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The Identity of Digital Nomads: A Consumption Perspective

U. G. A. C. Kavindi Abeysundara^a, Dinuka Wijetunga^b

^a Faculty of Management & Finance, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka

^b Department of Marketing, Faculty of Management & Finance,
University of Colombo, Sri Lanka

Abstract

Digital nomads are a distinct group within the current context of constructed identities and mobile lifestyles. Although prior research has examined their identity through mobility and work frameworks, limited attention has been paid to consumption as a central dimension of identity formation. Addressing this gap, this conceptual paper develops three propositions to theorize how consumption practices shape the digital nomad identity. Drawing on Bauman's theory of liquid modernity and Bardhi and Eckhardt's framework of liquid consumption, it argues that digital nomads engage in ephemeral, access-based, and dematerialized consumption patterns aligned with mobility and minimalism. Though practices such as geotagging, temporary housing, and reliance on digital infrastructures serve as markers of identity, they also expose tensions between espoused minimalist ideals and digital nomad consumption practices. By applying liquid consumption concepts to digital nomad identity, the paper contributes to advancing discussions on digital nomadism, liquid consumption, and materialism in contemporary consumer research.

Keywords: Digital Nomadism, Liquid Consumption, Identity Construction, Minimalism, Materialism

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 kavindiabeysundara@gmail.com  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5022-3830>

Introduction

Digital nomadism is a distinct lifestyle (Bozzi, 2020) encompassing complex projects of identity construction, placing identity in the nexus of blurred lines between location-independent digital work, leisure and travel (Luise, 2022; Prester, 2019, 2023), that exemplifies the contemporary fluid processes of identity construction (Bauman, 2000). Identity, as a concept, has been an evolving subject of interest within various academic disciplines, including sociology, psychology, and cultural studies. Although historically, the notion of identity began with a primary focus on the ‘self’, this discourse has significantly evolved, reflecting the complex interplay between individual agency and societal structures (Belk, 1988). The static, somewhat deterministic view of ‘self’ has long been challenged with a more fluid and dynamic ‘constructed’ nature identity proposed by many scholars (Dunn & Castro, 2012). For example, metaphors such as the vagabond, tourist and the player, used by Bauman (1996) characterize the fragmentation and temporariness of ‘constructed’ identities of the late modern times.

The shift in identity dynamics is further shaped by technological advancements and the rise of digital media, which have revolutionized the way identities are formed, maintained, and expressed (Sharifonnasabi et al., 2019). Furthermore, the concept of lifestyle mobilities, as coined by Cohen et al., (2013), emphasizes that contemporary identity is deeply intertwined with physical movement in search for meaning and self in a transient world (Cohen & Cohen, 2017). Lifestyle mobilities offer a form of existence where movement and change are central elements (Cohen et al., 2013), facilitated by the global flow of people, information, and capital, which has dismantled traditional barriers to movement and interaction. This era of globalization and technological innovation has led to more flexible, transient, and decentralized modes of living, profoundly impacting how identities are perceived and enacted (Almeida & Chase-Dunn, 2018). In this broad context, the focus of this paper is the identity construction of Digital Nomads, a distinct group that exemplifies this mobile lifestyle (Bozzi, 2024).

With the acceleration of technological growth and globalisation along with the growth of popularity and accessibility of lifestyle mobilities, this group, who blur the boundaries between work and leisure (Cohen et al., 2013) have been growing steadily (Cook, 2023). Digital nomads, as cosmopolitans at heart, engage in continuous short-term relocation and increasing disentanglement from the locations they roam, both

socially and culturally (Cook, 2023). Their lifestyle centres on mobility and a liminal state distinguished by location-independence emerging as “an essential component of their possibility for self-expression” (Mancinelli, 2020, p. 426). Rooted in the manifesto illustrated by Tim Ferris in his best-selling book *The Four-Hour Work Week* (2007), the digital nomad identity is characterized by the depiction of their escape from the “9-5 cubicle back home” (Cook, 2023, p. 46) and attempts to follow a minimalist lifestyle (Hannonen, 2020). The identity of digital nomads is far from static; rather, it is continuously performed and enacted through everyday actions and interactions across various social contexts. Prester et al. (2023) underscores the dynamic nature of digital nomad identity as a process of ‘becoming’, shaped by the interplay of social, technological, and contextual factors in unsettled work environments.

The existing literature on digital nomad identity predominantly explores its connection to worker identity, positioning digital nomads as high-skilled professionals who embody a distinct sense of self intertwined with personal freedom, mobility, and a strong reliance on digital tools (Cook, 2023; Orel, 2020; Prester et al., 2023). However, it is well established that the current society is a “consumer society” (Lee, 2000, p. ix), where “core social practices and cultural values, ideas, aspirations and *identities* are defined and oriented in relation to consumption rather than to other social dimensions such as work or citizenship, religious cosmology or military role” (Slater, 1997, p. 24, emphasis added). This indicates it is useful to examine the role played by consumption in the identity construction practices of digital nomads, too.

Literature bears evidence that consumption does play a role in the identity construction work of digital nomads (Benson & O’Reilly, 2018; Hannonen, 2020; Rainoldi et al., 2025). For example, while possession and accumulation of consumption objects have been central to identity construction in the consumer society (Belk, 1988, 2020), digital nomads position themselves in direct opposition to these dominant patterns, aligning with values of minimalism (Kannisto, 2016), escaping from materialistic values and resisting the demand increasing calls of market capitalism (Wang et al, 2019). Further, while traditionally, ownership of luxury homes has been used as a status marker (Wei et al., 2017) in identity construction projects, digital nomads, whose identity is linked with ‘mobility’ utilize alternative modes of consumption signals such as geotagging “the right amount of ‘cool’ places” (Bozzi, 2020, p. 9) they have visited. Although such consumption practices are mentioned in the literature, this is an under-explored dimension.

