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Living Heritage and Nomadic Encounters: A Case Study of Digital Nomads in Istanbul

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“They call it chaos, we call it home.”

Abstract

Digital nomads' growing presence in cities worldwide raises questions about how temporary residents engage with local culture beyond tourist consumption. This research investigates how digital nomads participate in the living culture of Istanbul, that is, the practices and norms that constitute 'ordinary' urban life. Through qualitative interviews with nine digital nomads who resided in Istanbul between three months and six years, the study investigates what structural conditions enable or prevent meaningful cultural participation. Drawing on Hannerz's concept of 'habitats of meaning' and Wenger's 'communities of practice', the analysis reveals that engagement depends less on characteristics of cultural practices than on structural conditions of nomadic life. Deep engagers accessed living culture through Turkish-exclusive social networks, continuous presence, and routines enabling spontaneous encounters, bypassing tourist infrastructure entirely. The most significant finding concerned unmarked everyday practices participants identified as distinctively Turkish yet lacking institutional recognition: trust-based payment, collective cat care, spontaneous hospitality, neighborhood codes. These practices are invisible to insiders through familiarity and to shallow outsiders through insufficient participation. The research indicates that there is a fundamental tension in nomadism characteristics: flexibility, circulation, autonomy versus integration values: commitment, continuity, community. This research contributes to the understanding of lifestyle mobilities, cultural participation in urban contexts, and the opportunities and constraints for belonging among temporary residents.

Keywords: digital nomads, living culture, Istanbul, cultural participation, lifestyle mobility

Sommario

Cultura Viva e Incontri Nomadici: Uno Studio di Caso sui Nomadi Digitali a Istanbul

Questa ricerca esamina il modo in cui i nomadi digitali si rapportano con la cultura viva di Istanbul, vale a dire le pratiche quotidiane, i codici sociali e i ritmi di quartiere che costituiscono la vita urbana ordinaria. Attraverso conversazioni approfondite con nove partecipanti residenti in città tra tre mesi e sei anni, lo studio indaga quali fattori consentano o impediscano una partecipazione culturale significativa tra i residenti temporanei mobili.

I risultati mettono in discussione le assunzioni comuni sull'accessibilità culturale. Il livello di coinvolgimento dipende meno dalle caratteristiche delle pratiche culturali in sé che dalle condizioni strutturali della vita nomadica. I partecipanti maggiormente integrati hanno evitato del tutto l'infrastruttura turistica, accedendo alla cultura viva direttamente attraverso reti sociali esclusivamente turche, presenza continuativa e routine quotidiane nei caffè che hanno favorito incontri spontanei di quartiere. Al contrario, coloro che hanno fruito maggiormente dell'infrastruttura turistica non sono andati oltre un coinvolgimento superficiale.

Il risultato più rilevante riguarda le pratiche quotidiane non istituzionalmente riconosciute che i partecipanti hanno identificato come distintamente turche: norme di pagamento basate sulla fiducia, cura collettiva dei gatti randagi, ospitalità spontanea (ikram), codici di vicinato (komşuluk). Tali pratiche restano invisibili agli insider per via della familiarità e agli outsider superficiali a causa di una partecipazione insufficiente, diventando riconoscibili solo attraverso un coinvolgimento prolungato—fenomeno che può essere definito come doppia invisibilità.

In quanto ricercatrice turca, questa cecità si è manifestata anche nel mio lavoro: pratiche che avevo vissuto per tutta la vita sono emerse come culturalmente distintive solo quando i partecipanti le hanno segnalate come tipicamente turche. Ciò comporta implicazioni metodologiche rilevanti: la ricerca sulla cultura viva necessita di combinare la conoscenza dall'interno con il processo di defamiliarizzazione che la partecipazione prolungata degli outsider consente.

La ricerca rivela una tensione fondamentale: i valori che animano il nomadismo digitale—flessibilità, circolazione, autonomia—entrano in conflitto strutturale con i requisiti dell'integrazione culturale: impegno, continuità, radicamento comunitario. La partecipazione profonda diventa possibile solo rinunciando alla mobilità che la rende fattibile. Tale tensione

potrebbe rappresentare la caratteristica definitoria della vita urbana contemporanea, in cui sempre più persone possono vivere ovunque ma sempre meno comprendono cosa significhi appartenere a un luogo.

Per le città con popolazioni nomadiche in crescita, le implicazioni risultano evidenti. Senza proteggere gli spazi di quartiere, garantire la stabilità abitativa e sostenere percorsi di integrazione, la presenza nomadica rischia di generare mondi paralleli in cui affluisce valore economico mentre permane l'assenza di connessione culturale. Per i nomadi stessi, l'appartenenza profonda richiede di sacrificare la mobilità che rende possibili le loro vite. La maggior parte non compirà questa scelta, né dovrebbe necessariamente sentirsi obbligata a farlo.

Questo studio contribuisce alla comprensione delle mobilità legate agli stili di vita, della partecipazione culturale nei contesti urbani, e delle possibilità e dei limiti dell'appartenenza per i residenti temporanei.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I first became aware of digital nomads not through academic literature but through a Facebook message. It was early 2021, during the pandemic and I was a university student in Istanbul. Within weeks, my spare room became a revolving door of laptops, Zoom calls in different languages and breakfast table conversations about cultural differences.

These were not tourists. Tourists came with itineraries and departure dates. Nor were they immigrants, they had no intention of staying permanently or applying for residency. They existed in a strange in-between space: living in Istanbul but not *of* Istanbul, present but temporary, committed but uncommitted. They called themselves digital nomads, remote workers, location-independent professionals. I called them my flatmates.

Living with them taught me to see my own city through foreign eyes. I watched a software engineer discover *simit* for the first time and declare it superior to croissants. I explained to a designer why everyone kisses twice on the cheeks but she should wait for the other person to initiate. I translated neighborhood rumors, suggested which lokanta served the most authentic home cooking, and did Turkish lessons over dinner. My apartment became a hub of cultural transmission. But I also saw patterns that unsettled me. Some roommates threw themselves into Turkish culture. They learned the language, made local friends, and explored neighborhoods that tourists didn't even know existed. Others stayed cozily in their international networks. They worked from their bedrooms, socialized primarily with other foreigners, and treated Istanbul as an attractive backdrop for their already-global lives. Some left after two months knowing more about Turkish culture than many long-term expats. Others stayed a year and left having barely scratched the surface.

These observations sparked the questions that became this research. What determines whether someone living temporarily in a city achieves meaningful cultural integration or remains a privileged observer? How do digital nomads, people whose entire identity centers on mobility and flexibility, engage with cultural practices rooted in place, continuity and community? What determines whether someone living and working temporarily in a city engages deeply with its everyday cultural life, its routines, social codes, and ordinary practices or remains at the surface of it? These observations became the questions that drove this research.

This thesis explores how digital nomads engage with the living culture of Istanbul. It explores what factors influence the level of this engagement: the ways in which daily routines, housing,

social connections, space, and work-life separation influence whether mobile populations engage with the city on a meaningful level or from a comfortable distance. The research originates in personal experience but goes well beyond my apartment.

1.1 Background: Digital Nomadism Mobility

The experience I have observed is a part of broader changes in the way people interact with work, place, and identity. Location-independent work became possible with the help of digital technology. However, the COVID-19 pandemic brought about this change at a rapid pace. Millions of people were forced to realize that their office work could be done from anywhere. Many went back to their offices once the restrictions were lifted, but a large number of people adopted mobility as a lifestyle choice.

Digital nomads are a particular kind of example of this shift. They are people who actively use remote work as a means to achieve long-term mobility across international borders. Unlike expatriates, they are self-directed in their mobility. Unlike expatriates, they self-direct their movement. Unlike tourists, they continue working routines. Unlike migrants, they find a certain kind of transient quality to be fundamental to their identity. As Cohen et al. (2015) argue, lifestyle mobilities like digital nomadism blur established categories. They are not tourists, nor are they migrants; they are not working, nor are they leisuring in any traditional way; they are not ‘home’ or ‘away’ but are always ‘in transit’.

Istanbul has become an important location in the international digital nomad network. Geo-arbitrage opportunities exist in Istanbul, and foreign currency earners are able to live a comfortable lifestyle despite economic fluctuations that may affect the Turkish lira. Apart from the cost of living, Istanbul has urban infrastructure, diverse neighborhoods, cultural richness, and a strategic location that bridges Europe and Asia. The involvement of this mobile population with local culture is thus significant in terms of cultural exchange.

1.2 Research Problem

Living culture, the practices and rhythms that make a city a living place, is not something that is accessible through observation alone. It circulates through participation, and participation requires time, relationships, and the kind of daily routine that makes a person part of the social fabric rather than passing through it. Digital nomads complicate this picture in specific ways. They are temporary residents rather than community members, yet they live in neighbourhoods

rather than hotels, develop daily routines rather than following itineraries, and sometimes form meaningful relationships with local residents. The question this research pursues is what conditions determine whether that temporary presence develops into genuine cultural participation or remains at the surface of local life.

Existing literature discusses digital nomadism from an economic perspective (geoarbitrage, housing effects) or a mobility perspective (privilege, identity). Heritage studies focus on visitor engagement and commodification issues. There is a lack of studies on the intersection of these topics: how do temporary residents, whose lifestyle revolves around mobility, engage with place-based practices that require continuity and community integration?

Theoretically, digital nomads are situated in liminal spaces. They are neither tourists nor migrants, nor working nor leisureing, nor integrated nor separate. Their engagement patterns could show how living heritage is practiced without being permanently integrated. Practically, the increasing number of nomads in cities around the world makes it important to understand their cultural engagement.

1.3 Research Questions

This research investigates digital nomads' relations with the local cultural environment. The main research question is:

How do digital nomads participate in Istanbul's living culture and what are the conditions that influence the depth of participation?

Three sub-questions operationalize this main question:

1. How do digital nomads engage with everyday cultural practices in Istanbul: what do they encounter, and how do they participate?

2. What conditions — structural (living arrangements, workspaces, networks, work rhythms) and individual (language, duration, prior knowledge) — determine whether engagement develops into genuine participation or remains at the surface?

These questions emerged from my apartment observations but extend far beyond individual cases.

1.4 Researcher Positioning

As described earlier, I came to this research through direct, sustained contact with digital nomads as flatmates. That experience revealed cultural dynamics I had never considered from my position as a permanent resident of Istanbul, but it also established a specific positioning that shaped both what I could see and what I risked overlooking.

As a Turkish citizen born in Zonguldak and educated in Istanbul, I brought cultural insider knowledge to the research. I possess an embodied understanding of Turkish social practices, the rhythms of neighbourhood interaction, the distinction between practices performed for tourists and those lived unremarkably by locals. My linguistic competence in Turkish allowed me to interpret participants' accounts with attention to what they were describing and what they might have misunderstood or partially grasped. When participants spoke of meaningful cultural encounters, I could recognize whether what they described constituted genuine social embedding or remained at the surface of urban life, because I understand what belonging looks like from a community perspective.

Yet this insider positioning also created potential blind spots. Practices embedded in my daily life as a normalized background may not register as culturally distinctive or as “heritage” worthy of research attention, precisely because cultural distance provides the defamiliarization that makes the ordinary visible. This methodological tension, between insider depth and outsider recognition, runs through the research. The integration of my insider perspective with participants' outsider observations became itself a methodological strength, revealing cultural patterns that might remain invisible from either position alone.

1.5 Definitions

Throughout this thesis, I use “digital nomad” as an umbrella term. It encompasses individuals who leverage remote work capabilities for sustained international mobility. Participants used varied self-identifications: digital nomad, remote worker, location-independent professional, expat, slow traveler. These terms carry different implications. “Digital nomad” particularly carries associations with privilege, tech work and lifestyle branding some participants rejected. I employ the term for consistency while recognizing the preferred terms of self-description by the participants.

Similarly, “integration” also needs clarification. I employ the term to describe the process of becoming embedded in local cultural practices and networks. I do not employ the term to imply assimilation or permanent settlement. Integration in this research means meaningful participation in daily cultural life rather than cultural erasure or abandonment of origin identities.

“Community” refers to social networks and face-to-face relationships through which cultural practices are transmitted.

Most critically, two terms central to this thesis require precise definition, as they are easily conflated but analytically distinct. “Living culture”, as used throughout this thesis, refers to the everyday practices, social codes, routines, and shared urban rhythms that constitute ordinary life in a city, in the anthropological sense of culture as an ongoing, relational process (Hannerz 1996). These practices are often unmarked: people enact them without naming them heritage, and they circulate through participation and social interaction rather than through formal transmission or institutional recognition. “UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH)”, by contrast, refers to a normative recognition regime: the process of nomination, evaluation, listing, and safeguarding through which certain practices receive formal international status under the 2003 Convention. ICH recognition can make living practices visible and institutionally legible, but it does not define or contain living culture. Many of the practices most significant to participants in this research carry no institutional status of any kind. Throughout this thesis, UNESCO ICH appears as a contextual background while living culture, in its anthropological sense, remains the primary object of investigation.

This introduction chapter has established the research foundation. It connects personal experience to systematic scholarly investigation. The following chapter reviews the existing literature on digital nomadism and living culture, establishing the theoretical and empirical foundations for the research questions this thesis pursues.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

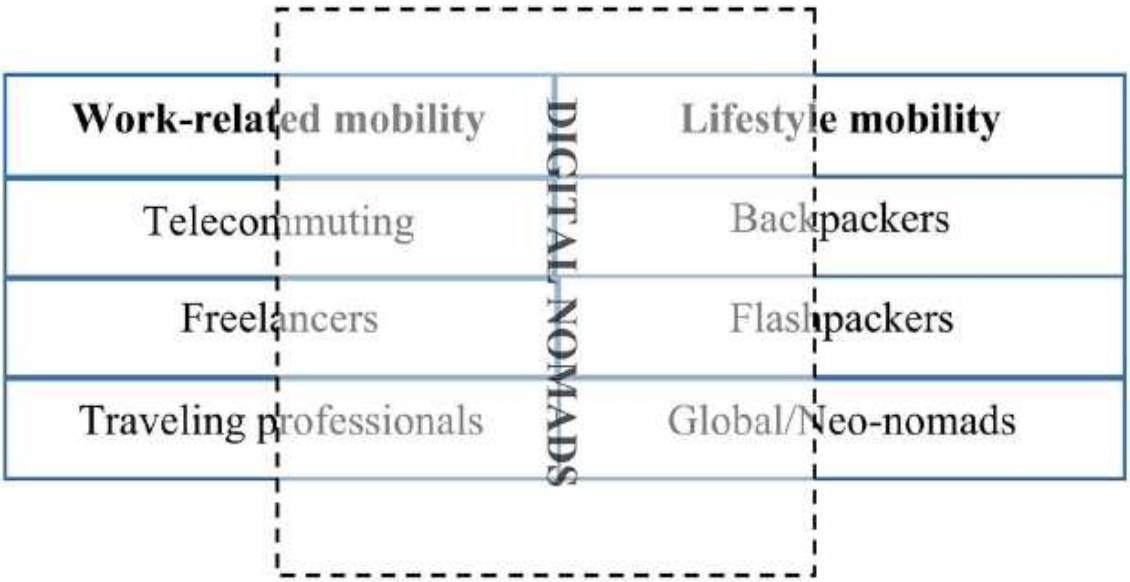
Digital nomads and living culture are two phenomena that existing research has rarely studied together. What has been left unexplored is the area between these two fields of study: how digital nomads, as they work online in a foreign city that is not their own, interact with the living culture of that city, and what conditions shape the extent to which this interaction occurs. This literature review sets the theoretical and empirical basis for exploring this question. It starts with the phenomenon of digital nomads (2.1), and then defines living culture and its connection to institutional recognition (2.2).

2.1 Digital Nomadism

2.1.1 Origins and Definitions

Digital nomads are location independent professionals who are able to work from any place with a stable internet connection. There is still no universally accepted academic definition of the term and contemporary definitions vary. The term "digital nomad" was first introduced by Makimoto and Manners in 1997 to describe an outcome of technological advancement on people's lives (Makimoto and Manners 1997). However, definitional challenges persist. Aroles, Granter and de Vaujany (2020, 126) argue that "there is a lack of clarity regarding what exactly constitutes digital nomadism. This ambiguity is in part connected to the variety of individuals who identify as digital nomads, ranging from freelancers to remote workers to independent entrepreneurs" (Dreher and Triandafyllidou 2025, 3). Dave Cook (2023, 259) defines 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.". Blair Wang et al. (2018, 2-9) provide a more comprehensive academic definition, describing digital nomads as teleworkers who choose to work from everywhere, living a life of ongoing interleaved work and travel. This definition emphasizes the intentional blending of work and travel. Beverly Yuen Thompson (2018) adds that digital nomads select their locations based on leisure and lifestyle considerations rather than work or employment requirements, which makes them different from traditional business travelers or relocated workers.

Figure 1. Interrelations of digital nomadism with related phenomena (Hannonen 2020).



Olga Hannonen's (2020) conceptual framework (Figure 1) distinguishes digital nomadism from related phenomena including traditional nomadism, lifestyle migration, tourism and business travel. This clarification establishes which mobile populations this research examines: individuals combining remote work with voluntary, sustained mobility across multiple destinations. Understanding these distinctions clarifies which mobile populations are likely to engage with local cultural practices

For this research, digital nomads are operationally defined as location-independent professionals who work remotely using digital technologies, maintain residence in destinations for a minimum of three months, select locations based on lifestyle preferences rather than employment requirements and self-identify as digital nomads (following Wang et al. 2018; Thompson 2018; Cook 2023). This definition distinguishes digital nomads from traditional tourists whose primary purpose is leisure without work, business travelers whose destinations are determined by employment and permanent migrants who seek long-term settlement rather than ongoing mobility.

2.1.2 Theoretical Framework: Lifestyle Mobilities

The phenomenon of digital nomadism can be understood through Cohen et al.'s (2015) theoretical framework of lifestyle mobilities. This framework argues that corporeal mobility has become central to many lifestyle choices, with patterns becoming more dynamic and complex as individuals use mobility to negotiate modern living complexity (McIntyre 2006,

cited in Cohen et al. 2015). Cohen et al. (2015) conceptualize lifestyle mobilities as voluntary ongoing mobile lifestyles that blur boundaries between travel, leisure and migration. This theoretical approach is important for understanding digital nomadism, because it captures the collapse of traditional work/leisure binaries and the destabilization of concepts of 'home' and 'away' that characterize nomadic lifestyles. Unlike permanent migration, lifestyle mobility presupposes the intention to move on, rather than move back and differs from temporary mobility by being sustained as an ongoing fluid process with higher significance placed on physical mobility as a defining aspect of identity (Cohen et al. 2015).
For digital nomads specifically, this work-leisure fusion creates what Bonneau and Aroles (2021) term as "a new form of leisure class", due to the way digital nomads articulate the centrality of leisure to their lifestyle (Toivanen 2025, 50). As Toivanen (2025) notes, drawing on Reichenberger (2018), "the traditional realms of work and leisure … are inextricably connected" in nomadic lifestyles. Cultural engagement functioning not as a tourist activity separate from work but as an integrated dimension of how nomads construct meaningful lives (Toivanen 2025).

