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Working from anywhere? Work from here! Approaches to attract digital nomads



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ABSTRACT

Although research on digital nomadism has been growing exponentially, its supply side, including government responses to this emerging class of mobile workers, remains under-explored. To address this gap, this paper systematically examines visa policies targeting digital nomads. By applying rigorous and replicable review methods to grey literature, it studies digital nomad visas implemented worldwide up to January 2023. The findings allow for categorisation of such policies, emphasising their heterogeneity of designs and implications. The findings reveal how digital nomad visas can reinforce governments' broader strategic priorities (mostly centred around tourism development), spur competition between countries, and redefine the notion of a 'digital nomad' from the host perspective, contributing to the broader discussion on the institutional context of digital nomadism.

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Introduction

Digital nomads are a class of highly mobile professionals, who work digitally while travelling on a long-term basis from one location to the next (Hannonen, 2020), and who can be conceptually located at the intersection of (technology-enabled) remote work and mobility. Although the remote work (r)evolution has been brewing for decades, the COVID-19 pandemic unquestionably accelerated and normalised the phenomenon (Brynjolfsson et al., 2020; Cook, 2020b; Hannonen et al., 2023; Hermann & Paris, 2020). By blurring the conventional boundaries between work, leisure, home, and travel (Ehn et al., 2022), it moved many working professionals closer to, if not into, the digital nomad lifestyle, first predicted in 1997 by Makimoto and Manners (1997). At the same time, COVID-induced lockdowns and border closures challenged the digital nomad, who relies on open borders and freedom of movement to pursue their lifestyle of remote work and peripatetic travel (De Almeida et al., 2021). An increasing number of governments have tried to adapt to this confluence of normalisation of remote work and location independence and the shattering of the tourism industry by the mobility restrictions and general threat of the virus. Some started introducing 'digital nomad visas' or 'remote work visas' to respond to this 'new normal' (Chevtaeva & Denizci-Guillet, 2021; De Almeida et al., 2021; Hannonen, 2020; Hermann & Paris, 2020).

Academic literature on digital nomadism has grown exponentially in the last decade. Nevertheless, scholars have predominantly focused on the digital nomad lifestyle, including, for example, their self-identification and self-perception (Aroles et al., 2020; De Almeida et al., 2021; Nash et al., 2018), work organisation practices (Cook, 2020a; Jarrahi et al., 2019; Nash et al.,

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2021; Schlagwein & Jarrahi, 2020; Wang et al., 2020), and social interactions in co-living and co-working spaces (Chevtaeva, 2021; Orel, 2019; von Zumbusch & Lalicic, 2020). At the same time, as emphasised by Wang et al. (2018, 2019), broader social, institutional, and economic circumstances shaping digital nomadism have been scarcely discussed.

More recently, policy bodies and think tanks have, to an extent, taken up the topic of digital nomad visas, exploring their practical implications for decision-makers (Dreher & Triandafyllidou, 2023; Elisabeth, 2022; Hooper & Benton, 2022). Some academic studies have also addressed this issue – most notably, Mancinelli (2020) has presented an extensive discussion on digital nomads' identity's construction and the impact of visa regimes on nomads' destination choices. Mancinelli and Germann Molz (2023) have analysed digital nomad visas from the angle of 'friction' between nomad's strategies to stay on the move and governments' measures to codify their legal status. However, they focus on the digital nomads' perspective, while the discussions about the 'supply side' of digital nomadism (Hannonen et al., 2023) are still in their infancy, and policymaking remains one of the core themes un- or under-explored by research on digital nomadism (Šimová, 2022). For example, Sánchez-Vergara et al. (2023) have reviewed selected digital nomad visas from the destinations' perspective, but their research has been exploratory and covered a limited sample of existing policies (see also Svobodová, 2022). As a result, even the total number of digital nomad visas has remained unclear, with estimates varying between 20 and 100 (Cook, 2023).

To address this gap, this paper, following Wang et al. (2018), asks: how do governments strategically respond to digital nomadism? It systematically reviews digital nomad and remote work visas implemented worldwide up to January 2023. Applying a systematic and replicable study design to identify and analyse these policies aims to provide a comprehensive picture of nation-states responses to digital nomadism (Wang et al., 2018). The study explores, in particular, how many such policies there are, how they are designed, whom they target, and whether and how they interact with the governments' broader strategic priorities. The study's main contribution is the categorisation of digital nomad visas, developed based on the interpretation of data gathered about the policies, including their design and policy intentions. The categorisation constitutes a novel approach to systematise the current state of knowledge about this emerging phenomenon. The study's results also contribute to the theoretical debate on the digital nomad figure by providing a 'supply side' perspective on digital nomadism (Hannonen et al., 2023). Specifically, the study centres around the institutional aspect, i.e., it looks into the public policy response (as opposed to the market reaction and the supply of goods and services targeted at the digital nomad). More broadly, the study enriches the perspectives on tourism development and destination branding, by looking at destinations that target a specific group of mobile digital workers to diversify their tourism offering and attract new tourist segments (see, e.g., Qu et al., 2011).

Literature review

The following sections review the existing literature on digital nomadism and the related underlying theoretical concepts. The aim of this theoretical anchoring is to encapsulate the breadth of theoretical framings and demonstrate the diversity of approaches towards conceptualising the figure of the digital nomad, particularly along two 'lenses': (1) temporal lens – concerning the duration and frequency of nomads' visits; and (2) identity lens – looking at various conceptualisations of the individual behind the 'digital nomad' label.

Temporal lens: 'in-between' mobilities

The binary division between tourism and migration as the main (or only) mobility types has been proving increasingly limiting, given the rise of more fluid modalities of work and travel (Cohen et al., 2015; Cohen & Cohen, 2012). In this context, the concept of 'lifestyle mobilities' has been gaining ground in the academic discourse as "a theoretical lens to challenge current thinking of the intersections between travel, leisure and migration" (Cohen et al., 2015, 156). Backpackers, travelling artists, transient rock climbers, and bohemian migrants (Ibid.; Korpela, 2020) are examples of these lifestyle or 'in-between' mobilities, i.e., mobilities that fall between the conventional categories of tourism and migration (Åkerlund & Sandberg, 2014; Hannonen, 2020). 'Lifestyle migration' is another related term for describing the movement of "relatively affluent individuals of all ages, moving either part-time or full-time to places that, for various reasons, signify for the migrant a better quality of life" (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009, 609; see also Benson & Osbaldiston, 2016). These include, for example, professional expats, retirement migrants, and foreign (recreational) property owners (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009, 2016).

