Digital Nomads Living on the Margins

EMERALD STUDIES IN ALTERNATIVITY AND MARGINALIZATION

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Samantha Holland, Leeds Beckett University, UK, and Karl Spracklen, Leeds Beckett University, UK

There is growing interest in work on transgression, liminality, and subcultural capital within cultural studies, sociology, and the social sciences more broadly. However, there is a lack of understanding of the problem of alternativity: what it means to be alternative in culture and society in modernity. What "alternative" looks like is often left unexplored. The alternative is either assumed un-problematically or stands in for some other form of social and cultural exclusion.

Alternativity delineates those spaces, scenes, subcultures, objects, and practices in modern society that are actively designed to be counter or resistive to mainstream popular culture. Alternativity is associated with marginalization, both actively pursued by individuals and imposed on individuals and subcultures. Alternativity was originally represented and constructed through acts of transgression and through shared subcultural capital. In contemporary society, alternative music scenes such as heavy metal, goth, and punk have spread around the world, and alternative fashions and embodiment practices are now adopted by footballers and fashion models. The nature of alternativity as a communicative lifeworld is now questioned in an age of globalization and hyper-commodification.

This book series provides a stimulus to new research and new theorizing on alternativity and marginalization. It provides a focus for scholars interested in sociological and cultural research that expands our understanding of the ontological status of spaces, scenes, subcultures, objects, and practices defined as alternative, liminal, or transgressive. In turn, the book series enables scholars to theorize about the status of the alternative in contemporary culture and society.

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Digital Nomads Living on the Margins: Remote-Working Laptop Entrepreneurs in the Gig Economy

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Dedicated to Margaret Kwei-On Yuen and Robert G. Thompson.
Dedicated to all struggling workers in the gig economy.

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About the Author

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Introduction

The Digital Nomad

Digital Nomads in Pandemic Times

I am writing during the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic, which has significantly altered the context of the digital nomad lifestyle. Pandemics and environmental catastrophes will likely continue to have increasing impacts on both leisure travel and remote work in ways only currently speculated upon. Before the pandemic – digital nomads – or remote workers who use their freedom-from-location to travel the world – were an odd minority. I envision them as "canaries in the digital coalmine." They point to the vulnerabilities of future employment models for the next generations. Overnight as we entered the pandemic crisis, many white-collar workers were thrown into a digital workplace, as they were quarantined in their homes, along with family members, and children released from school. For the top tech workers, such as those at Google and Microsoft, they have the privilege of continuing their work from home for the indefinite future (C. Duffy, 2020). Of course, the top tech and start-up workers are best positioned for remote work. Twitter is allowing its staff to work from home "forever" (Baron, 2020). The pandemic brought to light the impact of decades of dismantling and underfunding social safety nets and health care, environmental racism, widespread inequalities, and high rates of poverty in the United States and beyond. As millions lose their employment in the United States, even more desperate workers will seek employment on digital freelance platforms, competing with the already struggling entry-level digital nomad workers. As more people work remotely, their ability to travel or move to new locations increases, potentially shifting urban density. Digital nomads often found their hometowns prohibitively expensive, and the ability to live abroad more cheaply was one motivating factor. Now that is true for even more people. Matthew Haag (2020) writes for the *New York Times* an article entitled, "Manhattan Faces a Reckoning If Working From Home Becomes the Norm," in which he points out that finance firms and other high-expense Manhattan employers may not only allow workers to telecommute, but they may shutter their offices altogether and save billions in rent. Haag writes,

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> Before the coronavirus crisis, three of New York City's largest commercial tenants – Barclays, JP Morgan Chase and Morgan Stanley – had tens of thousands of workers in towers across Manhattan. Now, as the city wrestles with when and how to reopen, executives at all three firms have decided that it is highly unlikely that all their workers will ever return to those buildings.

If such high-paid tech workers were released from their offices, why would they continue to live in New York City when they could be anywhere in the world? While the travel industry has been grounded and shuttered for the time being, the industry continues to offer incentives for customers, and the irresistibly low prices – and loss of jobs – will entice people to once again travel, and thus, digital nomadism may be set to expand in the post-pandemic future.

