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Airbnb, Grab, and Beyond: A Qualitative Study of Digital Intermediaries in Vietnam's Urban Tourism

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how digital platforms are reshaping the dynamics of tourism in urban Vietnam, with a focus on Airbnb, Grab, and other intermediaries. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with hosts, tourists, and service providers in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, the research adopts a phenomenological approach to examine perceptions of trust, intimacy, and risk in digitally mediated encounters. The findings reveal that digital platforms extend beyond transactional functions by fostering new forms of social interaction, cultural exchange, and urban mobility. However, they also generate tensions around regulatory uncertainty, safety concerns, and the erosion of traditional hospitality practices. Hosts emphasized the dual role of platforms as enablers of economic opportunity and as mechanisms of surveillance and dependency, while tourists described a balance between convenience and a sense of detachment from authentic local life. By situating these experiences within debates on platformization and tourism, the study contributes to understanding how technology mediates host–guest relationships in emerging destinations. The results highlight the need for policies that safeguard cultural integrity and trust while supporting innovation in Vietnam's rapidly expanding tourism economy.

INTRODUCTION

Urban tourism in Vietnam has undergone substantial transformation in recent years, driven by the proliferation of digital platforms that mediate travel experiences. Platforms such as Airbnb and ride-hailing services like Grab have introduced new forms of access, mobility, and exchange between hosts and guests. In Vietnam, these intermediaries do not merely facilitate transactions; they reshape how tourism is performed, experienced, and governed in cities such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (Le & Moussa, 2025). The rise of platformized tourism in Vietnam reflects a global trend toward the "platformization of tourism," where tourism services from accommodation to experiences are mediated through digital infrastructures (Guttentag, 2019; Dolnicar, 2020)

One central concern in platformized tourism is how trust is established, negotiated, and sometimes eroded in host–guest relationships. In traditional hospitality, trust emerges through direct personal interactions, reputation, and institutional structures. However, digital platforms introduce new layers: users must develop trust in the host, the platform, and the broader ecosystem (Möhlmann & Geissinger, 2018; Stripp, 2021). Reviews, ratings, platform policies, and identity cues all act as trust-building artifacts in this mediated space (Zloteanu, Harvey, Tuckett, & Livan, 2018). The triadic structure of trust in sharing economies, dispositional, interpersonal, and institutional offers a useful analytic frame to examine how trust evolves in digitally mediated tourism (Stripp, 2021).

Beyond trust, digital platforms inflect notions of intimacy and authenticity in tourism encounters. Hosts often curate their online presences to present themselves as "local insiders" capable of offering immersive, authentic experiences (Tussyadiah & Park, as cited in "The projected identity of Airbnb hosts," 2025). Yet the very act of curation filtered photos, stylized descriptions, and algorithmic mediation may distance the guest from the "real" city (Stors & Baltes, 2018). In cities, platforms also engage in what has been termed "platform placemaking," where the digital representation of neighborhoods influences how tourists perceive and move through urban space (Rumpel & Haase, 2022).

Furthermore, the growth of platform tourism brings friction with traditional hospitality, regulatory regimes, and community norms. In Vietnam specifically, Airbnb's rapid expansion raises tensions around zoning, taxation,

housing affordability, and local resident displacement (Le & Moussa, 2025). While these debates are often framed in economic or regulatory terms, they also carry cultural and relational consequences: platform hosts may feel surveilled or constrained by platform rules, while guests may feel distanced from authentic cultural exchange. These tensions highlight that digitally mediated encounters are never neutral, they are embedded in power relations and contested meanings.

This study investigates how digital intermediaries such as Airbnb and Grab reshape host–guest relations in urban Vietnam, focusing on how trust, intimacy, and perceived risk are constructed and negotiated. By employing a phenomenological design and conducting in-depth interviews with hosts, tourists, and local service providers in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, the research seeks to surface the lived experiences behind platform metrics. In doing so, it contributes to theoretical debates on platform tourism, highlights culturally specific mechanisms of mediation, and offers policy insights into how to balance innovation with authenticity and social equity in Vietnamese urban tourism contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism worldwide has been reshaped by digital platforms, a transformation often described as the "platformization of tourism" (Dolnicar, 2020; Guttentag, 2019). Platforms such as Airbnb and Grab now mediate services that were once the domain of formal travel agencies or traditional hospitality. They promise convenience and personalization but also raise questions about power, authenticity, and regulation. Vietnam provides a critical case, as cities like Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City have experienced rapid adoption of such platforms, reflecting broader trends in Southeast Asia's tourism growth (Le & Moussa, 2025).

The literature identifies both opportunities and contradictions in platform tourism. On one hand, platforms enable micro-entrepreneurship by allowing households and drivers to participate in tourism economies. On the other, benefits are unevenly distributed, with wealthier actors dominating Airbnb listings and drivers facing precarious working conditions shaped by algorithmic management (Anwar & Graham, 2021). Guttentag (2019) highlights how Airbnb has shifted from peer-to-peer ideals to professionalized operations, revealing that platformization must be understood in terms of broader inequalities.

Trust is central to understanding digitally mediated tourism. Unlike traditional hospitality, which relies on institutional regulation and brand reputation, platforms depend on ratings, reviews, and identity verification (Möhlmann & Geissinger, 2018; Stripp, 2021). Research shows that trust operates on multiple levels: interpersonal trust between users, institutional trust in the platform, and cultural norms shaping dispositions toward risk (Zloteanu et al., 2018). In Vietnam, where hospitality is strongly rooted in relational trust, the digitization of trust reframes encounters into performances mediated by curated profiles and algorithmic visibility.

