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Digital nomadism in the post-pandemic world

The rise of digital nomad visas and Estonia as a pioneer

Master's Thesis
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Abstract of master's thesis

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Abstract

As a result of the ongoing blurring between work and leisure, and the catalyzing role of the COVID-19 pandemic for remote work, the world has seen the rise of a new type of remote worker, the digital nomad. Digital nomads are location-independent professionals who leverage the help of mobile devices and the Internet in their knowledge work. The size of the group grew by more than three times over the pandemic, to reach 35 million, globally, by the end of 2022. Digital nomads are beginning to transform the cultures and infrastructures around them, and legislations and policies are starting to follow along. During the pandemic, specific digital nomad visas emerged as a way to facilitate the nomads' work and life in their destinations. Consequently, these transformations are happening perhaps faster than understood. A level of coherency is yet to be found, as countries are only starting to experiment – the larger-scale implications of digital nomad visas are yet to be seen and studied.

In this thesis, I outline the post-pandemic state of digital nomadism. I study the recent demand to answer the digital nomad phenomenon in a legislative sense, connected with the emergence of digital nomad visas. Moreover, I study Estonia's role for digital nomadism. The country appears to be spearheading the development and to have established unique, promising circumstances for practicing digital nomadism. The research process of this thesis entails reviewing the existing literature and conducting an interview study with five experts on digital nomadism and Estonian digitality. The interviews are processed in a thematic analysis, from which several findings emerge.

First, my study concludes that the digital nomad phenomenon has gained a wider grasp in the recent years and can be expected to continue to grow – having diversified noticeably compared to its pre-pandemic state, with regards to types of people and work. The phenomenon seems to be even larger than suggested by the current literature. Secondly, as the number of digital nomads keeps increasing, my study uncovers a heightened need for better schemes and options for living as a digital nomad, and for countries to better facilitate the residence of digital nomads. If carried out appropriately, digital nomad visas could offer economic benefits for the issuing countries as well, meaning that the visas could serve both sides. In their current state, however, the visas need more recognition and exploration, in order to serve the nomads' needs better.

Finally, my research shows that Estonia is currently one of the countries leading the way and making the most progress in remote work and digital nomad developments. It acts as the example for other countries to follow. Digital nomad visas turn out to be part of a larger, all-encompassing structure of digitality in Estonia, with deep-rooted foundations in the country's essence. Ultimately, Estonia demonstrates that other countries, too, should see digital nomad visas as part of a larger offering of ways to facilitate digital work.

Keywords digital nomads, digital nomad visas, remote work, e-Residency

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Työn ja vapaa-ajan välisen eron hämärryttyä jo vuosien ajan koronaviruspandemia toimi katalyyttinä uudenlaisen etätyötekijän, diginomadin ilmaantumiselle. Diginomadit ovat fyysisestä olinpaikasta riippumattomia tietotyöntekijöitä, joiden työ rakentuu mobiililaitteiden ja Internetin varaan. Ryhmän koko kasvoi yli kolminkertaisesti pandemian aikana – vuoden 2022 lopussa diginomadeja oli maailmanlaajuisesti jo 35 miljoonaa. Nyt diginomadit muovaavat kulttuureja ja infrastruktuureja ympärillään, ja maiden lainsäädännöt alkavat hiljalleen seurata perässä. Pandemian aikana erilliset diginomadi-viisumit nousivat esiin tapana helpottaa nomadien elämää ja työntekoa heidän matkustuskohteissaan. Tästä seuraavat muutokset etenevät nyt kenties nopeammin kuin ymmärrämmekään. Eri maiden varhaisista viisumikokeiluista puuttuu yhtenäisyyttä ja johdonmukaisuutta – ylätason seuraukset ovat vielä näkemättä ja tutkimatta.

Tässä tutkielmassa esittelen diginomadismin tilan pandemian jälkeen. Perehdyn tuoreeltaan nousseeseen tarpeeseen vastata ilmiöön lainsäädännöllisin tavoin. Tämä kytkeytyy diginomadi-viisumien ilmaantumiseen. Tutkin lisäksi Viron roolia ilmiölle – maa vaikuttaa olevan digitaalisen kehityksen kärjessä tarjoten uniikkeja, lupaavia mahdollisuuksia diginomadismin harjoittamiselle. Työni tutkimusprosessi koostuu olemassa olevan kirjallisuuden tarkastelusta sekä haastattelututkimuksen suorittamisesta. Haastateltavina on viisi diginomadismin ja virolaisen digitaalisuuden asiantuntijaa. Analysoin haastattelut temaattisesti, minkä seurauksena tutkimuksesta nousee esille useita löytöjä.

Ensiksi tutkimukseni osoittaa, että diginomadismi on laajentunut ilmiönä mittavasti viime vuosien aikana ja sopii odottaa, että se jatkaa kasvuaan. Pandemiaa edeltävään tilaan verrattuna ilmiö on monimuotoistunut huomattavasti ihmis- ja työtyyppien osalta. Ilmiö vaikuttaa olevan kattavampi, kuin saatavilla oleva kirjallisuus antaa ymmärtää. Toiseksi, koska diginomadien määrä jatkaa kasvamistaan, tutkimukseni alleviivaa korostunutta tarvetta paremmille järjestelmille ja puitteille digonomadina elämiseen – myös valtiotasolla. Mikäli diginomadi-viisumit toteutetaan oikealla tavalla, ne voivat tarjota taloudellisia etuja myös viisumeja myöntäville maille, jolloin viisumit hyödyttävät kumpaakin osapuolta. Nykyisessä tilassaan viisumit tarvitsevat kuitenkin lisää tutkimus- ja kehitystyötä voidakseen vastata diginomadien tarpeisiin paremmin.

Viimeisenä osa-alueena tutkimukseni osoittaa, että Viro on tällä hetkellä yksi maista, jotka merkittävimmin edistävät etätyön ja diginomadismin kehitystä. Viro toimii esimerkkinä, jota muut maat voivat seurata omissa kehityksissään. Diginomadi-viisumit osoittautuvat osaksi laajempaa digitaalisuuden kokonaisuutta Virossa, sillä sen juuret ulottuvat pitkälle maan syvimpään olemukseen. Viime kädessä Viro todistaa, että muutkin maat voisivat lähestyä diginomadi-viisumeita osana suurempaa tarjontaa digitaalisen työn edistämiseksi.

Avainsanat diginomadit, diginomadi-viisumit, etätyö, e-asukkuus

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1. INTRODUCTION

This introductory section starts by outlining the background to the study and the emerging research gap, narrowing down the research problem and the current understanding of my research topic. I establish three research questions tackling the state of digital nomadism, digital nomad visas and the role of Estonia in the remote work field, to serve as the foundation for the study. This chapter ends by depicting the research design – the steps taken in order to answer the research questions – and the structure of the thesis.

1.1 Background to the study

The distinctions between work and place as well as free time and work have become more blurred for years, and balancing between one's professional and leisure time is a more ambiguous process than ever (Reichenberger 2018; Bowers 2011). There is a new pursuit of finding freedom and invigorating the work-life balance among professionals. A certain group of people, the *digital nomads*, call for "alienation through a life-style that makes travel not an occasional and temporally restricted leisure activity but a prominent, if not constant, part of life" (Reichenberger 2018, p. 367).

Digital nomads are location-independent professionals, who leverage the help of mobile devices and the Internet in their knowledge work (Kong, Schlagwein & Cecez-Kecmanovic 2019). The term itself was first introduced in a 1997 publication by Makimoto and Manners, who used it to describe a result of the progress of technology among humans (Hannonen 2020). The digital nomad can be seen to embody a new wave of employees. Utilizing resources around information and technology, the phenomenon becomes the window for observing how digital practices change the dynamics of modern work (Nash, Jarrahi, Sutherland & Philips 2018).

Most of the existing, related academic research on international worker mobility concentrates on migrants and expatriates that, while related, still differ notably from digital nomads. In the context of employment, migrants enter a country specifically to seek for a job, while nomads, in principle, retain their existing work while pursuing other aspects of living, such as cheaper prices, more pleasant climate and new cultural experiences. (Hannonen 2020; Schlagwein 2018; Andersen, Bergdolt, Margenfeld & Dickmann 2014.) Even more often, the research follows expatriates who, by definition, enter a foreign *subsidiary* in the country that they move to – following an initiative made by either themselves (Self-Initiated Expatriates) or their managers (Assigned Expatriates) (Andersen et al. 2014). Rather, while being employed, the novel country might not be related to the employer or the business of the digital nomad in any way.

Statistics demonstrate the significant, rapid popularization of digital nomadism in recent years. As illustrated by Think Remote (2023) "in 2020, 10.9 million people described themselves as digital nomads, but this number grew to 35 million by the end of 2022" – an increase of more than 320 percent. Nearly half, 48 percent, of these nomads are from the United States, where there was a 131 percent increase on people calling themselves digital nomads between 2019 and 2022 (Think Remote 2023; MBO Partners 2023). The same statistics also demonstrate the high income levels of digital nomads, estimated at an average of $117,959 in the US, where the average annual salary is around $53,000 (Think Remote 2023).

As digital nomadism continues to become a more notable part of work and lifestyle arrangements, new factors emerge for consideration (Stumpf, Califf & Lancaster 2022). Digital nomads shape their surroundings, having an influence on the cultures they visit and the infrastructures they use (Cook 2020; Sánchez-Vergara, Ignacio, Orel & Capdevila 2023). Legislations are also beginning to change alongside the phenomenon – most prominently with the arrival of specific *digital nomad visas* (Edwards 2020; Krakat 2021). Additionally, as a result of the different ways to respond to these changes, some countries are embracing digital nomadism more eagerly than others, meaning that some have already implemented tangible developments while others are still learning about the phenomenon (Sánchez-Vergara et al. 2023; Hindriks 2020).

1.2 Research gap

When it comes to the emerging considerations within digital nomadism, its state is now developing faster than perhaps understood. Currently, as the phenomenon exhibits strong momentum, it might be difficult to differentiate between outcomes related to following what is in fashion, and genuine, more fundamental change. Notably, as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the whole world has experienced a grand shift in remote work forms, and rapid transformations have ensued for all related parties: workers, employees, and governments and government officials. (Wang, Schlagwein, Cecez-Kecmanovic & Cahalane 2020; Shadel 2021; Stumpf et al. 2022.) The pandemic's effects are only starting to be discussed in academic literature.

This demands attention, because remote work has become ubiquitous and inevitable in professional lives throughout the world, and with new schemes and systems being adopted, various opportunities emerge that are not yet explored thoroughly (Stumpf et al. 2022). For professionals, companies and even countries to embrace these changes and transform alongside them, it is necessary to start building the foundations for encountering new, resulting forms of work. Simultaneously, it seems that there is lack of understanding in the face of newly arising challenges, too. Tackling them can be expected as a starting point for managing future challenges and opportunities, with regards to remote work and digital nomadism.

While digital nomadism has seemed to be difficult to grasp over its existence so far, it feels that the pandemic has made the situation even more complicated and the awareness more scattered (Stumpf et al. 2022). There are more factors than ever to consider with regards to remote work – having arisen in a very short time – some of which are related to digital nomadism while some not. Previous research has not had the time to cover them comprehensively. Simultaneously, the themes around digital nomadism have diversified, which means that there is more to understand on this field, too. The factors, consisting of new systems, infrastructures and work arrangements, for example, are still settling and taking their shape. Based on my initial research, I observe growing initial discussion but not a lot of academic coverage, yet. Notably, there is limited examination on who the drivers of this change are. While the digital nomad phenomenon, in practice, is in the hands of the nomads themselves, it is becoming apparent that even entire nations have their roles to play (Sánchez-Vergara et al. 2023).

The importance of this thesis ties in with the sensation that the future of digital and remote work is currently taking its foundational form. The thesis aims to establish grounds for recognizing the prevalent challenges and opportunities as well as other relevant elements regarding digital nomadism. I also cover digital nomad themes with more managerial implications that, in a similar way, have only recently begun to be explored in the academic field. Finally, the thesis focuses on Estonia, more specifically, as one of the countries quickly becoming notably important in the remote work field.

1.3 Research objectives and questions

This thesis has three objectives. First, I aim to outline the current state of the digital nomad phenomenon. With changes happening quickly, I will study whether new considerations have emerged. As a pre-assumption of my study, I expect that that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a transformative effect on the phenomenon but that its large-scale effects are only beginning to be seen. This will act as a foundation for the rest of the study and for examining the challenges and opportunities related to digital nomadism.

Secondly, I aim to summarize the available data on digital nomad visas, bringing to light their role in the digital work field, and assessing their significance in context. This seems important, because the emerge of digital nomad visas connects with the recent demand to start answering the phenomenon in a legislative sense (Sánchez-Vergara et al. 2023). Based on web articles and blogs, the initial sentiment is that the area has quickly gained a lot of attention, but a certain level of coherency is yet to be found.

Thirdly, this thesis aims to build an understanding on the role that Estonia plays for remote work and digital nomads. Based on primary indications, Estonia seems to be one of the key drivers of digital nomad development. Post-pandemic discussion on digital nomadism noticeably alludes to Estonia, seeming to have established unique, promising circumstances for practicing digital nomadism. This is particularly interesting from my personal, Finnish perspective, because, as neighboring countries, there are substantial similarities between Finland and Estonia, but Finland has not expressed noticeable interest towards digital nomadism yet. Moreover, from a cultural and geographical point of view, neither Finland or Estonia can be considered a very typical destination for the common digital nomad, making the comparison to other countries intriguing.

Three separate *research questions* arise from the aforementioned objectives:

1. *What is the state of digital nomadism following the pandemic?*
2. *Why are digital nomad visas needed?*
3. *What is the role of Estonia in the remote work field?*

The expectation is that while the explored themes are ambiguous to an extent, tangible implications are, nevertheless, reached. Especially with regards to the role of digital nomad visas, a clear-cut answer is anticipated, even if consisting of multiple factors. Additionally, more questions and areas for future research are expected to arise.

1.4 Research design and structure of the thesis

The aim of this research is to answer the research gap through a broad study of relevant articles and literary sources as well as qualitative data from experts. In order to execute this, the research process entails reviewing the existing literature and conducting an interview study. After processing the interviews, the data is analyzed thematically, the results of which I ultimately compare with the literature and discuss more comprehensively.

Structurally, following the Introduction, the Literature review section examines the preexisting, written sources that are seen as relevant for this study. To begin the thesis and set the foundation, I aim to explore where digital nomadism arises from and what characteristics should be considered within the phenomenon. The perspective of the chapter eventually advances from the level of individual nomads to policy-makers and countries. With this, the aim is to broaden the conversation on the more thoroughly researched individual level to larger implications.

Next, the Methodology chapter outlines the strategies used for data collection and analysis, while discussing the philosophical foundations of the study. In the chapter, I establish the qualitative, interpretative basis of the thesis. The chapter explains the process of using interviews to gather qualitative data and how they evolved from semi-structured to a more unstructured form. I also present the interviewees and their backgrounds. In the end, the chapter describes the study’s ethical considerations and evaluates its trustworthiness.

The Empirical findings section, in turn, displays the outcomes of the interviews in depth, presenting the results of the thematic analysis. The section concentrates on the emerging themes and the relevant narratives portrayed by the interviewees, ranging from digital nomadism more generally, to the case of Estonia more specifically. While the interpretative nature of the study leads to considering each interviewee’s descriptions individually, the section aims to connect and compare related themes arising from the interviews.

Finally, in the Discussion and Conclusions part, I answer the research questions as a result of reviewing the empirical findings and juxtaposing them with the research literature. Ultimately, I aim to portray larger-scale implications arising from the results, examining what they mean for digital nomads and policy-makers. The section concludes the thesis by considering the study’s limitations and presenting emerging areas for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I examine the existing, written material relevant for this study. The chapter follows the design of the research questions, progressing from digital nomads to digital nomad visas and, finally, the Estonian outlook more specifically. I start by establishing the theoretical background for digital nomadism and examining digital nomads as individuals. As a notable new factor, I review the effects of the pandemic for remote work. Moreover, I aim to build an understanding on the current reasons for digital nomadism and the challenges the nomads experience.

Moving forward, I discuss more abstract aspects related to digital nomadism, intending to build a basis for more high-level discussion. These aspects include work-life balance and the role of discipline, digital nomads' relation to other work settings and the importance of place and sense of belonging for digital nomads. Finally, I concentrate on a more distinct aspect of digital nomadism: digital nomad visas, through which the perspective focuses on the level of countries and policy-makers. These are the parties affecting digital nomads on a higher level. In preparation for the third research question, regarding the role of Estonia in the remote work field, I examine the available literature on Estonian remote work possibilities. The chapter ends by presenting a summary of the main takeaways of this section.

2.1 Digital work

Technology continues to change the nature of work as we have traditionally known it (Colbert, Yee & George 2016). The result is the redefinition of work, leading into *digital work* as its own notion. While digital work is embodied by the emergence of new technologies, systems and "related work concepts (e.g., open space offices)", it also means "reconfiguring work *practices* both from an individual and an organizational perspective" (Richter & Richter 2020 p. 78). As a response to the constant "pressure to become more dynamic and flexible" and to increase connectedness, organizations "build clusters of efficient virtual teams" (Richter et al. 2020 p. 77). As described by Ford, Piccolo & Ford (2017, p. 1) "the team - - does not reside in any single location, but consists of individuals located around the world", connected by "computer-based communication technology". The emergence of virtual teams in organizations ties in with employing "increasingly sophisticated technology to solve two key problems: (1) how to assemble an optimal array of human resources to solve problems that cross traditional organizational design clusters, and (2) how to assemble teams that can address location-specific needs" (Ford et al. 2017, p. 2).

Organizations are responding to this development by trying to be more fostering and lenient towards their employees – especially allowing for more freedom in terms of their location and time (Köffer 2015). Consequently, the general focus is broadening from "being restricted to what is done from 9 to 5 at the workplace" to "what is *done* – with less attention to the time and place where it happens" (Richter et al. 2020 p. 78). As an integral part of the *new normal*, "remote work lessens the cost of management, as organizations begin to understand that managing based on outcomes is more important than managing the physical presence of the workforce" (Richter et al. 2020 p. 78; Larsen and McInerney 2002).

Ens, Jensen & Stein (2018) connect the rise of digital work with the rise of the *digital workforce*, characterized by two elemental features: *mobility* and *uncertainty*. Mobility refers to variety in work locations, while uncertainty links with a reduced sense of security that arises from a more flexible, less bureaucratic, way of employment (Stumpf et al. 2022). With new forms of work, the detachment "from traditional employment structures" could often mean the loss of job benefits associated with a regular workplace (Ens et al. 2018, p. 4). An increase in the role of mobility is especially interesting, considering that as mobile devices and digital technologies associated with the Internet have become more popular, people have ended up in a near-perpetual state of being connected (Lee, Toombs, Erickson, Nemer, Ho, Jo & Guo 2019; Dery, Kolb & MacCormick 2014). As a result, these devices have obscured the boundaries between our work and personal lives (Richter et al. 2020). One could think, that the more connected we are, the less there would be a need to move around. Instead, despite these "communication advances that facilitate virtual and imaginative mobilities", "corporeal - - travel is increasing" (Cohen, Duncan & Thulemark 2015, p. 155).

2.1.1 Lifestyle mobility

One part of this phenomenon is explained by mobility becoming a lifestyle in itself. Lifestyles, overall, "can - - be seen as comprised of ongoing tangible practices, orientations and ways of identifying, constituting 'the basis for a separate, common social identity'" (Cohen et al. 2015, p. 156; Stebbins 1997, p. 350). According to Cohen et al. (2015, p. 156) "lifestyle practices provide both a unique sense of personal identity to their adherents on the one hand and a distinct and recognisable collective identity on the other". Cohen et al. (2015, p. 157) further note that "our choice of lifestyle affects our sense of self and that our sense of self affects our (mobility) consumption choices". Increasingly, the "patterns of such mobilities [are] becoming more dynamic and complex than in the past as individuals use mobility choices to negotiate the growing complexity of modern living" (Cohen et al. 2015, p. 155).

