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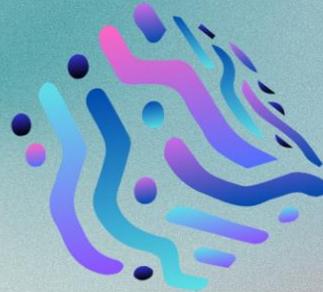
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Welcome to *Intersecta Minds Journal*, a multidisciplinary journal platform dedicated to fostering intellectual exploration and advancing knowledge in the realms of Social Science, Arts and Humanities, Business, Management, and Education. Our mission is to provide a space for scholars, researchers, and practitioners to share their insights, engage in interdisciplinary discourse, and contribute to the vibrant tapestry of human understanding. Here are the scopes and aims that define our commitment to excellence.

Intersecta Minds Journal is a Peer-Reviewed Journals and Full Open Access journal, published via publisher platforms, in full open access journals by 3 peer reviewers for every article.

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1. Interdisciplinary Discourse:

We encourage submissions that bridge the gaps between traditional academic disciplines, fostering a rich exchange of ideas and perspectives. Interdisciplinary research is at the core of our journal, reflecting the interconnected nature of human experience.

2. Social Science Exploration:

Our journal welcomes contributions that delve into the complexities of human societies, exploring topics such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, economics, political science, and more. We aim to showcase research that deepens our understanding of societal structures, dynamics, and challenges.

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Intersecta Minds Journal recognizes the role of research in driving positive social change. We aim to publish work that not only advances academic understanding but also contributes to the betterment of societies and communities worldwide.

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At Intersecta Minds Journal, our mission is to create a vibrant nexus where scholars, researchers, and practitioners converge to explore the multifaceted dimensions of the human experience. We strive to facilitate a rich exchange of ideas, nurture emerging talent, and contribute to the advancement of society through ethical and impactful scholarship.

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SOCIAL SCIENCE, ARTS & HUMANITIES,
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Editor's Introduction

The dynamic world of Intersecta Minds Journal, a scholarly hub committed to intellectual exploration and the advancement of knowledge across the realms of Social Science, Arts and Humanities, Business, Management, and Education. In expressing our gratitude for your continued support, we invite you to delve into the distinctive scopes and aims that define our journal. Thank You to Authors, we extend our sincere appreciation to the authors whose rigorous contributions enrich the diverse landscape of Intersecta Minds Journal. Your commitment to interdisciplinary scholarship forms the essence of our vibrant academic community. Thank You to Readers, to our esteemed readers, thank you for choosing Intersecta Minds as your source of knowledge and inspiration. Your engagement and curiosity fuel the transformative power of scholarly dialogue, and we invite you to immerse yourselves in the rich and thought-provoking content that awaits. Thank You to Pre-Reviewers, a special acknowledgment goes to our diligent pre-reviewers. Your meticulous assessments ensure the scholarly excellence that characterizes Intersecta Minds Journal. Your dedication significantly contributes to the high standards we uphold. Scopes and aims of Intersecta Minds Journal is not just a publication; it is a dynamic platform with specific focuses that guide our commitment to excellence.

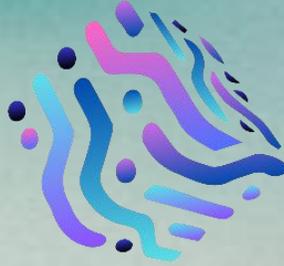
Intersecta Minds Journal is a collaborative endeavor, and we invite you to be part of this intellectual exploration. As we delve into specific areas of interest, we anticipate a continuing exchange of ideas, insights, and discoveries that will shape the future discourse.

Thank you for being an integral part of Intersecta Minds Journal. Your contributions, engagement, and intellectual curiosity are the cornerstones of our thriving community.

Warm regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Pensri Bangbon', with a large, stylized initial 'P'.

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Cloud Computing Adoption in Business Organizations

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Original Research Articles

Cloud Computing Adoption in Business Organizations

Priyansh Sahu^{1*}, & Jyotirmoy Bishnu²

Abstract

Cloud computing has become an essential part of how modern organizations design, deploy, and manage their information technology systems. Over the years, businesses across different sectors have increasingly shifted from traditional on premises infrastructure to cloud based services in order to achieve greater flexibility, scalability, and operational efficiency. This paper examines cloud computing adoption in business organizations using the Technology Organization Environment (TOE) framework, supported by recent large scale industry data. Current statistics indicate that approximately 94% of enterprises worldwide use cloud computing in some form, with 73% adopting hybrid cloud strategies and nearly 80% relying on multiple cloud service providers. While cloud platforms offer several benefits such as reduced capital expenditure, improved scalability, and faster time to market, organizations continue to face challenges related to security risks, cost control, and shortage of skilled professionals. Global public cloud spending is projected to exceed USD 720 billion by 2025, highlighting the growing importance of cloud technologies. The findings of this study emphasize that successful cloud adoption requires a balanced approach that considers technological capabilities, organizational readiness, and environmental influences.

Keywords: Cloud Adoption; Business Organizations; Digital Transformation

Introduction

Cloud computing has evolved from a specialized technological innovation into a fundamental pillar of contemporary business strategy. Organizations across diverse industries increasingly rely on cloud-based services to support core operational activities, deploy enterprise applications, manage large-scale data resources, and enable digital transformation initiatives. By providing on-demand access to shared and scalable computing resources, cloud computing significantly reduces the need for substantial upfront investments in physical IT infrastructure

while enhancing organizational agility and cost efficiency (Armbrust et al., 2010; Mell & Grance, 2011).

Despite its widespread adoption and acknowledged benefits, the transition from traditional on-premise IT systems to cloud-based environments remains a complex and multifaceted process. Organizations encounter a variety of technological challenges, including concerns related to data security, privacy, system interoperability, vendor lock-in, and service availability (Ali, Khan, & Vasilakos, 2015). These technical risks often raise uncertainty regarding the reliability and long-term sustainability of cloud solutions, particularly for organizations handling sensitive or mission-critical data.

Beyond technological considerations, organizational factors play a crucial role in shaping cloud computing adoption decisions. Prior research emphasizes the importance of top management support, organizational readiness, employee expertise, and financial capability in determining successful cloud implementation (Low, Chen, & Wu, 2011). A lack of skilled personnel or insufficient organizational alignment can significantly impede the effective integration of cloud services into existing business processes. Additionally, environmental factors—such as regulatory compliance requirements, industry norms, government policies, and competitive pressures—exert considerable influence on organizational decisions regarding cloud adoption (Oliveira, Thomas, & Espadanal, 2014).

Although existing studies have investigated cloud computing adoption, much of the prior literature has focused on isolated determinants or specific industry contexts, resulting in fragmented and limited insights. This highlights a notable research gap in understanding cloud adoption through a comprehensive and integrative lens. To address this gap, the present study adopts the Technology–Organization–Environment (TOE) framework to systematically examine the technological, organizational, and environmental factors influencing cloud computing adoption in business organizations. By applying the TOE framework, this research aims to contribute to both academic scholarship and managerial practice by offering a structured and holistic perspective on the drivers, benefits, and challenges shaping cloud computing adoption decisions.

Objective

1. Technological factors have a significant positive effect on cloud computing adoption in business organizations.
2. Organizational factors have a significant positive effect on cloud computing adoption.
3. Environmental factors have a significant positive effect on cloud computing adoption.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Cloud computing has emerged as a foundational technology in contemporary organizational information systems, fundamentally transforming how businesses design, deploy, and manage IT resources. Prior research indicates a steady shift from traditional on-premises infrastructure toward cloud-based solutions, driven by the need for enhanced flexibility, scalability, and operational efficiency (Armbrust et al., 2010; Mell & Grance, 2011). Cloud computing enables organizations to access computing resources on demand, reduce upfront capital investments, and accelerate innovation through rapid deployment of applications and services.

Recent large-scale industry and academic studies demonstrate the pervasive nature of cloud adoption across sectors. Approximately 94% of enterprises worldwide now utilize cloud computing in some capacity, with hybrid cloud architectures adopted by nearly 73% of organizations (Flexera, 2023). Furthermore, close to 80% of enterprises employ multi-cloud strategies, leveraging multiple cloud service providers to improve resilience, avoid vendor lock-in, and optimize performance (Hashizume et al., 2013; Gartner, 2024). These trends underscore the strategic importance of cloud computing in achieving organizational agility and competitiveness.

Despite its advantages, the literature consistently identifies several challenges associated with cloud adoption. Security and privacy concerns remain among the most significant barriers, particularly for organizations handling sensitive or regulated data (Subashini & Kavitha, 2011). Studies also highlight difficulties in managing cloud costs, as usage-based pricing models can lead to unexpected expenditures without effective governance mechanisms (Marston et al., 2011). Additionally, the shortage of skilled cloud professionals continues to hinder successful implementation and optimization of cloud services (Alshamaila, Papagiannidis, & Li, 2013).

From an economic perspective, the rapid growth of cloud computing is evident in global spending trends. Public cloud expenditure is projected to surpass USD 720 billion by 2025, reflecting sustained investment by organizations pursuing digital transformation and technological modernization (Gartner, 2024). Collectively, prior studies suggest that while cloud computing delivers substantial benefits, its successful adoption depends on multiple interrelated factors extending beyond purely technical considerations.

Technology–Organization–Environment (TOE)

This study adopts the Technology–Organization–Environment (TOE) framework as the theoretical foundation for examining cloud computing adoption in business organizations. Originally proposed by Tornatzky and Fleischer (1990), the TOE framework posits that organizational adoption of technological innovations is influenced by three contextual dimensions: technological, organizational, and environmental factors. The technological context

refers to the characteristics of the technology itself, including perceived relative advantage, compatibility with existing systems, complexity, security, and scalability. In the context of cloud computing, these factors influence how organizations evaluate cloud platforms as viable alternatives to traditional IT infrastructure (Oliveira, Thomas, & Espadanal, 2014). The organizational context encompasses internal characteristics such as firm size, top management support, IT expertise, financial resources, and organizational culture. Prior studies indicate that organizational readiness, particularly the availability of skilled personnel and managerial commitment, plays a critical role in determining the success of cloud adoption initiatives (Low, Chen, & Wu, 2011).

The environmental context includes external influences such as competitive pressure, regulatory requirements, industry standards, and relationships with cloud service providers. Increasing competitive intensity and regulatory compliance demands often motivate organizations to adopt cloud solutions that offer flexibility, reliability, and compliance support (Zhu, Dong, Xu, & Kraemer, 2006).

By integrating these three dimensions, the TOE framework provides a comprehensive lens for analyzing cloud computing adoption. This study leverages the TOE framework to explain how technological capabilities, organizational preparedness, and environmental pressures collectively shape cloud adoption decisions. The framework is particularly suitable for this research as it captures the multifaceted nature of cloud adoption and aligns with empirical findings reported in prior information systems and innovation diffusion studies.

Materials and Methods

This study observes cloud computing adoption in business organizations using a structured secondary data synthesis methodology. The study relies on recent, extensive industry reports that document actual cloud adoption practices rather than gathering primary data through surveys or interviews. This strategy minimizes the drawbacks of small or localized samples while enabling the study to look at adoption patterns across a variety of organizations.

Data Collection

Five authoritative industry datasets published between 2023 and 2025 were selected for analysis. The selection was based on four criteria: 1) A minimum sample size of 500 respondents, 2) Global or multi regional coverage, 3) Explicit discussion of technological, organizational, and environmental aspects of cloud adoption. 4) Transparent and well documented research methodologies.

The selected sources included reports from Brightlio (N = 2,100), Zoetalent (N = 1,850), Flexera (N = 750), TechRadar (N = 1,200), and Gartner (500+expert interviews). Together, these datasets represent cloud adoption experiences from over 6,000 organizations across multiple

industries and geographic regions. Using multiple independent datasets helps reduce single source bias and improves the robustness of the findings.

Implementation of the TOE Framework

The Technology Organization Environment (TOE) framework serves as the core analytical structure for this study. Rather than treating TOE as a purely conceptual model, it is operationalized through a systematic factor-based analysis.

First, a set of 18 TOE related factors was defined based on prior literature and recurring themes in cloud adoption studies. These factors were evenly distributed across the three TOE dimensions:

1. Technological factors (6): security and privacy, scalability, compatibility, system complexity, innovation access, and infrastructure reliability.
2. Organizational factors (6): top management support, financial resources, cost management capability, technical skills, organizational agility, and change readiness.
3. Environmental factors (6): regulatory compliance, competitive pressure, industry norms, vendor ecosystem, market uncertainty, and government or policy influence.

Following that, all industry reports were carefully scrutinized to identify any explicit or implicit references to these components. Because mentions were coded according to their corresponding TOE dimension, qualitative insights from the reports could be directly mapped onto the TOE framework. This process ensured that organizational, environmental, and technological influence analyses across all datasets were consistent and comparable.

The coding process was carried out by two separate researchers in order to increase reliability. Conflicts were discussed and settled by consensus. The high degree of agreement indicated by the inter-rater reliability score (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.89$) suggests that the TOE factor classification was applied consistently.

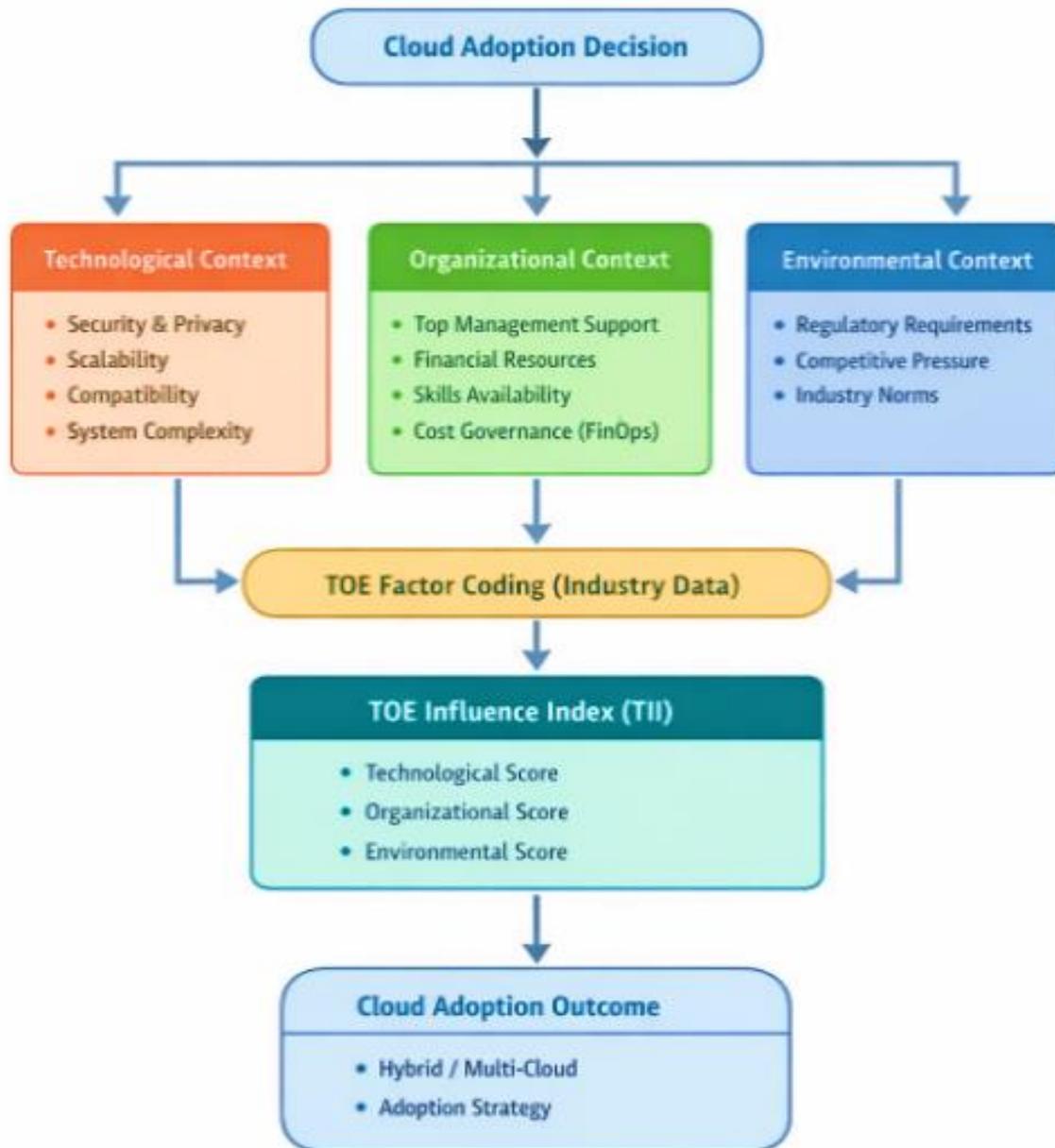


Figure 1 TOE in Cloud adoption

In *Fig 1*, the flowchart illustrates how cloud adoption is influenced by technological, organizational, and environmental factors using the TOE framework. These factors are identified from industry data and systematically mapped to the three TOE dimensions. They are then

aggregated using the TOE Influence Index to compare their relative influence and explain the adoption of hybrid and multi-cloud strategies.

TOE Influence Index (TII)

To move beyond descriptive analysis, the study introduces a quantitative measure called the TOE Influence Index (TII). The TII translates qualitative industry insights into numerical values, enabling direct comparison of the three TOE dimensions.

The index is calculated in three steps:

Factor Frequency:

$$F_{d,t} = \frac{n_{d,t}}{N_d} \quad (4)$$

where $n_{d,t}$ represents the number of references to TOE dimension t in dataset d , and N_d is the total number of coded references in that dataset.

Emphasis Weight:

$$W_{d,t} = \frac{S_{d,t}}{\sum_{i=1}^3 S_{d,i}} \quad (5)$$

where $S_{d,t}$ reflects the relative emphasis or importance given to a TOE dimension within a dataset, based on report structure, prioritization, and depth of discussion.

Aggregation Across Datasets:

$$TII_t = \frac{\sum_{d=1}^5 (F_{d,t} \times W_{d,t} \times R_d)}{\sum_{d=1}^5 R_d} \quad (6)$$

where R_d is a reliability weight assigned based on dataset size and methodological rigor.

This approach allows the study to quantify how strongly each TOE dimension influences cloud adoption decisions, rather than relying solely on narrative interpretation.

Methodological Advantages

The methodology offers several advantages. First, using multiple independent datasets reduces bias associated with single source studies. Second, operationalizing the TOE framework through predefined factors ensures analytical consistency. Third, the TOE Influence Index provides a transparent and reproducible way to compare adoption drivers across dimensions. Relying on recent industry data ensures that the findings reflect current cloud adoption trends and challenges faced by organizations in practice.

