

MASTER THESIS

Nomadic Tourism and Community Displacement

By Elena Rodriguez



# Nomadic Tourism and Community Displacement: Local Perceptions of Digital Nomadism on Koh Phangan

A qualitative analysis of the local perspectives on neocolonial structures, geoarbitrage and inequality of the housing market on Koh Phangan.

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Cover photo: Rodriguez, E.H.A. (2025). Construction site for new luxurious villas on the West Coast of Koh Phangan, Thailand. [Photograph].

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# 1. Introduction

'*Digital nomadism*' has become increasingly popular as an alternative lifestyle that allows people to travel and work simultaneously. It has given people freedom and flexibility while remaining their Western income (Arslan, 2024; Richards, 2023). Digital nomads are characterized by location-independent work, enabling them to explore diverse destinations while maintaining their professional commitments (Thompson, 2019). This thesis investigates how the rise of digital nomadism affects housing dynamics on Koh Phangan, Thailand, with particular attention to inequality, power relations, and local community perspectives.

Digital nomadism can be classified as a form of tourism, as digital nomads travel and engage in various touristic activities such as cultural exploration, relaxation, and adventure (Jiwasiddi et al., 2022; UNWTO, n.d.). More specifically, this can be referred to as nomadic tourism which differs from traditional tourism in motivations, behavior, and experiences (Prabawa & Pertiwi, 2020). Digital nomads are primarily motivated by the need to work while traveling, often staying longer in one place and choosing destinations that support their digital work needs. As a result, it can take longer for them to engage in leisure and sightseeing activities (Prabawa & Pertiwi, 2020).

Thailand has become an increasingly popular destination for digital nomads, with hubs like Chiang Mai, Bangkok, Koh Samui, and especially Koh Phangan frequently cited in digital nomad guides and rankings (Cooper, 2022; Kelsey, 2024; Saabor, 2024). Koh Phangan was even rated the top destination on *William Russel*, a popular website among digital nomads, for remote workers in 2021 and 2022 based on quality of life, healthcare, earning potential, and digital infrastructure (Cooper, 2022). Globally, destinations like Bali, Chiang Mai, Lisbon, and Koh Phangan have adapted their tourism policies to attract this emerging demographic (Jiwasiddi et al., 2022; Tun-Atiruj, 2023). However, the influx of digital nomadism in such hubs and all around the world raise critical questions about equality and economic development. At first sight, digital nomads are viewed to be contributing to economic development, but they also create significant challenges and hardships for the local community. Milano et al. (2019) argues that tourism growth should be perceived as a catalysator of inequalities. Adjacently, the influx of digital nomadism goes hand-in-hand with phenomena such as *neocolonialism*, *touristification*, *displacement* and *a decrease of social cohesion* (Holleran, 2022; Jiwasiddi, 2022).

Digital nomads often engage in geoarbitrage, a practice through which they optimize their income by relocating to destinations with significantly lower cost of living than in their countries of origin and employment (Holleran, 2022; Woldoff & Litchfield, 2021). This mobility is often facilitated by colonial structures that continue to shape global power relations. Many digital nomads are of Western origin and possess greater economic and social capital than the local populations in the tourist destinations they inhabit. Their ability to live and work abroad is enabled by structural economic and racial inequalities. These disparities are not only maintained but also exacerbated through neocolonial dynamics inherent in the practices of digital nomadism (McElroy, 2020). Consequently, such neocolonial processes contribute to a range of intersecting challenges and forms of inequality that disproportionately affect marginalized local communities. The term *digital nomad* thus glorifies a privileged form of mobility while masking the economic and racial inequalities that enable it. Rather than functioning as a neutral label, it reinforces classed and racialized distinctions by distancing Western remote workers from the stigmatized category of 'migrant' (Bonneau et al., 2022).

This thesis aims to explore and illuminate these inequalities associated with the housing market dynamics of the increasingly popular digital nomad destination Koh Phangan in Thailand.

## 1.1 Societal relevance

As an island that is notoriously famous for their *Full Moon Parties*, Koh Phangan has seen an increase in variety regarding tourism types since the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to health restrictions, the island cancelled Full Moon parties for nearly 2 years and tourism industries such as *wellness tourism* started to increase in popularity, tapping into the islands' serene and spiritual identity offering Yoga retreats to Thai and foreign visitors (Ploadaksorn et al., 2023). Next to this, *nomadic tourism* also gained popularity on the island. Health and social restrictions opened space and opportunities for many international remote workers to temporarily settle in a warm, exotic and serene working spot on the island (Fallon, 2024; Thompson, 2018). This accelerated the increase of digital nomads on the island and has left a lasting impact on the island's tourism types, activities and amenities (Fallon, 2024).

Tourism has a direct influence on the livelihoods of the people in the local communities, and it is therefore of great importance that the local community is respected in tourist activities (Jurowski et al., 1997; Matthew & Sreejesh, 2017). Considering the change and increased variety of tourism on the island, tourism's effects may have changed. Matthew & Sreejesh (2017) argue that when the host community has a positive and favorable perception of tourism practices and outcomes, tourism *may* become beneficial for them. However, the growth of tourism in the last few decennia is often associated with negative effects and perceptions and tourism has increasingly been criticized for it (Volo, 2020).

As digital nomadism on Koh Phangan becomes more prevalent, a simultaneous rise in housing demand can be noted (Koh Phangan Estate, 2024; Sense Property, 2024), resulting in concerning social and livability issues. These negative impacts of nomadic tourism have often been captured in terms such as *overtourism*, *transnational gentrification*, *displacement* and *touristification* (Butler, 2019; Holleran, 2022, Sigler & Wachsmuth, 2015). According to Segota et al. (2024), it is important to understand the residents' perceptions of tourism impacts, especially in terms of economic and social dimension, such as housing affordability.

Local communities often experience a dichotomy of tourism impacts. On the one hand, there are residents who appreciate and often benefit from the economic growth brought by tourism, while on the other hand, others may have concerns about their livability, displacement and the loss of cultural identity, and do not necessarily benefit economically from the tourism activities (Jurowski et al., 1997; Matthew & Sreejesh, 2017; Segota et al., 2024). Considering the recent development and increased variety of tourism on Koh Phangan, tourism's effects on the local community may have changed.

Moreover, the societal relevance of this research is to understand, emphasize and shed light on the effect of digital nomadism on the housing market. It has the potential to inform and raise awareness about the situation among the local authorities and community to help and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how tourism development can be managed to enhance and ensure the host community's well-being. This research highlights the significance of inclusive and participative tourism development between all stakeholders and to ensure that the voices of local residents are heard in discussions regarding housing and tourism policies.

## 1.2 Scientific relevance

This thesis contributes to the growing body of literature and research on digital nomadism, touristification and host-community dynamics. Digital nomadism can be viewed as an emergent trend in the tourism sector, and it is important to understand the implications and perceptions of host communities regarding these changes. This is essential for developing effective policies and practices that promote sustainable and equal development (Segota et al., 2024).

Academic literature and research have increasingly been focusing on the importance of a host community's attitude towards tourism development. For example, research by Mathew & Sreejesh (2017) and Segota et al. (2024) have shed light on the importance of recognizing and including perceptions of local residents in overall tourism development and policies. Jiwasiddi et al. (2022) even have acknowledged the significance of the host community as stakeholders in *nomadic tourism* and incorporated this perspective into their case study about digital nomadism in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

Figure 1 illustrates a sharp rise in academic research on digital nomadism since 2016, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic. This academic trend mirrors the global increase in digital nomads. According to Jaiswal et al. (2024), key themes in the literature include COVID-19, co-living/co-working, mobility, and neoliberalism. Other studies have examined geoarbitrage, touristification, and transnational gentrification (Hannonen, 2023; Holleran, 2022; Zhou et al., 2024). Hannonen et al. (2023) highlight a gap in research on local stakeholders' perceptions. While there is growing literature on local attitudes toward overtourism and geoarbitrage in broader terms, this study seeks to offer a more focused understanding of nomadic tourism's socio-economic impacts on the local community with regards to the housing dynamics.

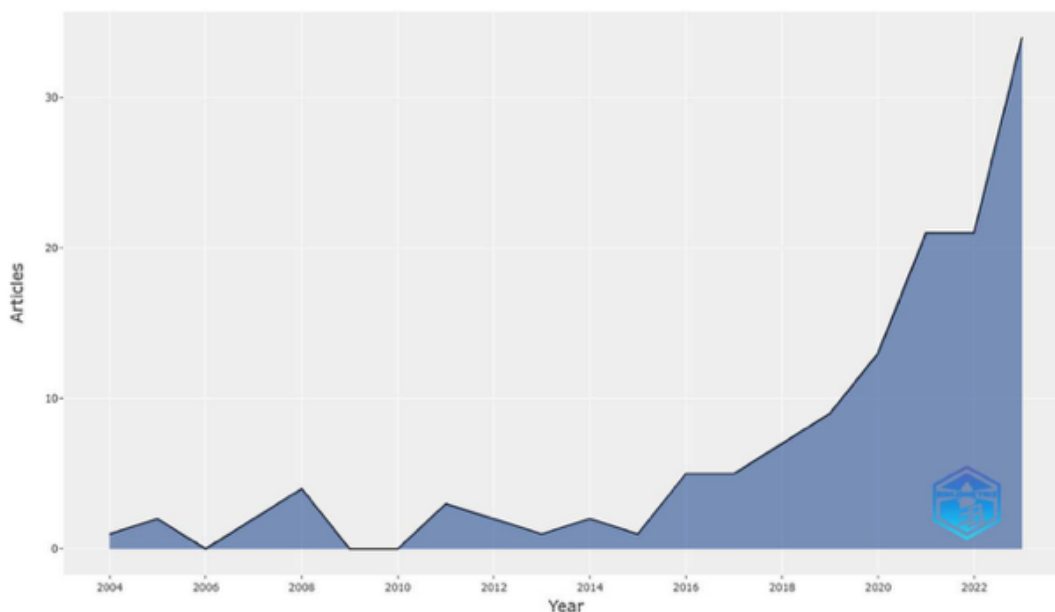


Figure 1: Annual Scientific Production Related to Digital Nomads from 2004-2023 (Jaiswal et al., 2024).

Research on digital nomadism, with a narrowed focus on the dynamics of the housing market on Koh Phangan has not yet been concluded. This study addresses that gap by foregrounding local community experiences in response to the rise of nomadic tourism in this increasingly popular destination. It aims to offer a nuanced understanding of how digital nomadism affects both housing and broader community dynamics. This research aim aligns with the increasing

emphasis on sustainable tourism practices that among other things prioritize economic and social equality, community well-being and stewardship. Scholars and tourism stakeholders must deal with the complexities of the new nomadic tourism. The insights gathered during this research can guide policymakers in creating frameworks that balance the interests of digital nomads with those of the local community. This ultimately fosters a more equitable and sustainable tourism model.

In summary, the scientific relevance of this thesis is found in its potential to deepen theoretical understanding, inform policy development, and contribute to the discourse on the effects *nomadic tourism* on the housing market and related community dynamics.

### 1.3 Research objective and research questions

The primary research objective of this thesis is to critically assess the impact of digital nomadism on the local population of Koh Phangan, Thailand. Considering the growing popularity of digital nomads in various tourist destinations and the associated socio-economic implications for local communities, this thesis will examine the small island of Koh Phangan, in the Gulf of Thailand. As digital nomadism continues to rise, understanding its effects on the housing market and the perceptions of local residents becomes crucial. This thesis will examine impacts regarding *displacement, economic exclusion, loss of space* and *temporary rentals*. This research aims to provide insights that can inform local authorities and stakeholders about the dynamics between digital nomads and the host community.

The main research question guiding this study is:

*'How does digital nomadism affect the economic and socio-cultural dynamics in regard to the housing market on Koh Phangan, Thailand from the perspective of local residents?'*

This question captures the essence of the research by focusing on the interplay between the influx of digital nomads and the experiences of the local community.

To address this main question, several sub-questions are formulated:

1. What are the specific socio-economic and socio-cultural impacts of digital nomadism on the housing market of Koh Phangan?
2. How do local residents perceive the socio-economic impacts of nomadic tourism on the housing market in their community?
3. How do the local residents perceive the socio-cultural impacts of nomadic tourism on the housing market in their community?

These sub-questions will contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the main research question. Each sub-question addresses distinct aspects of the socio-economic implications of nomadic tourism, ensuring that the research remains focused and relevant. By investigating these dimensions, the study aims to fill existing gaps in the literature regarding the host community's perspectives on nomadic tourism, particularly in relation to housing affordability.

## 2. Literature review

This chapter will provide an overview and insight into digital nomadism. Firstly, digital nomads will be conceptualized and the trend behind digital nomadism will shortly be highlighted. Furthermore, digital nomadism will be explained in the light of macro-dynamics such as geoarbitrage and neocolonialism. The Tourism Area Life Cycle from Butler (1980) will be highlighted to connect the lived impacts on local communities to their perceptions. Finally, the impacts of nomadic tourism dynamics will be explained in both socio-economic and socio-cultural frameworks, with particular attention to the housing market dynamics.

### 2.1 Conceptualizing Digital Nomadism

#### 2.1.1 Defining the digital nomad

According to Chevtaeva & Denizci-Guillet (2021), it is important to differentiate between digital nomads and other remote workers such as business travelers or expatriates. In this thesis, I would like to counterargue the importance of this differentiation in the case of Koh Phangan, Thailand. The definitions of digital nomads, resident nomads, (im)migrants, expatriates, and remote workers are complex and highly shaped by social perceptions and stigmas rather than objective or measurable characteristics. Most of these concepts overlap in terms of length of stay, travel motivation, community integration, and visa status. These categories are often fluid and depend on the personal, cultural, and social context of the individual (Hannonen, 2020).

Moreover, these definitions are embedded within broader global structures of privilege and inequality. The ability to move freely across borders is unequally distributed. While some individuals face hostile immigration systems, displacement, and depleted local environments, others can travel freely, pursue lifestyle changes, and live abroad with relative ease. This reflects what Polly Pallister-Wilkins (2022) has termed a *global color line*. Those on the privileged side of this line, such as many digital nomads as they are often from Western wealthier backgrounds, can take advantage of global capitalism for personal freedom and mobility, while others are excluded from these same opportunities due to systemic inequalities.

Woldoff and Litchfield (2021) defined digital nomads as a type of expatriate. However, a public debate has also started around the use of the term expat or digital nomad as a disguise or concealment of the negatively connoted term *migrant*. The term *migrant* can be defined in countless of different manners and is often used loosely in public debates. A common perception of a migrant often refers to an individual who has relocated to another country for a temporary timeframe. In public debate it is often unclear as to who is considered to be a migrant, and the public opinions and stigmas often conflate the issues of immigration, ethnicity and asylum (Anderson & Blinder, 2015). Both expatriates and digital nomads fit under the definition of a migrant but due to the glorified image and (self)perception they are often addressed as another demographic (Despotovic et al, 2022). Expats and digital nomads often rely on the positive stigma and stereotype of being high-skilled, high-educated, Western individuals. They typically earn high wages, are able to live a *jetsetter lifestyle* and are often categorized as *elites* of society (Woldoff & Litchfield, 2021).

This thesis recognizes that the tourism industry, especially nomadic tourism, is shaped by these unequal dynamics. The use of terms such as *digital nomad*, *expatriate* or a variation of it often conceals these inequalities and reinforces class- and race-based distinctions. While the tourism industry, governments, and individuals may use these terms interchangeably, the social meanings they carry are far from neutral (Bonneau et al., 2022). They can uphold privilege while distancing these individuals from the stigmatized label '*migrant*'. Therefore, I argue that

the distinction between expatriates and digital nomads is superficial and rooted more in discourse and perception than in any substantive difference in behavior or status.

I also plead that it is crucial to critically acknowledge the role of language and stigma in how we describe mobile individuals. Trendy labels like *digital nomad* do not only glorify a certain type of mobility but also idolize the economic and racial inequalities that underpin it. These terms maintain class boundaries and reproduce a global system in which some are free to move while others are not.

In this thesis, the term *digital nomad* will be used to refer to individuals who temporarily relocate abroad to work remotely through technological means, while maintaining a salary from their home country. This definition includes individuals colloquially labeled as *expats*, acknowledging the overlap in lifestyle, status, and global mobility. Furthermore, while a digital nomad was initially associated with young, individual remote workers, recent developments show an increasing presence of digital nomad families, often with children, who settle temporarily in destinations abroad (MBO Partners, 2024). By maintaining a home-based income, they enjoy significant purchasing power over the local population. While the term *digital nomad* may evoke images of flexibility and innovation, it also glosses over the structural inequalities that enable such mobility for some, while constraining it for others. Therefore, this thesis employs the term critically: not as a neutral or celebratory label, but as a lens to examine how economic and racial hierarchies are reproduced through lifestyle migration and tourism.

