Introduction

In 1997, Tsugio Makimoto and David Manners published their future-looking manifesto *Digital Nomad* at a moment when the internet—and its possibilities—were just entering the popular imagination. The authors present a vision of how the new technology could revolutionise modern life—especially by inverting work and leisure. No longer would residential location be based on commuting distance to cubicles—workers could disperse around the globe, to more temperate climates, and work the hours they wanted, with the magic of logging on to the computer. The authors envision a lifestyle that would (eventually) spark a movement—‘digital nomadism.’ Digital nomads are location-independent workers who use their freedom from office commuting to travel internationally. While digital nomadism is a popular topic for travel blogs and business magazines, empirical research on the lifestyle has lagged behind (Thompson, 2018). This chapter explores the leisure side of the digital
nomad lifestyle; in particular, the dating and love lives of those who are constantly on the move. As digital nomads’ work-lives are dependent on and managed through technology, the parallel uses of the internet to organise their social and dating lives are explored, focusing on their use of online meet-up groups and dating websites. Using a sociological approach to explore the concept of digital nomadism, this chapter will briefly overview how the lifestyle has been defined in the academic literature. The sociological literature on family and online dating will prove useful to understand how technology has intersected with dating patterns.

This chapter contributes to the empirical research on the leisure side of the digital nomadism phenomena as well as the literature focusing on online dating applications and how these have shifted dating patterns in Western contexts. As the digital nomad participants lack a deeper connection to the locations in which they reside and search for love, online dating applications provide an easy avenue for finding potential dates. However, since their stays in any one location tend to be of a shorter duration, such relationships are also short-lived, as potential partners may be location dependent. Such dating patterns are also strongly influenced by the demographic identities of the participants, with women and LGBT individuals managing the most complex challenges as nomads. The ethnographic data is based on interviews with 38 self-identified digital nomads, or aspirants, primarily women, who were found through three conferences aimed at an (aspiring) digital nomad audience. The empirical findings of this research present a contingent lifestyle where constant travel contributes to feelings of rootlessness and loneliness. The majority of the participants were single, and this loneliness contributed to their desire to seek out a romantic companion. Participants who were already in a relationship had the most emotional support.

Digital Nomads in the Gig Economy

Digital nomads are workers whose primary employment (e.g., digital marketing, web design, and software engineering) takes place on the internet—they are ‘location independent.’ Digital nomads travel frequently; both domestically and internationally. It is difficult to estimate
the number of digital nomads, but there are some measures that can provide context. The US Bureau of Labour Statistics reported in 2014 that there are 14.4 million self-employed workers in this country (comprising roughly 10% of the US workforce). As well, the number of full-time US employees who work primarily from home has risen to over 3.3 million (cited in Garrett, Spreitzer, & Bacevice, 2017, p. 822). Such numbers of freelancers in Europe were estimated at 15% of the workforce, according to Gandini’s (2016a) research on freelancers in Milan and London. Gandini (2016a) also finds that the popular freelance website Upwork has a registered nine million users, four million clients, and one million jobs posted each year for the exchange of $1 billion dollars (loc 1224). While well-compensated technology workers are predominantly men, women comprise the aspirational social media and low-level marketing workers that make very little, if any, money. Duffy (2017) labels this ‘aspirational labour,’ which she notes, “is a mode of (mostly) uncompensated, independent work that is propelled by the much venerated ideal of getting paid to do what you love” (p. 4).

