

## It's not All Shiny and Glamorous: Loneliness and Fear of Missing Out among Digital Nomads

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### Abstract

*The term 'digital nomad' has gained popularity to describe professionals who work remotely from different locations facilitated by using information and communication technology. This study explores the interaction between digital nomadism and loneliness, digital nomads' coping mechanisms to fight loneliness (with a special focus on social media use), as well as the phenomenon of fear of missing out (FoMO). Digital nomads who often experience isolation may turn to the use of Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram to keep in contact with family and friends and other social media like Facebook groups, Slack, and MeetUp to meet new people. However, intensive use of social media can generate FoMO. By using 15 in-depth interviews, this paper aims to explore loneliness and FoMO as issues that might negatively intersect with digital nomads' wellbeing, thus spotlighting some of the hidden dark sides of digital nomadism that go too often unnoticed.*

**Keywords:** Digital nomads, fear of missing out (FoMO), loneliness, meet ups, social media.

### 1. Introduction

In recent years, the metaphorical term 'digital nomad' (DN) has gained popularity to describe individuals, often Millennials, who continuously travel and work remotely from different locations around the world (Gretzel & Hardy, 2019; Hannonen, 2020; Hemsley et al., 2020; Nash et al., 2018; Schlegelmilch & Lysova, 2018; Thompson, 2019a, 2021). As Hannonen (2020, p. 235) put it, DNs "work while traveling and travel while working". While remote work is not particularly related to place, the main characteristics of a digitally nomadic lifestyle include visiting several places and experiencing

different cultures (Willment, 2020). The DN lifestyle experienced a boost during the COVID-19 pandemic, as many workers were able to work remotely, for example white collar workers who decided to live the digital nomadic lifestyle (De Almeida et al., 2021; Hermann & Paris, 2020), contributing to the expansion of the phenomenon.

Most studies about DNs are focused on the nature of work and mobility (e.g., Gretzel & Hardy, 2019; Hemsley et al., 2020), work-leisure balance (e.g., Cook, 2020), space (e.g., Nash et al., 2021); taxation (e.g., Kostić, 2019), and lifestyle (e.g., Chevtaeva & Denizci-Guillet, 2021; Krivtsova et al., 2019; Mancinelli, 2020). However, an area of research that is often disregarded when examining the wider implications of this lifestyle relates to the feeling of loneliness and fear of missing out (FoMO) (Akbari et al., 2021; Buglass et al., 2017; Przybylski et al., 2013; Tandon et al., 2021) that can have a severe negative impact on the psychological wellbeing of those engaging in digital nomadism.

Other groups that bear some resemblance to DNs are expats and exchange students. Caligiuri and Lazarova (2002) highlight that especially the early phases of being an expat are often characterized by social isolation, stress, disorientation, and loneliness. Likewise, studies with exchange students show that the new situation requires adjustment and international students often face loneliness and FoMO, especially at the beginning (e.g., Stewart & Lowenthal, 2022 for the special case during the pandemic). Zaman et al. (2022) looked at (travel-related) FoMO in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and found that FoMO is relatively prevalent among these expats. Studies on loneliness and FoMO experiences are usually associated with social media use and are mainly focused on college students (e.g., Hunt et al., 2018). How FoMO and loneliness relate in the context of social media among other

population groups remains a largely open question and DNs present an interesting test case.

Indeed, DNs often experience isolation (e.g., Dery & Hafermalz, 2016; Nash et al., 2018; Thompson, 2019a) and may turn to digital media to overcome loneliness (e.g., Fox, 2019; Pittman, 2018). In their study on remote workers, Dery and Hafermalz (2016, p. 109) found that individuals who work remotely often struggle with maintaining those ‘informal’ connections with co-workers “that are typically associated with building a sense of belonging”. They identified new digital media practices to maintain visual and social connections with co-workers at a distance. DNs may also use social media to socialize and foster personal relationships outside of their organizations (Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Jin et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2015) or to arrange physical meetings via MeetUp groups and dating apps (Thompson, 2019b) in order to find a balance between solitude and sociality (Liegl, 2014).

