

# Digital Nomads: a Cultural View

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**Digital nomads: a cultural view**

**(FINAL THESIS)**

**Rijeka, 2020.**

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# **Digital Nomads: a cultural view**

**FINAL THESIS**

**Undergraduate study programme: Cultural Studies**

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**Rijeka, 2020.**

**ABSTRACT:** In the past decade there has been a rise in the population of “digital nomads” that are choosing a nomadic lifestyle with modern commodities, such as the internet, over the normative sedentary lifestyle with a long term employment. This paper questions the factors influencing people to make that lifestyle change by engaging with digital nomads to get firsthand answers. By using netnography and online interviewing, I managed to gather collective conclusions based on a 12 participant sample. The participants stated that they were attracted to the sense of freedom and were motivated into the lifestyle change because they were dissatisfied with an office environment and the routine of a normative sedentary lifestyle.

**SAŽETAK:** U prošlom desetljeću, došlo je do porasta populacije “digitalnih nomada” koji odabiru nomadski način života sa modernim komoditetima, poput interneta, umjesto normativnog sjedilačkog načina života sa dugotrajnim zaposlenjem. Ovaj rad istražuje faktore koji utječu na odluku ljudi da promjene stil života na način uključivanja u zajednice digitalnih nomada kako bi dobili odgovore iz prve ruke. Koristeći se netnografijom i intervjuima preko interneta, uspjela sam sakupiti kolektivne zaključke bazirane na uzorku od 12 sudionika. Sudionici tvrde da ih je osjećaj slobode privukao ka načinu života digitalnih nomada te da su motivirani na tu promjenu stila života zbog nezadovoljstva uredskom atmosferom te rutinom normativnog sjedilačkog načina života

**KEYWORDS:** digital nomads, digital nomad professions, serious leisure, hoarding vs. minimalism, gig economy, remote work, alternative lifestyle, travel, employment

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# INTRODUCTION

This thesis is an effort in defining the factors motivating a growing number of people into leaving their normative communities and their sedentary lifestyle and pursuing the life of digital nomadism. Digital nomadism is a recent phenomena and it stands for people that are constantly traveling while simultaneously working online which is very relevant to explore since the phenomena is surpassing the difference of private and work life. The research is divided into topics where most topics have their theoretical and practical research to show whether the claims stated in the theoretical research are in fact confirmed in the practical research. Firstly, I talk about the theoretical background of the digital nomad concept and try to define it, explaining what it means to be a digital nomad and pointing out the digital and the nomad aspect of it as a base for the rest of the research. Secondly, I highlight the relevance of the topic seeing that it is a very recent phenomena that seems to be growing in numbers but without much research done on it. Also, I talk about personal interest and why I have chosen the topic of digital nomads for research. After laying the base of the work by defining what makes a person a digital nomad and highlighting the relevance, I state the methodology used in the research process. The methods are netnography (Kozinets, 2010), online research, and semi structured interviews (through Google forms) which were meant to explore the research questions, the most important being: What are the factors influencing people into living a digital nomad lifestyle? Moreover, the other research questions correspond to the following topics. In the topic of digital nomad professions, I talk about what types of employment and what types of professions are suitable for a digital nomad lifestyle. In the next topic, I explain the concept of serious leisure (Stebbins, 2001) and connect it to the concept of digital nomads. Furthermore, I research two opposing concepts: minimalism and hoarding, claiming that the digital nomad lifestyle is somewhat forcefully connected to minimalism. Additionally, I explain how digital nomads are trying to escape consumerism and the tourist identity but are still living a consumer mentality. Since, most digital nomads are freelancers (David, 2016) and are living from gig to gig, it was important to also talk about the benefits and disadvantages of the gig economy. Lastly, I talk about the main research questions by giving answers from digital nomad participants gathered through the semi structured interviews. In the end, I offer a conclusion based on theoretical and practical research with an accent on the research topics and questions regarding them.

## **DIGITAL NOMADS**

When thinking about digital nomadism, it seems the term was coined in the last decade. This is mostly due to the rise in popularity on the internet and how it has been popularized through many different social media outlets like Instagram, Youtube, Facebook and blogs. The truth is, the term was coined more than 20 years ago, to be accurate in 1997, in a book by Tsugio Makimoto and David Manners: *Digital Nomads*. This was a great prediction since the book was written in a period when the internet was just starting to appear in the world and slowly get into commercial use for the everyday person.

Firstly, it is important to explain what makes digital nomads nomads. There is a need to define a nomad in the 21st century. Historically speaking, nomads were people that moved often in the search for food, pasture or new ways of survival. There is a difference between migrants and nomads and expats. Expats are living and working in a location that is not their traditional ethnic home but are tied to that location. Generally when using the term migrants we refer to people changing their living location but in search for a new permanent one, for many different reasons. Those reasons may be of political nature, personal one, economic reasons or whatever else motivated or forced people to move. On the other hand, nomads move often and far more regularly and for different reasons. For them, nomadism is a lifestyle choice (Schlagwein, 2018.).

They are able to move freely across borders and without a permanent home or a work address. Practically speaking, it might seem hard for people without permanent living or work addresses to handle daily financial issues. The solution is actually quite simple, as they are working online, they are also getting paid online to real or virtual bank cards that don't have to be connected to actual bank accounts (Paypal, Revolut, etc.) and can use the money on them in different currencies. This is different from traditional nomadism, making it a new form which some call: neo-nomadism (Schlagwein, 2018.). An important thing to mention is that most nomads are owners of powerful passports (meaning they can enter the biggest number of countries without the need to obtain a visa) which makes them the most privileged and the transition into a nomadic lifestyle the easiest.

Most of the digital nomads belong to Generation Y or the Millennials (people born from 1981. to 1996.), which is proven by the research done by Elwes (2016). But the research of this lifestyle phenomena and shift in employment is really important since it will affect more and more this generation and every other that comes after it (Generation Z and later).