Results

The impact of each TOE dimension varies clearly, according to the TOE Influence Index results. The highest TII score was obtained by organizational factors (0.401), followed by technological factors (0.357) and environmental factors (0.242). This suggests that decisions about cloud adoption are influenced more by internal organizational capabilities than by external pressures alone. Security and scalability were found to be the most important factors in the technological context. While 88% of IT leaders cited scalability as a major advantage, more than 75% cited cloud security as a major challenge. Overall, organizational factors had the biggest impact, with cost control being a key issue. Roughly 94% of businesses said they had trouble keeping their cloud expenditures under control, and 68% said they had a lack of qualified cloud workers. Environmental factors, although ranked lower, still played an important role in shaping adoption strategies. Around 80% of organizations reported that regulatory requirements influenced their choice of deployment models. Highly regulated industries demonstrated significantly higher adoption of hybrid cloud solutions compared to less regulated sectors. Refer to *Table II* for reference.

Table 2 TOE Influence Index by Framework Dimension

TOE Dimension	Frequency Score	Emphasis Weight	TII	Rank
Organizational	0.42	0.38	0.401	1
Technological	0.36	0.35	0.357	2
Environmental	0.22	0.27	0.242	3

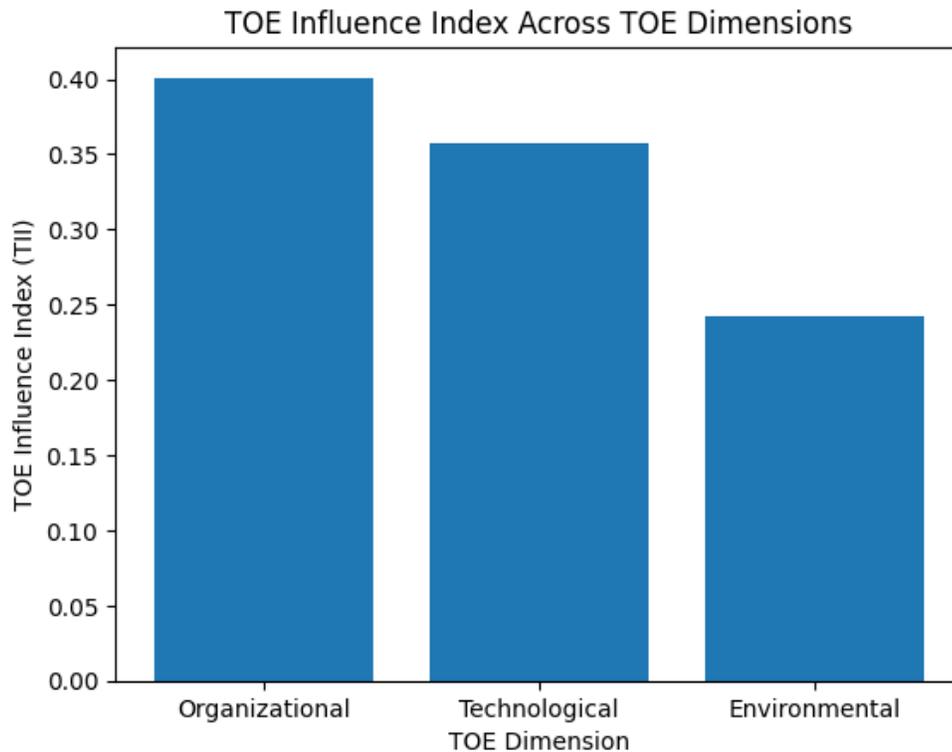


Figure 2 TOE Influence

Organizational context dominated (TII = 0.401), followed by technological (TII = 0.357), with environmental showing lower but meaningful impact (TII = 0.242). This suggests internal capabilities and technological readiness are more decisive than external pressures. *Fig. 2.* depicts the impact of Environmental, Organizational, and TOE.

Key Findings by Dimension

Within technology, security concerns and scalability benefits exhibited highest salience. Over 75% of IT leaders identified cloud security as a major challenge, while 88% cited scalability as a primary benefit. Security/Privacy received importance index 0.85, followed by Scalability (0.82), Innovation Access (0.68), and Compatibility (0.61).

Organizational factors showed strongest overall influence. Cost management emerged critical, with 94% of IT decision makers struggling with cloud cost control. Skills shortage affected 68% of organizations. Table 2 presents benefit versus barriers analysis.

Table 3 Cloud Computing Benefits vs. Organizational Barriers

Aspect	Primary Benefits	Primary Barriers	Prevalence
Cost Management	Pay as you go, Reduced CapEx	Unpredictable spending, Poor visibility	94%
Skills & Expertise	Managed services access	Shortage of cloud professionals	68%
Leadership Support	Strategic alignment	Competing priorities, ROI uncertainty	52%
Organizational Agility	Faster deployment, Rapid scaling	Change resistance	57%
Aspect	Primary Benefits	Primary Barriers	Prevalence

Environmental factors ranked third (TII = 0.242) but play important catalytic roles. Approximately 80% reported regulatory requirements influenced deployment model selection. Highly regulated industries showed significantly higher hybrid cloud adoption (73% vs. 51%). Competitive pressure (68%) acts more as an accelerator than primary driver.

Deployment Model and Growth Trends

Analysis revealed strong convergence toward hybrid and multi cloud: Hybrid Cloud 73%, Multi Cloud 82%, Public Cloud Only 28%, Private Cloud Only 12%. Only 28% rely solely on public cloud. Cloud adoption grew from 58% (2018) to projected 94% (2025), with global spending rising from \$182 billion to projected \$723 billion, representing 21.5% CAGR.

Discussion

This study examined the influence of technological, organizational, and environmental factors on cloud computing adoption in business organizations, guided by the Technology–Organization–Environment (TOE) framework. The findings confirm that all three dimensions exert a significant positive effect on cloud adoption, underscoring that cloud computing is not solely a technological decision but a multifaceted organizational transformation shaped by internal and external conditions.

Technological Factors and Cloud Computing Adoption

The results indicate that technological factors have a significant positive effect on cloud computing adoption, supporting the first research objective. Perceived relative advantage, scalability, cost efficiency, and system compatibility emerged as key drivers of adoption. These findings are consistent with prior research suggesting that organizations are more inclined to adopt cloud computing when they perceive clear operational and strategic benefits over traditional IT infrastructures (Marston et al., 2011; Gangwar et al., 2015). However, while technological benefits remain important, the findings suggest that they are not the dominant determinants of adoption. This challenges purely technology-centric adoption models and aligns with previous studies arguing that technological readiness alone does not guarantee successful cloud adoption (Low, Chen, & Wu, 2011). Thus, improved cloud technology, in isolation, is insufficient for widespread and effective adoption.

Organizational Factors and Cloud Computing Adoption

Organizational factors were found to exert the strongest influence on cloud computing adoption, providing strong support for the second objective. Factors such as top management support, financial readiness, organizational culture, and employee skills significantly shape adoption decisions. This dominance of organizational factors reinforces the argument that cloud adoption is fundamentally a managerial and strategic decision rather than a purely technical one. These findings are consistent with earlier studies emphasizing the critical role of leadership commitment, internal expertise, and change management in enabling successful cloud initiatives (Oliveira et al., 2014; Alshamaila, Papagiannidis, & Li, 2013). To truly reap the benefits of cloud computing, organizations must invest in robust financial governance mechanisms, continuous skill development, and structured change management programs. Without these organizational capabilities, the potential advantages of cloud technologies may remain unrealized.

Environmental Factors and Cloud Computing Adoption

The results also confirm that environmental factors have a significant positive effect on cloud computing adoption, supporting the third objective. Competitive pressure, regulatory requirements, and external support from cloud service providers influence organizations' decisions to adopt cloud solutions. This finding aligns with the TOE framework, which posits that external environmental conditions can either accelerate or constrain technological innovation (Tornatzky & Fleischer, 1990). In particular, increasing regulatory scrutiny related to data protection and privacy, along with competitive pressure to enhance agility and digital capabilities, has encouraged organizations to adopt cloud solutions strategically. The widespread adoption of hybrid and multi-cloud architectures reflects enterprises' pragmatic approach to balancing flexibility, cost optimization, risk mitigation, and compliance requirements. Similar observations have been reported in prior studies highlighting the role of industry norms and regulatory environments in shaping cloud adoption strategies (Hsu, Ray, & Li-Hsieh, 2014).

Implications of Hybrid and Multi-Cloud Adoption

While hybrid and multi-cloud strategies enable organizations to address diverse operational and regulatory needs, the findings also reveal that these approaches introduce additional complexity. Challenges related to system integration, administrative overhead, security management, and cost allocation necessitate more sophisticated governance structures. This supports recent literature emphasizing the growing importance of cloud governance frameworks to manage complexity and ensure value realization in multi-cloud environments (Janssen & Joha, 2011).

Overall, the data demonstrate that cloud computing adoption is driven by a complex interplay of technological advantages, organizational readiness, and environmental pressures. The prominence of organizational factors calls into question overly technology-focused adoption models and highlights the need for a more holistic perspective. Successful cloud adoption requires not only advanced technologies but also strong leadership, organizational capabilities, and adaptive governance mechanisms that respond to an evolving external environment.

Conclusion

This study examined cloud computing adoption in business organizations through the Technology–Organization–Environment (TOE) framework, drawing on large-scale, multi-source industry data. The findings demonstrate that cloud adoption is a multifaceted organizational decision influenced by the combined effects of technological capabilities, organizational readiness, and environmental pressures. Among these dimensions, organizational factors emerged as the most influential, highlighting that internal governance, cost management capability, leadership support, and workforce skills are more decisive than technological availability alone.

Technological factors such as scalability, security, and innovation access were found to play a critical enabling role, confirming that perceived benefits continue to drive adoption. However, persistent challenges related to security concerns and system complexity indicate that technological maturity does not automatically translate into successful adoption outcomes. Environmental factors, while comparatively less influential, act as important catalysts, particularly in highly regulated industries where compliance requirements shape deployment choices.

The widespread preference for hybrid and multi-cloud strategies reflects organizations' efforts to balance flexibility, performance optimization, regulatory compliance, and risk mitigation. Overall, the study reinforces the relevance of the TOE framework as a comprehensive lens for understanding cloud adoption and demonstrates that sustainable value from cloud

computing can only be achieved when technological investments are supported by strong organizational capabilities and adaptive governance structures.

Suggestions

Suggestions for Implementation

Based on the findings, several practical recommendations can be made for business organizations planning or expanding cloud adoption initiatives:

1. **Strengthen Organizational Readiness** Organizations should prioritize internal readiness by securing top management commitment, establishing clear cloud strategies, and aligning cloud initiatives with business objectives. Strong leadership involvement is essential for overcoming resistance to change and ensuring sustained investment.

2. **Enhance Cloud Cost Governance** Given the prevalence of cloud cost management challenges, organizations should adopt robust financial governance mechanisms, such as FinOps practices, real-time cost monitoring tools, and well-defined budgeting controls, to improve spending visibility and accountability.

3. **Invest in Skill Development** The shortage of qualified cloud professionals remains a major barrier. Continuous training programs, certifications, and partnerships with cloud service providers can help bridge skill gaps and improve internal technical expertise.

4. **Adopt Structured Security and Compliance Frameworks** Security and regulatory concerns should be addressed through standardized security architectures, data governance policies, and compliance-driven deployment models, particularly in regulated industries.

5. **Develop Multi-Cloud Governance Mechanisms** As hybrid and multi-cloud adoption increases, organizations should implement centralized governance frameworks to manage integration complexity, vendor relationships, security consistency, and operational efficiency.

Suggestions for Future Research

While this study provides a comprehensive overview of cloud adoption drivers, several avenues remain open for future research:

1. **Firm-Level Empirical Studies** Future research could conduct primary data collection at the organizational level to validate and extend the findings derived from industry reports.

2. **Longitudinal Analysis** Long-term studies examining how cloud adoption strategies evolve over time would provide deeper insights into post-adoption outcomes, maturity stages, and value realization.

3. **Industry-Specific Investigations** Comparative studies across different industries, particularly highly regulated versus less regulated sectors, could further clarify the role of environmental factors in shaping cloud strategies.

4. Integration with Emerging Technologies Future studies may explore how emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, edge computing, and serverless architectures interact with TOE dimensions to influence cloud adoption decisions.

Declaration of Interests

The authors declare that there are no financial, professional, or personal interests that could have influenced the research reported in this paper.

Ethical Considerations

This study is based exclusively on secondary data obtained from publicly available industry reports and published sources. No human participants, personal data, or confidential organizational information were involved. As a result, formal ethical approval was not required. All sources were used responsibly and cited appropriately to ensure transparency and academic integrity.

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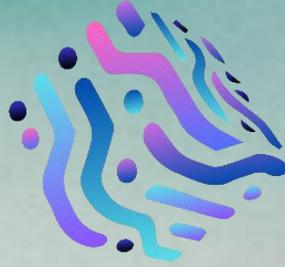
Definition of Conflicts of Interest

A conflict of interest refers to any situation in which an author's financial interests, personal relationships, or professional affiliations could unduly influence the research process, interpretation of findings, or presentation of results. In the context of this study, no such conflicts exist.

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Buddhism as Cultural Capital in Thailand

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Academic Articles

Buddhism as Cultural Capital in Thailand

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Abstract

This article examines Buddhism as cultural capital in Thai society, drawing upon sociological and anthropological perspectives on cultural capital. Utilizing Pierre Bourdieu's tripartite framework embodied, objectified, and institutionalized cultural capital—it explores how Buddhism functions historically and contemporarily as a vital resource shaping Thai identity, morality, and institutions. The study illustrates how Buddhist values and practices are embodied in personal habits, objectified in sacred spaces and religious artifacts, and institutionalized in education and governance. It then analyzes contemporary challenges facing Buddhism as cultural capital, including consumerism, digital culture, and globalization. While these forces transform the meanings and practices of Buddhism, they also reveal its adaptability as a living resource that continues to guide cultural continuity and social change. The article concludes that Buddhism remains both a resilient and contested form of cultural capital, whose significance lies in its capacity to balance tradition and innovation in an interconnected world.

Keywords: Buddhism, Cultural Capital, Thailand

Introduction

Buddhism has long been regarded as the cultural foundation of Thai society, shaping not only religious practices but also everyday life, values, and social structures. As the majority religion, embraced by more than 90% of the Thai population, Buddhism has functioned beyond its spiritual dimension to serve as a reservoir of cultural resources that define the nation's identity and collective memory (Phra Dhammapitaka, 1996). In this sense, Buddhism is not merely a system of belief but also a form of cultural capital that provides symbolic power, social legitimacy, and cultural continuity in Thai society (Kaewthep, 2009). Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital is beneficial for analyzing this phenomenon. He posited that cultural knowledge,

traditions, and symbolic practices accumulate in society and operate as forms of capital—resources that can be mobilized for social and symbolic advantage. Within the Thai context, Buddhism constitutes such capital, transmitted through rituals, festivals, artistic expressions, moral values, and educational traditions. These practices not only reflect spiritual devotion but also generate cultural legitimacy, reinforce moral norms, and preserve national identity. Despite the forces of globalization, modernization, and the challenges of consumerism and digital culture, Buddhism continues to play a vital role in sustaining Thai cultural capital. It remains a source of ethical reference, social cohesion, and cultural creativity that can be mobilized for contemporary development in education, the creative economy, and community resilience (Keyes, 1994; Tambiah, 1976). This article, therefore, aims to examine the role of Buddhism as cultural capital in Thailand by analyzing its mechanisms, dimensions, and significance in shaping and sustaining Thai cultural identity across historical and contemporary contexts.

Cultural Capital in Sociological and Anthropological Perspectives

The concept of cultural capital was introduced by Pierre Bourdieu in the 1970s as part of his broader theory of practice. Cultural capital refers to the non-material resources—such as knowledge, skills, education, tastes, and cultural practices—that individuals accumulate and utilize to gain social mobility and recognition within a given society (Bourdieu, 1986). Unlike economic capital, which relies on financial resources, cultural capital operates through symbolic systems that grant legitimacy, authority, and social distinction.

From a sociological perspective, cultural capital manifests in three forms:

1. Embodied cultural capital long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body, such as manners, worldviews, and values.
2. Objectified cultural capital cultural objects like books, artworks, temples, and artifacts that carry meaning and prestige.
3. Institutionalized cultural capital formal recognition of cultural competence through credentials, titles, or affiliations (Bourdieu, 1986; Swartz, 1997).

These forms of capital are not merely personal assets but also embedded within social structures, shaping power relations and reinforcing social hierarchies.

From an anthropological perspective, cultural capital is closely related to the study of culture as a system of meanings, symbols, and practices that structure everyday life (Geertz, 1973). Anthropologists highlight how cultural capital is not only transmitted through formal education but also through rituals, traditions, and community practices. Cultural capital thus serves as a mechanism for cultural reproduction, whereby values and norms are passed across generations, sustaining collective identity and cultural continuity (Erickson, 1996).

In combining sociological and anthropological insights, cultural capital can be understood both as a resource that shapes individual life chances and as a collective asset that sustains cultural heritage. This dual perspective is particularly relevant in analyzing Buddhism in Thailand,

where religious knowledge, rituals, and institutions serve simultaneously as symbolic resources for individuals and as cultural wealth for the nation.

Buddhism as Cultural Capital in the Thai Context

When applying Bourdieu's (1986) framework of cultural capital to Thai society, Buddhism can be seen as one of the most significant cultural resources that shapes social values, practices, and identities. The religion operates not only as a spiritual tradition but also as a form of capital embedded in daily life, rituals, art, and institutions. These dimensions can be categorized into embodied, objectified, and institutionalized cultural capital.

1. **Embodied Cultural Capital: Buddhist Values and Practices** Bourdieu's notion of embodied cultural capital emphasizes long-lasting dispositions, habits, and skills acquired through socialization. In the Thai context, Buddhism has served as a crucial mechanism for shaping such dispositions across generations. From early childhood, Thai individuals are introduced to Buddhist teachings through family practices, temple activities, and formal schooling. These teachings—centered on the concepts of karma (action and moral causation), mettā (loving-kindness), and sīla (morality)—are not merely abstract doctrines but are embodied as practical guides for everyday living (Keyes, 1993).

2. **Early Socialization and Moral Formation** Embodied Buddhist capital begins within the family, where parents encourage children to pay respect to monks, participate in merit-making rituals, and internalize ethical guidelines such as the Five Precepts (pañcasīla). Such practices instill dispositions of respect for hierarchy, mindfulness of consequences, and compassion toward others. These early experiences form part of what Bourdieu calls habitus: an embodied structure of perception and behavior that shapes how individuals navigate social life (Bourdieu, 1986). In rural settings, especially, children often accompany their families to temple ceremonies, festivals, and communal activities, embedding Buddhist values as part of their collective identity (Ishii, 1986).