In this context, the 'digital nomad' figure has emerged, incorporating the element of (remote) work into lifestyle mobilities and migration (Hermann & Paris, 2020). Two approaches are emerging in delineating digital nomadism from other mobilities. The first, narrow, approach draws precise lines between digital nomads and other mobile individuals. For example, Cook introduces the 'three relocations rule', defining digital nomads as those who "use digital technologies to work remotely, they have the ability to work and travel simultaneously, have autonomy over frequency and choice of location, and visit at least three locations a year that are not their own or a friend's or family home" (Cook, 2023, 4). The second – broader – approach acknowledges the fluidity and diversity within this category (Aroles et al., 2020; Reichenberger, 2018). Hannonen's definition of digital nomads as "highly mobile professionals, whose work is location-independent" and who work digitally "while travelling on a (semi-)permanent basis" best exemplifies this approach (Hannonen, 2020, 346). It emphasises digital nomads' *freedom* to move if desired but allows for periodical immobility – staying longer and 'feeling at home' in a destination (Hannonen, 2022; Matos & Ardévol, 2021).

The diversity of nomad modalities has indeed increased. On the one hand, researchers note the emergence of a relatively more sedentary remote worker, or 'slowmad' (Cook, 2023), who stays longer at a destination, becoming 'rooted' (Cangià et al., 2022), and living an 'expat life' (Chevtaeva & Denizci-Guillet, 2021; Holleran, 2022; Schlagwein, 2018). On the other hand, shorter

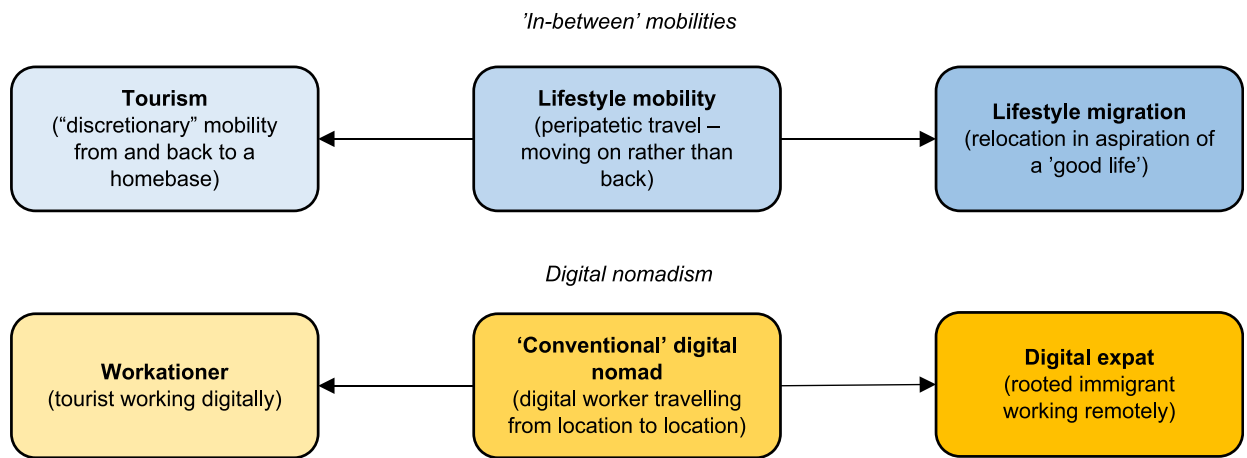


Fig. 1. A conceptualisation of modalities of in-between mobilities and digital nomadism. Source: Author.

modalities, which also encapsulate work and travel, emerge in the form of ‘remote work travel’ (Hannonen et al., 2023) and ‘workation’ (Cook, 2020b; Voll et al., 2022). Workation involves balancing leisure-oriented vacations with additional work phases, lasting from a week to half a year (Matsushita, 2021; Voll et al., 2022). For Cook (2023), these new modalities of remote work and travel fall beyond digital nomadism; in line with Hannonen’s approach (2022), they can be considered sub-categories of digital nomadism. This paper follows the latter – broader – definition of the digital nomad to account for the expanding range of lifestyles associated with digital nomadism, including transient visits, peripatetic travel, and lifestyle migration (understood as periodical immobility in a place outside usual residence or origin).

Fig. 1 summarises the modalities of digital nomadism, rooted in the theoretical lens of in-between mobilities.

Identity lens: tourists, high-skilled workers, entrepreneurs, and the mobile elite

Besides the temporal angle, digital nomads have been portrayed in the literature under different ‘labels’, or identities. First, digital nomadism has been located as a sub-category of tourism. Digital nomads have been described as creative tourists (Agirachman & Putra, 2016; Orel, 2021), non-institutionalised tourists (Chevtaeva, 2021), digital nomad tourists (Chevtaeva, 2021; Zerva et al., 2023), or simply “tourists who stay a long time and work” (MacRae, 2016, 24). Nevertheless, one needs to separate digital nomads (as mobile professionals working remotely while on the move) from other categories of working tourists, including individuals combining business travel with leisure or engaging in (typically unskilled and manual) labour in the destinations for short periods of time (Cohen, 1972, 1973, 1974; Uriely & Reichel, 2000).

Second, scholars perceive digital nomads as a novel type of location-independent workforce (Orel, 2019; Sutherland & Jarrahi, 2017). In particular, digital nomads have been typically highly skilled (Frick & Marx, 2021; Prester et al., 2019; Thompson, 2019a) and working in the knowledge economy, earning yet another label of ‘knowmads’ (Iliescu, 2021). Furthermore, digital nomads are often (digital) entrepreneurs or freelancers (Aroles et al., 2020; Cook, 2023) or seem to exhibit above-average entrepreneurial traits (Bartosik-Purgat, 2018; Iliescu, 2021). For example, Šimić Banović (2022) analyses digital nomads next to migrant entrepreneurs; others emphasise the networking aspect of co-working that spurs client acquisition and collaboration between nomad-own businesses (Chevtaeva, 2021; Woldoff & Litchfield, 2021).

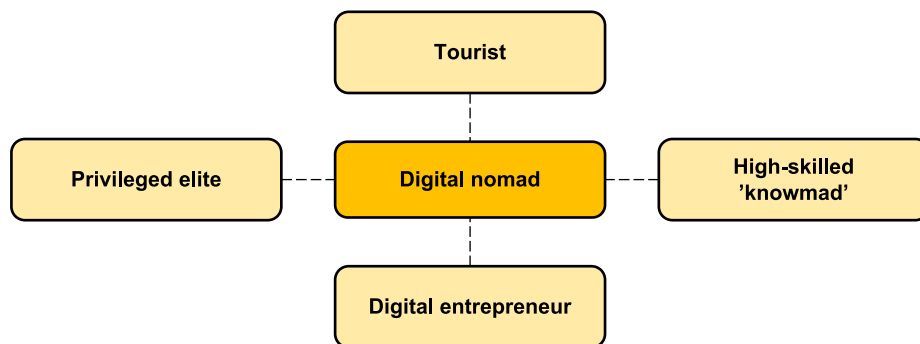


Fig. 2. A conceptualisation of digital nomad identities. Source: Author.