However, the freedoms this lifestyle promises are unevenly distributed. Digital nomads' extended residence in destinations creates distinct cultural encounter patterns. Unlike traditional tourists, nomads' sustained presence allows for deeper engagement with local practices through repeated interactions and routines. However, their temporary status and cultural outsider position shape these encounters. Dreher and Triandafyllidou (2025, 9) argues that "digital nomads are neoliberal subjects just like lifestyle migrants whose subjectivities are conditioned by the dominance of neoliberalism in late modernity." Among digital nomads, like among lifestyle migrants, 'white prestige' (Lundström 2014) persists as a cross-cutting racial hierarchy of power (Dreher and Triandafyllidou 2025, 9). Digital nomadism exists within the same ethnic, cultural and economic power relations that structure all migration (Dreher and Triandafyllidou 2025, 9).

At the structural level, these power relations are underwritten by citizenship-based mobility regimes. Toivanen (2025) argues that digital nomadic mobilities are fundamentally enabled by the privileged passports of Global North citizens, whose visa-free access expanded unevenly over decades while mobility rights for citizens of former colonial countries and the Global South progressively decreased (drawing on Mau et al. 2015; Shamir 2005). Shamir (2005) describes unequal mobility rights as "a major stratifying force in the global social hierarchy."

The psychological dimensions of lifestyle mobility require consideration of belonging and identity formation processes. Chris R. Glass and Christina M. Westmont (2014) define belongingness as feeling part of the community. But for nomads, this concept becomes complex as they navigate multiple temporary communities without traditional belonging forms. This temporary belongingness may influence their capacity for meaningful cultural encounter. It may limit cultural exchange to surface-level interactions. Wasela's (2023, 19) emphasis on personalized cultural experiences and deep, guided engagement provides a lens to assess whether digital nomads' mobility fosters meaningful heritage encounters or remains superficial due to their temporary presence. Within this framework of lifestyle mobility, digital nomads represent a diverse population requiring further classification.

2.1.3 Typologies and Classifications

Understanding digital nomadism requires clear differentiation from related but distinct phenomena. Digital nomads choose their locations based on personal preferences, but their travel purposes differ significantly from regular tourists. Their approach to remote work fundamentally represents their lifestyle philosophy. Employment is a crucial feature that distinguishes digital nomads from other location independent travellers such as backpackers or bohemian lifestyle migrants (Korpela 2020, cited in Dreher and Triandafyllidou 2025,4). The distinction from freelancers proves particularly important for conceptual clarity. While freelancers are self-employed professionals who enjoy locational flexibility, they do not generally pursue the lifestyle of ongoing travel that characterizes digital nomads. However, freelancers who do embrace continuous travel might also be considered digital nomads. This creates some overlap between categories.

To be considered as a digital nomad, the work is supposed to be performed online, by using technological devices, like graphic designer, illustrator, photographer, video editor as well as administrative jobs like data entry, virtual assistant, marketing assistant, community manager, etc. The dependence on technology makes them different from traditional travelers and shapes their destination choices. Unlike digital nomads, tourists and other groups of travelers, such as backpackers, also travel, but typically do not organize their travel around ongoing remote work. The main purpose is just traveling. On the other hand, for digital nomads mobility is by choice. Lifestyle preferences, cost of living considerations, climate, cultural attractions, or community presence affect their choice for destination.

Several researchers have developed typologies to categorize the diverse approaches to nomadic living.

> Reichenberger (2018) classifes digital nomads as (1) flexible workers without incorporating travel, (2) extensive travelers retaining permanent residence and (3) lifestyle movers without a place of permanent residence. In a similar vein, Toussaint (2009) distinguishes three diferent types of digital nomads: (1) continuous travelers who are on a continuous trip, living a life as simple as possible to save money and attempt to earn it by asking for donations or have sponsors; (2) independent workers who are fond of traveling and choose a profession that allows them to do so, conducting work through various communication techniques; (3) business travelers who travel around the world running their business, e.g. meeting clients and fnd a living environment that serves their requirements for a good habitat (Hannonen 2020).

Recent demographic research reveals greater diversity than early typologies suggested. Existing pre-COVID qualitative research describes them as white-collar professionals with strong passports that allow them to easily cross borders. (Bozzi 2024). Yet more recent works highlight a more diverse group of individuals, they are young professionals or millennials, predominantly male, white, single and well-educated individuals (Bozzi 2024a). While all these groups are regarded as digital nomads, some of these categories are examples of teleworkers, nomads and other (im)mobile professionals. In relation to the original term, only a few of these categories can be regarded as a digital nomadic lifestyle. While these classifications help organize our understanding of nomadic diversity, they also reveal the need for clearer boundaries between nomadism and related forms of mobile work.

> Aroles, Granter and de Vaujany (2020, 120) identify five modalities of work: remote employment, entrepreneurship, freelancing, travelling through work as an employee and having more than one professional activity. Cook (2023, 259) develops a similar classification framework that differentiates among freelance digital nomads, digital nomad business owners, salaried digital nomads, experimental digital nomads and armchair digital nomads. The latter two categories describe those who are not yet fully engaged in the digital nomad lifestyle. (Dreher and Triandafyllidou 2025, 4-5)

2.1.4 Spatial Patterns

Emerging hotspots of digital nomads around the world, such as Chiang Mai, Thailand and Bali, Indonesia, that successfully accommodate the needs of lifestyle travelers through co-working and co-living industries are vivid examples of lifestyle-led destinations that continue to attract

more digital nomads (Thompson 2018; Wang et al. 2018). The concentration of nomadic workers in specific locations has created complex socioeconomic impacts including gentrification, housing crises and pricing out of locals. These locations show how they have evolved from being traditional tourist spots to nomadic hubs. This transformation supports Cohen's (2011) lifestyle travellers exemplifying how tourism can 'tip' into an ongoing lifestyle, wherein extended episodes of touristic experience, or temporary mobility, blur into conceptions of geographic migration (Cohen et al. 2015).

Bozzi (2024a, 7) argues that digital nomad hotspots often overlap with tourist destinations but as it is particularly challenging for some nomads to find a work-life balance where everybody is on holiday, new and surprising digital nomad destinations might rise. The growing network of co-spaces (co-working and co-living spaces) offers insight into the emerging geography of digital nomads.

Dreher and Triandafyllidou (2025, 10) introduce the concept of "digital nomadlands" (inspired by Chloé Zhao's 2020 film Nomadland) to capture the complex, multi-scalar geographies we associate with digital nomad destinations. These locations are dynamic as their draw for digital nomads varies across time with changes to visa and immigration policies, local infrastructure and seasonal climate, among other factors (Dreher and Triandafyllidou 2025, 10).

The economic positioning of digital nomadism extends beyond traditional tourism models to encompass broader transformations in the global labor market and digital economy. Digital nomads are increasingly recognized as participants in what economists term the gray-market where their finances leave no trace for governments and they consume and produce services outside traditional regulatory frameworks (de Almeida et al. 2021, 2).

Cohen et al. (2015) state that lifestyle-led mobility patterns break the boundaries between leisure, migration and travel as well as conventional binary divides between work and leisure. This destabilises the concepts of 'home' and 'away'. For locals this might threaten their concept of home because of economic imbalances and cultural changes led by nomadic influx.

Critics argue that new businesses serving the needs of digital nomads often come at the expense of investments that could have served the needs of the local population and are often owned, managed and frequented by foreigners (Bozzi 2024a, 10). This creates what Bozzi (2024a) terms a "bubble effect that hampers cultural exchange."

The infrastructure enabling these bubbles has expanded rapidly. Toivanen (2025) defines "digital nomad infrastructure" as the full ecosystem of services.

> These services have been increasingly tailored for and targeted at digital nomads, and we can refer to them as the digital nomad infrastructure, understood 'as constituted of services and infra- structures, both pre-existing and emerging, and offered by both public and private sector actors that digital nomads make use of to lead a mobile lifestyle' (Toivanen 2023, 74). The rise of the digital nomad infrastructure speaks of the increased commodification of digital nomadism (Aroles et al. 2020; Toivanen 2023). This commodification process is resulting in the creation of a strong digital nomad ecosystem in certain locations, thus also affecting nomads' mobility trajectories and increasing the number of individuals taking part in lifestyle mobilities. Therefore, the digital nomad infrastructure needs to be considered as a major structural factor shaping digital nomadic mobilities. (Toivanen 2025, 47)

2.1.5 Power Dynamics and Inequalities

Even though digital nomadism is often framed in popular discourse as ultimate freedom and flexibility, critical examination reveals significant constraints and privilege requirements that limit access to nomadic lifestyles. The proposed freedom of mobility is often conditioned by entry and exit mobility regimes, the validity of visas and passports that define under which conditions and time periods one can visit a destination as well as exit a home country (Cohen 2004; Hannonen 2016, cited in Hannonen 2020)

Cohen et al. (2015) emphasize that mobility depends on access to economic conditions, power, technology and networks that facilitate movement across borders and cultures, with privileged citizens often seeing mobility as part of the everyday. Patterns of lifestyle mobility are often only available to the relatively privileged (Cohen et al. 2015).

In relation to mobility, contemporary studies of work focus on two perspectives: employment related geographical mobility and the digitalization of movement though platform work and telecommuting (Bissell 2018; Cresswell et al. 2016; Golden and Gajendran 2019, cited in Hannonen 2020). These perspectives examine mobility between fixed locations of home and workplace, with emphasis on geographical relocation as employment necessity rather than lifestyle choice.

Digital nomads challenge these traditional frameworks by performing non-location based employment (Thompson 2018). Thus, falling outside conventional research on labor mobilities.

Unlike permanent migration, Cohen et al.'s (2015) lifestyle mobility pre-supposes the intention to move on, rather than move back and differs from temporary mobility by being sustained as an ongoing fluid process. The spatial concentration of nomads in specific destinations reveals privileges and constraints that shape nomadic mobility.

Dreher and Triandafyllidou (2025) provide a comprehensive overview of the economic realities facing digital nomads:

> Despite narratives of personal and professional freedom, many digital nomads struggle with work-life balance and rely on a variety of external or self-imposed disciplining practices for productivity (Cook 2020). Digital nomadism involves more often than not precarious gig work and the desire for financial stability in more affordable locations (Thompson 2021). Among digital nomads, geoarbitrage, the practice of scaling down living expenses through (temporary) relocations is regarded as common practice (Dreher and Triandafyllidou 2023, 22). This practice reflects economic necessity rather than lifestyle preference alone, similar to patterns found among other lifestyle migrants (Hayes 2014; 2018)

Hannonen (2024), drawing on Thompson (2018), argues that digital nomads pass through destinations without making meaningful connections with locals. This pattern of creating a bubble-like existence, that has previously been noted in research on lifestyle migrants, shows that digital nomads connect with individuals that share similar lifestyles and values (Hannonen 2024). She further argues that these self-contained environments are actively sustained by destination-specific services and infrastructure that have been deliberately developed to cater to digital nomads' needs. Holleran and Notting (2023) also note that digital nomads 'potentially crowd out local competitors who could perform the same outsourced labor they are paid for (particularly ITwork); and their cultural interactions with locals are minimal and usually based around the fleeting interactions in the service economy'. Yet existing research has not explored whether this awareness extends to meaningful engagement with local cultural practices.

2.2 Living Culture and Institutional Recognition

This section maintains a distinction that is crucial to this thesis: between living culture, the practices and rhythms of everyday life through which people live a city, and UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, the recognition regime through which certain of these practices are formally designated and protected. This section defines living culture first (2.2.1), then turns to UNESCO ICH as recognition regime and background (2.2.2), gives examples from

Istanbul (2.2.3), analyses the terms of access to living culture (2.2.4), and concludes with the structural difficulties that digital nomads face in accessing it (2.2.5).

2.2.1 Living Culture: Everyday Practices

The cultural environment that digital nomads encounter in Istanbul is not primarily a set of listed or formally recognised practices. It is the everyday fabric of urban life. In this thesis, living culture refers to the ordinary, largely unmarked practices through which people inhabit a city together, the routines that organise daily life, the social codes that govern small interactions, the informal learning that accumulates through repeated presence in shared spaces. Following Hannerz (1996), this thesis approaches culture not as bounded 'worlds of meaning' but as an ongoing relational process produced through 'cultural process in social relationships' — situated encounters, changing networks, and the accumulation of ordinary social interaction.

For Hannerz (1996), culture operates through what he calls “habitats of meaning,” dynamic fields of everyday meaning-making produced continuously through the interactions of people who share spaces, routines, and social relationships. What distinguishes this approach is that “it is the analysis of cultural processes in social relationships, rather than an axiomatic assertion, that has to convince us that a habitat of meaning is really shared” (Hannerz 1996). Much of the time, cultural processes will be shaped rather by the way that fairly different habitats of meaning are made to intersect (Hannerz 1996). These habitats are shaped by the places we visit, the people we meet, the media we consume, our linguistic competences, and the capabilities we have built up for engaging with different cultural environments (Hannerz 1996). Urban culture, in this view, is constantly in motion: it is made and remade through encounters between people with different histories, positions, and trajectories within the city. What a digital nomad encounters in Istanbul, then, is not a fixed cultural landscape but “an arena where various people's habitats of meaning intersect, and where the global, or what has been local somewhere else, also has some chance of making itself at home” (Hannerz 1996).

What does living culture look like in practice? In the interviews that form the empirical core of this thesis, participants described learning that a vendor at the *pazar* would accept payment after the fact of a trust economy operating on entirely different social logic. They described the collective, unspoken responsibility for neighbourhood cats: food appearing, animals cared for, without anyone organizing it. They described *komşuluk* as the small acts of neighbourliness structuring apartment life and discovering, slowly, that the social grammar of a tea garden was different from a café: sitting long was expected, conversation with strangers was not intrusion,

refusal of a second glass required a specific gesture. They described *ikram,* the tea offered after a meal at a restaurant, given freely without being requested or added to the bill, an expression of hospitality that could not be declined without causing offense. These were not tourist encounters but the texture of urban life.

In this research, what the participants are navigating is the concept of living culture. None of these practices appear on a nomination list. Turkish residents do not call them heritage, they simply live them, unremarkably, as the ordinary background of daily life. They can only be accessed through time, proximity, and a willingness to engage with everyday social life on its own terms.

For some nomads, this "habitat of meaning" (Hannerz 1996) remained thin: the same international cafes, the same English-speaking social networks, the same comfortable distance from Turkish society. For others, sustained presence and growing language competence enabled genuine participation in the everyday practices that shape neighborhood life.

2.2.2 UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage

UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage refers not to living culture in the broad anthropological sense, but to a specific institutional recognition process through which certain practices are formally identified, documented, and safeguarded. Before 2003, dominant international heritage frameworks focused almost exclusively on monuments, sites, and built environments. The 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage represented a significant shift: for the first time, intangible practices, the knowledge, skills, rituals, and social codes held by communities and transmitted through participation gained institutional recognition. For this research, the Convention is relevant as contextual background: it explains how certain of Istanbul's everyday practices have been officially categorised and made visible to outsiders.

The Convention defines ICH as "the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation and constantly recreated by communities in response to their environment" (UNESCO 2003, Art. 2.1). As Francioni (2020, p. 52) emphasises, what was decisive in this definition was the centrality of the community as the source of recognition: ICH is what a community identifies, maintains, and transmits as its own.

What ICH recognition produces, in practical terms, is visibility and infrastructure. When a practice receives inscription, it gains documentation, institutional support, and a degree of public legibility it did not previously hold — generating, in many cases, workshops, guided experiences, and tourism-oriented formats through which the practice becomes accessible to outsiders. This process represents what can be understood as the heritization of living cultural practices: when the shared knowledge, everyday routines, and practical skills that circulate within a community of practice become recognized as folklore or tradition, the community gains institutional opportunity to apply for ICH nomination. Wenger (1998) defines communities of practice as groups formed through collective learning in pursuit of shared enterprises, whose practices reflect both their goals and their social relations. As Ehn, Löfgren and Wilk (2015, cited in Buccitelli & Schmitt 2016) observe, this shift makes visible what was previously backstage: the seemingly trivial routines and subtle details of daily life that carry strong moral messages for those who live them. For this research, that infrastructure is directly relevant: it constitutes one of the routes through which digital nomads in Istanbul could encounter local cultural practices in an organised and accessible form. Turkish coffee culture, Ebru marbling, and Hıdırellez each acquired this kind of visible infrastructure following inscription, and participants occasionally encountered them through it. ICH recognition thus creates access points through which certain practices become legible to temporary visitors, without exhausting the living cultural environment those practices are part of.

2.2.3 ICH in Istanbul

In Istanbul, the practices that have received formal inscription reflect the Convention's community-centred logic: they are practices with identifiable practitioner communities, documented transmission histories, and state-level support for nomination. Turkish coffee culture (2013) and tea culture (2022) are embedded in deep hospitality traditions; Ebru marbling (2014) connects to Ottoman artistic heritage transmitted through master-apprentice relationships; the spring festival of Hıdırellez (2017) marks a seasonal cycle shared across Turkish and Romani communities. Each inscription has produced specific effects that have shaped how these practices became accessible to temporary visitors.

These examples function in this research as contextual reference points, not as the boundary of what counts as culturally significant. In this research, Istanbul's inscribed practices served as initial anchors for interview questions about how digital nomads engaged with the city's

cultural environment, while remaining explicitly open to the practices participants themselves identified as meaningful.

2.2.4 Accessing Living Culture: Local and Embodied Processes

What makes living culture both meaningful and difficult to access is rooted in how it operates as a local, embodied process. For Hannerz (1996), what is local tends to be everyday life: repetitive, redundant, an almost endless round of activities in enduring settings. Crucially, everyday life is practical: people participate actively, training personal capacities through repeated action without necessarily reflecting on it, developing what Hannerz calls, in Veblenesque terms, "a trained capacity for handling things in one way, and perhaps a trained incapacity for doing anything else" (Hannerz 1996). The local is also face-to-face, operating through focused encounters and long-term relationships where shared understandings can be worked out in detail through the back-and-forth flow of words and deeds, where deviations can be punished informally but effectively, and where changes may need to be negotiated (Hannerz 1996). These relationships often involve significant others, which affects the meanings built up in them and the commitment to these meanings (Hannerz 1996).

Most importantly for understanding why temporary residents struggle to access living culture, the local tends to be a special kind of sensual experience (Hannerz 1996). People often make a distinction between a "real" experience and what they have only read about or seen on television. The difference is that people are in the local setting bodily, with all their senses, ready not only to look and listen but to touch, smell, and taste. As Hannerz (1996) describes it, "there is a feeling of immediacy, even of immersion, of being surrounded." What is experienced is also extensively contextualized. This is what constitutes a "real" experience as distinct from mediated encounters.

Because living culture is fundamentally relational, operating through what Wenger (1998) calls communities of practice — groups who share an interest and negotiate meaning through sustained participation — access requires becoming part of these communities over time. Wenger (1998) defines these as communities formed when "collective learning results in practices that reflect both the pursuit of our enterprises and the attendant social relations." Critically, members of these communities constantly negotiate meaning by means of participation (embodying meaning through practice) and reification (embedding meaning in artifacts and explicit representations) (Wenger 1998, cited in Klückmann 2016).

For digital nomads specifically, this creates a structural problem. The conditions that determine how much a person participates, how much time they spend in local spaces, whether they form relationships with residents, whether their daily rhythms create openings for face-to-face interaction, become the conditions that determine how deeply they engage with living culture. A nomad may carve out predictable windows for cultural engagement, or remain physically present in a neighbourhood while cognitively unavailable to it.

