



The Digital Nomad Lifestyle: (Remote) Work/Leisure Balance, Privilege, and Constructed Community

Beverly Yuen Thompson¹ 

Received: 15 August 2018 / Accepted: 7 December 2018 / Published online: 19 December 2018
© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2018

Abstract

This paper overviews key concepts about the digital nomad lifestyle, which is defined as the ability for individuals to work remotely from their laptop and use their freedom from an office to travel the world. This concept has found a lifestyle movement that sells itself via personal blogs, Instagram feeds, in-person conferences, news features, and numerous e-books. Based on interviews with thirty-eight self-described nomads, this paper overviews the digital nomad lifestyle around the themes of privilege, inequality, leisure, work, and community. Stebbins' (*International Journal of the Sociology of Leisure*, 1, 43–53, 2018) concept of serious leisure provides one theoretical perspective, in addition to other sociological theories of leisure, work, and community.

Keywords Digital nomad · Lifestyle · Travel · Serious leisure · Employment

1 Digital Nomadism

Digital nomads are remote workers often employed in tech fields such as web design, programming, or online marketing. Exploiting the advantage of their remote employment, they travel the world; in contrast to telecommuter workers of past decades who used their remote work flexibility to work from home, cut down costs of transportation, avoid office-based distractions, and provide childcare-friendly scheduling. Digital nomads select their location based on leisure considerations, rather than employment (Müller 2016). The term 'digital nomad' was first used by Makimoto and Manners (1997) for their manifesto on the revolutionary lifestyle changes possible with the advent of the internet. Twenty years after their publication, the internet has indeed created the possibility of telecommuting for those in computer design and online marketing, and the saturation of internet connectivity in leisure and work life blurs

✉ Beverly Yuen Thompson
BThompson@siena.edu

¹ Siena College, Loudonville, NY, USA

distinction between the two (Reichenberger 2017). Cohen et al. (2013) put forth their concept of ‘lifestyle mobilities,’ which resonates with the digital nomad lifestyle, in that it is based on voluntary and continuous mobility, with an uncertain return date (Richards 2015). While the news coverage of the digital nomad phenomena emphasizes the leisure aspect of the lifestyle; the neoliberal and downwardly mobile tendency of Millennial generation employment demonstrates that less pay results in more work and related anxiety (Fraser 2013). Moving to Thailand on an income that will barely cover U.S. rent and student loan debt may be less of an empowering dreamlife and more of an economic coping strategy.

This article will overview several key concepts related to the digital nomadism lifestyle considerations on balancing work and leisure. Robert Stebbins’ (2001, 2007, 2018) theory of ‘serious leisure’ is useful, as digital nomads have taken their leisure considerations and inverted their significance in life by prioritizing it over employment-based location. ‘Privilege and inequality’ will provide a critical lens to analyze the digital nomad demographics, as well as their relative global privilege and its impacts on interpersonal relationships. ‘Community’ will provide another angle in which to understand the social position of digital nomads in contrast to their family, friends, co-workers, peers, and locals. This article is based on thirty-eight in-depth interviews with self-identified digital nomads. I met all of the participants at three different digital nomad events: The Digital Nomad Conference 2017 DNX Lisbon, on 9–10 September; followed by the Digital Nomad Girls Retreat in Javea, Spain from 18 to 27 September; and finally, the 7in7 Conference for experienced nomads in Barcelona, Spain, on 3–9 October 2017. Skype interviews followed our in-person meetings at these events during the subsequent months. In contrast to the popular entrepreneurial literature encouraging a ‘freedom’ perspective on the digital nomad lifestyle, this article provides critical insight into the neoliberal context of the millennial generation’s increasingly downwardly mobile economic prospects. Additionally, while leisure and location are prioritized for hedonistic enjoyment, such pleasures come at the cost of social isolation, distance from loved ones, and loneliness. For those nomads who seek constructed community in expensive, all-inclusive communities such as co-living/co-working spaces, their privilege extends to an insulated bubble-like existence transporting a comfortable, middle-class, Western environment, to any location around the global, while excluding the local population and cultural contexts.

2 Digital Nomadism as Serious Leisure

Robert Stebbins (2001, 2007, 2018) introduces the concept of ‘serious leisure’ to distinguish between those leisure activities that are part of a general, perhaps mundane, everyday life (i.e., watching television, sports, taking pleasure in cooking or knitting), and activities taken to an elevated level of intensity demonstrated by more extreme investments of time, money, and seriousness. Stebbins’ (2001, 2007) ‘serious leisure’ concept is based on six defining characteristics: perseverance, leisure career, personal effort, tangible reward, identity, and unique ethos. This framework can contribute to an understanding of digital nomadism, as these individuals have demonstrated their prioritization of leisure, and digital nomadism provides a unique example of empirical evidence for consideration in the sociology of leisure studies (Reichenberger 2017).

Other theorists contribute to our understanding of other extreme leisure concepts as well as lifestyle practices based on leisure activity, or the inversion of leisure and work. Tony Blackshaw's (2018) concept of 'devotional leisure' goes so far as to describe it as 'the motor that sustains modern life' (p. 79). He continues, 'in these uses of leisure we perceive that we become ourselves, in a radical way' (Blackshaw 2018, 80). Thus, Blackshaw is suggesting a shift from an identity based on one's employment, to one based on one's specific leisure pursuits. Digital nomads often define themselves based more on their specific leisure interests and orientation—beach and surfing, mountain climbing, or snowboarding—rather than focus on an identity based on their specific type of remote work that supports their lifestyle.

