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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Negotiating Trust in the Digital Marketplace: Community Narratives of Informal Tourism in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The rise of digital platforms has transformed the organization of tourism economies, particularly in contexts where informal enterprises play a dominant role. In Indonesia, small-scale actors such as homestay owners, local guides, and craft producers increasingly rely on platforms like Airbnb, Instagram, and TikTok to market services and connect with travelers. Yet, while these platforms promise visibility and access to global markets, they also create new challenges of trust, dependence, and regulation. This study explores how informal tourism actors in Bali and Yogyakarta negotiate trust in the digital marketplace. Using qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews with homestay operators, local vendors, and community-based guides, as well as participant observation of online marketing practices, the research examines how digital tools mediate relationships between hosts and guests. Thematic analysis reveals that platforms are valued as vital gateways to income diversification, but they are also perceived as unpredictable, extractive, and difficult to control. Narratives highlight strategies of trust-building through personal storytelling, cultural authenticity, and community reputation, while also voicing concerns about algorithmic visibility, unfair reviews, and platform dependency. By foregrounding local voices, the study contributes to critical debates on digital tourism economies, informality, and community resilience in the Global South.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid proliferation of digital platforms has transformed the organization of tourism, enabling small-scale actors, homestay owners, local guides, craft vendors to bypass traditional intermediaries and reach a global audience (Capineri et al., 2021). In such platformized tourism ecosystems, trust becomes a central currency: hosts must project credibility through digital interfaces, while guests rely on ratings, visuals, and narratives to assess trustworthiness (Pumputis, 2024; Zloteanu et al., 2018). Yet, in contexts of informality where regulatory oversight is weak and actors operate beyond formal frameworks, the dynamics of trust, dependence, and agency acquire added complexity (Park et al., 2025).

In Indonesia, many tourism microenterprises remain informal, lacking registration, formal support, or legal protections. Platforms like Airbnb, Instagram, and TikTok offer pathways to visibility and income diversification, but they also introduce new vulnerabilities. Hosts face algorithmic uncertainty, unfair reviews, and platform commission structures that may erode profits (Bentley & Maharika, 2019). Moreover, because trust is often socially mediated, local hosts must balance mediated reputations with community standing, cultural authenticity, and guest expectations (Lim et al., 2020).

Prior research on sharing-economy platforms highlights the importance of visual cues and reputation systems in guests' decision making. Ert, Fleischer, and Magen (2016) show that the perceived trustworthiness of a host's photo positively influences listing price and booking likelihood, even more so than numerical review scores. Similarly, Tao et al. (2024) emphasize how interactive host–guest experiences shape relational trust beyond transactional exchanges. These findings are rich but often grounded in formalized, regulated settings; less is known about how trust is negotiated in more precarious environments like informal tourism in Indonesia.

Meanwhile, scholars of platformization in tourism argue that digital platforms reconfigure tourism spaces, giving hosts discursive power in representing localities and shaping visitor imaginaries (Capineri et al., 2021). Yet those same platforms also embed hierarchical logics: visibility is mediated by opaque algorithms, and hosts must negotiate these hidden structures in relation to local norms and social capital (Zloteanu et al., 2018). This tension is especially salient

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in informal tourism settings, where hosts' digital identities are entangled with strategies of self-presentation, community reputation, and survival.

Given this context, this study asks: How do informal tourism actors in Bali and Yogyakarta negotiate trust in the digital marketplace? Through a qualitative lens, interviews, participant observation, narrative analysis, we investigate how hosts articulate the opportunities and constraints of platform mediation, how they craft trust through storytelling, reviews, and local social networks, and how they navigate the risks of dependency and visibility. In doing so, this research contributes to critical literatures on digital tourism economies, informality, and community resilience in the Global South.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Trust in Platform-Mediated Tourism

