of travel, that they had chosen to become nomads for the freedom and to gain new experiences. All these topics meant moving on from one place to another, thereby disconnecting from the place they were leaving.

All the digital nomads interviewed in this study brought up their freedom as one of the best aspects of their life and as a prerequisite for choosing some of the instability constant travel meant. For example, Ian wanted to experience what it was like to not have the same routines he was used to. To change this, he made a deal with his employer to work remotely and then sold his belongings. This story was retold in some version by all respondents; they wanted a change or did not feel comfortable in their life, therefore they had arranged to leave their homes and begin moving around.

Evie, who described herself as a “slow nomad” had had this experience more than once. The first stop on her nomad journey had been Barcelona, where she had stayed for over one year. She described that she wanted to move on after this longer period because she again felt stuck in her routines, doing the same thing over and over again.

Lana, who had started as a freelancer in her hometown, had begun to travel to see new and beautiful places. She continues to describe how she and her boyfriend began traveling:

“So, we thought, okay, we have time, I can work from wherever, let's just try it out and in the beginning, we traveled all over Southeast Asia, just to see where we like it the most and also, where we can work from best.”

To Lana, this freedom to choose a country, city, and even if to sit in her hotel or at a co-working space meant the freedom to experience new places and new things. This was re-iterated by all the respondents, that living as a digital nomad provided them the freedom to have new experiences and learn new things outside of work.

Feeling that you were disconnected from a place could also be about not being able to arrange a suitable working situation. Janina describes an experience she had in Hong Kong:

“When I was in Hong Kong, there were no cafés, then you go to Starbucks and there is only thirty minutes, and the hotel rooms are like so tiny that you feel claustrophobic. So, of course, I didn’t enjoy working from there, no, or from a hotel room. Even in a hostel, I mean sometimes they are alright, but it is not the right place to work, here there is more like this atmosphere.”

Disconnecting from a place meant moving on for the nomads. They would begin to reject the routine and repetition they experienced and they associated this with the place they were in. The respondents did not discuss disconnecting as in breaking off relationships or taking farewell. Instead, they would talk about their need to travel and experience new things, which would mean moving on and not staying connected to one place. Disconnecting from a place thereby meant mobilizing a different set of practices, the ones for leaving one place and connecting to a new one.

4.3. Disconnecting from work

The third theme described here is disconnecting from work. Disconnecting activities have here been viewed as those where the respondents talked about taking control of their work or taking charge of their autonomy. The respondents discussed the relationship between work and non-work. They described how they would manage or not manage that boundary. The respondents also discussed how they managed their workload and organized their days to not let work become overbearing. The respondents also talked about working alone.

Most of the respondents managed their workload by not taking on too many projects or assignments at the same time. Those that could not manage their workload in this way were the employed respondents. They instead managed their workload by monitoring how many hours they worked. What was interesting was that none of the respondents experienced their workload as a problem, and therefore they did not need to set firm boundaries between work and non-work. Albert described this relationship as a game of chess:

“I work a lot [but] it doesn’t feel like work. [...] I’m generally interested in what I’m doing, what I’m doing feels like playing chess or some strategy game, I like it a lot. Of course, sometimes it feels like work, but no, I’m working more than I did as an employee, but it feels like I’m working less.”

None of the respondents expressed that they were completely satisfied with how much they worked, but as Albert, they would frame this as them wanting to work because they liked what they were doing.

Instead of managing workload, the respondents all spoke in different ways about prioritizing non-work. Janine told a story about how she went to Ubud, a different town in Bali, for three days to practice yoga and spend time with a few newfound friends, instead of working more. In a similar fashion, Kathleen describes her work weeks like this:

“I don’t like label the days, weekend, or Monday. I have to work on Sunday, and if it’s a day that I’m here [in the co-working space], if I want to work I work. If there is something better to do, [like] go to the meet ups, I’ll go the meetups. A lot of the deadlines they are really flexible. I know I can tackle down two- or three days worth of work with one focused day. Sometimes I am not inspired and if I’m running in circles, I’ll just have the day off.”

The possibility to prioritize non-work was important for all the respondents. As the quote from Kathleen shows, this meant that each individual could choose when and how to work to a greater extent than they could before. Choosing when and how to work was exacerbated the more alone the respondents worked, which some of them viewed as positive and others as negative. None of the respondents worked completely alone or only with others, they described it as changing. Lana, who worked mainly alone, reflected on the following:

“I’m working creatively so it would be cool to just exchange ideas and everything with some other people just to brainstorm, to just go to the pool and have a brainstorming session or something like that.”

She continues to say that a team can provide accountability and ensure that you make something of every day, at the same time a team would mean less flexibility. Albert was also working mostly alone at that time but found it mainly positive, he could *“do what needed to be done when it was needed”*.

