Vihtori Nurminen

Exploring digital nomadism and the culture change of digital nomads in the post pandemic world

School of Marketing and Communication
Bachelor's thesis in International Business

Vaasa 2025

UNIVERSITY OF VAASA
School of Marketing and Communication
Author: Vihtori Nurminen
Title of the Thesis: Exploring digital nomadism and the culture change of digital nomads in the post pandemic world
Degree: Bachelor of Economics and Business Administration
Programme: International Business
Supervisor: Ausrine Silenskyte
Year: 2025 **Sivumäärä:** 19

ABSTRACT:
Tässä kandidaatin tutkielmassa käydään lävitse diginomadikulttuuria sekä diginomadien elämäntyyliä. Tavoitteena on löytää vastauksia ja syitä miksi osa ihmisistä rupeaa diginomadeiksi ja kuinka elämäntyyli on vaikuttanut heihin. Onko diginomadeille kuinka tärkeää löytää tasapaino työn ja vapaa-ajan välillä sekä mitkä seikat vaikuttavat asuinpaikkavalintaan. Tutkielmassa käsitellään myös, miten diginomadeihin suhtaudutaan eri valtioissa, ja kuinka suhtautuminen etätyöskentelyperäiseen maahanmuuttoon on muuttunut Covid-19 pandemian myötä. Seuraavien vuosikymmenten aikana on järkevää olettaa, että yhä useammat työt muuttuvat etätöiksi, ja työntekijät valitsevat työpaikkoja sen perusteella, kuinka hyvin he voivat tehdä työtä etänä. Yhä useammat ihmiset pohtivat myös työelämän ja vapaa-ajan tasapainoa tai ainakin mainitsevat sen tärkeänä tekijänä työpaikkaa valittaessa. Nyt työikään tuleva nuorempi sukupolvi on valmis panostamaan terveelliseen elämään työn ulkopuolella, vaikka se tarkoittaisi pienempää palkkaa. Diginomadit ovat olleet etätyön pioneereja yli vuosikymmenen ajan. Koska heillä on eniten kokemusta tässä kasvavassa alueessa, sitä tulisi tutkia enemmän. Tässä opinnäytetyössä käydään läpi diginomadien kulttuuria monista eri näkökulmista.

KEYWORDS: digital nomadism, entrepreneurship, social movement

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

Digital nomadism as a lifestyle has gathered people from different parts of the globe to travel wherever they can work via laptop and wireless connection. Digital nomads can be described as individuals who are taking advantages of portable computing technologies and widespread internet (Mancinelli, 2020). As internet is beginning to be more and more reachable all over the world, the physical location of the individual working does not seem to matter as much. Approximately 37% of all Nordic jobs could theoretically be done remotely (Randall et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic changed the way people look remote work completely. Many physical offices were closed and moved to different online platforms.

In the next decades it is reasonable to assume more jobs will become remote, and employees are choosing jobs based on how well they are able to do the job remotely. More people are also thinking about work-life balance or at least mentioning it as an important factor when choosing a place to work. Younger generation that is now becoming working age are more willing to have healthy life outside of work even if it means lower paychecks.

Digital nomads have been pioneers in remote working for over a decade now. As they have the most experience in this growing field, it should be studied more. That is why this thesis will go through the culture of digital nomadism.

1.2 The objective of the thesis

The objective of the thesis is to explain and analyze digital nomadism, the culture around it and why some people decide to become digital nomads. This objective has been divided into three separate questions that the thesis will answer.

Research questions of this thesis:

1. What kind of geopolitical and social factors motivate individuals to accept digital nomadism?
2. How did the culture of digital nomadism change in the post pandemic world?
3. Which factors influence the work-life balance experiences of digital nomads?

1.3 The structure of the thesis

In the beginning of the thesis, I will introduce you to the subject and go through the basics of digital nomadism. I will go through the definition of digital nomadism and delve deeper into the meaning of their lifestyle choice. With a quick look into the history of migration and remote work to the geopolitics that play part in today's world of digital nomads. Part of the political view is the taxation and how digital nomads view taxation.

Second part will be a deep dive into the psychological side of the digital nomads and how pandemic changed their identity or if it didn't, how were they able to work in a world that had banned traveling. As for many digital nomads, travelling and searching meaningful life is the main reason for choosing the lifestyle (Mancinelli, 2020).

Then the thesis will look at how digital nomads feel about their work-life balance. The thesis will go through different definitions of work-life balance and which definition could be connected to the digital nomadism. As digital nomads are able to determine themselves their own working hours, is the life healthier and more balanced than working on-site fixed hours. We will also explore how digital nomads feel about not having usual safety net around them. If some global problem that restricts people's movement, like the pandemic, were to happen again, how would digital nomads be able to handle the pressure and risks.

