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#VanLife: Materiality, Makeovers and Mobility amongst Digital Nomads

Information and communication technologies enable the emergence of new digital lifestyles that are characterized by high mobility. This paper explores #vanlife as an emerging phenomenon that inspires a hyper-mobile life on the road. It connects it to digital nomadism and compares and contrasts it to RVing/camping. Using the visual components and hashtags of 200 Instagram posts, it specifically delves into the role materiality plays for vanlifers and discusses how the seemingly opposite of materiality and mobility are reconciled in this context. The resulting portrait painted of #vanlife adds significant knowledge to the mobility, digital nomadism and online consumer tribe literatures. Methodological and practical implications are also discussed.

Key words: vanlife, digital nomads, mobility, materiality, Instagram, netnography

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Introduction

Over 3.7 million posts on Instagram are associated with the hashtag #vanlife, a phenomenon that was allegedly started by Foster Huntington's photographic book "Home is where you park it", following his decision to remove himself from the traps of everyday working life and embark on full-time digital nomadism (Dorn, 2015). Indeed, vanlife offers the ultimate level of mobility to digital nomads (Reichenberger, 2018). As a lifestyle, it is characterized by minimalism and digital storytelling and social media provide the gathering space for this traveling neo-tribe (Hardy & Robards, 2015). While #vanlife has received extensive coverage in traditional and social media, academic resources that explore it and its connection to digital nomadism are scarce. This paper investigates this intersection of #vanlife and digital nomadism to contribute to the emerging literature on hyper-mobile lifestyles enabled by information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Cohen & Gössling, 2015).

Literature Review

Digital nomads are persons who take on work that can be accomplished using ICTs and therefore is not confined to a workplace (Müller, 2016). They use this opportunity to travel to exotic locations and essentially blur the boundaries between work, travel and leisure (Reichenberger, 2018). As such, digital nomads illustrate how ICTs make hyper-mobile travel lifestyles like full-time RVing (Hardy, Gretzel & Hanson, 2013) or flashpacking (Paris, 2012) accessible to a working population. Their mobility is afforded by not only their spatial and temporal flexibility but also their willingness to part with material things. Indeed, mobility and materiality seem to stand in stark contrast and literature on digital nomads highlights their digital existence (Müller, 2016). However, to fully free themselves from spatial constraints, digital nomads require mobile dwellings and the #vanlife movement offers

them nimble vehicles that can venture beyond the beaten tracks, and a digital tribe that exists outside of campground structures or shared digital nomad workspaces. To what extent digital nomadism and #vanlife overlap is the main focus of this paper.

Methodology

Netnography (Kozinets, 2015) was selected to explore #vanlife and its connection to digital nomadism. It is a research method that uses ethnographic techniques and, at the same time, takes advantage of social media affordances to access and archive data (e.g. search tools within social media sites to find hashtags) (Gretzel, 2017). It enables a rich cultural understanding of online phenomena by incorporating multiple types of data (e.g. text and visuals). By allowing the researcher to zoom in and out of the data, it further supports the revealing of patterns as well as the discovery of so-called "black swans", i.e. particularly interesting data points that challenge assumptions (Kozinets, 2015).

Data Collection and Sample

#Vanlife spans across a number of social media platforms. Following the principles outlined by netnography (Kozinets, 2015), Instagram was selected as the data collection site as it represents the platform on which the movement started and also one of the fastest growing social media sites (Statista, 2018). Given that public APIs no longer exist to allow automated access to Instagram posts, the data was scraped using a python script that used the web view of Instagram to search for the hashtag #vanlife in early September of 2018. The search sought out hashtags that were posted in the title of the photograph or were added in the comments. The scrape extracted the 200 most recent posts. The most recent rather than the "top posts" were selected to avoid commercial posts. A small corpus was necessary to allow for a qualitative reading of the data. Two distinct samples were constructed from the data.

The first included the visual components of the posts, with 100 visuals showing at least parts of the exterior or interior of a van or artistic renditions thereof. These were used to explore materiality and mobility. To construct the second sample, all hashtags used in the 200 posts were extracted. The focus on hashtags is justified as they are central means of marking a post's contribution to a conversation on Instagram and constitute a rich semiotic indexing system (Djerf-Pierre, Ghersetti & Hedman, 2016). Posts that referred to life in Vancouver or misused the hashtag for promotional purposes were excluded. Only 153 posts were retained. These posts used on average 15 hashtags, leading to a total textual sample of 2,334 hashtags.

