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# Digital Nomad Hubs as Platform-Mediated Communities of Practice: Cultural Governance and Rural Revitalisation in China

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# Abstract

The digital nomad lifestyle has become increasingly prevalent since the postpandemic era and the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence. Consequently, Digital Nomad Hubs (DNHs) have proliferated extensively throughout China, assuming a growing importance as a strategy for rural tourism. However, the underlying mechanisms through which these DNHs generate localised value remain inadequately theorised. The present study aims to elucidate the operational dynamics of DNHs by employing topic modelling to analyse textual data from the WeChat official accounts of four prominent Chinese DNH brands. The Cultural Web model was subsequently utilised to analyse the structural and cultural forces that drove these DNHs. The findings reveal that DNHs serve as both consumption-driven spaces and Communities of Practice (CoPs) for sociocultural capital accumulation. Ultimately, this research contributes crucial empirical evidence from the Chinese context, enriching the global literature on digital nomadism, the community of practice, and rural revitalisation.


# Introduction

Digital nomads were first proposed by Makimoto and Manners (1997), and with the rise of the gig economy, extensive academic discussion regarding this group has been ongoing since 2015 (Müller, 2016; Richards, 2015). In the postpandemic era, as the idea of '*Work from Anywhere*' became the norm, digital nomadism has garnered unprecedented attention across both social media and academia (Mancinelli, 2020; Thompson, 2021; Wang et al., 2020). Nowadays, as the explosive growth of AI technology has drastically enhanced production efficiency and reduced costs, while the traditional lifelong employment system is eroding, a vast number of people are beginning to pursue autonomy and self-fulfilment rather than becoming race rats. The prevalence of this nomadic lifestyle has given rise to the establishment of various digital nomad hubs and supporting infrastructure. More than 35 countries have introduced digital nomad visas to attract these high-tech talents (Wang & Schlagwein, 2018). Existing research is largely set within a Western context and tends to examine global mobility and tourism from a consumption perspective. In contrast, Chinese digital nomads lean towards domestic urban-rural migration, coincidentally aligning with national strategies including rural revitalisation, digital economy and talent development. Consequently, digital nomad hubs (DNHs) have obtained unprecedented official attention and a legitimate space to operate. The establishment of numerous DNHs has been facilitated by government support, leading to the revitalisation of idle fixed assets and the creation of novel job opportunities. Over 80 physical spaces designated as digital nomad hub had emerged in China (Chen, 2025), which may alleviate employment pressures (Yao & Yang, 2023; Zhou, 2024)These digital nomad hubs are not merely consumption-driven physical living or working spaces, but are fields where individual needs, the commercial world, and the socio-cultural localities collide, negotiate and fuse (Luo, 2024; Yu & Li, 2024; Zeng & Sha, 2024; Zhang & Fang, 2023).

Consequently, this study shifts the focus from individual mobility to spatial production. Although digital nomads are characterised by their physical mobility, while their social activities, capital exchanges and cultural production are contingent on specific physical spaces. When atomised digital nomads gather in

a specific geographical area driven by a shared purpose, they create an entirely new form of social organisation. This phenomenon also suggests that interest-based retribalisation may be the antidote to an atomised society (Zhang & Zhan, 2024), and represents a new trend in the age of AI. Another notable uniqueness of the digital nomad concept in China, which differentiates it from the conventional global definition is it emphasis on interprovincial mobility or urban-rural mobility rather than international movement. Unlike the traditional notion of digital nomads who work remotely while traveling internationally, the Chinese model promotes domestic movement across provinces and cities. This form of domestic relocation is facilitated by supportive regional policies, infrastructure and initiatives that aimed to promote balanced economic development and talent redistribution.

Rural revitalisation, a key national focus in China aimed at promoting sustainable rural development has been strongly prioritised by the local governments to reverse the multifaceted decline of rural areas. This policy seeks to address pressing challenges such as the aging rural population, persistent labour shortages, and the lack of social and economic advancement stemming from limited industrialisation. Through the introduction of DNH, the local government aims to stimulate economic growth, enhance social services, and promote regional development. Existing literature about digital nomads has primarily discussed on their characteristic (Cook, 2023; Nash et al., 2018; Reichenberger, 2018), their motivation for adopting a digital nomad lifestyle (Su et al., 2025; Tiberius et al., 2024), and their destination choices and geographical distribution (Bozzi, 2024; Yang et al., 2025). Moreover, current studies have regarded digital nomads primarily as a distinct segment of tourists and have focused on their economic and social impacts on host destinations (Ay & Güzel, 2024; Bednorz, 2024; Ji et al., 2024; Miocevic, 2025). However, rural revitalisation does not equal to rural tourism. This tourism perspective provides only a limited understanding of digital nomads as temporarily embedded residents and community participants. Relatively little is known about how their local embeddedness, resource exchanges, entrepreneurial activities, knowledge sharing, and community participation influence the development of rural communities.

Rural revitalisation necessitates the establishment of mechanisms through which knowledge, skills, networks, and projects can be shared, adapted, and translated into local practice and value creation. Hence, it is not only about whether digital nomads move into villages, but how DNHs can organise mobile individuals into communities capable of sustained learning, collaboration, and practical contribution. Community of Practice (CoP) theory provides a conceptual benchmark for assessing whether DNHs possess the social-learning conditions required to move beyond consumption-driven spatial aggregation. If DNHs exhibit CoP-like conditions, they may have the potential to support rural revitalisation through knowledge sharing, collective learning and locally value creation.

According to Wenger (2000), the establishment of a CoP is contingent on the existence of a conducive organisational environment. This study proposes the Cultural Web model as an analytical framework to demonstrate intangible community interactions. By deconstructing the six cultural elements within DNHs, this study aims to evaluate whether DNHs can be deemed as CoPs in order to achieve the expectation of rural revitalisation.

There are two research questions proposed in this study,

RQ1: What are the key elements that underpin the culture of digital nomad hubs in China?

RQ2: How do these cultural elements support the emergence of DNHs as Communities of Practice?

To answer the proposed research questions, an unsupervised machine learning technique is preliminarily used to identify keywords and topics through textual analysis. Topic modelling is used as the existing research primarily focuses on participatory observational or in-depth interviews, yet issues like sample size limitation or selection bias might exist. Subsequently, thematic analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) is adopted to systematically identify, code, and interpret recurring cultural patterns in the WeChat textual corpus, thereby explaining how Chinese digital nomad hubs are constructed as emerging Communities of Practice.

