Beyond the digital nomad: Transnational digital workers in Lisbon ☆

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the platformisation of urban life in Southern Europe, highlighting Lisbon as a key hub in the global outsourcing of digital labour. It identifies a model of digital corporate urbanism driven by transnational technology platforms and intermediary firms, where capital attraction, workforce management, and urban policy converge under the logic of global competitiveness.

Based on qualitative research involving interviews and participant observation, the study explores the experiences of transnational digital workers employed by companies such as Teleperformance, Accenture, and Sitel for essential tasks on platforms including TikTok and Google (content moderation, customer service, technical support). Despite being portrayed as part of the digital and creative economy, these workers face precarious and monitored labour conditions that contradict narratives of autonomy and innovation.

The findings challenge the idealisation of the *digital nomad*, showing that the mobility of these workers is not a lifestyle choice but a response to structural precarity and limited opportunities in their home countries. Their jobs, framed as technological, are characterized by routinisation, emotional strain, algorithmic control, and economic instability. Company-provided housing reinforces dependence and reveals the entanglement between work, dwelling, and urban regulation in a context of housing crisis.

Lisbon thus emerges as a strategic laboratory of platform capitalism, where global outsourcing intersects with local real estate dynamics. This configuration reproduces a new digital division of labour in which over-qualification coexists with repetitive, low-paid tasks, turning the city into an active agent that integrates labour, housing, and capital accumulation under the regime of digital urbanism.

1. Introduction

The ongoing platformisation of Southern European cities is giving rise to a new model of corporate urbanism, structured around the logic of digital platforms and transnational tech corporations. This transformation reflects, to a significant extent, the organizational and symbolic culture associated with Silicon Valley (Zukin, 2021). In recent years, Lisbon has positioned itself as a central node in the European landscape of digital labour migration, articulating an urban ecosystem in which technological capital, mobile knowledge workers, and public policies oriented toward global competitiveness actively converge.

This context has fostered the relocation of multinational firms specialized in digital outsourcing, drawn by a combination of structural conditions: relatively low wages, an urban environment perceived as attractive, and a flexible labour regulation framework. As a result, Lisbon has witnessed a notable increase in the presence of transnational workers subcontracted by companies such as Teleperformance, Accenture, and Sitel. These workers are tasked with carrying out essential operations for global platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Google, Airbnb, and Facebook. Although these jobs are often presented as competitive professional opportunities, the reality is marked by precarious employment conditions, social dislocation, and tight organizational supervision (Casilli & Posada, 2019; Irani, 2015).

The expansion of firms like Teleperformance in Lisbon exemplifies this trend, as they serve as intermediaries between global tech giants and a transnational, multilingual workforce. These companies manage critical tasks such as content moderation, technical support, and customer service—functions that are operationally central to platform capitalism

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yet largely invisible to end users. These tasks are performed by highly educated migrant workers who nonetheless face working conditions defined by instability, constant turnover, and weak social protections.

Our research suggests that Lisbon is becoming a strategic urban laboratory within the platform economy, where global outsourcing trends intersect with local dynamics of real estate transformation and broader shifts in urban regimes (Sequera, 2024). This evolution resonates with Barns' (2019) concept of platform urbanism, in which digital infrastructures reorganize urban socio-economic relations while reinforcing flexible forms of accumulation and control (Harvey, 1989).

As we show in this article, beyond the aspirational narratives promoted by local policies aimed at attracting digital talent and mobile professionals, what emerges in Lisbon is a relatively invisible segment of the digital labour force: qualified digital workers who occupy an intermediate position between the precarity of gig work and the privileges of elite digital nomads. This group, underexplored in much of the literature, is defined by ambiguous conditions shaped by outsourcing chains, fragmented tasks, and subtle forms of workplace alienation and insecurity (Hermann & Paris, 2020).

The main objective of this article is to contribute to current debates on the platformisation of urban life and the emergent geographies of digital capitalism. Drawing on qualitative research that combines semi-structured interviews and direct observation, we examine how Lisbon has become a major site for tech labour outsourcing in Europe. Rather than embodying a model of professional autonomy or digital emancipation, these employment arrangements reveal how international mobility is mobilized as a mechanism of social differentiation and labour control, reinforcing new forms of exploitation and governance under platform capitalism.

The article is structured as follows: the next section outlines a theoretical framework that problematizes the categories of digital nomad and subcontracted digital work within the broader context of platform economies. We then describe the qualitative methodology adopted in this study, followed by a contextual analysis of Lisbon's urban transformation and policy strategies for attracting transnational labour. Subsequently, we present the main empirical findings, organized into four thematic areas: working conditions, mobility and dislocation, lifestyle practices, and access to housing. We conclude by discussing the broader implications of these findings for understanding the intersections between digital urbanism, flexible capitalism, and contemporary labour regimes.