Gigs are one-time jobs that can be acquired by workers who are members of a particular employment website. Once the work is completed, the client rates the work performance and this contributes to the worker’s overall rating (Gandini, 2016a, 2016b; Gandini, Pais, & Beraldo, 2016; Luce, 2017). Gig work does not come with benefits—freelancers must cover their own retirement, health-care, and operational costs. Juliet Schor is one of the few critical sociologists examining the impacts of the gig economy on workers. According to a Pew survey that Schor and Attwood-Charles (2017) cite, “gig workers disproportionately earn less than US$30,000 annually, however, because many are in school, part timers, or not in the labour force; this is not surprising” (p. 9). This is similar to Gandini’s (2016a) findings, where his interviewees earned an average of £38,257 for London-based workers, and €32,487 for those in Milan. Gandini (2016a) also found that a significant number of workers relied on financial support from family to supplement their meagre incomes.
Digital nomads spend a large percentage of their life online—not only for work but also for leisure and love. Participants report pursuing this lifestyle to intensify their leisure, experiences, and social lives, yet a prominent emotional outcome is a sense of social disconnection and loneliness. With their isolated work-life, only relieved by co-working spaces and meet-ups, nomads have difficulty establishing community. This question of community is, of course, a central theme in sociological literature, from Emile Durkheim’s (1893/1997) concept of organic versus mechanical forms of solidarity, to Robert Putnam’s (2001) classic *Bowling Alone*.

According to Durkheim, organic solidarity arises in technologically advanced societies in which individuals are reliant on the interconnected webs of labour, supplies, and service for consumption. Alexis de Tocqueville (1835, 1840) focused on the democratising of American culture and its lively civic society organisations that brought the masses together in public forums, and yet he critiqued the homogenising process of mass culture. The liveliness of civic society at the turn of the century that de Tocqueville describes is reliant on the physical coming together of bodies in conversation with neighbours and townsfolk, not likely translated to the contemporary online forums in which nomads communicate, but still remain anonymous, apart from their constructed online personas. Contemporary theorists, such as Robert Putnam (2001, 2016), note a decline in social cohesion loosely associated with the rising neoliberal economy and precarious employment. Putnam’s writing demonstrates that this decline in community is not specific to digital nomads alone but part of the larger social context in which urban communities are becoming isolated in general, with social interactions often limited to the service economy.

Zygmunt Bauman (2000) conceptualises the post-modern era as ‘liquid’—unstable, adaptive, or combining irreconcilable differences. ‘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
neighbours all following better rules of cohabitation” (p. 92). Bauman describes this community as an idealised “short-cut to togetherness,” a grouping of people with sheer, comforting sameness (p. 99). Bauman (2000) also labels these moments of collective sameness as ‘carnival communities,’ or states that “explosive communities are events breaking the monotony of daily solitude.” Besides the outmoded aspiration towards an embodied community, Bauman makes the distinction that contemporary society is based on “their capacity as consumers,” positing our significant identity markers as nothing more than fashion objects purchased in the marketplace (p. 76). The online marketplace of dating fosters a mentality of objectifying people, another consumable item in the hyper-consumption and temporal lifestyle of the nomad, and the larger, unstable society (Bauman, 2000, p. 121; Henderson, 2014, p. 71). Bauman’s ‘carnival communities’ closely represent the ways in which digital nomads gather for a short period of time with a specific group of people, never lasting long enough to forge real connections. As digital nomads focus so much on the freedom that their remote work-life offers, it may be at the price of sacrificing social connections, especially romantic love.

Leisure, Privilege, and Power

It is important to understand how one’s demographics relate closely to homogeneous partner selection, even while travelling in different countries. Nomads’ interactions with locations are often bracketed off from local life, and the nomads remain at a distance from local culture. They overwhelmingly choose partners with demographics very similar to their own, rather than marrying local citizens. Unlike some ex-pats, who may settle in a new country and marry a local citizen, digital nomads are often looking for other travellers to join their nomadic adventures, rather than seeking a permanent home in a new location.

Nomads lack perspective on their privileged positioning within the global economy, including those based on citizenship, race, gender, dis/ability, and sexual orientation (Spracklen, 2013). In the copy written by digital nomad bloggers, one finds little recognition of these power imbalances, as they write that anyone can take up the lifestyle (Solomon, 2017).
Some nomads participate in ‘volunteer tourism’ and ‘travelling with a purpose,’ which ultimately may have little outcome other than a few selfie photos with the local people. Indeed, in their critique of volunteer tourism, Bandyopadhyay and Patil (2017) compare a key dimension of colonial tourism with that contemporary practice: travel writing. Digital nomads often capture their experiences on travel blogs with an intended audience of other nomads, tourist, and ex-pats, not the local community in which they are embedded.