## Literature Review

# Digital Nomads and Digital Nomad Hubs

To date, there is no consensus within global academia regarding the precise definition of digital nomads. Western researchers tend to emphasize spatial mobility through the lens of lifestyle migration, particularly global travel.(Cook, 2023; Hannonen, 2020; Nash et al., 2018; Reichenberger, 2018), while Chinese scholars focus on the nexus between individual autonomy and the macro-socioeconomic environment (Yang et al., 2025; Yu et al., 2024; Zhang, 2025). According to Yao and Yang (2023), most of the Chinese digital nomads are unable to travel globally, characterized by their Western counterparts due to constraints such as language barriers, cultural differences, and currency purchasing power. Previous studies reveal that the typical digital nomad in the western context is a mid-career professional, frequently a white male in his mid-30s who is remotely employed by established corporations (Bonneau & Aroles, 2021; Cook, 2023). In contrast, the composition of digital nomad hubs in China exhibits a higher degree of socio-professional heterogeneity and reflects diverse life stages, including freelancers, remote workers, entrepreneurs, students, and self-deprecatingly referred to as unemployed vagabonds (Luo, 2024; Niu & Chen, 2025; Yao & Guo, 2025).

Although there are disparities in their demographic profiles, both Western and Chinese digital nomads exhibit a pronounced trend toward communalisation in their lived experiences. The emergence of digital nomad hubs serves as a critical analytical lens and a vital spatial carrier for understanding the existential state and social dynamics of this geographically mobile population. Existing studies suggest that digital nomad hubs (DNHs) in popular destinations like Chiang Mai and Bali essentially remain in a tourism-driven consumption business model by providing accommodation and workspaces (Pacheco & Azevedo, 2022; Zhou et al., 2024). Meanwhile, some researchers find that digital nomads and local residents exist in a state of enclave-like isolation, whilst the digital nomad groups tend to form loose social networks (Chevtaeva, 2021; Von Zumbusch & Lalicic, 2020). Scholars claim that such weak ties lacking deep

connections not only fail to promote local development but may instead trigger negative issues such as driving up local property prices, increasing living costs, causing gentrification, and creating social conflicts with local residents, against the backdrop of China's macro-strategy of rural revitalisation, digital nomads are expected to tell a different story, who are entrusted with new hopes of resolving the challenge of brain drain in rural areas rather than merely natural landscape consumption. Scholars argue that the arrival of digital nomads not only brings direct consumption benefits but, more importantly, introduces new human capital, digital skills and cross-sectoral perspectives (Bai, 2025; Li et al., 2025; Wang & Lin, 2025). Therefore, this expectation has contributed to the rapid emergence of various DNHs in rural areas. To facilitate the DNHs' transition from a consumer-oriented to a producer-oriented paradigm, and to ensure their sustainable development and a substantive contribution to rural revitalisation, it should be shaped into Communities of Practice (CoPs). The fundamental utility of a CoP resides in its capacity to foster a practitioner-led iterative learning cycle. Its intrinsic value is manifested both in the human capital appreciation of individuals and in the collective augmentation of organizations' structural and operational capabilities (Wenger et al., 2023).

## Community of Practice (CoP)

The concept of Communities of Practice (CoPs) was proposed by a group of people who deepen their knowledge and expertise in a field with common concerns, problems or passions through ongoing social interaction. Stephens and Miller (2022) claimed that shared spaces operated as CoPs can significantly foster cross-disciplinary innovation and spontaneous creative activity. A CoP comprises three core elements: domain, community and practice. A domain serves as the shared focus of a community and the source of its identity. Members converge around a shared area of expertise that is not merely based on interest, but a key issue they genuinely care about and are committed to resolving. A community is a container of interpersonal relationships. Members build deep partnerships based on trust, support and commitment through long-term interaction, gaining an understanding of members' business contexts and professional expertise. The community's cohesion relies on the voluntary participation and ongoing commitment of its members. Practice is the foundation of action. Members must be genuine practitioners. The learning is deeply rooted in real-world challenges and serves as a testing field for new ideas. They share explicit knowledge through interaction, further distil tacit knowledge by solving problems together and sharing stories and experiences, thereby forming a continuous learning cycle. By shaping DNHs into CoPs, digital nomads can be transformed from consumers who enjoy physical spaces into practitioners who work together to tackle challenges in rural areas. Through meticulously devised cross-boundary initiatives to create shared community memories and in-depth local learning cycle, the social and spatial tensions arising from nomadic mobility can be effectively mitigated, thereby genuinely transforming the cultural and economic resources they contribute into enduring strategic assets for rural revitalisation.

## The Cultural Web Model as an Analytical Framework

Given that the fundamental nature of a CoP lies in informal social interaction organisation, traditional evaluation methods based on formal organisational structures struggle to accurately gauge whether a DNH has become a genuine CoP(Farnsworth et al., 2016). The Cultural Web proposed by Johnson (1992) serves as an analytical tool for dissecting the underlying operational mechanisms of communities. This model posits that the essence of an organisation is a complex web comprising a core paradigm and six interwoven elements surrounding it, namely rituals and routines, stories, symbols, power structures, control systems, and organisational structures. In recent years, this model has been widely applied to probe the deep structures of non-traditional organisations, hybrid work environments, and community cultures (Doherty & Stephens, 2019; Morris, 2018; Stephens & Miller, 2022). Applying Johnson's Cultural Web model to the study on digital nomad hubs can effectively analyse the internal elements within current communities. Besides, utilising the cultural network framework allows for a structured examination of whether DNHs possess the cultural soil necessary to support the operation of CoPs.

## Methodology

# Research Design

This study adopts a hybrid thematic analysis. BERTopic as computational exploration helped direct attention to recurring semantic fields. which used as exploratory tools to locate candidate textual patterns. Final themes were developed a systematic thematic analysis procedure. The Cultural Web model served as a sensitising framework for organising codes, while Communities of Practice theory was used at a subsequent interpretive stage to assess whether the identified cultural patterns corresponded to domain, community, and practice.

# Data Collection

Due to the inherently digital nature, digital nomads rely heavily on social media. WeChat, as China's prominent social infrastructure, had over 1.4 billion monthly active users in 2025, demonstrating its indispensable role in contemporary social life. Within this ecosystem, WeChat Official Accounts (WOA) has become the major channel for the digital nomad hubs to archive daily experiences, implement promotional strategies, and share their thoughts and reflections. Furthermore, unlike other platforms, posts on WOA primarily exist in text form and are rich in information. These narratives are not traditional official propaganda, but rather participatory archives of the digital nomad hubs. Due to an operational model based on decentralisation and rotating curators, most articles are written by digital nomads themselves, encompassing the group's collective knowledge, social norms and cultural identity. These texts possess high authenticity and research value, serving as the optimal entry point for deconstructing the cultural web by analysing and synthesising this corpus.