2. Theoretical framework: debating the digital nomad

The notion of the *digital nomad* has been widely promoted as a symbol of freedom, flexibility, and cosmopolitanism in contemporary labour markets. However, its uncritical use tends to obscure deep inequalities in access to mobility and the benefits associated with digital work (Hermann & Paris, 2020). As Sequera (2025) argues, the digital nomad figure must be understood as a discursive construction that serves the logic of neoliberalism—turning individual aspirations into mechanisms of urban valorisation and flexible forms of governmentality. This figure has become central to the repositioning strategies of cities in Southern Europe, which seek to attract global investment and mobile talent through narratives of innovation, diversity, and lifestyle. The figure of the digital nomad is commonly portrayed as a mobile professional who embodies autonomy, creativity and freedom. Yet empirical studies have shown that this lifestyle is often marked by contradictions and constraints, particularly regarding class position, precarity and the actual degree of mobility. These works include Cook (2020), Hannonen (2020), Nash et al. (2018) and Reichenberger (2017), among others (see also Mancinelli, 2023; Sciuva, 2025).

This aspirational narrative—combining hypermobility, entrepreneurial self-fashioning, and notions of authenticity—contributes to rendering invisible parallel processes of precarization and labour exclusion. In cities such as Lisbon or Barcelona, the appeal of digital nomadism is closely linked to urban branding strategies that promote a cosmopolitan image while masking labour market segmentation and the outsourcing of digital services (Barns, 2019). Yet, access to this type of mobility is far from equal. It is shaped by factors such as nationality, passport power, visa regimes, and social capital, creating internal hierarchies even within the digital nomad ecosystem itself (Mancinelli, 2020).

This discursive shift from precarity to freedom is part of a broader reconfiguration of labour subjectivity under digital capitalism. As Riesgo Gómez, 2020 points out, digital platforms, through their algorithms and interfaces, shape not only working conditions but also the ways in which workers perceive themselves, their trajectories, and their expectations. The entrepreneurial self—mobilized by the narratives of digital nomadism—functions as an affective and symbolic mode of self-management of precariousness.

These contradictions are most clearly embodied in the labour profiles that occupy intermediate positions within the digital ecosystem: workers who are neither fully precarious like gig workers nor fully privileged like elite digital nomads. These are technologically skilled professionals embedded in subcontracting chains, whose working conditions are marked by instability, surveillance, repetition, and low pay. Their ambiguous position is key to understanding the labour architecture of platform economies.

Recent research in cities such as Barcelona (Charnock & Ribera-Fumaz, 2024), Athens (Lilius & Balampanidis, 2020), and Lisbon (Sequera, 2024) supports this hypothesis. Urban digitalization has not yielded a democratized knowledge economy but rather a new division of digital labor, in which overqualification coexists with routinized, poorly paid tasks. In neighbourhoods like Poblenou, the image of Barcelona as a creative city masks an economic reality centered on customer service, back-office functions, and outsourced microtasks, typically carried out by young migrants lacking stability and labour rights.

A similar pattern can be found in Athens, where European offshore workers face considerable barriers in securing housing or stable contracts, undermining the common assumption that transnational mobility is necessarily linked to privilege (Lilius & Balampanidis, 2020). In Lisbon, as we will show in this study, intermediary companies manage a transnational workforce through contractual arrangements that combine flexibility, digital surveillance, and structural dependency.

This configuration is not accidental but rather intrinsic to the broader logic of technological capital relocation in Southern Europe. Drawing on Harvey (2001, 2003), the geographical displacement of capital serves to reduce costs, maximize profits, and exploit more permissive regulatory environments. Within this context, the platformisation of labour functions as a technique of global reorganization of digital services, displacing essential tasks (such as content moderation or technical support) to semi-peripheral regions through subcontracted intermediaries such as Teleperformance, Accenture, Concentrix or Sitel.

From a critical labour perspective, the concepts of *bullshit jobs* (Graeber, 2018) and *ghost work* (Gray & Suri, 2019) provide complementary analytical tools for understanding this reality. The former refers to jobs that, while consuming time and resources, are perceived as meaningless or socially useless, generating subjective alienation. The latter points to essential tasks for digital capitalism—such as data labelling or content moderation—that are systematically outsourced, rendered invisible, and stripped of labour rights. Both concepts converge in the cases examined here, in which intermediate workers perform tasks that are essential to the functioning of different digital platforms and to ensuring a satisfactory experience for their users, but which are structurally fragmented, monotonous and emotionally exhausting, and are performed under the illusion of autonomy.

This precarisation is intensified by algorithmic forms of management (Kellogg et al., 2020), flexible contracts, and the pressure to maintain individualized productivity—factors compounded by spatial and emotional dislocation. Ronel (2023) introduces the concept of *idle labour*

to describe the paradox of digital work: the promise of flexibility turns into permanent availability, where every moment is potentially monetizable, even when disguised as leisure. The outcome is a hyper-connected, segmented subjectivity that normalizes the absence of rights and the fragmentation of life itself.

Within this model, the city plays a central role—not as a neutral backdrop but as a material, symbolic, and political infrastructure of digital capitalism. Lisbon, in particular, has been repositioned as an innovation hub and desirable destination for mobile professionals through urban policies aimed at attracting talent, deregulating labour markets, and financializing housing (Cocola-Gant & Gago, 2019; Tulumello & Allegretti, 2020).

