



# Digital Nomadism as a Critique of Modern Life: The Role of Consumption

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation focuses on an articulation of the modern lived experience where fading traditions and shifting social norms are reshaping society in significant ways, while universal precarity and loss of hope in the future have become prominent features of the sociocultural landscape. Drawing on theories of liquid modernity and liquid consumption, three papers – two empirical and one conceptual – explore how consumers adapt and respond to these dynamics and answer to the overarching research question “how does living a liquid modern life shape and is shaped by consumption?” This question is explored ethnographically and netnographically with a three-year study of digital nomadism – a hypermobile lifestyle that closely reflects the multitudes of reconfigurations of life in liquid modernity. Collectively, the papers in this dissertation contour cultural and behavioral shifts where individuals drift away from traditional social roles and structures to seek alternative ways of being in the world in a critical quest to escape from the hegemonies of everyday life and to manage uncertainty. This dissertation unravels how consumption intersects with these dynamics and traces how consumers navigate this modern environment by drawing on new logics of consumption in the marketplace. Three shifts in the consumption behavior landscape are demonstrated: how consumers escape lived reality through consumption; how they attain symbolic capital, build image and pursue happiness in the absence of ownership; and how they find stability and security in an era of precarity. This dissertation contributes to consumer research by expanding the theoretical footprint of liquid consumption through leveraging it as a lens to revisit three foundational marketing constructs – marketplace utopias, materialism, and consumer security. Contributions to the domains of liquid consumption, utopian consumption, materialism, consumer security, and digital nomadism are discussed, alongside implications for marketing practice in retailing, experiential and symbolic consumption.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. Liquid life and consumption

Ours is an era of global mobility and social acceleration, fading traditions and shifting social norms, unfolding alongside ubiquitous precarity and uncertainty (Appadurai 1990; Bauman 2000; Beck 1992; Rosa 2013; Urry 2007). Against this backdrop, the modern experience is that of erosion of stabilities and the disappearance of solid structures and their acquainted reliabilities (Kesselring 2008). If several decades ago the overarching story line of (Western) modern life (Giddens 1991) would have depicted a nuclear family, comfortably settled into an owned home, and a lifelong career leading to secure retirement, today, for many, such signposts of normative social ordering of life are no longer either attainable, or the aspirational ideal. These trends are epiphenomenal to what Bauman labels “liquid modernity” (2000), denoting a shift from a “solid” world where institutions, traditions and norms were stable and enduring, to a “liquid” modern world defined by ephemerality and continual change in relationships, identities and social structures.

To live in a liquid modern world is to live a “liquid life” (Bauman 2005) – a precarious life, lived under conditions of constant ambivalence, that demands flexibility and the ability to “walk on quicksand” to cope with its unpredictability (Bauman 2005, 117). Individualization and disembedding from social, spatial and material ties are the principles of liquid life and those who can successfully cope with and manage it are those for whom “space matters little and distance is not a bother; people at home in many places but in no one place in particular” (Bauman 2005, 3). In turn, it is the nomad who is the paradigmatic social figure within liquid modernity (Kesselring 2008), a “wandering threat” and a present-day heroic subject at once, who is able to challenge the established ordering of life and reject state control and dependence, by shattering classifications, occupying un-striated spaces and embracing difference as a principle (Engebrigsten 2017, 44-45; also, Braidotti 1994; Deleuze and Guattari 1986; Peters 2006). The emergence of the present-day nomadic subjectivity reflects how, with its unpredictability and durable transience (Bauman 1992), liquid modernity thus demands a reconfiguration of contemporary life courses (Bauman 2000). It spells the end of



utopian visions centered on the idea of a “good life” to be had collectively in a distant future under a promise of delayed gratification (Bauman 2005) and gives rise to the instantaneity of consumer culture, where ability to “take the waiting out of wanting” is the measure of success of a life worth living (Blackshaw 2005, 114). “Liquid life is consuming life,” and its every aspect is mediated by the marketplace (Bauman 2005, 7). Studying it, thus, holds much potential for mapping the landscape of contemporary consumption.

Reflective of this, in consumer research, Bauman’s notion of liquidity has been applied in the development of new theoretical frameworks that illuminate emergent shifts in the marketplace and consumer behavior. In seminal work, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) advance that in liquid modernity the logic of consumption is changing and develop a framework conceptualizing modern consumption along a continuum between solid and liquid, where solid consumption is enduring, ownership based, and tangible, while liquid consumption is ephemeral, access based, and dematerialized. This theorization challenges a myriad of rational economic perspectives in which ownership-centrality is a foundational feature of consumption (Lamberton and Goldsmith 2020) and argues that, instead, consumers can occupy various points along the solid-liquid continuum (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017). Viewing consumption in today’s market through this lens reveals how many increasingly develop detached relationships with their possessions (Bardhi et al. 2012) and prefer consumption without acquisition all together. Yet, such waning desire for ownership is accompanied, nonetheless, with unabating desire to consume (Lamberton and Goldsmith 2020). Consumer research has only but begun to understand the implications of these new dynamics within contemporary global consumer culture (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017; Lamberton and Goldsmith 2020) and empirical and theoretical insights at the intercept between consumption and life in liquidity are at their infancy. Comprised of three research papers – two empirical and one conceptual – this dissertation aims to explore these questions and asks: how does living a liquid modern life shape and is shaped by consumption?

Situated within the tradition of culturally oriented consumer research scholarship known as Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), this thesis takes an in-depth, ethnographic approach to exploring these questions by studying the emergent lifestyle movement of digital nomadism.

Digital nomadism is a growing form of contemporary living, enabled by widespread Internet access and ease of mobility in a globalized world, where large cohorts choose to dispose of most of their possessions, unroot from their places of residence, and serially relocate either internationally or intranationally (e.g., via van-living; Gretzel and Hardy 2019) while working remotely from their laptops (Cook 2020; Green 2020; Hannonen 2020; Mancinelli 2020; Thompson 2021; Woldoff and Litchfield 2021). In contrast to that of other migrants, such as refugees or labor migrants, the digital nomadic way of life inheres lifestyle choices where migration is an antimodern, escapist, and reflexive self-realization project in search of the good life (Benson and O'Reilly 2009). In opposition to the social systems of their countries of origin, digital nomads reject sedentarism, blurring binary distinctions between home and workplace, or productive time and leisure, that have traditionally been used to understand place-based ways of life and their indicators of social position (Mancinelli 2020; cf. Atanasova et al. forthcoming). By disengaging from sedentary life, digital nomads express an ethos of freedom, in which minimalism and uncertainty replace material accumulation and stability (Mancinelli 2020). In turn, this movement is arising in response to a liquid modern social milieu where traditional notions such as 9-5 work life, family and marriage, and ownership and material accumulations, are both continuously challenged as well as harder to attain (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017; O'Reilly and Benson 2016). This makes digital nomadism a rich research context within which to explore the intercept between consumption and liquid modern life.

Through empirical investigation of this context, and synthesis and assimilation of theories of liquid modernity and consumption (Bauman 2000; 2005; 2007a; Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017), this dissertation traces distinct shifts in the ways consumers use consumption along the solid-liquid continuum and exposes that: 1) how consumers re-imagine and re-construct reality through consumption in pursuit of betterment, 2) how they attain happiness and cater to life goals, and 3) how they assert stability and find security, is changing. It shows that while conditions of liquidity can be challenging (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017), liquid consumption can offer novel and different opportunities for consumers to pursue life goals, accumulate symbolic capital, attain stability and escape the everyday. As such, this thesis revisits and re-conceptualizes three seminal marketing constructs in light of emergent dynamics:

marketplace utopias (Maclaran and Brown 2005) in the context of increased individualization (Paper 1), materialism (Belk 1985) in the context of dematerialization and digitalization (Paper 2), and consumer security in an era of precarity and insecurity (Campbell et al. 2020) (Paper 3).

Each of the three papers within this dissertation chronicle how, by shifting positions along the solid-liquid consumption continuum, consumers blend distinct logics in the marketplace toward navigating the complex sociocultural and economic landscape of life in liquid modernity. With that, the overarching contribution of this work is two-fold: first, it expands Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2017) theorization of consumption along a solid-liquid continuum by furthering our foundational understanding of how and to what ends some consumers move along different points of that continuum; and, second, it enhances marketing theory by applying this understanding toward building new theoretical lenses that capture previously untheorized shifts in consumer behavior in today's market.

Studying this intercept between consumption and liquid modern living is theoretically and practically important as it allows us to better understand novel contexts, consumer cohorts, lifestyles, trends and marketplace dynamics which are emerging as a result of these shifts in the contemporary landscape. Such shifts cannot be fully explained by orthodox marketing theories whose explanatory lenses have been largely focused on understanding of a solid and stable world, conceived through enduring social structures (Eckhardt and Bardhi 2020a). As such, this thesis offers an intervention to prevailing theoretical discourses that currently do not account for consumers' shifting consumption orientations along the solid-liquid consumption continuum (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017) which they adopt at various stages as they manage their life trajectories in a rapidly shifting macro context.

In the remainder of this chapter, I detail digital nomadism as a contemporary lifestyle and consumption phenomenon; then, I outline the tenets of consumer culture and the meta context of liquid modernity, and I problematize consumption in light of that context and extant consumer research. The chapter concludes with a summary of the three papers comprising the dissertation and a brief outline of their contributions.

## 1.2. Research phenomenon: Digital nomadism

During the last decade, the term “digital nomad” has been gaining popularity in the mass vernacular with definitions shifting alongside the movement itself. From early mentions of digital nomads as liberated, but always-on, knowledge workers (The Economist 2008), to recent descriptions of digital nomads as minimalists enabled by the cryptocurrency evolution (Radocchia 2019), digital nomads have evolved into the social figures of current work life (Müller 2016) and the embodiment of the liquid modern individual (Bauman 2000). Described as a new breed of wanderers enabled by technology and cheap airfare, digital nomads are known 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 exotic place to another, while making their living on-line, bringing their jobs with them wherever they go (Aroles et al. 2020; Green 2020; Cook 2020; Mancinelli 2020; Thompson 2018, 2021; Woldoff and Litchfield 2021).

As a term, digital nomadism was first coined by Makimoto and Manners (1997) who at the turn of the millennium laid out a vision of the future where portable work devices and technological advancements give rise to a new stratum of remote workers – “digital nomads” – who challenge the dominance of sedentarism as the status quo. Digital nomadism was brought to the mainstream vernacular, however, by Tim Ferriss who, in his bestseller “The 4-hour work week” (2007), detailed a lifestyle grounded in a liberatory ethos where the “good life” is made possible outside the confines of a 9-5 work life via a practice known as “geo arbitrage,” where lower income is leveraged by living in places with affordable cost of living. As such, digital nomadism grew popular by embodying an aspirational ideal for good living within reach to anyone who felt trapped in the rat race, not just the jet setting elite with the financial means to escape the cubicle.

Digital nomadism is thus a topical phenomenon that lays at the intersection of changing sociocultural dynamics in liquid modernity, lifestyle choices and global consumer culture that can elicit nuanced insight about unfolding consumer trends in the marketplace. Prior academic research has framed digital nomadism in three ways: as an economic activity, as a

cultural phenomenon, and as a new technology-enabled form of working and organizing (Aroles et al. 2020); alongside, empirical explorations have been carried out within different conceptual portfolios such as lifestyle mobilities (Cohen, Duncan and Thulemark 2015), lifestyle migration (O'Reilly and Benson 2009), and bohemian migration (Korpela 2020), among others. Yet, definitions have been fragmented and scattered through different disciplines and perspectives (Hannonen 2020). Most prominently, digital nomadism has been studied within the fields of mobilities, tourism, and technology and information systems, where a small but growing stream of papers have been examining the phenomenon either from a lifestyle or a work-life perspective (Hannonen 2020; see, Cook 2020; Green 2020; Müller 2016; Mancinelli 2020; Reichenberger 2018; Thompson 2018; 2021).

In this dissertation, I explore digital nomadism from a lifestyle lens which is suited to illuminate the sociocultural valorization of transnational mobility as a sign of fundamental changes in the construction of sociality and value systems (Mancinelli 2020). The increasing prominence of mobility lifestyles, which have emerged as distinct avenues for manifestation of choice and agency, has been regarded as a signifier of such broader shifts in today's social context (Mancinelli 2020). I follow in the conceptual understanding of digital nomadism as a contemporary lifestyle migration phenomenon (O'Reilly and Benson 2009) where migration is simultaneously about escape from somewhere and something, and escape to self-fulfillment and a new life (2). This way of living incorporates disembedding from communal or individual histories, from changing circumstances and prior constraints, and the opportunity for restoration or rediscovery of the self (O'Reilly and Benson 2009, 2-4). I thus define digital nomadism as a *liquid lifestyle where consumers re-orient away from accumulation of material possessions and let go of conventional everyday comforts or goals and turn instead toward continuous mobility as a means to a better and more fulfilling way of life*. By embracing this lifestyle, digital nomads seek to take agency over their own life circumstances, crafting individualistic projects of self-realization where mobility and disengaging with sedentary life allows them to develop a new set of values (Mancinelli 2020).

In contrast to that of other migrants, such as refugees or labor migrants, the digital nomadic way of life inheres lifestyle choices where migration is an anti-modern, escapist, and reflexive self-realization project in search of the “good life” that is emphasized by continuous comparison with life before migration (Benson and O’Reilly 2009). This “good life” is often described as standing in contrast with the shallowness, materialism and consumerism, or risk, uncertainty and insecurity of contemporary (Western) lifestyles: for lifestyle migrants, such as the digital nomads studied here, mobility is often driven by aspiration to avoid futures foreseen as riddled with economic insecurity or dread, fear of monotony, the burden of debt, lack of security, dead-end jobs or a lonely and isolated retirement (O’Reilly and Benson 2009, 4). It has been demonstrated that this way of living is embraced at seemingly pivotal points in these individuals’ lives such as identity crises, illness, major life events such as marriage or divorce, job loss or other major employment changes (Hoey 2009, 42-43).

Indeed, at present, while international travel has become increasingly difficult since the global Covid-19 health pandemic began, paradoxically, digital nomadism is on the rise (Kollewe 2021): on the one hand the attainability of lifestyle mobility has been amplified by the normalization of remote working during the pandemic (Hermann and Paris 2020), while on the other, society has been facing unprecedented levels of uncertainty and disruption. In turn, while countries like the Bahamas and Croatia are attracting seasoned digital nomads with novel work-from-home visas to compensate for vanishing tourism (Gershman 2021), many others choose to explore their own countries and embrace digital nomadism for the first time – letting go of their expensive metropolitan rentals and taking advantage of remote working while living in vans on the road or in cheaper rural areas (Tsapovsky 2020).

The reliance of digital nomads on the affordances of the digital economy to carry out daily life is a key difference between these individuals and other lifestyle migrants. Further, though similar in their hyper-mobile orientations, the digital nomadic cohort which I study differs from the elite global nomads (Bardhi et al. 2012) and cosmopolitans (Thompson and Tambyah 1999) of interest to prior consumer research in that digital nomads need not necessarily possess significant financial capital nor high-end professional profiles to live nomadically. The ethnographic accounts presented here illustrate that this way of living

attracts people of different walks of life – from college students to retirees. The participants in this research spanned ages from 18 through 57 and a third report income levels at \$20,000-\$40,000/year (See Appendix A). Growing coverage of this lifestyle in popular media further exposes the demographic variability within this cohort, illustrating that the digital nomad community consists of a diverse spectrum of individuals, many hailing from affluent Western countries but also from developing economies alike; can be freelancers, college dropouts, entrepreneurs, as well as remote employees, artists and gig workers (Bowles 2020; Filipovic 2020; Kale 2020; Kollwe 2021; Lufkin 2021). As Mancinelli (2020) points out, that is not to say that privileged preconditions such as the high standards of living, education and largely favorable visa regimes of their countries of origin do not enable digital nomadic mobility – geoarbitrage is indeed an opportunistic strategy that leverages such systemic privileges to enable nomads to navigate the global map to their own advantage. However, levels of economic privilege experienced by lifestyle migrants, such as digital nomads, are often overemphasized and it is seldom recognized that many lifestyle migrants have to consolidate all their economic resources in order to live this way (Benson and O'Reilly 2009). The rapid increase in the popularity of this way of living, and the key difference with past nomadic groups studied within consumer research, stems from the increased levels of reflexivity in these consumers (Benson and O'Reilly 2009) and rising discontent with the institutional ordering within the global capitalist system (e.g., Woldoff and Litchfield 2021) that propels these nomads' strong desire to escape it. Paradoxically, such escape is facilitated by an opportunistic adaptation to a neo-liberal ideology of entrepreneurial freedom flourishing in the global digital and gig-economies (Mancinelli 2020), which in and of itself is an advantage afforded to specific type of liquid modern subjects, and arguably at a cost for local populations (Thompson 2018). In this dissertation, however, I neither negate nor emphasize the various forms of privilege which inhere in the digital nomadic lifestyle (e.g., Atanasova et al. forthcoming). Rather, I focus my empirical investigation on the underlying ways in which the digital nomadic lifestyle emerges as a critical response to an ambivalent and uncertain modern-day macro context.

In sum, digital nomadism is a growing new form of contemporary living that is yet to be theorized in the consumer research literature, but which closely and directly reflects the

premise of Bauman's liquid modernity. As such, digital nomadism represents a topical research context, uniquely positioned to elicit rich empirical insight toward theorizing how living a liquid modern life shapes and is shaped by consumption.

### **1.3. Conceptual positioning: A Consumer Culture Theory perspective**

This dissertation is guided by an objective to better understand how the macro-level contextual dynamics of liquid modernity implicate consumer behavior in today's marketplace. In turn, this work is situated within the tradition of culturally oriented consumer research scholarship, succinctly known as Consumer Culture Theory (CCT).

CCT is a heuristic framework introduced by Arnould and Thompson (2005) to envelop a family of theoretical perspectives that address "the sociocultural, experiential, symbolic, and ideological aspects of consumption" and trace the "dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings" (868). Not a unified theory, but an interdisciplinary stream of socio-cultural research, CCT studies the cultural meanings, socio-historic influences, and social dynamics that shape consumer experiences and identities in the context of everyday life (Arnould and Thompson 2005). A foundational principle of CCT is that, following Geertz (1973), it conceptualizes culture as the very fabric of experience, meaning, and action, where consumers are not merely bearers of culture, but producers of culture. As such, CCT, is a stream of research interested in the "real behavior of real consumers" (Wells 1991, iii in Arnould et al. 2019) that sees culture not as a homogenous system of collectively shared meanings, ways of life, and unifying values shared by a member of society, but as a heterogeneous distribution of meanings and the multiplicity of overlapping cultural groupings that exist within the broader socio-historical frame of globalization and market capitalism (Arnould and Thompson 2005).

Research within this tradition shares common theoretical interests that systematically link together studies concerned with diverse methodological orientations, theoretical traditions (e.g., sociology, anthropology, critical theory) and substantive issues emanating from the particular research context (Arnould and Thompson 2007, 8). Due to its interest in



humanistic, interpretivist and culture-oriented research paradigms (Sherry 1991), CCT assumes an inherently qualitative research methodology subscribing to an interest toward deep, naturalistic, interpretation of lived culture (Lincoln and Guba 1985). In turn, a CCT approach is most suited to answer process-focused questions about the nature of consumption, in other words, the how- and what- of consumption phenomena, providing a broad grasp of how culture, consumer subjectivities and societal structures intertwine in everyday life, which makes it a suitable ideological and methodological framework to guide this research.

The origins of this “disciplinary brand” (Arnould and Thompson 2005) can be traced to early debates in the marketing field, most notably in the 60’s and 70’s, which were calling for new perspectives that can account for the symbolic rather than functional and positivist view of consumer behavior (e.g., Levy 1959, 2005). What followed was the interpretive turn (Sherry 1991) in consumer research and early CCT contributions, such as the Consumer Behavior Odyssey Project in the mid-1980s, when a group of consumer researchers set off across the U.S. in an RV to conduct a multi-sited ethnographic field study of various “swap meets, roadside attractions, flea markets, homeless shelters, farms and other unknown nooks and crannies of consumer culture” with the aim to meet consumer culture where it was happening and to gain a deep understanding of the form, places and perspectives of consumer experience (Arnould et al. 2019, 8; Joy and Li 2012). The Odyssey and resulting papers (e.g., Belk 1987; Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf 1988; Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989) led to significant theoretical and methodological contributions, including insights into the ways consumers engage with consumption practices, acquire and dispose of possessions, imbue possessions with meaning, or engage in sacred or profane consumption experiences (Arnould et al. 2019). Since then, CCT scholarship has established itself as a prolific and vibrant domain of research that has elicited insightful and impactful work on numerous macro-, meso- and micro- constructs, from marketplace dynamics, cultures, subcultures, and ideologies (e.g., Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012; Chatzidakis, Maclaran and Varman 2021; Kozinets 2002a; McCracken 1986; Schouten and McAlexander 1995) to consumer collectives, identities and practices (e.g., Belk 1988; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Parmentier and Fischer 2014; Thompson, Henry and Bardhi 2018).

This dissertation shares this line of research's interest in unraveling how consumer behavior is situated within the broader sociocultural and economic context and thus follows in the prominent interpretivist tradition of the CCT field, seeking to expand our understanding of how consumers consume (Holt 1995) today and how the contemporary liquid modern context re-shapes and is shaped by their everyday consumption practices, behaviors and dispositions.

#### **1.4. Problematizing Liquid Consumption**

Consumer culture theory research has been critiqued for having a tendency to over-signify consumer subjectivities (Fitchett et al. 2014) and lived experiences, and to miss the chance to extend the analytical terrain to broader meta- and macro-level frameworks which account for “the context of context” – that is, the systemic and structuring influences of markets and social systems that might not be necessarily felt or experienced by consumers in their daily lives (Askegaard and Linnet 2011). Drawing on Dilley (1999), Askegaard and Linnet (2011) outline three kinds of contexts: psychological or mental, internal, and external, with the latter “articulating ‘a connection between one domain of phenomena . . . and another’ such as the social life of a group, or wider societal or global structures and processes surrounding the phenomenon (Dilley 1999, 12).” The authors argue that analyses that aim for an elucidation of consumer culture, should be more attentive to the external cultural, historical and societal conditions that contextualize consumers' behaviors. The task of contextualization, they suggest, is to explain consumers' choices by referring both to the structuring force of such large-scale contexts, and the meaningful projects that arise in everyday sociality (Askegaard and Linnet 2011).

It is widely established in scholarship outside of marketing that liquid modernity complicates and problematizes life experiences, projects and aims, altering individuals' value systems and priorities and challenging the traditional social order and norms (Bauman 2000; Jacobsen 2007; Levitas 2011; Tester 2004). Drawing on such perspectives, in consumer research, liquid modernity is a macro level context that has recently been used to guide important theorizations of emergent shifts in the modern market that elicit how liquid modern

conditions reconstruct and alter everyday consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017; Eckhardt and Bardhi 2020). Yet, empirical and theoretical understanding of the implications of this meta context on consumers' lived experiences is still in its infancy. Increasingly, scholars are calling for development of new knowledge and new frameworks that can capture and explain the wide-ranging implications of liquidity on markets, consumers and society (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017; Lamberton and Goldsmith 2020; see also Campbell et al. 2020).

Critically, with material objects of consumption having been considered essential mediators of the experience of life and the intelligibility of one's cultural universe (Woodward 2007), the absence of ownership centrality in liquidity (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017; Lamberton and Goldsmith 2020) problematizes the role of both solid and liquid consumption in liquid life. To that end, Lamberton and Goldsmith (2020) call for research to study the antecedents and consequences that drive consumers' move along the consumption continuum. As established theoretical frameworks do not account for liquid consumption logics, research is also needed to capture how liquid consumption implicates related assumptions about consumer behavior, many of which have been anchored thus far in the importance consumers place on material possessions and the role of such possessions in consumers' lives (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017). In turn, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) question how liquid consumption relates to consumers' materialistic aims and whether it can be a measure of accomplishment toward the attainment of important consumer goals such as living desired lifestyles; or whether it can provide a sense of safety, like solid consumption can, and thus bring stability in consumers lives (590-593). Overall, as liquid consumption is challenging the central position which material possessions had once occupied, the cultural, utilitarian and symbolic efficacy of consumption is being implicated and theoretical understanding of the ensuing shifts in the marketplace is needed (Lamberton and Goldsmith 2020). Comprised of three research papers, this dissertation thus broadly asks: how does living a liquid modern life shape and is shaped by consumption? Responding to calls for research at the intersection of liquid consumption and the broader conceptual pane of marketing theory (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017), within this overarching question, this work unravels three specific inquiries at the phenomenon level: how do consumers escape and re-imagine their everyday life in today's marketplace through consumption? (Paper 1); how do they build image, signal status and pursue life goals absence

of ownership centrality? (Paper 2); and how do they find security and gain a sense of control in precarity? (Paper 3).

By studying ethnographically the emergent lifestyle of digital nomadism, which is cultivated out of the dynamics of liquid modernity (Bauman 2005; Benson and O'Reilly 2016; Mancinelli 2020), this thesis combines grounded observations and recordings of market-mediated practices with social theorization, thus abstracting analytical insight beyond the lived experience of consumers and instead situating their practices and consumption in a macro-level socially embedded context (Askegaard and Linnet 2011). To inform my analysis, I turn to theories of liquid modernity and consumption.

## **1.5. Theoretical background**

### *1.5.1. Liquid Modernity*

“Liquid modernity” is a metaphor introduced by sociologist Zygmunt Bauman to capture the unpredictable, constantly shifting nature of late modernity (2000). While modernity’s defining feature has always been change and rejection of the old order, Bauman suggests that in the past, the ensuing new order has been intended as more “solid” and permanent than the orders it replaced. In contrast, what he argues defines today’s new liquid phase of modernity is not the replacement, but the disappearance of solid, established structures and the omnipresence of continual change – immediate and unstoppable – resulting in an overwhelming abundance of desire, choice, but also ambivalence and uncertainty (Bauman 2000; 2005; 2007b).

An essential feature of Bauman’s sociology is his ongoing dialogue with conventional sociological vocabulary through criticizing existing assumptions and by way of developing new understandings through neologisms or metaphors intended to illustrate the lived experience of a variety of people (Jacobsen and Poder 2008); as such, his work has been characterized as “an odyssey of the transformation of modernity with its concomitant

intensive and extensive repercussions on all aspects of human life” (Jacobsen and Poder 2008, 3). Bauman’s theory of liquid modernity, thus, places in its focus some of the defining features of late modernity – globalization and individualization, fluid identities, transitory social relations, constant mobility, as well as shifting capital and forms of labor – which he explores at length within a set of reoccurring framing narratives within his work, three of which are used as enabling lenses here: consumption, utopia and ambivalence.

At the heart of this conception are the notions of change, uncertainty and transience, which permeate all aspects of liquid modern life: “liquidity reduces our sense of durability to suggest new levels of freedom and at the same time dissolves the bonds that reify our sense of security.” (Lee 2005, 67). Without security, the temporal focus in liquidity is anchored at the present; with the global economic, political and environmental future uncertain, and the world in constant and accelerating motion, what matters is the “here and now,” and the utopian desire to transform this “here and now” (however uncertain or short lived) into something better (Bauman 2007b). In consequence, liquid modernity produces an attachment to quick turnover and an obsession with novelty (Lee 2005) – “what is valued today (by choice as much as by unchosen necessity) is the ability to be on the move, to travel light and at short notice. Power is measured by the speed with which responsibilities can be escaped. Who accelerates, wins; who stays put, loses” (Bauman and Tester 2001, 95).

Toward this quest for betterment, at the epicenter of liquidity lays what Bauman sees as a “remarkable turn in the course of modern history” – a turn toward the “society of consumers” (2007a, 53) where consumption is not a choice but an obligation – the only way of dealing with all the excess inherent to liquidity is through consuming and absorbing it as fast as possible; for Bauman, liquid modern society today is an insatiable consumer society (2007a). While liquid modernity amplifies the centrality of consumption, it also problematizes and changes it fundamentally. As consumers’ positions have changed both socio-economically and culturally, the frame of reference needed to evaluate and analyze the constitution of consumption today has been altered as well.

### *1.5.2. Liquid Modernity and consumption*

Bauman's sociology is particularly valuable for consumer research for it puts consumption at the very heart of modern life. The seminal theorization of liquidity sees consumerism as the quintessential liquid modern way of life and consumer culture as an all-encompassing reality (Bauman 2000; 2005). As Bauman insists, "if our ancestors were shaped and trained by their societies as producers first and foremost, we are increasingly shaped and trained as consumers first, and all the rest after" (Bauman 2004, 66).

A growing, albeit still limited, strand of consumer research has begun to examine the intercept between liquid modernity and marketing. Some studies have applied Bauman's liquidity metaphor broadly to problematize marketplace transformations in contemporary retailing with a view of the fluid nature of the social, economic, political, and technological dynamics that influence marketplace arrangements (Kervenoael, Bajde and Schwob 2018; Herbert, Robert and Saucède 2018; Stigzelius 2018). Other works have noted the shifting positions and roles of consumers, particularly in the context of prosumption and entrepreneurship, where a liquid subject position within a networked environment of consumer tribes has been shown to support consumers' capacities to undertake entrepreneurial projects (Biraghi, Gambetti and Pace 2018). Research has also explored liquid modernity's influence on the proliferation of "liquid" entrepreneurial identities that are driven by the need for recognition in a society ridden by liquidity-induced identity crisis (Guercini and Cova 2018). Relatedly, the conditions of liquid modernity have been shown to inspire urges for "fresh starts" and willingness to embrace major lifestyle transformations in the wake of difficulty or past failures (Price et al. 2018). The challenges which liquidity imposes on individuals have also been recognized from the point of view of anti-consumerist lifestyle discourses (Binkley 2008), as well as in relation to consumers' discontent with market globalization and longing for re-solidification (Felix and Firat 2019).

Further exploring consumers' behavioral dispositions in liquidity, research has also documented how some consumers in conditions of deterritorialization and mobility have liquid (detached and flexible) relationships to their possessions as such relationships are more

conducive to their liquid lifestyles than enduring attachments to objects (Bardhi et al. 2012; cf. Santana and Botelho 2019). Other consumers have been shown to seek ways to slow down and escape their accelerated lives in liquidity (Husemann and Eckhardt 2019). Together, drawing insight from a variety of empirical contexts such as pilgrims and global cosmopolitans to name a few, this body of research has begun to contour the far-reaching influence of the liquid modern context and the ensuing social and economic change on marketplace structures, retail formats, and consumption practices. Still, with exception of Bardhi et al. (2012), in most of these works liquidity has been applied as a supporting metaphor rather than an enabling lens.

Bringing liquidity in a much closer dialogue with consumer research, Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2017) signature theorization of "liquid consumption" was the first to introduce a comprehensive explanatory conceptual framework for understanding emergent consumption phenomena in liquid modernity. In this work, the authors conceptualize consumption along a continuum with two contrasting endpoints characterized by either solid or liquid logics to consumption. This theorization brought to light how and why in today's marketplace, consumers increasingly gravitate toward consumption that is immaterial and ephemeral, whilst they de-prioritize solid values such as ownerships, attachment or long-term use value. A liquid logic to consumption foregrounds flexibility, adaptability, lightness, detachment, and speed (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017) and foreshadows the diminishing importance of ownership centrality in today's marketplace (Lamberton and Goldsmith 2020). This is evidenced by the rapid emergence of access-based consumption: where goods and services are used temporarily for a fraction of the cost needed for ownership (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012), or by the changing dialectics of how consumers choose to communicate social status and distinction through consumption in liquidity (Eckhardt and Bardhi 2020a). While liquid consumption offers a lens that accounts for consumers' shifting orientations in the contemporary marketplace, theorizing consumption along a continuum between solid and liquid problematizes a number of extant perspectives within marketing theory in which ownership centrality has thus far been a foundational premise (Lamberton and Goldsmith 2020). Questions remain whether with its focus on non-materiality liquid consumption is congruent with materialistic consumption orientations or whether it holds the same

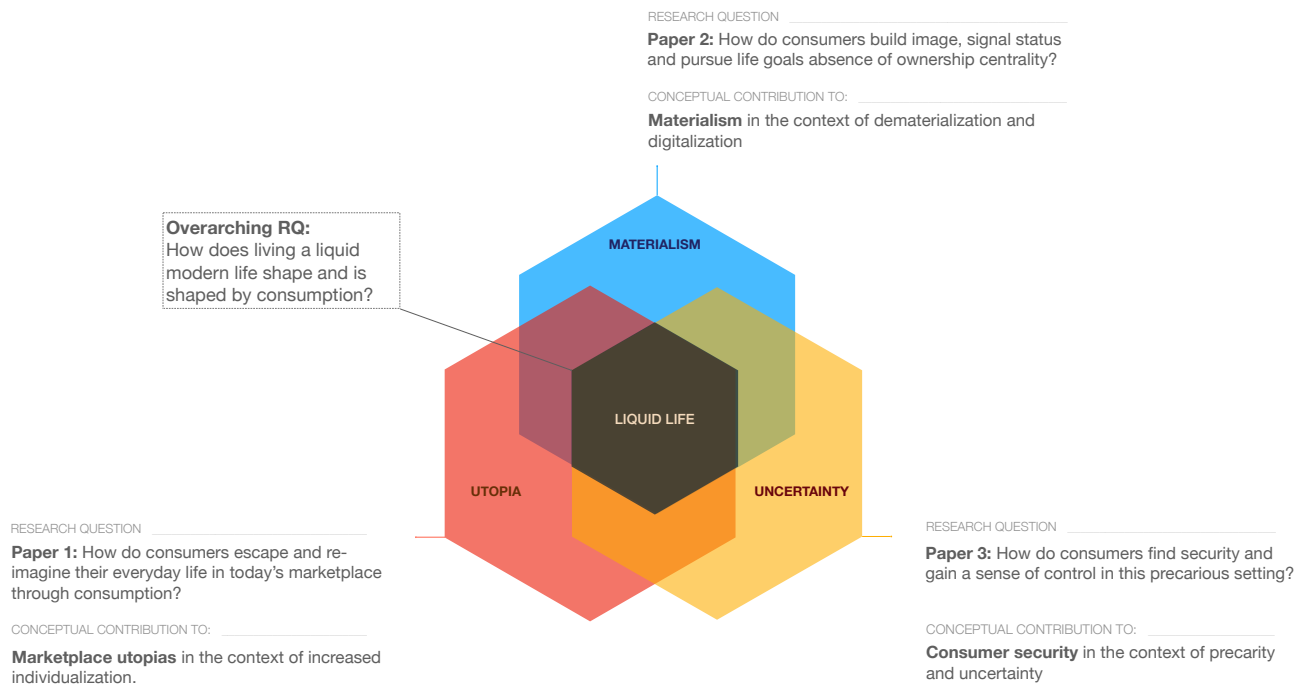
aspirational appeal and brings a similar sense of security, stability and status as solid consumption does (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017). Taking these questions into the fold of the overarching question that underpins this work – “how does living a liquid modern life shape and is shaped by consumption?” – this thesis furthers the domain of consumer research concerned with the effects of liquid modernity by placing a close focus on the role of liquid consumption in three principal concerns of living a liquid modern life (Bauman 2005; 2007a): renegotiating and managing the present, catering to endless desire for consumption, and finding security and stability in ambivalence. With that, this work extends the reach of liquid consumption theory to map the mediating role of consumption across several substantive domains that have not been explored thus far in the literature – utopian consumption, materialism and consumer security. The three papers and their contributions are summarized in brief next.

## **1.6. Overview of the dissertation**

This dissertation extends the theoretical domain of liquid consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017) to account for previously untheorized ways in which a liquid logic of consumption offers consumers new ways to cater to three principal consumption goals: to re-imagine and re-construct reality in pursuit of betterment (Paper 1); to attain happiness and cater to life goals (Paper 2); and to find stability and security (Paper 3) through consumption. With that, this dissertation expands the theoretical footprint of liquid consumption by leveraging this lens to revisit three foundational marketing constructs: 1) marketplace utopias (Maclaran and Brown 2005) in the context of increased individualization, 2) materialism (Belk 1985) in the context of dematerialization and digitalization, and 3) consumer security in an era of precarity (Campbell et al. 2020). Figure 1 offers an overview:



Figure 1: Summary of the investigative terrain within the dissertation



Paper 1, titled “Re-Examining Utopia in Contemporary Consumption: Conceptualization and Implications for Marketing,” is a conceptual paper which traces the changing nature of consumers’ desires in today’s context. This work zooms in on a number of emergent phenomena where consumers use the marketplace to re-imagine their precarious lived reality and builds a lens that theorizes these consumption behaviors as “liquid consumer utopias.” Three key characteristics of liquid utopias are outlined – immediacy, transience and hyper-individualization – each pointing to liquid consumer utopias’ function to facilitate present-oriented and short-lived re-imaginings of reality. Co-existing alongside the solid and collective utopian consumption of interest to prior research, these emergent forms of liquid consumer utopias articulate a re-imagining of the present (rather than the future), have an emphasis on individual (rather than communal) experiences of betterment, and an orientation toward temporary re-framings of the experienced reality (rather than a pursuit of permanence and long-lasting change). This paper is single-authored.

Paper 2, titled “The Broadening Boundaries of Materialism,” empirically explores how consumers build image, signal status and pursue life goals in the absence of ownership centrality. It builds on seminal understandings of materialism as a foundational consumption orientation in contemporary consumer culture, and shows that materialism emerges in new ways as ways of consuming change, advancing that in a liquid modern life it can manifest itself via a preoccupation with strategic curation rather than accumulation, prioritization of experiential consumption over ownership, and consumption polarization along continuums (solid and liquid, budget and luxury, access and ownership). This work’s primary contribution is in illustrating how, in contrast to established perspectives which emphasize the importance consumers ascribe to material goods en route to achieving life goals, materialism is adapting to a marketplace where ownership is not always possible or even desired. This paper is co-authored with Giana M. Eckhardt.

Paper 3, titled “Seeking Security through Liquidity in an Era of Precarity: An Ethnography of Digital Nomadism,” empirically examines how consumers find security and gain a sense of control in a setting where uncertainty and professional precarity, shifting social norms and outlooks are rendering traditional sources of stability, such as material possessions, accumulation, homeownership, increasingly unattainable or undesirable for many. This paper outlines how, with their confidence in what the future might bring continuously eroding, some consumers seek to attain a sense of stability by paradoxically choosing to lean into liquidity, rather to grasp for solidity, as established perspectives might indicate. In theorizing this behavioral shift, this work outlines a three-phase process of movement along the solid-liquid continuum toward lifestyle liquefaction as a means to emancipatory construction of control and security, whereby consumers: 1) Relinquish solidity, subsequent to disillusionment with solid ideals and aims; 2) Lean into liquidity via shifting consumption logics and undertaking reflexive reprogramming of the self; and 3) Legitimize lifestyle liquification as an alternative pathway to security via marketization and evangelization of liquid living. This paper is co-authored with Giana M. Eckhardt and Katharina C. Husemann.

Overall, by focusing on the liquid lifestyle of digital nomadism this dissertation advances theory of liquid consumption by showing how and to what ends some consumers move along

the solid-liquid continuum, specifically conceptualizing different ways in which liquid consumption can be a source of escape, of security or a means to accumulating social capital. As such, this dissertation problematizes consumption in the context of key macro level social and cultural transformations pertinent to liquid modernity, thus building new understanding of how, when and under what conditions consumers shift consumption logics between solid and liquid. With that, this work expands our understanding of consumption in liquidity and extends this novel theoretical domain by conceptualizing how and to what end consumers draw on liquid consumption logics in the marketplace.

This thesis identifies a range of theoretical and managerial implications for marketing and extends consumer research in several ways. First, it theorizes the shifting landscape of consumer desires and utopian visions by advancing the construct of “liquid consumer utopias” – marketplace mediated practices for reinvention, where the transformation is individualized and focused on the now, rather than communal and focused on the future as in traditional marketplace utopias such as Burning Man, Disneyland, or the retail mall (cf. Kozinets 2001; Maclaran and Brown 2005). Second, it outlines how materialism (cf. Belk 1985; Richins and Dawson 1990) – a foundational construct within consumer research that captures the role of consumption in the pursuit of happiness – is adapting to an increasingly digitalized and dematerialized marketplace and can emerge as a guiding logic to consumers’ pursuits of building image and attaining happiness even in a liquid life where ownership centrality is waning. Third, it theorizes how consumers can manage precarity and uncertainty via liquid rather than solid consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017) – a notion which offers new understanding on how consumers use consumption to establish security without ownership (Campbell et al. 2020).

These theoretical contributions extend to marketing practice in several domains. First, this work advances that consumers need not rely on ownership or accumulation of material goods to consume materialistically (cf. Belk 1985), to find security (cf. Wineberger et al. 2017) or envision the good life. Rather, it is suggested that liquid logics of consumption and access-based marketplace resources can offer such utility to the same ends for they can efficiently cater to liquid modern consumers’ need for instant gratification, individualization and

flexibility. For retailing practitioners this suggests that focusing on customization, fast rotation of retail environments, and novelty can be leveraged with consumers' perpetual fear-of-missing out and need for continuous reinvention in the changing liquid modern context. There is evidence that when such principles are applied in practice, for instance when stores rotate in and out frequently throughout the year on short-term leases (Thomas 2019), consumers are incentivized to visit such retail spaces continuously, giving a glimpse of hope in an overall bleak retailing landscape. The demise of a number of retailers in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic (e.g., the closure of the 240 years-old retailer Debenhams in the UK; Butler 2021), illustrate that unless given a novel reason to do so, consumers have few incentives to visit brick and mortar stores. In contrast, brands that have entirely opted out of a physical footprint to begin with are better positioned to navigate the unpredictability of today's economy with much needed agility. For instance, Shein, the Chinese fast fashion retailer turned Gen-Z sensation and dubbed "the future of fast fashion," does not maintain brick-and-mortar stores but hosts in-person pop-up events and markets its products almost exclusively through user generated TikTok reels (Nguyen 2021), suggesting that liquid approaches to building brand relevance are capturing the overarching sentiment in the market particularly well. Such a strategy is successful in bringing the user close to the brand, creating a seamless symbiosis between consumers' needs for continuous self-expression and pursuits of liquid utopias (Paper 1).