Finally, digital nomads have also been reconstructed through the lens of privilege. Although some point to the risks of precarity among digital nomads (Büscher, 2014; Thompson, 2019b), they have been often portrayed as the modern 'travelling elite' (Ens et al., 2018). Leveraging their highly sought-after skills and social capital and backed by a 'healthy bank balance' (Makimoto & Manners, 1997) and strong Western passports (Cook, 2023; Green, 2020), they "navigate the global map to their own advantage" (Mancinelli, 2020). Like corporations offshore production to low-cost locations, nomads maximise utility by spending their Western salaries in less expensive destinations, often in the Global South (Holleran, 2022; Mancinelli, 2020; Schlagwein, 2018).

Fig. 2 summarises the 'identities' of digital nomads.

Policy responses to digital nomadism

Traditionally, state policies have not catered to the needs of nomads. Considering the temporal lens, conventional visa regimes have catered predominantly to the two conventional categories of mobilities: tourism and migration. The 'in-between' has been left out (except for some lifestyle migrants, such as well-off retirees – see Korpela, 2020; MacRae, 2016; Toyota & Thang, 2017). Looking through the identity lens, governments have long competed, also through favourable visa regimes, to attract tourists (Chi et al., 2022; Lawson & Roychoudhury, 2016), high-skilled migrants (Cerna, 2008; Czaika & Parsons, 2017), entrepreneurs (Istad, 2022; Patuzzi, 2019), and wealthy to-be-residents (Azzopardi, 2018; Konrad & Rees, 2020). Nevertheless, these policies have excluded digital nomads, for example, by limiting tourist travel duration (tourist visas) or allowing only work or entrepreneurship *within* the destination rather than *from* it (immigration visas) (Mancinelli, 2020; Mancinelli & Germann Molz, 2023).

As a result, digital nomads often find themselves in a state of 'resistance and compliance' with host governments, including their border control policies (Wang et al., 2019). Several researchers have highlighted that visa restrictions limit nomadic travel and constitute one of the main determinants of stay duration (Hannonen, 2020; Mancinelli, 2020). Most nomads have travelled on tourist visas (Cook, 2020a; Mancinelli, 2020), which typically forbid work in the destination, or business visas (Korpela, 2020; Woldoff & Litchfield, 2021), designed for migrant entrepreneurs. Furthermore, often the only solution to prolong their stay is the so-called 'visa runs', i.e., leaving and re-entering a country to renew the (tourist) visa, which has become almost iconic for digital nomadism (Ehn et al., 2022; Green, 2020; Mancinelli, 2020; Mancinelli & Germann Molz, 2023; Woldoff & Litchfield, 2021). Such unfavourable visa regimes, and the practices to circumvent the legal obstacles stemming from them, often put digital nomads in the 'grey zone' of immigration rules (Cook, 2023; Green, 2020; Mancinelli & Germann Molz, 2023; Octavia, 2022; Wang et al., 2019).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, even those quasi-legal practices became off-limits. Pandemic-induced mobility restrictions and border closures risked compromising digital nomad lifestyles (Ehn et al., 2022). Some governments responded by temporarily relaxing visa rules – for example, by extending tourist visas for travellers who were effectively 'stuck' in the destination (Holleran, 2022). At the same time, amidst the steep decline in international tourism demand (see, for example, Škare et al., 2021), long-term working travellers suddenly became a viable alternative for traditionally tourism-dependent destinations. Several scholars trace back the rise of 'digital nomad visas' to the pandemic, when some countries (mostly Caribbean islands) rushed to attract digital nomads to patch up the budget gap caused by the decreasing tourism revenues (Ehn et al., 2022; Elisabeth, 2022; Foley et al., 2022; Richards & Morrill, 2021).

The overarching 'digital nomad visa' or 'remote work visa' labels may seem to suggest they constitute a homogenous category, even though some (mostly anecdotal) evidence suggests otherwise. First, the proactiveness of these policies might differ. Some of the rapidly emerging digital nomad visas "appear to be quick responses to a situation and not examples of pre-planned evidence-based policy" (Dreher & Triandafyllidou, 2023, 11). They tend to simply formalise the quasi-legal practices of digital nomads that were previously not enforced or penalised, likely due to the low priority of the problem and lack of resources (Elisabeth, 2022; Octavia, 2022). Nevertheless, some destinations have gone beyond legitimising digital nomads and implemented marketing schemes and communication strategies to attract this segment (Hannonen et al., 2023; Mladenovic, 2016) and/or modified their tourist products to adapt to digital nomads' needs (Orel, 2021). Mancinelli and Germann Molz (2023, 13) have referred to such marketing efforts of digital nomad visa-issuing destinations as the "selling mode' of tourism promotion".

Second, as discussed above, the digital nomad category is becoming more and more diverse, and the policies can be aimed at different segments of the nomad population, thus leading to different (expected) outcomes. Sánchez-Vergara et al. (2023) suggest that policies aimed at digital nomads, while predominantly concerned with the leisure industry, at the same time serve to "promote a business environment and strengthen a high-level entrepreneurial ecosystem" (p. 1) and "attract and retain talent" (p. 11; see also Mancinelli & Germann Molz, 2023). The simultaneity of these impacts has been questioned by Dreher and Triandafyllidou (2023) and Elisabeth (2022), who argue that most digital nomad visas prohibit local work, thus preventing nomads' contribution to local labour markets and the retention of skill and innovation in the long run. Therefore, countries likely take more variable approaches, "using the digital nomad visas with different motivations in mind" (Dreher & Triandafyllidou, 2023, 12). For example, Mancinelli and Germann Molz (2023) suggest two main reasons policymakers might try to attract digital nomads: (1) to boost an existing tourism industry, and (2) to attract skilled long-term visitors.

Finally, there is a question of digital nomad visas constituting measures for countries not to fall behind their regional peers in the competition for digital nomads (Khanna, 2022). Already in the 1990s, Makimoto and Manners hypothesised that the rise of the digital nomad (which they envisioned) would spur such competition: "Just as we are already seeing governments competing with each other to attract industrial investment, we may see governments competing with each other for citizens" (Makimoto & Manners, 1997). Since Makimoto and Manner's manifesto, we have witnessed countries competing for high-skilled workers – the

'creative class' (Florida, 2006). Furthermore, small and island states have been particularly 'innovative' in finding revenue streams, including 'citizenship selling' (Azzopardi, 2018; Prasad, 2004).