This paper contributes primarily to the increasing body of literature on digital nomads by extending the discussions on the identity construction of this group to incorporate the consumption dimension and providing a more formal, focused theorisation of this dimension. For this purpose, we will draw broadly on Bauman's (2000) notions of liquid society and, within that broad framework, Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2017) liquid consumerism concepts. The basic premise of the liquid society is the shift from a stable world governed by fixed institutions, traditions, and norms to a liquid modernity characterised by impermanence and constant transformations in relationships, identities, and social structures (Bauman, 2000). Central to Bauman's concept of liquid modernity are the pervasive elements of change, uncertainty, and transience, which inspire every facet of contemporary life (Garrett, 2012). The fluid nature of digital nomad identity construction, briefly noted above, aligns with Bauman's (2000) discussions of how individuals grapple with these liquid conditions of society. More recently, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) introduced the concepts of 'liquid consumption', which provides the tools to understand, among other things, "why and how consumers sometimes do not want to own things" (p. 2). Many of the consumption practices of digital nomads discussed in the literature, diffused as they are, lend themselves to be conceptualised through the concepts of 'liquid consumption'. For example, the practice of geotagging, mentioned previously, is a form of 'Dematerialization' (a characteristic of liquid consumption, Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017), where experiences have become more closely related to self than possessions.

By using liquid consumption, this paper also contributes by delineating the theoretical discussions of liquid consumption, linking some specific empirical evidence from digital nomad literature, and drawing out some interesting implications. For example, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) conceptualise liquid consumption as having "low relevance to self" (p. 7), placing identity in the realm of solid consumption. However, this paper will demonstrate that liquid consumption plays an important role in the construction of digital nomad identity.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. We begin with a short discussion of the current conceptualisation of the digital nomad identity to showcase its limited focus on consumption practices. This section ends with an explanation with how this paper will approach the consumption-based conceptualisation of this identity. The next three sections present three propositions: the first one proposes that Bauman's

(2000) principles of ‘liquidity’ are appropriate as a broad setting for examining, the consumption patterns of the digital nomads; the second proposes that digital nomads engage in the three ‘liquid’ consumption practices of *ephemerality*, *access* and *dematerialisation* in identity construction, and the third proposes that although liquid consumption facilitates a nomadic lifestyle with fewer possessions, it leads to some tensions and contradictions with the espoused minimalist ethos of the digital nomad identity. The propositions are followed by the theoretical contributions and practical implications of the paper. We conclude by presenting some avenues for further research ensuing from our discussion.

The Digital Nomad Identity

Digital nomadism represents a specific manifestation of lifestyle mobility in current society. The term ‘digital nomad’ was introduced by Makimoto and Manners in 1997 and has since gained recognition as a social phenomenon (Müller, 2016). Digital nomads are characterized as people on the move, without permanent homes, who travel without fixed rules for how long they should stay in a place, moving from one location to another while making their living online, bringing their jobs with them wherever they go (Green, 2020; Mancinelli, 2020; Thompson, 2018, 2021; Woldoff & Litchfield, 2021).

Research by Prester et al., (2023) underscores the dynamic nature of digital nomad identity as a process of ‘becoming,’ shaped by the interplay of social, technological, and contextual factors in unsettled work environments. Further studies highlight the fluid and transitional nature of digital nomad identities, characterized by a liminal state in which individuals navigate tensions between work autonomy and stability, as well as between leisure and professional responsibilities (Luise, 2022). This dynamic identity construction involves ‘identity play,’ where digital nomads experiment with potential selves rather than adhering to fixed roles (Hannonen et al., 2023). Embracing the digital nomad lifestyle becomes a reflexive project, where individuals actively construct their identities in response to existential conditions, often driven by dissatisfaction with traditional corporate careers (Campbell et al., 2020).

Literature conceptualizes this identity primarily as performative rather than fixed, with Prester et al., (2023) emphasizing how digital nomads enact identity through ongoing travel and blending work with social life. Digital nomad identity challenges traditional employment relationships by prioritizing autonomy and self-determination

(Tiberius et al., 2024), while simultaneously evolving to include hybrid forms such as “corporate nomads” who maintain traditional employment while adopting nomadic practices (Marx et al., 2023, p. 2). This identity is further characterized by the integration of work and lifestyle, project-based orientations creating a “projectified self” (Başaran, 2025, p. 2), and technological mediation that shapes both work practices and identity performance.

Thus, the identity of digital nomads is fluid, emergent, and continuously negotiated within mobile, technologically mediated contexts (Mancinelli, 2020; Prester et al., 2019). A central feature of digital nomad identity construction is the blending of professional and personal spheres. Rather than maintaining traditional boundaries between ‘work’ and ‘life,’ digital nomads engage in what Prester et al., (2019) describe as ‘workliving’ practices, where identity is not anchored to organizational affiliations but enacted through everyday activities and choices across geographically dispersed settings. This constant reassembling of self-concepts, mediated through digital infrastructures, highlights the performative and situated nature of identity among nomads (Nash et al., 2018).

Beyond the blurring of work-life boundaries, identity construction among digital nomads also involves deliberate acts of self-narrativization (Cook, 2023). Digital nomads often curate life stories that emphasize freedom, adventure, and self-determination; narratives that are continuously adjusted in relation to changing environments and audiences (Thompson, 2018). These autobiographical projects are not merely personal but deeply relational, shaped by collective imaginaries circulating within online communities (Korpela, 2019).

