DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND NIGHT-TIME ECONOMY IN HO CHI MINH CITY: EXTENDING UTAUT WITH NIGHTTIME DESTINATION IMAGE AS A MEDIATOR

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Abstract: ***This study extends the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) by incorporating Nighttime Destination Image (NDI) as a mediating variable to investigate the role of digital transformation in promoting the night-time economy in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Data were collected from 250 night-time economy businesses and analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The results show that Effort Expectancy, Performance Expectancy, and Social Influence are positively and significantly associated with Intention to Use digital platforms, which in turn strongly relates to actual Digital Platform Use. Digital Platform Use exhibits both a direct positive association with Customer Attraction and an indirect association through NDI, confirming partial mediation. The findings underscore the critical mediating role of NDI in linking digital adoption to enhanced customer attraction in the night-time economy context. Limitations include the use of convenience sampling and a cross-sectional design, which limit generalizability. The study provides practical implications for night-time businesses to prioritize user-friendly digital platforms and collective destination image building, and for policymakers to offer targeted digital training and supportive infrastructure. This research contributes to the literature by extending UTAUT with NDI mediation in the under-researched domain of Vietnam's night-time economy.***

• Keywords: *digital transformation; night-time economy; UTAUT; nighttime destination image; Ho Chi Minh City.*

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1. Introduction

The nighttime economy, encompassing leisure, entertainment, and cultural activities after dark, has become a critical driver of urban economic vitality and development worldwide (McArthur et al., 2019). Studies show that integrating nighttime activities into urban planning contributes to GDP while enhancing urban identity (McAvoy & Vadrevu, 2024). In South and Southeast Asia, major cities increasingly recognize the nighttime economy as a response to rapid urbanization (McAvoy & Vadrevu, 2024).

In Vietnam, the nighttime economy is gaining prominence in urban development, particularly in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (Son et al., 2023). Ho Chi Minh City is developing its nighttime economy through tourism sectors including bars, restaurants, and cultural activities. Despite strong ICT infrastructure (Tung et al., 2024), digital adoption among nighttime businesses faces barriers including limited finances, inadequate digital marketing expertise, and operational challenges (Sinh & Thai, 2025). While some businesses use digital platforms, adoption remains uneven. Despite strong ICT infrastructure (Tung et al., 2024), these constraints impact nighttime economy competitiveness.

Despite applying the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (Venkatesh et al., 2003) across sectors, its use in nighttime economy remains limited. Studies have overlooked how digital platforms influence customer attraction through perceived Nighttime Destination Image (NDI) encompassing vibrancy, safety, cultural atmosphere, and attractiveness. Integrating NDI as a mediating variable into UTAUT offers a promising approach to understanding digital transformation's role in nighttime economy competitiveness.

This study extends UTAUT by incorporating NDI as a mediator to examine digital transformation's impact on nighttime economy products in Ho Chi Minh City. Using data from 250 nighttime businesses and PLS-SEM modeling, the research tests hypothesized associations among constructs. The study contributes by extending UTAUT with NDI as a mediator for technology adoption, provides evidence of NDI's role between digital platforms and customer attraction in Vietnam, and offers insights for leveraging digital

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transformation in nighttime economy development.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the relevant literature and develops the research hypotheses; Section 3 outlines the research methodology; Section 4 presents the empirical results; and Section 5 discusses the findings, theoretical and practical implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1. The Nighttime Economy and the Role of Digital Transformation

The nighttime economy encompassing food, leisure, culture, entertainment, and tourism activities between 6:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m. has become vital for urban economic vitality worldwide (McArthur et al., 2019). In Ho Chi Minh City, it is emerging as a strategic development pillar, driven by infrastructure improvements and consumer preferences for nighttime experiences (Son et al., 2023). However, challenges persist, including restricted hours, safety concerns, and regulatory constraints (McArthur et al., 2019). Digital platforms have become essential for connecting nighttime businesses with younger consumers who are active on social media (Dung et al., 2024). Despite Ho Chi Minh City's advanced ICT infrastructure (Tung et al., 2024), many small enterprises face digital adoption barriers, including limited finances and inadequate digital skills (Sinh & Thai, 2025). These constraints necessitate investigating how digital transformation can promote the nighttime economy in Ho Chi Minh City.