Disconnecting from work meant that the digital nomads practiced restraint with regard to work. Since there was no structure in place to facilitate disconnecting; like an office or constant working hours, the nomads had to practice disconnecting in other ways. This meant that the respondents disconnected from work by prioritizing time to do other things or non-work. This could be going on trips or work focused for a few hours to have to time off in the evening. Working alone could lead to the respondents being disconnected from work because they had no external pressure to complete tasks, therefore they would be more available to non-work or certain kinds of work would be more difficult.

4.4. Connecting to work

The fourth theme described here is connecting to work. Connecting activities are in this case those

activities that would connect the digital nomads to distant others for work, as well as the material objects and routines needed for this connecting to happen. The respondents have talked about what it is like to work online and digitally, how they collaborate with others, and how they feel about it, as well as portrayed their working routines.

All respondents spoke about what they needed in form of material objects and infrastructure to be able to work, with the most important aspect being a reliable internet connection. When this part failed, they were unable to work or connect with others about work. It was the most common story told by the respondents about problems they had encountered as nomads. For the respondents that used a co-working space, securing a stable and reliable internet connection was the main reason to do so.

The respondents used their ability to work online to communicate with collaborators, colleagues, and clients. All respondents mentioned keeping in touch with distant others for work through email, chats, phone, and video calls. The chat apps were the most ones within the respondent group. Herman, who runs his own business describes it like this:

"[...] everything is online and all the people who work for me are remote workers in the US, so I need tools like Skype and some time management programs online where I can do their schedule, add to their task lists. They have, like, a digital version of my group, which I have for myself, whenever I have idea of things for them, I just add it, and they start working on it."

Connecting with others for work was, as Herman describes, central to being able to perform work. Several of the respondents mentioned Slack or WhatsApp specifically as ways to keep in touch with people they worked with or for.

The last way respondents would connect to their work was with the help of routines. All respondents planned their days in some way and upheld routines for their working days. This could mean keeping a list of tasks or keeping to certain hours of work. Albert described his routines in the following way:

"I set up like, the few tasks to do for the next day. When I start around 7am or 8 am I try to organize the tasks as the most important, not urgent, the most important, first. And most urgent in the middle of the day. Especially I try to do customer service as the first task as the client when you respond quite quickly to their request."

By having a routine, the respondents could get into work at the beginning of the day. Through this, they could connect with distant others online or connect with the material aspects of their work.

In sum, connecting with work needed certain infrastructure. Connecting was then practiced for example as a routine or as communicating with distant

others involved in work. Connecting with the abstract idea of work therefore not only meant turning on the computer but also placing oneself in a mindset of working and in contact with others who were engaged with the same work.

4.5. Reinforcing connecting

A fifth theme that emerged was that the respondents talked about specific places being important for work. As has been seen in both the theme 4.1 "connecting to a place" and 4.4 "connecting to work", communicating is central to connecting, and that specific places were better or worse for this. All the respondents would reflect on how coming to Bali specifically was important for them and their work. A few of them (5) mentioned that the specific co-working space was central to their work.

The reason for coming to Bali, as well as the co-working space, was that there were other digital nomads present. It was a place where they could find both mental and physical space to work and share their experience with others who knew what it was like. Manuel reflects like this:

"I love meeting people, of course, but having over and over the same conversations when you are meeting someone, it's nice to know what they do because here, there are many interesting people doing things different. But last week for instance, and today, I was playing football, I was very happy that I was playing football, sometimes you miss the simple things, talking about football, you know, you don't have to have the same conversation."

This quote is one example of how the respondents depicted specific places as important for them to connect with others that could relate to them and their experiences. Manuel found it soothing to meet people he did not have to introduce himself or explain his work and life choices. Instead, they just chatted about football and played a game together.

This indicates that connecting to a place and connecting to work are reinforcing themes. By connecting to a place, it is easier to connect to work and vice versa.

4.6. Reinforcing disconnecting

The sixth theme that emerged during coding was that all respondents expressed they did not need to separate work from non-work. As was discussed in 4.3 "disconnecting from work" the respondents several respondents explained that they did not need to separate out work because they were passionate about what they did.

At the same time, the respondents spoke about their moves and travels as grounded in searching for good places to work. They would disconnect from a place because it did not suit their work needs i.e., how they connected to work. This meant that if the respondent disconnected from a place, they would also disconnect from work. For example, Nathalie reflects on how she decided to move on from a longer stay in Barcelona:

“In Barcelona I do feel sometimes like, I mean lonely is maybe the wrong word, it’s more like work lonely because I do have friends there but they’re all working their office jobs so sometimes you’re just like alone at home thinking “oh, I wish I had a team now”

Similarly, the respondents described disconnecting from work by choosing to do other things, or by adhering to a list or planner. This is because the structure otherwise provided by a workplace was absent and needed to be taken over by the nomads themselves. In line with this, it could be argued that disconnecting from a place also helps in disconnecting from work. In disconnecting from a place, the digital nomads would want new experiences and seek a feeling of freedom, which aligns with prioritizing non-work over work and managing workload to be able to travel and have these experiences.

This indicates that disconnecting from work and disconnecting from a place are reinforcing themes. By disconnecting from a place, they could easier disconnect from work and vice versa.

