

1. Projects



Digital Nomads

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Digital nomads have come to symbolise the dream of a seamless combination of work and leisure freed from the strictures of office hours and hierarchical work relations. This is the image projected by the media and the way digital nomads themselves often like to present themselves. But does the empirical evidence support these dreamlike images? Sociologists and anthropologists are unveiling a more complex reality, often marked, for example, by financial insecurity, precarious work and loneliness, which questions representations of digital nomadism as a countercultural lifestyle. The report presented here reviews social science research on digital nomads before the Covid-19 pandemic. While the pandemic has transformed, at least temporarily, the conditions in which digital nomads work, travel and think about themselves and their relation to the world, understanding the actual practicalities of this lifestyle before the pandemic can help us to reflect on its potential futures.

Research participants

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Literature review about digital nomads - presentation

Digital nomads have attracted media attention in recent years. Journalists have portrayed them as young cosmopolitans who are 'living the dream' of working a minimal number of hours and spending the rest of the day relaxing at the beach or discovering exotic places. Their lifestyle is described as a seamless combination of work, leisure, and mobility, a pathway to free oneself from the routines and hierarchies of office work and burdensome local attachments. These are tales of a countercultural lifestyle that values the freedom of travelling light in opposition to ways of life predicated on sedentarism and the accumulation of material possessions.

This is still the dominant story told by journalists and often the way digital nomads like to present themselves in social media. However, a growing body of academic research is showing a more complex reality, often marked by financial insecurity, a risk of ‘precarious work’, concerns about loneliness, efforts at drawing a line between work and leisure in order to be productive, and even stress caused by the perceived urge to keep moving in order to maintain the social media ideal of a successful digital nomad.

While most commentators have regarded digital nomadism as an interesting micro-trend, the normalisation of working from home in a wide range of jobs during the Covid-19 pandemic has potentially created opportunities for the widespread adoption of this lifestyle. While the prospects of digital nomadism in a post-Covid-19 world are still unclear, understanding the actual practicalities of this lifestyle before the pandemic can help reflect on its potential futures.

The literature review conducted by Maurie Cohen and Laura Stanik situates the phenomenon of digital nomadism in the context of a broad conception of modernization, changing work practices, and contemporary discourses pertaining to mobility (and immobility). The authors of the report have in addition sought to ground our understanding – albeit selectively – in bodies of work drawn from the disciplines of sociology, geography/political economy, and anthropology/cultural tourism, as well as to integrate insights generated by the field of computer-supported cooperative work. They have furthermore considered several diverse, yet overlapping, bodies of research regarding itinerant lifestyles and global nomadism.

This brief introduction to the report concentrates on the literature explicitly focused on digital nomads. The first section deals with ongoing attempts to define the boundaries of what constitutes digital nomadism based on empirical evidence. The rest of the document summarises key findings of the academic literature in six themes: work, leisure, co-spaces of the digital nomad lifestyle, mobility practices, political economy, and identity. The final section outlines topics for a research agenda on digital nomads from a mobilities perspective.

Defining digital nomadism

Academic interest in digital nomadism is relatively recent and, although research is growing, there is often a lack of a coherent understanding of the term and phenomenon. Many of the attempts to define digital nomadism suggest that the lifestyle is a further developmental stage of existing patterns. Part of the challenge in defining digital nomadism rests on the fact that location independence, continuous travel and working on the move are widely understood as key aspects. However, these features are simultaneously common among other similar and conceptually adjacent types of location-independent work and lifestyles.

Table 1 shows some of the formulations advanced thus far.

Table 1

| Author | Date | Definition of Digital Nomad |
|--------|------|---|
| Liegl | 2014 | Borrows from pioneering computer scientist Leonard Kleinrock’s notion of digital technologies that enable “anytime, anywhere” connection and describes a digital nomad as “a mobile knowledge worker equipped with digital technologies to work ‘anytime, anywhere’” (pp. 163). |

| Author | Date | Definition of Digital Nomad |
|---|------|--|
| Wang, Schlagwein, Cecez-Kecmanovic and Cahalane | 2018 | <p>“Digital nomads are teleworkers who have become so geographically mobile that they are free to work from almost anywhere in the world” (pp. 2). Digital nomads are “teleworkers whose extreme geographic mobility allows them to work and live from anywhere” and who “therefore choose to work from everywhere, living a life of ongoing interleaved work and travel” (pp. 9) “We may understand digital nomadism as an example of economic activity, wherein digital nomads challenge traditional dichotomies such as production/consumption and government/business. We may understand digital nomadism as a cultural phenomenon arising from lifehacking subculture and fulfilling a modern analogue of the wandering journeymen of old. We may understand digital nomadism as an example of limited but effective technological progress, wherein underlying infrastructure and subsequent digital communications are imperfect but have allowed significant progress to be made in terms of regional inequality and flexible working” (pp. 9)</p> |
| Ritcher and Ritcher | 2020 | <p>Conceptualizes “digital nomadism at the interface of individual preferences (e.g., more flexibility), organizational development (e.g., more dynamic markets) and technological advances (e.g., broadband internet)” (pp. 78) “Digital nomads operate outside of the classical organizational boundaries (Makimoto and Manners 1997) and can be considered as ‘contemporary entrepreneurs’ who bring disruptive business models into different industries (de Vaujany 2016) and have a different working culture and value different types of capital (e.g., reputation, information, symbolic) (Nash et al 2018). Those who adhere to this style of life are redefining work life by pursuing employment that allows for global travel, flexibility in work hours, and a departure from the traditional office environment” (pp. 78).</p> |

