Transforming Migration Patterns through Digital Nomad Visa Policies in Strengthening the Digital Economy in the ASEAN Region

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Abstract

Global dynamics show that human migration patterns continue to undergo transformation in line with technological developments. Whereas migration was previously explained through the traditional push and pull theory with a dominant pattern from the global north to the global south, new phenomena such as digital nomads have emerged as a form of change in the direction of migrant mobility. Digital nomads, who work remotely using digital technology, not only shape a new concept of migration, but also create added value for the digital economy of the destination country. To accommodate this phenomenon, a number of countries have begun to introduce digital nomad visa policies as a legal instrument that allows the digital nomad community to stay longer legally. Although the digital nomad visa policy has not yet become a joint ASEAN agenda, several countries in the Southeast Asian region have implemented this policy as part of their national interest strategy, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. This policy has the potential to support the growing trend of ASEAN competitiveness in the field of innovation. This article analyses the impact of policy implementation on the prospects for the digital economy in the Southeast Asian region. The results of the study show that the transformation of migration patterns through digital nomad visa policies has the potential to accelerate the flow of knowledge exchange and enhance the region's position in the global digital economy. However, its effectiveness is limited by the lack of harmonisation of regional regulatory frameworks and the readiness of digital infrastructure. Thus, this transformation of migration patterns not only changes the way individuals move and work, but also repositions the meaning of traditional migration, which plays a strategic role in the consolidation of the digital economy and ASEAN's regional competitiveness in the era of digital globalisation.

Key Words
Digital nomad visa, digital economy, ASEAN, push and pull theory, migration

1. Introduction

For decades, international migration has often been understood through a traditional paradigm that frames it as a consequence of development failures in the country of origin. The dominant assumption is that individuals migrate due to limited economic, political, or social opportunities, and thus the higher the level of development in a country, the lower its migration rate (Clemens, 2014). This view shapes the general logic of many global policies and development assistance frameworks. However, the history of migration in Europe and the Global South shows that the relationship between development and migration is far more complex. A shift in thinking emerged after the end of the era of formal economic migration, such as the Bracero programme in the United States (1965) and the closure of labour migration routes in Europe in the early 1970s (Clemens, Lewis, & Postel, 2018). Since then, a new approach known as co-development has

emerged, in which Global North countries have begun to view migrants as agents of development. Migrants are no longer perceived merely as labourers or a social burden, but as actors who can bring skills that can be mobilised for the development of their countries and regions of origin.

In the context of globalisation and digital technology development, a new paradigm of migration is emerging. In 1997, Tsugio Makimoto and David Manners introduced the concept of digital nomads, a new class of workers who are able to work from anywhere without being tied to a fixed location. Although this concept initially received little attention, the COVID-19 pandemic became an important catalyst that legitimised cross-border digital work patterns (Kashif, 2024). Lockdown policies and mobility restrictions have driven the adoption of remote work systems by companies and governments, thereby expanding the legitimacy of the digital nomad lifestyle. This phenomenon not only influences social dynamics but also impacts national policies, particularly regarding visa regulations and human mobility management, reflecting the new reality of globalisation where geographical and national boundaries are increasingly blurred in economic and social activities.

Makimoto and Manners' book entitled "Digital Nomad" did not receive much serious attention at the time because it was considered too visionary compared to the labour market conditions at that time (Kashif, 2024) . The paradigm shift in international migration indicates that human mobility is increasingly viewed not only as a labour issue but also as an instrument of economic development and innovation, which is seen as a framework that is then relevant to digital nomad visa policies. In the case of ASEAN, where the digital talent gap and infrastructure capacity remain high, the digital nomad visa policy offers a new model of labour migration that not only avoids the social and economic burdens of permanent migration, but also transforms brain drain into brain gain through a system of non-permanent engagement. Digital nomad communities often bring technological skills, global business networks, and social capital that can be accessed by local communities (Bahri, 2024). The implications of this policy present significant downstream contributions to the digital ecosystem.