2.2.5 Structural Challenges for Digital Nomads

The challenge for digital nomads entering a city's living cultural environment is structural rather than motivational. Unlike tourists who move through in days, nomads live in neighbourhoods for months, which, in principle, creates conditions for the kind of sustained participation that Hannerz (1996) identifies as necessary for genuine cultural engagement.

Cook and Hannonen (2026) document this structural constraint directly in their ethnographic study of digital nomads in Chiang Mai. Their findings show that nomads aspired to cultural immersion but were systematically prevented from achieving it by productivity demands, limited time horizons, and the social gravity of international nomadic communities, producing what they call a failed gaze: the desire and structural failure of digital nomads to become genuinely immersed in local culture. As Cook and Hannonen (2026) observe, although “digital nomads may stay longer than tourists, locals still felt that this person was not sticking around” and developing lasting relationships across cultural boundaries remained persistently challenging. The social embeddedness that Hannerz (1996) and Wenger (1998) identified as essential to cultural participation and sustained presence in communities of practice where meanings are negotiated face-to-face was precisely what the failed gaze could not achieve.

The critical question is what conditions enable genuine participation in everyday cultural life when the structural pressures of digital nomadism typically work against it. The cultural environment was the ordinary, relational fabric of urban life, made and remade through daily participation, and shaped by the specific demands of working online in a city not their own.

Chapter 3: Istanbul as Research Context

This chapter establishes Istanbul as the empirical site for investigating digital nomad engagement with living heritage. Rather than cataloging UNESCO-recognized elements, it maps Istanbul's cultural landscape as temporary residents actually encounter it through daily routines, neighborhood life, embodied practices and seasonal rhythms that structure urban experience.

3.1 Why Istanbul?

Istanbul serves as an ideal site for studying digital nomad and heritage interactions. The city presents a heritage landscape characterized by graduated accessibility. Istanbul's position spanning Europe and Asia makes it a cultural bridge between East and West. This positioning becomes particularly important in terms of understanding how digital nomads engage with living heritage practices. The geography of the city creates a cultural environment where diverse traditions and languages coexist.

Three main aspects that make Istanbul especially significant to this study: First, the city hosts a significant number of nomadic populations. Second, the city has historical experience accommodating temporary residents. This history provides existing social structures that can facilitate nomadic cultural participation.

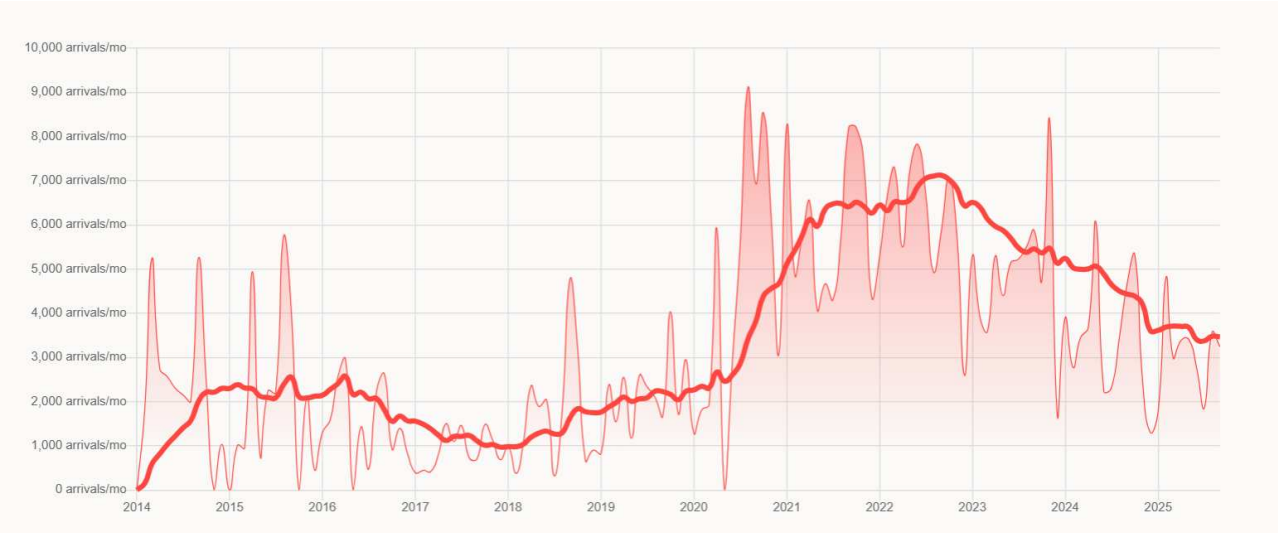
As Yelmi (2016, 308) notes, “Istanbul has always had great importance in bringing together European and Middle Eastern cultures. The city is very diverse in terms of religion, ethnicity and language, but also cultures and traditions.” This diversity creates multiple cultural entry points with varying accessibility levels making Istanbul an ideal context for understanding how temporary mobile residents navigate authentic cultural encounters.

3.2 Istanbul as a Digital Nomad Destination

Istanbul has emerged as a significant destination within the global digital nomad ecosystem. Unlike Southeast Asian destinations that experienced steady growth throughout the 2010s, Istanbul's nomadic population demonstrates fluctuating patterns with periods of decline followed by recent resurgence (see Figure 2). This volatility reflects Istanbul's sensitivity to geopolitical and economic instability. Such fluctuations distinguish Istanbul from established nomad hubs with more predictable populations. The post-2020 growth indicates Istanbul's adaptation to expanded remote work patterns following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Exact digital nomad numbers are difficult to verify given Turkey's lack of dedicated visa categories. Figure 2 presents estimated trends based on platform data.

Figure 2. Digital Nomad Population Trends in Istanbul 2015-2025 (https://nomads.com/)



Note: Figures represent estimates based on self-reported locations and platform activity. Exact numbers cannot be verified due to absence of official visa tracking.

As of 2025, Istanbul hosts an estimated 3,000-5,000 digital nomads at any time, though exact numbers are difficult to verify given population mobility and lack of visa tracking (Nomad List 2025). Turkey has not implemented digital nomad visa programs. Istanbul's nomadic population operates primarily through 90-day tourist visa mechanisms. This creates uncertainties regarding legal status and long-term residence possibilities

Istanbul's attractiveness stems fundamentally from “geoarbitrage” opportunities.

> The practice of geoarbitrage—which, as noted in earlier chapters, means gaining Global North salaries and spending day-to-day expenses in a low-cost country—is one such example. The term was popularised by Tim Ferriss in his book The 4-Hour Workweek: Escape 9–5, Live Anywhere, and Join the New Rich (2007). Ferriss presents the idea of escaping the nine-to-five style of working and becoming financially independent, an idea that is viewed with much allure among digital nomads. The digital nomad lifestyle can be expensive, due to travel and accommodation costs. However, using mobility practices strategically and directing their travel to specific destinations allows digital nomads to leverage the global inequality in income levels and cost of living. In this manner, nomads can lead a lifestyle that is possibly out of reach to them in their home countries and cities that have become more expensive to live in (Toivanen 2025, 176).

In the Istanbul context digital nomads earning foreign currency sustain comfortable lifestyles despite Turkish lira volatility. Beyond affordability, Istanbul's metropolitan scale offers diverse neighborhoods, extensive services and economic dynamism that smaller Turkish cities cannot match.

Digital nomads concentrate in specific neighborhoods creating distinct possibilities for cultural engagement. Research identifies several primary nomadic clusters, each with different characteristics affecting cultural access and living conditions. This geographic concentration establishes the demographic context for examining cultural encounters.

3.3 Istanbul's Living Heritage Landscape

Istanbul's cultural heritage exists not primarily in museums or formal sites but through living practices embedded in daily life. While some practices have UNESCO recognition (Turkish coffee culture 2013, tea culture 2022), this research focuses on how nomads encounter culture in lived experience rather than official heritage inventories.

This section organizes practices by accessibility thresholds as an analytical starting point, while recognizing that cultural transmission may occur through unmarked practices this framework cannot anticipate.. As established in the literature review, accessibility depends on three factors: commercialization, language requirements and community embeddedness. High-accessibility practices require minimal cultural knowledge and function within commercial spaces easily navigated by tourists. Moderate-accessibility practices demand time investment and structured instruction but remain available through workshop formats. Limited-accessibility practices require linguistic competence, community membership, or presence during specific temporal cycles. These conditions create substantial barriers for temporary residents.

Table 1: Istanbul's Heritage Accessibility Landscape

Accessibility Level	Structural Characteristics	Example Practices	Primary Barriers
High	Commercial infrastructure; English accommodation; immediate participation	Coffee/tea culture, street markets, street food, meyhane culture, tourist craft workshops	Cultural Meaning Depth
Moderate	Formalized instruction or service; fees; structured time commitment	Hammams, authentic artisan workshops, cooking classes	Aesthetic philosophy; Cultural protocols
Limited	Community-embedded; linguistic requirements; temporal constraints	Seasonal celebrations, komşuluk networks, religious practices	Insider status; Language competence; Sustained presence

This accessibility framework directly guides the interview approach outlined in Chapter 4. During in-depth conversations, participants are asked which practices they encountered, how they learned about them, what barriers they faced and whether extended residence enabled progression from high to moderate or limited accessibility practices. The framework provides analytical structure for interpreting engagement patterns in findings (Chapter 5).

3.3.1 High Accessibility Practices

The most accessible living heritage practices for digital nomads are those embedded in daily social life. They operate in commercial spaces requiring minimal Turkish competence or cultural insider knowledge.

Commercially embedded social rituals: Turkish coffee culture (UNESCO 2013) and tea culture (UNESCO 2022) function through extensive café, tea garden and coffee house infrastructure

throughout tourist and residential districts. These practices structure daily social interaction, hospitality and community formation in Turkish life. Physical access presents minimal barriers. Ordering requires only basic language or gestures and venues operate throughout the city with English accommodation in tourist-oriented areas. However, deeper participation requires understanding social protocols:

The saying “a cup of coffee has forty years of memory” (Bir kahvenin 40 yıl hatırı vardır.) reflects coffee's symbolic role in friendship and hospitality; coffee's presentation in marriage rituals signals acceptance; traditional kahvehaneler (coffeehouses) historically maintained masculine social structures with implicit behavioral codes (Koca and Ersöz Tüğen 2020, 353-354).

Weekly neighborhood markets (pazars) follow similar patterns. Operating throughout Istanbul's districts, these markets sell not only fruit and vegetables, but spices, textiles and household goods through traditional vendor interactions and seasonal rhythms. However, deeper engagement (learning seasonal specialties, negotiating appropriately, building vendor relationships) requires linguistic and cultural familiarity.

Traditional craft workshops teaching ebru (paper marbling), çini (tile-making), carpet weaving, ceramics and calligraphy operate in tourist districts (Sultanahmet) and artisan neighborhoods (Beyoğlu, Kadıköy). These represent centuries-old artistic traditions connecting to Ottoman cultural heritage, historically transmitted through years-long master-apprentice relationships. Contemporary workshops provide English-language instruction for fees and time commitments of 2-4 hours. This format makes introductory participation accessible without sustained master-apprentice relationships. This commercialization transforms traditional transmission into educational formats accommodating temporary participation.

3.3.2 Moderate Accessibility Practices

Moderate-accessibility practices require greater time investment, cultural knowledge, or structured instruction but remain reachable through specific formats.

Cooking classes

Cooking workshops represent structured cultural engagement balancing accessibility with cultural depth. These workshops provide tourists with the opportunity to cook and learn about

local culture, while offering a participatory gastronomic experience by involving them throughout the process (Everett 2012, as quoted in Yiğit 2022, 2). Unlike spontaneous coffee consumption or years-long artisan apprenticeships, cooking classes compress cultural transmission into time-bound formats compatible with tourist itineraries while maintaining claims to authenticity and pedagogical substance.

Workshops typically operate through two models: tourist-focused classes teaching Turkish cuisine in English-accommodating venues and market-integrated experiences. In the latter model, "tourists visit the market prior to class and purchase items from local vendors, followed by cooking and consumption" (Yiğit 2022, 2). The latter provides deeper immersion participants "gain a better understanding of local culture and numerous cultural values forming the basis of Turkish cuisine by purchasing and identifying raw materials in open-air markets" (Yiğit 2022, 2).

Meyhane Culture

Meyhane (traditional tavern) culture occupies contested terrain between commercial availability and cultural opacity. As cited in Öney (2019, 78), Zat (2018) defines meyhane as "places which could only emerge in a cosmopolitan city like Istanbul and where a collective taste that has been ongoing for hundreds of years with its own appetizers, rules and table manner has been synthesized and where a specific drinking culture is created, with no class distinctions, where everybody receives the same service". These establishments center around rakı consumption accompanied by meze (appetizers) following çilingirsofrası (drinking bout) tradition where small shared plates facilitate extended social interaction (Öney 2019, 79).

Physical accessibility appears straightforward meyhanes operate as commercial establishments throughout districts. However, participation requires navigating substantial cultural protocols. First, participants must recognize that "food is selected according to rakı" rather than rakı accompanying food (Öney, 2019, p. 78). Second, they comprehend meze-sharing etiquette, where "appetizer plates are placed in the middle of the table and shared by everyone" (Öney, 2019, p. 79). This symbolic sharing is key for "solidifying friendship, sharing feelings and ideas, spending good time" (Öney, 2019, p. 79)

Hammam

Turkish bath (hammam) culture integrates tangible architectural spaces with intangible social practices. Traditional hammams provide ritual bathing in heated marble rooms with specific

washing sequences and social protocols. Historically serving as women's social spaces, purification sites and neighborhood centers, hammams represent what Özgen (2016, 125) terms inseparable tangible-intangible heritage relationships. Tourist-oriented hammams (Sultanahmet, central Beyoğlu) provide English-speaking staff and standardized services; neighborhood hammams (Fatih, Üsküdar) serve primarily Turkish residents with less accommodation. Basic participation requires minimal knowledge as attendants guide processes. However, understanding gendered spatial protocols, bathing rituals and service norms requires cultural competence.

Traditional Artisan Crafts

Authentic artisan workshops operating in neighborhoods like Karaköy or traditional districts offer deeper craft engagement than tourist workshops. These require Turkish language for interaction, higher fees, extended time commitments (multi-session courses) and navigation of less tourist-oriented spaces. While more accessible than apprenticeship-based transmission, they demand greater cultural initiative.

3.3.3 Limited Accessibility Practices

The least accessible heritage practices for digital nomads are those embedded in community daily life, requiring linguistic competence, insider status, or temporal presence difficult for temporary residents to achieve.

Komşuluk (neighborliness) networks represent neighborhood-level reciprocity practices including food sharing, mutual assistance, life event participation and evening gatherings. These practices structure daily urban experience yet remain largely invisible to official heritage recognition. They transmit values of hospitality, reciprocity and collective responsibility while providing social cohesion (Aykan 2014). Participation requires Turkish language for daily interactions, understanding of cultural protocols and community acceptance built through sustained presence. Housing arrangements structure exposure: short-term tourist rentals provide minimal access; longer-term residential neighborhood rentals with Turkish landlords offer greater exposure, though exposure differs from participation.

Religious observances including Ramadan fasting, daily prayer schedules and holiday celebrations (Ramazan Bayramı, Kurban Bayramı) structure temporal rhythms and social gatherings for Muslim communities. While mosques remain physically accessible, meaningful participation requires Islamic faith, ritual knowledge, Turkish language and community

relationships enabling inclusion in neighborhood gatherings. Non-Muslim nomads observe Ramadan's social effects (shifted schedules, iftar meals) as urban phenomena but cannot participate in religious meaning.

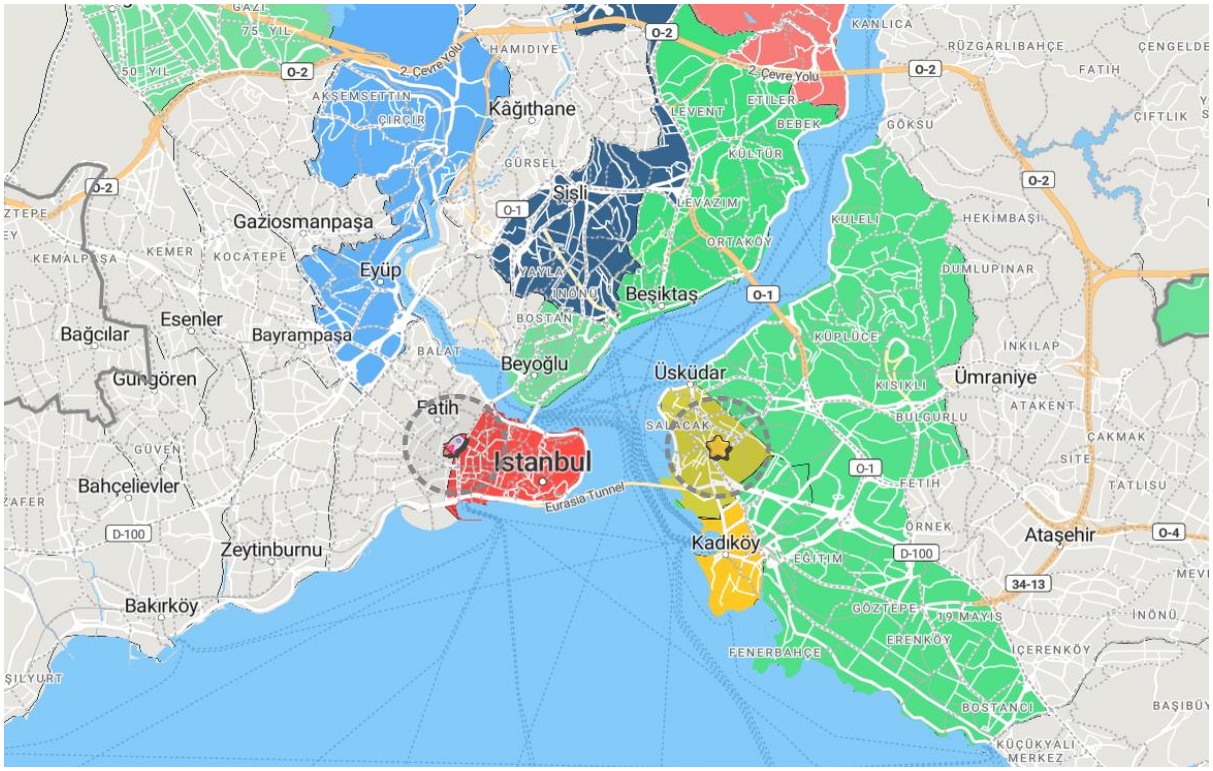
Heritage accessibility varies not only by practice type but also by geographic location, as the following section demonstrates. Neighborhood choice shapes which heritage practices become part of nomads' daily experience versus requiring intentional travel and cultural navigation.

3.4 Spatial Distribution of Cultural Encounters

Heritage practices are distributed unevenly across Istanbul's geography, creating different accessibility patterns depending on nomadic residential location. Understanding this spatial distribution reveals how neighborhood choice shapes living heritage engagement possibilities.

