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Digital Nomad Influence on Malay Work Ethics: Exploring Cultural Dynamics

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DIGITAL NOMAD INFLUENCE ON MALAY WORK ETHICS: EXPLORING CULTURAL DYNAMICS

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Abstract

The trend of digital nomadism has increased for several years, but limited studies examined digital nomadism from a work ethic view. This study explores the possibility of the Malays being digital nomads using Weber's Work Ethic and Cultural Adaptationist approach. This study used a qualitative approach with a library research design. A qualitative study was conducted by scrutinizing literature related to digital nomads and Malays' work ethic. Two primary keywords for obtaining data were "Digital Nomads" and "Malay Work Ethic". After searching for these keywords, 127 articles, books, and reports were received and sorted again according to research purposes. The selected sources were subjected to thematic analysis to identify patterns, concepts, relations, and meanings gathered from the data. The results show that the Malays will potentially join the digital nomadism trend in the future, but they will preserve Islamic values as their work ethic principles. Digital nomads in the Malay region should adapt to local values to be accepted in local communities. This study contributes to the Malay World study in response to the globalization of the workplace.

Keywords: *Digital Nomads; Malays; Work Ethic; Cultural Adaptationist.*



A. Introduction

The trend of digital nomads since the COVID-19 pandemic has increased. According to a survey by A Brother Abroad (2023), more than 35 million digital nomads are estimated to be worldwide by 2022. 76% of digital nomads are of European ethnicity, 10% are Hispanic/ Latin, 8% are Asian, and 6% are of African descent. Countries in the Malay world, such as Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines, are among the favorite destinations for digital nomads (Club Med, 2022). Based on data from the Nomad List (2023), Malaysia is the most likely country for digital nomads. Meanwhile, Statista (2023b) revealed that Bali had the most significant number of digital nomads across Southeast Asia in 2019. Some factors that attracted digital nomads to stay in Bali, Indonesia, are the affordable cost of living, the digital nomads visa launched by the Indonesian government, and the beautiful nature of Bali (Descalsota, 2023). From these statistics, people who work as digital nomads are dominated by the Western world, and developing countries, including the Malay world, are the only destinations. Asian people, including Malays, have not yet become digital nomads.

Digital nomads are touted as one of the most promising jobs in the future. A report from Aquent (2022) states that 60% of the employees surveyed want to become digital nomads. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted traditional ways of working into remote working. This condition encourages employees to seek work flexibility regarding place and time and get adequately paid (Thompson, 2021a). Apart from that, a trend shows that more and more people want to work independently while simultaneously building interactions with communities outside their origin, including digital nomads (Schlegelmilch & Lysova, 2018; Hasanah et al., 2023). The trend of digital nomads indicates the potential for changes in how people work and even their livelihoods. Therefore, this potential can also occur in Malays as citizens of a global community.

So far, several studies have discussed digital nomads from a sociocultural perspective. There is criticism of the phenomenon of digital

nomads being touted on social media as the job of the future, even though it is only limited to FOMO (Fearing of Missing Out) or fear of being out of date (Bozzi, 2020). On the other hand, Kurniasari et al. (2022) see digital nomads as a new way of working that is inevitable in the digital era. Another study shows that prospective digital nomads tend to join virtual forums filled with digital nomads (Almeida et al., 2022). Digital nomads tend to form a community of fellow pleasure seekers at work (Thompson, 2019). Even so, they will still interact and try to adapt to the local community (Richards, 2015), although they still hang out with each other (Thompson, 2021b). One form of interaction is doing training to find work online. Some local people feel inspired to become digital nomads (Jiwasiddi et al., 2022). Previous studies show that digital nomads emerged as the new way of work.

Several studies have tried to look at the phenomenon of digital nomads with an ethnographic approach. Green's ethnographic study (Green, 2020) in Chiang Mai shows that digital nomads disrupt traditional working and the meaning of tourist destinations as a place of work. Digital nomads seek freedom broadly, so they do not want to be bound by a "social contract" with the state or corporate bureaucracy (Cook, 2022). This study aligns with Prester et al. (2019), who stated that even though they do not want to be tightly bound to an organization, they can still build a work identity as digital moms, working with autonomy and ensuring self-assurance. They work in revolutionary, adaptive, and disguised ways to gain legitimacy from the surrounding community (Prester et al., 2021), even though they have not been in one area long (Matos & Ardévol, 2021). Various existing studies have not paid much attention to the issue of whether the presence of digital nomads will impact local people's desire to change jobs or the way they work.