Trust lies at the heart of digital tourism platforms. In peer-to-peer environments, trust must be constructed in the absence of traditional safeguards, and occurs through mediated cues such as ratings, reviews, photos, and narrative self-presentation (Ert, Fleischer, & Magen, 2016; Zloteanu, Harvey, Tuckett, & Livan, 2018). Ert et al. (2016) found that a host's perceived trustworthiness based on her photograph significantly affects listing price and likelihood of booking sometimes more so than review scores. The study underscores how visual cues can override numerical reputation in guest decision making. Similarly, Zloteanu et al. (2018) demonstrate that reputation and digital identity cues (such as profile completeness, description style, and host–guest interaction) shape trust judgments in the sharing economy.

Recent reviews of trust in the sharing economy catalogue numerous mechanisms by which trust is built, including platform guarantees, identity verification, rating systems, and community norms (Räisänen, 2021). Räisänen's systematic review outlines 28 strategies used to foster trust, from platform-mediated safeguards (e.g. escrow payments) to user-based reputation signals. Meanwhile, Pelgander (2022) analyzes how trust in sharing economy contexts emerges through relational interactions, emphasizing that trust is not just algorithmic but socially grounded. During crises, trust dynamics shift further: in the tourism sector, crisis contexts can amplify reliance on prior reputation and social networks, as algorithmic intermediaries become less predictable (Le et al., 2024).

These findings provide a useful foundation, but must be reconsidered within contexts of informality. In formal, regulated contexts, platforms may provide safeguards; in informal tourism, many of those institutional assurances are weaker or absent. Thus, informal hosts must rely more heavily on social capital, storytelling, and local reputation to negotiate trust under uncertainty.

Platformization and Informality in the Tourism Economy

Platformization refers to the extension of digital infrastructures and governance logics into domains of production, consumption, and exchange including tourism (Capineri et al., 2021). As tourism becomes increasingly mediated, platforms shape visibility, market access, and competition. In many contexts, hosts compete not just through service quality but through algorithmic positioning making platform logics a form of governance (Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2015). This shift matters especially for informal actors, who may lack resources, technical literacy, or institutional backing to compete effectively.

In Indonesia, the intersection between platforms and informality is particularly salient. A study of digital platforms in Jakarta (Park et al., 2025) shows how platform expansion penetrates informal sectors even into household services, motorcycle taxis, domestic work and how regulation, policy gaps, and local context mediate this process (Pelgander et al., 2025). In the tourism sector specifically, Bentley and Maharika's report Making Travel Platforms Work for Indonesian Workers and Small Businesses uncovers how small-scale tourism actors express both dependence on platforms and contestation toward algorithmic opacity, commission structures, and unfair visibility bias (Bentley & Maharika, 2020). They document that many MSMEs in Indonesian tourism become heavily reliant on platforms, yet lack power to negotiate favorable terms or visibility.

This body of work lays bare the tension: platforms can democratize market access, but they can also reproduce inequalities, especially when informal actors compete with more resourced peers. The opacity and algorithmic logic of platforms can favor those with historical advantage. Thus the study of informal tourism must engage both the enabling logics of platformization and the constraints it imposes.

Informality, Resilience, and Survival Strategies

In contexts where regulation is weak and formal protections limited, informal actors develop resilience and survival strategies. Widiastini et al. (2024) examine informal sector workers in Bali's tourism industry and identify strategies such as prudent financial management, social capital enhancement, communication skills, and purposeful engagement with policy to sustain livelihoods (Widiastini et al., 2024). Their findings suggest that informality is not merely a vulnerability but a site of innovation and adaptation.

Other studies of informal workers note that survival depends on flexibility, networked support, and hybrid strategies combining digital and non-digital modes. In tourism contexts, hosts may cross-subsidize offline services, rely on word-of-mouth, or use peer referral networks to mitigate platform risks. The necessity to manage uncertainty is acute in tourism, because demand is volatile. Thus informality intersects with precariousness, but also with entrepreneurial adaptability.