The Southeast Asian region, with its strategic geographical advantage between two oceans, attractive tropical climate, competitive cost of living, and continuously developing digital connectivity, has all the requirements to become a major magnet for global digital nomads. On the other hand, the digital economy has become the backbone of global economic growth in the 21st century. Amidst the slowdown in conventional economies and disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, digitalisation offers new opportunities for rapid growth. The Southeast Asian region, or ASEAN, is no exception. With a population of over 650 million, increasing internet penetration and technology adoption, and a demographic bonus of young workers, ASEAN is positioned to be one of the major players in the global digital economy in the coming decade (Sefrina, 2024). However, to realise this, ASEAN certainly needs not only digital infrastructure, but also connected digital talent. This is where the role of digital nomads becomes significant.

Thus, migration is no longer seen as a consequence of failed development, but rather as an integral part of digital development itself. The phenomenon of digital nomads presents a new paradox that reflects how digital development creates migration, while migration can also contribute back to development. It is this framework that makes digital nomad visa policies relevant, strategic, and worthy of consideration as innovative migration policy instruments in supporting the digital economic transformation in the Southeast Asian region.

2. Analytical Framework

In general, digital nomads can be understood as individuals who utilise digital technology to work remotely while moving between countries. In this research analysis, several key theories and concepts are used.

2.1. Push-Pull Theory

Traditional migration theory remains the basis for analysis, particularly through the push and pull factors approach (Lee, 1966). However, in the context of digital nomads, the push and pull factors are not solely economic, but also include the quality of digital infrastructure, visa policy flexibility, cost of living, and the existence of a global community. This marks a shift from the conventional migrant paradigm (labour or permanent migration) towards a form of temporary migration.

The Push and Pull Theory proposed by Everett Lee in 1966 is one of the classic frameworks in international migration studies that emphasises that mobility occurs due to a combination of push factors from the country of origin and pull factors from the destination country (Prabawa & Pertiwi, 2020) . Push factors arise due to various reasons, such as limited job opportunities and high living costs, or even political dynamics in the country of origin. Conversely, the pull factors offered by the destination country include abundant job opportunities, high wages, and a sense of security.

2.2. Conceptualisation of digital nomads

The concept of digital nomads was first introduced by Makimoto and Manners in 1997, who predicted a major transformation in migration patterns and work systems due to the growth of technology (Reher & Triandafyllidou, 2023). Initially, this concept was considered utopian due to the limited global internet access and high technology costs at the time. However, with the advancement of communication technology, the decrease in international travel costs, and the emergence of a remote work ecosystem, this concept eventually became a reality.

Digital nomads refer to a lifestyle and work practice that allows individuals to work remotely by utilising technology and internet connections, enabling them to move from place to place. From a migration perspective, digital nomads mark a shift in migration motives from being solely driven by "necessity" such as survival or safety, to being driven by "choice" associated with quality of life, work flexibility, and freedom (Mitra, 2025).

Socially, the digital nomad community is often concentrated in cities known as digital nomad hubs, such as Bali, Chiang Mai, Lisbon, and Medellin (Mitra, 2025). These cities offer a low cost of living, a similar atmosphere, and are also supported by the presence of

diverse communities (Litania & Marsan, 2023). In Bali, coworking spaces serve as centres for knowledge exchange and professional networking. This is also emphasised by a Canadian source, who noted that the presence of shared workspaces in the Canggu area not only facilitates remote work needs but also opens up opportunities for cross- disciplinary collaboration, ranging from informal discussions to joint project partnerships.

From the perspective of ASEAN's digital economy, the digital nomad community can be seen as one of the actors in promoting digital inclusivity. The growth of the digital economy in Southeast Asia, although rapid, has not been evenly distributed, especially between cities and villages, large companies and MSMEs, and between men and women (Litania & Marsan, 2023). If the digital nomad community actively engages in the local ecosystem (e.g., through digital skills training or collaboration with local SMEs), it can serve as a catalyst for digital inclusion. However, this can only be achieved if there is a bridge between the nomad community and the local community.

2.3. The concept of a digital nomad visa

The concept of digital nomads often raises legal debates because they work for international clients without having clear legal status in their country of residence. This is what led to the emergence of the digital nomad visa policy. The digital nomad visa is a new form of immigration policy that grants medium-term residence permits to remote workers from abroad, without requiring them to work in their country of origin.