This dissertation also illustrates how experiences, minimalism and curated possessions are emerging as new aesthetic languages for affluence and luxury and can signal status better than having a lot of possessions (Tolentino 2020; see also, Eckhardt and Bardhi 2020; Wilson and Bellezza 2021). This is particularly applicable for consumers who actively seek to step out of normative life trajectories and aspire for new ways to enact and communicate their standing in the world. The trend toward adopting "AirSpace" aesthetics (Chayka 2016), termed to denote how Silicon Valley is spreading "the same sterile aesthetic across the world" in home décor, or Mari Kondo reductionism is a key example of that.

For managers, this suggests that brand offerings which support consumers' quests for building liquid aspirational lifestyles by enabling consumers to be light, mobile and free from

constraints or liabilities have promising appeal in today's market. The rise of the subscription economy in recent years is a testament to that (Long and Van Dam 2021). For instance, this work illustrates that with the future increasingly uncertain, consumers are finding it harder to find stability in possessions, suggesting that marketers can leverage this to provide new sources of stability via foregrounding embedded flexibilities in their product and brand offerings. With more and more businesses turning to subscription models – from meal kits to cars (e.g., “Blue Apron” or “Audi select,” whose campaign slogan is “All of the power. None of the responsibility”) – consumers are signaling that opportunities to be untethered from ownership are actively sought after (Gale 2021).

The remaining chapters are structured as follows. Chapter 2 outlines the methodological approach to this dissertation, detailing data collection, analysis and interpretation procedures. Chapter 3 presents each of the three papers within this dissertation. Chapter 4 discusses the findings of the papers and draws them together toward an overarching discussion of their contributions, implications, limitations and the future research directions stemming from this work.

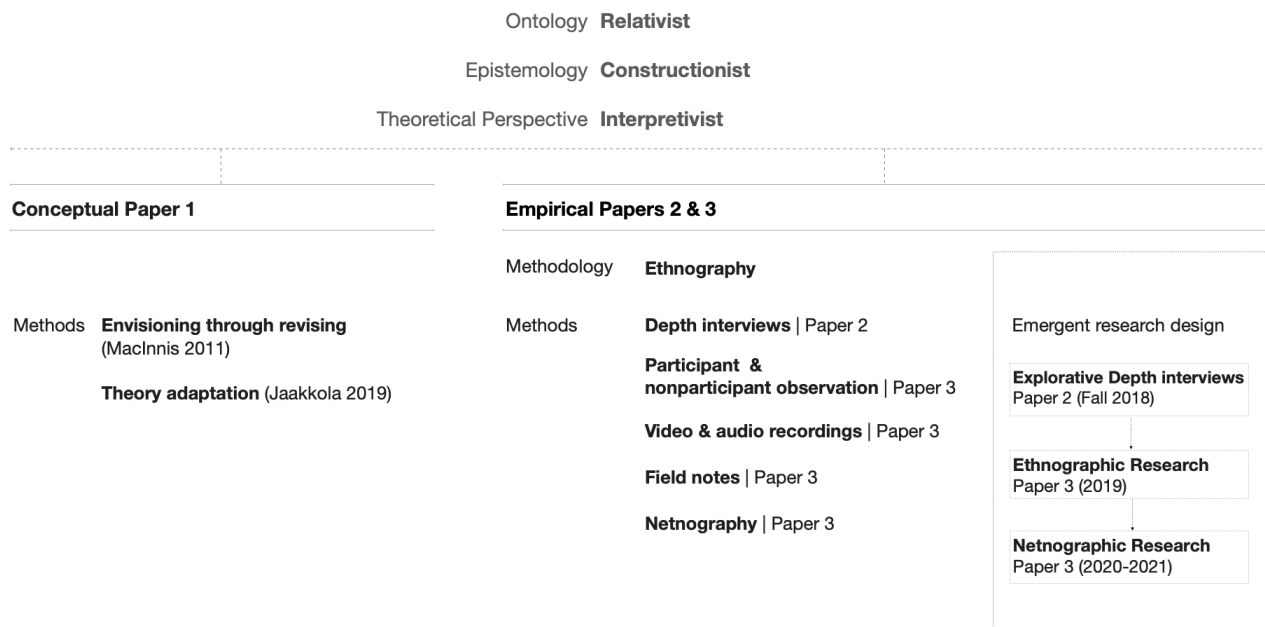
## **2. METHODS**

This chapter provides an overview of the methodological considerations that underpin this dissertation. I begin with a reflection on the paradigmatic framing of this work, followed by a brief review of the field of qualitative research. I then discuss the methodology and outline the research design and methods used in each of the papers. I conclude with a summary of the analytical procedures and research ethics.

### **2.1. Ontological and epistemological positions**

This dissertation follows a commitment to an interpretive theoretical perspective grounded in a constructionist epistemology where understanding of the world, truth and meaning are perceived as constructed through processes of social interaction and interpretations (see Figure 2 for an overview of the paradigmatic framing of the dissertation). This paradigmatic orientation assumes a relativist ontological position where realities are thought to exist not independently of our experiences and mind, as a realist ontology would postulate, but in the form of multiple mental constructions that are dependent for their form and content on the persons who hold them (Guba 1990; Guba and Lincoln 1994). Research in this tradition, thus, aims to understand the meanings human beings ascribe to phenomena and to explain social behavior through investigation of people's experiences within their everyday (Lincoln and Guba 2003; Denzin and Lincoln 2018). To be uncovered and understood, however, meaning and truth must be interpreted (Schwandt 1994). Inevitably, the pluralistic and relativist nature of this dissertation suggests that it offers my own constructions and interpretations, without ambitions for absolutism (Guba 1990).

Figure 2: Overview of the paradigmatic framing of the dissertation



This choice of paradigm shapes and frames not only the aim of the inquiry or the way knowledge is accumulated, but also the quality criteria (rigor and validity) of the research, and the ethics considered (Lincoln, Lynham and Guba 2018). One of the main criticisms of constructionist research involves relativist reduction and self-refutation – if reality is constructed and all constructions are true realities, then can truth be truth for all?; can any form of generalization be realized (Howell 2013)? To address such criticism, Lincoln and Guba (1985) outline the foundational tenets of the constructionist paradigm by introducing five key axioms which involve: multiplicity of realities such that each inquiry contributes toward some level of understanding, but prediction is unlikely; continuous interaction and mutual influence between researcher and researched – “knower and known are inseparable”; focus on the idiographic, rather than the nomothetic; understanding that all entities are in a state of mutual shaping so that it is not possible to distinguish causes from effects; and understanding that naturalistic research is necessarily value-bound and subjective, rather than value-free and objective.

These axioms have a number of practical implications for carrying out research in this tradition, most notably that such research: privileges qualitative methods over quantitative ones for it seeks to study the researched entity in its natural setting; uses purposive sampling as opposed to random or representative ones; engages with inductive data analysis rather than deductive; and argues for tentative application of the findings to broad contexts, unless there is sufficient empirical similarity between contexts (Lincoln and Guba 1985, 39-43). These implications impart that constructionist research inheres special criteria for its trustworthiness and a special stance for the objectivity and generalizability of its claims. Of relevance here is establishing: credibility rather than internal validity; transferability rather than external validity; dependability rather than reliability; and confirmability rather than objectivity (Lincoln and Guba 1985, 290-331). In this way, the ontological and epistemological orientation of this dissertation frames a number of assumptions, considerations and limitations which will be discussed in the remaining sections of this chapter. It also guides the philosophical stance that informs this work.

To that end, within its constructionist orientation, this dissertation is underpinned by an interpretivist theoretical perspective for it is peculiarly attuned to social experience by placing emphasis on culture and the interactional structures of social relationships (Blumer 1969/1986; Denzin 1992, 22). Central to this perspective is the premise that we have to see ourselves as social objects and we can only do that through adopting the standpoint of others (Crotty 1998; Denzin 1978, 99). Ethnography – where the notion of taking the place of the other is central, and where the principal task is to document culture and to “get inside” the way each group of people sees the world (Hammersley 1985, 152) – is thus the methodology that is particularly conducive to the theoretical perspective adopted here (Crotty 1998, 76). In turn, the overarching research strategy in this dissertation follows a qualitative orientation typical for naturalistic inquiries (Lincoln and Guba 1985) and draws on interruptive and ethnographic traditions developed within consumer research (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Belk et al. 1989). To that end, the first empirical paper uses explorative depth-interviews as a means to data collection, while the second draws on multi-sited ethnography which blends a variety of methods including participant and non-participant observation, depth interviews, and netnography. I discuss the research approach and methods of choice, next.



## 2.2. Research approach

### 2.2.1. *Qualitative research and marketing*

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the inquirer in the natural world (Denzin and Lincoln 2018, 43). It seeks to discover and to describe – narratively – what particular people do in their everyday lives, what their actions mean to them, and what meaning-relevant kinds of things (people, objects, beliefs, interests etc.) are present in their lives (Eirckson 2018). As such, it is focused on the mundane, the extraordinary, the symbolic and the meaningful in individuals' lives, all the same.

This mode of inquiry makes the world visible through a range of representations, such as field notes, interviews, photographs, and recordings, collected through a variety of methods (e.g., observation, participation and conversation) and then interpreted to grasp the meanings people bring to phenomena (Denzin and Lincoln 2018). Unlike quantitative research which asks, “How many instances of a certain kind are there here?”, qualitative research inquires instead, “What are the kinds of things (material and symbolic) to which people in this setting orient as they conduct everyday life?” thus focusing on differences in forms (qualities or features) of the entities that influence meaning (Eirckson 2018).

The path towards establishing qualitative research as a legitimate scientific mode of research has been (and continues to be) long and marked by academic and disciplinary resistance, and waves of decline and prominence (Denzin and Lincoln 2018; Levy 2006). Early representations of qualitative forms of inquiry can be traced to narrative descriptive reports on everyday practices used for scientific purposes in the ancient world and through the Middle Ages; with the Age of Enlightenment, however, quantitative research had become the standard, establishing dominance of the positivist paradigm to studying both the physical world and social processes; this positivist paradigm has been largely considered the hallmark to Western scientific thought (Crotty 1998; Erickson 2018; Vidich and Lyman 2003). By mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, however, a fundamental disagreement developed over what kind of a “science” the study of society should be, and the works of social philosophers such as

Wilhelm Dilthey, Max Weber and Georg Simmel, and early phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger had been at the center of this debate, giving prominence to an anti-positivist approach to studying the social world that differed from that of natural sciences in its focus on understanding social life's structures rather than explaining, measuring and counting (Erickson 2018). Their ideas became even more influential in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century with the “hermeneutical turn” taken by philosophers such as Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jürgen Habermas and by anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz (Erickson 2018). Fueled by such debates, by the 1970s, a reformist movement under the name of “qualitative inquiry” (Dimitriadis 2016) had begun in the academy which encompassed multiple paradigmatic criticisms of positivist social scientific research (Schwandt 2003).

In the field of marketing, interest toward qualitative, interpretive research dates back to the 1930s and 1940s when motivation research (Dichter 1947) using psychoanalytic and projective techniques to uncover conscious and subconscious consumer behaviors had begun to attract the interest of some academics and practitioners (Belk 1995; Levy 1994, 2005; Kassarian 1994; Tadajewski 2006). Until that time, marketing research had mainly focused on what consumers did, providing descriptions of their behaviors that were of quantitative and anecdotal character; in contrast, motivation research used qualitative research methods that delved deeper to explore why consumers actually behaved as they did (Kozinets 2010). As the post-World War II period brought higher standards of living and fueled the Consumer Revolution where more consumers than ever had access to consumer goods and were able to make choices and show self-determination, brands and advertisers needed more and better ways to understand and approach consumers (Levy 1994).

The enthusiasm for behavioral methods in marketing lasted in the decades to follow, linking marketplace behavior with personality traits, exploring consumer motivations and analyzing perceptions of products and brands, despite the continuous dominance of the positivist paradigm and the persisting hostility and doubt toward qualitative research (Levy 1994). From spirited debates over paradigm dominance (Hunt 1991; Levy 1959) to paradigm wars later turned into dialogues (Guba 1990; Lincoln and Guba 2003), interest in alternative ways of seeking knowledge in consumer research (Hudson and Ozanne 1998) eventually led to an

interpretive turn in the discipline (Sherry 1991). Paradigmatic, theoretical and methodological shifts ensued, culminating in the emergence of “the new consumer behavior” (Belk 1995) and the establishment of the CCT research tradition (Arnould and Thompson 2005) to encompass the growing stream of interpretive research in consumer behavior. This research rejected positivist tenets in favor of a broader array of non-positivist epistemologies and methodologies such as ethnography (Belk et al. 1989), existential phenomenology (Thompson et al. 1989), postmodernism (Firat and Venkatesh 1995), hermeneutics and semiotics (Holbrook and O’Shaughnessy 1988; Holbrook and Hirschman 1993; Thompson et al. 1994), post-structuralism (Holt 1997), introspection (Gould 1991; Brown and Reid 1997; Shankar 2000), critical theory (Hirschman 1993; Murray and Ozanne 1991), grounded theory (Goulding 1998; 1999) and literary theory (Stern 1989), to name but a few. As Belk insists, “removed from the sterile assumptions of the laboratory or anonymous scaled attitude measures,” this stream of literature offered, and continues to do so, a macro/cultural (vs. micro/managerial) perspective that sees consumers not as mere buyers making brand choices that maximize satisfaction, but as socially connected human beings participating in multiple interacting cultures, bound by their “consumption reality, involving wealth and poverty, haves and have-nots, hegemonic control, core and periphery cultures and subcultures, and desires and frustrations” (1995, 57). In that, consumer-oriented ethnography (Arnould 1998) has had central role.

### *2.2.2. Ethnography: a brief review*

Ethnography is written representation of culture that sits between two worlds or systems of meaning – that of the ethnographer and that of the cultural members (Van Maanen 2011). Of central concern for ethnographers is uncovering the meanings that lay beyond the surface or the obvious by decoding the “system of significant symbols” (Geertz 1973) that constitute culture and guide human behavior. Ethnography, thus, necessarily decodes one culture while recoding it for another (Barthes 1972 in Van Maanen 2011). As famously put by Geertz, ethnography is “thick description” that can distinguish an eye twitch from a wink (1973, 6). Ethnography thus, seeks to explicate “the native’s point of view” (Geertz 1973) by

connecting the existential grounds of experience (what people think, feel and remember) with its symbolic manifolds, or forms of representation – it provides the context within which signs and content, are joined with meaning (Manning 2007).

As an applied methodology, ethnography originates from 19<sup>th</sup> century Western anthropology where it developed as a way to study “the others” (from Greek, *graphein*, “to write,” and *ethnoi*, a plural noun for “the nations—the others”) (Erickson 2018). At that time, the term came to refer to an integration of both first-hand empirical investigation of non-Western societies, and the theoretical and comparative interpretation of social organization and culture; during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, anthropological ethnography came to be one of the models for research within Western sociology, involving also studies of towns in the United States and Western Europe, exploring the impact of urbanization and industrialization (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; Vidich and Lyman 2000). Early practitioners from this time did not claim to be describing everyday life from the points of view of those who lived it – rather, they were outsider observers, intended to provide accurate descriptions of “objective facts” about behavior (Erickson 2018). Through the work of Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski in the 1920s, however, interpretively oriented, realist ethnography based on first-hand immersion in the field, became a hallmark of ethnography in anthropology, offering interpretive reporting that included the meaning perspectives of those whose daily lives were studied and recognized that this meaning is contextual (Erickson 2018; Van Maanen 2011). While different strands of ethnography developed since, this dissertation follows in the social constructionist ethnographic tradition, where the work of Clifford Geertz and his interpretive theory of culture has had substantial influence.

For Geertz, culture is a semiotic concept and an interactive, hermeneutical phenomenon that begs for interpretation, not explanation (Schwandt 1994). The ethnographer is exposed to “a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render” (Geertz 1973, 10). The researcher’s role is to construct a reading of the meaning making processes related to these structures. Doing so requires “inscribing” social discourse, turning it from a passing event into an account

“which exists in its inscriptions and can be reconsulted” (Geertz 1973, 19). Grasping meaning, in the first instance, Geertz insists, requires looking over the respondents’ shoulders, understanding what for them are experiences-near and placing them, iteratively, in illuminating connection with experiences-distant which are the researcher’s own abstractions (1973; 1975). A lack of such analytical interchange between the emic and the etic leaves the ethnographer either “awash in immediacies, as well as entangled in vernacular” or “stranded in abstractions and smothered in jargon” (Geertz 1975, 48). For Geertz, “theoretical formulations hover so low over the interpretations they govern that they don’t make much sense or hold much interest apart from them. This is so, not because they are not general (if they are not general, they are not theoretical), but because, stated independently of their applications, they seem either commonplace or vacant” (1973, 25). As such, rather than being speculative or abstract, theory is always grounded and local (Schwandt 1994), seeking not to generalize across cases, but within them – to make thick description rather than to codify abstract regularities (Geertz 1973, 26). Such an approach to ethnography provides an integrated synthesis of theory and experience (Howell 2013), as has been the goal of this dissertation. Within interpretive consumer research, this ethnographic tradition has been applied widely, as discussed next.

### *2.2.3. Ethnography in consumer research*

Consumer- and market-oriented ethnography has proven a particularly valuable research approach to understanding consumers, mapping out marketplace dynamics and developing market strategy (Arnould 1998; Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). Ethnography allows for detailed grasp of both explicit and implicit consumer experiences, as well as articulated and tacit understandings that are manifest in everyday consumer behaviors (Arnould and Price 2006). It focuses its interest on consumers as intentional actors with personal projects that are embedded in their sociocultural life worlds and it pays attention to the socially meaningful practices that comprise them, to what people do and to how they organize their everyday lives, rather than what they say about brands, products, or tasks (Arnould and Price 2006). Ethnography in consumer research, thus, enables researchers to understand how consumer

behavior and consumer culture are co-construed and deeply integrated through meaningful practices that can otherwise be easily left out of sight.

Arnould (1998) identifies four research domains, where consumer-oriented ethnography offer significant opportunities for the development of culturally sophisticated theories of consumption and consumer behavior, which since the time of his writing have seen numerous contributions: 1) models of material culture, such as consumption sets, structures, use systems, and lifestyles (e.g., Hill and Stamey's (1990) study on the homeless and possessions; Üstüner and Holt's (2007) work on Turkish migrant women and acculturation); 2) analysis of service encounters (e.g., Arnould and Price's (1993) research on river rafting and hedonic experiences); 3) mundane shopping behavior and ways of consumption (e.g., Maclaran and Brown's (2005) study on utopian consumption and the retail mall; Wallendorf and Arnould's (1991) research on Thanksgiving and consumption rituals; Scott et al.'s (2017) research on painful consumption; or Husemann and Eckhardt's (2019) work on pilgrimages and temporal experiences ); and 4) market cultures and subcultures (e.g., Schouten and McAlexander's (1995) study on the biker culture in the U.S.; Kozinets' (2001; 2002a) exploration of the Burning Man festival and Star Trek fandom; or Chatzidakis et al.'s (2021) research on consumer movement solidarity).

This and other ethnographic consumer research offer intimate, yet theoretically robust insights into multitudes of tensions, patterns, enduring consumer beliefs and emergent meanings that converge in the contemporary marketplace. This dissertation follows in this tradition in employing an ethnographic lens to study the digital nomadic community and elicit how consumption shapes and is shaped by shifting sociocultural dynamics, value systems and meaning structures in that subcultural space.

#### *2.2.4. The ethnographic process*

Ethnography is intense, lengthy and “data-rich” research process that emphasizes depth rather than breadth, tends to zoom in on relatively narrow field of activity (Rock 2007), and focuses

on patterns of action that are cultural and social, rather than behavioral, cognitive or affective (Arnould 1998). O'Reilly offers a succinct critical definition of the ethnographic process by advancing that ethnography is a practice that: “evolves in design as the study progresses; involves direct and sustained contact with human beings, in the context of their daily lives, over a prolonged period of time; draws on a family of methods, usually including participant observation and conversation; respects the complexity of the social world; and therefore tells rich, sensitive and credible stories” (O'Reilly 2012, 11).

In ethnographic inquiry data collection and analysis are guided by emergent design because “it is inconceivable that enough could be known ahead of time about the many multiple realities to devise the design adequately” (Lincoln and Guba 1985, 41). Rather than being fixed, the research design is thus flexible, following an iterative-inductive approach (O'Reilly 2012) where data collection and data analysis occur simultaneously in a process of constant comparison (Glaser and Strauss 1967) until emergent conceptual categories from the data become saturated. When does this point of saturation occur cannot be predicted in advance as the researcher builds and tests an understanding of the phenomenon as it occurs in situ; in turn, the number of interviews or other data points also cannot be specified in advance (Belk et al. 1989). Key to ethnographic research, is that theory emerges from the data (Lincoln and Guba 1985). This requires that sampling is purposive and theoretical (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Lincoln and Guba 1985) and assumes that sampling criteria can change while the research progresses as data leads to new directions.

A main characteristic of ethnography is that the research is conducted in everyday contexts through prolonged immersion in the field and continuous contact with those who are studied. Extended participation allows for mutual familiarity to develop between the ethnographer and the people the research is trying to learn about, for “hanging out” which builds trust and results in ordinary behavior and conversations (Bernard 2006), for patterns to become apparent, and “explicit awareness” of the ordinary (Spradley 1980, 55) to begin to develop. Time in the field also allows for the crystallization of the research question and the aim of the inquiry (Arnould 1998; O'Reilly 2012). Such crystallization is needed as the researcher enters the field largely uninitiated, with an open mind and without preconceived ideas or

hypotheses. In practice, such naiveté is seldom possible today since it is hardly realistic to enter the field unaware of existing theory; it is important, then, for the ethnographer to be openminded about their preconceptions and proceed in a manner that is informed but open to surprises (O'Reilly 2012).

In the field, the process of data collection itself is mostly unstructured – the ethnographer listens, observes and asks questions. To that end, ethnography draws on a number of qualitative methods to gather data such as observation, participant observation, video and audio recordings of conversations, depth interviews, analysis of artifacts, documents and life histories. Out of those, participant observation is a key feature of the ethnographic method as it facilitates the iterative movement between etic and emic. As Bernard asserts: “participant observation involves immersing yourself in a culture and learning to remove yourself every day from that immersion so you can intellectualize what you’ve seen and heard, put it into perspective, and write about it convincingly” (2006, 344).

Data are collected from a range of sources, to ensure that evidence does not rely on a single voice, that data can become embedded in their contexts, and that it can be compared (Rock 2007). Using multiple sources is necessary so that triangulation can validate emergent accounts across other accounts and/or across other data collection methods. Guba and Lincoln (1985, 283) insist that no single item of information should ever be given serious consideration unless it can be triangulated. In addition, by combining data-collection methods disjunctures in behavior or praxis can become visible through and beyond informants’ value-laden accounts (Arnould 1998). As such, ethnographic research is particularly good at dealing with problems of validity for it focuses on the emic view, thus ensuring that the research is indeed “measuring” what it intends to measure, and that the argument is supported by enough evidence (Hammersley 1998; O'Reilly 2012). In the wake of the digital age, these principles have been adapted to researching the online space, as discussed next.



### 2.2.5. Netnography

Netnography is a type of online ethnography developed by Robert Kozinets (2002b; 2020) that constitutes a “particular set of actions for doing research within and about social media” (2020, 14). A key difference between netnography and other types of qualitative research is that it focuses on the study of online traces – that is, images, video or text that people share and leave online. After collecting, analyzing and interacting with online traces, netnographers may engage in other forms of data collection such as in-person interviewing, however, online traces as data are a key feature of netnographic research. To that end, in netnography, terms such as “field site” have considerably less meaning than they do in ethnography because data is dispersed among many “sites” (Kozinets 2020, 246).

Netnography further differs from ethnography by having significantly different rules of engagement in terms of data collection, analysis, ethics and representational practices. As such, netnography differentiates itself from other forms of online or digital ethnography by offering specific procedural guidelines that ground this research approach methodologically. Together, there are four distinct elements that define netnography: 1. Cultural focus, which links netnography conceptually with anthropology, sociology, cultural studies and ethnographic methodology; 2. Social media data, which differentiates netnography from traditional ethnography and other methods; 3. Immersive engagement, which distinguishes netnography from experience-distanced methods of social media research (e.g., content analysis); and 4. Netnographic praxis, which is a set of guidelines offering operational precision.

A key procedural difference between netnography and ethnography relating to engagement and participation warrants a specific mention. As in ethnography, the netnographer collects and interprets data continuously and iteratively. Among the different methods for data collection in netnography, however, the role of participation carries unique connotations that are specific to the online environment:

Participation does not necessarily mean reaching out to members with posts which ask them questions, as if the netnographer were conducting an interview

with the entire community, or even with certain select other members. Although participation can sometimes be visible to other community members, and preferably it will contribute to their communal interests and well-being, it can also involve other types of actions. The key guideline is that the netnographer should participate in the community at a level that is appropriate for a member. There are many different kinds of members of communities, and for some, it may be appropriate merely to observe the community, to read messages, to follow links and to be engaged in this way on a daily or more frequent basis. (Belk, Fischer and Kozinets 2013, 109 )

Data collection in netnography thus means engaging meaningfully with members of an online culture or community via active and relevant involvement and connection with the community and its members, however, meaningful engagement and participation are contextually bound (Belk et al. 2013). Engagement in netnography is thus “a series of choices and matters of degrees, a placement of the researcher and their focus and attention along a spectrum of various forms of [...] involvement, rather than a unidimensional choice about posting to this or that social media platform or not” (Kozinets 2020, 250).

While netnography was used in Paper 3, though not explicitly stated, I’ve also adhered to netnographic principles whenever I have been in the online “field” (e.g., the explorative research phase for Paper 2).

## **2.3. Research design and methods**

### *2.3.1. Empirical research design (Papers 2 & 3)*

Following in the tradition of naturalistic research, the empirical papers in this dissertation were subject to emergent design allowing for the inquiry to shift as my interaction with the phenomenon evolved (Lincoln and Guba 1985). As such, I began my investigation of the digital nomadic research context without a specific research question or pre-selected theoretical lens, but with broad interest in learning about the digital nomadic lifestyle, the

characteristics of those who practice it, the cultural meanings and understandings embedded in this way of living, and the role of consumption in everyday nomadic life.

Not knowing what I didn't know (Lincoln and Guba 1985), I initiated the research process for Paper 2 by immersing myself in the field by reading broadly academic research and popular press on digital nomadism and joining a number of social media groups for digital nomads where I could get a sense of the trends and dynamics that take place within this community. Subsequently, I chose to carry out explorative, narrative, depth interviews as the data collection method to inform Paper 2. Unlike hypothesis-testing interviews, explorative, narrative interviews are open with little pre-planned structure, where the inquirer introduces a broad topic and then follows up on the subject's answers, seeking new angles and information; narrative interviews focus on the stories the participants share, and on the temporal, social and meaning structures embedded within (Kvale 2009). This data collection method allowed to gain holistic understanding of the digital nomadic way of living and patterns of daily experience. The interview guide (Appendix C) contained brief open-ended questions and probes to guide the direction and scope of the conversation (McCracken 1988) along key topic of interest. Paper 2 drew exclusively on this interview data and used inductive data analysis procedures.

Subsequent to this explorative data collection phase, I proceeded with in-depth ethnographic study of the digital nomadic context. Data for the second empirical paper (Paper 3) were collected at the Nomad Cruise 8 (April 2019) and in subsequent netnographic research (2020-2021). As previously outlined, ethnographic research allows for obtaining an intimate understanding of a research context and the cultural meanings that structure and are structured by phenomena. As such, the ethnographic approach adopted for Paper 3 was a suitable continuation to the explorative research conducted for Paper 2. While initially it was not planned that I would engage with netnographic research, the events related to the coronavirus pandemic necessitated that ethnographic work continues online since travel was not permitted in 2020-2021. However, in line with the emergent design that underpins this work, incorporating a new method of inquiry was not problematic; on the contrary, as highlighted in Paper 3, it offered opportunities for exploring yet another dimension of the

digital nomadic research context and to study digital nomads in a highly naturalistic setting since a large portion of their social and professional lives are carried out in the digital space.

Sampling for both research phases was purposive and theoretical (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Lincoln and Guba 1985). The sampling strategy intentionally focused on heterogeneity, recruiting participants from different age groups, origins and socio-demographic profiles. This approach had two principal aims: to ensure that diverse nomadic voices would be included to enhance the transferability and representativeness of the findings, and to ensure that key consumers profiles are covered. As data collection occurred in tandem with data analysis, I continued to seek participants that could shed light on emergent analytical categories.

The data record from which this dissertation draws across the two empirical papers is comprised of 46 interviews, video and audio recordings, field notes, screenshots, and scraped data such as comments and posts on public websites, blogposts, and web content. Collectively, these data thus capture my thoughts and feelings as a researcher, detailed observations which come to life through video, audio and image, as well as records of interactions, sentiments, dialogues and other digital traces available online.

Trustworthiness and credibility of the research was ensured through triangulation across myself and my co-authors, across data sources, and across data collection methods (Belk et al. 1989; Denzin 1978; Lincoln and Guba 1985). The primary objective in using triangulation was to uncover possible discrepancies, ensure completeness and convergence, and assess the robustness of the interpretation. The prolonged engagement with the field and continuous debriefing between myself and my co-authors were also intentionally operationalized as techniques toward ensuring research credibility (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

### *2.3.2. Conceptual research design (Paper 1)*

When designing the conceptual article in this dissertation (Paper 1), I drew primarily on Jaakkola's (2019) framework for writing non-empirical papers. My starting point was grounded in focal phenomena that is observable but not adequately addressed in existing research (Jaakkola 2019) – namely, emergent forms of escapist consumption, which I argue are not adequately explained by extant marketing theory. Conceptual papers draw on two types of theory – domain theories and method theories (Jaakkola 2019; Lukka and Vinnari 2014). Domain theories illuminate a substantive topic area situated in a field or domain; method theories, in contrast, are meta-level conceptual systems for studying substantive issues that provide some new insight into the domain theory, offering a novel explanation of existing relationships (Lukka and Vinnari 2014 in Jaakkola 2019, 20). In line with these parameters, when constructing Paper 1, I invoked liquid modernity (Bauman 2000) and contemporary utopian theory (Levitas 2011) as method theories to advance the domain theory of utopian consumption (Maclaran and Brown 2005), thus proposing alternative ways of understanding escapist and utopian consumption in the contemporary marketplace. Paper 1, thus, represents what MacInnis (2011) labels envisioning through revising and Jaakkola (2019) terms a “theory adaptation” conceptual model for problematizing existing theory and expanding its application domain.

## **2.4. Analysis and interpretation**

For the two empirical papers in the dissertation (Papers 2 and 3), following Spiggle (1994; 1998) and her framework for working with interview and ethnographic data, I engaged with the empirical material across two phases – of analysis and interpretation. The analytical operations involved manipulating the data by sorting, reducing, and reconstituting it in search for patterns and co-occurring phenomena; the interpretation phase involved making sense of the data through identifying patterns and constructing conceptual frames to “re-present” the consumer in a research narrative (Spiggle 1998). These two phases occurred simultaneously

and iteratively during and after data collection. In the process, I drew on Thompson's (1997) hermeneutic model of consumer meaning, seeking to continuously elevate the data from the descriptive to the theoretical (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Spiggle 1994; 1998; Wallendorf and Brucks 1993). This process of analysis and interpretation was consistent for both empirical papers in this dissertation.

#### *2.4.1 Analysis*

Analysis entailed systematic manipulation of the data set, where data was reduced and reorganized toward developing an interpretation (Spiggle 1998). I carried this process iteratively. Data analysis began while in field, intensifying in the periods between active engagement with participants (e.g., between depth-interviews during data collection for Paper 2, or between data ethnographic and netnographic data collection for Paper 3) and directing subsequent refinement of the research design prior to returning to field (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). Collecting additional data sought to address emergent conceptual gaps or themes of interest. A starting point in this process was organization and categorization of the empirical data chronologically and thematically based on source type and data collection method. Spiggle (1994, 1998) identifies seven data analysis stages used to manipulate data which provided the roadmap for my analytical work and are outlined briefly:

- **Categorization:** I classified units of data as representing a certain phenomenon or behavioral or cultural category. I treated each paragraph of transcribed text and each single image or video-still as a unit of analysis and categorized these passages based upon their similarity and contiguity with other data points (Spiggle 1998), thus looking for emergent patterns and instances of co-occurrence.
- **Abstraction:** I grouped previously identified categories into higher order conceptual constructs, noting their potential theoretical significance by tracing their relationship to other constructs. The subsequent stages were concerned with exploring such theoretical significance (Spiggle 1994).

- Comparison: I studied the similarities and differences across the emergent categories, which provided directions for the additional data collection. While I sought to account for recurrent, and therefore theoretically significant disjunctures (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994), per Spiggle (1994) the process of comparison was driven by foregrounding similarity as the initial point of departure toward the interpretation phase of the data analysis.
  
- Dimensionalization: I studied the attributes of emerging concepts, exploring empirical variations and thus mapping out boundary conditions. (This phase was particularly pronounced in Paper 2, where the main theoretical contribution inhered in fleshing out expanding boundaries of an existing construct)
  
- Integration: I proceeded with tracing connections and relationships between the emergent concepts. (This phase was more pronounced in Paper 3, where the theoretical contribution inhered in outlining a process model).
  
- Iteration: in this stage, I followed Thompson's (1997) model for hermeneutic movement through the data. A central premise to hermeneutics is that "understanding" is a never-ending process, and emerges from a hermeneutic circle, where what is interpreted enters into current interpretations, just as the current interpretations will influence future interpretations and thus interpretations are always incomplete (Hudson and Ozanne 1988; Thompson 1997). I engaged in a holistic back-and-forth movement between each data point and the entire data set in two stages: an intratext cycle in which a unit of data is read in its entirety to gain a sense of it holistically; and a second, intertextual, part-to-whole movement whereby the I looked for patterns and differences across different interviews (Thompson 1997).
  
- Refutation: I subjected emerging inferences to empirical scrutiny through purposive sampling and negative case analysis, where I sought to identify cases and incidents that did not fit the emergent theorization, noting their occurrence and continuing with additional data collection to evaluate their significance.

Overall, this process involved continuous and systematic revision of newly and previously collected data, triangulating between materials and moving across different data sources.

#### *2.4.2. Interpretation*

The interpretation stage entailed exploring the patterns identified through data analysis (Spiggle 1998) toward abstracting theoretical understanding of my participants' accounts. This phase was part of the hermeneutical movement between data collection and analysis, where I sought to bridge conceptual structures across emergent themes and categories (Spiggle 1994). There are no rigid set of procedures or models for this phase for it is a subjective and intuitive process where interpretation occurs as a gestalt shift and represents a holistic grasp of meaning (Spiggle 1994). To that end, immersion in the data allows for the location of patterns, while distancing from it facilitates the construction of theoretical structures around which patterns in the data can be organized from loose constructs to useful frameworks (Spiggle 1998; also, Thompson and Hirschman 1995; Wallendorf and Brucks 1993).

As I engaged in this process, I moved back and forth between the theoretical lens of “liquidity,” which was used as inferential theoretical frame for the interpretation (Spiggle 1998), and emergent abstractions from the data toward constructing a theorized storyline and an integrative picture that reflects de-coded cultural meanings and higher order abstractions. Spiggle (1994; 1998) promotes the use literary tropes, such as metaphors, as lenses through which to make sense of data and frame interpretation. This approach was central in this dissertation, where “liquidity” lent itself as one such illuminating metaphor and was instrumental in the process of translation (Spiggle 1998) between analysis and interpretation. In each of the three papers that comprise this dissertation, I used this metaphor as a starting point toward constructing novel frames of reference for understanding emergent phenomena. Thus emerged the construct of “liquid utopias” (Paper 1) to capture shifting forms of escapist and transformative consumption, and “lifestyle liquification” (Paper 3) to elicit shifting lifestyle orientations mediated by liquid consumption. In Paper 2, I relied on liquidity more



peripherally though it was still instrumental in building an argument about shifting “boundaries” of normative conceptualization of materialism. Overall, using the metaphor of liquidity was a central device in the process of constructing interpretation.

## **2.5. Ethical considerations**

Data collection for this dissertation proceeded in two phases: in Fall 2018 and in Spring 2019-Spring 2021; College Ethics Approval was sought prior to commencing fieldwork and, subsequent to reporting detailed risk assessments, clearance was received each time; in each instance, no full ethics review was deemed necessary. Though human subjects were involved, this research is not considered sensitive or carrying substantial ethical implications or risks. Still, ethical considerations over access, disclosure, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, rapport and relationship-building, and representation, were continuously considered extensively. I will discuss them in the context of each respective method.

### *2.5.1. Depth interviews (Paper 2)*

For the data collection for Paper 2, access to the majority of respondents was gained through one of the largest Facebook groups for digital nomads, “Digital Nomads around the World,” where I became a member to become familiar with the digital nomadic context. Prior to gaining access to this closed group, in compliance with established principles (Kozinets 2020), I disclosed my identity as a researcher, affiliation and aims to the group’s administrators. In this phase of data collection my participation as a member of the group was passive – that is, I did not engage in online conversations, post questions, reacted to other members’ messages, nor used any member posts as data other than to inform my own understanding of the digital nomadic community and lifestyle. In turn, I did not post a disclosing message in the groups’ feed to broadcast my presence and intent. I used my

personal Facebook profile where my real name, personal pictures and other information are visible.

By browsing through the group's feed and reading members' posts, I identified individuals who seemed to potentially be able to shed light on the phenomenon and be good candidates for an interview. Such individuals would be active participants in the group, readily answering other members' questions, seemingly keen to share their story with others as they offered lengthy replies and appearing to have experience with this lifestyle. As I was interested in representing the voices of both experienced nomads and novices, I also noted members who were at the start of their nomadic journeys and were asking for tips and advice.

I approached such potential interviewees with a direct message via Facebook Messenger to ask if these individuals were interested in being interviewed. At that time, I disclosed in full that I am a researcher, the topic and nature of my research, and why I was reaching out to them specifically (i.e. that I had noticed a particular post of theirs that has caught my interest). To those individuals that were interested in participating, I sent the research information sheet and consent form (Appendix B) which they emailed back signed and dated. Gaining truly "informed" consent can be problematic, however, if it is not clear what the participant is consenting to and where "participation" begins and ends (Miller and Bell 2005). In turn, at the start of each interview I reiterated verbally that participation is voluntary, that one could terminate the interview at any time, that interviewee's participation is limited to the interview at hand, and that anonymity and confidentiality are guaranteed.

Even when carrying out research in an overt manner, however, researchers seldom disclose everything about the research to the participants (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). The information sheet which my participants were given has essential but limited information for it was important to minimize the risk of biasing their opinions and influencing their behavior. Because of this, at the end of each interview, I gave participants the opportunity to ask any questions they might have about the study, and many of them took advantage of this instance, curious to learn more details about the specific research objectives, which I then shared. Being mindful, however, that providing too much information might be problematic in case

follow-up interviews were needed, I was careful to offer balanced answers that would not jeopardize the participants suitability for further contact. No follow-up interviews took place.

All interviews were carried out via video conferencing platforms such as Zoom and the interview situation itself did not carry risks for affecting the personal consequences of the interview interaction (e.g., stress or changes in self-understanding) (Kvale 2009). During transcription, I protected the confidentiality of the participants by assigning generic pseudonyms. Other than for grammar and occasionally conciseness, no alterations were made to the interviewee's oral statements.

Lastly, no compensation or incentives for participation were offered at any point. In that regard, issues of exploitation may arise: people supply the information that is valuable to the researcher and yet get little or nothing in return (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). To that end, recommendations suggest that “that researchers should give something back, in the way of services or payment” or “that participants should be empowered by becoming part of the research process” (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, 218). Each of the informants in this study, and in the dissertation overall, agreed to participate enthusiastically and did not request or expect payment. However, it was indeed not uncommon that individuals would ask that they be updated about the progress of the research and informed when there are published materials they could access. For many, this was not the first time they have been interviewed by academics or journalists, and they felt that they are owed such updates. Some shared that they are taking part of the study because they want to do their part to popularize this lifestyle and fend off misconceptions and negative stereotypes about digital nomadism. It was evident to me that it was more important to these informants to feel that their participation would have positive consequences in the grander scheme of their belonging to this subculture. I intend on keeping these informants updated, as they requested.

### 2.5.2. *Ethnography (Paper 3)*

As I planned and carried out the ethnographic phase of this research, much of the same considerations discussed above regarding access, consent and disclosure were pertinent. I introduced myself to the organizers of the Cruise early on and I sought to be as transparent as possible during all of my interactions with the people I encountered. In the instances where I met individuals who I felt could have valuable insights, I asked them if they would be willing to sit for a recorded interview and provided them with the information sheet and consent form prior to our conversation, following the same ethical guidelines relating to depth interviews discussed above. When carrying out this ethnography, however, I embraced a standpoint of continuous reflexivity about my role as a researcher.

For instance, in ethnography, issues of anonymity and confidentiality are problematized. Murphy and Dingwall (2007, 341) point out that since most ethnographies are carried out in a single setting it is much more difficult to ensure that data are totally unattributable: field-notes and interview transcripts inevitably record sufficient detail to make participants identifiable and, where fieldwork is overt, many people come to know that it is taking place and will be able to identify the source of data after publication. Further, the distinction between confidentiality and anonymity is difficult to define (O'Reilly 2012). The digital nomadic community is tightly knit with many of its members knowing each other, each other's life stories and experiences well. Despite of measures which I have taken for anonymization of the data by assigning pseudonyms and removing identifying information, it is possible that members can recognize themselves and one another (Ellis 1995 in Murphy and Dingwall 2007). It is highly unlikely, however, that this may cause any of the participants harm in any way as these individuals readily share their stories publicly (e.g., in blogs, giving interviews, being on podcasts etc.) and no details of intimate or sensitive character have been included in the ethnographic writeup. Finally, it is worth mentioning that sometimes participants' strongly desire to be recognized (O'Reilly 2012). I experienced this several times when participants would express regret that the interview will not benefit them by helping them reach an audience or having their name "out there." In fact, multiple times, individuals declined my request for an interview precisely because it would have been

confidential and anonymous, thus depriving them of opportunity to mention and therefore promote their business, blog or other matter of interest. Indeed, motives around why some people become participants and others resist is a concern worth paying attention to (Miller and Bell 2005).

