



The touristification of work: Coworking spaces and digital nomads in Barcelona

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1. Introduction

Digital nomadism refers to a mode of work and life in which professionals leverage digital technologies to work remotely while continuously traveling (Orel, 2021). This phenomenon has expanded rapidly over the past two decades with the rise of high-speed internet, teleworking policies, and collaboration platforms (Matos & Ardévol, 2021). Digital nomads are typically freelancers, entrepreneurs, or remote employees who carry out their duties online from various locations worldwide (Cook, 2023). They often perceive the combination of flexible work arrangements and geographic mobility as enhancing their wellbeing and work-life balance (Holleran & Notting, 2023). In pursuit of autonomy and new cultural experiences, these workers seek destinations that offer both adequate infrastructure for productivity and an appealing quality of life (Holleran & Notting, 2023; Müller, 2016; Reichenberger, 2018; Thompson, 2019a). This study conceptualizes digital nomadism as a hybrid phenomenon that blurs traditional boundaries between work and tourism. While digital nomads engage in productive labor, their selection of destinations, consumption of urban amenities, and temporary residence patterns align them more closely with tourism mobilities than conventional labor migration. This hybridity is central to understanding how cities and workspaces strategically position themselves to attract this population, deploying both business infrastructure and leisure experiences as complementary attractors (Hannonen, 2024; Thompson, 2019b). However, while digital nomadism has attracted growing scholarly interest, theoretical gaps remain in understanding how this lifestyle is entangled with urban spaces, local communities, and emerging infrastructures.

This article focuses on Barcelona, a city defining itself as a ‘coworking-friendly city’ with a ‘concentrated market’ of digital nomads and international stakeholders (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2018, p. 30). Recent coworking sector growth has consolidated the city’s position as one of Europe’s leading nomadic destinations, evidenced by its high

concentration of coworking spaces and active promotion as a ‘workation’ destination where work and vacation converge (Bozzi, 2024). This study examines Barcelona’s coworking spaces as strategic intermediaries operating at the intersection of shaping digital nomad experiences, constructing urban place identity, and aligning private workspace provision with municipal place-branding strategies. We conceptualize these spaces as active agents in the ‘touristification of work,’ whereby work environments increasingly adopt tourism-like experiential logics to attract and retain mobile talent. The study seeks to answer two research questions: (1) What strategies do coworking spaces employ to attract and retain digital nomads, and how do these strategies reflect the touristification of work? and (2) How do coworking spaces function as intermediaries aligning private workspace provision with Barcelona’s place-branding efforts as a business-oriented destination? These questions examine both micro-level practices of workspace operators and macro-level processes integrating mobile talent attraction into urban development strategies.

A relatively unexplored aspect in the extant literature pertains to how coworking spaces transform the experience of digital nomads, in addition to their perception of and relationship with the urban environment. We conceptualize this transformation through the lens of ‘touristification of work’—a process whereby work environments increasingly adopt experiential, hospitality-oriented logics traditionally associated with tourism and leisure consumption. This concept captures how coworking spaces blur boundaries between productivity and pleasure, professional networking and social recreation, workspace provision and destination marketing. This aspect merits particular consideration, as these environments are predicated on narratives associated with creativity, the idealisation of startup culture, and the lifestyle of the nomadic community (Bonneau et al., 2023), while shaping an aesthetic imaginary that projects alternative ways of working (Bacevice, 2022; Bozzi, 2024). The touristification of work manifests in curated aesthetics, event programming that emphasizes leisure

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alongside productivity, multilingual hospitality-style service provision, and the strategic positioning of workspaces as gateways to urban cultural consumption. This framework allows us to analyze how coworking spaces function simultaneously as sites of labor and lifestyle, while serving as instruments of urban place-branding strategies.

Coworking spaces' spatial and social practices foster belonging and ownership, with contact between individuals and the city initiated within collaborative workspaces, providing access to organizational resources and tools. This process constitutes an integral component of commercial offerings, bolstered by marketing campaigns promoting coworking and city image. Coworking spaces' most significant potential lies in adapting environments to attract mobile talent as part of positioning and place management strategy, becoming powerful tools for international visibility. These spaces function as pivotal entities facilitating digital nomad adaptation while reinforcing entrepreneurial city narratives promoted by Barcelona's brand, requiring close collaboration between public administration and private enterprises, with coworking managers as mediators supporting integration and community building. This paper highlights coworking spaces as environments legitimizing nomadic lifestyles and central platforms shaping city perception as nomadic destinations.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Digital nomadism and coworking

Digital nomads are professionals who perform their duties remotely whilst traveling, leveraging global connectivity and digital technologies. They " ... consider the combination of flexible work and mobility to result in greater wellbeing" (Matos & Ardévol, 2021, p. 63). This trend has grown significantly due to the expansion of teleworking, high-speed internet access, and the rise of platforms that facilitate remote collaboration, which has become popular in the last twenty years (Bozzi, 2024; Thompson, 2019b). The primary requirements for these professionals include reliable technological infrastructure, collaborative workspaces, flexible visa arrangements, and stable internet connectivity.