### 2.1.2 The rise of digital nomadism

Digital nomadism appeared in the early 2000s, around the time when the internet enabled the first people to work remotely. Internet speeds increased, internet networks became more widespread and there was a significant use of social technologies, enabling videocalls. These technological developments opened businesses up to allow remote working on an individual level (Schlagwein, 2018). Also starting in the early 2000s, additional services allowed for the kickstart of remote work. Internet cafés, coworking spaces in urban areas and the first websites offering guidance for digital nomadism emerged. This aligns with the broader trend that travelling for both recreational and work purposes increased. Around the world, online platforms such as *TripAdvisor*, *Airbnb* and *Couchsurfing* accommodated digital nomads in finding alternative and more fitting accommodation types for the remote worker, who's reliant on electricity, internet and a working space (Schlagwein, 2018).

The influx of remote working continued during the rise of online visual communication such as social media and improved video calling (Richards, 2023; Schlagwein, 2018). In the 2010s, co-working spaces gained importance in many industries. Even dedicated digital nomad coworking spaces, such as Hubud on Bali, Indonesia or Ko Hub on Ko Lanta, Thailand, emerged and gained popularity among the digital nomad community. Additionally, communication *between* members of the community, but also *to 'home'* sped up and became more accessible as various social media had become more widespread and popular around the entire world (MBO Partners, 2024; Schlagwein, 2018).

The increase of digital nomads gained significant momentum during the COVID-19 pandemic (MBO Partners, 2024; Richards, 2023). Businesses were obligated to switch to remote work due to restrictions on physical proximity with the risk of spreading the virus. Policies for remote working were established and elaborated during the COVID years, creating more opportunities for employees to continue their remote work after the pandemic (MBO Partners, 2024). The

growth in the digital nomad market is expected to grow even further, as is depicted in Figure 2. The projected growth is then not only supported by technological advances and lenient work policies, but also by the introduction of digital nomad visas and policies which help them navigate the complex migration networks between countries (MBO Partners, 2024; Richards, 2023).

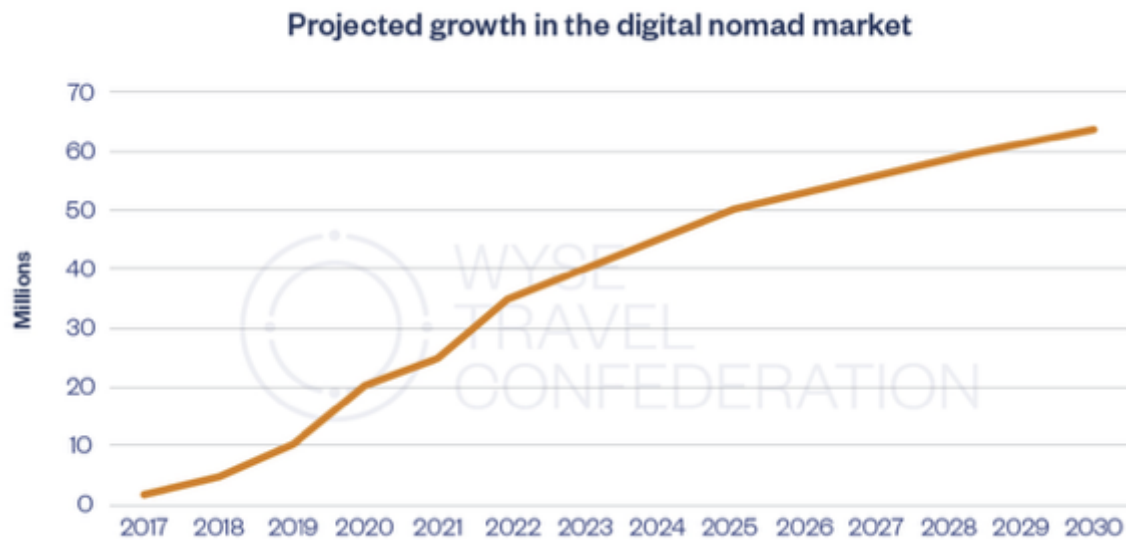


Figure 2: Projected Growth in the Digital Nomad Market (Richards, 2023).

## 2.2 Digital Nomadism and Global Power Structures

### 2.2.1 Geoarbitrage

Digital nomads tend to travel to less expensive destinations, often in the Global South, while they earn higher wages. The practice of moving to a destination with lower living expenses while maintaining your level of income is also known as *geoarbitrage*. Such salaries are often similar or equivalent to Western income levels and are frequently referred to as *Silicon-Valley salaries* (McElroy, 2020). This practice is often linked to the behavior and traveling of digital nomads (Holleran, 2022). Using this strategy, digital nomads maximize their salary (Woldoff & Litchfield, 2021). Living expenses are often more affordable than in their country of origin. Such expenses entail accommodation costs, hotels and apartments, but also food, gas, health and leisure expenses. The overall cost of living is therefore less costly in the host destinations than in their home countries (Holleran, 2022).

The practice of geoarbitrage influences the economy of the host destination. Their economy adapts and develops to accommodate the emergent digital nomad group by investing in accommodations, other hospitality services and touristic attractions. At first sight, these economic investments might seem positive and opportunistic for the local community, but often geoarbitrage has negative consequences for the local economy and community (Holleran, 2022). The cost of living can increase significantly, fitting the salaries of the digital nomads instead of the local community. As a result, the local communities are economically outstripped by the new demographic and can have difficulties paying for housing, food or health necessities. This eventually leads to communities being displaced (Hannonen, 2023). The opportunistic lifestyles of digital nomads engaging in geoarbitrage can eventually contribute to the increasing

gap between the Global South and North. Hannonen (2023) argues this *geo-hacking* takes place when digital nomads use a destinations' cheap resource but do not contribute to the local economy in a structural manner, such as employment. It is therefore important to remain aware and critical about potential income and opportunity inequalities caused and maintained by geoarbitrage (Gupta et al., 2024).

### 2.2.2 Neocolonialism

Geoarbitrage is often understood and linked to processes related to (*transnational*) *gentrification* and *uneven global labor division*. These processes in the context of digital nomadism can also be understood through (older) colonial structures which are characterized by economical and racial inequalities. Digital nomadism is often characterized by adventurous (often Western) pioneers who are free to roam the world, enabled by digital advancements. According to McElroy (2020) this reflects older colonial visions in which Western individuals settle into and claim a space without considering and/or caring for its many effects on the indigenous community.

Power structures, both historically and in the present, have facilitated and continue to sustain greater mobility, economic freedom, and influence for Western individuals compared to many other groups. Digital nomads typically fit into the demographic that has such power, as they come from countries with 'strong' economies and have access to the resources and jobs needed for remote work. However, the local communities usually do not experience equal power, freedom and opportunities as these digital nomads do. The disparity between the two demographics results in Western exploitation of destinations and their low costs of living (McElroy, 2020).

The increasing demand for remote work-hubs and housing for digital nomads often leads to the spatial colonization of landscapes in the Global South. Digital nomad hubs displace local communities either directly through rising housing costs and gentrification, or indirectly through reshaping place to suit the desires of digital nomads (Devine, 2016). These processes reinforce uneven neocolonial power dynamics.

Devine (2016) emphasizes how the neocolonial tendencies in the tourism industry commodify place by abstracting local identities and cultures into consumable products designed for tourist imaginaries. In digital nomad destinations, this commodification is reflected in the appropriation of cultural aesthetics, rituals, and languages into curated experiences, co-working decor, or branding strategies that detach meaning from local culture. The right to define and reproduce cultural and spatial identity in the Global South is then stolen from local communities and sold to Western consumers. Digital nomads therefore participate in the reproduction of neocolonial geographies and structures through appropriating space and culture as *theirs*.

## 2.3 Local Perceptions and Social Exchange Theory

Digital nomadism reshapes popular destinations like Koh Phangan. It is crucial to examine the advantages and disadvantages that local communities are confronted with. Rather than framing these impacts solely as perceptions, they represent lived realities that affect everyday life in dynamics such as increased housing costs and shifts in social cohesion. The Social Exchange Theory provides a valuable lens to understand how residents weigh these impacts against any benefits tourism might bring (Ap & Crompton, 1993; Wortman et al., 2016). When the costs begin to outweigh the gains, such as displacement, loss of affordable housing, or weakened

community ties, the local support for tourism tends to decline. This process is also reflected in Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle (1980). As presented in *figure 3*, the TALC describes how destinations move through phases of enthusiasm to resistance as the hardships of tourism intensify and increase. This section introduces theoretical perspectives to contextualize how local residents in Koh Phangan are not just forming opinions but are actively navigating and responding to the changing socio-economic dynamics driven by nomadic tourism (Jurowski et al., 1997; Matthew & Sreejesh, 2017).

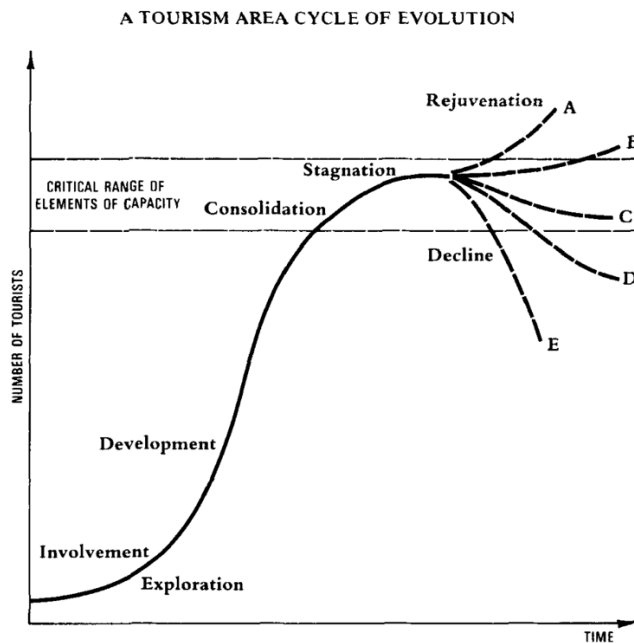


Figure 3: Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) by Butler, R.W. (1980).

All tourist destinations have a limit, often called *carrying capacity*, that cannot be exceeded without creating social, cultural, economic and environmental problems (Wortman et al., 2016; Vagena, 2021). In this literature review, such negative consequences of nomadic tourism in terms of socio-economic and socio-cultural aspects are discussed.

## 2.4 Housing Market Transformation in Nomad Hubs

### 2.4.1 Housing market response

Digital nomads rely heavily on digital technology and a strong internet connection to support their work and travel lifestyle (Arslan, 2024). These core needs directly influence both their destination and accommodation choices. As a result, the housing has started to respond and adapt to these new demands. Digital nomads often prefer longer stays and seek accommodations that provide a comfortable, work-friendly environment (Floričić & Pavia, 2021).

A comfortable working environment typically includes a stable, high-speed internet connection, office-like amenities, and a quiet space to enhance concentration. These features are now recognized as key components by accommodation providers when tailoring offers to digital nomads (Floričić & Pavia, 2021). In addition, core amenities such as a fully equipped kitchen

and comfortable sleeping arrangements contribute to the ‘home-away-from-home’ feeling that many nomads seek (Ramos-Henriquez & Morini-Marrero, 2024). Recognizing these needs, companies in the hospitality sector have started designing (semi-)private workspaces and remote work-friendly rooms (Arslan, 2024; Bozzi, 2024). Some rental providers go a step further by offering coworking facilities on-site, helping digital nomads maintain productivity while fostering a sense of community (Chevtaeva & Denizci-Guillet, 2021).

Fitting this trend, the popularity of temporary rentals over traditional hotel accommodation among digital nomads has increased significantly. It offers digital nomads the opportunity to stay in local neighborhoods and experience more authenticity and have closer interactions with the residents (Albuquerque et al., 2024). These advantages are often sought after by digital nomads (Floričić & Pavia, 2021).

The hospitality and housing market has increasingly shifted to accommodate the digital nomad lifestyle (Bozzi, 2024; Floričić & Pavia, 2021). A notable example is Airbnb, which has recognized the growing share of digital nomads among its users. In response, the platform has expanded its offerings to include short-, mid-, and long-term rentals tailored to all sorts of digital nomads. In particular, Airbnb has seen a rise in long-term bookings by nomadic individuals, prompting the platform to highlight and promote listings with work-friendly amenities (Bozzi, 2024; Ramos-Henriquez & Morini-Marrero, 2024). The line between traditional hospitality and residential living is blurred in this development, reflecting the evolving expectations of the digital nomad demographic.

#### 2.4.2 Transnational gentrification or touristification?

As residential living and tourist accommodation become more alike, the influx of digital nomads in a destination has an increasing influence on the local housing market (Holleran, 2022). It is often described in terms of *displacement*, *touristification* and *(transnational) gentrification*. However, there has been an ongoing debate about the usage of the term (transnational) gentrification in the case of tourism. The upvaluing of properties because of tourism and digital nomadism is inherently different than the traditional urban gentrification. Tourists and digital nomads do not settle down permanently and cause different issues regarding displacement, property changes and demographics (Milano et al., 2023).

Due to the arrival of digital nomads, the local housing market must accommodate both the locals and the digital nomads. Transnational gentrification refers to the process of profitable housing reinvestments in markets where such upvaluing would not have happened based on solely the local community (Sigler & Wachsmuth, 2015). The local community of a destination is forced by nomadic tourism to compete with the digital nomads, who have more money to spend on housing (Holleran, 2022). This results in landlords that opt for the more profitable option to rent out accommodation to digital nomads (Bozzi, 2024; Sigler & Wachsmuth, 2015).

The term touristification is according to Milano et al. (2023) and Jover & Barrero-Rescalvo (2023) more encompassing of the whole phenomenon. It refers to the broader tourism development and overlaps with some aspects of transnational gentrification. Touristification can be described as the appropriation of space to tourism purposes, including infrastructure and spaces with residential purpose such as housing, retail and public space (Cocola-Gant, 2022). Touristification is thus partly overlapping with gentrification dynamics (Jover & Diaz-Parra, 2020; Sigler & Wachsmuth, 2020).

## 2.5 Economic Impacts of Nomadic Tourism

Macro-dynamics such as geoarbitrage and neocolonialism impact the local community in various aspects of life. It often leads to socio-economic changes in host destinations that bring economic hardships to the local community. Investments in accommodations and infrastructure catering to digital nomads can displace local populations, raising concerns about sustainability and equity (Holleran, 2022).

### 2.5.1 Permanent vs temporary rentals

The rise of temporary rentals has intensified housing market competition in host communities (Albuquerque et al., 2024). This form of touristification is inherently different from gentrification as original lower income locals are replaced by other (international) tourists, such as digital nomads, and not by middle-income, permanent residents. Therefore, nomadic tourism hinders the residents' substitution, as we see in traditional gentrification. It paves the way for visitors, and leaves little room left for the middle-class locals as rentals to visitors are more profitable for the landlord (Jover & Barrero-Rescalvo, 2023).

The business models of the short-term rentals have changed over the years. Many accommodations catering to digital nomads have increasingly become commercialized and have stepped away from the original 'home-sharing' idea. The professionalization of the sector has led to an increase in commercial operators and professional property managers (Albuquerque et al., 2024). This commercialization of homes has brought some economic and social advantages to touristic regions. Benefits such as investments, revenue streams, job creation and the development of new businesses around hospitality can be of positive impact.

However, the professionalization of the home-sharing business also has negative consequences for residents, especially when tourism is close to, or has reached the destination's carrying capacity (Wortman et al, 2016). Local residents, the original permanent tenants, are replaced by the touristic short-term rental, as homes are converted into temporary rental units. The increasing popularity of temporary rentals among digital nomads than leads to decreased housing availability and subsequent increased rents and property prices. This forces the original permanent residents out of their homes, and makes room for the wealthy digital nomads, who can afford the increased prices.

### 2.5.2 Housing availability and affordability

Temporary rentals have a significant impact on the housing availability and affordability of (nomadic) tourism destinations. The increase of temporary rentals in a destination is a result of *financialization of housing*, a process in which housing is viewed to be a commodity and a way of accumulating wealth through trading (Gil, 2023).

Rentals aimed at tourists are often perceived to be lucrative because temporary rentals allow for higher rents to be extracted from the property in comparison to permanent rentals. The understanding *potential rent* in the economics of the housing markets has changed since the increase of short-term rentals (Gil, 2023). In traditional permanent rental agreements, a property earns the *actual ground rent*. However, when a property is converted to a temporary rental, it often generates more money due to the higher prices that tourists, such as digital nomads, are willing to pay. The difference between the *actual ground rent* in the residential, long term-rental market and the *potential rent* it could produce is called the *Airbnb-induced rent gap* (Wachsmuth & Weisler, 2018). The financial incentive for property owners to convert their

properties to short-term accommodations increases simultaneous to a growing rent-gap (Gil, 2023).

Especially for multi-property owners and investors, the conversion to temporary rental properties is extra lucrative (Wachsmuth & Weisler, 2018). Destinations experiencing a rapid increase in temporary rentals, often experience a rapid decline in permanent rentals simultaneously. The larger scale of investments in such destinations therefore exacerbate the housing shortages and likewise drive up the rental prices for the local residents (Gil, 2023).

Additionally, as temporary rentals generate higher profits, they contribute to the financialization of housing. Housing as a commodity is then increasingly treated as an income-generating asset instead of a home or fundamental living aspect for local residents. This process fuels speculation and encourages further investment in real estate for temporary rental purposes, rather than for traditional housing needs (Gil, 2023). Concluding, the *Airbnb-induced rent gap* not only reshapes local rental markets but also raises concerns about housing affordability and displacement in many tourist destinations (Wachsmuth & Weisler, 2018), such as digital nomadic hotspots.