Social media help generate both bonding social capital (i.e., close relationships of help and emotional support) and bridging social capital (i.e., benefits from interacting with weak ties) (Putman, 2001). Different studies (e.g., Ellison et al., 2011; Phua et al., 2017; Shane-Simpson et al., 2018; Vitak et al., 2011) show that Facebook plays a key role on developing bonding social capital, especially when those close relationships are situated in distant locations. On the other hand, Twitter scores the highest levels of bridging social capital (e.g., Phua et al., 2017; Shane-Simpson et al., 2018). Although social media may help DNs to keep connected and build social capital, at the same time, DNs can experience FoMO (Akbari et al., 2021; Buglass et al., 2017; Przybylski et al., 2013; Tandon et al., 2021) by watching on social media what family and friends are doing back home.

To advance knowledge on DNs’ lifestyle, this study explores the interaction between digital nomadism and loneliness, DNs’ coping mechanisms to fight loneliness (with a special focus on social media use), as well as the phenomenon of FoMO. We explore loneliness and FoMO as issues that negatively intersect with DNs’ wellbeing, thus spotlighting some of the hidden dark sides of digital nomadism that go too often unnoticed. Particularly, we focus our attention on social media as being both a source of FoMO for DNs as well as coping mechanism to overcome loneliness. The study is based on 15 in-depth interviews with DNs. Data was analyzed by using thematic analysis (Clark et al., 2015). Most existing research on the topic comes from the fields of management (e.g., Schlegelmilch & Lysova, 2018), information systems (e.g., Hemsley et al., 2020), tourism (e.g., Hermann & Paris, 2020), or sociology (e.g., Thompson, 2019a, 2019b, 2021). Therefore, this

paper offers a timely contribution to the research on DNs’ lifestyle from an Internet studies perspective.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Loneliness

Loneliness has been defined as “a distressing feeling that accompanies the perception that one’s social needs are not being met by the quantity or especially the quality of one’s social relationships” (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010, p. 218). Loneliness is a common experience, particularly prevalent among those under 18, young adults, and the elderly (e.g., those over 70) (Weeks, 1994). Research on the field of loneliness makes the clear distinction that loneliness is associated with perceived social isolation rather than objective one (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). Therefore, people can have a relatively solitary live and not feel lonely, and conversely people with a very active and visible social life can report high levels of perceived loneliness. Conversely, some people might decide to be alone (i.e., proactively reduce their social involvement) (Russell et al., 2012). We focus on loneliness rather than those choosing to be alone as research has found that the former can have wider wellbeing implications (Boss et al., 2015). Loneliness is also classified into two types: emotional and social. Emotional loneliness relates to the absence of an intimate figure (e.g., a romantic partner or best friend), whereas social loneliness relates to a deficit in a broader social group (e.g., work colleagues or friends) (Deckx et al., 2018).

Perceived loneliness impacts other emotional and cognitive processes as well as outcomes. For instance, perceived loneliness has been associated with mental health issues such as personality disorders, depression, and psychosis (Badcock et al., 2020; Erzen & Çikrikci, 2018; Liebke et al., 2017). It has also been connected to depression among all age ranges (Asher and Paquette, 2003; Cacioppo et al., 2006; Jones et al., 2011). Perceived loneliness does not only affect mental health, but it can also have a negative impact on cognitive performance, leading to cognitive decline over time (Boss et al., 2015). Finally, perceived loneliness has been associated with increased suicidal thoughts, suicide ideation, and ultimately risk of suicide (Stravynski & Boyer, 2001).

The relationship between social media use and perceived loneliness is counterintuitive. On the one hand, social media are lauded as a disruptive technology that has brought several benefits to users by increasing connectivity and enabling the co-creating of digital experiences as well as the formation of online communities (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). However,

even though social media have allowed for increased levels of connectivity and social capital, (e.g., Phua et al., 2017; Shane-Simpson et al., 2018; Vitak et al., 2011) research has found that challenges related to perceived loneliness and other aspects of psychological wellbeing have not reduced, and in fact might have increased among young adults (Pittman & Reich, 2016). Some evidence even suggests that less use of social media might lead to reduced perceptions of loneliness (Hunt et al., 2018). Rajan et al.'s. (2022) study on young Indians shows that heavy social media use increases loneliness and FoMO, although the increase of loneliness is more pronounced than FoMO.

