



Digital Nomads in the Era of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Ongoing research

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Digital nomads are itinerant worker-travelers who simultaneously combine work, travel, consumption, and leisure. Their lifestyles is enabled by information and communication technologies that break the need to co-locate work and "home" and enable location independence. Digital nomads use so-called "lifestyle arbitrage" strategies to exploit the difference between the compensation that they receive and their costs of living. There is strong reason to believe that the community of digital nomads has been severely disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and this project seeks to assess the impacts of the coronavirus on the ability of these individuals to reproduce their lifestyles.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is simultaneously a public health emergency and a source of profound social and economic disruption that is amplifying many prior macroscale

profound social and economic disruption that is amplifying many prior macroscale trends. Already before start of the crisis, a range of interlinked sociotechnical innovations were eroding customary employer-employee relationships based on regularized wages and reorganizing work in ways that enhanced casualization and informality. These alternative means of livelihood were increasingly structured around micro-entrepreneurship, freelancing, and contingent labor (oftentimes referred to as "gig" work). New information and communication technologies (ICT) have been an important part of this unfolding process and their deployment was further enabling the spatial separation of production and consumption practices and expanding **lifestyle** flexibility by dissolving the need for geographic proximity between work and home. In sometimes dramatic and provocative ways, a growing number of people were already prior to the coronavirus outbreak adapting themselves to these conditions of "location independence" by becoming "digital nomads." A distinctive characteristic of this lifestyle was financial remuneration for the performance of Internet-enabled tasks while either living in distant locales or engaging in a semi-continuous pattern of worldwide travel. Before the advent of the current contagion, accumulating evidence suggested that digital nomadism was becoming a poignant and evocative adaptation to changing social, cultural, and economic circumstances (see, for example, Thompson 2018; Birchnell 2019; Green 2020). Available evidence suggested that recruitment of individuals to this lifestyle was expanding on an annual basis. The future of this trend is now highly uncertain. Contributing to this situation is the fact that there is today little systemic understanding about how itinerant worker-travelers are managing to get along in the cities and other communities that served as hubs for their activities. This project aims to provide a background description of the status of the digital nomad lifestyle, to administer a broad-based survey to several hundred respondents, and to conduct a series of online interviews with key informants and several virtual focus groups. In addition, we seek to assess both what the future might hold for practitioners of this lifestyle and how developments in this sphere enhance contemporary understanding of the future of work, travel, consumption, and leisure.

Objectives

The objectives of this project are threefold. First, we will develop a comprehensive overview of the status of the digital nomad lifestyle prior to the onset of COVID-19 which we will serve as benchmark for gauging changes in response to the pandemic. Second, the project will develop an understanding of how the coronavirus outbreak is effecting digital nomads by designing and administering a survey (anticipated $n > 500$) and conducting a series of online interviews with key informants and several virtual focus groups. Finally, we aim to assemble scenarios assessing how digital nomadism might evolve in the post-COVID-19 era and to assess the degree to which this lifestyle will

continue to serve as a forerunner of social change in an era of increasing automation.