### 2.5.3 Local ownership of accommodation facilities

Investments during the processes of touristification are often made by wealthier and foreign corporations or individuals. Garrigós-Simon et al. (2015) describe economic leakages within tourism as the part of tourist expenses that do not reach or remain in the destination's local economy. A significant portion of money spent on touristic activities flows out to external entities, sometimes even located in another country, instead of towards the local community members or corporations (Chaitanya & Swain, 2023; Jönsson, 2015). Economic leakages are criticized for leaving insignificant revenue in host destinations which need to be reorganized by increasing economic linkages with host destinations (Jönsson, 2015).

Economic leakages often happen to destinations that at the start of tourism development do not have a diversified economy and cannot cater to the needs of the tourism industry by itself (Chaitanya & Swain, 2023). Moreover, rural destinations are more prone to experience economic problems such as leakages due to the exploitative core-periphery relationship it usually has on various geographical scales (Lacher & Nepal, 2010). Especially the accommodation sector, a vital sector for digital nomadism, is argued to be a key leakage gateway within the tourism industry. Accommodations owned by foreigners have more leakage than locally owned accommodation types, as their profits are earned overseas (Antara, 2014).

Small islands often experience difficulties in finding useful land and labor force to compete in the globalized economy (Wortman et al., 2016). Due to their size and lack of resources small islands are characterized by small domestic markets, lack of natural resources and dependency on imports and therefore more vulnerable to exogenous economic and financial disturbances (Seetanah, 2011). As a result, foreign investments are made in the tourism sector, ranging from various accommodation types to restaurants, cafes and leisure activities.

Foreign investment in the accommodation industry might cause concern, resistance and negative attitudes from local residents. As part of the profit seeps out of their local economy, they don't benefit much of these investments. These economic leakages can be a source of conflict between the local residents, the foreign investors and the consumer tourist. Residents might feel alienated due to the foreignization of space, as they feel like foreigners are taking

over their hometown (Worthman et al., 2016). The foreign investments might evoke feelings of exclusion and polarization, as they are often located near the more pristine and beautiful places in a destination.

Frustration among local residents is heightened when the residents perceive (local) government policies as favoring for foreign investors. They might feel forgotten, betrayed or subordinated by the government who, in their eyes, favors luxury developments over affordable housing for the local community (Worthman et al., 2016).

## 2.6 Social and Cultural Impacts of Nomadic Tourism

Tourism development in a destination has a significant impact on its host destination, including in terms of socio-cultural aspects of life. Touristification of a destination leads to changing community dynamics in terms of cultural commercialization and (economic) social exclusion in public space. Such changes are even more significant and challenging for smaller destinations when tourism develops extremely rapid. Negative socio-cultural impacts due to (nomadic) tourism development such as displacement, decay of social cohesion and loss of local culture and identity all contribute to the alienation of local residents.

### 2.6.1 Loss of space, *communicide* and displacement

The livelihoods of the local population are affected by touristification in various ways. Reduction of available and affordable housing pushes local residents out of the housing market competition, local shops aimed at residents are replaced by trendy, tourist-oriented businesses and the public sphere likewise becomes territory of the tourists. These impacts result in the alienation of residents because of the underlying phenomenon of tourism development (Arslan, 2024; Jover & Barrero-Rescalvo, 2023)

Cocola-Gant (2022) argues that the process of touristification, and specifically the housing market disruptions, can create a fracture between people and place. Local residents are both competed out of their houses through (1) perceived space change and (2) economical disadvantages. Displacement is traditionally seen, in gentrification studies, as involuntarily residential dislocation but does not account for the residents who stay at the expense of their own quality of life (Cocola-Gant, 2022).

Davidson (2008) therefore introduces the term *loss of space* to account for both indirect and direct displacement. It is argued that changing orientation of public and commercial services can result in residents feeling less at home or associated with that space. Touristification can cause such sense of displacement among residents, causing a disconnection between local residents and their home (Cocola-Gant, 2022). A disconnection between people and space can cause emotional suffering that has been compared to feelings of grief that can stay with the individual for the rest of their lives. The trauma experienced by residents after the feeling of alienation to their homes and neighborhood is described as '*communicide*' by Morris (2019). Highlighting the emotional and material loss of displacement, the term stresses the significant impact on one's emotional state. Feelings and emotions that are commonly experienced during and after the process of displacement are feelings of isolation, grief, loneliness, mourning, sadness, frustration and anger. As the community slowly thins and moves out, residents start to miss the aid, mutual trust and support from within the community.

Displacement is often examined as a result of economic or social impacts, but displacement can also be ecologically driven. Vestby et al. (2024) argue that environmental hazards such as

flooding are not purely ‘natural’ phenomena, but are socially produced through uneven development, infrastructural neglect, and political marginalization. This critical perspective reframes ecological displacement as a consequence of structural inequality, rather than environmental risk alone. In tourism-affected regions, rapid urbanization and land-use changes often amplify ecological vulnerabilities, compounding the alienation of residents not only socially and emotionally, but also environmentally. These insights expand the understanding of displacement to include the destabilizing effects of environmental degradation as part of the broader touristification process.

### 2.6.2 Social cohesion and community dynamics

Digital nomads are often associated with mindful travel, seeking deeper connections with local communities and work while abroad, their lifestyles can resemble those of local residents (Miocevic, 2024).

Yet, according to Jiwasiddi et al. (2024) digital nomads do not integrate fully into their host community. Digital nomads tend to seek other digital nomads during their travels, creating a social bubble around co-working spaces, co-accommodation communities and touristic activities (Bozzi, 2024; Chevtaeva & Denizci-Guillet, 2021; Miocevic, 2024). However, not all digital nomad bubbles are homogeneous. In some bubbles, activities aimed at connecting local residents to digital nomads are organized, including skill-labs and network events.

For digital nomads to adapt their lives and views to their new setting, a proactive lifestyle is required and interactions with local residents must proactively be sought (Miocevic, 2024). Host communities tend to welcome such efforts, which can help build supportive relationships (Hall et al., 2019). For the relationship to become successful, the host community also needs to have an open mind towards the digital nomads for an interaction to spark. Due to negative associations with digital nomads, the nomad bubble, the language barrier and the finite stay of digital nomads, residents are often hesitant to engage in ‘neighborly’ interactions (Cocola-Gant, 2022).

Social conflicts occur when different actors have opposing views, goals and values (Miocevic, 2024). The secluded and short-term presence of nomads creates different interests than those of long-term residents. Touristification can intensify this, leading to tensions around social cohesion and feelings of exclusion (Sequera & Nofre, 2019). The cultural insensitivity that is often experienced by the locals can pose a threat to social cohesion (Jaiswal et al., 2024).

Tyutyuryukov & Guseva (2021) indicate that there has been increasing attention and debates over the (fiscal) responsibilities of digital nomads. Holleran (2022) argues that the temporary and isolated nature of digital nomads can decrease their sense of responsibility towards their environment and host community. Furthermore, regulatory efforts to overcome these obstacles become increasingly difficult because of the impermanent place of nomads in a community. The mismatch between utilization and contribution to community infrastructures is one example of how tourist and residential preferences can cause social conflicts. Often, the residents’ well-being and health interests are opposed with the interests of the touristic commercial exploitation of a destination (Miocevic, 2024).

Most conflicts stem from effects of touristification, including inflation (especially in housing), displacement, and degradation of public space (Albuquerque, 2024; Miocevic, 2024). Other triggers include disrespectful behavior, noise, pollution and litter, traffic issues and vandalism

(Albuquerque, 2024). Residents in affected neighborhoods often react with frustration, hopelessness, or hostility (Cocola-Gant, 2022). Social conflicts between residents and nomads are especially common in areas undergoing rapid touristification (Miocevic, 2024).

### 2.6.3 Effects of touristification on local culture and identity

Culture has in many instances been capitalized, especially in the tourism sector. Destinations have used city branding and marketing techniques to increase visibility and popularity as a touristic hotspot (Ferro et al., 2024). Tourist destinations have started to recognize and act upon a strong local identity as differentiation and competition in the tourism market (André, 2011). As a reaction to the increasing capitalization and associated negative effects such as touristification, many neighborhoods or communities have started to protect their local culture by raising awareness and implementing specific protection policies (Ferro et al., 2024).

Promoting and using cultural heritage can be seen as regeneration of urban space, a prime factor in gentrification (Ferro et al., 2024). Competition for housing not only exacerbates economic inequality but also transforms the cultural landscape of these communities. As a result of touristification, a destination experiences a diversification of cultures through (temporal) residents and facilities. This enhanced multiculturalism can be perceived as a gain of economic value, but also as a disruption of and loss of cultural identity that weakens local economies (Daly et al., 2020). Goodwin (2017) argued that negative consequences of tourism, such as identity degradation, occur when tourism as an economical sector has focused on capital gains instead of the resulting disparities.

In many cases, economic growth has been prioritized over social and cultural effects in a destination (Dobbs & Butler, 2019). Naturally, the perceptions on advantages and disadvantages differ between the individuals receiving the benefits and the ones suffering from the costs (Koens & Postma, 2017). Adjacent to their argument, Pizam (1978) argued that residents' attitudes vary between people who are dependent on tourism, and who are not.

The commodification of culture in a destination has an impact on the relationship between the local resident and their home-environment. As destinations that experience increasing popularity tend to lose their identity during this process, residents start to lose their feeling of belonging. The term '*place identity*' refers to the meanings and perceptions of individuals in relation to their environment and is negatively impacted people's feelings of belonging. The touristification of a destination and the capitalization of culture and local identity reduces local identity and the well-being of a community (Daly et al., 2020).

Daly et al. (2020) distinguished four categories of perceived cultural identity attributes in an urban destination, namely (1) urban structure, (2) social characters, (3) authentic characters and (4) tourism attributes. Concerning non-urban destinations for tourism, the category of urban structure can be translated to 'landscape structure', focusing on the physical aspects of a destination and the locality of enterprises. Social characteristics concentrate on the cultural habits of one's daily life, such as street culture, neighborhood interactions and perceptions of security. Authenticity in the light of cultural identity includes topics such as local festivities and traditions that celebrate local values, beliefs and root and intangible heritage. The last category, tourism attributes, focuses on consciousness of residents towards the tourist influences such as 'forced' cohabitation and multiculturalism.

Furthermore, Daly et al. (2020) conclude in their research that tourism development and cultural preservation conflict with one another. A place's identity is unavoidably damaged due to tourism growth, deteriorating the resident's quality of life. An example of the disturbance of local identity, is the replacement of 'free' public spaces into consumer spaces and removing local residents with their traditions and values from the space for tourism purposes (Barata-Salguero et al., 2017). Furthermore, local businesses originally catering to residents are replaced by foreign establishments aimed at tourists, diversifying and altering to the needs of tourists over the needs of local residents (Jover & Barrero-Rescalvo, 2023).

Albuquerque et al. (2024) argue that local identity can also be lost due to touristification of a destination. Sometimes, these feelings and changes even trigger mental disorders such as depression or trauma-disorders. The decline of people's mental health due to the loss of space is often even accelerated like a downwards spiral. The touristification and gentrification like processes cause negative impacts on the health, and these negative implications are accelerated through the lack of social support found in their community (Cocola-Gant, 2022).

### 3. Methodology, methods and techniques

The perspectives and experiences of the local population of Koh Phangan are central in this thesis. Qualitative research methods are best suited to capture these opinions and experiences (Hay & Cope, 2021). Through interviewing local residents and local businessowners from Koh Phangan, complete and thorough answers on the sub questions as introduced earlier were received and analyzed.

These interviews were conducted during a 5-week fieldwork visit on Koh Phangan. Conducting a five-week fieldwork visit was essential for gaining a deeper understanding of the local context, the lived experiences and of the impacts on the residents directly affected digital nomadism. Being physically present allowed me to build trust and relationships with local residents, engage in informal conversations, and observe everyday life beyond what interviews alone could reveal. It provided time to actively participate in aspects of local community life and traditions, while also witnessing the influence of the digital nomad lifestyle and related activities. I was invited to visit participants' homes and workplaces, giving me a better understanding of their livelihoods. I developed a network of local residents as I went about and engaged in easy conversations, cultural festivities and spend time in local café's, restaurants and markets. Meanwhile, I also participated in co-working activities to gain understanding of the lives and movements of digital nomads. This immersion not only enriched the data but also helped me reflect critically on my own positionality. The insights gained during this period were invaluable and would not have been possible from a distance.

Combining the answers of the interviews, informal conversations and the everyday observations; the insights together answered the main research question. All research (sub)questions were focused on revealing experiences, thoughts and opinions of the residents. Interviews allowed me to capture a diverse set of feelings and viewpoints and therefore enabled me to apprehend and respect the complex dynamic of the topic (Hay & Cope, 2021, p. 149). Qualitative methods are considered to be intensive, in which the focus is laid on finding out and understanding background processes and how opinions are formed. Local residents and businessowners were asked to share their personal stories in interviews and together formed an answer to the main research question: *'How does digital nomadism affect the economic and socio-cultural dynamics in regard to the housing market on Koh Phangan, Thailand from the perspective of local residents?'*

#### 3.1 Interview techniques

The interviews were conducted through semi-structured interviews, a format that can be described to be in between a formally and fully structured interview guide and an open interview. The interview consisted of previously determined 'open' questions, but during the interview the questions and sequence were slightly adjusted when ought necessary (Hay & Cope, 2021, p. 149). The interview guides for both local residents and digital nomads are attached in *Appendix A*. Interview schedules have the advantage point for the researcher to easily and structurally compare the results of various interviews (Hay & Cope, 2021, p. 152).

The interviews have been conducted in an informal and casual manner, through *home-like conversations*, ensuring that the respondents felt comfortable and at ease with the interview and personal topics discussed. During the fieldwork, some respondents engaged in recurring interviews to enhance comprehension and trust between both parties. This led to drafts of one summary per multiple conversations. Additionally, not all interviews have been recorded nor

fully transcribed to preserve the comfortable, home-like and safe space. Not all respondents felt comfortable with their English-speaking level and used online translation-tools, hand gestures and friends to translate it. After each interview, a summary interview note has been drafted. It includes some quotations but mostly an interpretation of the stories and some anecdotes.

The interviews were conducted at the research location, Koh Phangan in Thailand. The respondents were selected through the *purposeful* and *snowball method*. The fieldwork and interviews took place over a period of 5 weeks. This gave the researcher enough time to build trust with the local residents, schedule interviews and observe the island and the interactions between digital nomads and local residents. A benefit from interviewing at the research location, is the ability to hold the interviews face-to-face. This has helped by taking body language, hand-gestures and attitudes into account. Additionally, issues regarding media, technology and the affordability of it were easily resolved.

### 3.2 Observations

During the five-week fieldwork period on Koh Phangan I conducted both informal and unstructured observations. These complemented the interviews and deepened my understanding of the dynamics between digital nomads and local residents. I visited various coworking spaces, cafés, wellness activities and other popular touristic hotspots to observe how digital nomads behave and interact with the local community. I paid attention to social and spatial separation, language use and conflict situations. In addition to these observations, I also explored the island to identify physical signs of digital nomadism and touristification. Such signs include construction projects, advertisements, deforestation, gated communities and coworking spaces. The observations provided valuable context for interpreting the interviews and conversations offering valuable insights into the impacts of nomadic tourism on the local community of Koh Phangan.

### 3.3 Sampling methods

Respondents were selected through *purposeful sampling* and *snowball sampling* methods. Using the islands' geographical location, the initial respondents were contacted on Koh Phangan (Stratton, 2021). The criteria for participating in this research are being a permanent resident of Koh Phangan, aged over 18 years old, having a basic understanding of the English language and if employed, employed in a Thai local company. The criteria of being employed by a Thai local company was included to ensure that participants are financially embedded in the local economy and receive their income in Thai Baht. This criteria helped distinguish local residents from those whose financial ties lie outside the island.

Any language barriers were overcome using online translation techniques and interpreters. The network and connections of the initial respondents were used to find additional respondents that met the criteria. Initial respondents were contacted in the physical public atmosphere, at restaurants, cafés, supermarkets and on the streets, but some were also approached using social media like *Facebook*. A variety of respondents in terms of background, financial status, careers and relations to the island and tourism was found during the fieldwork, demonstrated in *Table 1*.

Furthermore, a few interviews were conducted with digital nomads that were residing on Koh Phangan during the fieldwork-period. These interviews provided insights into their lifestyle, habits, economic and cultural behavior and awareness of their position within the Thai

community on Koh Phangan. Although not the main focus, these insights gave me a sharpened understanding of the dynamics between digital nomads and locals. Unfortunately, some digital nomads who were investing or actively involved in real estate or subleasing did not feel comfortable discussing these topics.

### 3.4 Respondents

During the fieldwork, 15 interviews were conducted with local residents and 3 additional interviews were conducted with digital nomads who were residing on Koh Phangan. The local residents were all embedded in the Thai economy as they work in a (legal) Thai company. The digital nomads all received their incomes from their country of origin.

In *Table 1* the characteristics of the respondents are listed. Each respondent got a pseudonym to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. The careers and nationalities can help explain their personal relations to the tourism sector and their positionalities regarding digital nomadism.