Digital nomads concentrate in specific Istanbul districts. Figure 3 shows primary clusters in Beyoğlu (European side), Kadıköy (Asian side), and Beşiktaş. Despite heritage tourism infrastructure in the Historical Peninsula (Hagia Sophia, Topkapı Palace, Grand Bazaar), few nomads reside there. Most encounter Istanbul through residential neighborhoods rather than tourist zones, shaping which living heritage practices become part of daily life versus requiring intentional visits.

Figure 3. Digital Nomad Concentration Patterns in Istanbul (source: Nomads.com, 2025)



Heat map visualization showing digital nomad activity concentration by district. Color intensity indicates relative presence levels, with darker shading representing higher concentration of nomadic activity. The Historical Peninsula shows tourist activity rather than residential concentration.

This represents general patterns across the platform's user base. Specific participant residential locations and mobility patterns are analyzed in Chapter 5.

This geographic concentration creates district-specific conditions for cultural encounter. Each area offers different heritage types, varying degrees of tourist infrastructure and distinct possibilities for daily cultural immersion. Table 2 summarizes these district-specific characteristics and their implications for cultural engagement:

Table 2: District Characteristics and Heritage-Nomad Intersection

District	Nomad Density	Heritage Type	Key Character	Research Implication
Historical Peninsula (Sultanahmet)	Minimal	Tourist oriented workshops, commercial heritage	Commercialized workshops, heritage tourism	Proximity without integration
Beyoğlu/Galata	High	Mixed gentrified, cosmopolitan	Meyhane culture, cosmopolitan heritage, contemporary arts scene	Gentrification pressures Heritage in transition
Kadıköy/Moda	Moderate	Residential embedded daily life	Pazar culture, tea gardens, ferry rituals, neighborhood authenticity	Daily life integration potential
Beşiktaş	High	Urban heritage	Ferry culture, fishing communities, yalı architecture	Invisible everyday heritage practices embedded in urban routines
Üsküdar/Beykoz	Minimal	Traditional community embedded	Historical and cultural structures, local delicacies	Highest cultural and linguistic barriers

This spatial distribution means heritage accessibility varies not just by practice type (as shown in Section 3.3) but by nomadic residential choice. Nomads concentrating in Beyoğlu and Kadıköy access distinct heritage types:

Beyoğlu offers commercialized and gentrified heritage (meyhane culture, workshop spaces, cosmopolitan atmospheres) but traditional neighborhood practices have largely transformed. Nomads gain convenient access to heritage-as-tourism while potentially missing community-embedded traditions. The district's gentrification means nomads both witness heritage transformation pressures and potentially contribute to them (Erbas 2019).

Kadıköy maintains more residential authenticity with pazar culture, neighborhood tea gardens and local gathering spaces functioning primarily for Turkish residents rather than tourists. Nomads choosing Kadıköy encounter daily heritage integration opportunities but face greater language barriers and less English accommodation than Beyoğlu.

Beşiktaş provides hybrid positioning, maritime heritage along the Bosphorus, university culture creating international atmospheres and proximity to both traditional and contemporary spaces. Ferry culture and waterfront socializing embed heritage within daily urban routines.

Historical Peninsula (Sultanahmet, Eminönü) concentrates tourist-oriented heritage infrastructure (commercial workshops, heritage tours, English-language accessibility) but few nomads reside here. Geographic proximity to heritage sites doesn't translate to residential integration.

Traditional districts (Üsküdar, Beykoz on Asian side) maintain the richest community-embedded heritage but highest access barriers. Conservative social character, limited English and lack of nomadic housing infrastructure mean few nomads experience these neighborhoods' authentic but inaccessible cultural practices.

This geographic pattern creates a paradox: the most accessible heritage (tourist-oriented Sultanahmet) attracts few nomadic residents, while nomadic residential concentrations (Beyoğlu, Kadıköy) offer transformed or moderately accessible heritage rather than most traditional practices. Whether nomads can overcome spatial barriers through intentional exploration, or whether cultural engagement remains constrained by residential geography, constitutes a key empirical question this study investigates.

Chapter 4: Research Methodology

This chapter presents the methodological approach used to investigate digital nomad engagement with Istanbul's living culture. The study adopts a qualitative case study design, with semi-structured interviews as the primary data source with spatial visualization for geographic context. This combined approach addresses the research questions by capturing both lived experience (through interviews) and spatial factors (through mapping) shaping nomad-cultural encounters.

4.1 Case Study Approach

Case studies provide researchers with an opportunity for greater depth of understanding of an issue (Stake 2010). This research adopts Istanbul as a strategic case study following Yin's (2018) framework for contemporary phenomenon investigation. The case study design is preferred as a research strategy when "how," "why," and "what" questions are the interest of the researcher (Yin 2018). Yin (2018) defines case study research as "an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident."

Istanbul is selected because it offers both a rich everyday cultural environment and a growing digital nomad ecosystem, making it an ideal site for examining how temporary mobile residents engage with the living culture of a city. As discussed in Chapter 3, Istanbul offers a "cultural crossroads" with rich living traditions. Ebru marbling (inscribed 2014), tea culture (inscribed 2022), Turkish coffee culture (inscribed 2013) and seasonal celebrations like Hıdırellez (inscribed 2017) are just a few examples of the city's living cultural practices that are included in its UNESCO World Heritage status. The city holds UNESCO World Heritage status for both tangible sites and living cultural practices. This range enables investigation of heritage accessibility across multiple engagement levels as outlined in Chapter 3. At the same time, the city offers a growing ecosystem for digital nomads with extensive co-working infrastructure in districts like Beyoğlu, Kadıköy and Beşiktaş, as documented before. The case study design directly addresses the research gap identified in the literature review. By focusing on a single city with a rich heritage landscape, this study can examine contextual factors that enable meaningful cultural exchange.

From a practical standpoint, Istanbul provides substantial methodological benefits for extended fieldwork. The city's international character facilitates research access. English proficiency in nomad-frequented districts makes interviews accessible. Turkey's geographic proximity to European nomad populations provides diverse participant recruitment opportunities. Nomadic residents concentrate in specific districts on the European side. This concentration creates manageable geographic boundaries for spatial analysis.

4.2 Research Design

4.2.1 Mixed-Methods Approach

This study adopts a qualitative-dominant mixed methods case study design. The research questions require understanding experiences, perceptions and cultural processes. As Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) note, mixed methods research is particularly suited when one data source may be insufficient and when results need explanation through multiple perspectives. This approach is important for this study because it enables “multiple ways of seeing and hearing, multiple ways of making sense of the social world” (Greene, cited in Creswell and Plano Clark 2017, 4).

Semi-structured interviews are the primary data source, as “a detailed understanding of a problem” (Creswell and Plano Clark 2017, 8). Hand-drawn cartographic visualization provides spatial and emotional context, capturing not just where cultural encounters occurred but how participants experienced and remembered these spaces. This interpretive mapping offers “a more general understanding” (Creswell and Plano Clark 2017, 8). The integration of these two data sources addresses the research problem more comprehensively. As Creswell and Plano Clark (2017, 13) note, mixed methods research provides more evidence for studying a research problem than either quantitative or qualitative research alone.

4.2.2 Theoretical Framework

The methodology operationalises the conceptual frameworks introduced in the literature review. Lifestyle mobilities (Cohen et al. 2015) enables an understanding of nomadic mobility patterns and the structural conditions of temporary residence. Hannerz's (1996) habitats of meaning guides analysis of how participants interacted with Istanbul's everyday cultural

environment. Together these frameworks direct both data collection and analysis toward the conditions shaping depth of everyday cultural participation.

4.3 Participant Selection and Sampling

4.3.1 Digital Nomads

The study focuses on 9 digital nomad collaborators. During the recruitment phase, one initially recruited participant withdrew before the interview could be conducted due to unexpected travel plans. This resulted in a final sample of nine collaborators who completed full interviews. I refer to participants as collaborators because they are not merely research subjects providing data, but active partners who co-create knowledge about nomad-cultural encounters through extended conversations about their experiences. This research prioritizes depth of conversation over breadth of participants. Rather than pursuing larger numbers with superficial data, in-depth conversations with 9 collaborators enable rich, detailed accounts that illuminate the nuances of cultural engagement processes.

Collaborators meet three selection criteria:

- A minimum of 3-month residence in Istanbul
- Location-independent remote work arrangements
- Self-identification as digital nomad

The selection deliberately includes two distinct groups:

- 4 collaborators who have left Istanbul (post-residence perspective, retrospective reflection)
- 5 collaborators currently residing in Istanbul (active engagement, real-time experiences)

This division enables comparison between retrospective narratives, how nomads remember and make meaning of their experiences after leaving and lived experiences of those currently navigating cultural engagement. As discussed in the literature review, temporal positioning may affect how nomads perceive and describe their heritage interactions.

4.3.2 Sampling Strategy

The study uses maximum variation sampling to ensure representation across important variables: accommodation type, cultural engagement level, professional background and length of stay (Patton 2015).

Recruitment was conducted through three complementary approaches:

Personal network (2 collaborators): Former flatmates from my experience hosting digital nomads provided trusted initial collaborators willing to engage in extended conversations about cultural experiences.

Online communities (5 collaborators): Istanbul digital nomad Facebook groups and nomad-focused social media (nomads.com) proved effective for reaching both current residents and those who had left the city.

Snowball sampling (2 collaborators): Some collaborators referred other nomads who met selection criteria and were interested in discussing their cultural experiences.

4.4 Data Collection Methods

4.4.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Primary data collection is 45-60 minute online interviews following a semi-structured format. This approach draws upon Mason's (2002) framework for qualitative interviewing: interactional dialogue exchange, thematic flexibility and recognition of situated knowledge (Edwards and Holland 2013). Rather than following standardized question-answer formats, conversations adapt to each collaborator's experiences while ensuring core themes are addressed. The conversational approach enables collaborators to guide discussion toward aspects they found meaningful rather than imposing researcher-determined categories. This respects collaborators as knowledge co-creators while maintaining thematic coherence across conversations.

The interview guide addresses five core themes directly linked to research questions:

1. Arrival and Settlement Context – motivations for choosing Istanbul, neighborhood choice, initial impressions and how relationship with the city evolved over time

2. Cultural Engagement Experiences – meaningful encounters, distinctions between tourist-oriented and authentic practices, barriers encountered, participation in Turkish traditions

3. Shared Living and Cultural Learning – flatmates and neighbors as cultural guides, co-living as transmission mechanism, daily routines as cultural education

4. Reflections on Cultural Participation — participants' own sense of how they related to local life, what they felt they understood or missed, and how they positioned themselves in relation to the city's everyday social environment.

5. Spatial and Social Patterns – weekly routines, neighborhood discovery, mobility patterns, comfort zones versus unfamiliar areas

Rather than asking predetermined questions in fixed order, I allowed conversations to flow naturally while ensuring all five themes were explored. This approach enabled systematic investigation of documented heritage while remaining open to participant-identified practices the research context chapter may have overlooked. As discussed earlier, cultural insider positionality (my Turkish nationality) may create familiarity blindness preventing recognition of everyday practices as heritage-worthy. The interview design incorporated methodological flexibility specifically to capture practices participants found culturally distinctive, regardless of whether they appeared in UNESCO inventories, tourism literature, or academic documentation.

This openness reflects qualitative methodology's core strength: the ability to discover unexpected patterns rather than only confirm predetermined hypotheses (Braun and Clarke 2006). If participants described economic norms, social protocols, or community practices as distinctively Turkish and culturally meaningful, such findings constitute important empirical evidence about which dimensions of living culture become accessible to temporary residents and under what conditions.

4.4.2 Spatial Data Collection

This research uses hand-drawn cartography to visualize participants' spatial experiences and emotional geographies of cultural encounters. This methodological choice reflects the humanities orientation of the research and aligns with the conceptual understanding of heritage as lived experience rather than measurable phenomenon.

During interviews, spatial information emerged organically through three complementary techniques:

Narrative Prompts: Interview questions naturally elicited spatial descriptions: “Walk me through a typical day in Istanbul” or “How did you decide where to live?”

These prompts encouraged participants to describe not just locations but their feelings about spaces, routes they avoided or preferred, and places that held cultural significance.

Screen-Share Mapping: I occasionally shared a simple Istanbul district map via screen share, asking participants to point out key locations while narrating their spatial experiences. For example: “Can you show me where your apartment was and which areas you visited most frequently?” This visual reference helped participants recall specific neighborhoods and venues while maintaining conversational flow. More importantly, it captured participants' mental maps: how they organized Istanbul cognitively, which districts they grouped together and which areas remained foreign or unmapped in their understanding.

Follow-Up Spatial Questions: When participants mentioned cultural encounters or daily routines, I asked clarifying spatial questions: “Which neighborhood was that café in?” or “How did you cross to the European side, ferry or bridge?”

These follow-ups provided not just geographic specificity but movement patterns, preferred routes and the emotional texture of mobility (ferry as cultural experience vs. bridge as functional transit).

Data Documentation

Spatial references were documented directly in interview transcripts. During interviews, I took notes of mentioned locations (neighborhoods, district names, specific venues, mobility routes). After each interview, I created a participant spatial summary noting:

- Residential neighborhood and housing type
- Regular work locations and café routines
- Frequently visited cultural sites and why they mattered
- Areas avoided and reasons for avoidance
- Mobility patterns (daily routines vs. occasional travel)

- Emotional associations with specific districts

These summaries captured both objective geography (where participants went) and subjective experience (how spaces felt, what they meant culturally, which areas provoked anxiety or comfort).

Cartographic Visualization

Following data collection, I will create hand-drawn maps that visualize participants' cultural geographies, using iPad with Procreate software.

The maps visualize patterns from interview data rather than claiming statistical precision. They preserve participants' subjective experiences of place. They show how spaces felt, not just where they were. Pink (2008) demonstrates through video and photography how attending to sensory and embodied dimensions helps ethnographers understand how participants are "emplaced" in their environments. Hand-drawn cartography extends this principle, making visible the emotional geographies participants described verbally.

4.5 Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase approach provides the primary analytical framework. Firstly, data familiarization is achieved through repeated transcript reading and initial note-taking on engagement patterns and spatial references. The transcripts are coded and analyzed through thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006, 79) emphasize that coding is both descriptive and interpretative, forming the foundation for subsequent theme development. Codes are collated and visually mapped. Cross-case comparison (Braun and Clarke 2006) is used during the reviewing themes phase to examine variation in cultural encounter depth across collaborators characteristics and spatial locations. Reflexive thinking is used throughout the analysis process to consider the researcher's role. Finally, interpretation and theoretical connection are carried out in the reporting phase.

Following thematic coding, spatial data is synthesized through hand-drawn cartography to visualize where and how cultural encounters occurred. The mapping process itself reveals patterns that might remain hidden in interview transcripts alone. Spatial data enhances thematic analysis through:

- Residential pattern mapping: Visualization of nomadic geographic distribution across Istanbul districts

- Cultural venue analysis: Frequency of engagement with different practice types (unmarked daily practices vs. tourist-oriented sites vs. community-embedded traditions)

- Spatial-engagement correlation: Relationships between residential neighborhood, daily mobility patterns and depth of cultural participation

Geographic visualization supports qualitative findings, understanding spatial factors affecting cultural engagement possibilities.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

All collaborators received comprehensive information about the study before agreeing to participate, ensuring informed consent throughout the research process. Prior to each interview, collaborators were provided with detailed information about the research purpose, their role as knowledge co-creators, how their data would be used and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. A consent form summarizing the research rationale, data collection procedures and collaborators rights was shared with each collaborator. Verbal consent was audio-recorded at the beginning of each conversation. To protect collaborator privacy, each collaborator is assigned a pseudonym used throughout the thesis. Geographic information is reported at the neighborhood level (e.g., “Beyoğlu” or “Kadıköy”) rather than specific addresses to protect privacy while maintaining contextual detail.

4.7 Researcher Positionality

My relationship to this research requires acknowledgment. I am Turkish, born in Zonguldak and educated in Istanbul. For several years, I hosted digital nomads as flatmates in my Istanbul apartment, providing firsthand observation of cultural exchanges and daily interactions.

As a woman conducting research on experiences that include gendered dimensions of mobility and safety, my gender shaped both the research process and what became visible within it. Female participants, particularly those who had experienced vulnerability or safety concerns, shared accounts they indicated feeling comfortable sharing with another woman. One participant shared an experience of serious violence that she wanted other women in similar circumstances to know about, something she offered not as personal confession but as structural critique of institutional gaps affecting female digital nomads. Receiving this testimony required me to consider my responsibility both to represent her experience honestly and to handle it with appropriate care in this thesis. My gender positioning thus created access

to dimensions of the digital nomad experience that might have remained unspoken in different interview dynamics.

This positioning creates both advantages and tensions. As a cultural insider, I understand Turkish living cultural practices and can recognize authentic engagement versus performative participation. However, I have never lived as a digital nomad myself, making me an outsider to this lifestyle. My positive experiences hosting nomads may incline me toward optimistic interpretations of cultural exchange possibilities.

My Turkish nationality and lived experience in Istanbul provide crucial advantages: cultural depth, linguistic competence and contextual knowledge for interpreting participant narratives. However, this insider positioning also creates potential limitations.

Practices embedded in my daily life as a normalized background may not register as "cultural heritage requiring research attention" because they lack the distinctiveness cultural distance provides. This familiarity-based blind spot has direct methodological implications for the accessibility framework developed in Chapter 3. Digital nomad participants, approaching Turkish culture from outsider positions, may identify cultural practices I cannot see through over-familiarity.

This methodological strategy acknowledges that optimal heritage research may require integrating insider knowledge (cultural-historical depth) with outsider perspectives (defamiliarized recognition). Rather than positioning my insider status as purely advantageous, I recognize it as creating both insights and blind spots, a positioning requiring methodological strategies to compensate for potential familiarity-based invisibility.

Participants were informed of my background during recruitment. I remain aware of these biases during analysis, seeking evidence that challenges my assumptions rather than only confirming them.

4.8 Research Limitations

A significant limitation emerged during fieldwork, which is the difficulty of recruiting collaborators through multiple channels. When I visited co-working spaces in Beyoğlu to approach digital nomads directly, most declined participation. Some cited work deadlines and productivity pressures. Others expressed disinterest in discussing cultural topics for an hour-long conversation. Several appeared uncomfortable with the research request itself, perhaps

viewing me as an outsider interrupting their work environment, or simply prioritizing work over cultural reflection.

Online recruitment proved similarly challenging. I reached out to numerous digital nomads through Istanbul nomad Facebook groups, social media platforms and nomad community forums. The vast majority did not respond to recruitment messages. Only a small number expressed willingness to participate in extended conversations about cultural engagement. The collaborators recruited through online platforms represent those who were already interested enough in cultural topics to invest time discussing them.

This rejection is itself revealing. It suggests that some digital nomads prioritize productivity over cultural engagement. The difficulty of access means my collaborators, those willing to discuss culture extensively, may represent more culturally curious or engaged nomads rather than the broader nomadic population. Digital nomads focused primarily on work, maintaining routines, or staying within international social bubbles proved unreachable through this research method.

This limitation affects finding interpretation. The study captures experiences of nomads willing to reflect on cultural engagement, not those uninterested in heritage or local culture. Conclusions about engagement depth may therefore overstate typical nomadic cultural participation.

4.9 Expected Contributions

This study addresses a gap that existing research has left open. Scholarship on digital nomadism has focused on economic patterns, spatial behaviour, and work-life management. Research on cultural participation has focused on community-based transmission and stable populations. Neither has examined in detail how temporary mobile residents engage with the everyday cultural life of their destination cities, and what conditions determine whether that engagement remains superficial or develops into genuine participation.

