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EDITED BY

Alan Chamberlain,
University of Nottingham, United Kingdom

REVIEWED BY

Yihong Wang,
Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, China

*CORRESPONDENCE:

Sandro Serpa
✉ sandro.nf.serpa@uac.pt

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Attraction policies for digital nomads: some emerging issues

Sandro Serpa^{1,2*}, Maria José Sá³ and Rolando Lalanda
Gonçalves¹

¹Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, University of the Azores;
Interdisciplinary Centre of Social Sciences - CICS.UAc/CICS.NOVA.UAc, Ponta Delgada, Portugal,

²Interdisciplinary Centre for Childhood and Adolescence – NICA – UAc, Ponta Delgada, Portugal,

³CIPES – Centre for Research in Higher Education Policies, Matosinhos, Portugal

The digital nomad phenomenon takes on a growing relevance in a digitalized society. This position paper aims to contribute to the analysis of the phenomenon of attraction policies for digital nomads, in its advantages, limitations and motivations, so as to justify a political and social intervention that is intended to be rigorously based.

KEYWORDS

digital nomads, policy agenda, coworking, new forms of work, location independence, coliving, attraction policies

1 Introduction

The transformations with globalization, international mobility, digitalization, technology, artificial intelligence, the internet of things, and the metaverse, among other changes, have brought about profound changes in the way of working (Angiello, 2022; Hannonen, 2020; Sá et al., 2021; Ferreira and Serpa, 2018; Serpa et al., 2021; Sá and Serpa, 2023; Serpa, 2021). These changes increased with the pandemic caused by COVID-19 and the transformations that its combat shaped, with lockdown and the need to increase telework, namely through remote working policies (Ferreira and Serpa, 2021; Loryn, 2022; Nichols, 2022). According to Christoph (2021, p. 43), “Interpersonal relations have changed, the digital educational and professional reality has given a new shape to human expectations; space and time take on a new meaning, our everyday life is situated in an increasing technological dimension.”

The concept of digital nomadism is itself multidisciplinary and complex (Reczuch, 2020; Serpa et al., 2017; Thompson, 2018; Hannonen, 2020; Wang et al., 2018; Cook, 2022), as seen in the very pertinent association between digitalization, economy and sociocultural phenomenon developed by Bonneau and Aroles (2021), through a lifestyle based on a huge flexibility between spatial mobility, personal and family life, and working hours (Matsushita, 2022) that ultimately calls into question the boundaries of the organization (Mourato et al., 2023; Cook, 2022). However, research on the topic of digital nomads is still taking its first steps (Šimová, 2022).

In this context, there has been a normalization, increase and importance of digital nomadism (Hermann and Paris, 2020; Reichenberger, 2018; Al-Hadi and Al-Aufi, 2019; Abdelgawad, 2021; Ahuja et al., 2020), for the moment, very concentrated in Western countries (Frick and Marx, 2021). Digital nomads are regarded as a niche population to some extent privileged (Papanikolaou et al., 2023). Furthermore, strategies are mainly focused in the increasing attempt to attract them through government policies directly and specifically targeted at them. As, in a very current and pertinent way, Mourato et al. (2023, 10) state,

[...] the destinations should facilitate the life of digital nomads in not only both legal and bureaucratic terms, but also in the sense of building a community for this specific niche. Most governments already offered a mix of “Nomad Visa” (that most nomads do not

need), tax breaks, even though most nomads do not pay taxes in the country of residence, empty tourism pictures as promotion, and empty global promises on how good it is to work from there. However, nomads are looking for community, connection, giving back, and nature. Recently, Portugal approved a law proposal to create a Remote Work visa, seeing remote work with repopulation as a goal. In fact, it is important to help and empower the people that want to lead the change in small communities. It is necessary to give local government support to facilitate and reinforce the need for the leaders in the community to work together, to build dynamic coworking and meeting spaces that support the right activities, to bring people from the outside to inspire change and feed with inspiration, to understand that villages might be the best place to live, that cities are overcrowded and a person does not need to live in one to work in a big corporation, and finally, to understand that community is what humans seek and what brings the power to people.

This position paper aims to contribute to the analysis of the phenomenon of digital nomads' attraction policies in terms of its advantages, limitations and motivations, so as to justify a political and social intervention by policymakers that is intended to be rigorously grounded (Šimová, 2022). To achieve this goal, we will address the policies to attract digital nomads, starting by explaining what digital nomads are, after which the Policy Agenda on Digital Nomads will be analyzed, focusing on the dimension of attracting and retaining digital nomads as a political strategy, which, with variations, is the basis of many policy options.