Closely related are questions of intimacy and authenticity. Tourism studies have long debated authenticity, with platforms intensifying its commodification. Hosts often present themselves as local cultural brokers offering access to "real" urban life (Tussyadiah & Park, 2018). Yet these presentations are carefully curated through images, descriptions, and platform algorithms, which may distance tourists from everyday realities (Stors & Baltes, 2018). While guests seek meaningful connections, mediation through digital infrastructures can dilute spontaneity, leading to what Farmaki and Stergiou (2019) describe as the paradox of digitally curated intimacy. In Vietnamese cities, this dynamic is visible in how Airbnb listings frame Hanoi's Old Quarter or Ho Chi Minh City's neighborhoods as authentic spaces while filtering visibility through platform logics.

Platform tourism also reshapes urban governance. Scholars of "Airbnbification" emphasize its impacts on housing affordability, neighborhood identity, and regulatory systems (Rumpel & Haase, 2022). In Vietnam, the expansion of Airbnb has raised concerns about zoning, taxation, and cultural preservation, while Grab has disrupted traditional taxi industries (Le & Moussa, 2025). Regulatory enforcement in Southeast Asia remains uneven, reflecting broader tensions between innovation, informality, and state authority (UNWTO, 2022). Platforms thus act as both economic enablers and sources of friction, embedding tourism into contested political and cultural landscapes.

Despite these insights, gaps remain. Much existing research focuses on Western contexts or prioritizes economic impacts. Little attention has been given to how Vietnamese hosts, guests, and service providers experience trust, intimacy, and risk in their everyday encounters. Moreover, while quantitative studies capture adoption trends, fewer qualitative works explore the phenomenological dimensions of platform tourism, such as

feelings of safety, authenticity, or alienation. Addressing this gap requires centering local voices and situating digital tourism within Vietnam's socio-cultural context.

This study responds to these gaps by adopting a qualitative, phenomenological approach to explore how digital platforms such as Airbnb and Grab reshape host–guest relationships in Vietnam's urban tourism. By focusing on lived experiences in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, it contributes to debates on trust and authenticity in the sharing economy while situating them in an emerging Southeast Asian context. In doing so, it extends theoretical discussions of platform tourism and offers practical insights for policy and governance.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, phenomenological research design to explore how digital platforms such as Airbnb and Grab reshape host–guest relationships in Vietnam's urban tourism. Phenomenology is particularly suitable because it emphasizes the lived experiences and meaning-making processes of individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By focusing on participants' subjective accounts, this approach allows the study to capture how trust, intimacy, and risk are constructed and negotiated in digitally mediated encounters. Unlike survey-based studies that prioritize breadth, phenomenology privileges depth of understanding, making it well-suited to uncovering the cultural and relational nuances of platform tourism in Vietnam.

Research Setting

The research was conducted in two major Vietnamese cities: Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. These sites were selected because they are leading destinations for both domestic and international tourists and have witnessed rapid adoption of digital platforms in the tourism sector. Hanoi represents a city where heritage and cultural authenticity are central to tourism narratives, whereas Ho Chi Minh City exemplifies rapid modernization, business tourism, and urban diversity. This contrast enhances the study's ability to capture varied experiences of digital intermediation across urban contexts.

Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants who had direct experience with tourism platforms. The sample included three groups: (1) local hosts using Airbnb, (2) drivers and service providers using Grab, and (3) tourists (both domestic and international) who had engaged with these platforms during their stay. This triangulated perspective ensured that insights were not limited to a single stakeholder group but reflected the dynamics across the platform ecosystem. Recruitment occurred through platform contact, social media groups, and snowball referrals. In total, 30 participants were interviewed: 10 Airbnb hosts, 10 Grab service providers, and 10 tourists. This number aligns with recommendations for phenomenological research, where 5–25 participants are generally considered adequate to achieve thematic saturation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

Data Collection

Data collection relied primarily on semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and were conducted either face-to-face or via video conferencing, depending on participants' availability. Interview guides included open-ended questions designed to elicit participants' experiences and perceptions regarding trust, intimacy, authenticity, and risk in their use of digital tourism platforms. For example, Airbnb hosts were asked how they represented themselves on the platform and how reviews shaped their sense of trustworthiness, while tourists were asked to describe memorable encounters with hosts or drivers. Interviews were conducted in both English and Vietnamese, with assistance from bilingual research assistants for translation when necessary. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview data, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. NVivo 12 software supported the coding process, enabling systematic organization of data and cross-case comparison. Initial coding was inductive, allowing categories to emerge from the participants' narratives. Later, themes were refined in relation to the theoretical constructs of trust, intimacy, and risk identified in the literature. This iterative process ensured that both participant-driven insights and conceptually informed dimensions were captured.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure the quality of the research, the study employed multiple strategies to establish trustworthiness as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was enhanced through member checking, where participants were invited to review summaries of their interviews to verify accuracy. Transferability was supported by providing thick descriptions of the research context and participant experiences. Dependability was ensured through an audit trail documenting decisions during data collection and analysis. Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive journaling by the researcher, which helped to acknowledge and mitigate potential biases.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was secured from all participants, and they were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Pseudonyms were used in reporting, and participants retained the right to withdraw at any point. Given the sensitivity of digital identity, special care was taken not to disclose specific host profiles or driver accounts, ensuring data protection in line with ethical research practices (Silverman, 2021)..