Secondly, it is also needed to explain the digital aspect of the digital nomad. Digital nomads are characterized, and different from the rest of the sedentary world, by their freedom from time and location constraints (Makimoto, 2013). They can get to any information from any place at any time, because the information isn't limited to a physical place which works at a specific time. If a person needs to reach his work files, he can do it at home, from the toilet, in a bus, on the beach, in a plane or anywhere possible as long as the three essential requirements (Makimoto, 2013.) are fulfilled. The first essential is a device. The device needs to be affordable, intelligent and portable while also coming in a practical shape. The second one is a wireless network. The device is useless for reaching information if it isn't connected to a high speed and readily available wireless internet network. By using the wireless network on the portable and intelligent device you can contact people from all over the world if they also have the essentials for that type of communication and any information that is available on the internet. The final requirement is cloud computing, which can easily be explained as a virtual archive of anything you need, work files, pictures, books, documents, videos or any other sort of information. This means, you don't have to physically carry that information on you or in a form of a hard drive, flash drive and similar devices, making it really easy to reach a huge amount of personal or professional information without the physical weight of it. Combining the three essential requirements, it is understandable why digital nomads do not need to abide the sedentary time and location constraints. They do not need an office to work, they do not have a 9 to 5 workday, they do not need physical access to files. They can work from wherever they want if the place has a good internet connection, at whatever time suits them with only having an intelligent and mobile device, with a full battery of course.

To get to the core of digital nomad identity more accurately we need to differentiate between different kinds of travelers. Kayleigh Franks (2016) makes the distinction between global nomads, digital nomads, backpackers and 1099 Workers, explaining that digital nomads are just one particular kind of nomads. Backpackers is a term usually associated with the younger population and it stands for tourists travelling on a budget, independently or in a small group, for a longer period of time, lasting anywhere from a month to several months. An important characteristic of this group is that backpackers return to their home countries, or their country of origin after they have finished their journey and they usually try to earn money on the way. 1099 Workers refers to people working independently as freelancers in their own hours, but they are generally not associated with life on the road. Global nomads is a concept defined by Caren Kaplan (1996) who stated that global nomads are individuals that can move through



space “*without adhering to any nation’s mastery*” (Mouratidis, 2018, p.31). For the digital nomad, the technology is their main means of income (ergo digital). On the other hand, global nomads don’t necessarily earn money through technology. A lot of them have long term sedentary jobs until they save enough money to travel for a longer period of time.

This topic has been talked about mainly in popular media such as blogs and social media, etc. but the scientific research on the matter of digital nomads and its potential influence on the economy and society stays very limited. The media usually glorifies it, showing the fun sides and making it look light and breezy (eg. a person sitting on a sandy beach with their laptop in their lap and a cocktail in their hand while simultaneously catching a tan from the tropic sun), while the reality is quite different, and there are many downsides to this lifestyle which remain to be explored. It is a quite important topic *„for sociological (and anthropological) consideration, especially as it signals a shift in employment practices for the Millennial and subsequent generations”* (Yuen Thompson, 2018, p.5). *„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“* (Yuen Thompson, 2018, p.6) making them the epitome of a capitalistic individualistic society. They escape from their local community into another one, while not contributing to either of them and using every resource to maximize their own wealth which makes them the perfect picture of a capitalistic individual even though the digital nomad community is often shown and tries their best to make it appear otherwise. Supporting minimalism while making themselves into a product for selling, or turning their lifestyle into a commodity for consuming.

They sell the seemingly inexplicable desire common to all people, to explore and travel without a final destination or a specific goal, neatly packaged in a sellable term: WANDERLUST. The key is in selling it as something that anybody can do, a lifestyle that anybody can live: „Quit your job, pack some clothes, sell your belongings and go!“ but is also ever so slightly out of reach. People wouldn't consume the digital nomad lifestyle content if they were all indeed able to live it.

## PERSONAL INTEREST AND RELEVANCE

I've chosen the topic of Digital nomads because I personally find it highly interesting. I follow the topic and the people living the lifestyle, digital nomads, in my daily life and wish to try out living in such a manner. The personal interest in the topic might make my work a bit more subjective but I will try to refrain from any personal comments or opinions and regard the topic strictly from the researched data. On the other hand, personal interest in the topic has made it easier for me to research it because of the access I have in the online communities and with all the information I already have on it.

The research topic is quite relevant since it is a very recent phenomenon and a very under researched one meaning there is plenty of space for new research on the topic, such as my thesis, and other scientific contributions. Digital nomads are a very interesting topic, that is still highly under researched, because they are „*blurring boundaries between opposing notions like home/abroad, sedentary/mobile, work/leisure, or even isolation/sociability*“ (Mouratidis, 2018, p.7). The concept might seem threatening to the current standards of normal sedentary life and its communities since the digital nomad lifestyle is changing the notions considered normal, of travel, family, community and work. This makes the topic very important to research since it may be foretelling of the future of societies. Deleuze and Guattari wrote in their book: *A thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987) about the concept of nomads and why they are perceived as a threat making it the perfect analogy for this work: „*nomads are the outsiders who keep threatening the authority and the power of the state, disrupting its principles and axioms*“ (Mouratidis, 2018, p.15). Nomads have the power capable of tearing down empires and states (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). The digital nomad topic is a global phenomenon that is challenging the traditions and beliefs, of mostly western civilizations, on employment and other values: family, tourism, sociability and other (Mouratidis, 2018).

## METHODOLOGY

In this paper, I am combining two different methodologies to get a fuller approach to the topic of digital nomads. The first methodology that I am using in writing this paper is Netnography. Robert Kozinets (2009) explains it as the method of exploring and researching the online culture and the online community on any given topic. By personally following the topic for a couple of years I have a unique insight and access to information on digital nomad lifestyle. The other method I used were semi structured interviews in writing through Google Forms. This allowed me to get a decent sample of participants (12) and to get firsthand answers and opinions from people living the lifestyle so I could compare them to the information gathered from the netnography.

