



LUND UNIVERSITY

# Digital Nomadism

Travel, Remote Work and Alternative Lifestyles

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Georgios Mouratidis

Master of Applied Cultural Analysis

Department of Arts and Cultural Sciences

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Supervisor

Lars-Eric Jönsson

## **Abstract**

This thesis takes an ethnographic approach in the examination of the phenomenon of digital nomadism. Generally, the term describes people who have rejected the idea of working in a conventional office, but instead, they work and travel without a clear destination. Through the daily life experiences of 15 individuals from different parts of the world living now as digital nomads, the thesis investigates how digital nomadism works for those who do it. The aim of the study is to focus on the advantages and disadvantages of remote work, as an alternative to “traditional,” locally-bound forms of employment. Specifically, I explore how they adapt to this new situation by forming new ways to communicate, work and socialize.

This research will focus on two major research areas: The first one concerns the factors that make individuals choose to travel and work remotely. What drives people to leave the office and what are they leaving it for? What are the consequences? What are the elements that constitute “working in the office” undesirable?

The second major part of my analysis concerns the travel patterns, productivity, work/leisure practices, and sociability forming behind a lifestyle that is not bound to a certain locality. Digital nomads are constantly on the move and have no designated work hours. How do they deal with the lack of a clear division between leisure time and work time? Although they are traveling from place to place nomads seem to want to be perceived as something “more” than a tourist. This part analyzes if and how this is possible.

**Keywords:** digital nomads; travel; employment; remote work; alternative lifestyles;

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# PART I

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This thesis examines the phenomenon of digital nomadism and digital nomads from an ethnographic perspective. This group of location-independent people represents a growing number of individuals that “*that leverage digital technologies to perform their work duties, and more generally conduct their lifestyle in a nomadic manner*” (Mohn, 2014). By choosing to travel while they simultaneously work, digital nomads give us valuable insights regarding the present and future of work in a globalized and increasingly mobile society. Furthermore, their status as perpetual travelers provides us with a great window into the psyche and social lives of individuals who are –seemingly- unbound of connections with (work)places or close relationships.

The term “Digital Nomad” was first nothing more than a neologism coined by the authors of the homonymous book published in 1997 (Makimoto & Manners, 1997). Back then, the hypothesis of long-distance working seemed distant, albeit possible, with the advent of the *millennium*. The evolution of work, technology, and travel worked in synergy to widen the options of highly specialized workers who can pursue their professional activities anywhere in the world. Nowadays, digital nomadism is a globally recognizable phenomenon (perhaps more so in western and south-eastern Asian countries) and has gained significant media attention due to the innovative way it approaches work. The term itself comes from the words “digital”, which translates as “*Involving or relating to the use of computer technology*” and “nomad” which refers to a member of a tribe that wanders from place to place in search for new pastures, without having a fixed adobe.

### **1.1 Defining the Digital Nomad**

In a (post)modern context, the term “nomad” reappeared in a completely new context during the 1970s, as it became the central point of the post-modernist concept of “new tribalism” introduced by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their work “*Nomadology: The War Machine*” (1986) In their work, Deleuze and Guattari reflected on the perpetual fight between state power and individual freedom, with the latter being personified as the ultimate antagonist to the power

of the state. This exciting analogy might actually be close to the "battle" between sedentary work life and the choice to be location independent. For Deleuze and Guattari, nomads were the force capable of destroying even the strongest empires (Deleuze et al., 1986). This archetypal nomad bred many new sociopolitical aspects of nomadism. In his book "*Millenium: Winners and Losers of the New World Order*" Jacques Attali used this theory as a point of departure to make some bleak predictions about the future of capitalism, claiming that the coming of the new millennium would be the beginning of an era for a *hyper-industrial* society of "rich nomads:"

Severed from any national allegiance or family ties by microchip-based gadgets that will enable individuals to carry out for themselves many of the functions of health, education, and security, the consumer-citizens of the world's privileged regions will become "rich nomads. Able to participate in the liberal market culture of political and economic choice, they will roam the planet seeking ways to use their free time, shopping for information, sensations, and goods only they can afford, while yearning for human fellowship, and the certitudes of home and community that no longer exist because their functions have become obsolete, (Attali, 1991, p. 11).

Using access to the internet as a catalyst that enables them to pursue their professional activities on the move, digital nomads are not confined to specific localities. Instead, they are always on the move, blurring the boundaries between opposing notions like home/abroad, sedentary/mobile, work/leisure or even isolation/sociability.

Of course, digital nomads are not the only professionals to work remotely or on the move. Plenty of other professions require individuals to work on the same basis. However, the fundamental difference between digital nomads and other professionals who work and travel, is that the latter does not move by choice but are forced to due to the nature of their work.

Then, there are freelancers: Professionals who can work from wherever they please, but do not choose to pursue a lifestyle of perpetual travel, contrary to digital nomads. Why or how digital nomads embark on their travels and what their goals are, are points largely analyzed in the present research.

## 1.2 Aim and Research Questions

The objective of this study is to generate awareness of the changing values in the world of employment and shed light on how technology is utilized as a means to abandon conventional work environments. Additionally, the research focuses on detecting the factors that deter people from entering a location-dependent job market and what the repercussions on their productivity are. Through this research, I want to delve deeper into the fascinating world of digital nomadism and see whether structuring one's life on the road is viable and rewarding. The aim of the thesis is to investigate the way digital nomadism works and explore the possible benefits and weaknesses of remote work as an alternative to traditional employment.

To do that, two primary research questions are employed, each expanding into a series of secondary topics:

- What are the factors that make individuals choose to travel and work remotely? What are the consequences?
  - What drives people to leave the office and what are they leaving it for?
  - What are the elements that render “working in the office” undesirable?
- What are the practices, connections, and rituals forming a lifestyle that is not bound to a specific locality?
  - What is the difference between digital nomads and tourists?
  - What is work and leisure in a perpetually connected life?
  - How do digital nomads interact and form connections with people and spaces over the world? Does this “boundness” cause problems?

Digital nomads choose to board a one-way flight to roam the world with just a laptop and a lightly packed bag. In the following chapters, we are going to explore their motivations, fears and hopes, as well as their social lives and community building while on the road.

## 1.3 Reflexivity

Whether they want it or not, researchers are always part of the subject they study and influence it to a certain degree. Past experiences, gender, ethnicity, age, interests, abilities and personal preferences play an important role in determining the point of view of the research. Thus,



objectivity in critical analysis is *de facto* unattainable: A phenomenon has as many truths as the individuals experiencing it (Airey & Tribe, 2007, p. 7).

I approached my informants through social media and message boards of which I was a member of, long before I started writing this thesis or expressed a scientific interest in this phenomenon. Entering the digital field as a researcher, interviewer and part of the community, gave me the insights necessary to make this research possible. Without being a full-time digital nomad myself, I doubt that I would have been aware of the everyday routine and experiences of this lifestyle if it wasn't for my informants.

My involvement in this lifestyle, even from the point of view of the digital professional worked as a double-edged sword: I was able to communicate better with people of a similar mindset, but my involvement in the lifestyle also hid certain things. Informants might have left some topics untapped, some notions unexplained or kept some thoughts to themselves because they considered them to be too commonplace in a discussion between two colleagues. I knew what digital nomadism was all about, and I asked questions that an outsider would not.

Of course my “double identity” did not come without criticism from fellow members of the online communities I was also part of. Surveying was explicitly prohibited in most message boards, and my attempts to conduct some form of quantitative research became more difficult than I initially thought. Therefore, I had to employ other methods to approach my informants and achieve my research goals. Interviewing and surveying were completely anonymous; participants were allowed to use fake names so as to be protected from any undesirable adverse effects. Moreover, they had the right to refuse to answer questions, if they so wished.

## **1.4 Organization of Thesis**

Before moving on to next parts of this research, a few words about the structure of the text are needed. This thesis comprises of five chapters, a conclusion and a reference list.

Chapter one is the introduction, in which I explain the phenomenon of digital nomadism, argue about the significance of my study and delineate the aim and research questions. Furthermore, I reveal my position in the digital nomad ecosystem and prepare a brief presentation of previous research on various “nomad” subcategories.

Chapter two presents the theoretical framework through which I will identify and analyze the subjectivities and push/pull factors behind the digital nomad lifestyle. The thesis assumes a

meta-theoretical orientation to tourism, societies, and power questioning, through a largely Foucauldian framework. The works of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, as well as semiotic theories are used to approach the research questions that guide the thesis.

Chapter three discusses the methodology, explaining the choice and use of tools for collecting the research material and conducting the analysis, which is based on netnographic research, discourse analysis, surveys and semi-structured interviews.

Chapter four answers the first research question and sub-questions. Using the data gathered by my research, I analyze the factors that make individuals choose to travel and work remotely and what the consequences of this decision are. Thus, I will try to discover the push/pull factors from a standard work environment and explore what the elements that drive people away from working in the office are.

Chapter five is essentially the analytical part of the second research question that focuses on the everyday life as a digital nomad. In this chapter, I will mentally follow digital nomads through their daily practices. I will also examine how global nomads place themselves among other traveling people, what kind of communities they belong to, and what kind of communities they could build in the future.

Chapter six, the conclusion, is where I will share some ethical considerations pertaining the phenomenon of nomadism and discuss what the digital nomadism movement could mean for the future of employment.

## **1.5 Relevance**

The significance of this thesis lies in its fresh take on a relatively new phenomenon that could be the foretelling of massive changes in the world of employment. Although the term “digital nomad” has been around since 1997, it was nothing more than a buzzword, since telecommuting was significantly harder back then. It is only during the last few years that technology has advanced to such a degree that almost all of the components of a regular white collar workday can be performed over wireless internet.

The present research, using the internet as a primary field to reach to the online communities of digital nomads, focuses on the driving factors behind the latter’s decisions and everyday practices, and attempts to communicate with individuals who are simultaneously unbound and tied to an internet connection as an invisible lifeline. The importance lies in its

focus on the intricate nuances of human experience while on the move. Their experience can provide us with valuable insight into the thoughts and feelings of people who are working and traveling as a lifestyle choice. The data of this research are useful to ethnographers precisely due to the nature of the digital nomad lifestyle.

## Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I will introduce the theoretical concepts through which the analytical part of the research will be developed. Issues of space, power relations regarding work relationships, identity, sociability and travel/mobility are the basic notions that will be used as departure points while exploring the words and practices of digital nomads.

### 2.1 Digital Nomadism as a Set of Signs

One of the concepts I use in order to approach the material, is a cultural semiotic approach first proposed by Cassirer (1971) and then developed through the works of Posner (2003), Lotman et al., (1984). Expanding upon these thoughts, provides a better understanding of the specifics, identity and culture of digital nomads by discerning the *artifacts* and *mentifacts* (Posner) that constitute the sign system of digital nomadism as a whole.

Posner describes *mentifacts* (a wordplay on *artifacts*, a key concept of civilization) as the pieces that formulate the mentality of a society, like its ideas and values, as well as the conventions and practices. Sets of artifacts and mentifacts together, constitute the very core of a society and are both carriers and producers of *culture*. Notions such as “freedom,” “independence,” “curiosity” or “sociability” might have different interpretations within the community of digital nomads. By using this theoretical framework, we can easily answer questions of values and sociability among the digital nomad community itself. According to Posner, “*mental culture is, nothing but a system of sign conventions which the members of a society share,*” (2003, p. 16).

This cultural and semiotic framework allows us to approach digital nomads and digital nomadism as a separate *semiosphere* (Lotman et al., 1984), with a specific set of systems that are used to develop and maintain an identity in the connected world. Furthermore, we can view digital nomads themselves as members of a community that has certain codes and a series of *semantic connections* that they all share.