This phenomenon aligns with Barns' (2019) notion of *platform urbanism*, a regime that reorganizes cities according to the logic of data infrastructures, platform economies, and tech capital. Merrifield (2013), Merrifield (2014) extends this idea by referring to the fetishization of urban space: neighbourhoods, buildings, and cultural enclaves are transformed into financial assets oriented toward tourism, talent attraction, and flexible rental markets. The singularity of place—sunlight, the sea, the worn-out aesthetic of authenticity—becomes a source of urban rent (Harvey, 2007), legitimizing policies that subordinate the city to digital and financial capital.

Within this framework, cities do not merely host precarious digital labour—they make it viable. The combination of low wages, attractive cultural offerings, flexible visa regimes, and relatively low living costs creates a functional environment for outsourcing. As we will show, companies not only hire workers but, such as Teleperformance, also house them, offering shared accommodations in central neighbourhoods at below-market rates. This intensifies worker dependence and reinforces disciplinary control beyond the workplace, as shown in classic studies focusing on the analysis of labour control processes (Edwards, 1979).

This platformized urban regime replicates, in Southern European cities, dynamics that Robinson (2002) identifies as typical of the Global South: mass subcontracting, weak legal protections, opaque contracts, and social segmentation. As Bozzi (2024) and Avdikos et al. (2025) demonstrate, these forms of digital maquila—no longer offshore but *nearshore*—enable large platforms to maintain their image of innovation while outsourcing their most demanding, repetitive, or sensitive tasks.

In summary, the theoretical framework underpinning this article begins with a critique of digital nomadism as an ideological tool that legitimizes new forms of labour segmentation and mobility. Building on this, we examine the platformisation of labour as a process of fragmentation, outsourcing, and disenfranchisement—processes that are most acutely manifested in the ambiguous status of intermediate workers. In this sense, we identify how uprooting and willingness to relocate are transformed into a productive resource that facilitates these processes. Finally, we situate these labour dynamics within broader patterns of urban transformation, in which cities like Lisbon emerge as key nodes in the architecture of global digital capitalism—reconfiguring housing, symbolic capital, and labour regimes in service of platform-based accumulation.

In this article, we adopt the term *Transnational Digital Worker* to describe a segment of mobile professionals whose experiences combine international migration, qualification, and structural dependency within the global digital economy. This category underscores the intersection between labour and mobility, distancing itself from the idealised notion of the *digital nomad*. Rather than freely mobile and autonomous professionals, these workers embody the contradictions of digital capitalism — simultaneously mobile and precarious, connected and subordinated. By using this term, we aim to deconstruct the romanticised image of digital nomadism and to highlight how digital infrastructures and outsourcing regimes generate new forms of labour stratification across transnational contexts.

Having outlined the conceptual framework and the main debates on digital nomadism and platform labour, the following section turns to Lisbon as an illustrative case. The city provides a privileged vantage point for observing how transnational digital work and urban transformation intersect in Southern Europe.

3. Why Lisbon?

Over the past decade, Lisbon has emerged as a key urban laboratory for understanding the intersections between urban transformation, the digital economy, and international labour mobility. Portugal occupies a semi-peripheral position in the global economy (Rodrigues et al., 2016; Santos et al., 2017) and, since the 2008 crisis, has undergone an accelerated process of opening up to transnational capital, particularly in the real estate and tourism sectors (Cocola-Gant & Gago, 2019; Mendes, 2021).

The political response to the crisis—characterized by austerity, the liberalization of the housing market, and tax incentives for foreign investors—consolidated an urban development model oriented toward global capital. Instruments such as the Non-Habitual Residents Regime (2009), the golden visa program (2012), and the digital nomad visa (2022) have aimed to attract investors, affluent retirees, and highly mobile remote workers. Taken together, these policies have facilitated the internationalization of Lisbon's housing market, driving up property prices, intensifying gentrification, and reshaping immigration patterns (Estevens et al., 2023).

Lisbon has thus shifted from being a city of emigration to a sought-after destination for international professionals. Between 2011 and 2021, the proportion of foreign residents in the city increased from 6.3 % to 10.1 % (INE, 2022), with particularly significant growth in central historical neighbourhoods. This transformation is not solely attributable to the expansion of tourism but is also linked to the development of digital sectors and international service industries, encouraged by state incentives and promotional campaigns such as the Web Summit.

Alongside this demographic and urban shift, Lisbon has experienced a boom in digital labour platforms and outsourcing companies. In a context of relatively low wages, robust technological infrastructure, and high symbolic appeal, firms such as Teleperformance, Accenture, Concentrix, and Foundever have established operational hubs and service centers to handle subcontracted tasks from global tech platforms like Meta, TikTok, and Google. Teleperformance alone employs approximately 14,000 people in Portugal, with eleven centers—five of them located in Lisbon.

These companies not only capitalize on the availability of a qualified and multilingual labour force, but also provide their own housing solutions, offering shared flats in central neighbourhoods. This strategy allows them to rapidly recruit and accommodate foreign workers, particularly young Europeans. It also illustrates how corporate control extends beyond the workplace, shaping workers' living conditions and the broader infrastructures of social reproduction.