Cohen et al. (2015, p. 156) outline four key characteristics for "voluntary ongoing mobile lifestyles". They "(1) blur the boundaries between travel, leisure and migration; (2) are exemplary of how a binary divide between work and leisure may be collapsed; (3) destabilise dichotomies of 'home' and 'away'; and (4) illustrate complexities of belonging and identity associated with sustained mobility" (Cohen et al. 2015, p. 156). Thus, the concept of *lifestyle mobility* emerges. It facilitates the linkage of "contemporary travel, leisure and migration" (Cohen et al. 2015, p. 166). Through the lifestyle mobility lens, then, the "ideas of permanence in migration studies" are challenged, as "lifestyle mobility pre-supposes the intention to move on, rather than move back" (Cohen et al. 2015, p. 167). In contrast to temporary mobility, Cohen et al. (2015, p. 158) note that lifestyle mobility "is sustained as an ongoing fluid process, carrying on as everyday practice over time", and that there is also "higher significance placed on physical mobility itself as a defining aspect of one's identity".

Lifestyle mobility has a significant place in the examination of digital workforce. Continuing from the two elemental features of digital workforce (mobility and uncertainty), four different types of digital workers emerge, depending on the extent that the features describe them. The four types are: "gig worker, nine to fiver, traveling elite, and digital nomad" (Ens et al. 2018, p. 1).

Figure 2.1: Four types of digital workers

	Low Mobility	*High Mobility*
High Uncertainty	Gig Worker	**Digital Nomad**
Low Uncertainty	Nine to Fiver	Traveling Elite

Source: Ens et al. (2018, p. 4)

Out of the four worker types, lifestyle mobility is most notably personified by the last, the *digital nomad* (Hannonen 2020). Also more widely recognized in literature as a part of the digital workforce (e.g. Lyytinen & Yoo 2002; Nash et al. 2018; Richter et al. 2020; Schlagwein 2018), digital nomads stand out as a confluence of *high mobility* and *high uncertainty* (Ens et al. 2018).

2.1.2 The emergence of digital nomads

In the relatively short time that they have been recognized, digital nomads have been characterized in many ways, leading to different understandings of their nature. Overall, digital nomads are seen as people who live and work using digital means (the Internet) while perpetually traveling (Nash et al. 2018; Hannonen 2020; Schlagwein 2018; Bartosik-Purgat 2018). They are described to "work while traveling and travel while working" (Hannonen 2020, p. 335) and to "connect earning money and realizing passion for travelling and being independent" (Bartosik-Purgat 2018, p. 259). Digital nomads are also characterized by being location-independent and mobile (Nash et al. 2018; Hannonen 2020; Bartosik-Purgat 2018; Kong et al. 2019), tech-savvy, and notably associated with the use of mobile devices (Nash et al. 2018; Richter et al. 2020; Hannonen 2020; Bartosik-Purgat 2018). They perform knowledge work, leveraging improved global information access (Nash et al. 2018; Richter et al. 2020; Dal Fiore, Mokhtarian, Salomon & Singer 2014; Schlagwein 2018) and cloud computing (Bartosik-Purgat 2018; Hannonen 2020). They also pursue and exhibit flexibility in work and life (Nash et al. 2018; Richter et al. 2020) as well as seeking adventure (Nash et al. 2018; Richter et al. 2020) and more suitable markets (Richter et al. 2020; Schlagwein 2018).

Stumpf et al. (2022, p. 34) note that, perhaps contrary to common perception, digital nomads are “not simply wistful globe trekkers who have rejected status quo social conventions and effortlessly receive passive income with a few clicks on a laptop under the shade of a coconut tree”, or “‘agents’ who exploit market opportunities to generate revenue through the sale of products and services across digital networks.” Instead, they are “individuals who undergo a profound period of self-exploration to embrace an idiosyncratic approach to life and work” Stumpf et al. (2022, p. 35; Ehn, Jorge & Marques-Pita 2020). Moreover, the person embarking on their digital nomad journey can often differ from their media-prominent archetype (“adventurous young adult running their business in sandals and shorts on their laptop from an internet café by the beach”) (Stumpf et al. 2022). Many beginnings to digital nomadism are characterized by “banality, discontent, and even desperation” arising from existing work conditions, even experiencing burnout (Stumpf et al. 2022, p. 42).

While technology plays a big role in the digital nomad way, there is no consensus on whether digital nomads only prevail in ICT business at this point (e.g. Reichenberger 2018) or “span a [wider] range of professions, for example mathematicians, psychologists or engineers” (Richter et al. 2020 p. 78). As digital nomads most often work on “project-based arrangements or run their own online businesses”, “being a digital nomad would not be possible without having entrepreneurial features” (Think Remote 2023; Schlagwein 2018, p. 1; Bartosik-Purgat 2018, p. 264). The avoidance and elimination of work-related hierarchy is a conscious part of the digitally nomadic mindset (Reichenberger 2018).

There are clear indications that digital nomadism will “only continue to grow in popularity” (Stumpf et al. 2022 p. 50). Recent years have brought more attention than ever for the phenomenon, as a result of an increasing amount of content and information covering it and introducing it to new people. Simultaneously, however, digital nomads have not yet gained a permanent status in “culture generally, and the conventional business community more specifically” (Stumpf et al. 2022 p. 33). As a result, there is still some exploration and experimentation to be done around with lifestyle – the world has not yet solidified around it.

2.1.3 The COVID-19 pandemic as the catalyst for remote work

Knowledge work has reached a critical turning point. Its future in recognized as digital, and the pandemic has greatly accelerated the adoption of digitality throughout it. (Wang et al. 2020.) Through this lens, Wang et al. (2020) identify three key impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. First, remote work has become the new normal for both workers and organizations. The rapid change is facilitated by a growing recognition of "economic efficiencies as well as lifestyle benefits associated with remote work (Wang et al. 2020, p. 1393). Secondly, there is a change in the mindset towards work in general: "the lockdowns have visibly displaced a deeply entrenched taken-for-granted way of working that is grounded in the Factory paradigm of knowledge work" (Wang et al. 2020, p. 1393). Finally, the exploration of ways of working beyond corporate models has now opened up for "many more knowledge workers" (Wang et al. 2020, p. 1393).

Wang et al. (2020, p. 1392) state that "for the most part, the human collective is in charge of creating the digital future of knowledge work and choosing the world in which we would like to live". The turmoil caused by the pandemic has acted as a catalyst for those privileged enough to be able to choose to switch to a remote form (Shadel 2021). Even after the pandemic, many companies have retained the freedom to work independent of location as a company practice that reflects the preferences of the digital nomad lifestyle (Stumpf et al. 2022).

Consequently, it does not come as a surprise that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the interest towards digital nomadism (Stumpf et al. 2022). After all, "digital nomads have succeeded in creating an alternative paradigm of knowledge work that focuses on the lived experience of the worker, not on the technical requirements of efficiency" (Wang et al. 2020, p. 1393–1394). These changes in mindset have increased the desire for companies and workers, as well as academics, to know more about the path of adopting and maintaining a digital nomad way of life – in notably larger numbers than before COVID-19 (Stumpf et al. 2022; Wang et al. 2020).

2.1.4 Culture, community, costs and freedom as motivations for digital nomadism

Having discovered digital nomadism as a lifestyle option, people often have similar reasons for pursuing it. According to Bartosik-Purgat (2018, p. 262), people generally "want to manage their time independently and have time for elements of life other than just work." Being a digital nomad is seen to allow for more "flexibility and autonomy for the individual" (Stumpf et al. 2022, p. 31).

Schlagwein (2018) identifies three main areas of reasoning for digital nomadism: *inspirational*, *civic* and *market*. First, inspirational reasons closely tie in with the "aspects of lifestyle choice", through a strong desire for traveling and new cultural and personal experiences (Schlagwein 2018, p. 1). For digital nomads, it is "a given that a travelling lifestyle is a valuable experience" as they relate "external, cultural experiences to inner growth" (Schlagwein 2018, p. 5). Second, civic reasons refer to pursuing a more interesting life through "belonging to a community of like-minded, interesting people" (Schlagwein 2018, p. 5). Finally, market reasons most often mean seeking a less expensive way of living – usually a lower-cost environment overseas. This allows digital nomads to maintain a higher quality of life while not having to increase working hours. (Schlagwein 2018.)

A search for freedom can be seen as one overarching reason to become a digital nomad. While Cook (2020, p. 358) describes "a desire to gain a symbolic or generalised feeling of freedom, autonomy and self-determination", this can be interpreted in many ways depending on the individual (Reichenberger 2018). Perhaps the most obvious aspect of freedom for digital nomads considers location – being able to change one's physical surroundings in a frequent manner (Reichenberger 2018, Cook 2020). Reichenberger (2018, p. 372). also describes a sense of "freedom within paid employment" as well as "freedom to pursue self-development". Interestingly, these authors have contradicting understandings of freedom related to work-life balance: Reichenberger (2018) concludes that holistic freedom relates to the confluence of work and leisure, their boundaries disappearing, while Cook (2020) argues that, in fact, the opposite might be true. In order to understand Cook's perspective, we first need a general understanding of the types of challenges that digital nomads encounter.

2.1.5 Establishment, travel, technology and individualism as challenges for digital nomads

While tempting to many, choosing the digital nomad lifestyle also comes with its challenges. Many starts to digital nomadism are rocky, as early nomads almost always start questioning their choices at one point during their first 1000 days. They consider giving up, due to a feeling of non-viability. (Stumpf et al. 2022.) Still, after initial progress, maintaining momentum and being able to have long-term sustainability often, in turn, become the nomad's main causes of anxiousness (Stumpf et al. 2022).

Outside of establishing the lifestyle, many of the further challenges are intertwined. Generally, they can be grouped into three areas: tangible travel-related aspects (e.g. Nash et al. 2018; Richter et al. 2020; Cook 2020), challenges imposed by technology (e.g. Richter et al. 2020; Cook 2020), and challenges stemming from individualism and self-management (e.g. Kong et al. 2019; Stumpf et al. 2022; Richter et al. 2020). As it turns out, the most notable solution seems to be the implementation of discipline (Cook 2020).

First, exploring new places can be considered one of the more alluring sides of digital nomadism, but getting established (i.e. setting up permanently for at least 2–3 months) is often seen as stressful (Reichenberger 2018). Changing locations is seen as disruptive to routines (Cook 2020, p. 368). While traveling takes time in itself, the problem is more often "the mobilization of resources, and the navigation of local infrastructures" (Richter et al. 2020 p. 79; Nash et al. 2018). In the most basic form, these types of challenges in a new location include "finding satisfactory places to sleep, eat and buy food and evaluating cafes and coworking spaces", which often takes several days (Cook 2020, p. 368–369). As summarized by Cook (2020, p. 368) "the very act of being a nomadic worker, specifically the necessity that an individual must frequently change work location, routines and spaces and then set this all up again in a new location, requires labour and effort." On another dimension, even managing differences between time zones becomes a challenge for digital nomads (Cook 2020).

Next, due to the ICT-heavy nature of the work, arises the problem of overload caused by excess use of technology (Mazmanian, Orlikowski & Yates 2013). The "increasing volume of ICT related communication they are required to engage with can often lead to increased 'work' overload" (Richter et al. 2020 p. 79; Tarafdar, Gupta & Turel 2013). The dominance of mobile devices is highlighted by the often-individualistic nature of the lifestyle, where spending time on one's own generally leads to focusing on work-related issues outside of so-called normal working hours (Cook 2020). Individualism in itself can pose a challenge to many, as the lack of support from colleagues can increase the amount of stress experienced by the digital nomad (Kong et al. 2019 p. 1).

Finally, this opens up to a broader challenge. Without surrounding guidance, with increased responsibility to manage oneself, the digital nomad often experiences "challenges in maintaining productivity and feeling competent at work" (Stumpf et al. 2022, p. 31). A heightened sense of individualism, especially tied with being able to use mobile devices to work anytime and anywhere, would initially be experienced as personal autonomy. In reality, the constant use of these devices would decrease digital nomads' ability to balance between personal interests and professional responsibilities – thus, in fact, reducing their autonomy. Mazmanian et al. (2013) refer to this phenomenon as the *autonomy paradox*. Cook (2020, p. 355) notes that "digital nomads often overlook the role of disciplining practices when first starting out, and do not foresee how working in sites of leisure and tourism might make managing a balance between work and non-work problematic."

2.2 Work-life balance and philosophical considerations for digital nomads

All of the aforementioned challenges relate to one of the most foundational areas of digital nomadism: an ongoing search for work-life balance. Experiencing a constant combination of work and travel, without a clear separation, the areas can blend in together and start to decrease the quality of each other. (Nash et al. 2018.) This way, work-life balance can quickly transform into burnout and work-life conflict (Stich, Farley, Cooper & Tarafdar 2015). While the whole world is experiencing the blur between work and leisure more than ever, "maintaining a balance between psychological needs, productivity, and travel is part of the digital nomad's identity" (Sánchez-Vergara et al. 2023, p. 2; Krakat 2021). Cousins & Robey (2015, p. 61) note that "as work continues to become detached from specific times and places, the management of work-life boundaries will become increasingly important”.

Thus, another paradox arises: while digital nomads choose their lifestyle in search for a clearer balance between work and leisure, the considerable effort needed to keep them separate ends up taking a toll on both sides (Cook 2020). A quote from an interview by Cook (2020, p. 376) illustrates this: “‘Sometimes it’s hard to stop work bleeding into every aspect of daily life - - now as a digital nomad, I have to work even harder to stop this happening’” (Cook 2020, p. 375–376). Contrary to the popular image of the digital nomad lifestyle where “digital nomads may appear to reject the traditional office with its impositions”, the result is, in fact, that “other bureaucracies and forms of labour quickly emerge” in their place (Cook 2020, p. 362). The answer to this problem is the increased role of discipline in all digital nomad activities: “although at first - - obscured by feelings of excitement and novelty”, becoming a digital nomad presents a comprehensive need for “individuals to develop highly disciplined practices over time” (Cook 2020, p. 368).

Discipline, in this case can be divided into two categories: self-discipline and external discipline, the latter of which can be further specified as “voluntarily entered into, negotiated or even welcomed” or “more forcefully imposed” (Cook 2020, p. 360). Regularly, (e.g. Nash et al. 2018; Reichenberger 2018) “the rejection of coercive and outwardly imposed time-discipline - - is - - central to digital nomad escape narratives and dreams of freedom” (Cook 2020, p. 361). Reichenberger (2018, p. 372) refers to abandoning “externally imposed structures” in order to pursue a “more flexible and tailored life”. Cook (2020, p. 387) critiques this idea, stating instead that “externally imposed structures often become valued, and over time” digital nomads “[end] up reformatting and replicating them.” This ties in with the notion that rather than aiming to “challenge the system” digital nomadism “is more of an adaptation to neoliberal impacts”, referring to a capitalist mindset that one would relate to more traditional ICT work (Thompson 2018, p. 40).

Cook (2020, p. 362) highlights the “paradox” “that digital nomads put disciplining practices in place in order to separate work and leisure, not to merge them”. This "challenges the logic that digital nomads wish to collapse the boundaries between work and leisure" (Cook 2020, p. 388). According to Cook (2020, p. 370), "these place-making rituals demonstrate that mobile workers must organise themselves to ameliorate and manage disruption". Thus, "these rituals also reveal why digital nomads must be more disciplined than other location-dependent workers and [crucially] more disciplined than their former location-dependent selves" (Cook 2020, p. 370).

The pursuit of discipline relates to several aspects of the digital nomad lifestyle, such as the use of technology and the challenges imposed by individualism. First, as "the phone is often associated with sociality, leisure, family, friends and distraction", "digital nomads often combine laptop usage with coworking spaces to create a sharp delineation between work and distracting non-work tasks" (Cook 2020, p. 370–371). Moreover, "many of these self-discipline techniques" are not digital – "to-do lists and time-boxed tasks were often written on paper" (Cook 2020, p. 382). Next, perhaps not surprisingly, digital nomads often find it alleviating to be able to share and externalize their workloads (Cook 2020). As noted by Cook (2020, p. 376), "it was generally agreed that delineating between work and leisure is much harder when travelling alone and more manageable when travelling as a couple. Social interaction, even within a couple, can produce regulating and disciplining effects for digital nomads which confirms the analysis that the workplace can play an important social function."

2.2.1 Facilitating digital nomads as corporate contractors

While finding discipline enables digital nomads to be effective on their own terms, it does not always mean that digital nomads only work for themselves. In fact, nowadays, it is common for corporations to contract digital nomads for individual work assignments. What makes digital nomads attractive for organizations to work with is their being typically more cost effective than hiring a full-time worker and for them to be able to specialize, with specific knowledge on a given subject. (Kong et al. 2019; Frey 2013.) Moreover, "the reliance on moving around from gig to gig on a project basis makes them more attractive to organizations who do not need to pay for health insurance, provide sick cover or allow for annual leave expense" (Richter et al. 2020, p. 79).

However, problems often arise from the differences between digital nomads and corporations. As noted by Richter et al. (2020 p. 79), “many digital nomads having little interaction and understanding of the client’s company”, and “the lack of understanding of the differences between the corporate and digital nomadic workstyle has led to the issue of misaligned expectations.” Kong et al. (2019 p. 11) identify three reasons for the misalignment between the corporate and digital nomad mindset. Firstly, “the lack of understanding of digital nomadism values by the corporate worker and conversely corporate values by the digital nomad - - leads to issues such as clients being too demanding with work” (Kong et al. 2019 p. 11). Secondly, “the institutional logics – the socially-constructed patterns, beliefs, values and rules that provide meaning to traditional corporates and the often-millennial digital nomads – are substantially different between digital nomadism and corporate environments” (Kong et al. 2019 p. 2). “Thirdly, misalignment between digital nomadism and corporate values can cause issues in digital nomad-corporate relations” (Kong et al. 2019 p. 12). Often, corporations and digital nomads exhibit differing fundamental motivations (Kong et al. 2019).

One of the most prominent of these motivations for digital nomads is “having the flexibility to self-dependently reconfigure their own work practices”, as it allows nomads “to work more efficiently and productively than in traditional corporate job settings” (Richter et al. 2020 p. 79). Sánchez-Vergara et al. (2023) recognize this as a disruptive factor, making it more difficult to manage digital nomads. Kong et al. (2019) connect this difficulty with traditional line-of-sight management, noting that without it, corporations can unintentionally overburden the digital nomads with tasks.

To prevent these “major digital nomad-corporate issues” Kong et al. (2019, p. 13) underline three methods to precede the start of the work. These consist of “establishing an ‘*outcomes-based culture*’ so it ‘doesn’t matter if they are ... in Bali or in India’”; “pre-communication”; and “[understanding] the right technologies to use based on the work context” (Kong et al. 2019 p. 12–13). Richter et al. (2020, p. 79) note that “the successful establishment of any new ways of working requires an alignment with the prevailing organizational culture and leadership paradigm”. Being able to openly communicate “expectations about availability and social protocols concerning ways and means of communication can help to create a healthy balance” (Richter et al. 2020, p. 80). Overall, Kong et al. (2019, p. 9) note that increased selectivity can reduce issues on both the digital nomad and the corporate hirer’s end, identifying “where there’s a good fit regarding what you have to offer and where the demand is for your services”. According to the authors, “the digital nomad should understand their own personal limits and avoid work opportunities they don’t have the resources for” (Kong et al. 2019 p. 9).

Ultimately, this suggests a higher-level shift in the interaction between managers and digital nomads. Richter et al. (2020, p. 79) and Nguyen, Lokman, Winata & Chong (2017) see the acceptance of digital nomads as part of the new, digital, corporate environment leading to a transition from “management (‘command and control’) to leadership (‘open and collaborative’)”.

2.2.2 Importance of place and sense of belonging for digital nomads

According to Bartosik-Purgat (2018, p. 261) “digital nomads usually work from the place they want to be or want to stay for a period of time”. They “select destinations based on their potential for tourism, culture, self-development, and entertainment-related travel” (Sánchez-Vergara et al. 2023, p. 10) and pursue “locations in which their demographic privileges are maximized, along with their hedonistic pleasures” (Thompson 2019, p. 33). Big cities are usually popular destinations for digital nomads, since they commonly provide better access to Internet and co-working facilities (David 2016). “Online resources such as Nomad List (nomadlist.com)” help to choose locations by creating rated lists that can be “filtered and ranked based on internet speed, quality of life and cost of living” (Cook 2020, p. 356).