The following analysis is guided by these three identified policy conundrums: (1) the proactiveness and the strategic importance of the policy (or lack thereof); (2) the target group of the policy, seen through the temporal and identity lenses of digital nomad categories; and (3) the competition discourse.

Methods and data

Study methodology

To identify a comprehensive set of policies targeted at digital nomads, this study applies systematic review search methods to grey literature, following Godin et al. (2015). Grey literature encompasses documents "not controlled by commercial publishers and publishing" including sources such as reports, websites, and policy documents (Auger, 1998 in Rothstein & Hopewell, 2009, p. 104). This method is particularly suitable for extracting policy-relevant information (Godin et al., 2015); for example, similar approaches have been deployed to review tourism strategies (Tribe & Paddison, 2023). In this study context, grey literature is a particularly valuable source, given the reported wealth of information created for digital nomads in media (Aroles et al., 2020; Hannonen, 2020), blogs (Nash et al., 2018), and online forums (Sutherland & Jarrahi, 2017). In this study, two source types are examined: (1) blogposts and online articles containing lists of digital nomad visas (to identify an exhaustive list of policies), and (2) official government websites, policy documents, and legal acts enacting them (to extract data on each policy).

A systematic review must follow an explicit and reproducible methodology and attempt to identify all sources that meet the pre-defined eligibility criteria (Higgins et al., 2019). Although more challenging than searching for academic literature, these standards can be applied in search methods used to capture grey literature (Mahood et al., 2014). While purposeful sampling has been previously used to study policy responses to digital nomadism (Mancinelli & Germann Molz, 2023; Sánchez-Vergara et al., 2023; Svobodová, 2022), samples used are the main limitation of these reviews since they do not provide a complete picture and might be biased (e.g., towards policies that are better promoted). Applying systematic methods to policy review should improve the quality of the synthesis and ensure that the sample is exhaustive and unbiased (Godin et al., 2015).

Search protocol

Before conducting the search, a detailed search protocol was developed, outlining the databases, search terms, and limits to be applied (Higgins et al., 2019). This review follows the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) reporting standard (Moher et al., 2009), adapted for a grey literature search. Fig. 3 depicts the search protocol on a PRISMA chart.

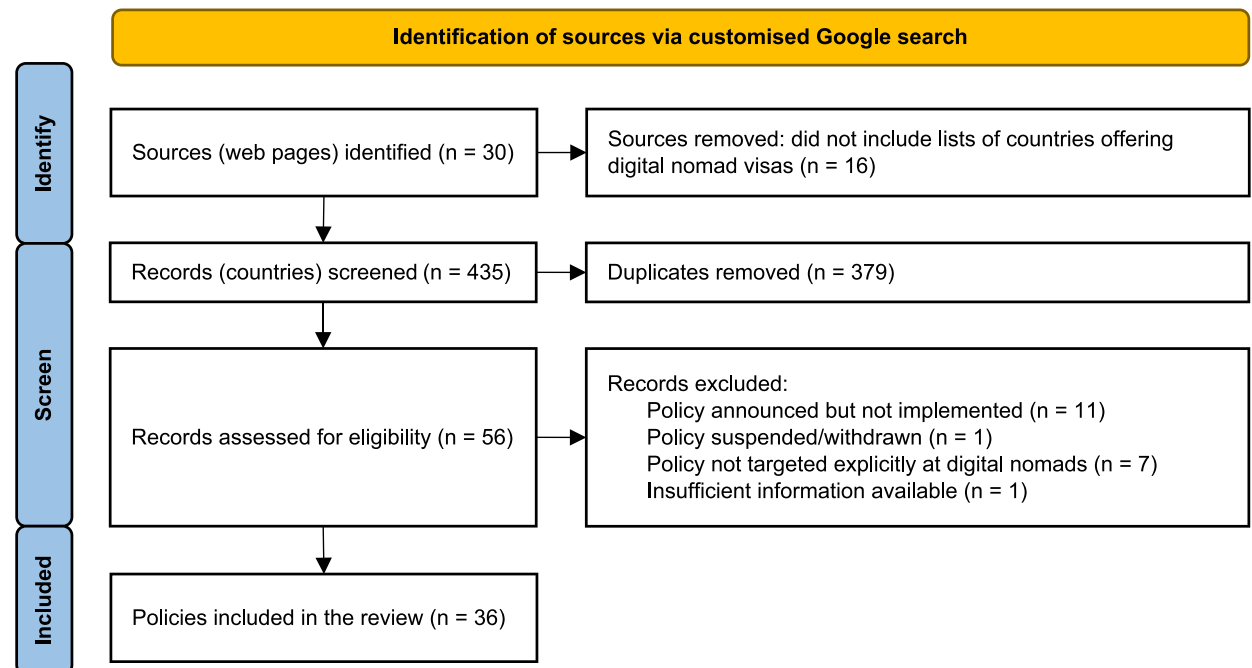


Fig. 3. PRISMA flow chart.
Source: Author.

Table 1

Data collected about the identified policies. Source: Author.

| Data category | Variables | Aim | Anchor in scholarly debates |
|---|---|---|--|
| Basic information about the policy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Country ■ Policy name ■ Link to the main information source(s) | Organise data | – |
| Policy design | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Definition of the applicant profile ■ Maximum duration of stay ■ Policy instrument (e.g., visa, residence permit) ■ Income threshold ■ Tax obligation ■ Other restrictions (esp. participation in the local labour market) | Identify the target group (within the 'digital nomad' category) Identify the policy intentions | Temporal lens: workationer – digital nomad – digital expat Identity lens: tourist – high-skilled worker – entrepreneur – wealthy individual Local spending – labour market integration – entrepreneurship and innovation – tax revenue |
| Roll-out and promotion | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Implementation date ■ Authority in charge ■ Application process and duration ■ Application fee ■ Promotional activities (website) ■ Ancillary services offered | Assess proactiveness level | Strategic activity – ad-hoc response |
| Geographical and macroeconomic conditions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Region ■ Population ■ Island/non-island ■ GNI per capita ■ Tourism revenues | Search for regional patterns | Global competition for mobile individuals, especially among small and island states |

