



The Influence of personal-relational and personal-communal identities on behavioral intentions among digital nomads in Thailand

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ABSTRACT

The recent surge in digital nomadism has significantly altered global mobility, yet little empirical research addresses how these transient professionals negotiate their personal-relational and personal-communal and how this process dictates their travel decisions. Grounded in the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI), this study investigates the relationship between the personal-relational and personal-communal of digital nomads and their behavioral intentions (specifically the intention to depart and the intention to revisit) with Thailand research context. A mixed-methods design was implemented, comprising survey data from 195 non-Thai digital nomads analyzed via multiple linear regression, and ten semi-structured interviews evaluated through thematic analysis. The quantitative results demonstrate that personal-relational identity (the quality of daily interactions with locals) is the primary predictor of revisit intention. Conversely, personal-communal identity (the sense of integration within the community) reveals an integration paradox: while it positively predicts the intention to return, it also strongly predicts the intention to leave. The qualitative findings explain this contradiction by introducing the "experience completion" effect, where highly integrated nomads feel their cultural immersion is accomplished, thereby motivating onward travel. Additionally, while the practical advantages of geo-arbitrage and a relaxed lifestyle encourage return visits, structural obstacles such as visa restrictions and the superficial limits of local social integration drive eventual departure. Ultimately, this research challenges the conventional assumption that community integration ensures retention. By distinguishing the factors that drive departure from those that encourage return, the study extends CTI to hyper-mobile populations and offers a framework for understanding the circular mobility patterns of modern remote workers.

KEYWORDS

Digital nomads, personal-relational, personal-communal, behavioral intentions, Thailand

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INTRODUCTION

Globalization and the advancement of Information and Communication Technologies have facilitated new flexible working arrangements, most notably digital nomadism. The widespread adoption of remote work, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has brought digital nomadism into the mainstream (Cook, 2023). The term digital nomad, first intro-

duced by Makimoto and Manners (1997), describes a lifestyle where work and leisure are no longer tied to a specific location but are instead supported by mobile communications and smart technologies. The popularity of digital nomadism has grown significantly, as evidenced by the notable increase in global search trends related to this lifestyle. The population of digital nomads in the United States alone increased by 49% between 2019 and 2020, reflecting a broader global trend (Everson, 2021). Predictions suggest that there could be one billion digital nomads by 2035 (Kong, 2019). With this rapid growth, destinations like Chiang Mai, Thailand, and Bali, Indonesia, have become hotspots, attracting digital nomads with their co-working and co-living industries (Thompson, 2018). At the same time, countries like Thailand and Indonesia have introduced long-term visa policies to attract and retain these travelers (Zhong, 2022).

Digital nomads differ from traditional tourists by being willing to adopt localized identities and engage more deeply with the local community, given their extended stays (de Loryn, 2022; Hannonen et al., 2023; Thompson, 2018). In the Thai context, such adoption can be displayed through the usage of basic Thai language in daily interactions, engagement in local customs or festivals, respectful conformity to Thai norms of politeness, and the creation of meaningful relationships with locals. These actions fit with the relational and enactment layers of the Communication Theory of Identity (Hecht et al., 1993) and show both a functional adjustment and a performative display of cultural identification. This interaction can foster a sense of belonging within the local area (Miocevic, 2024). However, digital nomads often maintain a dual identity, transitioning between their local and nomadic identities based on the context (Brewer & Pierce, 2005). While some digital nomads integrate into the local culture, others form communities with fellow nomads, remaining somewhat detached from the local society (Dobrinskaya, 2016). The fluidity of their identities challenges traditional concepts of nationalism, emphasizing a more decentralized and individualistic sense of belonging (Zhong, 2022).