Ethnography of the digital nomad culture is impossible for me to do since I don't live in a popular digital nomad destination such as Bali, Thailand or Mexico City (<https://nomadlist.com/>). Furthermore, to explore this phenomenon correctly I need to have participants of different origins and with different current locations. Another problem is that most online communities forbid, with their community guidelines, surveys or questionnaires, blocking people that send them in the online groups (which means losing access to a big group of possible participants), making it quite hard to get a decent participant sample. Since it is a new phenomenon, there are many people trying to research the lifestyle whether scientifically or for their own interest. The groups are made for the people living that way to engage with each other and share valuable advice and experience. They can get overwhelmed by the amount of people wanting to get their feedback on surveys and questionnaires and the important things can get overlooked.

I posted a form with a list of questions interrogating the opinion of participants on digital nomad topics in many online groups both regional and worldwide that gather people either explicitly digital nomads or travelers. The questions were written in a manner to leave a lot of room for participants' input as well as for them to explain their opinions which is necessary for this type of qualitative research. This methodology resulted in gathering 12 participants who provided extensive answers. The number of participants certainly isn't enough for a quantitative type of research, so the numbers and percentages might not coincide with previous research on the topic, however it is only due to a smaller number of participants and

does not dispute the research already made. Interviews in writing certainly do not provide the same insight as in person interviews would but have still been very insightful regardless.

The profile of interviewed digital nomads is highly influenced by my personal contacts. For example: the study suggests that most digital nomads come from developed countries with powerful passports yet the pattern of my interviews shows that a third of the interviewed people are Serbian (Serbian passport does not belong to the category of powerful passports).

The participants' ages range from 18 years old to 39 years old, which coincides with the research saying that most of the digital nomads belong to the Generation Y or Millennials (Elwes, 2016) with the eldest participant born one year before the start of the generation. The youngest participant is a few years after the end of that generation, belonging to the Generation Z.

Countries of origin in the participants sample are: Serbia, Slovakia, Italy, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Australia and Sweden, which makes it 8 different countries.

Many of the participants requested to stay anonymous so some of the names in the table are true and some are made up to make it easier to interpret their answers.

Another thing I wanted to find out was the participants' last digital nomad location and the answers are: Uruguay, Australia, Thailand, Tenerife, Bali, Lisbon, Russia, Spain, Bahamas and Croatia. The answers coincide with the digital nomad list (<https://nomadlist.com/>) which ranks the most popular digital nomad locations.

Name	Age	Country of origin	Profession
Gordana	38	Serbia	Copywriter
Jelena	29	Serbia	Social Media Specialist
Ema	25	Slovakia	Digital Marketer
Luca	22	Italy	Student
Maurice	32	Germany	Logistic engineer
Nemanja	30	Serbia	Language professor
Celia	18	Spain	Self employed
Jasna	34	Serbia	Communication specialist
Pedro	39	Portugal	People Operations Manager
Elayna	27	Australia	Youtuber sailor
Alva	25	Sweden	Creative producer
Ella Schmidt	29	Germany	Graphic/web designer

Table of participants with their name, age, country of origin and profession.

## DIGITAL NOMAD PROFESSIONS

According to David (2016), there are three distinguishable groups or types of digital nomads of today. The first group are those that work for international companies remotely. The second group, or the most widespread one are the freelancers, whose work is usually based on gig economy. The last group are the start up creators.

Digital nomads are definitely not the only ones working remotely. There are many other professionals doing the same thing, working remotely or changing locations for work. „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.“ (Mouratidis, 2018, p.7)

The digital nomad life does not apply to all sectors or types of work. Actually, it applies only to a small fragment of jobs on the job market. The digital nomad lifestyle is definitely not available to all professions since most of them are highly location and time constricted. If we take construction work for example, construction workers have to work a given shift on a very specific location since they are responsible for building some type of construction at a specific location. They depend on physical materials, building sites, daylight and specific work shifts. There really aren't many digital nomad professions, taking into account the wide specter of jobs in a society. Most of the jobs were created in the 21st century since the Internet has only come to life as it is today at the beginning of this century. The jobs have to have the option to be done remotely with only virtual information needed and with the possibility of doing it on a portable device. The most common digital nomad jobs are: programming, social media related jobs, SEO (search engine optimization) specialists, digital marketing and etc. People can also do new creative jobs with a digital nomad lifestyle: copywriting, design and similar. Also, there are a lot of photographers and videographers travelling to the location of the job to complete it and or, creating their own content and monetizing it without working for anybody.

*„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. (...) 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.“* (Moravec, 2008, p. 19)

Researching types of employment, the participants were offered the following options: working remotely for a company, solo entrepreneur, freelancer and mix of other options. 5 of the participants said they are working remotely for a company, 3 of them said that they mix some of the options to make a living, 2 of them are freelancers and 1 is a solo entrepreneur. The professions that are working remotely are: student, language and literature professor, communication specialist, people operations manager and graphic/web designer. The freelancers are: logistic engineer and creative producer. The solo entrepreneur is a social media specialist. A copywriter, digital marketer and a youtuber said they were earning through a mix of different types of employment. It is important to mention that there was one answer missing. All of the answers available fall into the 3 categories as stated by David (2016): working for international companies remotely, freelancers and start up creators.