Technological media, as defined by Posner are especially important in organizing the *semiosphere* (Lotman et al., 1984) of the digital nomadic lifestyle. Laptops, smartphones, and tablets are the mediums that connect the virtual with the physical domain, organizing all of the other types of media that are involved in the production of digital nomad signs. “Mobile media”

and “smart devices” permit the circulation of data without physical connections, providing their users the opportunity to work from everywhere, mostly in cafes that offer free WiFi and designated co-working spaces that also provide individual desk spaces and office facilities.

## 2.2 Notions of Power

If we are going to view the relationship between digital nomadism and regular employment through the prism of the *power relations* that they form and by which they are dictated, the ideas of French philosopher Michel Foucault offer a valuable approach (1990, 1995, 2009; 2000; 1979). Foucault has extensively discussed issues of power, how it infiltrates all social interactions with different *gravitas* and the perspectives that stem from it. His viewpoints provide ways of understanding how power is ever-present in work and leisure practices.

For Foucault, power is a network of relations, “*constantly in tension, in activity, rather than a privilege that one might possess; that one should take as its model a perpetual battle rather than a contract regulating transaction or the conquest of a territory,*” (Foucault, 1995, p. 26). This battle, however, is not only between governments and dissidents or repressive regimes and rebels. Power permeates all relationships, within institutions, families, schools or even personal relationships. The notion of power “*comprises strategies by which individuals try to direct and control the conduct of others,*” (Kannisto et al, 2014, p. 46). Power relations are not always antagonistic but can manifest in many ways, including aspects of work and employment.

When Foucault tried to discover and reflect upon the relations of power, he stated that when a subject is positioned within the production chain, it is simultaneously placed in a web of complex power relations (Foucault, 2000). However, that did not necessarily mean he was speaking only about class warfare only and tried to approach his topic from a fresh perspective, away from the “grand narrations” of the Enlightenment era. Instead Foucault suggested that we approach the conceptualization of Power by looking at all the instances in which said Power relations, excluded and cast away certain disobedient or inefficient subjects. For example, at instances of madness, illness, death, crime or sexuality, the “offenders” were simultaneously agents of resistance (2000). He did not deny the existence of a superior authority which exercised power over the subjects, but he claimed that the exertion of power is not a one-way road. According to his theoretical model, power, like the forces of gravity and friction, is ubiquitous in everyday life.

For Foucault, the modern state was similar to a pastoral power in the way it manipulated and drove the subjects into submission. The only thing that slightly changed over the years, was the narrative which they use: while the church promised a better life in the next world, the state promised well-being and security in the present one. The state used a double binding combination of individualization and totalizing procedures, which make the liberation of the subject nearly impossible.

According to Foucault, much as we are all ourselves practitioners of Power, we are all nothing but voluntary subjects to a higher authority which can provide what we ask for, if we comply with its rules. However, Foucault did not believe that liberating the individual from the state was enough. On the contrary, one should try to be liberated both from the state, but also from the subtle forms of individualization which work as agents of submission that are linked to the state (Foucault & Sheridan, 1979).

The digital nomad experience provides an opportunity not only to explore what happens when professionals take their work on the road, but to ask questions about the sedentary power dynamics as well. As the “normal” notions of work, sociability, family and tourism are shaken, it is important to explore the disruption in existing power relationships between the mobile and sedentary worker (Bærenholdt, 2013). However, the nature of the Foucauldian power should not be analyzed as a one-way, negative and repressive force that subjugates and restricts.

If power was never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no; it also traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network that runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression. (Foucault & Rabinow, 1984, p. 61)

This misconception often stems from the fact that Foucault himself chose to exemplify his theories by us far more complex than simply that. Aspects of power include the continuous surveillance of the subjects and the governance of their bodily conduct and sexuality (1990, 1995). These *biopolitical measures* come in the form of values, family and friend relationships

and, in our case, norms about employment. Implicit notions of biopower is a central theoretical aspect in the analysis of the empirical material and a more in-depth description can be found on Chapter Four of this thesis.

### **2.3 Towards a Digital *Nomadology***

Narratives and power structures concerning the term “nomadism” are not new in the history of critical theory. As mentioned in Chapter I, the metaphoric use of nomadic border transgression as an act of warfare against an overpowering authority was initially espoused by French theorists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their book *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987). In their work, nomads are the outsiders who keep threatening the authority and power of the state, disrupting its principles and axioms. For Deleuze and Guattari, nomads wielded the power that was capable of destroying even the strongest states and empires.

The book begins with a contrast between the games of “chess” and “go,” which served as a metaphor for the relational character of relevant constructions. In chess, the pieces have a fixed nomenclature and identity, based on the rules of the game. Their movements are dictated by a higher power, thus they are portrayed as lifeless subjects, endowed with a *substantial identity* (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007, p. 162). Contrary, the pieces in the game of “go” are bereft of any identity and hierarchy, with their only point of reference being their position on the board at any given kind. To understand the scale of the game, it has been estimated that the possible number of legal position combinations on a “Go” board are over  $2 \times 10^{170}$  (Tromp & Farneback, 2007).

Although the daring work of Deleuze and Guattari is more akin to a work of art rather than a robust analytical tool, the book still offers an interesting take on the dynamic relationship between sedentary power and “*lines of flight*” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) that serves as a valuable point of departure for the greater significance of this research, which is to examine the impact of digital nomadism as a global phenomenon that challenges long-held traditions and beliefs about employment. Of course, the connection between the term “nomads” in *A Thousand Plateaus* and digital nomads is a pure coincidence but serves as a perfect analogy for the purposes of this research.

## 2.4 Previous Research

This thesis makes use of a wide interdisciplinary body of work to support the multiplicities of digital nomad experiences, stemming mainly from ethnographic and tourism studies. The theoretical basis is on Foucauldian theories of (bio)power as well as the Deleuzian notion of nomadology. Also, theories of semiotics were used to initially approach the phenomenon. The above-mentioned combination reflects the larger processes in which digital nomads are entangled, such as travel, tourism, mobility, work and sociability which are interconnected and not bound to specific locations and timeframes (leisure time/work time).

Previous research regarding digital nomadism and nomadic professionals, in general, has been attempted primarily by academics in the field of tourism. They explore working and traveling from a tourist industry perspective and focus on the mobility aspect (Franks, 2016) and on how the phenomenon of global (not just digital) nomads can be explained and understood through tourism studies (Kannisto et al., 2014). The above-mentioned papers study digital nomads as a separate group of travelers and consumers within the experience economy, following the pioneering work of John Urry (2006; 2000), who tried to understand contemporary societies and meaning as reflected on the “tourist gaze.” The chosen research areas bring together both traditional concerns about individuals’ relationships to societies and more modern issues, like the traveler vs. tourist dichotomy, as well as notions of mobility, power, productivity and sociability.

Anthony D’Andrea focused his work on the theoretical aspect of neo-nomadism and global hypermodernity by doing fieldwork among expatriates in Ibiza (D’Andrea, 2006), while Moravec (2008) speaks about the emergence of a “Knowmad Society”:

A nomadic knowledge worker –that is, a creative, imaginative, and innovative person who can work with almost anybody, anytime, and anywhere. Industrial society is giving way to knowledge and innovation work. Whereas industrialization required people to settle in one place to perform a very specific role or function, the jobs associated with knowledge and information workers have become much less specific concerning task and place. Moreover, technologies allow for these new paradigm workers to work within broader options of space, including “real,” virtual, or blended. Knowmads can instantly



reconfigure and recontextualize their work environments, and greater mobility is creating new opportunities. (Ibid, 2008, p. 19).

From her point of view, Ina Reichenbacher attempted to examine how work, leisure and travel are interpreted from digital nomads in their quest for *independence*, still from the perspective of tourism studies (Reichenberger, 2017). In a more theoretical tone, Kuzheleva-Sagan and Nosova attempted various semiotic interpretations on digital nomadism, both positive (utopian) and negative (anti-utopian using concepts from Frankfurt School theorists, post-structuralists, and social scientists. Their work focuses on the collection and application of theoretical concepts on digital nomadism (KuzhelevaSagan & Nosova, 2016). Additionally, early work on the research of telecommuting by Mokhtarian and Salomon (1994), identified the dominant drivers that pushed people away from the workplace and into long-term travel. Travel is a big part of the digital nomad identity, therefore there has been extensive research on tourism studies. Researchers have explored the issue of digital nomadism, tourism and lifelong travel through the prisms of mobility, leisure and even Foucauldian theories about power. (Cary, 2004; Cohen, 1979; Galani-Moutafi, 2000; Larsen & Urry, 2011; Sheller & Urry, 2006; Tribe, 2007; Urry, 2000).

Still, apparently missing from the aforementioned literature is an exploration of the digital nomadism topic from a clear ethnographic perspective. Although ethnographic methods have been employed in many of the researches listed above, the context was about alternative-minded westerners (neo-nomads) seeking exotic experiences in the islands of Ibiza and the transcendent beaches of Goa in India (D'Andrea, 2006). Annika Müller (2016) succeeds in encapsulating the basic components of the digital nomad identity, as presented in an article by Anna Hart published in *The Telegraph* (2015). Scientific research up to this point does not focus on the roots of the phenomenon, but rather on its repercussions on travel and tourism. The majority of the papers that go deeper in nomadism studies, come from the field of tourism and travel. Therefore, there are a lot of concepts borrowed from tourism studies which I also use in my own research.

Nevertheless, I believe that the phenomenon of digital nomadism would be greatly served from a cultural analytic perspective. Applied ethnography could offer an actionable way to look at the changing trends in the world of travel and employment. The era of modern capitalism has

fundamentally shifted the way people conduct and interpret work, so it would be interesting to explore these notions by examining a group of people who are actively searching for alternatives to traditional employment.

## **Chapter 3: Methodological Approach**

The vast majority of the material used for this thesis comes from structured interviews and surveys with 15 active digital nomads, as well as “netnographic” methods and research. For the sake of simplicity, I am going to divide my methodologies into two sections: fieldwork and analytical methods. The first is about methods that were used to collect the material, while the second is about the methods used to analyze it.

### **3.1 Fieldwork Methods**

In this section, I will present the methods used to collect the material necessary for my research. The next section (Analytical Methods) is about how that material was analyzed.

#### **3.1.1 Netnography**

The internet is a relatively new field for social sciences. Even though it may have been here for the better part of the last three decades, it became a standard commodity during the last quarter of the ‘00s with the development of wireless connection systems. Markets and society have undergone a profound “infotransformation” (Rokka, 2010, p. 381) and it would have been highly surprising if the social sciences didn’t come up with some sort of research methods for this new digital era. The first steps towards that direction were taken in the form of surveys, but Hookway argued that the internet is a prominent field for the extraction of qualitative data as well (Hookway, 2008).

The term “netnography” was first used by Robert Kozinets (2009) and it is an application of ethnographic methods to study online cultures. To do so, the researcher must undertake a series of actions, such as investigating sites, forums, etc., and collecting data from the field, just as they would in any other physical area. Of course, he is not suggesting that “physical” ethnography is exactly the same as digital research. Specifically, he identifies three distinct points in which ethnography and netnography differ:

First, entering the online culture or community is distinct. It diverges from face-to-face entrée in terms of accessibility, approach and the span of potential inclusion (...). Secondly, gathering cultural data and analyzing it has particular challenges, as well as

opportunities. The idea of ‘inscription’ and ‘fieldnotes’ is radically altered. The amounts of data can be different. The ability to apply particular analytic tools and techniques changes when the data are already in digital form (...). Finally, there are few, if any, ethical procedures for in-person fieldwork that translate easily to the online medium. The abstract guidelines of informed consent are open to wide degrees of interpretation.