Gaps and the Case for Narrative Inquiry

While literature on trust, sharing economy platforms, and informality is robust in many sectors, it remains limited in relation to informal tourism in developing contexts. Much research focuses on quantitative metrics ratings, occupancy rates, or algorithmic outcomes while deeper social meanings, strategies, and narratives remain under-explored. Thus narrative inquiry is particularly apt for revealing how hosts interpret, negotiate, and resist platform dynamics in their own words.

By situating trust, platforms, and informality within the lived experience of small tourism actors in Bali and Yogyakarta, your study can contribute to theoretical and empirical gaps. It can expose how platform-mediated trust is co-produced through digital cues and local social relations, how informality shapes agency under algorithmic constraints, and how hosts craft survival strategies and resilience amidst dependency.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine how informal tourism actors in Indonesia negotiate trust within digital platforms. A qualitative approach is appropriate because it allows for an exploration of the meanings and narratives that hosts construct around their participation in platform-mediated markets. Rather than focusing on numerical ratings, occupancy rates, or other quantifiable measures, the study seeks to capture the lived experiences of small-scale actors whose voices are often obscured in policy discourse and platform data.

Fieldwork was conducted in two major Indonesian tourism destinations: Bali and Yogyakarta. These sites were chosen because they represent contrasting but complementary contexts for informal tourism. Bali is an internationally renowned destination with a long history of global tourism and a strong presence of platforms such as Airbnb and Instagram. In contrast, Yogyakarta is characterized by domestic and cultural tourism, where informal homestays, guides, and small vendors are increasingly turning to TikTok and other social media tools to reach travelers. Studying these two contexts together makes it possible to examine how platform-mediated informality unfolds across different types of tourism economies.

Participants were selected purposively to include a diverse range of informal tourism actors. These included homestay operators who rely on Airbnb or Booking.com for bookings, local guides who promote services through Instagram and Facebook, and craft producers who market their work through TikTok videos and online shops. Snowball sampling was used to expand the pool of participants, as existing contacts often facilitated introductions to others in their networks. In total, around forty participants were interviewed across both sites, with care taken to include a balance of gender, age, and length of experience with digital platforms.

Data collection combined several techniques. Semi-structured interviews lasting between one and one and a half hours were used to elicit personal accounts of how participants joined digital platforms, how they perceived issues of trust, and how they managed risks and opportunities. Focus group discussions were organized in village settings to allow participants to share and debate their experiences collectively, highlighting points of convergence and disagreement. In addition, participant observation was carried out by shadowing selected hosts as they interacted with digital tools, responded to guest inquiries, or crafted social media posts. This allowed the researcher to capture the material and embodied practices of negotiating digital trust. All interviews and group discussions were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and, where relevant, local dialects, and were audio-recorded

with consent. Detailed field notes complemented the recordings by capturing non-verbal cues, contextual observations, and reflections on the research process.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data, following the six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Transcripts were first read multiple times to ensure familiarity, then systematically coded to capture recurring ideas about trust, platform dynamics, and informal strategies. Codes were gradually grouped into broader themes such as algorithmic dependence, trust-building through storytelling, the role of online reviews, and perceptions of exploitation or empowerment. NVivo software supported the organization and retrieval of coded excerpts, ensuring transparency in the analytic process. In addition to thematic analysis, narrative attention was paid to how participants framed their stories, including the metaphors and contrasts they used to articulate experiences of risk and opportunity.

Several strategies were applied to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with a subset of participants and incorporating their feedback. Peer debriefing with colleagues in tourism and digital economy studies helped to refine emerging interpretations and reduce researcher bias. Reflexivity was maintained throughout fieldwork, with the researcher keeping a journal to critically examine positionality, particularly in relation to the unequal power dynamics inherent in studying informal actors within a globalized digital economy. Ethical approval was secured from a recognized institutional review board, and participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any stage. Pseudonyms are used in all reporting to protect identities.