The most popular ones, or the ones that you can see the most in the media are the content creators, creating the illusion and appeal of a cool, young, free lifestyle that anybody can adopt. Why are they the most represented? Their earnings come from that media representation. The content creators earn money by creating that digital nomad lifestyle appeal, taking pictures of their life on the road, or creating videos of their adventures. How exactly do they earn money by living that way? Well, by teaching online classes or organizing conferences where they will teach you how to earn money with the digital nomad lifestyle (e.g. <https://www.udemy.com/course/how-to-become-a-digital-nomad/>). Charging a „modern“ price for those kinds of things will ensure they continue living that lifestyle. Those earning money from certain professions and not from content making, in the most, won't have the need to completely share their lifestyle to experience since they do not depend on that for financing. That is why the content creators, or those that earn by living an appealing lifestyle, or rather creating a life that is appealing to others, are the most represented on the internet and especially on social media. One characteristic that is common to most popular digital nomads is the commodification of their own life or the digital nomad lifestyle. There are many ways in which the digital nomad community earns by living that way: conferences, merchandise, youtube and instagram views, sponsorships, social media traffic, e-books, online lessons or coaching, retreats etc. (e.g. <https://nomaddesignhouse.com/product-category/merchandise/digital-nomad/>).

When talking about the appeal of a digital nomad lifestyle, I wanted to know if that popularization of the lifestyle is what motivated people into doing it or did they want to live that way without being aware of the digital nomad trend. 45,5 % of the participants responded with: first learnt about the digital nomad lifestyle and then started living that way. The majority, or 54,5% responded with: living the digital nomad lifestyle before learning about the concept of it. Alva from Sweden said: *“Wanted to work based on my own schedule but know that I like to be productive and work hard on things I am passionate about.”* Pedro from Portugal says: *“I just started to work and travel, the concept doesn't mean anything to me.”* The difference is quite small but still worth mentioning that most participants that are living a digital nomad lifestyle have first wanted to live that way and started traveling and working before even learning about the concept of digital nomadism.



## SERIOUS LEISURE

Stebbins (2001) introduced the idea of “serious leisure” to explain the difference between leisure activities that are of a more mundane nature and belong to everyday life and those leisure activities taken on a more serious level by investing more time and money. Blackshaw (2018) expands on the idea and introduces the notion of “devotional leisure” which marks the shift from building an individual's identity based on their employment to an identity built on their leisure pursuits. Digital nomads tend to identify themselves by what the rest of the western civilization would call hobbies or leisure time, and not by the type of their employment or their profession. An individual would say they are a mountain biker or an avid surfer or a very common one: a yogini (yoga enthusiast or yoga instructor). If you were to walk the streets of any major city and ask the people on the streets what they are, they would reply: teacher or a student or a lawyer or a doctor, putting the emphasis on their profession before their interests. Seeing that digital nomads will identify with their interests more than their profession it means that they take their leisure time very seriously and that they „work in order to live, and not live in order to work“ (Bartosik-Purgat, 2018).

Furthermore, I wanted to test the theory on serious leisure (Blackshaw, 2018) and see if digital nomads do indeed identify with their hobbies and interests. I asked them to describe themselves shortly to see what they would instinctively identify themselves with. All of the participants described their character rather than their hobbies.. For example, Pedro from Portugal wrote about himself: *“Open minded person with a strong sense for others.”*, while Jasna from Serbia said for herself: *“Curious, energetic and easy going.”* Only Ella from Germany and Elayna from Australia said they were “cooks” which falls into the category of hobbies. If we talk about interests, a third of the participants described themselves as adventurous or wanting to travel and explore; Ema from Slovakia said: *“I’m a passionate creative entrepreneur who loves to explore new places and meet new people! Very organised, positive, and working towards my goals.”* and Alva from Sweden said: *“Giggley, hard working, adventurous”*. This could mean that the term: adventure or adventurous is a common characteristic of digital nomads.

## HOARDING VS MINIMALISM

Monbiot (2016) claims that neoliberalism is turning people's citizen status into that of a mere consumer. This claim goes on to state that the consumers' choices, freely exercised in a democratic society are used at their best by buying and selling since the neo capitalistic system „rewards merits and punishes inefficiency“. The neo capitalistic economy has its own normative and preferred behaviour. That behaviour is characterized by a desire and need of consumers to purchase and own as many goods as possible (Cabalza, 2019). In that kind of society: „acquisition of a large sum of goods indicates that a consumer is a competitive and free person of society“ (Cabalza, 2019 p.9). This kind of behavioural conditioning and mentality results in hoarding, an excessive need to collect and acquire as many items and goods as possible. Hoarders see a value in owning things, but in the action of owning rather than the goods being hoarded. They have difficulties in getting rid of possessions and are afraid to give any of their things up, thinking that somehow losing their possessions would result in losing themselves. Their identity is intertwined with the collected goods and possessions. This is an extreme example of the effects of neo capitalistic economy, characterized by the „debilitating need to consume“ (Cabalza, 2019 p.6). The hoarding mentality started appearing in „the first half of the twentieth century and snowballed into our current times“ (Cabalza, 2019, p.8).

On the other hand, 21st century started growing more and more minimalists, and spreading the minimalism mentality all over the developed world, purposely having as little possessions as possible, the bare necessities in order to clear out the house/apartment, clear out the mind, save money and ultimately to defy consumerism and neo capitalism. As opposed to the emergence of hoarding more than a 100 years ago, minimalism started appearing after the 2008 economic crisis (Meissner, 2019). It also started getting very popular and spreading through the internet in the past decade thanks to many online influencers talking about the lifestyle. There was also a documentary filmed by Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus that call themselves „The Minimalists“: Minimalism: A Documentary About the Important Things, (2015) which had the effect of popularizing the minimalism mindset and encouraging people into adopting the lifestyle by promoting the supposed benefits. Decluttering, dispossession or tidying up are all terms for going from a hoarder mentality to a minimalistic one. Why did the minimalist movement catch wind in the past two decades? The constant development of new technologies is directly related to the need for constant communication which tends to pressure people into overworking which leads to the newer

generations developing issues related with stress and anxiety. This link and the need for constant communication is erasing the boundaries between private and work life. In order to be a good employee in the digital work market, you need to be available 24/7. This makes it hard for people to have or even to want to have a „normal“ life with a spouse and children since they can't give them the attention and time they should be giving them. The constant communication and rapid development of technologies are not the only source of stress in the 21st century, clutter is turning out to be a big stress inducing factor. To sum up, it has been proven that there is a link between clutter, or in extreme cases hoarding, and stress, bad health and worse interpersonal relationships. The same goes the other way, meaning that decluttering is connected with a healthier lifestyle, better relationships and stress relieving. It makes sense that in a time of stress and anxiety, people are consuming content that claims to relieve them of those feelings and minimalism claims just that, while also saving money of people adopting the lifestyle (Cabalza, 2019). *It connotes voluntary simplicity (Karganilla on Tantiangco, 2018) and experts pursue to reject “consumer culture” by limiting their material possessions in saving time, energy, and resources to continue important life goals. It is also associated with the financial component because, as the cost of living rises, minimalism can be seen as a solution to tighten finances (Gordon, 2018 in Cabalza, 2019, p.14)*