Four DNHs are selected because they represent visible and influential DNH brands in China and their WeChat accounts provide rich textual archives of community narration, event organisation, membership recruitment, and place-based experimentation. Table 1 demonstrates the current physical spaces

operated by the four selected community brands, their respective cities, and the month of their first post on WeChat Official Accounts, which coincides with their founding month.

Table 1
Basic Information of the Four Digital Nomad Community Brands: First post month, Spaces, and Locations.

| Community Brand | First Post Publishing | Space in Operation | Location |
|---|---|---|---|
| Yuanxiangyingke Digital Nomad (DNC) | January, 2021 | DNC Guangshan | Nangwanggang Village, Guangshan County, Xinyang City, Henan Province, |
| | | DNC Shanghai | Shuiku Village, Caojing Town, Jinshan District, Shanghai |
| | | DNC Hainan | Li'an Town, Lingshui Li Autonomous County, Hainan Province |
| Digital Nomad Anji (DNAJ) | December, 2021 | DN Anji | Xilong Village, Anji County, Huzhou City, Zhejiang Province |
| Digital Nomad China (DNCN) | March, 2023 | DN Yucun | Yucun Village, Anji County, Huzhou City, Zhejiang Province |
| | | DN Huangshan | Huangdun Village, Tunguang Town, Huangshan City, Anhui Province |
| | | DN Wuyishan | Xingxian Village, Wufu Town, Wuyishan City, Fujian Province |
| Nomad Coliving and Cocreation (NCC) | April, 2023 | NCC Dali | Congyuan Village, Dali Town, Dali City, Yunnan |
| | | NCC Heydo Island | Biyang Town, Yixian County, Huangshan City, Anhui Province |
| | | NCC Wave and Work Island | Zhenhai Village, Yazhou District, Sanya City, Hainan Province |
| | | NCC Link Island | Jijiadun Village, Jinxi Town, Kunshan City, Jiangsu Province |

To collect all the posts, the identified official accounts were manually accessed to compile a comprehensive list of article URLs. Subsequently, a Python-based extraction script was used to retrieve the textual content, including titles, publication dates, and body text. From 14 January 2021 to December 31, 2025, a total of 1,174 articles were acquired into an Excel file. To construct a valid corpus, data screening was carefully conducted. Initially, articles with fewer than 200 characters were manually checked to exclude template posts images, videos, or audio files. Subsequently, text cleaning was performed to remove noise, web links, and other irrelevant information. Data eligibility assessment was needed to exclude articles irrelevant to the theme of digital nomads. In particular, early articles published

by DNC during its initial stage as a rural cultural tourism brand were removed, as they did not reflect its later digital nomad community operation. Eventually, a final corpus of 1,015 articles with a total of 2.73 million characters was obtained for the implementation of topic modelling.

## Topic Modelling

Topic modelling is a text mining technique capable of automatically discovering hidden semantic structures and latent themes from large volumes of unstructured text documents. In the social sciences and business research, Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) has long been regarded as the primary method of topic modelling (Egger & Yu, 2022). However, as a generative probabilistic model based on the bag-of-words assumption, LDA ignores the contextual relationships and semantic connections between words within sentences and is unable to capture complex contextual nuances (Sosa-Ramírez et al., 2024; Zikic et al., 2025). This study employs the BERTopic as an auxiliary discovery tool, which is an advanced neural topic modelling technique based on the Transformer architecture, which utilises context embeddings generated by pre-trained language models to construct topics. BERTopic exerts an excellent understanding of the contextual semantics of words and sentences, enabling it to identify semantically related document clusters even when words do not co-occur directly. Notably, BERTopic does not require extensive text pre-processing, such as stop-word removal or stemming, thereby preserving the rich semantic structure of the original text. The workflow of BERTopic refers to Fig. 1. BERTopic is suitable for exploratory work because it clusters documents using transformer-based embeddings and then represents topics through class-based TF-IDF (Grootendorst, 2022). In this study, its role was to help identify provisional keyword clusters and topic directions that could guide subsequent thematic analysis. The model output was not treated as a final finding because topic models identify semantic proximity statistically, whereas the research question requires interpretation of culture, practice, authority, and belonging.

## Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a flexible but systematic qualitative method for developing patterns of shared meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This study adopted an iterative hybrid thematic analysis, combining deductive, theory-informed coding with inductive, data-driven coding (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The procedure was further informed by the stepwise thematic analysis process proposed by Naeem et al. (2023). The analytical process began with repeated reading of the corpus to gain familiarity with the textual materials and to identify recurrent expressions, narrative patterns, and meaningful terms. Each article was treated as a document-level unit of analysis, while relevant textual segments within articles were used as evidence units for coding and interpretation. Meaningful keywords and recurring expressions were identified as retrieval anchors for locating candidate passages. Retrieved passages were then reviewed contextually in relation to the research question. Initial labels were generated from recurrent textual patterns and subsequently refined into focused codes. The Cultural Web model served as a sensitising analytical framework for organising and comparing these codes across six cultural

dimensions: stories, rituals and routines, symbols, organisational structures, power structures, and control systems.

Figure 2 demonstrated the entire analysis process. Deductive theoretical categories and inductive data-driven codes were compared iteratively. Textual segments that did not align with the initial framework were retained and documented as negative cases, contextual qualifiers, or boundary conditions. These cases informed subsequent refinement of the codebook and helped prevent the analysis from forcing all evidence into pre-existing theoretical categories. A codebook was developed to make the coding procedure transparent and reproducible. Each code included an operational definition, inclusion criteria, exclusion criteria, and keyword anchors. The codebook was iteratively refined to reduce overlap between codes, distinguish supporting evidence from contextual qualifiers or tensions, and cluster related codes into higher-order cultural themes. These themes were then interpreted in relation to Communities of Practice theory in the later analytical stage.

## Findings

# Stories: Romanticisation, Reflection and Revolution

Stories act as the organizational mythology(Johnson, 1992), legitimizing behaviour and teaching new members what is valued. These narratives form a crucial part of the shared culture paradigm, encoding tacit knowledge about why members choose this lifestyle and how they navigate it. The corpus reveals that DNHs' discourse can be summarized by three terms: romanticisation, reformation and revolution. Representative keywords such as "Wilderness", "Freedom", "Self-discovery" and "Escape" reveals hot debates regarding to naked resignation, urban escape, and returning to rural within young people, which construct a romantic hero journey, echoing the findings of Bonneau et al. (2023). In these stories, the traditional company is framed as the antagonist of a source of burnout and meaninglessness. The act of moving to a DNH is narrated not merely as a relaxation but as a spiritual quest for freedom and self-exploration. By celebrating these defectors, the precarious identity of the nomads is validated, implying that the community values spiritual autonomy over material stability.