It is important to understand how the personal-relational and personal-communal identities of digital nomads affect their behavioral intentions. This is especially true for Thailand, which is the second most visited country by digital nomads globally. Most previous studies have focused on defining the digital nomad concept, looking at their daily lives, and exploring their relationships with tourism destinations. There is still have few research regarding how their specific identity layers influence their behavioral intentions, such as their plans to leave or revisit a country. It investigates the influence of personal-relational and personal-communal identities on the behavioral intentions of digital nomads in Thailand. The research explores these identity dimensions among non-Thai digital nomads, examines their departure and revisit intentions, and tests the relationships between these variables. The findings are expected to offer practical suggestions for policymakers, local communities, and digital nomads to support better social integration.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The majority of extant literature employs specific terms to refer to people who are constantly mobility-constrained, including tourists, migrants, expatriates, global nomads, and digital nomads (Kannisto, 2016). Kannisto (2016) introduced the concept of lifestyle mobilities, encompassing a broad spectrum of voluntary relocations motivated by the pursuit of a divergent lifestyle. The term digital nomad was introduced to describe an outcome of technological advancement on people's lives, predicting how mobile technologies would augment work and leisure to produce a new lifestyle freed from constraints of time and location (Makimoto, 2013). Digital nomads are primarily young individuals motivated to explore and combine travel with virtual work (Reichenberger, 2018). Key elements highlighted in previous studies include the use of digital technologies, gig work, nomadic work, and global travel adventure (Nash et al., 2018). Orel (2019) suggests that digital nomads value freedom of movement quite highly and like to work in community-oriented workspaces. The feature that differentiates them from other remote workers is the value they attribute to gaining cultural and personal experiences through international travel (Mancinelli, 2020). Nomadism is linked to digitalization because digital nomads can work while moving simply by having a mobile device and internet connection (Demaj et al., 2021). The use of technology on the road does not make one a digital nomad automatically; it requires the accomplishment of work-related activities while traveling (Hannonen, 2020).

Cultural identity is socially constructed through a cultural lens using the medium of communication. Cultural identities are negotiated, co-created, reinforced, and challenged through communication (Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 1993). In this research, cultural identity is analyzed through the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI). The theory posits that individuals internalize social interactions, relationships, and a sense of self into identities through communication (Hecht et al., 2005). CTI establishes frames that align with intrinsic properties. Identity can be situated within specific layers, primarily the personal, enacted, relational, and communal layers. According to the original theoretical framework, these four frames of identity are not isolated. They continuously interpenetrate and interact with one another. This study adopts hybrid categories, specifically personal-relational and personal-communal identities, which are theoretically appropriate for highly mobile populations. The personal-relational construct represents the interpenetration of how individuals view themselves and how this self-concept is co-constructed through daily interactions with locals. The personal-communal construct captures the intersection of internal self-perception and the sense of belonging to a larger collective. In this study, personal-relational identity is operationally defined as how digital nomads perceive themselves and negotiate their cultural identity through daily communicative interactions with Thai locals. Personal-communal identity is operationally defined as the degree to which digital nomads feel a sense of integration, attachment, and belonging to a broader community within Thailand. Identity gaps develop when these frames do not align. Digital nomads may assume disparate identities when they endeavor to meet the expectations of others, leading to inconsistencies referred to as identity gaps (Jung & Hecht, 2005).

Behavioral intention is defined as an individual's expression of attitude during the process of deciding whether to adopt a particular behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Based on the theory of planned behavior, the behavior of an individual is determined by the presence or absence of behavioral intention (Ajzen, 1991). To justify the selection of specific cultural identity variables, it is necessary to compare digital nomads with other mobile populations. For traditional tourists, the stay in a host country is typically brief. Research shows that their behavioral intentions, such as the intention to revisit a destination, are primarily driven by destination image and consumer satisfaction (Chen & Tsai, 2007). Tourists do not need to build deep community connections. Conversely, migrants and long-term expatriates relocate with the intention of extended settlement. Their behavioral intentions depend heavily on successful acculturation and deep social integration (Berry, 1997). Digital nomads exist in a unique space between these two groups. They stay longer than traditional tourists, requiring them to establish daily social routines. They move much more frequently than migrants, meaning they do not seek permanent societal assimilation (Cook, 2023). Because they do not aim for local employment or citizenship, identity gaps related to the formal enacted frame or the material frame are less relevant to their travel decisions. The core psychological conflicts for digital nomads center on their daily social survival and their search for a supportive group. By focusing exclusively on the personal-relational and personal-communal dimensions, this study directly addresses the most relevant social challenges of the digital nomad lifestyle.

Because this study explores digital nomads residing specifically in Thailand, it is necessary to understand the foundational characteristics of the Thai cultural environment. Thai society is deeply influenced by Theravada Buddhism. A core element of this belief system is the emphasis on social harmony and calmness. In terms of social interaction, Thailand is recognized as a high-context culture. Thai communicative behaviors are typically indirect, highly polite, and non-confrontational (Pimpa, 2012). This politeness creates a pleasant daily experience for foreigners. It also establishes a social boundary. The true feelings of the local people can be difficult for outsiders to decode, which increases the difficulty of building deep cross-cultural relationships (Knutson et al., 2003). The daily rhythm of Thai society is characterized by the concept of “Sabai Sabai,” which describes a relaxed and comfortable approach to life. In addition to communication styles and lifestyle, the local social structure generally maintains a clear distinction between Thai citizens and Western foreigners, who are commonly referred to as “Farang.” Socially, foreigners are rarely considered fully assimilated members of the core local community (Green, 2020). These factors constitute the exact cultural context within which digital nomads must negotiate their personal and relational identities.