2.2. Theoretical Foundation and Hypothesis Development

2.2.1. Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT)

The Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (Venkatesh et al., 2003) explains intention to adopt new information technologies. The model includes four core constructs Performance Expectancy (PE), Effort Expectancy (EE), Social Influence (SI), and Facilitating Conditions that influence behavioral intention and technology use. In tourism, Performance Expectancy and Effort Expectancy strongly predict intention to adopt digital tools like mobile applications and booking systems (Topsakal & Çuhadar, 2025). In Vietnamese SMEs, Effort Expectancy has significant influence due to limited technical expertise and digital literacy among owners (Sinh & Thai, 2025). Social Influence from peer networks drives adoption of digital payment systems and e-commerce platforms(Linh et al., 2024). Given resource constraints of nighttime economy businesses in Ho Chi Minh City, these UTAUT constructs are expected to shape their intention to use digital platforms.

Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Performance Expectancy positively influences Intention to Use digital platforms.

H2: Effort Expectancy positively influences Intention to Use digital platforms.

H3: Social Influence positively influences Intention to Use digital platforms.

H4: Intention to Use positively influences actual Digital Platform Use.

2.2.2. Nighttime Destination Image and Its Role

Destination image represents beliefs, ideas, and impressions about a place (Ekinci, 2003). Nighttime Destination Image (NDI) extends this to capture perceptions of a destination after dark, including vibrancy, safety, culture, entertainment, and attractiveness (Son et al., 2023). A positive NDI influences tourist and local consumer decisions in urban nighttime settings. Digital platforms shape NDI through visual content, reviews, updates, and engagement (Dung et al., 2024). Through these mechanisms, digital platforms enhance a destination's perceived vibrancy and safety. A favorable NDI increases customer attraction, as consumers prefer destinations evoking positive responses (Li & Tsai, 2022).

Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H5: Digital Platform Use positively influences Nighttime Destination Image.

H6: Nighttime Destination Image positively influences Customer Attraction.

2.2.3. Direct and Mediating Effects of Digital Transformation

Digital platforms enhance customer engagement through targeted marketing, personalized content, and real-time interaction between businesses and consumers (Dung et al., 2024). These mechanisms are vital in the nighttime economy, where consumers use digital channels to discover venues. Digital platform use influences customer attraction through Nighttime Destination Image. A positive NDI, reflecting vibrancy, safety, and attractiveness, amplifies digital efforts' impact on customer behavior (Li & Tsai, 2022). Effective digital platform use builds a favorable

nighttime destination image, driving customer visits.

Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H7: Digital Platform Use positively influences Customer Attraction.

H8: Nighttime Destination Image mediates the relationship between Digital Platform Use and Customer Attraction.

2.3. Proposed Research Model

Drawing on theoretical foundations, the research model integrates core constructs of the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) Performance Expectancy (PE), Effort Expectancy (EE), and Social Influence (SI) with Nighttime Destination Image (NDI) as a mediating variable. This framework shows how digital transformation influences nighttime economy promotion through direct effects on customer attraction and indirect effects via destination perceptions.

The conceptual model in Figure 1 shows PE, EE, and SI shaping Intention to Use (ITU) digital platforms (H1–H3). ITU drives Digital Platform Use (DPU; H4), which positively affects Customer Attraction (CA; H7) and NDI (H5). NDI enhances CA (H6), while the partial mediation (DPU → NDI → CA; H8) shows destination image's role in converting digital adoption to business outcomes.

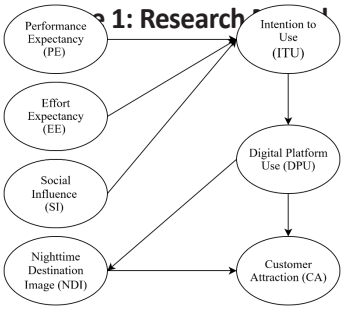


Figure 1 shows the research model with UTAUT constructs (Performance Expectancy, Effort Expectancy, Social Influence) influencing Intention to Use, which affects Digital Platform Use. This use impacts Customer Attraction directly and indirectly through Nighttime Destination Image.

3. Research Methods

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a quantitative research design using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to test the proposed theoretical model. The research was conducted in two phases. In the first phase (May 2025), semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 owners/managers of nighttime economy businesses in Ho Chi Minh City to refine measurement items and verify construct relevance. In the second phase (June to August 2025), a structured questionnaire was administered to collect data from a larger sample of nighttime businesses.

3.2. Measurement Scales

All latent constructs were operationalized using reflective scales adapted from prior studies and contextualized to Ho Chi Minh City's nighttime economy. Responses used a five-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The constructs, items, and sources are detailed below:

- Performance Expectancy (PE): 3 items, adapted from Venkatesh et al. (2003) and Nguyen & Ho (2022).

- Effort Expectancy (EE): 3 items, adapted from Venkatesh et al. (2003) and Nguyen & Ho (2022).