Respondent #	Pseudonym	Residency status	Nationality	Career
R1	Niran	Permanent	Thai	Mechanic
R2	Emily	Permanent	South Africa	Diving and tour instructor
R3	Malee	Permanent	Thai	Diving and tour instructor
R4	Chaiwat	Permanent	Thai	Manager real estate and cafe
R5	Anurak	Permanent	Thai	Owner motorbike shop
R6	Kanya	Permanent	Thai	Clothing boutique employee
R7	David	Digital nomad	Finland	Social media
R8	Luke	Permanent	UK	Owner wakeboarding company
R9	Anan	Permanent	Thai	Owner local family restaurant
R10	Saranya	Permanent	Thai	Owner smoothie shop
R11	Thomas	Permanent	Danish	Owner motorbike shop and bar
R12	Jack	Permanent	Thai	Owner digital nomad resort, co-working space and community platform
R13	Sophie	Permanent	South Africa	Legal consultant
R14	Nim	Permanent	Thai	Photographer and artist
R15	Gabriel	Permanent	French	Real estate agent
R16	Lily	Digital nomad	Scotland	Fashion designer and sales
R17	Jett	Permanent	Thai	Professional landlord
R18	Jimena	Digital nomad	Mexico/US	Shaman

### 3.5 Data analysis

Each interview has been recorded in a summary-document. These summaries were written on site, often with pen and paper. Afterwards the data was transferred into digital summaries. These digital summaries were transcribed and afterwards analyzed with the help of coding. The interviews were coded with help of coding software ATLAS.ti. Coding has helped identifying similarities, re-occurring topics and differences (Morchid & Hdouch, 2024). Examples of codes are given in *Appendix B*.

### 3.6 Operationalizing

The interview schedule was developed based on the research sub-questions and insights from the literature review. The questions had a focus on three central themes: the socio-economic impacts of digital nomadism on Koh Phangan's housing market, as well as the broader economic and socio-cultural community dynamics observed by local residents. The questions addressed topics such as housing availability, affordability, ownership structures, and local regulations, alongside shifts in social cohesion, community relations, and cultural identity. *Table B.1* in *Appendix B* provides an overview of how relevant theory was converted into measurable and distinctive indicators and accompanying questions for the respondents.

While the literature provided a general foundation, the interviews offered grounded, context-specific insights that highlight both tangible developments and the ways in which these changes are experienced and understood by those directly affected. For this reason, I also kept an open mind and allowed for new insights and issues to be brought up during the interview. I adjusted the interview guide accordingly after each conversation to include new topics, issues and insights that the literature review did not encompass beforehand. Such topics included nominee companies, subleasing tactics and migration flows. This approach ensured that the operationalization captured a wide range of relevant dynamics, beyond abstract trends or perceptions alone.

### 3.7 Challenges and positionality

This research had some priorly expected challenges, including the language barrier, positionality and privileges. The Thai local participants in this research spoke Thai fluently, and all had some understanding of the English language. A few Thai locals spoke English fluently. Some of the respondents were foreigners that reside on Koh Phangan permanently and are employed in a Thai business. These respondents had a good understanding of the English language. However, disregarding their background, not all participants were familiar with and fluent in the terms and jargon used in this thesis. Therefore, the questions remained simple, asking one question at once, avoiding double-questioning. The concept of a digital nomad was explained and contextualized at the start of the interviews, ensuring both the interviewer and interviewee had the same demographic in mind. During the interviews, with permission, translation technologies such as *Google Translate* or other AI-generated live-time translation tools were used to enhance conversations. However, when possible, the interviews were conducted with the help of an interpreter. The interpreters that helped me during the fieldwork were colleagues, acquaintances, friends or family of the respondent. Privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents remained the priority here.

A second challenge was my own positionality. It was of great importance during the entire research, and especially during the participatory learning and action on Koh Phangan, to acknowledge my personal positionality and its influence on the research outcomes (Bozalek,

2011). It is crucial to be aware of the power dynamics at play in Thailand such as the neocolonial tendencies of digital nomads and tourists, in which I (sub)consciously partook. Central to participatory methodology in research is the critical lens on dominant narratives of a research topic and the goal of improving the lives of those involved (Bozalek, 2011). During the interviews I have actively engaged with local residents rather than merely observing from an outsider's perspective. The interviews, interactions and informal conversations helped amplify the voices of the local populations making sure they are heard, respected and represented in tourism research.

Additionally, by embracing decolonizing methodologies, this research challenges the dominant narratives in nomadic tourism. Research often examines the economic, social and cultural benefits for host communities, while this research studied the associated disadvantages and disruptions for local communities (Bozalek, 2011). During this research, I adopted a critical perspective on the justification of geoarbitrage and neocolonial actions of digital nomads, while centering the narratives, perspectives, and opinions of local residents.

In order to ensure a trustful and confidential relation between myself, as the researcher, and the local community, I remained conscious of the normativity of my Western knowledge. As an *Outsider*, I tried to be as aware as possible that by viewing the local population of Koh Phangan, *the Insiders*, as a marginalized group in the globalized world, I took on a Marxist perspective (Bozalek, 2011; Browning, 2013). Although coming from honest and true intentions, it should not describe them solely as victims of neocolonial relations as it also might ignore their power and agency efforts (Bozalek, 2011). Instead, the conclusion of this thesis captures a description of *my analysis* of the neocolonial dynamics and implications on Koh Phangan. During the research, I have let myself be inspired, informed and coached to include the local community's perspective, narratives and discourses into the research.

Another important dimension is the difference between my *Outsider* perspective on nomadic tourism, and the local community's *Insider* perspective. The local community understands and tells their story, the answer to the research question far better than I, myself could ever understand. As my knowledge, and theirs is situated, we both view the world and the dynamics at play differently from one another (Browning, 2013). However, using participatory interview techniques, I have tried to grasp, understand and tell their story as closely to their truth and perspectives (Bozalek, 2011). Therefore, my interviews have been conducted in *home style conversation* like manners, creating a more equal space between me and the respondent. Additionally, some interviews were not recorded as it adds a level of formality and hierarchy to it. It remained priority that respondents at all times felt comfortable and at ease, which was more likely to be created in an informal, equal conversation instead of formal interviews. With oral permission, notes and quotes were taken during the conversations and were merged in a summarizing interview-note afterwards.

Lastly, there are obvious privileges that I embody. As a white, well-educated female researcher from the Netherlands the most obvious privileges I embody are *White Privilege*, *Economic Privilege* and *Researcher Privilege*. These privileges significantly influenced my access to the opportunities, resources and support systems that have helped me leading up to and during my research. In the case of digital nomadism on Koh Phangan, white privilege intersects with economic privilege through geoarbitrage (Browning, 2013). Digital nomads, as I also am for the time spent abroad, often benefit from lower costs of living in the Global South and power relations. I have been conscious in my bookings and consumption habits during my stay trying to ensure local economic benefit and minimizing my negative impact on the local community,

but I have also contributed to this power relation during my research in certain choices. Lastly, called researcher privilege, it is a privilege to pack up and return back home when the research data was collected.

## 4. Results

In this chapter, the results of the interviews, observations and discourse analysis will be discussed. It is important to note that the systems, processes and developments discovered in this research are not linear. The structures behind the displacement on Koh Phangan cannot and should not be comprehended in a linear form as suggested when written down on paper. Therefore, I urge you to keep in mind the multi-connectivity, intertwined and complex nature of the following processes, structures and experiences discussed. The results will be discussed in the following order: economic, socio-cultural and ecological impacts on the living conditions of the local community. This does not mean or indicate that this is the order in which every respondent views the process of digital nomadism, it is solely to create order and comprehension.

### 4.1 Descriptive analysis of Koh Phangan

Koh Phangan (125m<sup>2</sup>) is an island in the Gulf of Thailand. It is a relatively small island with a population of circa 13.000 people. The islands' main town is called Thong Sala and is located on the southwest coast, but other popular towns include Srithanu, Haadrin and Chaloklum (*Photo 2*). The island is most often associated with its two neighboring islands, Koh Samui and Koh Tao. Koh Samui is the biggest of the three and has an airport. Most of Koh Phangan's visitors travel through there. Koh Phangan is therefore accessible only through ferry rides from Koh Samui, Koh Tao and longer rides from Surat Thani, located on the mainland.

Around 40% of Koh Phangan is labeled and protected as a National Park. This area holds mountains, jungle and marine protected zones and is mostly situated in on the middle and north-east side of the island. The National Park status of the island protects these areas from land



Photo 1: Map of Koh Phangan highlighting its National Park in bright green outline.

Source: EcoThailand Foundation, 2020



Photo 2: Map of Koh Phangan highlighting popular villages on the island.

Source: ArcGIS Esri, 2020

development (EcoThailand Foundation, 2020). *Photo 1* shows the zoning plan of the National Park on Koh Phangan.

The island's tourism industry has developing slowly between 2005-2020. The island saw an increase of backpackers and wellness-oriented tourists coming to the island during these years. The island is also home to the world famous 'full-moon party' that has captured the interest of many backpackers, partygoers and other tourists around the world. The party is held once a month, during the full moon, on a beach in Haadrin. It started as a small backpacker gathering in the late 1980s but has grown to be a cultural phenomenon and festival for 20.000+ visitors each month (Full Moon Party, n.d.).

The islands' popularity increased due to the party and several other monthly parties and festivals have followed. The island now also hosts the famous 'halfmoon parties', OXA parties, jungle festivals and waterfall parties. These festivals tap into the party island stereotype and attract lots of backpackers and other tourists as well (Kimberly, 2025).

However, Koh Phangan has seen a change in tourism activities and motivations. The backpackers interested in parties, wellness, yoga and spirituality have increased in numbers over the years, allowing the tourism sector to grow. Next to this growth there has been a change in tourist types on the rest of the island. The past few years there are more mainstream tourists, nomads and expatriates coming to the island and the activities have adapted to this demographic as well.

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*Thomas (R11): 'Party backpackers, freedom-seeking, and all the wellness, and mental wellness in Srithanu were the first tourists to arrive on this island. However, currently the tourists entail more mainstream tourists that follow the online trends rather than books like the Lonely Planet. This has also transformed their behavior. More and more 'hotspots' and 'must-visits' are opening up and becoming popular for these mainstream tourists, nomads and expats. They have become super stressed, very very very busy trying to fit every activity into their tight schedules.'*

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As Thomas (R11) already noted, most of wellness, yoga and spirituality-related tourist activities take place in Srithanu. It is a small town on the west coast of the island and is home to many spiritual centers, yoga schools and Western restaurants that focus on conscious consumption. Next to this, *Zen Beach*, a popular (nudist) beach is also located in this town. The area is often mentioned in travel blogs, digital nomad guides or tourist must-dos on social media pages. Its popularity has increased among digital nomads and many of them have chosen to settle in this area.

After the COVID-19 pandemic, Koh Phangan mirrored the global trend as the popularity of digital nomads on the island increased. Though there are no exact figures on digital nomads on Koh Phangan, EcoThailand, an NGO based on Koh Phangan, provided some numbers on the demographic composition (Table 2). The estimate of 500,000 'mobile visitors' includes a wide range of individuals, from those working remotely to short-term tourists who may only partially align with the digital nomad profile. While this category is broad and does not distinguish between intentional remote workers and casual short-stay tourists, it nonetheless illustrates the

magnitude of transient, often digitally connected visitors shaping the island’s housing market and spatial dynamics, especially compared to the relatively small number of permanent residents.

Demographic	Number estimate
Thai natives	30.000
Asian (but non-Thai)	10.000
Permanent westerners	6.000
Mobile visitors (including digital nomads and tourists)	500.000

Table 2: Estimate of year-round residents on Koh Phangan by employee of NGO EcoThailand.

All respondents mentioned a shift in tourism and the increase of often Western, digital nomads on the island. This demographic was not always referred to as digital nomads by the local residents, but also as *digital expats*, *nomadic expats* and *remote workers*, confirming the loose definitions and noticeable differences of digital nomads and expatriates. Koh Phangan became a hotspot for digital nomads to reside while engaging in touristic activities such as wellness and yoga and explore the islands natural beauty and culture. Businesses in body-health and spirituality have increased in popularity over the past three years, since COVID-19. *‘The island is very well known for wellness and retreats, yoga, breathwork. So, most people do those sorts of activities here. While also working online next to it.’* – Emily (R2, F).

Aside from this, coworking spaces opened up to cater to this new demographic that needs facilities with high-speed Wi-Fi, monitors, proper desks and chairs, and air-conditioning. These coworking spaces also function as social spaces for digital nomads as they allow for them to meet each other and form a community. Emily (R2) had also noted this development on the island: *‘The Hustle Club, which is a co-working space for digital nomads, has been getting more and more busy up there now. It opened right after COVID. Because everyone, obviously during COVID, went to work online. And I think the owner saw a gap in the market and he knew that people who were travelling around would fit into the lifestyle of being a digital nomad and online. So, he decided to open up a coworking space. And there’s actually loads of coworking spaces around the island now.’*

Jack (R12) is the owner of a digital nomad resort with co-working spaces located in Baan Tai, the south coast of Koh Phangan. In the interview he shared that after COVID-19 he saw a business opportunity to sell his former company, a touring company for backpackers. He changed the backpacker resort into a digital nomad resort with plenty of co-working spaces to accommodate their needs. Next to several weekly activities, he hosts digital nomad meet-ups to facilitate community building for the digital nomads. He has also started a digital nomad community himself that hosts conferences on digital nomadism.

Other co-working spaces include coffee shops, cafes and restaurants. Emily (R2) points out other coworking spaces where she usually sees digital nomads working behind their laptops or which she knows through her digital nomad friends: *‘You will see many digital nomads in the coffee spots like Indigo, just around the corner, and most digital nomads go there because there is good coffee, fast Wi-Fi and it is very central in Thong Sala. [...] There is also the Phangan Arena, a hostel for nomads. They opened up co-working spaces and they also have private rooms which is nice if you need to concentrate or make calls.’* Below, on photos 3, 4 and 5 there are photos of co-working spaces. Some co-working spaces are exclusive and sell

memberships that allow digital nomads to have access to their Wi-Fi, desks and monitors. The middle picture shows a cafe that allows co-working along with a drink or meal.

Koh Phangan has also seen a demographic switch in the digital nomads. After the influx of individual digital nomads in 2022, the island has seen a remarkable influx of digital nomad families in 2024 and 2025, fitting the trend noted by MBO Partners (2024). Most of these families have migrated from Israel and to a lesser extent also from Russia due to the wars in their home countries. Several respondents indicated that the predominantly Jewish background of the Israeli demographic is perceived to align more closely with Thailand's Buddhist culture than Islamic cultures in, for example, Indonesia.



Photo 3, 4 & 5: On the left, an advertisement sign for a co-working space aimed at creative digital nomads. In the middle, a photograph of people working at a co-working space in Srithanu. On the right, a photograph of membership signs for a co-working space at Zen Beach, Srithanu.

*Gabriel (R15, M), who is a real estate agent from France and has been living and working in the real estate market on Koh Phangan for over 10 years notes: 'There are significantly more children on the island now, and more families. There are not many family homes, or homes I would deem big enough for families. That is probably why there is so much construction going on. The person coming to the island has also slightly changed. There is this mixture of families that still work online and use their foreign income here. And people who are investing and getting new things built on the island.'*

*Luke (R8), a male originally from the UK who moved to Koh Phangan over 20 years ago summarizes the tourism and construction development that he has witnessed from close by: 'Well, it's developed kind of slowly over the first, most of the 20 years. The last year has been extremely fast, the development since COVID, but it's, yeah, it's been quite a natural island. We've got 40% of the island is national [park]. So, it's always stayed quite green and natural, not as developed as Koh Samui, but now we're starting to see all of the villas and the families and investors come in.'*

As mentioned by *Gabriel (R15)* and *Luke (R8)*, there has been an increase in construction on the island. As 40% of the island is zoned as a national park and thereby protected from land development and construction, most of the development is clustered around the west and north coast of the island. Most of this construction has been taking place on the west side of the island in and around places such as Hin Kong, Sri Thanu and Haad Salad. The area is popular because of its beautiful sunset and sea view, and lively atmosphere around spirituality and health-body

practices. *Luke (R8)* perceives the sunset as a curse for the island: ‘*In the national park area, it's still pretty, well, that's all protected, it's 40% national park. So, you can't develop there and yeah, the sunset coast... the sunset kind of cursed that side because everybody wanted the sunset villa so yeah that got most of the development.*’. However, the land development has to a lesser extent also started to spread to the north side of the island, around the area of Chaloklum. Photos 6 and 7 show two new neighborhoods that are developed along the west coast of Koh Phangan. The new houses are built in a modern, luxurious architectural style and aimed at digital nomads and foreign families, who are able to pay these luxurious homes.



Photo 6 & 7: (Left) A photograph of a newly constructed neighborhood on the west coast of Koh Phangan taken from the sea. It shows new villas that are still in construction and villas that are already finished. The entire plot has been deforested to make room for these villas. (Right) A new neighborhood with modern, luxurious villas in construction in Haad Salad, a town north from Srithamu.