Another topic I explored in the practical part of the research was the topic of minimalism. The questions that I asked the participants were if they had to adopt a minimalist lifestyle to make the nomadic lifestyle more efficient and easy and what were their thoughts on getting rid of physical possessions? To the first question, seven of the participants responded with yes, three responded with no, one responded with yes and no, while one did not respond. Five of the participants have responded to the second question very positively, claiming that the minimalist lifestyle is very freeing or liberating. *“I think that's very healthy as we get attached to things and that can weigh us down unnecessarily.”* (Jasna) Three participants said they have their home bases making the minimalist lifestyle optional. *“I'm not a typical traveler with a minimum of belongings. I have a base in Europe and come back every month for a week or two.”* (Pedro) Two participants have not stated positive nor negative opinions and say that they are still getting used to the lifestyle. *“It is effective for traveling minimalistic but I am still getting used to it. I have times where I don't want to move because I have bought more things.”* (Ella) One participant does not like the idea of him living the minimalist lifestyle. *“I can't get rid easily as I'm a man who possesses a lot and also pays attention to clothes and materialistic things.”* (Maurice)

## EXPERIENCE CONSUMERISM

Considering the aforementioned statements on hoarding and minimalism, it would seem that digital nomads are, like other minimalists, successfully evading the trap of neo capitalism consumerism. I beg to differ. As mentioned already, digital nomads are characterized by an „ever-new“ need or desire. This makes them an example of neo capitalism consumerism. The difference is in the shift they made from consuming material goods and ownership mentality into experience consumerism. They keep buying and selling experiences, and making a living out of it. They are essentially doing with their lifestyle, what tourism is doing for locations. Packing everything up in a box labeled a must see or must do or must live experience. While distancing themselves from the tourist identity they are still buying the touristic experience. They are travelling to see all of the top destinations, to visit all of the popular beaches and to take pictures with any monumental sight. Since they are constantly on the move, it can be argued that they are more adapted to new situations and can find their way easier or act less touristy in a new location. The neo capitalistic society is moving from selling products to selling experience, because products do not attract the same kind of consumer desire as a holistic concept of experience. With product packaging, commercials, promotion and marketing they are targeting their focus groups and selling them the experience of the product which ultimately sells the product itself. Therefore, digital nomads are simultaneously consuming touristic experience and consuming the lifestyle from other people in the digital nomad community, and selling their own experience and lifestyle for other consumers to enjoy through many different media/products. The story around the product is what makes it desirable for consumers and what sells it. In the digital nomad case that can be anything from actual physical products (e.g. branded merchandise) or online content (e.g.. videos, photos, blogs, courses).

Another phenomena that I've researched is if the participants, digital nomads, consider themselves tourist and what would they say the difference was between them. 6 of the participants stated : No. while 3 participants stated yes, although 2 other longer answers also belong in the group that says yes. Erika says: *“Depends where I'm going and how long I'm there for. But I would lean towards yes”*. Nemanja expands on the statement: *“We are all tourists, even if you stay in one country for several months you're considered as a tourist because you don't have papers/passport of that country, therefore, you cannot have benefits as local people do. But do I consider myself being more a traveler than a tourist? Yes, I do.”*

I continued asking if there was a difference between tourists and digital nomads and what would they say it was. Only one participant stated there was no difference between digital nomads and tourists. Two of the participants feel like those two concepts are different but think you can be both at the same time, as Jelena from Serbia says: *“I think that you still have digital nomads that act like tourists and other way around. But I think that if you are a digital nomad, you tend to experience more of a real life and culture in a particular country. And you are not on holiday, so you don't act that way. You still have to work and put it all together.”* The rest of the participants stated there is a definite difference and the general idea is that digital nomads stay in a place longer than regular tourists allowing them to experience things (people and culture and not just the place) on a different level. *“Interest in the local way of living not tourist sightseeing”* (Alva) *“Tourists are more oriented to places, I'm more focusing on people.”* (Pedro) Furthermore, digital nomads are not on a holiday like a tourist, they are experiencing things while also working; it is their lifestyle and not a break from their sedentary life. *“Definitely. Tourists tend to follow a checklist and usually try to squeeze in as many new experiences in the limited time that is given to them. On the other hand, digital nomads tend to assimilate more into the given culture and are often not limited by time. This more relaxed approach gives you the opportunity to feel how it truly feels to live somewhere, to get to know the locals and discover everything in a much more natural way. And ultimately, enjoy it more.”* (Jasna) *“DN's are working online while traveling, whereas tourists are traveling only for their holidays.”* (Nemanja)

## **GIG ECONOMY**

Gig economy is the type of economy which characterizes the second and the most widespread group of digital nomads, or freelancers (David, 2016). It is defined as a system that works through apps or online platforms on which people can sell/monetize their labour. (Taylor et al., 2017) There are two kinds of work in the gig economy. The first one is the work that is arranged and paid through the app but is delivered locally (Glovo, Uber etc.). The second one is arranged and done remotely over the online platforms such as Upwork (programming, design etc.) (Wood et al.) Digital nomads fall into the second kind of work category since they are working and delivering the end product remotely. The biggest force that is responsible for the exponential growth of gig work is digital platforms. Those digital platforms create highly efficient, large-scale marketplaces that enable instantaneous connection between people needing a service, customers, to people providing that service, workers (Wood et al., 2019).