The growth of foreign immigration also reflects a transformation in migratory circuits and demographic profiles. Whereas previous decades were dominated by flows from Portugal's former colonies, recent years have seen a marked increase in migration from Northern Europe and South Asia. Between 2011 and 2021, the Italian population in Lisbon tripled, the German population doubled, and the number of U.S. residents also tripled (INE, 2022). Simultaneously, the number of residents from countries like Bangladesh and Nepal has grown substantially, with most employed in sectors such as hospitality, retail, and construction.

These demographic shifts are reflected in the data presented in Table 1, which shows the growth of Lisbon's foreign resident population between 2011 and 2021. Notably, the figures illustrate both the rise of professional migrants from the Global North and labour migrants from the Global South. This should be seen in the context of a slight population decline in the city during the same period, of less than 1 % (INE, 2022). (See Table 2.)

This urban, migratory, and economic panorama forms the broader context in which the expansion of intermediate digital labour in Lisbon

Table 1
Foreign population living in Lisbon (2011–2021).

Country	2011	2021	% change
Germany	579	1170	102.6 %
Spain	1844	2266	22.9 %
Italy	772	2717	251.3 %
United Kingdom	499	1114	123.9 %
United States	246	727	195.1 %
Brazil	11,402	16,527	44.8 %
Bangladesh	515	4362	747.2 %
China	2138	2831	32.3 %
Nepal	763	3569	367.2 %
Angola	1974	2737	38.6 %
Cape Verde	2645	1826	−31.0 %
Guinea-Bissau	1092	999	−8.5 %
Mozambique	374	417	11.5 %
São Tomé and Príncipe	760	710	−6.6 %

Source: INE Census 2021.

must be situated. The city offers a distinctive combination of technological infrastructure, international visibility, relatively low living costs, and urban policies favourable to mobile capital. This constellation enables global platforms to relocate operational tasks without relying on traditional offshore models. What emerges is a *nearshore* model: the outsourcing of core functions to transnational workers operating within Europe, but under semi-precarious conditions.

Finally, the financialization of housing and the ongoing touristification of Lisbon have created an urban environment in which residential stability is elusive—even for skilled workers. Access to affordable housing has become a structural challenge, especially in the city's historical center, where short-term rental units (Alojamento Local) now account for over 40 % of the total housing stock in parishes like Santa Maria Maior and Misericórdia (INE, 2022). Compounding this trend is the steady increase in real estate prices, which in the fourth quarter of 2024 reached €4340 per square meter in the city of Lisbon. In this context, the company-provided housing offered by outsourcing firms becomes a key mechanism of retention and control, reinforcing structural dependency between workers and their employers.

Lisbon, then, does not merely host digital workers—it enables and configures them, acting simultaneously as setting, infrastructure, and active agent within the platform urbanism regime analysed in this article.

4. Methods

This article is based on qualitative research conducted in the city of Lisbon throughout 2024, structured around two successive phases of fieldwork. During the first stage, one of the co-authors—who was undertaking a research stay—carried out ten semi-structured interviews. This phase was facilitated by their prior familiarity with the urban context and the support of local workers who acted as key informants, enabling access to relevant residential and workplace settings. This proximity-based approach aligns with what Olivier de Sardan (2008) refers to as *"impregnation"*, a form of situated knowledge grounded in direct observation and empathetic engagement with interlocutors.

The second phase, conducted during the second half of the year, was led by another co-author—a Portuguese citizen with prior knowledge of the phenomenon—who completed the sample with ten additional interviews. In total, twenty interviews were conducted with foreign workers residing in Lisbon, most of whom were employed by subcontracting firms providing services to major digital platforms such as Meta, TikTok, Google, or Airbnb.

The sampling strategy was intentional, combining theoretical criteria with the snowball method. While not statistically representative of the overall population under study, the sample captured a broad range of trajectories, nationalities, and job profiles, suitable to the exploratory aims of the research. The rationale guiding this selection

Table 2
List of interviewees: transnational digital workers in Lisbon.