The identification of policies was conducted in three main steps (see Fig. 3). First, Google was searched for the term 'digital nomad visas', and the first 30 results (first three result pages) were examined. The titles and snippets were scanned for relevance to identify sources (web pages) that contained information about digital nomad visas. These typically included regularly updated blog posts or databases targeted at the digital nomad community, listing digital nomad visas offered by countries worldwide (such as "49 Countries with Digital Nomad Visas – The Ultimate List" or "Countries Offering Visas for Digital Nomads"). Second, records (names of countries (allegedly) offering digital nomad visas) were extracted from the sources. Third, duplicates were removed, and the following three inclusion/exclusion criteria were applied:

1. The policy is currently in place. Policies that have been withdrawn, suspended, or announced but not (yet) rolled out were excluded.
2. The policy is targeted at digital nomads, i.e., its eligibility criteria correspond to the broad definition of digital nomad adopted in this study. In particular, the policy targets third-country nationals whose work (as employees or (solo-)entrepreneurs) is location-independent. Policies targeted at other, broader, groups (e.g., entrepreneurs, tourists) were excluded, even if digital nomads had been reported to use them. Policies that included digital nomads as one of the main target groups (e.g., along with remote students or retirees) were included.
3. Sufficient information about the policy is available from official (governmental) sources.¹

The search protocol was implemented twice – a pilot search was conducted in November 2022 and a principal search – in January 2023. Three points seem to validate the relative robustness of the proposed approach:

1. The pilot and the principal search resulted in the same list of policies, even though (likely due to Google's dynamic positioning), the two searches yielded a different set of sources (web pages) – only seven sources appeared in both searches.
2. The identified sources tended to take a relatively lax approach to the inclusion of policies. For example, they included policies that had been announced but not implemented at the time and policies not explicitly mentioning 'digital nomads', such as workation programmes and remote work, entrepreneurship or passive income visas. These were then filtered using the inclusion/exclusion criteria.
3. The degree of duplication of identified policies across sources ($n = 435$), although did not guarantee full exhaustiveness, suggested that expanding the search would be unlikely to yield additional results.

Data

For policies that passed the screening, data were extracted from official government sources, including websites of relevant public authorities, policy documents, and legal acts enacting them. Table 1 below summarises the collected data.

¹ For all policies but two, information was available in English. In the cases of Colombia and Panama, information was extracted from sources in Spanish (in which the author is proficient).

Results: approaches to implementing a digital nomad visa

Digital nomad visas – a heterogeneous category

Following the application of the search protocol, 36 active digital nomad visas have been identified. The analysis generally reveals high heterogeneity of such visas, and a two-tier categorisation can be derived from it, as shown in Fig. 4 below. Two primary approaches that policymakers take in designing digital nomad visas can be distinguished, based on their proactiveness:

- (1) In the **legitimising approach**, digital nomad visas are implemented seemingly without any explicit policy priority. They acknowledge remote workers as distinct visitor groups and provide means to legalise their stay (Elisabeth, 2022; Octavia, 2022). But they do very little to promote the programme, attract (certain sub-segments of) digital nomads, or simplify the administrative burdens associated with visa applications.
- (2) In the **strategic approach**, digital nomad visas are implemented to reinforce another – existing or emerging – policy priority, including in the tourism, labour market, entrepreneurship, or immigration policy areas (Dreher & Triandafyllidou, 2023). They are (more) actively promoted with clear policy intentions stemming from their design.

The strategic approach is heterogeneous in itself and can be further divided, based on the different ‘identities’ of digital nomads they appeal to. They include working tourists, high-earning expats, skilled workers, and digital entrepreneurs. This division closely follows and builds on that of Mancinelli and Germann Molz (2023) who have distinguished between countries that aspired to boost their tourism industry by attracting digital nomads and countries that aimed to attract high-skilled long-term visitors, including entrepreneurs.

Table 2 below summarises the key features of digital nomad visas under the primary approaches. Within the strategic approach, the digital nomad visas that target working tourists are distinguished. The following sections explain in more detail each of the approaches.

Strategic approach: working tourists

‘Strategic’ digital nomad visas that target working tourists generally constitute an extension of a country’s tourism offering. Visas following this approach are usually implemented and managed by a public authority in charge of tourism affairs, such as a Ministry of Tourism or a tourism board (see Table 2). They are rarely advertised as ‘visas’, understood as an authorisation to legalise a person’s stay in a destination. Instead, the destinations brand them as dedicated programmes with ‘catchy’ names, such as “Work from Greece”, “Barbados Welcome Stamp”, “One Happy Workation” (Aruba), “@HOME in Curaçao”, or “Live It” (Saint Lucia) (see also Mancinelli & Germann Molz, 2023; Sánchez-Vergara et al., 2023). Destinations also try to minimise the administrative burden usually associated with visa applications – in most cases, visitors can apply online, and the average application processing time is relatively low (see Table 2). Furthermore, nomads are usually offered explicit income tax waivers, even if their stay at the destination exceeds half a year, which is usually considered the main criterion for establishing tax residence (Kostic, 2019; Tyutyuryukov & Guseva, 2021).

Rhetorically, these destinations advertise the visas as solutions for ‘remote workers’ (e.g., Cape Verde, Dubai, Greece), ‘workationers’ (e.g., Aruba, Seychells), or simply ‘tourists on extended stays’ (e.g., Bahamas, Dominica). Practically, they tend to apply relatively looser eligibility criteria. For example, Aruba’s ‘One Happy Workation’ website clarifies that “[w]orking is not mandatory. You can spend your extended stay as you like.” Other destinations extend the target group to cover, for instance, remote students (Bahamas) or mobile retirees (Curaçao). The focus on working tourists also translates to shorter average stay durations allowed (12 months) under these programmes than the other approaches (see Table 2). The authorities managing the programmes also ‘sell’ the programme to prospective applicants (see also Mancinelli & Germann Molz, 2023) through

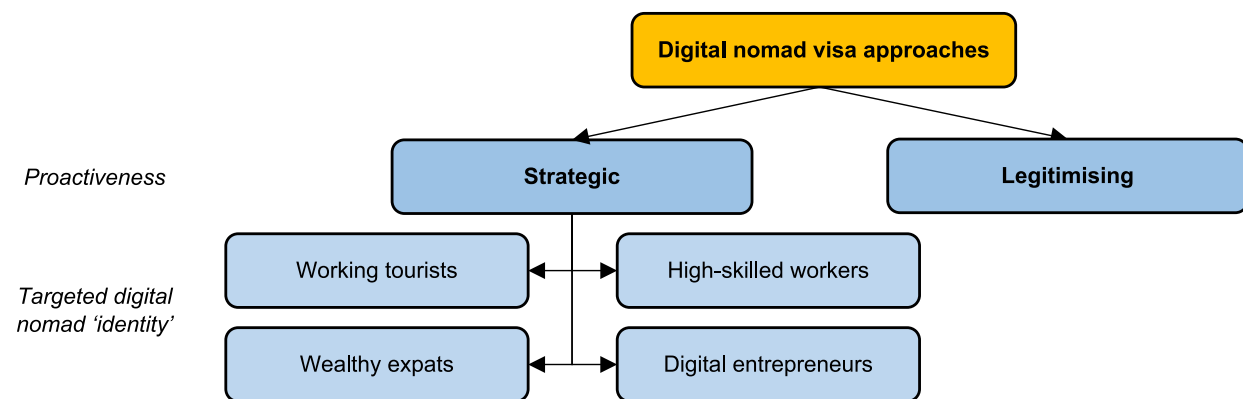


Fig. 4. Digital nomad visa categorisation.
Source: Author.