2 Materials and methods

This research study used a qualitative method to search and analyze data. Thus, the analysis of the collected data was carried out through content analysis, as it enables the compression of a high amount of data into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding (Bardin, 2013; Mayring, 2014; Krippendorff, 2018). This is a powerful technique as it enables to filter large volumes of data more easily and systematically (Mayring, 2014; Quivy and Campenhaut, 2005).

The authors carried out a literature search on the B-ON (2024) and SCILIT (2024) databases. While the B-ON (online) database incorporates the Web of Knowledge, SciELO, and DOAJ databases, among others, the SCILIT database encompasses all documentation to which a DOI (Digital Object Identifier) has been assigned. This literature search resulted in 70 publications, described in Table 1.

The search terms used were digital nomads, policy agenda, coworking, digitalization, new forms of work, location independence,

and coliving, which were mentioned either in the title or the abstract. The search was performed between 2 and 19 March 2023.

This article analyzed only studies that use a qualitative approach and qualitative methods and instruments, such as interpretive philosophy and an inductive approach (Ay and Güzel, 2024), in-depth case study (Matsushita, 2022), inductive content analysis (Chevtaeva, 2021), social constructivism approach (Pacheco and Azevedo, 2022) narrative interviews and netnography (Aufschnaiter et al., 2021), ethnography (Prester et al., 2019), grounded theory (Von Zumbusch and Lalicic, 2020), and participant observation (Thompson, 2018).

As this is a rather new field of study, information on digital nomads is still scarce, fragmented and non-scientific, and the vast majority of studies use a qualitative approach to analyze this phenomenon in particular (Shawkat et al., 2021). Thus, this still emergent phenomenon needs to be further studied, not only using both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Other studies (e.g., Zhang et al., 2018; Chen et al., 2020; Tavares and Brea, 2020; Rodríguez-Campo et al., 2019; Otoo et al., 2021; Hosany and Gilbert, 2010; He et al., 2020; Patwardhan et al., 2020; Agyeiwaah et al., 2021) use quantitative methods, but they focus on tourism attraction in general, and not specifically on the topic of digital nomads.

3 Attraction of digital nomads

3.1 Digital nomads

Digital nomads, while not necessarily being a homogeneous group (Sánchez-Vergara et al., 2023; Reichenberger, 2018), are, then, individuals who have the possibility to work anytime and anywhere (Richter and Richter, 2020), articulating with somewhat undefined or, at least, gray boundaries, more or less successfully, work, leisure and travel in their lifestyle (Reichenberger, 2018; Šimová, 2022), and who prioritize variables such as cheaper living costs when looking for places to work and live for a given period of time (Ehn et al., 2022); their lifestyle is, thus, referred to as digital nomadism (Hannonen, 2020).

Digital nomads are, therefore, professionals who, in comparison with the traditional concept of professional, have the particularity of developing their work in a digital way and at a distance, using the Internet to do so. They have no geographic ties, having the possibility to choose where they work and live, thus reflecting a lifestyle characterized by constant and unconstrained mobility. These professionals tend to be young and highly skilled graduates, who have developed their professional activity in several countries, having had contact with different socio-economic and cultural contexts (Angiello, 2022). Some authors argue that digital nomads envisage the workplace

TABLE 1 Document sources analyzed and their characterization.

Type of document		Geographical scope		Year of publication			
Theoretical/ conceptual	Empirical	International	National	2023	2022	2021	Prior to 2021
41	29	59	11	7	16	18	29
Total: 70 publications							

Source: Authors' production.

in a fluid way, in a context of liquid modernity (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017; Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2020; Aufschnaiter et al., 2021). Their way of life combines the dichotomies autonomy and structure/stability (Prester et al., 2019), freedom and discipline (Cook, 2020) or liquidity and solidity (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017). According to Mancinelli (2020), digital nomads give up a sedentary life, characterized by the accrual of material goods, stability and comfort, to adopt a new system of values guided by minimalism, uncertainty and risk.

To understand digital nomads as “mobile transnational online workers” (Loryn, 2022, p. 13), it is relevant to consider the following four dimensions in an articulated way: (1) digital work; (2) gig economy/work; (3) nomadic work; and (4) adventure and global travel (Nash et al., 2018; Sutherland and Jarrahi, 2017), always in an attempt to balance freedom, stability, mobility and flexibility, in a context of digitalization (Reczuch, 2020; Richter and Richter, 2020; Mancinelli, 2020; Hannonen, 2020; Hermann and Paris, 2020; Reichenberger, 2018).