3. **Meditation and the Cultivation of Dispositions** Meditation practices, including mindfulness (sati) and insight (vipassanā), also serve as key forms of embodied cultural capital. Meditation not only promotes mental discipline but also shapes individuals' emotional regulation, patience, and ability to focus qualities valued both in religious and secular contexts (McMahan, 2008). In Thailand, meditation retreats have expanded beyond monastic circles to include laypeople, students, and even corporate employees, indicating the flexibility and continued relevance of embodied Buddhist practices in modern society.

4. **Ritual Participation and Social Identity** Participation in rituals such as tham bun (making merit), kathin (robe-offering ceremonies), and ordination rites for young men reinforces communal bonds and personal identity. For instance, temporary ordination remains a significant rite of passage for Thai males, symbolizing moral maturity and social respectability (Cook, 2010). Such embodied experiences confer symbolic capital by associating individuals with moral

legitimacy and social honor. These practices highlight how religious embodiment functions as both personal cultivation and social positioning.

5. **Gendered Dimensions of Embodied Capital** Embodied Buddhist capital also reflects gendered patterns. While men traditionally embody religious capital through ordination and monastic scholarship, women often embody it through devotional practices, temple patronage, and roles in sustaining merit-making rituals (Seeger, 2009). This gendered embodiment demonstrates how Buddhist values and practices are distributed differently yet integrally across Thai society, reinforcing the interdependence of religious habitus within family and community life.

6. **Continuity and Transformation** While traditional forms of embodied Buddhist capital remain strong, modern influences such as consumerism and digital media are transforming how values are embodied. For example, young Thais may engage with Buddhist teachings through smartphone apps or YouTube sermons rather than temple visits. Yet even in these new forms, the embodied capital persists; mindfulness techniques, compassion-oriented practices, and ritual participation remain crucial dispositions shaping personal and social life.

Objectified Cultural Capital: Buddhist Material Culture and Symbolic Power

In Bourdieu's framework, objectified cultural capital refers to cultural goods and artifacts that embody symbolic value. Within Thai Buddhism, these include temples, scriptures, sacred images, ritual objects, and artistic expressions. These tangible forms do not merely reflect religious devotion but function as cultural resources that can be mobilized for social legitimacy, aesthetic recognition, and even economic exchange.

1. **Temples as Cultural Centers** Temples (wat) represent the most prominent objectified forms of Buddhist capital in Thailand. They are not only places of worship but also centers of education, community gatherings, and artistic expression (Swearer, 2010). Their architecture—characterized by ornate stupas (chedi), vihāras (assembly halls), and murals depicting Jātaka tales—embody symbolic meanings that link local communities with the cosmological and ethical universe of Buddhism. Temples thus serve as both religious and cultural landmarks, anchoring collective memory and social identity.

2. **Sacred Objects and Amulets** Amulets (phra khruang rang) and statues of the Buddha are perhaps the most widespread objectified forms of Buddhist capital. Amulets function simultaneously as objects of devotion, social markers of prestige, and commodities in religious economies (Tambiah, 1984; Jackson, 1999). They confer symbolic power upon their owners, believed to provide protection, charisma, and fortune. The widespread trade and collection of amulets illustrate how religious symbols circulate within broader social and economic fields, blurring boundaries between faith and commerce.

3. **Texts and Scriptures** Pāli scriptures, commentaries, and Thai vernacular Buddhist texts constitute another form of objectified capital. The preservation and recitation of canonical texts during rituals reinforce communal knowledge and transmit doctrinal legitimacy. Manuscripts and

inscriptions—often housed within monastic libraries—also serve as markers of scholarly and cultural authority (Skilling, 2009). The textual tradition thereby functions as a repository of knowledge, anchoring Buddhism within both local and transnational intellectual networks.

4. Buddhist Art and Cultural Identity

Buddhist art, including sculpture, murals, and ritual music, functions as a symbolic marker of Thai cultural identity. Images of the Buddha are not only devotional objects but also aesthetic representations of spiritual ideals. The replication and circulation of such art forms across Thai society reinforces shared cultural identity, while also serving as a resource for tourism and national branding (Taylor, 2016).

Objectified Buddhist capital, therefore, embodies a dual role: it sustains spiritual and cultural meanings while also participating in political, economic, and global circuits. These objects anchor Buddhism materially in Thai society, offering tangible symbols that mediate between the sacred and the secular.

Institutionalized Cultural Capital: Authority, Education, and State Legitimacy

Institutionalized cultural capital, in Bourdieu's sense, refers to recognized forms of cultural value legitimized by institutions—such as educational systems, bureaucracies, and legal frameworks. Thai Buddhism has historically been institutionalized in multiple ways, providing enduring legitimacy to both religious and political structures.

1. Monastic Education and Literacy Historically, Buddhist monasteries functioned as the primary institutions of literacy and education in Thailand. Monks provided instruction in reading, writing, and Buddhist teachings to young boys, embedding Buddhist values into the very structure of knowledge transmission (Ishii, 1986). This educational role institutionalized Buddhism as a gatekeeper of cultural knowledge and social mobility. Even today, monastic schools continue to provide alternative education for underprivileged children, extending the reach of institutionalized Buddhist capital.

2. The Sangha as an Institution The Sangha the monastic community represents a highly organized and institutionalized form of Buddhist authority. Governed by hierarchical structures such as the Supreme Sangha Council, the Sangha functions as both a religious authority and a political actor, closely linked with the Thai state (Taylor, 2016). State recognition of the Sangha reinforces its institutionalized legitimacy, while also subjecting it to regulation and reform. The Sangha thus embodies institutionalized capital by monopolizing religious authority and shaping national identity.

3. Buddhism and the Thai State Buddhism's institutionalization extends beyond the Sangha into the Thai state apparatus. The monarchy has historically positioned itself as a patron of Buddhism, reinforcing the symbolic legitimacy of both religion and kingship (Tambiah, 1976). The state's endorsement of Buddhism as the de facto national religion provides legal and political recognition, embedding Buddhist authority within national identity and statecraft. National

holidays, public rituals, and constitutional references to Buddhism reinforce its institutionalized position.

4. Institutionalized Buddhism in Global Contexts In recent decades, institutionalized Buddhism has also taken transnational forms. Thai Buddhist organizations have established international temples, meditation centers, and missionary networks, extending institutional authority abroad (McDaniel, 2011). This global institutionalization reinforces Thailand’s image as a guardian of Theravāda tradition while contributing to the international prestige of Thai Buddhism.

Institutionalized Buddhist capital thus operates at multiple levels—local, national, and global. It legitimizes authority, sustains educational functions, and reinforces national identity, while simultaneously adapting to new global and political contexts.

Contemporary Analysis: Buddhism as Cultural Capital in the Age of Consumerism, Digital Culture, and Globalization

While Buddhism has historically served as a profound source of cultural capital in Thai society, the forces of modernity—particularly consumerism, digital culture, and globalization—have reshaped its manifestations and relevance. These dynamics simultaneously challenge and redefine how Buddhism functions as embodied, objectified, and institutionalized cultural capital.

1. Buddhism and Consumerism In contemporary Thailand, Buddhism has increasingly intersected with consumerist practices. Religious rituals, amulets, and sacred objects are often commodified, transforming objectified cultural capital into items of exchange within market economies (Jackson, 1999). Temples market meditation courses to urban professionals seeking stress relief, while “merit-making” has at times been framed in transactional terms, where donations are linked to expectations of karmic returns (Kitiarsa, 2005). Although critics argue that this commodification undermines spiritual authenticity, it also demonstrates Buddhism’s adaptability, as it remains relevant in consumer-driven societies by integrating into new economic frameworks.

2. Buddhism and Digital Culture The digital era has profoundly altered the transmission and embodiment of Buddhist cultural capital. Online sermons, live-streamed meditation sessions, and the proliferation of Buddhist teachings on social media platforms allow individuals to access religious practices beyond traditional temple settings (McDaniel, 2017). This digital mediation democratizes access, particularly for younger generations who are more digitally native, thereby reconstituting embodied cultural capital in new ways. At the same time, digital Buddhism creates new tensions: while it expands access, it also risks superficial engagement, where religious teachings are consumed as fragments within fast-paced digital environments.

3. Buddhism and Globalization Globalization has opened Thai Buddhism to transnational flows of ideas, practices, and influences. The exportation of Theravāda meditation traditions—particularly Vipassanā and mindfulness—into global contexts exemplifies the institutionalization of Buddhist cultural capital on an international scale (Wilson, 2014). Conversely, global religious

pluralism and secular values challenge the centrality of Buddhism within Thai identity. Younger Thais, influenced by global discourses of individualism and rationalism, often re-interpret Buddhist practices less as religious obligations and more as personal, psychological, or cultural resources (Cassaniti & Luhrmann, 2011).

4. Challenges and Opportunities Taken together, these forces both destabilize and invigorate Buddhism as cultural capital. Consumerism risks reducing Buddhism to commodified symbols; digital culture can dilute depth in favor of accessibility; and globalization can erode traditional authority while simultaneously elevating Buddhism's global prestige. The key challenge lies in negotiating these shifts while preserving the depth of Buddhist teachings. Yet these developments also present opportunities for Buddhism to continue serving as an adaptable reservoir of cultural capital—one that evolves alongside Thailand's changing socio-cultural landscape.

Conclusion

This study has examined Buddhism as cultural capital in Thailand through the theoretical lens of Pierre Bourdieu's typology of embodied, objectified, and institutionalized cultural capital. The analysis demonstrates that Buddhism has long functioned as a foundational cultural resource shaping Thai moral dispositions, social practices, symbolic systems, and institutional legitimacy. As embodied cultural capital, Buddhist teachings and practices cultivate ethical habitus that guide everyday behavior, social relationships, and emotional discipline. As objectified cultural capital, temples, sacred objects, scriptures, and artistic expressions materialize Buddhist values and anchor collective memory, identity, and symbolic authority. As institutionalized cultural capital, monastic education, Sangha governance, and state patronage reinforce Buddhism's enduring influence within educational, political, and national frameworks.

The findings further reveal that Buddhism as cultural capital is neither static nor immune to contemporary social transformations. Consumerism, digital culture, and globalization have reshaped how Buddhist meanings are produced, circulated, and embodied in Thai society. While commodification and digital mediation raise concerns about superficial engagement and the erosion of doctrinal depth, these processes also illustrate Buddhism's adaptability as a living cultural resource. Globalization, in particular, has both challenged Buddhism's centrality within national identity and enhanced its transnational visibility through the global dissemination of meditation and mindfulness practices.

Overall, the study underscores that Buddhism remains a resilient yet contested form of cultural capital in Thailand. Its continued relevance depends on its ability to negotiate tensions between tradition and innovation, sacred meaning and market forces, institutional authority and individual interpretation. Recognizing Buddhism as a dynamic cultural resource rather than a fixed heritage allows for a more nuanced understanding of its role in sustaining Thai cultural identity while responding creatively to contemporary social change.

Suggestions

Suggestions for Implementation

1. **Cultural and Educational Policy** Educational institutions and policymakers should integrate Buddhist ethical principles such as mindfulness, compassion, and moral responsibility into curricula in ways that emphasize critical reflection rather than rote ritualism. This approach can strengthen embodied cultural capital while remaining compatible with pluralistic and modern educational frameworks.

2. **Temple and Community Engagement** Buddhist temples should be supported as cultural centers that balance spiritual functions with community education, social welfare, and cultural preservation. Programs that encourage intergenerational participation can help sustain Buddhist cultural capital amid rapid social change.

3. **Responsible Use of Digital Media** Religious institutions and educators should adopt digital platforms strategically to disseminate Buddhist teachings while maintaining doctrinal depth and ethical integrity. Digital content should complement, rather than replace, experiential learning and communal practice.

4. **Cultural Economy and Tourism** Policymakers and cultural practitioners should promote Buddhist heritage within the creative economy and tourism sector in ethically responsible ways that avoid excessive commodification and respect the spiritual significance of religious symbols and sites.

Suggestions for Future Research

1. **Comparative Studies** Future research could compare Buddhism as cultural capital in Thailand with its role in other Theravāda or Mahāyāna societies to identify similarities and divergences in institutionalization, embodiment, and global adaptation.

2. **Generational Perspectives** Empirical studies focusing on younger generations could provide deeper insights into how digital culture and globalization reshape embodied Buddhist capital, moral identity, and religious engagement.

3. **Gender and Power Dynamics** Further research could examine gendered distributions of Buddhist cultural capital, particularly the roles of women in sustaining religious practices, merit-making economies, and community networks.

4. **Quantitative and Mixed-Methods Approaches** While this study is primarily theoretical and qualitative, future research could incorporate surveys, interviews, or ethnographic methods to assess how Buddhism functions as cultural capital across different social classes and regions in Thailand.

Declaration of Interests

The authors declare that there are no financial, professional, or personal interests that could have influenced the research findings or the interpretation of the results presented in this article.

Ethical Considerations

This study is based on theoretical analysis and secondary sources. No human participants, personal data, or sensitive information were directly involved. All sources have been appropriately cited, and the research was conducted in accordance with accepted academic standards of integrity, transparency, and scholarly responsibility.

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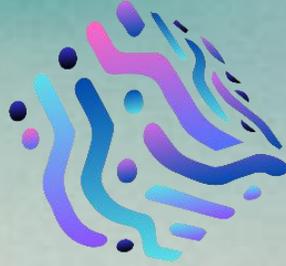
Definition of Conflicts of Interest

A conflict of interest refers to any situation in which an author's financial, institutional, or personal relationships could inappropriately influence or be perceived to influence the research process, interpretation of data, or presentation of findings. The authors confirm that no such conflicts of interest exist in relation to this study.

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Buddhist Criticism as a New Literary Criticism Theory and Its Applicability in Contemporary Literary Studies: The Case Study of Short Story Tram Ngan in Comparison with the Ullambaṇa Sūtra

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Original Research Articles

Buddhist Criticism as a New Literary Criticism Theory and Its Applicability in Contemporary Literary Studies – The Case Study of Short Story Tram Ngan in Comparison with the Ullambaṇa Sūtra

Nguyen Thanh Trung^{1*}

Abstract

This research addresses the limited scope of contemporary Vietnamese literary studies conducted through the framework of Buddhist criticism. The study aims to comparatively analyze the short story Tram Ngan by Ngo Tu Ngan winner of the runner-up prize in the 2022–2024 Literary Newspaper Short Story Competition and the Ullambana Sūtra (Vu Lan Sūtra), in order to demonstrate the interpretive potential of Buddhist critical approaches when applied to both modern literary texts and classical Buddhist scriptures. Employing qualitative research methodology, the study is based on textual analysis and comparative interpretation. The research population consists of literary and religious texts, with the selected sample comprising Tram Ngan as a representative of contemporary Vietnamese short fiction and the Ullambana Sūtra as a foundational Mahayana Buddhist scripture. The primary research tools include close reading, thematic analysis, and Buddhist critical theory, particularly concepts related to suffering (*dukkha*), compassion (*karuṇā*), transcendence, and filial piety (*filial gratitude*). Data are analyzed through interpretive comparison to identify shared and divergent thematic structures and spiritual meanings.

The findings reveal that both Tram Ngan and the Ullambana Sūtra prominently reflect three shared characteristics: tragedy rooted in human suffering, compassion arising from empathetic understanding, and transcendence through moral and spiritual awakening. Notably, the Ullambana Sūtra introduces the explicit dimension of filial piety, which, when applied as an interpretive lens, offers new insights into Tram Ngan, particularly in terms of ethical responsibility and emotional redemption. This study affirms that Buddhist criticism is a valuable and effective

approach for illuminating the deeper humanistic and spiritual dimensions of contemporary literature while simultaneously recontextualizing classical Buddhist texts. Ultimately, the research highlights the enduring relevance of Buddhist teachings in interpreting modern human experiences and reinforces the integrative relationship between literature and spiritual philosophy.

Keywords: Buddhist criticism; Tram Ngan; Ullambana Sutra

Introduction

This study seeks to elucidate the background, significance, and scholarly necessity of examining the intersection between literature and Buddhist philosophy, a field that while explored intermittently has yet to be systematically synthesised within Vietnamese literary studies. In literary criticism broadly, and Vietnamese studies in particular, the engagement between narrative art and Buddhist thought emerged relatively early and has yielded valuable interpretive insights. However, these efforts remain fragmented, lacking a cohesive theoretical framework capable of integrating modern literary texts with canonical Buddhist scriptures.

Against this backdrop, the short story *Tram Ngan* by Ngo Tu Ngan, recently published in *Van Nghe* (2024), has drawn notable critical and public attention. The work portrays themes of abandonment, itinerant existence, existential suffering, and the protagonist's yearning for reunion, thereby constructing a poignant tableau of human life that resonates strongly with core Buddhist principles such as impermanence (*anicca*), karmic causality (*karma*), suffering (*dukkha*), and the aspiration toward liberation (*mokṣa*). These thematic elements invite interpretation through a Buddhist-critical lens, positioning *Tram Ngan* as a contemporary literary manifestation of enduring spiritual concerns.

In contrast yet in dialogue with this modern narrative, the *Ullambaṇa Sūtra*—a foundational Mahāyāna Buddhist text—foregrounds filial piety (*hiếu đạo*) as a central ethical and soteriological principle. The *sūtra* emphasises liberation through compassion, meritorious action, and acts of gratitude toward one's parents, thereby transforming personal suffering into wisdom, loving-kindness (*mettā*), and spiritual awakening. Although differing in genre, historical context, and narrative strategy, both *Tram Ngan* and the *Ullambaṇa Sūtra* articulate the transformative power of Buddhist doctrine in reconfiguring human suffering into moral insight and compassionate practice. The contemporary relevance of *Tram Ngan* is further underscored by the controversy surrounding the 2022–2024 *Van Nghe* Short Story Competition, in which no first prize was awarded and *Tram Ngan* received a second prize. This outcome sparked significant public debate regarding aesthetic standards, thematic depth, and evaluative criteria in contemporary Vietnamese literature. Such controversy highlights an urgent need for rigorous, systematic, and theoretically grounded scholarly assessment of the work's literary and philosophical value. Within this context, the present study proposes a comparative analysis of *Tram Ngan* and the *Ullambaṇa Sūtra* through the framework of Buddhist criticism. By juxtaposing a modern Vietnamese short story with a canonical Buddhist scripture, the research aims to

expand the methodological scope of Buddhist literary criticism while reaffirming the enduring societal values of filial piety, compassion, and transcendence. Moreover, the study aspires to contribute to ethical and educational discourse by fostering awareness of virtuous and compassionate living, particularly among younger generations navigating contemporary social and existential challenges.