Most digital nomads live in Central America or Southeast Asia since, originating from the “Global North”, these destinations have more favorable “living costs, climate and tourism possibilities” (Bartosik-Purgat 2018, p. 262; Schlagwein 2018). Cook (2020 p. 355 & 375) notes that these are, at least, the “clichéd and most blogged about digital nomad centres”, whereas digital nomads often initially overlook the “clear gap between the utopian ideal of working in paradise and the daily realities of getting stuff done”. For most digital nomads, “the idea of living and working in - - sites of tourism - - [is] initially exciting", but "in practice it [can] be irritating and distracting" (Cook 2020, p. 371). Seeing the digital nomad identity to be centered around work, Cook (2020, p. 389) remarks that "attempting to work in sites of tourism is inherently problematic, creates anxieties, and ultimately leads to the additional burden and labour of separating work and leisure tasks" (Cook 2020, p. 389).

Thus, in order to maintain the digital nomad lifestyle, a high level of adaptability is required (Ehn et al. 2020). To be "able to alter their mobilities and spatial uses over time - - [ensures] that structured, manageable routines are maintained" (Cook 2020, p. 375). This leads digital nomads to seek to work in distinct coworking spaces that provide "not only - - the functions of a serviced office but also to create a protected work environment in locations primarily designed for leisure" (Cook 2020, p. 371). In fact, the role of these coworking spaces is so notable, that many digital nomads use them outside of urgent working tasks, in order to create more structure and familiarity for their lives (Cook 2020, p. 372).

Upon arriving at their destination, after only buying a one-way ticket to begin a new life, many digital nomads have no long-term plans. In this regard, the role of the digital nomad community is notable, since many get their introduction and guidance from someone more experienced or more used to the location to get started. (Stumpf et al. 2022.) "Expectations were expressed of being helpful to other digital nomads, from helping them to settle in a new place, to sharing information, educating one another and, in some cases, sharing clients and work" (Schlagwein 2018, p. 5). The role of the coworking community often grows beyond work as well, to include different kinds of leisure activities (Cook 2020).

The discussion around the frequent change of surroundings proposes the question of whether digital nomads experience a sense of home and what it means to them (Hannonen 2020). The constant change also means a changing set of people, which can be seen as especially challenging for the more introverted nomad. A lack of a permanent location can ultimately be seen as leading to loneliness, as the digital nomad is often incapable of maintaining long-term relationships with people. (Cook 2020.) Meetups and conferences around the globe, targeted at digital nomads in particular, aim to provide some resolution to this issue, but their effect has not been studied (Nash et al. 2018).

Using lifestyle mobility as a lens, Cohen et al. (2015, p. 159) describe that through it, “there is no ‘one’ place to which to return, and through time, there may be multiple ‘homes’ that one can return to and/or revisit.” This ends up being a clear illustration between “the differences between lifestyle mobility and seasonal migration” Cohen et al. (2015, p. 159). “Lifestyle mobility - - is bound up with issues of belonging in, to and with place, as people may relate to place in myriad ways, such as by a sense of home (in place), through a sense of citizenship (to place) and through affinity with place” (Cohen et al. 2015, p. 162; Conradson & McKay 2007).

Williams & McIntyre (2001, p. 400) note that even though it is generally stated that one cannot separate the “notion of home” from one’s perception of self, “home is not necessarily where one physically (or legally) resides. This is amplified by the forces of modernization and globalization” that “also tend to dislodge one’s heart (identity) from singular roots and redistribute it across space like so many rhizomes.” Butcher (2010) suggests that an underlying need for home still prevails even if it gets dispersed into multiple separate locations. The author suggests that being a “global citizen” does not negate the need to “feel the ground beneath their feet” and to have somewhere (or many places) that can be called home (Cohen et al. 2015, p. 164). Krakat (2020, p. 1) echoes this by describing that “often, of course, there are one or more permanent home bases or safe havens to which the traveller can return. Laptop work, passive income, and early retirement are included in highly individualistic patchworks of interlocking stories and identities.”

2.3 Digital nomad visas

Having explored areas and topics surrounding the first research question of this study – on the current state of digital nomadism – I now intend to move on to the second research question. To remind, the second question considers digital nomad visas and aims to understand their necessity.

Realizing lifestyle mobility is greatly facilitated by traveling “on passports that allow a relatively large number of visa-free entries into destinations worldwide - -. The same must be true for diversification of political protection by one’s actual home countries effectively acting as ‘anchors’ on global journeys” (Krakat 2020. p. 1). However, the problem for digital nomads has traditionally been, how one can legally work in a country without having a local employee and without encountering tax related issues (Smith 2021). Edwards (2020, p. 1) describes how digital nomads would commonly be “required to declare themselves as entrepreneurs or workers with a company to sponsor their stay (a lengthy, expensive, and bureaucratic process), or declare themselves as ‘tourists’ (but risk deportation if caught extending their stay by authorities)”. While many countries try to attract remote workers, “global, permanent travel appears as such as mostly a legal venture in itself”: “the laws of each country will need to be understood and followed, including any limitations and conditions imposed on working whilst on a tourist visa, as well as in regards to taxation based requirements” (Krakat 2020. p. 4–5). As a result, most digital nomads continue working while traveling solely on tourist visas, which is technically prohibited (Hindriks 2020).

Over the years, there have been adaptations to different kinds of work visas, but as they have not been designed distinctively with the digital nomad in mind, the end results have not met the nomads’ unique conditions, such as “the length of stay, the type of employer” and “the possibility of managing the permit as a couple or family” (Sánchez-Vergara et al. 2023, p. 15). To be relevant, a visa aimed at the digital nomad should be based on the principles of flexibility and transparency – something, that most current working visas seem to be lacking in (Ehn et al. 2022).

As a new way to tackle this problem, “amidst the COVID-19 crisis, as much of the world entered lockdowns and issued shelter-in-place orders in an attempt to restrict global mobility, a number of places began launching ‘digital nomad visas’ in order to entice remote workers” (Edwards 2020, p. 1). As summarized by Edwards (2020, p. 1), “these visas provide formalized yet flexible (and temporary) forms of citizenship”, meaning that digital nomads are thus able to work in a country without a local employer and without encountering common tax-related issues. Now, the number of countries offering digital nomad visas is estimated to increase quickly in the coming years (Krakat 2021).

According to Edwards (2020, p. 1), “the digital nomad visas - - have provided a legitimate route to flexible mobility through remote work.” Krakat (2021, p. 2) underlines that “these are, hence, no mere visitor visas with any working-restriction waived. As it seems, the closest visa category may be the actual work visa. This is because the visa conferral depends on evidence of work undertaken in reference to another jurisdiction.” The validity period of the visas varies from several years (e.g. Bahamas and Cyprus) to five or six months (e.g. Argentina and Iceland) (Sánchez-Vergara et al. 2023, p. 8–9).

Especially with the rising interest for organizations to hire digital nomads as workforce, this opens up an interesting storyline with higher-level implications – a battle for talent “not only between companies but between both companies and countries” (Edwards 2020, p. 2). This highlights the “perceived importance of new visa programs that support flexible, short-term forms of temporary citizenship” (Edwards 2020, p. 2). In this sense, “digital nomadism can serve as a focal point for consolidating policies for a country’s economic development, and implementing changes that attract and retain highly skilled workers” (Sánchez-Vergara et al. 2023, p. 13; Matos & Ardévol 2021). Edwards (2020, p. 2) notes agreement for this view “by government officials from the UAE to Estonia to Barbados, who emphasize the figure of the digital nomad as a highly skilled worker who will reinvigorate national economies and provide new avenues into tech markets”, as well as improving the countries’ tourism offerings (Cook 2020). “This is especially true for those cities seeking to position themselves as important references in technology and innovation, and that also have widely recognized tourism and leisure attributes” (Sánchez-Vergara et al. 2023, p. 13).

The role of digital nomad visa holders can be seen to have a “positive impact on local economies, generating more revenue than regular tourists, as their period of stay is far longer” (Krakat 2021, p. 3). Krakat (2021) believes that local citizens might be notably acceptive towards digital nomads, as they are expected to create local jobs, while supposedly not endangering any existing ones. The author ties this in with the high level of education and expertise associated with digital nomads. As a result of being able to continually renew digital nomad visas, “a win-win economic environment” is created (Krakat 2021, p. 3). Furthermore, “education and training programs, as well as conferences, and even start-ups could follow suit, bringing back local and global economies” (Krakat 2021, p. 3).

For countries to be able to attract digital nomads, they need to focus “on the perquisites and amenities”, as the choice of destination for digital nomads is made “based on their potential for tourism, culture, self-development, and entertainment-related travel (Sánchez-Vergara et al. 2023, p. 10). The country can strengthen its brand in the eyes of the nomad, leading to wider recognition and a more reinforced positioning, by “documenting and promoting [its] functional attributes - - (e.g. landscapes, technological networks, infrastructure, leisure activities, etc.)” (Sánchez-Vergara et al. 2023, p. 10). Contrarily, this strengthening of the brand can also include concentrating on less tangible, more psychological aspects, such as “a sense of security as part of their benefits. Offering an effective sanitation infrastructure assures future workers and their families” (Sánchez-Vergara et al. 2023, p. 10).

All in all, examining the digital nomad visa schemes from a larger perspective, it becomes clear that mere interest towards issuance is not enough. As illustrated by Sánchez-Vergara et al. (2023, p. 12), “although some places have been positioning themselves in recent years as nomadic destinations, the legal framework to establish this figure has not been sufficiently defined (for example, Indonesia, Mexico, and Spain), and governments are still working on providing clear guidelines designed for this segment”.

When it comes to policy frameworks, the government is the central figure for implementation (Sánchez-Vergara et al. 2023). Sánchez-Vergara et al. (2023, p. 13) name Estonia’s *e-Residency program* as one of the most notable examples of this, “where the government invites future residents to become part of the nomadic group. It presents the steps to formalize the visa and the contributions that this entails in the country”.

2.3.1 Estonia

As the final part of the literature review chapter, I will now concentrate on aspects surrounding the third research question – the role of Estonia in the remote work field. Out of the three research questions, this area appears as the least explored in the academic field.

What can be seen as the first digital nomad visa in the world (originally developed for launch in early 2019 but ultimately opened for applications in June 2020), the Estonian digital nomad visa still stands as one of the most accessible digital nomad visas in the world (Hindriks 2020). Its fairness arises from having been developed in "close collaboration with the global digital nomad community", as opposed to many other visas that remain more distant from the applicants throughout the development process (Hindriks 2020). The income requirements for the Estonian visa are set lower than most other digital nomad visas, with a "minimum threshold" of €4,500 "during the six months preceding the application" to be entitled to apply (Republic of Estonia e-Residency 2023b). While not insignificantly small, there is still a considerable difference to countries such as Thailand (€5,600) and Iceland (€6,600), whose "thresholds" can prove unrealistic to many applicants (Hindriks 2020; Smith 2021).

A major difference can also be seen in the accessibility to the application itself: a similar visa in Barbados had an application fee of $2,000–$3,000, while the Estonian application only costs around €80 (Hindriks 2020; Sánchez-Vergara et al. 2023). In 2023, at the time of writing, Mauritius stands as the only country offering a visa for digital nomads free of charge (Sánchez-Vergara et al. 2023).

The specialty in the Estonian case is, essentially, recognizing a new, modern wave of workers. As summarized by Sánchez-Vergara et al. (2023, p. 15), "the formalization and regulation of visas for digital nomads is part of the agenda of those countries that have promoted entrepreneurship and seek to consolidate business ecosystems. To attract these remote workers, efficient visa management is essential for choosing a destination. Therefore, optimizing bureaucratic procedures and the barriers imposed by the public administration can be significantly positive". This sentiment is supported by the survey for the Estonian digital nomad visa development process, according to which a notable majority of digital nomads (87%) would let the simplicity of the visa process affect the choice of country (Hindriks 2020).

2.4 Summary of the literature review

The literature review section followed the structure of the research questions of this study. The research questions were:

1. *What is the state of digital nomadism following the pandemic?*
2. *Why are digital nomad visas needed?*
3. *What is the role of Estonia in the remote work field?*

State of digital nomadism following the pandemic

Starting with the current state of digital nomadism, I first outlined the theoretical background for the phenomenon. Overall, the rise of digital work has led to the emergence of the digital workforce that can be measured in terms of mobility and uncertainty (Ens et al. 2018). Lifestyle mobility emerges as a lens that facilitates the linkage of "contemporary travel, leisure and migration" implying "the intention" for individuals "to move on, rather than move back" (Cohen et al. 2015, p. 166–167). With regards to the digital workforce, lifestyle mobility is most characterized by the digital nomad, exhibiting high mobility and high uncertainty (Hannonen 2020, Ens et al. 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic has acted as a catalyst for remote work in general, accelerating the adoption of different types of digital work, and for digital nomads more specifically (Wang et al. 2020; Stumpf et al. 2022). Stumpf et al. (2022) refer to increasing diversification within the digital nomad phenomenon, with notable growth to be expected. Still, the phenomenon has not yet gained a solid place in "culture generally, and the conventional business community more specifically", meaning that more understanding and research on digital nomadism is needed (Stumpf et al. 2022 p. 33).

While the phenomenon is growing at a fast pace, people still seem to have similar reasons than before, for pursuing the lifestyle. These include the search of cultural and personal growth, community and like-minded people as well as a more cost-efficient way of life (Schlagwein 2018). Overall, there seems to remain a more general search for a sense of freedom (Cook 2020; Reichenberger 2018).

On the other hand, the largest challenges for digital nomads relate to the pursuit of work-life balance (Nash et al. 2018). This includes establishing one's life, practical travel arrangements and challenges on individualism and self-management (Nash et al. 2018; Richter et al. 2020; Cook 2020; Kong et al. 2019). It seems that contrary to prevalent beliefs, digital nomads no not wish to combine work and leisure – they actually want and need to separate them (Reichenberger 2018; Cook 2020). It becomes apparent the considerable effort needed to keep work and leisure separate complicates both sides. Thus, the more discipline the nomads are able to introduce to their lives – whether outwardly or inwardly imposed – the better the outcomes against these challenges seem to be (Cook 2020). This is notable, because digital nomads are more often thought to reject discipline rather than welcoming it (Reichenberger 2018).

Digital nomads choose their destinations "based on their potential for tourism, culture, self-development, and entertainment-related travel" (Sánchez-Vergara et al. 2023, p. 10) and pursue "locations in which their demographic privileges are maximized, along with their hedonistic pleasures" (Thompson 2019, p. 33). Many digital nomads find out the hard way about the challenges related to working in popular tourist destinations, as it interferes with their work (Cook 2020). This eventually raises the discussion on the role of place for digital nomads, more generally, and whether it signifies anything more than merely being the surroundings for their work (Hannonen 2020). Cohen et al. (2015) and Butcher (2010) argue that a sense of "home" is needed and can be scattered into multiple parts, and Williams et al. (2001) note that home might not be tied to the place where one resides.

Digital nomad visas

Next, moving structurally to the second research question, I studied the literature on digital nomad visas and their necessity. Overall, the discussion on digital nomads' location introduces the topic of entering and residing in the destination in a legal way. Digital nomadism has been associated with legislative issues related to immigration, employment and taxation (Smith 2021). During the pandemic, instead of relying on tourist visas, digital nomads saw the emergence of new, specific digital nomad visas (Edwards 2020). Besides allowing for greater, approved mobility for digital nomads, digital nomad visas enable countries to "attract and retain highly skilled workers" (Sánchez-Vergara et al. 2023, p. 13). This way, "digital nomadism can serve as a focal point for consolidating policies for a country's economic development" overall (Sánchez-Vergara et al. 2023, p. 13).

So far, due to the novelty of these visas, there has been lack of research that "has critically examined how various governments have leveraged the category of digital nomadism to encourage independent workers to participate in their economies via remote work" (Edwards 2020). While beginning to be recognized in academic literature, the implementation and promotion of digital nomad visas has not yet been thoroughly explored. Moreover, the role of institutional actors in this implementation lacks understanding. (Sánchez-Vergara et al. 2023.) As two fundamental aspects needing investigation, Sánchez-Vergara et al. (2023) highlight "the policy framework that encompasses these initiatives, and the actors involved in the construction of these discourses". It seems clear that in order to facilitate digital nomads in the future, countries have to update their policies.

The role of Estonia in the remote work field

Finally, I concluded the literature review by concentrating on the third research question – studying the role of Estonia in the remote work field. As a driver of the digital work transformation, Estonia appears as one of the most prominent countries (Hindriks 2020; Sánchez-Vergara et al. 2023) In the short time that Estonia's position has begun to be recognized, very few academic studies have yet emerged that would provide a deeper understanding on the country's digital systems and foundational success factors. Estonia seems to represent a new point of view for digital nomadism, emphasizing the more "objective" and financially-driven side of the phenomenon.

3. METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the research process of the thesis and the strategies I used for data collection and analysis. I have also included a discussion of research ethics. The section outlines the evolution of the work from an initial state of uncertainty and broadness to narrowing down the topic and finding new areas of relevance. I start by establishing the philosophical foundations of the thesis: its ontological and epistemological premises, connecting with the qualitative research tradition. Next, I explain the research design, along with the data acquisition process and the subsequent analysis. This chapter concludes by talking through the ethical considerations and evaluations of trustworthiness of the thesis.

3.1 Ontological and epistemological premises of the study

As a notion, methodology refers to the philosophically and theoretically structuring system that guides the research process. It is, itself, based on a distinct set of theories regarding such fundamental concepts as the nature of reality, knowledge and truth. The resulting *lenses*, through which the research is conducted, can be viewed as the ontological and epistemological premise of this thesis. (Slevitch 2011.)

This study takes an *idealist* ontological view, assuming that the reality of each individual is subjective: a result of their own thinking, constructed “socially and psychologically” (Slevitch 2011, p. 77). According to Slevitch (2011), *ontology* studies reality or the things that it consists of. Ultimately, it asks, what is true in the world (Smith 1983). The idealist view leads to the belief that a single, uniform, reality does not exist, but that reality, in itself, only exists as a unique experience in an individual’s mind (Smith 1983). To contrast, another way of contemplating reality is the concept that everything exists as it is, independent of the observer, which leads to a view that could be considered academically objective – this is called the *realist* lens (Smith 1983).

Due to the novelty of the topics of this thesis, the available, preexisting information and evidence is limited and invokes to be supplemented with empirical data. Thus, it arises from subjective experiences regarding digital nomadism and the state of remote work. The interviews conducted for this thesis convey unique, subjective perspectives on the world, as the data has been gathered from people that have their own sets of values and beliefs. They speak as individuals – not representing wider entities. This subjectivity ties in with the nature of the qualitative research process. Because the idealist lens is built on interpretation, it ultimately has a fundamental connection to the qualitative tradition itself (Sale, Lohfeld & Brazil 2002).

Similarly to the idealist inclination of this study, its epistemological outlook is built on *subjectivism*. When it comes to the assessment of reality, *epistemology* considers the nature of knowledge and the ways of reaching truth (Slevitch 2011). Epistemology asks how we come to *know* the truth that ontology lays out (Smith 1983). The topics that this study explores are quite unresolved and, as phenomena, in a state with still a lot ambiguity. Because reality appears uniquely to each individual, gathering data from those individuals brings forth a more abstract understanding of the world. Through the subjectivist lens, seeking an objective voice of truth is deemed impossible and not desirable in the first place – considering digital nomads and remote work, too. Instead, the empirical research strives to form judgement through subjective views.

In fact, Slevtich (2011) describes qualitative epistemology to be inherently subjectivist, meaning that facts and values are interrelated by nature and that a definite sense of objectivity is unreachable. This also means that the research is able to only bring forth an interpretation that, itself, is built on the interpretations made by other individuals (Slevitch 2011). Sale et al. (2002) highlight that with this regard, the validity of a study is a result of its credibility within an individual's own judgement. In contrast, the *positivist* outlook, while similarly relying on experience as the source of knowledge, expects there to exist a definite reality that is objectively true (Turner 2001).

