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The sustainability paradox of digital nomadism: mobility, consumption, and socio-environmental engagement 🛒

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Purpose

This study aims to examine the sustainability paradox of digital nomadism, using paradox theory to explore how digital nomads navigate tensions between environmental ideals and socioeconomic realities across mobility, consumption and ethical engagement.

Design/methodology/approach

This study uses reflexive thematic analysis based on in-depth interviews and observations with young digital nomads in Dali, China, incorporating member checking to enhance trustworthiness. It explores how nomads' sustainability practices are shaped by economic, infrastructural and policy constraints.

Findings

This study identifies three interdependent sustainability paradoxes: mobility–sustainability, consumption–minimalism and engagement–transience. While digital nomads show environmental awareness and adopt selective sustainable practices, their efforts remain fragmented and constrained by systemic factors such as long-haul travel reliance, market logics, local socioeconomic pressures and regulatory gaps. These dynamics highlight the limits of voluntary, individualized sustainability efforts.

Originality/value

This study presents one of the first empirically grounded, paradox theory-informed analyses of digital nomad sustainability. Its contribution lies in applying paradox theory as an analytical lens to clarify systemic contradictions in remote work mobilities, and

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in providing insights for sustainability governance and destination management that integrate environmental stewardship with socioeconomic resilience.

Keywords: Digital nomads, Sustainable paradox, Sustainable tourism, Mobility governance, Ethical consumption, 数字游民、可持续悖论、可持续旅游、移动治理、道德消费, nómadas digitales, paradoja sostenible, turismo sostenible, gobernanza de la movilidad, consumo ético.

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