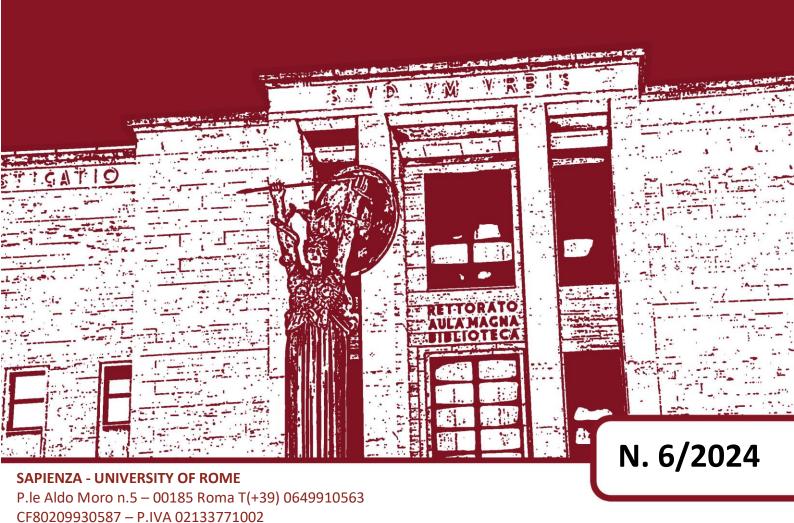# WORKING PAPERS SERIES
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Digital nomadism in liquid modernity: a casestudy of the Madeira Islands

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Digital nomadism in liquid modernity: a case study of the Madeira Islands

Abstract

This article explores the phenomenon of digital nomadism through the lens of Zygmunt Bauman's "liquid modernity," examining its socioeconomic, cultural, and ethical dimensions. Focusing on the case study of Madeira Island, the first European digital nomad hub, the article delves into the demographic profile of digital nomads, their impact on local economies, and the challenges posed to urban development and social cohesion. It discusses the opportunities for economic growth through digital nomadism while analyzing the potential for socio-cultural inequalities and the disruption of local communities. The article calls for a balanced approach in policy and urban planning, emphasizing the need for strategies that accommodate the fluid nature of modern work paradigms and ensure the inclusivity and well-being of transient and resident populations. The article contributes to the discourse on digital nomadism's sustainability and ethical implications in contemporary society by integrating theoretical perspectives and empirical data.

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1.   Introduction

Today's evolving work paradigm, driven by the demands of modernity, is increasingly characterized by flexibility in aesthetics and work processes. This shift, representing what Bauman (2000) calls "liquid modernity," reflects the ephemeral nature of contemporary times, where long-term stability is becoming obsolete, corresponding to the disposability of modern objects. Work, liberated from traditional temporal or spatial constraints, is in a state of perpetual evolution, characterized by change and innovation (Bauman, 2000). In conjunction with neoliberal economic changes, these ephemeral tendencies have recalibrated social power dynamics, diminishing the value of permanence and leading to new social movements, transformations, displacements, and diasporic forms of existence (M. Hart, 2005). These shifts are reflected in the evolving nature of work (Thompson, 2019).

The gig economy is an example of these changes. It replaces the traditional long-term employment models characterized by job security with a labor market defined by temporary, part-time, and contract work. This new paradigm, characterized by flexibility and technological advances, facilitates global connectivity across various occupations, ranging from delivery services to sophisticated software development (Bauman, 2000; Schor & Attwood-Charles, 2017). Current estimates suggest that online gig work represents a significant segment of the global workforce, accounting for 4.4 to 12.5 percent of the worldwide labor force. (The World Bank, 2023).

Originally from the music industry, "gig" stands for a specific task or a limited duration of work. This concept has expanded to include work mediated by platforms that connect gig workers with potential employers, offering

compensation structures based on project completion, piece rates, or hourly wages (The World Bank, 2023).