Background

Consistent with the themes of the Mobile Lives Forum, this project focuses in the first instance on how in the pre-COVID-19 era ICTs were changing relationships to place and enabling new lifestyle patterns of work, travel, consumption, and leisure. From the vantage point of some expert observers, high-income countries were in the early stages of a shift toward a “post-work” future in which a new generation of digital automation technologies were already disrupting large segments of the global economy. Related to this perspective, is an understanding of the future suggesting that these developments were significantly diminishing demand for human labor and jobs were becoming progressively more casual and contingent, thus releasing people—for better or worse—from the strictures of formal employment. Evidence of this trend was the growing numbers of micro-entrepreneurs, freelancers, and “gig” workers, as well as related developments involving so-called “digital nomads” adopting location-independent lifestyles. The term digital nomad derives from an eponymously titled book published two decades ago by electrical engineers Tsugio Makimoto and David Manners (1998). The lead author is pioneer in the design of semiconductors and early in the innovation trajectory of electronic miniaturization recognized the ways in which more powerful and flexible ICTs would enable people to transcend geographic constraints, reorganize work routines, and create new opportunities for footloose lifestyles. Participation in such social practices grew markedly during the economic contraction triggered by the 2008 financial crisis and expanded further over the past dozen years leading up to start of the coronavirus outbreak in late 2019. Another contributing factor has been rising occupational disaffection and narrowing scope for self-actualization in the contemporary workplace, but it is important not to disregard the social and technological factors that have been facilitating these alternative livelihood opportunities. Deriving a precise sense of the scale of digital nomadism in the pre-COVID-19 period is difficult for several reasons. First, there is some elasticity to the term—strict application implies residing in a foreign (non-home) country—but that is not always an essential condition. Second, the associated means of **mobility** does not need to involve air travel and can be via car, van, converted school bus, boat, or other means. Finally, people may over time transition in and out of the lifestyle.

Depending then on definitional rigor, the size of this population globally was estimated to range from a few hundred thousand to as many as one million. In practical terms, digital nomadism has encompassed itinerant technology worker-travelers who build websites, manage e-commerce businesses, develop mobile apps, and design online marketing resources as well as people who work as artists, graphic designers, videographers, and craft workers. Another facet of this trend has involved “nomad capitalists” who own and

manage successful platform-enabled businesses while traveling either continuously or on a regularly intermittent basis. Because the associated tasks can be performed virtually anywhere (as long as one has a laptop computer and a reliable Internet connection), these individuals have often lived in places that lend themselves to prized recreational or other non-vocational pursuits. Preferred sites tend to be locales previously developed for global tourism, but cities with cosmopolitan appeal (and affordability is an added plus) were also attractive destinations. This lifestyle has been closely related (but a more extreme) expression of co-living and co-working arrangements that are becoming more common in a number of countries around the world for generally similar reasons. The emergence of digital nomadism can then be attributed to three factors:

The global deployment of high-speed Internet services (which allows information-processing work to be performed on a location-independent basis).

The advent of new modes of contingent labor that are remunerated on a retainer or fee-for-service basis rather than by a weekly or monthly wage.

The availability of relatively low-cost and convenient international travel.

This combination of enabling conditions has allowed digital nomads to exploit the difference between, on the one hand, compensation scales in global cities and, on the other hand, living expenses in relatively economical nomad-oriented locales. The result is a kind of "lifestyle arbitrage" (also termed "geo-arbitrage") in which practitioners have worked on asynchronous and oftentimes irregular schedules while allowing ample time for pursuits that are part of a less work-centric existence. Opportunities have also been available to renegotiate the typically dichotomous relationship between work, travel, consumption, and leisure. During the pre-COVID-19 period, national governments tended to treat digital nomadism as a semi-illicit activity that was potentially in violation of national immigration, labor, or tax laws. A small number of countries (and subnational jurisdictions) broke from this general pattern. For instance, Estonia introduced in 2015 the notion of "e-residency" and then in February 2018 announced that it would institute a novel type of visa for which footloose worker-travelers would be eligible to receive. Until a few months ago, similar measures were also being considered in Singapore and Thailand. These developments suggest that the lifestyle was being acknowledged in some spheres as a source of social innovation and economic opportunity, and the widespread expectation was that this conception would diffuse more widely over time. Some nations appeared to be positioning themselves to take advantage of the widespread deployment of artificial intelligence and other allied technologies which many expert observers anticipated would release additional people with the skills and dispositions to become digital nomads.