Online Dating, Gender Roles, and Sexual Orientation

Online dating has quickly transformed the landscape of courtship, with large swaths of society using such websites, and yet there continues to be associations of deceit and lingering stigma with the practice (Freedman, 2011; Sautter, Tippett, & Morgan, 2010). Comedian Aziz Ansari (2016) teamed up with New York University sociologist Eric Klinenberg to interview people globally about their experiences with technologically enhanced contemporary dating, on topics ranging from sexting to cyber-cheating. Ansari’s main thesis is that people historically met their partners based on extreme proximity—they lived in the same apartment building or within a few blocks of each other (hence, the ‘girl next door’). People met through family introductions, friends, or church acquaintanceships. This data reflects historian Stephanie Coontz’s (1992) research on the history of marriage wherein she argues that throughout most of modern history, marriage was about tying socially equivalent families together, and very little to do with romantic love. With the advent of online dating, the supermarket of potential partners seems limitless, and it can create a sense that there is always someone else to ‘swipe right’ upon. Christian Rudder (2015) founder of OkCupid, uses his exclusive access to the company’s database to report the actual patterns of behaviour of the website users, not just personally reported behaviour. One of the most important findings that Rudder (2015) presents is the extreme homophilia exercised by a presumably cosmopolitan clientele.
daters wrote to potential partners who were very similar to themselves in race, religion, education, income, and even key-terms use (Skopek, Schulz, & Blossfeld, 2011). Other researchers have shown the nuances of how multiracial users maintain some benefits over their monoracial non-white counterparts in this highly racialised context in which whiteness continues to be prioritised (Curington, Lin, & Ludquist, 2015).

With each shifting new context of technological or lifestyle development, there is a hope to open the opportunity for gender equality, yet that is rarely the outcome—rather, gender norms continue to be entrenched in new ways. Rudder (2015) shows that the gender dynamics of who writes the first message follows traditional patterns of male pursuers. Pei and Ho (2008) find that Chinese women's sexual behaviour online mirrors their offline behaviour, in that they preferred “relationally-oriented activities” (p. 204). While recognising the pleasure that online dating and flirting brought to the women, Pei and Ho (2008) caution that the perspective of online dating as an equal space for women is exaggerated and ignores the embedded structural power of gender relations. Once couples are living together, gender imbalances of power in the household continue to reflect different opportunities in the home and in leisure choices. Gorman-Murray (2013) finds that gender dynamics alter the ways in which masculinity is performed within the domestic environment, by observing the spatial and embodied dynamics of men’s bodies in the home. Haworth (2014) finds that how couples can individually exercise choice in their leisure practices is highly contingent upon the couple’s negotiation and communication skills. Unequal gender dynamics continue to play out in all aspects of heterosexual coupling, from online dating, co-habitation, and selecting how one's leisure time is spent. Nomadic couples often have male partners earning more money, and therefore, leading the decision on location selection and leisure pursuits.

For gay, lesbian, and queer identified nomads, issues of coming out, and finding partners in the online environment, were prevalent, especially for lesbians. The process of coming out is an ongoing one, and in a heteronormative travel and leisure environment, reaffirming one's sexuality can be a constant process (Weston, 1991). Consideration of sexual orientation may play a role for nomads in selecting their travel itinerary as human rights protections are unevenly developed globally (Corrales,
While queerness and space may have been defined by gay neighbourhoods in past decades, the mobility of people and their interactions with locations is more fluid now, and less defined by space, but by temporal gatherings (Nash & Gorman-Murray, 2014). However, there is a correlation between the world’s richest cities and LGBT-friendly cities (Corrales, 2010).