Digital nomadism, a sophisticated manifestation of the gig economy, exemplifies the quest for liberation from geographic limitations. Digital nomads use various digital platforms to fulfill their professional obligations, transcending local barriers and enabling travel (Reichenberger, 2018; Wang et al., 2018). Propelled by technological ubiquity and evolving perceptions of work-life balance, this lifestyle has surged in popularity, particularly during the pandemic.

In the broader societal context, digital nomadism intersects with contemporary social structures characterized by escalating inequality (De Carvalho, 2023). This inequality is not merely an incidental outcome of economic systems; it is deeply embedded in modern societies' conceptualization of happiness and comfort. The systems that promulgate these ideals of digital nomadism simultaneously perpetuate privilege and exclusivity, posing significant challenges in democratizing these benefits (Bauman, 1998).

Terms like "neo-nomads" and "semi-tourists" have been proposed to describe the intersection of work, leisure, and travel (D'Andrea, 2006; Mueller, 2016; Reichenberger, 2018). However, despite the claim to authenticity, these lifestyles bear resemblances to traditional tourism or expatriate living (Thompson, 2019; Wang et al., 2018). Ferriss's (2007) portrayal of digital nomads as independent, perpetually traveling entrepreneurs further popularized this lifestyle.

Makimoto and Manners (1997) were the first to coin "digital nomads" and envisioned a future of remote work facilitated by technological advances. The subsequent spread of telecommuting ushered in the first wave of digital nomadism, characterized by the advantage of location independence. Subsequent waves saw a diversification of the digital nomad demographic and an expansion of available tools and platforms, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Nomad List, n.d.). Digital nomads challenge Bauman's "unbounded space" concept by simultaneously inhabiting physical and virtual realms (Bauman, 2000). Coworking spaces, blurring the lines between work and leisure, serve as transient homes and social hubs, necessitating new forms of community building and social organization.

Pre-pandemic, digital nomadism was confined to online niche communities (Mueller, 2016). In the post-pandemic world, it has emerged as a prominent feature of a burgeoning social subgroup, particularly among younger generations (Vermes, 2023). These individuals embody a "liquid identity," unanchored from traditional markers such as fixed jobs or geographic locations. They navigate a continual change and self-reinvention landscape, with fluid and fragmented identities shaped by their nomadic lifestyle, online communities, and diverse cultural encounters.

This article aims to contribute to the academic discussion on digital nomadism and its implications by drawing from a case study on Madeira Island. The research in the Madeira Islands employed a comprehensive methodology integrating quantitative and qualitative methods, economic and tourism data from the Madeira Chamber of Commerce and Industry, semi-structured interviews with the project manager of 'Digital Nomad Madeira Islands,' and pertinent documentation from StartUp Madeira.

2. The Emergence of Digital Nomadism and Its Consequential Implications

The 'digital nomad' concept has increasingly found its way into public discourse in recent years. Olga (2020) elucidates this term, describing a new class of professionals distinguished by high mobility. Their professional careers are intimately connected to their propensity for travel, resulting in a distinctly nomadic lifestyle. Recent statistics reveal a substantial rise in individuals identifying as digital nomads, from 10.9 million in the pre-pandemic era to an estimated 35 million in 2023[1] (Think Remote, 2023).

This demographic surge has spawned an industry catering to this lifestyle. Emerging companies focus on community building, information dissemination, consultancy services, and the creation of coworking and co-living environments. Additionally, digital platforms and social media groups have emerged to support those aspiring to this lifestyle (Hawker, 2023). Notably, four major Facebook groups for digital nomads collectively boast over half a million members[2].

Nomad List[3], a prominent membership platform for digital nomads, hosts a community exceeding 10,000 members. Individuals document their travels, engage in discussions, and organize real-world meetups. A 2023 survey from this platform indicates the typical digital nomad as an unmarried, white, 34-year-old American man, working full-time as a software developer, earning an annual salary of $85,000, and typically residing about seven months in one location (Nomad List, 2023).