Code	Position	Nationality and Biographical Information
Male 1	Currently working at Google, formerly at Facebook, in marketing (via Teleperformance)	French, 32 years old. Speaks French and English. Born outside of France. Degree in marketing.
Female 2	Content moderator at TikTok (via Teleperformance)	Italo-Brazilian, 29. Speaks Portuguese, Italian, and English. Some university studies in literature.
Female 3	Team Manager at TikTok (via Teleperformance)	Italian, 30. Completed five-year university degree.
Male 4	Supervisor for the Dutch-language market at TikTok (via Teleperformance)	Belgian, 34. Vocational training in hospitality.
Male 5	Customer service for hotel chain (via Teleperformance); also writes erotic chat scripts	Italian, 58. Previously worked for Airbnb Italy. Speaks Italian and English.
Male 6	Customer service (via Teleperformance)	Italian. 50 years old. Degree in Social Education and previous professional experience in the same field in his country.
Male 7	Accountant for an Irish construction firm based in Dublin; travels there frequently	Irish, 39. Degree in Economics.
Female 8	Works for Teleperformance Portugal; platform not specified (possibly TikTok or Instagram)	Spanish, ~30. Master's in Psychology.
Female 9	Works for Teleperformance Portugal; platform not specified (possibly TikTok or Instagram)	Spanish. Degree in Social Education (4 years).
Female 10	Customer service at SITEL for Airbnb and a telecom company	Italian. Secondary education (3 years), enrolled at Italian university.
Female 11	Works at Uber in the sexual assault response department	Brazilian, 31. Degree in Marketing.
Female 12	Works at Uber in the sexual assault response department	Brazilian, 36. Degree in International Relations.
Male 13	Developer of AI tools	Venezuelan, 26. Informal IT training; no university degree.
Male 14	Content reviewer for Google Play Store apps	Brazilian, 52. Degrees in Literature and Advertising; Master's in Cinema and Literature; 2 PhDs.
Male 15	Content reviewer at Meta (via Accenture)	Argentine, 35. MA in Advertising and Public Relations. Lived in Spain before moving to Lisbon.
Male 16	Web Analytics Manager at Deco Proteste	Argentine, 29. Degree in Commerce. Family lives in Spain.
Female 17	Content reviewer at Meta (via Accenture)	Brazilian, 32. Technical degree in furniture design.
Female 18	Trainer of content reviewers; formerly worked as reviewer at Meta (via Accenture)	Brazilian, 33. MA in Public Policy Management.
Male 19	Content reviewer at Meta (via Accenture)	Italian, 32. Technical training as an electrician.
Male 20	Former content moderator at TikTok; now in tech support at Google (via Concentrix)	Chilean, 32. Studied Dance.

draws on the tradition of qualitative sociology (Bertaux, 2005), which seeks to capture shared meaning systems among members of a specific social microcosm, as well as the practical rules that govern their actions in particular urban contexts.

One of the main methodological challenges was the difficulty of accessing informants. Although the target profile—foreign workers with medium or higher education engaged in subcontracted digital labour—is relatively common in Lisbon, it is not usual for these individuals to participate in academic studies. The presence of confidentiality agreements, alongside low levels of institutional trust, limited participants' willingness to engage in recorded interviews, even though many were

open to informal conversations. These barriers justified the decision to conduct fieldwork in two separate phases, allowing time to build trust and expand the contact network.

The inclusion criteria were based on two main requirements: (1) residing in Lisbon or its metropolitan area while being born in a different country; and (2) currently or recently engaged in primarily digital work—whether in in-person, hybrid, or remote mode—typically under contracts with intermediary companies. These criteria reflect a broader concern with exploring the empirical nuances of the "digital nomad" category, an ambiguous and floating signifier that, in practice, encompasses highly differentiated labour positions (Sequera, 2025).

The interview guide included open-ended questions regarding motivations for relocating to Lisbon, working conditions, housing, and lifestyle, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the intersections between migratory trajectory, labour regime, and urban experience. The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 min and were conducted in Portuguese, Spanish, English, or Italian, depending on the interviewee's preference. Some took place in person, others via videoconference. The conversational style adopted was intentionally non-directive (Alonso, 1998), designed to stimulate spontaneous, reflective, and situated narratives.

While the majority of participants were or had been employed by global tech platforms, two individuals who were not directly affiliated with these companies were also included, as their narratives offered useful points of comparison and contrast in the analysis. The final sample was balanced by gender and displayed diversity in terms of age, educational background, and national origin. A detailed table with the main sociodemographic and occupational characteristics of the participants is provided in the appendix to the article.

Although gender was not a central analytical focus of this study, it remains a relevant dimension for understanding transnational digital labour. Future research will explore how gender relations intersect with job type, destination city, shared housing arrangements, and experiences of hypermobility among transnational digital workers.

The following section presents the main empirical findings, organized into thematic dimensions that capture the lived experiences, contradictions, and spatial implications of transnational digital labour in Lisbon.

5. Results

5.1. Characteristics and contradictions of intermediate digital work

The data collected reveal a labour pattern marked by a clear misalignment between the projected image of digital employment and the material reality of the tasks performed. Although participants were recruited with the promise of joining innovative sectors, their daily routines replicate the logics of repetitive, poorly paid, and heavily monitored work.