Research on DNs has shown that this group can be vulnerable to feelings of perceived loneliness, even though they use technology-mediated platforms like social media to perform many of their networking activities and sometimes their work as DNs. For instance, one of the consequences of the DN lifestyle is that being distant from loved ones can lead to social isolation and feelings of perceived loneliness (Thompson, 2019; Nash et al., 2018). This is particularly severe in cases where DNs join countries with low presence of other DNs and where languages and customs from their host country differ significantly from their own (Thompson, 2021). Broadly speaking, coping strategies against loneliness can be problem-focused or emotion-focused (Deckx et al., 2018).

To counteract social isolation and perceived loneliness, DNs engage in certain problem-focused strategies such as co-living and co-working practices (Lee et al., 2015; Loryn, 2022; Von Zumbusch & Lalicic, 2020). This approach enables them to build a social support network, creating new opportunities for social contact. Other strategies include acceptance of loneliness and a self-healing process that includes a considerable amount of reflection and changing of attitudes from perceived loneliness to a state of reflective solitude (Rokach, 1990). However, the strategies DNs use on social media to reduce perceived loneliness remains an underdeveloped research area.

## **2.2. Fear of missing out (FoMO)**

Fear of missing out – or FoMO in short – is defined as “a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent” and it entails “the desire to stay continually connected with what others are doing” (Przybylski et al., 2013, p. 1841). According to Przybylski et al. (2013), FoMO occurs when an individual perceives someone’s experiences as more valuable but is not able to share the same experiences. Almost 70% of adults have experienced FoMO at least once (Abel et al.’s, 2016). Most research on FoMO adopts a quantitative and

psychological perspective, with a dearth of qualitative investigations. In their study of (travel-related) FoMO in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, Zaman et al. (2022) found that their respondent pool in the UAE scored 3.39/5.00 (on a 1-5 Likert scale) on average (SD of 0.79) on a 10-item FoMO scale. Therefore, FoMO is a common phenomenon among these expats.

FoMO is highly relevant in the context of social media as users are frequently confronted with others’ experiences through one-to-many (e.g., in their Facebook newsfeed) or one-to-one/many-to-many communication (e.g., in a WhatsApp chat or group chat). Despite social media contribution to satisfy connectivity needs, and intensive use of social media can also cause high levels of FoMO (Buglass et al., 2017). Since social media users are selective in their self-presentation and often portray an ideal self, with a polished version of themselves (Siibak, 2009), their audience is confronted with a disproportionate amount of positive and desirable content. Research has shown how the consumption of such content can result in envy (Krasnova et al., 2015). However, FoMO through social media is highly contingent on a user’s personality, their demographic characteristics, and the social media platform where the communication takes places (see Akbari et al., 2021; Tandon et al., 2021).

FoMO is similarly associated with social media engagement (Reer et al., 2019). In a study conducted by Fuster et al. (2017), FoMO correlated with the use of several social media platforms and with all indicators of social media use and smartphone addiction. Moore and Craciun (2021) focused on Instagram and found that FoMO had a significant and positive effect on attitudes towards Instagram, the total number of Instagram accounts followed, and social media addictive tendencies. Likewise, Van der Schyff et al. (2022) identified FoMO as a significant (and positive) predictor of excessive Instagram use. Overall, FoMO tends to have a negative association with wellbeing.

Bozzi (2020) positions digital nomadism as an antidote to FoMO but questions the inclusivity of the practice. However, DNs, by changing location frequently and living away from friends and family for long periods, are particularly susceptible to loneliness. Social media, which are widely used among DNs, open a window for connectivity to address loneliness. Simultaneously, the use of social media might also create FoMO as a side-effect because DNs are heavily confronted with content that might trigger this emotion. These tensions of social media use and how they play out in the context of digital nomadism offer a nuanced take and we proceed to explore them empirically in discussion section.

