Scaffolding liminality: The lived experience of women entrepreneurs in digital spaces

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ABSTRACT

Although digital entrepreneurship has been posited as a "great leveller", little is known about how women experience the transition into digital entrepreneurial careers, nor the coping strategies they employ in order to navigate digital work environments. To address this, we undertook a qualitative study using a liminality lens to explore how women digital entrepreneurs transition into, participate in and shape the digital spaces they occupy. Our findings show that women digital entrepreneurs operate in a dual space as both managers of the ritual process and individuals undergoing a liminal journey in digital contexts characterised by fluid structures, precarity and wider gender and capitalist social relations. In particular, our findings demonstrate the role of women digital entrepreneurs as active agents of their transition through liminality, and the creative ways in which they acquire and develop new knowledge, skills and relationships. As a result, we contribute to women's digital entrepreneurship, by theorizing an often overlooked aspect of career change, namely the liminal space of transformation through our provision of new empirical insights which highlights the ways in which gender and neoliberal narratives are embedded in digital spaces that reinforces women's outsider status.

1. Introduction

The discourse on the incorporation of digital technologies into women's entrepreneurship is still in its infancy, and whilst its gist can be traced to the broader digital entrepreneurship awakening, it is recognized as needing further theoretical grounding and empirical enquiry (Dy et al., 2017; McAdam et al., 2019, 2020). Specifically, there is a need for studies to move away from purely functionalist accounts of the newly developing technological characteristics of work and consider the wider cultural and gendered social context (Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2017; Dy et al., 2018; Ughetto et al., 2019). An underexplored, yet crucial, element of women's digital entrepreneurship is the nuances of the process of becoming a woman digital entrepreneur and how women construct work and life routines in contemporary neoliberal digital spaces. Furthermore, there is a dearth of empirical investigation into how women acquire and develop new knowledge, skills and relationships to overcome the challenges they encounter in digital work environments (Ughetto et al., 2019). Thus, we have neither a complete understanding of the phenomenon of women's digital entrepreneurship nor a comprehensive understanding of how uncertainties manifest and are negotiated by women in digital entrepreneurial contexts.

In response, we ask the following research question: how do women digital entrepreneurs transition into, participate in and shape the digital spaces they occupy? We address this gap in understanding by drawing on a qualitative methodology to investigate how women negotiate a new sense of self as digital entrepreneurs when occupational structures, positions, roles and their associated status become suspended. Through our analysis, we illustrate the value of the anthropological concept of liminality, or "*a state of being neither one thing nor another; or maybe both; or neither here nor there; or maybe nowhere … 'betwixt and between' recognized fixed points in the space-time of structural classification*" (Turner, 1969, p. 96). This state was discussed as part of a tripartite transition framework developed by van Gennep (1960) as involving separation, liminality and incorporation.

Within this paper, we make the following contributions. First, we contribute to women's digital entrepreneurship, as a result of our application of an anthropological liminality perspective to the experiences of women digital entrepreneurs by theorizing an often overlooked aspect of their career change, namely the spatial domain or the liminal space of transformation. Second, we advance research on liminality by theoretically elaborating how women entrepreneurs navigate a state of liminality in digital spaces. In addressing the above, our paper is

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structured as follows: we commence by outlining the rationale for our theoretical framework with a discrete analysis of the key constructs – women's digital entrepreneurship and liminality. Next, we provide an overview of our methodological rationale and research design process, which is followed by a critical evaluation of our empirical findings. Finally, we conclude the paper with a discussion of the main insights from our research, underscoring their theoretical contributions and by identifying future research directions.

2. Theoretical framing

2.1. Digital entrepreneurship

Digital trends such as social media, mobile services, cloud computing, the Internet and robotics have changed the ways of collaborating, designing products, matching complex demands and supplies, standards, and procedures (Autio et al., 2018; Giones and Brem, 2017). Such fast-growing technological advancements have deeply transformed the nature and process of entrepreneurship (Elia and Passiante, 2020). The concept of digital technologies is often illustrated as the consequence of three separate but embedded elements: digital artefacts, digital platforms, and digital infrastructures (Nambisan, 2017). From Nambisan's point of view, the digital artefact is an element, application, or media content existing as a stand-alone good or service or as part of a platform. The digital platform is considered a set of participated digital services to host supplementary offerings, including artefacts and digital infrastructure (Giones and Brem, 2017). Digital infrastructure collects digital technology equipment and systems that present collaboration, communication, and computing capacities (Rippa and Secundo, 2019). The dispersion of digital technologies has also created new routes for creative entrepreneurial practices and micro businesses by cultivating collaboration and collective intelligence (Rippa and Secundo, 2019; Shen et al., 2018). Consequently, this has shaped a new scope for research termed digital entrepreneurship (Elia and Passiante, 2020; Nambisan et al., 2019).

2.2. Women digital entrepreneurship: an emancipation perspective

One body of research within the domain of digital entrepreneurship adopts an emancipatory perspective by focusing on digital entrepreneurship as a vehicle for women's empowerment (Dy et al., 2018; McAdam et al., 2019, 2020; Ughetto et al., 2019). This literature examines the relationship between women and digital technology, suggesting that digital technology can provide a space for identity expression and liberation from traditional norms and constraints found in the offline environment (Daniels, 2009; Morahan-Martin, 2000; Plant, 1997). Since digital technology affects the *"rules and conditions of social interaction"* (van Dijck and Poell, 2013, p. 3), it *"redirects and reimagines what empowerment means for girls and women"* (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 17). Following this perspective, a growing body of scholarship focuses on the agenda, motivations and mechanisms by which digitalization shapes women's engagement with entrepreneurship through the lowering of barriers to entry to entrepreneurship (McAdam et al., 2019, 2020; Pergelova et al., 2019; Sorgner and Krieger-Boden, 2017; Ughetto et al., 2019).