Functionally speaking, these occupations require very limited technical skills, even though they are symbolically represented as part of the tech industry. Most positions involve customer service, technical support, or content moderation for platforms such as TikTok, Meta, or Airbnb—services outsourced through intermediary firms like Teleperformance or Accenture. As one interviewee explained: *"We wanted something online, something related to new technologies, because it seemed like it would bring good opportunities. But it's not what it seems."*

The dissonance between expectations and actual working conditions is reflected across multiple dimensions: monotony, emotional strain, constant surveillance, and ambiguity regarding the social utility of the work. One participant summarized the alienating routine as follows: *"I spend eight hours a day watching TikTok videos...* Another added: *"The job isn't hard; a monkey could do it. They sell it as the job of the century, but if you speak intermediate English and your native language, that's all you need."*

Several participants mentioned exposure to emotionally intense situations—such as handling emergency calls on Airbnb or moderating violent content—that directly affect their psychological well-being. Moderating sensitive material was described as mentally exhausting: *"All of us have insomnia, depression... We're used to violence. But it stays inside."*

Despite these conditions, companies continue to project an image of qualified and flexible employment, appealing to values like autonomy, multiculturalism, and remote work. This symbolic framing fosters workers' initial subjective alignment with the job. Partial telework, flexible shift scheduling, and so-called "international" environments generate an illusion of control and professionalism. As one participant explained: *"I can choose whether to go to the office or work from home. That makes me feel freer."*

On the economic level, precariousness is reinforced through a variable pay system based on a minimum base salary and performance bonuses. This structure generates instability and makes it difficult for workers to anticipate their monthly income. One worker described it as follows: *"Some months I earn two thousand, other months seven hundred. It all depends on the bonuses, on what they deduct and how they calculate it."*

In addition to monetary pay, companies offer symbolic and in-kind compensation—such as co-pay health insurance or meal vouchers—-that reinforce the perception of benefit, even if they do not substantially alter the structural precariousness. One participant spoke positively about the meal vouchers: *"It's better because you end up spending all of it, and since it's not taxed, you keep more."*

The narrative of autonomy and professionalization is built upon an unstable material foundation, where the symbolic status of the job contrasts sharply with task fragmentation, high turnover, social isolation, and structural dependency on the employer. These findings reinforce the idea that intermediate digital labour operates as a hybrid between the logics of *ghost work* and *bullshit jobs*: essential yet invisible occupations, enveloped in a rhetoric of value that conceals their low recognition and high human cost.

5.2. Precarity and mobility disposition: uprootedness as a productive resource

The interview analysis reveals that the international mobility of intermediate digital workers is not driven by an abstract desire for adventure or self-realization, but rather by structural conditions of precarity, lack of opportunity, and social exclusion in their countries of origin. Most participants are recurrent migrants, whose trajectories are marked by labour instability, geographic rotation, and persistent difficulties in establishing lasting settlement.

As one participant with a background in psychology recounted: "I've emigrated three times already—this is my third time. [...] Then, when I went back [to Spain], I found myself facing the same employment problem again." This testimony reflects a broader pattern: mobility is not so much a choice as a reaction to a context of structural impossibility.

In many cases, the migration process was triggered by a sudden job loss or a lack of immediate prospects. One Italian participant explained: *"I couldn't find anything—neither near home nor further away. [...] I found Teleperformance, sent them my CV, thought they wouldn't respond. And two weeks later, I was in Lisbon."*

The speed with which these relocations occur illustrates the depth of structural disconnection from one's place of origin, as well as the fragility of previous family and social ties. Another participant summarized: *"It all happened in one week. I didn't have time for anything—just to pack and undo my entire life."*

This uprootedness is not merely the result of geographic relocation; it is often a pre-existing condition that companies have learned to strategically exploit. A high willingness to move, combined with a lack of support networks, turns these workers into highly functional profiles within subcontracting schemes. Loneliness, disorientation, and organizational dependency heighten their vulnerability to non-negotiable

working conditions.

Recruitment firms actively capitalize on this predisposition, presenting mobility as an exciting opportunity rather than a structural necessity. Job ads emphasize the chance to experience a new city, integrate into a multicultural setting, or join an international community. These narratives—frequently internalized and repeated by the interviewees themselves—help legitimize a form of uprooting that is, in fact, driven by logics of structural expulsion.

Unlike expatriates or elite digital nomads—whose mobility is often framed as privilege—these workers operate within circuits tightly controlled by multinational corporations, with significantly narrower margins of choice. As our findings suggest, this mobility does not always lead to integration or rootedness in the host city. On the contrary, many participants describe a continuous experience of transit and fragile social ties, mostly confined to the workplace.

From this perspective, uprootedness becomes a productive resource in itself—a form of "generic capacity" exploited by platforms to configure a workforce that is adaptable, readily available, and institutionally isolated (Fugamalli, 2010). As the case of Lisbon shows, the ease with which such profiles are recruited is not solely a product of urban appeal, but also of the existence of a transnational labour market populated by mobile workers already accustomed to living unanchored lives.

These findings resonate with theories of unequal mobility (Hannam et al., 2006) and the circulation hierarchies of the global economy. While some professional profiles can choose among multiple destinations, subcontracted workers move within narrow circuits defined by digital outsourcing markets and rigid contractual frameworks.

In this case, mobility does not produce freedom; it generates new forms of dependency. Far from representing emancipation, it becomes a compulsory response to contexts of exclusion—contexts that platform companies have become adept at monetizing.

5.3. Urbanism of desire and low-cost hedonist lifestyles

Beyond the material conditions of their work, participants described a lifestyle experience that combines economic precariousness with symbolic access to a desired way of life. In their accounts, the city of Lisbon appears not only as a workplace, but as a meaningful space that acts as compensation for labour instability.

