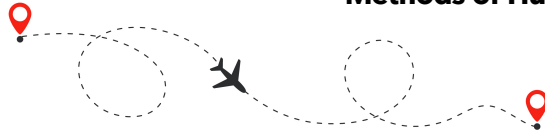




# DIGITAL NOMADS



## Introduction

Freedom, self-reliance and personal reinvention, these are terms that form the discourse of digital nomadism. In semester project at the University of Zurich we attempted to exemplify patterns behind why people become digital nomads and how they shape the discourse of their way of life. With different data collection methods such as interviews and surveys we approached the research question how digital nomads perceive their way of life and what defines them as digital nomads.

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## What are digital nomads?

The term "digital nomad" loosely describes people who live in a nomadic manner and use digital technology to make a living. Practically, this implies frequent travel over large distances and therefore readapting to work in different places all over the world. During our encounters with individuals, which are self-proclaimed digital nomads, we realized that the differences are vast, and that it is not possible to pin down a prototypical digital nomad. Apart from differences in their lifestyle, there is also a great diversity of origins:

World Regions of Origin

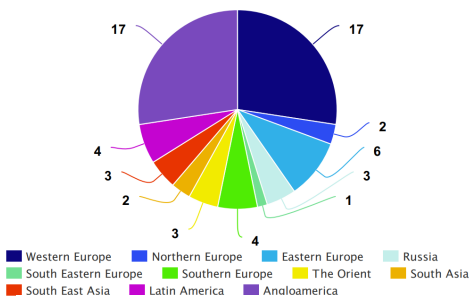


Figure 1: Digital nomads from 27 different countries filled in our survey. These were then integrated into world regions based on the concept of cultural areas (Newig, 1999) and the geographical classification provided by the Statistical Division of the UN for further statistical processing.

## How educated are digital nomads?

Our results from a survey with 60 digital nomads show that most (87,7%) digital nomads have a university degree. This points towards people of higher education being more likely to become digital nomads. The more detailed results and comments, however, indicate that this education itself is not essential for the lifestyle and the digital nomads themselves. In general, the respondents do not see the education as a key factor in becoming a digital nomad. It is reasonable to assume that the specific direction of the education is less relevant, given the decently high number of questioned digital nomads (49,2%), who are not working in the field that they were primarily educated for.

Highest Education (in %; n = 60)

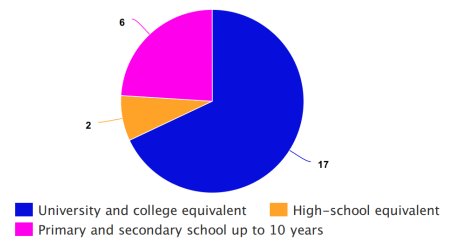
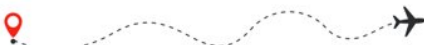


Figure 2: Answers to the question of highest education given the three categories.



Sources: Data collection by the stated authors as part of GEO242 - Methods of Human Geography FS20 Newig (1999): Das Konzept der Kulturerdteile. URL: <https://www.kulturerdteile.de/kulturerdteile/> (retrieved on 8.6.20)  
Airplane icons: <https://de.vecteezy.com/gratisvektor/airplane-dotted-line>

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## Movement patterns of digital nomads

Using the Chi-Square test on data gathered in an online survey we were able to accept the hypothesis stating that, the longer digital nomadism is practiced, the less frequently nomads move their place of residency.

The connection was strengthened by considering further results of our questionnaire. About 65% of the participants stated that over time the frequency of location changes has decreased or remained constant. On top of that, we detected a statistically significant connection between the duration digital nomadism has been practiced and the question, how the perception of the world was shaped by travelling. Less experienced nomads tend to perceive the world with a notion of diversity, while more experienced nomads more likely agree with the statement that people and places across the world resemble each other. The tendency of rather seeing similarities in the world, possibly stems from the circumstance of nomads often dwelling in cosmopolitan surroundings. Thus, a similar environment can be reproduced in any major city in the world, what in turn reduces reasons to change location and through that supports our hypothesis.

## Digital nomadism as the embodiment of flexibility

One essential property, which is a common thread to all digital nomads, arose out of the evaluation of our hourlong face-to-face interviews. It is the longing for the ultimate flexibility in their lives in terms of spatial and temporal freedom. By living digital nomadism, the structuring of everyday life by means of weekdays and vacation, that was slowly established over centuries, is redefined as an individual rhythm. The restructuring of everyday life is reflected by the way of speech when digital nomads talk about certain topics. For example when talking about the planned visit of a friend, nomads talk in spatial terms of countries and months ("In August I will be in Slovakia to visit my friend whom I met in Bolivia last year"), whereas people living a sedentary lifestyle use spatially smaller scaled words such as cities, towns and days to describe their planned visits. Sedentary lifestyle is interconnected with relatively large-scaled temporal residence at the same place and produces small-scaled spatial planning, whereas the nomadic lifestyle thinks in temporally shorter periods of residences at the same places and through that results in large-scaled spatial expression. This inverted spatio-temporal connection directly affects how relationships are lived. Friends of digital nomads are scattered all over the world. It has also become clear that these relationships are different, as "losing touch" is a common occurrence, but the connection is then reestablished.

## Conclusion and Perspectives

The diverse research results that we gathered with interviews, survey and discourse analysis show that there is not a stereotypical digital nomad in terms of background, education and field of work. The longing for a flexible structuring of everyday life is what unites digital nomads. Other than that hardly any similarities could be detected. This most likely stems from the fact, that nomads do not have to live after a rule book but try to figure out their personal rhythm. A potentially interesting research could try to identify the impact the corona-crisis (and its increase in remote working) has on the wider public interest in digital nomadism.