Table 2
Key digital nomad visa characteristics across the identified approaches. Source: Author.

| Approach | Strategic | | Legitimising (n = 12) |
|---|--|--|--|
| | Working tourists (n = 17) | Other (n = 7) | - |
| Target digital nomad 'identity' | | | |
| | | Policy design | |
| Average max duration in month without (with) extensions | 12 (16) | 21 (37) | 12 (26) |
| Policy instrument | Programme (76 %) | Visa or residence permit (57 %)/programme (43 %) | Visa or residence permit (92 %) |
| Average (median) income threshold | \$34,000 (\$36,000) | \$49,408 (\$46,224) | \$38,955 (\$38,017) |
| Explicit tax waiver (%) | 65 % | 29 % | 17 % |
| | | Roll-out and promotion | |
| Authority in charge | Tourism affairs (88 %) | Business development and investment (100 %) | Migration affairs (100 %) |
| Application online (%) | 76 % | 86 % | 8 % |
| Average maximum application processing time (days) | 11 | 28 | 48 |
| Average (median) application cost | \$509 (\$272) | \$547 (\$263) | \$273 (\$135) |
| Promotional website (%) | 100 % | 100 % | 50 % |
| Ancillary services (%) | 94 % | 57 % | 0 % |
| | | Country data | |
| Countries | Antigua and Barbuda, Aruba, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Cape Verde, Costa Rica, Croatia, Curaçao, Dominica, Ecuador, Greece, Montserrat, Namibia, Saint Lucia, Seychelles, United Arab Emirates | Bermuda, Cayman Islands (digital entrepreneurs); Estonia, Malaysia (high-skilled workers); Malta, Mauritius, Thailand (wealthy expats) | Albania, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Cyprus, Grenada, Hungary, Iceland, Latvia, Panama, Portugal, Romania |
| Island state (%) | 65 % | 57 % | 25 % |
| Small state (%) | 65 % | 71 % | 25 % |
| Average population (million) | 3.05 | 15.49 | 30.11 |
| Average GNI per capita | \$14,004 | \$36,063 | \$17,208 |
| Average tourism receipts (% of exports) | 48 % | 23 % | 24 % |

promotional websites containing appealing photos or videos, and pitches of 'why you should do it'. Finally, they often offer complementary services to applicants (see Table 2), including accommodation options and tourist activities. In Aruba, hotels offer whole 'packages' for remote workers with, for example, discounts for long-term stays and dedicated workspaces.

Strategic approach: wealthy expats, high-skilled workers, and digital entrepreneurs

While strategic digital nomad visas usually reinforce the destinations' commitment to strengthen and diversify their tourist offering, there are instances of visas supporting other policy priorities beyond tourism. First, Malta, Mauritius, and Thailand position themselves as destinations for wealthy (working) expats. Their digital nomad visas are implemented by residency agencies (e.g., Residency Malta Agency) next to other programmes leading to long-term residence, including 'residency by investment' or 'residency by retirement'. Conversely, their digital nomad visas allow some of the longest stays (between two and ten years). Second, in Bermuda and the Cayman Islands, the visas are targeted predominantly at (digital) entrepreneurs, are managed by business development agencies (Bermuda Business Development Agency and Cayman Enterprise City), and closely tied to business support and taxation policies. Finally, in Estonia and Malaysia, the digital nomad visas position these destinations as go-to places for the modern mobile workforce (Blue, 2021), and are linked to the related strategic policies – the Estonian 'e-Residency'

and 'Digital Malaysia', respectively. Crucially, they are the only two digital nomad visas in the sample where visa holders are permitted to work for local companies (although Malaysia limits the visa eligibility rules to workers with certain occupations in the 'digital sector') (Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation, 2023). To further facilitate the integration of foreign and local talent, Malaysia emphasises the availability of networking hubs and co-working spaces.

Across all three target groups, the average minimum income criterion is relatively high, emphasising the focus on high-earning individuals (see Table 2). Although one can usually apply online, the processing time is relatively long (following the usual visa-granting procedures). These visas are also relatively well-promoted through dedicated web pages (typically anchored in the overarching policy programmes' websites), although they are less focused on 'wowing' the viewer (compared to digital nomad visas focused on working tourists) and more on giving exhaustive information about the programme.

Legitimising approach

While the strategic digital nomad visas have a clear policy goal they reinforce (be it the attraction of international tourists, digital entrepreneurs, skilled workers or long-term wealthy residents), a group of digital nomad visas seems to lack such a specific policy context. In the legitimising approach, visas recognise remote workers as a distinct group of visitors and provide a legal means for them to arrive and stay in their countries. Still, they do so with much less dedication and foresight.

All digital nomad visas in this category are introduced by a public authority in charge of migration affairs (see Table 2). They carry relatively more formalistic labels such as "digital nomad visa" or "long-term visa for remote work", and often constitute mere changes in the migration legislation. Sometimes, they are introduced alongside a broader immigration law reform – for example, Albania simplified its migration laws and created a new 'single residence permit' for a range of target groups, including pensioners, athletes, volunteers, investors, and 'digital mobile workers'. Other countries add categories to existing visa types – for instance, Romania extended the use of its existing 'long-term visa' to include conditions classifying digital nomads under the category of 'other purposes'.

Authorities managing digital nomad visas under this approach are the least proactive in promoting or otherwise encouraging visa uptake. The visa application process is burdensome – for example, in most instances, one must apply in person at a relevant diplomatic post (see Table 2). The maximum processing time is also relatively long (over five weeks, on average – see Table 2). On the other hand, the application cost is relatively low – usually no different than other visas or residence permits (compared to relatively high fees for the strategic digital nomad visa 'programmes'). The visa rules remain silent about tax obligations or inform that the 'usual' rules apply, whereby a person becomes a tax resident after spending more than 180 or 183 days in a country. Digital nomads might find it also more difficult to find out about these visas – only half have a webpage with any information about the visa regime. These are often dubious to navigate and provide only legalistic (and often scant) information about eligibility and the application process. In other cases, the most exhaustive information source about visa features was the original piece of legislation introducing the visa regime. This shows a stark contrast between the catchy slogans and appealing websites of strategic digital nomad visas and, for example, the legalistic 'Resolution 5477' (Colombia) or 'Executive Decree 198' (Panama).