Parallel data from the Think Remote Platform portray the average digital nomad as a 32-year-old, single, white American male with an average annual income of $120,000, staying 1-3 months per destination, working full-time (less than 40 hours per week), freelancing, and engaged primarily in marketing, computer science, writing, design, and eCommerce. (Tagliaferri, 2023).

These communities resonate with what Bauman (2013) termed 'closed communities,' spaces of voluntary exile. This concept implies the absence of enduring commitments, where mental and moral disengagement and the evasion of the creation and experience of intimacy are prevalent. Individuals within these communities eschew interactions with others with divergent lifestyles, perceiving them as interlopers. This diminishes the likelihood of encountering diversity or facing cultural challenges (Bauman, 1995). Within this milieu, the construction of the self is predominantly influenced by consumer preferences, potentialities, or even chosen lifestyles.

According to Mueller (2016), digital nomads often prioritize leisure over work-related factors in selecting living locations. A notable practice among them is geo-arbitrage, where they reside in areas with a lower cost of living while earning in stronger currencies, such as the US dollar or the euro. This practice allows them to maximize their purchasing power and indulge their hedonistic tendencies (Thompson, 2019).

The Flatio Report (2023) suggests that the cost of living is the most crucial factor influencing digital nomads when choosing their next destination. 46.6% of respondents confirmed this. Other factors include sunlight (15%), safety (12%),

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[1] Available at: https://thinkremote.com/digital-nomad-statistics/

[2] Data from December 2023, from the groups: Digital Nomads Around the World (174.200 members), Digital Nomad Jobs (523.909 members), Female Digital Nomads (87.900 members) and Nomadbase - The Digital Nomad Community (67.900 members).

[3] Initially designed for digital nomads, the platform serves as a comprehensive resource for individuals seeking information on the best places in the world to live, work, and travel while pursuing remote work. The platform continuously collects massive amounts of data on thousands of cities worldwide, considering factors such as cost of living, climate, safety, etc.

Wi-Fi quality (9.4%), and the quality of healthcare (6.1%). This trend in destination choice could inadvertently exacerbate socioeconomic disparities, as an influx of digital nomads may inflate local prices, disrupting the economic equilibrium of host communities.

Although a relatively recent phenomenon, digital nomadism has already engendered global positive and negative socioeconomic impacts. Cities such as Medellin, Mexico City, and Lisbon are examples of the economic challenges posed by the influx of digital nomads, particularly following the global economic downturn induced by the pandemic. As the demand for real estate rises and the cost of living climbs, local infrastructure and the housing market face increasing strain, prompting growing discussions about colonial gentrification and its consequences for the local population. The trend towards longer-term accommodations to suit digital nomads further compounds these issues. Nevertheless, it is imperative to recognize that these economic challenges are multi-faceted, with digital nomadism being just one of the contributing factors (Vermes, 2023).

The phenomenon of digital nomadism has some paradoxical effects and is caught between hindering the development of local communities and acting as a catalyst for economic growth and innovation. Thompson (2019) claims that digital nomadism can undermine the development of local communities. In contrast, Choudhury (2022) argues that it has the potential to stimulate economic growth and promote innovation.

Almeida and Beleza (2022) take this concept further, arguing that digital nomadism can be used strategically to rejuvenate peripheral regions struggling with digital decentralization and environmental issues. One example of this application is the village of Ollolai in Sardinia. With the dual challenge of depopulation and economic stagnation, Ollolai has launched an innovative program called "Work from Ollolai."

The program is structured so that it places specific requirements on applicants. These include demonstrating their commitment to working remotely and committing to making a cultural contribution to the village. The nature of the contribution includes various activities, such as organizing conferences, writing essays, conducting research, or producing documentary films. The participants will be exempt from rent, utilities, and community fees for three months. However, participants must cover the cost of transportation and airfare themselves (Hughes, 2023).

A report by Flatio, a housing platform for digital nomads, provides insightful findings that further deepen the discourse on digital nomadism. Based on more than 1,200 responses, Portugal has emerged as the preferred destination for digital nomads, with Madeira, home to Europe's first digital nomad village, ranking seventh with a preference rate of 3.9% (Flatio, 2023).