RESULTS

The data analysis produced a set of interrelated themes that illuminate how digital platforms such as Airbnb and Grab are reshaping tourism encounters in urban Vietnam. Thirty participants contributed to this study, consisting of ten Airbnb hosts, ten Grab drivers and service providers, and ten tourists, both domestic and international. The participants represented a diversity of ages, occupations, and backgrounds, allowing for varied perspectives on the opportunities and challenges of digital intermediation in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

Thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework, generated five overarching themes: (1) negotiating trust in digital platforms, (2) intimacy and authenticity in mediated encounters, (3) experiences of risk and vulnerability, (4) urban space and platform placemaking, and (5) regulation, informality, and power relations. These themes are not mutually exclusive; rather, they overlap and intersect in ways that reveal the complex dynamics of digitally mediated tourism. For example, issues of trust are often closely connected to perceptions of risk, while practices of authenticity are embedded within broader struggles over regulation and cultural preservation.

The findings are presented thematically to highlight both the distinctiveness of each category and their interconnections. Each theme is supported by direct quotations from participants to demonstrate how individuals articulated their lived experiences. These quotations have been translated into English where necessary, with care taken to preserve the meaning and nuance of participants' words. Pseudonyms are used to ensure confidentiality.

Overall, the results reveal that while digital platforms expand opportunities for mobility, entrepreneurship, and cultural contact, they also generate tensions surrounding trust, safety, authenticity, and governance. The themes discussed in the following sections illustrate how Vietnamese hosts, drivers, and tourists navigate these tensions, offering insights into the social and cultural consequences of platformization in urban tourism.

Negotiating Trust in Digital Platforms

Trust emerged as a central theme in participants' narratives, underscoring its importance in shaping host–guest relationships and service exchanges on digital tourism platforms. For both Airbnb and Grab users, trust functioned as a necessary foundation for interaction in the absence of prior personal familiarity. Participants emphasized that ratings, reviews, and platform assurances were not simply technical features but critical mechanisms for reducing uncertainty and facilitating decision-making. As one tourist explained, "When I booked an Airbnb in Hanoi, I didn't know the host at all. The only reason I felt safe was because she had more than fifty positive reviews. Without that, I would never have stayed" (Linh, international tourist, 27).

Reliance on Ratings and Reviews

Participants consistently described reviews as the most influential factor in determining trustworthiness. Airbnb hosts highlighted the pressure of maintaining high ratings, noting that a single negative review could significantly impact bookings. A host in Ho Chi Minh City commented, "The platform gives me opportunities, but I always feel

like I am under surveillance. If my rating drops below 4.5, I lose visibility, and that means fewer guests" (Mai, host, 34). Similarly, Grab drivers emphasized that passenger ratings directly shaped their income and job security. "One bad review and the algorithm punishes you. I drive carefully, but sometimes guests are unfair" (Hung, Grab driver, 41). These experiences suggest that trust in platform tourism is both algorithmically mediated and precarious, creating constant performance pressure for service providers.

Self-Presentation and Digital Identity

Hosts also described deliberate strategies to cultivate trust through self-presentation. Many invested time in curating their online profiles, using professional photographs, warm descriptions, and rapid responsiveness to inquiries. As one Airbnb host explained, "I try to make my profile friendly. I upload pictures of my family and our home-cooked meals. Guests feel more comfortable when they see me as a real person" (Trang, host, 29). Tourists reported that such personal touches enhanced their sense of security, suggesting that digital trust is closely tied to perceived authenticity of identity. This aligns with research that highlights the role of self-presentation in constructing credibility on peer-to-peer platforms (Tussyadiah & Park, 2018).

Cross-Cultural Expectations of Trust

A further dimension of trust negotiation involved cross-cultural expectations. International tourists often compared their experiences in Vietnam to those in Western contexts, noting differences in how trust was communicated. For example, one European tourist remarked, "In Europe, I don't always read reviews in detail, but in Vietnam I do, because I'm not familiar with local rules. Reviews are my only guide" (Thomas, tourist, 35). Conversely, Vietnamese hosts suggested that they approached trust relationally, valuing direct communication and responsiveness more than formal contracts. "For us, trust is about showing respect. If a guest communicates openly, I feel I can trust them, even before they arrive" (Lan, host, 45). These contrasting perspectives illustrate how cultural norms shape the interpretation of digital trust mechanisms.

Platform Trust Versus Interpersonal Trust

Participants also distinguished between trusting the platform and trusting individual providers. Tourists generally expressed high trust in platforms such as Airbnb and Grab, assuming that platform policies and safety assurances offered a protective framework. However, they differentiated this from interpersonal trust, which developed only after direct interaction. As one tourist put it, "I trust Airbnb as a system, but I only trusted my host after we met. She welcomed me with tea, and that made me feel safe" (Sarah, tourist, 30). For service providers, this distinction was also evident. A Grab driver explained, "I trust Grab to bring me customers, but I don't always trust the customers themselves. Sometimes they cancel or behave rudely" (Vu, driver, 38). These accounts highlight the layered nature of trust in platform tourism: institutional trust in the system, interpersonal trust between actors, and situational trust negotiated in practice.