Subjectivity ties in with the qualitative nature of this study. It could be argued that deriving these individual experiences would be more difficult from quantitative data, as it can lack some of the "rich description of the phenomenon through meanings, interpretations, processes, and contexts" (Slevitch 2011, p. 77). Moreover, Sale et al.

(2002) suggest talking about the ability to derive generalizations from the findings. As a notable characteristic of qualitative studies, this means that the described experiences about a phenomenon can be further interpreted to accommodate everyone's own settings, due to the thoroughness of the description. As the thesis examines the early phases of remote work phenomena, it seems logical to pursue generalizability, in the sense that the results can then have more real-life connections and implications. The study explores what there is to learn, on a larger scale, from a more preliminary set of information. Essentially, findings about digital nomads and digital systems can be adapted for more specific individuals, groups and countries.

3.2 Evolution of the research process

This study got its beginning during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The circumstances induced a fundamental sense of volatility to the process, requiring flexibility over time. Besides the research process itself, this was reflected on the scoping of the subject itself. As the study started with looking into digital nomads on a more general level, it quickly became apparent that the phenomenon was in a transformative state – elements of it were developing at the same time that the study was beginning to take its shape. Initially, more philosophical themes played a bigger role, such as the role of location for individuals and team dynamics, but a certain sense of tangibility, a more definitive angle, seemed to be missing.

At this point, a focus on *digital nomad visas* started to arise. With Estonia launching its own digital nomad visa during the pandemic, much of the recent discussion on digital nomadism – web articles and blogs, especially – touched on Estonia. The country seemed to have emerged as one of the forerunners of remote work schemes. To me, as the author of this thesis, this seemed as a highly interesting aspect to embrace: from a Finnish perspective, Estonia provided a fascinating, notably close connection to the digital nomad world.

3.3 Background and research design

This research can be seen as *exploratory* in nature, as it investigates questions that have previously not yet been studied exhaustively. As opposed to proving preexisting hypotheses or assumptions, it aspires to provide a rich narrative and refine existing concepts around digital nomadism and identifying areas for further research (Jaeger & Halliday 1998). For this study, the exploratory nature of the research coincided with not having a wide array of information or data on the Estonian digital nomad visa or the recent developments within the phenomenon. This further connects with the general recommendation for exploratory research, when there is an overall idea of the topic of study but not an established paradigm or understanding through which to approach it (George 2023).

As mentioned with regards to the premises of this study, the narrowness of the available data demonstrated the need to acquire additional, qualitative data. An interview study became a rational choice for the type of empirical research to pursue, in order to broaden the understanding on the digital nomad phenomenon and Estonia's newfound emergence. As summarized by deMarrais & Laplan (2003, p. 52), an interview study responds to wanting to "gain in-depth knowledge from participants about particular phenomenon, experiences, or sets of experiences".

It was important to get perspectives from people that were familiar with digital nomads, visas, remote work schemes, as well as Estonia – and could link them together. Altogether, interviews were conducted with five different professionals specialized in remote work, Estonian commerce, and the Estonian e-Residency scheme. The first interviewees were chosen based on personal suggestions from my network and their availability for interviews as well as the perceived suitability for the topics at hand. Moreover, several interviewees were able to recommend further interviews with their colleagues or professional acquaintances, based on their understanding after each discussion. Each interviewee was initially connected via email or LinkedIn message, either directly or by being connected by a common acquaintance. The interviewees and their backgrounds are displayed in the following table.

Table 3.1: Interviewees of the study

Interviewee (Pseudonymized)	Job title	Nationality	Language of the interview
Jaan	Managing director of the Estonian e-Residency program	Estonian	English
Leena	Country manager of the commercial representative office of Estonia; Board advisor in the Finnish–Estonian Chamber of Commerce; President of the (board of administration of the) Finnish–Estonian cultural foundation	Finnish	Finnish
Sarah	Startup consultant; Founder & Cohost of Remote Commons; *Plumia* community team member	Thai	English
Olivia	Head of content at Estonian e-Residency	Australian	English
Tiina	Director at The Finnish Institute in Estonia	Finnish	Finnish

3.4 From semi-structured to unstructured interviews

Each of the interviews was conducted via video call (Zoom or Google Meet) in November–December 2022 and April 2023. The interviewees were physically located either in Estonia or Thailand. Two of the interviews were done in Finnish and three in English. Originally, my intention was to conduct strictly semi-structured interviews. My reasoning was that, overall, while providing a pre-planned (structured) framework provides efficiency and assurance for the interview situation, being *semi*-structured enables better reciprocity as a result of flexibility and versatility, which can further lead to more insightful data (Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson & Kangasniemi 2016). This meant preparing an interview guide to be used as a basis for the interviews, while keeping the conversation free-flowing and open to take unplanned or spontaneous directions, in order to allow a wider range of discovery. As noted by deMarrais et al. (2003, p. 52), in order to "construct as complete a picture as possible from the words and experiences of the participant - - the qualitative interview [has to be] open ended enough for the participant to provide a depth of knowledge on the research topic."

The interviews were planned to thematically progress from remote work more generally, to digital nomad visas more specifically and, lastly, to larger scale implications. An example of a full interview guide is included in the appendices of this thesis. Some example questions were:

- How has the field changed for digital nomads as a result of the pandemic (before versus after)?
- Why do people choose Estonia as their remote work / digital nomad destination?
- From a larger perspective, what are the effects of the digital nomad visa on Estonia (in terms of culture, economy etc.)?

While the questions were fixed for each interview, individual differences in the interviewees' areas of specialty and interest required more specific questions to be set before or to arise during the interviews. This tied in with the rise of a more organic flow of conversation: many interviewees were eager to share insight on topics that had not been planned – as the area of information was not known before – but that gave direction for the study in general. The novelty of the topics meant that each interview helped narrow down the scope of the study and, in a way, set the tone for the following interview. Eventually, however, this led to the interviews to assume more *unstructured* forms. In a way, many of the interview situations started resembling conversations more than traditional interviews. Accepting the loosening structures meant letting go of some of the coherence between interviews, while gaining understanding on important topics that enabled arriving to a more illuminating, perhaps more relevant, outcome.

3.5 Analysis

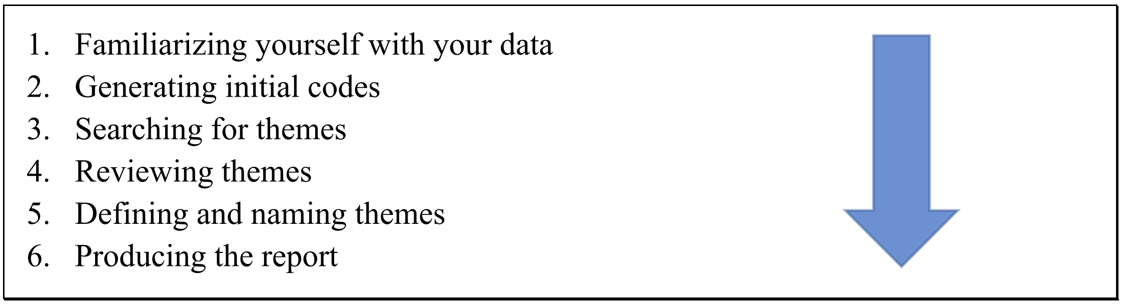
At the start of every interview, each interviewee gave permission for the interview to be recorded. After conducting the interviews, their recordings were processed to be used in the ensuing analysis. The interviews were transcribed into written form – Finnish transcriptions, additionally, being translated into English. Even though proving more time-consuming, it did not feel that working with a multilingual data set had significant effects on the outcomes of the analysis. If there was difficulty retaining the original meaning of the Finnish data – especially when translating colloquial expressions to English – I used several methods to minimize the risk of diminishing the original meanings of the interviewees. Depending on the situation, I provided additional comments in the transcriptions (e.g. original Finnish words), used quotation marks (to emphasize direct translations) or, with regards to some expressions, sought equivalent ones that I experienced to better retain the meaning.

I decided to follow an *inductive* approach for the analysis, where the data would determine the arising themes, and the overall flow of information would move from the specific level to the general (Thomas 2006). In practice, this would mean gathering individual, subjective opinions, experiences and ideas (through the interviews), and deriving larger-scale findings from them. To contrast, due to the novelty of the topic, it did not seem desirable to use an existing theoretical framework for this study: applying a preexisting model to be proved by the data.

In the end, this inductive analysis can be seen as consisting of two separate phases. First, each interview was processed more individually, concentrating on a more narrative-driven approach. This helped lay out the storyline of each interview, while maintaining a cohesive understanding of the whole. After processing each narrative, they were gathered together to start grouping areas into a singular form and comparing the similarities and differences between them.

Next, a more rigorous and formal *thematic analysis* was conducted. To suit the inductive approach, I selected an existing analysis model that would, in my view, best suit the set of data. As presented by Braun & Clarke (2006, p. 87–93), the *six-step thematic analysis model* processes the data, from bottom up, into initial codes that are then grouped into themes. Those themes are reviewed and defined, until they can be used to bring out the results of the analysis. The analysis model is summarized in the following figure.

Figure 3.1: The six-step model for thematic analysis



1. Familiarizing yourself with your data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

Source: Braun et al. (2006, p. 87–93)

Step 1 aligns with the first phase of my analysis process, in which each interview was reviewed in the more narrative-driven way, making notes and listing observations. Generating the initial codes, in Step 2, meant beginning a more detailed analysis, in which the interview transcriptions were scrutinized, highlighting and formulating individual points of data into codes. In Step 3, each code was brought into a single, comprehensive table (demonstrated in the following tables), in which they were arranged and grouped together with similar concepts and ideas. The connections between each set of codes was manifested in the form of themes – acting as higher-level labels. Steps 4 and 5 meant transitioning from the table-form into a more exhaustively structured written document, in which the themes could be reviewed, refined and named. Step 6 – the outcome of this analysis – is presented in the next chapter of this thesis.

In the following tables, I display some instances of the emerging themes, sub-themes and codes of the analysis, as well as the data, meaning quotes from the interviews, from which these results were derived. The codes aim to crystallize the main ideas and thoughts of the interviewees with regards to each quote, whereas the sub-themes and themes, aim to summarize each emerging code. In the large picture, the intention of the sub-themes is to divide the higher-level themes into more specific or areas subsets, instead of directly narrowing down to the codes.

Table 3.2: Thematic analysis examples 1

Theme	Sub-theme	Code	Data	Inter-viewee
Estonia's remote work tracks: connecting digitally to Estonia	Foundations of e-Residency	The e-System is built on Finnish foundations, but Finland did not make it mandatory while Estonia did	"As it all [the implementation of the Estonian ID card] could have been possible for us [Finns] too, but we did not go through with it – it is even based on Finnish [technology], developed in the Finnish banknote printing. While Finland started using it, it was made voluntary."	Tiina
			"On a side note, the [Estonian ID] card was originally copied from Finland, with the only difference being that it was made mandatory in Estonia."	Jaan
			"It is interesting that the Estonian ID card is based on a Finnish invention, which is not known to many. In a way, Finns left themselves in the starting point with regards to this, while Estonians started to work on it."	Leena
		Making digital implementation mandatory helped its success	"To summarize, being in the forefront was rooted in having a digital identity first, but also making it mandatory, which ended up creating a platform."	Jaan

Table 3.3: Thematic analysis examples 2

Theme	**Sub-theme**	**Code**	**Data**	**Interviewee**
Diversification of the digital nomad group	More types of people as digital nomads	The digital nomad demographic is broadening to include more communities, couples, families and older people	"Nowadays, there are a lot more digital nomad communities, couples and families, and older people."	Olivia
		The digital nomad demographic is also broadening from western countries to "low-to-middle income" countries (notably Indians and Africans, with their incomes and travel rights expanding)	"Whereas 'wraditionally' the majority of digital nomads have been coming from western countries (the US, Canada, Australia, Europe…), we are now starting to see a lot more coming from 'low-to-middle income countries' as well"	Olivia
			"There is a really big community of Indians, for example. A lot of Africans are starting to travel noticeably more as well, because they have a lot more income, and their travel rights are slowly expanding"	Olivia
		The demographic is beginning to widen (from young, males, tech/marketing jobs)	"But both due to the growth and maturation of the original nomads, as well as the newer nomads' entry into the population, there are a lot more parents and families within the movement now."	Sarah

In the case of this study, I alone act as the analyst and interpreter of the analysis results. This ties in with the subjective stance and interpretative nature of the study. Stainton Rogers & Willig (2017, p. 20) illustrate how the thematic analysis process embodies the inductive approach: "themes - - are the outcome of the analytic process rather than a starting point. They are not imagined or anticipated early on and do not drive analytic direction." The authors also underline the subjective and interpretative way of the coding and theme development process, stating that "the outcomes of these processes can be stronger or weaker but they cannot be right or wrong in any objective sense" (Stainton Rogers et al. 2017, p. 20).

3.6 Results of the analysis

On a large scale, I identified themes under two areas: The digital nomad phenomenon, and the Estonian outlook. In the big picture, however, these areas are not entirely separate – to some degree, they overlap, such as when talking about Estonian examples of digital nomadism and related arrangements. The resulting empirical findings from the analysis process are explored in the next chapter of the study.

First, with regards to the themes surrounding digital nomadism, the analysis produced four distinct themes, as displayed by the following table.

Table 3.4: Themes surrounding digital nomadism

THEMES I – THE EXPANSION OF DIGITAL NOMADISM
Greater acceptance of remote working after the pandemic
Diversification of the digital nomad group
Digital nomads' broadening sense of identity
Digital nomad arrangements and the rise of digital infrastructures

Next, six different themes around Estonia emerged as a result of the analysis.

Table 3.5: Themes surrounding Estonia

THEMES II – ESTONIAN PROGRESS AND DIGITAL DEVELOPMENTS
Estonia from the Finnish point of view: influencing and contrasting each other
Estonia's recent progress and rise to global recognition
Estonian e-systems and digital foundations
Entering Estonia as a digital nomad
Estonia's remote work tracks: coming physically to Estonia
Estonia's remote work tracks: connecting digitally to Estonia

3.7 Research ethics and evaluation of trustworthiness

To conclude this chapter, I first outline some key ethical considerations of the study – meaning the sets of moral principles driving my research design and practices – after which I finally evaluate its trustworthiness. Throughout the study, my aim has been to retain an ethical research approach to the best of my abilities, striving for honesty, transparency, confidentiality and responsibility. (Resnik 2020.) With regards to the empirical part, the interviewees were informed in advance about the nature of the study and what their role in it was. Each interview was scheduled beforehand, conforming to the availability of the interviewees, and in the start of each video call, each interviewee gave permission for the interview to be recorded. Throughout the research process and after it, the interview data was stored locally on an encrypted hard drive and was not shared with others in its raw form.

During the interviews, I aimed to facilitate a transparent discussion, in which the interviewees would not be compelled to express anything other than their genuine thinking. My intention, as the researcher responsible for representing the voices of the interviewees, has been to retain the original meanings as unaffected as possible. Ultimately, while I recognize that the interpretative nature of the study leads to my own subjective thinking having an influence on the end product, I have strived to not reshape the essence of the research data. The contents of the interviews, as well as the literature review, have not been modified or selectively cut unless actually seen to be unrelated to the topic of study.

Finally, I present some aspects of the study that could have an effect on its trustworthiness. Most of the interviewees have professional connections to Estonia. This can possibly incline them, whether consciously or not, to overly emphasize the role of the country within a more general discussion, as well as "painting a more positive picture" about Estonia. While I have approached this study with a special lens on Estonia, my aim is to not overemphasize its position. I also recognize that some of the topics I covered with the interviewees are ambiguous and not entirely black-and-white, meaning that they might not have definite answers or "solutions". In an interview situation, stating tentative opinions and views as facts is sometimes easier than expressing uncertainty, which means that a certain level of criticality is to be retained while analyzing the data.

4. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

In this section of the thesis, I present the findings of my qualitative study. As a reminder, the research questions set for this study were:

1. *What is the state of digital nomadism following the pandemic?*
2. *Why are digital nomad visas needed?*
3. *What is the role of Estonia in the remote work field?*

The empirical findings follow the outline of the questions, first aiming to reach an understanding about the current state of digital nomadism, then moving on from digital nomad visas to Estonia as the "lens" through which the remote work situation is viewed.

4.1 The expansion of digital nomadism

In a large perspective, the interviewees saw remote work and digital nomadism as gaining ground, following the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviewees suggested that the understanding of digital nomadism is widening – besides the number of digital nomads increasing, the concept of digital nomadism has diversified. As later discussed by the interviewees, there seem to be wider age ranges, more nationalities, and more types of employees and professionals, as opposed to entrepreneurs. This expansion questions the evolving identity of remote workers, while also demonstrating that there are aspects of digital nomadism that have not yet settled: overall, the group has not yet reach wide recognition and there is still a lack of formal structures. Finally, the analysis presents digitality as a type of societal foundation, underlining the role of new digital infrastructures.

4.1.1 Greater acceptance of remote working after the pandemic

When discussing the current state of the digital nomadism, it became apparent that the COVID-19 pandemic had acted as a catalyst for changes, as remarked by Sarah and Tiina. Besides digital nomadism, the nature of remote work as a whole seemed to be becoming more expansive.

> "During the pandemic it was understood that you can be at your summer cottage and work from there and at the same time you can be in Helsinki be in Zoom in some foreign meeting." (Tiina)

In practice, while remote work and digital nomadism had existed pre-pandemic, forcing the world into a remote-working form demonstrated its possibilities in a way that many had not grasped before. Rapid changes ensued, and suddenly a considerable number of professionals realized they had become independent of location. Sarah saw the pandemic acting as a temporal divider between "original nomads" and new nomads:

> "[Original nomads] behave culturally differently than the new nomads, who join this movement following a greater acceptance of remote working – post pandemic – this is a very different thing." (Sarah)

While the implications of this were not discussed, this could refer to getting used to differing remote work settings (with easier access to services and more established systems after the pandemic, including improved video calls) varying levels of tolerance for common travel factors associated with nomadism (greater desire for comfort and luxury with the income bracket moving up, as later noted), more available information and reference material (more blog posts, articles and social media content) and even social factors (increased talk about the phenomenon and a larger community acting as attractive aspects).

This "greater acceptance of remote working" was seen to induce a paradigm shift for remote work altogether, with its future being currently shaped. As explained by Sarah, the countries that could attract the most remote workers were seen as "winners" in the long run, as the workers' actions were predicted to speak on behalf of their needs, in the coming years. The countries would reap the benefits of attracting new talent, which could eventually be seen to lead to economic benefits and cultural diversification. Discovering a suitable strategy early enough was seen as vital, before, ultimately, a broader plateau would be reached:

> "Due to the growing amount of remote work, and the fact that so much is being done online, there is going to be a lot of leveling in the future, and countries that ignore that are in peril. Whoever is being experimental now, is likely going to be the winner in the coming years, because they are going to get the talent that they need for lighting the fire and doing more." (Sarah)

Being in this transformative state means that while digital nomadism is growing, the phenomenon still withholds gray areas that are yet to be settled on. The growth of remote work and nomadicity were seen by the interviewees as self-evident, but they also noted that people generally do not yet grasp the digital phenomena as a whole, including all of its implications. Digital nomadism was seen as a "loosely composed" movement without formal structure, which means that it is difficult trying to define its extent comprehensively (Sarah).

> "Contemporary forms of mobility and nomadicity are accelerating, and it is difficult to imagine them ever disappearing. - - It feels like the scope of the phenomenon has not yet been comprehended." (Leena)

> "There is a lot more people who are embarking upon this lifestyle. - - It is an informal 'membership'." (Sarah)

Sarah referred to seeing digital nomadism as an exclusive group that one could join – without having clear instructions or definitions on how to do it and how to portray being a "member". "Access" to this group would only be tied to identifying as a digital nomad. Overall, this demonstrates the sense of incompleteness related to the phenomenon, despite the growth of its popularity.

4.1.2 Diversification of the digital nomad group

Along with the growing extent of digital nomadism and remote work more generally, Sarah and Olivia described having experienced increased demographic diversity as well; there were more types of people embarking on the digital nomad journey. These included broadening from solo travelers to wider groups (communities, couples, families), from young to older people and more sexes (besides males), as described by Sarah and Olivia. More cultures and origins were starting to be seen represented – especially diversifying from Western to "low-to-middle income" countries (Olivia).