Digital nomads often speak of their travel patterns as more authentic or embedded than traditional tourism, however, examining their actual habits shows little distinction between the two. Kaplan (1996) focuses our attention on the inequalities and outcomes of tourism based on Westerners traveling to developing nations. While such impoverished countries depend more significantly upon a tourism economy, such income often remains within the multinational corporation level, rather than trickling down to the local populations. Indeed, tourists are often quite disconnected and ignorant as to the socio-economic factors of the countries to which they visit, and they stay at a social distance from local residents, who could potentially provide insight and connection to these locations. Kaplan (1996) suggests 'an almost nihilistic distancing' from locals in order to experience their 'otherness,' foreignness, which provides 'color,' and excitement to the otherwise bland consumerist experiences of tourists (p. 46). Digital nomads attempt to distance themselves from 'tourists,' by claiming that such travel is not bracketed off from their 'regular' life, that they 'slow travel,' or are more committed to a travel-lifestyle than a tourist (Putra and Agirachman 2016). However, from their selection of location, to the bracketed existence they inhabit, segregated from the local population, to the professional networking, and dating that is confined to similar demographics, nomads are difficult to distinguish from traditional tourists or ex-pats.

3 Digital Nomadism and the Economic Context of the Gig Economy

Popular entrepreneurial literature celebrates the 'gig economy' as a win-win for business and workers alike—it provides freedom and flexibility. Workers control their own schedules. Employers no longer are required to provide overhead expenses, such as office space or healthcare. Many aspiring or beginning digital nomads start their remote work in the online gig economy, providing piecemeal, one-time work provided by a corporate website connecting freelance workers with employers in a just-in-time economy. Platforms allow employers to post work request for such jobs as audio transcribers, translators, copy writers, or web designers, to freelancers who bid on the job, complete the work in a timely fashion, and receive a rating review on their performance, impacting future employment opportunities (Freelancers Union 2016). This encourages freelancers to work below market rate, or even for free, in order to have more gigs—and ratings—on one's professional profile (De Stefano 2016: 8; Luce 2017; Gandini 2016a, b; Gandini et al. 2016). And since piecemeal work does not come with benefits—freelancers must cover their retirement, health care, and operational costs out of this income.

Boston College professor Juliet Schor is one of the few critical sociologists examining the impacts of the gig economy on workers. According to a Pew survey that Schor and Attwood-Charles (2017: 9) cite, ‘gig workers disproportionately earn less than \$30,000 annually, however, because many are in school, part timers, or not in the labor force; this is not surprising.’ The workforce is also bifurcated between those who have full-time employment and do extra gigs on the side, and those who lack full-time employment and are scrambling to live off of their gigs. In the same Pew survey, 29% depended on this income to meet their basic needs, whereas 42% found the gig work an additional income (Schor and Attwood-Charles 2017: 7). Technology has assisted in destigmatizing gig-work through the platform applications because of the association they have with highly-educated and high cultural capital individuals, based on branding and early adoption by specific communities.

While digital nomads and telecommuters differ in lifestyle (telecommuters are often balancing family duties; while nomads are balancing leisure and work—and rarely, childrearing), both find it challenging to have distinctive boundaries between work, leisure, and family life. The research on work-family balance attempts to measure the extent to which policies of flexible work schedules assist employees in being both productive workers, and attentive family members (Anderson and Vinnicombe 2015; Vinnicombe et al. 2013; Vinnicombe and Anderson 2017; Stavrou-Costea et al. 2015). Unlike traditional telecommuters primarily concerned about balancing family obligations with employment; digital nomads very rarely have children and balance their work life nearly exclusively with leisure, and occasional visitation with family and friends.

4 Privilege and Inequality among Digital Nomads

The digital nomad lifestyle is an important topic for sociological consideration, especially as it signals a shift in employment practices for the Millennial and subsequent generations (Cohen et al. 2014). The media attention on this lifestyle phenomenon has primarily been published in newspapers and business magazines, which promote the concepts of freedom and employment flexibility—and avoid the idea of downwardly-mobile workers in a neoliberal economy. Technological advances create new ways in which to manage and squeeze workers.

Aydogdu (2016) challenges this ‘new nomad’ lifestyle, for being both tech- and phallo-centric, and argues that the lifestyle ignores the importance of real connection with destinations and their people:

The digital nomad thesis often fails to distinguish between different mobilities enabled and constrained by power-geometries. As a last remark, the nomad can be criticized from a critical feminist perspective for its perpetuation of a ‘phallo-centric’ and technologically-driven notion of progress. This nomad fully embraces the dominant capitalist logic of speeding up the desire for ever-new products and services. Notwithstanding assertions that permanent connectivity, not gadgetry and hyper-mobility, are what counts, the digital nomad strongly retains a male-biased flavor. Toys for the boys. The nomad also reaffirms Enlightenment ideals of hyper-individuality. It re-boxes old identity notions of total personal freedom and autonomy in a trendy term. Rather than perpetually

questioning fixed identity categories, as the nomadologists have it, this technologically-driven utilitarian nomad is happy to maximize his own freedom of movement and to optimize personal choices by exerting control. (8).