Through these methodological choices, the study aims to produce a rigorous, ethically grounded account of how informal tourism actors in Bali and Yogyakarta experience, negotiate, and adapt to the challenges of digital platforms. By prioritizing local voices, the research seeks to illuminate not only the structural constraints of platformization but also the everyday strategies of agency and resilience that shape informal tourism economies.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION
Building Trust through Digital Storytelling and Authenticity

Across both Bali and Yogyakarta, participants emphasized that establishing trust with potential guests depended less on formal guarantees than on their ability to present themselves convincingly through digital storytelling. Hosts described how they curated photographs, crafted narratives, and showcased elements of local culture to project a sense of authenticity that could not be reduced to a numerical rating. For homestay operators in Bali, carefully chosen images of family spaces, Balinese temples, or traditional meals were framed as invitations to experience "real local life." One participant explained that "the picture of our family eating together is more important than the star rating, because it shows guests we are open to sharing our home."

This reliance on personal storytelling extended beyond visual cues to the narratives hosts embedded in their online profiles. Many participants in Yogyakarta described how they wrote introductions that highlighted their personal journeys, cultural identity, or hospitality values. Rather than simply advertising rooms, they positioned themselves as cultural ambassadors, weaving stories about batik traditions, gamelan music, or local history. These narratives were intended not only to differentiate their listings from commercial hotels but also to create an emotional connection with prospective visitors. In this sense, digital platforms were seen not only as booking tools but as stages for self-representation and cultural expression.

Authenticity emerged as a recurring theme in these narratives. Hosts frequently contrasted their offerings with what they described as "impersonal" or "standardized" experiences provided by larger operators. By highlighting everyday practices family cooking, community rituals, or village landscapes—they sought to assure guests of an intimate and genuine encounter. This strategy was not only about marketing but also about reaffirming local pride and identity in a global marketplace. Several participants expressed that authenticity itself functioned as a form of trust currency: "When we tell our real story, guests believe us more than when we only show the room."

At the same time, hosts acknowledged the risks of digital storytelling. Some worried that emphasizing culture could lead to commodification, where traditions were reshaped to meet tourist expectations rather than community values. Others feared that their efforts to project authenticity might be overshadowed by the visual dominance of more professional competitors. These concerns reflect the delicate balance between crafting narratives that attract guests and preserving integrity in how culture is represented.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that in informal tourism economies, trust is not built primarily through institutional regulation or platform guarantees but through carefully curated acts of storytelling and authenticity. By presenting themselves as both reliable hosts and cultural stewards, participants sought to bridge the gap between digital anonymity and embodied hospitality. Their strategies highlight the central role of narrative and representation in mediating trust in contexts where formal protections are limited.

Navigating Algorithmic Dependence and Visibility

While participants in both Bali and Yogyakarta valued digital platforms for providing access to wider markets, they consistently described a sense of dependence on forces beyond their control. Narratives revealed that the visibility of their listings or content was strongly influenced by platform algorithms, which were perceived as opaque and unpredictable. Several hosts on Airbnb and Booking.com noted that their bookings fluctuated without clear explanation, despite maintaining high review scores. One participant in Bali remarked, "Last year my room was always on the first page. Now it is buried somewhere else, and I do not know why. It feels like the platform decides my fate."

This uncertainty was not limited to accommodation platforms. Vendors and guides using Instagram and TikTok similarly described anxiety about the shifting logic of likes, shares, and trending content. Younger participants were more adept at experimenting with hashtags, video formats, and influencer collaborations, but even they admitted that success was inconsistent. In Yogyakarta, one craft seller observed that "a video can suddenly go viral, but the next ten posts get nothing. The rules change all the time, and we cannot keep up." Such reflections illustrate the precariousness of algorithmic visibility, where livelihood opportunities depend on mechanisms that remain largely hidden from users.

