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ALGORITHMIC RUPTURES: TIKTOK'S ROLE IN SHAPING COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES OF DIGITAL NOMADS

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Introduction

This study investigates how TikTok's socio-technical architecture shapes online narratives, focusing on digital nomads, a mobile workforce with high tech-savviness and adaptive behaviour. Blending remote work, technology, and global mobility, digital nomads embody contemporary shifts toward flexible labor and blurred boundaries between professional and personal life (Hermann & Paris, 2020). Digital nomadism reflects a novel type of transnational mobility with distinct "devotional aesthetics" (Wright-Ríos & Martínez-Don, 2024) such as geographic independence (Schlagwein & Jarrahi, 2020) and anti-office sentiment (Toivonen, 2025). Amidst this diversity, digital nomads share a robust online presence on social media platforms, engaging with platform affordances, contextual possibilities shaped by technological properties and user practices (Bucher & Helmond, 2017). By engaging with literature on Maslow's hierarchy (Maslow, 1991; Sheldon et al., 2001; Tay & Diener, 2011) and schema-consistency biases in digital environments (Geboers et al., 2024), this study situates TikTok as a critical space for examining evolving cultural dynamics in mobility.

Conceptualizing TikTok's core affordances as relatability, discoverability, and accessibility, I analyze the boundaries between various social practices inherent to the digital nomad lifestyle, such as work, tourism, migration, and pilgrimage.

This study addresses three research questions: (1) What needs and dimensions of digital nomad identity are represented on TikTok? (2) How do TikTok's affordances affect the communication of these needs? (3) How do these representations reflect cultural shifts in human mobility motivations?

Methodology

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The study adopts mixed methods and analyzes TikTok content tagged with predefined hashtags: '#digitalnomadlifestyle,' '#digitalnomad,' '#digitalnomadlife,' '#remotework,' '#travellife,' and '#workfromanywhere.' and uploaded between 2020–2025 to examine how platform affordances shape digital nomad narratives over time. Data collection utilized TIKAPI, an unofficial third-party API, and retrieved metadata (captions, hashtags, engagement metrics). The dataset comprises 11,380 video contributions.

The study combines qualitative narrative analysis of 111 TikTok posts analyzed in a previous study (Ehn et al., forthcoming) and informs the development of deductive coding prompts that guide computational content analysis assisted by Perplexity Sonar 128k LLM, which help to identify storytelling patterns across the longitudinal dataset. The model outputs are assessed qualitatively, focusing primarily on examples where the model disagrees with the human coders (Chew et al., 2023) and employ the Jaccard Similarity Index, a statistical measure to assess intercoder reliability (IRR) by quantifying the degree of agreement between human and computer coding.

Ethical considerations followed the AoIR 3.0 guidelines (franzke et al., 2020), ensuring no direct video downloads or creator identification occurred. All data collection and analysis scripts were written in Python 3.9, with detailed documentation available in my GitHub repository <https://github.com/kargam0167/TikTok>.

Results

Analyzing TikTok narratives through Maslow's framework reveals significant variation in need prioritization across four identity lenses: tourist, worker, pilgrim, and migrant.

Tourist: Digital nomads reshape traditional tourism by emphasizing esteem needs, cultural savviness, and validation through unique experiences. Creators highlight navigating new environments authentically while addressing basic needs like affordability and comfort.

Worker: Worker-oriented narratives focus on basic needs such as stable internet connections and income stability. TikTok promotes location-independent employment opportunities (e.g., e-commerce courses or affiliate marketing), reflecting desires for freedom and flexibility. Accessibility and discoverability affordances amplify practical advice that resonates algorithmically with audiences.

Pilgrim: Pilgrim narratives frame digital nomadism as transformative journeys toward self-actualization. Leveraging visual storytelling affordances, emotional captions, and compelling sequences, creators depict personal evolutions from limitation to liberation. Despite transformative themes, basic needs remain central; tourist-like attractions often introduce deeper self-reflection narratives.

Migrant: Migrant-focused content employs hashtag-driven discoverability (#bali, #mexico) to transform transient aspirations into serious migration considerations. Immersive visual snippets virtually transport users to prospective relocation sites. Unlike

tourist portrayals prioritizing esteem needs, migrant narratives balance appealing lifestyle factors with practical settlement challenges like visa requirements.

Discussion

Findings position TikTok as a negotiation space disrupting Maslow's linear hierarchy while affirming its contextual flexibility (Sheldon et al., 2001; Tay & Diener, 2011). The "of course" meme exemplifies memetic need compression, collapsing cultural adaptation (esteem need) into simplified pleasure frames rewarded algorithmically. While democratizing memetic learning through accessible replication (Geboers et al., 2024), TikTok reinforces hedonistic pleasures and sensory-rich, touristic visuals over deeper reflections on structural complexities.

Contrary to Maslow's ideal self-actualization pinnacle achieved after fulfilling basic needs (Maslow, 1991), digital nomad narratives disproportionately emphasize immediate concerns like housing affordability or leisure activities. Schema-consistency biases further reinforce relatable experiences aligning with culturally entrenched sentiments of broader audiences.

Tourist-lens content transports audiences to affordable locales; worker tutorials prioritize content about stable internet connection and compact equipment; pilgrim-themed posts cater to relatable struggles over abstract growth. Consequently, digital nomadism paradoxically pursues stability under the guise of plasticity, where creators self-censor growth needs that align with audience preferences.

Conclusions

Analyzing digital nomad online identity through Maslow's hierarchy highlights how TikTok's features reshape motivations, emphasizing struggles like food and affordable travel while obscuring self-actualization needs such as personal growth or belonging.

Social media research, however, often captures utopian projections shaped by algorithms and audience expectations. Despite these limitations, studying micro-level processes in online environments is vital to understanding macro-social phenomena in the offline world, such as how digital nomads' narratives of affordability and tourism influence public perceptions of remote work and migration. Future research should examine strategies to reclaim self-actualization from algorithmic ruptures of social media. By critically addressing the tensions between class aspirations and structural inequities on platforms like TikTok, this study sheds light on how micro-level narratives drive broader transformations in contemporary mobility cultures.

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