In so doing, this builds on arguments from the literature on women's entrepreneurship which points to understanding and addressing the challenges that women face in establishing and running a business, with a particular focus on access to information, finance and networks (Henry et al., 2017; Jennings and Brush, 2013; Manello et al., 2019; Poggesi et al., 2015). A particular argument that is made in favour of digital developments for women, points to the increased flexibility, reduced mobility and temporal-spatial constraints it affords (Brush et al., 2019). Digital technologies have been seen by some theorists as offering a gender neutral space for women (Martin and Tiu Wright, 2005). Within this framing, the Internet has been characterised as a sociotechnical environment conducive to liberating women from traditional systems of legitimation. McAdam et al. (2019) elucidates this perspective in their empirical study conducted in Saudi Arabia, which utilises institutional theory to show how digital technologies may help female entrepreneurs to capitalise on institutional voids that may emerge in cultural or social forms. This deviation from cultural norms and practices may allow women to benefit from economic developments in the region and become active participants in the global market contributing to socio-economic development (McAdam et al., 2019). Consequently, many developing economies are seeking to improve their techniques and skill development programs, policy frameworks, and financing activities to promote women's digital entrepreneurship (Sorgner and Krieger-Boden, 2017).

2.3. Women digital entrepreneurship: a critical cyberfeminist perspective

An emerging body of critical cyberfeminist scholarship draws on the concepts of intersectionality and social positionality that suggests women experience a lack of agency and legitimacy as entrepreneurs in digital contexts (Heizmann and Liu, 2020; Dy et al., 2018). This emerges as a result of interlocking oppression through gender power relations, race and class that can marginalise women in digital spaces. For example, Dy et al.'s (2017) research sheds light on the challenges arising from the multiple social identities of women digital entrepreneurs across diverse sectors in the UK. By paying attention to how gender relations of power are constituted within and through digital spaces, these studies invite a more nuanced consideration of the lived experiences and daily negotiations of women in digital environments.

Other critical voices in the cyberfeminism literature question the celebration of agency, flexibility freedoms and autonomy afforded by digital technology through its capacity to transcend the normal limits of space, geography and time (Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2017; Dy et al., 2018). Rather, they draw on a neo-liberal postfeminist perspective (Elias and Gill, 2018; Gill, 2017), that point to the tensions and difficulties women face being placed *"in a situation under contemporary capitalism in which work extends far beyond the temporal and spatial limits of traditional workplaces, eluding effective forms of capture and measurement, and capital's productivity penetrates ever more deeply into all, including the most intimate, aspects of our lives"* (Hearn, 2011, p. 316). Indeed, Duffy & Pruchniewska (2017) argue that there is something ill-defined about the nature of the digital space encountered by many women entrepreneurs that reaches out beyond the work itself, almost bringing the world into the self and affecting the ways in which they understand their relative boundedness. Elias et al. (2017) discuss digital technologies as creating an environment for women wherein traditional power hierarchies are supplanted by a new burden of managing the self in conditions of radical uncertainty and constant connectivity.

In this light, women's increasing labour market participation in digital entrepreneurship can be also be seen as a phenomenon that is coached within neoliberal discourse, with responsibility shifting from governments, to the individual woman in digital enterprise who assume the risk and burden (Duffy and Hund, 2015). The sense of freedom and flexibility to work anytime and anywhere may be illusory and is vividly captured by Catlaw and Marshall (2018, p. 105) who argue that individuals in postmodern society are *"haunted by the ever-present, fatiguing shame of failure, inadequacy, and not making the most of one's potential and using one's life in the most productive way"*. At the same time, there is an increasing recognition of the somewhat unsettling *"total social fact"* (Mauss, 2001, p. 100) that every place in which individuals live could become a workplace, from home to other social environments. In particular, as critical social theorist Floradi (2014, p. 43) argues, we no longer just go online but instead dwell in digital spaces, with digital technologies becoming part of individuals' daily work and life routines. These potential tensions arising from the overlap of work and non-work spaces and intrusion of work into personal life which can no longer be easily bracketed, have primarily been approached in terms of a

work/life balance or boundary metaphors (Clark, 2000). Yet, this is analytically limited in the context of the "*collapse of the demarcation of the home/work environment*" (Wapshott and Mallett, 2011, p. 63). Thus, little is known about women's experiences of transitioning into and living at the borderland of digital spaces that is neither work nor home, with existing research failing to conceptualise this status (Dén-Nagy, 2014).

2.4. Liminality

We build on these insights and proffer liminality as a valuable heuristic for exploring the potential cognitive and affective turbulence experienced by women transitioning into digital entrepreneurial environments. In so doing, we extend the discussion of the impact of neoliberal reforms on women's increasing need to self-manage their careers by underscoring the liminal journey they undertake as they construct new digital entrepreneurial routines and navigate new social contexts.

The concept of liminality originates from the French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep's theoretical work "rites of passage" (1960), which has a particular focus on rituals such as the ritual initiation of an adolescent to adulthood or in the rituals following seasonal changes. Rites of passage are distinguishable from other rites mostly by their form: they comprise three sorts of rites, designated "*rites of separation,*" "*rites of transition,*" and "*rites of incorporation*" (van Gennep, 1960, pp. 1–10). Invoking an image of society as a house divided into rooms, in which people move from one room to another and thus necessarily pass over thresholds (limen in Latin), van Gennep further distinguished these rituals, and the stages to which they pertain, as preliminal, liminal, and postliminal. Rites of separation separate subjects from their original status (e.g., childhood in the case of initiations into adulthood); they frequently involve a change of place (e.g., subjects leave their homes and take up temporary residence in a special building or a hut in a forest) (Turner, 1967). The first, pre-liminal phase of separation signifies the detachment of the subject from its former attributes and identities, disconnecting it from an "*earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a state), or from both*" (Turner, 1969, p. 95).

The intermediate, yet central, "*liminal*" period marks the passage of the ritual subject through "*a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state*" (ibid.). The liminal phase is a situation of great ambiguity, since the "*liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial*" (Thomassen, 2012; Turner, 1969, p. 81). Rites of transition are those acts that occur during the transitional stage. During this ambiguous phase, participants are commonly viewed as both powerful and vulnerable. On the one hand, being betwixt and between is associated with marginality and inferiority as people lack status, power, rank or insignia (Turner, 1969), which in turn relates liminality to feelings of deep anxiety and potential suffering (Stenner et al., 2017; Thomassen, 2012). On the other hand, liminality is denoted by a positive state described by Turner (1969) as "*fructile chaos, a fertile nothingness, a storehouse of possibilities, not by any means a random assemblage but a striving after new forms and structure, a gestation process, a fetation of modes appropriate to and anticipating postliminal experience*". Indeed although Turner saw liminality as a state in which the individual was "*betwixt and between*" a social position and/or identity, and as such could not be clearly defined, he also saw it as space for liberation from "*structural obligations*" (Turner, 1969, p. 27) and where "*anything can happen*" (Turner, 1969, p. 13). Liminal experiences in this sense constitute a temporal-spatial period for reflection and creativity (Garcia-Lorenzo et al., 2018; Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016; Swan et al., 2015) and may have the potential for identity growth as it is associated with higher degrees of freedom and less pressure to conform (Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016).