The research object is the interplay between Buddhist philosophy and narrative art as manifested in Tram Ngan and the Ullambaṇa Sūtra. The scope of the study is delimited to: (1) Tram Ngan by Ngo Tu Ngan (Van Nghe, 2024), situated within the context of Southern Vietnamese literature from 2000 to the present; and (2) the Ullambaṇa Sūtra, examined within the broader corpus of classical Buddhist scriptures. The study aims to elucidate representations of impermanence, karma, compassion, filial piety, and transcendence in both texts, as well as to identify points of convergence and divergence between modern literary expression and Buddhist canonical thought. To achieve these aims, the research undertakes four specific tasks: (1) systematising the theoretical foundations of Buddhist literary criticism; (2) analysing Tram Ngan and the Ullambaṇa Sūtra through a Buddhist-critical lens; (3) identifying three core shared characteristics between the two texts while highlighting the distinctive emphasis on filial piety in the Ullambaṇa Sūtra and refining the Buddhist-critical analytical framework; and (4) assessing the contributions of both texts to contemporary literature and spiritual life. Through these objectives, the study seeks to offer theoretical, practical, and educational contributions to Vietnamese literary criticism and Buddhist humanities scholarship.

Objective

1. To systematise the theoretical foundations of Buddhist literary criticism, with particular attention to its applicability to modern Vietnamese literature in dialogue with canonical Buddhist texts.

2. To analyse Tram Ngan through a Buddhist-critical lens, identifying the narrative manifestations of impermanence, karmic causality, existential suffering, compassion, and the aspiration toward liberation.

3. To examine the Ullambaṇa Sūtra as a doctrinal and narrative text, focusing on its ethical and soteriological emphases, especially filial piety, compassion, and merit-making as pathways to liberation.

Literature Review

Buddhist Criticism in Literary Studies

Buddhist criticism within literary studies constitutes a diverse and historically marginal yet increasingly systematised interpretive approach that integrates Buddhist philosophy with literary analysis. Early scholarly contributions, such as Skilton (2000), emphasise the symbolic and

discursive dimensions of Buddhist canonical literature, laying a foundation for understanding Buddhist texts as sophisticated literary constructions rather than solely religious scriptures. Building upon this groundwork, Williams (2009) and Lopez (2013) expand the scope of inquiry by examining Mahāyāna philosophy and aesthetics as they manifest in literary discourse, particularly through concepts such as emptiness (*śūnyatā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), and non-duality. In the Vietnamese academic context, Nguyễn Thành Trung’s recent body of work represents a pioneering effort to systematise Buddhist criticism as a literary methodology. His studies—*A Critical Metaphysics Approach in Jean-Paul Sartre’s Nausea toward Vietnamese Spirituality in Yogācāra Vijñaptimātratā and Existentialist Literature* (2021), *Thái Nguyên Culture and the Novel The Chancellor Lưu Nhân Chú Viewed from the Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra* (2022), and *Reception of Võ Khắc Nghiêm’s Novel Thi Lộ Chính Danh from the Perspective of the Śrīmālādevī Siṃhanāda Sūtra and Quảng Ninh Provincial Culture* (2023)—apply Buddhist philosophical frameworks to both Western and Vietnamese literary texts. These works demonstrate the analytical efficacy of Buddhist criticism in elucidating the interrelationship between literary form, aesthetic expression, and spiritual ideology. Collectively, these studies conceptualise Buddhist criticism not merely as a form of religious exegesis but as an emergent interpretive paradigm in literary studies. As Nguyễn Thành Trung argues, Buddhist criticism examines how Buddhist thought is transformed into literary expression, offering an alternative trajectory for literary theory—one historically present yet insufficiently prioritised and theoretically consolidated.

Studies on the Ullambaṇa Sūtra and Buddhist Filial Piety

Scholarship on the Ullambaṇa Sūtra and the concept of Buddhist filial piety possesses a long-standing tradition in East Asian studies, particularly in relation to the seventh lunar month and the Ullambaṇa ritual cycle. Existing research has approached the text from religious, ritualistic, and socio-cultural perspectives. Berezkin (2016, 2020, 2021) foregrounds the Ullambaṇa Sūtra within the “scripture-telling” tradition, highlighting its narrative strategies and ethical emphasis on filial devotion. Through comparative analyses of tales such as *Lady Bright Eyes* and *Jin Qiaojue of Changshu*, Berezkin demonstrates how incarnations of Kṣitigarbha (Dizang) Bodhisattva embody filial piety as a central Buddhist virtue. Similarly, Gildow (2014) elucidates the integration of the Ullambaṇa Sūtra into Chinese social and moral values, arguing that the text functions as a unique religio-cultural symbol. It preserves Buddhist transcendental aspirations while simultaneously reaffirming filial piety as a foundational ethical principle within Buddhist praxis. These studies collectively position the Ullambaṇa Sūtra as a crucial nexus where soteriology, ethics, and cultural adaptation converge.

Contemporary Vietnamese Literature and Tram Ngân

Within Vietnamese contemporary literary history, scholars have observed a significant transition from epic–collective narratives toward individualised and introspective modes of expression (Nguyễn Thế Kỷ, 2020). This shift reflects broader socio-cultural transformations and a reorientation toward private consciousness, trauma, and ethical ambiguity. Thai Phan Vang Anh (2024) further highlights the role of female authors in constructing narrative spaces characterised by fragmentation, multiplicity, and layered meanings. Against this backdrop, Tram Ngân (Ngô Tú Ngân) emerges as a notable figure in contemporary Vietnamese literature. Her short story *Trầm Ngân* was awarded the second prize (with no first prize awarded) in the 2022–2024 Văn Nghệ competition, announced on 24 July in Hanoi. The award sparked intense debate within literary circles, as reflected in media responses such as “Award-Winning Văn Nghệ Short Story Sparks Controversy, Criticised by Many Writers” (Thiên An, 2025) and “Debate Surrounding Văn Nghệ Prize-Winning Short Story” (Phương Linh, 2025). These polarized reactions underscore the text’s aesthetic and ideological complexity. Viewed from a multilayered, female-authored perspective, *Trầm Ngân* should not be regarded as an isolated phenomenon. Rather, it represents a pivotal node in contemporary Vietnamese literary innovation, one that resonates with enduring Buddhist traditions and ethical concerns, thereby warranting sustained scholarly examination.

Materials and Methods

Buddhist criticism approaches texts as literary–Buddhist discourse, illuminated through impermanence, karma, compassion, and transcendence; defined as “employing Buddhist thought and artistry to investigate and resolve literary-artistic issues” (Nguyễn Thành Trung, 2022, 1306). In *Reception of Vo Khắc Nghiem’s Novel Thị Lo Chinh Danh from the Perspective of the Śrīmālādevī Siṃhanāda Sūtra and Quảng Ninh Culture* (2023), the author clarifies the method’s scope beyond literary problem-solving to becoming Buddhist studies’ object. Specifically, comparing literature and Buddhist studies manifests bodhisattva spirit through adept application of both worldly and Buddhist teachings. Accordingly, three specialised methods are deployed: narratology, poetics, and socio-cultural analysis.

Narratology, initiated by Tzvetan Todorov in *Grammaire du Décaméron* (1969) upon Vladimir Propp’s morphology (*Morphology of the Folktale*, 1928) and Ferdinand de Saussure’s structural linguistics (*Course in General Linguistics*, 1959), seeks narrative grammar – laws governing plot, character, time, perspective, and voice. Its strength lies in scientific structural analysis, facilitating comparison and interdisciplinary application in literature, film, and media. However, formalist emphasis risks historical–social contextual neglect and reductive treatment of textual polysemy and openness (Bal, 2009; Herman, 2011; Todorov, 1969). Here, narratology analyses itinerant plot structure, viewpoint, and character tragedy.

Poetics originates in Aristotle’s *Poetics* – the first systematised literary theory centring tragedy, epic, and catharsis. For Aristotle, poetry is regulated mimesis wherein plot structure and aesthetic effect determine artistic value. The method’s strength is foundational tools for Western literary criticism, establishing genre standards and linking art to ethical – humanistic values. Yet its scope is narrow, primarily Greco-tragic, rendering Aristotelian universals challenging for modern or non-Western literatures. Nonetheless, poetics remains vital for formal and aesthetic inquiry (Aristotle, 1996; Else, 1957; Halliwell, 1986). Poetics examines symbols (boat, river, dream), tone, and technique in the short story.

Socio-cultural analysis developed from Raymond Williams’s *Culture and Society* (1958) and *Marxism and Literature* (1977), integrated with Stuart Hall’s 1970s – 1990s popular culture and media theories. Literature is inseparable from cultural production/consumption contexts, reflecting and participating in power, ideology, class, gender, and race relations. Advantages include expanded analytical frames decoding socio-historical complexity and interdisciplinary foundations across literature, media, and politics. Limitations involve aesthetic dilution into sociological interpretation, risking extremism and subjectivity (Williams, 1958, 1977; Hall, 1997; Storey, 2015). This method situates *Tram Ngan* within Southern Vietnam, clarifying social origins of suffering. The research model is summarised below:

Table 1 Research Model

Research Hypothesis	Method	Object Characteristics	Research Aspect	Theoretical Significance
Maternal tragedy	Narratology	Tragedy	Plot, viewpoint	Emphasises impermanence–karma
Compassionate power	Poetics	Compassion	Symbols, tone	Affirms soteriological dimension
Transcendence orientation	Socio-cultural	Transcendence	Artistic theme	Links society to Buddhist liberation

Results

Tragedy and the Maternal Quest

Both tragedies pivoted maternal imagery and filial anguish. Maudgalyāyana’s tragedy is not personal suffering but agonised compassion witnessing his mother’s torment in the hungry-ghost realm, emaciated and parched. This pain intensifies given his supreme supernatural powers yet inability to save her: “Seeing his departed mother reborn as a hungry ghost, skeletal and famished, Maudgalyāyana grieved deeply, knowing her hunger and thirst yet bound by profound

filial love” (Thich Hue Dang, 2017, 7). *Tram Ngan*’s tragedy is maternal absence a lifelong ontological craving; the protagonist endures solitude, familial rejection, and an overriding desire to find his mother, searching from youth to old age despite terminal illness. Through filial quests, both works exalt profound filial piety, culturally resonant and enduring in East Asia.

Second, both depict individual effort’s futility against formidable barriers. Maudgalyāyana confronts karma; despite six supernatural powers enabling universal search, he cannot overcome entrenched retribution. Offered rice turns to burning coals; the Buddha declares even celestial kings’ aid insufficient. *Tram Ngan* faces fate and social circumstance; an ordinary, disadvantaged man battered since birth. Decades of wandering yield no maternal trace: “He had no home, no roots. He was an unacknowledged child. Often, he wished he had never been born. Life was riddled with questions a twenty-something man could not answer” (Ngo Tu Ngan, 2024). Barriers include human transience, informational voids, and mortal brevity compounded by illness. From a Buddhist lens, both tragedies stem from maternal karma—greed or abandonment. Causality renders filial ameliorative efforts futile. Thus, filial piety is a worldly truth; karma, a transcendent truth governing plot and incident.

Finally, both seek supramundane, spiritual resolutions. Maudgalyāyana relies on the Sangha’s collective merit on the fifteenth of the seventh month, enabling maternal karmic transformation and escape from ghostly rebirth: “Alone, none can intercede. Though your filial devotion resounds to the ninth heaven, reaching gods, demons, and four heavenly kings, even the six realms’ practitioners cannot save your mother. Only the ten directions’ monastic power can” (Thich Hue Dang, 2017, 8). Conversely, *Tram Ngan* achieves reunion only in death, unattainable in life, failing earthly search. Reunion and liberation arrive aboard the boat of Impermanence at life’s final dock: “Legs weary, eyes dim, he stepped toward the yellow light, boarding the small boat recognising the ferryman as the oft-mentioned Yin and Yang of Impermanence. He had reached life’s ultimate shore” (Ngo Tu Ngan, 2024). In the beyond, he meets his mother, learning she too searched for lifelong. Death fulfils lifelong yearning. Tragic dimensions are tabulated below:

Table 2 Comparative Maternal Tragedy and Quest

Aspect	<i>Tram Ngan</i> (Ngo Tu Ngan)	<i>Ullambaṇa Sūtra</i>
Central figure	Abandoned child, itinerant, maternal-deprived	Maudgalyāyana—arhat powerless before maternal karma
Core tragedy	Maternal reunion yearning, manifest in dreams	Witnessing maternal hellish torment, exceeding personal capacity
Message	Human suffering tied to maternal absence	Karma renders filial devotion insufficient for maternal salvation

In sum, one tragedy pits a saint against karma, the other a mortal against fate; both sacralise maternal bonds, filial anguish, and inability to fulfil piety, ultimately seeking supra-personal liberation. However, *Tram Ngan* reflects social tragedy versus *Ullambaṇa*'s moral tragedy. Consequently, internal moral tragedy is more resolvable than external social tragedy beyond individual agency, especially for socially marginal subjects. This embodies Buddhist humanism charting existential escape within saṃsāra; realism employs illusion and dream for resolution.

Compassion's Power and Soteriological Dimension

First, both texts affirm compassion as inaugural and foundational soteriological motive. In *Ullambaṇa*, Maudgalyāyana's maternal rescue springs from filial piety and profound compassion. Upon attaining six powers, he first employs clairvoyance to locate his mother in gratitude. Witnessing her ghostly starvation, he grieves, and exhausts rescue means. His piety "resounds to the ninth heaven": "Before Buddha's altar or stūpa, monastics chant for fulfilment, then partake of lunch. Upon the Buddha's pronouncement, Maudgalyāyana and bodhisattva-monastics rejoice; Maudgalyāyana ceases weeping" (Thich Hue Dang, 2017, 11). In *Tram Ngan*, lifelong maternal devotion transmutes into troupe camaraderie. All are drifting souls sustained by mutual compassion. This shields the protagonist in later years, transcending familial rejection. Compassion connects, liberates suffering, and seeks happiness; though *Tram Ngan* dies tragically, Buddhist-critically, his compassion radiates transformative depth – likely a prize factor.

Second, salvation derives from communal, not solitary, power. *Ullambaṇa* underscores individual supernormal incapacity against heavy karma. The Buddha teaches that despite Maudgalyāyana's miraculous powers and celestial aid; solitary rescue is impossible. Only the Sangha's collective ethical cultivation suffices. *Tram Ngan* cannot self-extricate from fate. Salvation arrives via troupe compassion. They nurse his illness, worry, and escort his remains home for final propriety. The troupe – as community – grants consolation unattainable individually: "The troupe leader said, 'I'll take you home, perform in the village too. Long journey – halfway we'll stop, perform a few days, then continue, alright?' Tram Ngan nodded. The troupe joyfully escorted him home, farewell kin with full propriety. Seeing universal care and encouragement, Tram Ngan felt all ailments dissolved; in this life, such love and support sufficed for fulfilment" (Ngo Tu Ngan, 2024). Yet communal nature differentiates soteriological efficacy. The Sangha's supernatural morality redirects merit, liberating Maudgalyāyana's mother via self-transformation from evil realms. *Tram Ngan*'s troupe – wandering performers, impoverished villagers—offers limited material aid (corpse repatriation), leaving core tragedy unresolved. The literary community is reality-constrained, humane yet fate-impotent; the scriptural Sangha

symbolises compassion for resolving tragic origins. Thus, *Tram Ngan* remains modern realist (with fantastical undertones) without trespassing scriptural mysticism.

Third, compassion profoundly heals giver and receiver; both narratives culminate in liberation and fulfilment. In *Ullambaṇa*, Sangha potency is no external miracle but internally catalyses maternal karmic purification and liberation. In *Tram Ngan*, compassion transforms the troupe. The protagonist's optimistic deathbed serenity awakens them; the leader Binh abandons vendetta, concluding life's painful drama. Compassion heals all, enabling full living. Though dying ill, *Tram Ngan* departs serenely, fulfilled by troupe love. Death is no ultimate tragedy but liberation from tribulation and maternal reunion at life's terminus.

Table 3 Comparative Compassion and Soteriology

Aspect	<i>Tram Ngan</i>	<i>Ullambaṇa Sūtra</i>
Compassion source	Troupe sheltering abandoned child	Maudgalyāyana's filial compassion, amplified by monastic power
Outcome	Protagonist consoled, loneliness alleviated	Mother escapes hell realm
Message	Communal compassion heals	Compassion and filiality enable transcendent liberation

In sum, despite generic and contextual disparity, both texts converge on a profound message: compassion and love especially communally enacted are supreme soteriological forces healing, transforming suffering, and granting complete liberation. Compassion transcends tragedy, simultaneously personal (inner peace) and transpersonal (soul salvation). Both affirm compassion's soteriological dimension beyond temporary solace, opening human and communal liberation.

Transcendence and Social Cohesion

Comparing religious canon and modern literature, both the third fourth-century *Ullambaṇa Sūtra* and 2024 *Tram Ngan* by Ngo Tu Ngan aspire to transcend suffering maternal separation or evil karma while fostering social cohesion through filial bonds. *Ullambaṇa* manifests optimistic supernatural transcendence: Maudgalyāyana rescues his mother from ghostly rebirth via Sangha offerings, redirecting merit to wholesome realms; social cohesion emerges through communal seventh-month *Ullambaṇa* rites generating merit and familial unity. Originating in China, the text transformed Confucian filiality into Buddhist instrument, supporting monastic interests, later disseminating to Vietnam integrating ancestral veneration and folk exorcism. Conversely, *Tram Ngan* offers pessimistic transcendence attainable only posthumously for the fruitlessly searching

wanderer, eschewing Buddhist elements; social cohesion critiques familial and societal indifference yet implicitly urges solidarity via Mekong Delta village compassion for marginalised, isolated, fate-battered souls like *Tram Ngan*: “If only he had some looks, I’d cast him as prince or general. Pity he joined young, now nearing fifty, still errand boy, playing crippled soldiers, ugly disabled. Heaven’s unequal favour. Some have talent, beauty, wealth, love; he has nothing” (Ngo Tu Ngan, 2024). Textually, this opposition reflects *Ullambaṇa*’s Buddhist–Confucian–folk acculturation versus *Tram Ngan* ’s realist tragedy.

Ullambaṇa and *Tram Ngan* exert differential reader, era, national, and ethnic impacts. For readers, *Ullambaṇa* inspires concrete action (offerings, filiality), granting inner peace; *Tram Ngan* evokes profound empathy yet helplessness, especially among youth. Epochally, third–fourth-century Chinese *Ullambaṇa* bolstered monastics against Confucian critique; post-COVID Vietnam, it became collective stress-relief ritual. *Tram Ngan* mirrors 2020s migration, urbanisation, and Southwest underdevelopment. Nationally, *Ullambaṇa* facilitated Vietnamese Buddhist war-transcendence via nationwide temple festivals. Maudgalyāyana’s maternal rescue prompted the Buddha to institute *Ullambaṇa* basin practice universally: “Use valuable offerings... Before Buddha’s altar or stūpa, monastics chant for fulfilment, then partake of lunch. Upon pronouncement, Maudgalyāyana and bodhisattva-monastics rejoice; Maudgalyāyana ceases sorrow” (Thich Hue Dang, 2017, 11). This birthed the *Ullambaṇa* festival – filial emblem in Buddhism, reminding communal parental gratitude. From personal tale, *Ullambaṇa* became ethically momentous, fostering peaceful, happy society. Despite negatives, its national value is overwhelmingly positive. *Tram Ngan* underscores Southwest tragedy amid urban erosion of traditional beauty, cherished across classes. Ethnically, *Ullambaṇa* reinforces Confucian–Buddhist filiality, disseminating “drink water, remember source” domestically and diasporically; *Tram Ngan* alerts to market-era ethical erosion in personal, familial, communal cores.

