

A Socio-Materialistic View of Digital Nomadism

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Digital nomadism has become one of the most significant social phenomena in the last few years. Preponderance of scholarly and anecdotal evidence about the rise of digitally nomadic lifestyle and its role of transforming societies, markets, and industries suggest that this phenomenon deserve more systematic explanation. To this end, we borrow the socio-materiality theory from the field of organisation science to propose a socio-materialistic view of digital nomadism. Our conceptualization suggests that digital nomadism is best understood as a form of continuous emergent of social life of a nomad and through his or her use of digital material. The socio-materiality of digital nomadism hence offers a new view of the phenomenon as an inseparable entity that is social and material.

Defining digital nomadism

Nomads are people who move often to different locations. Traditionally, they were motivated by the need to obtain food, find pasture for livestock, or otherwise make a living. While a grey zone exists in defining nomads and migrants, nomads move more often or move continuously as a lifestyle choice (Schlagwein, 2018). Among traditional nomads, we can distinguish hunter-gatherers (moving in their search for food), pastoral nomads (moving with their livestock, such as the Bedouin) and peripatetic nomads (moving to sell their craft, such as the Sinti) (Schlagwein, 2018).

Digital nomadism departs from these traditional forms by emphasizing the central role of digital technologies and the need to seek digital freedom which is enabled by internet. In 1997,

Makimoto and Manners recognised the power of internet in transforming lives in their manifesto called “digital nomad” in which they described the future of work as:

“At the moment, we do not have the ability to communicate by video link between any two points on the planet. But we will have it, and it will be generally affordable, within ten years. We will be able to see people, documents, and pictures wherever they happen to be, from anywhere we happen to be” (p. 5f).

Fast forward 25 years, prophesy of Makimoto and Manners has turned into a global reality. Digital nomadism is the offspring of the freedom that global digital technology and its rapid advancement and widespread adoption brings about. As described by Reichenberger (2017) freedom in the information era appears “in a variety of contexts, including freedom within paid employment, freedom relating to location independence and freedom to pursue self-development” (p. 9). Digital nomads are, then those mobile laborers who seek a new mode of work-life reconciliation (Müller, 2016) by adopting a nomadic lifestyle while working remotely by leveraging digital technologies. As such, digital nomads are also called “neo-nomads,” “global nomads,” “modern nomads,” or “new nomads” (Müller, 2016).

The lifestyle of the digital nomad unifies different aspects of multi-directional technology-enabled mobility and location-independent work on a new social level that may lead to a new global culture or a universal social system (Bozzi, 2020; Ibarra & Kalich, 2022; Müller, 2016; Woldoff & Litchfield, 2021). As such, a deeper understanding of the genesis of digital nomadism is warranted. To this end, we can distinguish two forces that play pivotal role in the formation of digital nomadism: 1) digital technology 2) socio-cultural style of a nomadic life. The question is, then, how these forces come together to explain the genesis of digital nomadism?

Socio-materiality theory

The socio-materiality theory is a theory of the interaction between technology (material) and organisation of societies in which different technologies are used. This theory aims to explain the state that is simultaneously social and material in the world (Kim & Yang, 2020).

Traditionally, the distinct and direct use of technology in societies was either absent or only implicitly discussed. The separation of technology and organisation of societies was paradoxical and problematic due to the rising importance of technologies in transforming existing and shaping new social norms and structures (Jain & Srinivasan, 2022; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008; Stanko, Dahm, Lahneman, & Richter, 2022). Therefore, the socio-materiality theory gained momentum as a theoretical view that replaces the separation of technologies from societies with a fusion of them (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008). In this way, the socio-materiality perspective rests on the premise that social and technological aspects of various social systems and phenomena are interlinked and inseparable in a given context. This inseparability creates constitutive entanglement and recursive intertwining which creates unique forces for the system to adapt and evolve (Jain & Srinivasan, 2022). Therefore, a socio-materialistic view of a given social or organisational phenomenon suggests that all materiality is created, interpreted, and used based on social practice, and all social practice is affected by materiality (Leonardi, 2013). We now use this view to propose a socio-materialistic view of digital nomadism.

A socio-materialistic view of digital nomadism and why it matters

In a socio-materialistic view, materiality refers to the qualities of material agencies including all technological tools, methods, techniques and essentially all non-human elements performing specific functions. Considering this, the digital and physical aspects of a digital nomadic lifestyle form the inseparable materialistic fabric of it. Furthermore, materiality is not limited to only technical aspects of digital nomadism. The workplace and the physical environment where a digital nomad is situated and works also constitutes as components of

its material identity. The social practice is however boarder and covers all human-enabled or performed agencies or routines that make a system functions. In the context of digital nomadism, the human-centric of a nomadic life and the way a nomad organises his or her life while balancing it with work constitute social practice. These includes routines, norms, policies, communications and personal as well as professional activities that are crucial to perform jobs and sustain the nomadic lifestyle. Taken together, a socio-materialistic view of digital nomadism suggests that digital and non-digital tools and technologies as well as human-cantered agency and different policies and behaviours work in tandem to create a reconciliation of work-specific requirements with the necessary conditions of a nomadic lifestyle.

This view is important in two ways. First, it portrays digital nomadism as a complex system of social and material factors which work together in order to create a unique lifestyle. This view is, therefore, a theoretically robust approach to study different aspects of digital nomadism. Second, it offers three intertwined directions to study the formation, functionality, and consequences of adopting digitally nomadic lifestyle. These three include, the materiality side, the social practice, and the fusion of these two in the form of a unified socio-materialistic phenomenon.

Conclusion

Digital nomadism has become one of the most talked-about buzz words recently. Despite its rising popularity, little research has been done on the theoretical foundation of this phenomenon. In this short essay we used the theoretical lens of socio-materiality and proposed a socio-materialistic view of digital nomadism. We argued that the technological and social sides of digital nomadism can't be separated. We also outlined why this view matters. We hope other researchers interested in this phenomenon see benefits in this approach and build on our conceptualization to advance research on this interesting phenomenon.

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