*We no longer surrender ourselves to algorithmic feeds, but measure the world with our own footsteps. We no longer lose ourselves in endless recommendations, but take root in nature. This is not merely a "digital decluttering," but the beginning of a deeper "reconstruction of life." We are not simply pausing, we are restarting*. [Article ID 569]

Meanwhile, the stories are more relevant to collective critiques of *neijuan* (societal involution) as well as deep thinking and reflection rather than just personal diaries. For instance, the column named *Everyone is an Anthropologist* established by NCC aims to share diverse perspectives to public by interviewing digital nomads. And the column named *Depth* created by DNAJ aims to demonstrate authentic observation and deep analysis related to digital nomads.

Influenced by Confucian's culture, *youmin* (nomads) in Chinese contains a potential stigma of being unemployed or drifting, while the DNHs construct a powerful counter-narrative of rural revitalization. This narrative aligns individual freedom with a macro-political mission. The textual data frequently uses terms like "Co-creation", "rural revitalisation", "rural Development", "entrepreneurship", and "super-individual" to describe nomads not as transient tourists but as active agents bringing technology and vitality to hollowed-out villages. As a column named *Village Neighbours Archive* established by DNCN and local ethnic culture and heritage records published by NCC reveal, the four hubs' posts often highlight interactions between nomads and locals. These anecdotes serve a myth-making function, projecting an image of harmonious integration, which is crucial for the hub's external legitimacy, positioning the DNH as a bridge between the urban digital economy and the rural traditional society.

*This is a reshaping and regeneration of traditional rural culture and art, aiming to explore new possibilities between the countryside and art, while also reconstructing rural life itself.* [Article ID 632]

Meanwhile, the narrative pattern also presents DNHs as sites of entrepreneurial experimentation, project incubation, creative work, and product testing, suggesting that public storytelling also legitimises DNHs as productive environments rather than consumption spaces.

*Using AI and Hitchcockian suspense to reimagine entrepreneurship, investment, and life. From investment thinking and business operations to the frontier of AI, this is a space for digital nomads to explore practical entrepreneurial insights and deeper reflections on money, networks, technology, and work. In a world changing faster than ever, how do we build both financial resilience and a future career?* [Article ID 521]

Therefore, these stories construct DNH culture through a tension between escaping from urban routines and the search for new forms of work, contribution, and local value creation.

# Rituals and Routines: Holistic Work-Life Integration

Rituals and routines are essential to shape a culture rooted in informal social interaction and knowledge transmission. They act as the social heartbeat synchronizing independent individuals into a cohesive group (Johnson, 2000). The textual data contain numerous references to routinized social activities that mimic family structures. The posts for monthly and yearly recaps were reviewed, which demonstrated that the activities including wellness like yoga and hiking, or social inclusion like shopping, drinking and cooking together occurred frequently, which are not commercial transactions but communal rituals that simulate familial intimacy and intensify the sense of belonging.

*Since then, every morning at 6 a.m., a group of people would gather somewhere in DNAJ to practice wellness exercises. What surprised me was that quite a few of them were actually able to keep getting up early. Once I started leading the practice, I suddenly developed a certain sense of responsibility; I could no longer be as casual and inconsistent as before.* [Article ID 62]

Alongside co-living routines, birthday celebrations, festivals, and seasonal rituals further provide temporal anchors for highly mobile participants, producing moments of collective memory and emotional continuity. These events create a shared calendar for communities whose members are otherwise mobile and temporary.

*Anji in January was bitterly cold, with several rounds of snow. Yet DNAJ felt like an enclave of warmth in a frozen world, immersed in a vibrant atmosphere ever since New Year's Eve. Throughout the first month of the year, DNAJ members were busy exchanging ideas, sparking conversations, collaborating, and co-creating, as if an unceasing flame were burning in everyone's heart.* [Article ID 35]

DNHs lack the strong constraints of a traditional company or formal institution, while they create various rituals on their autonomy to encourage production. Learning activities such as workshops, reading groups, training camps, hackathons, AI sessions, and skill-sharing events appear as recurring cultural practices, which are educational routines that encode the community's value of continuous upskilling, which implies that the community members embrace values of self-improvement, reinforcing a community cultural paradigm of growth mindset.

*Before long, we had formed two product teams and developed two digital products designed to improve organizational efficiency: one was a task management and point distribution tool for decentralised autonomous organisation (DAO), and the other was a GPT-based AI intelligent Q&A product. These two products won second prize at the Rebase Hackathon Workshop, respectively, earning a total of USD 5,000 in prize money.* [Article ID 69]

In conclusion, life, learning, work, and festivals are highly integrated in DNHs. Trust is built by co-living routines, which are necessary to facilitate tacit knowledge transfer. Besides, the festival and assembly rituals create collective moments and solidify the community's identity. In turn, they drive collaborative creation and production.

# Symbols: Urban Digital Natives in Rural Village

Symbols are the visible artifacts that represent the underlying assumptions of the cultural web. Based on the textual data, DNH is constructed through a combination of rural aesthetics, lifestyle objects, and digital autonomy. The first symbolic cluster concerns geography and landscape. Public narratives repeatedly invoke villages, fields, mountains, nature, outdoor life, craft, art, healing, and slow-life aesthetics.

*What I love about DNAJ's environment is how grounded it feels. There is no sense of pressure from towering buildings. When you wake up in the morning and open the door, you are greeted by fields, distant mountains, and grass you can freely walk on. For someone like me, a wild soul who loves rolling around and running free in open spaces, it feels like pure happiness.* [Article ID 61]

These symbols position rural space as an alternative to the high-pressure narrative of metropolitans. The countryside is presented as a landscape with aesthetic and affective value, associated with fresh air, natural beauty, sensory openness, and psychological recovery, which also implies a form of spatial autonomy for the members.

In addition, everyday consumption objects like coffee, craft beer, handmade goods, art materials, and outdoor equipment function as cultural markers through which urban middle-class tastes are relocated into rural settings. These objects help distinguish DNHs from ordinary rural spaces and suggest symbolic boundaries between mobile urban youth and local villagers in terms of taste, lifestyle, and cultural capital. It confirms previous findings regarding the elite privileged class of digital nomads (Bonneau & Aroles, 2021).