Data Analysis

The analysis involved: 1) a thematic analysis of the hashtags in the textual component of the posts; and, 2) a deep qualitative reading of the visuals. The first phase comprised the coding of hashtags into a priori themes: a) vanlife; b) RVing/camping; c) digital nomadism; and, d) vehicle to reflect materiality. The coding was done by one coder and cross-checked by a second. Word frequency counts established the relative importance of the themes. The second phase started with immersion of the researchers in #vanlife on Instagram over a period of two months. The analysis of the extracted data involved hermeneutic circles of reading, re-reading and discussing. It focused on the content of the visuals rather than their composition (Albers & James, 1988) and adopted a metaphoric rather than metanymic perspective (Stepchenkova & Zhen, 2013), i.e. rather than interpreting visual elements at face value, they were treated as "symbols that collectively allude to a meaning that lies outside of the particular picture" (p.591).

Findings

Hashtag Analysis

Vanlife: 305 hashtags (13.1%) pertained to various descriptors of vanlife as a phenomenon. The hashtags describe it as a project, a movement, a lifestyle, a culture but also a community (Table 1). It not only involves humans but also pets (#vandog). It is to some extent institutionalized through magazines and big enough to spur regional conversations (e.g. #vanlifeeurope). A great deal of the hashtags also pertains to digitally documenting #vanlife experiences (#vanlifediaries). Overall, the use of #vanlife-related hashtags makes it clear that these Instagrammers want to affiliate their posts with the #vanlife hashtag and its variants to become part of this online tribe.

Table 1. Frequently Used Hashtags

Theme	Most frequent Hashtag	Frequency Count
Vanlife	#vanlife	149
	#vanlifediaries	23
	#vanlifers	20
	#vanlifemovement	12
	#projectvanlife	10
RVing/Camping	#camping	12
	#camperlife	10
	#ourcamplife	5
	#glamping	5
	#camperlifestyle	5
Digital Nomadism	#homeiswhereyouparkit	24
	#nomad/s	15
	#nomadlife	9
	#digitalnomad/s	6
	#lifeontheroad	5
	#gypsysoul	5
Vehicle	#campervan	15
	#van/s	15
	#homeonwheels	10
	#vanagon	7
	#vw	7
	#westfalia	7
	#vwlove	7

RVing/Camping: Only 98 (4.2%) of the hashtags pertain to RVing/Camping, suggesting that #vanlife is indeed a separate travelstyle. It is interesting that #glamping emerged as an important hashtag as it represents a trendy form of camping that values material luxuries. Further, only two hashtags mention campgrounds, indicating that they play an insignificant role in #vanlife activities and culture, further highlighting the mobility of vanlifers. This also emphasizes that #vanlife is an imagined tribe, i.e. a community that connects via Instagram rather than in actuality. What matters to vanlifers is digital sociality rather than real-world connections formed during the happy hours and campfires offered by campgrounds.

Digital Nomadism: A total of 134 hashtags (5.7%) could be identified that relate to digital nomad concepts. The term #digitalnomad/s itself was used six times. The theme is comprised of two subthemes: 1) life on the road (88 mentions); and, 2) work while traveling (46 counts). Hashtags such as #travelpreneur indicate that for some, #vanlife is not just a weekend or vacation activity. Artists, photographers, writers, social media influencers and musicians are all professions represented in the hashtags. Hashtags such as #etsy further suggest that not all their work is purely digital but certainly supported by digital technologies.

Vehicle: Most of the hashtags (377, 16.2%) fell into this category, thus firmly establishing the importance of materiality in the form of the van. Various versions of hashtags representing Volkswagen and its van brands dominate the theme. Similar to RVers forming sub-tribes (Hardy et al., 2013), vanlifers label themselves based on the type of van they use. Many of the hashtags also refer to modifications or complete makeovers made to the vans. In addition, there is a strong retro/vintage theme that plays into nostalgia for the vans used by

hippies. Finally, several hashtags link the van with the concept of home, describing it as a home on wheels or a tiny home.