Methodology

I began this research by attending three major digital nomad events. The first event was the third annual DNX Conference for Digital Nomads & Life Hackers in Lisbon, Portugal, on 9–10 September 2017. The DNX hosts events in both German (the founders are German) and English, thereby representing the large German digital nomad community. This event was aimed towards aspiring nomads, with speakers presenting their personal, inspirational stories, often tracing a popular narrative arch: from corporate job to digital freedom. Next, I attended the Digital Nomad Girls retreat in Javea, Spain, from 18 to 27 September 2017. As an immersive, ten-day retreat, with a full agenda, and even shared rooms, the 15 participants bonded in a way reflective of such intensive time spent together. Half of the attendees were already nomads, while the other half were aspiring. I was able to bond with, and secure interviews with, the majority of attendees—including the founder Jenny Lachs and her partner Simon. Jenny then connected me with the founders of 7in7, a conference for experienced digital nomads. 7in7 took place from 3 to 9 October 2017, in Barcelona, Spain, and attracted approximately 70 participants. The title of the conference signified that it would take place each year for seven years on seven different continents—yes, including Antarctica. I interviewed all of the organisers, many of the main speakers, and quite a few of the participants during follow-up Skype interviews over the next three months. The 7in7 conference focuses on ‘invisible nomads,’ and centres on women, people of colour, and the LGBT community.
Participant Demographic Information

There were 38 participants in this study. All of the participants were from strong passport countries, and those who had citizenship in weaker passport countries had dual passports—thus paired with a stronger one. A passport’s strength is measured by how many visa-free countries one can enter. The participants overwhelmingly spoke only English. Those who spoke two or more languages were primarily of non-English speaking national background (n = 7). Rarely did white English speakers learn a second language (n = 4). Nearly all participants bemoaned their lack of bilingual abilities, but few put sustained effort into learning another language, and instead relied on the prevalence of English in the countries they visited. Thirteen participants spoke two or more languages, and five spoke three or more. Twenty-two participants spoke only English.

Their ages ranged from 21 to 49, with the majority in their thirties. In total, 12 of the participants were in their twenties, 22 were in their thirties, and 4 were in their forties. Twenty-eight of the participants were racially white (including one Arab and two Hispanic whites). Five participants were of African descent, two were Asian, and three were mixed race Asian and white. Thirty of the participants were heterosexual, three were bisexual, and five were lesbian, gay, or queer-identified. Six of the participants were married (with two in the process of divorce), while the majority of them were single (n = 32), with ten in significant relationships. Only 1 participant out of 37 had children (now grown). Only 6 participants hoped for children in the future, with 15 unsure, and 13 were adamant to remain child-free. Only six participants held a religious identity: including one Hindu, one Muslim, and four Christians. Some qualified themselves as ‘spiritual.’

Most of the participants held Bachelors’ degrees (n = 23). Nine participants had graduate degrees (MA = 6; JD = 1; PhD = 2). Six participants did not complete college. Four had some college education, and one participant graduated with a high school degree. Half of the participants had no student debt (n = 20) and the other half had student debt (n = 18). Criminal records pose barriers for travel. Only one of the participants had a minor misdemeanour criminal charge, which had been expunged.
This study was based primarily on female participants (n = 33), in addition to interviews with five male participants.

The three empirical themes below emerged from questions based on the academic and popular literature on digital nomads, as well as dominant themes covered at the conferences and in the interviews. Open questions based on lifestyle, motivation, dating, and romantic partnerships were asked of the participants. All interviews were conducted on Skype, audio recorded, fully transcribed, and codes were developed for themes that emerged from their stories. As two of the three conferences marketed their events for demographic minorities in the community (women, people of colour, queer), identity was central for this group of participants. The majority were single women, and therefore, questions and themes in the data related to their romantic searches were coded, based on their motivation and process of seeking partners. A few nomadic couples were interviewed, and their experiences provide important lessons for single nomads who aspired to be in a partnership.