Indeed, the digital nomad manifestos praise entrepreneurship and capitalism, and seek out ways to maximize their financial/business interests as well as personal lifestyle, over considerations of contributing to a location-based community. Feminist theorist Alexander (2005) argues that those with privilege, breeds feelings, and thus, actions, of superiority. She states:

One of the habits of privilege is that it spawns superiority, beckoning its owners to don a veil of false protection so that they never see themselves, the devastation they wreck or their accountability to it. Privilege and superiority blunt the loss that issues from enforced alienation and segregations of different kinds (p. 2).

Alexander (2005) reminds us that not only are these personal lifestyle choices, but institutionalized patterns of behavior that have consequences. Nomads select destinations where the local economies have been ravaged, and thus, prop up their own currency. Local people adapt to the tourist economy by promoting hospitality, even at the expense of local communities' development. Alexander presented one example where the ministry initiated a smile campaign in the Bahamas, so that local people were encouraged to be physically welcoming to tourists. Such examples provide insight into the distances between locals and tourists, which digital nomads are quick to overlook.

5 Creating Nomadic Community

Though nomads chose to leave the comforts of their hometown, family, and friends, for endless travel, their blogs and online postings highlight their feelings of isolation and loneliness. Their family and friends back home often express shock and bewilderment at their lifestyle choice; and at any rate, cannot relate to the experiences. Nomads haven't learned the languages or customs of their host countries, in southeast Asia, or South America. Therefore, they seek out other digital nomads via their online platforms. Those most committed to the identity label might attend digital nomad conferences where they can meet with others in the lifestyle and find new friends with whom to travel. Overwhelmingly, they seek a community that matches their own demographic background and lifestyle selection. They find others in co-living/co-working spaces, some of which provide all-inclusive experiences where nomads travel the world in a cohort of thirty or fifty other people (Gandini 2015; Garrett et al. 2017; O'Brien 2012; Putra and Agirachman 2016). The participants in this study were found at such lifestyle conferences, gathering together a more committed cohort of individuals adopting the 'digital nomad' label.

6 Methodology

I began this research by attending three major digital nomad events. The first event was the third annual DNX Conference for Digital Nomads & Life Hackers in Lisbon,

Portugal, on 9–10 September 2017. The DNX hosts events in both German (the founders are German) and English, thereby representing the large German digital nomad community. This event was aimed towards aspiring nomads, with speakers presenting their personal, inspirational stories, often tracing a popular narrative arch: from corporate job to digital freedom. Next, I attended the Digital Nomad Girls retreat in Javea, Spain, from 18 to 27 September 2017. As an immersive, ten-day retreat, with a full agenda, and even shared rooms, the fifteen participants bonded in a way reflective of such intensive time spent together. Half of the attendees were already nomads, while the other half were aspiring. I was able to bond with, and secure interviews with the majority of attendees—including the founder Jenny Lachs and her partner Simon. Jenny then connected me with the founders of 7in7, a conference for experienced digital nomads. 7in7 took place 3–9 October 2017, in Barcelona, Spain and attracted approximately seventy participants. The title of the conference signified that it would take place each year for 7 years on seven different continents—yes, including Antarctica. I interviewed all of the organizers, many of the main speakers, and quite a few of the participants during follow-up Skype interviews over the next 3 months. The 7in7 conference focuses on ‘invisible nomads,’ and centres on women, people of color, and the LGBT community.

6.1 Participant Demographic Information

There were thirty-eight participants in this study. All of the participants were from strong passport countries, and those who had citizenship in weaker passport countries, had dual passports—thus paired with a stronger one. A passport’s strength is measured by how many visa-free countries one can enter. The participants overwhelmingly spoke only English. Those who spoke two or more languages were primarily of non-English speaking national background ($n = 7$). Rarely, did white English speakers learn a second language ($n = 4$). Thirteen participants spoke two or more languages, and five spoke three or more. Twenty-two participants spoke only English.

Their ages ranged from 21 to 49, with the majority in their thirties. Twelve of the participants were in their twenties, twenty-two were in their thirties, and four were in their forties. Twenty-eight of the participants were racially white (including one Arab and two Hispanic whites). Five participants were of African descent, two were Asian, and three were mixed race Asian and white. Thirty of the participants were heterosexual, three were bisexual, and five were lesbian, gay, or queer-identified. Six of the participants were married (with two in the process of divorce), while the majority of them were single ($n = 32$), with ten in significant relationships. Only one participant out of thirty-seven had children (now grown). Only six participants hoped for children in the future, with fifteen unsure, and thirteen were adamant to remain child-free. Only six participants held a religious identity: including one Hindu, one Muslim, and four Christians. Some qualified themselves as ‘spiritual.’

Most of the participants held Bachelors’ degrees ($n = 23$). Nine participants had graduate degrees (MA = 6; JD = 1; PhD = 2). Six participants did not complete college. Four had some college education, and one participant graduated with a high school degree. Half of the participants had no student debt ($n = 20$) and the other half had student debt ($n = 18$). Criminal records pose barriers for travel. Only one of the participants had a minor misdemeanor criminal charge, which had been expunged.

6.2 Data Analysis

The thirty-eight interviews were fully transcribed, and hand-coded for themes based on research, interview questions, or those that emerged from the interview data themselves. As themes developed from these sources, the interviews were reviewed again to see the commonalities for each topic and the range of experiences that were stated. Quotes were coded under themes and subthemes, organized based on similar topics, and written up. Dominant themes were based on privilege, employment background, pathways to remote work, leisure pursuits, community development, and romantic relationships. I was the sole interviewer, transcript coder, and data analyst.