The Fragility of Digital Trust

Despite the centrality of trust, participants frequently described its fragility. Both hosts and drivers noted that the dependence on ratings and reviews left them vulnerable to the whims of guests. A single unfavorable review could jeopardize income, regardless of whether it reflected actual service quality. As one host lamented, "Sometimes guests are unhappy for reasons beyond my control, like noisy neighbors. But I still pay the price in ratings" (Hanh, host, 39). Tourists, meanwhile, acknowledged the risk of misrepresentation, with several noting discrepancies between online profiles and real experiences. "The photos made the apartment look larger and cleaner. When I arrived, it was different, but I felt trapped because I had already paid" (David, tourist, 32). Such experiences underscore that digital trust is precarious and contingent, requiring constant maintenance by providers and cautious interpretation by guests.

Taken together, these findings show that trust in Vietnam's platform tourism is deeply mediated by digital systems yet remains contingent on interpersonal practices and cultural norms. Reviews and ratings act as the primary currency of credibility, but their algorithmic governance creates vulnerabilities for providers. Self-presentation and responsiveness are critical strategies for cultivating trust, while cultural differences shape how guests and hosts interpret trust signals. Ultimately, trust is both the enabler and the constraint of digital tourism,

facilitating interaction but also embedding actors in asymmetrical relationships with platforms and with one another.

Intimacy and Authenticity in Mediated Encounters

A second major theme that emerged from the interviews concerned how intimacy and authenticity were constructed, negotiated, and sometimes contested in encounters mediated by platforms such as Airbnb and Grab. Participants repeatedly described their interactions not only as transactional but also as relational, infused with efforts to create or experience a sense of closeness, belonging, or cultural immersion. However, these attempts were often complicated by the digital mediation of encounters, which shaped what could be shared, how it was represented, and how it was interpreted.

Hosts as Cultural Brokers

Airbnb hosts frequently positioned themselves as cultural ambassadors, framing their role as offering more than accommodation. Several described organizing informal experiences for guests, such as cooking demonstrations, walking tours, or shared family meals. One host explained, "I don't just rent my room. I also take guests to the local market and show them how we prepare Vietnamese dishes. They say this feels authentic, something they cannot find in hotels" (Hoa, host, 31). Such accounts reveal how intimacy and authenticity were deliberately cultivated as part of the hosting practice, aligning with the platform's marketing of "living like a local."

Tourists often appreciated these gestures, noting that they differentiated Airbnb from standardized hotels. As one visitor from Singapore shared, "My host in Hanoi invited me to join dinner with her family. It felt very personal, and I understood more about Vietnamese life" (Amanda, tourist, 29). These narratives demonstrate that digital platforms create spaces where hosts can act as cultural brokers, mediating tourists' access to local ways of life and enhancing perceptions of authenticity.

The Performance of Authenticity

Yet participants also acknowledged that authenticity was often curated or staged. Hosts selected which aspects of their lives to present online and offline, strategically highlighting cultural traditions while concealing less attractive realities. One host reflected, "Guests don't want to see the messy parts of our daily life. I show them what makes them feel comfortable and interested, like traditional food or stories about the old town" (Minh, host, 42). Tourists, too, expressed awareness of this performative dimension. A European tourist commented, "I know some of it is staged, but I still enjoy it. Even if it is a performance, it feels closer than staying in a hotel" (Anna, tourist, 34). These accounts echo scholarly debates that authenticity in tourism is not a fixed property but a negotiated and performed practice (MacCannell, 1973; Stors & Baltes, 2018).

Digital Mediation of Intimacy

Digital interfaces also shaped how intimacy was initiated and sustained. Hosts and guests emphasized the importance of pre-arrival communication via Airbnb's messaging system or Grab's chat function. Quick replies and warm language were seen as indicators of care and reliability. A tourist explained, "Before arriving, I messaged my host many times. Her responses were kind and fast, so I felt like I already knew her before meeting" (Yuki, tourist, 26). Hosts likewise described how digital communication allowed them to project friendliness and reduce anxiety before the physical encounter. However, participants also noted the limitations of such mediated intimacy. As one Grab driver observed, "The app makes it easy to connect, but we don't really talk much. It's fast, efficient, but not personal" (Quang, driver, 39). This suggests that while digital platforms enable new forms of mediated closeness, they also constrain spontaneity and depth.

The Paradox of Curated Intimacy

A recurring theme was the paradoxical nature of intimacy in platform encounters. On the one hand, tourists valued opportunities for personal connection and cultural immersion. On the other, they recognized that such intimacy was curated within the logic of platform exchanges. One host summarized this paradox: "I want to be friendly, but I also have to think like a businessperson. I share enough to make guests happy, but I keep some distance because it is still work" (Thao, host, 36). Similarly, a tourist remarked, "It feels authentic in the moment,

but I know it is partly a service. The intimacy has boundaries" (Michael, tourist, 33). These reflections illustrate how intimacy in platform tourism is both genuine and instrumental, shaped by overlapping expectations of hospitality, commerce, and cultural representation.

Negotiating Boundaries

Finally, participants described how boundaries were negotiated to balance closeness and privacy. Hosts emphasized the need to remain hospitable while protecting personal space, while guests sometimes felt uncertain about the appropriate level of engagement. One domestic tourist explained, "I wanted to talk more with my host, but I worried about disturbing her family. It is not always clear where the boundary is" (Trang, tourist, 25). Grab drivers highlighted similar tensions, noting that brief rides rarely allowed for meaningful connection, though some tourists attempted to initiate conversations. These narratives reveal that intimacy in platform tourism is a negotiated process, mediated by cultural norms, individual preferences, and platform structures.