*Under the big roof, there was a craft beer tap and a beer cabinet, which made it one of my favourite spots in DNAJ as a drinker. That night, the three of us grabbed a few bottles of beer, carried some lounge chairs, and headed to the grass in DNAJ's backyard.* [Article ID 391]

A second symbolic cluster centres on remote work, digital nomadism, AI, Web3, self-media, global mobility, and independent work. These terms represent DNH participants as technologically enabled and professionally autonomous actors rather than conventional tourists or residents. The symbolic construction of DNH culture therefore depends on the combination of rural atmosphere and digital capability.

*How can we live with the times amid the wave of technological change? The AI Co-learning group is now open to explore a new path.* [Article ID 355]

Yet some texts question whether the idealised digital nomad lifestyle is realistic or affordable, indicating that freedom and rural aesthetics are also narrated through cost, uncertainty, and ambivalence.

*Those who only stay for a short time often experience a pattern of temporary integration followed by long-term disconnection.* [Article ID 20]

# Organisation Structure: A Porous Network of State-Market Hybridity

Organisational structures reveal how DNHs are publicly represented as coordinated communities and networked forms of operation, which composed of hub operators, hosts, residents, co-creators, mentors, volunteers, institutional partners, and local government actors. Accommodation, workstations, shared kitchens, meeting rooms, community spaces, check-in procedures, and basic services provide the material infrastructure through which members can live, work, and interact in a relatively stable setting. Yet these infrastructures do not operate by DNHs. They are coordinated through rotating roles in various activities participation. Hosts welcome and guide participants, organisers design activities, members

contribute knowledge and labour, and external partners provide resources, legitimacy, or project opportunities. Meanwhile, the findings suggest that these hubs operate not as isolated community but as a larger porous network. DNHs are also represented as networked organisational forms rather than single bounded communities which allowing members to flow freely between different nodes by establishing alliances. This multi-node structure corresponds to the mobility of digital nomads while still providing temporary anchors for residence, work, and community participation. DNHs are therefore represented as connected infrastructures through which mobility, residence, work, and community participation can be repeatedly reassembled. While organisational structures describe how roles and relationships are arranged, the following section on power structures examines how influence, authority, and resource control are distributed within these arrangements.

# Power Structure: Contribution-based Liquid Governance

Power structures are represented through both internal peer authority and external institutional resources. Internally, authority is frequently associated with contribution, such as hosting, teaching, sharing, organising, and initiating activities. Roles such as host, initiator, co-creator, volunteer, teacher, and facilitator suggest that influence within DNHs is publicly framed as contribution-based rather than strictly hierarchical. This supports an image of a peer-led and decentralised community culture. However, Wang and Lin (2025) find that the DNHs may be nominally managed by an operational team alongside hosts, real but hide authority often lies with key opinion leaders or senior digital nomads. Any new rule is unlikely to be implemented if these senior members object to it. Meanwhile, the narratives also show that DNHs are shaped by external actors, including governments, universities, foundations, enterprises, industrial parks, and policy platforms. As Sha (2024) claimed that DNH culture cannot be understood as purely autonomous or member-led since it is also shaped by local governments, market actors, infrastructures, and resource dependencies. Thus, DNH power relations appear as a hybrid arrangement combining peer contribution with external institutional support.

# Control System: Shared Value as Facilitative Control

Control systems reveal how DNHs construct participation boundaries and guide community behaviour. Textual data refers to rules, handbooks, check-in instructions, and participation conditions, suggesting that entry into DNHs is not entirely open or unregulated. These mechanisms serve as a standard of conduct and a baseline of civility in a co-living and co-working spaces. More significantly, keywords such as “Application”, “Invitation”, and “Recommender” act as control filters. By screening membership based on aligned shared value rather than payment capability, DNHs protect the Domain from dilution, which also creates a self-regulating social system where reputation serves as the ultimate currency. This gatekeeping ensures that the community remains a safe container for the high-trust interactions required for tacit knowledge sharing. In conclusion, DNHs rely more on softer mechanisms of visibility, rights, priority access, certification, identity, and reputation. It abandons a rigid disciplinary framework

bounded only by the fundamental rule of mutual respect and non-interference, where members are encouraged to contribute actively and fosters a culture of creative autonomy.

Overall, by applying the Cultural Web Model as analytical lens, it suggests that DNHs are publicly constructed around a paradigm of post-materialist distributed value co-creation. Figure 3 summarised the analysis results of culture web and emergent themes. First, the boundary between work and life is blurred, while co-living routines, rural aesthetics, and digital technology frame DNHs as spaces where digital nomad lifestyle can be pursued together. Second, value creation is represented as distributed rather than centrally controlled. DNHs emphasise peer learning, workshops, project experimentation, and rotating forms of participation, suggesting that knowledge is expected to circulate among members rather than flow only from formal managers or institutions. Third, DNHs are represented as locally embedded while externally connected. Rural development, institutional partnerships, and multi-node networks position the hubs as interfaces between mobile urban youth, rural places, digital work, and wider policy or market resources.

It provides the basis for interpreting DNHs through Communities of Practice theory since the identified cultural patterns correspond to the three core dimensions of a Community of Practice: a shared domain of concern, a relational community of sustained interaction, and a shared practice through which members exchange knowledge, develop capabilities, and participate in co-creation.

# Digital Nomad Hubs as Community of Practice

The analysis of DNHs' cultural web reveals that DNH has transcended the notion of co-living and co-working spaces. DNHs can be deemed as laboratories of autonomous professionalism and lifestyle. This paradigm predicated on the underlying belief that professional productivity and personal self-actualisation can be harmonized through a reputation-based, decentralised governance framework, ultimately achieving knowledge and skill flowing spontaneously.

The findings suggest that the DNHs can be interpreted as an emerging community of practice. As Table 2 summarized, DNHs confirmed that there is shared repertoire including shared stories, routines, norms and standard, further achieved knowledge transfer and social capital accumulation.(Wenger et al., 2023). It provides a social learning mechanism and helps to shape a new identity which not merely worker but autonomous and valuable actor capable of creating meaningful work and social value by provide legitimate peripheral participation within the community.