> "There is a really big community of Indians, for example. A lot of Africans are starting to travel noticeably more as well, because they have a lot more income, and their travel rights are slowly expanding." (Olivia)

This diversification was also seen to include more types of work and workers, which would mean a wider range of professions as well as positions. "Because employers were not so down with working this way [not familiar with the phenomenon or not accepting it as a work model]", there was previously a larger share of entrepreneurs, whereas now, there seems to be representation from more corporate ladders, including "executive nomads" that are able to travel at their company's expense (Sarah). At the same time, this widening seemed to have induced greater stability and formalization of the phenomenon. Sarah described digital nomadism to have lost some of its previous volatility, which has led to higher income than before:

> "The original wave of nomads were people who, probably, were more likely to be freelancers, and while they were definitely nomads within the population who made really good money, there was going to be a lot more variability. - - Now it has become more formalized, so as an income bracket, it has shifted up [the average salaries of digital nomads having increased], probably for good." (Sarah)

Thus, it seemed that working as a digital nomad had overcome some of its previous uncertainty. In the current state, arranging and retaining work would be more reliable than in the earlier years of the phenomenon. As a result, digital nomads would generally seem to have heightened their average income as well.

4.1.3 Digital nomads' broadening sense of identity

While the scope of digital nomadism is growing, interviewees noted that building a more thorough understanding of the phenomenon is still difficult due to the lack of access to suitable data. Most often, the available information can only be gathered from those who distinctly identify themselves as digital nomads:

> "No one is able to capture data on nomads very accurately, because it is all self-reported and none of it is global." (Sarah)

In fact, many digital nomads were described to distinctly alienate themselves from the phenomenon, not associating with some of its prominent features that could include indiscretion towards surroundings or a commercialist set of values. Sarah noted that most people would have an opinion about digital nomadism, either bad or good, instead of being indifferent. Even some digital nomads, themselves, avoid associating with the term.

> "A lot of the 'club members' do not even like the term 'digital nomad' - - When it comes to the term itself, very few people do not have an opinion – it is usually either very positive or very negative." (Sarah)

Sarah gave the impression that many digital nomads found the popularity of the phenomenon and its stereotypes off-putting – referring to a sense of superficiality. Another key reason for disassociating with the term could be that during their brief, new recognition, digital nomads have partially built a reputation of being a burden on their destinations. Disagreements have arisen between locals and digital nomads, as the locals had often felt irritated about nomads who failed to get accustomed in the new culture.

> "We have also seen some backlash, protests even. Portugal and Mexico, specifically, have quite a lot of skepticism against digital nomads. They, understandably, do not fully agree that digital nomads should be able to "just roam around" [having an impact on the local culture] – contrary to what many of the nomads themselves believe." (Sarah)

Now, however, a sense of change could be felt in this aspect. As Sarah and Olivia discussed the impacts of digital nomads settling into other cultures, it was described that being "very aware of the culture and the local customs, rules and norms of society" was starting to be seen as integral to fitting in. Consequently, this kind of cultural awareness was noted to be increasing – perhaps as a counterreaction to the previous cultural clash. Olivia referred to cultural adaptation becoming a key part of living the digital nomad life and settling in to other cultures.

> "This [more mindful] part of digital nomadism, this movement, is growing. A lot of digital nomads these days try and be as sustainable and as culturally aware as they can and put money into the local economies." (Olivia)

This leads to a discussion about the identities of digital nomads in general. The interviewees linked nomad identities with a sense of ambiguity – questioning whether they stemmed from "placelessness" itself, or from belonging to something else. Similarly, it was unclear, whether digital nomads needed a sense of *home*. Leena and Tiina remarked that it was possible to "identify with" multiple places at the same time and that the overall way of thinking about geographical areas was evolving.

> "In the future, young people will show an emphasis on the desire and need to move on a larger area than a single country." (Leena)

Leena referred to mobility beyond country borders, with one's identity tied to larger areas than their original home country. Tiina linked this with the concept of "multilocationality" (relating to multiple locations at the same time). When it comes to Estonia and Finland, Leena and Tiina noted that even before the pandemic, there were lots of people without a clear permanent location, blending the two countries together. Leena nicknamed this the "Talsinki phenomenon" (named after the capitals Tallinn and Helsinki). The notable ease of multilocationality between Estonia and Finland, in particular, was seen to be facilitated by the countries' similarities with each other. On the other hand, however, these multilocational people were known to cause confusion at both ends; being thought of arriving as immigrants, as well as leaving their home country in vain.

While Tiina underlined that multilocational people should be considered separate from digital nomads, their ability to promote transcendence of borders was highlighted. The difference to digital nomads would be a routine-like *back-and-forthness* between locations, instead of advancing from one place to the next in a more definitive manner. In other words, where digital nomads would change their locations on a more permanent basis, the people traveling on international business occasions could be described as commuters.

4.1.4 Digital nomad arrangements and the rise of digital infrastructures

While the interviewees largely associated the growth of digital nomadism with becoming more established and gaining ground, it was also noted that beginning as a digital nomad remains a relatively informal process. Sarah described that there is still some obscurity on how to begin as a digital nomad in the first place:

> "New nomads (or people who have not yet embarked beyond this pathway) almost think that there is a committee, of sorts, who gets to decide if you are nomadic 'in a proper way'. It might not be clear, at all, to everybody, how one would start as a nomad." (Sarah)

In fact, it was stated that the actual first steps can be very spontaneous, with not a lot of arrangements made. This would mean that while the amount of available information on digital nomadism has increased, notable frameworks or structures have not yet emerged over the years to help initiate the process. Instead, the beginning phase for digital nomadism resembles what it has traditionally been to this point, being "not a club to join" (Sarah). This ties in with Sarah's previous notion on the phenomenon being "loosely composed".

Leena and Olivia noted that digital nomadism withholds unique considerations for arranging one's life. Leena saw that "putting things to order in the nomadic framework is not simple", meaning that there were intrinsic, systemic aspects to address – not directly related to the nature of the work itself – that traditional employees would not have to consider to the same extent. Olivia illustrated this as digital nomads starting to see more emphasis on "boring adult" topics, such as pensions and wealth management, retirement, social security and taxes. In comparison to a traditional employee, the digital nomad would usually be solely responsible for making these arrangements.

This broadens the conversation to the tangible elements that the digital nomad would require around them in order to arrange their life in the desired way. It became clear that there was a growing need for systems and infrastructures specifically meant for digital nomads. Appropriately, the interviewees noted that digital infrastructures were beginning to emerge around the world exactly for this purpose. Sarah and Olivia alluded to the infrastructure's role as a possible societal foundation: *institutions* were seen to have traditionally acted as a fundamental success factor for democracies, and, these days, digital infrastructures could do the same. Olivia underlined that in order for the institution to work, it needs trust from the people. An anticipatory connection to Finland and Estonia could be seen:

> "Countries with small populations have more interconnectedness between the government, business and civil society, and that can, in fact, be a very positive thing for institution building." (Olivia)

This would imply that the successful implementation of digital infrastructures would depend on the level of trust towards the system. Furthermore, Olivia noted that, a certain level of bottom-up thinking is necessary – it would not be enough to establish the systems, but instead they would have to be built with the tangible applications and the "ground level" in mind.

> "So, there has to be a 'give or take' between the top building and the basics: saying, for instance, which hardware and software is going to be used, and then one would build it in a way that is their own." (Olivia)

In practice, the rise of the digital infrastructures is displayed in digital nomadism: as a new phenomenon, infrastructure is starting to be built specifically for digital nomads.

This includes new types of working spaces and schools (from primary schools up to high schools) which previously did not exist, according to Olivia. Tying in with the diversifying demographics, better access to these infrastructures enables a wider range of people to pursue digital nomadism.

> “Up until now, access to schools has been quite difficult for digital nomad families, particularly for older children. This has limited a lot of digital nomads to only pursue nomadism while their children are babies and toddlers, having to return home and to settle down once they get to school age. Now, however, there are already some promising Montessori type schools, hybrid online-offline schools, and self-learning options, where the idea is more communal. While these things are starting to grow more and more, families will continue, and grow, to travel.” (Olivia)

Thus, compared to previous years, more digital nomads and digital nomad families can pursue the way of life, even with school-aged children, due to increased access to schools that are properly suitable for their lifestyle. In relation to mentioning Estonia, Sarah described the emergence of a larger paradigm shift: “selling” these infrastructures, meaning the use of them as part of the country’s brand, in order to attract foreign talent.

> “Estonia has already shown, through their willingness to innovate with the *e-Residency program* that, in a way, countries can sell their infrastructures to service, and it can be really beneficial for their branding and their tax situation.” (Sarah)

The next section will continue with the established focus on Estonia and what this “willingness to innovate” withholds.

4.2 Estonian progress and digital developments

In this section, following the digital nomad phenomenon, the Estonian perspective is regarded more thoroughly. To act as the basis for viewing Estonia from a Finnish point of view (the innate point of view of this thesis), the section starts by comparing the countries' backgrounds and how they influence each other's perspective. Understanding these backgrounds yields a deeper understanding of particularly the newfound digital success of Estonia. Thereafter, the section turns to the role of digitality in Estonia, leading to foundational systems and unique possibilities for entering the country as a remote worker. A duality between two separate "tracks" for remote work appeared in the study, which not only include the digital nomad visa but also the *e-Residency scheme*. The latter allows one to connect to the Estonia completely digitally.

4.2.1 Estonia from the Finnish point of view: influencing and contrasting each other

Leena and Tiina talked about a sense of obscurity between Estonia and Finland; the countries might not know each other "well enough". According to Tiina, historical writing lacks information about the Estonian–Finnish relations and the shared background of the countries.

> "The Soviet occupation is so strong that even for the younger generation it's difficult to think that we belong together and are the same. The iron curtain used to run in the middle of the Gulf of Finland, and it is hard to know when that thought dissipates." (Tiina)

Leena noted that especially for more distant countries, it is difficult to be able to tell Finland and Estonia apart, while, simultaneously, there has long been talk about joining forces in order to become more inviting for global opportunities. It felt that, for Finland and Estonia, understanding each other better would be necessary and that the current perception needs modernization.

> "We might not know each other as well as we thought, and many people's [thought models] are 20 years behind." (Tiina)

Approaching the contents of this study by asking, what Finland could learn from Estonia in terms of its digital success, the question turns out to have historical roots. Jaan, Leena and Tiina talked about Finland and Estonia learning from each other not only in the current day, but historically as well. Tiina described that traditionally, Finland has, in a way, been seen as a role model for Estonia, acting as the window to the Western world.

Today, the learning areas appear to be somewhat opposite to each other. On the one hand, Tiina depicted Estonia to be able to learn from the "Finnish stability and strong institutions, and planning". Jaan and Tiina agreed that Finland would seem more grounded in both a positive and a negative way, as this would mean balance and innovativeness but also slowness, rigidness and excessive bureaucracy. On the other hand, Finland was noted to be able to learn from the Estonian responsiveness, reaction speed and openness – its "dynamism, flexibility and adaptability", according to Tiina. Jaan and Leena also remarked that Estonia seemed to be reaching some of the same sense of slowness, with increased stability and bureaucracy.

> "Suddenly there is more to lose than to win and things become a bit slower." (Jaan)

With this statement, Jaan makes a comparison to the post-Soviet Estonia, where making reformations and starting anew did not risk endangering integral, existing structures and systems, in the same sense as today. On many fronts, the country could start development directly from a blank slate. Leena agreed with this sentiment:

> "Estonia had the opportunity to skip over a considerable amount of archaic, slow systems and progress directly to the current day." (Leena)

Jaan noted that Estonia's small size additionally helped with the implementation of these reforms, by allowing to be more straightforward. The end result, having turned things around and surviving "against the odds" was seen as remarkable, by Tiina. Finland's way of turning things around was also seen as notable:

> "In the end, it is a miracle… a hundred years ago, we had a high infant mortality rate, we were mauled by the civil war - - extremely poor – how

> did that turn into the happiest country in the world that, in terms of indicators of competitiveness, is at the very top?" (Tiina)

Finland and Estonia's similar historical backgrounds were seen, by Tiina, as one reason for the countries to be able to learn from each other. A similarity was felt in the countries' cores – both had been subdued historically, to different extents. Jaan, Leena and Tiina attributed historical struggle and the ethos of survival as driving forces for Estonia and Finland. Tiina described survival to be a foundational factor for both countries, acting as the source for culture and identity. "Learning the hard way" was felt by Tiina to have established a fundamental sense of flexibility.

Today, where Finland was seen to excel in innovativeness, Estonia's specialty seemed to be in implementation, according to Tiina, who noted that if the countries could combine each other's strengths, it could prove beneficial for both:

> "If the Finn is not able to be as flexible and risk-taking and non-prejudiced, maybe with an Estonian friend they could." (Tiina)

It was clear that both countries had gone through fundamental changes, for the better. Interestingly, there did not seem to be a common idea of what the future would hold. As both countries were noted by the interviewees to be "slowing down", it was left undiscussed, whether this direction of development would continue or, instead, seek to change again.

4.2.2 Estonia's recent progress and rise to global recognition

All interviewees referred, in some form, to Estonia's recent societal and technological development. Leena, Sarah and Tiina described an accelerating nature to this. Tiina outlined Estonia catching up and even surpassing Finland in some areas; Leena saw the country as a pioneer in digital systems and Sarah as one of the pioneers in remote work.

> "While Estonia is not the only country with these kinds of systems, Estonia can be seen as a pioneer." (Leena)

> "Estonia is, without a doubt, one of the countries to keep an eye on [with regards to being ahead of others in digital nomad developments]." (Sarah)

This newfound progress was explained by certain critical steps taken in the start of the millennium, according to Jaan, Leena and Tiina. Tiina described governmental actions in the 2000s–2010s to having eventually led to positive effects, even though it was not easy to agree with them at the time. Jaan illustrated this by describing, how the digital scheme did not have a clearly paved path and how being a pioneer meant taking a "leap of faith":

> "In the beginning of the 2000s, it was very hard to rationalize the need to have an electronic ID and the qualified electronic signature. Instead, it was easy to criticize the system." (Jaan)

> "In the end, a certain leap of faith needed to be taken – perhaps alongside the 'risk appetite' of restarting a country." (Jaan)

Indeed, Olivia emphasized that doing the groundwork early was a definitive factor for the country's progress. In a way, the eventual success was up to the foresight of only a few individuals ("certain politicians" according to Jaan), who saw the prospective opportunities of the digital systems and made their implementation all-encompassing. Ever since, the branding of "e-Estonia" has been deliberate, and awareness about it has been spread across the world by even governmental figures (Tiina). As a result, newfound recognition and heightened identity were perceived as effects of Estonia's success; Olivia and Tiina both alluded to the country carving itself a place of international acknowledgement, with Olivia referring to digital systems as one of the definite reasons:

> "Estonia has sort of redeemed its visibility in the international sense – that it exists." (Tiina)

> "A lot of people have not heard of Estonia until they start Google-searching for the 'digital nomad visa' and they realize that there is this tiny country in Europe." (Olivia)

The digital success was described to having raised the Estonian self-esteem – particularly in relation to Finland, towards which there has existed an inferiority complex, of sorts – and the fact that the Estonian people were proud of this was apparent. Leena attributed Estonia's digital success to the role of "ease" – especially flexibility and rapidity as underlying factors. It all seemed to be part of "a larger phenomenon, in which 'ease' is seen, in a way, in everything" (Leena). One of the key factors for this appeared to be taking the effort to centralize the digital areas and services, instead of acting as separate, unrelated entities. As discussed next, this centralization ties in with having a common, electronic foundation to all digital infrastructures – which themselves have an extensive grasp throughout the society.

4.2.3 Estonian e-systems and digital foundations

Having established a substantial digital foundation means that digitality has a notable, all-encompassing role in Estonia:

> "In a way, it is surprising, how extensively everything in Estonia is conducted electronically, which is very convenient." (Leena)

While entering Estonia as a digital nomad is its own separate process, with its own unique considerations, the extensiveness of digitality, as a fundamental aspect for regular Estonian citizens, helps illustrate the country's readiness for further digital developments. In other words, the ability to successfully facilitate digital nomads and remote workers arises from the fact, that digitality is woven into the Estonian society, as a whole.

All of Estonia's digital systems were noted by Leena to have a common basis, the *X-Road* system, developed in Estonia, meaning the technological foundation on which everything was built on. This "open-source software and ecosystem solution that provides unified and secure data exchange between private and public sector organisations" is described as the “backbone of e-Estonia” (e-Estonia, 2023). Tiina remarked that Estonia had gifted this capability to Finland, to act as a similar foundation for Finland’s own *Suomi.fi* system. Interestingly, as noted by the Finnish *Digital and Population Data Services Agency* (2018), this has allowed Finland and Estonia to connect their “data exchange layers” (“uniform data transfer methods” for simplified “exchange of information”), making it “technologically possible to transfer data electronically over the Gulf of Finland between organisations”. While the outcomes are yet to be seen, in practice, this appears to act as an important foundation for future cooperation between the two countries.

Now, the digital roots of Estonia contribute to tangible developments, as the electronic systems can be further implemented to new innovations. Tiina introduced the “electronic embassy” scheme, in which the “basic data of diplomacy” – meaning important government documents – was stored in the cloud in Luxembourg, ensuring state continuity in a new way:

> “State continuity is not dependent anymore in the same sense as during World War II [when] papers were burned, and things were told to not have existed – after which the international community could only twiddle their thumbs.” (Tiina)

In terms of embodiments of the extensive digitality in Estonia, perhaps the most foundational form was indicated to be the *Electronic ID card*. Jaan described the country’s systems to be largely founded on the electronic identity:

> “The digital way of doing things is heavily linked to the strong digital identity card – having an electronic identity.” (Jaan)

According to e-Estonia (2023), “people use their e-IDs to pay bills, vote online, sign contracts, shop, access their health information, and much more.” To contrast, in Finland, for example, similar kind of online identification is tied with one’s banking credentials. This makes the Electronic ID card a prerequisite, of sorts, for being able to live in Estonia, according to Tiina:

> "The Estonian ID card is like an entrance ticket with which you can do anything – with the flip side that without it, it is hard to do anything at all." (Tiina)

Where the Soviet legacy would traditionally imply distrust towards authorities and government systems, Jaan called attention to an increased sense of trust and validity towards Estonian documents. Jaan attributed this partly to the documents being governed by the European-wide *Electronic ID Association (EIDAS)*. An additional benefit to this governance seemed to be that the EIDAS backed documents are valid all across the continent. This ties in with Olivia's remark on the successful implementation of digital infrastructures being dependent on the level of trust towards the system.

When it comes to immigration, however, Estonia poses strict limitations for foreign professionals. First of all, Jaan noted that entering the country requires a visa or a work permit, if one's passport does not allow it automatically. Then, Jaan, Leena and Tiina referred to the yearly quota and salary limits that dictate who is allowed to enter the country:

> "The number of foreign workers that can come into Estonia is regulated by a yearly quota that usually fills up in only 2 weeks after opening, in the start of the year." (Jaan)

> "There is a very strict quota for lower education level workers in Estonia: approximately 6000 people per year, which usually gets filled within the first week[s] of the year." (Leena)

As remarked by Leena and Tiina, the immigration limits do not concern talent pools that exceed certain "salary caps", meaning that more "highly positioned" workers have much easier access to Estonia than those who fall under the quota.

> "The Estonian mindset with regards to different experts is much the same; the higher the position, the easier it is to enter the country." (Leena)

Digital nomads and IT professionals generally surpass these salary limits, according to Tiina, which ties in with the idea, posed by Leena, that digital nomads are generally associated with more highly educated, highly skilled (migrant) professionals. In fact, Tiina pointed to Estonia's ambition to increase foreign talent, and Leena noted that Finland had the possibility to similarly attract foreign talent with digital systems:

> "Estonia is very eager, possibly even more so than Finland, to scrape together international talent and does everything in its power to get them to stay." (Tiina)

> "In the future, Finland can, indubitably, attract foreign workers, as digital systems are a strong factor, indeed." (Leena)

Being in a somewhat conflicting state, Leena and Tiina both expressed that much of the strictness of the quota ties in with Estonia's history and geo-political relations. What makes the situation even more difficult is that there is a need for a wider range of essential workers in the country, according to Leena. In order to fill these worker needs, while bypassing the quota, Leena noted that Estonia uses (less expensive) hired workforce from other countries.