The design of digital nomad visa policies in various countries can be grouped into two main approaches, namely the brand new approach and the adaptive approach (KC & Triandafyllidou, 2025) . The brand new approach is when a country creates a new type of visa specifically for digital nomads, as Barbados has done with its 12 Month Welcome Stamp programme (KC & Triandafyllidou, 2025). Meanwhile, the adaptive approach involves modifying existing visas, such as business or tourist visas, to include remote workers (KC & Triandafyllidou, 2025). The approach chosen reflects the policy priorities of the country concerned, whether it wants to introduce the country as a pioneer of migration innovation or simply take advantage of the economic opportunities of the growing trend.

2.4. The concept of the digital economy

The dynamics of the digital economy in the ASEAN region reflect the major transformation that is taking place with the increasing adoption of information and communication technology. The region has become one of the fastest growing internet markets in the world, with around 125,000 new internet users emerging every day. In 2018 alone, there were around 350 million internet users in six ASEAN countries, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam (Aljufri, 2019).

Currently, the ASEAN digital economy contributes only about 7% of GDP, far behind China (16%), Europe (27%), and the United States (35%) (Sefrina, An Inclusive Digital Economy in the ASEAN Region, 2024). This development is inseparable from regional policies that encourage digital integration. Through the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) Blueprint 2025 and the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025, ASEAN countries have committed to building an inclusive digital economy framework, including in terms of personal data protection, harmonisation of online consumer protection laws, and digital payment interoperability.

Ultimately, significant challenges remain. ASEAN's digital integration still faces high disparities among its member states, both in terms of internet penetration, digital literacy, and infrastructure readiness.

Graph 1. Internet penetration in Southeast Asia post-COVID-19
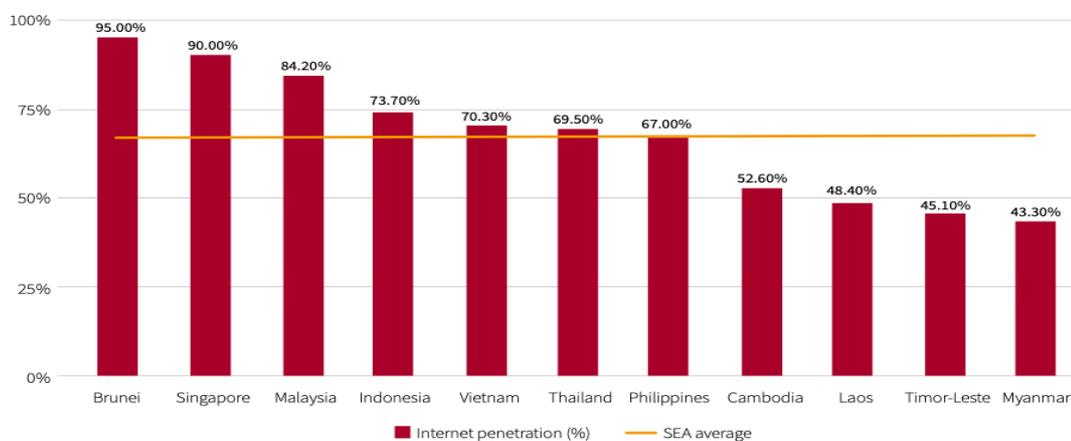
Source: Hootsuite/We are Social.

Hanafi et al. (2025)

A graph compiled by The World Bank (2022) shows a striking disparity, with Singapore, Malaysia, and Brunei having internet penetration rates above 80%, while Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, and the Philippines are still below 70% (Curtis, et al., 2022). These differences have a major impact on the readiness and competitiveness of the digital economy in each ASEAN country. In general, ASEAN countries have strengths in digital technology (Mouratidis, 2018) , but the application of this technology for sustainable development remains a major challenge.

On the other hand, socio-economic and cultural factors also influence the success of digital adoption, such as low ICT skills and resistance to change in conventional business models. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has been an important catalyst in accelerating digital transformation in the region. During the pandemic, there was an extraordinary surge in e-commerce traffic, digital banking, and digital entertainment platforms, accelerating changes in consumer behaviour and encouraging businesses to adopt digital use as an integral part of their activities (Soltani, 2024).

3. Research Method

This study uses a qualitative exploratory approach with one key informant, Beatrice Hamel, with the aim of gaining an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of digital nomad migration and the relevance of visa policies in promoting digital economic growth in the ASEAN region. This approach was chosen because the phenomenon of digital nomads is a contemporary issue that has not been fully mapped through traditional migration theoretical frameworks, thus requiring a flexible research strategy oriented towards discovering new concepts.