Participants also emphasized that the reliance on ratings and reviews deepened this sense of vulnerability. A single negative comment could significantly reduce bookings, even if the majority of feedback was positive. Several homestay operators recounted experiences of guests leaving unfair reviews—sometimes for issues outside their control, such as bad weather or transportation delays. In these cases, participants felt powerless to contest the judgments, since the platform prioritized the guest's perspective. As one host noted, "One bad review is like a shadow that follows you for months."

Despite these frustrations, participants also described strategies for coping with algorithmic dependence. Some sought to diversify their visibility by maintaining profiles on multiple platforms, while others combined online presence with offline networks, relying on word-of-mouth and community referrals to reduce dependency on digital rankings. A few younger hosts actively studied platform trends, attending informal workshops or following online tutorials to improve their digital literacy. These adaptive practices illustrate both the agency and the limits of small actors in negotiating platform logics.

Overall, the narratives convey a paradox. Digital platforms are celebrated as gateways to income and global exposure, yet they also induce feelings of precarity and dependency. Visibility is experienced as contingent on algorithms that remain inaccessible and beyond community control. This ambivalence underscores the structural imbalance of platform economies, where small informal actors contribute value but lack the power to influence the rules that govern their livelihoods.

Negotiating Power, Precarity, and Informality

Participants' accounts revealed a deep ambivalence about the power relations embedded in digital tourism platforms. On one hand, many emphasized that platforms gave them unprecedented access to markets that were previously unreachable. Homestay owners in Bali highlighted how Airbnb and Booking.com connected them directly to foreign guests without the need for expensive partnerships with travel agents or hotels. In Yogyakarta, local guides and craft producers explained that social media enabled them to bypass formal bureaucratic barriers and present their services directly to travelers. In this sense, platforms were viewed as instruments of empowerment, opening a space for informal actors to participate in the tourism economy on their own terms.

Yet this sense of empowerment was tempered by widespread feelings of vulnerability and dependency. Narratives repeatedly stressed that hosts had little control over pricing policies, commission fees, or dispute resolution systems. Several participants explained that disputes with guests were almost always decided in favor of the customer, reinforcing perceptions of unequal power relations. One host in Bali commented that "the

platform says it gives everyone a voice, but in reality, we are the weakest party. The guest has more power than us, and the platform protects them." Such stories illustrate how the informality of local actors intersects with the structural asymmetry of global platforms.

Economic precarity was another central theme. While some households achieved temporary financial gains, participants noted that income was unstable, seasonal, and highly dependent on external factors such as global travel restrictions or viral content trends. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many hosts in both Bali and Yogyakarta lost their primary source of livelihood almost overnight. Several returned to small-scale farming, fishing, or family businesses, underscoring that platform-mediated tourism offered opportunity but not security. This instability was framed not only as an economic challenge but also as an emotional burden, producing anxiety about the future.

Informality further complicated these dynamics. Because many participants operated without formal registration or licensing, they remained outside state protection mechanisms and lacked access to credit, subsidies, or insurance schemes. For some, this informality was a deliberate strategy to avoid bureaucratic costs; for others, it was a matter of necessity, as the process of formalization was considered too complex or expensive. In both cases, informality intersected with vulnerability, leaving hosts exposed to risks without recourse to institutional safeguards. The platform economy, rather than eliminating informality, often layered new forms of precarity onto existing informal structures.

Despite these constraints, participants were not passive. Some expressed agency by setting their own house rules, selectively choosing guests, or developing community agreements to share resources and manage conflicts. Others emphasized the importance of maintaining dignity and cultural values even when confronted with the power asymmetries of platforms. These narratives demonstrate that informal actors navigate the digital marketplace through a constant negotiation of power, simultaneously embracing the opportunities platforms provide while resisting or adapting to the vulnerabilities they impose.