Establishing business ecosystems and creative hubs serves as a strategy to appeal to workers consuming future experiences (Woldoff & Litchfield, 2021). Physical space constitutes a fundamental element in the digital nomad's imaginary, involved in producing mobilities as both destination and local place (Hannonen, 2024, p. 4). Digital nomads seek destinations (Brandajs & Russo, 2023) and spaces to work daily and foster communities (Berdicchia et al., 2022; Orel, 2021). Digital nomadism combines workspace and lifestyle, integrating work flexibility with geographic mobility (Aroles et al., 2020). These environments offer modern infrastructures, including high-speed internet, meeting rooms, and breakout areas, rendering them ideal for remote workers and entrepreneurs (Hermann & Paris, 2020; Richter & Richter, 2020). Coworking spaces have become pivotal locations for digital nomads due to functional attributes and capacity to facilitate meaningful experiences and symbolic value. Research across urban contexts from Rome (Fiorentino, 2019) to Italian social streets (Akhavan et al., 2018) to Barcelona (Capdevila, 2013, 2015) demonstrates their role as community-oriented spaces reshaping urban social life. These flexible infrastructures minimize social isolation, encourage networking (Orel, 2019), and promote shared practices and active participation (Bouncken & Gantert, 2023).

Digital nomads are attracted to these environments because they integrate a range of products and services essential to their professional activity, such as tax addresses, parcel reception and accounting advice (Thompson, 2019b). However, the appeal of these spaces extends beyond their instrumental function. Instead, they are designed to create stimulating atmospheres and carefully crafted aesthetics that respond to contemporary design trends, making them visually appealing (Orel & Alonso-Almeida, 2019).

Coworking spaces function as physical products whose experiences

are consumed symbolically, expressing individual and collective identities (Bacevice, 2022). Visual appeal is a deliberate strategy engendering preference and belonging (Bouncken & Aslam, 2021), with spaces designed to resonate with occupants' identities, communicating lifestyles and aspirations aligned with broader cultural logic (Bacevice & Wilhoit, 2024). Workspace provision extends beyond physical infrastructure, serving as symbolic territories where contemporary work conceptions are renegotiated. Recent scholarship has advanced digital nomadism understanding along critical dimensions. Sciuva (2025) and Hannonen (2024) show digital nomadism is deeply entangled with place-specific infrastructures, policies, and cultural configurations. Mitra and Paul (2025) demonstrate how digital infrastructure determines destination attractiveness, with urban hubs offering advantages in connectivity, coworking density, and networking opportunities. Arslan (2024) positions digital nomads in liminal space between tourism and work, central to understanding how coworking spaces function as productive workplaces and experiential consumption sites. Gupta et al.'s (2024) systematic review identifies research gaps our study addresses by examining coworking managers as mediators, community-builders, and symbiotic relationships between attraction strategies and urban place-branding. We empirically examine micro-level practices through which coworking spaces operationalize the work-tourism nexus while serving as instruments of urban entrepreneurial strategy, introducing 'touristification of work' to capture workspace provision's adoption of hospitality-sector logics.

2.2. Touristification of work

The concept of touristification has traditionally described processes through which urban areas, neighborhoods, or cultural practices become increasingly oriented toward tourist consumption, often at the expense of local residents' needs and traditional uses (Milano et al., 2023). However, we extend this concept to analyze a parallel phenomenon occurring within work environments: the adoption of tourism-like experiential logics, aesthetic strategies, and service models in spaces designed for productive labor. The touristification of work represents a conceptual lens for understanding how contemporary workspaces—particularly those targeting mobile professionals—increasingly function as hybrid sites that blur traditional boundaries between production and consumption, labor and leisure, workplace and destination.

This process manifests through several interconnected dimensions. First, experiential design: coworking spaces adopt aesthetic and atmospheric approaches borrowed from hospitality industries, creating Instagram-worthy environments that prioritize visual appeal and sensory experience alongside functional utility (Miguel et al., 2023; Orel & Alonso-Almeida, 2019). Second, service provision models: workspace operators increasingly function as hospitality providers, offering concierge-style services, curated local experiences, and community programming that resembles resort or hotel amenities more than traditional office management. Third, symbolic positioning: these spaces market themselves not merely as places to work but as gateways to lifestyle transformation and cultural immersion, employing promotional narratives that emphasize freedom, adventure, and belonging (Bonneau et al., 2023). Fourth, place integration: coworking spaces actively position themselves as intermediaries between workers and urban tourism infrastructure, curating content about local attractions and facilitating members' consumption of the city's leisure offerings. That said, the touristification of work has important implications for understanding digital nomadism and urban development. It reveals how cities seeking to attract mobile talent must offer not only functional business infrastructure but also the experiential qualities associated with desirable tourist destinations. Simultaneously, it demonstrates how workspace provision becomes entangled with broader urban place-branding strategies, with coworking spaces functioning as both private businesses and de facto ambassadors for entrepreneurial city identities.

2.3. Intersection of workspace and lifestyle

The emergence of collaborative workspaces has been concomitant with the lifestyle narratives of digital nomads. This development has created environments that seamlessly blend work and leisure, incorporating sensory experiences that are characteristic of the latter. These spaces are not merely a response to the demand for flexibility and global connectivity; they are also influenced by the aesthetic sensibilities of the hospitality industry and social media (Miguel et al., 2023; Thompson, 2019a). In this environment, wellbeing and comfort become distinguishing characteristics. The meticulous design of these environments promotes the concept of a de-localised working life, evoking images of freedom, creativity and community (Orel & Alonso-Almeida, 2019). Consequently, workspaces function not only as functional infrastructures, but also as settings that symbolise a new paradigm of contemporary work (Bouncken & Aslam, 2021; Bouncken et al., 2020).