Overall, the findings show that intimacy and authenticity in Vietnam's platform tourism are actively constructed through hosts' cultural brokerage, curated performances, and digitally mediated interactions. While guests often valued these encounters as more personal and authentic than traditional hospitality, both hosts and tourists acknowledged the performative and bounded nature of such intimacy. The paradox lies in the simultaneous desire for closeness and the recognition of its staged quality. Digital platforms enable new opportunities for cultural connection but also constrain spontaneity, embedding intimacy within the structures of commodified exchange.

Experiences of Risk and Vulnerability

While trust and intimacy were central to participants' narratives, discussions also revealed persistent concerns about risk and vulnerability in digitally mediated tourism. Both service providers and tourists acknowledged that while platforms such as Airbnb and Grab create opportunities for connection and mobility, they also expose individuals to new forms of insecurity. These vulnerabilities were economic, social, and physical in nature, shaped by the interplay between platform rules, urban environments, and cultural expectations.

Safety Concerns in Platform Encounters

For many tourists, especially women, physical safety was a recurring concern. Several described strategies to minimize perceived risks when booking accommodation or rides. One international tourist explained, "When I used Grab at night in Ho Chi Minh City, I always shared my live location with friends. I trusted the app, but as a woman traveling alone, I still felt unsafe" (Sophia, tourist, 28). Airbnb guests similarly highlighted the uncertainty of staying in a stranger's home, particularly when hosts were absent. "I worried about who else might have keys to the apartment. The platform doesn't tell you that" (David, tourist, 32). These narratives illustrate that while platforms provide digital assurances of safety, they cannot eliminate the embodied vulnerabilities of travel in unfamiliar settings.

Economic Precarity of Service Providers

Service providers, particularly Grab drivers, expressed concerns about economic vulnerability. They emphasized the instability of income caused by algorithmic pricing and frequent platform policy changes. One driver explained, "Last year Grab reduced our bonuses. Suddenly my income dropped by 30 percent. We have no power to negotiate" (Nam, driver, 40). Airbnb hosts also described economic precarity tied to fluctuations in demand and dependence on reviews. "If I get one bad review, bookings stop for weeks. My income disappears overnight" (Huong, host, 37). These accounts reveal that platform dependency creates structural vulnerabilities, as providers remain subject to unilateral decisions made by global corporations.

Social and Emotional Risks

Beyond economic and physical risks, participants described social and emotional vulnerabilities. Hosts noted that negative guest behavior could create stress and conflict. For example, one host shared, "A guest complained about noise from my neighbors and left a bad review. I felt ashamed even though it wasn't my fault" (Minh, host,

42). Drivers expressed similar frustrations when tourists canceled trips at the last minute, wasting time and fuel. Such experiences not only impacted income but also undermined participants' sense of dignity and fairness. Tourists, on the other hand, sometimes felt emotionally vulnerable when hosts were unwelcoming or overly transactional. "I expected warmth, but my host barely spoke to me. It made me feel like I was just money to them" (Linh, tourist, 26). These examples highlight the relational risks of platform tourism, where expectations of hospitality and fairness are not always met.

Platform Power and Asymmetry

A common thread across participants' accounts was the perception of asymmetrical power relations between individuals and platforms. Providers in particular felt vulnerable to the opaque algorithms that governed their visibility and income. A Grab driver remarked, "I don't understand how the app decides which rides I get. Sometimes I wait hours without requests. It feels like the system controls me" (Quoc, driver, 45). Airbnb hosts echoed this sentiment, noting that their dependence on the platform left them with little bargaining power. "If Airbnb blocks my account, I lose everything. I cannot argue with them. They are too big" (Trang, host, 29). These narratives suggest that platform dependence is not only economic but also structural, embedding service providers in relationships of vulnerability to global corporate systems.

Coping Strategies and Risk Negotiation

Despite these vulnerabilities, participants developed coping strategies to navigate risks. Tourists emphasized practices such as relying on verified reviews, avoiding new listings, and using safety features such as live ride tracking. Hosts described investing in improved security measures, such as installing cameras at property entrances or personally welcoming guests to establish rapport. Grab drivers employed strategies such as avoiding late-night rides in unsafe areas. These practices reflect the active negotiation of risk in daily tourism encounters, highlighting the resilience and adaptability of both providers and users.

Overall, the findings reveal that risk and vulnerability are integral to the experience of platform tourism in Vietnam. For tourists, concerns centered on physical safety and the reliability of hosts and drivers. For providers, vulnerabilities were primarily economic and structural, rooted in their dependency on platforms and exposure to the volatility of algorithmic systems. Emotional risks further complicated these dynamics, as participants navigated disappointment, unfair treatment, and relational tensions. While platforms offer tools to mitigate uncertainty, they also create new asymmetries of power and responsibility. The result is an ecosystem where risk is not eliminated but redistributed, with individuals both tourists and providers carrying the weight of vulnerability in their daily engagements.

Urban Space and Platform Placemaking

The analysis also revealed how digital platforms such as Airbnb and Grab are reshaping the experience, representation, and use of urban space in Vietnam. Rather than being neutral intermediaries, platforms actively participate in what scholars term "platform placemaking," where digital infrastructures and algorithms influence how neighborhoods are consumed, valued, and imagined (Rumpel & Haase, 2022). Participants' accounts illustrated that Airbnb listings and Grab mobility patterns were not only practical tools for accommodation and transport but also mechanisms that directed tourist flows, redefined neighborhood identities, and sometimes generated frictions with residents.