Lastly the thesis will present its conclusion, summarizing the whole thesis and go through the findings. The thesis will also present some suggestions for further research. These suggestions can be used later for example in the master's thesis work.

2 Digital nomadism around the world

Digital nomadism can be described as a lifestyle in which individuals are taking advantage of the wireless technology that allows the individuals to work remotely. What separates digital nomadism from what could be described as usual remote work is that they are almost completely independent from any one single location. Their lifestyle is often portrayed as travel reliant where the boundaries between travel, leisure and work are not exact. (Reichenberger, 2018)

In 1997 Makimoto and Manners published then futuristic utopia sounding research called *Digital nomad*. This research provided platform for multiple different academics to begin research how the future of work could look like. “The internet would provide a liberatory utopia in which workers could log on (from the beach), work four hours a week, and then catch the afternoon waves on his surfboard – and he was surely male.” (Thompson, 2019)

When thinking of digital nomadism some might say they are only western people in the global south sitting next to their computer and enjoying the sun. While it is true that most of digital nomads come from the global north (Mancianelli, 2020), digital nomadism doesn’t mean that the person is only interested in tanning in the sun. The challenges digital nomads face come in the forms of high risks, loneliness and uncertainty that comes with the lifestyle (Hermann & Morris, 2020).

The identity many digital nomads share are based around their way of travelling and working without having one place tying them up. In Mancianelli’s studies (2020) they found that many participants described themselves as “slow travelers” who change their living location seasonally 3-5 times in a year. “Travel is who I am, and this is not negotiable” one participant answered when asked about their identity.

2.1 Origins of digital nomadism

Digital nomadism itself is reasonably new way of living. First time that the term “digital nomad” was used was in 1997 when Makimoto and Manners introduced the idea that mobile technology would allow people to reengage with “urges inherited from nomadic ancestors”. As technology proceeded to evolve into more and more towards global connectivity, idea of global nomadism started to become reality. (Stumpf, 2022)

Digital nomadism needed technology to able people to work from any part of the globe. Makimoto and Manners (1997) predicted that when people are able to have videocalls with each other from anywhere and tap into any public information source, people would be able to become digital nomads. As we know today, those technologies are reality with wireless internet and different video calling platforms. These platforms can be company-wide, like Microsoft Teams or Slack, or more private like Facetime on Apple products.

With the technology on our hands today, remote work has become possibility for many. Approximately 37% of all Nordic jobs could theoretically be done remotely (Randall et al., 2022) and with the number of remote jobs increasing, the need for remote work technology is also increasing.

It was estimated in 2018, that there were over 4,8 million digital nomads in the United States of America alone. The amount globally is not known for different reasons and estimations vary. In the 2020’s the pandemic has helped people see the possibility of starting to work completely remotely, and it means the number of digital nomads in the world has grown and will continue to grow. In September 2020 the number of searches in Google.com with the search term “digital nomad” was almost five times the number compared to January 2019. This shows the huge interest people saw in possibility to begin living the digital nomad lifestyle. (Hermann & Paris, 2020)

2.2 Geopolitics of digital nomadism

Freedom, individualism, mobility, and world-citizenship are values that are mostly connected to digital nomadism (Mancianelli, 2020; Holleran & Notting, 2023). Digital nomads usually think that geopolitical boundaries are arbitrary and imaginary, while recognizing passports, visas and borders as unnecessary (Holleran &Notting, 2023). Mobility is part of digital nomads' culture so anything that tries to control that is seen as a problem. "They travel and do so frequently; both domestically and interna- tionally. They select their location choice based on leisure and lifestyle expectations, not work. Therefore, they often choose comfortable, warm, scenic places that are also quite affordable and welcoming to Westerners." (Thompson, 2019)

As seen in studies by Mancinelli & Molz (2023), Mancinelli (2020), Benson & O'Reilly (2016) and Kannisto (2014) digital nomads or migrants who can be seen as digital nomads are usually from a strong passport country. These countries usually consist of rich western democracies like the countries in the European Union. There are some digital nomads who the studies interviewed that came from countries like China and Russia which cannot be classified as western democracies, but in couple of cases these individuals had studied in western countries.

There are myriad reasons how digital nomad would choose a place to stay. Mancinelli and Molz (2023) discuss digital nomads are able and calculative enough to use their strong passports to choose countries where the cost of living is relatively low. They are then able to maximize their purchasing power in strong currency and relatively large wages that they are able to get from abroad. The act of getting paid in strong currency from a company that is located in global north while working in global south is called geographic arbitrage or "geoarbitrage" (Mancinelli 2020).