This study contributes in three ways. Theoretically, it connects lifestyle mobility research to anthropological understandings of urban cultural participation, showing how the structural conditions of remote work shape what is culturally accessible to temporary residents. Empirically, it provides the first detailed examination of digital nomad engagement with living culture in Istanbul, combining interview evidence with spatial visualisation to show both the

conditions enabling participation and those preventing it. Methodologically, it demonstrates how hand-drawn cartography can capture the emotional and experiential dimensions of cultural encounter in ways that purely textual analysis cannot.

Chapter 5: Findings

This chapter presents findings from semi-structured interviews with nine digital nomads who resided in Istanbul for extended periods between 2018 and 2025. The analysis examines how digital nomads engage with Istanbul's living culture, identifying factors that enable or constrain meaningful cultural participation.

Table 3: Participant Overview

Participant	Age	Origin	Total Duration	Pattern	Living Area	Digital Work Location
Naila	60	US-Palestine	6 years	Continuous	Maltepe	Café routine
Jan	23	Netherlands	12 months	6 months	Hotels	Café routine/Office
Aidan	24	US	7 months	Continuous	Beylerbeyi	Café routine
Leila	29	Lebanon	4 years	Continuous	Levent	Office
Sara	27	Tunisia	13 months	3 stays	Kadıköy	Bedroom
Louis	31	France	6 months	1 month	Kadıköy	Bedroom
Rebecca	30	US	3 months	2 stays	Hostels (Kadıköy)	Café-hopping
Emily	33	US	8 months	Continuous	Tarabya	Café routine
Milena	26	Russia	4 months	2 stays	Kadıköy	Café-hopping

Table 4: Key Integration Variables Across Participants

Participant	Social Networks	Work-Living Configuration	Cultural Engagement Pattern
Naila	Turkish exclusive	Café routine + Turkish flatmate	Unmarked practices
Jan	Turkish exclusive	Café routine + hotels	Unmarked practices
Aidan	Turkish exclusive	Café routine + Turkish flatmate	Unmarked practices
Leila	Turkish exclusive	Office + Turkish flatmate	Workplace-based
Sara	Mixed-Turkish priority	Bedroom + Turkish flatmate	Approach-based
Louis	Tourist circuits	Bedroom + living alone	Tourist consumption
Rebecca	Nomad-seeking	Café-hopping + hostels	Tourist consumption
Emily	International focused	Café routine + Turkish boyfriend	Minimal
Milena	Mixed-Turkish priority	Café-hopping + Turkish flatmate	Community engagement

Integration Self-Assessment

During interviews, participants were asked to position themselves on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 represents "complete tourist" and 10 represents "fully integrated local." This self-assessment captured how participants saw themselves rather than imposing my own categories. Responses ranged from 2/10 (Emily) to 10/10 (Leila), revealing participants' own perceptions of integration depth. Throughout this chapter, I use "deep engagers" to refer to participants self-assessing at 9-10/10 (Aidan, Jan, Naila, Leila), "intermediate engagers" for those at 6-7/10 (Sara, Louis, Milena), and "shallow engagers" for those at

2-3/10 (Rebecca, Emily). These categories emerged from participant self-assessments rather than predetermined analytical frameworks. The analysis then examines whether these self-reported integration levels align with actual engagement patterns.

5.1 Social Networks

5.1.1 Turkish-Exclusive Network Among "deep engagers"

Aidan, Jan and Naila maintained exclusively or near-exclusively Turkish social networks through active rejection of international nomad communities. Aidan stated that: "All my friends by the way are Turkish." When describing his approach, he contrasted it with typical nomad patterns: "I also don't really touch base with other nomads... not living in co-working spaces or going to these communities. My experience is kind of so different... a bit more isolated and individually driven."

Jan demonstrated an identical pattern despite transient hotel living: "All of my friends here are Turkish." His rejection proved most emphatic through repeated use of "absolutely hate":

> "I absolutely hate the international community. I absolutely hate it... If you only hang out with international people, you can do that anywhere and those are very often people who don't really respect the culture, who don't really try to understand the culture and just stay with their international friends to keep it easy for themselves."

His critique extended to the digital nomad identity itself: "The term digital nomad, I absolutely hate it because like the thing that I see is like the hippie in Thailand just playing tennis and things like that, doesn't know one word of the local language."

Naila's network excluded Western expatriates entirely: "Do I know expat friends? I know two Americans. Everybody else is principally Turkish or Syrian or my Moroccan friend." Both Americans existed within Turkish social contexts, one as girlfriend of her Moroccan friend, another with Turkish wife. Her forty-year critique positioned digital nomadism within longer expatriate privilege patterns:

> "I got to see my very first expat community [1980s China]... I was absolutely horrified by how people behaved... And I thought that was a one-off. And

then I started observing digital nomad communities in Colombia, Peru and Argentina... I see it in Istanbul too."

Her US military base analogy captured presence without participation: "People were living in Italy but they were on a US base. So yes they were in Italy but they weren't... I see this happening with digital nomads in groups. Yes they're in Turkey or Colombia, but they're not."

Leila achieved Turkish-exclusive networks through professional necessity rather than ideological choice. Working for NGOs on local governance required full professional immersion:

> "I actually did not get to know expats. It was all Turkish. My job was in Turkish."

However, Leila explicitly recognized her integration experience as "very biased" and "protected" rather than typical:

> "I had a Turkish friend so I was dealing with her parents, I was from her side, she took me to the local places, I was speaking Turkish... so I was protected in a way... Later on, I learned that it's inside the culture that Turkish people do not trust each other, even inside the culture. So having this positive view was very individualistic."

Her recognition that positive integration was "individualistic" rather than generalizable emerged after her boyfriend visited:

> "My boyfriend visited. And he absolutely looks very Arab. And I didn't speak Turkish because he didn't want that... And then totally, totally. I couldn't imagine. And I was like, oh, I understand now what they talk about."

5.1.2 Mixed Networks

Sara maintained Turkish-priority but not Turkish-exclusive networks, correlating with her intermediate integration (self-assessed 7/10):

> "I had friends there [initially]... I was curious and intrigued and genuinely interested in Turkish culture... I didn't move to foreign country just to have Tunisian friends. I made an intentional move to not meet only Tunisians."

Her phrase “intentional move” signals active boundary work, deliberately seeking Turkish connections despite the ease of same-nationality friendships. She articulated the most explicitly political moral framework against expatriate bubbles:

> “If I was living in my home country in Tunisia and someone was coming from abroad and all they were only hanging out with Americans or Canadians or British people... I would just think 'Oh my gosh, what an ignorant. Why is he living here?' Or I would even think 'Oh my gosh, that's racist. Why would you come here just because you can live cheaply or live in nice weather but never be interested in the local culture?' It would feel like they're taking advantage of a situation as opposed to being curious and interested in integrating the culture.”

Milena similarly achieved mixed networks through intentional Turkish flatmate living and research collaboration with her translator, though shorter duration (four months across two stays) limited integration depth (6/10 self-assessment).

Emily maintained primarily international networks despite living with a Turkish boyfriend. She participated in international women's groups on Facebook: “It's mostly expats... girls from outside the culture... it's a lot easier I think to connect with people from outside the culture.” She expressed desire for Turkish friendships but identified barriers: “I would love to make some Turkish girlfriends but... I don't have that environment... the English competency isn't as strong as obviously it would be with expats.” Her boyfriend's Turkish social circle did not translate into her independent Turkish friendships.

5.1.3 Tourist and Nomad Networks

Louis and Rebecca's network patterns revealed how nomads can spend months claiming “mostly Turkish friends” while maintaining fundamentally tourist social relationships.

Louis met Turkish friends through tourist infrastructure:

> “When I visit a new place, I do a free walking tour... and I do a pub crawl at night after that… And I met most of my Turkish friends doing that.”

Rebecca actively sought nomad community rather than local integration:

> "I went to a digital nomad conference last year in the Philippines... I realized there's a whole community of people out there that all traveled together... building each other up, helping each other be more successful as nomads. It's really easy to get connected to nomads... WhatsApp groups... Coworking spaces... you start meeting tons of people."

Her Turkish connections consisted of "some of them [at hostel] were Turkish" and "some people from my work" with whom she "did a work meet up and practised in Turkish." These are transactional relationships (hostel guest-staff, coworker) not deep friendships.

Rebecca distinguished herself from backpackers while embracing nomad identity:

> "I think there's a big difference between backpackers and digital nomads... Backpacker behavior is... trail of beer cans... nomad behavior is sinking my teeth into a place long term and getting to know it... I like hanging out with people that also need to work because then they help me stay moderated."

5.2 Temporal Patterns

5.2.1 Continuous Presence

Aidan's seven continuous months and Naila's six continuous years produced persistent local recognition despite foreign appearance. Aidan described social embedding: "Everyone recognizes me... most people think I'm joking [when I tell them where my apartment is] because I've been here so long."

Naila reported strongest recognition, Turkish residents spontaneously approaching her speaking Turkish:

> "Turkish men and women will walk up to me and start speaking Turkish... a lot of times I don't understand... So I guess, over the last few years whatever it is that originally made me seem American doesn't make me seem American anymore."

Jan achieved permanent guest status at İzmir restaurant through sustained patronage and gift exchange (see Section 5.5.4 for detailed discussion of this trust-based relationship transformation).

5.2.2 Sara's Discontinuity and Language Threshold

Sara accumulated twelve to thirteen months across three distinct periods (six months, then four months after break, then two-three months) yet explicitly identified discontinuity as barrier preventing local status:

> "I don't think I was completely a local. I think a big part of it was the fact that I didn't spend a continuous amount of time in Turkey... I've actually never spent an entire year with all four seasons in a row in Turkey."

Her self-positioning as "slow traveler" acknowledged intermediate temporality: "I always feel like a slow traveler... all the exposure I had of Turkey was intentional, like I had to choose it, because I could just be in my room all day."

5.2.3 Short Duration

Louis maintained a pattern of multiple one-month stays since 2023, returning frequently but with substantial gaps. His accumulated duration exceeded six months, yet he described recognition patterns distinct from continuous residents:

> "Now they recognize me, but when I come back, they don't recognize me yet and they will recognize me one week after."

Louis self-assessed as six or seven out of ten between tourist and local, identical to Sara's intermediate positioning despite potentially greater accumulated duration.

Rebecca spent approximately three months total across two separate stays (January, then March-April 2024), explicitly shorter than other participants. Her Turkey residence was circumstantial, brother's hair transplant recovery:

> "My brother was like I want to come out and start traveling with you and I want to start that off in Turkey because I want to get a hair transplant. So I was like Okay, I'll go back to Turkey and then we were there for like two months and I was with him while he was recovering."

She described her global pattern: "Every three months I go somewhere... when my visa expires, I go to another place for like three months and then I come back to Vietnam." Turkey functioned as one stop in broader nomadic circulation rather than an integration destination.

She described a template approach to language learning: “Any place that I'm at for longer than a month, I always try to learn the language at least a little bit... Could do some basics like teşekkürler (thanks), merhaba(hello).”

Rebecca's three-month total duration across two stays proved insufficient for integration depth regardless of other factors. Her circumstantial motivation (brother's medical tourism), template approach to language learning and broader nomadic circulation pattern positioned Turkey as a temporary stop rather than an integration destination.

5.3 Work and Living Arrangements

5.3.1 Café Work

Aidan, Jan and Naila conducted remote work primarily from cafés, creating daily spatial routines enabling spontaneous encounters. Aidan explained his selection criteria:

> “I work from cafés mostly or at home... I wouldn't want to go to a place where people are all on their computer and working. I try to go to places that are a bit computer friendly but they're not necessarily like work places.”

Naila identified Café Loop in Osmanağa/Yeldeğirmeni as a workspace and social hub: “My favorite café... that's where I got 90% of my friends.”

The café functioned simultaneously as work site and community integration space, regular daily presence transformed her from anonymous customer to recognized community member to friendship formation.

Emily worked from cafés but described different motivations than Aidan, Jan and Naila:

> “Having a consistent set of places that I go to... this sense of connection, sameness... important for my mental health... a coping thing... I would find a café near my apartment and I would go every day... even if it is literally a barista at a café.”

Emily's café work provided psychological comfort and routine familiarity rather than Turkish community integration. While she achieved vendor recognition at regular cafés, this didn't translate into the friendship formation Aidan, Jan and Naila experienced.

Rebecca's café-hopping pattern (Section 5.4.4) further demonstrates that workspace type alone doesn't produce integration, workspace consistency matters more.

5.3.2 Bedroom Work

Sara worked exclusively from bedroom despite living with Turkish flatmates, creating isolation preventing the public space integration café workers achieved:

> "I wasn't really working in a company or studying in a university in Turkey. I was working at home in my bedroom. So all the exposure that I had of Turkey was intentional, like I had to choose it, because I could just be in my room all day."

She articulated the counterfactual: "If I was working in a Turkish business, I would have to be the one who adapts to the manners... of a Turkish company. Whereas in my case... that was not the situation." She recognized she "could dose how much local culture I wanted to get."

Sara's bedroom isolation made it impossible to have that ambient cultural absorption that café workers experienced and she needed what she called 'intentional' interaction for every cultural experience.

Louis combined Sara's bedroom isolation with living alone, creating maximum isolation pattern:

> "I mostly work from home... because of my job I can be called every time... It can be noisy in coffee and stuff."

Unlike Sara who had Turkish flatmates providing domestic cultural immersion, Louis lives alone in Kadıköy apartment. His daily routine: "I wake up around 7-8 and I work on my other projects from 8 to 10. Then I go for a little walk in my neighborhood... Then I start working [from home]... until 8pm."

His two-hour lunch break provided a daily eating-out routine: "Every day pretty much I eat outside. In Kadıköy you have so many foods... I try to eat Turkish food."

Louis expressed preference for café work but cited job constraints preventing it: "I would love to work in coffee more" but his freelance software engineering with video meetings and potential calls requires quiet, private space.

5.3.3 Café-Hopping

Rebecca worked exclusively from cafés but café-hopped daily rather than becoming regular anywhere:

> "I was working in cafes a lot... most of my time was spent working... every day I would try a different café. So that's one way that I would get to know the place. And a lot of them were fun, quirky, themed cafes like the Breaking Bad one, or the Friends one."

Rebecca's café-hopping treated cafés as interchangeable workspaces rather than community sites, preventing the vendor recognition and friendship formation Aidan, Jan and Naila achieved through consistent patronage (Section 5.4.1).

5.3.4 Living Arrangements Determining Access

Aidan and Sara both lived with Turkish flatmates but in different configurations. Aidan shared an apartment with a Turkish friend: "I live with a Turkish friend... he actually owns the apartment himself." Sara lived with two Turkish women (me and my sister, Merve) as sole foreigner.

Sara provided detailed articulation of domestic cultural transmission:

> "The advantage of living with Turkish people is that you pick up on the everyday things of what it's like to be a Turkish person. So for instance, like one thing that really stands out for me is the culture around breakfast... seeing how dedicated you and Merve are to like that one hour or two hours or three hours in the morning of having breakfast, like the fact that even like on Turkish fridges, there's a shelf where you put breakfast stuff... the kind of things that you never know that you never probably think about as a Turkish person but that you notice as a foreigner."

Her exposure extended to economic consciousness:

> "As a foreigner who earns in dollars... you almost approach the situation with 'Oh my gosh everything is cheap'... But then... Merve was saying 'Look no this is not cheap, this is so expensive.' And I didn't really realize what cheap and expensive meant and the impact of inflation until I was exposed to that

> conversation on almost a daily basis... Initially I was like 'Oh this is so annoying, why are we talking about money all the time' but you can't escape a topic that is so prevalent in everyone's mind."

In the case of Jan's hotel transience did not prevent him from developing deep relationships. His primary social mechanism involved transforming restaurants into surrogate homes: "One place where I had food every night and it was a restaurant of one guy and his wife." After bringing a motorcycle helmet gift from the Netherlands, he received permanent guest status with payment refusal.

Emily lived with her Turkish boyfriend in Tarabya/Sarıyer area. This arrangement provided cultural exposure through relationship dynamics and family visits. She described learning to make Turkish tea, trying different recipes and experiencing gender role expectations:

> "The woman of the home... I do 100% of cooking and cleaning... he helps, he's very modern... but the standard that's established from generations prior is extremely different. A family visit to Mersin where nobody speaks English was so painful... I really wish that I could speak more fluently."

Louis and Rebecca lived alone or in transient arrangements without Turkish domestic immersion. Louis: "Usually I prefer to be alone... for work I can have meetings during the day. So I need some quiet space." Rebecca: "I was in Kadıköy... I kind of jumped around a bit... There was a hostel I was at for a long time... I started off [in hostels] and then I started to slow down... sometimes I'm in hostels sometimes I'm in hotels."

5.3.5 NGO Workplace

Leila's work with NGOs on local governance provided a qualitatively different professional context from other participants. She achieved functional fluency in Turkish within three months, an "accomplishment" she attributed to the supportive communicative environment she encountered in Turkey. She contrasted her language learning experiences across European contexts:

> "I was in France... half a year and then half a year in Germany. I tried to learn French, but the culture [sic] was not very easy on you... they pretend they don't understand what you're saying. However, in Turkish, I would say

> 'bakabilir miyim'... (can I see it?) They immediately understand. They just have compassion like they wait for me until I finish my sentence."

Her NGO work transmitted understanding of institutional operations: "I work with the NGO that works with local governments so it's always about the local problems, the way they are solving it, who did what... that gave you the local perspective."

She described learning political navigation: "When to talk about politics, when not, what do they think about this... how to understand what's the point of view of this person politically, socially."

She recognized hierarchical structures: "The hierarchy is in the culture so you are respected based on your position and based on your age... this is installed in the mentality even of the new generation."

Her story of addressing government officials illustrates workplace-based learning:

> "I was meeting a government official... I thought that when you're addressing someone, you have to add the '-cim' in the end... I told him İbrahim-cim [when should have been İbrahim Bey]... I could never get used to it, but I abided by it."

When asked where she'd place herself from tourist to local, Leila responded: "Very local... I would not say absolutely like very local 100%, no. But I can understand the city and the things, the local problems, the way they are solving it, who did what... I had other privileges and negatives as a nomad of course."

Leila's workplace integration represents a qualitatively different pathway than other participants' socially-driven integration. Her professional Turkish fluency requirement, institutional knowledge exposure and political literacy development enabled her to achieve structural instead of social integration. This let her understand how Turkish people live daily life. This learning pathway in her employment environment was unreachable for digital nomads working remotely outside Turkish occupational environments.

5.4 Cultural Engagement Patterns

The accessibility framework (Chapter 3.3) predicted that high-accessibility practices like tourist workshops and major historical sites would serve as entry points for nomadic cultural

engagement. However, deep engagers demonstrated unexpected patterns of heritage site avoidance despite structural accessibility.

5.4.1 Attitudes Toward Major Heritage Sites

Aidan expressed uncertainty about visiting Hagia Sophia: “I don't even know if I've been to Hagia Sophia yet”, treating Istanbul's premier UNESCO site as potentially unvisited.

Jan articulated strong negative reactions to tourist areas:

> “The place with the Hagia Sophia, I hate that place the most of all the city... In general I don't like the touristy stuff.”

