Moving Then, Moving Now, Moving Later: Understanding Digital Nomadism from a Life Course Perspective

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Introduction

A new form of lifestyle mobility is entering the stage of migration research. This extreme form of residential mobility is called digital nomadism. Although there is still debate about the exact definition of digital nomadism, the core that binds multiple definitions is a nomadic lifestyle in which individuals combine the freedom of location-independent digital work with the ability to travel (Cook, 2023; Hannonen, 2020). High-quality quantitative data about the size of this population is still lacking, partly because this form of migration is mostly not officially registered. But, the literature estimates a sharp increase in digital nomadism, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic when remote work became the standard for the majority (Hannonen, 2020; Hermann & Paris, 2020). The estimated number of American digital nomads has increased from 7.3 million in 2019 to 17.3 million in 2023 (MBO partners, 2023), indicating this lifestyle is gaining popularity fast.

From the residential mobility literature, it is known that frequent moving can be stressful, disrupting social relationships (Coleman, 1988), stability, and security. From the ontological security perspective, housing stability, security, and the 'sense of home' is crucial for a person's well-being (Giddens, 1991). A mobile lifestyle can disrupt this security, leading to feelings of rootlessness (Tonnessen et al., 2016) or anxiety (Oishi et al., 2012). Those who move frequently in adulthood, are more likely to have experience with frequent moving in childhood or adolescence (Bernard & Vidal, 2020), highlighting the importance of a life course perspective on mobility. From a life course perspective (Elder & Shanahan, 2006), individuals act as active agents in a social context, in which previous experiences, the timing of life events, and social connections influence life courses and life decisions. This means that life course decisions, such as choosing a nomadic lifestyle in adulthood, are formed in the context of previous life experiences, one's life phase, attitudes, agency, social networks, and future aspirations. So far, research into digital nomadism is still in its infancy and to the best of our knowledge, there is no study yet that examines this lifestyle from a life course perspective.

If we want to understand why individuals choose for a digital nomad lifestyle, how they cope with the instability, how they shape their mobility patterns, and how sustainable they think this lifestyle is for their future lives, we need in-depth qualitative interviews. This qualitative study explores the life course mobility of 27 digital nomads in Bali, Indonesia. The main research questions are: What are the experiences of digital nomads with childhood residential mobility and how do they relate this to their current lifestyle? How do digital nomads shape their mobility in terms of travel pace and destinations? Finally, how nomadic do digital nomads see their futures? Do they see themselves settle down eventually (if so, would that be in their origin country or elsewhere in the world) or do they prefer to keep a nomadic lifestyle? Answers to these questions can act as a guidance for governmental policy on digital nomadism. For example, the preferred length of stay in one destination country may inform the digital nomad visa regulations. In addition, if digital nomadism is seen as a gateway to permanent emigration by digital nomads themselves, this may help governments predict emigration in the future.

Methods and Sample

This paper will be based on a mixed-method design. The main data come from semi-structured face-to-face interviews with 27 digital nomads, conducted in Bali during a two-month fieldwork period. Participants should be working location independently combined with traveling for at least six months to be eligible. In addition, participants should be at least 18 years old and fluent in either English or Dutch. We aimed for a diverse sample in terms of gender, origin culture, and age (life phase). The final sample consists of 27 digital nomads, of which 13 females and 14 males. Ages ranged from 23 to 57 years old. The period of nomadism ranged from 6 months up to more than 10 years. Digital nomads had origin backgrounds in all continents except for Antarctica (i.e., Europe, North America, South America, Africa, Asia, and Australia). To support the interview data, participants completed a questionnaire including demographic variables, questions about life satisfaction, and personality. Interviews will be transcribed and analyzed following the thematic approach of Braun and Clarke (2006), in which the first coding round focuses on identifying explicit themes and the second round on underlying themes that might shape the semantic content of the data.

Preliminary findings

At the time of writing this abstract, the main data collection phase has finished, but interview and questionnaire data are not yet transcribed and analyzed. However, some preliminary

patterns arose from the data collection phase. These preliminary findings seem to indicate that almost all digital nomads had previous experiences with residential mobility before they made the step to a nomadic lifestyle. About one third of the sample experienced one or more international migrations already in childhood. This made them adapt to a new culture and language as children already. Some had to cope with difficulties regarding language, losing their friends, bullying in the new destination, or parents who could not integrate. A second substantial group moved frequently as children, either within their country or internationally. Sometimes due to family instability such as parental divorce or death of a parent, or because of parental employment. This group indicated that their mobile childhood formed them in a way that is beneficial for the digital nomad lifestyle. That is, due to the many residential and school changes, they got familiar with changes in living environment and social network, which made them flexible and adaptable to new situations, but also restless when they were staying longer in one place. Participants of these two groups choose to travel solo for longer periods or moved abroad for studies or work already before they made the step to digital nomadism. Contrarily, there was a small group, of predominantly recently started nomads (i.e., less than one year) that had no experience with childhood moves at all, and did not live abroad before their first digital nomad travel. However, they never really felt they fit in where they grew up, and wanted to break free.

The majority of digital nomads in this study agreed on the idea of traveling slow. That is, they preferred to stay minimum 1 to 3 months in one place. This length of stay allowed them to get to know the place well, to set up a routine, and to connect to the people deeply. Some traveled faster in the beginning of their digital nomad careers, but found out that this 'hyper nomadism' was too exhausting and superficial for them. Regarding their future orientations, most digital nomads were on the same page as well. For most, this lifestyle is not sustainable on the long term. They would like to continue traveling for a while, but not for ever. However, most did not see themselves settle down in one place, especially not in their origin countries. This implies that digital nomadism could act as a gateway to permanent migration. The majority pictured their future lives with multiple home bases in locations they liked the most, rotating between these homes every few months. This 'rotation migration' allows them on the one hand to change scenery once in a while, so they won't get bored and they can always live in a warm climate. Multiple familiar home bases on the other hand prevents them from the exhaustion of

permanent travel. Moreover, it allows them to build communities in every base and come back to the place and people they already know.

<div align="center">**References**</div>

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