7 Findings: Constructing a Digital Nomad Lifestyle

Stebbins' (2001, 2007) concept of serious leisure is helpful in understanding the digital nomad lifestyle as an application of the concept, because of its inversion of leisure and work in significance. The six defining characteristics of 'serious leisure' are applicable to the digital nomad lifestyles: perseverance, leisure career, personal effort, tangible reward, identity, and unique ethos. Nomads must initially persevere in pursuing a lifestyle that their co-workers, friends, and family often deem unimaginable, impossible, and/or irresponsible. Finding information on others pursuing such a lifestyle provides the initial inclination that it is indeed possible. However, many participants report conflict between their loved ones and their chosen lifestyle. The lifestyle becomes a strong identifying aspect of self-perception, especially once they come together collectively as a larger group to reinforce their legitimacy, identity, and community.

7.1 Privilege & Inequality

Digital nomads' select locations in which their demographic privileges are maximized, along with their hedonistic pleasures. Chiang Mai, Thailand is currently the most popular destination for digital nomads, where they rendezvous in co-working spaces, enjoy the balmy weather, beaches, and compliant population. Such hotspot locations are written up on digital nomad lifestyle blogs, Instagram posts, Facebook groups, and organizations. The behavior of the digital nomads in these decidedly tourist destinations does not distinguish themselves from the tourists or ex-pats in their selection of living with other Westerners, staying oblivious to local culture, traditions, and language, and socializing with other foreigners and service workers. Other popular locations include Vietnam, Bali, Cambodia, Medellin, Colombia, Lisbon, and so on. Such a difference in privilege and status is a difficult gap to bridge between nomads and locals. Such privilege can lead to what Alexander (2005) describes as 'a sense of being in a privileged lifestyle,' which impacts behaviors and creates blind-spots where the privileged do not see the damage that their lifestyle wrecks upon others (p. 2). Kaplan (1996) portrays this 'nihilistic distancing' as something that keeps locals as 'others... into cultural peripheries that provide "color" and excitement' (p. 46). Without this social distance, the locals would lose their exotic interest for the tourist, as well as their appeal as a commodity. Digital nomads compare themselves against their (generational and employment) peers in their home countries and may perceive themselves as more

downwardly mobile than the expectations around their social location. However, in contrast to populations in developing countries, their power differential is enormous.

The interviewees agreed that they do not stray from the tourist path and rarely interact with locals in a meaningful way. Alexandra from Australia states:

That is something that I really need to work on. I don't engage much with locals. When we were in Thailand, a friend of mine from the UK, he married a Thai woman, and they were living there for a while. She'll take us to a thing that Thai people do, for example. And I feel a lot of guilt as well. Because there's a lot of neo-colonial kind of stuff going on. Which is another thing that 'bro-mads' do not get.

Alexandra's statement shows her struggle with privilege and inequality and awareness of the imbalance between tourists and locals; however, her analysis and actions do not critically understand her own social position. She was unable to specifically list the cultural event she attended, referring instead to 'a thing that Thai people do.' She mentions 'bro-mads,' which would be a stereotypical tourist man fueled with toxic masculinity, focused on beer and surfing over social inequality. However, her position as a digital nomad does not express itself much differently from the stereotypical bro-mad, unaware of the cultural specifics of the southeast Asian country in which he finds himself.

Digital nomads of color have more potential for awareness of social inequalities and cultural exchanges during their travels. Amna provides more insight and consideration, yet her behavior still is not much different compared to her white traveling counterparts. Amna, a mixed heritage American with an Eastern European mother and a father from Pakistan, relies on the friendliness of service workers to count among her local friends:

Ideally, [we should be] learning about the culture, to be able to give back in some way. And that doesn't necessarily mean throwing money at a problem, but by engaging with people. Even if it's just the people at the local café where you work, like learning a little bit about them, a little bit about their life, maybe introducing them to a new concept, a new experience. I had become friendly with the people at the café I work at most of the time in Colombia, and they remembered me when I came back. To be able to share experiences and knowledge that you've gained can be a form of giving back. Colombia is this incredibly rich place with a very sad recent history because of the drug trade. And a lot of tourists come here, do a lot of drugs, party, and leave. That's not helping them.

Such perspective echoes Bandyopadhyay and Patil's (2017) discussion of the neo-colonialism inherent in women's volunteer tourism, and such statements reflect the 'helping' words of charity contributions over radical institutional critique. Amna is a volunteer at the 7in7 conference, which promotes charity contributions for digital nomads as a way to give back to local communities rather than critique inequality and promoting wider social change. Sally, an Arab American, and one of the few bicultural and bilingual participants, enjoys traveling in regions where Arabic is spoken:

I tend to travel to places where I can communicate in their native tongue. For me, I really try to travel in the Middle East. If you do this lifestyle, you have a

tendency to make connections, and then leave. So, sometimes the connections can be superficial. I try to choose places that I can better connect with people, and that I can stay for longer periods of time. This year, I did some travel in Arabic-speaking countries and Spanish-speaking countries. I am ethnically ambiguous, as well, so at first glance, no one can tell that I'm Arab, nor can they tell that I'm American. People make assumptions about where you are from.

Sally's comments demonstrate that experiences for nomads of color can differ from those of whites; thus, demonstrating the unspoken norm of whiteness underlying the nomadic lifestyle. The participants in this study rarely learned another language outside of their native languages, thus, those who spoke two or more languages were often ethnic minorities in Western countries. Few nomads could venture far from English-speaking locations.