With this in mind, this article presents and examines data from the 'Digital Nomad Madeira Islands' project.

3.   Madeira Island, establishing the first European digital nomad hub

The archipelago of Madeira in the Atlantic Ocean has long been renowned for its stunning landscapes and mild climate. This Portuguese territory comprises two mainly inhabited islands, Madeira and Porto Santo, and two uninhabited islands, the Desertas and Selvagens. Since 1976, Madeira has enjoyed

constitutional and administrative autonomy, allowing the establishment of its own legislative and governmental bodies.

As of 2000, the region's population was estimated at 242,400, with a notable density of 309 inhabitants per square kilometer, surpassing Portuguese and European Union averages. Approximately 75% of the populace resides in just 35% of Madeira's land area, predominantly along the southern coast where Funchal, the vibrant capital, is situated (NewCo, n.d.).

Prior to the pandemic-related disruption, Madeira's reputation as a desirable European tourist paradise was firmly established. Demographic analyses of tourists revealed notable patterns, with a pronounced skew toward middle-aged and older demographics. However, recent data indicates a noticeable change. The average age of tourists has dropped from 50 in 2019 to 45 in 2022. At the same time, the 25-34 demographic increased by 20% in 2022 and by another 25% in the first quarter of 2023 (Hawker, 2023).

Launching the 'Digital Nomad Madeira Islands' project, which offers a combination of jobs and consultancy services, has contributed to this demographic shift. This innovative initiative highlights the region's concerted efforts to reposition itself as a haven for digital nomads. Startup Madeira, a 26-year incubator, leveraged its extensive experience in the hospitality industry, favorable climatic conditions, and robust infrastructure to create a comprehensive framework. This framework aimed to support digital nomads and educate local stakeholders on the diverse needs of this emerging tourist group. The subsequent partnership with the regional government marked a crucial turning point that led to the operational launch of the "Digital Nomads Madeira Islands" project.

Between February and June 2021, Ponta do Sol underwent a significant transformation as the first 'Digital Nomad Village' (Startup Madeira, n.d.). A strategic approach was taken to ensure that local businesses could cater to the specific needs of digital nomads. These businesses received advice and training for approximately five months to readjust their strategies, services, and infrastructures under government and private sector sponsorship.

The local business landscape has evolved to include coworking facilities and bilingual services. After 2019, the number of coworking spaces in Madeira increased by 400% from ten to forty, a response to growing demand (Hawker, 2023). This adaptation of local businesses and infrastructure is an example of the commitment of the public and private sector partnership to support the adaptation of local businesses to respond to the evolving needs of the digital nomad community.

Following the success of the pilot project, the initiative has been extended to other locations, such as Funchal and Porto Santo to foster a vibrant ecosystem that accommodates digital nomads, boosting regional economic growth in the short term and the tax base in the long term (Startup Madeira, n.d.). This points to the economic potential of the flow of digital nomads to stimulate the local economy and reduce the volatility of traditional tourism.

The "Centro Cultural John dos Passos," located in Ponta do Sol, has become a hub for digital nomads. This transformation is mainly due to the partnership established with the Digital Nomads Madeira initiative. Since inaugurating their headquarters at the Center on February 1st, 2021, there has been a remarkable influx of international visitors. In February 2021 alone, the center attracted over 5,000 individuals from various countries seeking information and support.

The Digital Nomads Madeira project has demonstrated considerable global reach, receiving registrations between 9,400 and 9,800 digital nomads from 137 distinct nations - over two and a half years. This influx is quantitatively significant, representing approximately 4% of the total population of Madeira. Such data illustrates the project's substantial international traction and highlights the potential impact on the demographic composition of the region (Startup Madeira, n.d.). Nomad List[4] Estimates suggest an even more significant influx in 2022, affirming Madeira's significance in the digital nomad landscape, even amid the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2022). This data underscores the center's critical role in fostering a supportive environment for the digital nomad community (Startup Madeira, n.d.).