The types of data used in this study consist of primary and secondary data. Interviews were used in this study as Primary data. The author managed to obtain 1 key sources. The source was a digital nomad from Canada who periodically resides in Bali, Indonesia, and is active in the digital nomad community in the Canggu area. The interview was conducted online on 30 May 2025.

Secondary data was obtained through analysis of official policy documents published by ASEAN governments, including visa regulations and migration policies. This analysis also examined academic journals, scientific articles, reports from institutions such as ASEAN, the OECD, and the World Bank, as well as credible media outlets that extensively discuss the development of digital nomad trends and their contribution to the region's economy.

4. Results and Discussions

Lockdown policies and mobility restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic have prompted companies and governments to adopt digital-based work systems, which in turn have expanded the legitimacy of the digital nomad lifestyle. This phenomenon not only affects social dynamics but also impacts national policies, particularly in terms of visa regulations and human mobility management, reflecting the new reality of globalisation, where geographical and national boundaries are becoming increasingly blurred in economic and social activities. Furthermore, technology enables workers with this new phenomenon to work in more diverse spaces, including virtually or hybridly. Digital nomads can contextualise their work environments and gain greater mobility, thereby creating new opportunities (Mouratidis, 2018).

Furthermore, the digital nomad community essentially exploits the economic gap between their home country and destination country to maintain a standard of living that may be difficult for them to maintain in the West by moving to the East or South (Dogan, 2025). In their destination country, they can maintain a comfortable lifestyle with the wages they earn in the West, wages that may be inadequate or even barely adequate in their destination country.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, and even now, some digital nomad communities travel abroad using tourist visas. This is what makes it difficult for governments to legally distinguish them from tourists (Dogan, 2025). As the flow of digital nomads increases, more countries are beginning to introduce special digital nomad visa policies. While Estonia became one of the first countries in Europe to launch a Digital Nomad Visa in 2020, Thailand became the first country in Southeast Asia to implement such a visa scheme.

The digital nomad community is considered a relatively highly educated and financially stable group, so it is deemed to place less of a burden on the host country's development (Dogan, 2025). Unlike traditional migrants, who are often associated with labour needs, digital nomads are considered capable of contributing to the economy through their participation in consumption expenditure, taxes, and the local digital ecosystem. Based on this understanding, governments see the presence of digital nomads as an opportunity to boost the domestic economy without causing serious social consequences. Therefore, many countries have designed digital nomad visas selectively for individuals with upper-middle incomes and skills in STEM fields. While industrialisation requires individuals to settle in one place to carry out very specific roles or functions, jobs related to information and knowledge have become much less specific in terms of tasks and location (Mouratidis, 2018).

On the other hand, the paradigm shift in international migration shows that human mobility is increasingly seen not only as a labour issue but also as an instrument of economic development and innovation, which is then relevant to digital nomad visa policies. In the case of ASEAN, where the digital talent gap and infrastructure capacity are still high (Maulana & Suryana, 2023), digital nomad visa policies offer a new model of labour migration that not only avoids the social and economic burdens of permanent migration, but also transforms brain drain into brain gain through a system of non-permanent engagement. Digital nomad communities often bring technological skills, global business networks, and social capital that can be accessed by local communities. The implications of this policy present significant downstream contributions to the digital ecosystem.

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In the context of digital nomads, the driving factors are no longer synonymous with poverty or unemployment, but rather stem from the instability of the formal job market or simply the desire to break away from the conventional work system. The digital nomad visa policy in the ASEAN region has reconstructed the logic of migration from a traditional needs-based model to a new choice-based model with digital opportunities.

Table 1. Transformation of Push and Pull Theory: From Conventional Migration to Digital Migration

Analysis Aspect	Conventional Migration (Classic Push-Pull)	Digital Migration (New Push-Pull/Digital Nomad)
Migration Motivation	Economic needs, seeking employment, avoiding poverty or conflict	Seeking work flexibility, work-life balance, and digital-based cross-cultural experiences
Push Factors (Drivers)	- Limited job opportunities - Low wages - Social and political instability - Structural economic pressure	- Inflexibility of formal employment - Dissatisfaction with corporate work systems - Need for mobility and work independence
Pull Factors	- Higher wages - Wide range of job opportunities - Political and social stability	- Supportive digital nomad visa policies - Internet infrastructure and coworking spaces - Global digital lifestyle - Startup ecosystem and technology community

Source: Compiled and analysed by the author from various sources.