7.2 Employment

The participants overwhelmingly began their work lives as teenagers with entry-level, part-time jobs, often in the service industry, where they slowly developed skills in navigating work, and subsidizing their tuition payments for college (Thompson 2018). While they have cultural capital rooted in family and citizenship, many struggled to gain a foothold in their field, except for those especially in the 'intangible economic fields' based on high-skill and demand, such as computer programming, software engineers, computer technical support, and skilled digital marketing (Haskel and Westlake 2017). *Amna* was born in Pakistan and raised there until her parents divorced when she was eight-years-old, at which point she migrated with her mother and siblings to the United States. Her father was a businessman, who later earned a Ph.D. and became a professor. Her mother had earned advanced degrees in medicine and worked managing doctors' offices. Amna attended Bryn Mawr, an elite women's college, where she racked up a significant student debt, along with earning her degree. Her work life before and after college consisted of small and random gigs:

I was cobbling it together. I never had a full-time job. When I graduated, I was tutoring French, English, and babysitting. I was that person on the streets of New York City handing out coupons and ice cream samples.

Amna realized if she was 'cobbling it together' in New York City, the transition to living in more affordable places could be a distinct possibility. Her research on digital nomads lead her to find online jobs, working remotely, as she had done with hustling gigs in the U.S. She became involved in email and search engine-optimizing marketing, finding clients through various networking events. Connecting with other digital nomads provided her with the ideas of where to find new clients and gigs, and her various skills, including speaking some Arabic, Hebrew, French, and Spanish, were a further asset. However, she did not have a clear plan or trajectory, and was following her new digital nomad friends' travel itineraries. Amna's experiences of finding small and random gigs, both in New York City, and abroad, represent the lack of opportunities that Millennials face in the United States, even when they have extensive elite education, language abilities, and are bright, with significant cultural capital.

Nick is an American with an elite education in software development from Georgia Tech, raised in the suburbs of Washington DC, with parents who worked in the medical field, as well as finance. His parents paid for his tuition and he viewed his college-time retail job as a mind-break from his grueling university computer courses. Not long after graduation, he was employed in a string of shorter term full-time as well as freelance jobs, and this soon led to a full-time position with a six-figure salary, and extensive benefits. He maintained this position for two and a half years; however, during a holiday to Norway with his partner, the company quickly announced they were going out of business, and fired everyone. Nick received only a one-week severance package. However, the money he had earned could support them for six-months of world travel, compared to 2 months in their former home of Santa Monica, California, so they took the opportunity to launch into their digital nomad lifestyle. Since then, he has worked as a consultant and freelancer in the same industry but makes half of his previous salary.

I was originally trying to start a new company with the bones of the technology that I had built at this full-time company that was shut down. There were a lot of customers who were left hanging. I was trying to band together with some of the other developers and rebuild a bootstrap version of the software. It was very stressful. Six months later, I switched to being purely freelance. Take on a client. Do what they want. Make a ton of money. That was a better strategy. I design software, websites, and mobile optimize. I can do UX design. Nowadays, most of my development experience is in mobile, so IOS and mobile-responsive websites. Neither of those are going away anytime soon. You have to keep yourself up-to-date as the technology shifts but, luckily, it's as evergreen as it could be right now. ...Everything in my world is personal connections that I made as a full-time developer in L.A. Another person had come along needing some help. Shortly thereafter, I worked on a project for Disney. Then, that led to another project. There was a string of projects. For the first 5 years nomading, I never looked for work. Work dropped into my lap.

Nick represents those nomads with the highest skill set and thus, income-earning potential. For those at Nick's occupation level, they often report having been downsized from a corporate where they earned a significant salary, often in the six digits, and as a freelancer, they rarely ever match their full-time employment salary level. In addition to work, Nick has his passion projects, including being a co-founder and organizer of the 7in7 conference, which takes significant time away from freelancing hours, as well as income. Nomads often may have a passion project, hobby, or leisure habit in which they invest significant additional time and money.

Participants with high-tech and advanced skills in computing professions such as software engineers, web design, and IT support had the easiest transition to remote work. But for many others, their desire to be nomadic and travel was the first decision, and the employment area was of a secondary development. Many had random work histories without a particular specialization. They would often read digital nomad blogs and groups in order to find the most accessible remote jobs—often at a subsistence level, such as freelance piecework. Jenny and her boyfriend Simon completed their chemistry Ph.D.'s before deciding that this career trajectory was unappealing. Their peers were gaining employment in pharmaceutical industries. Both had UK passports,

which entitled them to work visas in Australia, which they took advantage of for a while, before moving on to Chiang Mai, Thailand. They began networking in co-working spaces and began trying the typical digital nomad jobs: drop-shipping, search-engine-optimized copywriting, social media marketing, and online translation work (for Jenny, with her German and English background). Simon settled into online chemistry academic copy-editing—primarily supporting both of them. Simon began this work while they were still in Australia:

I pretty much started straight out doing proof reading work, which I found through various online sources. The stuff that I do solely now is chemistry editing and proof reading. I found that pretty much immediately. In fact, I think I'd done a few jobs while I was still in Australia. So, that was a small thing. Maybe half or two-thirds of my income. Then, I was just taking odd proof-reading jobs of some really boring sales stuff. I also did a guy's autobiography that was fairly poorly written. I edited texts for a couple of websites written in poor English. Stuff like that. I've done far fewer jobs than my girlfriend did. She worked through a hell of a lot of trash to get to the good stuff. For me, the chemistry editing thing became quite stable.