This paper aims to complement the shortcomings of previous studies by exploring how the Malay community's way of working might change from the work ethic perspective. In the past, Malays were perceived as "lazy" despite many scholars having countered it. This perceived work



ethic emerged because the Malays refused to be British imperialist workers (Alatas, 1977), whereas the digital nomads came with their original culture and values. This paper examines how these two cultures interact and whether the Malay work ethic is compatible with the digital nomads. Furthermore, this paper will contribute to the discourse regarding the Malay world's response to globalization, which has made the world more connected across space and time.

This paper's main argument is the cultural diffusion process by digital nomads. The Malay world, which currently still hosts digital nomads, has the potential to gain new values from digital nomads who work in their surroundings. The diffusion process can change people's views on how to work and influence work ethics due to direct and indirect interactions with digital nomads. Therefore, the Malay community cannot be separated from the possibility of experiencing a change in livelihood to become a digital nomad.

B. Method

This study used a qualitative approach with a library research design. Library research was chosen to explore how the work ethic of digital nomads and Malays is contained in various literature, books, scientific journals, reports, and online newspapers. Books and academic journals were obtained from two primary databases: Scopus and Google Scholar. Reports and online newspapers were gathered from Google searches. These sources were based on primary keywords.

Two primary keywords for obtaining data were "Digital Nomads" and "Malay Work Ethic". After searching for these keywords, 127 articles, books, and reports were received and sorted again according to research purposes. The selected sources were subjected to thematic analysis to identify patterns, concepts, relations, and meanings gathered from the data. This step aimed to get a more profound understanding of the Malays and digital nomads' work ethic.



The next step was analyzed using work ethic theory adapted from Weber and Keesing's cultural adaptationist approach. Weber's Protestant Work Ethic explains how digital nomads' and Malays' work ethics are compared to explore the similarities and differences between those worldviews of work ethic. Meanwhile, the use of the cultural adaptationist approach attempts to predict how the penetration of the digital nomads in the Malay region could evolutionarily change the work ethic of the Malays.

The discussion is divided into three main themes. The first part confers how the concept of the influence of the presence of digital nomads on the lives of local people. The second part examines digital nomads' influence on Malays' work ethic. The last section discusses the contestation of the probability of Malays becoming digital nomads in terms of work ethic.

C. Result and Discussion

1. The Influence of Digital Nomads on Local Communities

Many digital nomads choose the Malay region as a destination because it is geographically located near the equator. The climate and weather around the equator are perfect for digital nomads, who incidentally mostly come from the cold regions of Europe and North America. In addition, the many exotic areas, easily accessible, friendly locals, and friendly culture make them feel more at home. It impacts local communities economically, environmentally, and socio-culturally.

Tourist attractions, of course, invite economic attractiveness as well. Moreover, digital nomads are those with high incomes. According to data, their monthly expenses reach USD 1,875 (A Brother Abroad, 2023) or around IDR 28,510,875 at an exchange rate of 1 USD = IDR 15,205. Of course, this number is significant for developing countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines. Such a considerable expenditure certainly drives the economy of the surrounding community. People will buy local products and services, from food and drinks to accommodation. The relatively low cost of living is not a problem for digital nomads. Even so, it turns out that this triggers another issue, namely rising



prices in the areas where digital nomads live. The standard cost of living in digital nomads' home countries is cheap, but for local people, it is expensive. This difference raises prices to be more expensive (Thompson, 2021). In some locations, gentrification has even occurred.

Traditional gentrification is a process of poor land use in urban areas carried out by the upper middle class. Meanwhile, gentrification in the digital context is a situation in which the continuous use of the internet gives rise to the phenomenon of isolation in the areas where digital nomads live. They live in neighborhoods, but there is an income gap between digital nomads and residents who have lower incomes. Another impact of this gentrification is increased social costs due to rising property prices in areas inhabited by digital nomads. In Chiang Mai, Thailand, the world's digital nomad hub, the inclining number of coffee, co-working spaces, hotels, and other properties has raised property prices, which are unaffordable for the local people (Cook, 2023). Still, on the other hand, it makes it difficult for residents to own property due to income inequality. The third impact produced by this gentrification is the fall of local businesses because many have switched to digital companies, both from the entrepreneur and consumer sides, who are increasingly digital-minded (Bahri & Widhyharto, 2021a). This gentrification phenomenon is one of the socioeconomic impacts due to the massive influx of digital nomads worldwide.