Working Lives of Digital Nomads

Digital nomads do not normally have access to the same kinds of centralized organizational resources (IT department or other institutionalized facilities) as other employees. In order to create the ‘information infrastructure’ required to perform daily activities, they rely on their own ingenuity or reach out to friends and colleagues for ad hoc support to ensure the viability of their ICT arrangements. This means continual innovation and reinvention. As Sutherland and Jarrahi (2017) write, itinerant workers ‘are not constrained by the conventions of installed IT [information technology] systems of an organization or platform, but rather they are able to pick up new technologies and practices in a highly flexible way, selecting those which complement their specific situation, their current location, or their current client.’ This also encourages digital nomads to cultivate a culture that encourages mutual learning, sharing knowledge, collaboration, and community. In this respect there is reason to speculate that as centralized work organizations give way to new alternatives (a process that the COVID-19 pandemic may accelerate), the experiences of digital nomads hold important insights for the future of work and the use of technology.

This autonomy and creativity are often cited as illustrating the freedom from the strictures of corporate employment enjoyed by digital nomads. Seldom discussed in the media, however, is the risk of sliding into ‘precarious work’ situations, with an uncertainty of finding more work and confusion around how to contract when financial transfers need to occur across national boundaries and can involve different currencies. The quest for strong online endorsements often leads them to ‘work below market rate, or even for free, in order to have more gigs’.

A feature of digital nomads’ work is their dealing with disjunctures between digital nomad and corporate dispositions regarding values, norms, expectations, and management styles among others. For example, two key values among digital nomads which may not always be found in certain

corporate cultures are respect for diversity (due to the need to adapt to different cultures and to navigate between cultural contexts) and resilience (due to the need to adapt to rising and falling business conditions). Differences between corporate and digital nomad dispositions can also concern the salience of trust and reliability in working engagements that lack a corporeal presence (referred to as “line-of-sight management”) and are frequently conducted over long distances (and stretch across multiple time zones).

Interestingly research has shown that some digital nomads prefer to hide the fact that they are digital nomads as they fear that their clients would not regard them as serious or reliable workers.

Non-working (Leisure) Lives of Digital Nomads

Digital nomadism places a premium on ‘freedom’ which in the eyes of individual itinerant workers is understood to entail ‘intrinsically motivated, fulfilling and enjoyable activities – in the realms of both work and leisure... freedom within paid employment, freedom relating to location independence and freedom to pursue self-development’. Research has shown, however, that due to practical considerations, there is a gap between how freedom is imagined and how it is experienced. Regarding leisure and paid employment, the reality is that digital nomads need to get stuff done and in order to do so they endeavour to keep their working and recreational lives relatively separate. Regarding social relations, researchers have also shown that the desire to be free to choose one’s relations on the move can often turn into loneliness. Regarding the freedom to move, frequency of travel and length of journeys confer status to digital nomads and maintaining an image of a success may entail moving frequently, even when digital nomads may prefer to stay longer in one place to ensure discipline, to maintain work productivity, and to limit disruption that detract from efforts to make a living.

This again shows how the multiple objectives underlying the hypermobile lifestyle that digital nomads seek to uphold can be inconsistent and difficult to harmonize. Completing everyday tasks, creating and maintaining social networks, overcoming loneliness, curating an image of success, and seeking a sense of security can interfere with efforts to realize the idealized expectations of how digital nomads should conduct themselves.

Co-spaces and the Digital Nomad Lifestyle

The recent rise of communal living and working spaces, often referred to as community based places or spaces (or ‘co-spaces’) has been a notable feature of remote and freelance livelihoods for the past decade. These shared facilities are often purposefully designed to meet the needs of individuals whose working-while-travelling and travelling-while-working routines require easy and affordable temporary bases suitable to their itinerant and temporary needs.

Co-spaces bring to the fore a paradox. Although much of the popular rhetoric surrounding the lifestyle emphasizes the blurring of distinctions between work and leisure, detailed investigation reveals that clear boundaries are essential to the well-being of digital nomads. Notably, co-spaces become an important means for achieving this objective.