The evolution of digital nomad identity reveals significant tensions and challenges, including what Marx et al., (2023), through the Identity Work Theory, term ‘the flexibility paradox’ between individual freedom and organizational constraints, and the navigation of multiple contradictory identities across different work contexts. Cook’s (2023) taxonomy distinguishes five types of digital nomads (freelance, business owners, salaried, experimental, and armchair), reflecting the diversification of this identity beyond its original conception. Digital nomads must perform their identity in ways that accomplish both “a coherent sense of self” and “a recognisable form of identity for others” (Prester et al., 2023, p. 443), particularly challenging when operating outside traditional organizational structures that typically provide identity validation.

Existing research has thoroughly examined various aspects of digital nomad identity, including tourism and travel motivations (Richards, 2015), working identity and remote work practices (Wang et al., 2019), co-working space usage and community formation (Chevtavaeva & Denizci-Guillet, 2021; Orel, 2019), and the negotiation of mobility and place attachment (Cook, 2020). Despite this growing body of literature on digital nomad identity through frameworks of identity performance (Prester et al., 2023), liquid modernity (Ahuja et al., 2020), and identity work (Cook, 2023), there remains a notable opportunity to explore this identity from a consumption perspective.

Emerging research suggests consumption practices play a significant role in digital nomad identity formation, with studies showing digital nomads engage in distinctive consumption patterns characterized by temporality, access over ownership, and dematerialization (Hannonen, 2020; Rainoldi et al., 2025). Evidence from Benson and O'Reilly (2018) demonstrates that digital nomads engage in consumption of experiences rather than material goods, using these experiences as identity markers, while Kannisto (2016) notes that digital nomads develop alternative consumption practices aligned with values of mobility, minimalism, and experience-seeking. There is also an ideological dimension of their identity related to consumption. They espouse a minimalistic approach to consumption, positioning themselves against the consumerist, materialistic tendencies of contemporary society (Atanasova & Eckhardt, 2021; Woldoff & Litchfield, 2021) and the push of market capitalism towards increasing demand (Wang et al., 2019) However, these observations related to consumption are diffuse and have not been comprehensively discussed or theorised.

This paper makes a more holistic conceptual examination of the place of consumption in digital nomad identity construction. Consumption practices have long been recognized as fundamental to identity construction in consumer research (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Belk, 1988), serving as vehicles through which individuals express values, signal group membership, and construct narratives of self. For digital nomads, whose lifestyle necessitates distinctive approaches to possession, materiality, and consumption experiences, understanding consumption practices is particularly important for comprehending identity formation. While focusing on consumption, in keeping with previous discussions on the identity of digital nomads (see, for example, Bonneau et al., 2022; Prester et al., 2023), we assume it to be an ongoing process or construction. We treat consumption in a broad sense, including daily consumption activities, those related to work (such as the consumption of a

computer) and leisure consumption. Since there is significant overlap between work, leisure and travel in the digital nomad lifestyle and identity (Rainoldi et al., 2025; Prester et al., 2019), we believe this broad approach is best. Finally, we approach the identity construction work of digital nomads in their consumption practices from an individual perspective. Although the digital nomad identity has been recognised as a collective identity with shared norms and narratives (Bozzi, 2024; Korpela, 2019), the construction of this identity is essentially an individual project (Ahuja et al., 2020; Prester et al., 2023). Given that this is a group of people that is constantly on the move, this is inevitable, although there are methods they use to ‘commune’ with like-minded others both physically and virtually (Rainoldi et al., 2025). Therefore, we believe an individual approach to consumption choices is warranted.

We theorise the consumption dimension of digital nomad identity using ‘liquid society’ as a broad theoretical platform and ‘liquid consumption’ as a narrower theoretical framework within it. Bauman’s (2000) concept of liquid modernity provides an overarching framework for understanding the fluid, unstable nature of contemporary social life, particularly relevant to the digital nomad experience, while Bardhi and Eckhardt’s (2017) concepts of liquid consumption, defined as “ephemeral, access based, and dematerialized” (p. 582), offer a valuable lenses to examine how digital nomads’ consumption practices contribute to identity formation.

Positioning the Digital Nomad Identity within the Concept of ‘Liquid Modernity’

Bauman’s (2000) concept of ‘liquid modernity’ provides an apt theoretical framework for understanding the paradigmatic shift in the discussion of identity from being viewed as a stable construct tethered to fixed social structures (Jenkins, 2000) to a more dynamic, continuous reconfiguration (Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 2011). Liquid modernity describes a move from a stable world governed by fixed institutions, traditions, and norms to one characterized by impermanence and constant transformations in relationships, identities, and social structures. Central to this concept are the pervasive elements of change, uncertainty, and transience, which inspire every facet of contemporary life (Garrett, 2012). As articulated by Atkinson (2008), the fluid nature of this era not only fosters new freedoms but also undermines the traditional bonds that provide a sense of security.

In liquid modernity, identity itself becomes a project marked by extreme individualization, where people are continually tasked with shaping their own identities and are held accountable for their actions in a rapidly changing world (Atkinson, 2008; Garrett, 2012). Bauman's (1996) analogy of moving from pilgrim (modern) to tourist (postmodern) vividly illustrates this transformation. The pilgrim, representing the modern identity, embodies stability and structure with a clear end goal, while the tourist, alongside other postmodern characters like the stroller, the vagabond, and the player, symbolizes identities marked by fragmentation, temporariness, and opposition to fixed definitions (Bauman, 1996). In postmodern society, individuals are no longer bound by fixed social roles or identities. Instead, they navigate through an array of lifestyle choices, embracing multiplicity and change. Identity becomes a project of continuous self-reinvention, influenced by global culture, media, and technology (Bauman, 1996; Firat et al., 1995).