From a sociocultural perspective, the presence of digital nomads also influences local communities. Digital nomads want to benefit the local community, but because more and more digital nomads are arriving, they sometimes do inappropriate things. Not all digital nomads can interact with the local community because they have much work to do, even though they want to learn about the local culture, including language and food. They want a sense of belonging to the local community. There is a phenomenon called a socio-cultural "bubble" (Jiwasiddi et al., 2022), namely the increasing number of specific immigrant communities in one area, which makes newcomers no longer enthusiastic about learning about local culture,

including language. They are more preoccupied and focused on interacting with their community, so a tendency has emerged that they do not need to adapt to the local culture. Even so, they relatively respect local culture and customs and are polite.

Digital nomads tend not to be stingy in sharing their knowledge and experience with the local community regarding work in the digital world. Some provide training to take advantage of the digital world as a source of livelihood. Few local people are interested in working in the digital world, including becoming digital nomads (Jiwasiddi et al., 2022). Especially during the pandemic, digital nomads were relatively unaffected in terms of income when many local people lost their jobs. Facts like this reinforce the image of the local community that works in the digital world as work that is more resilient to crises.

Social media amplify the image built by digital nomads (Jiwasiddi et al., 2022). Their work style, labeled as the “future of work”, encourages many young people to follow in the footsteps of digital nomads. Their lifestyle is widely exposed on social media as a work-life balance. They are portrayed as global travelers who travel easily without leaving their jobs. Of course, this interests young people and can potentially increase the number of digital nomads worldwide.

Social media influences young people's desire to become digital nomads (Bozzi, 2020). Instagram is a medium of exposure for digital nomads to show their lifestyles (Gretzel & Hardy, 2019). There are more than 3 million posts on Instagram with the hashtag #digitalnomad. It strengthens the evidence that social media exposure to digital nomads is high and can influence young people's decisions to become digital nomads, especially if they have directly interacted with them. Therefore, exposure to direct and indirect interactions with digital nomads impacts the desire to become a digital nomad.

The desire to become digital nomads is not without problems. People who want to become digital nomads must also understand the work



ethic of digital nomads, bearing in mind that there is a culture gap between digital nomads, who incidentally come from Western culture, and local people who are in Eastern cultural areas. It could be that many young people are interested in seeing how digital nomads move from one country to another. Based on data from Condor Ferries, as much as 50% of Gen Z and millennials prefer to travel solo. The data indicates that the two generations are ready to travel far from their origin.

2. Digital Nomads and the Malay Work Ethic

One of several things that make someone a digital nomad is the search for freedom, flexibility, and independence. The desire to get this makes a digital nomad must have high self-discipline so that work can be completed. An ethnographic study from Prester et al. (2019) shows that digital nomads work independently but still maintain professionalism regarding work ethic and technology. Even though they move quickly from one city to another, one country to another, this right does not interfere with their work; instead, they find comfort in it. The keywords are high self-discipline, anti-procrastination, and strict toward work targets so you can still feel freedom.

On the other hand, Malay people are heavily influenced by Islamic values in their work ethic. Several studies on the Islamic work ethic of Malays confirm it (Ahmad et al., 2016; Antoni, 2018; Husin, 2012, 2017; Niswah & Panorama, 2022). The Islamic values in question include not making the world the destination. Life after the world is the goal. This view has implications for how Malay people view a job. Whatever the work is permitted by religion, it can be carried out and ready to accept whatever the result is. In addition, the work ethic of the Malay people is in line with the Islamic work ethic's four pillars: effort, teamwork, honesty, and trustworthiness (Kamaluddin & Manan, 2010).