### 3. Methods

Considering the lack of previous findings on specific elements of DNs' psychological/subjective wellbeing, our research focus on the Why and How questions, and reduced accessibility of the target population, the present study follows an inductive and exploratory approach (Bryman, 2016) by conducting 15 in-depth interviews. We used purposive sampling, as we were looking to interview people that identified themselves as DNs (Etikan et al., 2016). To recruit participants, a call for participants was published on social media, including open and closed Facebook and LinkedIn groups aimed at DNs. The call for participants was also shared more widely through Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. As part of each interview protocol, the researcher(s) explained to the participants the objectives of the project and the ethical implications involved and their agreement was obtained via informed consent. At the beginning of the interview, the process in which the audio would be recorded to be later transcribed and analyzed was explained to all the participants. The interviews lasted 65 minutes on average and were conducted in the language preferred by the participants (14 were conducted in English and 1 in Spanish). The interview in Spanish was translated into English by one of the researchers that speaks both languages.

A total of 15 interviews were performed during April and May 2022. The data has been fully anonymized by using pseudonyms following the principles of maximizing the participants identity protection and maintaining the value and integrity of the data (Saunders et al., 2015). All participants were between their late 20s to the early 40s. They were two couples of DNs who did the interview together and are considered as one single participant since they reported similar points of view through the interview. Participants were originally from Colombia, Denmark, Estonia, Italy, Mexico, Poland, Portugal, and the US. The aliases, time as DN, whether they are employed (E) or Freelancer (F), and profession can be found in Table 1.

Name	Time as DN	E/F	Profession
Diana	1 year	E	Developer
Santiago	4 years	F	Digital Marketer
Katia	1,5 years	E	Finance Manager
Robert	6 years	E	Investor
Amparo & Antonio	1 year	F	Content Creators & Influencers
Imma & Daniel	5 months	F	Virtual Assistant & Investor/Influencers

Julian	7 years	F	Online Events Organizer
Ariadna	1,5 years	F	Self-development Couch
Silvio	2 years	E	Researcher
Fernando	5,5 years	F	Digital Marketer
Gemma	2 years	F	Spanish Teacher
Alexandra	3 months	F	Content Writer
Laura	7 months	F	Project Manager
Tom	1 year	E	Data Scientist
Alice	6 years	F	Developer

**Table 1: List of Participants**

In each interview a series of 'ground tour' questions (McCracken, 1988) with the objective to define the DN profile were first asked. Afterwards, we moved to more specific questions/themes in order to define: a) their interaction within social media, b) their relationship with the DNs community and c) their perception of loneliness and FoMO derived from their lifestyle. Interviews were recorded using MS Teams, and an initial transcription was conducted using commercially available automated natural language processing tools (i.e., Otter.ai). Following the initial transcription of the interviews, a research assistant verified the accuracy of all the transcripts. To analyze the data, thematic analysis was conducted following the approach suggested by Clarke et al. (2015) for the generation of initial codes and the identification of themes. Nvivo was used to facilitate this process. In addition, to ensure internal validity of the codes, each interview transcript was coded by two independent coders (Campbell et al., 2013). There were no major discrepancies between the two analyses. Thematical saturation was reached by the 15th interviewee – recurring information (on loneliness and FoMO) was identified after the 10th interviewee. In total, the analysis yielded seven themes: overall effect of DN lifestyle on loneliness, types of DN loneliness, specific drivers of DNs' loneliness (encompassed by subsection 4.1.), overview of DNs' mechanisms for coping with loneliness, usefulness of online-facilitated coping mechanisms (encompassed by subsection 4.2.), experiencing FoMO, and the effect of FoMO (encompassed by subsection 4.3.).