These changes have also been facilitated by the demolition of traditional barriers to the movement of people, information and capital, resulting in more liquid forms of lifestyles such as lifestyle mobilities (Cohen et al., 2013). While a lifestyle is considered a "relatively stable pattern of organising everyday life" (Bögenhold, 2001, quoted in Cohen & Hannonen, 2026, p. 116), the linkage with mobilities - making life on the move a part of the everyday organisation of life - makes these lifestyles more liquid. Digital nomadism is increasingly recognized as one such lifestyle mobility (Cohen & Hannonen, 2026; Hannonen, 2020). Digital nomads are distinguished from other mobile populations, such as business travellers, migrants, backpackers, and expatriates, by their engagement in migration as a means of self-actualization and pursuit of well-being through what Mancinelli (2020) describes as an "anti-modern escapist project" (p. 421). This involves continuous self-reflection on life before and after migration. For digital nomads, the 'good life' they seek stands in contrast to perceived shallowness, materialism, consumerism, risk, uncertainty, and insecurity of modern Western-centric lifestyles (Atanasova & Eckhardt, 2021).

The identity of digital nomads discussed above embody the principles of liquid modernity through their geographical mobility, flexible work arrangements, and rejection of traditional place-bound identities (Müller, 2016). Like the fluid nature of liquid modernity itself, digital nomads embrace transience and impermanence, constantly redefining themselves through movement and adaptation to new environments (Nash et al., 2021). Their identity is not anchored to a specific location

or community but is instead constructed through experiences, mobility, and the ability to connect digitally across geographical boundaries (Reichenberger, 2018). These characteristics, as well as others such as the blurring of boundaries between work and living (Prester et al., 2019), performing identity through lifestyle choices (Prester et al., 2023), and the narrativization of identity emphasising freedom, adventure and self determination (Thompson, 2018) are all emblematic of the construction of “a heterogeneous – and ephemeral, volatile, incoherent, eminently mutable – identity” that Bauman (2000, p., 29) discussed. Further, the prominent ‘location independence’ of this identity exemplifies the “extraterritoriality” or the identity of deliberately ‘not belonging’ to fixed localities that Bauman (2000, p. 29) discusses in relation to liquid identities.

Thus, the emergence of digital nomadism and their identity construction represent profound manifestations of the broader societal shift toward liquid modernity described by Bauman (2000). This is also reflected in their consumption patterns. The present-day lifestyle is intrinsically intertwined with consumption patterns and choices (Featherstone, 2007). Digital nomads, through their lifestyle choices, exemplify the ‘lightness’ that Bauman (2000) associates with liquid modernity: the ability to move quickly, adaptability to changing circumstances, and avoiding long-term commitments that might restrict future possibilities (Mancinelli, 2020). Their lifestyle choices and consumption patterns reflect a fundamental transformation in how contemporary individuals relate to possessions, experiences, and identity construction in an increasingly fluid global landscape. Digital nomads’ consumption practices such as temporality, access over ownership, and dematerialization (Hannonen, 2020; Rainoldi et al., 2025), consumption of experiences rather than material goods, using these experiences as identity markers (Benson & O’Reilly, 2018), all provide evidence for consumption patterns aligned with values of mobility, minimalism, and experience-seeking (Kannisto, 2016). Not only do these consumption practices align with Bauman’s arguments of how contemporary individuals engage in identity ‘projects’ (Bauman, 2007), but also with the ‘lightness’ associated with liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000).

General consumption patterns and the consumer security derived from them are intricately tied. Digital nomads’ relationship with consumer security represents a particularly revealing aspect of their liquid consumption practices. Atanasova’s (2021) research on liquid consumer security among digital nomads demonstrates how

they develop alternative security strategies that prioritize flexibility and adaptability over traditional stability-based approaches. Rather than seeking security through permanent housing, stable employment, or extensive insurance coverage, digital nomads often construct security through diversified income streams, transnational banking arrangements, and global mobility itself (Mimoun & Bardhi, 2021). This reconceptualization of security reflects what Atanasova et al., terms a liquid security logic (2023) that aligns with the broader principles of liquid consumption while addressing the practical challenges of a mobile lifestyle.

Therefore, recognising this broad alignment with the digital nomad identity construction with the concepts of liquid society proposed by Bauman (2000), and liquid consumption within it, we present our first proposition as,

P1: Digital nomads construct their identity through liquid forms of consumption.

Liquid consumption and digital nomad identity

As individuals who deliberately construct their identities through mobility, flexibility, and technological connectivity, digital nomads embody consumption practices that align remarkably with the liquid consumption framework developed by Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017). This framework conceptualizes consumption along a spectrum with solid and liquid endpoints. The solid end features endurance, ownership-based, and material forms of consumption, where value resides in long-standing possession and attachment to objects. In contrast, the liquid end, characterized by *ephemerality*, *access-based consumption*, and *dematerialization*, prioritizes flexibility, adaptability, and detachment. This theoretical perspective problematizes traditional marketing approaches where ownership has been a foundational premise (Lamberton & Goldsmith, 2020) and captures the shift toward consumption patterns that value utility and freedom over permanent possession. Digital nomads, with their mobile lifestyles and distinctive consumption practices, exemplify this liquid end of the spectrum.

Digital nomads navigate a complex consumption terrain that prioritizes mobility and adaptability over permanence and stability. Atanasova et al., (2023) observe that digital nomads develop distinctive consumption strategies that enable their mobile lifestyle while simultaneously expressing their values and identity. These strategies manifest across various domains from housing and workspace to technology and personal possessions, creating a consumption profile that stands in marked contrast to

traditional, place-bound consumption patterns. The nomadic approach to consumption is characterised not by the accumulation of material goods but by the strategic acquisition and shedding of possessions based on their utility in supporting mobility and remote work capabilities (Atanasova & Eckhardt, 2021).