Table 2
Digital Nomad Hubs as Community of Practice

| Domain | Definition | Measurement | Description |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **A shared area of knowledge, concern, or passion that members identify with.** | **It involves shared concerns beyond purely commercial interests.** | **Escaping burnout, pursuing autonomous growth and self-actualization forms the identity of digital nomads.** |
| **Community** | A trustworthy, supportive, committed and belonging network built by mutual engagement. | It involves frequent, informal, trust-based interactions among members. | Daily social activities and special festival and event celebrations built trusting relationships and gained a strong sense of belonging. |
| **Practice** | A shared repertoire and accumulation of communal resources developed by members. | It involves learning from and with each other and addressing real challenges together | Extensive knowledge and skill exchange takes place, enabling collective learning and further transform into local contribution |

At the domain level, DNHs share stories around autonomous growth, digital capability, and localised co-creation, combined with symbols imbued with indigenous folk culture and middle-class aesthetics, precisely brings together a group of individuals seeking to escape urban hyper-competition and seeking technological empowerment and a reconfiguration of life meaning. This cultural paradigm constitutes the shared domain that is essential to a CoP, thereby transforming the nomads from mere temporary visitors into participants and further contributor by a common spiritual pursuit.

As for community level, DNHs have established a common trust and cultivated a sense of identity through the implementation of rituals, routines and control system. The frequent daily social interactions like shared meals, group exercise and skill-sharing workshops have been identified as an approach to gain sense of belongings. Meanwhile, control systems regulate entry and conduct so that sociality remains legible, manageable, and reliable.

In terms of practice, it can be understood from two dimensions. As Fig. 4 shows, it ranges from everyday interests to professional production, and from informally participation to formally facilitated programmes. In addition, the soft control system, contribution-based governance, and flat structure are aligned with the legitimate peripheral participation principle of CoPs, which are high-openness and low-control (Wenger et al., 2023). It may facilitate the transformation of imaginative ideas into specific locally rooted initiatives, such as small business project, artistic reformation and digital solutions for agriculture.

# Conclusion

The current literature on digital nomads is typically interpreted through the lens of neoliberalism (Bozzi, 2024; Cook, 2020; Mancinelli, 2020). Researchers tend to portray digital nomads as privileged white males who leverage global economic inequalities to achieve a higher quality of life in countries of the

Global South with lower living costs (Zikic et al., 2025). Within this narrative, digital nomads are often deemed as tourists and consumers, and digital nomad hubs (DNHs) are viewed as consumption spaces spontaneously formed by market forces, whereas the role of the government is typically seen as reactive or limited to the provision of visa policies. Criticism from Western academia centres on how this mobility has led to local gentrification and neocolonial cultural exploitation (Mancinelli & Germann Molz, 2024; Serpa et al., 2024).

However, this study exhibits a different story of DHNs. This study examined how DNHs are culturally constructed through an online textual corpus using Johnson's Cultural Web framework, the findings show that DNHs are represented through a set of recurring stories, symbols, rituals and routines. Together, these elements construct DNHs as communities of practice. The analysis suggests that DNHs provide a situated context in which digital nomads, community operators, local villagers, and institutional actors interact around shared practices. Through legitimate peripheral participation, newcomers gradually become engage in community activities, exchange knowledge, develop shared repertoires, and form collective practices. These practices enable the transformation of individual digital skills and external networks into local value, including knowledge transfer, social capital formation, entrepreneurial initiatives, cultural reinterpretation, and rural revitalisation outcomes. Here, digital nomads are not merely consumers or tourists; rather, they are expected to become cocreators and contributors who can drive the upgrading of rural industries through knowledge spillover. When DNHs truly take root in rural areas as CoPs and engage with external systems including local governments, corporate sponsors and local villagers, they can generate economic benefits and further foster an entirely new social capital incubator. The countryside is no longer merely a landscape to be consumed, nor are nomads merely temporary tourists fleeing urban hypercompetition, together, they form a social learning system dedicated to solving the practical challenge of sustainable rural development in the digital age.

This study contributes to research on digital nomadism by shifting attention from individual mobility and lifestyle choices to the cultural and organisational work through which digital nomad communities are made visible and meaningful. Nevertheless, a notable limitation of this study is its focus on cultural mechanisms rather than measurable outcomes. Identifying a DNH as a CoP confirms its capacity for knowledge sharing and collaborative problem-solving, but it does not intrinsically validate the actual socioeconomic value delivered to the local. Additionally, the textual data source is from four representative DNHs since these texts contain many traces of personal actual experiences and community activities, which makes them valuable for examining how DNH culture is publicly articulated. However, they are also curated and self-presentational materials. They may still be inevitably romanticised or commodified (Bonneau et al., 2023). Accordingly, these findings are a complementary layer of evidence that reveals how community culture and practice are collectively framed, negotiated, and made visible in public discourse, which extends existing fieldwork and participant-observation studies by situating locally grounded experiences within a broader cultural and discursive context. Subsequent studies may aim to empirically measure the actual value generated by these DNHs in solving localised rural challenges. Furthermore, this research can investigate how the innovative

solutions and tacit knowledge generated within the DNHs are practically transferred, translated, and adopted by the local rural stakeholders to ensure sustained rural revitalisation.

## Declarations

# Author Contribution

Cai Xinzhu conceptualized and designed the study, collected and curated the data, conducted the BERTopic modelling and thematic analysis, interpreted the findings, and wrote approved the final manuscript.Phoong Seuk Wai reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

# Data Availability

The data analyzed in this study were collected from publicly accessible posts published by selected WeChat Official Accounts between 2021/01/01 and 2025/12/31. The original posts can be accessed through their respective public source pages. The derived dataset, including article metadata, source URLs and analytical outputs, is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Full-text redistribution may be subject to third-party copyright and platform conditions.

**Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the manuscript preparation process.**

During the preparation of this work the author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) to assist with English language editing, grammar checking, and improving the clarity and readability of the manuscript. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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# Figures