In the anthropological literature the ambiguous state of being in-between is consummated in the third phase of the ritual passage

termed reincorporation or postliminal and is where the relative stability of the subject in transition is regained, along with the restoration of the fairly stable order (Turner, 1969). The final ritual involves not so much incorporation as reincorporation, for example in initiations, where initiands are reintroduced into the same community from which they were separated during the transitional stage. However, they are reintroduced in a new social status—as adults and no longer as children or adolescents—and in this respect can be regarded as new persons, like strangers who are ritually inducted into a new community (Turner, 1985).

Yet, in the organisational literature, scholars have questioned whether liminality is a brief transitional stage or a more permanent phenomenon (Bamber et al., 2017; Johnsen and Sørensen, 2014; Reed and Thomas, 2021), and have proposed the possibility of permanent periods of liminality that are either understood as prolonged times of transit or in a more general sense as any perpetual betwixt-and-between experience (Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016). According to Ybema et al. (2011, p. 28) "*perpetual liminality creates a more permanent sense of being 'neither- X-nor-Y' or 'both-X-and-Y'*". More recently, scholars have devoted their attention to the experiences of liminality for temporary workers such as consultants who find themselves permanently between regular employment positions and structures in organisations (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Reed and Thomas, 2021) and for entrepreneurs whose liminal experience is not bounded by time and space with ongoing, uncertainty, ambiguity, enhanced reflexivity and possibility (Di Domenico et al., 2014; Muhr et al., 2019). However, little is known with regards to women's experience of digital entrepreneurship that is characterized by liminality, nor the factors that contribute to the beginning, end or ongoing nature of these transitions through liminality in digital environments. The paper now turns to our empirical investigation of women digital entrepreneurs.

3. Methods

3.1. Research design

Our research consisted of a qualitative interpretative research methodology and we adopt a gender-aware perspective (Brush et al., 2006, 2009; de Bruin et al., 2007) that deliberately seeks to give 'voice' to women's lived experiences (Brush et al., 2006; Sprague, 2016). Accordingly, our chosen research design aligns with the call for more feminist sensitive research (Leavy and Harris, 2018; Oakley, 1981, 2015). Recognising this, we are guided by feminist epistemologies that foreground women's perspectives and experiences (Marshall and Rossman, 2006; Sprague, 2016).

We demonstrate awareness of feminist imperatives for an ethical, reflexive approach attuned to the need to reduce the researcher-participant power imbalance by attempting not to gender the interview (Golombisky, 2006; Oakley, 1981), prioritising participants' voices through the use of narrative inquiry and the sharing of transcripts with participants (Longino, 2017; Patterson and Mavin, 2009). The reflexive nature of a qualitative, narrative inquiry research has emerged as an appropriate means to focus on issues relating to gender (Longino, 2017), with in-depth narrative interviews an appropriate source of data collection (Brown et al., 2008; Creswell and Poth, 2017).

Our sampling technique was purposive in nature, which is deemed apposite, when the goal is theoretical development rather than generalizability of findings (Creswell, 2007). In order to identify participants, we focused on women entrepreneurs operating in the health and fitness sector who had founded a business on their own, were responsible for an online business completely reliant on digital technology (i.e. social media), and had been operating for a minimum of one year. This resulted in a sample size of nine entrepreneurs which was deemed appropriate, given that the validity of qualitative research is determined by information-richness rather than the sample size (Glesne, 2011; Patton, 2002). An overview of the women digital entrepreneurs included

in this study are detailed in Table 1.

3.2. Data collection

In the collection of our interview data, we used narrative interviews which are a way of collecting people's stories about their experiences (Clandinin, 2016; Clandinin et al., 2007; Davis and Dwyer, 2017; Mueller, 2019). The narrative interview aligns with a participant centred approach to research and practice (Gioia, 2021), that places the women being studied at the heart of the study's process and privileges the meanings that they assign to their own stories. Using this method, researchers are able to capture and analyse individual stories to arrive at themes that help to describe and further understand a particular phenomenon (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990; Kirkpatrick and Anderson, 2016). Such an approach resulted in freely narrated responses, which honoured the individual experience of each female participant (Leavy and Harris, 2018) as the source of knowledge and understanding. However, at the conclusion of data collection, when the narratives are layered with one another, it becomes possible to discern patterns that occur across participant experiences (Clandinin, 2016; Connelly and Clandinin, 1990). The patterns are illuminating; they allow us to better understand the holistic reality of the phenomena we are interested in through individualized explorations of human experience.

Data collection took place over an eight month period. Each interview lasted on average between 45 and 90 minutes and were conducted over Skype with nine women digital entrepreneurs operating in the health and fitness sector. Our interview guide comprised open ended questions and was broadly structured using nine themes: a general

question ("Tell me about yourself in terms of educational attainments"), professional life history ("Where did you work previously?"), occupational self-definition ("How do you define yourself?"), work routine ("Describe a typical workday"), professional identity ("What is the nature of your work?"), the transition to independence and motivations for pursuing a digital entrepreneurial career ("When and how did this transition take place?"), advantages and disadvantages of working in the online environment, and experiences of using digital technologies ("What digital technologies do you use to perform and organise your work?").