The temporal orientation of digital nomad consumption reveals a distinctive relationship with possessions and experiences. The key characteristic of *ephemerality* in liquid consumption is that “the nature of consumers’ relationships to objects, services, and experiences, as well as the value derived from them, can be temporal and particular to a specific context” (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017, p. 4). In other words, any attachment to products, services or experiences is fleeting and context-specific. This is strongly evident in the consumption patterns of digital nomads. Unlike traditional consumers who often acquire goods with long-term ownership in mind, digital nomads typically approach consumption with a present-focused temporality that emphasizes immediate utility over enduring value or symbolic attachment. For example, digital nomads often sell (Bozzi, 2024) or rent out their homes and domestic possessions to avail themselves of the freedom to travel. Along with affording them the practical freedom to travel, this move is also as much a symbolic gesture of a lifetime commitment to the nomadic lifestyle and identity (Woldoff & Litchfield, 2021). In terms of other possessions, nomads tend to form only a situational attachment to products and services and often value them for their immediate use-value (Luise, 2022). For example, one digital nomad research participant states that she prefers to stay in Airbnb apartments because “You always know you’re going to get roughly the same wi-fi quality and decent bed and all that. So it’s a really nice way to have stability when your environment is changing so often.” (Prester et al., 2023, p. 450).

Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) state that ephemerality becomes salient in non-ownership contexts. Digital nomadism is one such instance since minimalism is a key dimension of the digital nomad identity (Hannonen, 2020; Kannisto, 2016; Woldoff & Litchfield, 2021). On the one hand, a life of permanent mobility necessitates a minimalist lifestyle – the quantity of possessions limited to what can be carried in airline baggage allowances (Hannonen, 2020). On the other hand, most digital nomads also subscribe to an ethos of minimalism, positioning themselves against what they consider as an oppressive materialistic lifestyle (Woldoff & Litchfield, 2021), and in resistance to the market economy’s push for high levels of demand (Wang et al., 2019).

The minimalist ethos manifests in various consumption domains, from physical possessions to digital tools. Atanasova and Eckhardt (2021) observe that digital nomads frequently articulate their identity through the deliberate limitation of material possessions, emphasizing quality over quantity and utility over abundance. The symbolic significance of minimalism extends beyond practical considerations, functioning as what Thompson (2018) describes as a form of conspicuous non-consumption. By visibly rejecting material accumulation, digital nomads signal their membership in a community that values freedom, mobility, and experiential richness over material wealth. This performative aspect of minimalism is particularly evident in digital nomads' social media presentations, where images of streamlined backpacks, capsule wardrobes, and uncluttered workspaces serve as visual markers of the digital nomad identity (Bozzi, 2020). Through these representations, minimalism becomes not just a practical approach to consumption but a central component of digital nomad identity construction.

Closely related to ephemerality is the liquid characteristic of *access* over ownership, which emerges as a central theme in digital nomad consumption practices. "Access consists of transactions that can be market mediated but where no transfer of ownership takes place" (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017, p. 17). Practices such as renting or using public services instead of privately owning products and the participating in the sharing economy as consumers, such as ride-hailing and using shared accommodation such as Airbnb (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012), are examples of access-based consumption. Rather than accumulating permanent possessions, digital nomads frequently prioritize temporary access to goods and services through sharing economies, subscription services, and rental arrangements (Cook, 2023). Widmoser and Schwarz (2024) observe that this preference for access-based consumption allows digital nomads to maintain the flexibility and mobility that define their lifestyle while still meeting their material needs. This shift from ownership to access manifests across various consumption domains, from transportation (ride-sharing services rather than vehicle ownership) to entertainment (streaming services rather than physical media collections) to professional tools (software subscriptions rather than permanent licenses, Hannonen, 2020; Zerva, 2023). Through these access-based consumption practices, digital nomads maintain functional capabilities while avoiding the anchoring effect of extensive material possessions (Rainoldi et al., 2025).

Traditionally, identity has been strongly linked to geographic locations (Ahuja et al., 2020), of home (Özgün & Uluengin, 2025) or work (Prester et al., 2023). In contrast, the identity of digital nomads is location independent, and they celebrate it. Their access-based consumption approaches both the living and work spaces is an important aspect of this identity, in which co-living and co-working spaces play a key role (Lee et al., 2019). This is demonstrated in the following quote:

When we asked coworking space owners about nomads' perceptions of community transience, they confirmed that up to half of their monthly members are only there for a month and do not renew membership for a second consecutive month. In fact, nomads love to joke that the first thing they ask a new person is: "How long are you staying?" ... Nomads' value for freedom translates into an acceptance that one can never be certain how long they or anyone else will be around, and their ethos normalizes and celebrates community fluidity. (Woldoff & Litchfield, 2021, p. 109)

Performing the digital nomad 'work' identity involves a continuous cycle of accessing spaces that allow them to set up their personal digital infrastructures as they move between temporary workspaces like cafes and coworking spaces. There are now service providers, such as WeWork (Ahuja et al., 2020), who provide such temporary workspace at varying prices. Further, the access-based consumption of workspaces provides a physical stage for performing the digital nomad identity to external audiences, particularly on social media. Nomads frequently post images of themselves working from cafes, pool sides, or trendy coworking spots to connect remote work freedom and connectedness (Bozzi, 2020). Uploading pictures of their "office of the day" to social media is a key aspect of their identity construction (Woldoff & Litchfield, 2021, p. 144)

The third element of liquid consumption *dematerialization* is also closely linked to the previously discussed two elements. Dematerialisation refers to providing the same level of functionality using fewer or no materials (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). They identify digitalisation of many consumption products such as art, music and information, and the consumption of experiences as opposed to material possessions as key dimensions of dematerialisation. Both these can be observed in the lifestyle and identity work of digital nomads. To begin with the digitalised aspect of consumption, Jarrahi et al., (2019) observe that digital nomads develop

sophisticated personal knowledge management systems that prioritize cloud-based storage, digital documentation, and virtual collaboration tools over physical alternatives. This preference for digital over material resources extends beyond work tools to encompass various aspects of daily life, from reading material (e-books rather than physical books) to financial management (digital banking rather than physical documentation) to social connections (virtual communities rather than place-bound relationships, Ahuja et al., 2020; Chevtaeva & Denizci-Guillet, 2021; Hermann & Paris, 2020; Mancinelli, 2020). This systematic dematerialization of consumption through digitalization enables the geographical mobility that defines the digital nomad lifestyle and identity.