Findings: Digital Nomad Dating

Social Distancing from the Stereotype of the ‘Digital Bro-Mad’

When asking participants about dating within the digital nomad community, the first image to emerge is the stereotype of the ‘digital bro-mad’—a privileged, heterosexual white male, located on the beach next to his laptop and surfboard, and who stays in Thailand where his socioeconomic status empowers him. Such images of nomads overlap with those of sexual tourists or men seeking ‘traditional women’ (Taylor, 2001; Wonders & Michalowski, 2001) or of those acting in a ‘colonialist tourist’ manner (Bandyopadhyay & Patil, 2017). Two of the participants mentioned this stereotype in order to distance themselves from it. Nicole, a lesbian from the United States, states:

Because of the temporariness—especially for men—there is a mindset that they’re here for a good time, not to be caged in or held down by dating
someone. They are like Tinder culture. They just want to have fun, hook up at night, go to the beach in the morning, work on their business in the afternoon, and party. They are like, ‘I’m here being better than a tourist. I’m here having fun living my life and this is how I want to do it.’ There are some couples that travel together, but they are very couple-y. Then, there is a very large subsection of people who are hooking up on the road. There is not a lot of dating. I think that that informs their behaviour, they think, ‘I can treat women like shit because I’m leaving.’

Nicole found herself outside of these options as a lesbian and also as someone who was not interested in dating, but mostly looking for friendships, or at least a serious relationship developing out of an established friendship. Because of her isolation in this regard, and the continual process of coming out (Weston, 1991), she established her own queer women’s digital nomad Facebook group to meet others. For US citizen Alexis, who has worked for years in Hong Kong and other countries, this stereotype did impact her dating life, as she found herself in second place to this imagined ‘traditional’ and submissive Asian woman, from which she deviated as a Western, mixed-race Asian-white, successful lawyer, with an outgoing personality:

I find that a lot of ex-pats are really privileged, at least male expats … A lot of people move to southeast Asia and think, ‘Oh, look at me, I can do whatever I want here because all the women want a white husband.’ That really turns me off, so that’s why I don’t normally date other expats or nomads … I saw this all the time in Asia with western guys … They said when you meet an Asian woman who has been brought up in Asia, she treats you like a god who can do no wrong. It actually made dating as an expat western female hard. As a mixed-race person who has some Asian blood, I thought I would clean up with the dudes in Asia, much more so than in New York … I thought Asia would be really refreshing, but they said, ‘You are too western for me.’

None of the participants in this study presented themselves in a stereotypical ‘bro-mad’ manner where they discussed dating local women, which could be attributed to the particular conference demographics I attended, and to my identity as a female and feminist researcher.
Searching Online for an Ideal Match

The nomads who were single and looking had romantic ideals about their perfect match—someone who could travel with them and form an independent unit. Frequent travelling to new places provides nomads with an ostensibly endless supply of potential partners, reflecting Ansari’s (2016) and Rudder’s (2015) findings of the seemingly endless prospective stream of partners contributing to a selective, consumerist mindset. Marie Clark, a mixed-race Japanese/white heterosexual woman from London, who is actively looking for a partner, states:

I would love to meet someone while travelling. Somebody that can come with me to America, who shares this lifestyle. In Portugal, I met this 24-year-old typical surfer. Totally bad for me! In my head, ‘no.’ In my heart, ‘no, no, no.’ But there was an incredible attraction. In my 20s, I was very spiritual. I didn't have many experiences with guys. It was only in my 30s that I thought, ‘Right. Fuck it.’ So, yeah, it was a great experience. Kind of heart-breaking, but fun. If you meet someone, you need to commit pretty early on to be with them. To change your travel plans to be with them. I realise that I would love to be the sort of girl or person that could not get attached, but I get incredibly attached.

Marie’s potential dating partners seem to announce their interest in her just as they are leaving town, offering her nothing but missed opportunities with fleeting acquaintances. Both Alexis and Marie Clark are not using dating applications such as Tinder. Marie socialises through co-living spaces, Bauman’s (2000) ‘carnival communities’ that bring a very specific demographic grouping of people together on a ‘fun,’ curated, and temporary basis. Finding a partner within the same lifestyle was one of the biggest challenges for nomads. Many worried about finding a partner that was location dependent, and who may ask them to stop travelling. Even when finding another nomad to partner with, their travel itineraries, work commitments, and desires, may differ significantly. Only US-born Taylor specifically stated that she dates local men in Guatemala, where she has settled. But even Taylor, who speaks fluent Spanish, still spends the majority of her time with ex-pats and nomads:
I’m one of those people who is all about living like a local, even though, most of my friends are ex-pats or international. In Antigua and Guatemala specifically, the two populations that make up the city are ex-pats and native Guatemalans. They are very welcoming. I really love having Guatemalan friends. They’re kind of my vice; I need to stay away. I’ve been in way too many casual relationships.