Taken together, the findings show that informality and precarity are not merely residual conditions but structural features of platform-mediated tourism in Indonesia. Platforms enable participation, but they also shape the terms of engagement in ways that reinforce dependency and inequality. The narratives of empowerment and vulnerability coexist, reflecting the paradoxical nature of informal tourism in the digital age.

Community Networks and Hybrid Trust Strategies

Although participants frequently spoke about their dependence on platforms, their narratives also revealed the enduring importance of community networks and offline relationships in shaping trust. In both Bali and Yogyakarta, hosts emphasized that their reputations within local communities carried as much weight as their online profiles. A homestay operator in Ubud explained that "guests may find me on Airbnb, but they stay because the village trusts me. My neighbors recommend me, and that is more powerful than the internet." Such accounts highlight how social capital, kinship ties, and word-of-mouth remain central forms of assurance in the informal tourism economy.

Participants described how they integrated these community resources with digital strategies in what can be called hybrid trust practices. In Yogyakarta, guides often relied on friends or family to provide referrals, then reinforced credibility through curated Instagram accounts showcasing past tours and satisfied guests. Similarly, craft sellers who initially attracted customers through TikTok reported that sustaining relationships required face-to-face interactions, repeat purchases, and community validation. These hybrid approaches suggest that online visibility alone was insufficient; digital trust needed to be anchored in offline legitimacy.

Community-based mechanisms of trust were also mobilized to manage uncertainty and protect against the risks of platform dependence. In some villages, informal associations of homestay operators pooled resources for marketing or agreed on common pricing strategies to reduce competition. Others established rotational hosting systems, where guests introduced through word-of-mouth were distributed among households, ensuring a more equitable spread of opportunities. These collective strategies demonstrate that informality is not merely an individual condition but often organized through shared norms and community arrangements.

Importantly, participants highlighted that hybrid trust strategies also served to preserve cultural integrity. By drawing on community reputation and collective practices, hosts resisted pressures to over-commercialize traditions or misrepresent their culture online. In this way, offline networks functioned as a counterbalance to

algorithmic logics, anchoring digital practices in social and cultural frameworks. A young host in Yogyakarta summarized this balance by stating, "The app brings the guest, but the community keeps the trust."

Together, these narratives illustrate that informal tourism actors do not rely exclusively on digital platforms to establish credibility. Instead, they blend online and offline strategies, leveraging cultural authenticity, social capital, and local networks to reinforce trust. This hybridity highlights the resilience of community structures in the face of digital disruption and suggests that informality in tourism is sustained not only by market opportunity but by collective practices that embed trust within broader social relations.

Discussion

The findings from Bali and Yogyakarta provide new insights into how informal tourism actors navigate the opportunities and risks of digital platforms. By centering community narratives, the study shows that trust is not simply a technical feature of algorithms or rating systems but is actively constructed through storytelling, social networks, and hybrid practices that merge online visibility with offline legitimacy. This extends existing scholarship on trust in the sharing economy, which emphasizes the role of platform-mediated cues such as ratings, photographs, and profile completeness (Ert, Fleischer, & Magen, 2016; Zloteanu, Harvey, Tuckett, & Livan, 2018), by demonstrating that in informal contexts, digital trust cannot be disentangled from local cultural and community structures.

One contribution of this research lies in its analysis of how digital storytelling and authenticity operate as strategies of trust-building. Previous studies have shown that perceptions of authenticity are central to travelers' decisions in peer-to-peer markets (Räisänen, 2021; Tao et al., 2024). This study complements such findings by showing how Indonesian hosts strategically deploy narratives about family life, cultural practices, and village identity not only to differentiate themselves from formal hotels but also to compensate for their marginal position within global platforms. In this way, authenticity functions as both a marketing tool and a social value, reaffirming local pride while generating trust with distant guests.