However, understanding and identifying a group of displaced (and constantly mobile) professionals such as digital nomads, is impossible without “going global” on the digital scale (Appadurai, 1996). Studying digital nomadism ethnographically inevitably belongs to the digital world. Therefore, every part of the collection of my material involved me getting active on message boards and social media using netnographic methodologies.

As a first step of this research, I conducted an online analysis obtaining information about digital nomads in relevant blogs, forums, social media and discussion pages. This analysis had two goals. The first was identifying potential participants for the interviews and the second was obtaining material based on existing discussions, to be inspected via discourse analysis.

The resources I used to conduct my research were:

- Reddit’s digital nomad (/r/digitalnomad) channel (110,000 members)
- Facebook’s *Digital Nomads around the World* group (68,000 members)
- Websites and forums specifically directed to the nomadic lifestyle:
  - Nomadlist.com (paid)
  - Digitalnomadsforum.com

The material collection was focused specifically on topics relevant to the research aims and questions. Therefore, I only recorded responses that regarded digital nomad sociability, motivations and the realities of their lived experience. The data then was subsequently collected and assigned to match each respective research question so as to finally create a stable database of existing discussions on the matters I was examining. The next step was identifying patterns and similar responses and questions across message boards and websites. The accumulated data helped me formulate an open-ended questionnaire to be shared among digital nomads.

### 3.1.2 Interviews & Survey

The primary research material was collected in the form of an open-ended questionnaire that also served as a basis for the interviews, conducted in February-March of 2018. The total number of participants came up to 15 individuals. The questions concerned their daily lives, their motivations, sociability, challenges, and comparison to standard work/life practices. The full list of questions can be found [here](#).

Finding participants for the questionnaire and the interviews was surprisingly tough, as most message boards and communities explicitly banned users who published posts asking for a response to surveys and research. What was particularly interesting, was that this policy was the same across all websites and forums, with very little variation. In the majority of cases, surveys were vehemently prohibited, even though the scope was strictly academic. Therefore, I had to track down freelancers through lesser known message boards and send messages to each one in person to get participants. Despite the initial difficulties, I managed to contact 15 individuals who were able to participate in the semi-structured interviews, either in writing or verbally.

Interviewing can take many distinctly different formats, depending on who is using it and for what reason. Ethnographic interviewing is mainly “unstructured” (meaning there is not a rigorous set of questions to be answered) and is often striving to emulate a true discussion, more than anything else (Davies, 1999). However, “unstructured” does not mean “unorganized”: there has to be a plan (no matter how loose) in the researcher’s mind to be able to spark a conversation and also keep it in place. There was a set of pre-meditated questions before the start of the research, however, all of them were open-ended and were treated more like the point of departure for discussion rather than a guided survey.

The nature of digital nomadism and the fact that most of the participants were scattered around the globe made gathering informants a challenge in itself. Things were more “relaxed” when it came to the questionnaire, as the individuals were free to complete it at their own leisure. Since meeting participants in person was both costly and not efficient the interviews were conducted via Skype. For the sake of brevity, interviews lasted from 20 to 40 minutes. Survey participants were from various parts of the world, and more specifically USA (4), Germany (3), France, Austria, Sweden, Poland, Australia, Greece, Colombia and Czech Republic.

Name	Job	Nation of Origin	Age
Alejandro	Product Designer	Colombia	22
Rachel	Writer	USA	24
Alizée	Digital marketing Specialist	France	28
John	Marketing	USA	39
Laura	Blogger, Teacher	USA	42
Chris	Digital Marketer	USA	28
Anna	GIS Specialist	Germany	34
Jan	Web Developer	Poland	27
Nils	Designer	Sweden	32
Linda	Student	Germany	18
Brook	Entrepreneur	Australia	41
Rafailia	Musician	Greece	28
Martin	Programming Educator	Austria	31
Nikola	Marketing Specialist	Czech Republic	29
Vivi	Virtual Assistant	Germany	27

The participants were given a choice to use their pseudonym if they so wished, in order to protect their personal data. As a researcher, I tried to be discreet regarding personal information and did not require real data or contact details. All of the participants were informed about the exact nature of this research and most of them have actually expressed their interest in reading a copy of the finished paper. Informants whose data were retrieved from message boards and forums were asked to give their consent before their statements were used in this essay.

### 3.1.3 Autoethnography

Auto-ethnographic accounts are a subject of discussion among the academic community. Self-positioning within the broader research topic is important but poses significant risks for the researcher. Acquiring and using material from personal accounts is, by definition, problematic. Autoethnography, as a genre, connects the personal to the cultural, placing the *self* within a social context (Reed-Danahay, 1997). In this study, for example, I frequently mention my

experience as a freelancer to add my point of view on the aspect of (remote) employment. The choice of this subject was not accidental, as I have also considered taking the route of digital nomadism.

Although researchers are generally encouraged to be self-reflective within their research and acknowledge the influence of their personal subjectivity (Holt, 2003), the line between introspection and narcissism is thin, according to Amanda Coffey, who suggested that autoethnographies are “*in danger of gross self-indulgence*” (1999, p. 132). While this criticism is not necessarily out of touch, I believe that using the *self* as a *source* can provide key insights within the grand scheme of qualitative research traditions, by producing knowledge on a little-known aspect: the connection of the personal with the cultural. However, the lack of verification process and the dangers of narcissistic outbursts are important factors to consider.

To solve the inherent problems associated with it, in this research, autoethnography was used only as an ancillary methodology. The goal was to provide a more personal account from the writer’s perspective without running the danger of developing into a “diary” or jeopardizing the credibility of the paper.

The need for the inclusion of a personal perspective stems from the fact that I have some degree of involvement with the world of digital nomadism. As a professional copywriter, I have spent significant time working with clients from all over the world while simultaneously traveling. Even though I never followed a full-time nomadic lifestyle (I had a base to return to), there was a high degree of subjectivity involved that needs to be pointed out. Being a part of the digital nomad community is partly the reason for starting this research. As a result, it is important that the reader knows that I have certain affinities and predispositions towards this way of life. Nevertheless, for the reasons pointed out above, I tried to limit my personal accounts to the final chapter of the thesis, to leave more space for the responses of the participants.

### **3.2 Analytical Methods**

This section regards the methods that were used for the analysis of the material obtained from my netnographic account. I have been involved in many online discussion and message boards across the internet to collect accounts pertaining the digital nomad experience. Discussions involved personal stories, questions about certain places, questions about the life of a digital nomad and even guides for people considering to go nomad.

### 3.2.1 Discourse Analysis

According to the Foucauldian definition, *discourse* pertains “*all the language and systems of rules whereby utterances/texts are produced; second, all texts and utterances produced by those rules, regardless of their literary or factual status; third, groupings of texts/utterances.*” (Macdonell, 1986, p. 4). In that sense, digital nomadism could be deciphered based on the total mode of thinking it represents, especially concerning the life choices and stance of the participants. This is a useful way of approaching all the *texts and utterances* produced within the community, expressing the digital nomads’ ideology, fears, decision making or work ethic.

Discourses are shaped by the institution and cultural context in which they are formed (Kannisto et al., 2014). According to Macdonell (1986), discourse can change depending on who is addressing whom or based on the status of the participants of a conversation. This can be applied to a wide range of notions, from the concept of wanderlust itself to the comments left behind in an internet forum. Therefore, a global truth about digital nomads is not sought after in the present study. Each individual experience is fluid, mobile and highly dependent upon the various contexts it populates. The texts analyzed under this spectrum, whether interview transcriptions, questionnaire responses or forum posts, are regarded as a unique, fleeting and valuable moment within time and space.

My material stemmed from a questionnaire, interviews and online discussions on message boards and forums. Ultimately, the material collected out of all the fieldwork methods was approached critically. The actual analysis was conducted following the stages proposed by Norman Fairclough (1989), pertaining to the three dimensions of critical discourse analysis:

- **Description**, which aims at the preparation of the research material (in this case by categorizing the texts based on the thematic group they belong to);
- **Interpretation**, which focuses on the relationship between text and interaction with seeing the text *as the product of a process of production*, and as a *resource in the process of interpretation* (ibid, 1989, p.26);
- **Explanation** (contextual analysis) is the most crucial aspect of this research, as it analyzes the words and statements of digital nomads regarding their lifestyle in relation to sedentary societies. The largest part of this research is actually reading between the lines to focus on answering the research questions and fulfilling the aim of this research.



It should be noted that these stages do not occur in a linear fashion, as Fairclough himself points out. The different points of analysis, explanation and interpretation are intertwined and it is not always easy to decide what should be included or left out of the research material:

What one “sees” in a text, what one regards as worth describing, and what one chooses to emphasize in a description, are all dependent on how one interprets a text. There is a positivist tendency to regard language texts as 'objects' whose formal properties can be mechanically described without interpretation. But try as they may, analysts cannot prevent themselves engaging with human products in a human, and therefore interpretative, way, (ibid, 1989, p.27).

Digital nomads may employ various discourses to represent their lifestyles in different terms, depending on various factors, such as the social, financial and cultural contexts they are in, to whom they are talking etc. These variables prove that discourse analysis does not happen *in vacuis locis*, but rather exists within “wider societal structures, relations and processes” (Kannisto et al., 2014, p. 67).

### **3.3 Limitations of methodologies**

As mentioned above, there were significant setbacks throughout my fieldwork. Not only because no perfect methodology exists, but mainly because it was hard to approach the digital nomad community, scattered as it was throughout the globe. To make matters worse, I was not allowed to ask nomads to participate in my study due to most online community guidelines (on Facebook and Reddit). Although I managed to contact enough people to have a respectable amount of responses, there is no doubt I could have a larger participant group had I had the opportunity of doing some participant observation in a popular digital nomad destination.

The unanimous ban on surveys on almost all online message boards and forums was an interesting topic for consideration. One can only imagine the amount of interest that this lifestyle generates. Marketers that are trying to identify with their target group, academics studying digital nomads from all possible angles and journalists trying to decipher the secret behind the “four-

hour week” flooded online digital nomad communities with surveys and questionnaires <sup>1</sup>. While this was practically a problem for my research, it also revealed the increased interest in the wave of digital nomadism and its significance.

Another limiting factor was the fact that even though the questionnaire was open-ended, surely the answers were not as in-depth as they would have been in more personal interviews. Although all the answers were on-point and that made classification and sampling easier, the responses lacked the vivacity of a more "traditional" interview. Lastly, the fact that English is not my native language may have also played a role in how I presented my questions and my scope to the participants of the study.

Finally, the fact that my informants were scattered all over the globe surely did not help me in collecting more personal data. Participant observation methods were impossible to implement. Therefore, I tried to make up for it by carefully monitoring message boards and discussions (netnography). Digital nomads do not form communities bound in physical places. Therefore, I tried to adapt to that paradigm and become a part of their online “meeting points”, even though my perspective was limited to the life of a freelancer/student.

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<sup>1</sup> “*You have to understand that at least once a week someone tries to do a survey. To be fair to everyone, we do not allow them at all.*” This is the actual message I received from the moderator of the /r/digitalnomad subreddit when I tried to recruit people for my research.

## PART II

### **Chapter 4: Going Nomad**

This chapter will pertain to my **first** research **question and sub-questions**. Using my data, I will try to define **which are the push/pull factors** that drive individuals to make that choice. Why are they leaving the office? What are they leaving it for? What are the elements that make office work undesirable? Do digital nomads find what they seek by following such a lifestyle? And if so, what are their findings?

#### **4.1 The Informants' Profile**

The previous chapters were a necessary introduction to the notion of digital nomadism from an ethnographic perspective. But who are these people? Are they possible to characterize?