For the majority of nomads seeking romantic relationships, they find their community—like the other parts of their lives—online. They network in digital nomad Facebook groups, attend nomad conferences, and there is even a dating site called nomadsoulmates.com. For LGBT folks, online dating is even more prevalent. American Kyrie did use Tinder during her travels before she met her current UK-born partner Hannah, another digital nomad with whom she travels. Once Kyrie partnered up, she no longer felt such a need to connect with other queer women online:

I met them on Tinder, mostly. But only like one or two people would come through Cambodia every month! It was an ongoing joke for me and my friends. ‘Oh! There’s one in town! I have a date this week!’ Dating kind of fell into my lap in Bangkok with Hannah. I am in a couple of queer nomad groups. I don’t engage much. Once you’re in a relationship, it’s a little less necessary to meet people. Before I met Hannah, I was travelling alone. She’s the longest relationship I’ve had. It’s such a contrast travelling with a person because you have your built-in community, and your built-in support system. I really enjoyed 7in7 for the fact that it has allowed me to meet a handful of queer digital nomads.

Now, instead of putting her energy into finding dating partners, Kyrie and Hannah spend their time considering which countries are more LGBT friendly. Homophobic episodes have not been a common occurrence for the couple, outside of the harassment of women on public streets. Kyrie states:

We’re pretty aware of the countries we are in, their views on GLBTQ folks, and what kind of public displays of affection are tolerated. The typical harassment of women is what we get. You come across that travelling, regardless of being queer. We were in Bangkok together, that was fine. It is
very open, you can hold hands and walk down the street. In Budapest, we wouldn’t. It is just about being aware of your surroundings.

US-based Jessa finds dating as a lesbian nomad quite challenging to navigate—both the sparsely populated queer online dating environment, as well as the responses she gets from potential partners to her lifestyle. Jessa reports:

I think part of it is just the lack of a critical mass of nomads, especially queer women nomads. Being queer reduces the dating pool by about 90%. I have been using sites like OkCupid when I’m in a location. I would get people who say, ‘I’m up for a fling.’ And, I say, ‘No. I actually want a relationship.’ Or, they would say, ‘I want a relationship. Maybe I can convince you that you don’t want to be a nomad anymore.’ So, neither of those are really great options. I have been continuously updating my profile on the sites: ‘I’m a nomad. I don’t plan to stop. I move every 2–3 months. Ideally, I am looking for somebody who wants to do that with me.’ But I’m open to the idea of having a home base.

Nicole asked her Facebook group of lesbian nomads about their dating experiences. She reports the group consensus that online dating was a challenge, if not ‘a mess’:

Basically, the consensus is that they are not necessarily meeting people through these online platforms. Or not happily. I think a lot of people have said they’ve met friends. I think a lot of people have hooked-up, but I think people aren’t going to post about that as much because it’s a public group.

Deb is a Chinese American lesbian who works in the field of medical technical writing and makes a six-figure salary each year, but works long, intense days, and balances her work with activities such as extreme mountain climbing. She has experienced both, travelling with a girlfriend for a year-long stint, as well as her current single and dating nomadic lifestyle:

Queer dating can be interesting, but also extremely challenging. You are really limited to only a few geographic areas in the world where you can really have fun as an out queer, and still get dates. Some queers avoid the
less friendly countries, but I try not to let it put me off. Maybe the Middle East is my threshold, as the laws are particularly bad, and I find the homophobia, culture, and being female a potentially challenging combination. And even then, I’m going to Uganda where there’s a ‘jail gays for life’ law and interest in a ‘kill the gays’ law. I try to balance it out with periodic stops in friendlier countries now, to be able to ‘top up on the gay,’ as I jokingly call it. For the immediate future, it looks like jaunts to less tolerant places (i.e., Uganda, Rwanda, and Kenya), are going to be interspersed with visits to Norway or Sweden, because it’s easier to get dates, I can kiss a woman in public, and I feel safe. As for the actual dating and my style of travelling, which tends to be fast, it can deter people from trying to meet me. On the other hand, if I can manage to meet up with someone somewhere, it seems like I meet more badass, interesting, and unconventional women who are more daring and risk-taking.