Geographical and temporal clustering

Besides the features of individual policies, the analysis has revealed some broader macro trends in implementing digital nomad visas. First, the countries' economic structures seem to determine their policy choices. Small island states in the Caribbean and Africa, highly dependent on tourism revenues (see Table 2), tend to focus on attracting working tourists. The other strategic approaches are prevalent among countries with high per capita incomes and digital adoption levels. The legitimising approach is most prevalent in Europe's and South America's bigger, industrialised economies. Second, there is a degree of geographical clustering – two main groups of countries that have activated digital nomad visas have emerged: (1) the Caribbean and the Atlantic coasts of Central and Northern America, and (2) Europe, particularly its Mediterranean shore and the North. Fig. 5 shows the geographical distribution of digital nomad visas. Finally, this regional clustering is paired with temporal clustering – countries in close geographical proximity to one another were generally more likely to implement digital nomad visas in short spans of time. For example, six digital nomad visas emerged in the Caribbean within just three months (between August and October 2020).

Discussion

Heterogeneity of digital nomad visas

The findings corroborate the view that digital nomad visas can be implemented to different ends (Dreher & Triandafyllidou, 2023), proposing a categorisation of such policies based on the interpretation of their stated intentions and expected implications. Two nuances should be emphasised. First, the division is not clear-cut – some policies exhibit characteristics of more than one approach. Second, the present categorisation of individual visas is not set in stone – particularly, it is conceivable that the legitimising approach constitutes only the first step (legalisation of digital nomad stays) and might develop into strategic approaches. For example, Grenada's digital nomad visa has been classified within the legitimising approach (the only one in the Caribbean not strategically targeted at working tourists), but the Grenada Tourism Authority announced that following the visa implementation, it "will soon roll out a new campaign to promote the opportunity for non-nationals to work remotely in Grenada under the new 'Remote Employment Act'" (Grenada Tourism Authority, 2021, n.d.). Furthermore, the approaches are

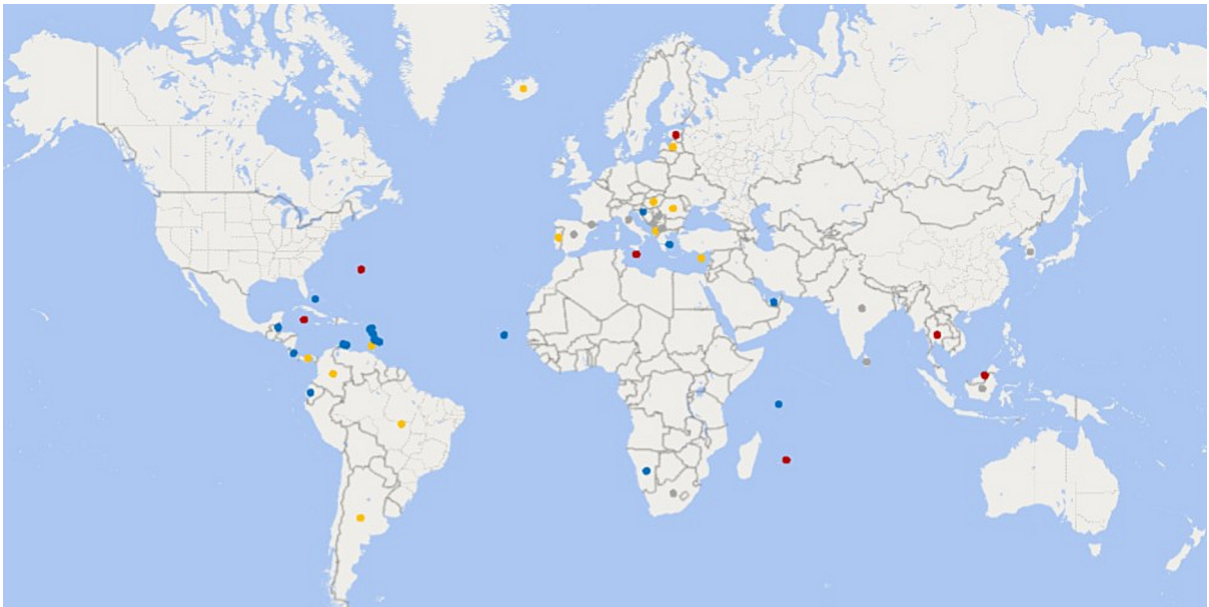


Fig. 5. Geographical distribution of digital nomad visas by approach.

Note: Digital nomad visas in the legitimising approach are marked in yellow, strategic (aimed at working tourists) – in blue, strategic (aimed at other digital nomad identities) – in red, and announced but not yet implemented visas – in grey.

Source: Author

identified and described from the policymaker perspective, or the ‘supply side’ of digital nomadism (Hannonen et al., 2023). Alternative typologies are conceivable that divide the digital nomad visas based on demand-side criteria – from the digital nomad perspective. Finally, the proposed approaches are fluid – one can identify several visas that share characteristics of more than one approach.

The design and roll-out of the visas under the identified approaches also shed light on the policy intentions in terms of the expected impacts of digital nomads on the host economies. Why would nation-states wish to attract digital nomads? One reason is to spur local consumption by high-earning and high-spending digital nomads as long-term tourists or wealthy expats (Jiwasiddi et al., 2022; Mancinelli & Germann Molz, 2023; Wang et al., 2019). This is the clear implied goal of the strategic digital nomad visas aimed at working tourists and wealthy working expats. For example, according to the OECD, Barbados reported “at least \$100 million worth of tourism revenue” within the first ten months of its Welcome Stamp roll-out, on top of \$6 million in application fees (Elisabeth, 2022, 6). Thus, in most cases, the digital nomad visa seemingly aims to boost the country’s tourism industry by diversifying the tourism offering and attracting new tourist segments (mobile digital workers).

Second, to capitalise on the other ‘identities’ of the digital nomad as high-skilled workers and entrepreneurs. For example, Sánchez-Vergara et al. (2023) suggest that policies aimed at digital nomads can support business environment and induce high-skilled migration. Although almost all visas in the sample prohibit work with local businesses and, due to limited durations, do not seem to be designed to retain skill and innovation in the long run (Dreher & Triandafyllidou, 2023; Elisabeth, 2022), the two visas (in Estonia and Malaysia) targeted at high-skilled digital workers do tap into this human capital potential of digital nomads.