The workspace is a fundamental element of user experience and identity, facilitating work tasks while reinforcing belonging and meaningful professional experience. Coworking spaces are particularly stimulating environments for startup culture (Bouncken & Reuschl, 2018, p. 320) as they bring together people with similar business interests and an understanding of the entrepreneurial lifestyle, motivations and goals. These spaces promote creative work and foster community through endorsement, encounter and engagement with social groups (Garrett et al., 2017). Studies of coworking communities in Barcelona (Capdevila, 2013) and other European cities (Merkel, 2015) have shown how these collaborative environments help freelancers and creative workers navigate precarious labor markets while building supportive networks.

The workspace-lifestyle relationship is pivotal in digital nomad work dynamics (Orel, 2019). Coworking spaces function as socio-symbolic infrastructures that shape and reflect users' identities, aspirations, and values (Moriset, 2014; Yang et al., 2019), offering curated environments aligned with borderless entrepreneurship and global citizenship beyond mere Wi-Fi and desks (Spinuzzi, 2012). These spaces bridge the paradox between spatial fluidity and community needs, creating continuity in discontinuous routines through belonging and shared culture based on collaboration, self-optimization, and innovation (Bonneau et al., 2023; Bozzi, 2020; Brown, 2017). Spaces become functional and expressive, narrating occupants' identities while projecting entrepreneurialism, creativity, and cosmopolitanism as identity performance stages. However, critics argue coworking spaces reinforce socio-economic homogeneity and create "bubbles" (Bacevice, 2022; de Vaujany et al., 2019; Moriset, 2014), attracting narrow demographics of young, highly educated, mobile tech or creative professionals while excluding those whose work styles or resources misalign. This exclusionary tendency limits diversity and amplifies neoliberal discourse equating flexibility with freedom and individual responsibility with success, obscuring precarities of gig work, platform labor, and digital nomadism (Mancinelli, 2020; Thompson, 2019a).

2.4. Place branding and talent attraction: the case of Barcelona

Place branding has emerged as a pivotal strategy for positioning destinations to attract global talent, contributing to economic development while accentuating distinctive attributes (da Silva Oliveira, 2015; Kavaratzis & Florek, 2021). The rise of digital nomads has significantly impacted the competitive landscape of tourist destinations. These destinations now tend to market themselves as leisure spots and desirable locations for remote working. This transformation has prompted numerous territories to adapt their marketing strategies, integrating work infrastructure and tourist experiences to position themselves as workation destinations that facilitate 'coworkation', which combines coworking with vacation travel (Zerva et al., 2023). Coworking spaces serve as the organizational infrastructure enabling this convergence, providing the professional amenities that allow extended stays to

function as both productive work periods and leisure experiences. Consequently, creative industries have promoted branding campaigns that reinforce this trend, promoting mobile and flexible lifestyles associated with work and tourism.

Barcelona's identity as an international city developed through events like the 1992 Olympics, 2004 Forum of Cultures (Forgas-Coll et al., 2012; Morillo, 2018), and Mobile World Congress (Colombo et al., 2022). The city's coworking sector has been studied for its community-building dimensions (Capdevila, 2013, 2015), though less attention has been paid to its role in attracting international mobile talent. Its branding has shifted toward business and digital growth (Compte-Pujol et al., 2018; Milano et al., 2023), ranking among the top European startup cities by 2018 (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2019). In recent years, Barcelona's metropolitan character, along with the growth of its economic and cultural life and business amenities, has increasingly attracted temporary users such as digital nomads (Donaire-Benito & Zerva, 2025). Initiatives like the *Barcelona International Welcome Desk* support talent reception while promoting internationalization (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2019). The city's global recognition attracts digital nomads (Escudero-Gómez, 2024), with innovation districts like 22@ housing technology companies (Bottero et al., 2020; Morisson, 2019, 2020). Reports from *fdI Intelligence* (2022) and *EY* (2023) confirm Barcelona's attractiveness for investment, reflecting its commitment to technological development through enhanced infrastructure and entrepreneurial ecosystems (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2023; Mobile World Capital Foundation, 2023).