The table above shows that migration is no longer driven solely by basic economic needs, but rather by the transformation of digital lifestyles and global work flexibility. Digital nomad visa policies have become a catalyst that shifts pull factors to be more oriented towards digital value attraction (Bahri, 2024), such as ease of access, global communities, and technological infrastructure. Meanwhile, push factors are more influenced by the pressure of conventional work systems that are rigid and unadaptive to digital economic trends.

In ASEAN, countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines (ASEAN-4) have implemented digital nomad visa policies (Imam, Wibowo, & Cahyowati, 2024) through various approaches as a strategy to attract more international workers and strengthen their position in the digital economy. Through the lens of International Relations, this phenomenon illustrates how globalisation drives the transformation of the role of the state and expands the actors in the international system. The digital nomad community is seen as a non-state actor capable of impacting national economic development and international perceptions of a country.

In the short term, mobility and development actually support each other (De Haas & Rodriguez, 2010) (Mancinelli, 2020) . This can also be seen from the increasing interest of ASEAN countries in creating an environment that is friendly to global digital workers through special visa regulations, flexible work infrastructure, and the promotion of local lifestyles. This is where the role of trust becomes important, as the digital nomad community chooses a destination country not only because of internet access or visas, but also because of political stability, policy friendliness, and local quality of life. Thus, the digital nomad visa in this case becomes an instrument of "development that attracts migration," not development that tries to stop it.

4.1. Case Study: Indonesia

Indonesia, particularly Bali, has long been a prime destination for the international digital nomad community. Factors such as relatively low living costs and a friendly and diverse local culture are also recognised by the researcher's sources:

> Cost of living is a consideration. But Bali isn't actually the cheapest. Vietnam or some places in Thailand are much cheaper. However, Bali is still cheaper than Canada, so that remains a plus point.

The Indonesian government recognises the economic potential of this trend, particularly in relation to increasing foreign exchange and diversifying the tourism sector post-pandemic (Taufiq & Aziz, 2025). To date, there are four visa schemes that can be used by the digital nomad community if they wish to stay in Indonesia, one of the most popular being the KITAS visa. The KITAS visa is not a special visa scheme for digital nomads but rather a visa that has been adapted to suit the needs of the digital nomad community. In fact, Indonesia recently issued a visa with the code E33G. In general, this visa is promoted for remote workers, but in terms of its approach and integration, the E33G visa is seen more as a bureaucratic compromise than a strategic policy.

The impact of the digital nomad visa policy is not only limited to local income but also attracts the attention of digital multinational companies that require an open and dynamic digital-based work ecosystem. Digital multinational enterprises (MNEs) such as Google, Microsoft, and Tencent have begun investing in the ASEAN region because it offers a flexible working environment supported by policies that are open to foreign remote workers.

A concrete manifestation of this approach can be seen in Microsoft's decision to launch Indonesia Central, its first Cloud Region in Indonesia, on 27 May 2025. This hyperscale infrastructure was built to support the growth of the artificial intelligence (AI) ecosystem in Indonesia. The presence of the Indonesia Central cloud region marks an important milestone in Microsoft's investment commitment in Indonesia. With a total investment plan of USD 1.7 billion for the 2024-2028 period (Microsoft, 2025) . The Indonesia cloud region is expected to facilitate organisations around the world to create, build and position Indonesia as a key player in the global digital economy.

However, this policy transformation was initially intended only to distinguish digital nomads from ordinary tourists, so that the government could obtain greater fiscal benefits while reducing the grey area where digital nomads use tourist visas to live and work informally. On the other hand, the presence of digital nomads in Bali has also contributed significantly to the economic growth of the region, including the digital economy (Prabawa & Pertiwi, 2020). Many local businesses have begun to adapt by shifting their business models towards digitalisation, such as online marketing and app-based services.