## 4.2 Economic impacts

### 4.2.1 Economic inequality and global power dynamics

Most of the digital nomads on Koh Phangan are from countries that typically have ‘stronger’ currencies. Many respondents noted that the new demographic of families mostly come from Israel and Russia and often earn a significantly higher salaries and savings than the Thai do. *Emily (R2)* shares: ‘*The people from Russia and Israel, often sell their houses over there and have much higher paying jobs. So, they come to the island with loads of money.*’. Although a substantial proportion of the digital nomads are Israeli or Russian, most other digital nomads are western and wealthy as well. The incomes are often referred to as ‘*European incomes*’ (*Sophie (R13)* and *Gabriel (R15)*) indicating that many of the digital nomads on Koh Phangan are originally from European countries and kept their European incomes whilst residing on Koh Phangan.

These digital nomads who have decided to live and/or stay on Koh Phangan are participating in *geoarbitrage*. As explained in the literature, geoarbitrage happens when someone relocates themselves in a destination with lower living expenses whilst maintaining their income. It allows them to *maximize* their salaries and spend money on extracurricular activities such as travel, tourist activities and other activities such as co-working (Holleran, 2022; McElroy, 2020; Woldoff & Litchfield, 2021). The process of geoarbitrage does not go unnoticed or uncriticized by Koh Phangan's local residents.

*Sophie (R13)* shares her view on how these nomads can afford higher prices on the housing market: *'Compared to two years ago, there were a lot of backpackers and different types of tourists. But now, there's a lot more tourists with money, like digital nomads. They won't even think twice about paying that. They are from countries where the salaries are significantly higher, and the rent would be a lot higher there as well. For them, even the increased prices seem cheap. There is a market for it, just not local.'* Reflecting the trend of digital nomadism after the COVID-19 pandemic, this respondent confirms an influx in digital nomads since 2022. According to *Sophie (R13)* the digital nomads are used to higher rents and property prices from their home countries. The increased housing prices on Koh Phangan fit their budget and probably are still lower than what they are used to, especially in comparison to the facilities, amenities and aesthetics it might bring.

The willingness and ability to pay higher rents is also noted by *Gabriel (R15)*, a real estate agent. He has seen an increase in Western nomads who are willing and most importantly able to pay the market price of these houses. *'It's very complicated to find a reasonable house, for a month, 100.000 Baht. Like 2,000 or 1,500 euros. That price, you know, maybe okay for London or Berlin or Paris, but it's very high.'* In this quote, *Gabriel (R15)* remarks the growing struggle for local residents to find housing now that the housing prices have adapted to Western income levels, aligning with previous literature on the effects of geoarbitrage (Holleran, 2022). This observation also corresponds with earlier research highlighting how the intensified housing market competition in touristic destinations systematically favors affluent foreigners at the expense of the local population (Albuquerque et al., 2024; Holleran, 2022).

The Thai residents on Koh Phangan earn significant lower salaries than the digital nomads, creating struggles to afford basic needs of life. The locals are paid according to Thai salary standards which are substantially lower than the Western incomes of the digital nomads. *Anurak (R5)*, a 50-year-old locally born male, expresses his hardships and the inequality between the locals and the nomads on the island.

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*'Own people have no money, barely to eat. But foreigners, they have a lot of money'. - Anurak (R5)*

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In the conversations with *Malee (R3)*, a 23-year-old female Thai-born who moved to Koh Phangan in search of better economic and personal opportunities, the economic inequality became even more evident. *'My salary is 10.000 Baht, without commissions. This means that in low season, when I have no or very little commission sales, I am left with 4.000 Baht for my food, health and all other stuff'*. The respondents' fixed salary is 10.000 Baht, which at the time of the interview can be converted to roughly € 268, -. Depending on the sales she makes, she gets an extra commission on her salary. The respondent explains that this makes life *'less*

*stressful* during the high seasons when she makes 5.000 to 10.000 Baht more. *Emily (R2)* confirmed the struggle and provided more insight on the average Thai income on Koh Phangan. *'The Thai workers will have a basic salary for like 10.000 or maybe 15.000 Baht per month and then for each and every sale they make they will get more. So, it is working on how driven you are and passionate. And same with tips in hotels and restaurants. That will be a little extra money they have.'*

Some Western migrants have permanently moved to Koh Phangan and are employed in Thai companies, meaning they *'get paid in Baht'* (- *Emily (R2)*) as well. Their income is usually higher than the salaries for the natively Thai due to differences in education and job qualifications. However, their salaries are also substantially lower compared to the digital nomads on the island. In an interview with *Sophie (R13)*, a legal consultant who moved to Koh Phangan from South Africa, she highlights her struggles with finding a house and paying for living expenses such as food. *'I cannot afford it, and I earn a good salary'*. Highlighting the difficulty for those employed in a Thai company to afford basic human needs such as housing and food on the island. The struggle to make ends meet is already a concern for higher paid locals, with the struggles of the *working class* only being exacerbated.

All living expenses on the island have increased significantly, especially since 2022. The increase of the prices went hand-in-hand with the development in digital nomadism. The prices escalated even more since 2024, when the island saw an even higher increase in families and nomads. During the interviews it became clear that the local salaries have not kept up with the increase of living expenses in various sectors. *'There are Thai people here, or people that just don't have European or Western salaries that can't afford where to stay.'* - *Lily (R16)*. Some interviewees, like *Luke (R8)*, say that the living expenses have adapted to the salaries of the wealthy digital nomad community on the island. *'The prices are now on the level for the farang [foreigners], not the Thai.'* The abrupt and expeditious change in living costs has resulted in economic inequality and exclusion of the local community on the housing market and in daily life. A locally born male shares: *'The landlords now expect like I said, European prices. This makes it extremely difficult for us locals.'* - *Anan (R9)*.

Digital nomads on Koh Phangan benefit from the stark income inequality between themselves and local (Thai) residents. Their use of geoarbitrage means they can afford housing, services, and leisure activities that are now too expensive for many locals, aligning with earlier criticisms on geoarbitrage such as Hannonen (2023) and Holleran (2022). As a result, their presence contributes significantly to a two-tiered economy in which wealthier foreigners are prioritized, while local communities face rising costs and exclusion from spaces that were once accessible. It reflects a form of neocolonialism (Devine, 2016; McElroy, 2020), reinforcing and benefiting from global inequalities, where people from the Global North continue to benefit from and shape life in the Global South, at the expense of the local population.

#### 4.2.2 Nominee companies

Koh Phangan has seen an influx in so-called *nominee companies* that impact the housing market and touristic businesses all across the island. A nominee company in Thailand is a company that holds a distinct business-structure in which it appears to be Thai-owned on paper but is actually controlled by foreigners. In order to bypass *Thailand's Foreign Business Act (FBA)* which restricts foreign ownership in certain sectors, foreigners try to get around these laws using Thai people as *nominees* (Tilleke & Gibbins, 2025). *Sophie (R13)* & *Jett (R17)* explained how this usually appears on the island: *'The Thai need to own 51% of the shares, leaving 49%*

*of the shares to foreigners. But what the foreigners do, is they get 3 or 4 Thai nominees. Important to know is, they do not know each other and cannot contact each other. Together these nominees own 51%, but each of them own only 10-15%. Because they are blindsided by the foreigner, they will never be able to make decisions. The foreigner then, played them out and has the power to make all the decisions, basically owning the company himself.*' – Jett (R17). The Thai nominees don't hold actual control or financial risk due to their low set of shares on the company. Thai nominees often participate in this set-up because of the financial gain. They usually get paid a fee or salary for holding the shares without actively having to do any work (Tilleke & Gibbins, 2025).

In reality, the foreign investor that holds 49% of the shares, has the control and makes the decisions. They are usually the ones that receive the benefits and high payrolls. A nominee company is illegal in Thailand. If the Thai authorities find out that a company is using Thai nominees to hide foreign control, it can lead to serious penalties. These penalties include criminal charges, company dissolution, and fines or imprisonment for those involved, including the Thai nominees (Tilleke & Gibbins, 2025; Jett (R17)).

Nominee companies are used to open up businesses, but predominantly to circumvent landownership restrictions for foreigners. *'You know, legally speaking, we, foreigners, are not allowed to own land. So, we have to either lease the land, or we could own it through a nominee company.'* - Sophie (R13). Nominee companies allow for foreigners to acquire land plots through the company and build private houses for themselves, but also to invest in construction for multiple villa's and rent them out. Some of the nominee companies are actually active in the construction or real estate sector, but many companies are just a mask without any actual job practice.

Sophie (R13) regularly comes across issues with nominee companies in her career as legal consultant. Nominee companies most often involve construction of new villas and renting it out to others. Sophie (R13) illustrates the following: *'If you drive through and around Srithanu, you will see all these developments. Cut down areas of land with white box housing being built on top of it, most of it is Israeli and it sure is meant for subleasing or short-term rental.'* The popular area around Srithanu has seen an influx in construction of villas that cater to the needs and wishes of western digital nomads. The land development and construction happening in the area has resulted in many plots being deforested and build with white, concrete and modern houses.

Corruption plays a key role in enabling nominee companies to operate on Koh Phangan. While there have been cases where such companies faced legal penalties after being caught, these instances remain rare due to the lack of consistent enforcement. As Gabriel (R15) explains, the Thai people involved in nominee companies often earn far less than the foreign investor, which creates the potential for conflict. He warns, *'The Thai people, the one in the nominee company, the investor, they make much more money than them. They could fight, like tell the judge or the police, and say they are playing with the regulations. But so far, we don't really have such things on Koh Phangan. But it could happen of course.'* Luke (R8) further highlights the island's vulnerability to corruption: *'Some of the laws are bendable here, and yeah, I'm not saying that there's a lot of corruption, but you could probably pay to get around certain problems, yeah.'* The combination of loose regulation and bribery opportunities allows financially powerful foreigners to remain economically untouchable and largely unchecked.

The local community is aware of the increase of nominee companies on the island. All respondents mentioned nominee companies and expressed negative feelings and emotions towards them and its complications. *Jack (R12)* expressed the following on the matter: *'I don't particularly like it. Because it is (A), it pushes the prices up and it pisses people off. And (B), it's not legal. You are not allowed to have a business in Thailand unless you have a registered business and a work permit and all of that stuff. And I bet 99% of the people that are doing subletting, are doing it illegally. And it's taking money away from the Thai people as well, really, because they are taking advantage of the fact that some Thai people on the island don't know how to use Airbnb, or Booking.com. They don't fully realize how much they could get for their rental property.'*

One of the issues mentioned by this respondent is the economic leakage that occurs due to these foreign investments. Nominee companies are used by foreigners to buy or develop properties and rent them out to other digital nomads. This experience and opinion is shared by *Lily (R16)*. A 24-year-old female from Scotland who moved to Koh Phangan as a digital nomad but tries to *'spend her money as locally as possible'*. During the interview she expressed critique on nominee companies because of its economic leakages and exploitative nature: *'A lot of people see it as easy and quick money, they are not looking at the implications. And the people I know personally who are doing it [subletting or nominee companies], don't give much back to the community either. They are renting out these spaces but not spending the money here. I think it is just causing inflation on the island, but it is not coming back to the island.'*

This perspective of frustration and sadness was shared with the majority of the respondents, especially among the Thai locals. Professionalization of the accommodation sector on Koh Phangan has led to economic and social difficulties and worries for the local community. These developments align with the theory of Worthman et al. (2016), which explains that when income flows out of the local economy through processes of economic leakage, communities often respond with concern, resistance, and negative sentiment. *Malee (R3)* expressed discontentment with the economic leakages due to nominee companies. *'I talk about this all the time with my friends, my Thai friends. It is a really big issue. It is too expensive because of all the foreigners. The money does not go to the Thai people. Foreigners come to work here, on Koh Phangan, and prices go up like crazy.'*

The viewpoint on economic leakages nominee companies, however, did differ between some respondents. *Luke (R8)* & *Jack (R12)*, both of whom migrated from the UK to start their own company on the island, argue that the economic leakages are kept to a minimum as the Thai law mandates businesses to hire Thai workers. They claim that the ongoing construction to accommodate Western digital nomads creates jobs and keeps the money circulating within Thailand. *'I mean, a lot of it ends up back in the Thai people's pockets. I mean, they're using Thai construction companies. It's a business maybe run by a Westerner. But, yeah, it gives jobs to the Thai people. And the money that they make, some of it is maybe getting sent out the country. But I think the vast majority of it gets re-spent into the Thai economy anyway.'* - *Luke (R8)*. This perspective, however, overlooks the fact that Thai workers are typically paid very little, while the largest share of the profit remains with the foreign business owner. Although jobs are created, the financial gains are unevenly distributed, reinforcing a structure where locals receive wages but do not benefit from ownership or long-term wealth.

### 4.2.3 Subletting

The most frequently mentioned issue during fieldwork regarding digital nomads and the housing market is *subletting*. *Subletting* or *subleasing* happens when the tenant rents out their rented apartment, villa or other building to a new tenant. Subleasing is lucrative because temporary rentals generate high revenue due to higher market rates as described in the *Airbnb-induced rent gap* by Wachsmuth & Weisler (2018). During the interviews the respondents shared concerns about the illegality, increased rents and exploitative nature of subleasing. An increasing issue regarding subleasing is the economic leakage it creates. Many foreigners engage in subleasing, which is illegal but considered as an investment and lucrative business creating financial prosperity for the tenant.

*Sophie (R13)* is also commonly confronted with subleasing in her work as legal consultant. She explains: *'Legal subletting is bullshit. You are not allowed to do Airbnb if you are a foreigner. But it happens a lot.'* Online rental platforms and advertisements for short-term rentals serve as indicator for illegality she explains. Very little rentals are sublet by legal Thai companies or Thai individuals. *Sophie (R13)* warns that most listings are illegal subleases of foreigners and that profiles on such platforms might use Thai personages to deliberately mislead tourists and nomads. Furthermore, she explains that many digital nomads sublease their accommodation when they leave Koh Phangan temporarily to travel elsewhere.

In another interview with *Nim (R14)* the issue of foreign sublet apartments on rental platforms and nightly, weekly- or monthly rates is discussed. *'They put it on Airbnb, or they put it on Facebook groups for monthly rentals, or even in high season, nightly rentals. I see some of the Russian hosts on Airbnb daily'*. Short-term rental tends to be more expensive than long term rentals, with nightly rates in the high season being the most expensive. During the interview with *Sophie (R13)*, the illegality of these temporary rentals was emphasized on multiple occasions. *'They charge a nightly rate, sometimes a monthly rate, but all short-term rentals. Which is, very illegal.'* – *Sophie (R13)*.

According to respondents and listings on platforms such as *Airbnb* and *Facebook*, the hosts of temporary rentals are frequently foreigners, with Russian and Israeli nationals most often mentioned. As *Nim (R14)* states, *'I see some of the Russian hosts on Airbnb daily'*. The dominance of foreign hosts reflects a broader inequality in access to property. Foreigners are often able to secure long-term rentals by paying a full year in advance, which is financially unattainable for most local residents. Digital nomads are part of this dynamic, frequently subletting their accommodations during travel. In the interview with real estate agent *Gabriel (R15)* this practice was further discussed and explained: *'That category of people, nomads, who arrive here, they rent and get cheaper things for one year, but they will stay only two months. They are settled for a margin, without bringing in more salary. And then they rent it out.'* In other cases, foreign control over rental spaces is maintained through outside investments or nominee company arrangements. This pattern reinforces the privileged position of foreigners within Koh Phangan's housing market and contributes to the exclusion of locals in favor of more profitable international tenants.

The permanent rentals used to be reserved for local residents, but recently digital nomads and other foreigners have started infiltrating this housing market. *'The cheaper houses, as soon as available, some farang takes it long term, and then a few days later you see it on Facebook group for house rental.'* - *Nim (R14)*. During the interview with *Nim (R14)*, she expressed

frustration and worries regarding the ability of securing long term rentals for Thai families due to the increase of sublease. Similar sentiments were expressed by other respondents, for instance *Sophie (R13)* notes: *'Most people come and go, very little actually stay, like me. They just invest money, go home and sublease their houses. It is just so so sad.'*

Subleasing tactics have resulted in an unfair housing competition between the wealthy foreigners and local (often Thai) population. Subsequently, the higher competition and increase of foreigners with higher budgets for housing results in increased housing prices on the entire market, both permanent and temporal rentals. *'Back then, I used to pay what seemed acceptable for a decent house, but now the cheapest you can find is already too expensive. Everyone is competing to get the cheap house... and people who can pay a year in advance have the upper hand.'* – *Nim (R14)*. This story confirms that wealthier people hold the power in the housing market on Koh Phangan, sidelining the local community in their own community as described by Holleran (2022).

The professionalization of the housing market on Koh Phangan has also contributed to the rise of subleasing practices, particularly in case of accumulation and commercialization of multiple rental properties. These accommodations are either obtained illegally through nominee companies or through renting several units simultaneously. In the case of *Lily (R16)*, the houses adjacent to her bungalow are subleased on *Airbnb* by a Russian host. These units were furnished in a minimalistic manner and listed for double the original rental price. As she explained, *'I pay 25,000 Baht per month directly to the Thai landlord for the exact same house, but she rents them out on Airbnb for 50,000 Baht... It is just too much.'* This example illustrates how housing is increasingly treated as a commercial asset, as Gil (2023) described as the *financialization of housing*. Rental units are repurposed for short-term profit rather than residential use, further inflating prices and pushing the market beyond the reach of local residents.