Airbnb and the Transformation of Neighborhood Identity

Airbnb hosts frequently highlighted how the platform amplified visibility for certain districts, particularly Hanoi's Old Quarter and Ho Chi Minh City's central neighborhoods. One host explained, "Before Airbnb, tourists rarely came to my street. Now almost every house here has a listing. It changes the feeling of the neighborhood" (Lan, host, 40). Tourists similarly reported that platform searches guided them toward areas framed as "authentic" or "historic." A European tourist commented, "Airbnb recommended the Old Quarter. All the listings said it was traditional, with old houses and food markets. I stayed there because the app made it look like the real Hanoi" (Anna, tourist, 34). These accounts demonstrate how platform representations, through curated photographs and algorithmic rankings, shape tourist perceptions of authenticity and concentrate demand in specific areas.

However, residents expressed ambivalence about these changes. While some welcomed the influx of tourism income, others felt that the neighborhood was becoming commodified. As one host noted, "It brings business, but also noise and higher rents. My neighbors complain that the area is no longer for locals, it is for tourists" (Hien, host, 46). This aligns with international research on "Airbnbification," where platform tourism reconfigures housing markets and neighborhood identities, often displacing residents or altering local cultural rhythms (Dolnicar, 2020; Guttentag, 2019).

Grab and Urban Mobility Patterns

Grab, as a ride-hailing platform, also played a significant role in reshaping urban mobility. Tourists described using Grab not only for convenience but also as a way of accessing areas they might otherwise have avoided. "With Grab, I felt safe exploring farther away from the center. I would never have taken a motorbike taxi by myself, but the app made it simple and reliable" (Mark, tourist, 31). For drivers, the platform influenced where and when they operated, with algorithms directing them toward high-demand zones. "The app tells me where to go. Sometimes I go to districts I never used to drive in. Now I know more parts of the city" (Quoc, driver, 45). These narratives illustrate how Grab alters both tourists' and locals' spatial practices, effectively redrawing maps of accessibility and mobility.

Nevertheless, this algorithmic shaping of movement also raised concerns. Drivers reported that platform incentives sometimes pushed them toward overcrowded areas, causing congestion. Residents noted that the increased presence of tourists in residential zones, facilitated by Grab, occasionally led to cultural misunderstandings. A local shopkeeper in Hanoi remarked, "Now tourists appear in small alleys because they follow the app. Sometimes they disturb local routines without knowing" (informal observation, field notes). This underscores how digital mediation can disrupt established spatial and cultural rhythms, creating frictions between everyday life and tourism flows.

Digital Maps and Tourist Imagination

Another dimension of placemaking was the role of digital maps embedded in platforms. Tourists often navigated cities almost exclusively through these maps, which highlighted particular restaurants, cafes, and attractions. One participant explained, "I didn't use a guidebook. I just followed Grab and Airbnb recommendations. The map showed me what to see" (Sophia, tourist, 28). While this provided efficiency, it also narrowed exploration, creating what some described as a "digital bubble." A domestic tourist reflected, "I realized I was only going to places with good reviews on the app. Maybe I missed other interesting spots that locals enjoy" (Trang, tourist, 25). These accounts suggest that platforms not only facilitate movement but also actively frame urban imagination, guiding how visitors interpret and prioritize spaces.

Cultural Tensions and Urban Change

The intersection of platforms and urban space also generated cultural tensions. Hosts and residents in popular neighborhoods expressed concerns about shifts in community dynamics, including noise, waste, and a decline in neighborly relations. "My family lived here for generations. Now most houses are for short-term rentals. I don't know my neighbors anymore" (Bao, resident host, 52). Grab drivers similarly observed that increased reliance on digital navigation eroded opportunities for casual conversation and traditional forms of guidance. "Before, passengers asked me about the city, and I could share stories. Now they just look at their phone map. The human contact is less" (Hung, driver, 41). These reflections highlight how platform tourism can alter not only spatial practices but also social interactions embedded in urban life.

In sum, participants' experiences underscore that platforms such as Airbnb and Grab actively shape urban tourism landscapes in Vietnam. Airbnb listings contribute to the rebranding and commodification of neighborhoods, concentrating tourism flows while altering local cultural dynamics. Grab reorganizes mobility patterns, expanding tourist access but also reinforcing algorithmic control over space. Together, these platforms influence not only where tourists go but also how they imagine and interact with cities. The result is a form of digital placemaking that blurs boundaries between local and tourist spaces, creating both opportunities for cultural exchange and tensions around urban change.

Regulation, Informality, and Power Relations

The final theme concerns the regulatory environment of platform tourism in Vietnam and the power relations embedded in its informal practices. While Airbnb and Grab have expanded rapidly in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, participants described a landscape marked by uncertainty, weak regulation, and asymmetrical dependence on global platforms. Regulation was viewed as both absent and intrusive, with providers caught between informal practices that offered flexibility and the looming possibility of stricter state intervention.

Awareness of Regulatory Ambiguity

Airbnb hosts demonstrated varying levels of awareness regarding taxation and zoning regulations. Some admitted they did not fully understand the legal requirements. One explained, "I know there are rules about registering with local authorities, but most small hosts don't do it. It's complicated, and the government does not check often" (Huong, host, 37). Others acknowledged paying informal fees or relying on neighborhood networks to avoid scrutiny. "Sometimes local officials ask questions, but as long as we cooperate informally, it is fine" (Minh, host, 42). These accounts suggest that informality is not merely a choice but a survival strategy in navigating regulatory ambiguity.