3. Methodological framework

This qualitative study identifies strategies attracting digital nomads to Barcelona's coworking spaces and how these spaces represent a business city vision. The research follows *Goulding's* (2002, p. 14) characterization of Grounded Theory as a "constellation of methods" focused on narrative data and theory building rather than testing (Savin-Baden & Howell, 2013, p. 183). The study uses an inductive, multi-method design with coworking and community managers as the primary observation unit, alongside space dynamics and customer experience design (Klaus & Kuppelwieser, 2023). The sample selection focused on Barcelona coworking spaces that met three criteria: city location, explicit digital nomad orientation, and presence on *coworking spain.com*. Fieldwork (2020–2023) included semi-structured interviews with 12 coworking professionals (managers, community leads, front desk staff), nine conducted on-site and three via Teams, all recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using MAXQDA software. Continuous researcher-manager interaction allowed studying organizational culture practices (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006), while document analysis revealed communication patterns and place-making strategies (LeCompte, 2000). Analysis used iterative coding, moving between empirical observations and theoretical concepts to develop 'analytical dimensions' addressing our research questions. These dimensions emerged through constant data comparison (interview transcripts, field notes, documents) and were refined through dialogue with three literature areas: (1) place branding and talent attraction (da Silva Oliveira, 2016; Kavaratzis & Florek, 2021), (2) coworking and community studies (Garrett et al., 2017; Spinuzzi, 2012), and (3) touristification and lifestyle mobilities (Milano et al., 2023; Thompson, 2019b). Three dimensions crystallized: (1) attraction strategies, (2) community building, and (3) place-brand alignment. *Table 1* summarizes data-collection techniques, sources, timeframes, and analytical purposes.

The observations followed a participant-observer methodology (Saunders et al., 2009; Yanow, 2012), with researchers integrated into the organizational context for in-situ understanding of practices, what *Patton* (2002) calls a "holistic perspective" (p. 262). Document analysis (Bowen, 2009) examined content from websites and social networks, facilitating interpretation of organizational culture and triangulation of data. Content collected from May 2020 until April 2023 included

Table 1

Research design.

Research method	Main characteristics and key aspects
Semi-structured interviews	Interviews with the 12 managers of the coworking spaces. The average duration of each interview was 30–60 min. A total of approximately 8.5 h of conversations were recorded and then transcribed verbatim.
Observation	Observation during the welcome tours to digital nomads, as well as other key moments (e.g. recreational activities, afterworks, talks and networking events).
Document analysis	Documents produced by the organisation, and disseminated through each company’s own media.

Instagram posts and stories, event invitations, collaborative activities, blog posts, and service descriptions published by communication teams of each coworking space, revealing how sense of place is transmitted to the nomad community (LeCompte, 2000). The names of the coworking spaces and the managers interviewed have been anonymised, using fictitious names for the offices and the code ‘CwM-[number]’ to refer to the informants.

4. Findings

The following sections present our findings organized according to the three analytical dimensions outlined in our methodological framework. Each dimension addresses how coworking spaces shape digital nomad experiences while reinforcing Barcelona’s brand as a destination for mobile talent. The first dimension examines spaces’ concrete strategies to attract and retain nomadic workers, revealing how these tactics blur conventional boundaries between workplace provision and hospitality services. The second dimension explores community-building practices that transform coworking spaces into social infrastructure for transient populations, analyzing professional networking and leisure integration. The third dimension investigates how individual coworking spaces align with and amplify Barcelona’s place-branding initiatives, functioning as spatial and symbolic gateways that mediate nomads’ relationships with the city. Together, these dimensions illuminate the process of work’s touristification—the increasing adoption of tourism-like experiential logics within productive work environments.

4.1. Strategies used by coworking spaces to attract digital nomads

4.1.1. Permanence

Digital nomads represent highly valued audiences for coworking spaces primarily due to their tendency toward permanence. Despite their mobile nature, these workers often seek longer-term contracts (one year or more) and become repeat customers and advocates. Managers value their commitment and low turnover, which facilitates community integration. Membership options typically fall into two categories: fixed (assigned desk, more expensive) and flexible (any available area). Interestingly, nomads often start with flexible options before transitioning to fixed memberships within their first year. As CwM-1 explains, *“It’s because first they come to try it out, they do it with fees that don’t require permanence, and then they like it when they start attending community parties and feel at home”*. This progression occurs as users develop community engagement and a sense of belonging. Coworking spaces facilitate these transitions by providing welcoming environments with essential amenities and communities that ease expatriate integration, ultimately enhancing membership commitment and contract extensions.

Strategies employed to attract coworking spaces to digital nomads have been meticulously crafted with a Business-to-Consumer (B2C) framework as a fundamental design principle. All the managers interviewed highlighted that their promotional campaigns and online communication are directed towards end customers. However, since the onset of the pandemic, there has been an observed rise in the level of

interest in B2B customers. This shift is primarily attributable to the decline in coworker memberships and the confinement experienced during the initial post-pandemic period.

“from March to May [2020] the reality was that all the nomads returned to their countries because they couldn’t do anything here” (CwM-2, L’Eixample, 12 February 2021)

“Our main and most loyal client was the remote worker, the expats, and with COVID they started to leave progressively, either because they didn’t invoice or because they preferred to work from home. The biggest challenge, and we knew it in the offices, was to bring them back when this happened, and it was not easy. In fact, we have not been able to do it completely” (CwM-3, Coworking 22@, 09 July 2021)

“One thing happened that we could see coming. The foreign workers, all of them freelancers, decided to leave because they had flexible contracts. So once their monthly contract ended, they left for fear of contagion. Although several hygiene measures had been implemented, it was difficult to convince them. We only succeeded with a small group” (CwM-4, Gràcia, 23 September 2020)

During the pandemic, Barcelona’s coworking spaces underwent strategic reconsideration as freelancers and digital nomads departed. Managers pivoted toward the business segment for greater financial stability, targeting companies with limited office space to facilitate workforce transitions while ensuring social distancing. While implementing hygiene protocols, retaining nomadic workers proved challenging, highlighting both vulnerability and adaptability of coworking business models. These permanence strategies illustrate a key dimension of work’s touristification: adapting hospitality-sector retention models to workspace provision. Just as hotels cultivate repeat guests through loyalty programs, coworking spaces develop membership progressions and community engagement tactics to transform transient users into committed long-term clients. The emphasis on ‘feeling at home’ mirrors boutique hotels or destination resorts, revealing how work environments increasingly adopt affective and relational strategies from the tourism industry.