3.3. Data analysis

The data analysis, providing deep and rich theoretical descriptions of context was guided by a systematic inductive approach to concept development (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Gioia et al., 2012). The systematic inductive approach to concept development added increased qualitative rigour to our exploratory research design while maintaining its potential for being revelatory (Aguinis and Solarino, 2019; Gioia, 2021; Gioia et al., 2012). In order to make sense of the 'critical mess' (Gartner, 2010), we adhered to Braun and Clarke's (2019) steps to thematic analysis, focusing on participants' narrative accounts. Our data analysis procedure was therefore an iterative, non-linear process during which data was compiled, disassembled and reassembled (Yin, 2013). We began with immersing ourselves in the data by reading the entire set of interview transcripts while searching for meaning and patterns prior to formal coding (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Once we were re-familiarized with the data, and ideas for coding noted, the next stage of data

Table 1
Overview of participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Status	Location	Education and qualifications	Former occupation	Characteristics of digital businesses	Duration as a digital entrepreneur (years)
Kathleen	30	Single	Ireland	Financial and Actuarial Mathematics Degree Personal Training Qualification	Actuary	Online health and fitness coach; creator of online health and fitness programs	4
Grace	24	Single	USA	Mathematics Degree Certificate in Nutrition	Teacher	Online nutritionist	2
Corah	33	Partner	UK	Sports Science Degree Sport and Exercise Master Exercise Physiology PhD Life Coaching Diploma Gym Instruction and Music Exercise Certificates Nutritional Certificate PGCAP in Teaching	Lecturer	Online health and fitness coach; Mentor	2
Sarah	42	Married with children	Canada	Alternative Systems of Medicine Degree MBA	Business owner in catering	Online holistic health and wellness coach	2
Olivia	40	Single	Northern Ireland	Degree in Accountancy Yoga and Acupuncture Qualification Holistic Therapy Qualification	Accountant	Online alternative medicine coach	2
Hilary	23	Single	Northern Ireland	Psychology Degree Nutrition Certificate	Software designer	Online health and fitness coach	2
Yvonne	28	Single	Ireland	Degree in Music Technology and Computer Science Beauty Therapy Qualification Nursing Degree Personal Training Qualification Nutrition Qualification	Nurse	Online health, fitness and well-being coach; Creator of online programmes	3
Deirdre	26	Partner	Northern Ireland	Fitness Instructor Personal Training Qualification	Retail	Health and fitness coach; Mentor	2
Georgina	32	Married	Ireland	Arts Degree Postgraduate Teacher Training Qualification Holistic Nutrition Certificate	Teacher	Health and well-being coach	1.5

analysis was undertaken. We then identified initial codes which were informed by our underpinning research question and extant literature. Initial coding was conducted manually but later this coded data was collated using computer NVivo 12 software. In the third stage, all data was coded, collated and sorted into overarching themes. Resulting from this stage, all coded data was sorted into groups of themes and sub-themes. In stage four, the refinement of identified overarching themes was undertaken (see Table 2). Each theme required a detailed account that explained its fit within the overall narrative and in relation to our underpinning research question.

4. Results: liminality in Women's digital entrepreneurial careers

We now present our findings, in which our aggregate theoretical dimensions (i.e. points of transition - separation, liminality, coping strategies and incorporation) (see Fig. 1) are explored in detail and illustrated with fragments of the narrative or "power quotes" (Pratt, 2007).

4.1. Separation

Concurring with van Gennep (1960, p. 141), the women digital entrepreneurs described separation, by highlighting how they began to feel uneasy in their social settings, which Deirdre framed as an experience "*of not being in a very good place with no reason to get up in the morning*". Kathleen described this discontentment with her professional occupation in terms of "*something not quite right*". During this separation phase, the women experienced a sense of being bounded by traditional institutional structures, job roles and routines which was nicely explained by Olivia -"*They were really nice to work for [employer] but I was just like, I can't sit at this desk for the next 40 years*". The women also became dissatisfied with the politics of working life and expressed the intensity of work-life pressures which spanned educational, organisational and healthcare domains. This dissatisfaction triggered their self-initiated separation from employment - "*I was tipping away at my hobby of studying acupuncture at weekends and I was like this is amazing, and then I was going back to an office and there was office politics and there I was sitting at a screen looking at …. I grew to hate the office and my life as it was*" (Olivia). This period was characterised by the motivation for career change which coalesced around push factors into a liminal space which mirrors the research by Conroy and O Leary-Kelly (2014), such as frustration with job roles and reduced career prospects. An example of the loss of career motivation was vividly apparent in Yvonne's story - "*When you get so far in a job and you think you can't evolve anymore, ….., if I go further it wasn't going to be where I wanted, it was somewhere else … so I wanted all that spare time to cultivate my thing which was health and fitness*". Furthermore, Sarah described how the sale of her company marked a physical end point of a phase of her life and opened up a space where she could reflect on pursuing a health and wellness career with a more generative impact using digital technology "*I thought, I can do more for people and began to reflect on the power of technology*".

4.2. Liminality

van Gennep (1960) stated that experiences of liminality can cause deep anxiety for an individual, as they move from (or between) the known to the unknown. Liminality in digital spaces involves an experience of occupying a space in which women find themselves excluded from institutional and social structures with heightened precarity and vulnerability. The women described the financial insecurity associated with being a digital entrepreneur and how they assumed a liminal status between social positions on the margin with a lack of access to social and economic safety nets - "*I couldn't rely on financial support from the government as I didn't fall into any eligible category … I was invisible really*" (Georgina). Success in this context was very much imbued with the rhetoric which positioned failure as resulting from a lack of ambition or

Table 2
Data structure.

First Order Codes	Sub Themes (Second Order Codes)	Aggregate Theoretical Dimensions
Statements about how the individual's social world 'contracts' through an awareness of limits to working within traditional organizational and institutional structures.	Perceiving career stagnation/boundedness	**Separation**
Statements about reflexive contemplation of the stressful nature of employment and distasteful organizational politics.	Dissatisfaction with work-life pressures and organizational politics	
Statements about unease with existing ways of working and feeling demotivated by job prospects.	Dissolving old patterns including motivations, routines and roles	
Statements about feeling anxiety about the lack of safety nets, financial insecurity and precarity.	Financial insecurity	**Liminality**
Statements about anxiety regarding the lack of certainty about sustaining a career in the health and wellness industry; Rapid redundancy of information; Having to constantly evolve and learn; Unregulated nature of the health and wellness industry.	Job precarity	
Statements about the demand for online publicness and intensified public scrutiny; Emotional burden of patterned exposure to harassment online; Statements about pressure to achieve the 'right look' and rewards for this behaviour in terms of social media metrics; Being bound to a capitalist system (platform algorithms) that reifies particular conceptions of femininity.	Enhanced visibility and exacerbated vulnerability	
Statements about difficulties experimenting with and reformulating a new sense of self and social positioning; Disliking being categorized as a social media influencer.	Feelings of being an outsider	
Statements about a perceived inability to switch off from work; Guilt and anxiety around taking a break; Difficulties switching off.	Difficulties disconnecting/"switching off"	
Statements about setting the daily temporal boundaries of work; taking time for self-care; exercise, meditation and yoga; practicing gratitude; building in those golden me time moments in the day; organizing creative and mundane tasks: Switching off from social media through physical deactivation strategies.	Blending a digital work-life rhythm	**Coping Strategies (for navigating liminality in digital spaces)**
Statements about developing a positive mind-set; Fostering an abundant	Developing resilience	