In 2025 post-pandemic, urbanised Vietnam, *Ullambaṇa* and *Tram Ngan* complementarily form a dual theoretical model: religion supplies ritual action; literature activates ethical reflection. *Ullambaṇa* – historically transforming Chinese Confucianism for monastic support, integrating Vietnamese folk rites (ghost appeasement, ancestral worship) – delivers supernatural salvation and durable communal cohesion. *Tram Ngan* adds realist depth, warning of personal tragedy, spurring societal awareness via literature. This religion–literature tandem – one meeting collective spiritual need, the other ethical critique – offers interdisciplinary application for collective consciousness in developing nations, healing social wounds, preserving identity, and fostering cohesive, transcendent society.

In sum, both texts’ core convergence links personal transcendence to social cohesion. Humans cannot liberate solitarily but rely on communal ethical and compassionate power. Individual transcendence inspires, teaches, radiates, healing the collective; transcendence is inseparable from community, entwined with individual – society relations. This reveals social

cohesion's linkage to Buddhist liberation – from personal tragedy, works expand into communal soteriology, liberation, and filiality lessons.

Discussion

This section discusses the research findings in relation to the study objectives, situating Tram Ngan within contemporary Southwest Vietnamese prose and Buddhist literary criticism. The analysis addresses (i) cultural–artistic limitations, (ii) the award-related controversy, and (iii) the dual Buddhist–literary value of the work, supported by comparative analysis and relevant theoretical perspectives.

Cultural–Artistic Limitations and Intertextual Influence

The findings indicate that Tram Ngan exhibits certain cultural and artistic limitations that warrant candid acknowledgment. These include minor inaccuracies in cultural detail—such as performers wearing cold-weather costumes inconsistent with traditional troupe practices—and discernible intertextual traces of Nguyen Ngoc Tu's prose, particularly in linguistic choices, rain–sun imagery, and motifs of Southern tragedy. Such features have fueled critical claims of imitation. However, comparative analysis demonstrates that, despite surface-level similarities, Ngo Tu Ngan (Tram Ngan) and Nguyen Ngoc Tu diverge substantially in stylistic execution, character construction, philosophical orientation, tonal register, and artistic intent (Table 4).

Table 4 Cultural–Artistic Limitations

Criterion	Nguyen Ngoc Tu	Ngo Tu Ngan (<i>Tram Ngan</i>)
Style	Simple, restrained, metaphoric/symbolic; melancholic, poignant tone	Colloquial, rustic, prolix passages
Character construction	Poor Southwest peasants, tragic yet escape-scarce	Abandoned child, itinerant, unjust; distinctive dream-maternal transcendence ending
Philosophy – ideological depth	Existential sorrow: life as tragedy, scant hope	Buddhist: life as <i>duḥkha</i> , yet compassion – liberation path (<i>nirvāṇa</i>)
Tone	Lyrical, plain, pathos-rich, poetic	Intimate, narrative, raw, oral-proximate, occasionally unrestrained

Criterion	Nguyen Ngoc Tu	Ngo Tu Ngan (<i>Tram Ngan</i>)
Artistic value	Distinctive style, novel Southwest breeze	Alleged imitation, yet Buddhist-critically: novel compassion – transcendence in Southwest prose

While Ngo Tu Ngan’s prose lacks Nguyen Ngoc Tu’s stylistic finesse and economy, it introduces a distinct Buddhist-critical dimension. The work inherits the construction of marginal lives common in Southwest realism but elevates these characters through Buddhist concepts of karma, compassion, and liberation. As a result, suffering is not merely represented as an existential dead end, as in much realist prose, but is reframed as a condition that can be transformed through ethical and spiritual insight. This philosophical repositioning differentiates Tram Ngan from both conventional realist short stories and Nguyen Ngoc Tu’s tragic existentialism. Accordingly, although stylistic shortcomings remain, the narrative achieves an authentic everyday texture well suited to portraying suffering and the yearning for liberation. This balance contributes to the work’s literary legitimacy and helps explain its recognition despite ongoing artistic debate.

Award, Reception, and Critical Controversy

Tram Ngan’s second prize in the 2022–2024 Văn Nghệ competition provoked public controversy, centering on allegations of Nguyen Ngoc Tu imitation, lack of stylistic distinctiveness, and cultural inaccuracies. From a Buddhist-critical perspective, however, the primary value of the text lies not in technical refinement or linguistic novelty, but in its capacity to transform representations of suffering into narratives of compassion and transcendence. Much of the criticism focuses on unpolished language and perceived derivative motifs. Yet such continuity can also be interpreted as opening alternative literary pathways. Rather than reiterating Southwest sorrow as an end in itself, Tram Ngan affirms Buddhist dimensions that elevate quotidian tragedy into a religio-humanistic narrative. This approach aligns with the central principle of Buddhist criticism: the ultimate aim of discourse is to guide beings toward enlightenment, while language and form function as instrumental vehicles rather than ends in themselves. This view resonates with the Buddhist metaphor of language as “the finger pointing at the moon,” emphasizing that excessive concern with form may obscure essential meaning (Śūraṅgama Sūtra, 1983, p. 36). From this standpoint, linguistic roughness does not invalidate a work whose core achievement lies in communicating compassion and insight into suffering.

Furthermore, the narrative evokes empathy for socially marginalized lives and conveys the lesson that suffering can be transformed through compassion. The protagonist’s solace within the troupe and the transcendent dream-like ending suggest a form of salvific faith. This reflects the second principle of Buddhist criticism—adaptation to audience capacity—where doctrine is conveyed in forms accessible to specific readerships. In this respect, Buddhist criticism intersects

with reception aesthetics, emphasizing audience resonance. Like the Ullambaṇa narrative, whose widespread influence derives from its articulation of universal filial ethics, Tram Ngan addresses lower-stratum lives in a rapidly changing Vietnamese socio-cultural context. Its focus on traditional performing arts and compassion for disadvantaged artists generates broad affective engagement. For Buddhist readers, such compassion is associated with merit-making and spiritual reassurance; for general readers, the story remains familiar, accessible, and emotionally persuasive factors that substantiate the award decision.

Dual Buddhist–Literary Value

The analysis further reveals that Tram Ngan achieves a distinctive synthesis of Southwest realism and Buddhist philosophy. The work vividly depicts Mekong Delta life—poverty, itinerancy, riverine existence, and abandoned individuals—through concrete imagery and regional language (Ngo Tu Ngan, 2024). Traditional troupes, emblematic of Southwest culture, are portrayed as both shelters for marginal lives and spaces of fragile belonging. Crucially, the narrative moves beyond pathos by employing Buddhist concepts of impermanence and karma to interpret the origins of suffering. The protagonist’s name, Tram Ngan, symbolically signifies an inherited burden, while his terminal illness becomes a site of philosophical reflection rather than despair. His acceptance of death viewed as part of the continuum of saṃsāra articulates a calm, compassionate worldview uncommon in conventional realist tragedy. Unlike closed tragic narratives that end in impasse, Tram Ngan reorients suffering toward transcendence. The maternal quest functions as both a psychological longing and a spiritual journey, transforming personal loss into a search for salvation and meaning. Death is not annihilation but the completion of a karmic cycle, suggesting release rather than defeat (Ngo Tu Ngan, 2024). Artistically, the work combines rustic, colloquial Southwest diction with emotive narration to evoke deep empathy one reason for comparisons with Nguyen Ngoc Tu. However, its integration of Buddhist philosophy ultimately distinguishes it from harsh realism by offering a framework for resolving suffering rather than merely depicting it. Karma, impermanence, and rebirth are embedded organically within the life story, avoiding doctrinal didacticism while remaining philosophically legible. Thus, Tram Ngan possesses a dual value. Literarily, it extends Southwest prose beyond social reflection toward existential and ethical inquiry. From a Buddhist-critical perspective, it demonstrates how narrative fiction can effectively convey core doctrines—duḥkha, impermanence, saṃsāra—in accessible, humane forms. By enabling readers to recognize suffering and intuit a path toward liberation, the work exemplifies literature’s potential as both aesthetic practice and compassionate pedagogy.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Buddhist criticism constitutes a coherent and productive literary-critical theory when applied to contemporary literature in dialogue with canonical Buddhist texts. Through a comparative analysis of *Tram Ngan* by Ngô Tú Ngân and the *Ullambaṇa Sūtra*, the research confirms that both works articulate three convergent dimensions—tragedy rooted in human suffering, compassion as a transformative ethical force, and transcendence as liberation from existential limitation—despite differences in genre, historical context, and narrative strategy.

The findings reveal that *Tram Ngan*, while marked by certain stylistic and cultural limitations, achieves significant literary and philosophical value when examined through a Buddhist-critical lens. The narrative reframes social marginalisation and maternal absence not merely as irreversible tragedy, but as conditions that can be ethically and spiritually transformed through compassion, communal solidarity, and acceptance of impermanence. When juxtaposed with the *Ullambaṇa Sūtra*, the short story gains additional interpretive depth, particularly through the *sūtra*'s emphasis on filial piety and collective merit as mechanisms of liberation.

At the theoretical level, the study affirms Buddhist criticism as more than a form of religious exegesis; rather, it functions as an integrative literary theory capable of mediating between aesthetics, ethics, and spirituality. By foregrounding concepts such as *duḥkha*, *karma*, *karuṇā*, impermanence, and transcendence, Buddhist criticism enables scholars to reassess contemporary literature beyond formalist or sociological paradigms alone. Ultimately, the research underscores the enduring relevance of Buddhist thought in interpreting modern human experiences and contributes to the consolidation of Buddhist criticism as a viable and innovative approach within contemporary literary studies.

Suggestions

Suggestions for Implementation

First, Buddhist criticism should be systematically integrated into literary research and teaching, particularly in regions where Buddhist culture constitutes an essential component of social and ethical life. University curricula in literature and cultural studies may incorporate Buddhist-critical perspectives alongside existing Western theories, thereby broadening students' interpretive frameworks and encouraging cross-cultural theoretical dialogue.

Second, contemporary literary evaluation—especially in award adjudication and critical reception should consider ethical–humanistic depth and spiritual resonance, not solely stylistic novelty or technical refinement. Works such as *Tram Ngan* demonstrate that literary value may reside in the capacity to transform representations of suffering into ethical insight and compassion, aligning literature with broader social and educational functions.

Third, interdisciplinary collaboration between literary studies, Buddhist studies, cultural studies, and education should be encouraged. Such collaboration can enhance the practical applicability of Buddhist criticism in addressing contemporary social issues, including alienation, moral erosion, and the psychological consequences of rapid modernisation.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should expand the scope of Buddhist-critical analysis beyond a single text or author. Comparative studies involving multiple contemporary Vietnamese short stories or novels particularly those emerging from marginalised regions such as the Mekong Delta would allow for more comprehensive evaluation of stylistic patterns and philosophical tendencies.

Additionally, further research may explore cross-national and cross-cultural comparisons, examining how Buddhist criticism operates in Southeast Asian, East Asian, or global literary contexts. Comparative studies between Vietnamese literature and other Buddhist-influenced traditions (such as Thai, Chinese, Korean, or Japanese literature) would contribute to the internationalisation of Buddhist literary criticism.

Finally, future studies could investigate reader reception and pedagogical impact, analysing how Buddhist-informed narratives influence ethical awareness, empathy, and spiritual reflection among contemporary readers, particularly younger generations.

Declaration of Interests

The author declares that there are no financial, professional, or personal interests that could be perceived as influencing the research reported in this article.

Ethical Considerations

This study is based exclusively on published literary and religious texts and does not involve human participants, personal data, or sensitive materials. All sources have been cited in accordance with academic standards, and the research adheres to principles of scholarly integrity, intellectual honesty, and respect for cultural and religious traditions.

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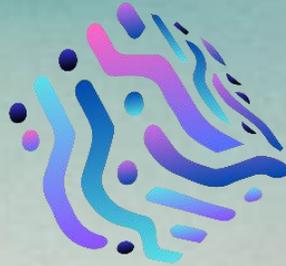
Definition of Conflicts of Interest

A conflict of interest refers to any situation in which personal, financial, or institutional relationships could potentially influence or appear to influence the objectivity, integrity, or interpretation of the research findings. In the present study, no such conflicts exist.

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The Question of Identity in The South (Jorge Luis Borges) And the Centaur in The Garden (Moacyr Scliar) From the Perspective of Mādhyamaka Philosophy

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Original Research Articles

The Question of Identity in The South (Jorge Luis Borges) And the Centaur in The Garden (Moacyr Scliar) From the Perspective of Mādhyamaka Philosophy

Doan Tien Dat^{1*}

Abstract

This study investigates the issue of identity regarding Guedali in *The Centaur in the Garden* (Moacyr Scliar) and Juan Dahlmann in *The South* (Jorge Luis Borges) under the light of Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka (Middle Way) philosophy. The article is motivated by the awareness of the absence of a Buddhist approach in the research of these two works. The central thesis of the paper is, through Nāgārjuna's method of deconstructing dualism, personal identity does not possess a fixed essence but is a process of sliding meaning, constructed within dependent origination (pratīyasamutpāda). Regarding methodology, we utilize a combination of postcolonial criticism, comparative and post-structuralism methods for research. The results indicate that both works construct an indeterminate ontology, where all designations are provisional and temporary. Therefore, the paper affirms the value of Madhyamaka as an effective theoretical framework for re-reading the issue of identity in modern literature.

Keywords: Identity; Madhyamaka; *The Centaur in the Garden* (Moacyr Scliar); *The South* (Jorge Luis Borges)

Introduction

In postmodern research, the issue of identity has moved to the center of discourse with the questioning of the concept of the "self" as a stable, unified entity. Latin American literature was formed and developed within a specific historical context: prolonged invasion, colonization, and cultural assimilation; thus, the region has become a breeding ground for numerous discourses on hybridity, crisis, and ontological fragmentation. Among these, *The Centaur in the Garden* by

Moacyr Scliar and *The South* by Jorge Luis Borges are two exceptional cases. If *The South* demonstrates the journey of finding the identity of the Latin American native after centuries of miscegenation, *The Centaur in the Garden* reflects the process of Jewish immigrants arriving in this land and having to adapt. Despite differences in genre (short story and novel), both reflect a common major theme: identity crisis. However, the issue of ontology has inherently been a traditional subject of study in Buddhist philosophy. Therefore, this article applies the perspective of Nāgārjuna in Madhyamaka to examine the issue of identity in these two works. Through this approach, the article contributes a new reading of the two texts while simultaneously expanding the scope of comparative literature research in an interdisciplinary direction (literature, Buddhism, philosophy). Thereby, the article holds significance in both theoretical and practical research aspects.

The research situation regarding *The Centaur in the Garden* by Moacyr Scliar and *The South* by Jorge Luis Borges has seen certain vibrancy. Some representative studies on identity in *The Centaur in the Garden* include the thesis *Alteridade e (re)construção identitária em O centauro no jardim*, de Moacyr Scliar (2014); Patrícia Ferreira Cerqueira approaches Moacyr Scliar's novels through the lens of identity reconstruction, transculturalism, and the cultural memory of Jewish immigrants in Brazil, arguing that Guedali is always in a "liminal" state and struggling to integrate. The article *Uma releitura de O centauro no jardim, de Moacyr Scliar, como processo de aprendizagem para o "ser e viver junto"* by Sérgio Israel Levemfous (2021) approaches the ontology of the character Guedali from the psychological-psychoanalytical perspective of Carl Jung. The study *Centavros Muito Além do Jardim* (2021) by Ana Fauri compared the centaur figure in the works of two authors, José Saramago (Portugal) and Moacyr Scliar (Brazil), to examine the aesthetics of the centaur figure in ancient Greece and explore how the two writers use this figure to reflect on issues of identity in the modern world. Regarding *The South*, Jorge Luis Borges wrote in the prologue/postscript to the 1956 edition of *Ficciones*, speaking briefly about including the short story *The South*: "it is my best story, let it suffice me to warn that it is possible to read it as a direct narrative of novelistic events, and also in another way" (Borges, 2023, 132). The phrase "another way" has beckoned many different approaches to this short story. Dardo Scavino in *El autor y su musa* (2006) relies on Lacan's psychoanalytic theory to point out the paradox of identity in the short story: the efforts to return to the purest roots are the very products of the gaze of a stranger within oneself. This means Juan Dahlmann only sees himself clearly when looking through the lens of another culture, and it is the gaze from there that painted the dream of a romantic but also harsh "South." Le Ngoc Phuong in the *Latin American Literature Curriculum* commented on the complex identity issue that created the magical quality of the work: "The magical originates from the multiple and complex Self, from which it spreads over the entire story" (2019, 118). Enrique Galvan-Alvarez and Fernando Galván with Coetzee and Borges: *the Southern Connections* (2023) argue that Juan Dahlmann is a symbol of Argentina's destiny, demonstrating the conflict and hybridity between many bloodlines and

affirming Borges as a writer who writes about universal themes while still retaining national identity, without necessarily abusing indigenous details to prove he is Argentine.

It can be observed that the issue of identity in *The South* and *The Centaur in the Garden* has been approached diversely from both internal and external perspectives, yet the majority of research still relies on Western theoretical systems such as postcolonial criticism, psychoanalysis, cultural-historical studies, poetics, etc. To date, there has been no work approaching these two works from a Buddhist perspective, specifically Madhyamaka. This gap allows the article to contribute a new interdisciplinary reading direction, re-identifying the issue of identity crisis in Latin American literary figures from a “non-essentialist” philosophical foundation.

Objective

1. To examine how the concept of identity is constructed and problematized in *The South* by Jorge Luis Borges and *The Centaur in the Garden* by Moacyr Scliar through the Madhyamaka philosophical principles of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*).

2. To analyze the representation of identity as a relational, provisional, and non-essential process in both literary works, demonstrating how Madhyamaka philosophy functions as a critical tool for dismantling fixed ontological and cultural binaries.

3. To investigate how narrative structure and discursive strategies at the levels of story, narrative, and narration reflect Madhyamaka’s non-dual logic and emptiness theory.