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Digital nomadism and loneliness

Digital nomadism generated/boosted loneliness, hindered it, contributed to both effects, or did not have any effect among DNs. While some participants claimed that the digital nomadism lifestyle does not influence

loneliness, other participants highlighted how digital nomadism can be a way of living and working that generates/boosts loneliness because of absence from long-term and stable social networks (e.g., family, friends from schools, colleagues at the same workplace):

“I felt very, very lonely. And I felt that somehow, I didn’t have what other (non-nomad) people had. Some of my friends (from back home) go to college, go to university, have a job... get together on the weekends, see their families on Saturdays... I felt like I had lost it completely, that I was not able to build that at all... I didn’t have that because all my friends are scattered around the world, and they don’t know each other.” (Robert, 6 years, E, Investor).

Covid-19, while leading to an increased interest in digital nomadism (De Almeida et al., 2021; Hermann & Paris, 2020), also accelerated these tendencies for loneliness. For example:

“...since I started working more online and less in person... (DN lifestyle) contributed to me feeling way lonelier. Way more really... it really contributed to me feeling more lonely, more depressed, in general... especially since COVID” (Ariadna, 1,5 years, F, Self-development Couch).

This participant was referring to how working remotely contributes to her feeling of loneliness (Dery, & Hafermalz, 2016). However, most participants did not talk about isolation in relation to remote work, but they associated loneliness with the continuous mobility embedded in the DN’s lifestyle which did not allow them to build personal relationships (friendships or romantic relationships). Importantly, loneliness perceptions are highly subjective (Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010) and can also occur when DNs have access to personal and physical contact, as some of our interviewees in couples highlighted. This lifestyle can add to loneliness even if one travels together with their partner – in turn, creating the alone-together feeling (Julian, F, Online Events Organizer). Other participants travelling with their partners made similar claims, for instance:

“we can (also) talk about being lonely as a couple...even if you have a partner sometimes you feel alone, sometimes you don’t have friends along the way” (Gemma, 2 years, F, Spanish Teacher).

In this case, participants were experiencing social loneliness (Deckx et al., 2018). On the other hand, digital nomadism might help DNs to feel less lonely in case they were not surrounded by supportive and likeminded people in their previous, settled life, for example:

“(Travelling/digital nomadism) helped me to be less lonely... all of us (DNs) have problems of (not) being accepted in place where we came from... we

never felt part of society there...” (Diana, 1 year, E, Developer).

This way, digital nomadism also lowered perceptions of loneliness for some due to a sense of togetherness, shared interests, and community. As Katia (1,5 years, E, Finance Manager) explained, her life as a DN was much more fulfilling than when she used to live in Poland since this lifestyle gave her the opportunity to meet many interesting like-minded people. The ambivalent interviewees reported loneliness and lack of it occurring simultaneously:

“(Digital nomadism) is a special case. I think it contributes a lot to loneliness. But on the other hand, when you’re alone, it contributes to open yourself to the world so you’re not alone” (Santiago, 4 years, F, Digital Marketer).

Furthermore, several specific factors, both individual and contextual, were identified as detrimental to DNs’ feeling of connectedness, including introversion, not living in the moment, and visa policies that forced them to move from places, even though sometimes they would have preferred to stay longer. For example

“... when you go to a place, especially outside the European Union, you cannot stay there forever. Usually countries such as Mexico, Colombia, or Thailand give you up to three months, 90 days.... (Once you arrive there) you have the jetlag, you have one month or less that is needed to get confident with the environment. And as soon as you are okay with the environment, you feel like okay, this is my new house, my new place for the future - you have to move because of the visa... or your new friends are about to leave...” (Fernando, 5,5 years, F, Digital Marketer).

Although most DNs who took part in this study travelled with tourist visas, increasingly there are some countries that are implementing DN visas to attract this type of remote workers (Svobodová, 2022). This is the case of Lisbon, where some of our participants were based at the moment of the interview. This contrasts with some groups who share similarities to DNs such as expatriates and exchange students. Expatriates and exchange students also have to adjust to a new context and often, especially at the beginning of their life abroad, suffer from feelings of social isolation, loneliness and sometimes FoMO (Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2002; Stewart & Lowenthal, 2022; Zaman et al., 2020). However, in opposition to DNs, they are more restricted to a certain location and have longer timeframes.