Identity determines actions and can be conceptualized as a method of interpreting behaviors (Kuiper, 2021). Identity gaps have consistently been demonstrated to be associated with negative individual and relational outcomes, including relationship dissatisfaction (Kennedy-Lightsey et al., 2015). Individuals new to an environment may experience a discrepancy between their personal identity and their enacted identity caused by deficiencies in linguistic competence (Hecht, 2005). Inherently, strong identification with the destination

and increased contact with residents would lead digital nomads toward developing a localized identity (de Loryn, 2022; Hannonen et al., 2023). Highly identified and integrated digital nomads might feel threatened to sacrifice their nomadic lifestyle for localized identity, affecting their revisit intention (Miocevic, 2024).

Based on this literature, this study proposes four hypotheses to test the influence of personal-relational and personal-communal identities on behavioral intentions among digital nomads in the Thai context

H1: There is a significant influence positive of personal-relational to departure intention among digital nomads in the Thai context.

H2: There is a significant influence positive of personal-relational to revisit intention among digital nomads in the Thai context.

H3: There is a significant influence positive of personal-communal to departure intention among digital nomads in the Thai context.

H4: There is a significant influence positive of personal-communal to revisit intention among digital nomads in the Thai context.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore the influence of personal-relational and personal-communal identities on behavioral intentions among digital nomads in the Thai context. As Creswell (2007) notes, mixed methods offer a more complete understanding of complex research problems by using the strengths of both numerical data and contextual narratives. A quantitative questionnaire survey was conducted first to gather numerical data. Based on the preliminary statistical results provided by this survey, ten volunteers were subsequently selected from the pool of 195 respondents to participate in qualitative semi-structured interviews. This sequential integration enabled the researcher to use qualitative findings to explain and confirm specific quantitative results, thereby enhancing the validity of the overall findings.

The target population for the quantitative phase consisted of non-Thai digital nomads who were currently residing or had previously resided in Thailand. Because digital nomads represent a highly mobile demographic, an exact official census is difficult to ascertain. Consequently, the researcher identified a Facebook group dedicated to digital nomads in Thailand as the accessible population frame. This group comprised approximately 8,600 active members at the time of data collection. Given the time constraints and the specific difficulties in reaching this mobile population, the researcher determined the sample size using Cochran's formula. Social science research involving hard-to-reach populations often accepts a broader margin of error to ensure practical feasibility. This study adopted a 95 percent confidence level with a 7 percent margin of error, supported by Bartlett, Kotrlik, and Higgins (2001). The calculation for the infinite population required 196 participants. Adjusting this figure for the finite population of 8,600 members resulted in a minimum

required sample size of 192. The researcher successfully collected a total of 195 valid questionnaires. According to Roscoe (1975) and Hair et al. (2010), a sample size exceeding 100 is methodologically sound and sufficient to obtain stable statistical results when utilizing multiple linear regression.

The quantitative research instrument was an online questionnaire designed in English to ensure accessibility for the target population. The final version consisted of four distinct sections. The initial section contained two screening questions to verify that participants identified as digital nomads and had living experience in Thailand. The second section comprised eleven questions to create a demographic profile, collecting data on gender, age, nationality, education level, occupation, and duration of stay. The third section measured the personal-relational and personal-communal identities of digital nomads as the independent variable. It consisted of seventeen items covering two dimensions: personal-relational identity and personal-communal identity. These items were adapted from the theoretical frameworks of Hecht et al. (2003) and modified based on recent empirical studies by Miocevic (2024) and Zhong (2022). The final section investigated behavioral intentions as the dependent variable, comprising six items to measure departure intention and revisit intention. Measurement across the core variables used a 5-point Likert Scale, ranging from 1 for totally disagree to 5 for totally agree (Likert, 1932).

To ensure content validity, the researcher employed the Index of Item-Objective Congruence method. Three experts in intercultural communication and social sciences evaluated the consistency between the questionnaire items and the research objectives. An item is considered valid if its index is 0.50 or higher (Turner & Carlson, 2003). All items in the questionnaire received a score of 0.50 or higher, indicating that the questions accurately measured the intended constructs. To assess internal consistency, a pilot study was conducted with 30 digital nomads. The personal-relational and personal-communal scale yielded a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.795, and the behavioral intention scale yielded 0.769. After collecting the formal data, the reliability was tested again using the full dataset of 195 responses. The analysis confirmed high internal consistency, as the Cronbach's alpha for all subscales remained well above the acceptable threshold of 0.70. This indicated that the questionnaire possessed high reliability for the final data analysis.