Literature Review

The question of personal identity occupies a central position in modern and postmodern literary studies, particularly in narratives that foreground fragmentation, ambiguity, and existential uncertainty. In Latin American literature, identity is frequently represented as unstable and contested, shaped by histories of colonialism, migration, and cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1994; Mignolo, 2000). Both Moacyr Scliar’s *The Centaur in the Garden* and Jorge Luis Borges’s “*The South*” have attracted sustained critical attention for their exploration of liminal subjectivities and ontological indeterminacy. Scholarship on *The Centaur in the Garden* has largely focused on hybridity, otherness, and assimilation. Critics commonly read Guedali’s centaur identity as an allegory of cultural marginalization, Jewish diaspora experience, and the pressures of normalization within dominant social structures (Vieira, 1995; Levinson, 2001). These interpretations often frame identity as a tension between bodily difference and social acceptance, implicitly presupposing an underlying essence that is either concealed or suppressed. Likewise, Borges’s “*The South*” has been extensively analyzed within existentialist, metafictional, and post-structuralist paradigms. Studies emphasize Borges’s destabilization of narrative certainty and his challenge to binary oppositions such as civilization and barbarism, reality and illusion, and fate and free will (Sarlo, 1993; Alazraki, 1998). Juan Dahlmann’s identity is frequently interpreted as a textual construct produced by narrative ambiguity rather than

psychological coherence. While these approaches effectively undermine essentialist models of identity, they remain predominantly grounded in Western philosophical traditions. Existentialism and post-structuralism question the stability of the self but do not fully articulate a systematic ontology of non-essentialism. Notably absent from the critical discourse is the application of Buddhist philosophy—particularly Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka school—which offers a rigorous account of selfhood as relational, contingent, and empty of inherent essence (Garfield, 1995). This study addresses this critical gap by introducing Madhyamaka philosophy as a theoretical framework for rereading identity in these two works. In doing so, it contributes to the growing field of cross-cultural literary studies and demonstrates the relevance of non-Western epistemologies in the interpretation of modern literature.

Materials and Methods

The article focuses on surveying how identity is constructed and presented in *The South* by Jorge Luis Borges and *The Centaur in the Garden* by Moacyr Scliar, on the basis of dialogue with Buddhist thinking, specifically Madhyamaka. Specifically, the article establishes the core characteristics of Madhyamaka and the corresponding narrative techniques (Genette’s three narrative layers), thereby contrasting them with specific manifestations in the two works. On this foundation, the research pays special attention to artistic perspectives that have thinking similar to Buddhist philosophy, thereby clarifying the shift and interaction between literary discourse and Buddhist studies in explaining identity crisis.

To achieve the research objectives, the article utilizes an interdisciplinary approach and Buddhist criticism, combining three specialized methods in literary research: comparative literature, post-structuralism, and postcolonial criticism.

First, the comparative method is used to place *The South* and *The Centaur in the Garden* on the same plane of analysis, focusing on how the two works construct the journey of searching for ontology through character figures and narrative structure. This approach helps highlight the similarities and differences in identity discourse, while avoiding viewing each text as an isolated case.

However, using the comparative method alone risks falling into formal listing or imposing equivalence. Therefore, the article continues to apply the post-structuralist method as a critical reading tool, aiming to analyze the instabilities, internal contradictions, and the sliding of meaning in narrative discourse. This method allows for clarification of the decentered nature and indeterminacy of ontology, simultaneously compatible with the spirit of Madhyamaka in denying the possibility of the existence of a fixed essence.

Furthermore, postcolonial criticism is deployed to place the two works in the Latin American historical-cultural context, where the process of invasion, assimilation, and hybridity has produced prolonged identity crises. This method helps anchor narrative and philosophical

analyses in specific socio-historical conditions, limiting the risk of excessive abstraction when approaching from a Buddhist perspective.

Applying three research methods and coordinating two approaches, we see corresponding characteristics of Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka theory: dependent origination (*pratīyasamutpāda*), absence of intrinsic nature (*niḥsvabhāva*), and the deconstruction of dualism. Continuing to contrast these with the two texts, we see the presentation of identity as follows: identity is merely a provisional designation (*prajñaptir*) because it is always in motion and shaped during the process of interaction with the external world due to causes and conditions (*hetu* and *pratyaya*), from which it is always in a state of hybridity and duality. Finally, the literary issue after reading the two works under the Buddhist perspective corresponds to Genette’s three narrative layers: story (*histoire*), narrative (*récit*), and narrating (*narration*). The research model can be summarized in the following table.

Table 1 Research Model

Methodology	Research methods	Madhyamaka Characteristic	Identity Presentation	Narrative aspect
Interdisciplinary Buddhist criticism	Comparative	Absence of intrinsic nature (Niḥsvabhāva)	Composite/provisional identity	Story
	Postcolonial criticism	Dependent origination (Pratīyasamutpāda)	Identity in interaction	Narrative
	Post-structuralism	Deconstruction of dualism	Amphibious identity	Narration

Results

Madhyamaka as a Tool for Exploring Identity

In the history of human thought, rarely has a concept been subjected to such fierce and continuous interrogation as the concept of "identity." From the ontological certainties of ancient Greek philosophy regarding an immutable soul, to Descartes’ affirmation of the thinking self (*Cogito, ergo sum*) during the Enlightenment, the West built a magnificent castle of rationalism based on the foundation of a unified, independent, and autonomous subject. However, moving into the 20th and early 21st centuries, that castle shook violently. The rise of psychoanalysis, structural linguistics, and especially the postmodern movement declared the “death of the

subject,” the fragmentation of the ego, and the constructed nature of all social identities. In this context of ontological crisis, Western thinking tools are flooded with fragmented, multidimensional viewpoints that are difficult to unify. Yet, these issues, seemingly very current and novel, have long been discussed in Buddhist doctrine. Among them, the perspective of Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna in Madhyamaka provides a sharp logical system to explore this complex issue of identity. The argumentative method of Madhyamaka is to negate all forms of essentialism by pointing out the emptiness (śūnyatā) of phenomena (dharmas), meaning the absence of an independent and immutable self-essence. Instead of establishing a new metaphysical system, Madhyamaka operates as a method of critical thinking, aiming to deconstruct cognitive extremes such as existence/non-existence, permanence/annihilation, subject/object. It is this non-constructive characteristic that makes Madhyamaka a flexible interpretive tool, capable of dialogue with interdisciplinary fields of knowledge. Evidence lies in the fact that Madhyamaka has moved beyond the borders of Buddhist monasteries to enter global philosophical discussions. Western thinkers, in their effort to find a way out of the impasse of modern metaphysics, have found in Nāgārjuna a potential interlocutor. As Lara Braitstein points out, the similarity between Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction method (the term *Différance*) and Nāgārjuna’s Emptiness has become a unique research topic (Lara Braitstein, 2004). Or even David Loy argues that Nāgārjuna is superior because he aims for an experience beyond language, while Derrida is trapped in the ceaseless “dissemination” of language (David Loy, 1987). As briefly presented in the methodology and research model section, we apply three methods and two approaches to demonstrate three key characteristics for researching the issue of identity in Madhyamaka: Dependent origination (*pratīyasamutpāda*), absence of intrinsic nature (*niḥsvabhāva*), and the deconstruction of dualism. Here we will present each characteristic specifically as well as its applicability in literary research.

First, it can be argued that the deconstruction of dualism is the most prominent characteristic of the Madhyamaka treatise; this is Nāgārjuna’s overarching mode of argumentation. Throughout his work, Nāgārjuna does not put forth any viewpoint but only “deconstructs” the wrong views (*dṛṣṭi*) of the extreme sects of that time. Nāgārjuna was born in India in the 2nd century AD, at a time when the original doctrine of the Buddha was facing the risk of scholasticism. Representative Buddhist sects such as Sarvāstivāda had developed a massive Abhidharma system. Although maintaining the doctrine of non-self (*anatta*), this sect advocated that phenomena (dharmas) possess a real “intrinsic nature” (*svabhāva*). They argued that while macroscopic objects are composite/provisional, the microscopic units constituting them (form, feeling, perception, etc.) must have substance to serve as a basis for existence. This view, called “realism of dharmas”, inadvertently re-established the essentialist thinking that the Buddha had rejected. Parallel to that, Brahmanical philosophical schools reinforced arguments about a permanent self (*ātman*). Faced with that context, Nāgārjuna wrote the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* as a method of negative dialectics to sweep away all conceptual attachments, all views clinging to existence/non-existence. The ultimate goal of the Bodhisattva

was to restore the original spirit of Buddhism, but Madhyamaka itself possesses a more radical logical reasoning: not only are human beings without a self, but all phenomena, concepts, and even “Emptiness” (śūnyatā) itself are without intrinsic nature: “Unannihilated, not permanent, not coming, not going, Without distinction, without identity, and free from conceptual construction.” (Nāgārjuna, MMK 1:1)

Deconstruction of dualism is the argumentative method, phenomena are the object of study; Nāgārjuna destroyed the extreme wrong views of holding to existence/non-existence, permanence/annihilation, arising/ceasing, returning the spirit of non-self to phenomena as having no intrinsic nature; no phenomenon carries a fixed essence. This is the second characteristic of Madhyamaka – absence of intrinsic nature (niḥsvabhāva). And precisely because of the absence of intrinsic nature, things can move, change, and develop. So how can phenomena change? According to Nāgārjuna, arising occurs due to the convergence of countless causes (hetu) and conditions (pratyaḃaya); that is also the third characteristic – dependent origination (pratīyasamutpāda). “Something that is not dependently arisen, such a thing does not exist. Therefore, a nonempty thing Does not exist.” (Nāgārjuna, MMK 24:19)

From the three characteristics above, it can be seen that Madhyamaka does not provide a definition of ontology, but operates as a critical tool, aiming to reveal the conventionality, indeterminacy, and relational nature of all forms. Applied to literary research, this argument allows us to overcome dualistic models such as identity/otherness, center/periphery, human/non-human. Without replacing one pole with the opposite pole, Nāgārjuna wrote Madhyamaka to open up a middle way space, where identity is understood as a relational process, not locked into any fixed designations. This characteristic makes Madhyamaka particularly suitable for researching postmodern literature, where identity is often presented as a structure that always slides in meaning, fragmented, and self-negating within the narrative discourse itself.

The Presentation of Identity in The South and The Centaur in the Garden Seen from Madhyamaka

The question “Who am I?” has perhaps always been the central driving force of contemporary Latin American literature due to the colonial legacy, the process of miscegenation, and the constant tension between civilization and barbarism: “throughout the length of modern literature, every work glimpses reflections on the human being, on the cultural identity of the nation” (Le Ngoc Phuong, 2019, p.27). Jorge Luis Borges and Moacyr Scliar, though writing in two different languages (Spanish and Portuguese) and belonging to two different generations, both grapple with the question of identity, thereby creating works with characters possessing complex identities. Juan Dahlmann in *The South* is torn between his German intellectual lineage and his romantic Argentine ancestry. Guedali Tartakovsky in *The Centaur in the Garden* exists as a Jewish centaur in Brazil, stuck between animal instinct and the desire to be human, between immigrant tradition and the New World. From the dependent origination (pratīyasamutpāda) characteristic

of Madhyamaka, identity does not exist as a self-contained entity but is formed only within a network of relations and conditions. Under this perspective, *The South* and *The Centaur in the Garden* both present identity as a process of development in the interaction between the individual and space, community, and cultural discourse. In *The South*, the protagonist's journey does not aim to discover a pre-existing "inner self" but is a "multiple self" (Le Ngoc Phuong, 2019, .118), a continuous collision with different forms of violence, honor, and death in the space leading towards the South. It is within these interactions that the character's identity is temporarily shaped, then blurred again; the self does not exist outside the relationship with historical and social circumstances. Why does Dahlmann seek out the estate in the "South", a place he has never once set foot in? The land of the "South" is an image in an heirloom photograph of Dahlmann; this is the place where Dahlmann's lineage fought against the gauchos, and also where his grandfather sacrificed his life. Returning here is akin to reconnecting with ancestral roots. Why do the young gauchos provoke Dahlmann? And why does Dahlmann accept the challenge of the young Indian while he is merely a weak-limbed intellectual? Dahlmann has German lineage while the youth is a native Indian; it could be because he is drunk, but it could also be due to the pain of the gauchos losing their homeland to white colonialists. As for Dahlmann, despite knowing he will face death, he still feels "a liberation, a joy, and a festive occasion" (Jorge Luis Borges, 2023, 224) and accepts the challenge as something his ancestors once did. The story opens with a war for territory protection between native inhabitants and European invaders, and Borges concludes it by reenacting the war once again in a modern space, like the cycle of samsara of phenomena, where every event is merely a repetition of conditions (pratyaya) in a new form. Similarly, in *The Centaur in the Garden*, Guedali's identity cannot be separated from the gaze of the Jewish immigrant community, of modern Brazilian society. The character only becomes "deformed", a "monster" or "human" when placed in specific interactive relationships. Identity, therefore, is dependently arisen. Moacyr Scliar himself shared this process: "At home, you speak Yiddish, eat gefilte fish, and celebrate Shabbat. But in the streets, you have soccer, samba, and Portuguese. After a while you feel like a centaur." (Judy Bolton-Fasman, 2003). Guedali's half-human, half-horse body does not define his identity; rather, it is the effort to integrate with society – from going to school, finding a job, to the decision to undergo surgery – that is the causes and conditions constructing his existence.

With the characteristic of absence of intrinsic nature (niḥsvabhāva) negating the possibility of a fixed essence in all phenomena identity at any given moment is merely "provisional/composite." In *The South*, Dahlmann's travel to the South may be due to the call of a journey in search of identity. With every step Dahlmann takes, we see layers of his identity. In Buenos Aires, Dahlmann is an intellectual, a gentle librarian. But when the train takes him far from the city, that librarian yields to the arising of another identity: the descendant of the heroic maternal grandfather who sacrificed himself at the frontier. The act of a life-and-death duel is not a return to a forgotten "true self", but only a new "provisional composite" activated by the violent context of the South. From the Madhyamaka perspective, Dahlmann is not German, nor

is he Argentine; he is a continuous stream of psychological states and actions arising in dependence on circumstances. There is no immutable subject Dahlmann throughout the story, only moments of temporary designation. With *The Centaur in the Garden*, Guedali's body is the most visual expression of a composite ontology. The decision to have surgery to become human does not make him achieve a "complete human" identity, but only replaces the centaur body with another composite human body. That form cannot eliminate the deep desires from the centaur's past: dreams of a winged horse, the nostalgia for the feeling of galloping. It is precisely the attachment to a pure identity, a human form, that leads to suffering for the centaur. Clearly, he cannot completely integrate with the human community because the differential nature always leaves traces. Guedali suspects society's "normal" standards while simultaneously doubting himself, and it is that imperfection that exposes the fragility of an identity thought to be stable. Only when he realizes that all forms are merely provisional composites, will he have a complete life.

Finally, the deconstruction of dualism characteristic of Madhyamaka allows for overcoming the rigid oppositions that often dominate identity discourse. Both works shake dualistic pairs such as self/other, civilization/barbarism, normal/deformed, thereby presenting identity as an amphibious/dual-formed state, irreducible to a single pole. In *The South*, the character is both an urban intellectual and a frontier vagabond; both a victim and a subject choosing death; at the end of the work, the reader also doubts his death: did he die in the suburbs or is this merely his dream in the hospital? These oppositions are not reconciled by a unified identity but coexist in a state of tension, reflecting the non-dual spirit of Madhyamaka. In *The Centaur in the Garden*, the centaur body demonstrates a dual-formed identity visually. Moacyr Scliar also explained that the centaur figure is: "a symbol of dual identity, typical of Jews in a country like Brazil" (Judy Bolton-Fasman, 2003). Guedali himself perceived the conflict: "surely that stinging, aching sensation left in me a sense of the opposition between hard and soft, between the fierce and the delicate, between the horse nature and the human nature" (Moacyr Scliar, 2005, 23). The journey of surgery to have a "normal" body does not erase that hybridity but only makes it more complex: a human body on the outside but an inner world still containing the anxiety of a centaur. Guedali's nature is the intermediate space, where the intersection between the "indigenous" and the "foreign" makes him constantly question the integrity of himself: "Wherever he is, he always feels like a stranger, looking at everything with curious and questioning eyes" (Priscila Finger do Prado, 2007, 13). Amphibiousness is not only a biological state but also a state of existence, where identity boundaries are blurred. Ultimately, the centaur chooses to return to the countryside carrying questions about identity, about the meaning of life, and about his position in society. After the conversation with his father about "centaur happiness," and with his wife who was also once a centaur, Guedali found relief. True healing lies in accepting and harmonizing the complex dual-formed ontology in the soul. Guedali found his own place in the world, whether in the countryside or the city, the centaur still pursues dreams and desires, but in a freer and

more comfortable way. This action is the very spirit of breaking dualism, accepting duality, and the change of self to find peace.

The Presentation of Identity Through Narrative Structure in *The South* and *The Centaur in the Garden* from the Perspective of Madhyamaka

This article applies the three layers of narratology according to Genette (story, narrative, narration) not to compare generic forms (short story versus novel), but to analyze the discursive mechanisms through the journey of searching for identity. These three layers are placed within the Madhyamaka framework to clarify the deconstruction of dualism, dependent origination (*pratīyasamutpāda*), and the absence of intrinsic nature (*niḥsvabhāva*) of identity in the two texts. At the primary layer of the narrative is the story, which is the layer of events and the sequence of actions at the level of “what happened”, meaning the content that the reader perceives in the work. Here, both works evoke two journeys in search of identity – a common theme in the Latin American region. In *The South*, the story revolves around a seemingly simple journey: the character suffers an accident, recovers, travels to the South, and on that journey, dies in a fight. However, this journey does not reveal any authentic identity of the character, but conversely, exposes the emptiness of all his designations. This is demonstrated at the end of the work when the reader begins to doubt Dahlmann’s journey to the South. The doubling and ambiguity in the telling make the reader suspect whether the trip to the South actually took place or was merely the hallucination of a dying patient, thereby further emphasizing the composite nature of the protagonist’s real identity, which is merely a temporary structure without a fixed entity. Thus, at the story layer, identity appears as a temporary collection of roles, lacking a substantial self. With *The Centaur in the Garden*, the story also revolves around the journey of self-definition of the centaur Guedali, only for him to finally realize that all desires for designation regarding form are provisional/composite. Similar to *The South*, the ending of *The Centaur in the Garden* also offers two choices for the reader: is this a story about a real centaur or merely hallucinations caused by a brain tumor: “A tumor that functions to make one imagine oneself as a centaur” (Moacyr Scliar, 2005, 230). This ambiguity causes the character himself to waver about his ontology: “I still believe I am a centaur, but a centaur that is shrinking moment by moment... accepting the reality they are imposing on me: that I am a human”

At the narrative layer – that is, the organization, arrangement, and connection of events – there is a correspondence with the principle of dependent origination (*pratīyasamutpāda*). At this level, identity is no longer viewed as “being”, but as “becoming” within a network of relationships. In *The South*, the narrative is not deployed according to a linear psychological development, but through loose connections between memory, space, violence, and honor. The character’s identity is formed from the continuous collision with the peripheral cultural structures of the South. It is this arrangement that causes identity to appear only in relation: between the modern and the savage, between individual choice and collective convention. In *The Centaur in the Garden*, Guedali’s identity is built around overlapping relationships: Jewish

origins (Bar Mitzvah ceremony), Russian memories (pogroms), the settlement context in Brazil (Quatro Irmãos farm), scientific and religious discourse... The centaur character's identity cannot be understood separately from these relationships. Therefore, each relationship redefines the character in a different way, clearly demonstrating identity as a dependently arisen product, true to the spirit of Madhyamaka. At the narrative layer, identity does not exist independently but arises in interaction, depending on how events and relations are arranged in the narrative.