4.2.4 Entering Estonia as a digital nomad

Screening the people that enter Estonia seemed to touch digital nomads as well. Sarah portrayed that even among remote workers, different "markets", or categorizations of people, could be identified. All in all, immigration could benefit from a "marketing funnel" way-of-thinking, where countries would identify "leads" (specific types of professionals to attract) and "filter" them down to ideal customers (choosing the actions that would get them to enter the country and stay) (Sarah). The "workcation" market was recognized, by Sarah, as a related, upper category for digital nomadism, more generally implying tourists who work while traveling. It was noted that compared to previous years, workcation periods were increasing:

> "People will be doing that more frequently and for longer periods. So, rather than someone taking a two-week holiday, they end up taking a six-week holiday, during which they will work for 3 or 4 of those weeks." (Sarah)

"Workcationers" display a connection to digital nomads more specifically, by raising a question about the right to work in the specific country they are traveling to. They would need their own work permission "as long as the worker does not work for any local entities or accidentally trigger their tax residency" (Sarah). A normal tourist visa would not allow this. Moreover, Sarah noted that tourist visas oversimplified the backgrounds of visa holders, as they would be dependent on the nationality of the visa holder. Sarah illustrated that the power of the applicant's passport (the number of countries that they could easily enter) would concentrate on representing government relations instead of the actual background of the individual. This way, separation from tourist visas would make the process fairer for all applicants.

For both of these reasons, the digital nomad visa seemed like a logical solution, as an extension of immigration options. Sarah depicted that in return, workcationers could benefit countries by diversifying their tourism, providing buffer for travel seasons and variance for locations (to include "smaller towns and more rural destinations").

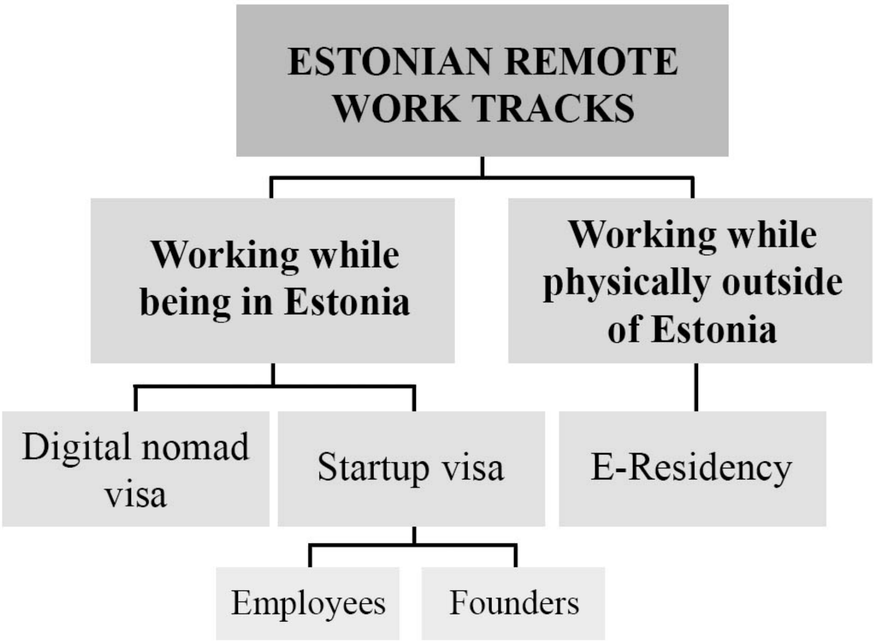
4.2.5 Estonia's remote work tracks: coming physically to Estonia

Jaan presented an interesting duality for remote work "tracks" in Estonia. It became apparent that it was possible to do remote work either *physically* in the country or by *digitally* gaining access to the country from elsewhere:

> "With regards to digital nomadism and remote work, Estonia has two different 'tracks': the physical and the digital track." (Jaan)

According to Jaan, the physical track consists of the digital nomad visa and the startup visa, and the digital track implies the e-Residency scheme. These tracks are summarized in the figure below and explored more thoroughly in the following sections.

Figure 4.1: Estonian remote work tracks


ESTONIAN REMOTE WORK TRACKS
Working while being in Estonia
Working while physically outside of Estonia
Digital nomad visa
Startup visa
E-Residency
Employees
Founders

Source: Empirical data

First, the physical track was described to consist of coming to Estonia with a visa. For this, there were a couple of alternatives, of which, perhaps unsurprisingly, the digital nomad visa appeared as the most notable one.

Digital nomad visa

Olivia noted that currently, Estonia has a 6-month time limit for the digital nomad visa, after which the visa holder would become a tax resident. The launch of the Estonian digital nomad visa appeared to have good timing in terms of publicity:

> "The visa was launched exactly into the 'second wave' of Covid, and as a result, it caught a lot of press and attention." (Jaan)

For countries generally, the challenges around digital nomad visas seemed to be arising from preexisting legislation and even contradicting the constitution. According to Olivia, many countries eager to establish digital nomad visas would often quickly end up finding hindrances:

> "A lot of the countries bring up nomad visas with the idea that 'it is going to be amazing, everyone is going to come here, you do not have to pay taxes…', and then, looking at their legislation and constitution, they realize that an abundance of changes would be required, and it would take a long time. That can be seen as a large issue." (Olivia)

Moreover, Sarah expanded on the complexity of digital nomad visas by describing that a majority of digital nomads do not actually use them. Instead, most would (illicitly) rely on tourist visas, which would also determine their travel destinations. Digital nomad visas were seen as still quite unknown – many digital nomads appeared to not have even heard of them, according to Sarah. A peculiar duality also emerged for the *demand and supply* of digital nomad visas: many of the countries offering digital nomad visas were not on the "nomad radar" (seen as attractive by the nomads) in the first place, whereas many popular nomad destinations did not have digital nomad visas to offer at all (Sarah).

Another grand concern, raised by Sarah, was that many of the current digital nomad visas did not actually seem to meet the nomads needs.

> "Because of [the visas'] newness, a lot of them are not very good – they do not really actually solve the pain points [of digital nomads]." (Sarah)

> "A common problem with proposals for digital nomad visas has been that the qualification criteria have cut out people who *are* digital nomads." (Sarah)

While not giving examples, Sarah possibly referred to people who live the digital nomad lifestyle but, for instance, fall short of a country's high income requirements – making less money than is set as the limit for applying. Forms of employment could also hamper digital nomads. Traditionally, being an entrepreneur or having one’s own company has been a problem for attaining a digital nomad visa, according to Sarah. Ideally, the form of employment should not be an obstruction. Furthermore, there arose a question of whether some visas were truly digital nomad visas or just existing visas with a new, more popular name. There seems to be not enough transparency on whether a nomad’s remote work situation is actually supported:

> “There are other types of schemes as well, such as Indonesia, seeming to be going ‘the rebrand route’ – the same way that a café might rebrand themselves as a coworking space, while really just offering the same amenities.” (Sarah)

> “A lot of what people call digital nomad visas could be more accurately referred to as ‘remote work residency programs.’” (Sarah)

Furthermore, some current visas appeared to dismiss one of the fundamental points of nomadism: the ability for frequent and easy travel:

> “[Digital nomads] prioritize mobility and they want to go to many places without extra hassle.” (Sarah)

> “If you have to be somewhere for two years and it is a lengthy application process – especially if it is a residency requirement, meaning that you have to be in the country for so-and-so many days in order to continue with your visa – or if you are expected to be a tax resident, that should not be considered a digital nomad visa, because digital nomads want to travel more frequently and easily.” (Sarah)

To elaborate, Sarah stated that digital nomad visas need to be short-term, temporary in nature, allowing for setting up local bank accounts, accessing local services and amenities, and perhaps registering taxes, if seen necessary. It was noted that a lot of digital nomads do not care about pathways for long term residency, but just wish to have access to local services during their limited stay.

In terms of visa eligibility, Estonia was seen, by Sarah (not associated with Estonia professionally), as a pioneer by setting broad-enough criteria, compared to many other restrictive options. By serving a wider range of workers, it was seen that the country could set an example for others as well:

> "With that information [on the factors of a successful digital nomad visa scheme, meaning the Estonian visa] existing out there, governments are able to follow the example, in order to be more inclusive and appropriate with their own upcoming visas." (Sarah)

As it was outlined that some digital nomad visas themselves seem to miss the point, it became evident that the application processes for the visas, too, need improvements – they "often misunderstand the nomads' needs and abilities" (Sarah). Problems were identified regarding the physical site, price and transparency of the application process. Where the Estonian digital nomad visa can be applied and picked up in Estonian embassies around the world, some processes strictly require the applicant to apply physically from their home country, as noted by Sarah. For digital nomads, this would pose a crucial difference, since it could mean interrupting their travel, having to fly half-way across the world just to be able to apply.

Sarah portrayed that the Estonian visa eligibility could be even more lenient by, for example, setting lower income requirements. Currently at a "minimum threshold" of €4,500 "during the six months preceding the application" to be entitled to apply for a visa, the number is quite high for many applicants (Republic of Estonia e-Residency 2023b). Even though many visas were even more expensive, Sarah still saw the high prices as an understandable approach:

> "This is likely on purpose, as the countries are being quite transparent about this – the idea being that only wealthy people [being more attractive from

> the country's perspective] are allowed to come to the country this way." (Sarah)

In this sense, the essential point to consider was underlined to be the transparency of the visa fees, as some issuers would require large payments upfront without the nomad knowing whether the process goes through in the first place:

> "As long as the transparency remains, this is acceptable. But it is not always like this. Some of the application processes have large, non-refundable fees – for example, where you would have to commit around $500 upfront without knowing, whether the process is going to work or not." (Sarah)

Finally, it was emphasized that digital nomads' origins should not matter if they meet relevant criteria for the visa – especially with people, whose passports do not allow visa-free visits to as many countries.

> "It should not matter what country they are from. - - If the digital nomad knows that they are getting a 6-month visa during which they will be able to legally work, it is likely that more people are more willing to 'jump those hoops.' This would be especially true for people from countries such as the Philippines or India, that do not have very strong passports [being easily able to visit many countries]" (Sarah)

As noted with reference to the workcation scheme, a certain level of reciprocity is expected between the nomad and the country of stay. Sarah described that "because of that longer length of stay, they are going to ask for certain infrastructure, but they are also going to give back something", meaning that in return for access to local services and systems, digital nomads would "offer" tech talent and youth leading to economic growth – besides the aforementioned diversification of the tourism market, too (Sarah). In the case of Estonia, ultimately, the digital nomad phenomenon is still in an early state, and while actions are taken towards better facilitation for digital nomads, it is difficult to make high-level conclusions regarding their effect on the country:

> “In the end, it is still a rather early to review the effects that digital nomads have had on Estonia.” (Olivia)

> “A lot of work is being put into improving the infrastructure and the services available for digital nomads – for instance, trying to find business partners that they can work with, to encourage more people to come.” (Olivia)

It can be expected that in the coming years, Estonia will aim to retain its role of pushing the digital nomad visa forwards. So far, the developments have happened at a quick pace, implying that it will not take long to see further effects of digital nomads on Estonia.

Startup visa

Linking back to the Estonian remote work duality, to contrast the digital nomad visa, Jaan also introduced another option for the *physical track*: the startup visa. There are two versions: the startup visa for *founders* and the startup visa for *employees*:

> “A type of business visa, the first enables founders to set up a startup in Estonia without the need to have a business ready yet or a bigger, established company - - vouching for them. On the other hand, the startup visa for employees makes it easier for people, especially from outside of the EU, to move to Estonia for work purposes.” (Jaan)

The startup visa has a distinct public–private foundation: Jaan depicted that contrary to common visa issuance, the startup visa is not the responsibility of the “police and the border guard” but instead driven by the startup ecosystem itself:

> “Based on the ecosystem’s preliminary decision, the Estonian Ministry of the Interior (responsible for handling the visa process) confirms that the criteria” for issuance “[have] been agreed on.” (Jaan)

Notably, the startup visa has a direct connection with Estonia’s strict immigration quota, being one of the means to bypass it:

> “Because [the quota] can be seen as being too rigid and less appealing, the startup track has been set up as one way for alleviating the process: it allows companies to bring in talent from 3rd countries by this ‘high-added-value industry’.” (Jaan)

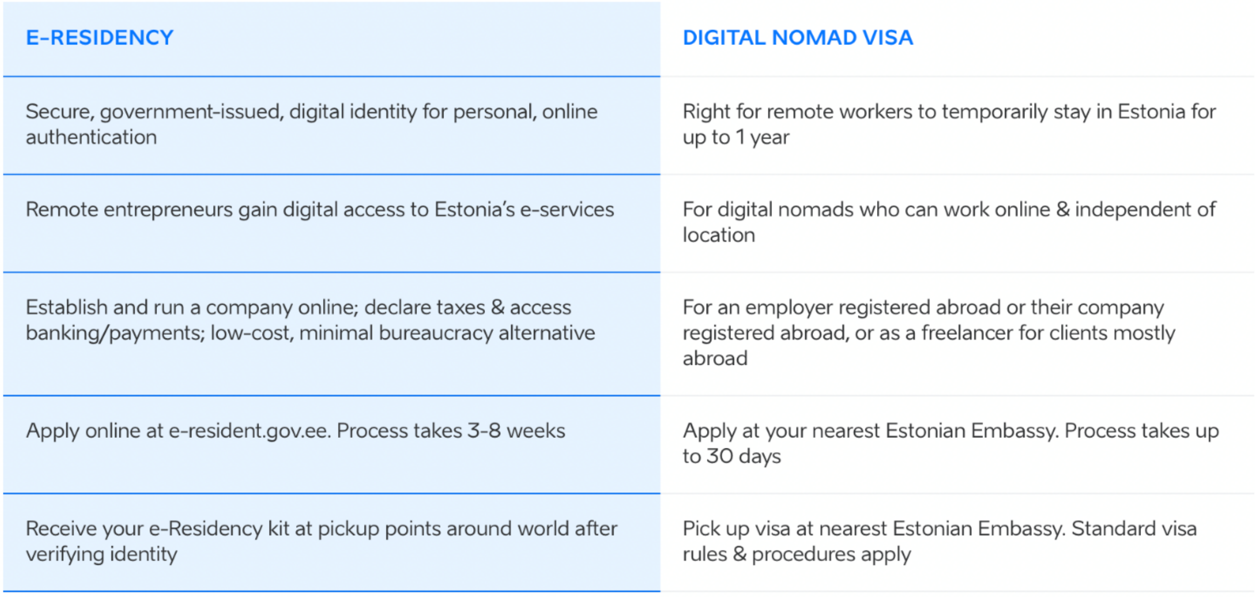
As a notable difference to the digital nomad visa, the applicant for the startup is tied to physically incorporating a company in Estonia. The startup visa allows one to “develop their innovative products physically in Estonia. It gives tax and credit benefits, access to e-government services, and investment opportunities in the Estonian jurisdiction” (Enty 2023). Furthermore, the permit appears to be for the business itself, whereas the applicant still needs a separate “temporary residence permit” (Enty 2023). In contrast, the digital nomad visa connects the personal and business side of a professional, not requiring the application of separate documents or the establishment of businesses in Estonia.

4.2.6 Estonia’s remote work tracks: connecting digitally to Estonia

Next, following the *physical vs digital* duality of Estonia presented by Jaan (summarized in Figure 4.1), the substantial role of connecting digitally to Estonia from outside of the country was explored. In practice, this implied the Estonian e-Residency scheme that was mentioned by each interviewee, on their own initiative.

The e-Residency and the digital nomad visa can be primarily viewed as two different remote work forms in Estonia – even though, as later discussed, they do have their interrelated aspects as well. The following table summarizes the differences between the e-Residency and the digital nomad visa – arguably the two most popular digital work schemes in Estonia.

Table 4.1: Differences between e-Residency and Digital Nomad Visa



E-RESIDENCY	DIGITAL NOMAD VISA
Secure, government-issued, digital identity for personal, online authentication	Right for remote workers to temporarily stay in Estonia for up to 1 year
Remote entrepreneurs gain digital access to Estonia's e-services	For digital nomads who can work online & independent of location
Establish and run a company online; declare taxes & access banking/payments; low-cost, minimal bureaucracy alternative	For an employer registered abroad or their company registered abroad, or as a freelancer for clients mostly abroad
Apply online at e-resident.gov.ee. Process takes 3-8 weeks	Apply at your nearest Estonian Embassy. Process takes up to 30 days
Receive your e-Residency kit at pickup points around world after verifying identity	Pick up visa at nearest Estonian Embassy. Standard visa rules & procedures apply

Source: Republic of Estonia e-Residency (2023b)

As described by Jaan, fundamentally, e-Residency enables accessing Estonia's systems and services online, anywhere in the world, without physically entering the country. As with the Estonian digital nomad visa, the Estonian e-Residency can be issued from a broad number of Estonian embassies around the world (Companio 2023). Originally developed to foster foreign business in Estonia in a remote way, the scheme means that Estonia offers an "electronic residency" for those not physically residing in Estonia (Jaan). It was seen as an "access card" to Estonian business by Leena or getting a digital "membership" to Estonia by Olivia. Tiina portrayed that, in a way, the e-Residency scheme identified one as a member of the Estonian society. However, it was emphasized, by Jaan and Tiina, that it did not mean *citizenship* in any form and that, despite its name, it did not actually allow (physical) *residency* in Estonia.

To elaborate on this, Jaan described that e-Residency stemmed from the idea "to help foreign business people who had business interest in Estonia, to interact with government agencies, banks and other institutions without having to physically be in the country".

> "In the case of Estonia, most of these interactions happen online, which means that they could not be properly done until attaining an Electronic ID. Before having one, you would need to physically visit a government office, which, in the case of most foreign investors and business people would not be possible. The first idea was to give these people the ID, to enable them to interact with the government in the same way that the locals do. But, because there was quite high interest from all kinds of people from around the world – without any existing business interactions with Estonia yet but with a desire to become e-residents – it was seen as an opportunity to invite more people to do business with Estonia." (Jaan)

Linking back to Estonia's vast electronic foundation, e-Residency has a direct connection to the Estonian ID card. It is one of the digital systems built on the same principles, as noted by Tiina:

> "Overall, it is about identification: how to make sure that you are exactly who you claim to be." (Tiina)

Interestingly, Jaan, Leena and Tiina remarked that all of Estonia's e-systems were built on Finnish technology, with the difference that Finland did not implement them in a mandatory way, while Estonia did. In Estonia's case, the electronic foundation was made an obligatory part of citizenship and identification, which helped its success, according to the interviewees.

> "As it all could have been possible for [Finnish people] too, but we did not go through with it – it is even based on Finnish [technology], developed in the Finnish banknote printing. While Finland started using it, it was made voluntary." (Tiina)

> "On a side note, the card was originally copied from Finland, with the only difference being that it was made mandatory in Estonia." (Jaan)

> "It is interesting that the Estonian ID card is based on a Finnish invention, which is not known to many. In a way, Finns left themselves in the starting point with regards to this, while Estonians started to work on it." (Leena)

Leena noted that from a "company perspective", in Estonia, e-Residency is more prominent than the digital nomad visa. Combined with the newness of the visa (versus the longer establishment of the e-Residency), this partly explained, why some interviewees seemed to be more familiar with the e-Residency than the visa.