When family visits, he minimizes exposure: “We do [tourist sites] in half a day and then be gone.”

Neither Aidan nor Jan mentioned attending workshops or structured cultural experiences. Naila similarly did not attend hammam, though she attributed this to water trauma rather than site avoidance: “I nearly drowned as an infant... I hate water... you will never find me in a hammam. I've been asked multiple times by friends.”

5.4.2 Approach-Based Authenticity

Sara developed unique philosophy prioritizing cultural intimacy over functional communication:

> “I was very much attached to the language, not as a way to communicate a thought... it wasn't for me a way to just communicate an idea. It was a way to connect with people. So that's why maybe I remembered the idioms more than the verbs of the prepositions and like the basic nouns... idioms were a way to really understand something that you're not able to translate almost right.”

Her learning mechanism emphasized embodied contextual acquisition:

> “Language became attached to memories... It always happened in a natural environment. Like [Merve] wouldn't just tell me idioms in the middle of nowhere, like something would happen and she would be like 'Oh this reminds me of this particular expression that we use in Turkish.’”

Sara actively visited major historical sites, describing engagement with Sultanahmet area: “I spent a bit of time in Sultanahmet... that entire region of like the Golden Horn... whenever I did a day trip to the European side, it was either that or like a bit more north in the Beşiktaş area.”

She visited Hagia Sophia, Topkapı and historical museums multiple times, accompanied by me who “enjoyed it even as a local.” Sara articulated her approach:

> “It really depends on what you're interested in. If you go to a place just to take pictures from a particular viewpoint... then of course it's gonna feel touristy. But if you're going with the general interest of 'Oh I wonder what the history is behind this wall, or behind this tower,' then it's a different feeling. So it depends on how you approach it rather than the activity itself.”

She also frequented Vefa Bozacısı (traditional boza shop) multiple times, identifying it as “the old Istanbul” a practice other participants dismissed as tourist commodification.

5.4.3 Tourist Consumption

Louis attended multiple workshops:

> “I recently started to do workshops in Istanbul... I did one for the Turkish Mosaic lamp. And I did one for Turkish coffee... it's well done. And it's awesome for like one afternoon.”

He described learning Turkish coffee preparation: “I know how to make Turkish coffee but I did not yet making it myself”. He also experienced hammam twice: “I tried that... the first time I came and I did it recently two years after.”

Louis repeatedly returned to tourist sites across visits:

> “Every time I go to Sultanahmet... I like to visit something even if I already did it. So I often go to Haghia Sophia... it was free to go inside [2023]... and now you have to pay a ticket... But I'm lucky to have been able to do the two of them [ground level and upper level]... It's the best way to experience it.”

He described European side visits: “being in the touristic area, you see all the people visiting the city for the first time... brings memory.”

Rebecca engaged in similar tourist infrastructure. She visited Grand Bazaar: “Pretty magical... thinking about that scene from James Bond. Sultanahmet Square wasn't as fun... a bit overwhelming. I visited Balat for colored houses.”

She “always wanted to learn how Turkish coffee is made” but never pursued it. She attended themed cafés including Breaking Bad and Friends cafés.

5.4.4 Everyday Cultural Practices

Participants varied significantly in their recognition of unmarked cultural practices embedded in daily Istanbul life. Deep engagers independently identified multiple practices through sustained neighborhood participation. Intermediate engagers learned some practices through Turkish flatmate education. Shallow engagers recognized minimal unmarked practices despite comparable or longer accumulated durations.

Economic Trust Systems

Aidan recognized trust-based payment norms as distinctively Turkish practice:

> “If I go to get a haircut and oh I don't have any cash, I can just come back the next day and pay the person. But in America that would not fly.”

This credit-without-documentation system operated in his neighborhood barber shop, local grocery and regular restaurants. Aidan contrasted this with American commercial relationships requiring immediate payment or formal credit systems. His recognition depended on actually attempting deferred payment, which he learned through practice.

Jan experienced similar trust norms through permanent guest status at his İzmir restaurant: “They were refusing my payment: 'You're our guest, you don't pay.'” This is best seen in his gift of a motorcycle helmet from the Netherlands. This occurred prior to the refusal of payment, indicating the role of gift-giving in hospitality. The usage of language such as “you're our guest” applied hospitality culture over market principles.

Neither Louis nor Rebecca mentioned trust-based payment experiences in their interviews.

Collective Animal Care

Aidan and Milena independently identified collective street cat care as distinctively Turkish cultural practice.

Aidan described community-level coordination:

> “Lots of locals feeding cats and so forth, like the whole system... Many people are just being street caretakers, like on the street at least three cats... they're a big part of the culture... It's a very cool, very unique system. I don't think anywhere else in the world this happens."

He contrasted Turkish behavior toward cats with other contexts:

> “With a dog we'll never always try to get a dog's attention. If we see it, we'll probably just ignore it... with cats, lots of locals are feeding cats... the whole system versus going to an adoption center in the US.”

Aidan identified this as community practice rather than institutional animal control, residents collectively functioning as “street caretakers” rather than relying on adoption centers or authorities.

Milena described this as generosity extending beyond human relationships:

> “People are very kind to cats. Like you can see that they care so much about, maybe people will pay to take a stray cat to the vet, which would never happen in a place like Northern Europe, for example."

She positioned animal care within broader cultural pattern of mutual support:

> “I think because life is quite hard, so without those small gestures, I think it's not even worth living. So I think there is a very strong culture of helping each other, even strangers or people.”

Both participants recognized this practice required community-level coordination, individual residents feeding cats on rotating schedules, neighbors collectively monitoring cat health, shopkeepers providing water and shelter. Milena explicitly contrasted this with Northern European contexts where “that would never happen” highlighting collective care as distinctively Turkish rather than universal practice.

Spontaneous Hospitality and Care Beyond Obligation

Milena, Leila and Naila identified unprompted care gestures as distinctively Turkish practice, where service workers and strangers provided assistance beyond formal role obligations.

Milena described ferry worker attending to unstated needs:

> "I was taking a ferry once and there was like a guy working on that ferry and maybe he saw that I was a bit cold, it was like nighttime and he just brought me like some tea with some cookies. Like I did not ask for it, it was completely free, just like as a gift."

In the case of Naila, she described her neighborhood grocery store owner's sustained educational care during early pandemic:

> "Before the Turkish government mandated masks for everybody to go into a public space, I was going every day to the local grocery store. The shop owner knew that I was a foreigner, I mean it was pretty obvious and for whatever reason, he decided that he was going to teach me one new Turkish word every day... it was so kind and just so generous."

This daily language teaching, unpaid, sustained, proactive transformed commercial transaction into pedagogical relationship.

When the government made wearing masks mandatory and restricted sales to Turkish citizens only, Naila made a request in a Facebook group. A stranger responded:

> "If you go down to your street corner, I will meet you on the street corner. I have two face masks, extra face mask, I'll give them both to you... So I went down to the corner, he literally did this drive-by and kind of threw the masks at me."

Naila emphasized her gratitude: "I was amazed... I felt like these were people I wanted to be around." The mask provider became her "walking buddy" during pandemic restrictions, demonstrating how care gestures initiated lasting relationships.

Meanwhile, Leila identified "kolay gelsin" (may your work be easy) as cultural practice activating reciprocity norms. She described using the expression with bus driver who subsequently provided extraordinary service:

> “The bus person... when you're nice to them, when you say kolay gelsin, you do it one time... he knew that I'm on the wrong bus at night, he literally went around and dropped me off like a private taxi.”

This expression represents a broader cultural pattern of acknowledging service workers' labor through verbal recognition.

These practices shared common features:

- Service workers and strangers noticing unstated needs (cold, language barrier, wrong bus, pandemic vulnerability)

- Initiative without request or payment expectation

- Actions exceeding role requirements (grocery owner becoming language teacher, stranger providing restricted goods, bus driver becoming taxi)

- Care gestures initiating or deepening relationships (walking buddy, daily teaching)

Milena positioned these gestures within a broader cultural context: “I think because life is quite hard, so without those small gestures, I think it's not even worth living. So I think there is a very strong culture of helping each other, even strangers.”

Leila's workplace provided additional exposure to respect hierarchies: “The hierarchy is in the culture so you are respected based on your position and based on your age... this is installed in the mentality even of the new generation.” She learned appropriate forms of address through workplace error: “I told him İbrahim-cim (my dear Ibrahim) [when should have been İbrahim Bey (Mr. Ibrahim)]... I could never get used to it, but I abided by it.”

Milena identified blurred professional-personal boundaries as distinctively Turkish:

> “In Turkey the lines blurred. So if you have a professional relationship, you can still become really good friends or like vice versa.”

She described translator Su's care extending far beyond professional obligations, introducing Milena to family and childhood friends, taking her to hospital during kidney infection, conducting 50 street surveys beyond paid scope. Milena contrasted this explicitly with Western contexts:

> "That would not be possible anywhere in the West... she didn't have to do it. She did so much for me."

This observation parallels Jan's restaurant transformation into surrogate family through gift exchange and Aidan's friendships through café routine. Turkish social practices appear to enable rapid relationship deepening across contexts (work, service, neighborhood) that remain strictly bounded in Western cultural frameworks.

5.4.5 Emotional Attachment

Jan expressed dual emotions: "I do have a lot of warm memories of Istanbul. I mean of course I also hate it. It's a city that you both hate and love."

Naila's attachment manifested through language of compulsion: "I don't know how to explain this to you and I don't even, it's not rational, I don't know, but I have to go back to Turkey."

Aidan expressed attachment through identity transformation: "I'm pretty much becoming 1% more Turk every day." His normative statement reinforced the investment: "I haven't met and been to any city where any culture is as respectful as Istanbul's culture or Turkish culture and I hope that doesn't change."

Sara's attachment language differed qualitatively, reflecting intermediate status:

> "I don't consider myself a local but I consider Turkey definitely more like a home... I missed the country... it's always a place that I see myself coming back to... So I see myself vacationing there on a regular basis."

Her self-positioning as "7 out of 10" quantified intermediate status: "I'm above average... I feel a bit more attached than a tourist but definitely not as much as a local would."

Milena expressed attachment through hypothetical future planning despite short accumulated duration:

> "If I was to have children, I would want them to be more Turkish than Danish... I would hate if my child was Danish and thought this was normal and that was their cultural code…"

She explicitly stated feeling “much more Turkish than Danish” despite longer Danish residence: “I feel much more connected to Turkey and Turkish people than to Denmark and Danish people.”

Milena's strong attachment despite brief duration (four months) and two-year gap suggests heritage proximity effects (Section 5.9.1), though she acknowledged this didn't translate to full integration (6/10 self-assessment) without language proficiency and longer continuous residence.

Louis and Rebecca did not express comparable emotional attachment in their interviews.

Emily self-assessed as “very tourist... maybe 2 out of 10” despite having a Turkish boyfriend and accumulated 6-8 months across multiple visits. She explained her reasoning:

> “I'm just from such a radically different culture... there's so much polarity in between cultures that I feel, until I can know and be confident I'm being polite right now, then I will always feel like an outsider. Until I know how to act in social environments with confidence, I don't feel it.”

She described a cultural violation incident: “We went to this old couple's house... I sat down on the couch, I crossed my legs. Because in American culture, that's a signal of respect... my boyfriend looked at me and he's like, ‘what are you doing, this is very disrespectful’... In my culture, this is respect.”

5.5 Spatial Mobilities

5.5.1 Residential Patterns

All six participants concentrated their activities primarily on Istanbul's Asian side, though with different residential locations and patterns. Emily lived in Tarabya/Sarıyer on the European side, planning to relocate to Yenikoy.

Aidan lived in Beylerbeyi, describing his geographic concentration: “Usually I am around like between Kadıköy and Üsküdar often. I don't go to the European side much... once or twice a month maybe for a specific reason.”

Jan formerly lived in Aksaray on the European side but now rotates hotels, preferring Asian side locations: “Beyoğlu is more touristy... but when you go to Suadiye [Asian side], you don't see any expat there.”

Naila resides in Maltepe. Sara remained in Kadıköy throughout her stay. Louis and Rebecca both lived in Kadıköy, Louis in apartments, Rebecca in hostels and hotels in Moda and north Kadıköy areas.

Milena identified Kadıköy as a site of liberal alternative youth culture challenging external assumptions about Turkish conservatism: “I was super amazed to find very liberal, alternative young people, as if you are in Europe... sometimes my European friends would be more conservative than my Turkish friends actually from Istanbul.” It highlights cultural differences at the neighborhood level, noting that Kadıköy represents a cosmopolitan lifestyle that attracts both Turkish youth and international residents.

5.5.2 European Side Avoidance

Aidan and Jan rarely visited the European side. Aidan's Hagia Sophia uncertainty and infrequent crossings (once or twice monthly for specific reasons) indicated minimal European side engagement. Jan expressed visceral dislike: “I hate that place the most of all the city” referring to Sultanahmet area.

Naila's avoidance derived from cognitive spatial disorientation:

> “There's one exception to [never getting lost]: the European side of Istanbul... I can get turned around there so fast and so horribly that it can literally take me hours to get back across the bridge. I hate that place because it's the only place in the world where I get lost.”

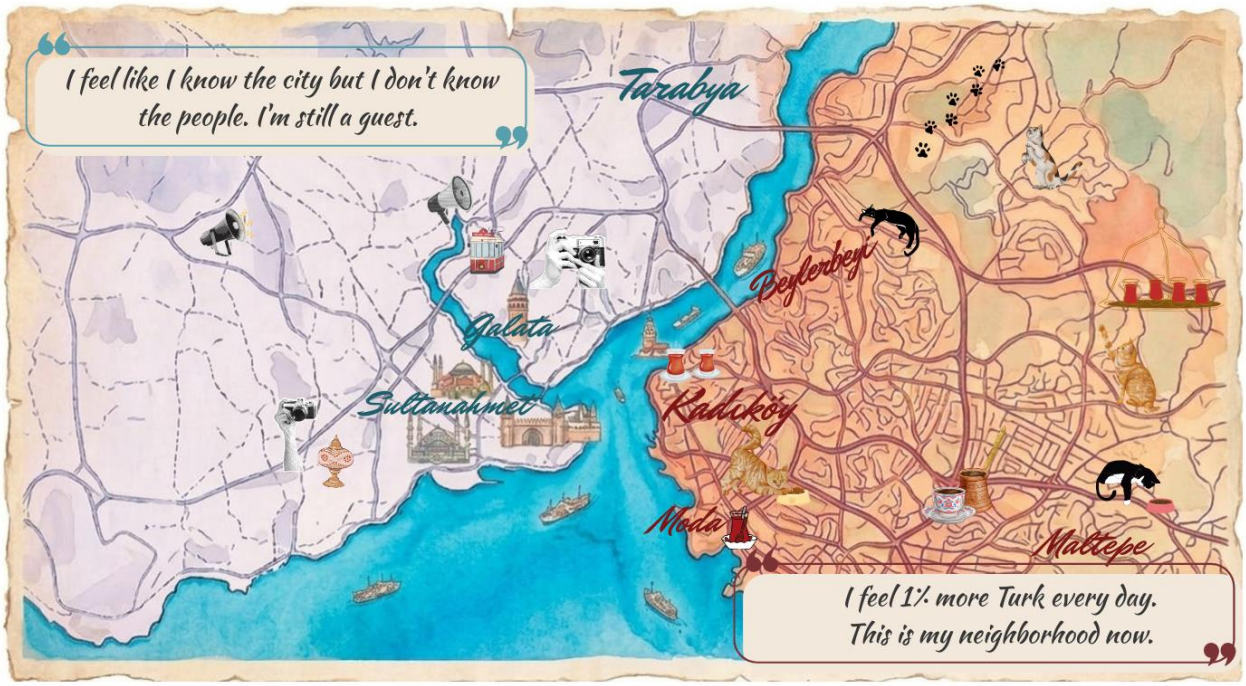
Louis and Rebecca actively engaged the European side. Louis stated: “I mostly [go European side] to party... I like to visit something even if I already did it. So I often go to Haghia Sophia.” He described appreciating the tourist atmosphere: “being in the touristic area, you see all the people visiting the city for the first time... brings back memories.”

Rebecca visited classic tourist circuit locations: Balat (colored houses), Grand Bazaar Sultanahmet Square, Galata Tower. She described markets: “The Grand Bazaar was really cool, it was pretty magical.”

5.5.3 Spatial Visualization

Participant residential choices and mobility patterns revealed geographic dimensions of cultural engagement. These spatial patterns demonstrate how neighborhood choice and mobility practices shaped their cultural encounters.

Figure 4. Two Ways of Experiencing the Same City



Note. Created using Procreate and Canva.

This map illustrates contrasting patterns of cultural engagement across Istanbul's European and Asian sides. Icons represent practices and experiences rather than landmarks: cats symbolize the city's inhabitants central to neighborhood life; cat food represents collective animal care; tea glasses indicate "*ikram*" (spontaneous hospitality) and Turkish coffee culture; cameras mark tourist sites; megaphones for guided tours. The warm-toned Asian side shows dense, interconnected routes of deep engagers embedded in neighborhood rhythms, while the cool-toned European side depicts fragmented routes of shallow engagers moving through tourist infrastructure. The Bosphorus functions as both a geographic and epistemological divide. Quotes are drawn from participant interviews (Emily and Aidan).

5.6 Economic Impact Consciousness

Participants varied significantly in economic impact consciousness, with three distinct frameworks emerging: systemic critique with self-implication (Naila, Jan), policy-focused structural analysis (Leila, Milena) and individual behavior focus (Louis, Rebecca, Emily). Sara recognized currency privilege through flatmate education but lacked structural analysis.

5.6.1 Naila's Economic Analysis

Naila provided detailed economic analysis with specific data points and historical context:

> "The increase in housing prices in Istanbul since 2019 has increased 1,885%... that is by a factor of 10 more than the increase in housing prices anywhere else in the world. I attribute that to poor economic management... but I also think that every time you look in a travel magazine, you see countless articles listing Turkey as one of the places to go to visit, to be a digital nomad."

She described currency dynamics:

> "Locals are living on liras and expats are living on euros, pounds and dollars. There's an attitude of 'Well I can pay for it so I don't care'... you're creating a situation that is economically unsustainable."

She identified impacts on Turkish residents: "For a normal Turkish person, it's impossible to buy a house right now."

She contextualized digital nomadism within four decades of observing expatriate communities:

> "I got to see my very first expat community [1980s China]... I was absolutely horrified by how people behaved... I see it in Istanbul too."

She acknowledged her own position: "Yes I live on dollars and euros. I try very, very hard to live as closely as possible like a local... Is that always successful? No, I'm human. I make mistakes."

5.6.2 Jan and Sara's Economic Awareness

Jan acknowledged personal contribution to housing issues:

> "I do feel like I'm contributing to that problem. Yes, yes. Of course I'm also very guilty of that."

He articulated a threshold perspective: "I do think that some expats are good for a city. If it's too many, I don't think it's good."

Sara recognized currency privilege through living with Turkish flatmates:

> "Initially you almost approach the situation with 'Oh my gosh everything is cheap'... But then Merve was saying 'Look no this is not cheap, this is so expensive.'"

She described how this shifted her perspective: "I didn't really realize what cheap and expensive meant and the impact of inflation until I was exposed to that conversation on almost a daily basis."