For the qualitative phase, the selection of interview participants was directly linked to the quantitative survey. To ensure the reliability of the qualitative data, the selection process strictly followed three criteria. Participants needed to be current or former digital nomads in Thailand, they must have completed the survey questionnaire, and they must have voluntarily agreed to participate in the follow-up session. At the end of the online questionnaire, respondents were asked to provide contact information if they were willing to be interviewed. From the pool of 195 valid respondents, 10 individuals who met all conditions were randomly selected. While qualitative studies utilize smaller samples, it is important to reach data saturation. Data saturation frequently occurs within the initial twelve interviews (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). This sample size of ten participants was adequate for generating substantial qualitative data. The semi-structured format allowed researchers to

ask predetermined open-ended questions based on the survey results while granting participants the autonomy to share their personal narratives.

Regarding data analysis, the quantitative data were processed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. Descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation, were used to examine the demographic characteristics and summarize the variable levels based on the interpretation intervals proposed by Best (1977). Prior to conducting the multiple linear regression, assumptions and diagnostics were evaluated to strengthen the credibility of the statistical findings. Multicollinearity was checked using Variance Inflation Factor values. All values were below the conservative threshold of 5.0, indicating that multicollinearity was not a concern (Hair et al., 2010). Multiple linear regression analyses were then employed to test the proposed hypotheses with a significance level of $p < 0.05$. Demographic factors were excluded as control variables in the primary regression models to maintain theoretical parsimony and focus strictly on the psychological identity constructs.

The qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, which is a widely accepted method for analyzing qualitative text. To ensure rigor and trustworthiness, the researcher followed the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and the credibility guidelines outlined by Nowell et al. (2017). The analytical process began with familiarization with the data through personal transcription and repeated reading of the interview recordings. The researcher then systematically generated initial codes across the entire dataset to identify segments relevant to the research questions. Following this, the codes were sorted and collated into potential broader themes. These themes were reviewed against the coded extracts to ensure they accurately represented the dataset. The researcher defined and named the final themes to ensure conceptual clarity. The final phase involved producing the report by selecting compelling extract examples to illustrate each theme.

RESULTS

Quantitative results

The quantitative phase of this study analyzed data collected from 195 digital nomads in Thailand. The analysis used descriptive statistics to outline the demographic profile and measure the variable levels. Multiple linear regression was used to test the proposed hypotheses.

The demographic information of the sample was analyzed using frequency and percentage. To highlight the most important characteristics, the core data is summarized in Table 1. The sample had a balanced gender distribution, with 51.4 percent male and 42.1 percent female respondents. Most respondents were young adults. Over 60 percent of the participants were under the age of 35. Regarding nationality, a large majority of 64.6 percent came from Europe. The participants also showed a high level of education, with 43.1 percent holding a bachelor's degree. In terms of occupation, the IT and Technology sector was the most common, accounting for 40.0 percent. Other survey questions revealed that Central

Thailand, primarily Bangkok, was the most popular location. Most respondents usually stayed for two to three months, and the low cost of living was their primary reason for choosing Thailand.

Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents (N=195) variable

Variable	Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	82	42.1
	Male	112	51.4
	Other	1	0.05
Age	18-25 years old	40	20.5
	26-30 years old	44	22.6
	31-35 years old	37	19.0
	36-40 years old	26	13.3
	Over 40 years old	48	24.7
Nationality	Europe	126	64.6
	North America	29	14.9
	Asia	29	14.9
	Africa	6	3.1
	Oceania	6	1.0
	South America	3	1.5
Occupation	IT & Technology	78	40.0
	Design & Creative Arts	18	9.2
	Media, Content & Marketing	14	7.2
	Business, Finance & Management	34	17.4
	Education & Academic	18	9.2
	Legal & Administrative	18	9.2
	Freelance & Digital Nomad	5	2.6
	Healthcare, Service & Others & N/A	10	5.2
Why did you decide to move Thailand?	Thai lifestyle & Thai culture	60	30.8
	Low living costs	85	43.6
	Climate	14	7.2
	Job	13	6.7
	Other digital nomads recommend	16	8.2
	others	7	3.6

Before testing the hypotheses, the study evaluated the central tendencies of the four core variables. The mean scores and standard deviations are presented in Table 2. Based on the interpretation criteria by Best (1977), the mean score for Personal-Relational Identity was 3.23 with a standard deviation of 0.64. The mean score for Personal-Communal Identity was 3.40 with a standard deviation of 0.65. Both independent variables indicated a moderate level. For the behavioral intentions, the mean score for Departure Intention was 3.02 with a

standard deviation of 0.75, showing a moderate level. In contrast, the mean score for Revisit Intention was 3.68 with a standard deviation of 0.58, indicating a high level.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of research variables