Research questions and hypothesis

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has likely paused many developments associated with digital nomadism, though it is notable that some countries such as Barbados have recently begun to actively market themselves as destinations for footloose digital workers. More generally, though, there is at present little understanding of what has happened to digital nomads in recent months as the contagion has swept around the world. Particularly notable research questions that will be pursued by this project are the following:

- What has become of digital nomads? Have they returned to their home countries?
- What challenges did digital nomads face in March 2020 after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 to be a pandemic?
- How have digital nomads adapting themselves to current economic conditions and what kinds of living and working arrangements have they evolved to adapt to contemporary challenges?
- If still living abroad, are digital nomads able, if necessary, to gain access to healthcare?
- What are the current financial circumstances of digital nomads given the shutdown/slowdown of large parts of the global economy?
- Are digital nomads currently planning to re-establish themselves in this lifestyle during the post-COVID-19 period?
- What are their prospects for digital nomads a future of more tightly regulated borders, less tolerance for legal ambiguity regarding residency status, and rapidly contracting global economic conditions?

Research design and methods

There has to date been in general a paucity of research on digital nomadism. Work has centered on establishing definitional boundaries, speculating from a distance on the cultural and logistical dimensions of this lifestyle, or exploring its potential as a novel catalyst for tourism. There has also been a preponderance of journalistic observations and anecdotal reports. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on digital nomads raises serious questions about the ongoing applicability of findings from prior research and this study is devoted to identifying the status and resilience of members of this community. In addition, the degree to which digital nomads may continue to be harbingers of emergent macroscale trends is very much an open question. The first phase of the project will highlight the pre-COVID-19 period and develop a conceptual framework describing the labor-market drivers that were contributing to the casualization of work, the role of digital automation in facilitating changes in the availability of wage labor, and the emergence of new logistical modes for organizing work. The output of this work package will involve a narrative synthesis of existing body of research conducted on digital nomadism. The

second will involve three elements. First, we will develop and administer a survey (in both English and French) to assess the recent experiences and current status of a sample of approximately 500 digital nomads. Respondents will be recruited through several popular online hubs for itinerant worker-travelers including NomadList and various Facebook groups that are popular among this subpopulation of individuals. Second, we will conduct at least ten online interviews with key informants who are knowledgeable about the lifestyles of digital nomads and able to report on the details of the disruption that COVID-19 has caused for members of the community. Finally, we will assemble and convene two or three focus groups with digital nomads to glean direct observations on these circumstances. The third phase of this initiative will necessarily be more speculative. We will monitor throughout the project ongoing developments regarding labor-market trends, macroeconomic conditions, investment patterns, and public policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim will be to develop a conjectural understanding of what the future might hold for digital nomadism as well as what the re-emergent activities of digital nomads themselves might tell us about evolving shifts and unfolding patterns. Finally, we will prepare a brief report outlining key insights from the French-language version of the survey as part of an effort to develop understanding of unique features pertaining to this group of respondents.

Claims to originality

This study marks the first effort to conduct a global survey on the lives and lifestyles of digital nomads. It is also noteworthy and original for its timing six months into the most severe pandemic in a century. We plan to disseminate the results of this project on a widespread basis and the outputs are likely to be relevant to policy makers and lifestyle-trends analysts as well as to digital nomads themselves who are today likely living through a period of profound uncertainty. The project also seeks to explore how this vanguard group of itinerant worker-travelers may offer instructive insights into the future of work, travel, consumption, and leisure. The results of the study are expected in October 2020.

References

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Lifestyle

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

More

Mobility

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

More

Keywords : [lifestyle](#), [Work](#), [travel](#), [covid-19](#)

Disciplines : [Humanities](#), [Social sciences](#), [Prospective studies](#)

Transport mode(s) : [All modes of transport](#)

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² <https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/marks/lifestyle-1756>

³ <https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/marks/mobility-450>

⁴ <https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/mots-cles/lifestyle>

⁵ <https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/mots-cles/work>

⁶ <https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/mots-cles/travel>

⁷ <https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/mots-cles/covid-19>

⁸ <https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/disciplines/sciences-humaines>

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¹⁰ <https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/disciplines/prospective>

¹¹ <https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/modes-transports/tous-modes-transport>