Another primary ethical consideration implicated in ethnographic research relates to the distinction between covert and overt research. Balancing the need to be open and honest with the desire to fit in and become unobtrusive is particularly challenging and requires a reflexive focus (O'Reilly 2012). At the Nomad Cruise, I openly and clearly introduced myself as a researcher to everyone I interacted with and was unambiguous about the purpose of my attendance. Still, much ethnographic data collection relies on non-participant observation or on being a bystander to conversations and interactions where others may not be immediately or continuously aware of my intents and purposes. Indeed, it is not only not uncommon for participants to quickly forget that they are interacting with a researcher once they come to know the ethnographer as a person, but ethnographers seek to facilitate this by actively building rapport, in an attempt to minimize reactivity (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, 210). In addition, participant observation and longitudinal immersion further a specific type of research relationship characterized by sharing personal and private experiences over a long period of time (Birch and Miller 2005). Such relationship development may entail acts of self-disclosure, where personal, private experiences are revealed to the researcher toward building closeness and trust – it is indeed the quality of such a relationship that can provide access to the rich data that the qualitative researcher seeks (Birch and Miller 2005, 91–92). Nevertheless, O'Reilly points out that “awareness of the potential for exploitation and the role of representation is a first step in trying to avoid it” (2009, 60). Ethnography is arguably less exploitative than other methodologies in that it is highly reflexive, it attempts to understand participants' worlds from their own points of view and eschews reductionism in its presentation of findings, seeking rich depth and hermeneutic understanding (O'Reilly 2009). I have been particularly mindful of the ethical implications of my ethnographic work and have been careful to respect, protect and represent truthfully the participants' stories and accounts.

### 2.5.3. Netnography (Paper 3)

Netnographic research involves an array of complex and multifaceted ethical concerns, many of which revolve around several interrelated concerns: “are the online sites used to be considered a private or a public site, and what constitutes informed consent in cyberspace?” (Kozinets 2002b; 2007, 134). During the netnographic phase of this research, I collected three types of data: investigative, interactive and immersive (Kozinets 2020). Investigative data are created by generally unknown others and selected by the researcher to include in the project (2020, 193) (e.g., comments on videos on YouTube, Tweets, blog posts etc.). Interactive data are result of researcher interference or questioning (e.g., online interviewing, posting a public question, commenting, direct messaging etc.). Immersive data involves researchers’ personal notes, screen captures and others (2020, 180). I engaged in this type of data collection across private sites that require having a password-protected account, and public sites that are indexed and accessible through common search engines. Each type of data collection assumes specific ethical considerations as follows (adapted from Kozinets 2020, 182–184).

- Data available on public sites has been shared under conditions that do not require special ethics procedures for netnographic study, though standard considerations relating to treatment and representation of data apply. Permission is usually not necessary when dealing with publicly available data, but informed consent is essential whenever there is direct interaction between researcher and participant. Netnographic data in this dissertation drew extensively from You Tube, yet because YouTube does not provide a feature that makes direct messaging with a poster possible, informed consent has not been sought.

- Data available on private sites require consent. At minimum, the netnographer must negotiate access and obtain permission from the moderators. Further, various levels of “cloaking” might be necessary, from subtly altering usernames, pseudonyms and verbatims so that they are not traceable to omitting to mention the social media sites all together and changing the data significantly. This dissertation, as most netnography, falls into the cloaked condition (Kozinets 2020, 400-401).

Throughout the netnography I made sure that my identity was disclosed to everyone I interacted with. My status as researcher was clearly visible as part of my profile in closed platforms and clubs which I was a part of. Whenever I attended online events such as presentations or online gatherings it was done so overtly. Verbatims, screenshots or other data from closed groups and private sites has not been used. Ethical procedures are essential in netnographic work and a hallmark for this particular method (Kozinets 2020, 185). Kozinets insists that while other forms of digital ethnographies might use different standards and less strict procedures, a netnography can only be labeled as such if it follows the latest comprehensive guidelines published by the author – Netnography 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Kozinets (2020). As such, before, during and after fieldwork, and in this writeup, I have drawn exclusively from that text.

Next, Papers 1, 2 and 3 are presented in sequence.

### **3. PAPERS**



### **3.1. Paper 1**

Atanasova, Aleksandrina (2021), “Re-Examining Utopia in Contemporary Consumption: Conceptualization and Implications for Marketing,” *AMS Review*, 11(1–2), 23–39.



# Re-examining utopia in contemporary consumption: conceptualization and implications for marketing

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## Abstract

This paper introduces liquid consumer utopias, defined as market-mediated expressions of individuals' desires to re-imagine and re-construct reality, and to re-frame the present. This conceptual lens illuminates previously untheorized consumption phenomena, which are socially constructed, and often critical, efforts to enact an alternative way of being in an increasingly uncertain and unpredictable world. Three key characteristics of liquid utopias are outlined—immediacy, transience and hyper-individualization—each pointing to liquid consumer utopias' function to facilitate present-oriented and short-lived re-imaginings of reality. Co-existing alongside the solid and collective utopian consumption of interest to prior research, these emergent forms of liquid consumer utopias articulate a re-imagining of the present (rather than the future), have an emphasis on individual (rather than communal) experiences of betterment, and an orientation toward temporary re-framings of the experienced reality (rather than a pursuit of permanence and long-lasting change). Implications are discussed for retailing, experiential consumption, and consumer self-optimization.

**Keywords** Utopia · Liquid consumption · Desire · Escape · Experiential consumption · Retailing

## Introduction

Some consumers are paying a premium to eat airplane food in their homes (Cherney, 2020); others queue for hours in empty airports just to take a “flight to nowhere” on aircrafts that take off and land at the same destination a few hours later (Mzezewa, 2020); and others still are “window swapping” as they “trade places” with strangers while staring at a website offering live sights and sounds from Vancouver to Jakarta (Hynes, 2020). These curious consumption phenomena emerged in 2020—the year that brought one of the largest healthcare pandemics in modern history, halted our quotidian ways of life, and in turn prompted a distinct longing for what can no longer be had. Even prior to this notorious year, however, consumers have been yearning for the seemingly inexplicable. Drones of digitally native youth, for instance, have for years been fetishizing knitting, cookie baking, grandma aesthetics and countryside living, spurring mass Gen Z trends such as “grandmacore”, “cottagecore”

and “farmcore”—signposts for nostalgia-ridden communities that, paradoxically, thrive on many of the most popular internet platforms of the day such as TikTok (Slone, 2020). What these phenomena have in common is a desire to live in a world outside the one currently inhabited—in the cottagecore universe, there are no phones pinging constantly with updates, no urgent emails (Slone, 2020); similarly, as one boards a flight to nowhere, a brief moment of familiar normalcy is imagined and inhabited—it is not the destination that one is after, but the process of getting somewhere, even if ultimately that might be nowhere.

While such consumption phenomena are growing in prominence in today's marketplace, they are largely under-theorized in consumer research. Neither particularly intense, risky, nor painful, this type of consumption is unlike the escapist and extraordinary consumption of interest to past scholarship, where escaping the mundanity of the everyday was achieved via extraordinary experiences such as skydiving (Celsi, Rose & Leigh, 1993), competing in Tough Mudder (Scott, Cayla & Cova, 2017), climbing Everest (Tumbat & Belk, 2011), surfing (Canniford & Shankar 2013), river rafting (Arnould & Price, 1993), attending the Burning Man festival (Kozinets, 2002) or the Mountain Man Rendez-Vous (Belk & Costa, 1998). A flight to nowhere

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or a staged old-world-aesthetic for a TikTok reel can also hardly be considered transformative experiences or even mundane escapes (Cova, Carù & Cayla, 2018) in their own right, for they are not necessarily defined by a search for self-suspension or a wish to escape from self-awareness (see Cova et al., 2018).

What these consumption episodes elicit, however, is a deep-rooted desire for reality to be different than what it is. Such yearning to repeatedly “measure the life ‘as it is’ by a life as it should be” (Bauman, 2003, p.11) has continuously, across literary and academic disciplines, been converging within the notion of utopia—an ambivalent and nuanced construct at the juncture between hope and desire for something else other than what is presently experienced or had (Levitas, 2013). While colloquially utopia denotes a place that does not exist, or a collectively pursued vision for a perfect world or society, analytically the term is understood to reflect our aspiration toward fulfilling needs that are currently unmet in life as-is—that is, our desire to bridge the implicit scarcity gap between needs and satisfactions (Levitas, 2011). To this end, contemporary utopian scholarship has advanced conceptualizations where utopia is seen not as a descriptive form—a place or an ideology—but as a function with emancipatory potential, a culturally constructed practice whose purpose is to reframe and transform the present (Levitas, 2011, 2013). In today’s consumer culture, consumption is often thought of as the organization and materialization of such utopian practices tasked with transforming one’s lived reality (Bauman, 2007; Fitchett, 2020); it is therefore important that we trace the emergent utopian visions of the day and build the theoretical tools needed to understand their function in shaping consumer behavior.

Drawing from recent advances in utopian theory (Levitas, 2013), as well as theory of liquid consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017), this paper conceptualizes the notion of liquid consumer utopias, defined as market-mediated expressions of individuals’ desires to re-imagine and re-construct reality, and to re-frame the present. By integrating critical sociological perspectives on the changing nature of utopia in consumer society (Bauman, 2007), it is theorized that liquid consumer utopias arise as a result of an emergent utopian impulse that sees a re-orientation from solid and communal grand utopian visions to liquid, short-termed and individual utopian pursuits of betterment through everyday consumption practices. We suggest that this utopian impulse motivates a re-imagining of the present (rather than the future), has an emphasis on individual (rather than communal or collective) experiences of betterment, and an orientation toward temporary re-framings of the experienced reality (rather than a pursuit of permanence or long-lasting change). We identify and outline three key characteristics of liquid consumer utopias—immediacy,

transience and hyper-individualization—each pointing to liquid consumer utopias’ function to facilitate present-oriented, short-lived and fragmented re-imaginings of reality. Against this theoretical backdrop, this paper advances the notion of liquid utopian consumption phenomena as lower key, yet ambitious, efforts to imagine an alternative way of being, to reshape the day-to-day, and do things otherwise, here and now, albeit for a fleeting moment. In the process of constructing this conceptual lens, we also highlight the context-dependent nature of consumers’ utopian imaginaries and trace how both liquid and solid utopian visions exist in parallel.

Prior consumer research suggests that “the majority of today’s utopias are marketing inflicted” (p.679) and that such utopias are to be found within perfect worlds of marketing created dreamlands of abundance and satisfaction such as Disneyland, McDonald’s, Las Vegas, or the shopping mall (Brown, Maclaran & Stevens, 1996; Sherry, 2013). This paper goes beyond this perspective and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the interface between consumption and utopia as an analytic construct by charting how utopias, in the context of consumption, might be taking new forms—increasingly to be found in liquid and private utopian imaginaries that consumers pursue through resources in the marketplace, rather than in readily discovered dream-like worlds already conjured by the marketplace. Tracing these shifts speaks to an understanding that utopian visions are never arbitrary, but embedded in their socio-cultural, political and economic contexts (Gordin, Tilley & Prakash, 2010; Levitas, 2013). To this end, the proposed theorization of liquid consumer utopias contributes to the literature by offering a lens that illuminates how consumers construct visions for a different and subjectively better way of being in today’s world. Faced with unmanageable natural and geopolitical events, health pandemics and a widespread sense of polarizing global political crisis, many consumers are continuously dealing with a heightened degree of uncertainty in relation to both what is to come and how it may be dealt with once it arrives (Cook, 2018). In such times of uncertainty, visions for betterment energize; theorizing liquid consumer utopias helps us trace how such visions can materialize through various forms of consumption. With that, this paper broadens the conceptual terrain between utopian scholarship and marketing, and extends recent research where efforts to “develop a more systematized understanding of contemporary consumer utopias” (Kozinets, 2019, p.66) have begun to recognize the multi-faceted nature of utopian consumption.

This work advances marketing theory through envisioning (MacInnis, 2011) the elusive construct of utopia in a new, phenomenologically relevant way, which can help us better understand otherwise hidden macro dynamics within the marketplace. In doing so, this paper expands our theoretical

arsenal from the margins (Vargo, 2019), drawing on perspectives outside of the discipline's core and building on the tradition within Consumer Culture Theoretics, wherein theory construction begins with delving into the sociohistorical and sociocultural dynamics that influence the symbolic and ideological aspects of consumption (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). This approach to examining consumption through a culturally grounded, utopian analytical lens allows us to suggest fruitful new avenues for research in marketing; three such avenues are examined in detail in this paper: retailing, experiential consumption, and consumer self-optimization.

Next, we review the theoretical underpinnings and trace the strands of utopian perspectives outside and within consumer research. Then, we map out the conceptual terrain of emergent contemporary utopian imaginaries and theorize liquid consumer utopias. Finally, we discuss the implications of this theorization for marketing.

## Utopia and marketing

### Theoretical underpinnings of utopia as a concept

An enduring fixture in the everyday vernacular, utopias are largely thought of as impossibilities and mere reflections of imaginaries never to be realized (Kumar, 1991; Levitas, 2011). As a scholarly construct, however, utopia is a much more ambivalent conception. This ambivalence has been largely inherited from Sir Thomas More's 1516 satirical novel *Utopia* whose title alone was intentionally ambiguous—a pun for a good place and no place at once, bounded by its territory and tempting with its promise for finality, the ultimate paradisiacal destination that did not exist, yet beyond which nothing better existed either. The world which More describes is a world of contradictions that can be read either as idealistic or as impractical—a deliberate ambiguity, which has rendered utopia an ideological battleground for literary, political and cultural scholars, anthropologists, sociologists and academics at large (Levitas, 2011). To that end, there are three primary ways in which social theorists have used the term utopia: as defined by their content, form or function (Levitas, 2011, 2013).

First, utopias can be defined in terms of content—that is, what is a utopia (Sargisson, 2002). Depending on the historical and sociocultural context, utopias can portray different prescriptive versions of ideal societies or alternative worlds, reflecting issues which appear to be important to different social groups at a specific time. Through this lens, the content of utopia can vary significantly across time and places—past, future, Utopia, Atlantis, Shangri-la, Cockayne—but the content tends to be evaluative and normative, specifying in detail what a good society would

be and how it would function (Levitas, 2011, p.5). Stretching from early modernity to the present day, a canon of utopian—and, latterly, anti-utopian or dystopian—texts has been established to relay various such normative prescriptions of utopia (Garforth, 2009). This points to a second approach to defining utopias—descriptively. That is, in terms of the form through which utopian ideals are expressed. As such, utopia can be defined as a literary genre, imaginative fiction, strands in political theory, or myths (Levitas, 2011). Within this definition too, utopias most often describe what a good society would look like (whether possible or not) and tend to detail normative blueprints of an ideal commonwealth, but the focus is on the different forms and expressions through which this is done. To this end, More's *Utopia* established what is seen as the quintessential utopian form, which has been replicated across numerous literary pieces where a basic narrative pattern portrays a visitor from another place or time encountering a superior civilization (such portrayals have been generously enhanced by satire, which later would bring about the literary sub-genres of dystopia or anti-utopia) (Kumar, 1991, p.26–27). Like other literary utopian works, More's utopia depicts a journey (an escape), a voyage toward a world that stands in total contrast with the harsh reality of the day and where no human need is left unattended (Brown et al., 1996).

Inherent to the utopian literary genre is the issue of impossibility relayed through the notion of distance, for these works seek to portray worlds at distinguishable distance from reality. In other utopian forms however, such as utopian socialist writings, the notion of impossibility has been deliberately offset; there, the issue of realization and possibility have been intrinsic to the appeal of the transformational process in overcoming the poverty and degradation that were characteristic for the early industrial society which inspired these writings (Levitas, 2011, p.42). Yet again however, throughout the twentieth century, the notion of utopian impossibility was further reinforced by the multitudes of failed socialist utopias turned dystopias—idealistic visions either gone entirely wrong or functioning only for particular segments of society (Gordin et al., 2010). Overall, on these accounts, prior to the postmodern turn in social and cultural theory, most definitions of utopia have been concerned with either the content or the form of utopia, resulting in a tendency to think of utopia as either a totalitarian political project, or a literary genre of fictions about perfect societies (Levitas, 2012).

In late modernity, however, a new approach to theorizing the utopian imaginary has come to the fore: a marked shift from an emphasis on representation or content (a perfect society, a fictional land) to an emphasis on process (an individual practice seeking to transform the everyday) (Levitas, 2012; Bauman, 2007). In turn, in contemporary utopian scholarship, a third way of defining utopia is in focus—utopia seen

in terms of its function, that is, in terms of what it does. This viewpoint culminates in Levitas' definition of utopia as "the expression of desire for a better way of living and being" (2013, p.4)—a definition which not only isolates *desire* as the shared element among the disparate forms and contents of utopia throughout time (Garforth, 2009), but crucially foregrounds desire as the key in unraveling the function of the utopian imagination. Utopia can thus be conceived as a way of attempting to remedy the experience of lack, of dissatisfaction, of "something's missing," in the actuality of human existence, as it unfolds through time (Levitas, 2012). Such a definition is analytic rather than descriptive and it thus enables us to look at the utopian aspects of various cultural forms and expressions (Levitas, 2013).

Through this perspective, utopia may take place in different socially constructed forms (Levitas, 2005): imagining an alternative future is only one such manifestation (consider social justice movements such as Extinction Rebellion or Black Lives Matter, demanding radical structural and sociocultural change); utopia may also transpire within a more personal locus, in the quest for the ideal relationship, or for the perfect self or body (consider the human potential movement of the 1960s and the ensuing—and enduring to this day—interest shown by mainstream society in personal development, self-help, the quality of relationships and emotional literacy; see Puttick, 2000). Thus, while expressions of utopian longings may critique dominant ideologies or explore oppositional ways of living and being, they need not always be necessarily profound (Levitas, 2012)—they can be escape attempts (Cohen & Taylor, 1976) seeking to transform the daily struggle or routine and change one's place within the world, rather than change the world itself (Levitas, 2011, p.99). Uniformly, however, seen as expression of desire for a better, and thus different, way of living and being, utopia emerges as a form of counter-factual thinking (although not always self-consciously so) (Levitas, 2005, p.198).

The function of such a liberatory mode of thinking is to open up the possibility of apprehending another way of being, one that can be glimpsed from within a dominant social totality (Garforth, 2009). Coincidentally, historical research shows that utopian visions thrive in times when political and social patterns grow tedious or troubling (Friesen & Friesen, 2004). Various utopian imaginaries, for instance, flourished in America in the politically turbulent 1970s in protest against the fetishization of achievement, competition, or materialistic success. The hippie movement and related sub-cultures sprung as an embodiment of antiestablishment behavior—the lived reality was critically reimagined and countered via alternative fashions, belief in enlightenment through drugs, experimenting with unusual sexual behaviors, embracing Eastern spiritualities, astrology, and the like (Friesen & Friesen, 2004; Spencer,

1990). Tracing the function of such liberatory and critical expressions reveals utopia not as a "natural impulse" that is socially mediated, but a socially constructed response to an equally socially constructed gap between needs, wants and satisfactions generated in a society (Levitas, 2011, p.210). We adopt this function-view orientation toward the analytic (rather than descriptive) construct of utopia and we adopt Levitas' definition of utopia as "the expression of desire for a better way of living and being" (2013, p.4) while we trace the utopian imaginary within contemporary consumption phenomena as it unfolds in our dynamic present-day context.

### Liquid modernity and utopia

Studying utopia in terms of its function positions the construct not just as a conception anchored in a certain space–time coordinate, but as a practice (practice in this sense is understood to mean a nexus of performances, doings and sayings; see Warde, 2005), a lens used by actors for understanding their particular circumstances and by researchers for understanding contemporary culture (Gordin et al., 2010). Late modernity witnesses a contemporary culture that is ridden with generational anxieties and burn-out (Petersen, 2020), existential and ontological insecurities (Areni, 2019), acceleration (Rosa, 2013), and information overload (Hemp, 2009). These trends are epiphenomenal to what Zygmunt Bauman has labeled "liquid modernity" (2000)—the social condition of increased mobility, fluid identities, and weakening of established social norms and institutions within contemporary society. At the heart of the conception of liquid modernity are the notions of change, uncertainty and transience. Utopia has a central place in times of uncertainty and, consequentially, is an integral part of the theory of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000, 2007).

To that end, it has been suggested that the social and cultural dynamics in late modernity have instigated a transformation in the utopian imaginary: a shift from communal, solid and long-term visions, to individual, liquid and short-lived desires (Bauman, 2003, 2007). Bauman, himself a function-view utopian thinker, has consistently focused on describing this transformation of utopia and the causes and consequences of this shift (Jacobsen, 2008). For him, we live in an era where a new and unseen spirit of liquid utopianism is taking hold (Jacobsen, 2008) in which "the 'place' (whether physical or social) has been replaced by the unending sequence of new beginnings [...] and the desire of a different today has elbowed out concern with a better tomorrow" (Bauman, 2003, p.24). In developing these ideas, Bauman distinguishes between what he theorizes as solid and liquid utopias. He defines solid utopias as typified by their territoriality and finality—that is, they portray or pursue visions of a better life that are confined to a clearly defined territory and they inhere a potential to

reach a natural conclusion at some point where any further change could only be a change for the worse (Bauman, 2003). These solid utopias' function is to envision and/or enact a desired future; they occur within practices that are collective, holistic, forward-looking and often manifesting themselves in different movements, communities or tribes. Liquid utopias, in contrast, are temporary and highly individualized, embedded within and unfolding alongside the rhythm of contemporary society. Their function is not to seek shared improvement or to envision a desired future, but to creatively transform the present moment through fragmented and individualized action (Bauman, 2003, 2007; Jacobsen, 2008).

While Bauman's view positions solid utopias firmly in the past, and liquid utopias in the present, we use his theorization not as a blueprint, but as a heuristic device that is useful in eliciting and tracing the shifting trajectories of utopian desire in our present day. To that end, we adopt a perspective which recognizes that both solid and liquid *orientations* within the utopian mode of thinking are a part of the social imaginary in various ways. Consider, for instance, the numerous contemporary subcultures and collectives, such as Burning Man (see Kozinets, 2002) or the hipster communities settling in abandoned Western movie sets, turned ghost towns, and seeking to counter the accelerated and socially disparate realities of mainstream life (Krueger, 2016). In these current sociocultural phenomena, visions for betterment and transformation have a more solid, future-orientation where permanence is desired albeit not achievable; the utopian imaginary is conjured up and pursued collectively within designated locales where it could be articulated freely. We thus advance that both solid and liquid utopias can thrive in liquid modernity's cast of contradictions that transpire in the everyday—consider climate change deniers and activists, Brexit and Remain, return of the analogue and exponential growth of the digital. Of course, similar dichotomies have always existed. In our late modern context, however, they are infused within the daily discourse—influencing, shifting and motivating behavior.

To that end, Bauman argues that today's utopias' primary means of expression is through consumption—the ultimate arena for pursuit of desire (see Bauman, 2007, p.94–110). Other contemporary thinkers agree, proclaiming that “today, the market is the source of utopian aspirations, and consumer culture is where we can realize those dreams” and that “we should distinguish between ‘spectacular’ utopian and dystopian spaces, and ‘mundane’ or ‘everyday’ ones” (Fitchett, 2020, p.55–56). It is indeed this expression of utopia through consumption to which Maclaran and Brown (2001, p.370) also referred to when urging scholars to look for the “newtopias” of the day, thus opening paths for the function-view of utopia within consumer research. Ensuing

scholarship, however, had largely focused on the “spectacular” consumer utopian visions and grand utopian scapes, such as shopping malls, festivals and the like, leaving many of consumers' everyday liquid utopian expressions untheorized. This literature is briefly reviewed next.

## Utopia in consumer research

As a central heuristic tool, the concept of utopia has thus far been mostly used to unravel consumption in “emblematic marketing institutions” with “essentially [u]topian or quasi-utopian function” (Brown et al., 1996, p.676), such as immersive consumption-scapes or collective movements. Two of the earliest empirical studies that turn to a function view of utopia examine a shopping mall in Ireland and illustrate how this consumption-scape—in both its form (as a magical discovery one stumbles upon) and function (as a critique to the established norms of shopping) (Maclaran & Brown, 2001)—can be seen as a space with utopian potential, where utopian meanings are collectively constructed between consumers and retailers (Maclaran & Brown, 2005). In a similar vein, Murtola (2010) also focuses on the utopian function of the shopping mall and describes it as a commercial space attractive to the masses which imitates paradisiacal (and well-guarded) templates of harmony and abundance. In Murtola's view, the critical potential of utopias that unfold within such commercial-scapes, however, is largely absent; instead, she argues, “utopia has been reduced to an instrument of capital accumulation and turned into a form fitting the confines of commercial consumption” (2010, p.46).

In contrast, Bossy (2014) uses utopia as a lens to understand political consumerism where a network of individual and collective actors politicize the act of buying in order to search and promote other types of consumption. Bossy sees utopia both as discourse and a practice that can enable positive collective action through rejection of the existing society and conception of an alternative world. Such conceptions can be similarly seen in the Star Trek fandom which Kozinets (2001) describes as a closely knit “utopian refuge for the alienated and disenfranchised” (p.71) and a commercially facilitated collective utopia that bonds together the Star Trek fan community. Another type of collective utopia is studied by Chatzidakis, Maclaran and Bradshaw (2012) who conceptualize an Athenian neighborhood, renowned for its anti-capitalist ethos, as a critically charged heterotopian space for utopian praxis where collective action and communal spirit can flourish. Finally, and also rooting their analysis in alternative urban spaces, Hong and Vicdan (2016) study ecovillages as ostensibly utopian spaces where collectively shared utopian ideals are re-imagined based on the social configuration of sustainable

lifestyles. Across these studies, utopias are materialized through distinct spacial forms intended for collective enjoyment and bound within physical places, and their expressions echo aspirational and prescriptive visions for what society, or one's lived experience within it, ought to be.

Utopia is also frequently used as a peripheral construct in consumer research. Within this group of studies, the notion of utopia is evoked to bring richness or clarity to emancipatory or anti-structural consumption phenomena via reference to colloquial ideals of what society could or should look like. Within this group of studies, a plethora of consumption contexts and performances have been identified as utopian or holding utopian potential: from depiction of a quasi-utopian world of democratic togetherness on board cruise ships (Kolberg, 2016); to the Burning Man festival where within a confined space, and during a limited amount of time, escapist utopian visions can unfold within a “youtopia—a good place for me to be myself, and you to be yourself, together” (Kozinets, 2002, p.36); to microfinance and entrepreneurial philanthropy (Bajde, 2013) and fantasy reenactment rendezvous (Belk & Costa, 1998).

Overall, the perspective which these studies share outlines an understanding of utopia as a vision that is implicitly or explicitly communal and shared in character, either in the process of envisioning it or enacting it. Such a vantage point frames the issue of desire in relation to spacial forms and engagement with such spaces and/or at the level of community or subcultures of consumption. Since much of consumer research has been notably interested in collective consumption experiences, tribes, flagship marketplaces, and phenomena generally unfolding at the meso-level of analysis (e.g. Belk & Costa, 1998; Kozinets, 2001, 2002; O'Guinn & Belk, 1989), it is not surprising that utopia's communal nature has often been a useful backdrop for many of these studies. See Table 1 for a review of selected universally recognized literary and political utopian writings, as well as for an overview of the various ways utopia has been defined and used in consumer research.

As alluded to earlier, however, in liquid modernity, loss of stable social structures, withering of long-term thinking and planning, alongside gradual withdrawal from collective action and social solidarity, are pushing the nature of utopia and its emancipatory function away from its collectivist origins, toward a realm of hyper-individualization and commoditization (Bauman, 2003, 2007). To capture this, this paper advocates for an expanded theorization of the nexus between utopia and consumption; a theorization that allows that utopia may be fragmentary, fleeting, elusive, with its primary function being to disrupt the taken-for-granted nature of the present (Levitas, 2013). Using such a lens can help us better understand how consumers use consumption to

navigate the multitudes of tensions and circumstances in our contemporary times and envision a better way of being in the world.

In recent consumer scholarship, we have already begun to see interest in exploring the notion of individualized utopias: in conceptual (Roux, 2014) and empirical (Roux & Belk, 2019) work on tattooed bodies as sources of utopias and as “places” where “embodied heterotopias” can be produced; as well as in empirical work on heterotopian selfie practices (Rokka & Canniford, 2016). Improving our theoretical grasp of alternative, individualized utopian imaginaries is therefore timely. Importantly, this is not to say that utopia at the level of the collective is no longer analytically relevant: as Kozinets (2019) has recently shown with his work on YouTube utopian clicktivism, collective utopian visions that elicit shared focus on common goals continue to have a role in our contemporary discourse. As such, liquid and solid utopian orientations co-exist within the contemporary consumption landscape. The theorization offered here, however, seeks to shine light on emergent forms of utopian consumption that have thus far been left out of sight. We construct this conceptual lens next.

## Liquid consumer utopias

Proposing that both the finality and territoriality of earlier solid utopian projects are becoming problematic in liquidity, Bauman reads the resulting change as a privatization of imagination in the utopian impulse—a shift from the collective to the individual, from structures to experience, and from a distant future to here and now (Levitas, 2003). His argument about these changing contents of utopian desire develops largely against the backdrop of his understanding that consumption, under the guise of pursuit of happiness, has emerged as the only achievable utopia in our contemporary consumer culture. He thus sees contemporary utopias as very much active, but also private endeavors that are “cut to the measure of ‘individualized society’” (Bauman in Rojek, 2004, p.309). In liquid modernity, Bauman sees consumption as conjugated to desire and to desire's even more liquid form—the wish (Lee, 2005). His analysis of consumption takes the experiences of wish fulfillment to be the epitome of discrete utopian actions accomplished without involvement of others (Lee, 2005). Utopias in the context of consumption therefore emerge as desires and wishes for alternative ways of living and being in the world that are expressed and pursued through private acts of consumption. We use this orientation to conceptually outline the shift within utopian thinking as it relates to consumption.

At the meso level, we conceptualize the notion of liquid consumer utopias, defined as market-mediated expressions of individuals' desires to re-imagine and re-construct reality,

**Table 1** Conceptualizations of utopia

Author	Conceptualizations of Utopia	Context
<b>SELECTED LITERARY UTOPIAS</b>		
Plato 375 BC	A utopian state model depicting the political structure, demographics, theology and laws of two ideal cities: the first truly just but austere, the second “feverish” and “luxurious”	Ideal commonwealth
Unknown c.1250	Land of Cockayne: a medieval folk poem depicting an imaginary conflict-free and deprivation-free land of material abundance, where finest wines flow plentifully in rivers, houses are made of delicacies, and plump geese roast by themselves	Mythical place
More 1516	An ideal welfare state where there is no private property, people are distributed in equal numbers across towns and households, wearing simple clothes, performing essential trades, and dining in communal spaces together	Ideal commonwealth
Bellamy 1888	A depiction of an ideal twentieth century centralized socialist society in the US, where poverty is eradicated, industry is nationalized, and capitalism has been replaced by centralized organizations of production and consumption	Ideal commonwealth
Morris 1890	An alternative to Bellamy’s ideal social state and a counter-view of socialism that is depicting England in the twenty-second century, where money has been abolished and one simply asks for what one wants, craftwork has pushed aside “wage slavery,” contracts of marriage have been replaced by flexible bonds of affection, and industrialism has given way to informal patterns of co-operation. The central theme of this model of socialism is of work as pleasure, subject not to massive centralization but active participation of individuals (see Levitas, 2011)	Ideal commonwealth
Wells 1905	Two travelers fall into a space-warp and suddenly find themselves upon a Utopian Earth controlled by a single World Government, where all people share a common language, there is sexual, economic and racial equality, and society is ruled by socialist ideals enforced by an austere, voluntary elite: the “Samurai”	Ideal commonwealth
<b>SELECTED POLITICAL UTOPIAS</b>		
Owen 1813	Promoted a radically different society brought to existence through the setting up of small self-supporting experimental communities where workers were paid what they were worth and shared, rather than competed, in all areas of life. Residents believed that the three main evils of society are religion, private property and marriage	Ideal commonwealth
Saint-Simon 1817	Advanced the ideology of “industrialism” and believed that industrial development provides the conditions for abundance and elimination of poverty and ignorance. Envisioned holistic transformation of the whole society (rather than gradual change in small experimental communities)	Ideal commonwealth
Fourier 1830	Promoted a form of ideal society comprised of small, self-supporting and primarily agricultural communities, called “phalanstères,” where choice of occupation, congenial company and variety of the work itself would mean that labour would cease to be an imposition (see Levitas, 2011)	Ideal commonwealth
<b>CONSUMER UTOPIAS</b>		
Maclaran and Brown 2001	“[A] significant part of western culture [...] ) that provides a crucial critical function for engaging with reality and for perpetually rearranging one’s place in that reality [...]” (p.369)	Shopping mall
Kozinets 2001	Implied: “[A] world without injustice, intolerance, or poverty” (p.73)	Star Trek convention
Kozinets 2002	Implied: “[E]xperience of caring human contact in a society ‘whose economic and technological dynamic attrits and intrudes upon the integrity of the cultural process’ (Harvey, 1997)” (p.21)	Burning Man festival
Maclaran and Brown 2005	“Not just an idyllic place [but] an activity, a trajectory, a process”; “a heuristic device for perfectibility”; “a process that draws attention to the gap between what it is and what could be” (p.312)	Shopping mall
Murtola 2010	“Utopia is, in this sense, the eternal not-yet-here but potentially to come, and simultaneously also the potentially not to come. As such, it is the ever-new, the desired future that always eludes the present” (p.38)	Shopping mall



**Table 1** (continued)

Author	Conceptualizations of Utopia	Context
Chatzidakis, Maclaran and Bradshaw 2012	"Whereas the concept of utopia envisages a future state of perfection, heterotopia is in the here and now, facilitating [...] the function or process of utopian thinking rather than its ultimate realization [...].": "Heterotopias [...] are collective or shared spaces of 'otherness' where alternative forms of social organisation take place, forms that stand in stark contrast to their surrounding environment" (p.497)	Radical Athenian neighborhood
Bossy 2014	"A discourse and a set of practices. The utopian discourse includes, first, a rejection of the existing society, and, second, if not a clear conception of what another world might look like, at least the idea that another society is possible and desirable. The utopian practices need to be an attempt to create here and now at least some of the features of this utopian discourse in the hope of a spread in the rest of society" (p.179)	Slow food movement
Roux 2014	"[U]topias are places that are nowhere (Maclaran & Brown, 2005), sites with no real place (Foucault, 2009), 'spaces that are fundamentally and essentially unreal' (Foucault, 1967/2001, p.1574), but whose purpose is to remedy the deficiencies of the present world (Kozinets, 2001)" (p.62)	Tattooing
Kolberg 2016	"Impulse and longing for the dissolution of class striation" (p.6)	Carnival Cruise
Hong and Victan 2016	Emancipatory and reactive, "a very modern phenomenon that considers spatial enlightenment a societal-level priority" (p.121)	Eco-villages
Kozinets 2019	"Utopianism: The attempt to create significantly better societies by first challenging dominant social institutions, such as capitalism, socialism, contemporary politics, or communism Metopianism: A self-oriented view of consumer utopia; a conception of consumers' views of world betterment as embedded in marketing and consumption-based improvements in practices, goods, and services, leading to a personal experience of ever-improving standards of living Wetopianism: A collectively oriented formulation of consumer utopia; a conception of consumers' views of world betterment as based on a questioning of, and challenge to, extant and embedded industrial systems of marketing and consumption that might hide social inequities and ecological consequences" (p.69)	YouTube clicktivism
Roux and Belk 2019	"Utopia [...] projects imagination into a better elsewhere [which] provides idealists with romantic desires of transformation that challenge reality" (p.486)	Tattooing

and to re-frame the present. Drawing on Bauman (2007), we theorize that liquid consumer utopias arise as a result of an emergent utopian impulse that sees a re-orientation from solid, communal and conditionally distant utopian visions to liquid, short-termed and individually enacted utopian desires for betterment. As such, we propose that liquid consumer utopias articulate a re-imagining of the present (rather than the future), have an emphasis on individual (rather than communal or collective) experiences of betterment, and an orientation toward temporary re-framings of the experienced reality (rather than a pursuit of permanence and long-lasting change).

The utopian imaginary within consumption, however, is necessarily reflective of the broader context and immediate circumstances which waver in the unpredictability of late modernity. In turn, we suggest that consumption can be framed by either solid or liquid orientations within a utopian mode of thinking and that both solid and liquid consumer utopias can co-exist

within contemporary consumer culture (see also Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). To that end, we propose that solid consumer utopias emerge when ideals of collective betterment and communal experiences are sought after, and/or when the yearning for transformation is concerned with grander visions for society and one's place in it. Solid utopias are propelled by desire for the transformation to be long lasting and a belief that the upcoming change for the better is, or at least could be, in the offing. See Table 2 for a comparison between solid consumer utopias and liquid consumer utopias.

Within this theoretical lens, we advance the notion of liquid consumer utopias as lower key, fast paced, and individually enacted efforts to imagine an alternative way of being, to reshape the day-to-day, and do things otherwise, here and now, albeit for a fleeting moment. Several features define the nature of such liquid utopias in today's context: 1) they are immediate and present-oriented, propelled by an instant gratification mentality

**Table 2** Characteristics of solid and liquid consumer utopias

Solid Consumer Utopias	Liquid Consumer Utopias
<i>Attributes</i>	<i>Attributes</i>
<b>DISTANT &amp; FUTURE-ORIENTED</b>	<b>IMMEDIATE &amp; PRESENT-ORIENTED</b>
Conditionally distant and based on a belief that the desired future will eventually come	Prompted by uncertainty for what is to come and focused on transforming the present
<b>LONG TERM &amp; PERMANENT</b>	<b>SHORT-LIVED &amp; TEMPORARY</b>
Oriented toward long-term planning and desire for the transformation to be long lasting	Oriented toward short-term pursuits of individualized desires and fulfillment of ephemeral visions
<b>COLLECTIVE &amp; HOLISTIC</b>	<b>HYPER-INDIVIDUALIZED &amp; FRAGMENTED</b>
Undertaken or experienced by collectives/groups in pursuit of holistic betterment and change	Undertaken at the individual-level and manifesting as fragmented episodes of betterment and change
<i>Example Consumption Contexts</i>	<i>Example Consumption Contexts</i>
Festivals and group consumption (e.g. Burning Man; Kozinets, 2002)	Relationships between people and places / things (e.g. decluttering and minimalism; Kondo, 2014)
Grand physical retail spaces (e.g. shopping malls; Maclaran & Brown, 2005)	Individual consumption at home (e.g. Netflix and chill; Young, 2016)
Socio-political groups and urban communities (e.g. eco-villages; Chatzidakis, Maclaran, & Bradshaw, 2012)	Mobile consumer collectives / networks (e.g. digital nomads; Atanasova & Eckhardt, 2021)
Consumer collectives, fandoms and brand tribes (e.g. Star Trek; Kozinets, 2001)	Identity projects / the body / optimization of the self (e.g. self-quantification, tattooing; Roux, 2014)

(Jacobsen, 2008); 2) they are short-lived, resembling “hunts” (Bauman, 2007) performed by utopian hunters, “sensation seekers” that are constantly searching for fulfillment of desires through consumption; 3) and they are highly fragmented and individualized, reflecting a transition from a discourse of shared improvement to that of individual survival (Bauman, 2007). These attributes are synthesized here within three key characteristics of liquid consumer utopias: immediacy, transience and hyper-individualization.

### Immediacy

First, unlike solid utopias, whose function is to envision or enact a desired future, liquid consumer utopias enable transformation of the present through their immediacy. They are lived, rather than being lived towards (Bauman, 2007). As such, liquid utopias are anchored in the present, propelled by an all-encompassing fear of missing out which fuels an eager pursuit of instant gratification in a race against the speed of our everyday. These utopian visions thrive in the consumer society of liquid modernity, where for many, life emerges as a daily market-mediated cycle for developing and fulfilling desires and wishes (Blackshaw, 2005). Momentary and immediate, liquid consumer utopias manifest as fleeting moments of satisfaction and relief. In the contemporary marketplace, access-based consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012), for instance, through its quick cycles

of acquisition and disposal, is particularly conducive for the immediate realization of consumers’ liquid utopian imaginaries. With its limitless potential for instantaneous consumption, access-based consumption enables consumers to have and experience virtually anything, here and now, without the burdens of ownership nor its demands and prerequisites. Consider the offerings of Rent the Runway or AirBnB Luxe for consumers eager to re-imagine their not so affluent reality and seeking to circumvent its limitations—a different present no longer needs to be merely fantasized about; one could actually visit and observe it, and some of us could even acquire it, albeit for an instant (Fitchett, 2020). In liquidity, whatever might the contents of one’s utopian desires be, they always belong to the realm of the possible. Blackshaw (2005) summarizes Bauman’s vision succinctly: “it is the instantaneity of consumer culture and its ability to ‘take the waiting out of wanting’ in delivering *homo consumens*’ hopes and dreams that is today what is imagined as the measure of the success of a life worth living” (p.114). Importantly, however, liquid utopias, although propagated by the market, do not passively reside in the mundane; to be utopian, consumption must inhere a confrontation with commonsense (Bauman in Jacobsen, 2016) and be motivated by an active pursuit of re-framing and imagining life otherwise. The function of liquid consumer utopias is therefore concerned with creatively, and sometimes critically, transforming the present in the moment, via resources in the marketplace.

## Transience

Second, liquid consumer utopias are short-term and short-lived, defined by their transience. In Bauman's writings, liquid utopias are metaphorically presented as "hunts" performed by individuals who are "constantly looking for prey and for that extra supply of sensation or stimulus to saturate, however unsuccessfully or short-lived, their insatiable appetite for ever more" (Jacobsen, 2008, p.220). Similarly, liquid consumer utopias are not about satisfying articulated consumer needs, but about catering to ephemeral desires in a contemporary society starved for time (see Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019). Consider for instance, the surprising demand for the "flights to nowhere" mentioned earlier, where in an effort to transform and reframe their lived reality during coronavirus lockdowns, deprived travelers compete for a chance to be given a fake itinerary, check in, go through passport control, security, and even board and interact with flight attendants on the aircraft—one that is never intended to take off or at best would take off and land at the same point of departure a few hours later (Wang, 2020).