But to what extent is this demand for flexibility reflected in the way these individuals work and live, as well as in the role they take on in a context of extreme variability (Hemsley et al., 2020; Thompson, 2018; Von Zumbusch and Lalicic, 2020)?

First, co-living spaces should ensure that their community managers are doing everything they can to maximize the opportunities for users to network and socialize within the co-living spaces, thus creating the sense of community. Second, co-living spaces, especially when operated under a franchise model or other models where multiple properties are operated under the same brand name, should maintain their service standards across all locations to ensure that the co-living experiences are contributing to digital nomads' well-being in a consistent manner. Last but not least, facilitators should make sure that the design of the co-living properties are actually promoting well-being as such, whereby adequate spaces are dedicated to members for exercise, work, socializing and rest, respectively (Von Zumbusch and Lalicic, 2020, 451).

Flexibility and mobility are, then, ways of life (Angiello, 2022; Richter and Richter, 2020; Bonneau and Aroles, 2021), in a permanent articulation between the formal and the informal (Barbosa et al., 2021; Frick and Marx, 2021; Arifa et al., 2022; Cook, 2022). “Coworking spaces are not only seen as work-life habitats, but also as places of innovation and well-being” (Pacheco and Azevedo, 2022, p. 195).

Digital nomads may be associated with a differentiated mobile lifestyle with a management of their personal and professional identity very much based on the virtual world marked by volatility and plurality (Reczuch, 2020; Serpa and Ferreira, 2018; Ahuja et al., 2020; Reichenberger, 2018). This lifestyle adopted by digital nomads is described by Bala (2021, 341) as.

Having the ability to travel all the time requires high adaptability. Each new location nomads are able to redefine themselves and start from scratch. Try something new. Take a risk. Be able to handle a lot of daily inconveniences, to take care of the unexpected, free to choose. Live without the crutches of usual comfort.

However, one cannot fall into a romanticized image (Bonneau et al., 2022; Sánchez-Vergara et al., 2023; Reichenberger, 2018; Nash et al.,

2018; Cook, 2020; De Vaujany et al., 2021; Samek Lodovici et al., 2021) of idealized independence and freedom of the digital nomadism lifestyle, as these professionals need to find a balance between autonomy and stability, between freedom and discipline, which makes their lifestyle not entirely liquid and their mobility projects anchored in sources of solidity (Aufschnaiter et al., 2021). In the words of Cook (2020, 8),

Digital nomads then are engaged in a love/hate relationship with the Western institution of work. They might initially proclaim that they are escaping the ‘traditional office’ or the ‘9 to 5’, but they end up performing and reformatting these structures in their daily routines. [...] In today’s globalized and connected world, it seems it does not really matter if you are working in an office or in a coworking space, as an employee or as a freelancer; all workers are required to be responsible, self-motivated, flexible and disciplined. From these pressures it seems there is currently no escape, whoever you work for or wherever you are (p. 388).

Thus, the lifestyle adopted by digital nomads is only apparently ideal, in an optimal combination between work and leisure (materialized in permanent travels), inasmuch that, according to Bonneau and Aroles (2021, 23), “[...] achieving and sustaining constant mobility is a challenge and not everyone carries equal changes of ‘making it’. At some point, even the most convinced nomads realize that their quest for a leisure-driven lifestyle actually means that they are always working while travelling.” Furthermore, and following Thompson (2018, 40), employers have some advantages in adopting these new forms of working, as they do not need to worry about providing their workers, the digital nomads, with “[...] full-time employment, benefits, office space and paid leave.” In turn, and as a consequence on the workers’ side, they “[...] have the freedom to work constantly, as their precarious and competitive salary is often decreasing and at the mercy of an algorithm” (Thompson, 2018, 40).

Digital nomads, by the roles performed, are usually entrepreneurs or freelance specialists (Cook, 2020; Richter and Richter, 2020), demonstrating high-level skills and literacy (Al-Hadi and Al-Aufi, 2019; Reczuch, 2020; Nash et al., 2018; Christoph, 2021; Sá and Serpa, 2018; Sá et al., 2021; Ministry of Labor, Solidarity and Social Security, 2022), which is one of the reasons why much of the policy agenda at the international level puts forth, very explicitly and intentionally, attempts to attract these digital nomads (Sánchez-Vergara et al., 2023), as discussed in the following sub-section.