5.6.3 Policy-Focused Frameworks

Leila and Milena, both with political science education, articulated economic impacts through structural policy lens rather than individual nomad behavior critique.

Leila emphasized government policy failures enabling exploitation:

> "Look, in politics, it's the easiest thing because we have the same thing in Lebanon. They sold on the Syrians. People coming in, they actually make the economy go around... I wouldn't say that expats, I'm totally aggressive because... it's very easy to blame the foreigner."

She described experiencing rent price discrimination requiring Turkish friend's name on contract:

> "When I went and I wanted to rent, I have to take it on the name of my friend because if I am renting it, it's 40,000 [TL at the time, 2019]... but because for my friend who's Turkish, it was for 15,000. So I had to take it on her name."

She compared Turkey's lack of regulations to other countries' protective policies:

> "There should be a policy like in Saudi Arabia, they have a policy you have a certain limit... because he's a foreigner [you cannot] rent a different price than the local."

Leila argued foreigners provide net economic benefits:

> "The foreigners do keep the inflation steady at one point. Without foreign currency it will go more up and up and up... the foreigner is giving more money than taking."

Milena similarly positioned responsibility with governments rather than individual nomads:

> "Unfortunately because of capitalism we can't really change much, so it will keep happening but I think just the governments need to set some boundaries... it's more of a policy thing and business thing... it's not personal responsibility in my opinion."

She provided pandemic-era example illustrating her framing:

> "When Ramadan was happening, they decided to do complete shutdown, so nothing would be open... I was always functioning within the policy-making space. I was not the one doing things. We can't really blame private people because also not everyone has time to sit and read about global capitalism and gentrification."

Both participants rejected individualized blame frameworks, instead identifying systemic problems: lack of rent control, foreign-local price parity gaps, lack of institutional protections (police translators, legal support) and insufficient government boundary-setting on foreign presence.

Leila compared Turkey's institutional gaps with countries providing foreigner support infrastructure:

> "When I look at other Arab countries... they have special visas for digital nomads, they also always have translators to be beside the expats, they have extra protection for the expats."

Milena compared Turkey (where nomad impacts remain limited) to Bali as an example of an unregulated concentration of digital nomads.

> “I would never want to go to Bali because I feel like there is no local culture left. It's literally fake, like Las Vegas... very performative.”

She framed digital nomadism as requiring careful policy balance: “I think it's both good and bad. It promotes development, of course, local development that maybe would not have happened otherwise. But at the same time, it increases the prices, gentrification and maybe erosion of local cultural identity.”

Both participants' policy-focused frameworks reflected their academic training. Leila's four years working at a NGO on local governance provided institutional knowledge enabling regulatory gap identification. Milena's master's thesis research on Turkish women's rights organizations and social movements provided analytical tools for structural critique rather than individual blame.

5.6.4 Louis' Perspective on Nomad Presence

Louis expressed views about digital nomad impacts on cities:

> “Having digital nomads is good for your city, because usually we go to the same kind of places and during the day like coffee and stuff and we make it alive a little bit... it's a number game. You can't have a lot of digital nomads... you cannot have all of that because most digital nomads may pay a lot more for services and you can create an imbalance.”

He framed cultural exchange positively:

> “Exchange between locals and digital nomads when it happens, I think it's good for everyone. Digital nomads will learn more about the culture and the locals will learn a lot too.”

5.6.5 Rebecca and Emily’s Individual Behavior Focus

Rebecca emphasized environmental and animal welfare consciousness:

> “It's really easy to make a negative impact... some people... not very good with animals... go hang out with a drugged tiger, ride an elephant... the

> Nomad community is quite aware... they know what's okay and what's not okay... they're not buying plastic water bottles... They carry their own filter."

She distinguished between backpacker and nomad behavior:

> "Backpacker behavior is... trail of beer cans... nomad behavior is sinking my teeth into a place long term."

Rebecca did not mention housing costs, gentrification, or local displacement in her interview. Emily focused on individual economic behavior:

> "My ability to... go to nail tech and give her a nice tip... pay for that service without batting an eye... I think as a whole, I like to be able to do that. So yeah, I mean, I think there's, you know, good and bad economically."

She positioned Istanbul's internationalism as reducing nomad impact: "Istanbul's a pretty international city, so I don't know that nomads necessarily have a level of influence on that." She framed cultural exchange positively: "I think it's good for any culture to be able to get external perspectives... as we become a more globally connected world."

5.7 Gender and Safety Experiences

Safety emerged as an unexpected dimension of this research. It was not foregrounded in my interview guide and no participant raised it in the way Leila did. Toward the end of our conversation, after discussing cultural encounters, economic impacts, and her assessment of Turkey as a nomadic destination, Leila paused. She wanted to add something she felt mattered beyond the questions I had asked.

> "One of the things is that Turkey is not safe for a digital nomad. As a female digital nomad I would look for safety."

She then shared that after leaving Istanbul, she had moved to a secondary city alone in Southeastern Turkey. There she experienced sexual assault. Leila named what happened plainly, without euphemism and moved directly to structural analysis. She did not dwell on the assault itself but on what institutional support should have existed and what was missing.

> "It's good to look at the government services, at the police. How do they serve expats? Do they have translators?"

She described navigating police reporting, an ongoing legal investigation, and the absence of support systems designed for foreign residents in crisis. She compared Turkey's institutional support with other countries:

> "When I look at other Arab countries... they have special visas for digital nomads, they also always have translators to be beside the expats, they have extra protection for the expats."

Leila shared this deliberately, as something she believed other women should know.

> "Speaking about a digital nomad is something and speaking about a female digital nomad is another thing."

This distinction between the generic digital nomad experience and the specifically gendered one framed her account not as personal confession but as structural critique.

Her Istanbul experience had felt "protected", a word she used deliberately.

> "I had a Turkish friend so I was dealing with her parents, I was from her side, she took me to the local places... so I was protected in a way."

This protection was social and relational. When those relationships were no longer geographically present, the protection dissolved.

Leila's disclosure emerged outside my interview guide and beyond this research's focus on cultural engagement. I present it here not as data to analyze, but because she chose to share it, believing it mattered. She identified institutional failures that shape women digital nomads' safety in ways I had not anticipated. I do not generalize from her experience. Instead, I honor her decision to speak by including her testimony and recognizing what she made visible: that safety for temporary foreign residents, particularly women, demands urgent attention. She trusted me with this, and I present it with the gravity it deserves.

5.8 The 2023 Earthquake Response

Milena's response to the devastating earthquake that struck southern and central Turkey in February 2023 revealed potential for digital nomad community contributions beyond economic impacts. The earthquake affected an enormous region spanning multiple provinces and the disaster's scale overwhelmed local response capacity. Across Turkey, citizens mobilized through grassroots initiatives to send supplies, coordinate rescue

efforts, and provide support where government response proved insufficient. Upon learning about the disaster and witnessing the nationwide mobilization, Milena immediately organized her own fundraising initiative through her remote consulting work:

> "I talked to my boss and said can we please have some sort of initiative where I do consultations for people for free... my time is free and whatever they pay, every single dollar goes to Turkey."

She raised approximately $3,000 through donation-based consultations, explicitly avoiding large NGOs:

> "I wasn't thrilled about donating to the UN or some b******* organizations... if you donate to the UN your money will be used to finance the UN salary and their nice coffee cups."

Her approach prioritized local knowledge over external assumptions:

> "I always asked my Turkish friends to tell me what's needed most... like menstrual hygiene products and baby diapers, things people don't normally think about. So we went to the store, bought everything and delivered it to the donation facility."

This response to the crisis showed many features of integration, including the use of the social network for access to local knowledge, trust in the expertise of Turkish friends over institutional advice and the willingness and ability to engage with the community in need.

Her engagement with the earthquake took place during the second visit after a two year gap, which shows that integration from the previous stay (three-month stay with me and my sister in 2021) established a connection that enabled a response despite a discontinuous time period. This is in contrast to shallow engagers who remained unconnected to events and concerns in the locality despite a longer period. Milena's experience suggests that meaningful nomad contributions to local communities become possible when cultural integration depth, social network quality and crisis moments align.

5.9 Cultural Backgrounds

Heritage proximity showed potential effects on integration. Other potential variables (profession, age, previous international experience, personality) could not be systematically analyzed given sample size and diversity.

Three participants had Middle Eastern or North African heritage providing cultural reference points for Turkish culture.

Naila, with Palestinian mother, described cultural familiarity:

> "southeastern Turkish culture... it's very similar to my mom's... it isn't foreign to me."

She described achieving behavioral comfort across Mediterranean contexts including Greece, Morocco and Turkey.

Sara, from Tunisia, described her initial impressions of Istanbul:

> "felt familiar enough, didn't feel like complete culture shock but foreign enough."

Leila, from Lebanon, provided detailed comparison:

> "A little bit similar to the traditional Arab culture, like the old, old culture. You feel not very foreign, but at the same time there is the local governance that's very well structured in services. So you have the European services, but you have the culture of close to Arab countries."

She described Turkey as providing a unique combination: "Arab cultural familiarity (hospitality norms, respect for elderly, gender roles, food culture)" alongside "European institutional efficiency (governance structures, service quality)."

Milena, from Russia, described Russian-Turkish cultural similarity providing immediate familiarity:

> "Turkish people are very similar to Russian people, so it feels super familiar... like something I know from childhood... social cues, very understandable."

She explicitly contrasted Turkish culture with Danish cultural confusion despite two years Danish residence:

> "Social cues in Denmark, I still don't get them as much. Like the way people interact with you, the way they speak, the way they hold themselves, I still find it very foreign."

Her heritage proximity facilitated rapid integration (6/10 self-assessment after four months accumulated) comparable to Sara's Tunisian background and Leila's Lebanese familiarity. Russian cultural patterns (emotional expressiveness, friendship, intimacy, community support, resilience) were quite similar to those in Turkey and allowed for this "superfamiliar" experience.

5.10 Summary

Three factors determined integration depth: social network composition, temporal continuity and work-living arrangements. These operated interdependently.

Turkish-exclusive networks enabled deep integration (9-10/10) regardless of other factors (Aidan, Jan, Naila, Leila). Mixed Turkish-priority networks produced moderate integration (Sara 7/10, Milena 6/10). Nomad-focused or tourist networks prevented integration even with long stays (Louis 6-7/10, Rebecca, Emily 2-3/10).

Continuous presence mattered more than accumulated time. Aidan's seven continuous months (10/10) outweighed Sara's twelve interrupted months (7/10) or Louis' six-plus months in one-month visits (6-7/10). Breaks created "recognition decay", participants had to rebuild relationships.

Workspace-living arrangements created an isolation-immersion spectrum. Café routines enabled spontaneous encounters (Aidan, Jan, Naila). Bedroom work required intentional effort (Sara, Louis). Turkish flatmates provided compensatory cultural transmission (Sara, Milena). Solo bedroom work created maximum isolation (Louis).

Structured cultural activities didn't deepen integration without enabling conditions. Louis attended the most workshops but remained 6-7/10. Deep engagers avoided tourist sites but independently found unmarked everyday practices: trust-based payment, collective cat care, spontaneous hospitality, fluid boundaries. Shallow engagers consumed tourist sites extensively but recognized few unmarked practices.

Deep integration (9-10/10) required all three conditions aligned simultaneously. Moderate integration (6-7/10) came from partial alignment. Shallow integration (2/10) resulted from missing conditions. Heritage proximity helped but could not overcome structural barriers. Gender safety concerns operated independently of integration depth.

Meaningful cultural engagement requires conditions rarely aligned in typical nomadic practice, explaining why deep integration remains exceptional rather than normal among extended-stay nomads.

Chapter 6: Discussion

6.1 Introduction

This research aimed to comprehend the engagement of digital nomads with Istanbul's living culture and the factors that influence the depth of this engagement. The findings showed an unexpected outcome: the accessibility framework outlined in Chapter 3 was not supported by the data. The framework expected that high-accessibility practices (tourist sites, commercial workshops) would serve as entry points, and that sustained presence combined with Turkish social networks would enable progression to deeper engagement with limited-accessibility practices like neighborhood routines and unmarked cultural codes. Instead, deep engagers avoided tourist infrastructure entirely from the start, while shallow engagers consumed it extensively without progressing to deeper participation.

The research questions that framed this study were: How do digital nomads participate in Istanbul's living culture, and what conditions influence the depth of that participation? Specifically: what cultural practices do nomads encounter and how do they engage with them, and what structural and individual conditions determine whether engagement develops into genuine participation or remains superficial?

The main argument is that cultural engagement requires the presence of specific circumstances that are normally not present in the case of the nomad. The structural nature of digital nomadism functions as a barrier in the case of cultural engagement. In other words, the success of the engagement in culture by the digital nomad happens in cases where they decide to avoid the normal nomadic practices.

6.2 The Accessibility Framework: Limitations

Chapter 3 categorized cultural practices according to accessibility: high (commercial workshops, major sites with structured access), moderate (hammams, cooking classes requiring reservation and payment), and limited (neighborhood networks, seasonal celebrations requiring insider knowledge). The framework expected that high-accessibility practices would serve as initial entry points, providing opportunities for nomads to encounter Turkish culture in organized formats. Deep engagement with limited-accessibility practices, unmarked neighborhood routines, trust-based relationships, spontaneous hospitality would require sustained presence and Turkish social networks to access. The framework assumed nomads

would use both: accessible infrastructure as starting points and Turkish networks to gradually access everyday practices.

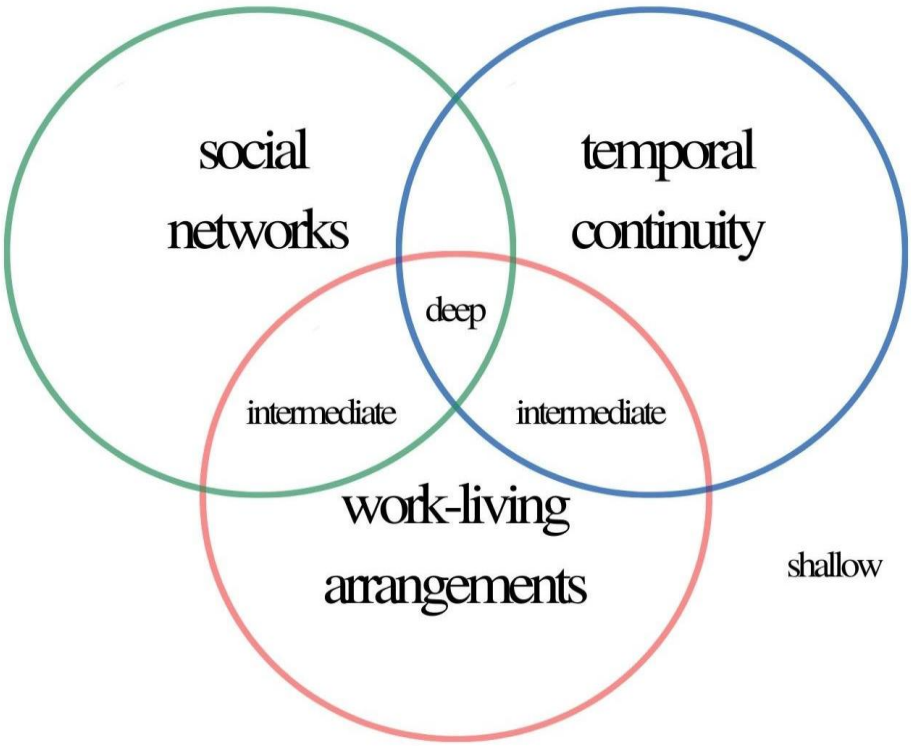
However, this did not happen at all. Deep engagers like Aidan, Jan, Naila, avoided tourist sites and workshops despite their long stay in Istanbul. Jan's comment, “I hate that place the most of all the city,” about Sultanahmet, and Aidan's hesitation about ever visiting Hagia Sophia indicated active avoidance rather than indifference. Louis attended multiple workshops and visited tourist sites repeatedly but remained at 6-7/10 integration levels, and Rebecca engaged extensively with tourist circuits but reached only 3/10. Accessible infrastructure, rather than being an entry point, seemed to be an alternative to neighborhood integration.

The framework assumed three things. First, it assumed practice characteristics would shape engagement patterns. Instead, nomad characteristics determined depth entirely: social networks, work-living arrangements, temporal patterns. Second, it assumed nomads seeking authentic engagement would value accessibility features as aids to cultural understanding. Instead, Jan explicitly positioned tourist infrastructure as antithetical to authenticity, distinguishing “touristy Beyoğlu” from “authentic Suadiye where you don't see any expat there.” Accessible infrastructure marked spaces as foreign to deep engagers, not as pathways to participation. Third, it assumed the two pathways would be compatible, that infrastructure could serve as entry points while networks enabled deeper access. Instead, they proved mutually exclusive. If practice accessibility did not determine engagement depth, what did? The findings revealed that engagement depth depended on three structural conditions of nomadic life.

6.3 Integration Framework

The depth of integration was dependent on three key factors: social network composition, temporal continuity, and work-living arrangements. These operated interdependently, deep integration required all three aligned simultaneously.

Figure 5. Structural Integration Framework



Note. Created using Canva.

This interdependence is represented in Figure 5. Deep integration (9-10/10 self-assessment) is possible only when all three factors align fully. Intermediate engagement (6-7/10) results from partial alignment of two factors. Shallow engagement (2-3/10) happens when important structural requirements are not met or are merely surface-level.

6.3.1 Social Network Composition

Turkish-exclusive social networks enabled deep integration (9-10/10) regardless of other factors: Aidan's seven months, Jan's hotel transience, Naila's six years, Leila's workplace immersion all achieved the same level of depth. Mixed Turkish-priority networks enabled moderate integration (Sara 7/10, Milena 6/10). Nomad-focused networks prevented integration even with substantial duration (Louis 6-7/10, Rebecca and Emily 2-3/10).

However, Turkish networks were necessary but not sufficient on their own. Emily lived with a Turkish boyfriend for 6-8 months but self-assessed as “very tourist” (2/10), while Sara assessed herself as 7/10 with Turkish flatmates. Emily kept international women’s groups because it

was easier to meet expats, and she gave them priority over her boyfriend's Turkish networks.circle. Sara made an intentional move to not meet only Tunisians, actively seeking Turkish connections despite equivalent linguistic barriers. Turkish networks provided access, but nomads had to choose sustained engagement over international comfort.

6.3.2 Temporal Continuity

Continuous presence was more important than accumulated time. Aidan's seven continuous months outweighed Sara's thirteen interrupted months and Louis's six-plus months across one-month visits. Sara explicitly identified discontinuity as preventing local status: "I never spent an entire year with all four seasons in a row in Turkey." Interruptions created "recognition decay": Louis described how vendors "don't recognize me yet and they will recognize me one week after."

Continuous presence enabled community recognition patterns. Aidan termed it "everyone recognizes me"; Naila experienced Turkish residents spontaneously speaking Turkish to her. These recognition patterns required months of daily presence in the community. This finding challenges Cohen et al.'s (2015) characterization of lifestyle mobility as a fluid process as it integrates to specific locations.