- Social Influence (SI): 3 items initially, adapted from Venkatesh et al. (2003) and Linh et al. (2024). One item (SI3) was removed during measurement model assessment due to low outer loading (< 0.60), resulting in a final scale of 2 items.

- Intention to Use (ITU): 3 items, adapted from Venkatesh et al. (2003).

- Digital Platform Use (DPU): 4 items, measuring frequency and diversity of platform usage (e.g., TikTok, Google Maps, ShopeeFood), adapted from established digital adoption studies.

- Nighttime Destination Image (NDI): 4 items, adapted from (Ekinci, 2003) and Nixon et al. (2017), capturing perceptions of vibrancy, safety, cultural atmosphere, and nighttime attractiveness.

- Customer Attraction (CA): 4 items, assessing perceived increases in customer visits, patronage, and revenue attributable to digital platform activities.

Two items (PE3 and SI3) were removed due to low outer loadings (< 0.60), in accordance with established PLS-SEM guidelines (Hair et al., 2022). The final scales for PE and SI consist of 3 and 2 items, respectively.

Scales were assessed for content validity through expert review and pilot testing (May 2025). During PLS-SEM analysis, items with outer loadings below 0.60 were removed for convergent validity and model parsimony (Hair et al., 2022).

3.3. Sampling and Data Collection

The target population comprised owners/ managers of nighttime economy businesses in Ho

Chi Minh City, focusing on establishments active after 6:00 p.m. like bars, pubs, restaurants, karaoke venues, cafes, and entertainment spots. Due to lack of a comprehensive sampling frame for nighttime operations, non-probability convenience sampling was used. While this limits generalizability, it was suitable given the practical challenges in accessing this dispersed business population.

Questionnaires were distributed both physically and online (via email, Zalo, and Facebook groups) between June-August 2025. From 350 distributed questionnaires, 268 usable responses were obtained (76.6% response rate). After screening for outliers and missing values, 250 valid responses were retained (71.4% effective rate). Respondents were assured anonymity and confidentiality.

3.4. Common Method Bias

As this study uses self-reported data from a single source and time point, common method bias (CMB) was carefully addressed. Procedural measures during questionnaire design included clear instructions, randomized items, varied response formats, and assured respondent anonymity (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Harman's single-factor test showed the first unrotated factor accounted for 38.6% of total variance, below the 50% threshold, indicating CMB was not significant. All variance inflation factors (VIF) in the structural model were below 3.3 (1.12 to 2.87), confirming no problematic multicollinearity (Hair, 2014).

3.5. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SmartPLS 4.0 software, suited for PLS-SEM analysis in exploratory research with complex models (Hair et al., 2022). The analysis used a two-stage approach. First, the measurement model was evaluated for reliability (Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability), convergent validity (AVE), and discriminant validity (Fornell–Larcker criterion and HTMT). Second, the structural model was assessed through path coefficients, significance (bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples), R^2, Q^2, and mediation effects. Tests were conducted at $p < 0.05$.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

All ethical standards for human research were observed. Before completing the questionnaire, respondents received a clear explanation of the study's purpose and voluntary nature. They were assured their responses would remain confidential and anonymous, with no personal information collected. Participants could withdraw anytime without consequence. The research was conducted independently by the authors, without external funding or conflicts of interest.

4. Results

4.1 Common Method Bias and Multicollinearity

Harman's single-factor test was performed to evaluate common method bias. The first unrotated factor accounted for 38.6% of total variance, below the 50% threshold for serious common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003). This result and procedural remedies during data collection indicate that common method bias does not threaten validity. Additionally, variance inflation factors (VIF) in the structural model ranged from 1.000 to 1.855, below the 3.3 threshold recommended by Hair et al. (2022), confirming no problematic multicollinearity among predictors.

4.2. Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model was assessed for reliability, convergent, and discriminant validity following PLS-SEM guidelines (Hair et al., 2022). After initial evaluation, two items (PE3, SI3) were removed due to low outer loadings (< 0.60). Remaining items showed strong outer loadings > 0.70. Results are in Table 1.