The opportunity to live in a sunny, diverse, cosmopolitan, and relatively affordable environment compared to other Global North countries was a central incentive in their decisions to migrate. As a French worker noted: *"Choose Portugal because it's so much cheaper than in their own countries. And also, the weather, because of the beaches, you know."*

This desire draws on a symbolic representation of Lisbon as a unique place, full of accessible experiences—good food, the sea, culture, history. As Harvey (2002) pointed out, this valorisation of the urban environment translates into the production of locational rents, based on the economic exploitation of specific territorial qualities. After the Great Recession, Lisbon sought to capitalize on these singularities through urban policies focused on attracting foreign investment and tourism, producing a spectacularized and gentrified urban landscape tailored to new mobile classes.

The lifestyle that emerges from this environment is described by participants as simple yet rich in experiences. One interviewee shared: *"In general, I like the city. I think it has a lot of cultural activity. There's always something going on... concerts, autumn markets... I went to a Blink 182 concert, right next to my house!"*

This identification with the city allows participants to subjectively reframe their position within the labour structure. As one respondent put it: *"Not because of the salary, but because I like interacting with people from many nationalities. That's why."*

These preferences reinforce an illusion of agency and choice, even when the work itself is objectively precarious.

This dynamic makes precarity more liveable, thanks to an urban ecosystem that offers symbolic, cultural, and aesthetic satisfaction. The desire to be in Lisbon partially neutralizes the awareness of exploitation, allowing for an active acceptance of the model. As one participant expressed: *"I prefer living in Lisbon, even if it means saving less, because here I feel good."*

This lifestyle—hedonistic, unanchored, and flexible—is inseparable from the corporate model under analysis. It is not just about paying low wages but about generating an environment that makes those wages tolerable. This mode of life does not conform to the Fordist paradigm of upward career mobility, stability, and rootedness. Rather, it corresponds to a present-oriented existence focused on experience consumption and individualism. One worker put it bluntly: *"Yes, I want to travel, travel, travel. I want to stop working and travel, that's the next step."*

However, this aspirational mobility coexists with difficulties in forming lasting social ties. Many participants acknowledged that their relationships were limited to colleagues of the same nationality or to the workplace. As an Italian interviewee explained: *"It's very difficult to meet Portuguese people. I work with Italians, and it's easier to make friends with them."* Another added: *"The longer I stay, the harder it gets to make friends."*

This suggests that the desired lifestyle—based on flexibility and enjoyment—also reproduces forms of isolation, cultural insularity, and weak social ties, even after years of residence in the city. The result is an urbanism of desire: a spatial configuration designed to attract and sustain mobile classes, where the symbolic consumption of the city compensates for the lack of rootedness and structural precariousness.

5.4. Housing as a tool of employer discipline

Housing plays a central role in the labour outsourcing model we have examined. In a context shaped by the financialization of the real estate market and the scarcity of affordable rental housing, subcontracting companies do not merely offer jobs—they also provide accommodation, creating a form of dependency that goes beyond the strictly professional domain.

Teleperformance, for example, provides shared rooms to international workers newly arrived in Lisbon. These accommodations are located in central and desirable neighbourhoods and are rented at reduced prices—around 200 euros per month. This arrangement allows the company to facilitate the relocation and immediate settlement of its workforce. Beyond simplifying the recruitment process, it also reinforces corporate and social control over workers.

From the employees' perspective, this housing solution is initially perceived as a benefit. In a highly competitive housing market, where prices per square meter exceed €4300, immediate access to a centrally located and affordable room is interpreted as a form of privilege. However, over time, this perception tends to shift.

Living in close quarters with strangers generates tension and discomfort. One worker described: *"There are nine of us living there. That's the only little issue."*. Another added: *"At first, I was nice, I said good morning... but when I saw how things were... I had problems with two girls because they wouldn't let me sleep."*

For those trying to become independent, economic barriers are significant. One participant who managed to leave company-provided housing explained: *"This is one of the best places I found, because I didn't have many options. I've seen rooms going for €400 without windows—come on! I can't afford an adult life."*

Others admitted that, even if they wanted to move out, they simply couldn't: *"I'm waiting for prices to drop. I can't afford to live alone."*

In some cases, those who leave these shared accommodations are forced to move to peripheral areas, which affects their relationship with the city. As one interviewee put it: *"I had to move to the other side of the river, and that completely changed my life."*

The employer-tenant relationship produces a clear disciplinary effect. The employer acts as the provider of an essential good, and that dependency enables a form of informal yet highly effective control. As

one participant remarked: *"If you have problems living with others and you're Spanish, they might fire you. But if you're Dutch—since there aren't many—they'll probably just move you to another house."*

This blurring of boundaries between living space and workspace turns housing into a tool of corporate governance. The worker depends on their job not only to earn a wage, but to have a place to sleep. This creates a condition of structural vulnerability: losing the job means losing access to housing.

From a business standpoint, this model maximizes profitability. Not only does it help sustain low wages, but it also generates housing surplus value: the company rents below market rates but above real cost, presenting the arrangement as a benefit. At the same time, it operates as a mechanism for retaining labour, making it materially difficult for workers to leave their jobs without immediate consequences.