6.3.3 Work-Living Arrangements

Work location and living arrangements created isolation-immersion spectrums determining daily cultural exposure. Café routines allowed spontaneous encounters and friendships (Aidan, Jan, Naila) through what Aidan called "ambient cultural absorption" unplanned conversations, overhearing Turkish, observing rituals, and being approached by locals. Bedroom work eliminated ambient absorption, requiring intentional cultural seeking (Sara) or creating isolation (Louis). Turkish flatmates provided compensatory transmission (Sara, Milena). The combination of bedroom work and solo living produced maximum isolation (Louis).

As Sara insightfully noticed, working from the bedroom meant that "all the exposure I had of Turkey was intentional, like I had to choose it, because I could just be in my room all day." While nomads choose destinations freely, work arrangements constrain daily encounter possibilities.

6.3.4 Framework Application

Louis and Emily demonstrate how misalignment prevents integration despite apparent advantages. Louis's bedroom isolation, solo living, one-month patterns, and mixed networks created structural barriers no intentional consumption could overcome. Emily's international network orientation prevented integration despite living with a Turkish boyfriend.

This shows that meaningful cultural engagement requires conditions rarely aligned in typical nomadic practice. Digital nomadism's structural features systematically prevent deep integration requirements. When nomads do achieve it, integration results from deliberate rejection of typical nomadic patterns rather than natural evolution.

6.4 Unmarked Everyday Practices

The most significant finding concerned practices that appeared nowhere in the accessibility framework yet participants consistently identified as distinctively Turkish and central to cultural understanding. Aidan recognized trust-based payment norms through direct experience: “If I go to get a haircut and oh I don't have any cash, I can just come back the next day and pay the person. But in America that would not fly.” Milena identified collective cat care as distinctively Turkish: “People are very kind to cats. Like you can see that they care so much about, maybe people will pay to take a stray cat to the vet, which would never happen in a place like Northern Europe, for example.” Sara learned *komşuluk,* neighborhood social codes, through her Turkish flatmate's explanations of how neighbors are expected to interact in apartment life.

These practices lacked institutional recognition. They were not UNESCO-listed, tourism-documented, or academically catalogued. Yet participants experienced them as culturally defining. This is what can be called 'double invisibility': practices invisible to insiders due to familiarity blindness and to superficial observers due to observational distance, only visible through participatory observation. For Turkish residents, paying a barber tomorrow or feeding street cats is an unremarkable daily routine. For tourists passing through, these practices remain unnoticed. Only nomads with sustained presence and social embedding recognized them through what Hannerz (1996) describes as participation in local “habitats of meaning.”

6.4.1 Insider and Outsider Recognition

Recognition of living culture depends on observer positioning. What insiders and outsiders identify as culturally significant differs based on their position and mode of engagement.

As a Turkish researcher, I initially focused on institutionally recognized practices, such as UNESCO-listed traditions, tourism-documented sites, academically catalogued customs. Practices embedded in daily life remained invisible not because they lacked cultural meaning but because their ordinariness prevented recognition as culturally distinctive. This created a form of "familiarity blindness." I could not recognize these practices as distinctive because they were simply too ordinary for me.

Digital nomads' outsider positioning made it possible to recognize them as they can make a comparison culturally. Aidan identified trust-based payment norms by comparing Turkish and American commercial relationships: "If I go to get a haircut and oh I don't have any cash, I can just come back the next day and pay the person. But in America that would not fly." For Turkish residents, paying a barber tomorrow represents normal neighborhood trust relationships. Milena identified collective cat care through comparison with Northern European contexts: "People are very kind to cats... maybe people will pay to take a stray cat to the vet, which would never happen in a place like Northern Europe." Aidan further elaborated on cat care as community practice: "Lots of locals feeding cats and so forth, like the whole system... Many people are just being street caretakers, like on the street at least three cats... It's a very cool, very unique system. I don't think anywhere else in the world this happens."

However, cultural distance alone proved insufficient. Louis, Rebecca, and Emily made no mention of trust-based payment, collective cat care, or spontaneous hospitality in their interviews despite outsider status and comparable duration. Their interview narratives focused on tourist sites, workshops, and commercial encounters. Emily's access through her Turkish boyfriend didn't enable recognition of unmarked practices because her social orientation remained international: "It's a lot easier I think to connect with people from outside the culture."

Recognition required not just cultural distance but sustained participation. Aidan's recognition of trust-based payment emerged through actually attempting deferred payment at his neighborhood barber, not through observation. Milena realized cat care by her involvement in the feeding rituals, as she said: "I think because life is quite hard, so without those small gestures, I think it's not even worth living. So I think there is a very strong culture of helping

each other, even strangers or people." Her involvement in the feeding of cats with Turkish flatmates helped her to be aware of this aspect as part of the cultural practice. Jan's recognition of spontaneous hospitality came through receiving it, the restaurant owner's refusal of payment and declaration "You're our guest, you don't pay"not through reading about Turkish hospitality norms.

6.4.2 Methodological Implications

This pattern of double invisibility has important methodological implications. Everyday living culture may be invisible to insider researchers (familiarity blindness) and to outsider observers (insufficient participation). It is beneficial to combine insider knowledge of culture with outsider defamiliarization through participatory engagement. The finding of unmarked practices in this study was made possible by complementarity: the outsider positioning of the participants enabled defamiliarization, and my insider knowledge provided cultural depth.

6.5 Theoretical Implications

These findings both confirm and complicate existing theoretical approaches to lifestyle mobilities and cultural participation.

6.5.1 Lifestyle Mobilities: Privilege and Constraint

Cohen et al.'s (2015) framework emphasizing lifestyle mobility as voluntary, sustained, and blurring work-leisure boundaries proved partially true. The voluntary aspect was true for destination choice, all participants chose Istanbul for lifestyle reasons. However, the findings also highlighted significant limitations within this chosen mobility. Sara's view on "I could dose how much local culture I wanted to get" supports mobility as strategic life management.

Findings strongly confirm Cohen et al.'s arguments about privilege as a prerequisite for lifestyle mobility. Naila's forty-year critique positioned digital nomadism within longer expatriate privilege patterns, drawing on observations from 1980s China to contemporary Istanbul. She described expatriate presence without participation using a military base analogy: "People were living in Italy but they were on a US base. So yes they were in Italy but they weren't... I see this happening with digital nomads in groups. Yes they're in Turkey or Colombia, but they're not." She identified economic disparities explicitly: "Locals are living on liras and expats are living on euros, pounds and dollars... you're creating a situation that is economically unsustainable." Each participant held citizenship that granted visa access easily, earned foreign

currency that gave geoarbitrage advantages, and had cultural capital allowing them to navigate internationally easily.

These findings contribute to lifestyle mobility scholarship by showing structural incompatibility between core nomadic values (flexibility, circulation, autonomy) and integration requirements (commitment, continuity, community embedding). While the framework's emphasis on strategic life management is key, nomads' decisions often prioritize comfort over cultural depth.

6.5.2 Participation Without Transmission

The findings confirm Hannerz's (1996) understanding of culture as relational process produced through situated encounters and accumulated through participation in shared 'habitats of meaning.' Deep engagers achieved what Wenger (1998, p. 45) describes as participation in 'communities of practice' where meanings are negotiated through sustained social interaction. Jan described his permanent guest status: “One place where I had food every night... They were refusing my payment: ‘You're our guest, you don't pay.’” Naila reported that “Turkish men and women will walk up to me and start speaking Turkish... over the last few years whatever it is that originally made me seem American doesn't make me seem American anymore.” Aidan described his integration process: “I'm pretty much becoming 1% more Turk every day.”

However, the findings reveal a temporal limitation for temporary residents. Sara's statement, “I've never spent an entire year with all four seasons in a row in Turkey” showed that temporal discontinuity was a factor in not being able to fully belong to the community. Although deep engagers were active participants during their time, their eventual departure meant that they were not in a position to continue the intergenerational transmission that is necessary for a community of practice.

This indicates that there is a difference between cultural participation and cultural transmission. Cultural participation is possible by temporary residents, but cultural transmission is not possible without being a member of the community. Deep engagers were able to tap into the living culture through participation, but their temporary nature restricted their ability to contribute to its reproduction.

6.6 Practical Implications

These findings have implications for urban policymakers, cultural practitioners, and digital nomads themselves. Three patterns, however, appear worth considering: nomadic flexibility conflicts with integration requirements, social networks enable cultural access, and unmarked practices matter most for meaningful engagement.

6.6.1 Cultural Policy: Protecting Everyday Spaces

Urban planners and cultural policymakers may assume that making cultural practices accessible through infrastructure (workshops, guided experiences, documentation) will enable meaningful engagement. This research shows that might not be the case. Louis was actively involved in the workshops and site visits but was only moderately engaged (6-7/10), while Aidan, Jan, and Naila avoided all infrastructure but were highly integrated (9-10/10) in their neighborhood.

This does not mean that initiatives for accessibility are not valuable, as they play critical roles in tourism as a source of income and economic support for cultural practitioners. The problem is that the infrastructure that attracts the short-term visitor (signage, commercialization, and organized experiences) may repel those who seek more integrated experiences. Cultural policy in cities with a growing number of digital nomads may need to ensure the protection of public spaces where cultural life occurs naturally, even if this means limiting tourist-oriented development. This is a difficult balance between the economic advantages of cultural tourism and the preservation of local community space

6.6.2 Urban Policy: Beyond Individual Responsibility

Participants had different opinions on the economic effect of the nomads. Some participants, like Naila and Jan, focused on systemic displacement. Others, like Leila and Milena, focused on policy failure rather than individual actions. Lastly, there are those like Louis and Rebecca, who focused on individual actions. This shows that regulation needs to come from the government and not depend on individual actions of the nomads.

Leila emphasized government policy failures enabling exploitation: “Look, in politics, it's the easiest thing.... it's very easy to blame the foreigner.” She described experiencing rent price discrimination: “When I went and I wanted to rent, I had to take it on the name of my friend

because if I am renting it, it's 40k [TL]... but because for my friend who's Turkish, it was for 15k. So I had to take it on her name." She argued that policy gaps, not nomad presence, created problems: "There should be a policy like in Saudi Arabia... you cannot rent a different price than the local."

Milena similarly positioned responsibility with governments: "Unfortunately because of capitalism we can't really change much, so it will keep happening but I think just the governments need to set some boundaries... it's more of a policy thing and business thing... it's not personal responsibility in my opinion."

However, the housing crisis in Istanbul is partly a product of general instability in the economy, not just the nomadic population. The simplistic argument that nomads cause displacement is an oversimplification. The key to a successful policy is striking a balance between local needs and gaining from the influx of foreign currency, cultural exchange and avoiding expatriate ghettos, heritage and evolution. The Turkish policy is a lack of: no digital nomad visa, short-term rentals, and few protection for foreigners. A policy that aims to guide nomadic populations into a positive influence while minimizing their impact requires an acknowledgment of trade-offs, rather than pretending all stakeholders benefit equally.

6.6.3 For Nomads: The Integration Paradox

In relation to digital nomads who are interested in deep cultural integration, the results are both promising and discouraging. Deep cultural integration is possible, but it involves sacrificing much of what digital nomadism is about. Turkish-exclusive networks mean choosing linguistic struggle instead of comfortable English-speaking interactions. Continuous presence means staying beyond visa expiration dates, beyond tightening budgets, and beyond the point of boredom with daily routines. These are not small changes; they are changes that go against the very fabric of digital nomadism and its promises of freedom, flexibility, and comfort. This brings us to a paradox: the digital nomad lifestyle, which allows for long-term international experience, works against deep cultural integration for digital nomads. Most will choose flexibility over deep cultural integration. However, for those who are interested in deep cultural integration, it should be noted that even intermediate levels of cultural integration, such as what Sara and Milena were able to accomplish, are not easy. Not everyone feels the need to "become local." The uncomfortable truth is that full cultural integration may be fundamentally at odds with the nomadic lifestyle which the majority of digital nomads choose to live. It can be

achieved at an individual level by effectively giving up the nomad lifestyle altogether, but at a population level, they are likely to continue showing a shallow to moderate level of engagement. This is simply the nature of the two lifestyles.

6.7 Synthesis

This research makes three interconnected contributions to understanding cultural participation and lifestyle mobility.

First, engagement depth depends on structural conditions of nomadic life, not on characteristics of cultural practices. The accessibility framework failed because it analyzed practice accessibility rather than nomad circumstances. Emily's structural access through her Turkish boyfriend and Louis's workshop attendance could not overcome misaligned work-living arrangements and network orientations.

Second, the most culturally meaningful practices lack institutional recognition. Unmarked everyday practices such as trust-based payment, collective cat care, spontaneous hospitality, proved central to deep engagers' cultural understanding despite their absence from tourism infrastructure. Recognition of these practices depends on epistemological positioning and participatory engagement, not just cultural distance.

Third, core values of digital nomadism (flexibility, circulation, autonomy) are incompatible with the requirements of integration (commitment, continuity, community embedding). Deep integration emerges from a deliberate rejection of common nomadic patterns.

These findings challenge assumptions about cultural accessibility, reveal limitations of temporary residents' participation, and expose contradictions between mobility and belonging that urban policy and individual nomads must navigate.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This research began with a question: why did some digital nomads develop deep cultural connections in Istanbul while others remained outsiders, even after living in the city for extended periods? Through conversations with nine participants who had resided in Istanbul for periods ranging from three months to six years, a pattern emerged that challenged my initial assumptions. Meaningful participation depended not on which cultural practices were accessible, but on how nomads' lives were structured. Those who achieved deep integration had done so by abandoning what defines digital nomadism itself: flexibility, circulation, and the comfort of international networks.

I had expected accessible cultural infrastructure such as workshops, documented traditions, and tourist sites to serve as entry points toward deeper engagement. Instead, those who integrated most deeply avoided this infrastructure entirely, treating places like Sultanahmet as spaces to actively reject. They accessed living culture directly: through Turkish-exclusive friendships, continuous uninterrupted presence, and daily café routines that became neighborhood rhythms. Meanwhile, those who consumed tourist infrastructure most extensively progressed no further than surface engagement.

What the research ultimately revealed is a paradox. Digital nomadism promises freedom through mobility, yet the very values that animate this lifestyle—circulation, workspace autonomy, international social comfort—structurally prevent the conditions integration requires. Deep participation becomes possible only by suspending the mobility that enables it. These understandings emerged through conversations with nine people willing to reflect on cultural integration. Those living in expatriate bubbles, passing through quickly, or working from co-living spaces are largely absent from this research. What this research captures is therefore partial: a particular slice of nomadic experience among those willing and able to reflect on their cultural positioning.

Living culture operates through everyday practices and accumulated relationships, becoming accessible only through sustained presence and the gradual trust-building that neighborhood life enables. This research has shown that temporary residents can access it, but only by creating conditions nomadic life systematically works against. The tension is structural, not individual: workspace autonomy enables isolation, transient accommodation prevents

neighborhood embedding, international networks provide comfortable alternatives to cultural struggle.

For cities with growing nomadic populations, the implications are clear. Without protecting neighborhood spaces, ensuring housing stability, and supporting integration, nomadic presence will likely create parallel worlds where economic value flows in while cultural connection remains absent. Whether policy can foster genuine participation, or whether integration requires individual commitments beyond policy's reach, remains an open question. For nomads themselves, deep belonging requires sacrificing the mobility that enables their lives. Most will not make this choice, nor should they necessarily feel obligated to. What this research shows is not a moral imperative but a structural reality: movement and rootedness exist in fundamental tension. This tension may be the defining feature of contemporary urban life, when more people than ever can live anywhere but fewer understand what it means to belong somewhere.

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APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Research Title: *Living Heritage and Nomadic Encounters: A Case Study of Digital Nomads in Istanbul*

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Purpose of the Study

This research examines how digital nomads (remote workers who travel while working) engage with Istanbul's traditional cultural practices such as coffee culture, traditional crafts, and community celebrations. The study aims to understand what makes some cultural encounters meaningful and others superficial, and how factors like living arrangements, neighborhood choices, and length of stay influence these experiences. This research is being conducted as part of a master's thesis at the University of Padua and will contribute to academic knowledge about cultural heritage and mobility patterns. Your experiences and perspectives are valuable regardless of how much or little you have engaged with local culture during your time in Istanbul.

What Participation Involves

- If you agree, you will take part in a one interview lasting 45-60 minutes.
- You will be asked about your experiences living in Istanbul and engaging with local culture.
- The interview can be conducted face-to-face or online, according to your preference.
- With your permission, the interview may be audio-recorded to ensure accuracy.

Voluntary Participation

- Your participation is **completely voluntary**.
- You may choose **not to answer any question**.
- You may **stop the interview at any time** without any consequences.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

- Your name will **not** appear in the research or in any publications.
- You will be assigned a **pseudonym** in all research materials.
- All information will be kept confidential and stored securely.
- Only the researcher and academic supervisors will have access to raw data.

Consent Statement

Please read and tick the boxes below:

☐ I have read and understood the information above.
☐ I know that my participation is voluntary and I can withdraw at any time.
☐ I agree that the interview may be recorded (optional).
☐ I agree to take part in this research study.

Participant's Name (optional): _____

Participant's Signature / Thumbprint: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Supervisor's Signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE

SECTION 1: ARRIVAL & SETTLEMENT CONTEXT

Q1. How did you end up choosing Istanbul? Like, what was the story, how'd you hear about it, what attracted you?

Q2. Where do you live in Istanbul, and how did you choose that neighborhood?

Q3. How long have you been in Istanbul? Did you plan to stay this long, or did it just happen?

SECTION 2: CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT PATTERNS & DEPTH

Q4. So tell me about the Turkish cultural stuff you've actually gotten into while you're here what have you experienced or tried?

Q5. Did you learn about cultural significance and history, or mainly the surface experience?

Q6. Did you feel like a temporary guest or part of the community? What signals that difference?

Q7. Can you think of a specific moment when something clicked—like when an experience went from surface-level to actually meaningful?

Q8. How has your relationship with Istanbul's culture changed over time? Like, first month versus now?

Q9. Was there anything you wanted to experience but couldn't? What got in the way?

SECTION 3: SPATIAL & SOCIAL TRANSMISSION

Q10. Tell me about your living situation alone, with flatmates, co-living space?

Q11. How has that shaped what you've learned about Turkish culture?

Q12. Walk me through a typical week—where do you spend your time for work, socializing, and cultural activities?

Q13. Do you socialize mainly with other nomads, with locals, or a mix?

Q14. What's been the most important factor in shaping your cultural experience here?

SECTION 4: NOMADIC IMPACT & POWER DYNAMICS

Q15. How do you think digital nomads' presence affects Istanbul's culture—positively, negatively, or neutrally?How do YOU personally affect it?

Q16. What's your role/responsibility as a temporary resident in this cultural ecosystem?

SECTION 5: AUTHENTICITY, DEPTH

Q17. On a spectrum from "tourist" to "temporary local," where would you place yourself, and why?

Q18. I'm basically trying to figure out if spending more time in a place lets you go from doing touristy stuff to actually participating in community life. Does that match your experience, or would you describe it differently?

SECTION 6: SPATIAL MAPPING EXERCISE (5 minutes)

Q19. Let's visualize your spatial patterns together. Can you help me mark:

- Your residential location (home icon)
- Regular coworking spaces or work locations
- Cultural heritage sites you've engaged with—let's use different colors:
- Places where meaningful cultural encounters happened
- Districts you've never visited or avoid

Q20. Looking at this map we've created together, what patterns do you notice? Are there clusters? Barriers? Surprises?