These platforms and the gig economy itself might result in increased productivity, greater availability of services and creating more opportunities for the unemployed. The unemployed or the employed that are seeking side jobs can use these platforms as much or as little as they want, making it highly suitable for independent workers. Another benefit for the customer is that there are no working hours, if people on your side of the Earth are sleeping but you need something done now, there is always going to be somebody on another continent that can provide you with the needed service. The digital platforms for independent workers are not tied to space or time. They can be used anytime and anywhere as long as you have a portable device, a wireless network and access to the information needed for providing the service.

There are also many downsides or rather challenges that are yet to be addressed, let alone overcome. A big part of a „price“ goes to taxes, expenses and benefits. In a very competitive instantaneous market, people are lowering prices to get a „gig“ easier, making a price that has no room for the aforementioned expenses. Another important problem is training and credentials. It will get much harder to factually check someone's credentials, education background and professional experience. Compared to a long term employment type of job where the company is responsible for developing their own workers since it benefits them and they can reap the results of improving workers over time; in a gig economy the training or the constant improvement of a worker becomes his own responsibility since the customer is only interested for a gig, whether it is a one time thing or on multiple occasions, the customer has

no interest or benefits from improving the worker. In the gig economy's marketplace, freelancers are competing for a position that they will ultimately share with other freelancers, since the economy is based on gig work and not on long term employment as it would be in a company. On the other hand, the freelancers are not sharing or even getting any of the benefits (pension, health, dental etc.) and have to take that on to themselves without the security of their position of employment (Wood et al., 2019)

The gig economy is a result of a shift from closed employment relationships to market-mediated open employment relationships. This kind of shift means that workers themselves are responsible for skill development and have to take on themselves any economic risk as opposed to firms providing security and education or training for its workers. The closed employment relationships are built upon „*strong institutional protection*“ (Wood et al., 2019, p.59). On the other hand, the new market-mediated, open employment relationships were built upon competition, weak labour institutions, free market and almost nonexistent standards and regulations.

I already talked about the stress digital nomad professions are going through, especially the ones working gig to gig or the freelancers because they have to constantly be in a competition with other freelancers for jobs and have to be available at any time to earn enough money. I posed two questions interrogating if the participants are available 24/7 or do they give themselves working hours, or have working hours, and if they feel the need to be constantly available. Three participants said that they are available 24/7 and a couple mentioned that it depends on the project they are working on or on the gig. Most of the other participants say they give themselves working hours and some give themselves free weekends and a few have working hours fixed by their companies. Nemanja from Serbia who is working remotely for a company as a language and literature professor says: “*I have a fixed working schedule Monday-Friday.*“ Jasna from Serbia who is a communication specialist says: “*I have working hours, but I do keep checking Slack/emails as I like to stay on top of things throughout the day, rather than facing them all at once on the following morning.*”, meaning that she does have working hours but still has the option to work in her own time as well. Alva from Sweden is a freelance creative producer states: “*Mostly reachable at all times but do work on projects dedicatedly until finished and adjust my schedule/plans accordingly.*” As a freelancer working from gig to gig, or project to project, she needs to be available to get hired for projects and then works without a fixed schedule until a deadline or until the project is finished. When asked if they feel the pressure to be constantly available, surprisingly, most of

them said no. To be exact, 4 of them said : “No.”; Ella (a graphic/web designer from Germany) said: *“No because I work for a company and fixed pay.”* giving her the security of a regular income which makes it less likely for her to be stressed about availability. Nemanja stated: *“I had that type of pressure in the beginning of working remotely simply because this is my first fully remote job. But I've set boundaries with myself (as you should with any other work, not just remote work) and I'm fully available during my working hours. After hours I can check in here and there but I tend not to do so very often, only if there's an emergency.”* He explains that the pressure tends to exist in the beginning but you have to set your own working hours in order to not live as stressfully. Jasna goes on to say: *“A little bit - the nature of my work is such that new requests and updates keep rolling in all the time and it's difficult to switch off completely.”* highlighting the importance of the nature of the work in the availability factor. Not all professions and types of employment have the same nature of work. Emma, being a self employed digital marketer from Slovakia says: *“Yes, I feel like I need to work 24/7 since it's my business”*, even though she gives herself working hours. Even though the presumption was that most digital nomads would feel stressed or anxious about being constantly available to long term or short term employers or clients, the participants' answers say otherwise. Most of them stated they do not feel the pressure to be constantly available, some said that they used to feel it but have given themselves working hours in order to live with less stress and some do feel that pressure but the number of those that don't is much greater.

To summarise what is said in the theoretical and the practical research, digital nomads are a product of a modern society. They, as a phenomenon, would not be possible if the global economy did not develop in the direction of gig economy, allowing the people to work from gig to gig from wherever they like. Furthermore, digital nomads exist because of the technological advancements that created an opportunity to be free from location constraints if they have a portable device, a wireless network and cloud computing. Moreover, the nomadic lifestyle is enabled by living in a developed country with a powerful passport which makes continuously moving very easy when it comes to borders and official documents required to cross them.



## FACTORS INFLUENCING PEOPLE TO LIVE AS A DIGITAL NOMAD

The research questions that posed themselves during the netnography are what are the common factors of digital nomads, that made them decide to leave a sedentary lifestyle and pushed them away from a normative type of employment into a nomadic lifestyle with a digital job. What is the difference for them and how are they satisfied with living as a nomad?

It was very important to identify the factors that were attracting people to the digital nomad lifestyle. The most common factor mentioned in the answers was the sense of freedom. *“Freedom in every aspect.”* (Elayna) The participants are attracted and content with the lifestyle because they can manage their own time and move locations freely without depending on an external work schedule or an office. *“I love freedom, traveling and the spontaneity it brings. I also don't like the idea of being stuck in one place just because of your job.”* (Jasna) Jelena said: *“I never liked that someone else decides about my time and that limited concept of “holidays” where you don't work at all and you have limited time where you will go”* explaining again that it all comes down to freedom, of choice, of work and of travel.