Let's start with the oldest one among them, Laura (42), who decided to leave the United States in order to *escape personal issues and grief*. For Laura, who currently lives in Scotland, negative emotions and pressure "*morphed into long-term travel*" when, after much trial and error, she realized she could make money online as a *travel consultant, writer, photographer, blogger and teacher*. Laura's multiple income sources and professions shed light on another important fact of the nomad life, which is the diversification of assets. There are many things one can do online to make money and in the case of Laura, all of the above took up 10 to 40 hours of work per week. Most digital nomads are part of what is called "gig economy," a term used to describe a professional space "...which espouses micro-entrepreneurship, self-employment, and computer mediated peer-like exchanges" (Sutherland & Jarrahi, 2017, p. 97:2). While some of the participants worked as remote employees for companies all over the world, a significant portion found work through freelance marketplaces like UpWork, Fiverr, Freelancer.com and others.

The majority of the participants came from the United States. **Rachel**, for example, was a 24-year old US citizen living somewhere in South America at the time of the interview, following her partner in their travels, working as a writer. When asked about her choice to join her partner, she admitted that although instability is a real issue regarding digital nomads in other

countries, she believes that this lifestyle was more fulfilling for her: “I am not stuck in an office. When I am working, I am actually productive the entire time. Plus, I enjoy the freedom to schedule my days as I please.”

**Alejandro**, a 22-year old product designer from Colombia was located in Spain when he answered the questionnaire. When asked about his decision to go nomad, he replied: “I knew from a very young age that I didn’t want to work a 9-5 job. Reddit & YouTube were my main source of education; the rest just came down to lucky coincidences.”

This is the first statement in which we find the phrase “9-5 job” describing a less than ideal situation. Alejandro clearly pinpointed a division between the norm of a regular office job with an alternative lifestyle that was, to an extent, powered by social media. Contrary to older participants, such as **Laura**, who discovered the possibilities of remote work through *trial and error* or, in the case of **Brook** who just happened to be in his twenties during the Dotcom bubble<sup>2</sup>, Alejandro grew up doing freelance gigs:

I started guest writing for blogs at 17, then as I went to college I started practicing what I learned through freelance design gigs, after quite a bit of bad experiences with clients I decided to switch to translating text for a more objective client experience.

**Alizée** was a French digital marketer that was based in Paris during the time she completed the questionnaire. According to her, location independence offered a way out of “...strict office hours and office rules which don’t always make sense.” In her case, going nomad was the result of careful consideration. “After three years of research and one year of planning, we have decided to go full remote with my boyfriend,” she said.

Planning to go nomad was a big part of the conversation in relevant fora and message boards. Many of the questions and topics were about making the decision to go nomad, rather than actual discussions regarding the everyday details of the nomad life. And although we couldn’t actually know how many of those who asked finally made the leap to digital nomadism,

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<sup>2</sup> The dot-com bubble was a financial bubble caused by the explosive growth of Internet during the years 1997-2001. The NASDAQ stock market –which included many tech companies- grew exponentially until March 2000 based on speculation, before crashing, taking down some of the biggest companies of the time, such as Pets.com and Webvan and causing significant losses to established brands such as Cisco, Ebay and Amazon (Cassidy, 2009).

increasing interest was a sign of the appeal of this particular lifestyle, at least in a theoretical level.

**John** was a US national that worked as a marketer from Spain. He and his wife decided to go nomad after he was fired from his job and his wife was passed over for promotion. “Tired of the office life, we left and never came back. We knew that there would be challenges, but that we would overcome them,” he claimed. This was yet another instance where the office life is painted with a bleak color, as office politics stood in the way of professional evolution.

**Chris**, a digital marketer from the US stationed in Greece, started traveling the world after he left his last job. “I wanted to travel the world instead of spending so much time at an office. I was fed up with the office life and I thought I am wasting my time.”

**Rafailia**, a Greek musician living in Ireland was one of the very few exceptions that made the move from a cheaper to a more expensive country.<sup>3</sup>

I decided to go nomad because I needed to extend my connections’ network and meet new people related to my work field. Also, because it is always refreshing to change environments to work in and you have a different cultural influence each time. You become creative at all levels this way.

Comparing and contrasting the countries of origin with the countries that the participants were based in at the time of the research was very interesting. In most cases, people chose affordable destinations that could offer a high standard of living with significantly less amount of work. However, as we can see here, this was not always the case. Rafailia left a country in financial distress in order to practice her art in countries such as Singapore, USA and Ireland, following a *reverse* digital nomad trajectory.

**Brook** an Australian entrepreneur stationed in Thailand was one of the few digital nomads that managed to build a passive income by taking advantage of the Dotcom boom during the nineties.

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<sup>3</sup> Data obtained by Numbeo.com (“Cost of Living Comparison Between Athens, Greece And Dublin, Ireland,”<[https://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/compare\\_cities.jsp?country1=Greece&country2=Ireland&city1=Athens&city2=Dublin](https://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/compare_cities.jsp?country1=Greece&country2=Ireland&city1=Athens&city2=Dublin)>)

I bought several domain names that I knew would gain value and developed them over the last 15 years. Now I just update the content and work with a remote team to constantly improve the design. I make money through affiliate marketing and ads.

**Jan**, a web developer from Poland living in Thailand at the time stated that he left home because of “the bad weather” and boredom that working alone entailed:

I had no reason to stay back in Poland. All my friends had regular jobs and my schedule was very different...I wanted to do something meaningful with my life. So I started traveling about a year ago and have been working from my laptop. It's not so bad but I do miss my family from time to time.

**Nils**, a designer from Sweden was based in the US during the time of the research. For him, digital nomadism was an escape from an otherwise comfortable life:

I had been working as an in-house designer for a few years. I lived in a nice place not far from work. Everything was comfortable. I went to work, I came home, and I passed the time doing various stuff. One day I looked around and realized I had no pets, no girlfriend, and wasn't really close to anyone and couldn't figure out why. I was stagnant. So I got rid of the house and hit the road.

**Anna**, a GIS specialist from Germany, had a similar story to share with most of the participants. Living in Spain at the time, she decided to go nomad in order to escape the office environment. “I've always wanted to travel but I was afraid about going nomad alone. But one day I just decided to take a 6-month trip... And here I am two years later!”

**Martin**, a freelance programmer educator from Austria who lived in Thailand, a prominent destination for digital nomads. His decision to go nomad came organically, since his job was to educate people via the internet.

I don't really consider myself “nomadic,” and it wasn't a strict decision to move around. I enjoyed traveling for a long time and over the years I grew more and more interested in

staying longer at one spot abroad. Lately I took a plunge to go somewhere warm, this one basically just for my own pleasure.

Age-wise, we see that most of the participants were between 24-34 years old and they usually had some background working in office jobs that played some role in their decision to choose a nomad lifestyle. Eight of them had completed a Master's degree, while the remaining ones had a Bachelor's (no high-school graduates).

In terms of work, the participants worked either as freelancers or remote employees. The main jobs I encountered were digital marketing, web development and design, with many of the participants listing more than one profession as a way of making money on the road. Few of them had their own companies, which they ran with the help of a remote workforce, scattered all over the globe. Of course, all the jobs were related to information technology to some extent and could be performed via a laptop. This very obvious condition was also a very strong signifier that differentiated *digital* nomads from *backpackers* or *tourists*, who also travel, but either do not need to work, or just work odd jobs to make ends meet to continue their journey.

The distinction between the different kinds of travelers was a critical part in pinpointing the characteristics that constituted the identity of Digital Nomads. In her work, Kayleigh Franks (2016) stated that “digital” nomads were just a particular subset of other kinds of nomads, such as:

- **Global Nomads:** The concept was developed by Caren Kaplan, who defined global nomads as individuals who can move through seemingly illogical space without adhering to any nation's mastery (Kaplan, 1996). Contrary to digital nomads, global nomads do not necessarily use technology as the main means of their survival on the go. Many of them work sedentary jobs until they raise the funds necessary to travel, or work sporadically to earn enough money to move on.
- **1099 Workers:** While this particular group of creative professionals lives and work on their own hours as independent contractors, they are not as associated to life on the road as digital or global nomads. The name “1099 workers” is derived from their recurrent use of the U.S Internal Revenue Service form 1099 (Franks, 2016).
- **Backpackers:** Often associated with younger individuals, the term backpacking refers to budget tourists who travel independently for a relatively long time (one to several months),

without a specific destination. After their journey, the travelers return to their countries of origin (Kannisto et al., 2014). Although it is a form of nomadism, backpacking is in reality closer to the *Grand Tour* practice of European nobility during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, that part of the education of young noblemen. This “rite of passage” involved the student going on a guided journey, in order to gain experiences and familiarize himself with the cultural heritage of the European continent (Urry, 2000).

Long-term-travel and migration had always been an important part of the forming and reshaping of societal practices. Until now, migration and tourism studies have focused more on *purposeful* travel: Expatriates who traveled for work, migrants that settled in foreign places in search of better living conditions, refugees that fled seeking political asylum, ethnic minorities, such as Roma populations following century-old traditions of pastoral life, and of course, tourists who travel for leisure.

On the other hand, nomads travel without a clearly defined purpose, and, in many cases, without a clear reason, except perhaps, the quest for self-development and completion. Moreover, it is important keeping in mind that digital nomads who participated in this study and relied on their remote work to survive, came mostly from financially and technologically affluent Western countries. Among the 15 informants that took part in this research alone, 90% come from countries like USA, France, Italy, Germany and Sweden, while most of them held a Master’s degree. Of course, the sample of this research was very narrow compared to the grand scheme of things, but even my research on social media revealed a similar trend. Living in the western world and higher standards of education gave these people the means and the know-how to leverage technology and the new market. Interestingly enough, digital nomads used this knowledge to avoid a life that would seem ideal to many of the locals in the countries they visit.

## **4.2 Leaving the Office Behind**

Several participants stated similar reasons for their decision to adopt the digital nomad lifestyle. The comparison with a “boring” office life was inevitable and was in fact one of the most usual responses provided. Digital nomads resisted the structure of the 9-5 work day and denying settling in sedentary environments was a common denominator among them. Nils said:



There is not much room for experimentation in an office environment. Every day you have some objectives that others have assigned to you and that's it. If you work on your own though, you have to do everything by yourself. You have to deal with people and understand how they think. It is not easy, but it's very rewarding.

In a similar fashion, John pointed out the alienation that occurs in a corporate environment:

When you have to work for at least 40 hours a week you don't really have much time available to focus on the things you actually enjoy. That suits many people, but not me. I felt kinda like tied to a desk, just to make a paycheck.

Most participants described office life as unfulfilling, stagnant and as a source of depressive thoughts. The nomads were not satisfied with this form of employment, therefore they decided to abandon it for something more "satisfying." However, they did admit that the safety of regular paychecks and a standard social circle were also a very important happiness factor that they often missed on the road. "It all comes down to balance," **Alejandro** said. "...being a "pure" digital nomad can be very stressful and lonely, having a steady source of income really does marvels for one's mental health."

Alizee commented that both office work and digital nomadism are both "...fine for a while... It's just two different ways to experience life!," while **Laura** offered a more detailed explanation when asked whether she considered digital nomadism as a more fulfilling lifestyle: "In some ways yes, in other ways no. Having a wider perspective and meeting a large cross-section of people is very satisfying. However, living outside the normal constructs of society limits your connections and influence." On the other hand, informants such as **Martin** were a bit conflicted about how digital nomadism worked for them:

I'm not sure if digital nomadism is more fulfilling. I'd say it strongly depends on the person. I personally enjoy it because I learn a lot when plunging into different countries and cultures. I learn geography and get a feel for the life reality of people. I find ways to do live cheaply and learn about how I fit into a new context. That is a very gratifying experience for me, but it can also be stressful and wasteful (in terms of time and

productivity). So it really depends what you want to get and achieve. I also like being at home, ha-ha! So it's not either or, I think it's just one way of doing things.