In addition to the replacement of physical consumption objects with digital ones to facilitate the mobile lifestyle that is the hallmark of their identity, digital nomads also engage in other dematerialised digital forms of consumption to construct their identity. In the consumerist culture, ownership of products is symbolic of identity and status; however, among digital nomads, there are dematerialized forms of consumption utilised in identity marking. For example, usage of hashtags on Instagram such as #digitalnomad, #travel, #remotework, #entrepreneur, #workandtravel, #laptoplife, and #freelance as identity labels is a common practice (Bozzi, 2020). Even the previously discussed practice of sharing pictures of working from cafes and pool sides (Bozzi, 2020; Woldoff & Litchfield, 2021) is a dematerialized form social media consumption utilized in identity construction.

Finally, for digital nomads, there is a shift in consumption from material accumulation to ‘collectable experiences’ where status is signalled through travel, cultural immersion (Cook & Hannonen, 2026), and social media representations (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). Nomads often consume ‘sociality’ itself; for example, they attend business events not for networking, but to consume the feeling of being members of the egalitarian nomad community (Luise, 2022). Luise (2022) quotes one digital nomad that exemplifies the ritualised identity performance to ‘feel belonging to the community’:

In the first weeks in Chiang Mai, I used to go to business events. I was interested in knowing...feeling part of a broader community of people I admired. Moreover, I dedicated my time to meditation practices and yoga. Once, I went to a meditation retreat near a waterfall. We ate and slept in a hut in the forest. (pp. 218-219)

Digital nomads also ‘collect’ exotic experiences (in the manner consumers usually collect consumption objects), such as “eating Thai street food at the Saturday night market, having a chat with a monk in a Buddhist temple about how to find spiritual consciousness, [and] walking through the forest with the elephants” (Luise, 2022, p. 220). In addition to enjoying these exotic experiences, digital nomads are proud of the number of exotic places they have visited and actively collect passport stamps to new places they have visited (Woldoff & Litchfield, 2021). Further, geotagging, i.e., assigning GPS coordinates to photographs shared on social media, is a means of (status) signalling the ‘cool’ places that they have visited (Bozzi, 2020).

The above discussion demonstrates several aspects about the links between digital nomad consumption and identity practices. First, the liquid characteristics of *ephemerality*, *access* and *dematerialization* are strongly evident in their consumption practices. Second, these characteristics are implicated in their identity construction by either facilitating the nomadic lifestyle (e.g., access-based approach to living and working facilitates constant movement), and/or the performance of the ideological aspects of their identity (e.g., ephemerality is strongly linked with the minimalist, non-attached ethos towards consumption objects, and dematerialised means are actively drawn upon in communicating the digital nomad identity). Third, the liquid consumption practices are closely linked and overlapping in the identity construction practices. For example, the *access*-based approach to living and working arrangements allows the digital nomads to have an *ephemeral* relationship with most consumption objects, with only fleeting, use-value-oriented attachment and non-ownership. Thus, this access-based approach supports their mobile lifestyle on the one hand, and the location-independent, flexible, free-from-the-oppression-of-too-many-possession ideology (Woldoff & Litchfield, 2021) on the other. Finally, the *dematerialised* consumption practice of posting photographs of the *access*-based “‘office of the day’ ... is an activity that explicitly reminds themselves and others of their identity” (Woldoff & Litchfield, 2021, p. 144).

Based on the above observations, we propose the second proposition as,

P2: In constructing their identity, digital nomads engage in liquid consumption practices characterised by *ephemerality*, *access* and *dematerialization* in closely interconnected ways.

Tensions and contradictions in digital nomad consumption

While digital nomads largely embody liquid consumption practices that enable the construction of their identity, their relationship with consumption is not without tensions and contradictions. In this section, we explore two aspects of how their consumption patterns appear contradictory to the espoused minimalist ethos of the digital nomads that embody elements of resistance to the materialistic and demand-driven market economy (Wang et al., 2019; Woldoff & Litchfield, 2021). First, we show that although liquid consumption facilitates a lifestyle of nomadism and reduced possessions, as previously discussed, it leads to a different form of materialism. Second, we put forward the argument of Atanasova and Eckhardt (2021), that the predominantly liquid forms of consumption have paradoxically intensified the digital nomads' materialistic preoccupation with their few (solid) possessions.

Minimalism represents a core ideological component of the digital nomad identity, functioning as both a practical necessity and a symbolic rejection of conventional consumer culture. Hannonen (2020) identifies minimalism as a central tenet of digital nomad discourse, noting that it serves as a marker of distinction from traditional lifestyles characterized by material accumulation and place-bound consumption. In the previous proposition, it was argued that, within the identity construction practices of digital nomads, *ephemerality* in the form of minimal ownership of consumption goods is embraced by digital nomads as a form of escape from the oppression of materialistic consumption patterns (Woldoff & Litchfield, 2021) and a resistance to creating high demand (Wang et al., 2019). It was also demonstrated that this minimalist lifestyle of living on a few possessions is assisted by the other liquid practices of *access* rather than ownership, and *dematerialization* such as emphasizing experiences. However, some scholars argue that this shift to liquid forms of consumption, such as ownership to access, does not demonstrate the espoused escape from materialism, but new materialistic ways of consumption, such as status signalling through travel (Bozzie, 2024).