Researchers distinguish between co-living and co-working spaces. Co-living spaces involve multiple co-residents sharing the same accommodation through either self-coordination or the mediation of a third party provider. Co-working spaces are shared workspaces that give mobile virtual workers and others access to working facilities on a temporary basis (the interval can be as short as one hour) for a modest fee or subscription. It was estimated that in 2017 there were 1.27 million co-working users and approximately 15,500 co-working spaces.

So how do co-spaces construct and enable the digital nomad lifestyle? The ‘nomadic’ nature of computer-supported creative work is both a resource and a concern. On one hand, changing locations can, for example, spark creativity, offer inspiration, and enable new social connections. On the other

hand, the frequent need to find or create the correct technical and practical conditions of a space in a way that is conducive to working can hinder productivity. As noted earlier, changing locations and acquaintances frequently can lead to loneliness and, despite the rhetoric of adventure and openness to cultural difference. But co-spaces can provide a source of watchful discipline that can enhance creativity and allow physical co-presence in public settings to be combined with virtual co-presence through social media. Upon arrival, digital nomads can meet like-minded acquaintances with whom to organize excursions and to rely on for disciplining pressure – to avoid both over-working and over-recreating. Therefore co-spaces can help to reduce feelings of isolation experienced by digital nomads and enhance their overall sense of well-being.

Mobility Practices of Digital Nomads

Mobility defines the work of digital nomads, how they source and perform their work, when they work, what work they do, how they establish work-life balance, where they live and work, and even who their clients are. Paradoxically though we know little about their actual mobility practices. Researchers often mention that digital nomads move location regularly and that they can conceive of mobility as a resource for creativity (being inspired by movement, new locations and acquaintances) and a source of status (the more places you have lived in and the more you travel the higher you rank). But overall little is known about the mobility patterns of digital nomads within and between countries and how this relates to their work and leisure practices (e.g. under what conditions more or less travel shapes their worldviews and has a positive impact on wellbeing, finances and job prospects, careers, romantic relationships, etc.).

Political Economy of Digital Nomadism

In the promotional rhetoric of digital nomadism, a key feature of the lifestyle is that it represents a break from the ordinary working world and allows practitioners to free themselves from the boring and exploitative strictures of neoliberal capitalism. This narrative provides a rationale for hypermobility and nomadicity while also giving it a more noble cause: digital nomads are valiantly challenging the status quo and are in the vanguard of historically significant change. But is this really the case? Does digital nomadism represent a radical rupture in the evolutionary progress of capitalism?

An important aspect to consider is that each digital nomad is her or his own micro-enterprise, one that needs to be continually maintained and in large part reconstructed whenever one moves. Digital nomads draw attention to themselves to provide prospective clients and customers with information about their technical skills and other competencies. Researchers have noted that ‘the mobile life project of digital nomads has to be run like an entrepreneurial project and relies on an ideology of entrepreneurialism that is the hallmark of neoliberalism.’ The reality is that it takes a tremendous amount of work – and considerable good luck – to nurture a personal enterprise to a level where it provides a sufficient livelihood to digital nomads with relatively modest expectations.

Researchers have also highlighted that the lifestyle of digital nomads is enabled by geographic arbitrage (or “geoarbitrage”), a term that refers to opportunities to exploit the difference between compensation rates for online work in nations of the global North and expenses to maintain a livelihood in countries of the global South. This disparity makes it possible to nurture an enterprise during its formative period, to explore ancillary business opportunities, and to work fewer hours by ‘stretching’ income. Geoarbitrage has its challenges, though:

- There is an increasingly globalized labour pool where compensation rates are subject to continual downward pressure.
- Being absent from formal employment in Western countries detaches digital nomads from state-sponsored healthcare and retirement savings, as well as – if circumstances pertain – public education for children.

- Health issues can arise as geoarbitrage means living and working across multiple time zones which become debilitating due to the need to adopt a nocturnal (or completely sleepless during extreme periods) lifestyle.

Researchers have also noted that digital nomadism is becoming a business opportunity in itself which means a growing commodification of the digital nomad lifestyle. The growing number of books, courses and conferences on how to become a digital nomad and the proliferation of working spaces and accommodation explicitly catering for digital nomads are a testament to this

Identity of Digital Nomads

Researchers have studied whether and how mobile digital workers might construct stable work identities. As noted above, the identity of digital nomads is often understood as based on independence and they do not generally undertake the normal activities that provide a work identity. Digital nomads tend to avoid integrating themselves into traditional organizational work environments, associating themselves with a strong organizational culture, or closely attaching themselves to colleagues in customary workplaces. Lacking the institutional support and consistent connections needed to develop an established work identity, their identity is more dependent on the need to balance simultaneously desires for stability and autonomy. Digital nomads use stability to enable locational autonomy. ICTs play a key role. They are simultaneously the means through which digital nomads work from anywhere and the stabilizing tool that keeps them connected with clients, colleagues, family, and friends. Through their discipline in getting work done, ensuring a constant inflow of commissions, and maintaining social relations in location and online, digital nomads are able to construct the commonly presented digital nomad identity of independence.