Regarding work ethic, several things must be examined further between digital nomads and Malays. First, digital nomads tend to expect freedom from various aspects inherent in Western cultural life. Liberalism

in life is a common thing for digital nomads who come from the West. According to Nomad List (2023), 54% of digital nomads are not religious. It is opposed to most Malays who are bound by a particular religion. Apart from working, the search for freedom also spreads to other things. One visible indication is that they are a non-married couple. They go together, live together, and work together (Bahri & Widhyharto, 2021b; Chevtaeva & Denizci-Guillet, 2021; Cook, 2020; Green, 2020; Thompson, 2019). For them, it is just a normal thing and a common occurrence. They are also part of the LGBT community and, even in Bali, are received kindly (Bahri & Widhyharto, 2021b; Prabawati, 2021; Thompson, 2021b). Drinking alcohol is also an inseparable part of their daily life (Green, 2020; Thompson, 2018).

Some of these indications contradict the Islamic work ethic that many Malays adhere to. The Islamic work ethic emphasizes the halal and haram aspects based on Islamic law. The habits of the digital nomads above are indeed unacceptable in Islam. Digital nomads usually form their community, so there is a mixture of various habits.

The second note is related to the lazy stereotype attributed to Malays. Milner (2008) captured Malays as "Lazy Native". Nevertheless, Syed Hussein Alatas (1977, p. 80) countered this attribute by arguing that it was a myth because they refused to work as colonial economy plantation suppliers. Even though this is a matter of debate, some still consider it relevant to the current conditions. For example, Mahathir Muhammad's statement on one occasion that many Malays are poor because they are too lazy to work even though various supporting infrastructures for industrialization have been facilitated (Kontan.co.id, 2019). Of course, this goes against the work ethic of digital nomads, who are known to be hard workers. If someone wants to become a digital nomad, procrastinating work or procrastination must be avoided.

Thirdly, digital nomads are identified as people with high work ethics and achievement (Chevtaeva & Denizci-Guillet, 2021; Hall et al., 2019). They continue to pursue what they have targeted until they achieve it. Meanwhile, Malay people tend not to follow the world too much because



their highest achievement is in life after the world (Richardson et al., 2017). Achieving hereafter life does not mean pursuing the world. It is just that, in making a living in the world, there is no need to be ambitious. The debate between the work ethic of digital nomads and Malays regarding self-achievement can be examined in two dimensions. The first dimension is intention, while the second is action.

In terms of purposes, the achievements of digital nomads and Malays are transcendently different. The transcendental dimension of Malay people tends to be stronger because of the meaning of life after the world. Meanwhile, more than 50% of digital nomads are not religious, according to Nomad List (2023). In other words, most digital nomads do not believe in the transcendental dimension of the afterlife. As for action, there are exciting things about self-achievement expressed by digital nomads. They use the community of fellow digital nomads to get new customers, recruit new staff, and establish synergies between community members. Meanwhile, the actions in self-achievement of Malay people are not only seen from the side of how they work to meet the needs of their families but also provide benefits to the surrounding community. Digital nomads use the community for work purposes, while the Malay people's work ethic indicates the interests of others who need help.

The fourth note relates to Max Weber's thesis on work ethic. Chriss (2019) tried to explain Weber's theory in five stages. Weber saw different reasons why Protestants dominated capitalism. This question was the beginning of the emergence of Weber's thesis. Then, Weber tried to analyze why capitalism can happen. One of his findings was that capitalism occurs because of the spirit of seeking profit in a systematic and planned way that existed among Protestants. This stage was a turning point to explore the early stages of why the Protestant work ethic could inspire the emergence of capitalism.

Weber had a thesis that one of the reasons for the emergence of capitalism is the existence of a work ethic that stems from the religious



beliefs of Protestants. According to him, Protestant belief was that the proof of people of faith is those who try to fulfill all their worldly needs. It is what is referred to as “the Calling” or calls. The doctrine of predestination or destiny reinforced this belief. According to Weber, there is no guarantee for anyone in the world about their fate in the afterlife. Only God has the sole authority to determine which people are chosen to be blessed and which are to be cursed. Therefore, one of the signs of the chosen people is those who are successful in worldly affairs, including working and earning.