This argument appears to be very much in line with previously discussed *dematerialised* experiential consumption, with status signalling practices, such as geotagging (Bozzi, 2020) and proud display of photos of exotic places visited (Woldoff & Litchfield, 2021), that have distinct undertones of materialistic symbolic consumption (Atanasova & Eckhardt, 2021). Thus, as Atanasova and Eckhardt (2021) suggest, it appears that in “liquid contexts” such as digital nomadism, “experiences can

emerge not as an escape from materialism, but as an avenue for pursuing materialistic aims such as cultivating image and signalling status through consumption” (p. 491). These consumption patterns are liquid, and as previously discussed, facilitate the nomadic lifestyle, but create tensions between the lifestyle and the ideologies of the identity.

The tensions are further deepened by the commercialisation of digital nomadism (Özgün & Uluengin, 2025) that further distances the digital nomad lifestyle from the ideal of resisting the push by the market system to increase demand (Wang et al., 2019). Myriad businesses have sprung up on social media, offering products and services to the specialized needs of digital nomads (Bozzi, 2020). For example, “the hotel comfort home” concept, developed to serve the digital nomad market, organizes properties as ‘homes’ catering to luxury needs, available for daily or monthly leases on rental platforms” (Özgün & Uluengin, 2025, p. 343). These authors further point out that with the increasing demand for such luxuries at higher rents by elite digital nomads, the cost of renting rises for local residents in locations that attract digital nomads. Similarly, Nash et al., (2021) emphasize that the capacity to discover or establish appropriate workspaces that align with personal preferences and technical prerequisites is of utmost importance for digital nomads. This often involves paying for access to co-working spaces, cafes with reliable internet, or other temporary work environments; consumption practices that are necessary for maintaining productivity but may conflict with strict minimalist principles. As Lee et al., (2019) note, these workspace consumption practices reflect the practical compromises that digital nomads must make between minimalist ideals and functional necessities. These necessities also come into conflict with the notion of freedom in location independence, in that the digital nomads are not completely free in selecting their destinations (Bozzi, 2024). In fact, there are now well-established digital nomad hubs such as Chiang Mai (Thailand) and Porto (Portugal) that cater to the specific work and living needs of the digital nomads (Bozzi, 2024). These discussions indicate that the market appears to have co-opted (Kozinets, 2002) the very lifestyle practices digital nomads adopt to resist it (Wang et al., 2019).

To examine further, the difficulties imposed by the digital nomad lifestyle on the ideal of reducing market demand (Wang et al., 2019), they face the practical necessity of maintaining access to tools, technologies, and services that enable their mobile work practices. This functional imperative creates what Nash et al., (2018)

identify as a tension between the ideological commitment to minimalism and the practical requirements of remote work. Unlike traditional minimalism, which might prioritize reduction for its own sake, digital nomad minimalism must accommodate the technological infrastructure necessary for maintaining location-independent income. Jarrahi et al., (2019) observe that digital nomads develop sophisticated personal knowledge management systems that often require multiple devices, software subscriptions, and digital services. These technological tools are not merely functional but become what Wang et al., (2019) describe as identity-enabling artifacts, physical and digital possessions that make the digital nomad lifestyle possible. The necessity of these tools creates what Sutherland and Jarrahi (2018) identify as a technological dependency that stands in tension with minimalist ideals. Beyond digital tools, functional requirements extend to various other consumption domains as well. Reichenberger (2018) notes that digital nomads must navigate practical considerations related to accommodation, transportation, healthcare, and other basic needs while maintaining their mobile lifestyle. These functional requirements often necessitate consumption practices that may appear at odds with minimalist ideals, such as maintaining multiple bank accounts, insurance policies, or subscriptions to various services. As Cook (2020) observes, the practical realities of digital nomadism often require a level of consumption that challenges purely minimalist aspirations.

Other than a few physical objects such as a “computer, laptop stand and noise-cancelling headphones” (Prester et al., 2023, p. 450), and a few personal possessions, sometimes fewer than 25 items (Woldoff & Litchfield, 2021), most of the consumption necessities described above are *access*-based and/or *dematerialised* (i.e., digital). Yet, as shown above, they are quite sophisticated and can hardly be considered as minimalist in the sense of resisting the increase of market demand (Lamberton & Goldsmith, 2020). Further, while much of the preceding discussion focused on the practical necessities of the digital nomad lifestyle, the references to luxury living through “hotel comfort home” concept (Özgün & Uluengin, 2025, p. 343) exemplifies an instance of “materialistic preoccupation with attaining happiness via consumption” through experiential (liquid) means rather than through possessions (Atanasova & Eckhardt, 2021, p. 491), which contradicts their oppositional stance towards the materialistic culture (Woldoff & Litchfield, 2021). In summary, the digital nomadic identity facilitated by liquid consumption lifestyle choices appears to be fraught with tensions related to the ideals of the said identity.