Table 2 (*continued*)

First Order Codes	Sub Themes (Second Order Codes)	Aggregate Theoretical Dimensions
attitude; Building resilience to negative online comments.		
Statements about seeking creative outlets for turning side hustles into a career; Working extraordinarily hard; Intelligence and astuteness; Undertaking nutrition and fitness courses; Building new networks.	Building new knowledge and learning networks	
Statements about building a safe online community.	Creating and leading online health and wellness communities	**Incorporation**
Statements about feeling knowledgeable and educated; Not being afraid to speak your mind on important health issues; Being regarded as an expert and subject specialist.	Becoming leaders and authority figures in health and wellness	
Statements about approaching work in a way that ties it to a sense of meaning and purpose such as being authentic; Statements about work becoming a fulfilling socially valuable end in itself; A sense of being compelled to educate and empower women on health and well-being issues; Work becoming something that pays the bills and pays the heart.	Meaningful work	

personal shortcomings in relation to a lack of work ethic echoing findings by Duffy and Pruchniewska (2017). For example, Grace lamented *"you need to work hard, learn and be self-disciplined. If your business starts to go downhill and you're not making any money, just kind of feel like a slob and I don't like feeling like a slob"*.

The transition to a post-liminal state is a complex precarious accomplishment largely in the absence of mentors and the opportunity to learn from 'elders' who themselves have gone through the rite of passage (Turner, 1967). In our study, there were strong feelings of insecurity amongst the women about entering an unfamiliar territory which generated anxiety about being once again a novice *"I didn't have a clue in the beginning as there were not many females to learn from, that I knew of"* (Kathleen). A key aspect of indeterminacy in relation to women's experience of transitioning into digital entrepreneurial roles was the perceived precarity associated with the health and fitness profession having *"a sell-by date on it"* (Corah). There was also the need to *"constantly learn to keep knowledge current"* (Grace). Yvonne expressed this as *"I never take 'holidays'. Although I imagine people look at my life and think I am on a permanent holiday - what people don't know is the hours I put in behind the scene"*. This theme was echoed by all participants as they explained the hidden preparatory work involved in creating new content for their online programmes, podcasts, videos and Instagram and Facebook stories. The women also discussed the uncertainties about the skills and knowledge required to operate in the profession. For example, Deirdre remarked, *"It can be a vicious place … operating online, trying to make sense of all the information being pushed at people"*. Whilst Hilary commented on the lack of regulation of the health and wellness industry, with digital technology serving to produce echo chambers propagating inaccurate information which she referred to as *"misinformation and over-saturation of the market"*.

Navigation of digital spaces required a certain literacy of reading and making sense of implicit cultural rules. *"Staying in your lane"* (Georgina) or knowing what to and not to discuss, indelibly, yet invisibly, inscribed in the digital environment, in which there were existing dominant voices. Furthermore, the unregulated nature of digital spaces meant that harassment and bullying were an endemic feature, which often resulted in negative self-talk as highlighted by Sarah -*"they're just waiting for me to screw up and criticize me. I keep thinking oh my god what if I actually do make a mistake"*.

The women regularly expressed feelings of feeling unwelcome and under scrutiny with a blurring of private/public boundaries. Kathleen suggested that she refrained from *"getting really get flashy"* for fear of being attacked online. The narratives elucidated the problematic nature of women's entrepreneurial activities in digital spaces due to the digital manipulation of images. Specifically, the stories illuminated oppressive constructions of images of a healthy and fit female body and a control around women's embodied aesthetics described as *"the pressure to be perfect"* (Sarah) and *"the need to assume a certain slim and glowing look"* (Corah). It was clear that success was constructed as more than simply financial performance, and that the women faced difficulties in balancing the embodied performance of merit and the feminine fit body. The women also expressed feelings of self-questioning, alienation and embarrassment about pursuing a digital career in the early period of separating from employment, which was coupled with scepticism and critique from friends and colleagues who remained invested in the employment identities they were trying to shed. As Grace commented *"people often say to me, "oh, when you had a real job", " …. even though I'm making four times the amount of money I made as a teacher! It really is a real job but it is undefined"*.

The women digital entrepreneurs experienced the cognitive dissonance that occurs when individuals experience liminality as a transitional process between different states of being (Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016). For example, Hilary explained a sense of cognitive dissonance around the lack of clear boundaries of working online echoing research by Dén-Nagy (2014) and Di Domenico et al. (2014) - *"unfortunately on social media people are very used to instant gratification and I get a lot of messages most days and it's impossible for me to reply to them all"*. A further example of dissonance was given by Corah who explained her anxiety about taking a holiday and having to plan how not to work. This tension was equally referred to as being *"difficult to separate my own time from my work time, especially when it's online, so it's with me all the time, it's on my phone, it's on my computer"* (Grace). Moreover, the need to be *"always switched on"* (Yvonne) and *"the struggle of switching off"* (Corah) from technology was a prominent tension in their daily lives. This transgressed nature of work/home boundaries was referred to as *"being all consuming and stressful"* (Olivia).