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
Personal-Relational Identity	3.23	0.64	Moderate
Personal-Communal Identity	3.40	0.65	Moderate
Departure Intention	3.02	0.75	Moderate
Revisit Intention	3.68	0.58	High

To test the specific hypotheses, multiple linear regression analysis was employed. The first regression model (Table 3) examined the influence of personal-relational and personal-communal on departure intention. The overall model fit yielded an R Square value of .423. This means that 42.3 percent of the variance in departure intention can be explained by the two independent variables. The ANOVA (Table 4) results showed an F-value of 70.277 with a significance level of $p < .001$.

Table 3 Model summary (departure intention)

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.650 ^a	.423	.417	.49852

Note. ^a Predictors: (Constant), PC, PR

Table 4. ANOVA (dependent variable: departure intention)

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	34.932	2	17.466	70.277	<.001 ^a
	Residual	47.717	192	.249		
	Total	82.649	194			

Note. ^a Predictors: (Constant), PC, PR.

Table 5. Coefficients (dependent variable: departure intention)

Model		Unstandardized B	Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	1.999	.198		10.110	<.001
	PR	-.021	.088	-.021	-.236	.814
	PC	.664	.087	.666	7.650	<.001

Table 5 shows the specific influence of each variable. The relationship between Personal-Relational Identity and Departure Intention was not statistically significant. The t-value was -.236 and the p-value was .814. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 is rejected. This means daily interactions with locals do not drive their decision to leave. In contrast, the relationship between Personal-Communal Identity and Departure Intention was statistically significant.

The t-value was 7.650 and the p-value was less than .001. The standardized beta coefficient was positive at .666. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 is supported. This result indicates that higher community integration leads to a stronger intention to leave.

The second regression model (Table 6) aimed to identify the factors driving revisit intention. The model summary showed an R Square value of .726. This indicates that 72.6 percent of the variance in revisit intention is explained personal-relational and personal-communal. The ANOVA results (Table 7) confirmed the model's significance with an F-value of 254.838 and a p-value of less than .001.

Table 6. Model summary (revisit intention)

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
2	.852 ^a	.726	.724	.42169

Note. ^a Predictors: (Constant), PC, PR

Table 7. ANOVA (dependent variable: revisit intention)

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
2	Regression	90.632	2	45.316	254.838	<.001 ^a
	Residual	34.142	192	.178		
	Total	124.774	194			

Note. ^a Predictors: (Constant), PC, PR.

Table 8. Coefficients (dependent variable: revisit intention)

Model		Unstandardized B	Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
2	(Constant)	-.316	.167		-1.889	.060
	PR	.738	.075	.592	9.883	<.001
	PC	.375	.073	.306	5.111	<.001

The regression coefficients in Table 8 provided strong evidence for the remaining hypotheses. Personal-Relational Identity had a significant positive influence on revisit intention. The t-value was 9.883 and the p-value was less than .001. The standardized beta coefficient was .592. Consequently, Hypothesis 2 is supported. This highlights that pleasant daily interactions with Thai people strongly encourage nomads to come back. Similarly, Personal-Communal Identity showed a statistically significant positive relationship with revisit intention. The t-value was 5.111 and the p-value was less than .001. The standardized beta coefficient was .306. Based on these results, Hypothesis 4 is also supported.

Qualitative findings

The qualitative research phase used semi-structured interviews to explain the statistical patterns found in the quantitative phase. Ten digital nomads participated in the interviews. The researcher used thematic analysis to extract identity themes and discover the practical factors influencing their travel behavior. The systematic analysis of the interview transcripts revealed three major themes. There was a total of 10 respondents. In the following analysis, we will use P to refer to the respondents, with P1 being the first respondent and so on.

Personal-relational and personal-communal identities and social barriers

The first major theme relates to how digital nomads perceive their identity and the social barriers they face when interacting with the local society. Although participants expressed an appreciation for Thai culture, the data revealed a gap between surface-level friendliness and deep cultural integration.