Although there was a unanimous disdain for the rigid structure of the 40-hour work week, most of the informants were not dismissive of the people who actually work on traditional work environments.

#### 4.2.1 The “Freedom/Slavery” Discourse

When asked about digital nomadism in relation to a standard 40+ hour work week, some participants used an interesting array of words to describe their feelings towards it. “I believe digital nomadism is more fulfilling because I am not **stuck** in an office. When I am working I am **actually productive** the entire time. Plus, I enjoy the **freedom** to schedule my days as I please,” said **Rachel**. **John's** use of the word *slave* earlier was an exaggerated but powerful metaphor about his feelings towards the *cubicle* work environment. Brook said:

People need to be mobile. Confined spaces are a punishment for **prisoners**. Employers should realize that and stop doing that to their employees. People who are stuck in an office and can't leave will inevitably become alienated and won't love their work.

Resentment, disagreement or simple boredom of office work was definitely a major push factor for many of the digital nomads. Although most of them agreed that there was some merit to traditional employment and respected the choice of people who live that lifestyle, the use of words like “*stuck*,” “*slave*,” “*prisoner*,” “*unproductive*,” etc., conveyed a sense of immobility and stagnation that was clearly not worth the monthly compensation. On the other hand, the most common descriptive term regarding digital nomadism was the word “*freedom*.”

The concept of freedom is tricky to grasp under this specific context. After all, aren't digital nomads still workers? Their well-being is directly tied to the influx of clients and projects, that fluctuates. Hence digital nomads usually have some kind of emergency fund in order to survive if something goes wrong. So, how does freedom from the confines of the office function for the digital nomad?

Chris Rojek believed that freedom is best defined by looking at its opposites (in this case, 9-5 work). According to Rojek, “freedom is a realm of behavior in which minimal constraints over subjective choice apply,” (Rojek, 2010, p.5). Applying this definition, we can understand that the uncertainty associated with the digital nomad lifestyle is the “price to pay” for freedom. The risk to abandon a “safe” work environment is their choice, and as such, it constitutes an aspect of the **freedom** they enjoy. Of course, whether that freedom is linked with a sense of *happiness* is something that should be further explored.

#### 4.2.2 Issues of Biopower

Deciding to leave the safety of home meant that many of the digital nomads waived important rights, such as social security, insurance and healthcare. Essentially, they decided to seize control of their life from the hands of state mechanisms, denouncing the influence of *biopower* over their bodies. With his notion of *biopower*, Michel Foucault (2009) tried to explain:

...a number of phenomena that seem to me to be quite significant, namely, the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power, or, in other words, how, starting from the 18th century, modern Western societies took on board the fundamental biological fact that human beings are a species. This is what I have called biopower. (Ibid, 2009, p. 1).

What Foucault calls “biopower” mainly takes two forms. The first one refers to the discipline of the body, in which the human body is trained and programmed as a “machine” of productivity and usefulness. The state consolidates this biopower via institutions such as the military, school or, in our case, work. The second form of biopower exists on the macro-scale, visible only to demographic analyses and statistics. Biopower and the rise of the capitalist system are intertwined in Foucault’s work, as human life became precious for the survival of the new socioeconomic status. People’s lives needed to be understood, controlled and regulated. Law was no longer a restrictive factor but rather took the role of normalizing and optimizing the life conditions of its subjects. According to Foucault, that meant that life fell under the domain of politics.

Biopower is practiced by everyone, including both people who hold a special status in society (like judges, bosses and doctors, just to name a few) and individuals like friends and family. However, it is not violent or antagonistic, like military or police repression. Rather, it works *through invisibility and anonymity, because its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms* (Kannisto et al., 2014, p. 48; Foucault, 1990; Bauman, 2009). There are many examples of this in work, but in our case, it is most evident in the digital nomad decision to stray away from social circles and work environments. Nobody openly criticizes their decision, but as we can see in their words, life itself is not designed for this type of mobility. On a similar note, as we will see later on, many of them find it hard to work if they are not properly dressed and away from home. All of the above points are simply biopower at work:

It (biopower) produces collective practices that people follow, often unconsciously, because they have become normal to them. In fact, the binary division normal/abnormal is one of the most pervasive forms that biopower assumes when trying to ensure desirable behaviours. It is social control, which is based on constant supervision: it compares, differentiates, orders, homogenises, and excludes (Kannisto et al., 2014, p. 49).

Aspects of biopower are used in this paper as a prism, through which we analyze the transformation of work for the digital nomads. Their escape from the constraints of an office or even the benefits of having a secure life within the confines of the state was ultimately perceived by digital nomads as an act of *rebellion*, that closely resembles the metaphor between “chess” and “go” used in Deleuze & Guattari’s Nomadology.

Taking your life on your hands is very rewarding and demanding at the same time. If anything happens to me, I am entirely responsible for what will happen. This is one of the biggest tradeoffs if you go outside the security of your country, said **Anna**.

Biopower struggles were evident throughout the discourse digital nomads used to justify and explain their lifestyle. Sedentary office life was considered to be the standard way of life among educated individuals. In fact, the term “traditional” employment has been extensively used in this text, signifying the fact that this is considered the norm. Digital nomads felt like they should

explain why they chose this lifestyle and were often under suspicion regarding how much they actually work. Their vision of freedom, along with all the risks that come with it, is a direct renegotiation of power. Their lifestyle in itself is a statement that makes us rethink the notions of dwelling, security and mobility.

Freedom from the repetitive lifestyle of a 9-5 work was a crucial push factor behind the decision of becoming a digital nomad. On a similar note, freedom to explore the world and working on a custom schedule was a major pull factor *towards* the digital nomad lifestyle. Also, freedom from the location dependence of traditional office jobs was a major *push* factor. Most of my informants recognized that the risk factor that came with their choice was significant. However, it is still a choice that they made and that is enough to count as *freedom* for them. In fact, when asked about what they believe the best part about digital nomadism is, all of them cited *freedom* and *flexibility* as the most important parts.

### **4.3 Expectations and Reality**

One can see how digital nomadism can be an appealing life choice for many individuals currently working in standard jobs. Its basic building blocks (perpetual travel and new experiences, location independence and being your own boss) resonate well with people that might feel disappointed with the levels of stress in their sedentary lifestyle. These concepts are frequently used in advertising, promoting a welcome escape from a regular everyday work life in the western world. Proof of this popularity is the number of individuals interested in becoming digital nomads themselves. For example, the [/r/digitalnomad](#) subreddit has over 100,000 followers, and a significant portion of new topics that open on a daily basis *concern* the same thing: *How do I become a digital nomad?*

This trend generated a response from the digital nomad community, as newbie questions were often viewed with suspicion (especially if the topic has been answered before). Indeed, although many people take an interest in the concept of digital nomadism, few decided to take the plunge. Preparing to become – and eventually, becoming – a digital nomad requires careful preparation and meticulous planning, two factors that take away a lot of the “fun” about traveling perpetually. For Chris there was a certain “trial through fire” for people that wanted to become digital nomads:

There are people who don't want to be digital nomads, and that's perfectly ok. They might be too stimulated and challenged enough back home that they don't even need to change anything in their lives - they're as inspired and as busy as it gets. And then you get most of the people, who are in the middle and only dream of becoming digital nomads.

Being able to work from anywhere, with unlimited potential and no standard hours may be a pipeline dream for many. However, the distance between expectations and reality is significant and many active digital nomads risked a lot to get into the "drivers position," as Chris said.

Most of the people who want to follow this lifestyle are not going to do much about it. I think this is because they don't really want it. It is hard becoming a digital nomad and you have to make sacrifices. But, to each their own I guess!

That is why I believed it was important to actually ask my informants about their expectations of digital nomadism and the reality they face in their everyday life on the road. For Alejandro, moving to Spain was a realization that the world still doesn't know much about digital nomadism and remote work:

I wanted to find like minded people, Colombia still has a long way to go before digital work is widely accepted, after a year in Spain I've realized it's not just my home country but most of the world that needs to set up a new standard.

Even though people spend many hours of their day online for entertainment or communication (Bauer, 2017) the concept of digital work is surprisingly under-communicated. People can do many things online, but Alejandro's words convey a sense of frustration about how people perceived remote work in Colombia and Spain. The rise of perpetually "connected" technological media has disrupted the way we consume, enjoy and entertain ourselves, and is now, slowly but steadily, changing the way we conduct work. However, there is apparently a long way to go before remote work becomes mainstream, if ever.

### 4.3.1 Getting Out of the “*Comfort Zone*”

Most of the informants saw digital nomadism as an escape from a comfort zone (or at least that is what they anticipated). When asked about what they expected from life on the road, most participants seemed to be following a vague self-development path with no apparent ending point. “I wanted to work fewer hours per week than my old job, lots of time to relax, enjoying time outdoors,” said **Rachel**. “Seeing lots of interesting cultures and meeting new people,” was the primary driver for **Laura**. The desire to live out of the *comfort zone* is such, it has created a whole market of products, eBooks and consultants, the most prominent of which is the book “*The Four-Hour Work Week*” by Tim Ferris (Franks, 2016).

A quick Google.ie search for the term “comfort zone” yields 72,200,000 results and some of the results appearing on the front page (excluding Wikipedia entries and local results) are:

- The Science of Breaking Out of Your Comfort Zone (and Why You Should), *Lifehacker* (Henry, 2013).
- 6 Reasons To Step Outside Your Comfort Zone, *Huffington Post* (Gregoire, 2014)
- 3 Reasons Your Comfort Zone is Killing You (and How to Beat It), *Goalcast*, (Valentine, 2017)
- Ten Ways to Step Outside Your Comfort Zone -- And Why It's Important, *Forbes*. (Ryan, 2018)

The list went on and on, but very rarely did I see opinions criticizing this point of view. According to the general consensus, what is called “*the comfort zone*” has a negative connotation. Social media only serve to enhance the stigma of comfort, by offering glimpses into the lives of other people, inevitably eliciting a sense of comparison. A good example of this mindset comes from the Reddit /r/digitalnomad forum, in which users submit photos of their “office for the day.” This usually involves a laptop sitting in the foreground of an idyllic scenery, in which the user is working for the day. However, there is a much more to being a digital nomad than just taking shareable photos.

I think many people are drawn to the digital nomad life and travel as they’re seeking to make the best of their lives. Many don’t want to have “wasted” their lives staying at home, going through the motions etc. I think travel is becoming a status thing also. You need to travel or you're nobody. So people feel a lot of peer pressure to leave their homes

or they feel they may one day regret it. Even if it's not what they want, but what other's are telling them they should have (...) People are led to believe nowadays that visiting every country on earth will make them happy. But really, what makes people happy is family, friends, community etc. All of which mean settling down and placing roots. ("The digital nomad movement has a hidden dark side • r/digitalnomad," 2016)

Escaping the comfort zone was a recurring theme among my digital nomad informants, especially those among them coming from more affluent countries<sup>4</sup>, like Brook:

Part of being an entrepreneur meaning I have to challenge myself constantly. Staying out of your comfort zone is one of my most important life philosophies, and that's why I try to travel as much as possible.

Some of my informants seemed to realize and pointed out the privileged status in which they were born (especially compared to the locals in the countries they visit). Although this essay lacks the perspective of the locals, it would be very interesting to see the phenomenon of digital nomadism from their perspective. In line with the above, John observed:

I doubt that I would be able to do that (be a digital nomad) were it not for the fact I have an American passport. Most people in the world will never get to travel as much as we do, because their passport isn't strong enough and they don't have the money. Someone living in the US or Germany can save up working any job and travel the world. This is not possible for people in Thailand or Vietnam. We are very lucky to be born where we have.