2.2.1 Governments' views on digital nomads

Even though digital nomads might claim autonomy as world citizens, they are still subjects of the countries they reside in and their bureaucratic systems and tax collections. Many governments have made it easier for digital nomads to apply for visas and get their residence and work permits faster. "Especially those countries that have been relying on tourists may profit from revenue created by way of digital nomad workers" (Krakat, 2021).

Special digital nomad visas (DNV) and remote workers have raised political discussion in multiple countries. "Several states, including some small island states, have proposed their own versions of the DNV, allowing foreign nationals to stay for longer periods while working their jobs or projects remotely" (Krakat, 2021). Many countries offer digital nomads flexible taxation, like Belize, or complete exemption on personal income tax, like Antigua & Barbuda, Costa Rica and Dubai.

In the case of Estonia, they decided to go a step forward. Estonia launched an e-residency programme in 2014, which allowed people to build businesses and start-ups in this completely new virtual state. The main idea was to attract talented individuals to Estonia to build businesses there without even being physically there. Estonia also launched its own digital nomad visa which targeted digital nomads who were in the grey area in the eyes of the law, usually working on a tourist visa. (Mancinelli & Molz, 2023)

Krakat (2021) makes a claim that countries that offer digital nomad visas would likely get a positive impact from allowing digital nomads to work there. Digital nomads would generate more revenue than regular tourists, based on just the time spent in the country. Krakat (2021) also claims that locals might accept digital nomads easier than some other groups of migrants. Digital nomads don't threaten the local jobs as their work is online for companies around the globe and they can also be seen as creating local jobs . Digital nomads could also blend in the local culture better than regular tourists would. (Krakat, 2021)

Table 1. Countries that have relevant policies towards digital nomads. (Sánchez-Vergara et al., 2023)

Country	Policy naming	Formation
1 Anguilla	Lose The Crowd Find Yourself. Work. Life. Bliss.	August, 2020
2 Antigua & Barbuda	Nomad Digital Residence (NDR)	September, 2020
3 Argentina	Digital Nomad Visa	June, 2022
4 Bahamas	Bahamas Extended Access Travel Stay	October, 2020
5 Barbados	Barbados Welcome Stamp	July, 2020
6 Bermuda	Work from Bermuda Certificate	August, 2020
7 Brazil	Digital Nomad Visa	January, 2022
8 Cayman Islands	Global Citizen Concierge Programme (GCCP)	October, 2020
9 Costa Rica	Rentista visa / Digital Nomad Visa	August, 2021
10 Croatia	Digital Nomad Visa	January, 2021
11 Curacao	@Home in Curacao programme	February, 2021
12 Cyprus	Cyprus Digital Nomad Visa	January, 2022
13 Czech Republic	Zvino	January, 2020
14 Dominica	Work in Nature (WIN)	March, 2021
15 Estonia	Digital Nomad Visa, e-residency	December, 2014
16 Georgia	Remotely from Georgia	August, 2020
17 Hungary	White Card (Hungary Digital Nomad Visa)	January, 2022
18 Iceland	Long-term visa for remote work	October, 2020
19 Italy	Digital Nomad Visa	March, 2022
20 Latvia	Digital Nomad Visa	February, 2022
21 Malta	Nomad Residence Permit	June, 2021
22 Mauritius	Mauritius Premium Visa	October, 2020
23 Seychelles	Seychelles Workation Programme	January, 2021
24 UAE	Dubai's virtual working programme	March, 2021

3 The consequences of the pandemic for digital nomads

The Covid-19 pandemic was unprecedented in human history. Humanity has faced many different pandemics throughout its history, but humanity has never been as interconnected as today. The Covid-19 pandemic reduced our mobility more than anything after the second world war (Holleran & Notting, 2023). Our logistic chains are extremely well made and work on tight schedule. When something as tragic as a pandemic happens, the logistic chains feel it as well as does the people traveling around the world.

In 2020 people quarantined to prevent themselves from catching the virus. This so called “new normal” came as a shock for many and especially to those who travel a lot. Digital nomads who were already abroad before the pandemic had to choose where to stay. Many digital nomads thought that their whole lifestyle was in danger, after nations closed their borders from tourists.(Holleran & Notting, 2023)

Groups of digital nomads were created on different social media and messaging sites to contact other nomads in the same area. These chat groups would often discuss living situations, are they leaving or staying in the country and how to get help if something happens. In the beginning of the pandemic developed countries were hit much faster than some of the developing countries the nomads resided in. This made many nomads have a safe feeling and gave them hope on their future as continuing the nomadic lifestyle. Longer the pandemic had lasted more of the people that originally thought of staying, fled the host countries for developed, richer countries. (Holleran, 2022)

4 Work-life balance and digital nomadism

Individualism, freedom, and mobility are core values of digital nomads. While digital nomadism might seem like completely revolutionizing lifestyle, it doesn't have to disrupt structures that are already in place in working environment. It actually can go hand-in-hand with the more traditional structures as need for flexibility has grown in recent time. (Hermann & Paris, 2020)

Even though digital nomads might seem like tanning in the sun is their only goal when choosing the lifestyle, the lifestyle isn't for everyone. Digital nomads face challenges in their working life. Uncertainty and loneliness can cause anxiousness and stress. Challenges digital nomads can also face come also from moving between places. The social circles that might be in one place don't necessarily continue to the next place of residence.