In this configuration, housing ceases to function as a right or an autonomous space. It becomes a disciplinary device, part of a broader strategy in which labour, mobility, lifestyle, and material reproduction are integrated and managed according to the logic of platforms.

Beyond these empirical insights, the findings invite a broader reflection on how the digital nomad ideal operates as a mechanism of legitimation for precarious mobility and labour dependency.

6. Final remarks: rethinking the digital nomad ideal

The findings presented above invite a reconsideration of how we conceptualize mobility and digital labour under contemporary capitalism. Drawing on the debates about digital nomadism and platform urbanism, this study reveals that many of the so-called "mobile professionals" in Lisbon occupy structurally dependent positions that contradict the dominant narratives of autonomy and self-realization.

Often in management literature or in press articles aimed at promoting this figure, we find an image of the digital nomad identified mainly as a man, self-employed or freelance, with a high level of education, who performs his work entirely online, enabling a high degree of international mobility. However, empirical studies that delve into their characterisation reveal inconsistencies and ambiguities that depart from this ideal type. For instance, when cross-referencing dimensions of mobility and self-identification, Reichenberger (2017) found cases of digital nomads who considered travelling to a café within their own city sufficient to qualify for this category. What appears to matter is an attitude toward life and a perceived independence from the workplace.

In this sense, remote work emerges as a shared feature across studies on digital nomadism — a condition also present among all participants in this research. Some occasionally performed tasks from abroad, although using company-provided equipment and VPNs to protect confidential information. This condition distances them from the ideal of work autonomy associated with nomadism, as they remain subject to strict, digitised, and semi-automated forms of labour control. Yet their experiences are not entirely removed from what some empirical evidence on digital nomadism reveals. Cook (2020) notes that among self-employed nomads, self-discipline and self-control can exceed the demands imposed by a conventional employer. Likewise, Thompson (2019) highlights how the choice of digital nomadism as a lifestyle often entails an acceptance of job insecurity, further intensifying self-discipline. To complicate the picture, Cook (2020) observes a growing number of employees embracing digital nomadism, particularly after the pandemic.

As Sequera (2025) suggests, the ideal of the digital nomad operates as a "floating signifier" that bridges desire and exploitation, offering workers a symbolic compensation for their subaltern position. In Lisbon, this logic materialises in an urban environment that simultaneously attracts and disciplines transnational digital workers, blending precariousness with aesthetic gratification. The city thus becomes an active agent in the production of a new digital proletariat, where labour, housing, and desire are tightly entangled.

7. Conclusions

Building on these reflections, the conclusion synthesises the key contributions of the article and outlines the implications for understanding digital labour and urban transformation in the European periphery. This article has shown how the platformisation of the digital economy unfolds in Southern European cities such as Lisbon through forms of labour that combine advanced technologies with extractive labour dynamics. Against the dominant rhetoric of digital nomadism as synonymous with freedom, flexibility, and cosmopolitanism, our research highlights the existence of an intermediate segment of transnational digital workers whose conditions are defined by structural precarity, constant surveillance, and deep employer dependency.

Drawing on our fieldwork, we identified four key dimensions that help illuminate the contours of this intermediate digital labour model. First, working conditions are characterized by repetitive tasks, constant monitoring, functional ambiguity, and unstable pay systems—even when the jobs are presented as skilled positions. Second, international mobility emerges less as a voluntary option and more as a response to the lack of opportunities and pre-existing uprootedness. This mobility is strategically instrumentalized by companies as a productive resource. Third, interviewees describe a lifestyle that combines symbolic consumption of the city with low-cost hedonism, which partially offsets their precarity but reinforces dynamics of social isolation and weak ties. Finally, access to housing—often directly managed by the companies themselves—acts as a mechanism of control, reinforcing worker dependency beyond the workplace.

Within this context, platform urbanism does not merely provide digital infrastructure; it organizes modes of living in which precarious digital labour becomes viable. The city plays an active role in co-producing this regime by offering an environment that legitimizes, softens, and obscures labour exploitation under the allure of multiculturalism, mild weather, or access to low-cost experiences.

Taken together, this model challenges the assumption that digitalization necessarily leads to improved labour conditions. On the contrary, platforms operate as extractive agents that benefit from labour, social, and urban resources—integrating work, mobility, social reproduction, and the desire to live in particular cities under a single logic.

Often presenting themselves as dematerialised entities operating exclusively in a virtual realm, in this paper we show how they actually impose labour regulation and geographical arbitration mechanisms that are highly demanding in human and urban terms, since both the delocalised and relocalised labour that we highlight here and the city's brand appeal are essential resources that platforms exploit to reduce their costs and increase their profitability.

The configuration of Lisbon as a node within global digital capitalism reveals how the platform economy is built upon a profoundly unequal urban reorganization—one that produces mobile, available, and governable subjects through both technological and material infrastructures.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Víctor Riesgo Gómez: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Pedro Cortez:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Javier Gil:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Jorge Sequera:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

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