In this introductory chapter, I will consider the rise in popularity of the digital nomad concept. I will discuss the methodology used for empirical data collection on digital nomads. I then turn to a brief overview of each chapter. This book provides a critical examination of the digital nomad lifestyle, concept, and community and contextualizes it within a sociological perspective of neoliberal capitalism, the gig economy, and escalating global inequality.

Defining the Digital Nomad

At the dawn of the internet, Tsugio Makimoto and David Manners (1997) wrote their manifesto *Digital Nomad*. In this book, they speculated about the potential of the internet to liberate workers from the shackles of their office – they could use a computer to work and relocate somewhere pleasant and more affordable – like the beach! This image has been latched onto by a subculture – decades later – that have adopted Makimoto and Manner's term, "digital nomad," as they pose with laptops on the beach that the authors envisioned. The underlying orientation of Makimoto and Manners' (1997) *Digital Nomad* is that of freedom and serious travel. For example, Ina Reichenberger (2017) reflects the zeitgeist of popular nomadic lifestyle literature: "Freedom then appeared in a variety of contexts, including freedom within paid employment, freedom relating to location independence and freedom to pursue self-development" (p. 9). Indeed, one of the popular authors that digital nomads latch onto early in their subcultural career is Tim Ferriss's (2009) book *The 4-Hour Workweek*, which pledges to provide a blueprint on how to barely work and make more money than ever. "However," Muller (2016) cautions,

> the digital nomad should not be confused with the figure of a dropout. Although the dropout and the digital nomad share an interest in designing a self-determined life, the value of labor productivity is an important feature in the lifestyle of digital nomads. (p. 345)

Digital nomads are obsessed with their work and promoting their brand; indeed, it is of which they think while engaging in their leisure or dreaming of their future

destinations. In Cook's (2020) findings, digital nomads struggle with disciplinary practices of balancing work and leisure, especially in tourist locations and when new to the lifestyle.

The nomads attempt to distinguish themselves from the more assumedly low-brow "tourist," on their cruise ships or package tours. Digital nomads like to think of themselves as "world-citizens," or "travelers," or indeed, nomads, freedom-seekers. At any rate, the attempt is one of achieving authenticity (Azariah, 2016). Yet, Wood (2005) argues, "the nomad and the global tourist are two aspects of the same process; their relationship to the world is primarily aesthetic" (p. 54). In Reichenberger's (2017) study of digital nomads, she states that the subculture created a hierarchy around one's commitment to travel. Those able to work remotely 100% of the time and travel continuously were at the pinnacle, those with less time or flexibility to travel to the furthest places, the most exotic, remote, and trendiest, followed. Yet, they too, live in co-living/coworking spaces, like tourists on a cruise ship, they rarely engage with the locals on a deeper level than all-inclusive resort vacationers. At any rate, while the pathways of the nomads and tourist do not diverge widely, the perception that nomads have of their lifestyle is that of the enlightened traveler, exchanging the consumer lifestyle of property ownership and material accumulation for one of travel and collection of mementos.

Methodology

This research adopts the methodology of ethnography and the aligned sociological theory of symbolic interaction, which Blumer (1969) describes as the "distinctive character of interaction as it takes place between human beings" (p. 79). Paul Atkinson, Delamont, and Housley (2008) takes the definition further:

> Things have social lives. They are produced, reproduced, and exchanged. They are the objects and outcomes of socially organized work, and they are embedded in networks of social relations. They are endowed with meaning. They are collected and displayed. They permit social activity and they also constrain social action. Material goods and objects are thoroughly social, and they are a fundamental part of cultural life …. They are used to enact memory, to express individual biography, and to enshrine collective identity. (p. 119)

Qualitative research centers the individual, and their perspective, in an attempt to understand how they make meaning of their social environment, and how their interactions reinforce these meanings, through actions and patterned behaviors. Social action and interaction reflect the larger social structures, institutions, and cultural norms (Blumer, 1969). Other terms are used to describe qualitative research process that also relate to this study. A phenomenological study approaches a particular phenomenon, an experience that applies to a group of people, and so by examining how the group has experienced a phenomenon, we can better understand that particular social ritual (i.e., grief and insomnia)

(Creswell, 2007). Similarly, Harold Garfinkel (1967) uses the term ethnomethodological to explain how researchers analyze everyday activities. Gleeson and Erben (1976) further describe the same concept as how members "directly experience the world and in the consequent effect this has on their intentionality and the consequent effect their intentionality has on the procedures of the world" (p. 477). They state that this can help researchers understand how people define their position within this particular social world and thus how they understand their "parameters and avenues for choice within the contexts of their defined everyday existence" (p. 482).