4.1.2. Language

English predominates as the primary communication language in digital nomads’ lives, widely recognized in coworking spaces where it’s used for daily interactions, social and professional activities, internal correspondence, and social media. Job postings consistently identify advanced English as essential given high volumes of English-language customer service interactions, extending to digital content production and event organization. Analysis reveals internationally-oriented startups conducting operations in English, aligning with the Global Startup Ecosystem Index (2024), which ranks Barcelona among the top five cities globally for entrepreneurial activity and international talent attraction. The city’s developed sectors (foodtech, internet, gaming, e-commerce, pharmaceuticals) are predominantly staffed by foreign professionals in coworking spaces, making communication skills crucial for attracting international talent.

“We try to ensure that communication in general is also in English, as it is a safe way to reach this audience, and they feel more comfortable and welcome (...) in Barcelona. All of them come from abroad to work in the most powerful sectors, such as technology, software, etc., and they don’t speak Spanish. Here we make this [language] not a barrier” (CwM-5, Sagrada Família, 23 September 2021)

“Here [at the coworking space] at the front desk you will find two community managers who speak English, Spanish and Catalan. Languages are part of our work; we communicate in all three because there are people from all over the world. Digital nomads also ask for their contracts and all the information in English. In fact, on the corporate website they can access their account and select English to

do everything to do with coworking. They can even order lunch. If you look at the Whatsapp group of the catering company that brings the food, you will see that the menu is also in English. It's about offering a tailor-made service, and that's what we do" (CwM-6, *Plaça Catalunya*, 6 September 2023)

While English proficiency attracts digital nomads for work purposes, increasing numbers seek Spanish and Catalan language acquisition within coworking spaces. Managers designed initiatives such as conversation clubs and thematic lunches for language practice—at *Beach and Sun*, sports activities were conducted in Spanish; at *Bogatell*, learning sessions in all three languages were included, given the considerable number of expatriate members. This multilingual service provision and language-learning initiatives exemplify touristification through hospitality-sector approaches to cultural mediation. Coworking spaces function like international hotels, providing linguistic accessibility while offering 'authentic' local cultural experiences through controlled encounters. This dual positioning - familiar (English-speaking, globally legible) and exotic (offering local languages and customs) - mirrors the tourism paradox of seeking difference within comfort, transposed into work environments.

4.1.3. Customer search

Pre-pandemic, Barcelona's coworking spaces enjoyed high demand with waiting lists, prompting expansion. *Plaça Catalunya* established a new office in Portal de l'Àngel by 2022 that quickly reached capacity, while *Bogatell* and *Sagrada Família* similarly expanded to serve individual entrepreneurs and corporate groups. Post-pandemic, attracting members became challenging despite safety measures (partition screens, masks, cleaning supplies). Marketing teams pivoted to targeting international companies needing to relocate or redistribute workforce due to space constraints and post-pandemic regulations, though promotional efforts weren't entirely successful in maintaining pre-pandemic occupancy. Coworking spaces identified new business clients while providing workspace, ongoing support, and guidance on visa requirements, housing arrangements, and health concerns. While effective, this wasn't the most successful approach. Other spaces (*Gràcia*, *22@*, *Liceu*) implemented sales promotions to attract international audiences, but these proved unsuccessful. New member activation was achieved primarily through user referrals.

"... we work a lot on the basis of what coworkers who are already there say. In fact, little publicity is given to digital nomads, because they all come by recommendation" (CwM-7, *Beach and Sun*, 11 October 2021).

"For example, in the two *Plaça Catalunya* spaces, the 'OneMember' plan has been designed, which consists of a membership to go four times a month, designed for digital nomads, for those who want to try out what it's all about. Then, in 100 % of cases, they stay" (CwM-9, *Plaça Catalunya 2*, 6 September 2023).

"Advertising has not brought us customers. In fact, we invest little in advertising. What we do do is make a lot of effort with the community that already exists. The better they are, the more they are connected and well attended, the more successful we will be" (CwM-8, *Liceu*, 15 March 2022).

The coworking space's programme of activities is also a strategic tool for attracting users. For the managers interviewed, social and professional events are also a way of creating publicity, especially internally, which generally guarantees a subsequent recommendation. One piece of evidence from the research was that coworking spaces with higher capacity and specialised communication teams were the ones that gained the newest members, even in times of crisis.