## 4.2. Coping with loneliness

A few participants mentioned that their coping mechanisms to fight loneliness included calling friends, doing familiar things like watching series, hobbies (e.g.,

playing football or board games), attending free walking tours, staying in hostels to socialize, using CouchSurfing to be hosted by locals, as well as travelling at a slower pace to have time to connect with locals. However, the majority referred to using social media to cope with loneliness, either to talk to friends (e.g., Instagram or WhatsApp) or connect with new people and find meetups to attend in person via social media platforms such as Slack, MeetUp, or Facebook groups. Participants found more private social media platforms, such as WhatsApp to be more useful for close contacts and strong tie management (Putman, 2001), for example:

“I use Instagram less because when I’m lonely I want a real connection with someone I feel like Instagram doesn’t give me that...(with) WhatsApp I have direct contact with that person and, I don’t know, I feel closer” (Gemma, 2 years, F, Spanish Teacher).

Shane-Simpson et al. (2018), in their comparative study on social media platform use and social capital, found that participants who preferred using Facebook reported higher levels of bonding social capital compared to those who preferred using Instagram. However, many of our interviewees reported also using Instagram when they felt lonely in order to entertain themselves or to socialize and keep in contact with friends or other DNs:

“I’m relying on Instagram when I don’t feel happy or feel lonely or feel depressed, I can just watch some random videos there. And if I’m doing it a long time, it takes my focus away from my problems, my feelings so I can rest, so you can just like watch random videos with no purpose or something for a couple of hours and feel rest after this” (Diana, 1 year, E, Developer).

“...when you post something (on Instagram), and someone likes it, or reacts to it, it gives you a bit of dopamine, right? So, your brain is not so lonely” (Alexandra, 3 months, F, Content Writer).

However, as observed by Moore and Craciun (2021), relying on online interactions to socialize might be addictive and it may provide a false safety net:

“Okay, yeah, people are giving me attention and blah, blah, blah - but also, Instagram itself was a source of an addiction, you know what I mean? Because it feels like having that safety net, which is an illusion” (Ariadna, 1,5 years, F, Self-development Couch).

Different social media platforms are used for socializing, both in more passive and consumptive and more active and communicative ways, thus helping DNs to fulfill their connective needs (Buglass et al., 2017). Instagram’s role and affordances made it a suitable resource as a conversation starter and for self-affirmation through likes and attention. Thus, Instagram served mostly as a platform for bridging social capital and creating or maintaining weak ties (Phua et al., 2017;

Shane-Simpson et al., 2018). Contrary to studies conducted with college students (e.g., Phua et al., 2017; Shane-Simpson et al., 2018), Twitter was not reported as a platform that facilitated bridging social capital among the DNs taking part on this study, and it was in fact a platform barely used by participants. Platforms used for bridging social capital included Tinder and other dating apps, as well as Slack and Facebook groups, and CouchSurfing. Also, as observed in previous studies on DNs (e.g., Matos & Ardévol, 2021; Sutherland & Jarrahi, 2017; Thompson, 2021), many participants used MeetUp to find face-to-face meetings in their current or next location in order to socialize and network:

“Whenever I moved to a new location, maybe the first few days, I’ll research the Facebook groups, the WhatsApp groups, the Telegram groups, the Slack groups, the MeetUp groups... whatever groups that exist in that area and usually, I would select the couple of meetups which are most interesting to me, and start from there” (Alice, 6 years, F, Developer).

“Mostly I start with the MeetUps... it starts always with the MeetUps. And we use a lot of Slack (local DNs groups) to communicate with each other and WhatsApp. But WhatsApp is more for personal contact. And Slack is more for people you don’t know that well in the beginning” (Laura, 7 months, F, Project Manager).