Finally, the narration layer – that is, the mode of telling, voice, point of view, and discursive strategy – in the postmodern, post-structural context, these aspects increasingly demonstrate Nāgārjuna's spirit of breaking the dualistic structure in Madhyamaka. In *The South*, the neutral, cold, yet highly ironic voice creates a distance between action and meaning. The mode of narration here neither confirms nor denies dualistic values such as hero/coward, civilized/savage. It is the suspension in the narrative voice that causes the character's identity to exist in an amphibious/dual-formed state: both a subject of choice and one swept away by cultural destiny. In *The Centaur in the Garden*, the narration is self-reflexive, both serious and mocking. It is this voice that constructs a centaur myth in modern life; the reader is self-aware that this is fiction but in parallel still believes this is a true story because Moacyr Scliar builds the story in a real space and specific time. This does not allow the reader to place firm trust in one side: human or monster, normal or deformed. Even when the character becomes "human", Moacyr Scliar's narration continuously erodes that dualism, showing that identity will always be in an amphibious, hybrid state. At this level, identity is presented as a state of superposition of many cultural layers; opposing pairs are not excluded but coexist in tension, true to the spirit of deconstructing dualism in Madhyamaka.

Discussion

This study aimed to examine the problem of personal identity in *The Centaur in the Garden* by Moacyr Scliar and *The South* by Jorge Luis Borges through the philosophical lens of Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka. Addressing the notable absence of Buddhist frameworks in existing scholarship on these texts, the paper reconsiders identity beyond essentialist and dualistic paradigms. The findings indicate that both narratives articulate an indeterminate ontology of selfhood that closely corresponds to Nāgārjuna's critique of intrinsic existence (svabhāva), thereby supporting the study's central thesis.

Identity as Non-Essential and Relational

The analysis demonstrates that Guedali and Juan Dahlmann are not constructed as stable, autonomous subjects but as contingent formations emerging through cultural, historical, and narrative conditions. This representation closely aligns with Nāgārjuna's claim that all phenomena arise through dependent origination (pratītyasamutpāda) and therefore lack inherent essence (Nāgārjuna, trans. Garfield, 1995). Guedali's oscillation between human and

centaur identities exemplifies the Madhyamaka rejection of a singular, fixed self, revealing identity as a provisional designation rather than an ontological ground. Similarly, Dahlmann's ambiguous position between civilization and barbarism, modernity and tradition, and ultimately life and death reflect what Nāgārjuna characterizes as the emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of all conceptual boundaries. Borges's refusal to resolve Dahlmann's fate mirrors the Middle Way's avoidance of ontological extremes, reinforcing the view that identity cannot be reduced to a determinate essence. This reading complements post-structuralist critiques of subjectivity, particularly Derrida's concept of *différance*, which emphasizes the instability and deferral of meaning within systems of signification (Derrida, 1976). Madhyamaka, however, extends this instability beyond language into the ontological domain, grounding identity's fluidity in dependent origination rather than solely linguistic play.

Deconstruction of Dualism

One of the study's primary objectives was to explore how Nāgārjuna's method of deconstructing dualism illuminates the thematic tensions in both texts. The findings reveal that *The Centaur in the Garden* and *The South* systematically undermine binary oppositions such as human/animal, center/margin, rational/mythic, and civilized/primitive. This narrative strategy parallels Nāgārjuna's use of the *catuṣkoṭi* (tetralemma), which dismantles all fixed ontological positions without replacing them with an alternative metaphysical foundation (Garfield, 1995).

In Scliar's novel, Guedali's hybrid existence resists assimilation into normative human identity while simultaneously refusing mythic transcendence. This liminal positioning recalls Bhabha's notion of the "third space," where identity emerges through negotiation rather than inheritance (Bhabha, 1994). Read through Madhyamaka, however, this hybridity is not merely cultural or postcolonial but ontological, revealing the emptiness of all identity claims. Borges's *The South* similarly destabilizes narrative and philosophical binaries, refusing to privilege rational realism over mythic fatalism, or life over death, thereby aligning with the Middle Way's suspension of reified distinctions.

Indeterminate Ontology and Narrative Provisionality

The results further indicate that both works construct an indeterminate ontology in which narrative designations function as temporary and conventional rather than absolute. Nāgārjuna's distinction between conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*) and ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*) provides a productive framework for interpreting Borges's narrative ambiguity and Scliar's ironic destabilization of identity (Nāgārjuna, trans. Garfield, 1995). From this perspective, literary ambiguity is not a failure of meaning but an enactment of emptiness, demonstrating the limits of conceptual thought. While Borges scholarship has often emphasized epistemological uncertainty and metafictional self-reflexivity (Sarlo, 1993), and Scliar criticism has focused on hybridity and diasporic identity (Lesser, 1995), this study contributes a novel ontological

dimension to these readings. Madhyamaka philosophy enables a reinterpretation of ambiguity as an ethical and philosophical stance that resists dogmatism and essentialism, rather than merely an aesthetic strategy.

Contribution to Literary and Philosophical Studies

By integrating Madhyamaka with postcolonial, comparative, and post-structuralist methodologies, this study affirms the value of Buddhist philosophy as a viable and rigorous theoretical framework for literary criticism. It challenges the predominance of Eurocentric philosophical models and demonstrates that Nāgārjuna's thought offers a cross-cultural perspective capable of enriching modern literary studies (Garfield, 2002). Ultimately, identity in *The Centaur in the Garden* and *The South* emerges not as a stable essence but as a dynamic process of becoming, situated between essentialism and nihilism—precisely the space articulated by Nāgārjuna's Middle Way.

Conclusion

This study has examined the question of identity in *The South* by Jorge Luis Borges and *The Centaur in the Garden* by Moacyr Scliar through the philosophical lens of Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka. By bringing Buddhist non-essentialist ontology into dialogue with Latin American literary texts, the article has sought to address a notable gap in existing scholarship, which has largely relied on Western theoretical paradigms. Through an interdisciplinary methodology combining comparative literature, post-structuralism, and postcolonial criticism, the research demonstrates that identity in both works is neither fixed nor self-sufficient but emerges as a contingent, relational, and provisional process.

The analysis shows that Juan Dahlmann and Guedali are constructed as subjects without intrinsic essence (*niḥsvabhāva*), whose identities arise through dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) within historical, cultural, and narrative conditions. Borges's deliberate narrative ambiguity and Scliar's centaur figure both enact a radical destabilization of ontological certainty, revealing identity as a conventional designation rather than an ultimate ground of being. From a Madhyamaka perspective, the suffering experienced by these characters stems from attachment to reified identity constructs—national, cultural, bodily, or symbolic—which are ultimately shown to be empty of inherent nature.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates a close correspondence between Madhyamaka philosophy and narratological structure. Genette's three narrative levels—story, narrative, and narration—function as discursive spaces in which non-duality, relationality, and indeterminacy are enacted. Narrative ambiguity, hybridity, and suspension are not merely aesthetic devices but philosophical expressions of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and the Middle Way's rejection of ontological extremes. In this sense, Madhyamaka does not impose an external interpretive system onto the texts but resonates organically with their internal logic.

Ultimately, this research affirms Madhyamaka as a productive and rigorous theoretical framework for literary studies, capable of enriching interpretations of identity in modern and postmodern literature. By moving beyond essentialism and nihilism alike, the Middle Way offers a nuanced understanding of identity as a dynamic process of becoming—an understanding that is particularly relevant to Latin American literature shaped by histories of colonialism, migration, and cultural hybridity.

Suggestions

Suggestions for Implementation

The findings of this study suggest several practical implications for literary research and pedagogy. First, Madhyamaka philosophy can be fruitfully incorporated into comparative literature curricula as an alternative non-Western theoretical framework for analyzing identity, subjectivity, and ontology. Introducing Buddhist philosophical concepts such as emptiness, dependent origination, and non-duality may help students move beyond binary and essentialist readings of literary texts, particularly those dealing with hybridity and fragmentation.

Second, interdisciplinary approaches that integrate philosophy, religious studies, and literary criticism should be encouraged in both teaching and research contexts. The application of Madhyamaka in this study demonstrates that Buddhist philosophy is not limited to religious or doctrinal inquiry but possesses strong analytical potential for humanities scholarship. Journals and academic institutions may consider fostering such cross-cultural theoretical dialogues to diversify critical perspectives and reduce Eurocentric dominance in literary studies.

Finally, the Madhyamaka framework may also serve as a reflective tool in contemporary discussions of identity politics. By emphasizing relationality and provisional designation, this approach can contribute to more flexible and inclusive understandings of identity in multicultural and postcolonial societies, without collapsing differences into rigid or exclusionary categories.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research may expand this study in several directions. First, further comparative analyses could apply Madhyamaka philosophy to other Latin American authors—such as Clarice Lispector, Julio Cortázar, or Gabriel García Márquez—to explore how non-essentialist ontology manifests across different narrative styles and historical contexts.

Second, scholars may consider comparative studies between Madhyamaka and other philosophical traditions that address identity and non-self, such as Daoism, Zen Buddhism, or phenomenology, in order to examine points of convergence and divergence in their literary applications. Such research would deepen the theoretical dialogue between Eastern and Western philosophies in literary criticism.

Third, future studies might focus more explicitly on ethical and affective dimensions of Madhyamaka in literature, examining how non-attachment and the dismantling of ego relate to themes of suffering, compassion, and liberation in narrative texts. This direction would further highlight the ethical implications of Buddhist philosophy beyond ontology and epistemology.

Declaration of Interests

The author declares that there are no financial, personal, or institutional interests that could have influenced the research or interpretation of the findings presented in this article.

Ethical Considerations

This study is based entirely on textual analysis of published literary works and philosophical texts. No human participants, personal data, or sensitive materials were involved. Therefore, ethical approval was not required. All sources have been appropriately cited, and the research adheres to accepted standards of academic integrity and scholarly conduct.

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Definition of Conflicts of Interest

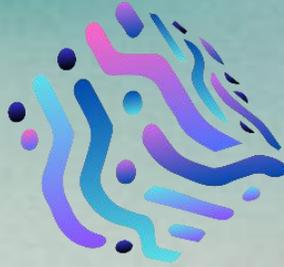
A conflict of interest exists when an author's personal, financial, or professional affiliations could potentially influence the research process or outcomes. In the context of this study, no such conflicts are present. The author confirms that the research was conducted independently and objectively, without external influence or competing interests.

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The Impact of Digital Financial Inclusion on Micro-Enterprise Performance in Southeast Asia

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Original Research Articles

The Impact of Digital Financial Inclusion on Micro-Enterprise Performance in Southeast Asia

Worawit Woracharone^{1*}

Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between digital financial inclusion and the performance of micro-enterprises in Southeast Asia. A cross-sectional quantitative design was employed, sampling 350 micro-enterprise owners across Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia. Data were collected using structured questionnaires covering digital financial access, usage behavior, and business performance indicators. Statistical techniques including multiple regression and correlation analyses were applied. Findings reveal that digital payment adoption and access to mobile banking services significantly enhance revenue growth and financial resilience among micro-enterprises. The study concludes that digital financial inclusion plays a critical role in improving economic outcomes at the micro level, with policy implications for regional development and financial regulation. Limitations and recommendations for future research are addressed.

Keywords: Digital Financial Inclusion; Micro-enterprise Performance; Southeast Asia; Mobile Banking; Economic Development

Introduction

Micro-enterprises play a vital role in the economic landscape of Southeast Asia, accounting for a significant share of employment generation, income creation, and poverty reduction across the region. In many ASEAN countries, micro-businesses constitute more than 90 percent of total enterprises and serve as a primary source of livelihood for low-income households (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2020). Despite their importance, these enterprises often face persistent financial constraints, including limited access to formal credit, high transaction costs,

and inadequate financial infrastructure, which restrict their growth, productivity, and long-term sustainability (Beck & Demirgüç-Kunt, 2006).

In recent years, digital financial inclusion (DFI) has emerged as a potential solution to these challenges. Digital financial inclusion refers to the access to and use of formal financial services through digital channels such as mobile money, online banking platforms, digital payment systems, and fintech applications (Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2018). By reducing geographical, informational, and cost barriers, digital financial services can enable micro-enterprises to manage transactions efficiently, access credit, improve cash flow management, and enhance financial resilience (Ozili, 2018). Southeast Asia, in particular, has experienced rapid growth in mobile phone penetration and fintech innovation, creating new opportunities for micro-enterprises to participate in the formal financial system (World Bank, 2022).

Although a growing body of literature has examined the macroeconomic benefits of financial inclusion, empirical evidence on the direct impact of digital financial inclusion on micro-enterprise performance remains limited, especially within the Southeast Asian context. Existing studies often focus on households or small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), with relatively few investigations centered specifically on micro-enterprises (Suri & Jack, 2016; Ghosh & Vinod, 2017). Moreover, many studies analyze financial inclusion in a traditional sense without distinguishing digital financial tools from conventional banking services. As a result, there is insufficient empirical understanding of how digital financial inclusion influences key business performance indicators such as revenue growth, financial stability, and business sustainability among micro-enterprises in ASEAN economies.

To address these gaps, this study examines the impact of digital financial inclusion on micro-enterprise performance in selected Southeast Asian countries. Specifically, the study aims to: (1) measure the level of digital financial inclusion among micro-enterprises in Southeast Asia; (2) examine the relationship between digital financial inclusion and business performance indicators, including revenue, financial stability, and sustainability; and (3) provide policy recommendations based on empirical evidence to support inclusive digital finance strategies for micro-enterprise development. By focusing on micro-businesses and digital financial tools, this research contributes to the existing literature and offers practical insights for policymakers, financial institutions, and development practitioners seeking to enhance inclusive growth in the region.

Objective

1. To measure the level of digital financial inclusion among micro-enterprises in Southeast Asia.
2. To examine the relationship between digital financial inclusion and business performance indicators.
3. To provide policy recommendations based on empirical evidence.

Literature Review

Economic Role of Micro-Enterprises

Micro-enterprises constitute the backbone of economic activity in developing and emerging economies, particularly in Southeast Asia. Defined typically as firms employing fewer than ten workers, micro-enterprises account for the majority of business establishments and play a crucial role in employment generation, income creation, and poverty alleviation (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2020). In ASEAN countries, micro-enterprises are often embedded within informal economic structures, serving as a primary livelihood source for low-income and vulnerable populations (World Bank, 2019).

Beyond their contribution to employment, micro-enterprises foster inclusive economic growth by promoting entrepreneurship and local innovation. Their flexibility allows them to respond quickly to market changes and absorb labor that cannot be accommodated by larger firms (Ayyagari, Demirgüç-Kunt, & Maksimovic, 2014). However, despite their economic significance, micro-enterprises face persistent challenges, particularly limited access to formal financial services, weak financial management capabilities, and vulnerability to economic shocks (Beck & Demirgüç-Kunt, 2006).

In Southeast Asia, these constraints are exacerbated by geographical dispersion, underdeveloped financial infrastructure in rural areas, and stringent lending requirements imposed by traditional financial institutions (ADB, 2020). As a result, many micro-enterprises remain financially excluded, limiting their capacity to grow, stabilize income, and sustain operations over time.

Digital Financial Inclusion

Digital financial inclusion (DFI) refers to the access and use of formal financial services through digital platforms such as mobile money, digital payment systems, online banking, and fintech applications (Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2018). Unlike traditional financial inclusion, DFI leverages digital technologies to overcome barriers related to distance, cost, and documentation, making financial services more accessible to underserved populations, including micro-entrepreneurs.

Prior empirical studies indicate that digital financial inclusion positively influences economic participation by improving savings behavior, facilitating access to credit, and enhancing transaction efficiency (Suri & Jack, 2016; Ozili, 2018). Digital payment systems reduce transaction costs and risks associated with cash handling, while mobile banking enables faster and more transparent financial transactions (Ghosh & Vinod, 2017). These benefits are particularly relevant for micro-enterprises that operate with limited capital and high liquidity constraints.

Recent studies focusing on developing economies suggest that digital financial services contribute to improved firm performance by enabling better cash-flow management, expanding

market access, and increasing financial resilience (Zhang et al., 2023; Xie et al., 2024). In the ASEAN context, fintech expansion and rising mobile penetration have accelerated DFI adoption among micro- and small enterprises, although usage levels and impacts vary significantly across countries (Ong et al., 2025).

Despite growing interest in digital finance, the literature reveals notable gaps. Many studies concentrate on households or small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), while micro-enterprises remain under-examined. Furthermore, limited empirical research directly links DFI to measurable micro-enterprise performance outcomes such as revenue growth, financial stability, and business sustainability in Southeast Asia. This gap underscores the need for region-specific and firm-level empirical analysis.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Financial Access Theory, which posits that access to financial services enables economic agents to allocate resources more efficiently, reduce transaction costs, and mitigate financial risks (Beck, Demirgüç-Kunt, & Levine, 2007). According to the theory, financial inclusion enhances productivity and performance by easing liquidity constraints and facilitating investment decisions.

Within a digital context, financial access theory suggests that digital financial inclusion further amplifies these benefits by lowering operational costs, increasing transaction speed, and improving information symmetry between financial service providers and users (Ozili, 2018). For micro-enterprises, access to digital financial tools such as mobile payments, digital savings, and online credit platforms can enhance operational efficiency, stabilize cash flows, and support long-term business sustainability.

Based on this theoretical foundation, the study proposes that higher levels of digital financial inclusion are positively associated with improved micro-enterprise performance indicators, including revenue growth, financial stability, and business continuity. The framework assumes that digital financial inclusion acts as a key enabling mechanism through which micro-enterprises can overcome traditional financial barriers and enhance economic outcomes in the Southeast Asian context.

Materials and Methods

Data Collection Tools

Data for this study will be collected using a structured questionnaire, which is widely recognized as an effective instrument for measuring perceptions, behaviors, and outcomes in business and financial inclusion research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014). The questionnaire will be composed of three main sections corresponding to the study's

key constructs: (1) digital financial inclusion, (2) business performance indicators, and (3) respondent socio-demographic characteristics.

Digital Financial Inclusion Measures. Drawing on validated scales from prior research on financial inclusion and digital finance adoption, items measuring digital financial inclusion will capture both access and usage frequency of digital financial services (Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2018; Ozili, 2018). Access indicators will assess whether respondents have the means to use digital financial tools such as mobile money accounts, online banking, and digital payment platforms (e.g., “I have an active digital payment account for business transactions”). Usage frequency items will quantify regular engagement with these services (e.g., “How often do you use digital financial services for business payments?” rated on a Likert-type scale from 1 = Never to 5 = Daily), consistent with measurement approaches in financial inclusion surveys (Suri & Jack, 2016).