"The big challenge post-pandemic was to take up the events. This is our window to new or potential members. Social activities, parties and games are our calling card, and that was the first thing that was

eliminated after the state of alarm and the following months. After that, at least in our case, it was complicated to resume them in the same way" (CwM-3, *22@*, 16 December 2021)

"The entrepreneurs' breakfast is the most valuable activity we have to connect people. As it is open, and it is a day that someone from outside can come, it was also a way for others to discover the space, to experience it like us and to imagine the day to day. We didn't suspend it, but we did start to limit the capacity and that worked" (CwM-4, *Gràcia*, 23 September 2020)

Coworking spaces offer shared infrastructure complemented by activities energizing the community, including professional events (conferences, workshops) and social gatherings fostering belonging. Community breakfasts exemplify this approach, serving as networking forums and project presentation platforms. At *Gràcia* and *Plaça Catalunya*, these English-language events include pre-activity conversations with entrepreneurs, with membership being the only participation requirement. Community managers play pivotal roles identifying user profiles and developing participation strategies. The most effective events occur when attendees receive advance notification about featured projects, as seen at *Gràcia*, *Bogatell*, *Liceu* and *Plaça Catalunya*. These typically 2-h sessions include 10–15 min presentations followed by constructive feedback exchanges, strengthening professional contacts and business opportunities throughout the community.

4.2. Community building and networking

A primary objective of coworking spaces is to facilitate the establishment of networks and teams. The results of this study demonstrate the emergence of two distinct types of communities within which digital nomads consistently interact: social and professional. The distinction between these two categories is often indistinct, and the specific nature of the coworking space has a significant impact on this blurring of boundaries. For instance, in environments such as *Beach and Sun*, where the membership consists of sixteen individuals and the group's activities are centred around sports and aquatic pursuits, the distinction between these categories becomes less pronounced. The foreign workers settle in the coworking space and organise their activities based on the references provided by this place. It has been observed that in smaller communities, with numbers ranging from 5 to 20 individuals, the bonds are stronger, more personal, and recreational in nature. This phenomenon, characterised by the presence of digital nomads, is observed in all the spaces, and is typified by workers who first become acquainted with the city through the coworking space and the social opportunities it offers. Notably, the participation rate of digital nomads in events exceeds that of local members. This suggests a higher level of receptiveness among digital nomads to engaging with the community within the coworking space.

"We know that nomads, expats and international workers, whatever you want to call them, are motivated by a dynamic space, where they not only work, but also have an active social life, which there is no way to have outside because they [the nomadic community] don't know anyone in the city, they have no reference groups, no contacts. Everything comes from here [the coworking space] and we have to give them all the tools they need to have a good time. They are interested in getting to know Barcelona, they like the summer and the long days, they are, let's say, on holiday while they work. We have to create an environment for this to happen and the coworking space has to offer it to them" (CwM-7, *Beach and Sun*, 11 October 2021)

The events facilitated by such spaces extend beyond mere social interactions, encompassing a diverse array of professional activities such as talks, mentoring meetings, workshops, and other meetings with a professional orientation. Nevertheless, the activities most appealing to digital nomads are recreational activities. Consequently, the primary

focus of these spaces is to organise events that bring this public together, thereby facilitating connections with the city's tourism facilities and potential partners and sponsors. For instance, *Sarrià* organizes group sports training sessions, akin to boot camps, within the coworking space facilities and on the beachfront. The objective of this initiative is twofold: firstly, to establish a connection between the workplace and the leisure area, and secondly, to facilitate the integration of digital nomads into the local community. A particularly appealing event for digital nomads is the *Vermut de la comunitat*, which combines aperitifs with this characteristic drink of Catalonia to celebrate Mediterranean traditions.

“What you're looking for in a coworking space is for the outsider to feel like a local. That's what these guys [digital nomads] are looking for, to feel part of a place, to do what they do there, to live the way they live there (...) you have to show it here first, and let them get to know a bit of the local culture” (CwM-10, *Sarrià*, 15 March 2022).

“Digital nomads clearly come to Spain to work, but the most important thing is not the networking they can do. It's about enjoying the city in all its tourist dimension” (CwM-11, *Diagonal*, 25 January 2021).

“Sometimes I think work is an excuse (laughs), they want to use the coworking space as a place to have fun. They are the first to sign up for the afterworks, parties and concerts we organise. If you think about it, it's a way to make friends in a safe environment” (CwM-12, *Gran Via*, 30 September 2021)

Community-building practices reveal how coworking spaces operationalize the touristification of work through programming that merges professional networking with leisure activities. Fostering connections is essential to coworking managers' daily work, with the main objective of understanding each digital nomad's profile as itinerant workers. Interviewees agree that post-COVID-19, offering alternatives that encourage staying is crucial. Special membership plans build loyalty and turn nomads into recurring customers—managers facilitate location changes within their brand network, allowing nomads to move between neighborhoods while maintaining membership, providing budgetary stability. Events like *Vermut de la comunitat*, beach fitness sessions, and afterwork parties transform workspaces into 'lifestyle clubs' where boundaries between work, socializing, and tourism dissolve. As one manager observed, 'sometimes I think work is an excuse' for digital nomads seeking structured social environments. This inversion—where work becomes the pretext for leisure—epitomizes touristification: workspaces become valued not primarily for productivity but for experiential satisfaction and social belonging typically associated with vacation contexts.