The findings show how DNs tap into the platform-specific affordances of social media (Scolere et al., 2018) to overcome loneliness. Despite the benefits of the instant sociality facilitated by the use of platforms such as MeetUp or CouchSurfing (Miguel, 2018), shallow talks at meetups and temporariness of newly established acquaintanceships seem to be the major obstacle to overcome loneliness in the long-term. For instance:

“... it’s kind of like strange loneliness when you have a lot of people around but not so many close people (at DNs’ meetups) ... you don’t feel any like deep connection... I really feel it’s like I am having more and more this lonely feeling” (Diana, 1 year, E, Developer).

“I did feel a bit lonely at times when I would go to these meetups... you would meet these digital marketers who are dressed like they were off the catwalk, and they wear these cool sunglasses, and they’re kind of like, really present and really excited, like, ‘this is the best time of my life’. And then I would feel kind of lonely” (Silvio, 2 years, E, Researcher).

“I have not found real friends; they are all temporary friends. In the end, they do show you as if we are friends, but when you really leave it’s as if that (friendship) didn’t exist...” (Gemma, 2 years, F, Spanish Teacher).

In this case, participants were relating to emotional loneliness (Deckx et al., 2018). Thus, although they may have an active social life, they miss having closer

connections, people they can trust and share confidences or ask for help in case of need. For that reason, many participants use social media to keep in contact with their close ties and achieve bonding social capital (Phua et al., 2017; Vitak et al., 2011).

### 4.3. FoMO

In relation to FoMO (Akbari et al., 2021; Buglass et al., 2017; Przybylski et al., 2013; Tandon et al., 2021), only a few participants reported experiencing it, especially if they were strongly attached to their family and friends:

“My boyfriend does not feel so much FoMO because he is more detached from his family, but I do. Every time I see a photo is like it makes me want to cry, and knowing that I’m so far away, yes, yes, yes, it is hard” (Gemma, 2 years, F, Spanish Teacher).

“I might feel a bit of FoMO when I see my friends meet... and that’s a friend circle where we used to meet, all of us together and now they’re meeting without me... but nothing which hurts me too much” (Alice, 6 years, F, Developer).

However, many participants explained that they felt FoMO at the beginning of their DN journey, but they got used to this feeling and it did not affect their wellbeing:

“I really did at the beginning, especially when you see like the post of weddings and graduation and special events, right?” (Alexandra, 3 months, F, Content Writer).

“Yes, I do feel FoMO... but it’s something that I’ve learned how to manage it, so it doesn’t affect me” (Robert, 6 years, E, Investor).

This shows how digital nomadism over time becomes an ever more important part of participants’ identity, while previous identities might lose in importance, thus overcoming initial FoMO. During this habituation, DNs develop coping strategies such as effective time and emotion management.

Finally, most participants claimed that they did not feel FoMO because they were satisfied with their lifestyle. For example:

“No, no – but, of course, I’m sorry. For instance, I miss the marriage of one of my closest friends. But it is what it is. I mean, I’m doing other things. They know it. They’re okay with that. Of course, I’m sorry. But no, no fear of missing out” (Fernando, 5,5 years, F, Digital Marketer).

“No, no, no, because I like my life so much more when I’m a DN.... I’m actually not (feeling FoMO), maybe when my friends are getting children. That it’s a point that you maybe want to be in your country. But yeah, it didn’t happen yet” (Laura, 7 months, F, Project Manager).

These last quotes show how the DNs who did not report FoMO were very happy and settled with their current lifestyle. Thus, the main reason why participants claimed not to feel FoMO was because they were more satisfied with their DN lifestyle, which prioritizes leisure over work (Thompson, 2019a), than with their previous lifestyle in a stable location. In this way, missing out some events from their former social life seemed like a fair trade-off for their new, and more exciting lifestyle on the move.