In the meantime, Jenny was busy establishing herself within digital nomad communities online—especially focusing on women. Jenny had established a Facebook group—Digital Nomad Girls—for which she organized meet-ups, events, and eventually a ten-day long retreat. I met both she, Simon, and her attendees at this event in Javea, Spain. Jenny told me about the process of growing her online community:

The group had already grown to a few hundred girls. A lot of them were in Chiang Mai at the time so we said, 'Do you want to meet up?' We met at a wine bar and 10 or 12 girls showed up. It was really incredible and super fun. I set up a Facebook event for them. They were starting to do meet-ups around the world. Sadly, I never counted how many we had and in how many cities: London, Sydney, Brazil, and everywhere. That's how it started. Then, pretty soon after that, people started asking, 'When are we going to meet in real life?' ... I've always organized events or meet-ups, but I'd never organized a retreat before. I winged it, to be honest. I found a place. People came. It was incredible. I had no idea this would happen. We had 14 people from 10 different countries. So, the first retreat was by far the most diverse. Then, it was immediately, 'When are we going to do the next one?' So, I organized the next one and it just went from there.

Shifting from organizing low stakes meet-ups, to major retreats, made the difference between a hobby and starting a business. Yet Simon's income supporting the both of them allowed Jenny the freedom to explore her possibilities without needing to bring in a paycheck. Such partner financial support can be overlooked when examining employment, yet it is an important consideration for understanding nomad income. Overall, while the digital nomad literature often speaks optimistically about income potential, the reality of the income for the nomads interviewed described a world of precarious employment without benefits.

7.3 Commodified Communities: Conferences and the Curated Co-living Experience

7.3.1 Conferences

Digital nomad conferences are primarily held in English (and German), thus providing a straightforward statement about the intended audience—Western. The DNX is one conference that socially constructs a normative mainstream digital nomad community. The founders are a white German couple encouraging others to become digital nomads, like themselves. The speakers are other German and European speakers reflecting similar cultural backgrounds, and shared leisure aims of drinking and surfing. During the DNX conference, numerous meetups were held, but all of them were located in alcohol-fueled establishments, thus potentially repelling non-alcohol preferences, or promoting specific gender and sexuality arrangements that may not be comfortable for everyone. In response to conferences such as DNX, other conferences attempt to appeal to demographics that become marginalized in such an environment. The following two conference—7in7 and Digital Nomad Girls—targeted marginalized nomads, and it was from these events that I found the participants for this study.

Kyrie is one of three founders of 7in7. This conference aims to host speakers at the annual conference that are 75% women, people of color, and sexual minorities. They target the ‘secret nomads’ as the founders call them. Kyrie told me:

The digital nomad image is of some 25-year-old white guy developer from Silicon Valley who says, ‘I quit my job. You can do it. Go to Southeast Asia and work in Chiang Mai.’ There were not a lot of female voices, or lesbians, or people of color, and we were getting frustrated. That was one of the reasons that we tried to create a community around these ‘secret nomads,’ so they could come out of hiding and meet each other. Nomad life can be really lonely, you want to make sure that you find the right people –your people.

Jennifer Lachs began with a Facebook group called Digital Nomad Girls, and once she developed a following, she began organizing retreats:

I had no idea how to do it. I just knew some people said they wanted to come, so I said, ‘Let’s try it.’ I’ve never done this before. I’ve always organized events or meet-ups, but never a retreat. I winged it, to be honest. I found a place. I had posted the notice in the group 5 – 7 times. Created a website. People came. It was incredible. I had no idea this would happen. I had kind of planned it in such a way that we could run it if 6 people showed up. But we had 14 from 10 different countries. So, the first retreat was by far the most diverse. Then, the question was, ‘When are we going to do the next one?’ So, I organized the next one, and it just went from there. We had 6 nights instead of 9. It was much shorter. But we did master mind sessions. We did a little bit of skill shares. We had workshops about productivity and pricing. We did a few trips. We had a kayaking trip. We did a photo walk. And just hung out. It was quite a tight schedule.

Selling the lifestyle and practical tips on expanding one’s potential business to remote work and strategic travel becomes almost like a pyramid scheme of selling the dream to

the next group of aspirants in order to fund another's lifestyle. Digital nomad aspirants provide an endless supply of eager clients, willing to invest in the potential of learning remote work tactics and networking with other micro-entrepreneurs.

7.3.2 Curated Co-living Experiences

The digital nomad experience is a lonely one. Digital nomads face the challenge of creating a work environment in which they can co-work with others if they prefer that experience or attend networking events to find potential clients and collaborators. Single nomads use phone app dating sites, but long-term relationships are nearly impossible to maintain while traveling (Thompson 2019). Friendship circles are disrupted. Therefore, the option of all-inclusive co-living and co-working spaces appeal to some nomads who are interested in connecting with others in the lifestyle. Alexis, the remote lawyer from Florida, described the range of companies specializing in such products:

There are so many of them now: 7in7, GlobeKick, and Remote. They're trying to get digital nomads to come together and spend time with each other for a month, or two months at a time. They offer room and board. They organize entrepreneurship retreats. They make it business-oriented so that it's not just summer camp for adults. There is networking or some kind of TED Talk-style seminars on business and motivation, and of course, fun little excursions. If I thought about monetizing my blog and my Instagram, that would be the place to meet people to do it.