3.2 Policy agenda on digital nomads

Many countries are already demonstrating, in the policies implemented by their governments, the adoption of measures to motivate digital nomads and attract these professionals, for example, with the establishment of legal conditions, such as the creation of specific visas (Ministry of Labor, Solidarity and Social Security, 2022; Hermann and Paris, 2020; Bozzi, 2020; Al-Hadi and Al-Aufi, 2019; Chevtaeva, 2021; Orel, 2021; ETIAS, 2023).

Parreño-Castellano et al. (2022) argue that the political agenda regarding the attraction of digital nomads has both state-level policies (e.g., attractive taxation, visa-free stays, e-residency or digital nomad visas) and regional-level policies (e.g., the organization of symposiums and conventions of digital nomads and campaigns to

attract and promote their locations). In the case of Spain, the authors mention that by the end of 2022, the government has prepared a draft of the Law for the Promotion of the Start-up Ecosystem, which includes the establishment of a new visa for remote workers from foreign companies, and that digital nomads working for companies of the European Economic Area (Schengen Area) do not need a visa for stays of over 3 months and can be Spanish residents, provided that they are self-employed or work as employees and are entitled to an health insurance (Parreño-Castellano et al., 2022).

Another example of the design of policies that aim to attract digital nomads is Portugal. This country has strategies that seek to increase the conditions for hosting digital nomads, namely by offering coworking spaces via the refurbishment of public spaces and infrastructures not being used, the mobilization of infrastructures with available capacity (e.g., business hubs of the national network or other equipment currently intended for other purposes) aiming to boost the potential of attraction at both the national and regional levels (Ministry of Labor, Solidarity and Social Security, 2022).

In Thailand, several provinces and metropolitan areas are increasingly focusing their attraction policies on “[...] accommodating technology-driven guests through the rebranding and reshaping of existing infrastructure, or by constructing desired work-leisure hubs,” which consist of remotely located coworking spaces (Orel, 2021, 4). These policies aiming for the development of work-leisure infrastructures in Thailand resulted in efforts of the Thai government to foster creative tourism to respond to the demands of the digital. However, the author stresses that this form of tourism may negatively influence the local environment as a result of overcrowding and depletion of resources in these regions; so, the balance between sustainable development and the increase in the conditions to host digital nomads is frail, and caution should be taken when designing these policies (Orel, 2021).

Other country destinations for digital nomads are, according to the research by Ay and Güzel (2024), Croatia, Turkey, Indonesia and Malaysia, as a result of attraction policies put in place by the governments of these countries, namely by providing good conditions for digital nomads to carry out their work (in terms of accessibility, facilities, and supportive services). Adding to the countries that are most attractive to digital nomads, Zhou et al. (2024), in their study of the countries’ strategies to attract these digital workers, point out Saudi and Colombia.

In their mobility, digital nomads need to find workspaces that allow them to develop their activity (Von Zumbusch and Lalicic, 2020; Nash et al., 2018; Al-Hadi and Al-Aufi, 2019; Chevtaeva, 2021). This need of digital nomads to find spaces that articulate work with leisure (Von Zumbusch and Lalicic, 2020; Richter and Richter, 2020; Orel, 2021) is potentially shaping new forms of tourism (Reichenberger, 2018; Chevtaeva, 2021; Gede et al., 2021), and digital nomads cannot, in a reductionist way, be considered just another type of tourism, as they are a segment with specific and differentiated needs (Sánchez-Vergara et al., 2023). It is, therefore, essential that the various stakeholders (academic leaders, companies and the government) articulate themselves to create the optimal conditions for this emerging trend, which combines leisure and work, to take into account, on the one hand, the transformation of regional environments and the way this transformation occurs and, on the other hand, that the resulting development safeguards the interests of the local economy and the inhabitants of these areas (Orel, 2021).

This attraction attempt takes place at various levels, such as international entities (for example, the European Union), or at the country level (national, regional and even local), for example, in Portugal, to “Position Portugal as a country of excellence to attract

Digital Nomads” (Ministry of Labor, Solidarity and Social Security, 2022, 174). The study states, in this respect, that,

[...] from a public policy perspective, digital nomadism can facilitate the settlement of people in different territories, especially outside urban centers, and enhance the attraction of new residents. Digital nomadism can boost local economies, promote increased consumption and bring greater dynamism in the respective rental markets, as well as deepen cultural exchange and the creation of coworking centers (Ministry of Labor, Solidarity and Social Security, 2022, 73).