In liquid modernity, liquid consumer utopias emerge in chasing after and stringing together such short moments of satisfaction. This is a substantively different orientation than that inherent to solid utopian imaginaries, where the desire to transform reality involves a certain hope for permanence and longevity of the transformation (consider the very much utopian "Make America Great Again" movement and the solid aspirations that it embodies). In contrast, a liquid utopian orientation promotes disengagement rather than life-long loyalty, movement rather than rootedness, gigs rather than a career, escaping rather than committing, experiencing rather than accumulating. It exploits and valorizes consumer society's never ending search for stimulation and novelty. Thus, for such sensation-seeking consumer-hunters, "utopia is a utopia of time coupled with a utopia of speed—of time as an episodic and endless series of consumer sensations with no conceivable or coveted endpoint in which the only thing that counts is the speed with which to obtain, live through and consume these sensations" (Jacobsen, 2008, p.221). The implication of that in terms of consumption is two-fold: on the one hand, liquid consumer utopias' transient character opens up possibilities for continuous transformation of the present time and time again, as each new utopian pursuit is charged with potential; on the other, liquid utopias' ability to satisfy consumer desire is short lived. In their role as episodic pursuits of betterment, liquid consumer utopias thus emerge as means to cope with the ephemerality and temporality that are characteristic for

liquid consumption, where value is markedly transitory and context dependent (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). As such, liquid consumer utopias are not exclusive to the elite; for many, they emerge in response to not having the means to access solidity and security, even if it is desired.

## Hyper-individualization

Finally, liquid consumer utopias are defined by their fragmentation and hyper-individualization. In liquidity, the utopian pursuit is in the singular, subjectively constructed and deeply personalized; "unlike the utopian model of the good life, happiness is thought of as an aim to be pursued individually, and as a series of happy moments succeeding each other—not as a steady state" (Bauman, 2002, p.240). As such, liquid consumer utopias' function is transformative, escapist and emancipatory at the micro-level. They reframe the present without seeking lasting or collective transformation—such would be beyond the scope of liquid utopias. Rather, for the yearning consumer, a liquid utopian lens reshapes the everyday in the singular. Consider, for instance, Netflix binge watching labeled as self-care or glamorizing "staying-in" as "the new going out"; as Young (2016) asserts, "why risk a restaurant when you can order Seamless or sauté premade gnocchi from Blue Apron? Why go to a bar when you can swipe right? Why go to a reading when you can download a podcast?" Liquid consumer utopias, as market-mediated expressions of individuals' desires to re-imagine and re-construct reality, thus emerge as fragmented, open-ended and hyper-individualized imaginings. Such are born out of individuals' own privatized pursuits and critical evaluation of their lived reality, and hence no two utopian visions need to be the same. Of course, as Jacobsen (2008) paraphrases, in the hunting liquid utopias of today, most times people hunt alone, but sometimes hunting in packs appears more rewarding and assuring, as when groups desire identical consumer goods and create short-lived and shallow "imagined communities" in order to exclusively claim and obtain them (Bauman, 1992, p.xix). This can be seen in the emergence of various fluid community-enabled marketplace systems that center around utopian ideals and offer alternative ways of being in the world, such as peer-to-peer clothing rental communities (Albinsson & Perera, 2018) and hybrid co-working/co-living residence collectives (Gandini, 2015).

## Solid and liquid utopias in an age of uncertainty

Liquidity is, of course, a metaphor, enabling us to see and analyze the world through a specific lens which is inevitably selective, leaving out much of what might be within view for the sake of a sharper focus on what might otherwise be missed (Lakoff & Johnson, 1981). As such, a liquid lens does not deny the possibility for solidity in utopian consumption nor does it suggest contemporary consumer culture has dissolved into

boundless fluidity for everyone everywhere—the solid, which encompasses structure, still very much exists (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020b). To that end, it is useful to think about solid and liquid as two ends of a continuum, highlighting that there are middle points combining liquid and solid (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). Prior scholarship has shown that how and why consumers move along such a solid–liquid continuum is dependent on a number of antecedents such as extent of professional and economic scarcity, access to mobility systems, consumers’ innate characteristic and others (see Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017; Lamberton & Goldsmith, 2020). In a similar vein, solid and liquid utopian orientations should also be thought of as co-existing, and reflective of how consumers globally navigate and integrate a realm between solid and liquid consumption, practices, or circumstances.

This is particularly evident in the context of the global Covid-19 health pandemic which has illustrated some of the tensions between solid and liquid. In liquidity, notions of choice, individualization and acceleration are dominant logics that structure everyday life (Eckhardt, 2020). Covid-19 has largely taken away the liberties and choices we have been so accustomed to and it has, in many ways, halted the acceleration inherent to liquidity. For instance, while, for better or worse, the pandemic has forced families to spend more time together (McCracken, 2020) and has sparked a renaissance of sorts to notions of familial togetherness and closeness, it has also rendered such notions deeply problematic, for togetherness has become a vector for the disease, notwithstanding plexiglass screens, face masks and shields. Consequentially, hallmarks of liquid utopian individualism such as introspection, me-time and self-care are being glamorized and becoming even more mainstream than before (Silva, 2017). Moreover, while in this moment of living in uncertainty, many are moving back home, leaving dense cities for more open spaces, and swapping costly urban residencies for more affordable ones, others are leaning into the precarity rather than trying to redress it by opting for van-living instead of taking up a permanent residence with monthly rent (Tsapovsky, 2020). Thus, even in the context of the coronavirus pandemic, which is amplifying needs for safety and stability, many who are facing job insecurity and mounting expenses are pushed to seek more liquid and flexible ways of living.

In parallel however, the pandemic has also challenged notions of lightness. In a consumer culture where minimalism and getting rid of domestic clutter are signals of privilege and affluence from those who don’t have to worry about what unforeseen wants or needs might lie ahead, scarcity of basic goods and empty grocery store shelves have a way of challenging or even reversing such logics, prompting some to overstock their pantries or re-order the very same board games and casual diversions they had parted with, Mari

Kondo-style, back when their lives were busier and the boxes were taking up space in a closet (Mull, 2020a). Thus, while the pandemic has brought more solid orientations such as accumulation, as well as solid structures such as government intervention programs and border closings, it has also, in many ways, reinforced the fragmentation, isolation and uncertainty of liquidity (Eckhardt, 2020). Long-term planning or thinking of the future is particularly challenged, for the future is acutely uncertain under the menace of not only the ongoing pandemic but the potentiality of other similar ones to come. This has opened up avenues for various expressions of liquid utopian desire for a different way of being in the world to unfold—through once obscure, now in vogue avocations such as gardening, baking, and the like, consumers are seeking ways to ground themselves in the present, to summon a sense of control over the unpredictable, and to re-frame their lived lockdown realities.

Theorizing liquid consumer utopias thus does not suggest that solid utopian visions no longer exist, but it allows us to see and explain new consumption patterns, behaviors and dispositions that were not visible before, not only in the broad context of contemporary consumer culture but also in the present pandemic context where the instability and fragmentation of liquidity are particularly pronounced (Eckhardt, 2020). We discuss the emergence of liquid consumer utopias in today’s marketplace next.

## Liquid utopias in contemporary consumption

In contemporary consumption, liquid utopias, with their potential to transform the present, are emergent in a variety of consumption phenomena. If several decades ago a vision of the good life would have depicted a lifelong career, financial stability, secure retirement, and a nuclear family settled into an owned home, today, these are not dreams that everyone aspires to anymore. If before, consumers sought refuge from the mundane reality in festivals, brandscapes and shopping malls, where collective experiences could soften the lonely and fragmented nature of the postmodern context (Maclaran & Brown, 2001), today increasingly more consumers “stay-in” and “opt-out”, avoid brand signification, show a growing distaste for broadcasted tribe allegiance, declutter, and seek extreme personalization from what they consume and experience (Harris, 2017; Rosenbaum et al., 2019). What emerges through this lens is a type of liquid utopian orientation that is grounded in consumers’ perpetual hunt for positive sensations and control. It is an orientation which is adopted systematically and opportunistically—it empowers and fuels the enactment of transformative imaginaries through various resources in the marketplace.

We have already begun to see the implications of the emergent influence of liquid utopian perspectives in shaping global trends. For instance, the phenomenon of downshifting, propelled by the soaring popularity of the Mari Kondo brand, whose ethos is spreading the “life changing magic of tidying up” (2014), emerges as a prime example of a liquid utopian vision materialized in practice. As Kondo is showing consumers how to seek immediate bliss and overall life improvement through mindfulness about the materiality that surrounds them, the hoarders’ cluttered lives are quickly transformed into neat and open spaces inviting abundant possibilities for happiness. The process is easy and instantaneous—all that it takes is a few piles of clothes soon to be disposed of and one is granted happiness here and now, no spiritual enlightenment required. Of course, chances are that the bliss will be short-term, as true emancipation from the market is not possible (cf. Kozinets, 2002). Nonetheless, as the popularity of Kondo demonstrates, through pursuing short-lived transformative practices for betterment, one can simultaneously cater to desires for a better life and relieve some of the burdens imposed by contemporary consumer culture.

Anticipatory visions and desires for the good life also materialize through alternative forms of liquid consumption where access-based consumption is transforming the boundaries of established social codes of conduct. Consider Japan’s Rent-a-Family industry (Batuman, 2018), for people who are short on relatives and need to hire a husband, a mother, or an entire family clan for weddings, funerals or graduations. Immediate, short-term and highly individualized, this consumption phenomenon offers instantaneous solutions for a range of woes: the service is equally useful for single (often career-oriented) women with marriage-obsessed parents who rent fake boyfriends or fiancés, as well as for bachelors who rent wives and children in order to experience having the kind of nuclear family seen on TV. In confronting commonsense and relishing in the idea of having, but not the having itself, this practice foregrounds liquid utopian visions’ potential to transform the present instantaneously through consumption and to materialize an alternative reality albeit only for a short moment.

Similarly, through a liquid utopian theoretical lens, we can begin to see that the Millennial generation’s famed propensity to stay-in and construct the good life away from established norms and socio-economic structures (cf. Harris, 2017) is not a generational idiosyncrasy but in fact a critical liquid utopian impulse—immediate and short-lived. Such an impulse materializes through clusters of consumption practices instilling a sense of making it in the world, even if on a micro, hyper-individualized scale; for example, collecting Instagram-worthy high-end cookware as “trophy of domesticity” and markers of adult achievement, in lieu of

traditional markers such as home ownership (Mull, 2020b). Such practices allow this cohort to reframe the narrative of overall “hopelessness” (Chung, 2017) that stems from their relative low purchasing power, toxic competitiveness, instability and dismal job prospects (cf. Petersen, 2020). Thus, Millennials’ liquid utopian consumption practices inhere a sense of control, prioritization of the self, and wellness—fulfilled visions for a better way of being in a world where much is lacking.

The emergent phenomenon in China known as “sang culture” vividly exemplifies liquid utopia’s reframing and transforming potential. Sang—a term that loosely translates to feeling hopeless, demotivated or dispirited—refers to a kind of youth subculture of quiet rebellion and ironic defeatism in an authoritarian regime notorious for its control (Chung, 2017). Sang culture represents more broadly the millennial propensity to “opt out” and push back against traditional values. This is motivated by this cohort’s circumstantial inability to conform to such values (e.g. buying a house, marry when it customary to do so). Consumption is the medium through which sang culture is expressed and disseminated, and the act of opting out is often manifested via consumption of sang-inspired products. One such product, for instance, is Sung Tea—a brand that sells beverages like “my-ex ‘s-life-is-better-than-mine fruit tea”, “can’t-afford-a-house macchiato” and “achieved-absolutely-nothing black tea”. Similarly, the opting-out Millennial in China can also choose products from other brands such as “fat-free and aspiration-free” “Hopeless Drinking Yoghurt” (Chung, 2017). Through deliberate and public consumption of such products, liquid utopian expressions of the desire for a different way of being in the world emerge as momentary bursts of vocalized discontent. These utopian consumption episodes lay in pockets of transformational re-framings of a mundane life that is far away from the one actually desired. Nonetheless, through engaging in sang, a better life is temporarily conceived as possible, or is at least acted upon.

Notably, liquid utopian consumption manifests in lifestyle choices that seek to resolve the tension from living in a bleak present. This is acutely exemplified by digital nomadism—a lifestyle migration phenomenon where cohorts of demographically diverse consumers (from struggling graduates to entrepreneurs and even retirees) choose to let go of most of their possessions and serially relocate, looking for affordable, yet exotic, places to live and building lifestyles outside of traditional work-life structures, homeownership or traditional notions of “success” (O’Reilly & Benson, 2016). Empirical evidence from the digital nomadic context speaks to nomads’ deliberate pursuit of critically oriented “liquid” lives, where the emotional and physical burdens of a 9–5 lifestyle are suspended and counteracted with short-term pursuits of happiness via global mobility and rejection of normativity (Atanasova & Eckhardt, 2021). The good life

is pursued and achieved, here and now, through deliberate “lifestyle design” intended to propel the nomad among the “new rich” of our modernity—those with ample time and resources, not necessarily wealth (Ferriss, 2009). Through the conceptualization of liquid consumer utopias we can begin to see that digital nomads engage in hyper-individualized pursuits of utopian desire toward a better way of being and living in the world, where the “hunt” for the next best place and experience is insatiable, and where their critique of rigid, solid structures evokes an urge for a perpetual escape from the constraints of societal expectations. A liquid utopian lens allows us to better understand such consumption desires and motivations—geared toward experiences and short-lived indulgence (not possessions), immediacy (not long-term benefit), and transformative lifestyle experiences considered desirable for they lie outside the margins and solid structures of mainstream society.

The vantage point of liquid consumer utopias presented here, provides a foundation from which particular acts of consumption can be read as culturally variable, socially constructed, and often critical, expressions of utopian desire to re-imagine and re-construct reality, and to re-frame the present. This perspective illuminates utopias as widely at work in everyday life, and often inconspicuously embedded in consumption contexts which may not present or advertise themselves as utopian (Levitas, 2007, 2017). Next, we discuss implications and future research for several domains within marketing.

## Implications for marketing

Theorizing utopian desire through a liquid lens allows marketers to decode some of consumers’ contemporary utopian propensities and to draw managerial insights with an apt analytical focus. The conception of liquid consumer utopias illuminates emergent intersections of marketplace dynamics and consumption in a number of domains in consumer research, three of which will be explored here for their frequent association with utopian notions: retailing, experiential and anti-structural consumption, and consumer self-optimization.

First, given that the retail context is frequently evoked in extant marketing research on utopias, a liquid utopian conceptualization holds potential for opening up new perspectives to studying retail in an increasingly digitalized and dematerialized world. Traditionally, planned retail spaces, such as malls and department stores, have been positioned as quintessential sites for utopian realization, where “the utopian conceptions of consumers and marketers meld” (Maclaran & Brown, 2005, p.312). At its very genesis, the contemporary shopping mall has been envisioned as “the nucleus of a utopian experiment” and a space where

“shoppers will be so bedazzled by a store’s surroundings that they will be drawn—unconsciously, continually to shop in a master-planned, mixed-use community” (Gruen in Scharoun, 2014, p.1). Liquid consumer utopias, however, illuminate that many consumers increasingly prioritize hyper-individualized and instantaneous means for catering to their desires which are not easily facilitated by traditional retail environments. In liquidity, such environments are perceived as disseminating mostly mass-produced commercial goods, available to the many, at a time when consumers show a growing distaste for logo-driven brands and mass, pre-packaged offerings (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020a).

Living the good life is instead increasingly pursued in a marketplace where ownership centrality is waning (Lamberton & Goldsmith, 2020) and where materialistic orientations increasingly transpire in liquid forms of consumption such as access, sharing or curation of individualized experiences, not possessions, as signals of status and image (Atanasova & Eckhardt, 2021). This suggests that the role of traditional retail spaces as consumerist utopias is rapidly diminishing. The growing popularity of non-traditional types of retail such as pop-up spaces, nostalgia-fueled media themed diners (e.g., Saved by the Bell, 90210, and Die Hard pop-ups) or Instagramable environments like the Ice Cream Museum in New York City, illustrate consumers’ increasing desire for ever-new and ephemeral utopian escapes. We can see this shift in what has been termed a “retail apocalypse,” evidenced by the nearly ten thousand malls and department stores closing in the U.S. alone in 2019 (Peterson, 2019). In addition, even experiential retailers (e.g. Apple, Tesla) have not been successful in driving more in-store traffic or making going to the mall any more exciting (Thomas, 2019). The liquid utopian lens offered here suggests that the much-publicized demise of the once idealized shopping mall reveals itself not only as a casualty of e-commerce, but also as a victim of consumers’ increasing reorientation from solid to liquid in their pursuit of a better way of being and living.

For retailing scholars, this suggests that envisioning malls as paradisiacal utopias might no longer be as useful. Rather, accounting for the changing landscape of the world of retailing (see Roggeveen & Sethuraman, 2020), a liquid utopian approach suggests reconstructing digital and brick and mortar retail as high-speed channels for immersive, efficient and personalized brand-to-consumer (e.g. NIKEiD) or consumer-to-consumer interactions (e.g. Rent the Runway, StockX). Our theorization foregrounds consumers’ fear of missing out and their desire for speedy consumption that can deliver on their individualized visions quickly. This perspective explains why ephemeral retailing formats, where stores rotate in and out frequently throughout the year on short-term leases, are showing promising results in an overall bleak retailing landscape (Thomas, 2019).

Further, AI and VR augmented environments (Heller et al., 2019) that bridge the offline and online are emerging as new retail utopias for consumers' preference for immediate, transitory and individualized interactions. Consider, for instance, Lululemon's acquisition of "Mirror" in the aftermath of rapidly declining retail sales as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. Mirror is an exercise hardware startup that has brought to the market an innovative at-home, live-stream reflective display with a built-in camera and speakers which allows users to simultaneously stream workouts while watching themselves to benchmark their performance against an instructor; from boxing to yoga, classes are fully customizable, and can either be watched live, with real-time feedback from instructors, or accessed via an on-demand library (Hobbs, 2020). While consumers may not be able to leave their homes and in turn have fewer reasons to purchase new activewear, Mirror ensures that activewear remains integral to our daily lives, and foresees that many would want to look good while watching themselves in the exercise mirror. The liquid utopian theorization proposed here presents a useful explanatory framework which can be leveraged in future research exploring these new logics of retailing and experiential consumption that privilege immediacy, transience and hyper-individualization.

As a construct, utopia is also closely related to the notion of escape. To this end, contemporary liquid utopias shed new light on experiential consumption and the notion of escape from reality via consumption (see Cova et al., 2018). Seminally, consumption, and particularly experiential consumption, has been framed as an escape from the mundanity of the everyday (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). In this vein, Turner's (1969) structure/anti-structure model has been applied widely in conceptualizing experiential consumption as positive, anti-structural and regenerative experiences that unfold in liminal spaces which challenge established structures and hierarchies. With their potential to bring immediate change, transformation and possibility (as compared to stasis, order, and structure), liquid consumer utopias echo Turner's description of the *communitas* (opposed to the *societas* demanding structure and order) where human spontaneity, self-constitution, experimentation, and transformation can freely unfold (Jacobsen, 2004). While holding much of the escapist potential found in anti-structural consumption, liquid consumer utopias, however, privilege individualization, not community, and the anti-structural and liminal is found in the hyper-personalized, not the shared. This is in agreement with Tumbat and Belk's (2011) observation that extraordinary and anti-structural consumption experiences need not be conducive to feelings of community, but can be very individualistic and competitive (see also Husemann et al., 2016).

Liquid utopias offer opportunities for further problematizing the shifting boundaries of anti-structural

consumption in contemporary modernity. Cova et al. (2018) advance the distinction between escapes "from" structures and escapes "into" anti-structures, and theorize experiential consumption according to the distance from home or the self that it facilitates. Future research can examine the new types of escape that liquid consumer utopias motivate, particularly in a time of unprecedented global uncertainty. For instance, Bauman (2007) proposes that liquid utopias are prompted by a desire to escape from present reality, not to run toward an idealized future. How does this notion blend with the imagining *and* the actualization of everyday escapes? With the future increasingly uncertain and everyday life fundamentally disrupted, how do consumers construct and materialize such utopian escapes from the confines of their homes?

As the consumer experience literature traditionally privileges Western subjectivity (Cova et al., 2018) there is also little empirical research on the plethora of escapist consumption unique for non-Western societies. Similar to the Chinese Sang culture referenced earlier, Japan's rage rooms for de-stressing, are becoming a global phenomenon offering refuge from the everyday, in which women are punished for showing anger or where destruction is generally viewed to be against established norms (Brigita, 2017). A liquid utopian lens would suggest that such experiences are much more than mere releases of frustration, but quick and efficient re-imaginings of reality through short-term and emotionally charged experiential consumption that renders self-expression possible. Future research can better map the escapist and utopian potential of such consumption practices and further expand our understanding of the new forms of experiential consumption in liquidity.

Another fruitful avenue for research would be to explore the mechanisms that drive consumers' orientations toward solid or liquid utopian modes of thinking—what are the various antecedents and consequences, on contextual and individual level, that frame consumers' movement along the solid–liquid continuum (cf. Lamberton & Goldsmith, 2020)? Lamberton and Goldsmith (2020), for instance, infer that intrinsic and individual difference factors (e.g. psychographic, demographics, social trust) may combine with external factors (e.g. economic recession, uncertainty about the future) in predicting solid or liquid tendencies. The anecdotal evidence pertaining to utopian consumption presented earlier speaks to the plausibility of this effect. Future research will be well-positioned to theorize what factors influence consumers' tendencies to adopt solid or liquid orientations in the process of envisioning a better way of being in the world. Essential for this line of research would also be to map out what accounts for an experience of liquid or solid utopia, or no utopia at all?

Finally, a liquid utopian perspective also sheds light on the growing domains of lifestyle design and

self-optimization, which inherently focus on individuals' aspirations for betterment within. For Bauman (1998), as for Giddens (1991, p.198), artificially framed styles of life and projects of self-actualization in liquidity are intensely commodified, packaged and distributed by the market in the form of self-help books. In liquidity, consumers are on the lookout for guides of living and blueprints for self-optimization, which are framed as means for "hacking life" (Ferriss, 2009) and dealing with the uncertainty felt by individuals in modern society (Bauman, 1998, p.178–179). These are essentially utopian pursuits for betterment in a life that is hard to control and filled with insecurities. In turn, a growing trend for consumption of the self (Rindfleish, 2005), guided by New Age spiritualities, have resulted in the proliferation of go-to tools, apps, techniques and books offering guidance not only for managing life, but mastering it and turning it into a triumphant utopian success (instantaneously at that). Research has shown that the physical body itself also holds potential for mediating utopian visions (Roux & Belk, 2019). Liquid utopias can thus be seen as productive avenues for arriving at such spiritual or bodily self-transformation. Also of interest would be to examine to what extent consumers' aversion from future-planning and envisioning of the long-term affects their motivations to invest (themselves) in extended projects of identity building (such as those spelled out in the popular self-optimization literature), and how these tensions might be resolved through pursuit of liquid utopian projects.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we conceptualize the notion of liquid consumer utopias as market-mediated expressions of individuals' desires to re-imagine and re-construct reality, and to re-frame the present. Drawing from contemporary utopian scholarship (Bauman, 2007; Levitas, 2011), we propose that unlike the solid, grand and collective consumer utopias of interest to prior research, liquid consumer utopias articulate a re-imagining of the present (rather than the future), have an emphasis on individual (rather than communal or collective) experiences of betterment, and an orientation toward temporary re-framings of the experienced reality (rather than a pursuit of permanence and long-lasting change). We demonstrate that solid and liquid consumer utopias can co-exist within today's marketplace, and offer a theoretical lens that can shed light on emergent liquid forms of utopian consumption that have thus far been left out of sight. By conceptualizing the liquifying nature of the utopian imaginary, this work seeks to bring new conceptual energy to the construct of utopia within the marketing literature. To this end, we offer future research suggestions in three

domains: retailing, experiential consumption, and consumer self-optimization. Overall, this paper offers a new lens toward decoding consumers' contemporary desires for better living and being in an increasingly uncertain, unpredictable, and dematerialized world.

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### **3.2. Paper 2**

Atanasova, Aleksandrina and Giana M Eckhardt (2021), “The Broadening Boundaries of Materialism,” *Marketing Theory*, doi:10.1177/14705931211019077

# The broadening boundaries of materialism

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## Abstract

The implications of waning desire for ownership on materialism are not well understood. This study examines the interface between materialism and consumption and asks, is materialism manifest in the absence of ownership centrality, and if so, how? Drawing from an interpretive investigation of digital nomads, it is suggested that materialism has broadened to adapt to non-ownership centrality, and we define it as a logic of consumption, which manifests as a preoccupation with the consumption of objects, access or experiences as a way to signal status, build image, pursue happiness, and attain a sense of self-worth. Three discrete but complementary ways through which materialism emerges in the absence of ownership centrality are identified: (1) preoccupation with *strategic curation* rather than accumulation, (2) intentional *prioritization of experiential consumption* over ownership as a means to fulfill materialistic aims, and (3) *adoption of bricolages across spectrums of consumption* (solid/liquid, budget/luxury, access/ownership).

## Keywords

Access, digital nomads, experiential consumption, liquidity, materialism, minimalism, status signaling, symbolic consumption

## Introduction

In much of the marketing discipline, acquisitive consumption has been recognized as the bedrock of a contemporary consumer culture preoccupied with materialism and materialistic values, where ownership of things has come to be seen as a central means to the achievement of goals (Fournier and Richins, 1991; Richins, 2017). How consumers consume, however, has changed significantly in recent decades. Digitalization and dematerialization, as part of the growth of social acceleration and global mobility, are some of the contextual factors that have driven much of this change

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(Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017). In light of this, it has been theorized that in today's marketplace, solid consumption, which is enduring, ownership-based, and tangible, exists on a continuum with liquid consumption, which is ephemeral, access-based, and dematerialized (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017). This theoretical lens captures the notion that, for some consumers, the desire for solid consumption is fading and ownership is no longer a central concern (Lamberton and Goldsmith, 2020). As can be discerned by the proliferation of access-based (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012) and digital consumption (Belk, 2013; Mardon and Belk, 2018), however, waning desire to own does not necessarily translate into waning desire to consume (Lamberton and Goldsmith, 2020). The implications of this on consumers' materialistic inclinations to place high value on acquisition are not well understood theoretically yet. Is materialism manifest in the absence of ownership centrality, and if so, how? In this article, we examine this interface between materialism and consumption as it unfolds on a solid–liquid continuum.

Materialism is a complex and multifaceted concept which has received much attention in the marketing literature. Ger and Belk (1999: 184) offer a cumulative definition suggesting that,

whether for pleasure seeking, self or relationship definition/expression, or status claiming, it is an excessive reliance on consumer goods to achieve these ends, a consumption-based orientation to happiness-seeking, a high importance of material issues in life that is generally taken to be materialism.

In empirical work, materialism has been most commonly considered to be an individual difference variable, conceptualized around a belief in the importance of possessions in life (Belk, 2015), and defined either as a personality trait (Belk, 1985) or a personal value (Richins and Dawson, 1992). At this individual level, materialism relates to adjacent constructs such as individual traits, values, and behaviors, including acquisitiveness, possessiveness, envy, and compulsive buying (Belk, 2015). However, materialism is not the consumption of luxury goods, nor is it conspicuous consumption necessarily, but rather the desire for “more” (Richins, 2017).

In turn, at a broader cultural level, materialism is often considered the counterpart of consumer culture, where market-based capitalism produces unlimited desires and where acquisition and possessions are considered instrumental for identity building (Belk, 2015). Through this lens, materialism relates not to individual level variables but to social constructs such as cultural capital accumulation, social comparison, and status seeking through consumption. We follow in the tradition of this latter understanding of materialism. In today's marketplace, however, when consumers adopt a less material perspective and prioritize access over acquisition (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017), the need to reexamine the link between materialism and ownership in light of the broader shifts in consumption from solid to liquid is amplified.

While research has begun to suggest that experiences can be acquired and used in materialistic ways (Shrum et al., 2013) and that when longing for unique products materialists can overcome their possessiveness and opt for access rather than ownership (Akbar et al., 2016), much remains to be theoretically and empirically substantiated about the interface between materialism and consumption in the absence of ownership centrality.

To investigate our research question, we turn to a rapidly growing cohort of consumers known as digital nomads—individuals who choose to let go of most of their possessions and property, reject the notion of a 9-to-5 work life, and travel the world from one exotic and inexpensive location to another, while working from their laptops. As a lifestyle, nomadism is not new; global nomads and cosmopolitans, for instance, are hypermobile cohorts whose sensibility toward issues of consumption has been explored (Bardhi et al., 2012; Thompson and Tambyah, 1999). What sets

digital nomadism apart, however, is the increasing accessibility of this aspirational lifestyle: the internet has made it possible for anyone (from college dropouts and struggling professionals, to entrepreneurs and retirees) to work remotely without the suit-and-tie and seek cheaper living costs while indulging in lifestyle luxuries (Kale, 2020). We use this context as a lens through which to consider broader questions about materialism in contemporary consumer culture where ownership is not necessarily a priority.

Based on our analysis, we define materialism as a logic of consumption, which manifests as a preoccupation with the consumption of objects, access or experiences as a way to signal status, build image, pursue happiness, and attain a sense of self-worth. Within this definition, we advance that a materialistic logic to consumption need not necessarily involve material goods or prioritize acquisition of possessions but can also manifest in the absence of ownership centrality—through preoccupation with the affordances of liquid consumption. Specifically, we suggest that in less ownership-focused contexts, materialism can permeate consumption in three discrete ways: (1) preoccupation with *strategic curation* rather than accumulation, (2) intentional *prioritization of experiential consumption* over ownership as a means to fulfill materialistic aims, and (3) *adoption of bricolages across spectrums of consumption* (solid and liquid, budget and luxury, access and ownership).

We conceptualize these practices as independent but complementary to one another, such that in the absence of ownership centrality, materialism can emerge in one or several of these ways. That is, expressions of materialism can be idiosyncratic and contextually bound by the cultural, social, and economic factors that structure consumption in a given market and push consumers in and between the solid and liquid to varying degrees. We thus suggest that as a consumption-based orientation to happiness-seeking (Belk, 1985), materialism continues to be a prominent logic of consumption even when ownership is declining as a central concern—it can permeate beyond the boundaries of acquisition and possessiveness and emerge in access-based and experiential consumption alike. With this, we demonstrate that materialism is not only experienced by some consumers in a different way than past literature suggests, but that it can surface even in counterintuitive consumption phenomena such as minimalism and Marie Kondo-inspired reductionism, where the emphasis is on reducing material possessions and where minimalistic aesthetics and having “less” are broadcasted as conspicuous signals of status. That is, preoccupation with a lack of consumption and non-ownership can be just as materialistic as focusing on possessions and having “more.” Next, we review the theoretical foundations that inform our inquiry.

## Conceptual foundations

### *Materialism*

The leading conceptualizations of materialism have theorized the construct as an individual difference variable, where foregrounded is the belief in the importance of possessions in life (Belk, 2020). Belk’s seminal work sees materialism as a personality trait which manifests through the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions and the centrality these objects have as the greatest sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction (Belk, 1985). For Richins and Dawson (1992), materialism is a personal value constituted by the belief that acquisition is necessary for happiness, the tendency to judge the success of one’s self and others by their possessions, and the centrality of acquisition and possessions in one’s life.

As such, materialism is understood not as a dichotomy (where consumers can be classified as materialist or non-materialist), but as existing on a continuum, ranging from low to high, depending on the degree to which one views material goods as the best way to achieve goals (Richins, 2017). These foundational works, and other research that has considered materialism at the individual level (e.g. Burroughs and Rindfleisch, 2002; Chang and Arkin, 2002; Kasser, 2016), have provided a micro psychological approach to understanding materialism which has been both complemented and challenged by expanding theorizations at the cultural rather than the individual level.

At the cultural level, materialism has emphasized the symbolic and signification qualities of goods, opening additional analytical avenues to consider materialism beyond acquisition and utility at the individual level (Belk, 2015). Research from this stream has generally taken a more qualitative, historical, and cultural perspective (Belk, 2015) and has suggested that expressions of materialism are contextually bound and subject to broad sociocultural, historical, and economic influences. Materialism can manifest itself differently in different countries and at different time periods, both within and between cultures, in affluent and less affluent societies alike (Belk, 2015; Ger and Belk, 1996, 1999) For instance, it has been demonstrated that what consumers in different cultural, economic, and political environments consider materialistic is negotiated through culturally grounded ethics and moral codes, such that seemingly materialistic behaviors can be justified and valorized as nonmaterialistic (Ger and Belk, 1999).

Alluding to the variability within the notion of materialism, prior literature has also called attention to the need to expand the construct beyond its focus on possessions (Holt, 1995, 1998; see also Belk, 2020; Shrum et al., 2013). As noted by Holt (1995: 14), “because materialism involves how one consumes, not what one consumes, it need not involve material goods—services and activities such as entertainment, vacations, and even education can be consumed in a materialist style.” These different expressions of materialism across material and experiential consumption have been viewed as social markers of class, education, and levels of cultural capital (Holt, 1998). It thus becomes important to consider the construct of materialism in relation to the broader contemporary social, cultural, and economic contexts within which consumption unfolds. To this end, empirical evidence suggests that heightened materialism can be linked to dynamic social conditions, cultural change, greater social mobility, and confusion in norms (Ger and Belk, 1996), characteristics which are consistent with the contemporary global context.

In particular, consumer culture theory scholars have demonstrated that materialism manifests itself as a mode in which social identities are constructed through interaction with the marketplace (Holt, 1998). Across different social groups, this may be based on different understandings of what is considered luxury or what signals status (Holt, 1998). For instance, for affluent consumers with high cultural capital, materialistic consumption might manifest as consumption of luxurious or scarce goods, while for those with lesser means and lower cultural capital, materialism could manifest as abundant consumption that seeks to signal distance from material needs (Holt, 1998). In turn, consumption activities that are often deemed non-materialist, for example, when objects are viewed as resources to be leveraged toward experiences rather than as terminal sources of value, may not be that different from those which privilege acquisition and possessiveness of objects (Holt, 1995). This can be particularly relevant in the contemporary context where established notions of status, luxury, and class are shifting and where digital, access-based, and inconspicuous consumption are becoming instrumental for achieving distinction (Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020a). Our understanding, however, of how materialism at this broader aggregate level

interacts with consumption in a contemporary marketplace where many eschew ownership and privilege experiences and access is scant.

### *Contemporary modernity and consumption*

Scholars have already begun to map how contemporary modernity is changing the ways consumers enhance their self-constructions (Belk, 2013), collect digital objects in the age of dematerialization (Mardon and Belk, 2018), and seek ways to slow down and escape their accelerated lifestyles (Husemann and Eckhardt, 2019). At the social level, the dynamics of contemporary modernity are captured by Zygmunt Bauman's (2000, 2007) term liquid modernity, denoting a passage from a "solid" to a "liquid" phase of modernity. This shift is characterized by reduction in long-term thinking and planning, weakening of established social structures, and fragmentation of identity and established class formations (Bauman 2000, 2007). Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) suggest that these broader contextual dynamics have resulted in a new logic of consumption that directs consumption across a spectrum of solid to liquid: solid consumption is an enduring, ownership-based, and material form of consumption where consumer value resides in the centrality of ownership, while liquid consumption is ephemeral, access-based, and dematerialized. This theorization advances the idea that, in liquidity, some consumers no longer seek possessions as anchors to their identity projects, but instead can form flexible, detached relationships to possessions and can find value not necessarily in ownership, but in immateriality, situational instrumentality, ephemerality, lightness, and flexibility (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017). Eckhardt and Bardhi (2020b) emphasize that examining this liquid relationship to possessions can result in gainful new insights to marketing theory in a variety of domains.

On a macro level, the shift from solid to liquid is evidenced by the rapid emergence of access-based consumption where goods and services can be used temporarily for a fraction of the cost needed for ownership (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012). For many consumers, access-based consumption allows the enactment of affluence and enjoyment of experiences that may be otherwise unattainable through solid consumption: for instance, renting luxury fashion labels, sports cars or vacationing in high-end homes offered for temporary usage in marketplaces such as AirBnB Luxe (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Eckhardt and Bardhi 2020a). Recent evidence demonstrates that materialistic consumers who are typically focused on acquisition will engage in access-based consumption if the sharing system fulfills their desire for unique consumer products (Akbar et al., 2016). As such, it is possible that materialistic pursuits of achieving happiness and signaling status, image, and wealth can flourish via access-based consumption, where the symbolic value of consumption inheres in the process of accessing, not ownership (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017). Additionally, Lamberton and Goldsmith (2020) suggest that consumers can be more committed and territorial to accessed, rather than owned, goods. Finally, in the hurried "nowist" culture of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2007), hunger for instant gratification and fear of missing out emerge as new driving forces for consumption. To this end, access-based consumption can afford immediacy of consumption that is not always possible within an ownership-based approach, yielding quick, albeit temporary access to goods, services, locations, and experiences.

In parallel, the proliferation of the digital has not necessarily resulted in an absence of material consumption, but in a rapid turnover of what might be perfectly functional technology items in pursuit of the status cachet of having the latest iteration with which to acquire or access digital content (Belk, 2020). It has been shown that this digital keeping up with the Joneses (Belk, 2020) is not a phenomenon limited to the affluent world, as poorer consumers willingly sacrifice necessities



in order to afford luxuries such as having the latest electronics or fashions (Belk, 1999). Yet, while the construct of materialism has been strongly associated with such overly emphasized status-signaling conspicuous consumption (Fournier and Richins, 1991), conspicuous displays of affluence are starting to lose their appeal for some (Eckhardt et al., 2015). Many consumers increasingly turn toward inconspicuous consumption to build status and distinction, following new symbolic codes (Eckhardt et al., 2015). This manifests itself as diverted attention from traditional displays of status and power, such as luxury goods, toward symbolic markers of authenticity, such as collecting desirable experiences and displaying knowledge (Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020a). However, how the logic of materialism has adapted to these new shifts has not been theorized or investigated empirically yet. In this study, we therefore examine the interface between materialism and consumption as it unfolds on a solid–liquid continuum and we ask, is materialism manifest in the absence of ownership centrality, and if so, how?

## Research context

To explore this, we turn to a growing phenomenon known as digital nomadism. In the academic literature, digital nomadism has been defined as a distinctive work-life culture of interwoven value systems which privileges creativity and individualism, aspirations for belonging to a collective of like-minded individuals, and striving toward boot-strapping financial success and independence (Schlagwein, 2018). Digital nomads are lifestyle migrants who renegotiate work-life balance, engage in strategies of reorientation toward alternative living, seek freedom from prior constraints, expectations, or changing circumstances, and pursue opportunities for self-realization (Benson and O'Reilly, 2016).

Along with other consumption phenomena such as minimalism, Mari-Kondo essentialism, and the tiny-house movement, digital nomadism is a movement in which the centrality of possessions in one's life is questioned and often juxtaposed to attainment of happiness. With their continuous mobility, preference for lightness, detachment from traditional roles, and dependence on consuming the conveniences afforded by a globalized marketplace, digital nomads are thus particularly suited for this study. Unlike global nomads or cosmopolitans, who have significant financial capital and high-end professional profiles (Bardhi et al., 2012; Thompson and Tambyah, 1999), the digital nomad community consists of a demographically diverse spectrum of individuals with varying financial means, occupations, and age groups. We find that emerging flexible taxation and administrative havens (e.g. Estonia's e-residency program) and proliferation of global freelancing platforms abundant with remote work (e.g. Upwork) make this way of living attainable for diverse cohorts. Digital nomads also focus on reducing their cost of living by choosing locales which are comparatively inexpensive to live in but have a developed tech infrastructure (e.g. Bali, Chiang Mai, Lisbon, and Budapest) (cf. Green, 2020; Mancinelli, 2020). As such, this lifestyle movement has evolved into an arena in which individuals embark on projects of hacking one's life (Ferriss, 2009), where the goal is to escape 9-to-5 structures, live cheaply, work efficiently to generate sufficient income, and live a life where flexibility and lightness are the main priority.

## Method

We conducted 16 semi-structured depth interviews with self-identified digital nomads. As our informants were located around the world, we conducted the interviews through videoconferencing platforms (Skype and Zoom). The interview guide was developed on the basis of our

immersion in the literature on consumption in contemporary modernity, as well as our pre-understanding of the digital nomadic phenomenon (McCracken, 1988) which we built via engagement in a variety of digital platforms, blogs, and content forums for digital nomads (e.g. Nomad List, r/digitalnomad, Making it Anywhere). The interviews covered grand-tour questions such as life history and motivations for adopting the digital nomadic lifestyle, and further focused on daily life, work, and leisure practices and routines, consumption experiences, perceived benefits and drawbacks of nomadic living, and plans for the future. As a result of an iterative process of revisiting the literature during the period of data collection and engaging with preliminary iterative analysis of conducted interviews throughout the data collection process (Spiggle, 1994), the interview guide evolved and was modified to address topics of consumption practices and experiences in more detail. As we were not focused on exploring materialism at the individual level, we did not probe directly for informants' beliefs or value orientations regarding materialism; instead, notions of materialistic orientations and materialistic styles of consumption emerged emically from informants' narratives.

We used both purposive and snowball sampling (Miles and Huberman, 1994) when recruiting our informants. The majority of respondents were found in one of the largest Facebook groups for digital nomads, "Digital Nomads around the World," and many of these participants referred us to other nomads. The final sample consisted of seven women and nine men aged between 20 and 57 years old, representing 13 nationalities and hailing from various professional backgrounds—from writers, students, and engineers to investment bankers—bringing demographic scope to our sample that is representative of the diversity within the digital nomadic community (see Table 1).

Throughout data collection, we engaged in an iterative process of preliminary data analysis after each interview, refining our interview guide to better tap into emergent themes, and proceeding with additional data collection until we reached sufficient theoretical saturation and convergence across interviews which rendered collecting more data unnecessary (Spiggle, 1994). The interview transcripts were subject to iterative part-to-whole analysis where the data set was interpreted within a hermeneutical framework with two main phases: impressionistic ideographic intratext readings and intertextual analysis of the texts (Thompson, 1997). Engaging in this hermeneutical movement between the analytic reduction of the empirical data and a resulting interpretive restructuring, we arrived at a theoretical explanation of a broadening logic of materialism, which is contextually anchored in both the phenomenon of digital nomadism and the wider context of contemporary modernity. In interpreting our data, we approached our theorization and the subsequent discussion of our findings through a lens of analytical generalization (Stake, 2005), drawing on the similarities between our context and related consumption phenomena to guide the transferability of our findings. We elaborate on these findings next.