The relatively low cost of living in Madeira renders it an attractive destination. According to data from the Madeira Project, the average monthly expenditure of digital nomads is around €1,800, which includes vital expenses such as rent, food, and transportation. However, a significant proportion of Western European foreigners living in Madeira perceive the cost of living to be around 50% lower than in their home countries.[5] (NewCo, n.d.).

Professionals usually opt for one to three-month stays in the archipelago. Collaborations with companies like Flatio have streamlined the rental landscape, offering tailored accommodation solutions for digital nomads. Data from Flatio indicates a significant increase in demand for extended rental periods between 2019 and 2021 (Supercasa, 2022). Madeira's status as the inaugural 'village of digital nomads' contributed to a 172% increase in rental value and a 36% uptick in bookings (Publituris, 2022).

The estimated monthly economic influx of 1.5 million euros from digital nomads is significant. This spending reflects the economic benefits that digital nomads bring to the local economy by offsetting traditional fluctuations in tourism and contributing to a more stable economic environment. An analysis of the business landscape from 2019 to 2022 shows that sectors such as tourism are resilient despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, maintaining and tentatively growing the number of businesses in sectors ranging from accommodation and hospitality to technical consultancy.[6] (Table 1).

Table 1: Balance of companies opened and closed between 2019 and 2022.

Economic activity (CAE Rev. 3)	2019	2020	2021	2022
Accommodation, food service, and related activities	107	102	60	111
Artistic, entertainment, sports, and recreational activities	20	18	7	23
Consulting, scientific, technical, and related activities	51	67	49	113
Other service activities	-1	15	12	33
Real estate activities	93	65	53	141

Source: INE, Database of Incorporated and Dissolved Companies

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[4] Available at: https://nomadlist.com/trends/madeira. Values reported are estimated visits by traveling remote workers based on the total number of trips logged by Nomad List members. Visits to a location are only counted once per year per user, even if they visit more than that year. Since not all nomads are on the Nomad List and not all Nomad List members log their trips, the data is indicative only.

[5] Determining the average cost of living in Madeira is challenging, given individual residents' different living conditions and preferences.

[6] It is noteworthy to emphasize that several things could be improved in establishing a causal relationship. Numerous factors may influence this context, but the available data also needs to provide information on the initial dates of the dissolved companies. The objective was to deepen the relationship between digital nomadism and its impact in the context of Madeira.

However, while ambitious, the 'Digital Nomad Madeira Islands' project has encountered scalability challenges, particularly in smaller villages. Beyond infrastructure considerations, integrating a nomadic population into local communities necessitates careful planning to mitigate socio-cultural mismatches and manage impacts on housing affordability and cost of living.

The lure of exotic experiences risks turning Madeira into a mere "liquid commodity" to be packaged and consumed for fleeting thrills in the burgeoning economy of digital nomads. This commercialization raises legitimate concerns about cultural homogenization and the unsustainable exploitation of local resources.

In this intricate interplay, initiatives such as the Madeira Friends International Community Association (MFICA) emphasize the imperative of symbiotic coexistence. The belief that knowledge exchange is central to regional development is at the heart of this vision.

Initially intended to support digital nomads, MFICA has since evolved into a comprehensive platform linking Madeirans and the digital nomad community. As the MFICA community blossomed, it spearheaded various philanthropic projects, from fundraising for local causes to supporting Ukrainian refugees (Baptista, n.d.).

The association's mission has expanded to include various activities, including wellness, cultural engagement, and education. The involvement of digital nomads in educational initiatives, such as working with local schools and mentoring programs, demonstrates a positive commitment to the community. Such initiatives benefit local youth by teaching them digital skills and fostering community between the nomads and locals (Baptista, n.d.). For these nomads, their stay in Madeira is more than just a temporary phase — it is an opportunity to bring new perspectives and skills to the locals (Baptista, n.d.).

