Digital Nomad

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Published on: May 31, 2023
URL: https://saw.americananthro.org/pub/keyword-digitalnomad
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A digital nomad is an individual whose primary employment takes place on the internet (Thompson 2018). Although digital nomads work from anywhere in the world, Chiang Mai, Thailand — with its availability of tropical leisure activities and good internet connectivity — happens to be a particularly good place to think about factors that drive individuals into digital nomadism (Reichenberger 2017, Thompson 2018, Cook 2020, Green 2020). Here, as in many other contexts, a holistic life is the ultimate objective of the digital nomads, with freedom as its centerpiece. Digital nomads define freedom as the capacity to choose between work and leisure and the ability to free oneself from the authority of the traditional workplace (Reichenberger 2017).

The journey towards a holistic lifestyle of a digital nomad begins by enacting freedom through location independence, mobility, and discipline. Their work location independent, digital nomads take control over the designation and execution of job tasks and attempt to free themselves of particular kinds of hierarchy, domination, and external evaluation that is the norm in traditional workplaces (Reichenberger 2017). Digital nomads achieve this by coproducing work schedules and expectations with their employers and limiting the work relation to project execution alone. Mobility enables them to immerse in another culture, learn new skills and be creative (Reichenberger 2017, Cook 2020). Discipline helps them be productive at work and lead to opportunities for self-development and success (Green 2020).

For digital nomads, the idea of location independence vary widely in scope with “full-time” digital nomads who live without a permanent residence for several years to “part-time” nomads who have a home-base and travel while working (Reichenberger 2017). Despite the emphasis on location independence, some studies found that digital nomads often had location-based connections at work that went beyond the direct establishment of an enterprise. As hiring local workers meant creating entrenched social relations within the local communities that went against the ethos of nomadic life, digital nomads often hired contractual workers from platforms such as Upwork and delegated piece-meal tasks to them (Green 2020).

Digital nomads imagine mobility as a progressive force that enable relative freedom and view place attachments negatively, as overbearing and threatening. In the literature reviewed, some digital nomads criticized the “statist nomad” who showed little inclination of moving on, as being trapped in a place. However, there were others who did not feel the same way about the need to move. For example, one participant had set up a drop shipping business that required an office space and coordination between clients and suppliers in different time zones (Green 2020). He had also found himself a local girlfriend and showed not only signs of making Chiang Mai a more permanent settlement, but feeling no contradiction with his identity as a digital nomad. For another participant who was an online tutor, the reason for staying put was mostly logistical since reliable Wi-Fi connectivity and insulated spaces to work was necessary for some jobs (Green 2020).

Digital nomads use their philosophy of mobility to distinguish themselves from the voyeuristic mobility of the tourist. Travelling light is considered a virtue in the digital nomadic community and they are against the
concrete and symbolic resource base of a tourist’s large backpack (Walsh and Tucker 2010). The passing tourist is distinguished from the digital nomadic community by its unceasing need to discuss and enact “work, work routines and productivity” as a fundamental benchmark of identity (Norum 2013). These digital nomads emphatically convey the work-laden nature of their identity to their friends, family and the immediate local community (Green 2020).

In the studies under review, the view of freedom among digital nomads was not static. Over a course of time, digital nomads overlooked their initial preoccupations with freedom and began to be increasingly concerned with disciplining practices. One participant who reflected on his initial years remarked that he did not have a concept of free time until “downtime” was scheduled in his daily routine (Green 2020). Discipline was categorized as externally or internally imposed. Externally imposed discipline could be in the form of deadlines which digital nomads acknowledged as volitional participation that helped in maintaining productivity. This is in contrast with internal or self-discipline. Digital nomads expressed self-discipline as an expression of freedom and self-determination. Furthermore, self-discipline was also posed against externally imposed discipline. Many digital nomads who participated in the studies worried that they were not self-disciplined enough. The idea of shifting responsibility to the personal level seemed to change the identity of the nomads. Schedules, calendars and other digital applications controlled and determined what digital nomads did with their time. With the application of disciplining tactics, digital nomads also began to distrust their own internal voices that had helped in rearranging their work lives in an internally driven manner before (Green 2020).

Digital nomads distinguished themselves from failed travel bloggers, who also called themselves digital nomads, by foregrounding work and discipline. There was a constant effort to become “successful” and the idea of entrepreneurism dominated their thoughts. For example, digital nomads constantly advertised themselves as personal mobile businesses and engaged a large portion of their time in personal branding and marketing activities besides their core job portfolio (Green 2020). For many, being present in a comfortable pleasing location increased their sense of failure when work did not come through. One participant described their inability to enjoy the beauty around them because of their preoccupation with work in the initial years (Reichenberger 2017).

In reviewing digital nomadism as a quest for work-life balance, what becomes clear is how much the search for seamlessness is defined by structure. For example, digital nomad’s autonomy to organize a day is punctuated through external and internal forms of discipline. The ability to break away from the rigid structures of work and leisure is mediated by the availability of financial, technical and social infrastructures. Location independence is tethered to those places where the logistics of working and enjoying leisure is possible at a lower cost. The freedom that mobile nomads experience by venturing into a new place is tamed by the work ethic that anchors the nomads in a social life with other nomads. However, the idea of freedom from authority that is achieved through mobility and location independence is itself reflective of the digital nomad’s position in a system that privileges some with mobility while disallowing others.


References


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