Respondents also pointed to the steep rise in rental prices in recent years, which has further widened the gap between local and foreign access to housing. *Anan (R9)*, referring to digital nomads, remarked: *'People rent houses from Thais for 15,000 Baht and then sublet them for 35,000 Baht. This is easy business for people in internet business, easy money.'* *Emily (R2)* shared that her rent more than doubled in four years, from 9,000 Baht to 25,000 Baht. These accounts expose how digital nomadism contributes to housing market inflation and displacement. Through subleasing strategies driven by financial self-interest, digital nomads participate in extractive dynamics that erode local affordability and reform housing into a commodity serving mobile, high-income outsiders.

#### 4.2.4 Affordable housing decline

In response to the increased housing demand, construction on Koh Phangan has also intensified. Most of the construction happening on the island is aimed at providing more modern and luxurious villas for wealthy digital nomads and foreigners. These developments rarely benefit the local population. *Saranya (R10)* lives across from a construction site where 6 modern villas are built. She informs me: *'These houses will only be for the farang. The Thai don't live in this type of housing; it is too expensive.'*

The competition on the housing market for Thai traditional houses or cheaper accommodations such as bamboo bungalows has also increased in the past 4 years. This competition is a result of the conversion of permanent rentals into temporary rentals by and for foreigners, but also from the influx of workers that relocated to Koh Phangan to work in the construction and tourist

sector. Broader tourism and land development has induced an influx of mostly Burmese workers that moved to the island because of the employment opportunities. *'All the migrant workers take up a large proportion of the affordable housing such as bamboo bungalows. This is an extra strain on the housing market for the generation of locals that is moving out of their parents' home. There is a lot of development for luxury villas, not so much of affordable housing for the locals.'* – Thomas (R11).

During the fieldwork many of the servers in restaurants, workers in construction and cleaning services were natively Burmese. The political instability in Myanmar has displaced many Burmese people into neighboring countries such as Thailand. As a response to the increased demand for cheap labor on Koh Phangan as a direct result of increased tourism and digital nomadism on the island, many of the Burmese refugees have fulfilled so-called *'dirty jobs'* in the tourism sector. These Burmese workers often earn lower salaries than Thai workers and experience even more difficulty finding affordable housing.

In an interview with *Chaiwat (R4)* the living experiences of his Burmese employees were shared. *'The employees cannot afford their own housing or bungalow, and get it provided from the company. Most of us are Thai or Burmese and share bungalows together. Their housing is very simplistic. They are bamboo or wooden bungalows, with a simple fan and no kitchen.'* As many of these workers get their housing provided for by the companies they work for, these bungalows are often built on-site, meaning the houses do not enter the real estate market. Real estate agent *Gabriel (R15)* explains that the housing market for these company-provided houses is therefore partly separate from the housing market in which the Thai look for housing.

Not all of the houses are provided for, and competition on the housing market for the cheaper accommodation has increased. There has been some development and construction of affordable housing, but it is not nearly enough nor is it up-to-standards. *'The locals cannot afford the prices of these farang villas and choose for knock-down houses instead. These are houses ordered from the mainland. They come in with steel and wooden panels and they put together very fast, because we don't have enough houses for locals.'* – Nim (R14).

#### 4.2.5 Worries and effects

The widespread use of sublease tactics and lack of investment in affordable housing for locals have left the local community concerned about their living situations. They often cannot afford the rising living expenses anymore. *Lily (R16)*, *Jack (R12)*, *Nim (R14)* and *Sophie (R13)* shared the observation that locals have been gradually pushed out of areas like Srithanu or even Koh Phangan altogether due to unaffordable prices. As *Jack (R12)* noted, *'I know other people that can't really afford that they used to be able to. They worry or they just leave.'*

The pressures of rising housing costs on Koh Phangan have become increasingly visible, particularly among local residents. During an interview, *Malee (R3)* illustrated the severity of these pressures. At the time, she was renting a small bedroom without a kitchen or living room for 6,000 Baht. She voiced her uncertainty about the future, stating: *'I don't know what will happen when I have to move. I will have to pay 10.000 to 20.000 Baht for an unsafe bungalow, with nothing, and I only get paid 10.000 baht in the low season. How will I eat?'* Her situation underscores the mismatch between local income levels and the rapidly increasing living costs.

This concern is echoed by other residents. *Luke (R8)* shared, *'I'm worried that the rents gonna go up to a point that I can't pay it and, Thankfully \*touchwood\*. I know my landlady very well.'*

*We've known each other 20 years and, she's always been reasonable and fair with me.*'. While personal relationships with landlords may still offer some measure of stability, such arrangements are becoming increasingly rare as rental dynamics shift.

*Kanya (R6)*, a Thai woman in her mid-thirties, has already relocated away from Srithanu due to affordability concerns and a diminishing sense of belonging. She explained that her income is no longer sufficient to support her family, and she worries that any future rent increase would further deteriorate her financial situation. Her experience resembles *loss of space* as described by Davidson (2008). Her sense of belonging erodes due to rapidly shifting socio-economic as a result of increasing digital nomadism. Morris (2019) refers to the term *communicide*, which describes the alienation experienced by the local community of Koh Phangan. This can lead to profound emotional consequences such as grief, isolation and loss of community support.

It is important to note that some locals own the land and a family house on their plot. These landowners are often not directly affected by rental increases. *Anurak (R5)*, who owns land and operates a motorbike shop in the center of Srithanu, explained, *'I don't worry about my rent because I don't pay rent. I already paid for my land 30 years ago. But my son, he wants to move out. But it is too expensive.'* His personal housing finances are protected through historical ownership, a protection more commonly experienced by other locally born elders in the community. Younger members of the local community have difficulties finding their housing on the island and choose to live at home for a bit longer. This experience was also shared with a *22-year-old friend of Malee (R3)*, who cannot move out of her parents' house because she cannot afford it.

#### 4.2.6 Touristification

During the interviews, the respondents also expressed how the public scenery, economy and life has changed to accommodate tourists and other tourists. Fitting the term *touristification* as Cocola-Gant (2022) argues, Koh Phangan has adapted to accommodate tourists, particularly digital nomads. According to the respondents, the housing market is focused on digital nomads and other wealthy foreigners with a majority of high-end, luxurious villas out of the price range of the local community. Aside from the housing market, the public space, activities and businesses have also adjusted to the tourism demographics.

Restaurants, cafés and co-working spaces are catering to a foreign clientele. Numerous 'foreign' cuisines such as Israeli, Greek, Russian and Italian are widely available. *Kanya (R6)* voiced her displeasure and discontent with the influx of tourist restaurants. *'Now it is everywhere here [Srithanu area]. All is healthy healthy healthy like... avocado toast or smoothie bowl. Everything is vegan. I do not like. No... And there is no Thai place in Srithanu. I can only get the healthy vegan food.'* This respondent expressed dissatisfaction and frustration with the touristification of restaurants and vanishing local Thai restaurants. Restaurants and cafes always provide menus in English and sometimes also in Hebrew and Russian, accommodating the two main foreign nationalities on Koh Phangan. Additionally, the prices at restaurants and local food markets have become too expensive for the local community. They are economically excluded in such social activities and gatherings. *Emily (R2)* talks about the prices of foreign food: *'The moment you want to eat foreign food; it is quite expensive. 280-350 Baht. [...] When you live here on Thai salary, you cannot eat like that every day.'*

Other businesses around the island also cater to the needs, wishes and wallets of tourists. On Koh Phangan, most common tourist activities are related to spirituality, yoga and breathwork.

Many businesses have opened up with retreats, teacher-schools, workshops and classes that cater to digital nomads and other tourists. The area around Srithanu is known for being the islands spiritual center. *Emily (R2)* shares: *'Srithanu is like the yogi type of area. There is a lot of breath work, vegan restaurants and stuff like that. I can see how it changed and became very commercialized around that image. It's not only digital nomads, but also people who immigrate here. It used to look like little fruit stalls and now there's massive gyms, massive massage places. It is not local anymore. It is a hidden gem discovered and commercialized.'* It exemplifies how Srithanu has developed to cater to tourists and touristic activities.

Confirming Devine's (2016) analysis of neocolonialism in tourism, the appropriation and commodification of yoga and spirituality by Western practitioners in Koh Phangan exemplify how cultural practices are abstracted from their local and historical contexts to serve Westerners. This process displaces local agency and local Thai culture whilst reinforcing neocolonial structures. This shift has also led to cultural tensions. *Anan (R9)*, a 50-year-old local man comments, *'I don't like yoga; it is not Thailand. Only farang do this.'* Additionally, locals are economically excluded from these practices as the prices are aimed to affluent foreigners.

Co-working spaces have rapidly expanded across Koh Phangan to meet the needs of digital nomads, offering high-speed internet, air-conditioning, and café-style amenities. These spaces are largely inaccessible to the local population, as most residents do not work online and the prices are too expensive. As *Malee (R3)* remarked, *'I work here at the shop, I don't work online. What should I do there? Most of us [Thai] don't have online job. And the coffee is too expensive.'*

Inflation and economic exclusion across all sectors is a direct result of digital nomadism, as *Luke (R8)* exemplifies in his statement below.

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*'There's inflation on everything, food, accommodation, electric um, taxes and business costs. Everything's getting more expensive. It's been ongoing for a long time but just mostly because of the accommodation increases then uh the staff need to get paid more to afford their accommodation uh which means the food has to go up in more and more and more and more and more and more, price to cover the increase in wages. Yeah, it's a knock-on effect.'*

– *Luke (R8)*

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The appropriation of public space and retail to the new, affluent demographic has increased socio-economic difficulties among local residents. *Nim (R14)* reflects on the tourism development since 2022, stating: *'It is too much for me because everything now is too expensive. 100%. Yes. 100%.'*

#### 4.2.7 Neocolonial narratives on economic benefits

The arrival of digital nomads on Koh Phangan is often framed as economically beneficial, both by digital nomads themselves and by (foreign) business owners who cater to them. However, such narratives must be situated within broader critical debates on tourism, mobility, and power. Digital nomadism is enabled by and maintains global inequalities that determine who gets to move, who gets to profit, and who is excluded. Narratives that center economic benefits of digital nomadism often stem from actors positioned to profit from neocolonial power structures (Devine, 2016).

This framing was particularly evident in interviews with foreign business owners who benefit directly from nomadic spending. *Luke (R8)*, for example, emphasized the positive impact of digital nomads on his business, stating: *'So, yeah, it's great. It's great to see so many digital nomads coming over and it's good for my business because that means that people that are earning Western money often and they have money to spend on things like wake boarding.'* However, this perspective reflects a privileged economic position rather than an inclusive view of local economic wellbeing.

Similarly, *Jack (R12)*, a UK-born entrepreneur catering to digital nomads, argues that the *'redistribution of wealth'* allows for economic benefits and prosperity to be shared from digital nomads to the local community. *'You are basically taking money from rich countries and then bringing it into the economies of poor countries.'* This framing not only neglects historical and systemic power imbalances between the Global North and South but also reinforces the idea that Western economic presence is inherently beneficial, an assumption rooted in neocolonial ideology.

Digital nomads themselves also expressed views reflecting this logic. *Lily (R16)* argued that digital nomads support to the local economy by extending tourism into the low season: *'Where the island might have had more low seasons historically, there does not seem to be as much of a low season anymore. They are getting steady income.'* However, this perspective is shaped by her own mobility and economic privilege. While some businesses catering to digital nomads may benefit from year-round demand, this does not extend to all sectors and local community members. Local tourism workers such as *Emily (R2)* and *Malee (R3)*, employed in a diving shop, reported ongoing fluctuations in income. *Malee (R3)* in particular noted significant financial hardship during the low season due to her reliance on commission-based earnings.

### 4.3 Socio-cultural impacts

#### 4.3.1 International community dynamics

The community on Koh Phangan has changed significantly over the years. Digital nomads have increasingly become part of the community on Koh Phangan, especially since the influx after the COVID-19 pandemic. *Emily (R2)* demonstrates the community change in the following quote: *'Yeah, the community has changed 100%. When I first came to the island, our island was very popular for the full moon party. Most of the tourists were backpackers from Europe and the UK, all aged between 18-24. Now there are more families, especially on the northwest side of the island.'* Koh Phangan has grown in population, but also in nationalities. Many foreigners have entered the community with the biggest groups of digital nomads coming from Israel, Russia and the EU. Aside from digital nomads, many Burmese and Thai individuals have moved to Koh Phangan and work in the tourism industry.

On Koh Phangan, a stark hierarchy between Western digital nomads and Burmese migrants reflects broader global inequalities in mobility and labor. While both groups technically fit the definition of migrants (Anderson & Blinder, 2015), Westerners are often labeled as *digital nomads* or *expats*, terms that carry positive connotations of privilege, skill, and cosmopolitanism (Despotovic et al., 2022; Woldoff & Litchfield, 2021). In contrast, Burmese workers are confined to low-wage, stigmatized service roles and described as doing *'dirty jobs'* reinforcing racialized divisions of labor. As one respondent noted, management positions are held by Thais, while Burmese workers *'serve you, making the food.'* – Emily (R2).

The community dynamics have also altered due to increase of digital nomads on Koh Phangan. Malee (R3) thinks that the population ratio on Koh Phangan is *'50% digital nomads, 30% Thai and 20% Burmese.'* Such a swift influx has contributed to growing tensions, especially between local residents and the predominantly Western nomad population. Luke (R8) noted: *'The last year has been quite strained because of the massive influx of tourism, so there is a kind of negative feeling towards Westerners, but it's not, it's not, it's not bad.'* These strained relations are shaped by cultural shifts, misunderstandings, and disrespectful behavior, as well as by the economic challenges discussed in chapter 4.2 *Economic impacts*.

#### 4.3.2 Segregation

Overall segregation in the community is maintained and elevated by the spatial segregation of Thai locals and digital nomads. Digital nomads tend to live in the newly developed villas that are almost all located on the *'sunset coast'* of Koh Phangan, while locals are being geographically displaced and live elsewhere on the island. Some digital nomad communities are even gated communities, using physical barriers to separate them from other neighborhoods. Photos 8 and 9 show a land development sign for the *Nomad Hill* and the community *Arcana* on the west coast of Koh Phangan. These developments are explicitly built for digital nomads, and their branding constructs a spatial and symbolic divide between the new demographic and the local population. This form of spatial and social separation reflects what Jiwasiddi et al. (2024) describe as the *digital nomad bubble*, where digital nomads live in exclusive, self-contained enclaves with minimal engagement with the surrounding community. These bubbles reinforce socio-economic and cultural segregation, enabling nomads to enjoy the benefits of paradise without being confronted with the inequalities their presence causes and intensifies.

During the interview with Anan (R9), he mentioned a change in community dynamics in terms of pace and attitudes. He described digital nomads as *'rushed and everything fast fast fast.'* The respondent explained that the Thai culture is very laid back, relaxed and tranquil, a viewpoint shared with many other respondents (2, 3, 4, 8, 11, 12 & 14). Chaiwat (R4) adds that these Western cultures do not mix well with the Thai culture says: *'Europeans are no Buddhist; it is no good for Thailand.'*

Several interviews and conversations pointed out that digital nomads often remain socially and culturally secluded from the Thai and Buddhist culture on Koh Phangan. This perceived lack of integration was summarized by Chaiwat (R4, M), who stated, *'They only care about themselves.'*, a sentiment echoed by other local residents. This again confirms the *'digital nomad bubble'* (Jiwasiddi et al., 2024). Interactions with the local culture and community remains superficial and selective. Jack (R12), noted that *'The nomads have a bit more of an understanding and... they give a shit... They are more passionate about the environment and trying to recycle the plastic and stuff.'* Such perceptions often relate to consumption practices rather than cultural engagement.



*Photo 8: Photograph of an advertisement sign for the 'nomad hill' and roads for construction traffic. The nomad hill is a to-be-developed digital nomad neighborhood on the west-coast of Koh Phangan.*



*Photo 9: A photograph of an eco-village that is partly still in construction. It is a neighborhood and community that also provides yoga-retreats for digital nomads. It is surrounded by a concrete-wall creating a physical barrier to enter the community.*

The increasing disconnection experienced between the local community and the digital nomads mirrors the discussion in the literature review around social cohesion and the difficulty of forming lasting bonds due to the transient nature of digital nomads and mismatch between utilization and contribution to the community (Miocevic, 2024). It also reflects the Social Exchange Theory, where locals' increasingly negative perceptions stem from the costs, such as cultural erosion and reduced housing access. Such perceptions eventually outweigh the perceived benefits of tourism, creating a negative perception and attitude towards nomadic tourism development (Ap & Crompton, 1993; Wortman et al., 2016).