Overall, qualitative research methods – ethnography – can contribute a deeper understanding of how individuals make sense of their social world outside of the statistical numerical context of quantitative methods (Gibson-Graham, 2014). Denzin (2006) argues that conducting ethnography is also not an innocent practice but is political, performative, and pedagogical – we ultimately present the data (our participants experiences) – to an audience and thus we exercise some power over representation as researchers. Because ethnography is an interpersonal research method, in contrast to statistics methods where a researcher may never encounter the participants, the researcher themselves become a part of the data collection experience. Especially considering the ways in which the symbolic interaction perspective points to the significance of the micro-interactions of daily life and how these patterned behaviors reinforce larger institutional forces of power dynamics. Therefore, the interaction between that of researcher and participants can be one of a power dynamic; one in which an authority figure takes an individual's personal story, biological sample (in the case of medicine), or other personal data, for an abstract purpose.

After gaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to being seeking participants, researchers confront the daunting task of finding their initial participants. If the researcher is studying a subculture in which they are already involved, they may already know the "cast of characters" (Lofland & Lofland, 1995, p. 37). For example, Mwenda Ntarangwi (2010) writes an ethnography from both an insider/outsider perspective, as an African anthropologist using field methods to observe the professional world of American anthropology, as enacted in the academy and professional conferences. Thus, he calls his study "reversed gaze," using the tools of anthropologists to study the hidden backstage of professional anthropologists as they work in universities, present at conferences, conduct fieldwork in foreign nations, and write about "the other" for a primarily Western audience. He feels this is important as it contributes "an African perspective into understanding anthropology" and to "decipher the underlying anthropological culture that has so much impacted the ways that Africans are studied and perceived" (Ntarangwi, 2010, p. 3).

Ethnographers often feel a responsibility toward their participants and want to be open about expressing their intentions and approaches to the subject matter – in short, they want to create a meaningful relationship between themselves and their participants (Pelias, 2009). As an insider, one might stress their commitment to the community. They will at any rate anticipate such questions from participants or might use their own experience as an opening to discuss similar

experiences from the participants (Friedman, 1990, p. 64). Feminist theorists have also brought to the forefront the importance of assessing the embodied nature of research – as researchers we have a particular identity and embodiment that affects the interaction with participants, if we are like them or distinct, the emotional labor engaged in during ethnography, and the ways in which we talk about and experience our own bodies (Atkinson et al., 2008, p. 141).

Since we cannot interview or access all the individuals and data related to a particular topic, we must gather a sub-selection of participants that can represent the larger social issue, enough to gain a saturation of sampling representing most of the outcomes, and enough information to be generalizable to the class as a whole (Becker, 1998, p. 67). Finding participants is one of the first challenges researchers encounter – finding people that represent the issue at hand. These initial contacts are significant in the direction that they will lead the researcher to other contacts, which may reveal over time the political nature of the subcommunity and the social pathways created by interpersonal politics (Duneier, 2011, p. 3). Researchers may need to find a particular organization, community center, or other specific locations in which their target population resides.

For this research on digital nomads, I first sought out online communities where nomads gather, to discuss the intricacies of their lifestyle, and to connect with other members with whom they can relate, share resources, and make friends. After exploring the online communities of digital nomads, I then personally attended three different digital nomad conferences in Europe in 2017. From these conferences, I was able to make contact with many digital nomads and complete 38 in-depth interviews. The first conference was an event targeted to digital nomads and newcomers, it was one of the first major conferences, originating in the German-speaking world and later branching into English. This took place in September 2017, in Lisbon, Portugal. The attendees were primarily white European and American millennials. All of the associated meetups took place in bars around the city, thus contributing a youth-oriented party atmosphere. While I soaked up the atmosphere at this conference, I did not interview participants from it.