## **The broadening boundaries of materialism**

Based on our analysis, we define materialism as a logic of consumption, which manifests as a preoccupation with the consumption of objects, access, or experiences as a way to signal status, build image, pursue happiness, and attain a sense of self-worth. Our findings suggest that materialism can permeate beyond the boundaries of acquisition and emerge in the absence of ownership centrality through non-ownership forms of consumption such as access-based and experiential consumption. Specifically, we suggest that in less ownership-focused contexts materialism can permeate consumption in three ways: (1) preoccupation with *strategic curation* rather than accumulation, (2) intentional *prioritization of experiential consumption* over ownership as a means

Table 1. Participant profiles.

Informant pseudonym	Age /gender	Nationality	Yearly income	Occupation	Location at time of interview	Years as nomad
Neil	37/M	Ireland	€40,000–€60,000	Blogger/life-coach	Indonesia	3
Martin	37/M	Germany	€125,000 +	Software engineer	United States	4
Amy	51/F	United States	€125,000 +	Writer	Italy	3.5
Lary	57/M	United States	€125,000 +	Law consultant	Italy	3.5
Ema	35/F	The Netherlands	€40,000–€60,000	Digital marketer	Thailand	8
Tom	28/M	China/Mongolia	€40,000–€60,000	Blogger	Mongolia	4
Brandon	43/M	United States, Canada, Czechia	€60,000–€80,000	Software developer	United States	2.5
Ian	20/M	Germany	€40,000–€60,000	Copywriter	Qatar	4
Sonja	39/F	United Kingdom	€20,000–€40,000	Copywriter	Costa Rica	1.2
Miles	27/M	Canada	€40,000–€60,000	Writer	Canada	5
Karin	33/F	Philippines	€20,000–€40,000	Entrepreneur	Philippines	10
Audrey	35/F	Romania	€20,000–€40,000	Fitness coach	Brazil	4.5
Lena	30/F	United States	€40,000–€60,000	Entrepreneur	Argentina	1
John	26/M	France	Less than €20,000	IT specialist	France	0.3
Alan	39/M	United States	€80,000 +	Investment broker	United States	1
Kristina	32/F	United Kingdom	€20,000–€40,000	Social media manager	France	10+

to fulfill materialistic aims, and (3) *adoption of bricolages across spectrums of consumption* (solid and liquid, budget and luxury, access and ownership). We suggest that these practices are independent but complementary to one another, such that consuming materialistically can manifest in one or several of these ways. At the aggregate, our data shows that when ownership centrality is de-emphasized, consumers' materialistic goals for attaining happiness via resources in the marketplace are pursued with a pronounced strategic intentionality toward solid and liquid consumption alike, as solid consumption cannot be fully avoided. However, triggered by an overemphasized preoccupation with the outcomes of consumption, this strategic intentionality influences *how* consumers move along the solid–liquid continuum and mediates consumers' materialistic orientations. Next, we outline the three ways in which materialism manifests in the absence of ownership centrality.

### *Strategic curation*

Given the centrality of possessiveness and ownership in established definitions of materialism, it can be inferred that liquid consumption is a nonmaterialistic style of consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017). Previous empirical evidence has already demonstrated that, in liquidity, consumers place less importance on their acquisitive behaviors and demonstrate a general lack of engagement with physical objects (Bardhi et al., 2012)—a notion further reinforcing the postulation that liquid consumers might be nonmaterialistic since acquisition is not a priority. Indeed, not surprisingly, in a context of continuous mobility, the need for lightness is foregrounded and preference is given to items which can easily fit in a carry-on suitcase (Bardhi et al., 2012). In contrast, however, our analysis reveals that while liquidity pushes digital nomads from solid to liquid consumption, consuming across the spectrum is transformed from an act of accumulation to a tactical practice of curation, largely driven by a materialistic preoccupation with the signaling utility of what is consumed.

Our data suggests that at the solid end of the consumption continuum, for digital nomads, acquisition and consumption of objects are acts laden with much importance, purpose, and effort. Buying objects is not entirely uncommon for digital nomads but is guided by a pronounced strategic intentionality which prioritizes both the instrumental and symbolic value of such consumption. As one of our respondents shares:

Digital nomads spend more time making conscious purchase decisions for all the stuff they have, and some of those are absurd. Like there is an entire Nomad Slack forum [for] what are the best pencils, you know? And people spend hours researching the best pencil! (Martin)

Martin's narrative illustrates that digital nomads engage with material objects in a highly deliberate manner, where the focus is shifting from accumulation to a deliberate pursuit of the highest possible utility, both practical and status signaling. As illustrated by the Marie Kondo essentialist movement, when one owns very few solid possessions, their value and meaning becomes of much more central concern. Such curated minimalism emerges as a form of conspicuous consumption and a means for taste and status signaling. As also evidenced in our data, in the absence of ownership centrality, materialism surfaces as an extreme preoccupation with consumption as means to an end, and acquisition becomes an act of targeted curation. Even when consumers describe themselves as nonmaterialistic and unexcited by consumption, their focus on consumption is all-encompassing and fueled by a search for instrumentality. Kristina, a digital nomad with over 10 years of experience living that lifestyle, illuminates the essence of this:

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.

Kristina’s narrative echoes insight in the literature that liquidity evokes an intensified concern with the use value of the consumption object (Bardhi et al., 2012). Our study extends these findings in showing how this preoccupation with use-value can result in a heightened engagement with both the object and the act of consumption, rendering even low-involvement purchases objects of deliberate evaluation. As liquidity de-emphasizes the importance of material possessions overall, a materialistic logic to consumption drives a preoccupation with the consumption of the few solid objects that digital nomads do purchase and foregrounds their utility (instrumental, hedonic, and signaling). Miles, for instance, a Canadian writer who has been living as a digital nomad for the last 5 years, shares a typical shopping episode:

I had to buy a winter coat this year and it literally took me two months of visiting stores and looking at coats and going home and going to the same stores again and looking at coats and going home and doing this four or five times over, until I finally had to break down and buy a coat because it was -10F and I was really cold. But I have a really hard time buying things. Even things that I need.

We see a paradigmatic shift within materialism as a logic: a turn from excessive acquisition of possessions (see Belk, 2015) to strategic intentionality of consumption and careful curation of valued objects. In contexts where ownership centrality is de-emphasized, acquisition is a drawn-out process of effortful selectivity and demands detailed assessment of the specific desired ends which consumption can facilitate.

This preoccupation with utility and function can lead to consumers’ tendencies to strategically curate expensive, durable products that fulfill at once practical needs as well as concerns related to building a desired image and gaining attention—for example, a warm jacket that necessarily looks good on Instagram. Within this realm, in line with extant literature (Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020a; Eckhardt et al., 2015), our data also points to some consumers’ preference to communicate and signal status and image inconspicuously. As Miles recalls, one of his primary purchase criteria was that his expensive new jacket does not “have a large logo or branding on it.” He continues:

I really hate that. There was one jacket I tried on that was a really nice, but it had DKNY written in big white letters across the ass. And I was like, why did they do this?! It looks terrible!

For Miles, conspicuous display of brand affiliations is unnecessary and counterproductive. The curation of valuable, yet inconspicuous items, is instead perceived as a more effective means for communicating the desired image of minimalism—an orientation which in turn opens new forms for materialism’s expressions.

### *Prioritization of experiential consumption*

It has been suggested that materialists are less likely to make experiential consumption choices; moreover, experiential consumption is frequently positioned as a nonmaterialistic alternative to object consumption (Van Boven, 2005). Our data illustrates, however, that in liquid contexts, a materialistic preoccupation with attaining happiness via consumption primarily concerns experiential consumption. In contrast to previous micro-consumption level theorizations (Van Boven, 2005), we suggest that at the macro level, experiences can emerge not as an escape from materialism, but as an avenue for pursuing materialistic aims such as cultivating image and signaling status through consumption. Immaterial and inscribed with meanings that are easily moldable to various signaling goals, in liquid consumption, experiences hold better potential for delivering on materialistic aspirations than possessions do. As such, the focus of materialism as a logic to consumption shifts from that of ownership centrality to that of experience centrality. Experiences such as meditation retreats or travel to lesser known and hard to reach destinations that can signal achievement of important and admirable life goals (spiritual enlightenment, attainment of self-worth, emancipation from 9-to-5 structures, or cultural knowledge) are particularly sought after. Brandon's narrative reflects these ideas as he describes how he transitioned from consuming material objects to experiences:

I chucked everything no matter what it was [...] I just threw it all in the trash and I was able to never really look back on it. When you get rid of all of your possessions, it's a reminder that you can reinvent yourself every day. Stuff no longer controls you. You don't define yourself in terms of things that are around you or what you own, but you've got other ways of defining yourself, for you can create new approaches to defining yourself. [...] I simply don't buy anything for the sake of buying it anymore, [...] the money's all going to experiences. [...] Before [...] I spent so much of my life working, showing up to the same place all the time that I could look back at the entire year and feel like outside of work I had nothing to show for it. And it was terribly uninspiring really. And then afterwards, you know, in the last two years I'm truly living the best years of my life. I mean, I've been to Machu Picchu and to Angkor Wat, I've ridden a camel in the Sahara desert and I got back from a balloon ride in Turkey and I've just been able to do all these incredible, amazing things by taking charge and putting life first ahead of work.

The notion that in contemporary modernity consumers' lives are permeated by existential anxieties and doubt about the value or appropriateness of their life choices (Thompson et al., 2018) alongside their consumption choices is evident in Brandon's thoughts. We find that as digital nomads navigate between the experiential and the material, consumed experiences are reflexively reframed and mobilized to help alleviate the burdens which contemporary modernity imposes on self-actualization. With that, as preoccupation with material accumulation might wane, fixation on experiential consumption grows purposefully and intentionally. Kristina, for instance, sees experiential consumption as a means for defining herself differently from the rest

The sense of society in the UK stresses me out. People believe that you have to live such a regimented lifestyle and do the same thing every week... You are not experiencing [...]. I find it pretty difficult to be at home because I always felt like I want to be free and be out there and experiencing as much as I can. Whereas a lot of the people I was surrounded with would just stress out for wanting to have a nice house, have a nice car, live in a certain way and so they were living in a routine thinking that they could get and achieve that in that way.

Kristina perceives lifestyles that prioritize accumulation of possessions to be enslaved to a pursuit of what she considers dull and unimpressive markers of success—for her, cars and houses are void of appeal or meaning. Experiential consumption, in contrast, emerges instead as a desirable alternative to solid consumption. This shifting focus to experiential consumption, however, is reinforced by a materialistic preoccupation with how one engages with such consumption. Experiences are more than just a fleeting relief from the mundanity of daily life; as Tom asserts, “Life, it’s just way bigger than going to work and getting your paid holiday.” Liquid living mobilizes reflexive reworkings of the meanings embedded in experiential consumption—experiences are most desired when they have high instrumental value for both conspicuous and inconspicuous signaling and for achieving a sense of self-worth. As Martin explains:

If you just live in one place for a long time, you might have nice experiences, but they are not going to be novel for very long. So this is, I think, how most people differentiate and strive for learning things, for feeling like I am growing as a person and for experiencing novel things; for living to tell the tale. [. . .] It is a lifestyle that looks really good on pictures. [. . .] [But] maybe it is not about showing off, maybe it is about showing to yourself that you are right there where you wanted to be so hard, you know. You have a lot of money and you know you can prove to yourself that you’ve got it. I don’t think that digital nomadism is different from any other kind of lifestyle trends that we have. Whether you post your workout photos from your gym or your travel photos . . . you know everybody has this one friend on Instagram who every Sunday posts a picture of a glass of rosé and a book . . . It’s just a way of saying, oh this is kind of the feeling and environment I want to create for myself and *I am there*, right now.

For digital nomads, experiential consumption is internalized as a path toward attaining happiness and self-actualization. Importantly however, it is also internalized as a signifier for success and a skillfully managed escape from the bland landscapes of everyday life—an escape which is impossible without hard-earned financial resources. Ian, a German entrepreneur, shares:

I just couldn’t see myself going anywhere. It was the same thing every day, even though I was meeting different clients and people, but it still was the same thing at the end. So, I tried to break out [and] my first destination was actually the furthest place I could go to. So I went all the way to New Zealand just to get away, I kind of tried to rescue myself. I couldn’t do this 9-to-5 anymore. I like to meet new people, I like to expand my knowledge. I try to evolve. I try to have some progress on a daily basis, even if it’s small sometimes. [N]ow I can do whatever I want basically. If I don’t want to work, I just stop working and try to delegate a little bit. I’m at a position where I can just hire people, let them do my job or I do it myself. [. . .] [M]y friends that stayed, they might not understand what I’m doing. They might be a little bit jealous because this is working out perfectly well and they’re in different positions in their lives. They regret that they didn’t take the leap—just starting something new, getting involved with something totally different.

Ian’s narrative echoes how in contemporary modernity, taking charge of one’s life involves risk and discomfort, as it means accepting a break with the past and drawing the future into the present by means of reflexive organization and reorganization of knowledge and desires (Giddens, 1991). Here, the notion of self-construction takes the lead in guiding consumers’ actions and motivates a proactive undertaking of “lifestyle design”—a term introduced in the digital nomad bible “The 4-

Hour Workweek” (Ferriss, 2009), which aptly illustrates the implications of liquidity on the construct of materialism. Ferriss (2009: 7–8) elaborates:

The New Rich are those who abandon the deferred-life plan and create luxury lifestyles in the present using the currency of the New Rich: time and mobility. This is an art and a science we will refer to as Lifestyle Design. [...] People don’t want to be millionaires—they want to experience what they believe only millions can buy.

Experiences thus emerge as the foundational ingredient in the recipe of lifestyle design. In the words of Brandon: “I really look at this lifestyle as a way of hacking one’s life.”

Our findings build upon Holt’s (1998) theorization of materialism as a class practice by demonstrating that in liquidity, as markers of class and status shift (Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020a), status claims that might emanate from experiential consumption are particularly amplified, but also increasingly blurred. In a world where struggling professionals, affluent entrepreneurs and eccentric artists can all work side by side in exotic and inexpensive locations, while sharing sights and experiences, signifiers of cultural capital are becoming unreliable signals of social standing. Thus, experiences have become a significant way to engage in materialism, but not with the same social class connotations as in the past.

### *Adoption of bricolages across spectrums of consumption*

Our data suggests that as a logic which can manifest as a preoccupation with both solid and liquid consumption, materialism can influence how and why consumers move along the solid–liquid continuum. Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) identify the conditions that affect the extent to which consumption is liquid or solid: relevance to the self, the nature of social relationships, accessibility to mobility networks, and the nature of precarity. We build upon this by demonstrating that consumers not only move along the continuum based on these four conditions but also based on the extent to which their consumption is directed by a materialistic logic. We show that when pre-occupied with goals such as pursuing happiness, building image or signaling status, digital nomads intentionally and strategically polarize their consumption between budget and luxury, access and ownership, as well as ways of spending and accumulating wealth. Materialism can thus emerge via the adoption of such selective bricolages of consumption along continuums. With this, our findings extend previous conceptualizations suggesting that consumers shift between solid and liquid consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017) by introducing the notion of consumption polarization and adoption of bricolages across spectrums as means to do so. That is, we provide insight into *how* consumers move along the continuum when guided by a materialistic logic of consumption.

Our data indicates that materialistic orientations can be optimized through polarization of consumption, irrespective of one’s financial means or status. Audrey’s narrative reflects her first experiences after she embraced digital nomadism:

We had our projects rolling but they were not generating as much money, [so] we needed to find an option in which we could travel with an affordable budget and also work on our online projects. And we started traveling using house sitting. We first went to Spain, near Malaga, into like this really amazing mansion with a pool and a view overlooking a valley with olive trees and it was just amazing. And we had the pool, we had the huge villa, we had a pool guy and a maid come and clean the house every day, and even a car, and in exchange we had to look after three dogs and it was so, so great. And this was our start.



Audrey's testimony illustrates how strategic construction of consumption bricolages—as she secures the experience of high-end living on low-end budget—opens possibilities for a shift in how materialistic aspirations and pleasures manifest, irrespective of affluence. As Neil elaborates while he describes his life in Bali:

I often say that I am trapped in paradise. It is weird. Some months you earn good money and some months you don't and a lot of it is trial and error. But at the end of the day, I am living in a beautiful villa, there is a pool outside, and you know if I wanted to go live in a city like Vancouver, I wouldn't have that option. I mean I'd have to work a lot harder.

Digital nomads exist within a juxtaposition of lightness contrasted with indulgent living that does not necessarily require wealth but is dependent on mobility and access to markets. Tom illustrates this notion:

Most of my friends who graduated from the same college in Beijing also found jobs in Beijing. They get married and they get a like \$1 million loan, a mortgage to buy an apartment. Then they're locked for life! [Others] just decided to sell everything, get free and move out of China to somewhere that is way cheaper. So that's part of the new digital nomad culture. You want to increase the value of your assets by moving somewhere that's more cost effective. [...] There's no reason for you to pay \$3,000 just for rent when you can pay \$100–\$200 for rent in Chiang Mai; that's a no brainer. [...] I mean, some people say: I like New York, I like Beijing—there are concerts and everything, but you can always fly back when there's a concert. It still saves you a lot of money.

Materialism across the solid–liquid continuum here emerges in carefully planned asset-optimization practices that allow consumers to skillfully curate a lifestyle that maximizes the opportunities in a globalized world. Trading down so that more money can be allocated to things that matter more—also known as hybrid consumption—has been recognized in the literature as a style of consumption which allows consumers to explore fragmented marketplaces (Ehrnrooth and Gronroos, 2013). We further advance the idea that consumers in liquidity can legitimize consumption behaviors, which may be stigmatized as negatively materialistic, through selective polarization that allows them to balance their consumption across the spectrums of materialistic–nonmaterialistic. This echoes the notion of “justification” presented by Ger and Belk (1999), who demonstrate that consumers across cultures tend to admit their materialism, but either reconstruct it as a positive thing, or deny the label of materialist by redefining materialism itself. Here, the logic of materialism emerges through practices of consumption polarization and adoption of consumption bricolages, which allows for consuming abundance and luxury while at the same time de-prioritizing ownership. As Neil asserts

My values were more materialistic beforehand. And money is massively important—don't get me wrong [...] [but] all the s\*\*t I wasted my money on... I'd get my paycheck and I'd spend hundreds of dollars on things I didn't need... new clothes and all that. I just don't care about that anymore. But it is easy not to care about that in Bali. [...] Walking around in shorts and t-shirts all day, and having all that, I love the lifestyle and how it is affordable here.

Accumulation of economic capital, as alluded to in our data, is of high importance to digital nomads and is another domain where construction of strategic bricolages takes place. Building

affluence is often done via practices for generating passive income, where an initial investment of effort or money pays off in time and delivers income without the need for active work being done daily or in the long run. Alan, while describing the few T-shirts and pairs of shorts that he owns, notes that he is “not really into consuming in the first place” and shares his vision for an ideal lifestyle setup

I am aiming for having my own places in different locations—that are mine, with just my things there. And so in Barcelona it'd be a few t-shirts there that are mine and I wouldn't have to travel with them [ . . . ] By extension, if you put it out on AirBnB it will always pay for itself because short term rentals are just more lucrative than long term rentals. It's a cash flow positive thing which means that the place is now working for you.

Alan's narrative illustrates how the logic of materialism can unfold and take shape in liquidity: consumption is approached with pronounced strategic intentionality, where carefully constructed portfolios of material objects and experiences frame the desired way of life, while strategies of polarization across and within spectrums enable indulgent living at optimized cost and cater to successful pursuits of lifestyle design projects.

To summarize our findings, we suggest that the logic of materialism need not involve material goods or centrality of ownership and accumulation of possessions. We demonstrate that when ownership is de-prioritized, materialism can manifest itself in three ways: (1) preoccupation with *strategic curation* rather than accumulation, (2) intentional *prioritization of experiential consumption* over ownership as a means to fulfill materialistic aims, and (3) *adoption of bricolages across spectrums of consumption* (solid and liquid, budget and luxury, access and ownership). We see these practices as independent but complementary to one another such that in the absence of ownership centrality, materialism can unfold through varying degrees in one or several of these ways. We discuss the implications of this next.

## Discussion

In this article, we advance current understandings of materialism by examining it at the socio-cultural level in the context of shifting consumption orientations from solid to liquid within a marketplace where ownership is not necessarily a central concern for many. Accounting for the rise of dematerialized, digital, and access-based consumption, we propose that some consumers can depart from materialistic orientations that prioritize acquisition and ownership as a way to attain happiness and signal status and can turn instead to more liquid forms of consumption toward the same ends. We thus suggest that the boundaries of materialism have expanded to encompass solid and liquid consumption alike. With that, we make contributions to scholarship on materialism, liquid consumption, minimalism, and status signaling, as well as digital nomadism as an emergent lifestyle.

First, to the literature on materialism, we contribute by illustrating how materialism is adapting to contemporary modernity, where global mobility and the rise of inconspicuous and access-based consumption have emerged as avenues for catering to consumers' pursuits of the good life (Atanasova, 2021). While in the past, the construct of materialism has captured the importance consumers ascribe to material goods en route to achieving life goals (Belk, 1985), we propose a conceptualization that encompasses how materialism as a logic shifts alongside emergent contemporary consumption dynamics. We suggest that as consumers move back and forth along the solid-liquid continuum, materialism can emerge through preoccupation with material and

nonmaterial (access and experiential) consumption, where consumption is closely scrutinized and strategically curated as means to advancing aims for gaining attention, designing a desired lifestyle, and building image. This conceptualization answers Richins' (2017) call for research to explore materialistic consumption of experiences by detailing how, in place of preoccupation with having things, experiential consumption emerges as a viable and desirable alternative to fulfilling materialistic goals in non-ownership contexts.

While we detail how experiential consumption is internalized as an intentionally pursued path toward attaining happiness and signaling status or image, further research is needed to delineate the various contextual and individual level nuances of materialistic experiential consumption. Future research can revisit the measurement of materialism in light of the broadening boundaries of the construct. The most established scales for materialism (Richins and Dawson, 1992; cf. Richins, 2004; see also Belk, 1985) focus on the centrality of acquisition and possessions in one's life, the importance of possessions in the pursuit of happiness, and the ways in which possessions are used to define success. Our findings suggest that measurements of materialism can adapt to capture the various emergent expressions of materialism in the absence of ownership; in particular, the three we have highlighted. In addition, Holt (1998) foregrounded a shift toward the prominence of experiences as a part of class and status signification, which we have built upon by showing that experiences can be used strategically to gain distinction, regardless of class. Holt (1998) articulates his understanding of materialism around how people consume, rather than what they consume. We extend this perspective by outlining the ways in which the logic of materialism pushes consumers to overemphasize the importance of consumption as a means to achieve goals along the consumption spectrum, while engaging with different forms of consumption, for example, material, access-based, experiential. Following up further on Holt's (1998) ideas, future research can examine how the manifestations of materialism in the absence of ownership centrality which we have outlined here reflect and enable contemporary notions of low and high cultural capital individuals.

This work also extends Richins' (2017) conception that materialism exists on a continuum from high to low depending on the degree to which one places importance on material goods by proposing that in today's economy, materialism is better understood as a degree of preoccupation with consumption overall—both material and experiential. That is, if one views experiences or access as the best way to achieve life goals, that is just as materialistic as doing so with objects. As such, we expand the continuum that Richins (2017) introduces, upon which materialism unfolds, across a broader conceptual plane. This expansion re-charts the conceptual boundaries of materialism and illuminates how it emerges in counterintuitive places. Without bringing materialism to the context of solid–liquid consumption as we have done, it is easy to miss the various inconspicuous expressions of materialism specifically within the liquid end of the spectrum. This is evidenced in that, with few exceptions (Akbar et al., 2016), most research to date that acknowledges nonmaterial materialism (e.g. Holt, 1998; Shrum et al., 2013) accounts for experiential consumption, but not access or lifestyle trends such as minimalism, reductionism, and others which we discuss.

Second, we contribute to liquid consumption research by outlining how the logic of materialism can direct consumers' movement from one end of the solid–liquid continuum to the other (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017). In response to Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2017) call for examination of the relationship between liquid consumption and materialism, we illustrate that a decrease in ownership centrality can paradoxically result in an exaggerated preoccupation with consumption and its utility toward materialistic aims. We demonstrate how consumers not only weave-in strategic bricolages along the solid–liquid continuum, but also along spectrums of budget and luxury, and

access and ownership. In our data, consumers tend to foreground the ends of these spectrums that align with lightness and disengagement with consumption (e.g. owning just a few possessions; being a savvy consumer), while de-emphasizing and reappropriating solid materialistic behaviors (e.g. purchasing property; maximizing property value through AirBnB). Future research can further explore how practices of polarization of consumption and adoption of bricolages across spectrums implicate consumers' efforts to navigate the tensions which arise from transitioning between solid and liquid in their lifestyles and consumption orientations.

This article also answers Lamberton and Goldsmith's (2020) call for research into the implications of consumers' waning desire to own on established conceptions in consumer behavior. We expand upon their conceptual framework addressing ownership on a solid–liquid continuum by demonstrating how the logic of materialism emerges as an additional antecedent of the preference for solid versus liquid consumption, which they have not considered. Future research can build on this by exploring the underlying processes on individual and cultural levels that are associated with materialism along the solid–liquid continuum and its consequences.

Third, our work also suggests that as materialism adapts to the absence of ownership centrality, a more robust conceptual delineation between minimalism as a consumption orientation and non-material expressions of materialism to signal status is needed. We show that non-ownership and minimalist orientations need not stem from anti-consumption dispositions (cf. Chatzidakis and Lee, 2013) and that as long as consumption, not the absence of it, guides consumers' pursuit of happiness, materialistic orientations adapt to accommodate a shift away from acquisition and ownership. From a consumption point of view, as a lifestyle movement, digital nomadism resembles other emergent lifestyle trends such as minimalism, Marie Kondo essentialism, or the tiny house movement, which center around getting rid of objects and buying less. The transferability of our findings to these other contexts enables a theoretical understanding of why and how such aspirational lifestyles can emerge as aesthetic languages for affluence and luxury. As Tolentino (2020) asserts,

less is more attractive when money is not an issue, and minimalism is easily transformed from a philosophy of intentional restraint into an aesthetic language through which to assert a form of walled-off luxury—a self-centered and competitive impulse that is not so different from the acquisitive attitude that minimalism purports to reject.

The accounts of our informants suggest that de-prioritizing ownership is not a nonmaterialistic practice. We thus demonstrate that elective minimalism (vs. imposed minimalism such as in the case of poverty or homelessness), aesthetics of sparseness, reductionism, and conspicuous displays of “not-having” are emerging as potent symbolic signifiers of affluence, taste, and status. That is, preoccupation with having less and non-ownership can be just as materialistic as consuming to have “more” (Richins, 2017).

Finally, we contribute to an understanding of digital nomadism, a context which is ripe for exploring a variety of marketing issues. The wide demographic range within this growing cohort suggests opportunities for examining how notions of social class, precarity, and liminality affect various aspects of consumption as individuals negotiate tensions between reality and imagination, solidity and liquidity, and online and offline identity construction. Also, a critical reflection on the digital nomadic lifestyle and its impact on the planet and on host communities is needed to further illuminate how globalization affects consumers (cf. Sharifonnasabi et al., 2020). Digital nomads around the world are advancing toward establishing a Digital Nomad Nation

(digitalnomadsnation.org), seeking to legitimize the lifestyle and circumvent taxation and visa issues. What are some of the consequences of these types of macro level shifts? Research outside of consumer behavior has already begun to explore issues of identity, privilege, selfhood, and inequality (Aroles et al., 2020; Green, 2020; Mancinelli, 2020; Thompson, 2019)—there are many marketing related questions that arise from this important new form of living to be explored.

In sum, we propose that the boundaries of materialism have broadened in today's marketplace, and that when ownership is de-prioritized, materialism can encompass strategic curation, experiential consumption, and adoption of bricolages across spectrums of solid-liquid, luxury-budget, and access-ownership. This conceptualization helps illuminate how materialism can emerge in new ways as ways of consuming change. In this way, materialism remains a robust construct, which continues to adapt to contemporary dynamics and can continue to be used to understand consumers' engagement with consumption into the future.

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### **3.3. Paper 3**

“Seeking Security through Liquidity in an Era of Precarity: An Ethnography of Digital Nomadism,” with Giana M. Eckhardt and Katharina C. Husemann, to be submitted to *Journal of Consumer Research*.



## Seeking Security through Liquidity in an Era of Precarity:

### An Ethnography of Digital Nomadism

#### ABSTRACT

Prior research suggests that consumers build a sense of security through material possessions and solid consumption; having retirement savings, reliable employment and being a homeowner have been regarded as established markers of stability and control over one's life trajectory. In today's late modern context, however, uncertainty and professional precarity, shifting social norms and outlooks, as well as environmental decline and health pandemics, are increasingly making these signposts of stability either unattainable or undesirable for many. How do consumers find security and gain a sense of control in this precarious setting? Drawing on a two-and-a-half-year ethnography of the growing lifestyle of digital nomadism, we find that, with their confidence in what the future might bring continuously eroding, some consumers seek to attain a sense of stability by paradoxically choosing to lean into liquidity, rather by grasping for solidity, as established perspectives might indicate. We outline a three-phase process of movement along the solid-liquid continuum toward lifestyle liquification as a means to emancipatory construction of control and security, whereby consumers: 1. *Relinquish solidity*, subsequent to disillusionment with solid ideals and aims; 2. *Lean into liquidity* via shifting consumption logics and undertaking reflexive reprogramming of the self; and 3. *Legitimize lifestyle liquification* as an alternative pathway to security via marketization and evangelization of liquid living. Our contributions lay in advancing new perspectives on consumer precarity and security, liquid consumption and consumer self-transformations.

**Key words:** liquid consumption, digital nomads, control, ontological security, risk, mobility

## INTRODUCTION

*I imagine 90% of those digital nomads barely make enough to get by. But then again, neither do I, and I do have a stable job and an apartment, and all the things society tells you must have. And with those things come expenses. A f\*\*\*load of them. The last time I had money over to spend on a nice vacation or anything really? I don't even remember when that was. Years and years ago. And I don't see it changing anytime soon. Maybe what has been romanticized too much for too long is the idea of settling down. Because this idea of a partner, kids, house, a kiss goodbye and a smile before you leave for work, etc. does not exist either. At least not for most people. 90% of them also wish they had a different life. Honestly, if I am going to struggle, I'd rather do it in the sun. (Flipflop Poet, YouTube, 2019)*

Economic uncertainty and professional precarity, alongside environmental decline and global health pandemics, are defining the contemporary moment (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017; Bauman 2000; Campbell et al. 2020; Giddens 1991; Vail 1999). On a macro level, the late modern experience is one of constant change, restructuring of the social order, erosion of stabilities, and disappearance of solid structures and their reliabilities (Bauman 2000; Beck 1986/1992; Giddens 1991; Kesselring 2008). These changes permeate consumers' daily lives and amplify their needs for stability and security, as they navigate life trajectories which for prior generations might have been considered largely solid, predictable and stable (e.g., a lifelong career; guaranteed retirement; owned home) but are now increasingly fluid, ambivalent and uncertain, as the opening quote illustrates. This contemporary context, aptly labeled liquid modernity (Bauman 2000), can be challenging for many as it erodes consumers' confidence in what the future might bring and demands adaptability and flexibility to cope with its ever-shifting environment (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017; Bauman 2007a; Beck, Giddens and Lash 1991). How consumers manage such inherent threats has been recognized as an important and topical research domain (Campbell et al. 2020). We contribute to this research stream as we explore: how do consumers find security and gain a sense of control in precarity?

In consumer research, the metaphor of liquidity has been used to illuminate a new logic in the way people consume, which has emerged in light of this rapidly changing sociocultural environment. Recent theorizations suggests that in today's marketplace, consumers shift

along a continuum between solid and liquid consumption, where solid consumption is enduring, ownership based and tangible, and liquid consumption is ephemeral, access based and dematerialized (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017). It has been widely established that, consumers respond to uncertainty by anchoring their sense of security in solid consumption, such as accumulating material objects, consuming familiar goods and products, or achieving solid ideals such as having a family or owning a home (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017; Miller 2008; Rindfleisch et al. 2009; Saatcioglu and Ozanne 2013; Weinberger et al. 2017). While recognizing this perspective, we argue that, as solidity is increasingly becoming a luxury and a resource-heavy indulgence out of reach for many (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017), liquidity can emerge as an alternative path to building consumers' sense of security in today's ambivalent times.

Our analysis draws on a two-and-a-half-year ethnography and netnography of digital nomadism – a global lifestyle movement where, unlike the affluent elite global nomads studied previously (Bardhi et al. 2012; Thompson and Tambyah 1999), individuals seek to leverage not only digital technologies, travel interests and aspirations for self-realization, but also cheaper costs of living as they work or study remotely while hopping between exotic yet inexpensive locations (Atanasova and Eckhardt 2021; Green 2020; Mancinelli 2020). The digital nomads we study are a demographically diverse cohort including people from various age groups and walks of life, where many have relative socioeconomic privilege, yet others are of modest means; indeed, particularly for those from the millennial generation, the desire for digital nomadic living is often fueled by limited economic and employment prospects which motivate these consumers to seek ways to maximize their insufficient purchasing power (Thompson 2018; Green 2020; Woldoff and Litchfield. 2021).

Studying this growing lifestyle movement, we demonstrate that, disenchanted with their lives or insecure of what the future might look like, these consumers paradoxically attain a sense of security by choosing to lean into liquidity, rather than to grasp for solidity, as established perspectives might indicate. Specifically, we suggest that when solidity is out of reach or is undesirable, some consumers attain a sense of security through “liquifying” their lives and consumption instead. For instance, for the average individual, having traditional markers of

security and stability, such as owning a home, require financial resources which in turn are tied to having stable, long-term employment which, for many, is unattainable in a global economy characterized by flexible labor regimes (Han 2018); we demonstrate that opting out of these aspirations, and embracing ideals of lightness and uprootedness instead, allows these consumers to shift the narrative from that of arduously aspiring toward hard to reach solidity to that of escaping from its inherent demands and burdens. To that end, we introduce the term *lifestyle liquification* to denote a transition in everyday living from a solid lifestyle where security is sought in possessions, rootedness, and accumulation, to a liquid lifestyle where security is sought in lightness, flexibility and detachment. We outline a three-phase process of movement along the solid-liquid continuum (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017) toward lifestyle liquification as a means to emancipatory construction of control and a sense of security: 1. *Relinquishing solidity* subsequent to disillusionment with solid ideals and aims; 2. *Leaning into liquidity* via shifting consumption logics and undertaking reflexive reprogramming of the self; and 3. *Legitimizing lifestyle liquification* as an alternative pathway to security via marketization and evangelization of liquid living.

Theorizing how consumers can attain security through liquidity enables us to make several contributions. First, we bring into focus lifestyle liquification as an alternative path for attainment of security in times of uncertainty (Campbell et al. 2020), and we advance that, in contrast to Weinberger et al. (2017), previously idealized future goals of being married, having a family and owning a home are social norms that are no longer aspirational or attainable sources of stability for a growing cohort of consumers who are increasingly disillusioned with normative life trajectories. Second, we extend Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) as we answer their call to advance understanding of how consumers use consumption along the solid-liquid continuum to establish security without ownership, possessions, or safety nets (593). Third, we offer a process perspective on consumer lifestyle transformations and expand our understanding on how consumers undertake fresh starts (Price et al. 2018) by materializing pursuits of a better life through liquidity in the face of precarity and uncertainty. Next, we introduce the tenets of our theoretical lens, we then detail our research context and methodology and proceed with outlining our findings.

## INSECURITY AND CONSUMPTION

Material possessions are considered primary anchors for consumers' sense of identity and placement in the world (Belk 1998; Cova 1997). To that end, prior research has established that disruptions to consumers' normal or anticipated lives, or threats to their sense of ontological security (that is, their confidence in the continuity of the events in one's life; Giddens 1991), can trigger a variety of compensatory or reactionary consumption behaviors related to material consumption (Campbell et al. 2020).

Evidence suggests for instance that, when consumers face uncertainties within the self or relating to social norms, their materialistic tendencies can increase and they tend place more value on possessions (Chang and Arkin 2002; Clark et al. 2011). Experiencing scarcity (real or perceived) or diminished personal control have also been shown to direct consumers toward compensatory consumption on a quest for control-restoration which can include displaying or caring for possessions, and consuming goods that provide a sense of security, such as long-lasting material goods (Cannon et al. 2019; Saatcioglu and Ozanne 2013). Consumers also turn to objects and tend to form strong brand connections when they experience existential insecurity, which is anxiety associated with the awareness of one's mortality (Rindfleisch et al. 2009).

Research has further suggested that being married, having a family and owning a home are considered universally aspirational sources of security and stability (Weinberger et al. 2017). Studying young consumers entering adulthood, Weinberger et al. advance that both middle and working class individuals aspire toward eventually having settled, domesticated futures where solid lifestyles take priority. This is congruent with suggestions that homeowners have a greater sense of security than renters because renting is associated with instability and dependence, while owning a home is linked with having greater material control over the future (Phipps and Ozanne 2017). In that vein, it has been shown that security is embedded in different material configurations around the home which can create a sense of predictable and stable present and future (Phipps and Ozanne 2017). Overall, it is well established in the literature that, historically, consumers have built their safety nets around solid consumption practices such as accumulating possessions, building retirement savings, as well as forming enduring relationships to products and brands (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017). In turn, within

consumer behavior, solidity and solid consumption have been regarded as central sources of security in consumers lives (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017).

Solid consumption, however, is increasingly becoming a luxury and a resource-heavy indulgence out of reach for many (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017). As modern living gives rise to constellations of risk and uncertainty and demands mobility and flexibility to manage them (Kesselring 2018), solidity, while an anchor for stability and security for many, can also be a liability for those who desire it (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017). Concurrently, it has been shown that, for some consumers, the desire for ownership is waning (Lamberton and Goldsmith 2020), giving way to preference for liquid consumption which promotes flexibility and lightness in lieu of attachment and permanence (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017). Analyses at the macro-level suggest that times of uncertainty invite such flexibility and adaptability. For instance, it has been advanced that liquid modernity's unpredictability can prompt consumers to "reset" when they see that future goals might be unreachable and can invoke a "fresh-start mindset" – an adaptive response to the constantly changing circumstances of liquidity and contemporary global consumer culture, that entails purchasing and consuming products and services that enable betterment and changed circumstances for an enhanced self (Price et al. 2018). Moreover, permanence, long-term thinking, and life projects are challenged and difficult to maintain in a liquid world (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017; Bauman 2000). To that end, emergent conceptual lenses suggest that when it comes to the pursuit of the good life, the ambivalence pertinent to the late modern context can also shift consumers' temporal orientations from the future to the present, propelling an instant gratification mentality in a race against the unpredictable future (Atanasova 2021; Bauman 2007b).

Empirical evidence suggests that consumption is, indeed, a proxy of individuals' confidence in what is ahead, and that sustained uncertainty about the future affects choices such as how to spend time and what to consume (Pavia and Mason 2004). For instance, consumers with a future orientation adapt their behaviors to control and optimize distant outcomes and tend to invest in durables and future-oriented purchases (Pavia and Mason 2004). In contrast, those with a present perspective prioritize living for the moment and focus on opportunistic, impulsive consumption (Cotte et al. 2004). Relatedly, it has been proposed that universally felt hardship and uncertainty, such as those triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic, increase

consumers' willingness to take risks in the now and sparks people to be "change-minded," shifting their reference points and reframing their mental models so that people are more willing to try new things with lowered expectations (Lamberton and Wood 2020).

In sum, the dominant perspective within consumer research suggests that uncertainty pushes consumers to turn to solid consumption and to, more broadly, seek solidity in an effort to assert a sense of security through acquiring durable, long-lasting possessions. Uncertainty, however, can also change how consumers think about the future and their present and can shift their focus to the now rather than the future, rendering the temporal commitments associated with solid consumption a potential liability. It is largely unknown how consumers navigate this terrain and attain security in today's environment where solidity and permanence, which have been traditional sources of security for consumers, are increasingly out of reach and where everyday life is riddled with precarity and insecurity that leave the future uncertain, as we review next.

### **INSECURITY AND PRECURITY IN LIQUID MODERNITY**

Conceptions of insecurity implicitly embrace notions of what security is and how it is achieved (Vail 1999). In defining security as a conceptual construct, we follow in what Vail describes as "the self-assurance and confidence of achieving one's goals, of being able to 'secure' some favorable outcome," where "an individual has reliable expectations of continuity in their surroundings and relationships" (7). Insecurity, conversely, is a feeling of hopelessness, a constrained sense of self, a belief in the futility of advancement, and a feeling of uncertainty about the future (Vail 1999).

Insecurity and uncertainty are hallmarks of the present moment (Bauman 2000; Beck 1986/1992; Giddens 1991; Vail 1999). While change has always been modernity's defining feature, today we are witnessing a uniquely new order where society structures and norms, institutions and individuals' sense of selfhood are shifting from their traditionally stable state to much more fluid, unstable and ambivalent new forms (Bauman 2000; 2005). This leads to an overwhelming abundance of possibilities and choice, but also of risk, uncertainty, and

insecurity permeating a world that is significantly less predictable and controllable than that of the past (Bauman 2005).

Beck (1986/1992) describes this contemporary era as a second, reflexive, modernity marked by the emergence of a risk society, where the threat of downward social mobility is omnipresent for all social classes and precarious stabilities are considered to be in a state of liquification (Kesselring 2008). The insecurity of livelihood, the uncertainty of one's future, and the lack of safety are seen as chronically overloading individuals' personal worries and anxieties (Lee 2011; Bauman 2000, 181). Insecurity has thus become the template of our daily lived experience, and its hallmark is its extension across broad sections of the population, giving rise to an epidemic of middle-class anxiety, where many are uneasy about their present economic prospects and fearful about their children's future (Vail 1999).