In this atmosphere of opportunism, the digital nomad lifestyle provides a stream of potential clients eager to purchase the curated experience. Putra and Agirachman (2016) describe the centrality of creative tourism at the heart of coworking and coliving spaces. In the study by Garrett et al. (2017), the authors point to the importance of building community for attendees—even though it is based on nothing more than a collective of individuals purchasing the same experience. Although certain demographic similarities bring together people with potentially similar interests. They are often in their 30s, white, active, single, social, extroverted, and alcohol-consuming. London-born Marie Clarke cherishes the social dynamic as the central appeal for her, an avid consumer of co-living and mindfulness retreats:

I pick co-living spaces; otherwise, I become very unproductive and miserable. I found a place called Co-work Surf, which combines surfing with working. It was very poorly organized, but I met a lot of people there. The costs are high, but they're still lower than London. I realized that I need to go to a co-living place even if it costs me a lot of money. I get the best of both worlds by having Monday to Friday to work and relax. Then, on the weekends: traveling, organizing trips, surfing, stand-up paddle boarding, and camping. Life is like a massive surfing session. Right now, I'm on this great wave and I'm enjoying it, and trying things that I wouldn't do at home in suburbia.

The 'self' as developmental project (or almost as enlightenment seeking through consumption of experience) is a Western consumer process in which many nomads participate, combining a pseudo-spirituality with entrepreneurialism.

8 Discussion and Conclusion

Much of the literature on the digital nomad lifestyle focuses optimistically on the freedom potential for workers and employers alike. However, under critical and empirical analysis, it is apparent that employers are finding a great deal of freedom as they shed responsibility for providing full-time employment, benefits, office space and paid leave. Meanwhile, employees have the freedom to work constantly, as their precarious and competitive salary is often decreasing and at the mercy of an algorithm. Neoliberalism is driving this economic context, which is not limited to nomads, but a widespread phenomenon impacting many workers. Digital nomads have differentiated themselves from their Millennial counterparts by taking their downward mobility on the road, to an international context far more hospitable to their meager income, thus cashing in on their passport strength. Such a lifestyle is more of an adaptation to neoliberal impacts than a challenge to the system, indeed, nomads are resolutely capitalist in their micro-entrepreneurial aims. Aydogdu (2016) points out,

As a last remark, the nomad can be criticized from a critical feminist perspective for its perpetuation of a 'phallo-centric' and technologically-driven notion of progress. This nomad fully embraces the dominant capitalist logic of speeding up the desire for ever-new products and services.

Such male-orientation and lack of critique within the digital nomad subculture has led to the creation of alternative digital nomad conferences. A critique of inequality within the business world and the digital nomad lifestyle can help us understand the downward mobility and economic prospects for the Millennial workforce.

Since employment is failing the expectations of the Millennial generation, those rare few who become digital nomads take a creative approach by inverting leisure in importance and following their passion for travel and finding remote work only to make money to fuel their trip. An insignificant number of nomads had full time employment, benefits, or a retirement fund. Their currency became the number of countries they have entered. Because of this significant elevation of travel leisure in the lifestyle, Robert Stebbins' (2001, 2007) concept of serious leisure, can provide a framework for understanding the extent of their consuming passion through the lens of his six defining characteristics: perseverance, leisure career, personal effort, tangible reward, identity, and unique ethos. Digital nomads exhibit these traits by centering leisure for selecting where they live, rather than based on employment. They also have an identity based on this lifestyle for which they may come together collectively at conferences and retreats to meet others and reinforce this identity. In such locations, the parameters and definitions of the subculture are established in order to create group cohesion and the division between insider and outsider.

This research was based upon thirty-eight in-depth interviews with self-identified digital nomads whom I encountered at lifestyle conferences in Europe. In this article I provide a critique on the aspects of privilege and inequality of the digital nomad life that is often overlooked in the entrepreneurial literature. I briefly overview some examples of the types of remote work in which digital nomads engage and which funds their travels. Because of the loneliness of the lifestyle, many nomads are motivated to come together collectively, either at large events, or in co-living and co-working spaces.

This is an initial investigation into a sub-selection of digital nomads who are active around their identity to the extent that they attend such events and reflect on the community. However, many nomads never attend such an event and may best be encountered online or in geographic hotspots, such as Chiang Mai, Thailand. In other publications I have written about the employment context of digital nomads (Thompson 2018) as well as their dating lives (Thompson 2019). Therefore, this article provides more insight into the privileges and inequality of the nomadic demographic as well as their search for community. Future research may find it interesting to focus on certain digital nomad hot spots, specifics of co-living environments, a critical assessment on the realities of the income nomads make, or if this lifestyle is indeed a temporary one, as the challenges of constant mobility pull nomads into a more traditional lifestyle once again.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