4.3. The Barcelona brand, coworking space and digital nomads

Barcelona's position as one of Europe's most attractive destinations with strong tourist appeal provides an environment favorable for business innovation and opportunities—key incentives for digital nomads seeking both leisure possibilities and professional development conditions. Coworking spaces regularly publish content featuring these nomads to showcase their lifestyle and support services. Spain's 2022 Startup Law, which established a specific digital nomad visa, further streamlined non-EU citizens' stays, though growth in foreign workers was already evident before this legislation (primarily Europeans, for whom immigration procedures posed few obstacles). This regulatory advancement, coupled with liberalized immigration policies, has created consensus among interviewees that the market has become more appealing through enhanced institutional, economic, and political support, with coworking spaces firmly established as a segment catering to expatriates.

“I think that in the coming years we are going to strengthen the nomadic community. Because we do have many entrepreneurs

coming from Mexico, Colombia and other countries like USA or Canada, but they have Spanish nationality and living here or moving in the EU is easy, but what will happen from now on is that these people will come from their countries to invest and work, and they will be able to stay for more than a year. That favors both the local economy and the coworking itself. If before it was 20 %, now [from the new law] we can talk about double” (CwM-5, *Sagrada Família*, 23 September 2022).

“Barcelona has always been touristy, international events are held here, the character is more global every time and it has what people are looking for. That is why it is a powerful city in terms of coworking, because it has always welcomed people from abroad, they integrate easily (...) what we do here is that this integration is comfortable, at least where to work and make connections, is not a problem for the expat” (CwM-11, *Diagonal*, 25 January 2022).

The Barcelona brand has established itself as an international benchmark by combining quality of life, global connectivity, technological infrastructure, and a vibrant cultural-business scene—positioning it as a magnet for digital nomads seeking dynamic urban environments with active professional networks. Public-private sector initiatives encourage integrating these workers into the local entrepreneurial ecosystem, strengthening the city's business fabric and global innovation profile. The *Barcelona International Welcome Desk*, overseen by *Barcelona Activa* (a City Council-affiliated entity), exemplifies how international talent integration contributes to economic diversification and enhances the city's global competitiveness. This collaboration between public institutions and private entities, including partnerships with coworking spaces, fosters entrepreneurship and innovation while serving as an ambassador for Barcelona's entrepreneurial spirit, establishing the city as a global exemplar for startups, freelancers, and digital nomads.

The alignment between coworking spaces and Barcelona's place-branding strategy represents the macro-level dimension of work's touristification: integrating workspace provision into urban tourism and destination marketing. Our studied coworking spaces demonstrate strategic positioning—nine in the city center, one at the beach, two in the 22@ innovation district—reflecting deliberate concentration in economically dynamic areas. These hybrid entities function simultaneously as private businesses and quasi-public instruments of talent attraction, leveraging the city's tourism assets (beaches, culture, Mediterranean lifestyle) as competitive advantages in the global market for mobile labor. Interviewees emphasize that location aesthetics, proximity to transportation and leisure options, and sustainable mobility access significantly influence selection. Promotional strategies, from location-based Instagram content to partnerships with the Barcelona International Welcome Desk, reveal how workspace operators and municipal authorities collaboratively construct Barcelona as a destination where one can 'work from paradise.' This convergence exemplifies how cities position themselves within overlapping circuits of business travel, tourism, and talent migration, with coworking spaces serving as organizational infrastructure enabling this multi-scalar integration.

5. Discussion

Barcelona's coworking spaces play a pivotal role as social and professional anchors for digital nomads, corroborating theories that place and community remain crucial even for highly mobile workers (Hannonen, 2024; Lee et al., 2019; Orel, 2019; Rainoldi et al., 2025, pp. 217–224). Managers deliberately cultivate community to help transient newcomers establish belonging and networks, with many nomads relying on coworking venues as their primary locus of social life and professional collaboration. The coworking environment shapes nomads' daily routines and shared identity (Orel, 2019), with community-building events (breakfast meetups to sports outings) blurring social and professional spheres, fostering friendship and business

connections. Ethnographic evidence showed that digital nomads participate in events at higher rates than local members, and depending on coworking spaces to fulfill camaraderie and networking needs, they cannot easily meet elsewhere. As one manager explained, foreign remote workers “*have no reference groups, no contacts*” outside coworking, so “*everything comes from here*”. Coworking spaces function as “social infrastructure” (Lee et al., 2019) for nomads, intentionally designed to mitigate isolation and integrate members. They act as surrogate organizations for independent workers, filling gaps between colleagues and office culture with engineered communities, serving as catalysts for social connection and informal knowledge exchange (Nash et al., 2021; Waters-Lynch et al., 2016) across diverse urban contexts from Berlin (Merkel, 2015, 2019) to Rome (Fiorentino, 2019, 2024) to Barcelona (Capdevila, 2013). Fiorentino’s (2024) conceptualization of coworking spaces as social infrastructure proves particularly relevant, as our findings demonstrate how these venues provide work facilities and relational and informational scaffolding enabling digital nomads to integrate into urban life.

Crucially, our findings demonstrate that the touristification of work is not an incidental byproduct of serving mobile populations but a deliberate strategic orientation that shapes organizational practices, spatial design, and promotional narratives. Coworking space managers consciously blur work-leisure boundaries, curate ‘authentic’ local experiences, adopt hospitality-sector service models, and position their venues as gateways to urban cultural consumption. This intentionality distinguishes our contribution: while previous research has noted overlaps between work and tourism in digital nomad practices (Thompson, 2019b), we reveal the organizational mechanisms and spatial strategies through which this hybridization is actively produced. The concept of touristification thus provides analytical purchase for understanding how workspace provision becomes entangled with urban destination marketing, how labor and leisure increasingly occupy shared sites and temporalities, and how cities strategically deploy experiential work environments as instruments of competitive positioning in global talent markets.