The “Peach Pit” of social interaction

A recurring observation among the participants was the specific nature of social interactions with Thai locals. The interviewees frequently described Thai people as polite and welcoming. They consistently found it difficult to form deep personal relationships. One participant utilized a specific metaphor to describe this cultural dynamic:

The culture is a peach pit. Because they smile at you, they are sweet. And then they are hard. You cannot get deeper. Thai people do not really expect to be friends with most of the people they meet. They expect to just sort of be friendly with them. It is very transactional. (P2)

The consensus among participants is that this transactional nature creates an invisible boundary. This limits their integration to surface-level exchanges. The data shows that social distance persists even when digital nomads make deliberate efforts to live in local neighborhoods. Another participant intentionally chose to live in a non-touristy area and provided clear evidence of this limitation:

I rent a traditional Thai house. And so nobody around me is American. It is 100 percent Thai people around me. I try to be polite. I know how to be respectful. But I do not really speak with them in depth. We just say hello. I think there is a limit to how much we can understand each other. (P8)

Language as a structural impediment versus the convenience of English

The data clearly highlighted the relationship between language barriers and the lack of deeper social relationships. Most participants explicitly cited the Thai language as the primary structural impediment to their local integration. One interviewee emphasized that without mastering the local language, any attempt at deep social integration is difficult:

I think the language is the greatest barrier because the Thai characters are very foreign to almost anyone. Unless you can speak the local languages well, you will not be able to have any deep talk with the local people. The integration must have a requirement that you know to speak the local language well. (P4)

Because learning Thai is perceived as too difficult, many nomads rely entirely on the widespread use of English in urban centers. This reliance creates a comfort zone that reduces the motivation to learn the local language. Another interviewee noted that basic English and translation applications are sufficient for daily tasks:

You have your translator app and you learn how to get by with hand gestures and pointing at things. They speak enough English that it is not a huge issue to survive. But you only communicate for services, not for making real connections. (P9)

Identity fluidity and seeking connections within the nomad bubble

When discussing their cultural identity, participants frequently rejected the digital nomad label while simultaneously seeking deep social connections exclusively within the digital nomad bubble. Many participants felt the term carried negative connotations of entitlement. The interviewee expressed a desire to distance herself from the typical stereotype:

Digital nomad has a lot of negative connotations. Like people who just come in and do not bother to learn or appreciate anything, just take, take and take. And I do not want to be seen as one of those people. I see myself as more of a global nomad. (P1)

Despite rejecting the label, the temporary nature of their stay forces them to seek social fulfillment rapidly. Integrating with locals takes too much time. They turn to other foreigners who share similar experiences. Another participant highlighted the practical reasons for finding friends within the expatriate network:

It is easier to make friends with other digital nomads. We are in the same boat. We have the same problems with visas, we speak English, and we understand the remote work lifestyle. With Thai locals, there is always a distance, but with nomads, you can connect instantly. (P5)

Factors influencing departure intention

The second major theme identifies the specific reasons why digital nomads choose to leave Thailand. The data indicates that departure is rarely driven by a dislike of the host culture.

It is primarily motivated by structural limitations and the psychological lifecycle of the nomadic experience.

Visa regulations and bureaucratic hurdles

A prominent structural limitation raised by the participants was the complexity and restriction of visa regulations. Participants described the process of legally maintaining their stay as stressful and a primary reason for their departure. The participant explained that his departure was a consequence of border control policies:

The first reason I left is the visa validity period. At that time Chinese passport holders can only stay without a visa for one month. The border check officer asked me about my itinerary and said if I enter Thailand again, she will not let me in. So I had to leave. I could not stay longer even if I wanted to. (P4)

This strict time limitation and the resulting forced departure is a shared pattern across different nationalities. Another interviewee noted that this precarious legal status enforces their transient identity:

Because in Europe we do not need a visa. So visa, if you travel, is always something you have to think about. We will always be expats. The moment we do not have a job or the right paperwork, we have to go outside. We do not have a real choice to stay. (P6)

The “Experience Completion” phenomenon

A significant psychological push factor identified in the data is the concept of experience completion. Several participants indicated that mobility is the core of their lifestyle. Once they have familiarized themselves with a location, the desire for novelty drives them to depart. One interviewee explained that settling down permanently contradicts their core motivation:

For all my life I have always traveled, even before there was internet. I was always a nomad. I think just the choice of freedom to not have to go somewhere for work, you can choose where you want to be. I like to move. Mobility is part of who we are. (P8)

The host country is treated as a temporary project. Once they explore the local area, the location loses its initial novelty. The interviewee described this shared psychological lifecycle and how it affects their departure time: “The funniest period of time to be in a country for is three months. It is just enough time that you never feel hurried, and when you are leaving is exactly when the honeymoon period psychologically wears off” (P9).