However, as with all transformative initiatives, constant introspection is required to ensure that the lure of economic gain is preserved in the essence of Madeira's rich cultural heritage. The increased demand for housing driven by digital nomads can lead to rising costs and decreased affordability for residents. This can trigger gentrification and displacement, exacerbating existing social inequalities. In addition, the influx of digital nomads can dilute local traditions and cultural practices, homogenizing and commodifying the island's unique identity. In addition, the lifestyle choices of some digital nomads can lead to increased consumption of resources and generation of waste, putting pressure on Madeira's infrastructure and environment. Digital nomads prioritizing convenience and exotic experiences may contribute to unsustainable tourism practices, damaging the island's natural resources and cultural heritage.

To ensure inclusive and sustainable development, policymakers and communities in Madeira must carefully consider both the positive and negative externalities of digital nomadism. This requires flexible policies and regulations that meet the evolving needs of digital nomads and the local population. Fostering collaboration between these groups and local businesses is crucial to creating a shared vision for the island's future. In addition, promoting sustainable tourism models that minimize the environmental impact and respect the local culture is paramount.

Final Considerations

Zygmunt Bauman's "liquid modernity" concept offers a compelling lens through which to examine the emerging phenomenon of digital nomadism. This societal shift, deeply embedded in the gig economy, represents a radical departure from traditional work structures, social relationships, and our understanding of space and time. Digital nomadism embodies the fluidity and adaptability of contemporary identities, as Bauman (2020) envisioned.

Digital nomads find themselves in a liminal space where they belong neither to their place of origin nor to a specific destination. They carry their cultural heritage while engaging with new environments, creating a dynamic negotiation of belonging. This can be liberating and challenging, fostering a sense of global citizenship while raising questions about rootlessness and the search for belonging.

Examining digital nomadism in the context of Madeira Island provides a nuanced understanding of its complex relationship to modern work and urban development. Our research shows that digital nomadism is not just a passing trend. However, it can potentially bring about profound economic and social changes in the urban environment, both positive and negative.

The Madeira project is an illustrative case study of the potential benefits and challenges associated with adopting digital nomadism as a strategy for regional development. While it offers economic growth, modernization, and diversification opportunities, such changes can also lead to higher living costs and socio-cultural inequalities. Furthermore, a carefully calibrated approach is required to preserve the host community's socio-cultural heritage and socioeconomic stability. While these effects have not yet been observed on a large scale in Madeira, they have been observed in other cities, highlighting the need for a differentiated policy approach.

Effective collaboration between the public and private sectors is crucial for success. In contrast to traditional tourists, digital nomads' greater engagement in the local economy and their more extended stays offer lasting economic benefits. As policymakers and urban planners navigate this emerging landscape, our findings underscore the critical need for adaptable and sustainable urban development strategies. These strategies should consider the fluid nature of today's working paradigms while ensuring the inclusivity and well-being of both transient and resident populations.

At the same time, digital nomads can become agents of change in Bauman's fluid modernity. Their fluidity can break up rigid systems, promote cultural exchange, and advocate for alternative work, life, and governance models. Bauman's "liquid modernity" framework reminds us that there are no easy solutions in a world of constant change. At the same time, Bauman's concept of "glocal consumption" offers a promising alternative. By fostering meaningful collaboration with local communities, respecting their cultural traditions, and prioritizing sustainable practices, digital nomads can contribute to a more responsible and mutually beneficial form of tourism.

However, digital nomadism presents an ethical conundrum. The tension between individual mobility and preserving local norms remains a challenge. Further research is needed to understand the long-term impact of digital nomadism on urban societies. Future research should also address the sustainability of the economy driven by digital nomads and the effectiveness of policy measures in different urban contexts.

As digitalization and remote work continue to increase, the findings from Madeira Island offer valuable lessons for other regions undergoing similar

trends. The interplay between Bauman's fluid modernity, the complexity of the gig economy, and Madeira's ongoing transformation invites reflection on the broader implications for contemporary social structures. This raises critical questions about the viability of these paradigms, the concept of belonging in a fluid world, and the future of professional practice in a digitally decentralized world.

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