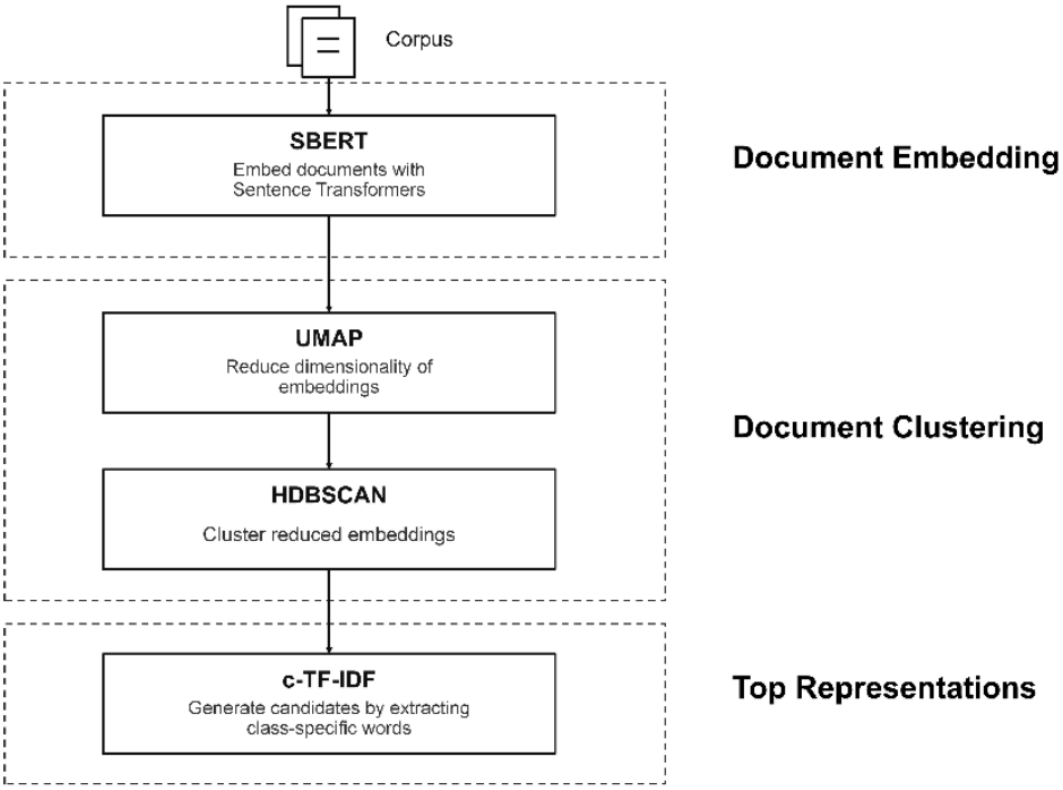



**Figure 1**

BERTopic Workflow

Source: Author’s own creation

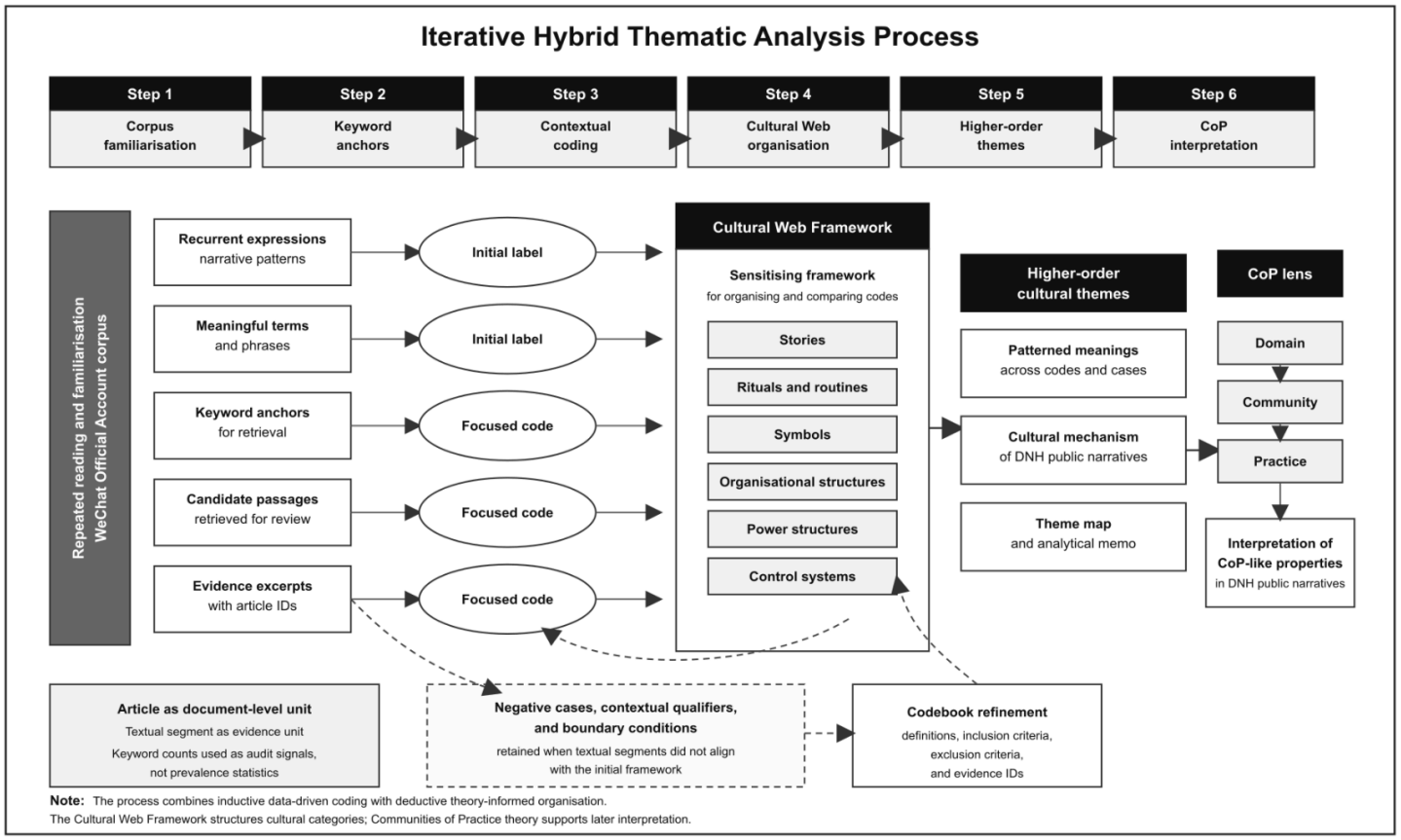



**Figure 2**

Process of iterative hybrid thematic analysis.