Environmental and infrastructure issues

Certain environmental factors serve as practical reasons for departure. While the participants generally praised the overall infrastructure, they consistently identified extreme weather and environmental pollution as major disruptions to their daily routines. One participant highlighted how the extreme heat significantly limits her daily life:

Because it is so hot, everything you need is inside. So you go to the shopping mall every weekend, but there are not many outdoor activities. That is why we were like, okay, we have seen this enough, now we move on. (P6)

Predictable seasonal issues also form a consistent pattern that dictates travel schedules. The participant mentioned the necessity of leaving during specific months due to severe air quality drops in Northern Thailand: “Everything works well, but maybe the weather during the rainy season. And the smoky season. Like I will leave for the smoky season. Because the pollution is too much to handle.” (P3)

Factors influencing revisit intention

The final major theme explores the reasons why digital nomads display a high intention to return to Thailand. The findings reveal that revisit intentions are primarily driven by practical advantages, personal comfort, and established networking facilities.

Cost of living and “Geo-Arbitrage”

A major motivation for revisiting Thailand is the exceptional value for money the country offers. These individuals strategically leverage their earning power in stronger currencies to enjoy a significantly higher standard of living. The participant summarized how this economic advantage overrides other concerns:

Bangkok offers a rare global combination. It is a place where low prices are coupled with virtually unlimited access to goods and services. It is just the basic ability to exchange money for goods and services is much rarer than you would think. That is why I keep coming back. (P2)

This sentiment of unparalleled convenience relative to cost was shared across different nationalities. Another participant mentioned that the low cost allows for a significantly better daily routine that cannot be replicated in his home country:

Even if they go somewhere else, maybe they do it just because it is cheap they can live. It is cheaper for them to live here, to rent a nice condo with a swimming pool, and to eat out every day. You cannot do that in Europe. (P7)

The “Sabai Sabai” lifestyle and environmental comfort

Participants repeatedly expressed a strong preference for the relaxed and tolerant lifestyle in Thailand. Digital nomads interpret the local cultural concept of a relaxed lifestyle as a psychological safe space. One interviewee highlighted the psychological relief provided by the local atmosphere:

I like the social atmosphere here. I feel very free and very relaxed. I like Thai people and I like Thai culture from what I have seen. It reminds me of where I grew up in some ways. It is very calming for me. (P1)

This sense of comfort is further reinforced by a high level of societal tolerance. The interviewee noted that feeling accepted without judgment is a major factor in her desire to return and stay: “The mindset is extremely tolerant and optimistic. And I love that. You can be any religion, any sexuality, you are free. People will not judge you. That has really changed me a lot and makes me feel comfortable” (P5).

The established digital nomad infrastructure

Finally, the established network and infrastructure catering to remote workers serve as a powerful magnet. Digital nomads return to Thailand because it requires minimal effort to restart their professional and social lives. The participant described Chiang Mai as a central hub that naturally attracts repeat visitors:

Chiang Mai is known as the Digital Nomad Capital of the World. This is the place with the most nomads. It is a good place to do work, the Wi-Fi is very fast. And there are lots of meetups. So it makes it easy to meet lots of people with shared interests. (P8)

This ready-made infrastructure means that nomads do not have to struggle to find resources upon arrival. One participant echoed this point. He noted that the concentration of similar individuals provides valuable business and social opportunities:

There is a big community of digital nomads and it is very cool for me to network. I can meet a lot of entrepreneurs. So it is a mix of several criteria, but the community is a huge reason to be here. (P10)

DISCUSSION

The core of this research revolves around testing hypotheses regarding how personal-relational and personal-communal identities influence departure and revisit intentions among digital nomads in Thailand. This study used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. The quantitative survey provided the statistical results. The qualitative

interviews offered contextual depth to explain these numerical findings and understand the decision-making processes of this mobile population.

The statistical results rejected Hypothesis 1. This indicates that the quality of daily interactions with locals does not determine a digital nomad's decision to leave the country. The qualitative interviews explain this result through the peach pit culture. Digital nomads experience transactional politeness instead of deep emotional connections with local residents. These superficial relationships are not strong enough to act as anchors. According to the relational layer of the Communication Theory of Identity (Hecht et al., 2005), identity is co-created in relationships. When these relationships remain shallow due to language barriers and cultural differences, the relational identity does not create a strong attachment to the location. The decision to depart relies on other structural factors.

Hypothesis 3 was supported with a significant positive relationship. The quantitative data showed that a higher sense of community integration leads to a stronger intention to leave. This presents an integration paradox. The qualitative data explains this counter-intuitive finding through the experience completion effect. Digital nomads are defined by their mobility (Cook, 2023). Once they navigate the local culture and establish a routine, they feel they have completed their cultural experience. The novelty disappears, and their nomadic desire pushes them to seek a new destination. Successful integration acts as a milestone signaling the end of their stay. At the same time, digital nomads confront structural barriers when they attempt to integrate deeply. The stress of visa regulations and the realization that they will always be foreigners create a sense of disillusionment (Green, 2020). Nomads who try hard to integrate often feel the structural rejection of the host country more strongly. This feeling speeds up their departure intention.