Table 1: Measurement model results

Construct	Items	Outer loadings	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
CA	CA1 – CA4	0.789 - 0.825	0.817	0.818	0.646
DPU	DPU1 – DPU4	0.759 – 0.800	0.779	0.781	0.602
EE	EE1 – EE3	0.765 – 0.854	0.739	0.781	0.650
ITU	ITU1 – ITU3	0.829 - 0.889	0.739	0.781	0.650
NID	NID1 - NID4	0.797 – 0.828	0.823	0.824	0.653
PE	PE1. PE2, PE4	0.777 - 0.857	0.784	0.834	0.682
SI	SI1 - SI2	0.903 - 0.939	0.824	0.853	0.845

Note: PE3 and SI3 have been removed due to loading < 0.6

As shown in Table 2, Cronbach's alpha (0.739-0.824) and composite reliability values (0.781-0.853) exceeded 0.70, confirming internal consistency. Average variance extracted values ranged from 0.602 to 0.845, above 0.50, indicating satisfactory convergent validity.

Discriminant validity was established using two criteria. First, the Fornell–Larcker criterion showed each construct's AVE square root exceeded correlations with other constructs (see Table 2). Second, all Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratios were below 0.85, confirming discriminant validity.

Table 2: Fornell–Larcker criterion (square root of AVE on diagonal)

	PE	EE	SI	ITU	DPU	NDI	CA
PE	**0.787**						
EE	0.542	**0.812**					
SI	0.518	0.487	**0.801**				
ITU	0.563	0.601	0.524	**0.801**			
DPU	0.489	0.512	0.441	0.421	**0.776**		
NDI	0.521	0.498	0.463	0.467	0.679	**0.810**	
CA	0.538	0.507	0.492	0.485	0.612	0.721	**0.921**

4.3. Structural Model Assessment

The structural model showed acceptable fit with a Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) of 0.061, below the 0.08 threshold (Hair et al., 2022). Path coefficients, standard deviations, t-values, p-values, and hypothesis testing results are summarized in Table 3. Given the cross-sectional data, path coefficients indicate associations rather than causal relationships, requiring validation through longitudinal or experimental designs.

Table 3: Structural model results and hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Path	β	SD	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	PE → ITU	0.185	0.058	3.181	0.001	Supported
H2	EE → ITU	0.252	0.053	4.750	0.000	Supported
H3	SI → ITU	0.151	0.060	2.518	0.012	Supported
H4	ITU → DPU	0.421	0.054	7.813	0.000	Supported
H5	DPU → NDI	0.679	0.032	21.312	0.000	Supported
H6	NDI → CA	0.554	0.055	10.072	0.000	Supported
H7	DPU → CA	0.252	0.062	4.078	0.000	Supported

All eight direct hypotheses were supported at 5% significance. Effort Expectancy was the strongest predictor of Intention to Use ($\beta = 0.252$, $p < 0.001$), followed by Performance Expectancy ($\beta = 0.185$, $p < 0.001$) and Social Influence ($\beta = 0.151$, $p = 0.012$). Intention to Use predicted Digital Platform Use ($\beta = 0.421$, $p < 0.001$). Digital Platform Use showed positive associations with Nighttime Destination Image ($\beta = 0.679$, $p < 0.001$) and Customer Attraction ($\beta = 0.252$, $p < 0.001$). Nighttime Destination Image positively associated with Customer Attraction ($\beta = 0.554$, $p < 0.001$).

Mediation analysis using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples showed that Nighttime Destination Image partially mediates the Digital Platform Use-Customer Attraction relationship (indirect effect = 0.376, $t = 9.288$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.299, 0.459]). A sensitivity analysis, removing one NDI item at a time, confirmed the stability of this partial mediation finding, with indirect effects remaining significant ($p < 0.001$). Results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Mediation analysis

Path	Indirect Effect	SD	t-value	p-value	CI 95%	Result
DPU → NDI → CA (H8)	0.376	0.041	9.288	0.000	[0.299, 0.459]	Partial mediation

The model explained variance in Customer Attraction ($R^2 = 0.561$), Nighttime Destination Image ($R^2 = 0.461$), and Digital Platform Use ($R^2 = 0.177$), with modest explanatory power for Intention to Use ($R^2 = 0.159$). All Stone–Geisser Q^2 values were positive, indicating satisfactory predictive relevance.

4.5. Discussion of Results

The empirical findings support the extended UTAUT model for nighttime economy businesses in Ho Chi Minh City. Effort Expectancy was the strongest predictor of Intention to Use digital platforms ($\beta = 0.252$, $p < 0.001$), followed by Performance Expectancy ($\beta = 0.185$, $p < 0.001$) and Social Influence ($\beta = 0.151$, $p = 0.012$). This aligns with studies in Vietnamese SMEs (Nguyen & Ho, 2022;Sinh & Thai, 2025), where ease of use outweighs perceived usefulness due to limited technical skills. The path from Intention to Use to Digital Platform Use ($\beta = 0.421$, $p < 0.001$) confirms the UTAUT linkage. Digital Platform Use strongly affected Nighttime Destination Image ($\beta = 0.679$, $p < 0.001$), highlighting digital tools' role in shaping perceptions after dark. This extends research (Nixon et al., 2017;Dung et al., 2024)by showing digital engagement builds favorable nighttime destination image. The partial mediation of Nighttime Destination Image (indirect effect = 0.376, $p < 0.001$) shows that digital platform use drives Customer Attraction through operational effects and image-building (Li & Tsai, 2022). The modest R^2 value for Intention to Use (0.159) aligns with prior UTAUT applications in emerging markets (Sinh & Thai, 2025), where barriers reduce core antecedents' explanatory power.