The second dimension of tension that could be identified between the ideological minimalism of digital nomads and their consumption patterns is the idea presented by Atanasova & Eckhardt (2021), that the predominant liquid nature of consumption has exaggerated the materialistic element of their relationship with their few ‘solid’ possessions. They call this form of materialism a “preoccupation with *strategic curation* rather than accumulation” (Atanasova & Eckhardt, 2021, p. 487, emphasis in the original). They note, that even when the digital nomads “describe themselves as nonmaterialistic and unexcited by consumption, their focus on consumption is all-encompassing” (p. 489). However, the focus of these digital nomads is not on the accumulation of objects, but “a deliberate pursuit of the highest possible utility, both practical and status signalling” (p. 489). This all-encompassing emersion in both the practical and signalling value of the few products they own is exemplified in the following quote from one of their research participants:

Oh, it takes me ages to [decide what to buy]. I think, “Alright, do I really need this?” So, say for example if I wanted to buy a warm jacket now, it would just take me ages because I will be like: “Alright, what are the pockets like in it; can I put everything I need in there when I am hiking; is it waterproof; is it windproof; what’s the hood like; does it stay up in the wind.” All of the things! Okay I’d probably pick a nice color that would look good in an Instagram photo. So that would be another thing: would the color stand out in a blog photo. The practicality of something [is important] and I would think: “Can I wear this with everything, so I don’t need to buy another jacket?” So, this is kind of that—I want this to be my only jacket, if that makes sense. I would never just go into a shop, grab something and just walk out. (Atanasova & Eckhardt, 2021, p. 490)

Further discussing the concept of strategic curation, these authors argue that while the predominantly liquid consumption pattern of digital nomads helps to de-emphasise the possession of many objects, it has heightened their preoccupation with both the functional and symbolic aspects of the few products they own. This, once again, stands in stark contrast to the ideal of escaping from the materialistic values of modern society (Woldoff & Litchfield, 2021).

The discussion in this section suggests that, as Bozzi (2024) argues, “digital nomads are not in any way less consumers but just consumers of different goods”

(p. 10) and puts their minimalist ethos to question. Therefore, we present our third proposition:

P3: Although liquid consumption enables the construction of the digital nomad identity through enabling their nomadic lifestyle in multiple ways, including the reduction of possessions, it leads to different forms of materialism that result in tensions between the consumption patterns and the espoused minimalism of the identity.

Theoretical contributions

Through this paper, we contributed to the literature on digital nomads in several ways. First, we enriched the discussion on digital nomad identity by theorising the role of consumption in their identity construction practices in a holistic manner. Although notions of liquid society (Ahuja et al., 2020) and liquid consumption (Atanasova & Eckhardt, 2021; Atanasova et al., 2023) have been discussed in relation to digital nomads, in this paper we demonstrate that the liquid consumption concepts of *ephemerality*, *access*, and *dematerialisation* can be used to holistically conceptualise the identity of digital nomads from a consumption perspective.

By introducing the consumption perspective, we also foreground some tensions in the identity construction processes and a key ideological dimension of the digital nomad identity that is directly related to consumption, namely, minimalism. There is some discussion in the literature on how “digital nomadism perpetuates prevailing logics and practices of capitalism and the market economy” while nominally resisting them (Wang et al. 2019, p. 7). However, this is predominantly from a production angle; we introduce a consumption perspective to this discussion. Although Atanasova and Eckhardt (2021) discuss materialism of digital nomads, they do not foreground the identity tension, as we have done, since identity is not the focus of their paper.

This paper also contributes to the liquid consumption literature by linking some related empirical evidence from the literature to demonstrate a specific context in which these concepts are applicable. In doing so, we also demonstrate that although, in introducing these concepts, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) propose that liquid consumption has low relevance to identity, in highly liquid contexts (Atanasova & Eckhardt, 2021), such as digital nomadism, liquid consumption can have a high relevance to identity. We also contribute to broadening the discussion on materialism to include liquid contexts (Atanasova & Eckhardt, 2021) by providing more evidence on digital nomads’ consumption patterns from a wide range of sources.

Practical implications

The consumption practices presented in the paper indicate that digital nomads are a distinctive group of travellers (Bozzi, 2020) with specialised needs. These provide new business opportunities for catering to these special needs. For instance, providing access-based working and living space has already been identified as a lucrative business opportunity by businesses such as Airbnb (Prester et al., 2023) and WeWork (Ahuja et al., 2020). Another possible business opportunity lies in assisting the digital nomads to mitigate the tensions between their consumption practices and the minimalist ideal. For example, Atanasova and Eckhardt (2021) note that while digital nomads prefer expensive products with high use value, they also do not want the products to conspicuously display brand affiliations, so that they could maintain the desired image on social media. (In discussing practical implications, it should be noted that given that one identity ideal of digital nomads is resisting the capitalist market system (Wang et al., 2019), any discussion of business implications is rather ironic since it amounts to a co-opting (Kozinets, 2002) of the identity aimed at resisting the market.)

Conclusion

In this paper, we have contributed to knowledge on identity construction in liquid modernity by proposing a theoretical framework for understanding digital nomad identity through the lens of consumption practices. Drawing on Bauman's (2000) concepts of liquid modernity and Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2017) liquid consumption framework, we advanced three key propositions: (1) Digital nomads construct their identity through liquid forms of consumption; (2) In constructing their identity, digital nomads engage in liquid consumption practices characterised by *ephemerality*, *access* and *dematerialization* in closely interconnected ways.; and (3) Although liquid consumption enables the construction digital nomad identity through enabling their nomadic lifestyle in multiple ways, including the reduction of possessions, it leads to different forms of materialism that result in tensions between the consumption patterns and the espoused minimalism of the identity. While the key contribution of this paper was to the literature on digital nomadism, we also brought in some new insights to liquid consumption. We also demonstrated through our conceptualisation that consumption patterns through which digital nomads construct their identity provide some business opportunities to cater to this distinct class of travellers (Bozzi, 2020).

The propositions in this paper were developed with support from current literature and theory on digital nomadism, liquid modernity, and consumer culture. However, they should be further verified empirically in future research. The ways digital nomads frame their purchasing decisions, rationalise material ownership, and interact with consumption norms within their community are also areas for deeper inquiry. Additionally, the tensions between minimalist ideals and practical consumption habits suggest complexities that require further investigation to understand how digital nomads resolve, challenge, or conform to these narratives over time. Beyond verifying the propositions, empirical investigations would also enable researchers to identify how they apply across different contexts and types of digital nomads.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript. No funding was received to support the preparation or publication of this work.

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