The regression model for revisit intention showed high explanatory power. Hypothesis 2 was supported and emerged as the strongest predictor. Smooth and pleasant interpersonal interactions encourage digital nomads to return. The qualitative data explains this statistical result. Nomads may not form deep friendships, but their daily micro-interactions are very positive. The relaxed lifestyle and polite nature of Thai locals fulfill the enactment layer of identity smoothly (Hecht et al., 1993). Digital nomads revisit Thailand to re-experience this calming daily relational atmosphere. The ease of daily interactions makes the host country an appealing environment.

Hypothesis 4 was also supported. The quantitative data indicated that personal-communal identity positively influences revisit intention. The qualitative findings reveal that the community digital nomads belong to is often the expatriate network rather than the traditional local society. This relates to the conflict between ascribed identity and subjective identity. Local people often define them simply as foreign tourists. In contrast, digital nomads define themselves by their professional skills and global mobility. Because integrating into the local society is difficult, they find belonging in the nomad bubble. The host destination offers developed infrastructures that allow nomads to join a supportive network instantly. The combination of cheap living through geo-arbitrage (Mancinelli, 2020) and access to an international community act as a strong motivation. They return because this specific communal identity is efficient for their professional lifestyles.

This research contributes to the academic literature by expanding the Communication Theory of Identity to a highly transient population. Traditional research assumes that strong relational and communal identities lead to long-term commitment to a specific place. This study demonstrates that identity construction is fluid for digital nomads. The finding that a strong personal-communal identity triggers departure introduces a new dynamic to the framework. Achieving a sense of community identity can serve as a catalyst for onward movement. This integration paradox is not unique to digital nomads. It may apply to other highly mobile populations like serial expatriates. For these groups, achieving integration signals the completion of a cultural project rather than a desire for permanent settlement. The study also contributes to mobility studies by separating departure intention from revisit intention (Reichenberger, 2018). It proves that the factors driving a digital nomad away from a destination are different from the factors bringing them back. This supports the concept of circular mobility. Digital nomads continuously leave and return to destinations based on their practical needs.

Regarding practical implications, Thai policymakers should recognize the high revisit intentions and the frustration over visa policies. Bureaucratic friction causes a loss of long-term economic contributions. Authorities should streamline the application process for long-term options like the Destination Thailand Visa. They should also simplify the regular reporting requirements to reduce the forced departure of integrated nomads. Additionally, the government could educate local communities about the digital nomad concept to reduce prejudice. Local businesses should maintain high standards of polite hospitality. Personal-relational identity is the strongest driver for revisiting. Nomads seek community primarily within their own circles. Businesses can thrive by providing spaces that support networking among remote workers.

This study has several limitations. The quantitative data used non-probability purposive sampling from Facebook groups. This sampling method may limit the generalizability of the findings to the global digital nomad population. The cross-sectional research design only captures a snapshot of digital nomads' intentions at one specific time. Cultural identity and mobility intentions change over time. Causality cannot be established over the long term. This research is also context-specific to Thailand. The unique Thai lifestyle and specific visa regulations shaped the participants' experiences. These findings might apply differently in other digital nomad hubs in Europe or South America.

Future research should use longitudinal approaches to capture the changes in identity and mobility over time. Tracking the same individuals across multiple years and destinations would clarify how the experience completion effect evolves. It would also show whether their behavioral intentions shift as they move between different cultures. Comparative studies across diverse regional hubs would help identify which identity factors are universal to the nomadic lifestyle and which are destination-specific.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this mixed-methods study reached its main research objectives. It explored the personal-relational and personal-communal identities of non-Thai digital nomads. It investigated their behavioral intentions and examined how these identities influence their travel decisions in Thailand. The research confirms that these specific identity dimensions are strong predictors of nomadic behavior. The most significant finding is the clear difference between the reasons for leaving and returning. A high level of community integration actually drives digital nomads to depart and search for new experiences. This behavior highlights their core need for constant mobility. On the other hand, the ease of daily polite interactions with local people serves as the main factor pulling them back to Thailand. By demonstrating that digital nomads engage in circular mobility, this study shows how different identity needs and practical benefits guide their travel patterns. Ultimately, the research provides a useful framework for understanding the future of global remote work and transnational living.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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