Beck traces these developments across the landscape of what he terms "the political economy of insecurity" (2000, 1) where the "job for life" has disappeared; "paid employment is becoming precarious; the foundations of the social-welfare state are collapsing; normal life-stories are breaking up into fragments; old age poverty is programmed in advance; and the growing demands on welfare protection cannot be met from the empty coffers of local authorities" (3). This overarching insecurity, which Beck refers to, sees precarity as the underlying logic of the contemporary era, which has come to depict the ways in which modes of life and labor have transformed along the shift from early Fordist industrialism to postindustrial neo-liberal capitalism. As states have withdrawn welfare and labor has become unstable as it has been reorganized from the industrial assembly line to networked forms, large swaths of the middle class now find themselves in a predicament that had previously only been seen as circumscribed to "the poor": casual labor, difficulties in making it to the end of the month financially, dwelling on the urban periphery (Han 2018, 332). Such precarity is thus not a marginal phenomenon – even in the affluent neoliberal West, it can no longer be outsourced to the socio-geographical spaces of the periphery where it only affects others (Lorey 2015). In turn, it is believed that the contemporary moment witnesses a convergence within and among working classes, rendering geo-economic distinctions between working lives in the Global North and South increasingly obsolete (Carbonella and Kasmir 2014; Kasmir 2018).



As a concept, precarity is theoretically linked with a number of terms, such as precariousness, precarization, or ‘the precariat’ (Butler 2006; 2010; Lorey 2015; Standing 2011). At a more granular level, analytic distinction can be also drawn between distinct forms of precarity, such as economic or professional precarity (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017). Cumulatively, however, we focus our lens through a meta level understanding of precarity as a pervasive condition of insecurity and ensuing loss of hope for the future against the backdrop of fraying fantasies for upward mobility and job security, and the dissolution of optimistic scenarios that had once held the space open for the good-life fantasy (Berlant 2011). In unraveling the implications of this precarization of modern life on consumption, we follow Lorey (2015, 1) who outlines precarization to mean “more than insecure jobs, more than the lack of security given by waged employment. By way of insecurity and danger it embraces the whole of existence, the body, modes of subjectivation. It is threat and coercion, even while it opens up new possibilities of living and working. Precarization means living with the unforeseeable, with contingency.” As Allison (2016) further reflects: “Uncertain about where/when/how one will make do in the present, the precarious lack handrails for anchoring the future [...]. In this uncertainty of time, where everyday efforts don’t align with a teleology of progressive betterment, living can be often just that. Not leading particularly anywhere, lives get lived nonetheless.[...] The future is distant or opaque. It is not quite an endpoint, that which one works toward as a horizon of expectation.”

This precarious setting problematizes how consumers find security at a time when solid ideals and aspirations, such as those of owning a home, having a family or being able to rely on savings and retirement are increasingly challenged. Consumer research is yet to examine how consumers live with enduring insecurity (Campbell et al. 2020) or manage to establish security in the long run without ownership, possessions, or safety nets (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017, 593). In this paper, we are therefore concerned with building a macro-level perspective in tracing how living such precarious lives implicate consumption and consumer lifestyles on the quest to attain security. In light of this, we ask, how do consumers find security and gain a sense of control in this precarious setting?

## RESEARCH CONTEXT

We explore this research question in the context of digital nomadism—a global lifestyle movement where large cohorts choose to dispose of most of their possessions and, enabled by widespread Internet access and ease of mobility in a globalized world, serially relocate either internationally or intra-nationally (e.g., via van-living; Gretzel and Hardy 2019) while working remotely from their laptops (Cook 2020; Green 2020; Hannonen 2020; Mancinelli 2020). Digital nomadism was brought to the mainstream vernacular by Tim Ferriss who, in his bestseller “The-4-hour work week” (2007), detailed a lifestyle grounded in a liberatory ethos where the good life is made possible outside the confines of the 9-5 via “geo arbitration” – a practice where lower income is leveraged by living in places with affordable cost of living. As such, digital nomadism grew popular by embodying an aspirational ideal for good living within reach to anyone who felt trapped in the rat race, not just the jet setting elite with the financial means to escape the cubicle. To that end, we explore digital nomadism from a lifestyle lens which is suited to illuminate the sociocultural valorization of transnational mobility as a sign of fundamental changes in the construction of identity, sociality and value systems (Mancinelli 2020).

We follow in the conceptual understanding of digital nomadism as a contemporary lifestyle migration phenomenon (O’Reilly and Benson 2009) where migration is simultaneously about escape *from* somewhere and something, and escape *to* self-fulfillment and a new life (2-4; original italics). In contrast to that of other migrants, such as refugees or labor migrants, the digital nomadic way of life inheres lifestyle choices where migration is an antimodern, escapist, and reflexive self-realization project in search of the good life that is emphasized by continuous comparison with life before migration (Benson and O’Reilly 2009). This good life is often described as standing in contrast with the shallowness, materialism and consumerism, or risk, uncertainty and insecurity of contemporary (Western) lifestyles: for lifestyle migrants, such as the digital nomads we study, mobility is often driven by aspiration to avoid futures foreseen as riddled with economic insecurity or dread, fear of monotony, the burden of debt, lack of security, dead-end jobs or a lonely and isolated retirement (O’Reilly and Benson 2009, 4; Woldoff and Litchfield 2021). This makes digital nomadism a rich research context

for exploring how consumers seek to pursue alternative paths to security within a broader socioeconomic context of precarity and insecurity.

The various levels of economic privilege experienced by lifestyle migrants, such as digital nomads, are often overlooked and it is seldom recognized that many have to consolidate all their economic resources in order to live this way (Benson and O'Reilly 2009). In line with other research (Atanasova and Eckhardt 2021), we impart that the digital nomad community consists of a demographically diverse spectrum of individuals of varying financial means, occupations and age groups. Digital nomads hail primarily from affluent Western countries but can be from developing economies alike; can be retirees, freelancers, college dropouts, entrepreneurs, as well as remote employees, artists and gig workers (Kale 2020; Woldoff and Litchfield 2021). In turn, without negating that various forms of privilege which inhere in the digital nomadic lifestyle (cf. Atanasova et al. 2021), such as the high standards of living, education and favorable visa regimes of their countries of origin (Mancinelli 2020), we focus our inquiry on the underlying ways in which the digital nomadic lifestyle emerges as a reflexive response to an ambivalent and uncertain modern-day context. Next, we detail our method.

## **METHOD**

We conducted an ethnography of digital nomadism over the course of two and a half years, from late 2018 until early 2021. First, we sought to gain a broad understanding of digital nomadism as a lifestyle by immersing ourselves in prominent social media groups for digital nomads, reading popular press and blogposts on the phenomenon, as well as best-selling 'how-to' guides popular within the digital nomadic circles (e.g., "The 4-hour Work Week," Ferriss 2007; "The Art of Non-Conformity," Guillebeau 2010).

Second, we studied ethnographically of one of the largest events for digital nomads – a biannual community gathering known as The Nomad Cruise, which attracts hundreds of digital nomads in a single space, a cruise boat taking passengers to various destinations

around the world. The first author attended Nomad Cruise 8, a seven-day cruise in April 2019 which left from Las Palmas, Gran Canaria and landed in Lisbon, Portugal, with interim stops in Tenerife, Lanzarote, Casablanca and Cadiz. The event followed a program where each day focused on a certain phase of immersion in the digital nomadic lifestyle: Day 1: Setting sail; Day 2: Get out of the cubicle; Day 3: Scale your business; Day 4: Deep dive in nomading; Day 5: Hack yourself; Day 6: “It’s just a beginning” (see figure 1). The daily schedule balanced talks given by invited speakers (well-known nomads within these circles), workshops, and time for networking and recreation. Once in Lisbon, the second author joined, and we stayed in a popular co-living hub for digital nomads for additional four days of after-cruise events and gatherings around the city. Embodied participation in talks, workshops, seminars, social events, recreational gatherings and excursions, alongside participant observation, depth interviews, video and audio diaries, extensive field notes and photographs comprise the primary pool of data for this data collection phase (O’Reilly 2012). Until the end of fieldwork in 2021, the first author continued to follow the community on social media and took part in regular ‘Nomad Cruise Alumni’ virtual gatherings, which were often organized as a means for the nomads to stay connected during the Covid-19 pandemic when travel was not possible.

To that end, as planned immersion in different upcoming nomadic gathering had to be cancelled, our data collection proceeded with a netnography (Kozinets 2019). Because the digital realm is a commonplace place for digital nomads to work, connect with one another and socialize, immersion in the digital environment was highly naturalistic. Thus, this shift in methodological approach, while unplanned, allowed us to sharpen our understanding of digital nomadism as a contemporary phenomenon. Collection of investigative data (Kozinets 2020), interactive participation, unobtrusive online observation, as well as netnographic immersive engagement (249-250) took place across a number of digital platforms such as Slack communities for nomads (Nomads Talk and the Nomad List); Reddit threads such as *r/digitalnomad*, *r/vagabond*, *r/VanLife*; YouTube channels created by self-identified digital nomads; podcasts (e.g. Nomadtopia radio; Nomad Together; Ditching 9 to 5; Keep Your Daydream; Become Nomad); and popular public blogs (e.g. The Lifestyle Hunter; Wandering Earl; Digital Nomad Soul; Nomad Capitalist; The Broke Backpacker; Nomadic Matt; Making

It Anywhere). During this phase of data collection, the first author attended and directly interacted with other participants in online sharing sessions, virtual parties, screening events, and conferences which would have otherwise taken place face-to-face, but were shifted online due to the pandemic.

All together, we collected 30 in-depth interviews with digital nomads representing 17 nationalities, between ages 18 through 66, at various socio-economic levels (see table 1). The most inexperienced informants had practiced digital nomadism for several months, whereas the most seasoned participants have been living nomadically for over ten years. We used both purposive and snowball sampling (Miles and Huberman 1994) when recruiting our informants, seeking to capture a demographic and psychographic scope that is representative of the diversity within the digital nomadic community. Among our participants were not only ordinary nomads, but also nomads who have the status of opinion leaders and are also service providers, authoring popular blogs, podcasts, organizing events or running businesses serving the community (e.g., co-working spaces, retreats, events etc.).

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Throughout fieldwork, our identity as researchers was fully disclosed. Following procedures for complying with research ethics when scoping closed-access online destinations (Kozinets 2020), when recruiting participants from social media groups or channels we approached them via private messages where our intent was clearly established; official consent forms were signed prior to each interview and the conversations followed established practices for depth interviewing (McCracken 1988). The interviews lasted from 30min to 2.5hrs. Those interviews conducted during the ethnographic immersion in the Nomad Cruise community took place face to face, while follow-up interviews and those conducted during the netnographic data collection phase were carried over Zoom, Face Time or Facebook Video Messenger.

In collecting data from multitudes of sources, we used data triangulation as a strategy for ensuring convergent validity and reliability across cases. This allowed for deliberate uncovering of similarities, disjunctures, divergent perspectives and conflicting accounts, and in turn contributed toward the rich and faithful representation of the observed phenomena (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Spiggle 1994). We analyzed the empirical data continuously and iteratively throughout fieldwork, engaging in a dialectical interaction between data collection and data analysis, progressively focusing our inquiry over the course of fieldwork, shifting from a concern with understanding digital nomadism as a phenomenon at the individual and community level toward developing our emergent theorization (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). To that end, we analyzed the data by moving from part-to-whole within a hermeneutic framework of intra- and intertextual readings of the data, noting patterns and differences between the participants' stories, structuring and restructuring the data along emergent codes and indexes, and building holistic understanding of emergent analytical categories (Thompson 1997). Next, we discuss our findings.

## FINDINGS

We find that in an increasingly precarious contemporary context, instead of seeking stability through solidity (possessions, material accumulations, permanence), some consumers paradoxically choose to lean into liquidity as a means to transform and re-imagine their uncertain lived reality and to find security and control. Drawing on an ethnography of the digital nomadic lifestyle, we suggest that when solidity is out of reach or is undesirable, consumers attain a sense of security through *lifestyle liquification* – a term we introduce to denote a transition in everyday living from a solid lifestyle where security is sought in possessions, rootedness, and accumulation, to a liquid lifestyle where security is sought in lightness, flexibility and detachment. We outline a three-phase process of movement along the solid-liquid continuum (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017) toward lifestyle liquification as a means to emancipatory construction of control and a sense of security: 1. *Relinquishing solidity* subsequent to disillusionment with solid ideals and aims; 2. *Leaning into liquidity* via shifting consumption logics and undertaking reflexive reprogramming of the self; and 3.

*Legitimizing lifestyle liquification* as an alternative pathway to security via marketization and evangelization of liquid living (figure 2). Each of these phases represents a stage of gradual progression on a continuum from solid to liquid lifestyle orientation, though different consumers may occupy various positions along this continuum. We advance that in solid lifestyle orientations security is to be found in possessions, rootedness and accumulation, whereas in liquid lifestyle orientations it inheres in lightness, flexibility and detachment. We discuss each of these phases in turn.

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Insert figure 2 about here

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## **Relinquishing Solidity**

### *Disillusionment with Solid Ideals and Aims*

*When I grew up – I was born 1965 – it was 20 years after the war, so everything was built, built, built up. People had a lot more prosperity when I grew up. [...] I was able to study, I earned a lot of money. My parents kept on becoming more prosperous, so everything went up, up, up. And I think being young now it's more difficult. There are so many choices... [Before] we believed in success and money and capitalism and that it will bring prosperity for everyone. And I think more and more people [today] are realizing that that's a dead end. So something has to change. And more and more people are kind of shifting. [...] And young people making that kind of decisions [to live nomadically] with no money in the bank.... I think it's very brave. (Marina, The Nomad Cruise, 2019)*

After decades of working herself from one burnout to another, Marina had come to the Nomad Cruise to make sense of it all and see a different way of living. With her hard-earned financial security and seasoned perspective that allowed her to evaluate her life in hindsight, she stood out from the many digital nomads on the cruise who, most of them younger and self-employed, had come to share and absorb knowledge on how to make it in a world where having a long, prosperous tenure in a corporate job is no longer the norm nor the aspirational

ideal (Atanasova and Eckhardt 2021; Bauman 2007a). Marina was well aware of her privileged position of having “money in the bank,” something she saw many of her aspiring fellow cruisers were lacking. In her reflections, however, she captured what is a deeper source of uncertainty that is shared among the nomads: overarching sense of disbelief in the futility of advancement (Vail 1999) and lack of confidence that paths well-traveled by previous generations are viable today. Reinforced by the precarious logics of contemporary everyday living (Beck 2000) these insecurities cumulate in our respondents’ disillusionment with normative life trajectories and the viability of attaining solidity. Tina, an entrepreneur specializing in offering life coaching retreats, captures this aptly:

*I think the younger generation is very impatient to have the good life and they, I think they worry that they won't get it. I think they've looked at their parents sort of waiting patiently to retire and die. And I don't think they're interested in that. I also think that that the current financial situation for younger people often leads them to believe that they may not ever own their own home. They may not ever, you know. So do they want to sell their soul to big corporations [in vein] and then wait to retire to live? (Tina, The Nomad Cruise, 2019)*

Tina’s testimony affirms how, in liquid modernity, it is the ability to ‘take the waiting out of wanting’ that is the measure of success of a life worth living (Bauman 2000; Blackshaw 2005). Pursuing a deferred life-plan (Ferriss 2007), where the good life modeled by previous generations, with its stability and rootedness, is hoped to be had at some indefinite future, is problematized in liquid modernity.

The path to reaching a pivotal sense of disillusionment with the promise of normative living anchored in security, ownership and rootedness, looks different for different nomads. For many, the desire to turn nomadic and embrace liquidity stems from a realization that life as-is is unlikely to yield desired outcomes. Alan, for instance, a Romania-born graphic designer, recalls reaching the tipping point that got him to quit his low paying 9-5 corporate job and lean into the unknown for a chance to build a life that could allow him to both pursue self-realization and support his ill mother: *I had that moment of honesty with me and I was like, okay, who are you? [...] You are no one. You are not even earning a thousand a month.*



*You've been working for three years here. Why wouldn't you try to get out of your comfort zone? So I said, fine, f\*\*\* it, let's try. (Alan, The Nomad Cruise, 2019)*

For others, however, unrooting life from solidity and embracing the alternative of nomadic living is triggered by an urge to change what they fear might lay ahead:

*My grandmother is illiterate. And she had 16 kids. Six of those survived. My mother, being the youngest immigrated to the United States in the late sixties. There was a lot of sacrifices, a lot of hardship growing up. And I knew that I just ... I did not want to admit it, but I didn't want to continue living that way, with all that uncertainty. Are we paying the rent this month or are we paying the gas this month? Or is it getting fixed or is our electricity getting shut off again? It was just an always, an ever looming reality from my childhood. So that was my motivating factor. (Samuel, 2020)*

Samuel is a digital nomad practicing FIRE (financial independence, retire early) lifestyle where one works long hours and lives frugally in order to save enough money, reach financial independence and not be dependent on employment. For him, past experiences of uncertainty and financial insecurity play a prominent role in his motivation to pursue a different way of being in the world where he feels he can control what the future would bring. Notably, nomads like Samuel seek to avoid frugality in the future by voluntarily embracing it in the present as a means to finding financial independence and security.

Thus, while aspiring for freedom and self-realization are common motivations for nomadism (Benson and O'Reilly 2009; Mancinelli 2020) shared by our informants, our data brings into focus an emergent orientation where the pursuit of the good life begins as a run away from an imagined and feared (precarious and uncertain) future, rather than a journey toward an idealized and anticipated (better) time to come (Atanasova 2021; Bauman 2007b).

### *A turning point toward liquidity*

In line with others (Hoey 2009, 42-43), we find that this way of living is embraced at seemingly pivotal points in these individuals' lives: identity crises, illness, major life events

such as marriage or divorce, job loss or other major employment changes. Johnathan, a well-known service provider in the community, puts this succinctly: *No-one does this because they are happy with their lives. No one drops everything or changes their life because they are feeling good about where life is going. So people do drastic things.* (Johnathan, 2020).

As such, following a general sense of disillusionment with the prospects and promises of normative lifestyle trajectories, a tipping point toward disembedding from solid living and orienting toward lifestyle liquification occurs. Our respondents spoke of reaching such turning points in consequence of having experienced macro level precipitating events (Giesler and Thompson 2016), such as 9/11 or Trump's election, or micro-level ones, such as living through illness. Taim, a 41-years-old Egyptian-American, reflects on reaching his tipping point toward liquidity:

*So I was brought up in a pretty ambitious culture, very traditional in the sense that it's important to have a successful career and that's how you're valued. How you're valued is having a respectable job and making good money. So from an early age academics were highly encouraged in my family. And then I ended up going to college and went to an undergraduate business school. Then, what everyone did is they always went to New York to get a business job. And so that's what I did. Looking back, I was on the passenger seat in the car, you know, not really looking within to decide what I wanted, but more about [worrying about] what are the social norms. And I got a job in New York, right out of college. I moved to New York two months before 9/11...9/11 really rocked my world. The whole world, but mine, especially, as I come from an Egyptian Muslim background. So it was extra tough. I was [also] going through some family problems. And everything was crashing down... And I ended up losing my job, which was like a dream job for me... So here I am, like 22, 23 years-old, feeling completely discouraged when just a year earlier I was about to take over the world.. Then, I was unemployed for six months, couldn't find a job. And when I finally found a job...then I realized that I never wanted to be this vulnerable again.* (Taim, 2020)

The vulnerability which Taim describes, encompasses what Bauman refers to as “derivative fear” – a frame of mind that is best described as the sentiment of being susceptible to danger; a feeling of vulnerability and insecurity, arising from the numerous threats to one's place in the world, security of livelihood, or immunity to social degradation which accompany the modern experience (2006, 3). Our data suggests that orienting toward liquidity emerges as a

path toward gaining independence from the very structures which, though historically have been considered anchors of solidity, now transpire as sources of vulnerability. As Olivia, a fitness coach training clients remotely, reflects: *I feel much more secure right now than before. I can't get fired because I don't work for anyone. I don't have to worry if they will grace me with extending my employment contract for another month and how am I going to pay my rent. I am in control* (Olivia, 2020)

Similarly to Samuel from earlier, who seeks to avoid frugal living in the future by living frugally in the now, Olivia finds herself in better control of her life and more secure in the possible outcomes, paradoxically, by not having a 9-5 job and being reliant on her employer. Once outside solid structures, the insecurity and fear of losing solidity is no longer a threat by proxy of its absence. Instead, with liquidity comes the potential for attaining a sense of agency, security and control over one's own life trajectory. Disembedding from solid quotidian life with all its threats and uncertainties and embracing what is inherently in and of itself a precarious way to live (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017), emerge for our respondents as the better alternative to a rooted life, which many perceived as no more secure. This is because the ambivalence of risk and security that are integrated into everyday life in late modernity can turn sources of comfort into sources of danger (Le Breton 2018). Kevin, an 18-year-old nomad, living in a van while studying, sheds light on this rationalization:

*Between a Covid infested dorm and my little van - I pick the van. I was so scared there [in the dorm]. I couldn't cope mentally anymore. So I decided, why do I even need to be here? My classes are all online anyway.. Is this scary? Yes! But much less scary than what I had before. [...] I want people to know that this in option for them and they don't have to be stuck. [...] A lot of those people are probably living paycheck to paycheck, trying to make ends, meet, trying to pay off this house, trying to pay off their new car. But if something bad were to happen, then they don't really have room to spend money elsewhere. Whereas I feel like if you're in a van, you have more money. If you have a job and you're in a van, then you're spending a lot less money than those people that are in houses. So you have more money as security instead of just like assets, like a house that could burn down. I guess you could get into a car crash and that wouldn't be good for your van, but it's ultimately not going to be as expensive as a house would be if something were to go bad.* (Kevin, 2020)

While the literature on transformative consumption and “fresh-start mindsets” (Price et al. 2017) would suggest that such life “resets” assume a future-temporal focus, our data suggests that lifestyle transformation toward liquidity is often motivated by a need to experience betterment in the present rather than in a distant future, suggesting that a fresh-start mindset orientation can transpire within different temporal foci. Importantly, nomads’ comfort with this liquid way of living stems from their conviction that solidity is out of reach anyway and attempts to pursue it would be futile. As this viewer of a digital nomadic lifestyle documentary argues in defense of the digital nomadic worldview: *Why assume that everyone needs to save for a house? [...] it's kind of only an assumption that people are saving for traditional things [...]. If I knew I could travel whenever I wanted, I'd gladly never own a house. I likely won't anyway, but that's neither here nor there. (TheShauNanigans, YouTube, 2019)*

## **Leaning into Liquidity**

### *Shifting Consumption Logics*

The second phase in the process of lifestyle liquification encompasses an embodied transition from a solid to liquid way of life. This transition entails a shift in consumption logics along the solid-liquid continuum (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017), letting go of possessions and detaching from their linking value (Bardhi et al. 2012) and unrooting from one’s permanent residence en route to embracing a nomadic everyday life.

These actions manifest through a series of meaning-laden rituals around liquification, which emerge in our informants’ narratives as performative acts symbolizing one’s initiation to liquid living. Taim shares: *“I had short hair, suit and tie clean shaven, had a belly, was a smoker, highly stressed, running around in skyscraper to skyscraper, trying to win over other suits. Compare to my daily routine today of wearing a tank top and flip flops and going into cafes for my meetings!” (Taim, 2020)*. The tank and flip flops in Taim’s story, his tan, long hair tied in a high bun and 3-day beard visible on camera during our conversation, are

signposts for Taim's position along the solid-liquid continuum. In his liquid life, with his clothing now literally light, Taim feels liberated from the tiresome chase of success and validation.

In many ways, disembedding from solidity and moving toward the liquid end of the continuum is a process that involves adopting a detachment mindset. Sophie, a German-born nomad of one year, recalls her experience:

*I realized that I would work all day in order to leave to go back home to sleep in like two square meters of flat and then go back to work where I would spend all my day on one square meter at my desk and all of that to finance that flat. And then, I had to have a surgery and that was actually the starting point of my change journey. [...] So, I started when I started selling all my stuff. Putting it all online. (Sophie, The Nomad Cruise, 2019)*

In line with prior research, our findings reflect that nomadic life is a life with few possessions where objects are valued for their situational and use-value and their portability (Bardhi et al. 2012). Living this way can be difficult (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017), however, and requires skills and adaptability, without which life in liquidity can be particularly taxing. To that end, the internet is profuse with advice, tips and hacks for aspiring digital nomads on how to live with so few possessions. And at the Nomad Cruise, one of the very popular workshops was "Minimalist Packing", part of the program for Day 4 – "Deep Dive in Nomading" (figure 3). The first author's field notes reflect on this event:

*The workshop was supposed to take place on the main stage at the disco, but the door to the disco was locked for some reason and we couldn't find staff from the cruise to get it opened. So instead, everyone gathered in the hallway by the bar and just circled around this empty suitcase and a pile of clothes which someone dumped on the ground. Someone joked: you never know what door in life will get locked, so you better have your carry-on in order so you can just roll out. Everyone laughed. "True that" echoed. It felt as if they were all so unchained and burden-free, indeed. (Field notes, The Nomad Cruise, Day 4, 2019)*

Our findings illustrate that, in liquidity, solid possessions are not only a burden in everyday living (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017), but a ballast that can slow one down en route to overcoming difficulties should the unexpected arise. This is in contrast to the feelings of

security and stability which solid possessions have been shown to bring to other consumers (e.g., Rindfleisch et al. 2009; Weinberger et al. 2017). For the digital nomads we study, lightness and flexibility are instead the very qualities that enable them to face and manage the unpredictability of modern everyday life and change course if and when they need to.

Our data also foregrounds the instant gratification mentality that guides these nomads' worldviews. In liquidity, life is lived in the now and accumulating possessions or planning for the future is reprioritized (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017). In turn, solidity is not envisioned in the future, nor aspired toward. Marie, a theater actress living nomadically for the last four years, evocatively illustrates her present temporal orientation:

*I don't have any retirement savings at all. I'm not even thinking about retirement and I know I will be the first to admit that that's quite irresponsible. I don't know. I'm 34 years old. I should probably be thinking maybe a little bit about putting away some savings, but maybe I am of a generation and have a mindset where I'm like, no, I want to live my life now. I don't care when I'm 65 or 70 years old, I'm not going to have as much energy or desire maybe to travel the world. I want to do it now. Like while I have the physical energy and strength to go hike up this mountain and go walk around a city for hours and hours. So I would rather spend my money on travel now than saved my money for travel when I'm 70 years old. And so in a way I feel like, um, when I'm 70, I'll worry about that when I'm 70, you know, when I'm 65 or 70, that's when I'll think about what I'm going to do then. (Marie, The Nomad Cruise, 2019)*

Nomads' acute short-term orientation and present temporal focus liberate them from having to continuously work toward established templates for an imagined, and uncertain, future. In contrast to Weinberger et al. (2017), we find that for these consumers solidity and homeownership are not considered signposts for security, but rather liabilities one is trapped into taking care of. Roger, an American drop-shipper who makes a living re-selling on Amazon – at a premium – items that he purchases at low prices from retailers such as Target or Walmart, captures the risk- and worry-free life that liquidity gives him:

*The recipe for the good life is to not want too much. I'm quite happy with just, you know, my backpack and my little duffle bag of clothes that I have and the one laptop I can work from. And it would be different for everyone, but you know, in this way, there's much less to worry about. If you can find ways to remove the different kinds of stress that are in your life, then you just have more room to be happy. [...] In the US, if you have a house and you have a car and you have a*

*whole house full of things... that's a lot of things to think about. You need to care for that house, you need to drive the cars and put gas in them and don't get into accidents.... You know, I just fly around to a different Airbnb and rent them for a bit [...].* (Roger, The Nomad Cruise, 2019)

For Roger, solid consumption requires resources and care that stand in the way of the good life he envisions. His ideal life is facilitated, instead, through liquid consumption and is mediated by the sharing and digital economies. For many of these nomads, life in solidity, with its signposts and measures of success, has become meaningless – a losing race one must escape from. For these consumers, life in liquidity, offers more opportunities to live comfortably and to manage insecurities and risk than rooted living. In this way of living, the shape and form of the stability and security that our informants pursue might evade normative characterizations but the nomads in our study *feel* that liquidity is the better alternative:

*Everyone's version of success is different. It seems you assume everyone should have ONE solid income which is so strange, when most people who are actually rich in the world have many sources of income. Just because someone's income streams aren't what you would want your income streams to be doesn't mean they are struggling. It seems like they are happy to struggle monetarily if it means they get to see different parts of the world.* (Winn, YouTube, 2020)

Perceiving and experiencing life in liquidity as a positive trade off to struggling in solidity, however, requires what some of our participants referred to as “reprogramming” of the self.

### *Reprogramming of the Self*

The process of lifestyle liquification involves also emancipatory reinvention and self-transformation where our participants purposefully sought to shift their value orientations, dispositions, and even basic daily habits such as nutrition and exercise regimes. Our participants often referred emically to this phase as “re-programming” or “self-hacking”; the latter, was also the theme for Day 5 of the cruise. Daily routines aside, however, the liberatory potential of this phase primarily inheres in a nuanced act of detachment from past

narratives and expectations. Sophie captures the emotional landscape of this transitional phase toward liquidity as she recalls how she had to not only let go of her possessions, but of her past:

*I felt like I was slowly finishing a lot of stories by selling all my belongings. [...] It was difficult [to let go] but not of the stuff; rather, it was the inner journey [that was hard]. Taking myself out of these situations, handing all the energy back to these [objects that] were given to me by someone from my family, from friends, maybe from even from old relationships. I dunno, like a lot of stories connected, attached to belonging, but I did feel like I could let go of it. And I also had a lot of fun with it because I put them on eBay and then people would come to my house and they would have like, for example, fun with my guitar and somebody would be playing it. And I didn't play that for years, but I just had it. So I know that all my stuff is now somewhere and it's still alive. This helped a lot. (Sophie, The Nomad Cruise, 2019)*

In our respondents' narratives, letting go of the past generates a multiplicity of opportunities for self-development in anticipation of the new life that lays ahead. Freed from the emotional and material burdens of possessions and past narratives, nomads' shift toward consuming tools and experiences which aid and facilitate "self-hacking," such as skill-sharing events, personal coaching, training courses, webinars and other resources aimed at propelling lifestyle transformation. These tools are commoditized and mediated by the market, and enable processes of reorganization of the self, directing what McCracken (2008) refers to as "transformational routines" – a set of conventions that specify what one is before and after the transformation, and how the transformation will take place (xxii). Shirley, a dancer, psychologist and life-coach, shares an elaborate journey to first "de-programming" and then "re-programming" her mindset to better fit and represent her new liquid lifestyle:

*It was all about understanding how I've been conditioned and programmed. [...] Before I actually started living this lifestyle, I spent six to eight months just learning and investigating [...] There's a lot of un-conditioning to do. Kind of like learning, re-learning, reflecting, because in the end it's a whole change of structure. What we were used to, what we've been taught somehow completely fades away. And then it's like, whoa, I don't see things like this anymore! I started spending a lot of time on my own feelings. [...] Like, do I really believe this? Do I really think this? And so there was a moment that I just started questioning so much and I realized, wait, something's wrong. I didn't even know myself. I didn't really know what my values are. I don't know what's meaningful for me. I don't*



*even know if I like to dance. If I like psychology. Suddenly everything was like a bit messed up. And so that's when I was like, I need to stop. I need to get into this [nomadism]. And I didn't know what [resources] was available until I went to Bali. And there, it was nonstop. I started researching on my own. I started reading books, taking courses, went to retreats, got a mentor. It was like a whole year. And I've never stopped since then. It's been five years. And I just started getting more and more into it. And it's also where I started learning about myself. It's really building this relationship with yourself without blaming yourself or judging yourself. You are just observing how you were conditioned since being a child. And so I started kind of going through my whole lifespan. Like, Oh, I learned this from my mom. I learned this from my dad. And these are the values at home. And this is what happened to me and how every little moment has impacted me. A lot of regression. And then it was like, well, right now with this awareness, what do I do? I have to maybe change my routines like this isn't working for me anymore. This mindset is blocking me. It's limiting. It's not helping me get to where I want to. So I say like the reprogramming and learning meant that I was doubting the ways that I've been doing things forever and understanding that even if I've been doing them forever, it doesn't mean that they still help me or they still work for me today. (Shirley, 2020)*

Many of our participants shared experiences of breaking free from the expectations of those around them, particularly family, and un-learning what measures of success and stability are. Taim reflects on this as he opens up more about the vulnerability he experienced after being laid off:

*“ [T]hat was traumatizing to feel that I can't make it on my own that... that nobody wants to hire me, you know. [...] To be so programmed so hard that it's about being independent and being successful and making money [...] I mean, the vast majority of Americans, all they want to do is make more money. Like when, no matter what level you're at, whether you're a poor person who wants to be middle class, whether you're middle class, whether you're up, you always want to make more money because that's how society is measuring you. That's how you to measure your own self worth. [...] So that's why I was afraid of it. I mean, it was insane and now when I look back it, it was the best decision I ever made, but at the time people thought I lost it. [...] And I do feel secure right now. The old me would be like paralyzed. I wouldn't be able to do anything without having a reliable income and the bank account going up. But the new me got comfortable with watching bank accounts go down and not jumping off a bridge. Along the journey, I kind of found my spirituality in some ways and I kinda just have faith that it's all gonna work out.” (Taim 2020)*

Transitioning into liquid way of living and taking charge of one's life in this way involves risk, because it means confronting a diversity of open possibilities and being able to contemplate novel courses of action that cannot be guided by established habits (Giddens 1991, 73). Yet, our participants' testimonies evidenced confidence, determination, and projected a sense of control over one's life trajectory, rather than fear or insecurity. This was particularly evident across multitudes of expressions adopted on the Cruise and used by the nomads to communicate collective agreement on a topic; for instance, one such expression was the affirmative expletive "F\*ck yeah!", and its variant "Hell yes!", which were adopted on Day 1 as a mark for being in charge of your life and of doing only things one truly wants to do – a category which included anything from giving consent to have a drink with someone, to living life by one's own rules. The first author's field notes capture the lyrics of a parody remake of Gloria Gaynor's classic hit "I Will Survive," which a few of the nomads on the cruise had brainstormed and then performed during the Talent Show on Day 5; the culminating point at the end of the lyrics illustrates the agentic charge of such expressions:

*At first I was afraid, I was petrified  
Kept thinking I could never leave my boring office job  
But then I spent so many nights just thinking how it did me wrong  
And I grew strong  
And I learned how to get along  
And now I'm on this nomad cruise  
I'm taking deep connection workshops  
Eating too much chocolate mousse  
I'm out here traveling the world  
I got myself an awesome tribe  
To keep me going as I make my way  
Into a brand new life*

*So now I'm on  
This shaky boat  
I'm not afraid, no  
Cause I know how to stay afloat  
Yeah I'm the one who dreamed that one day I would fly  
They thought I'd crumble  
They thought I'd come back home and cry  
Oh no not I  
I will survive  
Oh cause now I got my nomad tribe  
I know I'll stay alive*

*I've got all my life to live  
And I've got all my love to give  
And I'll survive  
And will thrive*

*It took all the strength I had to  
To take the final dive  
I'm gonna travel like a boss Instead of working 9-5  
I'm gonna get on the right track  
I'm gonna buy myself a Mac  
And I will cram a few belongings in  
My minimalist pack  
Now you see me  
Somebody new  
I'm not that chained up little person in a cubicle  
And so I'm takin a big leap  
I won't be just another sheep  
You'll see me smiling in my photos  
From my office on the beach*

*Chorus x 2  
(F\*ck yeah!!!)*

Moreover, however, the song reflects the large extent to which nomadism is undertaken as an act of resistance against normative structures, values and lifestyles. The nomads see themselves as “unchained” and unafraid, “not just another sheep”. Living a liquid, nomadic life, is thus constructed through such resistance and transpires as a powerful expression of agency and emancipation from oppressive institutional ordering (Giddens 1991) of solid, rooted life.

## **Legitimizing Lifestyle Liquification**

### *Consuming Liquid Lifestyle Know-how*

The final phase toward lifestyle liquification involves engaging in the growing marketplace for knowhow and templates for liquid living. Books, e-courses, bootcamps, blogs, podcasts, documentaries, chat rooms, festivals and events such as the Nomad Cruise, are among the

many outlets catering to the growing digital nomadic community. The Nomad Cruise, among other things, is a skill-sharing event with a price tag of around €2,000 per person, which the nomads willingly pay for a chance to connect with others, learn and share valuable tips on how to live a liquid life as a nomad. As part of the program, cruise attendees would volunteer to give free workshops on any topic that might be within their expertise (see figure 4 depicting a pin board for announcements for such ad-hoc workshops; e.g., Financial freedom - how to invest your savings; How to start; How to buy cash-flow renting properties in the US; Personality test; Sales training etc). The main events on the cruise, however, are they keynote speeches where well-known nomads would give lengthy presentations in which they share inspirational success stories and tried and tested approaches to mastering this lifestyle. Embracing liquidity can feel overwhelming; success stories are consumed as validation and assurance that this is a viable life path. The first author's field notes reflect on one such instance:

*The disco hall is packed. Upcoming is Frank's keynote on proven strategies for generating passive income. He goes on to explain that earning passive income is the only way to be actually free to pursue passion projects and to make a difference. And that he is there to share, with all of us, how all of us can too be free one day and make money while we travel, not while sitting in a cubicle. The room is tense with anticipation and charged with euphoria. (Field notes, The Nomad Cruise, Day 4)*

The tension felt in the room is reflective of the stakes involved in knowing how to make a living as a nomad. Knowing how to generate income while living a liquid lifestyle is essential for being successful at managing it and key for being able to face uncertainty and attain a sense of security outside of solid structures. In turn, free and paid for information resources are available in abundance for aspiring and seasoned nomads alike. Passive income (that is, income stemming from a single output, investment or activity, that does not require continuous efforts to maintain) and full-time housesitting are for digital nomads some of the most commonly practiced strategies for attaining security and financial freedom in liquidity for they function outside of the realm of solid life ordering (e.g. they do not require employment, mortgage, rent etc.). A blogpost praising the benefits of housesitting, titled "How to Work Remotely Without Paying Rent" assures: "*Some of you are undoubtedly*

*afraid of the unpredictable nature of housesitting. You're thinking: What if I can't find another sit? I'll be homeless. What if I have nowhere to go after my first one? We've all had these fears, but the truth is that this site offers new sits every single day (especially in the UK and the US). There's never a shortage of sits available. [...] No more rent; no more bills. [...] You save enough money to start building savings" (<https://nomadfinanceandfreedom.com>).*

This type of content is infused with tropes about taking control of one's own life, getting unstuck and escaping the dread. A nomad-run business offering a "Laptop Lifestyle Bootcamp" that is "*designed exclusively for over-achievers who are tired of feeling lost and overwhelmed*" promises that if "*you've always envisioned yourself putting up metaphorical middle finger up to the "normal" life and wanting to defy everything you were taught about how life 'should' be lived [...] everything you've wanted for your life is on the other side of Laptop Lifestyle Bootcamp*" (<https://amandakolbye.com/laptop-lifestyle-bootcamp>). These narratives are hard at work to associate liquid living with security – that is, with a sense of confidence that one's goals are achievable and that favorable outcomes are within the realm of possibility (Vail 1999). The many outlets for lifestyle know-how foreground the impression that such a sense of security inheres in liquid living both in terms professional and economic security, but also social – promising that a likeminded community awaits on the other side. The visibility which this lifestyle achieves via such commodification both validates and legitimizes this way of living and as well as finances it, positioning the nomad as a prosumer (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010) of idealized narratives about the superiority of this way of living over solid, rooted lifestyles. Our data suggests that digital nomads at all levels of experience with the lifestyle are continuously consuming such resources. Many are also involved in producing them, as we will discuss next.

#### *Marketizing and Evangelizing Lifestyle Liquification*

Along the lifestyle liquification process, a tendency to marketize know-how emerges once nomads have successfully "hacked" life. From life coaching to webinars on passive income growth techniques, to self-published books and guides on how to reprogram oneself – digital nomads tend to commodify their paths to reinvention in duty to help others (Bauman 2007b).

In the words of Kate: *“There's a draw somehow to this package of the digital nomadic lifestyle. [And] the next level is all about contribution.”* (Kate, *The Nomad Cruise*, 2019)

Interestingly, many nomads who are just starting to live this way and therefore, objectively, do not have significant experience with liquid living are enthusiastically commoditizing their journeys by, for instance, writing blog posts, maintaining YouTube or TikTok channels, or publishing “how-to” guides. Such contributions are often a valuable source of income in the nomad’s life. David elaborates on how he contributes: *“It was such a transformational experience to me that when I was done with it, I was just like, I want to make this easier for other people. And selfishly I think there's a revenue opportunity there, but I wanted to make something good and then something that I could also profit from. So the best thing I could think of was to make a podcast. Well, I made the e-course first.”* (David, *The Nomad Cruise*, 2019). With such micro-entrepreneurial practices, liquid living transforms from a risky endeavor to a self-sustainable lifestyle, generating continuous influx of passive income and with that –security.