People who have a significant income are a sign of worldly success. Nevertheless, Weber saw a need for asceticism, namely a disciplined attitude not to enjoy short stability so that one neglects to work and accumulate wealth. The accumulated wealth should not be saved but reinvested to continue in a competitive market. As a worker, perseverance and efficiency are the keys to survival in this labor market (Stzompka, 2008; Rosidi, 2022; Ismail et al., 2023). The struggle in the market raised the spirit of capitalism, which, in the end, ran independently without the need for (secular) religious support.

This thesis is one of the foundations of why many digital nomads come from Western countries. The pursuit of pleasure and wealth becomes the goal. They are free from religious practices and concerned for society. It differs from the Islamic work ethic, which emphasizes the spirit of worship, including at work, in contrast to most digital nomads who claim not to practice any religious practices (Statista, 2023a). The Islamic work ethic also encourages people to establish good relations with the surrounding community and care for others (Quoquab, 2016; Shirokanova, 2015). Digital nomads experience a sociocultural “bubble”, so they no longer try to approach and learn the culture of the local people. They are also becoming more focused on their community and work as more digital nomads arrive at a particular destination. When viewed from Weber’s thesis, it appears that there is a difference in work ethic between most digital nomads and the Islamic work ethic adhered to by many Malays.



3. Do Malays become digital nomads? A Cultural Adaptionist View

In discussing more deeply whether Malays can become digital nomads, this paper will review it from the perspective of cultural adaptationist theory. This view appears to answer how cultural changes occur evolutionarily. The pattern of the physical form of the human body is “open-ended”. It recognizes that refinement and adjustment through cultural learning allow humans to shape and develop life in a particular ecological environment. This theory has at least four basic assumptions (Keesing, 2014).

- a. Culture is an operating system that links human communities with their ecological environment. This system has previously been formed from social patterns and behavior. This culture includes society’s way of life, including technology and models of economic organization, patterns of settlement, models of social divisions and political organizations, religious beliefs, and practices of the people. The concept of culture is reduced to a pattern of behavior attached to specific groups of people, commonly called “customs” or “way of life” of humans.
- b. Cultural change is a process of adaptation and part of natural selection. Cultural change creates balance in an ecosystem when viewed from an adaptive system. Still, if this balance is disrupted by changes in the environment, demographics, technology, and other systems, further adaptation will change through the cultural approach. The feedback in this cultural system may be operationalized in a positive direction (a change towards a new directed balance) and an adverse order (self-correction and return to a balance point).
- c. Technology, the subsistence economy, and elements of the social organization directly tied to production are the core of the culture most adaptive to change. It is in this sector that adaptive change begins and will grow. Economic factors and their social support are the main drivers of cultural change. As for the religious system, the way of life, traditions, and rituals are the second layer of epiphenomena.



- d. Cultural components, such as population, livelihoods, ecosystems, and others, will experience adaptation to changes that occur, even if they happen slowly. It is necessary to observe the interactions between cultural components to observe the adaptation process to this change.

From the cultural adaptationist view, technology, the economy, and changes in social structure are the main factors in cultural change. Several points can be examined if drawn into the context of digital nomads. First, increasingly sophisticated information technology changes have manifested in how people work. Changes in the way of working are starting to be flexible anywhere and from anywhere. This work change is known as the New Way of Working (Blok et al., 2011; Fleissner, 2007; Sproull et al., 1991). This change in the way of work is primarily driven by technological advances that make it easier for people to communicate and work connectivity. No longer need to be in a room or office, but productivity is maintained, and work targets are achieved.

Digital nomads are concrete evidence of changing working methods driven by technological advances. They are professionals who work entirely online. Because no one supervises directly like office workers, they must have high self-discipline in completing work. The growing trend of flexible working methods can shift old working ways that tend to be bound by time and place. It can be proven by the increasing number of remote workers and the booming trend of digital nomads. Forbes (2022) reported that 87% of respondents stated that working online improves the overall work-life balance. A survey from Gallup in June 2022 found that 8 out of 10 people want to work online or hybrid, while 2 others prefer to work in an office. FlexJobs' Career Pulse Survey data reveals that 65% of respondents want to work entirely online, and 32% want to work in a hybrid manner. The data above shows a shift in the way people work.