5. Discussion

This paper seeks to examine how connectivity is accomplished in the absence of a workplace. When studying connectivity in workplaces it implies a situated context where an assemblage of individuals, organizations, workplaces and material objects partake in connecting and disconnecting. As work becomes more remote and distant, there is a need to better understand how connectivity in work is accomplished when this assemblage is composed differently.

Digital nomads who are indefinite without a stable workplace, are an extreme example of this changed assemblage. For this paper, an interview study with 14 digital nomads was conducted and analyzed using a grounded theory-based method of coding in three steps. This has yielded six themes of interest, two themes for how digital nomads connect and disconnect from a place, two themes for how the digital nomads connect to and disconnect from work, and two themes for how the connecting and disconnecting activities are reinforcing each other.

A common and important point brought up during the interviews for this paper was that the respondents value freedom and flexibility. This has been established as a central driver for digital nomads (Chevtaeva &

Denizci-Guillet, 2021; Cook, 2020). But as realized by e.g. Prengler et al. (2021) searching for freedom and flexibility is not a one-way journey. They discuss how digital nomads first seek autonomy, and then find themselves needing to restrict that autonomy. This oscillating process lands them in an equilibrium where the digital nomads have restricted themselves to not having complete freedom. Woldoff and Litchfield (2021) have made similar observations in their detailing of being digital nomads, going through a process of freeing and then restricting. These practices can be compared to the connecting to and disconnecting from shown in this paper. The respondents recount how they connect and disconnect over time, at times seeking space to focus by connecting to their work and the place and at times needing more interaction and distraction, disconnecting from work, and moving to new places.

The freedoms discussed by both Prengler et al. (2021) and by Woldoff and Litchfield (2021) are directly part of disconnecting from a place in this paper. The respondents discussed wanting freedom to choose and to travel. This drive was part of them becoming digital nomads, which aligns with Prengler et al. (2021) and Woldoff and Litchfield (2021). However, after becoming established nomads the stories diverge. The respondents here still speak highly of their freedom and instead of restricting it, the drive for freedom works to propel the nomads to move on, thereby disconnecting from a place and keeping the loops going.

As described connecting to and disconnecting from both places and work are socialmaterial practices (Gherardi, 2008; Mazmanian et al., 2013; Orlikowski, 2010). This means that connectivity is here practiced by an assemblage involving both humans and material objects. Wajcman and Rose (2011) contextualized their study on interruptions at work as the material of today’s tech-rich world entangles with the social, and work itself is transformed. In this case, the transformation of work does not involve the work itself, all respondents had the same work or profession as they did before they started as digital nomads. Instead, the transformation indicated in the interviews is that the nomads use their possibility to travel to make the workplace a transient place. The social relationships of work seemed to be stable; the nomads who worked together with others would maintain these while moving places. Instead, many of the material aspects of work were transient, as the nomads worked from co-working spaces, cafés, or hotel rooms in everchanging cities.

6. Conclusion

As shown in this study connectivity can encompass more than just technology-mediated communication between individuals. Because connectivity is viewed both as a metaphor similar to organizational culture

(Kolb, 2008) and as a sociomaterial construct mobilized by an assemblage (Kolb et al., 2012), connecting and disconnecting happens within a context. In this study, the focus has been on digital nomads where the assemblage that mobilizes connectivity is inherently different because of the combination of their travels and online work.

This study has indicated that connecting and disconnecting are, as described in Kolb (2008), part of a duality, where they are mutually constitutive. The freedom or autonomy that the digital nomads seek has to be restricted as Prenalder et al (2021) note. In this study, the nomads both connect and disconnect, where both are needed.

In comparison to studies of connectivity in the workplace such as Hafermalz and Riemer (2020), Mazmanian et al. (2013), and Wajcman and Rose (2011), this study put effort into understanding how disconnecting is accomplished, instead of a focus on connections and increased connecting. In this study disconnecting has been realized as a different set of practices compared to connecting, both when it comes to disconnecting from a place and from work.

6.1. Limitations & future research

As digital nomads are still a nascent phenomenon there are also several possible avenues for future research, which also address the main limitations of this study. As a small, exploratory study based on interviews, this study holds a few notable limitations. More interviews are needed to clarify and detail the themes found here, and these should be made in other locations. The respondents in this study have all come to a specific place, Bali. Further, it would be advisable to verify themes and patterns through a questionnaire to get more responses and to further the interviews to talk to other connected groups; managers of co-working spaces, those who are considering becoming digital nomads, and those who have stopped are a few examples.

A second avenue for future research is to continue to study connectivity in settings where digital technology is a prerequisite for the given context, but where connecting and disconnecting is not only performed through a technological medium. Studies like Hafermalz and Riemer (2020) as well as this one, indicate that connectivity does not only have to focus on human/machine interaction and how people connect through a technological medium.

A third avenue of future research is to continue to study digital nomads as part of a sociotechnical system to better understand both the social and the material aspects needed for digital nomads to be able to do their work and thrive while doing it.

7. References

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