The pattern of answers regarding expectations before leaving home revealed that curiosity, escapism and a desire for overcoming inner fears are what pushed digital nomads to this lifestyle. Meeting new cultures and seeing different places were surely powerful motivators. For most of them, staying in one place for a longer amount of time is equal to a *comfort zone* that must break, one way or another. However, my informants seemed to understand that both the concepts of the

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<sup>4</sup> According to data obtained by the IMF official page. (World Economic Outlook Database, 2012).



comfort zone and escaping from it, were the direct results of their education, nationality and status.

## **Chapter 5: A Lifestyle, Not a Job: Digital Nomad Everyday Lives and Productivity**

After having identified who the digital nomads and what is the motivations behind their decision are, I will try to answer my second research question and take a closer look at their travel patterns, everyday lives and practices. Specifically, I will investigate the formation of connections, rituals, productivity and everyday work/life routine, in a mobile lifestyle that is – seemingly – independent of any localities and limits.

Additionally, in a deeper level, I will attempt to decipher the inevitable connections that digital nomads form with physical spaces all over the world. Namely, what constitutive factors generate a sense of “home” out of home and how the digital nomads’ social lives are affected by their mobility.

### **5.1 Travel Patterns**

According to the theoretical model introduced by Mokhtarian and Salomon (1996), technological advancements have proved instrumental for travel. As the workforce renegotiates the relationship between time, space, and locality, new behaviors, rituals and communication patterns emerge (O’Brien, 2011). However, there is a significant gap between being able to work from anywhere and traveling the whole world while working. One would imagine that not having to go to work every morning would be perfectly adequate for many people. However, as we have seen up until now, travel itself is not a sufficient motivator (Franks, 2016). There are instead, other factors at play, which will be analyzed at a later stage. Mokhtarian’s and Salomon’s model of the internal decision-making process involved in travel (P L Mokhtarian & Salomon, 1994) determines the numerous factors at play when people decide to adopt this “alternative” way of life.

A search for an improved work/life balance and the fact that in this case mobility is a choice categorizes digital nomads under the general label of "lifestyle migration" (Benson & O’reilly, 2009).

Despite the links between the two, it is important not to reduce lifestyle migration to tourism as this undermines the diverse motivations and experiences of the migrants. Not all lifestyle migration began as tourism, and there has yet to be an adequate explanation

of why people might want to turn their experiences from tourism into a way of life, (Ibid, 2009, p. 614).

Ultimately, the most significant and critical difference of digital nomads in comparison to typical long-term travelers is that the latter do not combine work with leisure and they want to return home at some point (Papastergiadis, 2000). On the other hand, digital nomads have no permanent address and no immediate social circle. Many among them do not wish to settle, nor do they seek emotional attachment, at least at a personal level (Kannisto et al., 2014). In conclusion, it could be suggested that lifestyle migration, and especially digital nomadism challenges a current grand narrative regarding employability. Digital nomads are not only trying to “experience” a foreign culture, but they are rather trying to “immerse” themselves in a culture-filled lifestyle (Korpela, 2009). This “immersion” comes in the form of a purer, less touristic experience. Digital nomads perceive themselves as more intelligent travelers, staying well off the beaten path and creating connections with the locals. In the following section, we will analyze whether that is possible.

### **5.1.1 Traveler or Tourist**

Contrary to other long-term travelers, like backpackers and tourists, digital nomads have more or less similar travel patterns. Most of the informants stayed in a certain place from one to three months before moving on to the next destination. Brook believed that monthly intervals worked best:

I think a month is a good time to stay at a place, because you get better deals in monthly plans on anything: co-working, rent, airbnb, etc. Moving around monthly works best for me.

Others claimed that moving frequently helped them not to become attached to one place. When asked about how much she stays in a place at any given time, Linda said: “I think moving on quickly – like every one or two months into a different place keeps me from getting too comfortable in one place.” However, most of the informants claimed that monthly intervals are a good rule of thumb as all necessary leases are usually calculated on a monthly basis.

Although most of them travel in tourist destinations, digital nomads try to distance themselves from tourists. The same consensus was to be found among my informants as well. In their opinion, tourists experience travel as consumers, whereas they are more involved with the local community. “Sometimes I enjoy doing all the touristy stuff, but after a while it gets boring. Locals often think that you are a walking wallet,” said Chris. This answer implied a certain pattern of behavior of the locals towards tourists, whom they often see as *dollars*. In turn, tourists are often arrogant and have an entitled behavior towards locals. “Most of American tourists are rude to locals. We [she and her partner] try to avoid them and try to live like locals when we are staying in one place,” Rachel pointed out. So, interestingly, some responses generated a visible “We/Them” dichotomy, which shows how differentiation forms identities and power relationships (Foucault et al., 2000). *We* (digital nomads) search for authenticity, while *they* (tourists) seek excitement.

Going through these responses, it is worth investigating how that quest for authenticity works out for the digital nomads. Is there a standard measurement for authenticity? Does authenticity not occupy the same spectrum as the “artificial” tourist experience? Perhaps this quest for the “authentic local experience” is nothing more than a way for digital nomads to express their individuality and/or opposition against the obvious drawbacks of mass tourism (McCabe, 2005). By criticizing tourists, digital nomads position themselves in the spectrum of “travelers,” who seek out personal connections and cultural stimulation rather than brief spells of enjoyment.

Researchers like Galani-Moutafi (2000), reflect on the issue of whether there is indeed a difference between the experience of ethnographers, tourists and travelers. The author argues that all types of “visitors” are merely *observers who gaze into the elsewhere and the Other, while looking for their own reflection* (ibid, p.220). In that sense, the anti-touristic role is simply another manifestation of individuals who wish to maintain the distinctiveness and identity of their own experiences. Tourists are often associated with superficiality, laziness and narrow-mindedness, whereas travelers follow a more decentralized approach. These traits are not new in tourism studies: Erik Cohen first attempted to offer a critical explanation by mapping out the *modes of behavior* between the different kinds of tourists and travelers back in 1979. On the one side of the spectrum lie the tourists, who attempt to recreate a familiar scape and will stick to the “well-known sites.” On the other end, we find the “existential tourist” (Cohen, 1979), who:

...is completely alienated from their own society, seeks an alternative to it, embraces the other beyond the boundaries of their own world, and turns it into their 'elective center'. The existential tourist is deeply concerned with the authenticity of their experiences." (McCabe 2005, p.89)

Stephanie Hom Cary (2004) claimed that there is not only one version of authenticity in the tourist experience and the complexity of the multiple possible authenticities should be noted. In her research, Cary deals with the tourist as a *subject*, taking the focus off the divisions of previous scholars. Hom Cary does this through an analysis of representations in narratives:

The tourist moment, which conditions a spontaneous instance of self-discovery and communal belonging, simultaneously produces and erases the tourist-as-subject, for at the very instant one is aware of and represents oneself as 'tourist,' one goes beyond 'being a tourist'. This double movement of constitution and dissolution represents the temporary end to the MacCannellian search for authenticity for the 'tourist' perceives to have gotten beyond touristic representation, as well as to have gone beyond the tourist-as-subject, (Ibid, 2004, p. 63).

Ultimately, digital nomads, like many like-minded travelers, do not wish to partake in the negative aspects of "otherness" traditionally associated with mass tourism. As such, they will do anything to *re-package* their experiences and activities in a more meaningful, deeper manner. Digital nomads in particular try to align themselves with locals and not tourists, but cultural immersion in itself is just another aspect in which the tourism industry works in the "experience economy" dimension. Digital nomads, much like tourists, come from different backgrounds, have stronger visas and considerably higher buying power in the countries they visit (although it should be noted that this is not always the case, as this research showed). Whether or not they visit the landmarks or the tourist traps, they are exactly as alienated from their environment as tourists.

## 5.2 Work and Productivity

Even though digital nomads are travelers of the world, working while they move from place to place is a core part of their identity and essentially, it is what differentiates them from other long-term travel groups. However, the stress of work combined with the eagerness of travel can create powerful distractions. Therefore, questions about productivity and the digital nomad work ethic are inevitable. Does being a digital nomad hurt productivity or does it improve performance?

According to a study by Kurland and Bailey (1999), workers who adopted telecommuting tend to take fewer sick days and have higher job satisfaction. The study also showed that virtual work environments led to greater work/life balance, lower levels of stress, improved morale and increased motivation. However, one should not forget that this study was conducted in the late '90s, a time when the internet was just becoming popular and Wi-Fi was still a nascent technology. Moreover, telecommuting is quite different than digital nomadism, as it doesn't include the concept of long-term travel in relation to work. In an effort to understand how the everyday life of the digital nomad is structured, I asked my informants about their productivity levels while on the move. Nikola pinpointed the connection between productivity and the need for familiarity:

A lot of energy is spent nomading. That is a fact. Everyday stuff like grocery shopping, getting a haircut or finding a dry cleaner can take twice as long in a new place because you need to solve language and culture issues. Productivity is affected, and even if your work hours are focused, your life simply has more challenges.

On the same topic, Martin commented:

Being a digital nomad affected my productivity in two aspects: 1) in a "set-up" stage (arriving somewhere and figuring out how things run around here, where everything is, how to interact, how to find places that are affordable etc.) it can be quite time-consuming and have a negative effect on my productivity, 2) when being "established" it can do the opposite. Since it is a new space I can establish my situation in whatever way feels the most correct at the moment.

Prolonged periods of travel can take their toll on productivity, as it is hard to work during transport from one place to the next. What is more, many of my informants stated that they needed some time to settle in their new environment before getting comfortable enough with their new surroundings. Assessing and locating the everyday essential points, such as the gym, the dry-cleaners, the grocery shop and the local café takes time. On a more personal note, I can attest that a nearby coffee shop or quiet pub with reliable internet can play a very important role in the way a digital nomad's productivity levels fluctuate. For individuals that find it hard to concentrate at home, a place to work (but not a workplace) is a matter of the utmost importance.

Motivation is a big issue in all working environments, as it is directly linked to employee productivity. In more standard location-bound businesses, where there is a clearly defined structure that works toward creating a sense of loyalty and commitment to a brand. However, the digital nomad has escaped the corporate “all-seeing” eye. When asked about productivity while working by themselves, most of the informants responded in similar lines:

It is on ME to get the work done. I can waste time all morning, but that just means I will be stuck inside all day. It has led me to procrastinate much less. I like having a separate workspace where I am “on” and then move to a different area of the home to read, scroll through social media, etc. I think it helps with concentrating (Rachel).

Everything I do is maximized for productivity since I get paid for creating things, not by the hour (Laura).

Additionally, through being away from everyone I know, I get a lot of “free time” that I can schedule as wished. Being unattached also makes it much easier for me to create and stick to routines, which makes me be productive, (Martin).

Productivity when working as a digital nomad is all about making routines, like dressing up, working in a different room from where I sleep, listening to the right music and creating a “work environment” that gets me going, (Alizee).

An interesting point of discussion here would be the digital nomad need to have a separate workplace from the one that is associated with rest or procrastination. My informants essentially “train” their minds into productivity mode by associating certain localities and routines with their job. Even though they live many miles from home and there is no need to comply with any of the societal expectations, we have seen that many of them still need to follow a certain ritual in order to be “productive.” This ritual involves dressing up, going to other places and creating a “work environment.” The only practical differences with a 9-5 job are the ability to leave at will and the absence of standard operating hours. And it is precisely this sense of choice that ultimately leads to the improvement of morale among digital nomads.