The interviewee also described how simple interactions between digital nomads and local businesses can form new forms of collaboration:

> I often collaborate with local businesses without payment if I really like the place. I once shared a newly opened place, and the video was viewed about 300,000 times. After that, they received many bookings. I am sure it had a big impact. But I am very selective. If I don't like it, I still pay and don't share it. That's important to maintain my credibility.

Without formal mechanisms, digital nomads can have a real economic impact through content sharing on social media. In this context, promotion is done voluntarily and selectively based on personal preferences, opening up access for small and medium-sized businesses to gain global recognition.

4.2. Direct contributions

Digital nomads who stay for medium to long periods tend to contribute to more stable local spending than conventional tourists. Unlike tourists who usually only spend a few days or weeks, digital nomads can stay for months (Chevtaeva & Denizci-Guillet, 2021), thereby triggering consistent demand across various service sectors. They not only utilise accommodation services

such as hotels, villas, or rental apartments but also rely on local transportation services, restaurants, cafes, and coworking spaces.

The presence of digital nomads has even encouraged the growth of new business ecosystems, such as high-speed internet service providers, private healthcare services, and digital or language skills classes (Chevtaeva & Denizci- Guillet, 2021). Thus, the resulting consumption patterns are not only short-term but also create a multiplier effect for the local economy. In addition to contributing to consumption, the digital nomad visa policy also opens up fiscal revenue opportunities for countries. First, through visa processing fees, which are generally set higher than tourist visas, countries obtain direct income without having to provide full access to the domestic labour market. Second, a number of countries have begun to design special taxation regulations for digital nomad visa holders, especially for those with incomes above a certain threshold. For example, Thailand, which implements the Long-Term Resident (LTR) Visa, targets high-income individuals with large investment requirements in Thailand (Litania & Marsan, 2023).

4.3. Indirect contributions

In various ASEAN countries, digital nomads have driven the growth of a more inclusive digital ecosystem. Their presence has created high demand for coworking spaces, innovation centres, and digital economy support services. In Thailand, the city of Chiang Mai has become a global magnet for the digital nomad community, with a network of coworking spaces that has created a strong local start-up ecosystem. Malaysia, through its DE Rantau Nomad Pass programme, is also explicitly targeting accelerated digital transformation by leveraging the contributions of the digital nomad community (Litania & Marsan, 2023). Thus, this migration pattern not only increases the number of global workers, but also contributes to the development of digital infrastructure that can be utilised by local communities.

Digital nomads are typically highly educated workers specialising in technology, digital marketing, creative design, and global entrepreneurship (Chevtaeva & Denizci-Guillet, 2021). Through formal interactions such as training, seminars, or workshops, as well as informal interactions in cafes, creative communities, or coworking spaces, there is a significant exchange of knowledge with local workers.

This process accelerates the adoption of digital skills in the ASEAN region, enhances the competitiveness of the local workforce, and enriches the technology-based entrepreneurial ecosystem.

5. Conclusion

The transformation of migration patterns in the digital age shows a fundamental shift from migration based on formal economic needs to more flexible, technology-based mobility influenced by lifestyle. The phenomenon of digital nomads is a clear representation of this change, where individuals no longer depend on the domestic labour market but are able to work across countries with the support of digital infrastructure. Digital nomad visa policies that have begun to be implemented in the ASEAN region, such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, are an adaptive response to these changes in migration patterns. Through these policies, ASEAN countries are seeking to differentiate digital nomads from ordinary tourists, while also capitalising on the economic potential they bring. Directly, this policy contributes to increased local consumption and fiscal revenue, while indirectly strengthening the start-up ecosystem, promoting knowledge transfer, and building ASEAN's image as a global digital hub. Thus, the digital nomad visa policy is not only a new migration instrument but also a regional economic strategy that can accelerate digital integration in ASEAN.

Overall, the transformation of push and pull theory in the context of digital migration confirms that modern migration patterns can no longer be explained by economic determinants alone, but rather by a complex configuration of policy and technology.

Digital migration under digital nomad visa policies reveals new dynamics:

- Push factors have shifted from economic pressures to cultural and professional incentives for flexibility and freedom;
- Pull factors are shifting from economic incentives to digital and regulatory attractions that create a global work environment.

Thus, the push and pull theory entered a phase from a needs-based migration theory to a technology and innovation-based mobility theory. This change became the conceptual basis for a new understanding of digital migration as an instrument of ASEAN regional economic integration.

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