The biggest differences between digital nomads and other groups of remote workers (telecommuters for example) are the three core values. Some other groups of remote workers have other reasons for being remote workers. A big portion of remote workers are balancing family life as a parent and at the same time their professional career. For a digital nomad whose values are individualism, freedom and mobility, family and children are not often high on the priority list. (Thompson, 2019)

These challenges have been noted by digital nomad community and also some companies. Today there are many digital nomad hubs mostly in South-East Asia. Cities such as Medelling, Chiang Mai, Ubud and Phuket host digital nomads and are destinations for like-minded individuals. Also, the rise of co-living and co-working spaces have given digital nomads the feel of social interactions humans need. These bubbles of digital nomads might have benefitting effects on digital nomads themselves, but they can also exclude local cultural aspects of day-to-day life. (Hermann & Paris, 2020)

5 Conclusions

As wireless technology has experienced a rapid growth during the last couple of years, it has opened myriads of possibilities for people who would never have even thought of becoming digital nomads. This thesis went through some aspects of digital nomad culture and their way of life. Digital nomads have been frontrunners in taking advantage of technology, possibility of remote work and travel at the same time.

Digital nomads are still largely from the richer global north that emigrate to low-cost countries. This gives them buying power much higher than locals while their living expenses are much lower than they would be in the global north. This monetary availability increases the willingness to become a digital nomad.

There is also the freedom of movement aspect. More countries do accept remote workers and grant them different visas or different ways to work in their counties. Availability to locate freely is a factor for people picking up the nomadic lifestyle. Pandemic caused by Covid-19 did limit digital nomads' freedom of movement with extra health checks and different rulings in countries on how to handle the pandemic.

Pandemic also made more and more digital nomads find online forums where they can share their experiences with other digital nomads, who were able to relate to each other's stories. This was important for some digital nomads who enjoyed the individualism the lifestyle brought, but lacked a community where they would belong. When previously you might not know other digital nomads at all, during the pandemic online communities would have great importance in sharing knowledge on different counties, how and where to go to get different information important to digital nomads and also just a forum to find belonging.

Feeling that one belongs somewhere is also an important part of digital nomad's work-life balance. Individualism and freedom to choose where, when and how to work are some of the core principals that digital nomad culture builds on. Different cities have

digital nomad communities where like-minded individuals can share their thoughts and how they are doing.

5.1 Summary of findings

Technological advancements have made working remotely easier and more suitable for individuals and companies. These advancements enable individuals' mobility and doesn't anchor them in one place at a time. This more often applies to people from global north, who have the monetary capability and strong passport to move freely. This allows digital nomads' lifestyle choice of migration.

The Covid-19 pandemic had a huge impact in normalizing remote work. This normalization made it possible for digital nomad lifestyle become more mainstream and get more notice from different governments. The online forums digital nomads were on helped them navigate the mobility restrictions caused by the pandemic. These forums also created the sense of belonging to digital nomads.

When the restrictions of movement were lifted governments started to notice digital nomads' needs to migrate and countries started launching their versions of digital nomad visas. The lifestyle was recognized as a way to work in a modern society. This acceptance from different countries also aided the positive views and helped more individuals to become digital nomads.

The work-life balance can be perceived as optimal by many digital nomads. The freedom to choose when and where to work gives an individual sense of autonomy. The self-reliance of a digital nomad can still bring stress, loneliness and uncertainty that can affect an individual. When the lifestyle blurs the lines between work and leisure, the individual's capability to adapt becomes important. Co-living and co-working spaces have helped individuals to adapt to this way of life.

5.2 Suggestions for further research

In further research, there should be more studies done on what has been the economic value for different countries that do provide digital nomad visas. If there have been economic advantages from digital nomads, is there some aspects that has been worsen. Does the digital nomad from global north have a negative effect on social network in local circles?

There should also be studies on the environmental effects of lifestyle migration. Is constant migration net positive for the globe compared to being anchored in one place? This could bring up some interesting discussions on how we perceive travel and work emissions.

Finally, studies should be conducted on how fully remotely working employees perform compared to their fully on-site working colleagues. If there are any challenges that fully remotely working individuals face or how they are perceived by their colleagues.

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