Source: Author’s own creation

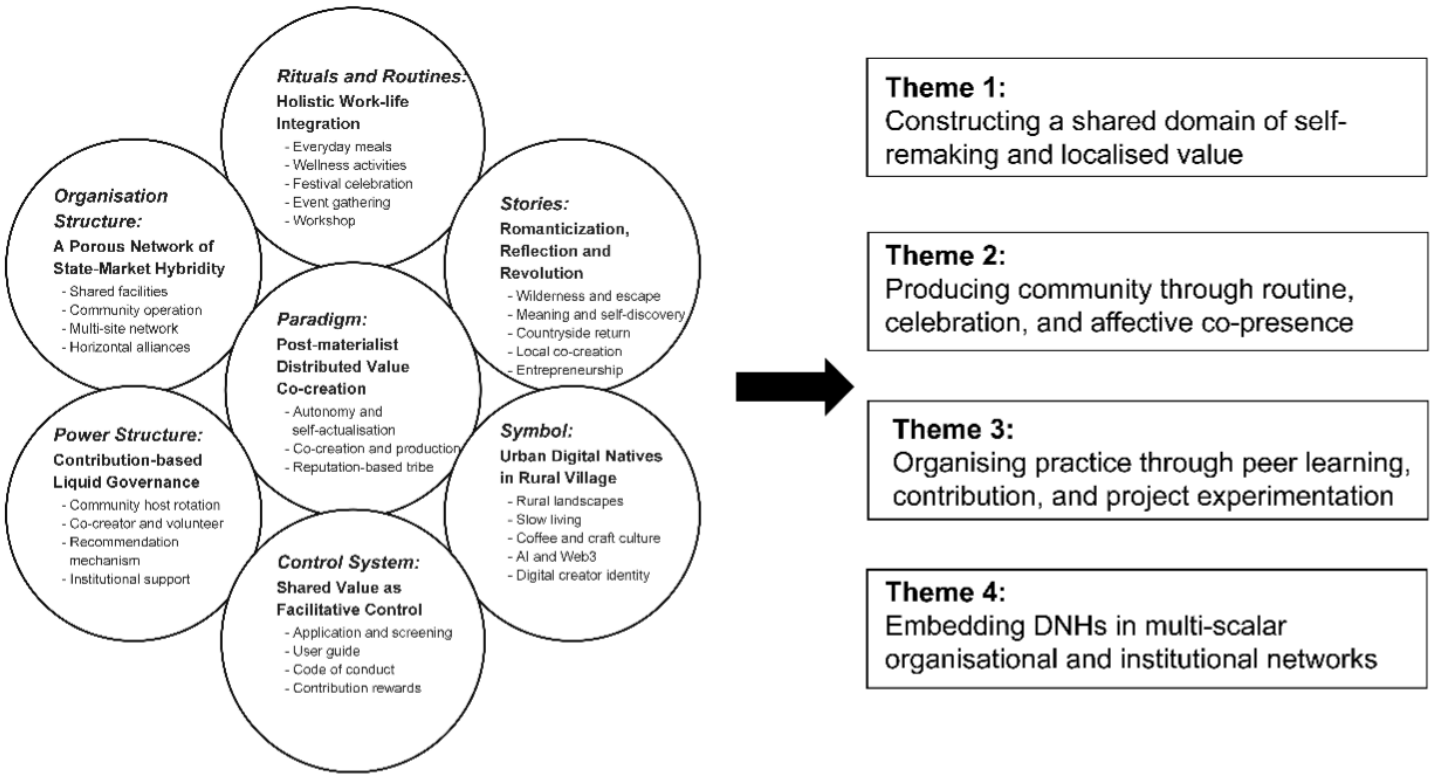



**Figure 3**

Cultural Web of DNHs.

Source: Author's own creation

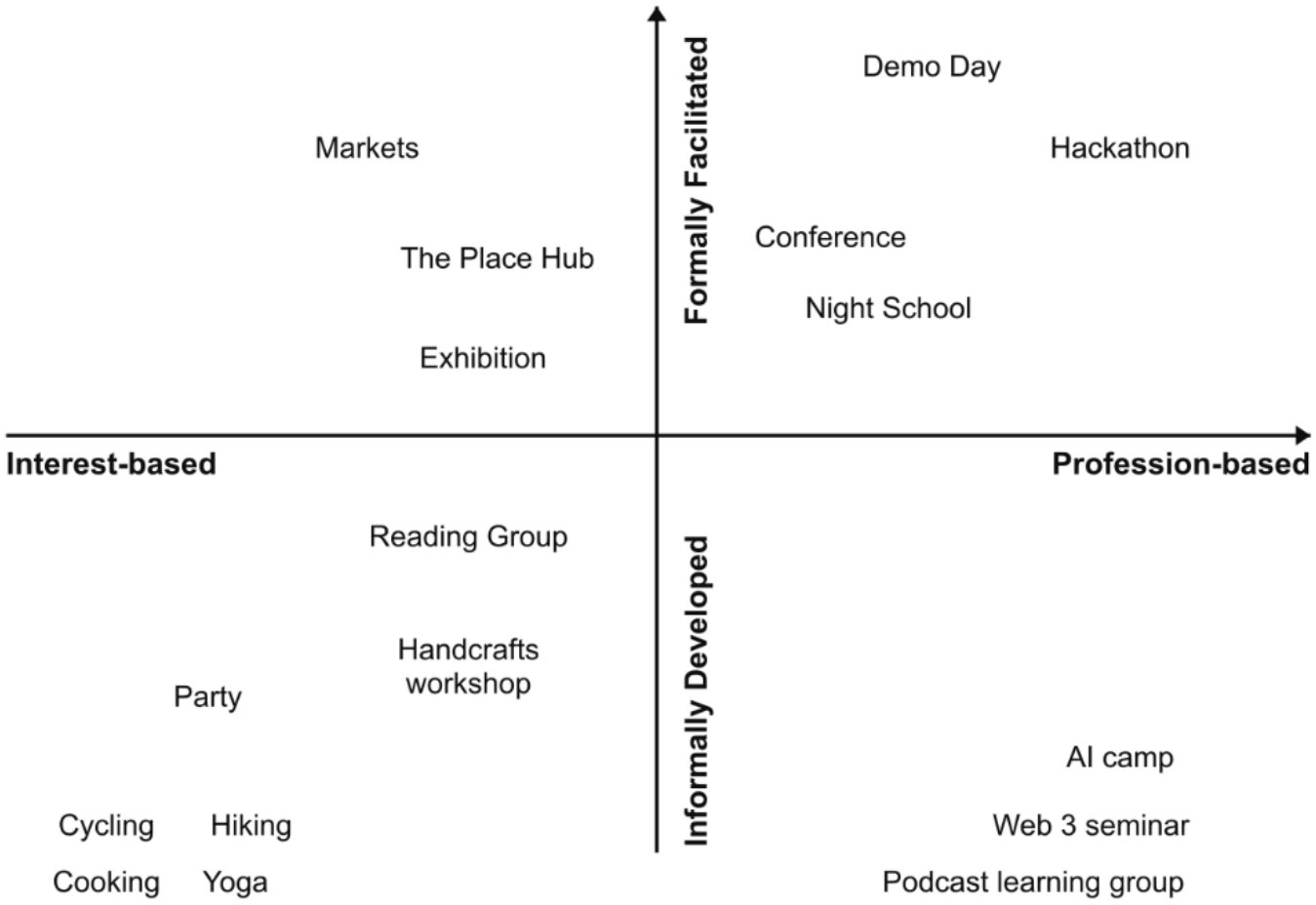



**Figure 4**

Types of Practices in DNHs

Source: Author's own creation