Changes in the way of work due to technological advances can potentially change the livelihood system in a culture, including Malay



culture. Adaptive work ethic allows Malays to work differently than before. For example, the Minangkabau people like to migrate as traders. Their wandering habits may manifest in digital jobs. Minangnese people, for instance, often migrate to other areas to prove they can succeed elsewhere. The Minang belief said, "Better to be a leader in a small group than to be a team member in a big company". This principle is the spirit of the work ethic of Minangnese people with strong independence at work (Andri et al., 2019). It is relevant to the work ethic of digital nomads.

Another example is Palembang Malay, which has the principle "Heavy bones light the stomach, light bones weigh the stomach", which means that people who are too lazy to work will live in poverty. Whoever works hard, life will surely be calm and sufficient (Ritawati & Septiana, 2018). This principle shows the work ethic of the Palembang people who are hardworking. Hard work is, of course, adaptive to various trends in job changes. Therefore, the potential for some Malays to become digital nomads is wide open with an adaptive, independent, hardworking work ethic.

The second point that needs to be examined from the implications of cultural adaptationist theory is cultural change driven by economic factors. The world's digital economy is expected to account for more than 15% of the total global GDP, or US\$14.5 trillion, by 2021 (Hayat, 2022). This sizeable economic turnover certainly drives many new economic sectors in various fields and potentially shifts the traditional economy in the future. The current production model is transforming a lot towards digital. As stated by Marvin Harris, cultural changes occur more quickly in sectors related to production. Many digital nomads work in the service production sector with a sizeable economic turnover. Thus, the digital economy drives a massive demand for digital skills. Digital nomads have independence in terms of technological proficiency. Malay people have the principle of "Sit the same low, stand the same height", which means that Malay people have an egalitarian spirit and can have the same skills as any nation (Ritawati & Septiana, 2018). In other words, the learning spirit of Malay people can capture market demand in the digital world.



Ultimately, the work ethic of Malay people who are adaptive to change still adheres to the principle that “if work goes wrong, the world and the afterlife will be exposed to disgrace”. It means that no matter your important job, do not deviate from Islamic law. Digital nomads are a new way of working that disrupts traditional working methods. Using a cultural adaptationist approach, the Malay way of working can be disrupted by a new digital, flexible, and independent way of working. One of the latest jobs and ways of working that has the potential to become a new livelihood for Malays is digital nomads with a record that the digital nomads’ lifestyle does not follow Malay and Islamic values and is not maintained. In other words, continuous change applies to Malay digital nomads. Occupations and ways of working may change, but Malay values closely related to Islamic values are still preserved among them.

D. Conclusion

The trend of digital nomads has recently increased and disrupted traditional working methods. Most perpetrators of digital nomadism are Americans and Europeans, while their favorite destinations are in the Malay world, such as Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia. This paper relates these trends to the potential for changes in how Malays work from a work ethic perspective. Digital nomads influence local communities, both from economic and socio-cultural aspects.

From a financial perspective, digital nomads drive the local community’s economy by buying their products and services. From a sociocultural part, digital nomads attract the desire of residents to study and work in the digital world. On the other hand, there are moral impacts and gentrification. Then, most of the work ethic of digital nomads is relevant to the Malay context, such as being disciplined, working hard, and being independent. By using a cultural adaptationist approach, the Malay way of working has the potential to be disrupted by a new way of working that is entirely digital, flexible, and independent. The principle of continuous change applies to Malay digital nomads. Occupations and ways



of working may change, but Malay values closely related to Islamic values are still preserved among them.

This study presents the role of local values in preserving local people from the awful effects of globalization. It is opposite to the (Jiwasiddi et al., 2022) finding that revealed the sociocultural “bubble”. The Malays mostly stick to their belief in Islamic teachings that refuse some habits of digital nomads, such as drinking beer and LGBTQ. A Sociocultural “bubble” occurs when many immigrants do not care for local culture. However, the Malay culture of Islam will force digital nomads to adapt to the local people and culture to be accepted to work remotely in the Malay region. Nevertheless, in the long term, the Malays may be influenced by the new way of working with digital nomads, yet they will keep their religious beliefs.

This research has implications for the literature on changing new ways of working with a work ethic approach. It provides an initial picture that Malays can be part of this new way of working as digital nomads. Even so, this study also has limitations regarding research design using literature. As a result, this study has not been able to describe how native Malays view and respond to digital nomads. Therefore, the ethnographic research of Malays as digital nomads will complement this literature study.

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