4.3. Coping strategies for navigating liminality

Despite a lack of formal structure for working in digital spaces encountered during liminality, all participants utilized the period as *"a stage of reflection"* that reflects the classic concept of liminality (Turner, 1967, p. 105) that can serve as a basis for *"the reformulation of old elements in new patterns"* (Turner, 1967, p. 99). The women digital entrepreneurs spoke of working in digital spaces as sites of freedom and excitement. This was illuminated in terms of the exercise of agency in establishing new working routines: *"choose when and where I work"* (Yvonne), *"operate without an alarm clock"* (Kathleen), and have freedom and flexibility *"to work anywhere anytime"* (Hilary), with just an Internet connection and a laptop required to work online. They also indicated freedom in terms of possible selves as *"you can be whoever you want"* (Olivia). The lack of temporal-spatial constraints meant that the women digital entrepreneurs could construct a new work schedule that enabled them to be more productive and creative. Temporal flexibility also meant the opportunity to craft time to engage in activities they enjoyed, which ranged from spending time with family, travelling, undertaking
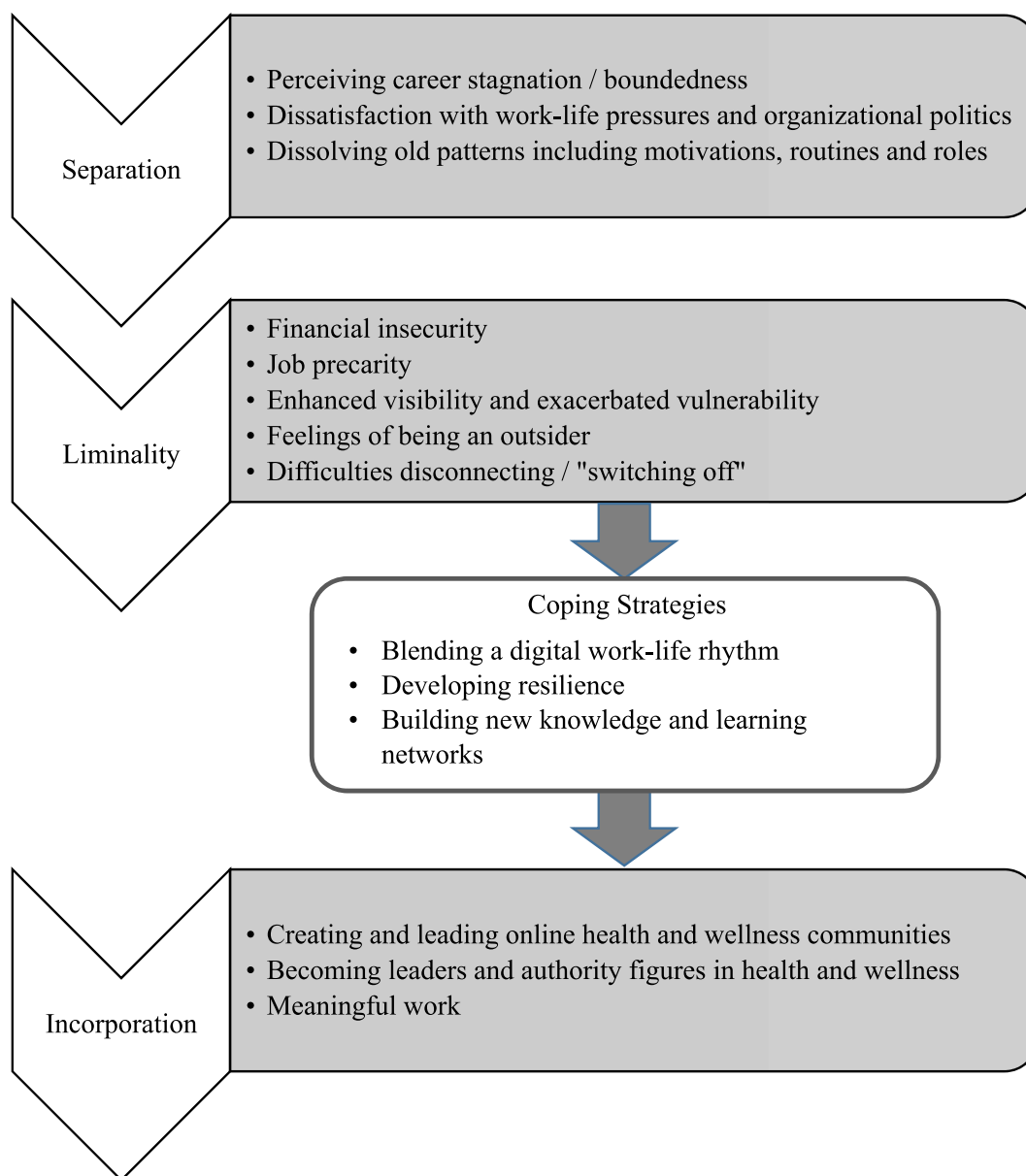
Separation
- Perceiving career stagnation / boundedness
- Dissatisfaction with work-life pressures and organizational politics
- Dissolving old patterns including motivations, routines and roles

Liminality
- Financial insecurity
- Job precarity
- Enhanced visibility and exacerbated vulnerability
- Feelings of being an outsider
- Difficulties disconnecting / "switching off"

Coping Strategies
- Blending a digital work-life rhythm
- Developing resilience
- Building new knowledge and learning networks

Incorporation
- Creating and leading online health and wellness communities
- Becoming leaders and authority figures in health and wellness
- Meaningful work

Fig. 1. Points of transition.

further education and having reflective time. As illustrated by Corah, "*working online gives me more time to spend with the people I want to spend time with because I'm much more flexible in my hours*".

Over time, the women crafted daily work routines and dress code rituals and also weekly schedules that gave them temporal control of their work - "*I do thrive off of having organisation, having a schedule, so I do keep a schedule for myself*" (Grace). The establishment of boundaries around their contactable times was a critically important skill that they developed in addition to developing time for personal and family life. The women thus developed switching on and off from work techniques which involved health and fitness rituals - "*I'm very, very compartmentalized in the fact that I have a clear morning routine of taking care of myself*" (Sarah). In combination with reconstructing a structured work routine was the need to establish offline-online boundaries in terms of how much of yourself to present online - "*you need to be you, know your values and boundaries and guard the hell out of them and this comes over time as you carve out your place*" (Georgina). This theme was discussed by the women, who all agreed the importance of having down time from social media and keeping their private lives offline: "*There are certain parts of*

my life that I won't share, dates and love life side of things" (Corah).