For LGBT nomads, such concerns as the safety and homophobic climate of national laws, as well as the ability to find a date, are more of a problem than for their heterosexual counterparts. Human rights organisations and researchers have brought attention to the uneven development of LGBT rights globally. Such organisations find uneven rights, with most of the LGBT-friendly cities overlapping with the richest world cities, and protective laws increasing in some places (e.g., South America), while violence against LGBT communities remains relatively high (e.g., Brazil) (Corrales, 2010, 2015; Thoreson, 2014).

Challenges for Nomadic Couples

Finding a partner was not the end of challenges for nomadic romance. Both partners needed to find a happy compromise between their travel itineraries, their location-independent or -dependent work contracts, and when they decided to settle down for a period or indefinitely. When I spoke with Mariza, she was married to a man whom she met while she spent several years working in Brazil:

I met my husband during the second year I was in Brazil. We were together for a couple of years. He is a programmer. … My husband ended up getting
a contract in Brazil until November of this year, so he stayed. I decided in June that I would go back and try to figure something else out with a start-up that I was working with.

Her husband’s contract grounded him in Brazil, and Mariza was less than enthusiastic to return to Brazil for the indefinite future, but she was willing to try. However, a few months later, the couple engaged in a Facebook-public divorce in which Mariza had to quickly establish residency in the state of Nevada in order to complete the divorce proceedings. Alexis has a digital nomad partner, but they travel separately and come together for shorter periods of time. She states:

I have a partner and he is in a similar situation. We have a location-independent partnership. He is based somewhere else right now and the lifestyle seems to work for us. We don’t want to totally merge, but we still love being there for each other … We’re going to Panama City in a couple of weeks. That’s going to be fun.

Gender dynamics were still prevalent with the heterosexual digital nomad couples. When the decision to go nomadic comes from the male partner, the decision is mostly affirmative, even when the female partner disagrees with the decision. This reflects the differential power dynamics related to job type and income, as the male digital nomads had more computer design employment, whereas women had much lower paid and aspirational social media gigs that provided little income to use for travel and more expensive country visits (Duffy, 2017; Gandini, 2016a; Schor & Attwood-Charles, 2017). For Marta from Poland, her boyfriend decided to become a digital nomad and resented Marta’s financial dependency on him, which strained their relationship. They temporarily broke up, only to have her submit to his lifestyle decision in order to remain a couple:

It was not my idea, to be absolutely fair. My fiancé is a real nerd—in work and life. He lives online. He started encountering articles about the digital nomad movement. We had these conversations over wine and I was always supportive. I loved travelling for holidays, but I never took it seriously. We had some problems in our relationship. I had left my job and stayed at home. That didn’t work very well for our interactions because I became
dependent on him. At some point, he decided that he was going to travel. I said, ‘I don’t want to.’ So, we broke up. It was for about 2 or 3 weeks. I decided to travel on my own. With a lot of drama, we decided that we loved each other very much and actually wanted to build a life together. We created a 1-year plan to prepare ourselves for this financially. We bought tickets a year in advance to Chiang Mai. We decided to go to a place where we will meet nomads.

For Mirtha, originally from the Dominican Republic and currently working as a computer technician, she is excited about the possibility of becoming nomadic, but her boyfriend is not. She states:

He learned about [the lifestyle] from me. He is very reluctant. He was born and raised in Barcelona. Of course, it’s something that I want, but I also love him. He’s insecure because all his clients are in Barcelona. Any time I bring this subject to the table, he is like, ‘Ah, but no. My clients are here. There is no possibility for me to work remotely.’ But he can have meetings on Skype. I would like to have a person to share this adventure with. I hope things work out and we can stay together. I understand that if it has to end because of that, then I will just have to accept it and move on.