Grab drivers described similar dynamics. While Grab is officially licensed, drivers noted that enforcement of rules such as helmet regulations or vehicle permits was inconsistent. A driver explained, "Sometimes police stop me, sometimes they don't. The rules change quickly, and we never know what applies" (Tuan, driver, 39). This unpredictability created anxiety and reinforced a sense of vulnerability. At the same time, drivers emphasized that flexibility and informality allowed them to operate without the bureaucratic burdens associated with formal taxi companies.

Informality as Opportunity and Risk

Participants expressed ambivalence toward informality. On one hand, informality enabled participation by lowering entry barriers. Airbnb hosts valued that they could begin hosting without extensive licensing, while Grab drivers appreciated that joining the platform required minimal documentation. As one driver remarked, "I don't have the resources to start a taxi company. Grab lets me work easily with just my motorbike" (Hung, driver, 41). Similarly, a host commented, "Airbnb gave me income during the pandemic. If I had to follow strict hotel rules, I could not do it" (Trang, host, 29).

On the other hand, informality created risks. Providers feared sudden crackdowns or penalties from local authorities. A host noted, "We never know when the government will decide to regulate more strictly. If they close my listing, I lose everything" (Lan, host, 45). Grab drivers echoed these concerns, highlighting their lack of labor protections. "We don't have insurance or benefits. If I have an accident, I am on my own" (Quoc, driver, 44). These narratives reflect the precarious balance between opportunity and risk that characterizes informal participation in platform economies.

Power Asymmetries with Platforms

Another prominent concern was the asymmetry of power between local providers and global platforms. Hosts and drivers consistently described their dependence on Airbnb and Grab as disempowering, since they had little influence over platform policies. One host lamented, "Airbnb decides the fees, the rules, and we must accept. We are small people compared to the company" (Bao, host, 52). Drivers described similar frustrations with Grab's algorithmic management, noting that incentives and commission rates could change without consultation. "We just follow the app. If they reduce our share, we cannot fight. We have no voice" (Nam, driver, 40). These accounts highlight the structural vulnerabilities created by platform dependency, where local actors bear risks without meaningful bargaining power.

State–Platform–Provider Tensions

The findings also reveal tensions between state authority, platforms, and providers. Some participants viewed the state as a potential protector of local interests. A tourist reflected, "I think the government should regulate more, so housing is not only for tourists" (Thomas, tourist, 35). However, hosts and drivers often feared that increased state intervention would disproportionately affect small operators rather than platforms. "If new rules

come, it will be us who suffer, not Airbnb or Grab. They can adapt, but we may lose our jobs" (Hien, host, 46). This tension reflects the unequal distribution of power: global platforms negotiate with governments, while local providers remain marginal.

Taken together, these findings highlight that platform tourism in Vietnam is embedded in a regulatory environment characterized by ambiguity, informality, and asymmetrical power relations. Informality offers flexibility and opportunity but also exposes providers to sudden enforcement and lack of protections. Trust in platforms is accompanied by frustration at providers' lack of bargaining power, while regulatory uncertainty reinforces vulnerability. The interplay of state, platform, and local actors creates a precarious ecosystem in which providers must constantly balance opportunity and risk. Ultimately, regulation and power relations are central to understanding the lived realities of platform tourism, shaping not only economic outcomes but also cultural and social dynamics of urban tourism in Vietnam.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to explore how digital platforms such as Airbnb and Grab reshape host–guest relationships and tourism encounters in Vietnam's urban contexts. By adopting a phenomenological approach, it examined how trust, intimacy, risk, spatial practices, and regulation are experienced by Airbnb hosts, Grab drivers, and tourists in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. The findings reveal that platform tourism is not only an economic phenomenon but also a cultural, spatial, and relational process, shaped by both global digital infrastructures and local socio-cultural contexts.

The analysis underscores the central role of trust in digitally mediated tourism, echoing existing research on the sharing economy (Möhlmann & Geissinger, 2018; Stripp, 2021). Like studies in Western contexts, Vietnamese participants highlighted the importance of reviews and ratings in fostering trust. However, this study contributes by showing how these mechanisms intersect with cultural norms of relational trust in Vietnam, where responsiveness, respect, and direct communication remain critical indicators of reliability. The findings also extend discussions of trust by highlighting its fragility in contexts of algorithmic governance. Hosts and drivers described their reputations as vulnerable to unpredictable reviews, while tourists reported anxiety about misrepresentation and safety. In this sense, trust and risk are mutually reinforcing: digital systems enable initial trust but simultaneously produce new vulnerabilities. This aligns with Zloteanu et al. (2018), who note that digital trust is contingent and situational rather than absolute.

The study also contributes to debates on authenticity in tourism (MacCannell, 1973; Stors & Baltes, 2018). Hosts acted as cultural brokers, curating aspects of everyday life to meet guests' expectations of authenticity. Tourists valued these encounters as more personal than hotels, but both parties recognized their staged quality. This finding supports Farmaki and Stergiou's (2019) notion of "curated intimacy," where closeness is simultaneously genuine and commodified. In the Vietnamese context, intimacy was often enacted through food, family interactions, and storytelling, reflecting local cultural values. Yet this intimacy was bounded by professionalism, with hosts balancing warmth against the need to maintain ratings and privacy. The paradox of intimacy in platform tourism being both desired and constrained highlights the commodification of cultural practices and the tensions of hospitality in digitally mediated contexts.