#### 4.3.3 Behavior

Cultural disrespect emerged as a central theme in conversations about the tensions between digital nomads and the local Thai community. Respondents described a growing sense that many digital nomads and other tourists fail to understand or engage with local values, norms, and religious customs. *Thomas (R11)* remarked, '*One of the things I'm missing... Expats, migrants, whatever we call them, trying to understand the local norms and values and culture.*'. Disrespectful behavior examples such as littering, shouting, wearing inappropriate clothing, or refusing to remove shoes in shops and restaurants were frequently mentioned across interviews, online forums and observed during the fieldwork. *Thomas (R11)* listed some of the common issues: '*haggling, bargaining, scooter accidents, littering and garbage accumulation on the streets and drug and alcohol usage in tourist areas.*'.

Several respondents pointed to nudity and beachwear as especially offensive in a Buddhist context. *Nim (R14)* clarifies: '*It is a Buddhist culture and there are certain things that are just disrespect. Like nudity. And basic things like cover your shoulders when you enter a temple. And all the nudity on the beaches.*'. *Emily (R2)* added: '*I have never seen a Thai person on that beach [Zen Beach]. Never.*'. Such incidents were also linked to general frustration with foreigners' behavior in public spaces. *Lily (R16)* said, '*If you are on the beach, when you are walking through. Just cover up. Locals do notice it. Small things mean a lot, especially when there are more expats and more foreigners coming to the island.*'.

*Luke (R8)* adds to this: '*There is a lot of disrespect... Not wearing shirts in public or, going walking around in bikinis or topless.*'. He points out that such occurrences have increased as there are more digital nomads coming to the island. '*Koh Phangan has become a more standard tropical beach destinations, and that comes with nudity [...] It becomes less and less like Thailand on Koh Phangan here. [...] The locals are not as surprised anymore as before but they still do not appreciate it. Especially the older generation.*'.

Another issue that was repeatedly mentioned is the refusal to take of one's shoes when entering shops, temples, restaurants or homes. *Nim (R14)* illustrates: '*When you see people in places and not taking their shoes off. It takes two seconds to realize that people are taking them off. Do that. It just little things that show respect for the country.*'. During the fieldwork multiple discussions between Thai shop owners and digital nomads about taking one's shoes off were witnessed. Many restaurants and shops have put up signs to remind people of this practice, but many times these posters and signs were ignored.

*Anurak (R5)* and *Malee (R3)* observed a clash between Western efficiency and Thai social norms. They find it disrespectful when Western customers are very demanding and in a hurry. *Malee (R3)* also described a public confrontation between an Israeli couple that shouted at a Thai taxi driver. It reflects the cultural differences in terms of tone and communication. She

elaborates: *'This really does not go well with the Thai slowed down culture. The taxi driver did not shout back, as we will never raise our voices and have a fight.'*

Theft is also an increasing problem on the island. There have been more instances of digital nomads leaving shops and restaurants without paying. *Jack (R12)* mentioned how many of these instances are reported in online community platforms, trying to get more attention to this problem. *Emily (R2)* too has seen an increase in these problems and elaborates how awareness is raised among the community members: *'On the Facebook group you see it so many times that Israeli people come in and eat but leave without paying. They just walk out and never pay the bill. And they will post it with video footage and be like please come in and pay the bill. It is just all this small stuff and common courtesy.'*

While many respondents clarified that not all visitors are disrespectful, several specifically named the Israeli community as a frequent source of tension. *Sophie (R13)* shared, *'I know it is not all of them. I mean of all the Israeli people I have met, like 90%, the majority, is disrespectful to the Thai culture.'* These perspectives reflect how certain nationalities may become associated with broader patterns of cultural friction on the island, reinforcing perceptions of social misalignment between digital nomads and local Thai life. Although the Israeli community was mentioned by multiple respondents, it was not the specific focus of this research and is therefore not explored in detail. Nonetheless, its repeated appearance in the narratives signals a relevant direction for future investigation, which will be further disclosed in the *discussion (chapter 6)*.

#### 4.3.4 Westernization of the architectural landscape

Public space has also changed due to the increase of digital nomads. The development of new buildings are mostly done in a Western or European architectural style. As Devine (2016) and Cocola-Gant (2022) argue, tourism development often commodifies space and culture, prioritizing tourist imaginaries over local identities. On Koh Phangan, this process is reflected in the replacement of traditional Thai wooden houses with modern villas aimed at affluent nomadic populations. In the interview with *Sophie (R13)*, she recurrently mentioned her distaste in the new public aesthetics: *'I mean... they cut down everything and build these white, ugly looking houses... ugh... they are just so so so ugly.'*

*Nim (R14)*, who is saddened by the loss of Thai traditional houses, tells me a story of how traditional Thai houses are substituted with modern houses. The respondent feels and expresses a lot of frustration, disappointment and grief in regard to incident illustrated in her story. She values the Thai traditional houses and the preservation of such buildings but feels powerless in this development.

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*'Also, a lot of Thai wooden houses are disappearing. When I came here, I used to come in high season, and I cannot find a place to stay. I get to stay in very old Thai house. All the building made out of wood, and I don't see it anymore. And some of them, like last week, I went to meet some investor, and he showed me the land on the beach, and it was breathtaking, very beautiful. But I feel and he showed me the plan and then I am like, okay, this is another spot that is going to disappear. It's only exclusive for people who have money to spend and yeah, I am sad, but I did not say anything. It*

*is the way it is you know. And yeah, I walked out and still see one old Thai house you know, like traditional Thai house. Village style. Well built, you know, big one. And I was so happy that I still see it here even though there is a fence blocking the house on the cliff. You can see the view from the balcony but then they put this wall like because the construction is starting \*aaargh\* in front of her. And I was like wow the grandma will not see the sea view anymore... Also, you know, the investor guy told me that there is grandma living there and I am actually surprised that it is not sold in the middle of all the fancy luxury villa. And he said 'oh that is sold, we let her stay as long as she is alive. When she passes, we're gonna remove this house and build a villa.' And then you know, this is depressing for me'..*

*– Nim (R14).*

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Below, photos 10 and 11 show the architectural styles of the new and modern housing on Koh Phangan. Photos 12 & 13 show two Thai traditional houses. The contrast between these images reflects a broader trend on the island, where modern developments are increasingly replacing traditional structures. This shift is further evidenced by earlier stories of respondents, highlighting the ongoing demolition of traditional houses to accommodate contemporary construction.



*Photo 10 & 11: Newly constructed houses. On the left: a house in the center of Chaloklum build in Greek style. On the right: new villas build in the mountains of the west coast.*



Photo 12 & 13: Two Thai traditional houses in Thong Sala. Mostly made of wooden materials and located in a small neighborhood near Thong Sala with other traditional houses.

During the interviews respondents expressed feelings of alienation due to the Westernization of the architectural landscape on Koh Phangan, which closely corresponds to the theoretical ideas of loss of place and communiticide (Davidson, 2008; Morris, 2019). These feelings align with Cocola-Gant's (2022) argument about both direct and indirect displacement caused by touristification.

#### 4.4 Ecological impacts

Although not the central focus of this research, environmental changes on Koh Phangan emerged frequently in interviews and intersect meaningfully with experiences of housing-related displacement. The increase of people on Koh Phangan has resulted in a strain on the environment. Such strains include widespread deforestation which results in flooding, landslides and biodiversity loss. The majority of flooding issues are concentrated around Srithanu, where extensive land development is occurring in the mountainous areas behind the coastal town.

*Luke (R8) who lives adjacent to a construction site near Chaloklum, notes that excessive flooding now occurs more regularly as development intensifies. He notes: 'Destruction of nature is causing my house to flood, you know, things like this, because all the dirt that they cut the mountain from, it washes into the rivers, fills the rivers up with building sand, and then the water can't get out to the sea, you know, so. A lot of flooding.'* Anurak (R5) echoed this: *'It floods every time it rains.'* He criticized foreign developers for removing all trees on a plot before construction: *'The land development of the foreigners is very different from Thai, traditional land development. The new developments often cut down all trees on a plot, no matter where the houses are exactly gonna be put, and later on they will plant a tree back as a garden.'*



*Photo 14 & 15: Two construction sites. On the left, a construction on top of a hill near Chaloklum. All (palm)trees have been demolished, and the ground is getting prepared for building. On the right, a construction site on a hill next to Koh Ma Beach. Almost all trees on the plot have been removed.*

Photos 14 and 15 show two plots in development, where deforestation has caused trouble for the people who live downhill, as that is where the water accumulates and a lot of flooding happens. At the time of the fieldwork, the roads around Srithanu flooded every time heavy rainfall occurred. Streams of dirt water and garbage fled into the roads creating hazardous roads with potholes and slippery soil as depicted in photos 16, 17 and 18.



*Photo 16, 17, 18: Flooding of the roads around Srithanu after heavy rainfall.*

Several respondents also raised concerns about biodiversity loss. *Nim (R14)* reflected on a former living situation of hers: *'They cut so many trees, and there is a lot of birds, squirrels and snakes also come to my house then because the trees get cut down. I have never seen so much before at night. And I am sad for them, you know? Because they are losing homes.'* Similarly, *Thomas (R11)* noted: *'Undeveloped wetlands have rich biodiversity. You know birds, toads, fish and lizards. Much more ecologically valuable. But they don't care.'* He explained how filling such wetlands with sand enable construction but removes natural water retention areas, contributing to flooding and declining water safety: *'The wetlands were our water reservoirs, keeping the roads from flooding and supplying us with fresh water. The water can't slowly sink into the ground anymore and just slides right over it, straight into the sea as water finds the easiest way, destroying everything on its way, going to the ocean.'*

Ecological degradation on Koh Phangan contributes to a deeper form of displacement, as deforestation and land development erode residents' emotional connection to place, aligning with earlier research of Vestby et al. (2024). *Nim (R14)* expressed feeling *'sad, sad, sad'* watching wildlife lose their homes. The environmental destruction weakens community bonds and identity, contributing to feelings of communiticide and loss of space (Davidson, 2008; Morris, 2019; Vestby et al., 2024). Although residents may remain physically in place, the loss of natural landscapes strips away familiarity and belonging, reinforcing the layered impacts of digital nomad-driven transformation on the island.

## 5. Conclusion

This research aimed to explore how digital nomadism affects the economic and socio-cultural dynamics of the housing market in Koh Phangan. The central research question was: *How does digital nomadism affect the economic and socio-cultural dynamics in regard to the housing market on Koh Phangan, Thailand from the perspective of local residents?*

This research question was supported by the following sub-questions:

1. *What are the specific socio-economic and socio-cultural impacts of digital nomadism on the housing market of Koh Phangan?*
2. *How do local residents perceive the socio-economic impacts of nomadic tourism on the housing market in their community?*
3. *How do the local residents perceive the socio-cultural impacts of nomadic tourism on the housing market in their community?*

To answer this overarching question, the perceptions of the socio-economic and socio-cultural impacts are evaluated. Furthermore, the perceptions of the ecological consequences are considered. The literature review provided a critical lens that revealed the global inequalities sustaining the digital nomad lifestyle and the processes of geoarbitrage, neocolonialism, and touristification. These theoretical insights were echoed in the fieldwork findings, reinforcing the argument that digital nomadism often reproduces unequal global power relations at the local scale.

### 5.1 Socio-economic impacts

The influx of digital nomads has led to a significant increase in demand for housing on Koh Phangan, especially on the Westcoast and Srithanu. Through the practice of geoarbitrage, digital nomads are able to afford higher rents than locals, often outbidding them by paying yearly rent upfront. This has stimulated an increase in subleasing, in which foreigners illegally sublease apartments to other digital nomads or other tourists as short-term rentals. These temporary rentals generate higher profits than the earnings of original Thai landlords and reflect a shift toward speculative rental practices.

Moreover, there has been an increase in nominee companies, in which Thai individuals mask the foreign ownership of a company. These nominee companies enable non-locals to circumvent legal restrictions and purchase land, often for housing development and investments. These villas, aimed exclusively at digital nomads, contribute to a landscape increasingly designed for affluent outsiders. While these investments *can* bring revenue, they predominantly facilitate capital extraction, as nomads are not structurally tied to the community and often do not reinvest locally. The resulting *economic leakages* reinforce economic inequality and undermine community development. During fieldwork, local residents voiced strong frustration and a growing sense of injustice toward these patterns of exclusion and exploitation.

The increase of digital nomads on the island has contributed to reduced availability of affordable housing for local residents. The *Airbnb-induced rent gap* incentivizes landlords and investors to prioritize profitability over community needs. Koh Phangan's housing market has adapted to temporary, affluent digital nomads and other foreigners rather than the permanent community. Interviewees described how housing prices have doubled since COVID-19,

adapting to the incomes of the wealthy digital nomads, while the Thai income levels have almost stayed unaltered. This caused many concerns among the local community about their (future) living and housing situation.

The strain on affordable housing is further intensified by the increased presence of Burmese workers. In order to accommodate and cater to the wealthy digital nomads on Koh Phangan, the island has witnessed an influx in Burmese workers who work the *'dirty jobs'* such as construction, cleaning and restaurant service. Earning less than Thai residents, Burmese migrant workers intensify competition for low-cost housing, deepening strain at the lower end of the market. Their presence reveals a frequently neglected dimension of nomadic tourism's labor structure, where the burden of sustaining luxury and convenience for digital nomads is disproportionately carried by a vulnerable migrant workforce. Although some companies now provide designated housing for these workers, the overall effect has been a deepening disparity of access to housing based on class, ethnicity, and citizenship.

In addition to housing, the cost of living has risen across sectors. Respondents affirmed that the prices in food, fuel, healthcare and leisure had increased rapidly. Basic needs are now often out of reach for residents employed in Thai businesses. Local livelihoods are no longer supported by the island's economy, forcing residents to make difficult trade-offs, reduce their quality of life, or consider relocation. This mirrors patterns of indirect displacement described in gentrification studies, where individuals remain in place but feel economically and socially excluded.

Overall, the local population on Koh Phangan has faced social and financial hardships since the rise of digital nomadism. Since 2023–2024, residents have observed accelerating land development, nominee companies, and unregulated subleasing, all of which have intensified housing pressures. Displacement, both direct and indirect, has become lived reality. Some residents have relocated within the island, while others have left entirely. Rooted in deeper structures of neocolonialism and geoarbitrage, these transformations harm the local community and their economy. Digital nomadism upkeeps global hierarchies, where mobility and ownership are reserved for a Western mobile elite, while displacement and deprivation remain the experience of the local Thai majority. The limited economic gains are captured by a small group of actors embedded in high-end tourism and real estate, while the broader workforce is left navigating their communities marked by exclusion, precarity, and loss.

## 5.2 Socio-cultural impacts

Respondents expressed strong feelings of alienation and loss of community, particularly due to the spatial and social separation between digital nomads and local residents. The arrival of digital nomads accelerated the appropriation of everyday spaces and reshaped them according to foreign needs and aesthetics. Since COVID-19, local commercial and cultural venues have increasingly been replaced by tourist-oriented businesses. This transformation contributed to a growing sense of displacement and a diminishing sense of place identity, leading to emotional and social disconnection with one's environment and community.

While digital nomads often portray themselves as conscious and respectful travelers, their interactions with the local community remain limited. The increase of exclusive digital nomad hubs and gatherings has further established the separation between the two demographics. Digital nomads are often found in 'digital nomad bubbles' at co-working spaces or co-living communities and have limited social integration with the local community. These enclaves

intensified feelings of exclusion among locals, particularly when public and natural spaces are increasingly adapted to the digital nomad lifestyle. Residents reported that beaches, cafés and parks have been rebranded and repurposed to cater to digital nomads, marginalizing local uses and traditions.

In the past few years, Koh Phangan has seen an influx of digital nomads, with a variety of nationalities and cultures settling on the island. Most digital nomads on Koh Phangan are from Western countries, most notably from Israel. The increase of new cultures on the island has disrupted existing community dynamics, cultural traditions and practices. Additionally, clashes with Thai and/or Buddhist values and customs have increased and intensified. Respondents shared personal stories and anecdotes of cultural friction, such as public nudity, inappropriate behavior in temples, disregard for basic cultural norms such as removing shoes before entering buildings and communication-style differences.

In addition, Thai residents expressed concern over the commercialization and reinterpretation of spirituality and wellness. Practices such as yoga, healing and breathwork, which are often imported and led by foreigners, are now branded as part of the island's image, even though this does not originate from Thai tradition. This raises concerns over cultural appropriation and the erasure of local identity, aligning with neocolonial tendencies.

Public space, including commercial spaces, has altered to accommodate digital nomads and their culture. Local residents reported a change in scenery along the island, especially the west coast. Land development is almost solely catering to the styles of Western elites, reflecting a Westernization of architecture. Traditional Thai wooden houses are replaced by white, concrete modern houses changing the landscape drastically in a short period of time. These developments symbolize more than stylistic change; they reflect deeper neocolonial dynamics. Such processes are part of the spatial colonization of the Global South, where Western individuals use geoarbitrage to convert their economic privilege into physical dominance. Land becomes a commodity shaped around their desires, with minimal regard for local communities. The locals have started to feel that their physical and cultural environment is no longer theirs to define.

The Social Exchange Theory offers an important lens to understand the growing dissatisfaction among residents. The costs of nomadic tourism have become more severe and noticeable among the broader part of the local population as digital nomads increasingly dominate public space and culture on Koh Phangan. Fieldwork made clear that many residents no longer feel the benefits of nomadic tourism outweigh the disruptions. The loss of culture, the feeling of alienation and the social segregation all contribute to rising frustration. As touristification and economic inequality increases, community trust and cohesion is weakened.