Although digital entrepreneurial contexts emerged as anxiety provoking for our participants and coalesced around women's attempt to resolve identity incoherence and fragility experiences, woven into such narratives was building resilience and the development of positive self-concepts as illustrated by Sarah "*I now believe that with wellness and the different areas, you're going to inspire everyone at different times and you need to view things positively*". This was also echoed in Corah's career story which also indicates the need to build resilience as a response to harassment in the online environment - "*but now, because I've been doing this for a while I'm used to it, so I'm used to silly things {reference to online personal comments] and I'm getting a lot better at just saying I'll give you some energy and then I'll stop and then I'll move forward so that's all you can really do*". It was also evident that the drive to learn and be knowledgeable for participants was partially fuelled by a fear of being attacked in the public online domain, and that knowledge acted as a buffering mechanism - "*{reference to an online attack} It can make you feel that you need to protect yourself or get out of the digital environment but then you say no I have a right to be here with educated answers*" (Yvonne).

The transition into digital enterprise requires specialist and generalist knowledge, and the exercise of agency to acquire it (McAdam et al., 2020). In our study, the women used Instagram to connect with other professionals, build social capital and create new opportunities; with forging new relationships and connecting to new networks promoting the creation of new selves and diluting the strength of older ties within which established identities were previously negotiated - *"I think I was not being really clear what my social networks and channels wanted to achieve and who I was and how to use them to deliver my message and learn from others and when you embed yourself in the right community then you settle"* (Sarah).

4.4. Incorporation

A sense of incorporation for the women emerged as they left behind their original status and immersed themselves in digital entrepreneurial projects and built new online learning communities. A key part of the women's career transition involved the development of intrinsic satisfaction from the work they performed and becoming knowledgeable leaders. As Olivia remarked *"I'm a leader in this space through being highly educated"*. Accordingly, the narratives indicated the way in which the women developed confidence - *"I talk loudly about aligning your nutritional protocol with your values on my podcasts and across my online channels … not quite what the textbooks say but this is my practice and I set the tone and I'm proud"* (Hilary).

The women gained clarity over time that allowed them to resolve tensions about possible selves in digital spaces through narrating their personal journeys and experiences on Instagram stories and podcasts which served as a positive reinforcement of their career change. They also expressed how they successfully built communities in digital spaces underpinned by bonds of trust. They indicated the benefits of having the support of a small but growing online health and fitness community as they stepped over the threshold to their new career. This, to different degrees, allowed them to navigate the digital space. As Yvonne mused, *"I realize I have found a like-minded community of health and wellness enthusiasts that I'm part of and contribute to"*. Digital spaces were thus referred to as a community based setting in which women can maintain a sense of self-worth where otherwise they might have faced criticism. As Deirdre commented, *"Initially I worried about not knowing enough and getting a lot of negativity but there are so many welcoming women now in this space and we bounce ideas off each other … it is a growing community and I love my work"*.

The narratives illustrate that meaningful assimilation of a new career identity occurs over time in which work becomes meaningful and passionate, *"as a calling to transform people's lives"* (Sarah). This often takes the form of a profound self-realisation, suggesting crossing an identity threshold. For some participants, this process happened through a sudden moment of achieving a new understanding of their specialist health and wellness area, with learning, creativity and innovation occurring in a Schumpeterian manner *"at a microwave pace"* (Grace) or *"in a whirlwind fashion"* (Yvonne), whilst for others *"it occurred gradually over time"* (Olivia) and *"just creeped up"* (Georgina).

5. Discussion

Within this paper, we respond to recent calls to theorise and empirically investigate women's digital entrepreneurship (Dy et al., 2017; McAdam et al., 2019, 2020), by asking how do women digital entrepreneurs transition into, participate in and shape the digital spaces they occupy? We addressed this research question by drawing on the concept of liminality as a framework for exploring the liminal nuances of women digital entrepreneurs' career journey that have a beginning which captures a previous (pre-liminal) way of employment and life underpinned by an increasing sense of dissatisfaction; a middle (liminal) stage that depicts a place of separation and a domain of transition into new professional identities and flexible lifestyles characterised by

financial and spiritual abundance; and an ending (post liminal) stage characterised by feelings of joy, well-being and a heightened sense of belonging or communitas. The findings illustrate that leaving employment, which provides a clear work identity and a position in the labour market and entry into digital entrepreneurship involves a socially complex process underpinned by uncertainty, emotional turmoil and changing social relations in line with the anthropological study of rites of passage (Turner, 1967; van Gennep, 1960).

Liminality refers to the margin or transition that is generated between a past and a future structure (Turner, 1969). In these transitions, the liminal person is separated from the group they usually coexist with, in order to enter a state that is neither the space inhabited before, nor any other defined structure. The qualities of a liminal state were interwoven in the women's stories of their career transition experiences, and marked by *"invisibility, darkness, wilderness, an eclipse of the sun or moon"*, according to (Turner, 1969, p. 95), but also a state that can be used positively to manage ambivalence to facilitate movements from employment to digital entrepreneurship (Beech, 2011; Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016). In this regard, we proffer a liminality perspective (Turner, 1969; van Gennep, 1960) to provide a more nuanced understanding of what happens when women encounter liminal situations which tend to perpetuate themselves amidst the blurring of boundaries between work and life and how they form new rituals and routines to restore order in such contexts.

For Turner (1967, p. 128), the openness of becoming involves personal identities and self-understandings to be in flux and this "*often appear(s) to flood their subjects with affect*". We see such uncertainty and emotion amidst the women's discussion of digital spaces as a place and career phase of separation from existing identities and a domain of transition, growth and the acquisition of new self-concepts and affiliations. Our findings show that women's experiences of liminality in digital spaces increasingly became one of communitas and a source of creativity and meaningful work that has not been captured in or accounted for in prior studies of women's digital entrepreneurship. We thus consider liminal spaces as critical social environments for creativity and renewal (Swan et al., 2015), in which women digital entrepreneurs become custodians or managers of the ritual process.