The results also highlight the precarious dependence of informal actors on algorithmic visibility. Prior work has argued that platforms impose new forms of governance by mediating access to markets through opaque algorithms (Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2015; Capineri et al., 2021). The narratives in this study confirm that small actors experience algorithmic shifts as unpredictable and destabilizing, often undermining their ability to plan for stable income. Unlike formal businesses with resources to invest in digital marketing, informal hosts must constantly adapt to changes they cannot fully understand or control. This reinforces structural inequalities in the platform economy, where visibility is unequally distributed and largely outside the agency of small-scale operators (Bentley & Maharika, 2019).

At the same time, the study underscores the dual nature of platforms as both empowering and exploitative. Platforms provide informal actors with unprecedented access to international and domestic tourism flows, echoing research that identifies peer-to-peer platforms as democratizing tools (Coria & Calfucura, 2012). Yet participants' accounts of high commissions, guest-dominated dispute resolution, and unstable income resonate with critiques that platform economies often entrench precarity rather than alleviate it (Park et al., 2025). The coexistence of empowerment and vulnerability in participants' narratives highlights what can be described as the paradox of digital informality: while platforms expand market access, they simultaneously reinforce dependency and insecurity.

Another important contribution of the study lies in documenting hybrid trust strategies that blend digital and community-based mechanisms. This confirms earlier work on the resilience of informal actors, who mobilize social capital and collective arrangements to sustain livelihoods (Widiastini et al., 2024). In both Bali and Yogyakarta, hosts drew on kinship networks, community recommendations, and rotational hosting practices to mitigate risks associated with platform dependency. These findings suggest that informality should not be viewed merely as disorganized or marginal; rather, it operates through relational forms of governance that can stabilize trust in ways that platforms alone cannot provide.

Finally, the comparative perspective shows that while Bali and Yogyakarta differ in scale and type of tourism, both reveal similar ambivalences toward digital platforms. This convergence suggests that the challenges of trust, precarity, and hybrid adaptation are not unique to a single destination but reflect broader structural dynamics of platform tourism in the Global South. By foregrounding voices from Indonesia, the study contributes to

rebalancing the literature on digital tourism economies, which has been dominated by Western cases. In doing so, it highlights the importance of situating platformization within contexts of informality, cultural specificity, and community resilience.

In sum, the discussion emphasizes that trust in platform-mediated informal tourism is negotiated through more than ratings and algorithms. It is embedded in local narratives, cultural authenticity, and community practices that coexist uneasily with the logics of global platforms. Sustainable and equitable outcomes for informal actors will depend on recognizing these hybrid strategies and addressing the structural asymmetries that underpin platform economies.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how informal tourism actors in Bali and Yogyakarta negotiate trust within digital platforms, highlighting the interplay between storytelling, algorithmic visibility, structural vulnerability, and community networks. The findings reveal that trust is not produced solely by platform-based mechanisms such as ratings and reviews but is actively constructed through narrative practices, cultural authenticity, and offline social relations. For many participants, digital storytelling functioned as both a strategy of differentiation and a reaffirmation of cultural pride, allowing them to project reliability in a competitive marketplace.

At the same time, the research underscored the precariousness of platform dependence. Hosts described the volatility of algorithmic visibility, the anxiety of negative reviews, and the unequal power relations that privilege guests and platforms over small-scale providers. These accounts confirm that while platforms expand access to global tourism markets, they also entrench conditions of informality and insecurity. Yet, residents are not passive in the face of these challenges. Community networks, collective agreements, and hybrid strategies that blend online reputations with offline legitimacy provide alternative sources of trust and resilience.

The study concludes that digital platforms in informal tourism economies represent both opportunity and constraint. They democratize access while simultaneously reproducing inequalities, creating a paradoxical environment of empowerment and vulnerability. Sustainable pathways for informal actors will require not only individual adaptation but also broader recognition of community practices, cultural values, and the structural asymmetries of the platform economy. By foregrounding narratives from Indonesia, the research contributes to critical debates on digital tourism economies and underscores the need to place informality and community resilience at the center of future discussions about trust and platformization in the Global South.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to the publication of this study.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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