# NAVIGATING INTIMACY IN A MOBILE WORLD: ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS IN THE DIGITAL NOMAD LIFESTYLE

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## Introduction

Digital nomads (DNs) employ digital tools to work remotely while traveling (Gupta et al., 2024). The rise of digital nomadism is underpinned by advancements in technology and changing work paradigms (Nash et al., 2021), partly driven by changes in work patterns because of the COVID-19 pandemic (Cook, 2023). The appeal of this lifestyle lies in the combination of work and leisure, enabling individuals to experience diverse cultures, as well as enhancing their quality of life by living in locations with lower cost-of-living than the higher-cost countries where their incomes come from, the so-called geoarbitrage (Thompson, 2024). Moreover, DNs place a high value on the freedom and flexibility their lifestyle affords (Reichenberger, 2018). Despite its benefits, research has shown several challenges of digital nomadism. Although DNs often seek community among like-minded individuals, for example by using social media to connect with other DNs and locals (Miguel et al., 2025a), the fleeting nature of their lifestyle can impede the development of deep and more meaningful romantic relationships (Miguel et al., 2025b,

2025c). While DNs are predominantly single, there are also DNs who travel with partners or families (Reichenberger, 2018). Nevertheless, the trend of minimal attachments remains prevalent among DNs (Wang et al., 2018).

This paper explores how DNs navigate their romantic relationships, identifying their struggles and conflict resolution mechanisms to balance their nomadic lifestyle with the creation and maintenance of intimate bonds.[1] To achieve this aim, the following research questions guide this study: (1) How do digital nomads explain their experience with romantic relationships in relation to their lifestyle? and (2) How do DNs deal with difficulties of forming and maintaining romantic relationships? Considering DNs' "quest for holistic freedom in work and leisure" (Reichenberger, 2018, p. 364) and the challenges they face attempting to establish/maintain romantic relationships (Thompson, 2019), the paper describes the tensions between the DN lifestyle and the formation and maintenance of romantic relationships.

## Theoretical Framework

We rely on the concept of relational work (Zelizer, 2005) to investigate the efforts required, practices and interpersonal negotiations that go into establishing and maintaining romantic relationships among DNs. Relational work describes the management of social relationships and the creation of viable matches. The concept shows how intimacy and the economic sphere are not strictly separated, and neither one dominates the other. Instead, the two are closely and seamlessly intertwined in the sense of "connected lives". Zelizer's understanding of relational work is rooted in a contextual and processual perspective to economic sociology that acknowledges the importance of relational practices and foregrounds aspects such as boundary management, symbolic meanings, and exchange media for transactions (Zelizer, 2005, 2012).

Moreover, we apply the theories of inter-role conflict. DNs' inter-role conflict stands for an incompatibility between their lifestyle demands and responsibilities of romantic relationships. This perspective draws on a) the theory of personal resource scarcity stating that one's time and energy/attention are limited (Greenhaus & Powell, 2003) and b) the conservation of resources theory stating that "people strive to retain, protect, and build resources and that what is threatening to them is the potential or actual loss of these valued resources" (Hobfoll, 1989, p. 513). Accordingly, major forms of the conflict are time-, strain-, and behaviour-based (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). To navigate conflict, people employ three mechanisms: the resource drain/conservation, compensation, and segmentation mechanism (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000; Sirgy & Lee, 2018).

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[1] A full-text version of this article has in the meantime been published as a journal article. See Miguel et al. (2025c) for this version.

**Methods**

We employed a mixed methods approach (Bergin, 2018), including both ethnographic methods (participant observation and interviews) and computational content analysis from the r/digitalnomad subreddit. First, one of the researchers conducted offline and online participant observation for two months. The researcher lived in a co-living with other DNs and attended several DN meetings and, at the same time, she observed the r/digitalnomad subreddit. Second, 20 DNs were interviewed to explore their approach to romantic relationships and their dating and relationships experiences since they became DNs. Third, unstructured field data was extracted in the form of the 200 most recent publicly available posts in the r/digitalnomad subreddit to identify the main topics discussed around dating and romantic relationships among DNs. Data from r/digitalnomad was gathered via Communalytic (Gruzd & Mai, 2024) through Reddit's API from October to November 2024, with 25,960 records, including 200 submissions, 7,711 comments, and 18,049 replies from May 2018 to September 2024. Preprocessing in R removed URLs, numbers, symbols, abbreviations, and elongations. Text was tokenized, with stop words removed and lemmatization applied. Ethical considerations adhered to r/digitalnomad's community guidelines, which do not explicitly prohibit research use of public content. Identifiable information was anonymized, quoted posts paraphrased, and overly personal or distressing content omitted. Later, interview data was analysed by using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and the data from the subreddit was analysed with topic modeling (Vayansky & Kumar, 2020).

**Discussion and Conclusions**

This study shows that DNs perceive that their lifestyle heavily influences the way they relate romantically, often leading to short-term connections, as this reflects the transient nature of their way of living. Our findings support the proposition posited by Zelizer (2005) that constant negotiations of boundaries around different aspects of a relationship such as time spent together, both online and offline; financial decisions, and even the agreement around travel plans are necessary to maintain fulfilling romantic relations. The paper identifies conflict originator factors that hinder DNs' capabilities to form and maintain romantic relationships. These factors can be attitude-based (e.g., prioritizing the lifestyle over relationships), location-based (e.g., travel plans that conflict with the formation of stable romantic relations), time-based (e.g., related to choices  DNs made on how they allocate their time), and money-based (e.g., by not having  sufficient financial resources to maintain a transient lifestyle).

 DNs used different conflict resolution mechanisms, including resource conservation approaches (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000), which involve withdrawing or reducing the degree of time and financial investment in relationships if they become too demanding or if conflicts arise from their lifestyle and the relationship. Compensation strategies (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000; Sirgy & Lee, 2018) come from seeking increased satisfaction in other life domains when the romantic relationship domain does not fulfil their anticipated needs (e.g., travelling). Finally, segmentation mechanisms (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000; Sirgy & Lee, 2023) used by DNs included compartmentalizing key elements of their personal life such as finances or time. As Zelizer (2005) pointed out, people in intimate relationships may purposefully separate finances to manage the

tensions between economic and romantic commitments. This separation is not necessarily a denial of intimacy but a practical strategy to preserve both financial autonomy and relational harmony. Travel/mobility planning was also an important conflict-resolution strategy for couples. In terms of strategies to establish romantic relationships, we found that DNs attended DN events and group activities organised via social media groups to connect with fellow DNs, as many believed that finding a partner who was a fellow DN would be ideal to keep their lifestyle and not to have to reduce their mobility patterns (as opposed to dating a non-DN). DNs also engaged with locals via dating apps, however, this posed some challenges, as it was recognized by many participants that cultural norms varied on how dating activities were performed, as well as the expectation of the other party.

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