The calling to enlighten others about the opportunities that inhere in lifestyle liquification is evident in these digital nomads’ narratives who feel almost a sense of responsibility to rescue all the “wasted potential” (Alan) in the grip of normative living:

*In my country [...] there is incredible talent. Smart people and kind people [...] unfortunately I also understood that it doesn't matter how smart you are or how good you are. Your location plays a very important role in how your life ends up and, in Romania, everything is maybe 20, 30 years ago behind - the mentality, even the technology, the way of doing things. But there are still people that are so bright and ...I've seen them and I've seen so much wasted potential. [T]hat makes me feel sad when I see someone who ...I see myself in him a couple of years ago when I just felt this struggle of knowing that I would like to better, but I just didn't have the opportunity. I didn't know how; there was no one to tell me how, there was no one to show me. I didn't even think it was possible. And the thing is that they keep you so controlled that it's even difficult for many to think, to imagine that [something else] exists. It's really strange. So my goal is to find people that are similar to me and just to help them change their lives and live their truth through life.* (Alan, *The Nomad Cruise*, 2019)

The notion that life in solidity is a life where one is controlled, robbed of opportunity, stuck in rootedness is a central theme in our participants' testimonies. In turn, commodifying and marketizing liquid nomadic living is largely perceived as a selfless act. Delivering both a sense of contribution and a source of income, the marketization of liquid lifestyle visions and the tools to materialize these visions emerge as potent avenues for attaining stability after disembedding from solidity. Notably, such stability is not found in normative comforts and prosperity necessarily, but in flexibility, the liberation from the "rat race," and reliance on oneself. A YouTube viewer illustrates this:

*3 years ago, sick of living in the rat race and chasing more money and more stuff, I gave up my apartment in the San Francisco Bay Area, bought an old RV and took my marketing consulting practice remote. Now I make videos about my life and travels to support myself. It is definitively not the easy, cushy way to go. It's a lot of work, but I still prefer it to my old life. I think more and more of us are going to be working remotely and become more location independent. (Carol's RV Life, YouTube, 2019)*

While positioning themselves outside of solid normative lifestyles, our informants shared narratives which reflected an eagerness to promote, normalize and legitimize liquidity as a way of being in the world. Legitimization is important also for it demythologizes stereotypes and counterbalances insistent critique that nomadism is an irresponsible way to live that impacts negatively the environment, the economy or local communities – taxation, housing shortages, and carbon footprint are only but a few of the controversial issues around digital nomadic living. In a heated discussion on the topic, a viewer comments:

*"At the end its a selfish lifestyle: Always the same concept, traveling somewhere and hanging around with complete strangers in underdeveloped and unfortunate countries and pretending to be open minded because they had the money to buy or eat stuff which the locals in these countries cant. To earn money those nomads are feeding us with some copy paste content from others and selling it on a blog or Fiverr or keep on doing dropshipping. Everyone will become a lonely individual with screwing around this tiny planet. No reliability to such nomads, since they have this over exaggerated freedom they won't keep customer service, they will shut down their Macbook whenever and wherever they want." (Sa Gi, YouTube,2020).*

Another viewer, however, is fast to refute: “*Ah yes. And the rest of the world is so kind and generous. The lovable politicians, the selfless corporates, the just lawyers, marketers and stock brokers who want what's best for you.*” (Sethi, YouTube, 2020). Similar debates in the online space are abound. While highly aspirational for some, for many others, digital nomadism is seen as a fundamental threat to their communities and way of life, and as an underlying root to precarity and uncertainty for those that are not on the move and are striving for solidity:

*Welcome to colonialism 2.0. [W]hilst I hear and understand the call to step out of a performance capitalistic life, this is something only already privileged people can afford to do and live from. They can take advantage of their financial privilege in cheaper countries, whilst often driving up the prices for locals, and secure their future by investing and at the end of the day partly controlling, thus deciding, for small businesses run or originally owned by non-white/non-European/non-Northern American/non upper middle class people. It might look good on paper, but it still has the same mechanisms and systemic inequalities than colonialism does...(VH, YouTube, 2021)*

In digital spaces, such as YouTube, those living a liquid lifestyle are invested in balancing this debate, foregrounding their positive impact to the communities they visit. An older nomad, responds to the VH’s opinion above:

*Not True. I have been a nomad since I was 25, and I am now 73. When you enter into third world village, you will pay more for what ever you buy, but the villagers still pay the same. When in Asia you can't drive up the price of land because you are not allowed to buy, but you can lease. Any money you spend there gets moved around the village so I can assure you they are happy for you to be there. [...]*  
(CP, YouTube, 2021)

Such debates highlight the ideological tensions between different forms of dwelling and mobility, and the problematization of local communities as places of consumption, notwithstanding their dependence upon diverse mobilities (Urry 2000).

At the individual level, nomads are keen to emphasize that this way of liquid living is a lifestyle choice, no less legitimate than rooted living, centered around ownership. Kevin, for instance invokes his ambitions to get a master’s degree and seeks to distance associations of



van-living as a life on the margins from the positive symbolism of empowerment and self-discovery which dominate his worldview:

*I would say a lot of people think that people that live in vans are like completely free spirits and like, don't have much of a standard for themselves. But even though I'm living in a van, like I'm still in college, I still plan to.... I'm hoping to get a master's degree eventually. [...] if you are making into lifestyle, then you're no different than anyone else. I think a lot of people think that living in a van automatically means that it's kind of your last, last ditch effort in life. Like you have nothing to lose, so you're just going to go drive off in a van and do whatever. So I think people just need to understand that even if you are van living, then you can still make a difference in the world and you can still contribute, even though you don't have a house, you can still do just as much as anyone else. (Kevin, 2020)*

Holt (1997, 335) advances that lifestyles are created by relational differences between consumption patterns and their meanings are constructed by and exist in these differences. For the digital nomads we study, on the one hand, marketizing liquid living is aimed toward signaling a position of superiority relative to those left to struggle with the burdens and ambivalence of mainstream life; on the other, it promotes liquid living as a social practice of nonconformity with normative life trajectories. As Mancinelli (2020) suggests, “despite their apparent rejection of material accumulation, nomads’ lifestyle design remains a consumer process, where mobility experiences and intangible assets replace tangible goods in the process of social differentiation”. As told by our informants, their narratives for breaking the chains for solidity and the 9-5 purposefully seek to reveal just as much about who these nomads have become, as well as about who they would rather not be.

In sum, we find that, with their confidence in what the future might bring continuously eroding, some consumers seek to attain a sense of stability by paradoxically choosing to lean into liquidity, rather to grasp for solidity, as established perspectives might indicate. We introduce the term lifestyle liquification to denote a transition in everyday living from a solid lifestyle where security is sought in possessions, rootedness, and accumulation, to a liquid lifestyle where security is sought in lightness, flexibility and detachment. Our analysis outlines a shift in what a growing number of consumers consider a desirable way to live and

documents how, paradoxically, many choose to manage late modern precarity and find security in liquid lifestyles where not having a lot of possessions and not having a fixed residencies are interpreted as circumventing potentially unmanageable liabilities and risk. For these consumers, liquidity thus affords more control over their life trajectories compared to normative solid lifestyles.

## **DISCUSSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

In this paper we show that shifting lifestyle orientations from solid to liquid can enable some consumers to respond to an ambivalent socioeconomic context where security in the future to come, and what that might look like, is increasingly challenged. Prior research has shown that in times of trouble, whether in response to potential long-term macro-threats or actual immediate dangers, consumers' adapt their behaviors in myriads of ways, most prominently, seeking security and control in solid consumption, accumulation, and long-term planning (see Campbell et al. 2020 for review). We show this is not the case for a growing stratum of consumers, who struggle to cope with the uncertainty that pervades the everyday and to hang on to a solid ordering of life. Lifestyle liquification entails a drastic shift in the way consumers experience uncertainty and how this experience relates to their consumption; we demonstrate that solidity and ownership, and the temporal commitments they imply, are emerging for some as sources of risk and as potential burden. Key to this orientation is the premise that in a liquid way of living, de-prioritization of ownership, rootedness and accumulation translate into absence of liability and reduction of risk, as opposed to absence of security or stability; that is, in liquidity, the liability for one to care for material possessions, the risk of losing them, or the need to have the means to accumulate them, are curtailed by the virtue of their absence.

The liquid realm which our participants inhabit is one where relations between the individual and existing societal structures are problematized and hardly resolved. Living at what may seem the margins of society, these consumers are on a quest for better control over their lives and futures. In this way, these consumers are fundamentally different from, for instance,

mobile home consumers of interest to prior research (Saatcioglu and Ozanne 2013), whose lack of solidity is an acute source of insecurity. In the strategic re-orientation toward liquid living that we detail, the digital nomads we studied feel that the ephemeral and the transient are easier to hold on to, while the solid and permanent are increasingly out of reach. As such, in many ways, digital nomads' narratives are ultimately those of escape from the fixities of solidity which, in the liquid modern era, is perpetually out of reach and in an unstable state of dissolvment (Bauman 2000, 2005), rather than resistance to it.

Our theorization of lifestyle liquification as a response to the challenges of late modern living shares conceptual outlines with Beck's concept of individualization through which he explores not just how people deal with late modern transformations in terms of their identity and consciousness, but also how their life situations and biographical patterns are changing (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, 202). Beck outlines individualization as a three-dimensional process of 1) disembedding, where individuals detach from historically prescribed social forms and commitments in terms of family, class, gender roles, and work routines (what he terms the "liberating" dimension); 2) loss of traditional security with respect to knowledge, faith or norms (the "disenchantment" dimension); 3) re-embedding into new forms of control in terms of consumption, the market and the institutions of the welfare state (the "control" dimension) (Beck 1986/1992: 128; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Vij 2019). Unlike life liquification, individualization is not a choice (Bauman in Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002), yet it is a concept that paints a meta narrative of an emerging society in which family and personal life is changing, employment is becoming less secure and more fragmented and the political system appears to be incapable of engaging with these processes (Rutherford in Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). This study offers an empirical account of the reverberations of this macro shift at the micro level of consumer lifestyle choices and everyday living. Our contributions lay in advancing new perspectives on consumer security research, liquid consumption, consumer self-transformations, and digital nomadism.

## Security and Consumption

Our findings challenge established views that consumers attain security in solidity, and through solid consumption, such as accumulation of possessions, homeownership, having a family, and planning for the future (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017; Miller 2008; Rindfleisch et al. 2009; Saatcioglu and Ozanne 2013; Weinberger et al. 2017). We suggest that in an increasingly precarious and uncertain context, striving for solidity can be an unattainable ideal and, as such, a source of hardship for consumers. We thus offer a different approach to consumer security research by examining how security is attained when solidity itself is perceived as out of reach. Our study contributes to this research domain by demonstrating an alternative response to felt insecurity where consumers embrace lifestyle liquification as an attempt to sidestep the inherent risks and liabilities of normative solid living, and as a means to attaining control.

The perception that solidity is out of reach has implications on how consumers think about their future and on the extent to which they are motivated to accumulate material goods or financial resources to be used in a future moment. It has been suggested that when it comes to pursuing visions for the good life, liquidity pushes consumers toward a present-temporal orientation and it propels an instant gratification mentality in a race against an unpredictable future (Atanasova 2021; Bauman 2007b). We suggest that this can manifest in major lifestyle transitions, such as the one we outline here from a solid to a liquid lifestyle orientation, that motivate consumers to actively seek new paths for a better way of being and living in the world. We show how in the pursuit to resolve felt insecurities about future favorable outcomes (Vail 1999), living in the now is prioritized while accumulating possessions or planning for the future is de-prioritized (Atanasova 2021; Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017). From this vantage point, solidity is not envisioned in the future, nor aspired toward.

Our work thus offers a new lens to understanding consumers' perceptions of risk and insecurity in today's marketplace. The shift in the way consumers experience uncertainty that we document, demonstrates that solidity and ownership, and the temporal commitments they imply, can emerge as sources of risk and a potential burden in the contemporary precarious context. Through leaning into liquidity, the need to care for material possessions, the risk of

losing them, or the need to have the means to accumulate them, are minimized by the virtue of living a liquid life. We thus argue that for many solidity is not considered a signpost for security, but rather a liability that can be a source of insecurity. This illustrates an intriguing response to felt insecurity, where consumers choose to avoid uncertainty by stepping out of the conditions that present sources of the insecurity.

In light of these findings, our study demonstrates that previously idealized future goals of being married, having a family and owning a home (cf. Weinberger et al. 2017) are social norms that for many are no longer an imagined source of stability and security. That is because they may be not only unattainable but also counterproductive when trying to keep up with the speed and flexibility that liquid modernity demands (Bauman 2000, 2005). We show that consumers' aversion from future-planning in liquidity can redirect their motivations away from extended projects of lifestyle building through solid consumption, and toward adaptive, commoditized blueprints for flexible, liquid lifestyle trajectories.

Finally, Campbell et al. (2020) outline a framework for understanding consumers' responses to actual or potential threats and suggest that both consumers and markets respond adaptively to circumstances that threaten one's sense of ontological security (Giddens 1991). While they detail a range of literature that has captured many of these responses, we suggest that lifestyle liquification is an alternative adaptive response to diminished ontological security that has not been previously identified in the literature. Banham (2020) suggests that ontological security is fundamentally about trust in continuity and as such is a complex construct that should not be reduced to something that one either has or lacks. Building on Bondi's (2014) understanding that ontological security and ontological insecurity are on a continuum along which we all necessarily move, Banham argues that "ontological insecurity is not the opposite or absence of security but rather, the experience of the diminishment (whether through relational, cultural, and/or material processes) of these qualities of acceptance and assurance" (2020, 134). Our analysis suggests that a movement along a continuum between ontological security and ontological insecurity can be facilitated by consumers' movement along a different continuum—that of solid and liquid consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017). As we illustrate, for some consumers there is an inverse relationship whereby

ontological security is invoked and supported through liquid rather than the solid consumption logics. With that we suggest that in today's precarious marker context, moving toward lifestyle liquification can be one way to move toward a sense of ontological security. It would be fruitful for future research to examine, however, how sustainable anchoring security in liquidity is in the long-run? Are felt experiences of control and improved security short-lived perceptions or something that can last in time? Would consumers ultimately seek to re-embed in solidity?

### **Consumption along the Solid-liquid Continuum**

Our study also contributes to theory on liquid consumption in several ways. Generally, liquid consumption has been thought to eliminate sources of security and stability for consumers (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017). We show, however, an alternative application of the liquid consumption logic where it can mediate attainment of security for consumers who find solidity undesirable or unattainable. With that, we extend Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) by offering new understanding of how consumers use consumption along the solid-liquid continuum to establish security without ownership, possessions, or safety nets (593). This perspective also illuminates how and why consumers may chose to move along the solid-liquid continuum, thus contributing toward better understanding of the different types of utility along various points of the continuum, as well as potential antecedents for such a movement.

Further, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) suggest that, among other factors, the nature of precarity, whether it is professional or economic, can affect the extent to which consumption is either liquid or solid. They advance that when precarity stems from economic downward mobility consumers look to solidify their consumption as a way to regain a sense of security and control, whereas precarity stemming from professional insecurity pertinent to freelance or flexible work, for instance, invokes liquid consumption for it enables the flexibility needed to manage it. Our findings suggest that the increasing economic precarity characteristic for the present moment can also trigger a liquid logic, particularly for those who have little

confidence in the viability of their futures and the state's ability to alleviate the crisis. We recognize that economic precarity can be experienced at different levels and that severe economic precarity such that experienced by the poor or the homeless is not the same as the economic precarity and uncertainty felt by our respondents. However, without denying that vulnerability is differentiated and is allocated differentially across the globe (Butler 2006), we focus our study and anchor our analysis in what is an universal global logic of precarity and precarization (Beck 2000; Standing 2011). With that, we suggest that in light of increasing labor contingency, as well as emergent threats from global health pandemics and the climate crisis, many are prone to believe that "a tomorrow" is not guaranteed, in turn illustrating that meta level pervasive precarity, such as the one we focus on in this research, is another form of precarity that can influence how consumers consume. In other words, we propose that alongside economic and professional precarity (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017) such all-encompassing precarity emerges as a form of precarity that can also lead consumers toward the liquid end of the consumption continuum. As remote working gets normalized, however, and more consumers globally have less barriers to adopting geo-arbitration as a way to improve their standard of life and seek to improve their life trajectories, it would be important to explore for which types of consumers is finding security through liquid consumption a viable path to managing precarity? As conditions of liquidity continue to permeate the fabric of everyday life, are those who are not able to attain security through liquidity going to emerge as the new precarious class? What is the role of brands and the marketplace in enabling consumers to finding security in liquid rather than solid consumption?

### **Lifestyle Transformations**

Our work also offers a process perspective on consumer self-transformations and expands our understanding on how consumers undertake fresh starts (Price et al. 2018). We echo Price et al.'s suggestion that consumers use fresh starts to avoid rather than resolve issues, since, as previously outlined, choosing liquidity over solidity can be interpreted as form of sidestepping risks and uncertainties associated with solidity rather than resolving them. At the same time, however, we posit that drastic self-transformative changes such as life liquifaction

can also be read as a proactive attempt toward finding new (liquid) solutions to (solid) problems and regaining control in life. Building on this, our findings suggest that lifestyle liquification transpires as an agentic mean to reflexively create a fresh start outside the margins of mainstream life and we outline a three-phase process through which consumers construct and materialize such pursuits for better life in the face of precarity and uncertainty. Our study also points to an emergent intercept between present temporal orientations and the motivation to undertake fresh starts, highlighting that as a mindset, the fresh-start mindset can inhere in both future or present oriented self-transformative practices. Moreover, Price et al. frame the fresh-start mindset as a quintessentially American phenomenon. Our findings expand this assertion by illustrating that in a globalized and cosmopolitan world, aspirations to start anew are potentially a more universally shared characteristic. It is important to recognize, however, that digital nomads are able to navigate the global inequalities of the capitalist system due to privileged preconditions that enable their lifestyle, such as the high standards of living, education and favorable visa regimes of their countries of origin (Mancinelli 2020). A question thus remains, what is the role of culture in the experience of finding security in liquidity and undertaking life transformations in pursuit of new beginnings?

Further, it's been suggested that fresh starts are linked to consumption in various ways and that individuals who regularly look for a fresh start may face negative psychological and financial costs (Price et al. 2018). We advance this perspective by showing how letting go of solid ideals, possessions and identity narratives and leaning toward liquid versus solid consumption is an involved and, in many ways, laborious way in which fresh starts are mediated and facilitated by consumption. What are the long-term consequences of lifestyle liquification and how does it implicate consumer well-being?

## **Digital Nomadism**

To our knowledge, this study is the first in consumer behavior to explore digital nomadism and the implications of this emergent lifestyle on consumption. As a growing phenomenon,



digital nomadism offers abundant opportunities for tracing how sociocultural norms are shifting in the contemporary environment. While for a number of years digital nomadism was an under-the-radar trend reminiscent to the bohemian hippy movements of the 60s and 70s or, more broadly, a variety of self-marginalized groups, such as expatriates, ravers, or New Agers (D’Andrea 2006), the normalization of remote work, which peaked with the Covid-19 pandemic, and the growing role of the digital in how work is conducted at large, are making this way of living increasingly possible for many (Bowles 2020; Filipovic 2020; Kollwe 2021; Lufkin 2021). Indeed, while international travel became difficult in the wake of the global health pandemic, paradoxically, digital nomadism was on the rise: on the one hand the attainability of lifestyle mobility has been amplified by the normalization of remote working during the pandemic (Hermann and Paris 2020), while on the other, society has been facing unprecedented levels of uncertainty and disruption. In turn, while countries like the Bahamas and Croatia are attracting seasoned digital nomads with novel work-from-home visas to compensate for vanishing tourism (Gershman 2021), many choose to explore their own countries and embrace digital nomadism for the first time—letting go of their expensive metropolitan rentals and taking advantage of remote working while living in vans on the road or in cheaper rural areas (Tsapovsky 2020). Other, more “conventional” workers have also begun to move towards digitally nomadic set-ups, choosing to work from beach cottages, forest cabins and suburban houses outside expensive city centers (Lufkin 2021). Many are thus asking: are we on the brink of remote workers scattering across the globe en masse (Lufkin 2021)? There are abundant opportunities for future research to explore what the implications of such a nomadic future might be for consumers and the marketplace?

## CONCLUSION

Drawing on a two-and-a-half-year ethnography of the growing lifestyle of digital nomadism, in this paper we demonstrate that, with their confidence in what the future might bring continuously eroding, some consumers seek to attain a sense of stability by paradoxically choosing to lean into liquidity, rather to grasp for solidity, as established perspectives might indicate. This study opens new perspectives on understanding how consumers today navigate

their life projects and draw on different logics of consumption to attain security and assert control in a dynamic and unpredictable modern context. We hope that this new conceptual lens would spark ideas and fruitful new directions for tracing emergent shifts in the contemporary marketplace.

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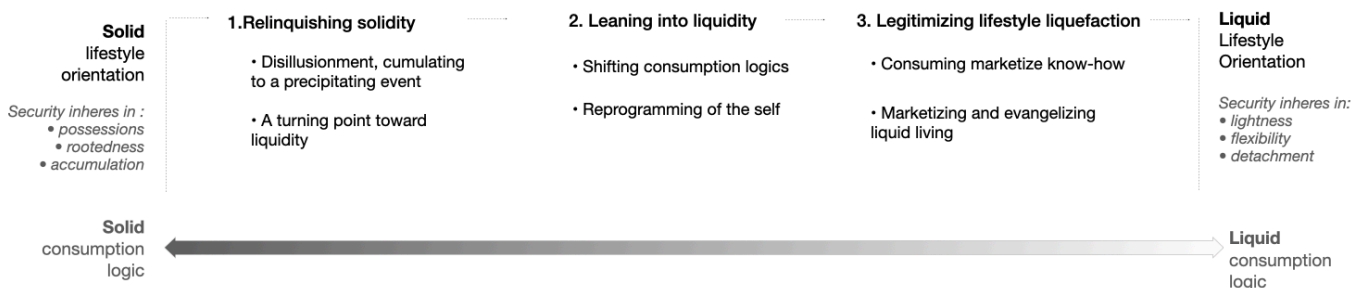
**Table 1.** Table of Participants

<b>Informant pseudonym</b>	<b>Age /Gender</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Yearly income</b>
Marina	53/F	Netherlands	€80,000 +
Roger	29/M	USA	€20,000 - €40,000
Olivia	32/F	USA	€20,000 - €40,000
Nanette	34/F	USA	€40,000 - €60,000
Sam	34/M	USA	€80,000 +
Marie	29 / F	Germany	€40,000 - €60,000
Greg	31 / M	Germany	€80,000 +
Tina	55 / F	USA	€80,000 +
Anne	55 / F	Australia	€80,000 +
Alan	25 / M	Romania	€20,000 - €40,000
Jack	48 / M	UK	€40,000 - €60,000
Sophie	31 / F	Germany	€20,000 - €40,000
Kari	28 / M	USA	€20,000 - €40,000
Trevor	49 / M	Greece	€20,000 - €40,000
Sonja	44 /F	Germany	€80,000 +
Taim	40 / M	USA / Egypt	€40,000 - €60,000
Shannon	42 / F	USA / India	€20,000 - €40,000
David	43 / M	Sweden	€40,000 - €60,000
Max	47 / M	USA	€20,000 - €40,000
Johnathan	38 / M	Germany	€80,000 +
Shirely	29 / F	Germany	€20,000 - €40,000
Veronica	23 / F	Netherlands	€80,000 +
Michael	27 / M	USA / Mexico	€80,000 +
Kevin	18 / M	USA	€40,000 - €60,000
Ian	49 / M	Ireland	€40,000 - €60,000
Brian	27 / M	Poland	€20,000 - €40,000
Lauren	38 / F	Hungary	€20,000 - €40,000
Ana	60 / F	Mexico	€20,000 - €40,000
Carol	49 / F	Colombia	€20,000 - €40,000
James	28 / M	Bulgaria	€20,000 - €40,000

Figure 1. Nomad Cruise 8 Schedule

NOMADCRUISE 8   PROGRAM SCHEDULE					
DAY 1	DAY 2	DAY 3	DAY 4	DAY 5	DAY 6
Saturday - April 6	Sunday - April 7	Monday - April 8	Tuesday - April 9	Wednesday - April 10	Thursday - April 11
SETTING SAIL	GET OUT OF THE CUBICLE	SCALE YOUR BUSINESS	DEEP DIVE IN NOMADING	HACK YOURSELF	"IT'S JUST A BEGINNING"
REGISTRATION	Excursion TENERIFE (An Introduction to Teide) Meeting Point / Time: 08:45 in front of the Cruise Ship	Excursion LANZAROTE (Valley of 1000 Palms) Meeting Point / Time: 08:45 in front of the Cruise Ship	Johannes Voelkner Lessons learned from 8 years as a digital nomad Johnny FD: Passive Income 18 Proven Methods and Case Studies to Earn Money Passively! Lydia Machova How I've created my own profession - break - Judit Osika Traveling (around our) personalities Bori Vigh What freedom really means - break - Matt Bowels Minimalist packing. Travel the world with carry-On luggage Andres Piñeiro How to get your ideas sponsored Aurely Pons How to create successful landing pages Thomas Ropel Performance Marketing Reece Turner How to master public speaking Tarek Kholoussy 6 inspiring lessons from 100 countries, 25 marathons and 1 social enterprise Estefania Fernandez Fuenmayor Nutrition myths & scientific realities of popular diets Sébastien Roger de Nuñez Superhero State and Habits - Boosting your Productivity	CASABLANCA	CADIZ
17:30	30 second pitches + Salsa	Deep Connections	TALENT SHOW Theatre	Piranha Tank	Meet Up Time
19:00	Meet Up Time	Meet Up Time	Meet Up Time	Meet Up Time	CLOSING CEREMONY
20:00		Talent Show Audition - Disco	Piranha Tank Audition - Disco		Dinner
21:45	Dinner	Dinner	Dinner	Charity Dinner & Party	

Figure 2. The process of lifestyle liquification



**Figure 3.** Minimalist packing workshop



**Figure 4.** Pin board for announcements for ad-hoc workshops offered by attendees





#### 4. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The purpose of this dissertation is to illuminate how living a liquid modern life shapes and is shaped by consumption. Drawing on the context of digital nomadism, an emergent lifestyle embodying the premise of liquid modern living (Bauman 2000), one conceptual and two empirical papers address this objective, opening new theoretical windows toward delineating the changing landscape of consumption in the wake of ubiquitous uncertainty, waning ownership centrality, and proliferation of digital and access-based consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017; Bauman 2000; Lamberton and Goldsmith 2020).

The overarching contribution of this work is two-fold: first, it lays in expanding Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2017) theorization of consumption along a solid-liquid continuum, by furthering our foundational understanding of how and to what ends some consumers move along different points of the continuum; and, second, in enhancing marketing theory by applying this understanding toward building new theoretical lenses that capture previously untheorized shifts in consumer behavior in today's market. Specifically, at the substantive level, this dissertation charts how adopting a liquid orientation to life and consumption offers consumers new ways to engage with the marketplace and attend to three principal consumption goals: to re-imagine and re-construct reality in pursuit of betterment (Paper 1); to attain happiness and cater to life goals (Paper 2); and to find stability and security (Paper 3) through consumption. Abstracting these findings to the conceptual level, this dissertation expands the theoretical footprint of liquid consumption by leveraging this lens to revisit three foundational marketing constructs: marketplace utopias (Maclaran and Brown 2005), materialism (Belk 1985), and consumer security in an era of precarity (Campbell et al. 2020). These consumption goals, and their respective conceptual domains, emerged through the interpretive decoding of digital nomads' liquid modern lives, where utopian, materialistic and security-enhancing consumption transpire at the epicenter of consumers' efforts to situate themselves in the larger experience of living in a liquid modern world – a world where consumption is the backbone of sociality (Blackshaw 2005) and insecurity (whether financial, emotional, environmental, political or other) orchestrates the shaping of contemporary consumer culture (Bauman 2005, 115).

Such a contribution is relevant because the perspective that has dominated consumer research thus far has been that of solidity and solid consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017). Yet, the social transformations that underpin liquid modernity – the transformation of markets, effects of itinerant labor, new levels and forms of precarity, redrawing of class lines, and contradictions of consumption (Lee 2005) – demand new explanatory frameworks and theoretical tools, able to trace their emergent influence in today’s market. Individuals are increasingly uncertain of their futures, young generations globally struggle to achieve the stability and financial prospects that their parents had, and as the era of digitalization continues to flourish, consumers have more ways and more reasons to consume non-materially, to rent, access and share rather than own. The introduction of liquid consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017) as a new theoretical construct in the field of marketing was a significant step in capturing these transformations and illuminated a number of domains within the discipline that are implicated by this emergent way of consuming. This dissertation moves the field forward by substantiating empirically and extending conceptually this realm of inquiry. It problematizes consumption in the context of key, macro level, social and cultural transformations pertinent to liquid modernity, thus building new understanding of how, when, under what conditions and to what ends consumers shift consumption logics between solid and liquid. In the process, it uncovers and theorizes novel construct relationships between liquid consumption and other theory, advancing this still nascent theoretical strand in the marketing discipline. Next, I provide a brief overview of the findings of the three papers in this dissertation, followed by a discussion of their implications and contributions to different research domains.

#### **4.1. Overview of the findings**

Digital nomads are exemplars of liquid modern life (Kesselring 2008) – a life lived in an age of uncertainty by a society of consumers hunting for the realization of a utopian ideal of escape to something better (Bauman 2000; 2005; 2007a; 2007b). This dissertation unravels how consumption intersects with this way of being in the world and illuminates three substantive domains within which these consumers shift consumption logics and orient

toward the liquid end of the solid-liquid continuum of consumption in pursuit of different end goals (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017). See figure 3 for an overview of the papers in this dissertation and a summary of their theoretical contributions.

Paper 1 offers a broad conceptual entry point to illuminating the unique nature of liquid modern living, focusing on how consumers cater to their yearning for betterment in liquid modernity. It traces how the perpetual human condition of imagining and aspiring towards better ways of being in the world, known as utopia, is changing – from being collective and future oriented, to instead being individualized and fixated on the present (Bauman 2007). Transposing this into the field of consumer research, this work contributes to the theoretical domain of consumer utopianism (Brown et al. 1996; Maclaran and Brown 2001, 2005; Kozinets 2001, 2002a, 2019) by offering new conceptual space for tracing how consumers re-imagine their lived reality through consumption. Prior research suggests that consumers pursue utopian visions in the marketplace collectively, in dream-like branded spaces or communities where consumers negotiate dreams for an imagined better future. In contrast, this paper shows that new forms of individualized and short-lived utopias, tasked with changing the immediate present, have begun to unfold in the marketplace (e.g., flights to nowhere; rent-a-family service in Japan etc.). As such, this paper delineates between the solid marketplace utopias of yore, such as the retail mall or the amusement park where consumers collectively have been finding refuge from the everyday mundanity, and new forms of “liquid consumer utopias” emerging as market-mediated expressions of individuals’ desires to re-imagine reality, individually, briefly and in the now. This work highlights how, while utopian thinking continues to be an indelible component of liquid life (Bauman 2005; 2007b), today it takes new forms and directs consumers to draw from the marketplace through liquid consumption logics of quick access, flexibility and immediacy. Digital nomads’ deliberate pursuit of “liquid” lives, where the emotional and physical burdens of a 9-5 lifestyle and dreams for a better future in retirement are suspended and replaced with short-term pursuits of happiness via global mobility and preference for liquid consumption, is a vivid example of liquid utopian ideals in action. To the domain of liquid consumption, this conceptual paper contributes by conceptualizing the escapist qualities of such consumption – a profiling of liquid consumption which had not been theorized before – and demonstrates how liquid

consumption lends itself particularly conducive to contemporary utopian desires to re-frame the present and circumvent its limitations.

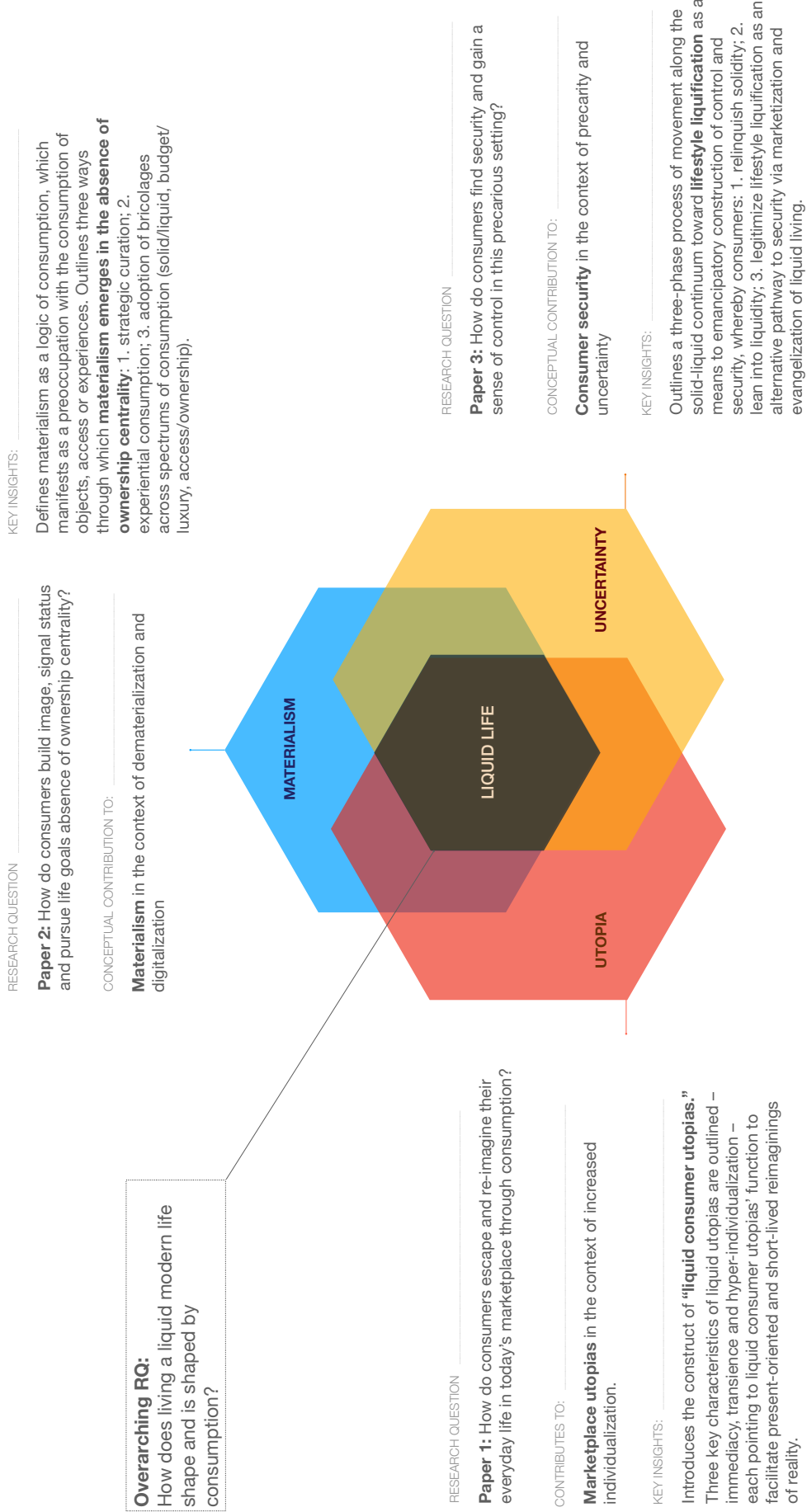
Taking an empirical approach to examining the pursuit of betterment in liquid modern life through consumption, Paper 2 engages with the phenomenon of digital nomadism to look deeply into the ways consumers use the marketplace to attain happiness, cater to life goals and accumulate symbolic capital. This work thus zooms into the consumption-based orientation to happiness-seeking traditionally captured by the construct of materialism (Belk 1985). Seminally, materialism is understood as consumers' preoccupation with material consumption and acquisition as a means to reach important life goals and desired end states (Belk 1985; Richins and Dawson 1992; Richins 2017). Through exploring the consumption practices of digital nomads, however, this paper demonstrates that materialistic preoccupation with the pursuit of happiness through consumption is experienced by some consumers in a different way than past literature suggests – increasingly mediated by a non-ownership and a non-material orientation, and facilitated by liquid logics to consumption and the access- and digital economies. Theorizing from this context at the macro level, such a conception illuminates how while more consumers are choosing to opt out of the normative materialist narrative, they are also charting a new, liquid one. Some cater to familiar desires in new ways (e.g., showing off a luxury wardrobe by renting on Rent the Runway rather than owning the garments), while others are forgoing established markers of status all together (e.g., prioritizing experiential rather material consumption to convey social standing to others). Overall, this work contributes to the domain of materialism research by suggesting that in today's market, the logic of materialism, as a consumption orientation to pursuing life goals, signaling status, building image, and seeking happiness, need not involve material goods or accumulation of possessions; instead, it can be mediated through liquid consumption practices where digital, access-based or even minimalistic consumption can be means to achieving these same ends. In its contribution, this work thus rejuvenates a foundational construct within marketing theory, demonstrating that materialism continues to be a prominent logic of consumption even when ownership is declining as a central concern, and that it can permeate beyond the boundaries of acquisition and possessiveness and emerge in access-based and experiential consumption alike. In parallel, to the domain of liquid



consumption, this work delineates the materialistic, symbolic and status signaling qualities of such consumption.

Finally, Paper 3, focuses on investigating the intercept between the broader socioeconomic context and consumers' orientations in the marketplace and problematizes consumption in relation to the meta narrative of liquid modernity where ubiquitous insecurity converges with ever-present possibilities for reinvention (Bauman 2000; 2007b). By examining the roots of digital nomadism as a lifestyle trend, this ethnographic work focuses on the dissipation of stability and security in liquid modernity and the ensuing transformation of consumers' life trajectories, which, for many, are no longer considered predictable or stable (e.g., lifelong career; guaranteed retirement; owned home) (Bauman 2000; 2005). In extending the domain of consumer insecurity, this paper shows that, in contrast to prior research where consumers have traditionally been shown to build a sense of security through material possessions and solid consumption (Rindfleisch et al. 2009; Saatcioglu and Ozanne 2013; Weinberger et al. 2017), today, solid consumption is not only increasingly out of reach or a luxury (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017) but can also foster insecurity and be seen as a source of hardship. In a modern context where the threats of downward social mobility and professional precarity are omnipresent for all social classes (Beck 1986/1992), for many, solid consumption carries inherent risks and liabilities. Through studying digital nomads' lived experiences, this work demonstrates that, disenchanted with their lives or insecure about what the future might look like, these consumers paradoxically attain a sense of security by choosing to lean into liquidity rather than to grasp for solidity. Specifically, it is suggested that when solidity is out of reach or is undesirable, these consumers attain a sense of security through "liquifying" their lives and consumption instead. Opting out of aspirations for solidity, and embracing ideals of lightness and uprootedness, allows these consumers to shift the narrative to that of escaping the unrealistic expectations of a solid future. In its contribution, this work thus invites a different way of thinking about security in consumer research and shows how it can be facilitated in non-normative ways at the liquid end of the solid-liquid continuum. With that, this paper conceptualizes the stabilizing qualities of liquid consumption – a notion which extends the liquid consumption theorization in new directions.

Figure 3: Summary of theoretical contributions



Together, the three papers of this dissertation theorize how at the intercept of a changing marketplace and shifting sociocultural landscape, consumers strategically move along the solid-liquid continuum and adopt and adapt to liquid consumption logics to cater to their life projects and manage various aspects of the liquid modern experience. At the macro cultural level, this thesis paints a picture of a critical re-orientation in the contemporary context. One that both practically, as illustrated by the digital nomadic research context, and conceptually embodies an emergent nomadic resistance (Bauman 2000; Braidotti 2011) to traditional points of reference and regimes of fixity subjugated to normative structuring of daily life. I advance that much of this re-orientation, though magnified and vividly exemplified in the digital nomadic community, spans beyond the boundaries of this subculture as it reflects a broader shift in the socially mediated processes of becoming and being in the world today. The substantive research context of digital nomadism makes salient how multitudes of struggles, expectations and hopes for betterment are weaved through the sociocultural fabric and mediated by a changing marketplace and an increasingly challenging environment. The theorizations of liquid modernity in sociology (Bauman 2000) and liquid consumption in consumer research (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017) point to changes in the deeper conceptual roots that anchor individual aspirations and ambitions, as well as in their feasibility. This dissertation explores several of these changes and furthers this perspective as it details an emergent stratum of consumers that navigate liquid modern life in new ways via consumption. Collectively, the papers in this dissertation thus contour important cultural and behavioral shifts where individuals drift away from permanence, confidence in the future, and reliance on normative social structures, and find alternatives in liquidity. These shifts reverberate broadly in global consumer culture today and the three papers comprising this dissertation illustrate this from different vantage points, each unraveling a discrete form of departure from the normative and the solid. Next, I discuss the theoretical implications and contributions of these findings.

## 4.2. Contributions to consumer research

The overarching concern which underpins this inquiry is the notion that against the backdrop of continuous sociocultural and economic change, many consumers today are facing challenging times, not only grappling with their ability to build the good life in the now, but also with their expectations of the future. This is an important topic for consumer research because while dreams of a life well-lived persist, what that life looks like is increasingly different from what it used to be in the past (Bauman 2005; 2007b); in turn, the role of consumption in the process of conjuring up consumers' new ideal lives needs to be re-examined. To that end, this thesis contributes to consumer research by tracing different ways in which some consumers adapt and respond to the modern environment by drawing on different logics of consumption in the marketplace. Three shifts in the consumption behavior landscape are presented: how consumer escape lived reality through consumption (Paper 1); how they attain symbolic capital and pursue happiness (Paper 2); and how they find stability and security through consumption (Paper 3).

These shifts are theorized from the in-depth exploration of digital nomadism – a hallmark of resistance to the late modern experience and a lifestyle trend that has emerged in response to the challenging modern lived reality (Benson and O'Reilly 2009; Ferriss 2007; Mancinelli 2020; Woldoff and Litchfield 2021). Digital nomadism is a multifaceted research context that embodies various dynamics. Many digital nomads are privileged in different ways, benefitting from favorable visa regimes, high standards of living and education in their countries of origin that provide an advantaged foundation to their migration endeavors later on (Mancinelli 2020); on the surface, they are hardly an embodiment of conventionally understood existential or economic hardship. Yet, digital nomads reflect what is an experience of a higher order insecurity and struggle to attain prosperity, stability and realization in a liquid modern world (Woldoff and Litchfield 2021); insecurity that is not limited to this cohort but infiltrates the broader social fabric and renders modern living at large far removed from normative understandings of contentment (Beck 1986/1992). Grounding this dissertation empirically, digital nomadism is thus a context that tells a novel story in the field of consumer research about how and why disembedding from the

normative ordering of life and opting for nomadic, liquid living with few possessions is a desirable lifestyle choice for increasing number of consumers. This dissertation translates this story into theoretical insights about the role of consumption in these consumers' quests to re-imagine reality, pursue happiness and find security. In this way, digital nomadism is an extraordinary research context (Arnould et al. 2007) that allows for the examination of how various theories of consumption operate at the extreme where complex interactions between constructs surface and can be observed (Mook 1983 in Arnould et al. 2007). This thesis is concerned with four such theories: liquid consumption, materialism, consumer security and marketplace utopias.

#### *4.2.1. Liquid consumption*

The seminal theorization of liquid consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017) challenged established marketing constructs in illuminating that they are predominantly suited to articulate a solid orientation in the marketplace, one where possessions and accumulation are a source of stability, serve as identity markers, and reflect idealized versions of the self. With conceptualizing consumption as existing along a continuum between solid and liquid, however, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) advanced the thesis that alongside traditional solid consumption orientations, many consumers today embrace liquid consumption logics which manifest in digital and access-based consumption. This conceptualization suggested that a number of theoretical domains are implicated by this shift from solid to liquid along the consumption continuum (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017; Lamberton and Goldsmith 2020) – broadly, if solid consumption has traditionally attended to consumers' symbolic, affective and utilitarian needs, what can we make of these same needs in the absence of solidity and in the realm of liquid modern living, and how can theory account for this? This thesis contributes to this conversation by offering some insight.