Expanding on this issue, are the factors that pushed people away from a sedentary lifestyle with a 9 to 5 employment style. Jasna identifies them quite explicitly by saying *“Predictability, imposed routine, commute, having to leave the house on a gloomy day, lack of new experiences and learning, realising that traveling has turned into an escape from the everyday life, rather than being something you do out of pleasure.”* Almost all of the participants agree with Jasna and feel that the normative sedentary lifestyle doesn't leave room for spontaneity and diversity. *“Routines, habits, boredom, material world.”* (Elayna) They think of the lifestyle as monotonous and stressful and dull which diminishes their life satisfaction. By living the digital nomad lifestyle they are taking back the joy of travel and turning it into a daily occurrence and not settling for given holiday days. Maurice is an exception in the pattern and states: *“I prefer a 9 to 5 job actually as I like structures within corporations. For now freelancing is okay and just a way to earn money”* Maurice likes the stability of a corporate 9 to 5 job and is now living the digital nomad lifestyle as a way of gaining financial means.

After identifying the factors that pushed them away from a normative sedentary 9 to 5 lifestyle and the factors that attracted them to a digital nomad lifestyle, it is necessary to identify the reasons that motivated them into making the lifestyle change. Not all that are attracted to the lifestyle actually end up living that way. Jasna said: *“Realising that I am deeply settled within my comfort zone and perceived “security” of it. I had a profound feeling that time is passing and that unless I make an effort to step out of the comfort zone and actively participate in realisation of my aspirations for freedom, learning and exploration - life will simply go by.”* Ella agrees with Jasna by saying: *“I don't think I would feel happy staying in one place and working in an office. This way I get to experience much more and life's pretty short not to enjoy it.”* stating the transience of life as a big motivator for getting out of their comfort zone and the “stability” of a sedentary lifestyle. *“I wasn't happy with my 9-5 job and also after 9 years of working in hospitality I wanted a change. I knew I wanted to be able to travel and work while moving around.”* (Ema) Gordana mentions that she was changing from job to job in different locations, ending up in an office job and realising it does not suit her character. Being dissatisfied with the lifestyle you are living, or as others mentioned not being able to conform to office norms and company environment, can push people into looking for a lifestyle change and ultimately into changing it.

However, there might be certain factors of their old lifestyle that they are missing. When asked what those factors might be, three participants responded with: nothing. Nemanja said: *“I only miss having my friends closer to me.”* and 4 other participants agree they miss their family, friends and the people that are important to them since they do not see them and spend time with them as often as they would if they were living their old lifestyle. Three of the participants stated that they miss: *“stable income”* (Ema), *“greater job security”* (Jasna) and *“secure paychecks”* (Gordana). This factor of job and income stability and security concerns the freelancers more than the ones working remotely for a company since they, in theory, get their paychecks regularly while the freelancers are finding their way in the gig economy which can be quite stressful.

Connected to the question before, this one is asking if there are any downsides that the participants felt to living a nomadic lifestyle. Three participants feel that one of the biggest downsides is the *“uncertainty of employment”* (Alva). One of which is Ema who expands on the downsides by stating: *“Expect the unexpected, every day is different, unstable income, loneliness, you need to be able to manage your time and prioritise because there can be many*

*distractions around (especially if you are abroad and want to explore new country but you still need to keep yourself motivated to work), doing everything on your own abroad (taxes, paper work, etc) - these could be downsides but for me it's not bad at all and I found my own ways on how to deal with these or turn it into good things."* When your daily constant is travelling it is hard to draw the line between work and leisure and to stay productive and to find motivation for working when there is no external control except deadlines. Gordana agrees with the loneliness downside and claims that travelling is more fulfilling with important people in your life and Elayna confirms it by saying *"separation from loved ones, hard to keep contact and friendships"* is a big downside Ella feels it is a bit hard to be constantly on the road without having a base or a home to return to. Jasna, as a downside, mentions the concept of "travel burnout" and goes on to say: *"it can get a bit overwhelming having to juggle work and flights, finding the right accommodation and a place to work, stable wifi"* which is saying that the nomadic lifestyle takes its toll on the mental and physical health and can be very demanding settling into new places and satisfying all of your basic life and work needs.

Furthermore, the loneliness aspect seems to be ingrained in the digital nomad lifestyle and very important to the participants, so they were asked to compare their sociability now with the sociability in their old lifestyle to inspect the difference. Only one participant stated that the sociability now is worse than the sociability in the old lifestyle. *"It is more lonely. I had a great social life before and now it has gotten to a minimum"* (Maurice) Three of the participants stated in one way or another that their sociability levels haven't changed noticeably and that they were always sociable and friendly. *"I was always sociable and enjoyed hanging out with new people. Also very curious about other cultures and places."* (Alva) Surprisingly, four (or a third) of the participants stated that their sociability has somehow improved since starting the digital nomad lifestyle in comparison to their old lifestyle. *"Traveling so often has helped me in becoming more extroverted and learning how to communicate with people, especially people I don't know."* (Nemanja) As Nemanja said, traveling a living nomadically has actually pushed the participants into more socializing than before since every time they change a location they have to settle in which means meeting new people as well. Two of the participants offered longer explanations which both show the relativity of sociability claiming that a lot of it depends on the nomads effort to meet new people and open up and whether the person is working from home or in a coworking space. *"This depends on the location. When I started my business, I was working from home and that*

*could get lonely sometimes. But once I got to Bali, I was going to coworking, different events, and it was full of digital nomads. So it depends on how you make it. I'm a pretty social person, so I need to have people around whether that's through online coworkings, working from cafes, or actually meeting people in person.”* (Ema)