Business Performance Measures. To evaluate enterprise performance, the questionnaire will include objective and subjective indicators recommended in small business research (Wiklund & Shepherd, 2003; Zhang et al., 2023). Objective indicators will assess financial outcomes such as changes in revenue, profit margin, and growth rate over the preceding 12 months (e.g., “Percentage change in annual revenue”). Subjective performance questions will supplement financial data by capturing owner perceptions of financial stability and sustainability, which have been shown to correlate with actual firm performance (Peake, 2019).

Instrument Development and Pre-testing. The questionnaire will be developed in English and professionally translated into Thai, Vietnamese, and Indonesian to ensure clarity and cultural appropriateness. Pre-testing with a small sample ($n \approx 30$) of micro-enterprise owners in each city will be conducted to refine item wording, response scales, and overall survey flow, following best practices in survey methodology (Dillman et al., 2014; Presser et al., 2004). Reliability of multi-item constructs (e.g., digital access, usage frequency) will be assessed using Cronbach’s alpha ($\alpha \geq .70$ considered acceptable; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

By operationalizing digital financial inclusion and business performance with established scales and rigorous pre-testing, the data collection tool will provide robust measures that align directly with the study’s objectives — specifically, to quantify levels of digital financial inclusion and examine its relationship with enterprise performance outcomes across urban micro-enterprises in Southeast Asia.

Data Analysis

Data analysis will proceed in two phases:

1. **Descriptive Statistics** uses descriptive analyses (means, standard deviations, frequencies) will profile respondents’ socio-demographic characteristics and key study variables (digital financial inclusion and business performance), providing an overall snapshot of the sample. Such profiling is critical in cross-sectional survey research to assess distributional properties and inform subsequent modeling (Pallant, 2020).

2. Inferential Analysis uses multiple regression to test the influence of digital financial inclusion on business performance indicators; multiple regression analysis will be performed. This technique allows examination of the predictive power of independent variables (e.g., digital access, usage frequency) on dependent variables (e.g., revenue change, profit growth), while controlling for relevant covariates (e.g., firm age, owner education) (Hair et al., 2019). Statistical significance will be evaluated at $\alpha = .05$, and diagnostic tests (e.g., multicollinearity, normality of residuals) will be conducted to ensure model validity (Field, 2018).

Regression outcomes will quantify the strength and direction of relationships between digital financial inclusion and firm performance, directly addressing the study's second objective and providing empirical evidence to inform policy and practice.

Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the respondents and their enterprises. The sample comprised 350 micro-enterprise owners from Bangkok, Ho Chi Minh City, and Jakarta, with a balanced distribution across locations. Most firms were owner-managed and employed fewer than five workers. Over half of the enterprises had been operating for three to ten years, reflecting a mix of early-stage and established businesses. Retail trade, food services, and personal services dominated the sample. In terms of owner characteristics, the majority had completed at least secondary education, and more than two-thirds reported prior experience using digital technologies for business purposes.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics of Respondents and Firm Characteristics (N = 350)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Location	Bangkok, Thailand	117	33.4
	Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam	116	33.2
	Jakarta, Indonesia	117	33.4
Firm size (employees)	Owner only	142	40.6
	1–4 employees	208	59.4
Years of operation	Less than 3 years	86	24.6
	3–10 years	189	54.0
	More than 10 years	75	21.4
Business sector	Retail trade	132	37.7
	Food services	104	29.7
	Personal services	79	22.6
	Other services	35	10.0
Owner education level	Primary education	62	17.7
	Secondary education	181	51.7
	Tertiary education	107	30.6
Prior use of digital technologies	Yes	238	68.0
	No	112	32.0

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the respondents and firm characteristics based on 350 valid responses collected from micro-enterprise owners in Bangkok (Thailand), Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam), and Jakarta (Indonesia). The distribution of respondents across the three locations was nearly equal, with Bangkok and Jakarta each accounting for 33.4% of the sample, and Ho Chi Minh City representing 33.2%, ensuring balanced regional representation.

Regarding firm characteristics, most enterprises were owner-managed or employed fewer than five workers. Specifically, 40.6% of the businesses were operated solely by the owner, while 59.4% employed between one and four workers, consistent with the definition of micro-enterprises. In terms of business maturity, over half of the firms (54.0%) had been operating for three to ten years, indicating a predominance of established enterprises. Firms operating for less than three years accounted for 24.6% of the sample, while 21.4% had been in operation for more than ten years. With respect to industry classification, retail trade was the most represented sector (37.7%), followed by food services (29.7%) and personal services (22.6%). Other service-related activities constituted 10.0% of the sample, suggesting a concentration of micro-enterprises in consumer-facing sectors.

Owner demographic characteristics revealed that a majority of respondents had completed at least secondary education. Specifically, 51.7% reported secondary education as their highest level of attainment, while 30.6% had completed tertiary education. Only 17.7% of respondents reported primary education. Additionally, a substantial proportion of respondents (68.0%) indicated prior experience using digital technologies for business purposes, reflecting a relatively high level of digital exposure among micro-enterprise owners in the sample.

Level of Digital Financial Inclusion among Micro-Enterprises

Table 2 Level of Digital Financial Inclusion among Respondents (N = 350)

Digital Financial Inclusion Indicator	Low (%)	Moderate (%)	High (%)
Access to digital financial services	21.4	46.9	31.7
Usage of digital payments	18.0	39.1	42.9
Access to digital credit/savings	27.7	44.6	27.7
Overall DFI level	19.1	48.6	32.3

Table 2 presents report on the objective 1 as the distribution of digital financial inclusion (DFI) levels among micro-enterprises in Southeast Asia. Overall, nearly half of the respondents (48.6%) exhibited a moderate level of digital financial inclusion, while 32.3% demonstrated a high level of inclusion. Only 19.1% of enterprises were classified as having low digital financial inclusion. Among the individual components, usage of digital payment systems showed the highest level of adoption, with 42.9% of respondents reporting high usage. In contrast, access to digital credit and savings products remained comparatively limited, with over one-quarter of enterprises (27.7%) reporting low access. These findings suggest that while transactional digital

finance tools are widely adopted, more advanced financial services remain less accessible to micro-enterprises.

Relationship between Digital Financial Inclusion and Business Performance

Table 3 Regression Analysis of Digital Financial Inclusion and Business Performance (N = 350)

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	β	Std. Error	t-value	p-value
Revenue growth	Digital financial inclusion index	0.48	0.07	6.86	< .01
Business resilience	Digital financial inclusion index	0.41	0.08	5.13	< .01
Revenue growth	Digital payment adoption	0.52	0.06	8.67	< .01
Business resilience	Digital payment adoption	0.45	0.07	6.43	< .01

Report (Objective 2) in the table 3 reports the results of the regression analysis examining the relationship between digital financial inclusion and business performance indicators. The findings reveal a statistically significant and positive relationship between digital financial inclusion and revenue growth ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < .01$). This indicates that higher levels of engagement with digital financial services are associated with improved financial performance among micro-enterprises. Similarly, digital financial inclusion was found to have a significant positive effect on business resilience ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < .01$), suggesting that digitally included enterprises are better able to withstand economic shocks and operational disruptions. When examining individual components of digital financial inclusion, digital payment adoption emerged as the strongest predictor of both revenue growth ($\beta = 0.52$, $p < .01$) and business resilience ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < .01$). These results highlight the central role of digital payment systems in enhancing micro-enterprise performance.

Table 4 Robustness Checks and Regression Diagnostics (N = 350)

Diagnostic Test / Model	Revenue Growth	Business Resilience
Baseline OLS (DFI index)	$\beta = 0.48^{***}$	$\beta = 0.41^{***}$
Robust standard errors	$\beta = 0.46^{***}$	$\beta = 0.39^{***}$
Alternative specification (DFI components)	$\beta = 0.52^{***}$ (Digital payments)	$\beta = 0.45^{***}$ (Digital payments)
Variance Inflation Factor (VIF)	Mean VIF = 1.84	Mean VIF = 1.84
Breusch–Pagan test (heteroskedasticity)	$\chi^2 = 2.31$ ($p > .10$)	$\chi^2 = 2.67$ ($p > .10$)
Ramsey RESET test (model specification)	F = 1.42 ($p > .10$)	F = 1.58 ($p > .10$)
Adjusted R ²	0.38	0.34

To ensure the reliability of the regression results, several robustness checks and diagnostic tests were conducted. First, the baseline ordinary least squares (OLS) models were re-estimated using robust standard errors to account for potential heteroskedasticity. The estimated

coefficients for digital financial inclusion remained positive and statistically significant for both revenue growth ($\beta = 0.46$, $p < .01$) and business resilience ($\beta = 0.39$, $p < .01$), indicating that the main findings are not sensitive to the estimation method.

Second, alternative model specifications were tested by replacing the composite digital financial inclusion index with its individual components. Consistent with the main results, digital payment adoption continued to exhibit the strongest and most significant association with both revenue growth ($\beta = 0.52$, $p < .01$) and business resilience ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < .01$), confirming the robustness of the findings across different model formulations. Multicollinearity diagnostics revealed no serious concerns, with mean variance inflation factor (VIF) values well below the commonly accepted threshold of 5. The Breusch–Pagan test failed to reject the null hypothesis of homoskedasticity, suggesting that heteroskedasticity is not a significant issue in the models. Additionally, the Ramsey RESET test indicated no evidence of model misspecification.

The summary these robustness checks and diagnostic tests provide strong support for the validity and stability of the estimated relationships between digital financial inclusion and micro-enterprise performance.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Report (Objective 3) based on the empirical findings, several policy implications emerge. First, policymakers should prioritize expanding access to affordable and user-friendly digital payment infrastructure, as digital payment adoption demonstrated the strongest association with improved business performance. Second, targeted financial literacy and digital skills training programs should be introduced to enable micro-enterprise owners—particularly those with lower educational attainment—to effectively utilize digital financial services. Third, financial institutions and fintech providers should collaborate to develop inclusive digital credit and savings products tailored to the needs of micro-enterprises, as access to these services remains relatively limited. Collectively, these policy measures can enhance digital financial inclusion and contribute to sustainable growth and resilience among micro-enterprises in Southeast Asia.

Discussion

Level of Digital Financial Inclusion among Micro-Enterprises

The results related to Objective 1 indicate that digital financial inclusion among micro-enterprises in Southeast Asia is moderate overall, with nearly half of the respondents classified at a moderate level and approximately one-third exhibiting high digital financial inclusion. This pattern suggests meaningful progress in digital finance adoption, while also revealing persistent inclusion gaps.

The relatively high uptake of digital payment systems aligns closely with global and regional evidence reported in the Global Findex Database (Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2018), which highlights payments as the most widely adopted digital financial service in developing economies. Similar patterns have been observed in recent studies focusing on micro- and small enterprises, where digital payments are often the first point of entry into formal digital finance ecosystems (Dao, 2025; Ozili, 2018). However, the comparatively lower access to digital credit and savings products observed in this study reflects structural constraints documented in prior research. Studies using World Bank enterprise surveys and fintech adoption data report that while payment platforms are increasingly accessible, micro-enterprises continue to face barriers in accessing digitally delivered credit due to risk profiling, limited credit histories, and regulatory constraints (Nature Communications, 2024; Zhang et al., 2023). This finding is consistent with Ong et al. (2025), who note uneven digital financial deepening across ASEAN countries, particularly for advanced financial products.

Thus, the findings support the broader literature in demonstrating that digital financial inclusion is multi-dimensional, with transaction-based services diffusing more rapidly than savings and credit instruments. At the same time, the relatively high share of digitally experienced owners in the sample suggests that demand-side readiness may be increasing faster than supply-side inclusion mechanisms, especially for micro-enterprises.

Digital Financial Inclusion and Business Performance

Addressing Objective 2, the regression results provide strong empirical evidence of a positive and statistically significant relationship between digital financial inclusion and micro-enterprise performance, as measured by revenue growth and business resilience. These results are robust across alternative model specifications and diagnostic tests, reinforcing confidence in the estimated relationships.

The positive association between DFI and revenue growth supports theoretical and empirical arguments that digital financial services reduce transaction costs, improve cash flow management, and enhance market access for small firms (Wiklund & Shepherd, 2003; Xie et al., 2024). The magnitude of the coefficient suggests that digital financial inclusion is not merely a complementary factor, but a substantive driver of micro-enterprise financial outcomes.

The finding that digital payment adoption is the strongest predictor of both revenue growth and business resilience is particularly noteworthy. This result aligns with prior studies demonstrating that digital payments enhance operational efficiency and enable firms to participate more fully in digital value chains (Suri & Jack, 2016; *Int. J. Financial Studies*, 2025). Similar evidence from China and other emerging markets indicates that payment digitization often precedes broader financial deepening and contributes directly to firm survival and growth (Zhang et al., 2023; Xie et al., 2024).

In contrast, while access to digital credit and savings remains important, its weaker predictive power in this study may reflect continued constraints in the effective use of these products by micro-enterprises. This partially diverges from findings in more financially mature contexts, where digital credit has been shown to significantly enhance firm expansion (Zhang et al., 2023). The difference suggests that institutional and regulatory environments in Southeast Asia may moderate the performance effects of advanced digital financial services.

Overall, the results strongly support existing evidence that digital financial inclusion enhances firm performance, while also extending the literature by highlighting business resilience as a critical outcome in micro-enterprise contexts, especially in volatile economic environments.

Policy Implications and Contribution to the Literature

In relation to Objective 3, the findings provide clear and evidence-based guidance for policymakers, financial institutions, and development agencies. The strong role of digital payment adoption suggests that policies aimed at expanding interoperable, low-cost payment infrastructure can yield immediate performance benefits for micro-enterprises. This supports recommendations in global policy frameworks advocating payments-first approaches to financial inclusion (Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2018; Ozili, 2018).

Furthermore, the observed gap in access to digital credit and savings underscores the need for targeted policy interventions that address both supply-side and demand-side constraints. Prior studies emphasize the importance of alternative data, fintech–bank partnerships, and supportive regulation in extending credit to underserved enterprises (Dao, 2025; Nature Communications, 2024). The present findings reinforce these recommendations, particularly for micro-enterprises operating outside traditional financial systems.

From an academic perspective, this study contributes to the literature by providing cross-country empirical evidence from three major Southeast Asian cities, addressing calls for more regionally diverse research on digital financial inclusion (Ong et al., 2025). By incorporating robustness checks and multiple performance indicators, the study also responds to methodological concerns raised in prior research regarding measurement validity and model stability (Peake, 2019; Hair et al., 2019).

Taken together, the results suggest that digital financial inclusion is a critical enabler of micro-enterprise growth and resilience, but its benefits are uneven across financial service dimensions. Future research may extend this work by examining causal mechanisms, longitudinal effects, and the role of institutional quality in shaping the performance outcomes of digital financial inclusion.

Conclusion

This study investigated the level of digital financial inclusion and its impact on micro-enterprise performance in Southeast Asia, using survey data from 350 micro-enterprise owners in Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia. The findings indicate that digital financial inclusion among micro-enterprises is moderate overall, with significant variation across different financial service dimensions. Digital payment systems are the most widely adopted digital financial tools, while access to digital credit and savings products remains comparatively limited.

Empirical results from multiple regression analyses demonstrate a strong and statistically significant positive relationship between digital financial inclusion and micro-enterprise performance, particularly in terms of revenue growth and business resilience. Among the components of digital financial inclusion, digital payment adoption emerged as the most influential factor, highlighting its role in enhancing transaction efficiency, cash-flow management, and firms' ability to withstand economic shocks. These relationships remained robust across alternative model specifications and diagnostic tests, reinforcing the reliability of the findings.

By focusing specifically on micro-enterprises rather than households or SMEs, this study contributes to the literature on digital finance by providing firm-level evidence from a Southeast Asian context. The results underscore that digital financial inclusion is not merely a complementary tool but a critical driver of micro-enterprise growth and sustainability. However, the uneven impact across financial service types suggests that expanding inclusion beyond basic payment services is essential. Overall, the study highlights digital financial inclusion as a key mechanism for promoting inclusive economic development and strengthening micro-enterprise resilience in emerging economies.

Suggestions

Suggestions for Implementation

1. Policy-Level Implementations

First, governments and regulators should prioritize the expansion of affordable and interoperable digital payment infrastructure. Given the strong association between digital payment adoption and micro-enterprise performance, investments in national QR payment systems, interoperability between banks and fintech providers, and reduced transaction fees for small-value payments can generate immediate benefits. Such initiatives can accelerate the transition from cash-based transactions and enhance operational efficiency among micro-enterprises.

Second, regulatory authorities should adopt tiered and risk-based regulatory frameworks tailored to micro-enterprises. Simplified know-your-customer (KYC) requirements and proportional compliance standards for low-risk digital accounts can lower entry barriers while

maintaining financial system integrity. This approach can facilitate broader access to digital savings and credit products, which remain limited among micro-enterprises.

2. Financial Institution and Fintech Implementations

Financial institutions and fintech firms should develop digital financial products specifically designed for micro-enterprises. Digital credit and savings products should account for irregular cash flows, small transaction volumes, and limited collateral. Leveraging alternative data—such as digital payment histories and transaction records—can improve credit assessment and expand access to finance for underserved micro-enterprises.

In addition, digital payment platforms should integrate value-added services, including basic accounting tools, inventory management, and automated transaction records. Such integrations can enhance financial management capabilities and amplify the performance benefits associated with digital payment adoption.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should adopt longitudinal or panel data designs to examine the causal effects of digital financial inclusion on micro-enterprise performance over time. While this study provides strong cross-sectional evidence, longitudinal approaches would offer deeper insights into how sustained use of digital financial services influences growth trajectories and business survival.

Further studies should also explore institutional and contextual factors—such as regulatory quality, financial infrastructure, and fintech ecosystems—that may moderate the relationship between digital financial inclusion and enterprise performance. Comparative research across rural and urban settings, or across additional ASEAN countries, would enhance the generalizability of findings.

Finally, qualitative or mixed-method approaches could complement quantitative analysis by exploring micro-entrepreneurs' experiences, constraints, and perceptions related to digital financial services. Such insights would deepen understanding of adoption barriers and inform more inclusive digital finance policies.

Declaration of Interests

The author declares that there are no known competing financial or non-financial interests that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with accepted ethical standards for social science research. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to data collection. Respondents were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their

responses, and no personally identifiable information was collected. The data were used solely for academic research purposes.

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Definition of Conflicts of Interest

A conflict of interest refers to any financial, professional, or personal relationship that could inappropriately influence, or be perceived to influence, the research process or outcomes. Such conflicts may include employment, consultancies, stock ownership, honoraria, paid expert testimony, or personal relationships. The author confirms that no conflicts of interest exist in relation to this study.

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