In terms of the types of professionals to apply for e-Residency, according to Sarah, a notable portion of e-residents are founders and entrepreneurs. Olivia and Tiina also expressed that in Estonia, it was typical to for digital nomads to be e-residents. This means that while digital nomadism and e-Residency could be considered separate "tracks" in Estonia, they can also be interlinked and stemming from each other. In fact, the early adopters of the e-Residency scheme were depicted to have been location independent entrepreneurs and digital nomads, by Olivia. For many digital nomads, the process could follow a linear order: e-Residency was noted, by Tiina, to have acted as a *connector* to Estonia, in the first place:

> "The e-Residency scheme has played a part, not necessarily because it gives the right to enter the country, but because it has connected a lot of digital nomads to the country." (Olivia)

The same linearity could be observed on the design level as well: Olivia portrayed e-Residency as a type of foundation for the digital nomad visa:

> "In a way, the groundwork that was put towards the e-Residency in the early years – promoting starting a business in Estonia without having to visit here – actually has now benefited them, in the sense that the digital nomad visa was set up after all of that, during Covid." (Olivia)

For digital nomads, as described by Olivia, e-Residency removes unnecessary bureaucracy by being able to run the business completely digitally:

> "Many digital nomads are looking for an easy, completely digital way to run their business (or being a freelancer) - -. A lot of countries in the world do not have that yet. In most cases, one would still need to go to the government office or a notary; one would still have to do things with paper, whereas starting a company completely digitally – being able to use business banking, file taxes, do annual reports, all online – is one of the best options for digital nomads." (Olivia)

E-Residency also appears to allow digital nomads to streamline their taxation – concentrating it in Estonia while being physically located elsewhere:

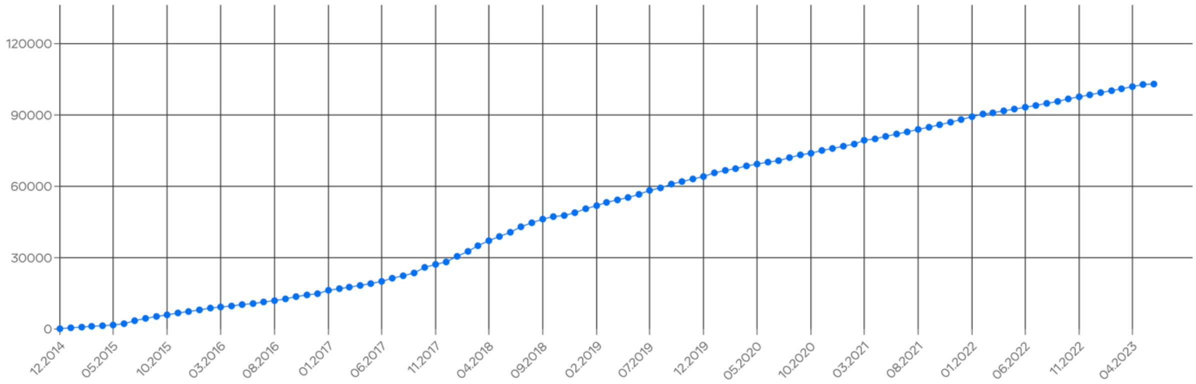
> "A lot of digital nomads do not have a tax residency, and because they are traveling a lot, they will have a very good argument to pay their company taxes in Estonia. There will not be other countries pursuing their tax money with the argument that they are residing, and doing work, in a different country than where their company is registered." (Olivia)

This way, while continuing their lifestyle, traveling between countries, digital nomads would not be required to pay taxes for each country separately.

While e-Residency is still in a relatively early phase and its large-scale implications are not entirely clear, it seems to play a big role for Estonia. Jaan noted that the number of e-residents is already high: just over 100,000, amounting to around 7.5% of the whole Estonian population (Republic of Estonia e-Residency 2023a). Interestingly, this would amount to the second largest "city" in Estonia, only trailing the capital Tallinn, with around 450,000 people at the time of writing (Statistics Estonia 2023).

Because e-Residency has to be applied and granted, e-residents are easier to track than digital nomads, leading to more accurate statistics on them. Data from the e-Residency program shows a steady climb on the number of e-residents themselves as well as the number of companies established by them, as illustrated by the following graphs.

Figure 4.2: Number of Estonian e-residents over time

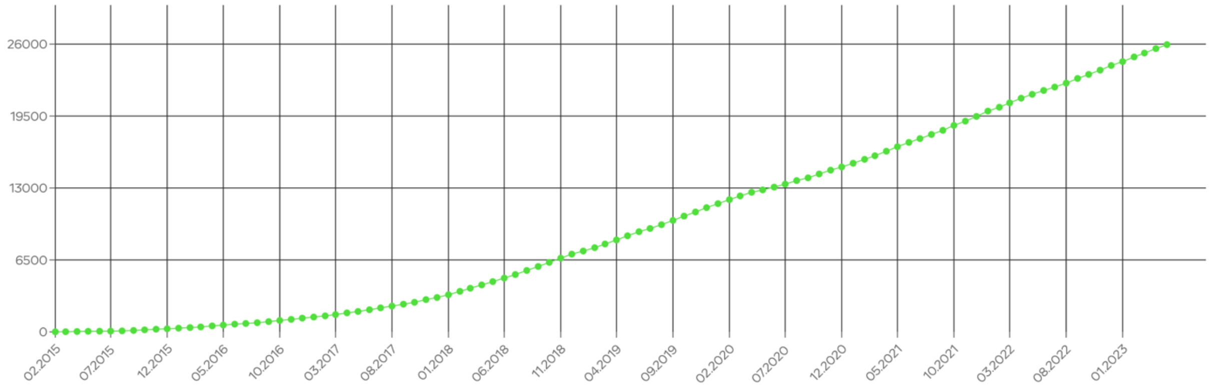


Source: Republic of Estonia e-Residency (2023a)

Moreover, e-residents seem to have a large role in starting Estonian businesses – each year, around 20% of those established – that, in turn, have a large local impact:

> "At this point, e-resident companies have hired around 3.5–4 thousand people locally, providing direct benefit to the country, as their taxes are also paid locally, diversifying the business environment." (Jaan)

Figure 4.3: Number of Estonian companies established by e-residents



Source: Republic of Estonia e-Residency (2023a)

On a global scale, e-Residency is able to broaden the scope of doing business beyond the Nordic neighbors, as it creates business connections that otherwise could not be reached:

> "[At the time of interviewing], people from 173 different countries have become Estonian e-residents – with most of whom there would otherwise be no business connection." (Jaan)

These figures indicate that the Estonian e-Residency scheme will continue to grow in the coming years, becoming increasingly more prominent in its role for the country. Overall, the extent of different "tracks" for remote work in Estonia displays the country's advancement in digitality and portrays a unique willingness to innovate.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this final chapter of the thesis, I will first revisit the research questions presented at the start of the study. These questions are then answered by reviewing the empirical findings and comparing them to the literature review. Simultaneously, the aim is to crystallize the key ideas of the empirical section. After this, the concluding results are presented and some notable differences between the literature and empirical data are identified. This thesis ends by presenting key conclusions from the study and, finally, considering its limitations as well as areas for future research.

5.1 Summary

In the beginning of the study, digital nomads were identified as an extreme case of digital workforce, most personifying *lifestyle mobility* by displaying High Uncertainty and High Mobility (Hannonen 2020; Ens et al. 2018). In order to pursue their lifestyle and tackle some of the key challenges, it became clear that digital nomads had unique requirements, related to their length of stay and form of employment, for example. At the time of gathering information, digital nomad visas appeared as perhaps the most notable, new, exclusive development for the group of people. The importance of attaining an understanding on the role of these visas was underlined by their novelty, and the apparent pace at which the schemes were developing.

The empirical data and the research literature were able to supplement each other, by offering more insight on some of the topics covered less deeply by the other. Due to the design of the study, especially the empirical data deepened the understanding on many important topics, such as the digital nomad demographics, while also bringing to light new ones to examine, such as the issues around digital nomad visas and broader remote work possibilities. On the other hand, to illustrate some of the key areas where the research literature and empirical data offered unique perspectives to each other, they are juxtaposed in the following table. Double lines divide the table into three sections, representing the three separate research questions.

Table 5.1: Previous research versus my interview study

Key finding	Previous research	My interview study
Expansion of digital nomadism	Increased number of nomads, generally (e.g. Stumpf et al. 2022)	Increased diversity as well: nationalities, types and levels of workers, wider age ranges, more even gender distribution
Groups besides solo nomads	Nomad couples mentioned in passing (Cook 2020)	Nomad couples, families and groups of nomads discussed more purposefully
Range of professions as digital nomads	Questioned whether widening beyond the ICT sector (e.g. Reichenberger 2018; Richter et al. 2020)	Not considered
Employment vs entrepreneurship	A sense that most nomads are entrepreneurs – entrepreneurship noted as a key feature for nomadism (Schlagwein 2018; Bartosik-Purgat 2018)	A sense of change: now more higher corporate level nomads; income bracket has shifted up
"Evolution" of digital nomads	An ongoing development	Pandemic as a tangible divider between "original and new nomads" (greater acceptance of remote work); change in mindset
Global recognition of digital nomads	World not solidified around digital nomadism, noting that regular vacation settings will not suffice for them (Stumpf et al. 2022)	Recent rise of specific digital nomad infrastructure (working spaces, schools); possible function as a societal foundation
Other arrangements regarding the digital nomad life	Not necessarily explored	Noticing more discussion on "boring adult topics" (e.g. pensions and wealth management, retirement, social security and taxes)
Sense of place and home	A feeling of home is needed, even if ambiguous; roots can be distributed across the globe (Cohen et al. 2015; Williams and McIntyre 2001)	Questioning whether identity arises from placelessness itself
Digital nomads' effect on tourism	Bringing more revenue because of longer stay (Krakat 2021)	Diversifying, providing buffer for travel seasons and variance for locations
Digital nomads' effect on economies more generally	Bringing in talent and youth, leading to longer-term economic growth (Sánchez-Vergara et al. 2023)	Agreeing, while also noting a fairer access for nationalities with restrictive passports, meaning a wider range of people

Countries' lack of suitable digital nomad visas	Recognition of need for more flexibility and transparency (Sánchez-Vergara et al. 2023; Ehn et al. 2022)	Agreed, including the application process; also noting that some schemes are posed as digital nomad visas while in truth other types of regular schemes
Other remote work options for digital nomads	Generally not explored	Juxtaposition with e-Residency – specifically for those nomads with business in mind; notion that the schemes can coexist, be parallel to each other
Alternatives/parallels to the Estonian digital nomad visa	Not covered	Startup visa, e-Residency – noted that they do not necessarily cancel each other out, e.g. e-Residency can act as the connector for digital nomads
The success of "e-Estonia"	Recognized but reasons for it not explored (Hindriks 2020)	Attributed to good implementation and being able to skip over hurdles when restarting the country after the Soviet collapse

Overall, after conducting the analysis and comparing the literature and empirical data, this study was able to shed light into the areas outlined by the research questions, while expanding the understanding about digital nomadism, digital nomad visas and the role of Estonia. It was also demonstrated that the themes are somewhat ambiguous, especially due to the novelty of the phenomena in question. Many themes around digital nomadism have not yet adopted a clear form.

5.2 Answering the research questions

There were three main objectives for this study. The first objective was to provide a state-of-the art understanding of digital nomadism. This acted as the basis for the study and further examination around the phenomenon. Secondly, more solid awareness on the role of digital nomad visas would be pursued, exploring the state of their necessity. Due to the novelty of the visa schemes, at the time of the study, it seemed that digital nomad visas had started gaining a lot of attention, but the information on them had not yet reached a fully cohesive level and was somewhat scattered. Besides, a lot of the written information was not academic in nature but instead found in internet articles and blogs. Finally, seeing Estonia emerge as one of the most prominent countries with regards to the initial conversation on digital nomad visas, the third aim was to build on this understanding, tackling the presumption that the country was a pioneer in the field.

The research questions ensuing from these objectives were:

1. *What is the state of digital nomadism following the pandemic?*
2. *Why are digital nomad visas needed?*
3. *What is the role of Estonia in the remote work field?*

Next, each question will be answered individually, through the lenses of the literature review and the empirical findings.

5.2.1 The widened state of digital nomadism following the pandemic

The first research question was: *What is the state of digital nomadism following the pandemic?*

In short, it was apparent, based on the literature review and the empirical data, that the digital nomad phenomenon has gained a wider grasp in the recent years and can be expected to continue to grow (e.g. Stumpf et al. 2022). The study made clear that digital nomadism has diversified noticeably compared to its pre-pandemic state, now consisting of more types of people and work. This way, the interviews showed that the phenomenon seems to be even larger than suggested by the current literature.

Both the literature and the interviewees described that, besides increasing interest towards digital nomadism more specifically, the pandemic had solidified the adoption of remote work overall. It also proved to many that they were able to work remotely in the first place. (Wang et al. 2020; Shadel 2021; Stumpf et al. 2022.) Wang et al. (2020) also noted that the mindset towards different ways of working was progressing beyond corporate models, opening up new opportunities for more knowledge work. However, much of the available literature, at the time of writing, preceded the pandemic, meaning that its implications had not yet been widely discussed in the academic field, which partly explained, why the interviewees were able to discuss the diversification of digital nomadism to a greater extent.

My findings demonstrated that after the pandemic, not only the number of people beginning as digital nomads was growing, but the group was also diversifying in terms of types of people and work. In 2023, at the time of writing, the existing academic literature demonstrated the broadening of the digital nomad phenomenon less concretely, whereas the findings provided more tangible illustration: the empirical data displayed a wider range of people as digital nomads after the pandemic, including more nationalities, types and positions of workers, ages and a more even gender distribution. In turn, Stumpf et al. (2022) and Wang et al. (2020), for example, concentrated more on the increasing number of digital nomads in general. When it came to the definition of digital nomads, the research literature and empirical data portrayed that these days, they can greatly differ from their stereotypes ("adventurous young adult running their business in sandals and shorts on their laptop from an internet café by the beach") (Stumpf et al. 2022, p. 42). This was clear, even though the literature did not necessarily demonstrate it to the same extent that the empirical data did – the interviewees described different types of (post-pandemic) "new nomads" more extensively.

Furthermore, post-pandemic digital nomadism seems to display a wider number of alternatives to solo travelers. The literature covered this only in passing, touching on nomad couples (Cook 2020), whereas the interviewees discussed the increase of couples, families and groups more distinctively. The discrepancy between the literature and the empirical data can partly be explained by the novelty of these changes, meaning that there has not yet been enough time to investigate them (Hannonen 2020). Moreover, the interviewees could be expected to have more firsthand insight on digital nomadism, whereas the academic literature was noted, by Reichenberger (2018), to suffer from limited access to wide-enough data.

What the empirical findings did not seem to cover, that the literature did, was whether post-pandemic digital nomadism included other professionals besides the ICT sector (e.g. Reichenberger 2018; Richter et al. 2020). Both the literature and the empirical data agreed that most digital nomads were entrepreneurs, but the interviewees underlined a sense of change following the pandemic (Schlagwein 2018). So-called “corporate nomads” (positioned highly on the corporate ladder) had taken part in the phenomenon and the income levels seemed to have shifted up, overall, meaning that the average salary of the digital nomad was higher than before.

Digital nomadism also seems to have experienced a change of mindset following the pandemic. Where the empirical findings alluded to a temporal distinction between “original and new nomads” – with the pandemic acting as the divider – the literature did not seem to recognize this separation. To clarify, the pandemic was attributed to having grown the phenomenon, but the interviewees referred to a discernible difference between digital nomads before and after the pandemic. The interviewees gave the impression, that the mindset of the post-pandemic digital nomad would differ from the pre-pandemic one. This could refer to getting used to differing remote work settings (with easier access to services and more established systems after the pandemic, including improved video calls) varying levels of tolerance for common travel factors associated with nomadism (greater desire for comfort and luxury with the income bracket moving up), more available information and reference material (more blog posts, articles and social media content) and social factors (increased talk on the phenomenon and a larger community acting as attractive aspects).

There also appeared to be aspects of the state of digital nomadism that had remained the same compared to pre-pandemic times. Although referring to a greater acceptance of remote work and digital nomadism, the literature indicated that digital nomads had not yet gained a permanent cultural or “business” status. This means that they are not yet recognized as a distinct group in those contexts – in the same manner that expatriates, for instance, would be (Stumpf et al. 2022). The empirical data demonstrated this further, by discussing that there are still gray areas within the phenomenon and notable formal structures had not yet emerged; digital nomadism is still a “loosely composed” movement, not understood by everybody. Accordingly, void of existing models for starting the digital nomad journey, both Stumpf et al. (2022) and the interviewees alluded to the often-spontaneous nature of beginning as a digital nomad. Stumpf et al. (2022) specifically mentioned that this spontaneity sometimes stemmed from discontent towards one's existing work situation – professionals would, in a way, wait until a concrete separation from work would suffice as the only solution.

Ultimately, the fundamental reasons for pursuing digital nomadism appeared to not have changed drastically compared to pre-pandemic times. While difficult to portray under a single model, the general themes seemed the same between the literature and the empirical data. The empirical findings displayed a distinction between the "lifestyle aspects" and "objective criteria" for choosing the digital nomad path. In some of the literature, these areas would be more intertwined – for example, with the financial reasons being part of the lifestyle (often referring to cheaper costs of living). Preceding the pandemic, Schlagwein (2018), for instance, identified three distinct main areas of reasoning for digital nomadism: *inspirational* (lifestyle), *civic* (community, belonging) and *market* (cost management). There were no indications that these areas had changed, or that new ones would have emerged. Even more generally, a broader search for "freedom" was named a major reason for digital nomadism before the pandemic (Reichenberger 2018) as well as during it (Cook 2020).

Post-pandemic digital nomadism has also seen the rise of distinct digital nomad infrastructure, recognized especially by the interviewees. Cook (2020) recognized its necessity but also did not really consider where it came from and what its emergence required. The recent appearance of these infrastructures, including specific working spaces and schools was only discussed by the interviewees. Still, Cook (2020, p. 375) underlined the necessity for these kind of structures by noting how a typical vacation environment, on its own, would eventually not facilitate remote work: "there is a clear gap between the utopian ideal of working in paradise and the daily realities of getting stuff done, and that this gap is overlooked when digital nomads start out". A question about these novel infrastructures being a form of societal foundation was brought up by the interviewees, as they would now allow for more people to start as nomads. Finally, the empirical data also noted that recently, more discussion had begun to arise on "boring adult topics" (as expressed by Olivia) around arranging one's life to suit the digital nomad way (including pensions and wealth management, retirement, social security and taxes). The literature did not seem to recognize this evolution yet.

Finally, both the literature (e.g. Hannonen 2020; Cohen et al. 2015) and the empirical data questioned the role of the changing, ambiguous identity of digital nomads and what a sense of *home* meant to them. This meant that even after the pandemic, exploring the digital nomad identity was still seen as an important, unsolved area. The interviewees questioned whether the digital nomad identity was arising from placelessness itself. Before the popularization of remote work more generally, Williams and McIntyre (2001) had summarized that one's home would not necessarily be tied to a physical place of residence and that one's roots could be redistributed across the globe. Cohen et al. (2015) argued that feeling a sense of home was a certain necessity, even if the concept of home would not be obvious. The digital nomad could have multiple different bases to act as "safe havens" during their travels. Ultimately, the interviewees questioned, whether it was acceptable for digital nomads to be able to settle into other cultures, in the first place. Evidently, this had led to problems before, as some digital nomads were known to cause disruption and even disregard the local ways. The interviewees noted that many nomads had started to recognize this and now aimed to be more mindful towards their surroundings – as if adapting their identities to fit accordingly.

To conclude, the post-pandemic state of digital nomadism shows various levels of widening and diversification. Simultaneously, it becomes clear that there are many aspects of the phenomenon that have not yet settled and the overall recognition is only beginning to grow.

5.2.2 The importance of digital nomad visas

The second research question was: *Why are digital nomad visas needed?*

To summarize, my research made it evident that as the number of digital nomads keeps increasing, there is heightened need for better schemes and options for living as a digital nomad, and for countries to facilitate the residence of digital nomads. The digital nomad visa appeared as perhaps the most prominent way for this. If carried out appropriately, digital nomad visas could offer economic benefits for the issuing countries as well, meaning that the visas could serve both sides. The research also demonstrated that digital nomad visas need more recognition and exploration, in order to be developed towards serving the nomads' needs better. On a large scale, the literature and the empirical data displayed that digital nomad visas had carved an important place in the world of remote work and that their prominence was also strengthening, due to the spread of remote work and digital nomadism.