The findings extend scholarship on "Airbnbification" and digital placemaking (Rumpel & Haase, 2022) by showing how platforms reshape urban space in Vietnam. Airbnb listings concentrated tourist flows in Hanoi's Old Quarter and central Ho Chi Minh City, amplifying representations of authenticity and contributing to neighborhood rebranding. Grab altered mobility patterns by expanding access to peripheral areas while reinforcing algorithmic control over movement. These insights demonstrate that platforms are not neutral intermediaries but spatial actors that actively produce new urban geographies. This echoes Dolnicar's (2020) claim that platforms alter not only market dynamics but also cultural and spatial rhythms. In Vietnam, these transformations carry particular resonance, as they intersect with rapid urbanization, heritage preservation, and community life.

The theme of regulation highlights the structural conditions underpinning platform tourism. Similar to findings elsewhere in Southeast Asia (UNWTO, 2022), informality emerged as both opportunity and risk. Providers valued the flexibility of entering the market without heavy regulation but feared sudden enforcement or account suspensions. This reflects the "double-edged" nature of informality: enabling access while exposing

participants to precarity. Moreover, the findings reveal asymmetrical power relations between local actors and global platforms. Hosts and drivers described their dependence on Airbnb and Grab as disempowering, echoing Anwar and Graham's (2021) critique of algorithmic exploitation in the gig economy. While the state was viewed ambivalently simultaneously as a potential protector and threat—the ultimate imbalance lay in the limited bargaining power of individuals against platforms that set terms unilaterally.

A key contribution of this study is the cultural lens it brings to platform tourism. Much existing literature has focused on Western contexts, with limited attention to how digital trust and authenticity are interpreted in Asian cultural settings. In Vietnam, hospitality is embedded in norms of respect, relational trust, and family-oriented interactions. These cultural expectations shaped how hosts curated authenticity and how guests evaluated intimacy. For example, tourists interpreted family meals as signs of authenticity, while hosts saw them as extensions of traditional hospitality. These culturally embedded practices illustrate that platform tourism cannot be understood solely through universal models of the sharing economy. Instead, it requires attention to local cultural scripts that intersect with global digital infrastructures.

This study makes three main theoretical contributions. First, it extends debates on trust in the sharing economy by demonstrating how digital trust mechanisms intersect with local cultural norms. Trust is not merely algorithmically produced but also relationally interpreted. Second, it contributes to discussions on authenticity by showing how intimacy in platform tourism is simultaneously genuine and commodified, with hosts strategically curating cultural practices to balance guest expectations and platform pressures. Third, it advances the concept of digital placemaking by illustrating how platforms actively shape urban tourism geographies, not just through economic flows but through algorithmic visibility and representation.

The findings also hold practical implications. For hosts and drivers, the study highlights the importance of balancing digital self-presentation with cultural authenticity while safeguarding personal boundaries. For policymakers, the research underscores the need for regulatory frameworks that recognize the contributions of small providers while mitigating risks of precarity and neighborhood disruption. Rather than heavy-handed bans or laissez-faire approaches, balanced regulation should protect local communities, ensure fair taxation, and provide social protections for platform workers. For platforms themselves, greater transparency in algorithmic governance and stronger support mechanisms for providers are necessary to reduce vulnerabilities.

This study is not without limitations. First, its sample size of 30 participants, while sufficient for phenomenological depth (Creswell & Poth, 2018), limits generalizability. Second, the focus on Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City excludes other Vietnamese contexts, such as smaller cities or rural areas, where platform tourism may play different roles. Third, the study relied primarily on interviews; incorporating ethnographic observation of platform encounters could yield richer insights. Future research could extend this work by comparing platform tourism across different Southeast Asian countries, examining longitudinal changes in platform regulation, or exploring how digital platforms intersect with sustainability and community resilience in tourism.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how digital platforms, specifically Airbnb and Grab, are reshaping tourism encounters in Vietnam's urban contexts. Drawing on phenomenological interviews with hosts, drivers, and tourists in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, the findings revealed that platform tourism is characterized by both opportunity and precarity. Trust emerged as indispensable but fragile, sustained by reviews, ratings, and responsiveness while constantly threatened by algorithmic governance and cultural misunderstandings. Intimacy and authenticity were highly valued yet often curated, reflecting the commodification of everyday life under platform logics. Risk and vulnerability permeated participants' experiences, from tourists' safety concerns to providers' economic insecurity. Platforms also functioned as spatial actors, concentrating tourism flows, rebranding neighborhoods, and altering urban mobility patterns through algorithmic placemaking. Finally, regulation and informality shaped participation, with flexibility enabling entry but exposing individuals to unpredictability and power asymmetries vis-à-vis global corporations.

The study contributes theoretically by linking platform tourism to local cultural norms of trust and hospitality, while also extending debates on authenticity and digital placemaking. Practically, it underscores the need for transparent platform governance and balanced state regulation that protect small providers and communities

without undermining innovation. Ultimately, platform tourism in Vietnam reflects both global digital transformations and locally specific cultural negotiations.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest that could have influenced the conduct or reporting of this study.

Data Availability

The data is available upon reasonable request.

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