### **5.2.1 Work-Leisure Balance and Stressors**

Data suggests that freelancers and remote workers report a better balance between work and leisure. This key metric refers to the availability to experience non-work-related situation without stress. Sue Campbell Clark suggested that work-leisure balance is described as the degree to which people experience their life both at work and during their leisure time while experiencing minimum stress (Clark, 2000). According to her theory, the workspace and the family-space are two different domains, which even though permeable by elements such as overtime, work brought home or phone calls from home, remain separate. However, technology advances challenged these notions, starting with the introduction of the PDA<sup>5</sup> in the daily lives of professionals back in the early ‘00s. These devices were the symbol of a breakdown between work and family (leisure) environments, as they offered increased productivity options from everywhere (Golden & Geisler, 2007).

Digital nomads travel neither for work nor leisure: They travel as they work and they work as they travel. But how are the terms “work” and “leisure” defined in this particular context?

Early attempts to define the dichotomy between work and leisure were founded on the notion that they were two opposites that presupposed each other in order to exist. Leisure was thus simply defined as *the absence of work*, lacking *an intrinsic character of its own* (Beatty &

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<sup>5</sup> A personal digital assistant (PDA), also known as a handheld PC, is a variety mobile device which functions as a personal information manager. PDAs were largely discontinued in the early 2010s after the widespread adoption of highly capable smartphones, in particular those based on iOS and Android.



Torbert, 2003, p. 240). Other research has attempted to approach leisure time as the time available after work-related commitments were completed (Robinson & Godbey, 1997), but this was still an inadequate exploration, as it failed to take into account everyday tasks and errands (Reichenberger, 2017). The need for more comprehensive approaches forced researchers to apply behavioral aspects in their analysis, essentially interpreting only “enjoyable” activities outside of work as leisure (ibid, 2003). Expanding on the concept, researchers shifted the perspective from the external parameters to the individuals. Thus there are certain components of perceived leisure that might be associated with pleasure and ease of mind and relaxation (Shaw, 1985), but the *freedom of choice* has emerged in several studies as a prerequisite for the existence of leisurely time (Kleiber, 1979; Patricia L. Mokhtarian, Salomon, & Handy, 2006). However, the components of leisure still remain subjective. It is the individual framework that determines whether an activity is considered “leisure,” rather than the opposite (Beatty & Torbert, 2003; Hamilton-Smith, 1992). Based on the above, leisure is perceived and should not necessarily be positioned outside the world of employment. Whether something is considered as work or leisure, depends on how the individuals experience it.

In the case in hand, digital nomads wish to eliminate all of the structures that prevent them from experiencing “freedom” and alienation, through their reversal of travel practices. Traveling and tourism have always been connected with the “leisure” domain and digital nomads usually function within an environment that is not totally work or not totally leisure. The excitement of an upcoming trip is hindered by the need to earn enough money to keep on going. A great new experience always comes second in the face of work (in this research, work refers to the activities that are associated with making money). *Working is hard when you are in a nice place. It prevents you from getting into the real traveling vibe. You can never be entirely relaxed when you have meetings and deadlines coming your way*, said **Chris**. Others, like Martin seemed to be more used to this kind of lifestyle:

Yeah, it’s always been like this for me. I've never long-term worked in a company job that would provide me with this clear distinction (between work and leisure). University didn't either. So it’s comfortable for me because it's known. Maybe 'I'd like it more the other way? Could be, I don't really know.

Informants such as **Laura**, claimed that the lack of distinction between work and leisure time has not affected them as much:

I enjoy the work I do and how I do it, so it doesn't feel like work anymore. I guess what bothered me in my old job is that I didn't like it as much and I had to work for others. There is still is a clear line between work and play, because, you know, money, but it doesn't really feel that different to me anymore.

It seems like the informants perceived work and leisure in different ways. One way in which work and leisure are clearly defined is the act of traveling and sightseeing. When the digital nomads were not occupied with a project, they tried to immerse themselves in the local culture. However, there were no set working hours or "free time." Different time zones between clients, pressing deadlines and emergencies made "not working" substantially harder:

At first it was horrible, my sleep schedule was erratic, and I struggled to keep a work/life balance, but realizing those mistakes and trying to find a solution often gives good results. (**Alejandro**)

It's not always easy to stop working when you really should relax, and it is not easy to resume working when you are overly relaxed. It takes a lot of willpower and discipline to separate the two but it is not always possible. Clients might ring me up at any time, work is always there when I turn on my laptop. (**Chris**)

We can see that the flexibility that the digital nomads get can also backfire. As the boundaries between work and leisure are more psychological than practical (a different workplace), it is harder to tell which one is which. For digital nomads, no work means the end of the line, as they will not have enough money to maintain this status. The mental state of not really having a lot of leisure time seems to affect some individuals more than others, but it is certainly a problem that kept coming up throughout the research.

Although working independently works wonders for the morale of professionals (according to their answers), the digital nomad lifestyle is not entirely bereft of stressful

situations. According to my informants and forum discussions, the topic of “burnout” kept coming up when discussing the stressors of life on the road. These burnouts are distinctively different than the regular 9-5 work burnouts, as they stemmed both by the blurred lines between work and leisure and the process of continuous traveling. Traveling in itself is a stressful experience, in the sense that it deprives the nomads of a standard routine and rhythm. Having to work, travel, establish their presence in a new place and then do it all over again after 30 days takes its toll on a professional, even if it is a digital nomad, according to Jan:

Sometimes traveling actually adds a whole lot of stress than the one you would experience in a conventional nine to five job. Traveling around every one or two months can burn you out and that can be a real issue when your way of life isn't really balanced.

Other informants admit that having a base actually takes a lot of the stress away. “I've been traveling a lot in the last five years so it got a bit tiresome. I like stability as well. So I would like to have a base at least somewhere,” said Jan.

The actual process of traveling is the first part of a two-fold problem. Apparently, most of the informants found the initial period in a new place de-stabilizing, as they tried to set up a new routine. For Rachel, starting all over every now and then was a less than enjoyable situation:

Don't get me wrong, I love seeing new places. What I hate is getting established in them every time. Find a place to live, find a place to work, find good restaurants and cafes, find friends, figure out how things work, the red tape, the culture that is different. It's like having a culture shock every few months. New nomads don't see that. You spend days and days getting nowhere, knowing no one, it's lonely, and then if your business isn't good yet, it can be bad.

Along with the lack of a well-defined work/leisure time division, the initial process of settling in a new country was among the most stressful situations in a digital nomad's everyday life. Most of the productivity of the digital nomad came from the establishment of routines that were disrupted by the constant moving around. Apart from finding a home, having a place to eat, a place to work and a place to hang out were essential for the mental state of the informants.

Therefore, even though the basic premise of digital nomadism is independence, there was a very apparent connection with certain spaces and places that caused a sharp drop in productivity when cut.

## **5.3 Digital Nomadism and Sociability**

Digital nomads at some point decided to leave their home behind, and with it, a part of their social life. Most of the informants were traveling by themselves, while two of them were traveling with a significant other. In this section of the analytical part, I will examine how digital nomad sociability is formed while on the move for both groups. Also, I will attempt to understand how the lifestyle of the digital nomad has affected their existing relationships.

### **5.3.1 Traveling Solo**

Only two of the informants were actually traveling with a partner. Others just decided to depart on their own and take life as it comes. By now we have deduced that the digital nomad lifestyle is highly individualistic and, much like the actual nomads, participants avoid commitment and staying at one place for longer than a few months. However, when asked about their social life, my informants revealed that, behind the excitement of getting to see the world, there was always a lingering sense of loneliness.

“Sometimes you can spend weeks on end without leaving the house and not realizing that the last time you made human contact was with the cashier at the market,” said **Alejandro**. The nature of digital nomadic travel makes it extremely difficult to travel with a partner or friend. After all, the spirit of the digital nomad is that of the “total lack of commitment,” whether that concerns a full-time job or a partner. Friendships, relationships, jobs and challenges take time and dedication and many digital nomads simply decided to pick up their stuff and leave whenever something didn’t work out. However, this is not a hard and fast rule. Sometimes digital nomads yearn for human companionship, as Nils pointed out:

Nomading can be very lonely. All your friends and family are on the other side of the world and most of the time you don’t have anyone to speak to. Add the pressure of work and travel, so you can imagine... Finding new friends is easy and fun for some people, but for me it’s hard work. I am a fairly reserved person and being social doesn’t come easy to

me. Sure you can try to socialize in the co-working spaces, to meetups, but even if you do make some friends, it won't be for long.

Coworking spaces are an interesting dimension of the digital nomad sociability and lifestyle spectrum. Usually, they involve independent computer-based work in open, shared offices, which freelancers, digital nomads or entrepreneurs can rent out by the day or monthly. Coworking spaces usually feature office facilities and offer fast Wi-Fi in a relaxed, modern environment (O'Brien, 2011). However, what these areas represented for the digital nomads was more like a version of community, rather than a place to work from (after all, that could have been done from anywhere).

The need for human companionship was prevalent in the words of some informants. Others, however, explicitly stated that they prefer a state of "limited sociability," as it helped them focus exclusively on their own goals and work. For some, digital nomadism even helped to go through heartbreak or even meet new people on the road, like Laura.

Digital nomadism has distanced me from all my shitty ex-boyfriends! I feel less alone when I travel by myself, than being friendless and lonely in my hometown. I have made many friends on the road and I started returning to the same places so I can reconnect with people who live there. I split most of my time between 3 places in the US, UK, and Spain.

Even though digital nomadism is built on a foundation of self-reliance and minimal constraints, we can clearly see that there is a struggle going on. The need for meaningful interpersonal connections seems to come into conflict with the "absolute individualism" of the traveling digital professional. Friendships take time and effort, but that often involves the physical presence of all parties. Therefore, many digital nomads either follow a pattern that resembles "traditional" employment (going to the coworking spaces) or re-visit places to meet with friends.

This is not always the case though. Informants like Alejandro and Martin were actively avoiding forming any relationships with people, fearing that personal connections would inhibit their professional goals. For Alejandro, a romantic experience turned bad was –probably- the cause that generated this mentality:

I made the mistake of going after a girlfriend to another country once. Since then I've decided to stay off intimate relationships for a while, just to get everything I want to accomplish done. I mostly use socializing apps to meet with people, like Meetup<sup>6</sup> and Facebook groups, I've made some of my closest friends like that.

But negative experiences were not the sole cause for the resentment against investing in connections while traveling. Martin believed that peace of mind was more valuable than the company of other people:

I don't socialize much. It's difficult to be connected to too many people, plus there are always some connections that automatically arise through life. So I more often try not to make connections, because that allows me the time and mind-space to work on the things I want to work on.

Finally, people like Rafailia simply didn't seem to find the time to pursue an active social life, or even when they do, they combine it with work. Also, in this particular case, the topic of work and leisure comes up once again:

Relationships with people have changed a lot because there is actually no time. Because of the non-distinction part between leisure and work the result is to have no time for others aside from your work. I mostly try to find new friends through events, screenings, concerts, facebook, watching somebody's work online and contact them.

In conclusion, there is not a certain pattern of sociability regarding digital nomads who travel on their own. Some of them view personal connections as a burden, some desire to connect with people, while others do not have the time to form friendships and intimate relationships.

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<sup>6</sup> A social website providing membership software, allowing its users to schedule events using a common platform.

### 5.3.2 Digital Nomad Couples

Not all of the participants were traveling on their own. Specifically, Rachel and John were both on the road with their partners, who also were digital nomads. When asked about how and if their lifestyle affected their relationship, they responded in a positive way.