Wanting to further inspect the differences, I asked the participants how they would compare their local communities to the Digital Nomad community. Two of the participants are exceptions to the opinion of the majority. Pedro says that he is not a part of any digital nomad community and Maurice says that he prefers the conservative community and will return to it. On the other hand, Jasna offers an insightful opinion: *“I love the comradeship that often arises and fast bonding as you're maybe going through the same problems. Under the normal circumstances, an average grown up with a 9 to 5 job might not have a lot of opportunities to meet, interact and ultimately share a part of their life with new people and that, to me, is probably the biggest difference. Other than that, it's a community like any other and it's up to us to participate as much as we want to.”* In her opinion, the digital nomad community has more understanding of the lifestyle because the people in the community are going through the same thing and Ema states the same thing in her response. Gordana feels that it is always up to the individual how it perceives the community. *“It all depends on the individuals - as in all communities. All nomads have different desires, jobs, places they want to see, way of work, etc.”* Alva summarises the opinion of the majority of the participants in a couple of words, saying that the digital nomad community is *“more open, content, productive, inclusive, adventurous”*. Most of the participants feel that the digital nomad community is open, welcoming and understanding and feel like their local communities don't understand the lifestyle but are not against them

## CONCLUSION

The term: digital nomads was created more than 20 years ago, in 1997, by Tsugio Makimoto and David Manner. Digital nomads are in fact nomads because they are changing locations of living often as a lifestyle choice (Schlagwein, 2018). When talking about the digital aspect, they are digital because they are working remotely, online, using a smart portable device, wireless internet and cloud computing to access all the information and tools needed for working (Makimoto, 2013). Digital nomads are slowly erasing the lines of time and location constraints when it comes to employment since they can work from anywhere if they have a wireless connection and a full battery. The topic is very important since it signals the shift in the world of employment for current generations (Yuen Thompson, 2018). Since the digital nomad concept is a new phenomena it is still very under researched. Also, it is an important one because it is shaking up the notions of a normative sedentary lifestyle, such as family, work and travel (Mouratidis, 2018). The two types of methodology used in the work were netnography (Kozinets, 2009), or the research of online sources, and semi structured interviews that were held through Google forms. By posting the questions in digital nomad groups and to digital nomad friends, I managed to collect a sample of 12 participants. When it comes to digital nomad professions, as I already mentioned the digital aspect is crucial, so the professions have to be done over a portable device with a connection to a wireless internet so only a small portion of jobs can actually be done by living a nomadic lifestyle (e.g. programming, graphic design, SEO). According to David (2016) all of the digital nomads fall into one or more of three categories: freelancers, start up creators and remotely working for a company. My research has shown that all of the participants do belong in one or more of those categories. Using the Stebbins' (2001) theory on serious leisure (stands for a shift in identity building from an employment based to an interest based identity) I wanted to test if the participants identify with their interests. When asked to describe themselves, all of the participants described their character rather than their hobbies but a third of the participants stated they love to travel and they love adventure which might mean that "adventurous" could be a common characteristic of digital nomads. After the 2008 economic crisis, a new lifestyle movement was starting to rise in mainstream culture called minimalism which appeared as an opposition to hoarding and ownership mentality (Meissner, 2019). Since the participants are living a nomadic lifestyle it would seem that they had to adopt a minimalist lifestyle as to travel and move more efficiently. 7 participants responded with yes out of which 5 responded with positive feelings attached to living a minimalist lifestyle. 3 participants stated that they

had a home base which made the minimalist lifestyle for them optional and only 1 participant had negative opinions on living minimalistically. Digital nomads are making a shift from goods consumerism to experience consumerism since they are buying and selling experience and it is usually the tourist kind. When asked if they would identify as a tourist, half of the participants stated no and the other half stated yes, but when asked if there was any difference between them and tourists only 1 participant claimed that there wasn't one. Others agreed on the general idea that the main differences are that digital nomads stay in one place longer than a regular tourist would and they are also working at the locations of travel while tourists are there for a holiday. Gig economy is a system where people work from gig to gig over different kinds of online platforms or apps to monetize their labour (Taylor et al., 2017). Digital nomads, that are working as freelancers, are arranging their gig and delivering the result or product remotely. Since there are no working hours on those platforms and the livelihood of a digital nomad depends on the gigs it would seem that most people would feel pressured to be available 24/7. The results of the research are that the majority of the participants give themselves working hours and also most of them do not feel the pressure to be constantly available. Finally, I wanted to investigate what were the actual reasons for the lifestyle change, or the factors that motivated and pushed people into living as a digital nomad. The most common factor that attracted the participants to the lifestyle was a sense of freedom. Furthermore, the factors that pushed them away from a normative sedentary lifestyle with a 9 to 5 employment were mostly routine and dullness, feeling there was no place for spontaneity and freedom of time and location. Only one participant stated that he likes the 9 to 5 employment style. Moreover, the motivators for the actual lifestyle change were identified as dissatisfaction with their current life and not being able to conform or adapt to an office environment. The factors that they missed about their old lifestyle are their friends and family on one hand and job security and stable income on the other. The participants also talked about the downsides of living nomadically and claim that travelling often and moving locations takes a toll on your mental health because it is not easy to constantly assimilate into new environments. The sociability factor depends on the digital nomads introvertness or extrovertness and the willingness to meet new people and socialize. Lastly, they were asked to compare their local communities to the digital nomad ones. The majority of the participants feel that the digital nomad communities are much more understanding because they are living the same way and that the local communities do not understand the lifestyle but are not directly against it. Digital nomads are a product of many factors that are specific to modern society. The gig economy created space for people willing to work from gig to gig which

enables them to do the job regardless of their location if the essential requirements are fulfilled which are directly tied to the digital in digital nomad, portable device, cloud computing and wireless network. The nomadic aspect is the result of powerful passports ensuring easy border crossing and an adventurous spirit that keeps them constantly on the go and in search of the new.

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