A striking insight from the case is how leisure and work merge in the digital nomad experience, embodying the workation and coworkation phenomena characterizing contemporary mobile work. Barcelona operators purposefully infuse local leisure culture into work environments, e.g., organizing beach fitness classes, vermouth tastings, and after-work parties, effectively creating hybrid work/leisure clubhouses. This supports Thompson’s (2019b) observation that digital nomad lifestyles constantly interweave productivity with tourism. Managers noted that nomads often approach Barcelona as “vacation while working,” showing more enthusiasm for social activities than formal networking. The workspace thus becomes a curated lifestyle space where work and play coexist (Orel, 2019), representing a new paradigm where productivity intertwines with wellbeing, mobility, and experiential richness (Bouncken et al., 2020). Our findings extend these ideas by showing how local cultural elements become incorporated: digital nomads consume the city’s culture through the mediated environment of coworking spaces. At the same time, operators leverage Barcelona’s symbolic assets to market distinctive lifestyle experiences, effectively commodifying local culture. This illustrates the significant interplay between private coworking initiatives and Barcelona’s place-branding strategy. City institutions provide policies (startup visas, welcome programs) and infrastructure, while coworking spaces deliver tangible environments for nomads. These dynamics demonstrate how stakeholders co-produce attractive urban milieus (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015), with Barcelona’s hubs functioning as micro-clusters integrating global talent flows into the production of mobility (Font-Cot et al., 2023; Hannonen, 2024). However, benefits aren’t universal—attracting elite mobile professionals may exacerbate urban inequalities (Bozzi, 2024; Brandajs & Russo, 2023), with proliferating spaces potentially inflating costs and creating insulated enclaves (Milano et al., 2023; Russo & Scarnato, 2018). These observations position digital nomadism as simultaneously

technological and socio-spatial—shaped by digital infrastructure and physical-cultural environments—pointing toward sustainable development strategies balancing international talent attraction with local community needs.

6. Conclusions, limitations, and directions for future research

This research has clarified how digital nomadism, coworking spaces, and urban strategy intersect in the case of Barcelona. In response to our first research question, our findings reveal that coworking spaces employ multifaceted strategies to attract and retain digital nomads—including permanence-oriented membership models, multilingual communication, referral-based customer acquisition, and experiential programming—that increasingly adopt tourism-like logics in their operation. These strategies exemplify the touristification of work, whereby productive workspaces incorporate hospitality-sector approaches to create environments that blend professional infrastructure with leisure experiences. Addressing our second research question, we demonstrate that coworking spaces function as strategic intermediaries that align their operations with Barcelona’s place-branding initiatives, serving as physical and symbolic gateways through which digital nomads encounter and consume the city’s entrepreneurial identity.

Coworking spaces operate symbiotically with Barcelona’s place-branding initiatives to embed transient knowledge workers into the local entrepreneurial ecosystem while leveraging the city’s cultural assets for mutual benefit. The convergence of flexible work culture, curated community-oriented spaces, and proactive municipal policies creates an urban environment that transforms the traditionally temporary nature of nomadic work into extended engagement with the city’s social and economic fabric. Coworking spaces achieve this by serving as mediators that filter and curate information about tourism, history, and lifestyle: managers guide nomads on navigating the city while positioning their venues as preferred long-term workplaces. However, this role also involves constructing a fragmented and aestheticised representation of Barcelona that obscures structural problems. This idealised image, underlining cultural consumption, technological innovation, and global talent attraction, functions as urban whitewashing that conceals environmental crises, social inequalities, and housing risks affecting local populations. The corporate brand of coworking spaces intertwines with the city brand in a symbolic alliance between private actors and public institutions, consolidating Barcelona as a modern, cosmopolitan business city capable of attracting international talent and investment in an increasingly competitive global urban scene.

For practical implications, coworking managers should prioritize social interaction and local cultural immersion through community managers, city-oriented events, and flexible membership options to attract traveling remote workers. City policymakers should support coworking and innovation ecosystems through infrastructure, visa facilitation, and promotional partnerships to attract global talent, potentially collaborating on “soft landing” programs helping newcomers form connections while balancing local community interests. This study’s limitations include focusing on a single city context and gathering insights primarily from coworking providers, potentially limiting generalizability. Barcelona’s highly touristic, cosmopolitan character may not represent smaller or less globally connected cities. The qualitative, cross-sectional design captures a temporal snapshot as digital nomad trends and urban policies evolve rapidly post-pandemic. Future research could compare multiple cities examining how different urban environments and policies influence digital nomad communities, explore user perceptions and belonging, conduct longitudinal ethnographic studies following digital nomads across locales tracking place attachment formation, and incorporate nomad and resident perspectives for fuller understanding of social impacts and sustainability in urban settings.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

José Ignacio Sánchez-Vergara: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Marko Orel:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Data curation, Conceptualization.

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.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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