Finally, taxation of high-earning nomads is another contentious point – nomads benefit from the infrastructure funded by the host governments, but the literature had previously noted that the rules of their (potentially high) fiscal contribution often remain unclear (Holleran, 2022; Tyutyuryukov & Guseva, 2021; Wang et al., 2018, 2019). This question remains somewhat elusive. Most strategic digital nomad visas aimed at working tourists explicitly and purposefully forgo the potential tax revenues (by guaranteeing a ‘tax waiver’). Other visas either do not clarify nomads’ tax obligations or follow the established tax residency principles (Kostic, 2019) – how they are enforced, though, is not fully clear.

This paper also opens the discussion on the potential ‘race’ of nation-states for the digital nomad. Digital nomad visas have been snowballing across the globe at an unprecedented pace since the first COVID-induced lockdown – on average, more than one visa was implemented every month over the studied period. Furthermore, the geographical, temporal, and strategic clustering indicates a degree of regional competition for (specific segments of) remote workers among countries in close proximity and with similar macroeconomic conditions. Digital nomad visas may thus be becoming a strategic imperative for countries not to stay behind, as visa activation in a region triggers responses from the closest competitors. Such a competitive streak would not be unprecedented – countries have been competing for high-skilled workers (Florida, 2006), and small and island states (overrepresented in the sample) have been particularly ‘fierce’ in trying to attract revenue-generating individuals (Azzopardi, 2018; Prasad, 2004).

Definitional debate

This study contributes to the theoretical debate on who is the digital nomad by offering a definition from a host country perspective. The basic eligibility rules of most digital nomad visas follow the broad definition of a digital nomad as a remote worker who generates income outside the host country by using digital technologies, including employees, business owners, and freelancers or the self-employed (Aroles et al., 2020; Hannonen, 2020). However, the academic debate has centred around the digital nomad perspective and their lifestyle of long-term travel from one destination to the next. The host country perspective offers an alternative viewpoint – what matters for them is that these individuals stay in the country for a certain duration while working remotely – where they come from and where they go next scarcely matters. Therefore, the following definition of the digital nomad from the host country perspective is suggested: *a foreign professional who stays at the destination for a fixed period of time (defined by visa rules), sustained by their income from work or entrepreneurial activity based abroad and performed digitally.*

The designs of digital nomad visas also shed light on the emerging modalities of digital nomadism. Policymakers often blend the terms ‘workation’, ‘digital nomadism’, and ‘remote work’. One could argue that the relatively long permitted durations, defined by visa rules (12 months on average), mean that the visas are not targeted at the ‘conventional’ digital nomads (Cook, 2023). However, it seems unreasonable to expect policymakers to limit the pool of visitors to match the precise (narrow) definition of the digital nomad. Instead, policies often cover a variety of digital nomad modalities from shorter workations, through ‘conventional’ digital nomadism, to long-term digital expatriatism, in some cases possibly leading even to permanent residency. They also only set the *maximum* duration – visa holders are not required to sit out the whole visa period and are free to move on (or back) as they choose – very much in line with the broader understanding of digital nomadism (Hannonen, 2022).

Conclusions

This paper provides a systematic review of digital nomad visas, providing a relatively accurate and exhaustive snapshot of the digital nomad visa ‘market’ (as of January 2023). Furthermore, building on the identified set of 36 digital nomad visas, it proposes a two-tier categorisation based on the proactiveness and strategic intention (or lack thereof) of the policy, as well as the targeted ‘identity’ of the digital nomad. The findings offer a new take on the potential economic importance of digital nomads from the institutional perspective and provide empirical evidence on the nation-states strategic response to this new class of remote workers (Wang et al., 2018, 2019). They nuance some previous views on the homogeneity of digital nomad visas (Sánchez-Vergara et al., 2023), and expand the argument that governments tend to implement such visas with various intentions, often aligned with their broader strategic priorities (Dreher & Triandafyllidou, 2023; Mancinelli & Germann Molz, 2023). The paper also provides a ‘supply side’ view of the digital nomad, contributing to the ongoing debate on the definition and scope of the ‘digital nomad’ label. More broadly, the findings add to the perspectives on tourism development and destination branding, studying how destinations can leverage the new work patterns to diversify their tourism offering and attract new tourist segments (see, e.g., Qu et al., 2011).

Some limitations of the study should be acknowledged. First, although the paper contributes to expanding the methodological toolkit for researchers of lifestyle mobility and digital nomadism by applying systematic methods to policy review, the reliance on secondary sources for the identification of digital nomad policies might have resulted in the omission of some policies. Furthermore, a certain degree of arbitrariness of the approach (present in any social science methods) needs to be noted when first setting and then applying the inclusion/exclusion criteria. Finally, the findings provide only a description of the state-of-play at a specific point in time. Future research could, first and foremost, replicate the design of this study to validate the results (perhaps based on improved sources to identify the policies in question, if available in the future) and track the development of the digital nomad visa market in time.

Second, this study operationalises ‘government responses’ as visa regimes, which inevitably limits the scope of the examined policies. Future research could investigate other kinds of policies (including taxation) that aim to attract or retain digital nomads, especially in destinations where visa regimes are potentially of lower importance (e.g., the internal movements of nomads within the EU single market or the United States). Researchers could also examine how the policies targeted at digital nomads fit in the destination’s broader tourism development strategies (or entrepreneurship, or human capital strategies – depending on the approach) – are digital nomads recognised by policymakers also at the higher strategic level?

Third, this study takes a ‘supply side’ perspective, while most previous research has focused on the nomad perspective. Digital nomad scholarship could look further at the intersection of these perspectives (as recently done by Mancinelli & Germann Molz, 2023), examining the interplay between: (1) the supply and demand for digital nomad visas (and other public and private services), and (2) the relationship between the source (sending) and target (receiving) countries. Such explorations could be framed in the context of ‘multi-residentiality’ or ‘multi-local living’ frameworks (Kaufmann et al., 2004; Mancinelli, 2020).

Finally, this study provides a broad perspective on digital nomad visas – a narrower and deeper look at individual visas, including primary data collection, either qualitative or quantitative, should be explored. In particular, the impacts of digital nomads on the destinations they visit remain an underexplored area (Hannonen, 2020). Although this study deduces the policy intentions from the design of digital nomad visas, researchers should further investigate their *real* impacts in light of these intentions. Similarly, this study only touches upon a previously unexplored theme – the competition between nation-states for the digital nomad, which merits further investigation. *Which* countries enter this competition and *why*?

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Jan Bednorz: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2023.103715>.

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