This study, published by the Office of Strategy and Planning of the Ministry of Labor, Solidarity and Social Security of the Portuguese Government, proposes to policymakers the strategies detailed in Figure 1.

However, we should be aware that this kind of presence (by definition tending to be highly provisional and temporary) is not necessarily positive for the receiving community (Christoph, 2021; Orel, 2019, 2021; Chevtaeva, 2021; Thompson, 2018). For example, and quite pertinently, two very relevant comments follow:

For those nomads who seek constructed community in expensive, all-inclusive communities such as co-living/co-working spaces, their privilege extends to an insulated bubble-like existence transporting a comfortable, middle-class, Western environment, to any location around the globe, while excluding the local population and cultural contexts (Thompson, 2018, 28);

The optimistic atmosphere perceived in blogs, conferences and official pages about the business opportunities of the nomadic way of life does not correspond to the difficulties that some reveal. Moreover, we might wonder to what extent digital nomadism causes greater precariousness than the workers would have with a model of life more rooted in their places of origin, due to the underutilization of their family and social capital. Despite this, their mobile behavior allows them to live or feel privileged in relation to the population of the host places. Mobility thus becomes an instrument to live an illusion of privilege, which must be interpreted as a loss of self-criticism and as a factor of distancing and segregation with respect to local communities (Parreño-Castellano et al., 2022, 15).

4 Conclusion

In this brief reflection on the movement of policies to attract digital nomads as a strategy of many political entities, it is safe to ascertain that it has to be based in a more justified way (Sánchez-Vergara et al., 2023) and has to observe the difficulties that policy makers at national, regional and even transnational levels face in managing the digital nomadism phenomenon, considering its flexible and disruptive nature (Sánchez-Vergara et al., 2023). If these issues are not properly addressed, they involve the potential of reproducing old and producing new social inequalities (Sá and Serpa, 2022).

Public action has, to a certain extent, reproduced the optimistic and uncritical vision that emerges in the media, in events that debate the issue of digital nomadism, in business marketing and the discourses and stances of the digital nomads themselves. Thus, it is paramount that

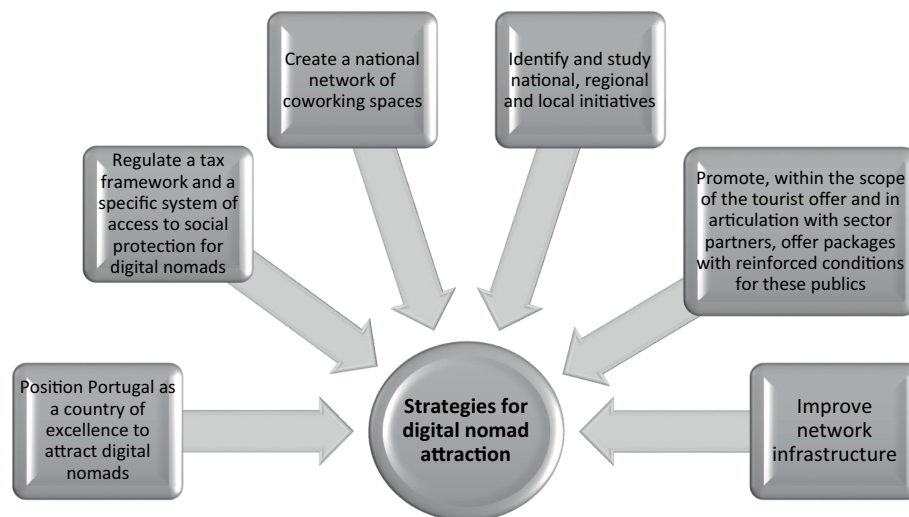


FIGURE 1

Digital nomad attraction proposals for Portugal [Adapted from the [Ministry of Labor, Solidarity and Social Security, 2022](#), 174–175].

public and political action be concerned with understanding the different profiles of digital nomads and the implications that the arrival of these professionals may have in the regions (Parreño-Castellano et al., 2022).

This is neither a new nor an original position, but it does not seem to have been sufficiently considered or justified when designing strategies to promote this trend, which makes it even more relevant to reinforce it at the present time. Above all, it is a matter of striking a balance between the advantages for countries, their populations and their environment of digital nomadism and the negative effects that this socio-economic and cultural phenomenon may have at the national and local level of the regions where it occurs.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

SS: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. MS: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. RL: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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