The next two conferences were more in-depth experiences transpiring over a week and a half each. One was a digital nomad women's retreat in Spain (which I will simply refer to in this book as "the women's retreat," or more simply, "the retreat"). In this small seaside town, 15 women lived together in a co-living space for 10 days. In this immersive environment, I was able to spend a great deal of time with all of the participants. I was able to conduct many interviews during the retreat itself, as we would find a quiet area to speak about their experiences as female digital nomads. Subsequently, the founder passed my name to her colleagues and co-founders of another digital nomad conference event forthcoming. Their event was only a few weeks later, also in Spain, and they employed me as their photographer. The founders of this particular conference (which I will simple refer to as "the conference" in this book) aimed to promote women and people of color within the subculture. This was their second annual event, with their inaugural year launching in Thailand. During this particular September, protests for an independent Catalonia were transpiring, with an independence vote, a

general strike, and daily protests providing the urban context. While I was in the streets photographing this social movement, I was struck by the lack of political interest among the digital nomads, who stayed within their coworking spaces and continued building their brand, ignoring the cheering crowds outside. Working closely with the co-organizers of the conference and attending most of the events in my capacity as photographer gave me excellent access to the community, with whom I developed a comradery (Creswell, 2007; Madison, 2020). For the next several months following the conference, I continued to interview most of the participants on Skype, as we found ourselves in different countries around the world.

Participant Demographics

In this section, I will briefly overview the main demographic categories of the 38 participants interviewed for this study.

Gender. There were 33 women and 5 men.

Citizenship. Seventeen interviewees were American. Six people were from the UK. There was one Austrian, two Australians, and six Canadians. Two individuals had backgrounds and passports from both Central America and Spain. One participant was from Nigeria and migrated to Ireland as a youth. Another participant was from the Netherlands. One interviewee was from Poland.

Languages. Twenty-two of the participants spoke only English. Sixteen spoke additional languages, primarily based on their own cultural background, as few participants learned a non-native tongue.

Age. Twelve of the participants were in their 20s. Twenty-two participants were in their 30s. Four participants were in their 40s. None of the participants were over the age of 49.

Race/ethnicity. Twenty-five participants were white. Five were black American or African or Afro-Caribbean. One was Indian and one was Chinese. Three were mixed-race with white and Asian or Pakistani backgrounds. Two were Hispanic white. One was Arab American.

Sexuality. Thirty participants identified as straight. Five identified as lesbian, queer, or gay. Three identified as bisexual or fluid.

Education. Twenty-three participants had a bachelor's degree. Six had a master's degree. One had a Juris Doctor or law degree. Two participants had PhDs. One had an associate degree. Three had some college. One was in college. And one had only attended high school. Nineteen of the participants did not have student loan debt. Eighteen of the participants did have student loan debt, especially the Americans, and the British were the next worse off with high debts. Those from the UK and Australia only paid a small tax – if they had an income – for their repayment and did not need to pay if they had little to no income. Four participants were in deferment. The highest debt amount was $130,000.

Marital status. Thirty-two participants were single or not married. Ten of them were in relationships. Six participants were married; but of those, two were getting divorced.

Children. Thirty-seven of the participants did not have children. The one with children was now retired, and the children were grown adults. None of the

interviewees were currently raising children. Did they want children in the future? Six said yes, two qualified their statements. Fifteen were unsure, ambivalent, or pushed the idea far into the future. Fourteen were quite confident that they did not want children.

Criminal record. Thirty-seven participants did not disclose any criminal record. One had previously been convicted of a "driving under the influence" charge, but it had since been expunged. Having a criminal record can impact one's ability to travel, as many countries ask about such records. This is rarely discussed among digital nomads and travelers but does impact millions of people globally.

Religion. Of 14 participants who mentioned religion, only two identified with an established religion: They were Christian and Muslim.

Property owner. Of the 10 participants who mentioned property ownership, four were current homeowners.