### 5.3 Ecological impacts

The influx of digital nomads and the demand for suitable housing for this demographic has resulted in land development all around the island, but particularly on the west coast. In the mountains and at the beach front land tracts have been established through deforestation and land filling of wetlands. These plots are used to build houses, co-working spaces and other facilities for digital nomads.

These tactics have resulted in environmental degradation in various manners. Deforestation has led to biodiversity loss and increased flooding. Floods around the west coast, especially in

Srithanu, have caused damage to buildings and infrastructure. These floods are also worsened by transformed wetlands. Wetlands have been a natural water storage on Koh Phangan but due to the development into building plots, the water cannot be safely stored anymore. This has caused biodiversity loss but also concerns and issues regarding the water levels and water safety on the island.

The local population is devastated by the loss of the natural beauty of Koh Phangan and by the damage it causes. It causes economic strains for repair and redevelopment. Although the local residents are proud that 40% of their island is protected from land development through a status of a National Park, they feel powerless and saddened by the level of construction elsewhere on Koh Phangan. These feelings further erode the emotional connection to environmental space and enhances feelings related to *loss of space*.

#### 5.4 Concluding remarks

Digital nomadism in Koh Phangan has resulted in various disadvantages and hardships for the local community. For the broader local population, the dominant impact has been one of increasing inequality. The local economy is increasingly tailored to the income levels of digital nomads, which far exceed those of Thai residents. This disparity has deepened divisions within the housing market and compromised the overall affordability and livability for locals. These imbalances are further maintained through profit-seeking practices such as illegal subleasing and nominee companies, which often exclude locals from meaningful participation or benefit.

Socio-culturally, digital nomadism causes feelings of disconnection, cultural and identity loss, and community tension. The quick surge in digital nomads and Western cultures has resulted in conflicts between the two demographics regarding economic, social, cultural and ecological issues. Furthermore, digital nomads often live socially and physically secluded from the (Thai) local residents, toughening the community dynamics even more. In light of the Social Exchange Theory, the costs of digital nomadism have started to outweigh the benefits for many local residents. Local residents are increasingly experiencing feelings of displacement and/or are physically relocated out of their local community.

These harsh dynamics can be related to phenomena such as neocolonialism, in which racial and economic inequalities have laid the foundation for the exploitation of the Thai culture, workforce and community. Nomadic tourism exploits rather than supports the host community on Koh Phangan. If left unaddressed, these developments risk further marginalizing local voices and representation, further eroding local culture and undermining long-term sustainability of tourism on the island.

## 6. Discussion

Digital nomadism on Koh Phangan presents a complex dynamic of benefits and challenges. Future policy and academic efforts should prioritize sustainable and inclusive development strategies. The inequality issues that are maintained and aggravated by the neocolonial structures within digital nomadism should be critically assessed.

The findings of this research underscore how digital nomadism on Koh Phangan operates within *and* reproduces global power structures shaped by neocolonial relations. As highlighted in the literature, digital nomads often benefit from geoarbitrage and structural privilege (Holleran, 2022; McElroy, 2020). The economy on Koh Phangan has adapted to the economic means of the digital nomads, creating financial hardships for the broader local population. The transformation of public space to serve digital nomads aligns with earlier research on touristification. Across all sectors, but particularly in the housing sector, prices have rapidly increased. The effects of touristification, both economical and socio-cultural, have led to disruptions in the housing market and community dynamics leading up to displacement, communicide and loss of space. It is furthermore important to highlight the new insights on digital nomadism this thesis captured. Specific difficulties and concerns on subleasing and nominee companies deepened the context on housing market dynamics and allowed for a better, and new understanding of rental increases. Nonetheless, the outcomes of this thesis point to a need for more critical engagement with the spatial and emotional consequences of tourism-driven development.

Future development strategies and related research such prioritize economic opportunities for local communities while preserving local culture, social cohesion and housing equity. Policies should include housing protections for permanent residents, tighter regulation of temporary rentals and participatory governance mechanisms that give voice to local concerns. This thesis has provided insights into the inequality experienced by the local residents of Koh Phangan with regards to the housing market, but this overall topic could be explored further.

### 6.1 Reflection

While this study provides relevant and timely insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. Firstly, the sample size was relatively small and based largely on snowball sampling, which may have excluded certain voices and perspectives. Especially the older native population had little voice in this research as the language barrier made it hard to involve them in the research and communicate with them. In these cases, some interviews relied on online translation tools or informal interpreters, which potentially affected the nuance, emotional tone, or depth of certain personal narratives.

The selection of my research population was guided by the clear aim to center the experiences of local residents who are economically embedded in Koh Phangan's context and impacted by changes in the housing market. This focus provided valuable insights into the everyday realities of displacement, rising costs, and shifting social dynamics. However, this focus also influenced which perspectives were highlighted and which remained less visible. The population consisted mainly of Thai residents, as well as some long-term foreign residents who were employed in a Thai business and received their income in Thai Baht. These Western foreign residents still occupy a relatively privileged position, often earning higher salaries than Thai natives and benefit from neocolonial structures. This scope risks amplifying perspectives shaped by mobility and whiteness rather than structural vulnerability of solely Thai natives.

Furthermore, the interpretation of the interviews and observations carries an inherent risk of bias, influenced by my own positionality as a white, Western, highly mobile visitor. During the fieldwork steps such as informal, trust-based interviewing and reflexive research practices were taken. However, I remained entangled in and enabled by the very structures this thesis critiques. These power asymmetries may have influenced what my respondents have said, what was silenced and how stories were framed. The research has sought to mitigate these challenges through a participatory and reflexive methodology (Bozalek, 2011), but the findings should still be understood within the context-specific nature of the research process and the relationships formed during fieldwork.

In addition, the five-week fieldwork period, though immersive, captured only a snapshot of a much longer and evolving transformation. Seasonal dynamics, such as fluctuations in digital nomad populations or tourism flows, may have impacted both housing pressure and resident perceptions. This research therefore reflects a specific moment, rather than longer-term trends. Nonetheless, by capturing this particular moment through the lens of local experience, this study contributes to a growing understanding of how digital nomadism reshapes lived space and socio-economic justice on a micro-scale.

## 6.2 Recommendations for further research

Future research should adopt long-term, participatory approaches that allow for deeper engagement with local communities, including those who are less digitally connected or linguistically accessible. An additional recommendation is to include a local Thai researcher to help bridge linguistic and cultural barriers, enhance trust with participants, and provide deeper contextual knowledge that has remained inaccessible. This approach could help counter epistemic imbalances and contribute to more grounded and equitable knowledge production.

Additionally, future studies could focus on the perspectives and degrees of integration of digital nomads themselves, providing a more nuanced overview of digital nomadism. How do digital nomads perceive their own impact on Koh Phangan? To what extent are they aware of geoarbitrage, displacement, and neocolonial dynamics? Research could also expand to include other local groups, such as refugee workers from Myanmar, whose voices are often absent in this thesis. These perspectives could help form an inclusive tourism development strategy for the local government, providing a more nuanced and comprehensive plan for equality.

Furthermore, one promising avenue for future study is the rising presence of Israeli digital nomads on the island. Research might explore their patterns of settlement, cultural and social interactions, and their own self-perception as temporary residents. During this research, respondents shed light on the settlement of Israeli digital nomads on the island, and the issues that emerged from this. However, the research topic of this thesis did not focus on a specific nationality and settlement patterns, neglecting crucial topics for analyzing these dynamics.

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## Appendix A – Interview Guides

Two semi-structured interview guides for 1) interviews with local residents (Table A.1) and 2) interviews with digital nomads (Table A.2)

Practical information	Name interviewee:  Date:	Nationality:  Profession:
Introductionary questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Can you tell me a little bit about yourself and your connection to Koh Phangan?</li> <li>○ How long have you lived in Koh Phangan? Have you noticed any changes in the community over time?</li> <li>○ What motivated you to live in Koh Phangan? What do you like most about it?</li> <li>○ Could you describe your connection to tourism and/or digital nomad development on the island?</li> <li>○ Have you noticed an increase in digital nomads on the island? How would you describe this development?</li> <li>○ How would you describe the lifestyle and atmosphere of Koh Phangan?</li> <li>○ How would you describe the economy on Koh Phangan? What is the role of tourism in it?</li> <li>○ What are the main tourist attractions on the island? Where are they located?</li> <li>○ How would you describe the role of digital nomads on the island? How do you distinguish between traditional tourists and digital nomads?</li> <li>○ What are the main spots for digital nomads on the island?</li> <li>○ What do you think are the positive outcomes of nomadic tourism? What do you think are more negative outcomes of nomadic tourism?</li> <li>○ Have you noticed any differences in public space?</li> </ul>	
Social and cultural impacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ How do you feel about the presence of digital nomads in Koh Phangan?</li> <li>○ How do you think digital nomads have an impact on the local community? How do you feel about that?</li> <li>○ Have you noticed any changes in or around public spaces due to digital nomads?</li> <li>○ Have you noticed any changes in businesses and restaurants due to digital nomads?</li> <li>○ How would you describe your personal relation to your neighborhood and community? Has this changed over the years? If yes, how has this changed?</li> <li>○ Do you interact with digital nomads? If so, how would you describe these interactions?</li> <li>○ How would you describe the connection between digital nomads and your community?</li> </ul>	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ How would you describe Koh Phangan’s culture? What is the role of your local culture and identity in tourism development? Has this role changed over the years?</li> <li>○ Have digital nomads affected local traditions or community dynamics?</li> </ul>
Economic impacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ How do you think digital nomads have an impact on the local economy? How do you feel about that?</li> <li>○ What does the accommodation sector look like on the island? Where are most of the accommodations for digital nomads located? Do you know what they look like?</li> <li>○ Have you experienced any changes in housing affordability or availability in recent years? How would you describe this change? How do you feel about it?</li> <li>○ Can you name a reason for these changes?</li> <li>○ Have you noticed increased competition on the housing market?</li> <li>○ Do you worry about your housing situation?</li> <li>○ Have you noticed any differences in investments on Koh Phangan?</li> <li>○ Who, do you think, are the owners of accommodation facilities on Koh Phangan? What about other facilities for digital nomads? How do you feel about this?</li> <li>○ How do you think digital nomads contribute to the local economy? Why do you think so? How does that make you feel?</li> <li>○ Have you noticed a change in prices on the island (inflation)? In which sector(s)? (housing/food &amp; beverage/leisure etc.)</li> <li>○ What are the governments regulations and policies to support local businesses and especially accommodation facilities? How do you feel about these regulations?</li> </ul>
Concluding questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What is your overall opinion on tourism development, specifically digital nomadism, on the island?</li> <li>○ What would you say are the most prominent challenges on the housing market right now? Where do you think these challenges come from?</li> <li>○ Do you have anything else you would like to add?</li> </ul>

*Table A.1: Interview Guide for local residents*

Practical information	Name interviewee:  Date:  Nationality:	Profession:  Length of stay in Koh Phangan:
Introductionary questions:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Can you tell me a little bit about yourself and your background?</li> <li>○ What motivated you to come to Koh Phangan as a digital nomad?</li> <li>○ How long have you been staying in Koh Phangan? Have you stayed in other popular digital nomad destinations before?</li> <li>○ How do you experience daily life as a digital nomad on the island? What does a typical day look like for you?</li> <li>○ Where do you stay on the island? How did you find your accommodation?</li> <li>○ How would you describe the atmosphere and lifestyle in Koh Phangan? What attracts digital nomads here?</li> <li>○ How do you distinguish between traditional tourists and digital nomads on the island?</li> </ul>	
Awareness of socio-cultural impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ How do you perceive the relationship between digital nomads and the local community?</li> <li>○ Do you interact with local residents? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?</li> <li>○ Have you noticed any cultural differences between digital nomads and locals? How do you navigate these differences?</li> <li>○ Do you think digital nomads affect local traditions or community dynamics? If yes, how?</li> <li>○ Have you observed any changes in local businesses or public spaces that could be linked to the presence of digital nomads?</li> <li>○ Do you think digital nomads contribute to the local community beyond economic aspects? If so, how?</li> </ul>	
Awareness of economic impact on the housing market	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Are you aware of the impact digital nomads have on the local housing market? What are your thoughts on this?</li> <li>○ Have you heard of any local concerns regarding housing affordability or availability? What do you think about this?</li> <li>○ Do you think digital nomads contribute positively to the local economy? Why or why not?</li> <li>○ How are the prices (cost of living) compared to your 'home' country? Have you noticed inflation whilst traveling the past couple of years? What are your thoughts on this?</li> <li>○ Are you aware of any local regulations or policies aimed at digital nomads? Do you think such policies are necessary?</li> </ul>	
Personal reflection and ethical considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Do you think digital nomads should take responsibility for their impact on local communities? Why or why not?</li> <li>○ What steps, if any, do you personally take to minimize negative impacts on the local community and environment?</li> </ul>	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Have you ever reconsidered your presence in a destination due to concerns about over-tourism or gentrification?</li> <li>○ What advice would you give to future digital nomads coming to Koh Phangan regarding their impact on the island?</li> </ul>
Concluding questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What is your overall perspective on digital nomadism and its long-term sustainability in Koh Phangan?</li> <li>○ Do you have anything else you would like to add about your experience as a digital nomad on the island?</li> </ul>

*Table A.2: Interview Guide for Digital Nomads*

## Appendix B – Operationalization table

Theoretical concept	Indicators	Codes	Targeting interview questions (examples)	Target group
<b>Housing affordability and displacement</b>	Rising rent, reduced housing availability, increased competition	Housing price increase; rental increase; moving; causes of price increase; construction increase; displacement; increased competition; worries housing prices; lack of local housing	<p>- Have you experienced any changes in housing affordability or availability in recent years? How would you describe this change? How do you feel about it? Can you name a reason for these changes?</p> <p>- What are the most prominent challenges on the housing market right now?</p> <p>- What does the accommodation sector look like on the island? Where are most of the accommodations for digital nomads located? Do you know what they look like?</p> <p>- Do you worry about your housing situation?</p>	Local residents
<b>Geoarbitrage</b>	Income differences between nomads and locals, low cost of living motivation for nomads	Commission based income; Baht salaries; pull factors digital nomads; Western incomes	<p>- How are the prices (cost of living) compared to your 'home' country? Have you noticed inflation?</p> <p>- What motivated you to come to Koh Phangan as a digital nomad?</p>	Digital nomads
<b>Touristification</b>	Change in businesses and public spaces for tourists/nomads	Construction; gentrification; new businesses; yoga/pilates, spirituality; co-working spaces' tourism development;	<p>- Have you noticed any changes in businesses and restaurants due to digital nomads?</p> <p>- Have you observed any changes in public spaces?</p>	Local residents
<b>Social Cohesion &amp; Integration</b>	Social Cohesion / Integration	Disrespect; preservation of locality; community dynamics; gated communities; resorts; stealing	<p>- How do you feel about the presence of digital nomads in Koh Phangan?</p> <p>- How do you think digital nomads have an impact on the local community? How do you feel about that?</p>	Local residents

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Do you interact with digital nomads? If so, how would you describe these interactions?</li> <li>- How would you describe the relationship between digital nomads and the local community?</li> </ul>	
<b>Cultural change and identity loss</b>	Change in traditions, values, festivals, everyday practices	Adapting to new cultures; name changes; nuisance; aesthetics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--How would you describe Koh Phangan's culture? What is the role of your local culture and identity in tourism development? Has this role changed over the years?</li> <li>- Have digital nomads affected local traditions or community dynamics?</li> </ul>	Local residents
<b>Economic leakages, contribution and inflation</b>	Investment, consumption, inflation, contribution to local economy	Economic leakage; construction illegal; subleasing; land ownership; nominee companies; short term rental; vanishing cuisines;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Have you noticed any differences in investments on Koh Phangan?</li> <li>- Who, do you think, are the owners of accommodation facilities on Koh Phangan? What about other facilities for digital nomads? How do you feel about this?</li> <li>- How do you think digital nomads contribute to the local economy? Why do you think so? How does that make you feel?</li> <li>- Have you noticed a change in prices on the island (inflation)? In which sector(s)? (housing/food &amp; beverage/leisure etc.)</li> </ul>	Local residents
<b>Awareness of Impact</b>	Reflections on own behavior and consequences	Responsibility; unawareness foreigners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Are you aware of the impact digital nomads have on the local housing market? What are your thoughts on this?</li> <li>- Do you think digital nomads should take responsibility for their impact?</li> <li>- What steps do you</li> </ul>	Digital nomads

			personally take to minimize negative impacts?	
<b>Regulatory environment</b>	Awareness and opinions on local regulations	Corruption; government regulations	<p>- Are you aware of any local regulations aimed at digital nomads? Do you think such policies are necessary?</p> <p>- What are the governments regulations and policies to support local businesses and especially accommodation facilities? How do you feel about these regulations?</p>	Both groups
<b>Ecological impacts</b>	Environmental changes	Construction environmental; flooding; landslides; biodiversity loss; water safety	- Have you noticed any differences in public space?	Local residents

Table B.1: Operationalization table to convert theory into practical indicators and questions for the interviews.