Visual Analysis

The van-related visuals either feature selfies (mostly inside the van) and the van itself, or portray the van in the wilderness, using frames and filters to conform with Instagram aesthetics (Gretzel, 2017). The first major theme identified was "Home on wheels". Similar to RVing, the campervan becomes the gravitational centre of #vanlife. Doormats, pets, musical instruments and room to cook home-made meals are prominently displayed and suggest that digital nomads create home-like places when on the road. The materiality of this home-life is evident in the cooking utensils, drying racks and other utilitarian objects but also in the home decorations, such as potted plants and dream-catchers. The material aspects of digital nomad work (e.g. laptops and smartphones) only appear in the background of a few pictures. Entertainment technologies typically used in the home (tablets and projectors) are the focus of some posts.
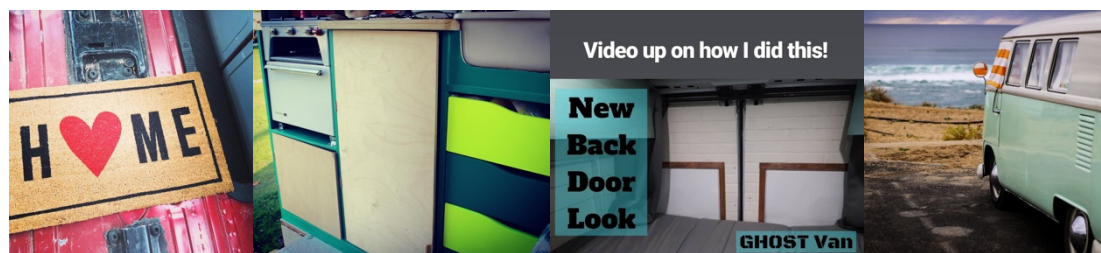

Figure 1. Visual representations of materiality and mobility in #vanlife pictures

The second theme revolves around the consequences of materiality and was entitled "Storage and Packing". Vanlifers proudly present their storage solutions and packing skills that ensure mobility. Related to this is the "DIY" theme. Several of the visuals feature self-made van conversions, additions or makeovers. An obsession with vintage and designer looks

appears in some of the posts. Finally, materiality and mobility were also evident in what we named "Vanlove", with visuals prominently featuring the van brand, the van's versatility or the van's agility in different terrains. Figure 1 presents a visual representation for each of the four themes.

Conclusion

The findings paint a picture of vanlifers as a hyper-mobile online tribe that uses Instagram to document and connect, and which significantly overlaps with digital nomadism. Although ICTs are not explicitly mentioned in the hashtag, they appear in the visuals. Despite or maybe because of this digital, minimalist and mobile lifestyle, material things play an important role. Both the van and the things in it that make it a tiny home on wheels are the central pillars of #vanlife materiality. Thus, the paper provides an important contribution to the digital nomadism literature by adding a material dimension to the discussion of online tribes. Future research can build on these findings to explore the materiality of technology in this context or extend the research to specific groups of campers (e.g. freedom campers) or flashpackers to understand how their materiality-mobility nexus might differ. The research further contributes to the growing literature on neo-tribes in leisure and tourism (Hardy, Bennett & Robards, 2018) by adding discussions on hypermobility and materiality while also challenging the fluidity of tribal membership in relation to digital nomadism.

The paper's methodological contribution lies in illustrating the deep cultural understanding that can be derived when applying netnographic research techniques. While the hashtag analysis provided an overview of the #vanlife phenomenon and allowed for an exploration of its link to digital nomadism and a positioning against more traditional RVing, the qualitative reading of the visuals beyond their composition and content elements provided insights into the material lives of vanlifers. As such, the research also illustrates the

limitations of current big data-based quantitative content analyses who still mostly rely on hashtags to interpret visuals posted on social media.

There are clear practical implications for the producers and providers of campervans in terms of how to accommodate both the material and the mobility needs. Understanding vanlife as a travel and social media phenomenon is also important for destination marketers and municipalities whose destinations are currently or potentially visited by this group. Future research should further explore the material, spatial and social needs of these hypermobile digital nomads to spur innovations in technology services and travel products tailored to this emerging lifestyle group.

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