In our study, we identified how digital environments were gendered spaces, places of contest and sites of transformation and how, when taken together, these ideas shed light on the liminal qualities of digital spaces. Whether generated by a sudden realisation or over a longer period of self-questioning and analysis, what these narratives show is the need for women to form new productive routines in digital spaces to cope with fractured work habits and blurring of their sense of work and life boundaries. Moreover, there was a need for the reconstruction of boundaries and maintaining a balance between policing the boundaries and allowing permeability. This resonates with research on the creative boundary management of women entrepreneurs (Carrigan and Duberley, 2013). In addition, intrusions from the platform algorithms constantly threatened the integrity of this liminal time-space. Whilst the leadership of women digital entrepreneurs was evident in this study in the way they shielded clients and younger health and fitness professionals from the chaos of a social environment in a state of flux, they found themselves having to constantly negotiate a liminal space which was psychological demanding and challenging. This echoes recent research that suggests the possibility of more enduring or permanent states of liminality (Bamber et al., 2017; Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Johnsen and Sørensen, 2014; Ybema et al., 2011). In this regard, our critical inquiry into the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs in digital spaces is both timely and important.

We also begin to address concerns that *"liminality's conceptual development has not kept pace with its popularity"* (Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016, p. 48) by showing how this state is navigated through agentic behaviours in which women break out of others' categorisation of them based on their gender, revise their identities by becoming experts and authority figures in health and fitness using online platforms to

disseminate their knowledge and formulate new learning communities. We highlight the importance of revisiting the core elements of the original and classic social anthropological research on liminality in order to understand the nature of contemporary career experiences and identities (Söderlund and Borg, 2018; Thomassen, 2012; Vesala and Tuomivaara, 2019). Unlike recent studies on contemporary working life, we maintain the original meaning of the concept of a transitional rite. However, we illuminate the ways in which gender norms and the constant connectivity culture in digital spaces combine in unique ways to shape the liminal journey and its outcomes, suggesting the possibility of enduring liminality in women's contemporary careers. In so doing, we point to the darker side of contemporary career dynamics in which being caught in a constant liminality can lead to burnout.

6. Practical implications

From a practical standpoint, a better understanding of women's transition into digital entrepreneurial careers in health and fitness affords new insights into women entrepreneurs' adaptations to digital environments and the strategies they adopt to navigate liminality. Here, our findings add nuance that complements and extends understanding of how women experience career transitions into digital entrepreneurial environments without adequate institutional supports and encounter gendered stereotypes, precarity and permeable boundaries between work and life that has longer term implications for health and wellbeing. For the women digital entrepreneur, this analysis has implications for understanding the sources of the challenges they face by providing insights into the importance of the interplay of institutional factors and neoliberal norms that impact their digital entrepreneurial activities. Our research also has implications for how the digital space is presented to women by popular opinion and by policy advisors as neutral and laden with opportunity. It suggests the need for an integrated inclusive approach for fostering women digital entrepreneurs that is not blind to overarching institutionalised social structures and gender asymmetries.

7. Conclusion, limitations and future research

In this paper, we analysed how women digital entrepreneurs transition into, participate in and shape the digital spaces they occupy by drawing on a liminality perspective and qualitative interviews. Beginning with a review of the role of digital technologies for women entrepreneurs, we indicated the opportunities afforded by the Internet, mobile technologies and digital media as external enablers of new digital business models for women. Yet although functionalist accounts capture some of the essence of the phenomenon, they fail to capture its complexity. Through a qualitative inquiry into liminality and gender, the culture of capitalism and social inequality in digital spaces, we showed that a shift in focus from function to meaning provides a more fruitful stance from which the complexities of the phenomenon of women's digital entrepreneurship can be unravelled. Our qualitative methodology enabled us to explore the emergence of a state of liminality as a core facet of the lived experience of women digital entrepreneurs, which is underexplored. In so doing, we demonstrate that, liminality, first theorised by Arnold van Gennep, and later elaborated by Victor Turner, captures many attributes of women digital entrepreneurs' status, namely, their experience of symbolic stress, outsider status, social inferiority and rituals of transition and transformation.

Within this paper, we make two contributions. First, we contribute to women's digital entrepreneurship (Sorgner and Krieger-Boden, 2017; Ughetto et al., 2019), as a result of our application of an anthropological liminality perspective to the experiences of women digital entrepreneurs by theorizing a less known aspect of their career change, namely the spatial domain or the liminal space of transformation. We provide new empirical insights into women's digital entrepreneurship by highlighting the ways in which gender norms and neoliberal narratives are embedded in digital spaces that contributes to women's outsider status. We show that women digital entrepreneurs operate in a dual space as both managers of the ritual process and individuals undergoing a liminal journey in digital contexts characterised by fluid structures, precarity and wider gender and capitalist social relations. This perspective complements existing literature on the instrumentality of digital technologies with a lens that investigates them as 'living' spaces with permeability, social relations and fluidity as the heart of the enquiry, where women are given a voice and technology participates. We also contribute to the emerging cyberfeminism discourse (Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2017; Dy et al., 2018; Heizmann and Liu, 2020; McAdam et al., 2020) by drawing attention to the darker side of contemporary digital entrepreneurship career trends. We highlight the underexplored contradictions, tensions and paradoxes experienced by women digital entrepreneurs whose occupational choice not only allows them to fulfil their career passion but also exposes them to an experience of being suspended in a state of being at the borderland of work, life and social interactions in algorithmically controlled digital spaces. Second, we advance research on liminality by theoretically elaborating how women entrepreneurs navigate a state of liminality in digital spaces. In particular, we demonstrate the role of women digital entrepreneurs as active agents in their transition through liminality, and the creative ways in which they acquire and develop new knowledge, skills and relationships to alter the contours of the digital spaces they occupy.

Our study suggests a number of possibilities for future work to address some of the limitations of this research. We recognise that despite the theoretical saturation achieved in our data collection, which revealed the fecundity of the liminality concept to enable the development of a more nuanced understanding of women's entrepreneurship as a "lived" phenomenon in digital spaces, our sample is modest in size. Future research could therefore engage larger samples combined with a longitudinal approach to further understanding of how liminality in digital spaces is transformed over time. We also identified the role of technology in the creation of permeable liminal spaces which creates a lacuna in which a wider and complex shift in identity occurs, new entrepreneurial knowledge and skills are assembled and communicated online, and in which communities are imagined and practiced. In light of digital technologies and their increasing role in people's lives, future research could utilise elements of netnography, which facilitates the cultural analysis of social media and online community data (Kozinets, 2010) to study how specific technological characteristics of liminal spaces (such as the time-space instability) contributes to shaping work identities in different ways.

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