Firstly, having unique visas for digital nomads, as agreed by the empirical data and literature (Sánchez-Vergara et al. 2023), can lead to positive effects on both the individual as well as the country of stay. The interviewees talked about being able to diversify the country's tourism, by providing buffer for travel seasons and variance for locations, and Krakat (2021) noted that visa holders would generate more revenue than regular tourists, because of their longer stay. Digital nomads were noted by Sánchez-Vergara et al. (2023) to bring in tech talent and youth, leading to longer-term economic growth, and the ensuing developments were seen to further attract more talent in the future. Besides agreeing on these factors, interviewees also underlined the digital nomad visas' role of enabling fairer access to countries than passports, which would be more tied with prevailing geo-political relations. Overall, the interviewees marked that digital nomad visas could promote the reinforcement and diversification of local business ecosystems.

While these factors demonstrate that digital nomad visas are needed, it became clear that the mere existence of them would not suffice. The growing need for these visas connects with the need for them to be designed in the right way. To demonstrate and contrast, Sánchez-Vergara et al. (2023) and Ehn et al. (2022) noted that varying adaptations to existing work visas, over the years, have not met the digital nomads' unique needs, and better flexibility and transparency were required. Problems were noted to traditionally arise from not having a local employee, which would lead to either registering under a "sponsor company" or working while on a tourist visa, or having to pay double taxes due to being linked to two countries at the same time (Smith 2021; Edwards 2020; Hindriks 2020). Excessive bureaucracy was also noted as a hinderance, leading to complicated legal ventures that could stand in the way of pursuing digital nomadism (Krakat 2020).

Nevertheless, the interviewees also emphasized that none of the digital nomad visas, either, were perfect yet, and that certain changes were needed. The interviewees described that most digital nomads did not, in fact, even use digital nomad visas and instead used regular tourist visas for traveling, which only Hindriks (2020) seemed to acknowledge within the literature. The lack of use appeared to be not only due to the novelty and lack of recognition of the digital nomad visas, but it also became apparent that most visas did not meet the nomad needs. These needs, not particularly explored by the literature, include more lenient forms of employment, frequent and easy travel and overall transparency about the process. The interviewees noted that most digital nomads only wanted access to local services and systems without immediately considering long-term aspects for immigration.

The interviewee data also brought forth the interesting notion, that some of the current digital nomad visas did not necessarily qualify as such – with reference to only being "rebranded" forms of other existing visas. The countries presenting these would stand somewhere in the middle of not offering suitable digital nomad visas, yet having found the right track. The interviewees also alluded to the notion that a lot of the countries offering some forms of digital nomad visas were not necessarily the most relevant or alluring destinations for digital nomads, whereas some of the more popular destinations did not offer digital nomad visas in the first place. This would insinuate that there is demand for an even larger number of destinations offering digital nomad visas.

To relate back to the research question, these factors illustrate how *not* having access to proper digital nomad visas causes unnecessary restriction and trouble for the nomads. The importance of digital nomad visas ties in with simplifying and alleviating the process for those who pursue the digital nomad path, allowing even more people to do it in the first place. This sentiment continues with the visa application process itself. As noted by the interviewees, many current application processes lack transparency, especially with regards to the price, as well as demanding better access to be able to apply locally.

As discussed by the interviewees, it was apparent that not all countries were actually ready for issuing their own digital nomad visa schemes, even though there seemed to be interest towards it. In fact, most legislations today did not support the remote work schemes in question. It could be summarized that especially with the emergence of the post-pandemic "new nomads" (as opposed to the "original nomads", presented by Sarah) the need for current policies to change and adapt is highlighted. Krakat (2021) indicated that the number of countries offering digital nomad visas would increase quickly in the coming years, but Sánchez-Vergara et al. (2023) noted that in many instances, the legal frameworks need further adjustments.

Finally, a major new theme arising from the empirical findings was the existence of other possibilities for varying remote work needs. Most notably, Estonia's e-Residency scheme appeared as a more established example that would answer a part of digital nomads' requirements too, especially with regards to being able to conduct one's own business digitally. For some remote workers, e-Residency might be what they are looking for, allowing for interaction with government agencies and institutions without physically entering the country – this would provide a unique form of location independence. This demonstrated that, truly, the digital nomad visa is part of a larger remote work and visa infrastructure. In the current literature about digital nomads, references to the e-Residency and other schemes were scarce. More notably, none of the literary sources used for this thesis compared e-Residency and the digital nomad visa with each other – either as alternatives to each other or as parallel arrangements. Sánchez-Vergara et al. (2023) mention e-Residency separately, as an example of implementing policy frameworks; only Hannonen (2020) mentions it more generally as an example of ways to welcome more digital nomads to a country but does not elaborate on this.

5.2.3 Estonia as a pioneer in the remote work field

The third and final research question was: *What is the role of Estonia in the remote work field?*

My research concluded that Estonia is currently one of the countries leading the way and making the most progress in remote work and digital nomad developments. The interviewees underlined that other countries interested in developing similar digital schemes could follow Estonia’s example. However, due to the novelty of the Estonian success, especially with regards to the digital nomad visas, not a lot of academic sources had yet covered the topic and, instead, mostly blogs or web articles had written about it. On the other hand, all of the interviewees referred to Estonia’s recent societal and technological advancement. Even Sarah, not having a direct connection to Estonia, saw the country as a pioneer in digital systems and remote work.

The interviews revealed the *physical versus digital dichotomy* for Estonian remote work “tracks” (or forms), which was not apparent in literature. Overall, when Estonia came up in the literature, in relation to digital nomad visas, other remote work schemes offered by the country, such as the e-Residency, were not really mentioned.

The Estonian digital nomad visa, more specifically, was recognized by Hindriks (2020), as the first digital nomad visa scheme to be established, and it was noted that it still offered some of the most appropriate criteria for applicants. This would mean accepting a wide-enough range of forms of employment while not raising the income requirements too high. The empirical data concurred with the suitability of the criteria but argued that the income requirements could actually be set even lower. What was also noted by Hindriks (2020) and the interviewees was the appropriateness of the application process itself, being cheap, globally accessible and transparent.

The empirical findings showed that Estonia’s digital success was largely a result of the foresight of a few individuals (“certain politicians” as described by Jaan) in the early 2000s; requiring a leap of faith, when there was not yet much evidence on the opportunities arising from digital systems. The interviewees underlined that by doing the groundwork early – establishing the vast digital infrastructure of the country – it was easier for Estonia to later continue building on the deep-rooted structures. Notably, this included the all-encompassing Electronic ID that was made mandatory for every Estonian citizen. Surviving the country’s historical struggle was seen as one factor for the quick pace of the development: during the rebuild of the country, following the Soviet collapse, it was possible to start from a clean slate, directly bypassing some “hurdles” that would come to hinder more established societies. Overall, an “ethos of survival” was seen, by the interviewees, to have been instilled among the population. It became apparent, that the entire society is largely built on digitality, which was demonstrated by the large role of e-residents starting new businesses and eventually boosting the economy – for instance, through hiring locals.

The empirical data suggested that the branding of an “e-Estonia” has been deliberate, leading to gaining international recognition as a technological utopia, of sorts. In fact, the interviewees demonstrated that having the electronic basis for business enabled gaining a notably wider reach in terms of business relations – with countries that there would have otherwise been no other contact to. From the empirical data, it also became clear that digital nomad visas were directly linked to the previously established e-Residency. The scheme had acted as a solid foundation, with many of the considerations for the visa already worked out, which partly explained, why the Estonian visa, out of all digital nomad visas, was considered so successful.

While Sánchez-Vergara et al. (2023) spoke of countries being able to attract digital nomads and the possible ensuing benefits they bring to the local economies and cultures, the discussion seemed to remain at a rather superficial level. In this sense, the empirical data was able to illustrate some of the opportunities through using Estonia as an example. The role of building digital infrastructures was depicted as a possible societal foundation, where Estonia seemed to be leading the way for the rest of the world. E-Residency and the digital nomad visa were equated to high-level “products” that could be used to invite and attract talent into the country, eventually shaping it to the desired direction. Moreover, due to the smallness of the Estonia – which leads to increased interconnectedness – as well as the relatively deep establishment of digital systems, it was noted that there was a high level of trust towards the electronic schemes, among the people. This would further act towards strengthening and legitimizing the digital foundation.

In the remote work field, Estonia’s role also appeared to concentrate around proving to the rest of the world, that remote work and digitality go beyond individual schemes. The country had demonstrated this through the connection of digital nomadism and e-

Residency, as illustrated by the interviewees. Moreover, this connection showed that, instead of being a spontaneous, low-effort, trendy gimmick, there seems to be a larger societal foundation backed by a cohesive mindset. For digital nomads, the interviewees pose the role of e-Residency as something deeper than business access or a temporary visit – it is advocated as establishing a digital, yet tangible, tie to Estonia. This way, the digital nomad visa and e-Residency can be seen as intertwined aspects of realizing the digital nomad way of life and seeking genuine connections.

Estonia and Finland

Interestingly, the empirical findings also pointed to Finland and Estonia being able to learn from each other. Interviewees described a long background in common business relations and having similar historical backgrounds as small nations. More recently, Finland was seen to have acted as a model for Estonia – as the "window" to the Western world and surviving "against the odds". In the present day, from the Estonian point of view, Finland was described to be seen as more stable, having strong institutions and doing well in planning, through being more well-established. At the same time, however, the country was seen as slower and more rigid. In turn, Estonia was now noted to be able to act as a model country in terms of being more reactive and open, excelling in dynamism, flexibility and adaptability – especially due to the country's fresh start. Still, it was noted, that Estonia was naturally becoming slower, too, and that the premises for common undertakings between the countries were not yet ready. There were deficiencies in developing legislation and necessary systems between the countries, besides the actual willingness to cooperate on promising fronts, according to the empirical findings.

Finally, interviewees remarked that Finland had the capabilities and the foundational technologies for following Estonia's digital success. In fact, many of these technologies were the same ones used in Estonia: they were originally developed in Finland, or based on Finnish inventions, with the difference only being in their implementation. Estonia had made them a mandatory part of their identification system, while Finland had not. Moreover, it was noted that Estonia had recently gifted some of its own capabilities to Finland, including the *X-Road* system, upon which much of the all-encompassing digitality of the country is built. The final question arising is, whether Finland would like to offer something similar to foreigners – its own versions of empowering digital systems or attractive remote work schemes.

Having now answered the three research questions, it is clear that the world is in a transformative point in time, with regards to remote work and digital nomadism more specifically. There are more possibilities than ever, to pursue the way of life, and the world is beginning to see notable diversification among the people choosing to do so. Simultaneously, the legislations and policies are starting to transform accordingly. While aiming to facilitate the arrival of digital nomads, countries can, themselves, start to reap the benefits of attracting more talent to boost their economies. Some countries are leading the way in these new digital developments, with Estonia being one of the most prominent ones.

5.3 Conclusions

Following the pandemic, modern professionals have new opportunities for ways of doing their work. Overall, the mindset towards different ways of working has progressed beyond corporate models. This means that in the future, more people can consider pursuing the digital nomad lifestyle – notable diversification is already seen with regards to nationalities, types and positions of workers, ages and a more even gender distribution. Because there is also a wider number of alternatives to solo travelers, it is likely that digital nomad families will become more popular, leading to even further adaptations of living the remote work life. Accordingly, countries can and will be expected to keep developing infrastructures specifically for digital nomads. With regards to the increasing number of families, for instance, more schools suitable for the digital nomads' children will be needed.

My study demonstrates that the popularization of digital nomadism is already reshaping legislations and policies all over the world. Once looking into the new digital nomad visas, it has become clear that they could offered benefits for both the nomads themselves as well as the countries issuing the visas. Many countries have not yet realized the arising opportunities from this and those who have, have become highly interested to release their own versions of the digital nomad visa. The number of willing countries can be expected to rise considerably, in the coming years. However, in the current state, most of these countries do not manage to tackle the pain points of digital nomads – they have either set their criteria too inaccessible or they lack in transparency. It has become apparent, that sheer willingness to develop one's own visa is not enough. Better visas and application processes are needed – otherwise digital nomads will keep on using tourist visas to visit their destinations. Eventually, this will lead to lost opportunities, from the countries' perspectives. Developments in cooperation with the digital nomads are needed, and it is not enough to rename an existing visa scheme as a digital nomad one.

In a way, all of the digital nomad visa-issuing countries seemed to have followed the footsteps of Estonia, which was noted, during the study, as the first country in the world to offer a proper visa option. This encouraged me to seek more information about the Estonian situation – why did Estonia, out of all countries, seem to be the pioneer? As a result of the research, it appeared that Estonia had successfully combined the will to develop quickly, with the insight to pursue digital systems and an overall trust towards these systems, among the people. Interestingly, when interviewing the Estonian experts, a lot of the attention was turned towards Estonia's other digital work schemes as well. Overall, a difference was drawn between being physically in Estonia versus connecting to the country digitally – establishing the *physical vs digital dichotomy*. It was illustrated that in the case of Estonia, the digital nomad visa is part of a larger digital scheme, offering parallel opportunities to utilize the countries systems for different cases.

Based on this, it could be argued that other countries, too, should see digital nomad visas as part of a larger offering for ways to facilitate digital work. As demonstrated by the e-Residency, countries can have varying levels of remote work schemes that exist on multiple levels. This suggests that it could be useful to design digital nomad visas as part of a country's larger digital infrastructure, in which the aforementioned benefits are the end goal, but the ways to get there are broken into steps and alleviated in the eye of the remote worker.

Lastly, the ability for Finland and Estonia to be able to learn from each other illustrates that countries should be open to follow each other's examples in the remote work field, too. Both Finland and Estonia have given each other technologies upon which to build on modern digital capabilities. The difference maker in Estonia's success was the determined implementation of these systems for every citizen of the country. With Finland being the latter to receive technology from Estonia (the foundational *X-Road* system), I, ultimately, recognize the possibility for Finland to pursue similar digital success as Estonia has – if it so decides.

5.4 Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research

As the final part of this thesis, I will cover some of the limitations that I have uncovered during the study, as well as presenting opportunities for future research. First, with regards to the methodology, it must be noted that the empirical part of this study was conducted with a very limited sample size of five interviewees. While some of the explored themes were quite specific, with a restricted number of experts available for interviews, it could be argued that an increase of perspectives could provide more solid insight in future research.

In a theoretical sense, certain areas also emerged as being rather limited in their current state. First, as noted by both the research literature and the interviewees, the current understanding on digital nomads is narrow due to the phenomenon being quite open to interpretation; digital nomads are often identified by themselves instead of a set of predetermined guidelines or factors (Reichenberger 2018). On the other hand, both the empirical data and the literature referred to the observation that all digital nomads did not identify themselves as digital nomads in the first place (Schlagwein 2018). Cook (2020, p. 356) described that "whilst the term may have both hopeful and derogatory connotations, terms such as 'location-independent' and 'remote worker' are sometimes used as more neutral alternatives".

The challenge is the ensuing selectiveness of the data on digital nomads, often gathered via surveys and interviews that get their origins in online forums and communities (the only “databases” of digital nomads currently available). It thus narrows the group of people to the ones who are self-identified enough to seek after communities online. This leads to suspect that the data, upon which the available literature is written, mostly portrays those examples of digital nomadism that have relatively strong, explicitly voiced opinions of the subject. One way of tackling this could be to study a more general group of remote workers in a given research context, and to let the researcher be the one identifying the digital nomads within the group.

Another notable consideration regarding the available information was that a lot of the phenomena considered in this study were largely still in their early phases. Particularly, this included the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the newly established digital nomad visa schemes. Both of these areas were recent to the extent that much of the research literature preceded their emergence. As noted earlier, it is still difficult to discern some of the larger-scale implications of these factors. In future research, there needs to be a clear distinction between articles written before and after the pandemic, and the relevance and newness of the research literature is underlined as a necessity.

While digital nomads are gaining ground in the academic field, it is clear that there is still more to understand about them and the phenomenon. Before the pandemic, literature on digital nomadism was described as being absent (Kong et al. 2019; Schlagwein 2018). Schlagwein (2018, p. 6) notes, that there have been definite calls for more tangible research, as “scholarly understanding and theorizing are lacking behind the development in practice”. Indeed, the majority of academic work on digital nomadism has, until now, concentrated on the definition of the phenomenon and how the nomads experience their own circumstances (Hermann and Paris 2020). Even these descriptions contain a lot of ambiguity: as summarized by Hannonen (2020, p. 337), over the years, “digital nomadism has been approached as a form of creative tourism (Putra and Agirachman 2016) and a type of leisure activity (Reichenberger 2018), as a novel type of location independent workforce (Orel 2019; Wang et al. 2018), and as a new economic activity and a cultural phenomenon (Wang et al. 2018)”.

Furthermore, Hannonen (2020, p. 2) alludes to the research on digital nomadism lacking a holistic perspective, stating that there is a "need to develop comprehensive terminological and conceptual perspectives on digital nomadism to frame it as a proper research category and rapidly emerging mobility practice to serve future studies on the phenomenon." This means that the majority of literature on digital nomadism has, so far, concentrated on descriptions of the phenomenon and individual aspects of it, instead of considering the larger implications and how these individual areas affect each other. As opposed to defining the phenomenon and studying the lifestyle aspects of it, Nash et al. (2018) call for better understanding of the nature of digital nomad work itself. Accordingly, the authors express an aspiration towards better theoretical comprehension of digital work, more generally. Kong et al. (2019) also call for more research on digital nomads in corporate settings, noting that their number, too, is set to increase in the future. As noticed during the literature review of this study (dated some years after the aforementioned requests) only the first versions of these topics had been brought forward. In short, for future research, I suggest concentrating on further implications of digital nomadism and limiting the effort of trying to define the phenomenon once again.

With the writing process of this thesis occurring in the wake of the pandemic, it was clear that the whole remote work world had seen a paradigm shift and that fundamental aspects had transformed for digital nomadism. An evident desire to learn more about these effects emerges correspondingly. Moreover, as noted by the interviewees, the increase of so-called "boring adult topics" (including pensions, wealth management and so on) and arranging one's life as a digital nomad had recently begun to be experienced as more pressing by the nomads. This leads me to suggest aiming to understand these factors better from an academic point of view, too.

Digital nomad visas also present a notable area for future research. Connected to the novelty of these visas, many elemental factors are yet open and undecided. Edwards (2020, p. 1) calls attention to the lack of research that "has critically examined how various governments have leveraged the category of digital nomadism to encourage independent workers to participate in their economies via remote work". Sánchez-Vergara et al. (2023, p. 3) note that academic literature has not yet "explored how the promotion of visas is carried out, and how institutional actors intervene in their implementation framework”. Two fundamental aspects needing investigation are then highlighted: “the policy framework that encompasses these initiatives, and the actors involved in the construction of these discourses” (Sánchez-Vergara et al. 2023, p. 6).

Ultimately, in the future, even more research could be conducted on the Estonian remote work field, specifically. As demonstrated by the empirical insight, there are many areas to explore with regards to different remote work options. For example, the role of e-Residency has yet to be notably compared with the digital nomad visa. Besides seeing the digital nomad visa and e-Residency as alternative options, some research could focus on them as parallel options as well as opportunities for similar implementations in other countries. The development of these schemes is quick-paced, and major transformations can be expected in the coming years.

It is clear that the world is more open than ever for the modern remote worker. More opportunities for digital work will continue to enable one to experiment with their physical location and to explore the balance between work and leisure. Seeing legislations and policies adapt to these transformations illustrates how the way is being paved for the digital nomad, and how countries are reaching new possibilities for economic development.

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APPENDIX 1: Interview Guide example

- With regards to remote work, what drives people to change their physical location?
- How familiar are you with digital nomads and how would you define the term?
- How has the field changed for digital nomads as a result of the pandemic (before versus after)?
- Where is the digital nomad phenomenon heading to?

- How did Estonia arrive at the forefront of remote work?
- Why do people choose Estonia as their remote work / digital nomad destination?
- For the digital nomad visa, what separates attractive countries from others?
- What is the current outlook of the Estonian digital nomad visa?
    - What kind of people apply for it? How many?
- What direction should it be developed towards?

- From a larger perspective, what are the effects of the digital nomad visa on Estonia (in terms of culture, economy etc.)?
- Similarly, what are the effects on the remote work and digital nomad field?
- What can Finland learn from Estonia in terms of digitality and remote work?