First, this work demonstrates how, in today's market, liquid consumption logics infiltrate three substantive concerns: how consumption is used to re-imagine reality, to pursue happiness and to find security in the contemporary turbulent socioeconomic and cultural

context. Each of the papers in this dissertation shows how some consumers eschew solid consumption and turn to liquid consumption instead to cater to these needs. In the process, this dissertation advances understanding of the escapist (Paper 1), symbolic and signaling (Paper 2), and stabilizing (Paper 3) qualities of liquid consumption, which are emergent conceptual parameters that have not been explored empirically or theoretically in prior research. With that, this work provides additional dimensionality to the existing theoretical scaffolding of this emergent consumption logic.

Second, this dissertation advances theoretical insights into how each of these qualities of liquid consumption play a role in drawing consumers to different positions along the solid-liquid continuum. While liquid consumption theory (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017) contours several conditions that dictate whether consumers orient to solid or liquid consumption (relevance to the self, the nature of relationships, accessibility to mobility networks, and the nature of precarity), it does so largely in terms of consumers' relationships to each other or to the product (Lamberton and Goldsmith 2020); it does not discuss how or when consumers choose to move strategically along the solid liquid continuum and in what circumstances liquid consumption is deployed as a means to specific ends. Collectively, the papers in this thesis contribute toward this gap by eliciting the intercept between the three aforementioned consumption-related goals and the role of liquid consumption logic in the process. Attending to the specific qualities of liquid consumption that drive consumers toward that consumption logic in certain instances allows us to map more holistically how individuals navigate the marketplace as a whole, and exposes new layers of consumers' preferences, which are not visible through rational economic perspectives (Lamberton and Goldsmiths 2020).

Finally, pointing to the escapist, materialist and stabilizing qualities of liquid consumption prompts rethinking of the theoretical domains that seminally encompass our understanding of consumption to these ends. By investigating how and when consumers move along the solid-liquid continuum to reimagine reality, pursue happiness or find security, this dissertation injects new dynamics in three corresponding stand-alone conceptual domains – marketplace utopias (Paper 1), materialism (Paper 2) and uncertainty (Paper 3). Each paper outlines specific ways in which consumers cater to their life goals and aspirations in manners that no

longer align with the established theoretical understandings that underpin these domains. They show that a liquid logic allows consumers to repurpose the utility they can extract from consumption from the solid to the liquid realm. In that context, lightness need not equate to lack of safety but to security (Paper 3), curatorial and minimalistic consumption does not necessarily signal lack of preoccupation with the material but preoccupation with its value (Paper 2), and short-lived individualistic escapes from reality in the now can be as transformative as shared utopian visions for a better future (Paper 1). As such, this dissertation not only extends the existing conceptual domain of liquid consumption, but advances marketing theory in new directions (Alvesson and Sandberg 2013) across theoretical panes which thus far had not accounted for the role of liquid logics in individuals' engagement with the marketplace toward various strategic ends. This allows for theoretical comprehending (Sandberg and Alvesson 2021) of various previously hidden meanings that inhere in emergent liquid consumption phenomena.

All together, these contributions point to a number of new paths for future research. First, this research focuses primarily on consumers' uni-directional movement from the solid to the liquid end of the consumption continuum. In line with extant theory (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017), however, the papers in this dissertation also recognize that consumers can occupy different positions between solid and liquid. Additional research is needed to outline how and to what ends consumers blend consumption logics (a direction that has been initiated in Paper 2) and what are the implications of that for different actors in the marketplace. Future research could also examine the reverse process of solidification of consumption and lifestyle orientations. In that regard, many questions remain about the temporal bounds of liquid living – is this a way of life that is sustainable in the long run? Conversely, in light of the turbulent and rapidly changing social, environment and economic milieu, can solid consumption be considered a logic that can underpin consumers' long-term orientations in the marketplace? There are also ample opportunities to explore what is the role of brands along different points of the solid-liquid continuum in enabling and mediating how consumers navigate the marketplace. As the theoretical conversation around liquid consumption extends, so do the multitudes of directions for future research.

#### *4.2.2. Materialism*

In consumer research, materialism is a foundational construct shaping our understanding of the ways in which consumers across cultures use consumption to achieve important life goals (Belk 1985; Ger and Belk 1996; Richins 2017; Richins and Dawson 1992). This dissertation challenges such established understandings by charting a consumption landscape where the central position material possessions had once occupied is being undermined by an expanding liquid market economy. It demonstrates how consumers are finding more ways to replicate the cultural, utilitarian and symbolic efficacy of solid consumption through liquid consumption and in the absence of ownership. These findings confront baseline understandings where material objects of consumption are seen as essential mediators of the experience of modern life and the intelligibility of one's cultural universe (Woodward 2007). In contrast, this work illustrates emergent ways in which eschewing acquisition and material consumption is symbolically charged and laden with intent and meaning, signaling people's relation to the world and others (Paper 2) and anchoring their sense of control and stability within their life trajectories (Paper 3).

This dissertation, and Paper 2 in particular, offer several primary contributions to consumer research on materialism. First, this work is the first to advance that, in the present-day economy, the materialistic logic to consumption has new, expanded boundaries. While in the past the construct of materialism had focused on the importance of material consumption, this work demonstrates that in today's marketplace, materialistic orientations to consumption also encompass nonmaterial and experiential consumption. This extends Richins' (2017) conception that materialism exists on a continuum from high to low depending on perceived importance of material goods by proposing that in today's economy, materialism is better understood as a degree of preoccupation with consumption overall – both material and experiential. This invites reconsideration of how materialism can be measured in light of its expanding blueprint upon consumer behavior. Established scales (Richins and Dawson 1992; cf. Richins 2004; see also Belk 1985) focus on the centrality of acquisition and possessions in one's life, the importance of possessions in the pursuit of happiness, and the ways in which possessions are used to define success. Future research is well positioned to balance extant



scales with paired items that consider fixation on non-material consumption: e.g., an item such as “The things I own say a lot about how well I’m doing in life” (Richins 2004) can be counterbalanced with an alternative statement that can elicit the importance of experiential consumption is a means to the same ends, such as “The experiences I get to enjoy say a lot about how well I’m doing in life”. More centrally, however, this invites problematization of extant scales to account not for the centrality of acquisitions but for the *degree of preoccupation*, i.e. the desire for “more” (Richins 2017), in regards to both non-material and material consumption. This also suggests that the interpretation of reverse scaled items needs to be reconsidered – that is, a strong affirmative response to “I don’t place much emphasis on the amount of material objects people own as a sign of success” (Richins 2004) cannot elicit whether the respondent is not preoccupied with access-based or experiential consumption instead. Overall, future research can examine how measurements of materialism can adapt to capture the various emergent expressions of materialism in the absence of ownership and can account for consumers’ pre-occupation with consumption overall as a focal variable.

In addition, this work engages with the cultural and symbolic significance of materialism. To that end, Holt (1998) articulates an understanding of materialism around how people consume, rather than what they consume, and foregrounds a shift toward the prominence of experiences as a part of class and status signification. This work extends and updates this perspective for the modern market by showing that experiences can be used strategically to gain distinction, regardless of class. The digital nomadic context illuminates how affluent entrepreneurs and college dropouts are all consuming experientially side by side within the bounds of their common lifestyle. The theoretical lens offered in this work thus allows for the decoding of materialistic orientations beyond normative class stratification. Following up further on Holt’s (1998) ideas, future research can examine how the manifestations of materialism in the absence of ownership centrality which are outlined in this work reflect and enable contemporary notions of low and high cultural capital individuals.

Further, this dissertation offers insight on how consumers’ waning desire to own implicates established conceptions in consumer behavior (Lamberton and Goldsmith 2020). Paper 2 expands upon Lamberton and Goldsmith’s (2020) conceptual framework which

conceptualizes antecedents and consequences of ownership on a solid–liquid continuum by demonstrating how the logic of materialism emerges as an additional antecedent of the preference for solid versus liquid consumption, which they have not considered. Future research can build on this by exploring the underlying processes on individual and cultural levels that are associated with materialism along the solid–liquid continuum and its consequences.

Relatedly, this work also invites a different way of thinking about the symbolic significance of voluntary simplicity, reductionism, and experiential consumption. Prior research considers these orientations to be non-materialistic for they deemphasize the value of material consumption (e.g. Cherrier 2009). In contrast, the findings presented in this dissertation demonstrate that de-prioritizing ownership is not a non-materialistic practice. In many instances such consumption practices can be read as even more materialistic for they require a pronounced preoccupation with the value and utility of the fewer remaining solid possessions. This work thus demonstrates that elective minimalism (vs. imposed minimalism such as in the case of poverty or homelessness), aesthetics of sparseness, reductionism, and conspicuous displays of “not-having” are emerging as potent symbolic signifiers of affluence, taste, and status. That is, preoccupation with having less and non-ownership can be just as materialistic as consuming to have “more” (Richins, 2017). Future research can seek to outline the conceptual boundaries that chart for whom, when and to what ends minimalism and non-ownership are delineated as aesthetic languages for affluence, luxury and status.

#### *4.2.3. Consumer security*

This dissertation also contributes to the theoretical conversation on precarious consumption and security (Campbell et al. 2020). Prior research suggests that consumers build a sense of security through material possessions and solid consumption; building retirement savings and being a homeowner have been regarded as established markers of stability and control. Paper 3, however, argues that today, uncertainty and professional precarity, as well as

environmental decline and health pandemics, are increasingly making these signposts of stability either unattainable or undesirable for many. The present research demonstrates that, with their confidence in the future continuously eroding, some consumers choose to attain a sense of security by paradoxically leaning into liquidity and orienting toward liquid consumption rather than by grasping for solidity. To that end, this work introduces the concept of “lifestyle liquification” to denote a transition in everyday living from a solid lifestyle where security is sought in possessions, rootedness, and accumulation, to a liquid lifestyle where security is sought in lightness, flexibility and detachment.

This conceptualization challenges established perspectives in the literature which postulate that future goals of settling down and owning a home continue to be desirable social norms that bring people stability and security in life (cf. Weinberger et al. 2017). In contrast, this work demonstrates that for a growing cohort of consumers who are increasingly disillusioned with the viability and feasibility of normative life trajectories, such goals are no longer aspirational and can be considered a potential liability and a source of insecurity – e.g., owning a home requires having a stable job, which, for many, is unattainable in a global economy characterized by flexible labor regimes (Han 2018). This work thus illuminates how and why for some consumers in today’s economy, material possessions – the need to care for them, the risk of losing them, or the need to have the means to accumulate them – can emerge as sources of risk.

Theorizing felt security in liquidity rather than in solidity raises a number of questions. For instance, for which types of consumers is finding security through liquidity a viable path to managing precarity? Are felt experiences of control and improved security short-lived perceptions or something that can last in time? Would consumers ultimately seek to re-embed in solidity and if so, how would lives spend in liquidity implicate that – for example, finding a stable 9-5 corporate job after years of freelancing and gig-employment can be challenging with employers valuing continuity in employment history; similarly getting a mortgage without credit history and/or stable employment, can be difficult in many countries. Alternatively, as uncertainty continues to permeate the fabric of everyday life, can solid consumption continue to be universal symbol of stability or will it be perceived as a liability?

Are those who are not able to attain security through liquidity going to emerge as the new precarious class? There are many theoretically important implications for future research to explore.

Overall, with its focus on precarious consumption and consumers' response to felt insecurity this work engages with increasingly topical conversation in consumer research where the need for new tools to help chart how consumers and markets adapt to times of trouble has been emphasized (Campbell et al. 2020). In popular culture, the award-winning film *Nomadland* (2021), which chronicles a growing population of middle-aged and older people living in vans, trailers or RVs, as they chase one temporary job after another (Brooks 2021), had also brought to the forefront the growing prominence of nomadic living at the intercept of precarity and insecurity. While it is not to say that digital nomads are as economically precarious or disadvantaged as the elderly nomads portrayed in the movie, this thesis points to the shared ethos of freedom and control in life that these nomadic groups project despite their inherently precarious way of life. Charting how control and stability are constructed in liquid living is thus an increasingly important domain of research to which this dissertation offers novel insights. Future research is well positioned to explore further the increasing prominence of nomadism across social classes and specifically in the context of felt precarity.

#### *4.2.4. Marketplace utopias*

Finally, within the realm of consumer research, this dissertation also expands the theoretical domain of utopian consumption by overlaying theories of utopia as a method (Levitas 2011) and liquid modernity (Bauman 2000; 2007) toward introducing the new conceptual construct of "liquid consumer utopias" (Paper 1). Extant understandings of utopian consumption have thus far focused on extraordinary, collective consumption, often geared toward imagining a better future, and taking place in branded spaces conjured by the marketplace (e.g., Kozinets 2002a; Maclaran and Brown 2001; 2005; Scott, Cayla and Cova 2017). Paper 1 in this dissertation argues that these perspectives leave emergent forms of individualized, short-lived and escapist consumption out of sight. To that end, it advances a theoretical framing that

brings to the forefront how consumers cater to seemingly fleeting wishes and desires through the marketplace where vague wants can be transformed into instantaneously metamorphic consumption episodes. This theorization contributes to experiential consumption research and research on consumption as escape by opening new avenues for exploring anticipatory visions and desires for renegotiating one's experience in the everyday through alternative forms of liquid consumption.

In marketing, Brown, Maclaran and Stevens (1996) were among the first to recognize the potential of utopia as an illuminating construct and to suggest that “[m]arketing, indeed, can be defined as the production, distribution and consumption of [u]topia” (680). In the broader conceptual context of this dissertation, the liquid utopian perspective advanced here thus allows for re-examination of consumption's potential to mediate consumers' urges for betterment in an increasingly unstable and uncertain world and of the marketplace's function in mediating such re-imaginings. With that, this work re-introduces the updated construct of utopia in the marketing discipline as a useful heuristic to understanding a variety of consumption behaviors.

Yet, as consumers seek to resolve the tension from living in a bleak present through escapist liquid utopian consumption, questions arise about how can visions for collective betterment be ignited and facilitated. Liquid modernity valorizes hyper-individualization – happiness in a liquid modern life is thought of as an aim to be pursued individually (Bauman 2003). At the juncture between utopias' form and function, the emphasis has changed from the presentation of collectively achieved finished perfection to an open exploration in which the construction of the individual is the central issue (Levitas 1990, 8). In turn, as the function of solid collective utopian visions for a better tomorrow have historically catalyzed aspirations for societal improvement, it remains unanswered what kind of social progress is possible in a world of liquid utopian forms whose function is fixated on individual's betterment.

### **4.3. Contributions to theory of Liquid Modernity**

By operationalizing the construct of liquid utopias in the domain of consumption, as just discussed, this dissertation also extends the theorization of liquid modernity. Though the themes of utopia and consumer society are central in Bauman's work, he discusses the intercept between the two with more breadth rather than depth, covering vast conceptual ground as he introduces his ideas of the dissolvment of solid utopian visions in an age of uncertainty (Bauman 2007a; 2007b). This thesis, and Paper 1 in particular, bring his ideas in attentive dialogue with contemporary utopian theory (Levitas 2011) and thus frames his arguments about the blurring lines between utopianism, wishful thinking, and daydreaming (Bauman 2007b) within a bounded theoretical lens suited to elicit the "hunts" of the good life which he envisions within the marketplace.

While Bauman's view positions solid utopias firmly in the past, and liquid utopias in the present, this work uses his theorization not as a blueprint, but as a heuristic device that is useful in tracing and delineating the shifting trajectories of utopian desire in our present day. To that end, in contrast to Bauman, this dissertation advances a perspective which recognizes that both solid and liquid orientations within the utopian mode of thinking are a simultaneously part of the social imaginary in various ways. The need to recognize that a fusion of solid and liquid occurs continuously and that the two are not mutually exclusive has been also discussed elsewhere (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017; Eckhardt and Bardhi 2020). This work follows in line with these previous efforts in adapting and applying the theory of liquid modernity as an enabling lens able to capture the complex nuances of the everyday context.

Finally, one of the main critiques of Bauman's work is that it is akin to sociologically-minded social commentary, lacking empirical validation and unable to sustain critical interrogation (Atkinson 2008). In adopting Bauman's liquidity as an enabling theory through this dissertation and its constituent empirical works, this thesis contributes toward giving various strands of his theoretical portmanteau, such as utopias in the age of uncertainty and preoccupation with consumption in liquid modern life, texture, substantiation and empirical grounding.

#### **4.4. Contributions to digital nomadism and consumption**

In marketing, this dissertation offers the first empirical in-depth exploration of digital nomadism as a consumer lifestyle emergent from an era of reflexivity, rapid cultural transformation and globalization (Bauman 2000; Giddens 1991; Hannerz 1990; Lash and Urry 1994). With that, the three papers in this dissertation are among the first to extend social science's understanding of digital nomads consumption orientations and practices, shedding light on the intercept between this lifestyle and contemporary consumer culture.

To date, prior consumer scholarship interested in hyper-mobility lifestyles has primarily focused on global nomads (Bardhi et al. 2012) and cosmopolitans (Figueiredo and Uncles 2015; Thompson and Tambyah 1999) and have offered insights about how nomadism influences these consumers relations to their possessions, their practices for managing the rhythms of daily life, for constructing a sense of home, or pursuing identity projects. The focus of these studies, however, has been on specific strata of affluent "frequent-flying, fast-lane, professional elites" (Figueiredo and Uncles 2015, 39), thus shedding light on a cohort of consumers with a privileged economic and cultural standing in the global marketplace. By zooming in on digital nomads instead, this dissertation brings into focus a notably more diverse group, comprised of individuals with varied financial means, the majority of whom make a living through intermittent employment in the freelance and gig economy rather than via elite professional occupations. In turn, through studying this group of consumers this research delivers a nuanced depiction of liquid consumption behaviors contextualized by the wider range of positions in the marketplace which this cohort occupies.

Further, this research's findings bring into theoretical focus the function of this lifestyle as a critical quest to overcome past hardship or escape a feared future – a motivation which is not exhibited by elite nomadic cohorts. Across the three papers in this dissertation, digital nomadism emerges as a consumer lifestyle which manifests as a protest to and an escape from the hegemonies and structuring of everyday life. Though motivations to travel and to experience novelty underpin nomads' desire to practice hyper mobility, as previous literature has also demonstrated, for the informants in this research a catalyzing impulse to leap into

nomadism inheres in a disillusionment with the prospects of achieving the “good life.” This work thus foregrounds digital nomadism as a lifestyle where hedonic motivations are surpassed by strategic ones toward managing and overcoming the signature challenges of liquid modern life – professional precarity, uncertainty, burnout or lack of confidence in the future. It is notable that this particular lifestyle choice is veiled in a romanticized belief that letting go of solidity and embracing nomadism is a form of resistance to materialistic values and the race to keep up with the Joneses. Still, as Mancinelli (2020, 16) notes, “despite their apparent rejection of material accumulation, nomads’ lifestyle design remains a consumer process, where mobility experiences and intangible assets replace tangible goods in the process of social differentiation.” This thesis develops this notion theoretically (Paper 2) by illuminating how, though critical towards normative consumer practices and mainstream consumer culture, digital nomads dwell in an alternative, liquid, consumption space along the liquid end of the solid-liquid continuum where they might draw on the marketplace through different, liquid, consumption logics, but still toward similar materialistic ends.

This dissertation extends the growing corpus of knowledge around digital nomadism as a lifestyle subculture (Atanasova et al. forthcoming, Cook 2020; Green 2020; Mancinelli 2020; Thompson 2021; Woldoff and Litchfield 2021). Like this dissertation, this interdisciplinary research paints a picture of digital nomadism as an escape attempt from unfulfilling professional paths and unsatisfactory quality of life in expensive big cities where the pursuit for wealth and career success, with their accompanying overwork, stress and lack of free time, are seen as detrimental to one’s health and personal growth (Woldoff and Litchfield 2021). This literature anchors conceptually around a meta narrative of freedom, individualization, self-realization and opposition to existing social systems and established norms. While at this point much is known about why some individuals embrace nomadic living and how they manage their work lives (Cook 2020), balance leisure (Thompson 2021), bridge remote work across various place-based communities (Woldoff and Litchfield 2021), claim control over their time and thus build privilege (Atanasova et al. forthcoming), or employ creative strategies to diversify their income, adapting to the logic of the dominant neoliberal order, with its emphasis on flexibility and entrepreneurialism (Mancinelli 2021), this literature is situated within a treatment of the nomadic subject as-worker and as-



neoliberal subject. This dissertation is the first to offer a systematic and detailed account of how digital nomads enact nomadic lifestyles as-consumers and how these individuals' consumption practices are implicated by their nomadic orientation within the global marketplace and digital economy. This vantage point offers a conceptual space where valuable new insights from the convergence between nomadism as privilege, as escape, as protest and as consumption practice can emerge.

#### **4.5. Managerial and policy implications**

These theoretical advances offer a number of implications. First, the conceptual framework of liquid utopias, presented here, allows marketers to grasp how consumers advance their life projects and cater to their desires through liquid, rather than solid, consumption behaviors and practices, thus drawing attention to emergent need gaps for brands to fill and novel opportunities for the marketplace to leverage. As pointed out most prominently in Paper 1, consumers are increasingly seeking brands, services and retailers that can offer them new immediate, hyper-individualized and transient avenues for reimagining their every day (e.g., flights to nowhere, Rent the Runway, Netflix binge watching). As liquid logics continue to transcend multitudes of domains in daily life, new services are fast emerging to cater to various consumer desires for accelerating and liquifying their consumption. For instance, increasingly time-starved consumers are eager to be well-read without reading, prompting the emergence of book summarizing services, such as Blinkist, which enable users to listen to book synopses at standard or fast speed, making it possible to “read” a book in an Uber ride or while standing in line (Cain 2018); similarly, the appetite for forgoing normative education and instead compressing years of university classes into mere hours is on the rise, as reflected by the growing popularity of e-learning start-ups (e.g., MasterClass, Khan Academy, Udemy and others; Nevins 2020). Liquid consumer utopias articulate a re-imagining of the present (rather than the future), have an emphasis on individual (rather than communal) experiences of betterment, and an orientation toward temporary re-framings of the experienced reality (rather than a pursuit of permanence and long-lasting change). In turn, increasingly, consumers demand individualized experiences and are motivated by desire to have, to

experience, and to accomplish their goals instantaneously. In this market landscape, even traditionally slow forms of consumption such as mediation are being productized as delivering instant happiness (e.g., “Make every day happier. [...] It only takes a few minutes to find some headspace.”; <https://www.headspace.com>) and individualized fit (“Start improving your life now. [...] Introducing the world’s first personalized meditation app.”; <https://www.balanceapp.com>). Brands that can offer consumer-centric approaches accounting for consumers’ yearnings for present-oriented and short-lived re-imaginings of reality, are well positioned to successfully leverage the many need gaps emerging as a result of individuals’ deepening present-temporal orientations and thirst for ever more and ever new, as fast as possible.

Second, as more consumers adopt liquid logics of consumption, the ability of the liquid marketplace to mediate consumers’ preoccupation with not only attaining instantaneous happiness but also building image and accumulating symbolic capital through consumption is also increasingly topical, as detailed by Paper 2. Theorizing how liquid consumption can facilitate materialistic logics of consumption illuminates how seemingly anti-consumption orientations such as minimalism, essentialism and reductionism are emerging as new signals of status. This rests on the premise that in today’s marketplace the luxury of having less is possible for those that can afford having more; access-based and curatorial consumption, which are considered liquid forms of consumption, are becoming avenues to signal this conspicuously (see Eckhardt and Bardhi 2020). The home-sharing platform Airbnb’s extension of its business model to luxury and novelty lodging (e.g., a life-size version of Barbie’s Malibu Dreamhouse created in partnership between AirBnb and the Barbie brand; Fortin and Taylor 2019) is a testament to the growing consumer interest in experiential consumption that is liquid, escapist, enviable and affordable at once. In line with amounting viewpoints in popular discourse (e.g., Chayka 2020; Tolentino 2020) and recently in consumer research (Wilson and Bellezza 2021), this dissertation illuminates for practitioners how in today’s marketplace elective minimalism is a strong signifier of symbolic capital and that it can be achieved, strategically, by people with varied means. With that, this work points to new opportunities for brands in the access, digital and non-ownership space to cater to consumers’ expanded portfolio of consumption orientations through which they draw on the

marketplace toward materialistic aims such as signaling status. To that end, luxury logics, for instance, are increasingly driving new offerings in the access-economy in multitudes of domains, from fashion renting (e.g., Rent the Runway) to ride sharing (e.g., UberLUX) to art (e.g., Curina).

This work points to how curation, experiential consumption and blending of high-end and low-end consumption are new approaches through which consumers use the marketplace to build and signal desired image. This gives brands permission to infuse the experiential domain with tropes for exclusivity and rarity that can support status signaling aims, while the product domain with tropes for selectivity and restraint that appeal to curatorial orientations. Further, this work shows how consumers adopt bricolages across spectrums of consumption (solid/liquid, budget/luxury, access/ownership). Consumers who embrace liquid lifestyle orientations tend to foreground the ends of these spectrums that align with lightness and restrained consumption (e.g., owning just a few possessions; being a savvy consumer), while de-emphasizing and reappropriating solid materialistic behaviors (e.g., owning a property but maximizing its value through AirBnB); for those embracing more solid lifestyle orientations, narratives of permanence, stability and longevity are more resonant. For practitioners, this lens presents an additional tool for more precise market segmentation, targeting and positioning practices.

Third, by tracing how security can emerge in liquidity, this work also advances our understanding of how the marketplace mediates consumers' sense of stability, security and control in new ways. This implicates how brands and products that are positioned at the solid end of the continuum can retain relevance with a growing cohort of consumers who are questioning the value of solidity. For instance, this is particularly pertinent for big-ticket high-involvement purchases such as real estate. While this is not to say that consumers will be no longer interested in owning property, this work showcases that there is a shift in what is valued: increasingly consumers are exhibiting a growing preference for renting and co-living in lieu of owning, housesitting in lieu of renting, or even van-living in lieu of solid housing all together – all options which offer flexibility and agility should circumstances demand it. This highlights the need for practitioners to reconsider how traditionally solid product

offerings can continue to appeal in this new market landscape. One avenue to do so is to package solid products in liquid subscription models, offering consumers the flexibility and freedom they are increasingly focused on – e.g., Peloton leasing, car subscriptions and other. This dissertation suggests that brands which can foreground embedded flexibilities in their products and offerings, will continue to draw consumers in these times of uncertainty.

Finally, liquid forms of living such as digital nomadism point to proliferating challenges to established social structures or norms, which in turn raise a number of implications for policy and governance. The rise of liquid living is a consequence of the erosion of previously relied on stabilities such as state support in retirement, healthcare, or neoliberal ideologies nourishing individuals' belief in their ability to build a comfortable future for oneself through hard work. In liquid modernity, mobility is relational to new emergent forms of power and inequality; against this backdrop, consumers are being pushed to part with traditional ideals and familiar ways life (Atanasova and Eckhardt 2021). As new liquid ways of life emerge however, multitudes of tensions surface at the juncture between rootedness and mobility – where does the liquid nomadic citizen of the world pay taxes, insure their assets, retire, or stand accountable in front of the law? Legitimation of liquid living unfolds alongside not only social and commercial resources but also structural shifts on a policy level. Historically, nomadic living by definition has been thought of as living on the margins. Recently, however, governments around the world (e.g., Estonia, Croatia, Bermuda, Bali, Costa Rica, Dubai, Georgia and others) are making deliberate efforts to incentivize and legalize nomadic living in their territories by issuing “digital nomad visas” (Gershman 2021) seeking to attract the tax dollars and discretionary spending of the nomads, offering them legal anchor points along their mobile lifestyles.

The visibility which such policy changes achieve, both validates and legitimizes this way of living, giving momentum to wider initiatives. For instance, there is a growing interest in establishing a Digital Nomad Nation; at present, this project is at the level of an e-nation organization advocating on behalf of digital nomads to “public and private organizations worldwide on long-term visas for digital nomads, legitimization of virtual residency status, favorable taxation for digital nomads, remote banking and business management options”

(<https://digitalnomadsnation.org/about/1/mission-first-digital-nation>). Such initiatives highlight the lived reality of many consumers from weaker passport countries in the Global South for whom nomadic mobility, as a form of escape from unsatisfactory living conditions, is legally and practically much more challenging. This points to the paradox that while liquid lifestyles seek to challenge normative social and power structures, ironically, on a macro-scale, they are substantiated and enabled by the very presence of such structures. There are vast opportunities and challenges on policy and governance levels to account for consumers' growing interest in liquifying their lives and consumption in attempts to circumvent the multitudes of risks and instabilities that define modern life. Doing so would be a step further in recognizing and addressing the rising global insecurity and precarity facing consumers across social classes and the profound shifts in the ways many choose to change their lives in response.

#### **4.6. Critical evaluation and limitations**

This dissertation is bound by three primary limitations: its choice of method, its research context, and the circumstantial limitations that came with carrying out ethnographic research in 2020-2021 when in the wake of the global health pandemic travel restrictions and social isolation put a halt to in-person interviewing and embodied field immersion.

First, the principal limitation associated with qualitative research is that of generalizability since many believe that generalizations, which are context-free assertions of enduring value of what should be universal truths, are at the very essence of scientific inquiry (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Qualitative research actively rejects generalizability as a goal (Denzin 1983), however, and instead focuses on “naturalistic generalization” and transferability to other settings (Stake 2000). Naturalistic generalizations “derive from the tacit knowledge of how things are, why they are, how people feel about them, and how these things are likely to be later or in other places with which this person is familiar” (Stake 2000, 22). The aim of the qualitative researcher is thus to provide enough thick description “to enable someone

interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether the transfer can be contemplated as a possibility” (Lincoln and Guba 1985, 316). To that end, transferability makes ethnographic research representative through inferences that the findings and abstracted theory are transferable to other contexts on the basis of their “fittingness” (Guba and Lincoln 1985). This relates to Geertz’ reference to Joneseville-is-the-USA as a representation not of the world as a whole but a particular type of life in the world. He elaborates: “What one finds in small towns and villages is (alas) small-town or village life. If localized, microscopic studies were really dependent for their greater relevance upon such a premise – that they captured the great world in the little – they wouldn’t have any relevance” (1973, 22). That is because no matter how significant the findings of qualitative naturalistic research, generalizing that findings pertinent to one context would apply to another, or that the studied sample is an accurate representation of the larger population is not epistemologically aligned with this method of inquiry (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Instead, ethnographic research, such as the one carried out here, adheres to epistemological assumptions that foreground relevance, particularity, representativeness, depth of understanding and trustworthiness, rather than generalizability (Lincoln and Guba 1985). In turn, this dissertation does not attempt to detach from its research context of digital nomadism or its meta context of liquidity in search of making context-free assertions, but it remains closely bound to them throughout, drawing abstractions and theorizations from the thick description of these contexts. Accordingly, this thesis offers findings and theoretical insights that are transferable theoretically to other instances and context where consumption might be contextually shaped by liquidity and ephemerality. With that, this ethnography also offers relevance at the level of theory by advancing the broader theoretical landscape of modern theories of consumption within which its focus is situated (O’Reilly 2012).

Secondly, critical reflection illuminates that the perspective offered here is limited in its cultural singularity. Issues of consumption are implicated by the cultural contexts within which they emerge (e.g., Slater 1997). In turn, an inclusive, comprehensive account of liquid lifestyles, precarity, materialism and visions of the future is inescapably depended on the breadth and depth of cultural representation. In this way, this dissertation is limited by being illustrative of a predominantly Western cultural vantage point. While through purposive

sampling I made efforts to weave minority voices in the presented final narrative, the findings in this dissertation have nonetheless been shaped by a Western analytical and theoretical lens.

Further, my own positionally as a researcher predisposes me to particular points of view that are informed by my background as a female millennial with Eastern European upbringing and Western education and cultural indoctrination. Mindful that my own judgements are culturally contextualized, I have engaged in ongoing self-reflection and reflexivity to continuously inform my sensitivity to the cultural, political, and social contexts which implicate this research (Bryman 2016) and to my own affective relation to them – e.g., tropes of migration, liberatory escapism from one geography to another, lived experiences pertinent to the millennial generation which many digital nomads are a part of and other.

Finally, the process of carrying out this research was impacted by the global health pandemic which began to unfold in the early months of 2020. In the initial phases of planning and development it was intended that the ethnographic component of this work would draw on embodied immersion in several physical contexts – the Nomad Cruise (2019), a co-living digital nomadic hub in Budapest, Hungary (2020), and a yearly Nomad Fest in Bansko, Bulgaria (2020). Such multi-sited ethnographic research would have benefited from diversified exposure to multiple nomadic communities and would have contributed toward reinforcing the credibility (Lincoln and Guba 1985) of this work. Worldwide bans on travel, however, and the virtual halt of normal daily life rendered such research plans unfeasible. In its current form, this thesis draws on embodied ethnographic immersion in one physical context, that of the Nomad Cruise 2019, which is supplemented with prolonged netnographic research. While the ethnographic richness and depth which this work aspired toward was inhibited by the global events that ensued during its development, as outlined earlier, incorporating the netnographic method in the methodological portfolio of this research was highly beneficial in its own right.

#### 4.6. Concluding remarks

This dissertation focuses on an articulation of the modern lived experience where fading traditions and shifting social norms (Bauman 2000; 2007) are reshaping society in significant ways, while universal precarity and loss of hope in the future have become prominent features of the sociocultural landscape (Beck 1986; Berlant 2011; Lorey 2014). Three papers explore how consumers adapt and respond to these dynamics and answer to the overarching research question “how does living a liquid modern life shape and is shaped by consumption?” To study liquid modern life (Bauman 2005) and consumption, this work explored ethnographically and netnographically the research phenomenon of digital nomadism – a hyper mobile lifestyle that closely reflects the multitudes of reconfigurations of life in liquid modernity (Bauman 2000). Responding to calls for research on the implications of liquidity for consumers (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017; Lamberton and Goldsmith 2020), this dissertation expands the theoretical footprint of liquid consumption (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017) by leveraging this lens to revisit three foundational marketing constructs – marketplace utopias, materialism, and consumer security in an era of precarity – charting how liquid consumption logics offer consumers new ways to escape their lived reality, find security and build symbolic capital.

In its broad positioning with the contemporary discourse, this dissertation puts a spotlight on the rise of a community of consumers that embody an overarching sense of discontent with normative life and seek ways to renegotiate their position within the global market economy. The digital nomads studied here are individuals who seek to confront, escape and resolve the tensions that plague everyday modern life. Tensions arising from ubiquitous insecurity, professional precarity, and lack of attainable stability, for which extant social institutions offer few solutions. This dissertation shows how, as it gains more visibility and thus, by proxy, becomes more legitimized, digital nomadism offers attractive opportunities for consumers to circumvent the burdens and liabilities inherent to solid, rooted living.

While questions about the sustainability of this lifestyle for the future remain (Cook 2020; Thompson 2021), there are many indications that digital nomadism is here to stay (Everson,



King and Ockels 2021). Increasingly, governments are signaling that they are becoming more receptive to digital nomads and are even incentivizing them to create temporary bases in their countries by offering “digital nomads visas” which in some cases come together with a cash bonus in return to a commitment to settle in the country for some period of time (Kelleher 2020). These initiatives recognize the positive economic impact that digital nomads bring to the places they visit, for example through building communities, helping to fight tourism or population decline in remote villages or the seasonality of the tourism market (Dartford 2021). At the same time, digital nomads are criticized for their “bracketed existence” from the locales they reside in, with their income often remaining within the multinational corporation level, rather than trickling down to the local populations (Thompson 2018). Many are also questioning the adverse effect of digital nomadism on local communities, putting blame on this cohort for driving housing prices up and taking advantage of low costs in poor economies (Kushner 2021). Optimizing one’s daily living costs by relocating to less expensive locales is indeed at the very heart of “geo-arbitration” (Ferriss 2007), which is a prime strategy enabling nomadic living (Paper 3).

Yet, the widespread normalization of remote work in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic has played a significant role in dispelling notions that one must live near their place of work or even in the same country as their employer (Gershman 2021), making digital nomadism a feasible and desirable option for an unprecedented number of people. In consequence, a paradigm shift in the constitution of contemporary life is in the offing. Within that shift, “slowmadism” is poised to become the lifestyle of choice for a new wave of nomadically minded “life-hackers” (Ferriss 2007), eager to live better but willing to stick around for longer, as their new nomadic visas encourage them to do (Shadel 2021). Understanding digital nomads “as consumers” thus becomes increasingly important and this dissertation contributes toward positioning marketing practitioners and academics at a better vantage for grasping the constellations of practices and behaviors that will continue to unfold within this new market space.

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## Appendix A: Table of Participants

Informant pseudonym	Age /Gender	Nationality	Yearly income
Neil	37 / M	Ireland	€40,000 - €60,000
Martin	37 / M	Germany	€125,000 +
Amy	51 / F	USA	€125,000 +
Lary	57 / M	USA	€125,000 +
Ema	35 / F	Netherlands	€40,000 - €60,000
Tom	28/ M	China / Mongolia	€40,000 - €60,000
Brandon	43/M	USA, Canada, Czechia	€60,000 - €80,000
Ian	20 / M	Germany	€40,000 - €60,000
Sonja	39 / F	UK	€20,000 - €40,000
Miles	27 / M	Canada	€40,000 - €60,000
Karin	33 / F	Philippines	€20,000 - €40,000
Audrey	35 / F	Romania	€20,000 - €40,000
Lena	30 / F	USA	€40,000 - €60,000
John	26 / M	France	Less than €20,000
Alan	39 / M	USA	€80,000 +
Kristina	32 / F	UK	€20,000 - €40,000
Marina	53/F	Netherlands	€80,000 +
Roger	29/M	USA	€20,000 - €40,000
Olivia	32/F	USA	€20,000 - €40,000
Nanette	34/F	USA	€40,000 - €60,000
Sam	34/M	USA	€80,000 +
Marie	29 / F	Germany	€40,000 - €60,000
Greg	31 / M	Germany	€80,000 +
Tina	55 / F	USA	€80,000 +
Anne	55 / F	Australia	€80,000 +
Alan	25 / M	Romania	€20,000 - €40,000
Jack	48 / M	UK	€40,000 - €60,000
Sophie	31 / F	Germany	€20,000 - €40,000
Kari	28 / M	USA	€20,000 - €40,000
Trevor	49 / M	Greece	€20,000 - €40,000
Sonja	44 / F	Germany	€80,000 +
Taim	40 / M	USA / Egypt	€40,000 - €60,000
Shannon	42 / F	USA / India	€20,000 - €40,000
David	43 / M	Sweden	€40,000 - €60,000
Max	47 / M	USA	€20,000 - €40,000
Johnathan	38 / M	Germany	€80,000 +
Shirely	29 / F	Germany	€20,000 - €40,000
Veronica	23 / F	Netherlands	€80,000 +
Michael	27 / M	USA / Mexico	€80,000 +
Kevin	18 / M	USA	€40,000 - €60,000
Ian	49 / M	Ireland	€40,000 - €60,000
Brian	27 / M	Poland	€20,000 - €40,000
Lauren	38 / F	Hungary	€20,000 - €40,000
Ana	35 / F	Mexico	€20,000 - €40,000
Carol	34 / F	Colombia	€20,000 - €40,000
James	28 / M	Bulgaria	€20,000 - €40,000

## Appendix B: Information Sheet & Consent Form



### Participant Information Form

**Title of the Research Project:** Life Projects and Consumption Behaviors of Digital Nomads

**Researchers:** Alex Atanasova and Giana Eckhardt

#### About the Research Project:

In this research project we seek to explore the phenomenon of digital nomadism. In our research we focus on the consumer experiential aspects of nomadism to better understand this global phenomenon.

#### Participation in the study:

Participation is entirely voluntary, anonymous and confidential. Participants can decide not to answer any question if they prefer not to. Participants can withdraw at any time without giving a reason. Participants' consent form will be stored separately from the responses provided. Participants can retain this information sheet for reference and contact the researchers with any questions at any time.

#### In case of questions or any other concerns, please contact:

Alex Atanasova  
Royal Holloway, University of London  
School of Management.  
Egham, Surrey TW20 0EX  
England  
Alex.Atanasova.2018@live.rhuk.ac.uk



## Participant Consent Form

*Research Project: Life Projects and Consumption Behaviors of Digital Nomads*

Please indicate that

I have read the information sheet about this study (YES/NO)

I have had the opportunity to ask questions (YES/NO)

I have received satisfactory answers to any questions (YES/NO)

I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time, without giving a reason (YES/NO)

I agree to participate in this study (YES/NO)

I agree that the interview is audiotaped (YES/NO)

I understand that my responses will be anonymous and I will not be identified in any way (YES/NO)

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C: Interview Guide | Nomad Cruise 2019

### *Grand tour*

Tell me about yourself? What is life like when not on the Cruise?

### *Life before being a nomad*

What were you doing before you became a full-time nomad?

What made you decide to become a nomad?

At the time, how did you imagine life as a nomad? What were some of the expectations or concerns you had when you started? Has your perspective changed since then?

### *Relations with others*

How do people react when you tell them that you are a nomad?

When not on this Cruise, what would be a typical place or situation where you would be with other digital nomads?

How important is community for digital nomads?

### *Life as a nomad*

What is it like to live as a nomad? Could you describe what does your typical day look like?

What are your daily routines?

What is it that you appreciate the most about nomadic living? How has living this way changed you or your personal and/or professional life? What are some of the things that you prioritize in your life as a nomad?

If you can think of a meaningful memory that defines your life as a nomad, what would that be?

What has been a highlight for you here on the Cruise? Have your expectations been met?

What are the downsides of being a digital nomad? What are the biggest challenges living this way, compared to “normal life”? Are there things you have had to sacrifice or things that you miss?

### *Consumption*

What is important to you know in terms of how you spend your money and what you buy?

What are some of the things that bring you security/stability within a nomadic lifestyle?

### *Orientation toward the future*

If you were to describe what does a perfect life look like, what would you say?

Where do you see yourself 5yrs from now?

If you were to convince someone that they should become a nomad what would you say to them?

Anything else you would like to share?