Digital nomadism as a couple has made my partner with my relationship stronger, but caused some weaker friendships back home to fizzle. Most of the time we are together, so admittedly, we haven't made many friends. **(Rachel)**

My relationship with my wife has greatly improved. Friends and family from our former lives have dropped off. We still meet new people through activities we enjoy: scuba diving, learning a language, meetups and other activities. **(John)**

Comparing these responses with the ones in the previous subchapter, we can see that nomadism with a partner is a distinctively different experience. Although they represent a smaller percentage of the participants, digital nomad couples have seen their relationships thrive while on the road. Both of the interviewees claimed that the bond with their partners has strengthened, and that friendships from the past have fizzled out due to their mobile lifestyle.

Whether it is the thrill of constantly changing scenery, the excitement of the adventure or the hardships of travel that couples go through together, the responses of digital nomads who travel with a partner were distinctively unanimous: This perpetual adventure only helped in the improvement of their relationships. Of course, the number of participants is relatively low to make any claims, but having the need for communication fulfilled seems to be an important factor in the overall nomadic experience.

# PART III

## **Chapter 6: Conclusions**

### **6.1 The Digital Nomad Paradigm**

This thesis has offered an ethnographic insight into the phenomenon of digital nomadism, through a series of research questions. The aim was to focus on an extreme aspect of remote work, as an alternative to “traditional,” locally-bound forms of employment. The research questions focused on identifying the reasons that made the informants want to leave their sedentary office jobs and work remotely. Also, I attempted to uncover what are the consequences of such a lifestyle. Moreover, the paper tried to discern which parts of the office work are undesirable for professionals and whether life on the move offered a viable alternative.

In order to achieve the above-mentioned scopes, a wide range of theories and methodologies were used, with Michel Foucault’s ideas about (bio)power resonating heavily throughout the analytical part. A significant part of the literature review draws inspiration from essays on tourism studies and travel types, such as Paaivi Kannisto’s paper on global nomads and Kayleigh Franks’ thesis on digital nomadism and contingency structures in relation to travel. The pioneering work of John Urry in offered valuable insights regarding the -supposed- distinction between “tourist” and “digital nomad.” The above studies signified an important paradigm shift in migration and tourism studies, as they changed the focus from purposeful travel (voluntary travel with a destination) to a nomadic lifestyle. Under this prism, a new group of travelers arises: Nomads, traveling without a destination and purpose, just trying to escape a sedentary office life and see as much of the world as possible (digital nomads) or just trying to “find themselves” (global nomads).

For this study I gathered data from relevant internet forums, social media and an open-ended questionnaire that was filled by 15 participants of various nationalities and professions. The vast majority of the informants were highly-qualified individuals that came from countries that belong to the western world. Leveraging digital media and connected devices, they were trying to conduct their daily work tasks on their own accord, while simultaneously traveling from place to place.



According to their responses, the biggest push factor away from the office environment was the repetitiveness of the 9-5 work structure that most of them would have to endure if they chose to pursue a career in their home countries. When asked about their primary source of happiness in their digital nomad lifestyle, all of them cited freedom from the confines of the office and freedom to conduct their work and itinerary as they saw fit. On the contrary, they described office work and sedentary lifestyles using words like “stuck,” “prisoner” or simply “bored.” Participating digital nomads felt that stagnation is a synonym to office work, however they did mention that it is a perfectly acceptable way to live. Also, most of them felt the need to explain their lifestyle choice to other people, due to the relatively unknown status of digital nomadism.

This issue was analyzed with second theoretical model I decided to use, inspired by Michel Foucault’s work on biopower, together with the “nomadology” model introduced by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1986). According to that, working as a nomad, seemingly unshackled by the constraints of society (along with all the risks that come with it), is a direct renegotiation of power. Their lifestyle in itself is a statement that makes us rethink the notions of dwelling, security and mobility. The digital nomad lifestyle has many attractive aspects that generate a lot of interest from people who want to become one but are afraid of cutting ties with the security of their home (comfort zone). Of course, many are interested but few will actually take the step, something that made existing digital nomads somewhat suspicious of “newbie” questions in the social media. According to most of my informants, people often overlook the effort it takes in order to build a web-based business and mistake digital nomadism for tourism or an easy way out. Further, they add that remote work is still an unfathomable notion for many people (and not only baby-boomers). Digital nomads defined mobile media and smart devices as integral parts of their semiosphere, and without them, they wouldn’t be able to support their lifestyle.

As undesirable as the 9-5 lifestyle seems for most of the participants, it was not enough to explain digital nomadism as a whole. After all, people who have created successful businesses could have just as easily maintained a comfortable lifestyle in their own town and enjoy their freedom by traveling. For most digital nomads, wanderlust and a desire to “break their comfort zone” are very powerful motivators. Escaping the comfort zone is a trending social media catchphrase and involves the pushing of one’s boundaries away from the familiar for the sake of

self-development. Curiosity, a love for soaking up new experiences and a desire to break free from the constraints of the affluent lifestyles in European and American cities are the primary drivers towards perpetual travel. However, it should be noted that most digital nomads agree that this lifestyle is not for everyone and that each individual has a different way of enjoying life and discovering themselves..

The second part of my analytical chapters focused on the actual lifestyle of digital nomadism and delved deeper into the work/life routine of digital nomads, their travel patterns and their productivity while on the road. Digital nomads belong in a category that Benson and O'Reilly have described as lifestyle migrants (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009). This categorization differs distinctly from tourism, as the motivation behind is much more complicated than just a desire to escape from everyday reality for a few days. The interviews, however, proved that it is a need for a better life/work balance provided by technology and a desire for meeting new cultures that pushed people towards this choice. The informants themselves feel uncomfortable being confused with tourists or other kinds of global nomads, such as backpackers, as their philosophy is to “immerse” themselves in the lifestyle of the countries they visit.

Digital nomads' travel patterns varied wildly. Most of them had not yet decided if they want to return to their home country at some point. The timeframe in which they traveled from one place to the next ranged from a few weeks to indefinitely. However, most of them discovered that monthly intervals work best, as it is the way most accommodation and phone contracts are calculated. In addition, the majority of the informants reported increased levels of productivity while working on their own, although that seemed to change during the initial period of moving to a new place. What is even more difficult, is maintaining a clear distinction between leisure time and work time, especially when visiting new and exciting places. These two stressors can lead to what the community calls “nomad burnout.” This is caused by the pressure of work, but also by challenges that occur when an individual needs to set up a new web of connections in an entirely new environment.

Digital nomadism is not always a solitary experience. A significant number of informants ended up as digital nomads by following the lead of a partner or spouse. According to the responses, digital nomad couples report that their relationships have strengthened, while their constant travels have caused some of the weaker friendships back home to disappear. Solo digital nomads try to connect with their peers in coworking spaces or by using social media. However,

many of them do not actively seek human companionship, as they find it difficult to get emotionally attached to people they most likely will never see again.

On a final note, it should be reminded that the participants of this research mostly come from affluent Western countries (Burns & O'Regan, 2008) who have the potential to challenge the privileged environments in which they grew up. There is a long list of constraints that limit one's potential to work and travel, a reminder that even though digital nomads seemingly escape from a sedentary society, they still remain a part of their bio-political networks. In its core, digital nomads are never really free from their nationality, passport, citizenship and, more importantly, work routines. Ironically, it is exactly this power constraint that allows digital nomads to travel and experience the world away from the tedious environment of a bleak office. However, some responses revealed that a good portion of the informants was well aware of their status compared to 70% of the world's population.

## **6.2 Applicability**

The digital nomadic lifestyle is the precursor to significant changes in present and future trends, particularly in general employment value systems. These changes are already visible in the western world, in areas such as work ethics and consumption habits. People in western societies show a growing interest in redefining their social practices and lifestyles in search of a more meaningful and fulfilling life (Bauman, 2005). Digital nomads are just one of these examples, trying to earn a living outside the traditional job market.

These changing values are also what brings us to the aim of this research: To identify how digital nomadism works and what are the possible benefits and weaknesses of remote work as an alternative to "locality-bound" employment. Digital nomads reported increased levels of productivity that stemmed from the freedom to choose their own hours and pace with their projects. Even though this arrangement eliminates the location-bound division between work time and leisure time, this didn't seem to work as an adequate deterrent for active digital nomads. Instead, they focused on the empowerment of taking ownership of their life, work and travel, acknowledging that this lifestyle might not be for everyone. Indifferent to biopolitical networks, such as social security, pension plans and family ties, they are willing to play with subjectivities and embrace their role as the opposite of a sedentary society.

Digital nomadism is still in its infancy but has drawn a lot of attention due to its groundbreaking premise. Using only a fast internet connection and a laptop, professionals in the service and informational sectors of the economy can perform their duties from anywhere in the world. Remote work is a growing trend, and according to some reports it is only going to keep getting bigger, at least for specific industries. Interestingly, the very same reports state that workers are most engaged when they spend at least 1-2 days at a physical office (Chokshi, 2018).

It is worth noting, however, that all studies and reports do not make a distinction between freelancers (working under contract/commission) and digital nomads (who can be either remote employees or freelancers). In any case, an increased degree of autonomy has beneficial effects on workers. However, digital nomadism might not be an ideal solution for a remote employee of a company. An asymmetrical communication might be suitable for freelancing projects, but full-time workers have to adhere to certain work hours, meetings and obligations that might be difficult to follow in opposite time zones.

### **6.2.1 For Cultural Analysts**

During the process of writing this thesis, I came across several researchers from other disciplines, who were trying to collect material for their own work, proving that digital nomadism is still a growing trend. Although it has already been the subject of numerous papers in tourism studies (due to the interesting take on “endless” travel), sociologists and marketing students are also approaching the phenomenon from a fresh perspective.

From a cultural analytical standpoint, future research could be greatly served by a focus on digital nomadism from the “native” point of view. It would be very interesting to see how digital nomadism affects the lives of the locals in big centers of remote work (such as Chiang Mai in Thailand). Based on the theories we explored in chapter 5, we could observe the interaction of digital nomads with the cities they live in and to what extent they actually “immerse” themselves in the local culture. With the help of a cultural analyst, local authorities could identify exactly how digital nomadism changes the scape of a city and solve issues as they arise. Also, turning a city into a digital nomad destination could have positive effects on the local economy.

The remote work and digital nomad market could have a lot of potential for cultural analysts, but mainly in the executive branch. Although cultural analysis has a fairly flexible

definition and qualified professionals could position themselves in many ways, it is difficult for them to become full-blown digital nomads. However, cultural analysts could help implement remote working policies in companies, ensuring that intercultural teams located all over the globe communicate efficiently. Therefore, internal community management is another field that could be worth tapping into for cultural analyst graduates.

### **6.3 Concluding Reflections**

All things considered, I believe that we are still a long way from digital nomad ever becoming the norm. The lack of a permanent basis, the absence of a social circle and the atavistic migration from one place to the next is certainly a lifestyle that would not suit most people (and it is a consensus that most of my active digital nomad informants agree with). Personally, I see digital nomadism as the extreme manifestation of a noble cause: The ability to leverage technology in ways that promote productivity, work-life balance and personal freedom.

Work and travel aside what should be the most important conclusion of this thesis is the need for a lifestyle that grants more freedom from employment constraints that might be outdated. With the help of information technologies, many professions can (and eventually will) move to the digital plane, transferring a big part of the physical office to digital dashboards that allow every aspect of the productivity pipeline to be conducted remotely.

As an active part of this community, I was curious to connect with members of the digital nomad community and verify whether this lifestyle is indeed viable. What I've found out, is that, like all things, it all depends on the dedication and work involved. It is perfectly possible for an individual to run a business or be employed remotely. However, what are the effects of this arrangement is something that varies wildly from person to person.

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