Mirtha took time at the Digital Nomad Girls’ retreat to gather the advice of the other attendees who supported her decision to choose her nomadic freedom over her established relationship, which Mirtha was reluctant to leave.

Finally, considering the difficulties of dating as a digital nomad, many simply give up on the prospects and enjoy their curated digital nomad community, with whom they gather in popular tourist destinations. For many nomads, the lifestyle proves to be temporary, and establishing and maintaining relationships are one aspect of the challenges that pressure people to once again become location dependent. The majority of the nomads interviewed were single, only a few were (still) married, and only one-third of the unmarried nomads had significant relationships. Therefore, the challenges of an established relationship, especially those including childrearing, were a strong impediment to a nomadic lifestyle.
Conclusion

Digital nomads have adopted a lifestyle in which they attempt to blend their passion for travel with remote work. Critiques of freelance work point to its precarious nature, in which workers must bid for each small ‘gig’ or job, for which they are remunerated without benefits or security, which academics are beginning to examine. Because of this financial situation, many nomads move to affordable locations, such as Thailand, where such income can still pay the rent. The digital nomads interviewed here are primarily of the Millennial generation, and as such, at a time in their lives before they have married or have children, and they are often dating or in relationships. However, the digital nomad lifestyle does not lend itself easily for dating and establishing relationships. The participants primarily sought the company of other nomads, travellers, and expats of their own country, or those of other English speaking, developed countries—not locals in the places in which they travel. Their dating targets were of this similar demographic. Therefore, they used online meet-up groups and dating websites to find their social and romantic company. Some, like Marie Clark from the United Kingdom, utilised co-living spaces that were populated with this target demographic from which to select friends and romantic partnerships. In her case, by the time potential partners expressed interest, it was always at the end of their stay in the co-living space, and thus, a missed opportunity, falling through the cracks of both of their travel itineraries. For nomads to find a romantic partner among those of the same group was a challenge in itself. But for them to agree to travel together and harmonise their travel plans—a fast or slow pace, country selection, or accommodation type—provides a real challenge. Furthermore, finding a partner that is not remote and pressures the nomad to establish a base with them is yet another challenge. And finally, for those who eventually would like to have children, that will most likely force them to find a base, as none of the digital nomads interviewed had minor-age children (although managing such a challenge is often a topic covered at digital nomad conferences, such as 7in7 and DNX).
Conferences such as 7in7 attempt to address demographic-based inequalities inherent in the digital nomad community. Such inequality is represented by the ‘bro-mad’ stereotype—a financially secure, heterosexual white male travelling to beach resort town such as Chiang Mai, Thailand, where he can drink, surf, and indulge with local women without repercussion for bad behaviour. 7in7 advertises that its conference speakers are overwhelmingly comprised of women, people of colour, and people of diverse sexual orientations. Gender inequalities arise in the nomadic community based on the more powerful position men have with higher-paying employment and thus more power to make lifestyle decisions, whereas their female partners are often in lower-financial tier jobs that provide little security (Duffy, 2017).

LGBT folks were most likely to find community at the 7in7 conference, which addressed their specific demographic needs in the nomadic community, unlike more established conferences such as DNX. LGBT folks reported paying more attention to the social climate of homophobia in destination countries and managed their travel and self-presentation accordingly. For lesbians, they report encountering more gender-based harassment than homophobia, but they were cautious about expressing affection in certain countries perceived as less tolerant than others. As Deb expressed, she alternates her travel between intolerant and tolerant countries, so she can “top up on the gay.” LGBT folks were the most likely to rely on dating applications and websites as they were less likely to encounter other sexual minorities in the general nomad community. Nicole has established a Facebook group for lesbian nomads in order to create her own community and bring others together to network, make friends, and discuss issues specific to their concerns.

Overall, while the digital nomad lifestyle branding had the feel of a pyramid scheme being sold on popular websites, where individuals may try and sell the lifestyle via their e-books and video courses, there were many lifestyle challenges that were unaddressed—particularly around the topic of loneliness and maintaining romantic partnerships. The challenges of establishing and maintaining a long-term partnership provide an impetus for becoming less nomadic and more location-based.
References