References

- Alexander, M. J. (2005). *Pedagogies of crossing: Mediations on feminism, sexual politics, memory, and the sacred*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Anderson, D. A., & Vinnicombe, S. (2015). Senior women, work-life balance and the decision to quit: A generational perspective. In A. M. Broadbridge & S. L. Fielden (Eds.), *Handbook of gendered careers in management: Getting in, getting on, getting out* (pp. 445–459). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Aydogdu, F. (2016). Frame of new nomad. <http://neonomadproject.com/nomadology-read.html>. Accessed 28 Sept 2017.
- Bandyopadhyay, R., & Patil, V. (2017). The white woman's burden'—the racialized, gendered politics of volunteer tourism. *An International Journal of Tourism Space, Place and Environment*, 19(4), 1–13.
- Blackshaw, T. (2018). The two rival concepts of devotional leisure: towards an understanding of twenty-first century human creativity and the possibility of freedom. *Int J Sociol Leis*, 1, 75–97.
- Cohen, S. A., Duncan, T., & Thulemark, M. (2013). Lifestyle mobilities: the crossroads of travel, leisure and migration. *Mobilities*, 10(1), 155–172.
- Cohen, S. A., Prayag, G., & Moital, M. (2014). Consumer behaviour in tourism: concepts, influences and opportunities. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 17(10), 872–909.
- De Stefano, V. (2016). The rise of the just-in-time workforce: On-demand work, crowdwork and labor protection in the “gig-economy”. In *ILO conditions of work and employment series, Working Paper No. 71* (pp. 1–51). Geneva: ILO.
- Fraser, N. (2013). *Fortunes of feminism: From state-managed capitalism to neoliberal crisis*. New York: Verso.
- Freelancers Union. (2016). Freelancing in America 2016. https://fu-web-storage-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/content/filer_public/c2/06/c2065a8a-7f00-46db-915a-2122965df7d9/fu_freelancinginamericareport_v3-rgb.pdf. Accessed 28 Sept 2017.
- Gandini, A. (2015). The rise of coworking spaces: a literature review. *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organization*, 15(1), 193–205.
- Gandini, A. (2016a). *The reputation economy: Understanding knowledge work in digital society*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gandini, A. (2016b). Digital work: Self-branding and social capital in the freelance knowledge economy. *Marketing Theory*, 16(1), 123–141.
- Gandini, A., Pais, I., & Beraldo, D. (2016). Reputation and trust on online labor markets: the reputation economy of Elance. *Work Organization, Labor and Globalization*, 10(1), 27–43.
- Garrett, L. E., Spreitzer, G. M., & Bacevice, P. A. (2017). Co-constructing a sense of community at work: the emergence of community in coworking spaces. *Organization Studies*, 38(6), 821–842.
- Haskel, J. & Westlake, S. (2017). *Capitalism without capital: the rise of the intangible economy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kaplan, C. (1996). *Questions of travel: Postmodern discourse of displacement*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- Luce, E. (2017). *The retreat of Western liberalism*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press.
- Makimoto, T., & Manners, D. (1997). *Digital nomad*. New York: Wiley.
- Müller, A. (2016). The digital nomad: Buzzword or research category? *Transnational Social Review: A Social Work Journal*, 6(3), 344–348.
- O'Brien, M. (2012). Finding a home for the 'digital nomad': New forms of identity and work in relation to mobile media and public space. http://www.michelleobrien.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/OBRIEN_Home_digital_nomad.pdf. Accessed 12 July 2018.
- Putra, G. B. & Agirachman, F.A. (2016). Urban coworking space: Creative tourism in digital nomads perspective. 4–5 August. Arte-Polis 6 International Conference. Bandung, Indonesia, PGN. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316472768_Urban_Coworking_Space_Creative_Tourism_in_Digital_Nomads_Perspective. Accessed 17 Sept 2017.
- Reichenberger, I. (2017). Digital nomads: a quest for holistic freedom in work and leisure. *Annals of Leisure Research*, 21(3), 364–380. <https://doi.org/10.1080/11745398.2017.1358098>.
- Richards, G. (2015). The new global nomads: youth travel in a globalizing world. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 40(3), 340–352. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2015.1075724>.
- Schor, J. B., & Attwood-Charles, W. (2017). The “sharing” economy: labor, inequality, and social connection on for-profit platforms. *Sociology Compass*, 11(8), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12493>.
- Stavrou-Costea, E., Parry, E., & Anderson, D. (2015). Nonstandard work arrangements and configurations of firm and societal systems. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 26(19), 2412–2433.
- Stebbins, R. A. (2001). Serious leisure. *Society*, (May/June), 53–57.
- Stebbins, R. A. (2007). *Serious leisure: A perspective for our time*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.
- Stebbins, R. A. (2018). The sociology of leisure: an estranged child of mainstream sociology. *International Journal of the Sociology of Leisure*, 1, 43–53. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41978-017-0003-5>.
- Thompson, B. Y. (2018). Digital nomads: Employment in the online gig economy. *Glocalism: Journal of Culture, Politics and Innovation*, 2018(1). <https://doi.org/10.12893/gjcp.2018.1.11>.
- Thompson, B. Y. (2019). 'I get my lovin' on the run': Digital nomads, constant travel, and nurturing romantic relationships. In A. Gorman-Murray & C. J. Nash (Eds.), *The geographies of digital sexualities* Australia.
- Vinnicombe, S., & Anderson, D. (2017). Expanding the notion of dialogic trading zones for impactful research: the case of women on boards research. *British Journal of Management*, 28(1), 64–83.
- Vinnicombe, S., Moore, L. L., & Anderson, D. (2013). Women's leadership programmes are still important. In S. Vinnicombe, R. J. Burke, S. Blake-Beard, & L. L. Moore (Eds.), *Handbook of research on promoting women's careers* (pp. 406–419). Northampton: Edward Elgar.