Book Overview

Chapter 1. Digital Nomads, Liquid Modernity, and the COVID-19 Pandemic

In the first chapter, we place the digital nomad concept within the theories of "liquid times," by Zygmunt Bauman (2000), this era marked by uncertainty, diminishing government, rising corporate rule, and shifting individual allegiances. (Nationalist) "community" belongs to the solidity of the past, which Bauman (2000) calls

> the last relic of the old-time utopias of the good society; it stands for whatever has been left of the dreams of a better life shared with better neighbors all following better rules of cohabitation. (p. 92)

Bauman describes this community as an idealized "short-cut to togetherness," a grouping of people with sheer, comforting sameness (p. 99). He also labels these moments of collective sameness as "carnival communities" or "explosive communities are events breaking the monotony of daily solitude" (p. 99). These concepts capture both the larger economic context of hyper-capitalism in which digital nomads are embedded and their subcultural gatherings at conferences and co-living spaces where they re-inscribe what it means to be a member of this community. This capitalist instability is one more element of the naturally disoriented nature of nomadic life. The digital nomad is adapted for "the crisis of late capitalist society engaged in a long-term historical process of destroying jobs security, while the virtues of work are ironically and ever more insistently being glorified" (Aronowitz et al., 1998, p. 40). Impoverishment is no longer only for the poor, as middle- and upper-income workers feel the squeeze of the new-order of downsizing, shrinking labor union protection, loss of state welfare, and (job-replacing) technologies (Aronowitz, Esposito, DiFazio, & Yard, 1998). In this world, long-term employment with a family wage and benefits is dissolved. Makimoto and Manners (1997) specified workers in web design and computer information would be the most likely to be remote workers. Using the framework of Doyle

and Conboy's (2020) theoretical application of a liquid-modern perspective to the COVID-19 pandemic, the final section examines how the pandemic provides a liquid event furthering the social instabilities. This chapter focuses on theories of the neoliberal economy and the creation of the "gig economy" through the loss of "good jobs" in order to contextualize the plight of millennial age digital nomads as they employ the rhetoric of "freedom" while riding a wave of ultimate downward mobility. The COVID-19 pandemic has only increased such instabilities and exasperated such inequalities, especially those related to technological and platform employment.

Chapter 2. Western Millennials: Demographics and Socioeconomic Status

In this chapter, digital nomads are positioned within the socioeconomic context of millennials in Western countries, by examining some data and theories of generation-cohort outcomes. Moos, Pfeiffer, and Vinodrai (2018) address how the millennial demographic should be taken into account in regard to policy and urban planning as they represent major behavioral shifts in lifestyle and demographics. Millennials are the most highly educated generation in the United States at 38% (Fry, 2018, p. 54). This chapter will explore this demographic and socioeconomic context of the digital nomad participants interviewed for this book. This chapter will look at the background of the participants including factors, such as family wealth, social class, nationality, education, debt/asset, gender and sexual orientation, political engagement and workforce participation. From this overview, we can understand the general background of digital nomads and how the lifestyle may be unobtainable for others. Finally, this chapter contextualizes how the neoliberal national context and shrinking social safety net makes this lifestyle appealing.

Chapter 3. Digital Nomads: Outcasts of the Global Bazaar Economy

Tsugio Makimoto and David Manners' (1997) future-oriented manifesto *Digital Nomad* conceptualized the subculture that would come about nearly 20 years later to take on their label as their own identity. While Makimoto and Manners' were writing at the dawn of "telecommuting," they were able to foresee many of the social problems and limitations inherent in this lifestyle. They understood both that such a lifestyle would require a certain level of privilege and financial resources, while also letting companies off the hook in providing full-time employment and benefits for workers. They envisioned tourist hot spots and overcrowding, as well as how white-collar professionals could be freed while service workers were more location-based than ever. They understood that computer technical workers would have the best opportunity for remote work, as well as a high-enough income to enjoy a leisurely lifestyle in ideal destination cities. This chapter examines the types of employment that the participants have engaged in during their short trajectories of employment history, from their entry into the workforce and their current attempts at finding sufficient remote work to pay their bills, while rarely having employee benefits. This chapter asks the detailed