Researchers have highlighted the role that attachment to family, place, and other fixed and anchoring aspects of life play in the identity-making process. The concept of living on the move is inherently tied to moving away from home, 'the place they "belong" and locate their memories and invest surplus money and time into'. In examining digital nomads' identity, researchers have directed attention to notions of (and commitments to) home, citizenship, family, care, among others, that they maintain or from which they try to decouple in their efforts to construct a mobile identity.

Researchers have also noted the extent to which digital nomads consciously curate an image of success both to show others (including other digital nomads) and to increase their visibility in the market and secure more gigs. Self-presentation often requires significant amounts of work. And although there is a rhetoric of freedom to move, ultimately digital nomads' dependence on ICTs means that their identity is necessarily strongly tied to specific locations that enable connectivity.

Research agenda

As noted above little is known about the mobility patterns of digital nomads and the meaning of such travels in their day-to-day working and leisure activities. Research on the mobility of digital nomads may benefit from addressing questions related to the following themes identified in the literature review.

Simple living and minimalism

Digital nomadism is a lifestyle project imagined in opposition to what is described as a stable, predictable, comfortable life revolving around material accumulation and an office job in corporate business. Two key moments when starting life as a digital nomad are leaving the job and selling one's possessions. After that being a digital nomad is about living a 'simple life' and 'travelling light'. While being a digital nomad may not entail accumulation of objects in a home, at least some ways of practising it may entail frequent flying which requires consuming levels of fossil fuels well above that of

an average European or North America citizen, let alone a person from some of the less developed countries where digital nomads often live. Have digital nomads thought about the carbon footprint of flying? Does this conflict with their ideas of enjoying a simple life? Are they considering flying less? How would digital nomadism look in a world in which aviation demand had been reduced to meet the temperature commitments of the Paris Agreement? Can digital nomadism be reconfigured around slow travel?

Productivity

Behind the discourse of freedom, autonomy and pursuing a life that blends work and leisure, there is a concern about productivity and efficiency (i.e. not being productive enough or struggling to be productive and efficient) and a constant effort to create boundaries between work and leisure. What is the role of mobility in productivity? Does too much travel limit productivity? Or is frequent travel, frequent change of scenery, and meeting 'interesting people' seen as necessary for creativity? How do digital nomads negotiate these tensions?

Isolation and loneliness

Behind the discourse of freedom and autonomy there is also a concern about being isolated and a need to belong to a community of like-minded people. What role does mobility play in enhancing or lessening feelings of isolation? Some digital nomads attend conferences explicitly to meet others, some visit family or friends frequently. Is too much travel to see places a source of isolation? Digital nomads are also visited by friends and family. How often? And does this lessen isolation but also reduce productivity? Under what circumstances do digital nomads reduce travel plans and stay longer in a location so as to establish relationships and 'belong' to a (temporary) group of itinerant workers? What kinds of online communication serve to reduce loneliness? Does too much time on the screen intensified feelings of loneliness?

Inequality and downward mobility

How much travel can a digital nomad afford? Are their travel patterns limited mostly by cost? Or is it mostly time? What kind of work facilitates travel?

Self branding

Digital nomads spend time projecting an image of themselves that enhances their visibility as freelance workers / entrepreneurs. How much of this self branding relies on posting photos of places visited? How much are travel and leisure needed to convey the right image?

Postpandemic futures

To what extent has the Covid-19 pandemic, with the initial disruption of travel and the growth of opportunities for remote work, fundamentally altered key features of the digital nomad lifestyle? Has the normalisation of work from home in certain countries eroded the pre-pandemic image of digital nomadism as an 'alternative' or 'pioneering' lifestyle? Have companies become more attuned to the needs and expectations of digital nomads? Do companies see digital nomadism as an opportunity to further externalise the work force or offer better opportunities for a work-life balance?

Download

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

En savoir plus x

Lifestyle

A lifestyle is a composition of daily activities and experiences that give sense and meaning to the life of a person or a group in time and space.

En savoir plus x

Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

En savoir plus x

Associated Thematics :

Lifestyles

- Aspirations
- Diversity of lifestyles
- Leisure & tourism
- Digital technologies
- Rhythms of everyday life
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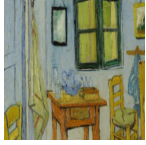
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