5. Conclusions and Implications

5.1. Summary of Findings

This study extends the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) by incorporating Nighttime Destination Image (NDI) as a mediator to examine digital transformation's impact on nighttime economy in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Using data from 250 nighttime businesses and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), the analysis supported all hypotheses. Effort Expectancy showed the strongest influence on Intention to Use digital platforms ($\beta = 0.252$, $p < 0.001$), followed by Performance Expectancy ($\beta = 0.185$, $p < 0.001$) and Social Influence ($\beta = 0.151$, $p = 0.012$). Intention to Use predicted Digital Platform Use ($\beta = 0.421$, $p < 0.001$). Digital Platform Use enhanced Customer Attraction directly ($\beta = 0.252$, $p < 0.001$) and indirectly through Nighttime Destination Image (indirect effect = 0.376, $p < 0.001$), showing partial mediation.

5.2. Theoretical Contributions

The study makes three key contributions. First, it extends UTAUT by introducing Nighttime Destination Image as a mediator, linking technology acceptance to destination outcomes in the nighttime economy. Second, it provides initial quantitative

evidence from Vietnam showing NDI's mediating role between digital platform use and customer attraction, connecting individual technology adoption to destination perception. Third, the importance of Effort Expectancy highlights UTAUT's context-specific relevance in emerging markets, contributing to technology adoption theory in urban development.

5.3. Practical Implications

The findings offer actionable recommendations for nighttime economy businesses and policymakers in Ho Chi Minh City.

For nighttime business operators, particularly small enterprises, three priorities are recommended. First, adopt user-friendly digital platforms (TikTok, Google Maps, ShopeeFood) that align with limited digital literacy. Second, monitor key metrics engagement rates, click-through rates, and digital sales for data-driven optimization. Third, collaborate to create content reinforcing a shared Nighttime Destination Image emphasizing safety and cultural authenticity. Collective branding can yield greater benefits than individual campaigns.

For policymakers, four directions are proposed. First, provide subsidized digital training workshops tailored to nighttime businesses' schedules. Second, develop a branding strategy positioning Ho Chi Minh City as a safe nighttime destination through coordinated campaigns. Third, establish regulations on data privacy and consumer protection to build trust. Finally, invest in infrastructure including public Wi-Fi, pedestrian zones, late-night transportation, and digital maps to enhance visitor experience.

5.4. Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. First, convenience sampling may have introduced selection bias, as digitally active businesses were over-represented, limiting generalizability. Second, the cross-sectional design prevents establishing causal inferences, though PLS-SEM provides robust relationship estimates. Third, the model excludes potential moderating variables like firm size and location, which may influence relationships. Finally, Digital Platform Use measurement focused on frequency and variety, without capturing content quality factors affecting outcomes.

5.5. Directions for Future Research

The findings suggest key directions for future research. First, studies should examine moderators like firm size and technological readiness. Second, comparative analyses across Vietnamese cities or Southeast Asian nighttime economies would enhance validity. Third, longitudinal research should track changes in platform adoption and destination image over time. Fourth, future work could explore AI, AR, VR, and metaverse applications in nighttime promotion. Finally, consumer surveys would show how digital content impacts different demographics.

5.6. Conclusion

Digital transformation is critical for enhancing Ho Chi Minh City's nighttime economy competitiveness. Digital platforms help businesses gain customers through visibility while cultivating a Nighttime Destination Image (NDI) of vibrancy, safety, and culture. NDI's partial mediation effect shows the importance of destination branding in the digital era.

The extension of UTAUT with NDI provides a framework for understanding technology adoption in nighttime economies. The findings guide businesses to focus on ease of use, digital training, and infrastructure. As Vietnam positions cities as 24/7 destinations, digital transformation will be crucial for nighttime economies in emerging markets.

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Note: References published in 2025 were accessed during the final revision stage of the manuscript (December 2025) and reflect the most recent literature available at the time of submission

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