## 5. Conclusion

In this contribution, we investigated some of the dark sides of digital nomadism. Based on 15 in-depth qualitative interviews with DNs, we identified loneliness as a common feeling. The interviews showed how loneliness among DNs is highly contextual, depending on a range of factors such as personality (e.g., being introverted), career plans and life goals (long-term planning vs. living in the moment) as well as the destination. In that regard, the fact that DNs must restrict the duration of stay due to restrictive visa policies was seen a barrier to building longer-term relationships that could tackle loneliness. Social media emerged as a key tool for coping with loneliness. Facebook groups, MeetUp, and Slack are important platforms in the DN eco-system that are mostly used for attending meetings to meet locals (mainly expats) or other fellow DNs, networking, and contact initiation, before transitioning to more personal conversation channels such as WhatsApp or Instagram. However, the emergence of FoMO is a potential side-effect of using social media to fight loneliness. On social media, DNs not only satisfy their need for connection but sometimes also get confronted with the more stable lives and experiences some of their friends have. Not all the interviewees reported feelings of FoMO but for those that did, it was often tied to a feeling of homesickness that gets triggered by content encountered on social media. This feeling was exacerbated throughout the pandemic. Some DNs reported feeling FoMO in the past but having learnt to overcome it, thus showing identity shifts, and gradually becoming at ease with the lifestyle.

Taken together, our study showed some of the dark sides of the digital nomadism. Earlier research has documented how DNs experience isolation and loneliness (e.g., Nash et al., 2018; Thompson, 2019a), while research on social media more generally has shown how social media can act as a remedy against loneliness (e.g., Fox, 2019; Pittman, 2018). However, the specific ways in which different social media platforms and their affordances allow DNs to overcome loneliness has been uncharted territory. Our contribution shows how DNs rely on a flexible and

dynamic repertoire of social media platforms and apps, also labelled polymedia (Madianou & Miller, 2013), to satisfy their need for connectedness and to fight loneliness. Instagram, Facebook groups, Slack, MeetUp, and Tinder are identified as key platforms for DNs to connect with people, especially for bridging social capital, whereas WhatsApp is used more for bonding social capital, in contrast to other studies that found Facebook to be the most popular platform to maintain strong ties (Phua et al., 2017; Shane-Simpson et al., 2018), probably because the authors did not consider WhatsApp as social media. We found how certain platforms and use modalities, especially in the case of Instagram, can come with unintended side-effects such as addictive potential or FoMO.

While exploratory and situated in a specific temporal (i.e., interviews conducted, while Covid-19 restrictions still applied in some countries) and geographical context (i.e., sample of DNs focused on Europe), our findings have implications for different stakeholders, including aspiring DNs, community managers and content creators, as well as platform designers. For aspiring DNs, our research shows that the shiny and glamorous side of digital nomadism is accompanied by darker aspects, including loneliness and FoMO. By doing so, the results raise awareness how venturing into this lifestyle can be challenging at times and should be thoroughly thought through. For community managers (e.g., administrators of social media groups for DNs) and content creators (e.g., DNs blogging about digital nomadism), our research spotlights the prominent role of mental health issues, sensitizing them to engage with their communities and audiences proactively to address these issues. Having a keen eye how community or audience members express loneliness can help foster a more inclusive approach to digital nomadism. Finally, platform designers can learn from the findings by reflecting on the role specific platforms play in tackling or reinforcing wellbeing issues such as loneliness and FoMO. Specific features for availability management and contact initiation that consider DNs' preferences could be designed. For instance, a matching or hotline feature could be implemented that lets DNs who arrive in a new place but feel lonely connect instantly with an available DN buddy. An algorithmic recommendation system that factors in DN status when making contact suggestions would be another option.

Our study might be limited by the geographic scope since most of our interviewees are from Europe. DNs in other contexts might have different experiences of loneliness, and potentially rely on different coping strategies. However, given the global nature of digital nomadism and similarities in practices, we would expect similar results even with DNs from other countries and

backgrounds. Future research could quantify the occurrence of loneliness and FoMO among DNs with quantitative methods and broad sampling frames, comparing their experiences to non-nomads. Finally, studying the actual social media practices of digital methods in conjunction with their lived experiences would be fruitful to situate experiences of loneliness and FoMO more clearly. Which formats, types of content and communication modalities are particularly effective in fighting loneliness? What triggers FoMO most? Future research could use methods such as diary studies or autoethnography to answer these questions.

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