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# Impact of Digital Colonisation on the Local Hospitality Sector of Myanmar Owners in Thailand

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## Abstract

This study investigates the socio-economic and relational impacts of digital colonisation and platform capitalism on Myanmar-owned hospitality micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) operating within Thailand. While public narratives routinely position third-party digital infrastructures as neutral mechanisms of economic empowerment, this research exposes them as highly asymmetrical mediating architectures. Using an interpretivist qualitative approach, the study conducts an enterprise-level analysis through semi-structured interviews with 20 purposively sampled Myanmar entrepreneurs across restaurants, cafes, guesthouses, small hotels, and online retail spaces in major urban centers such as Bangkok.

The empirical findings demonstrate that integration into digital ecosystems does not automatically equate to digital justice. Instead, platforms function as extractive digital gatekeepers that centralize core business dynamics—including discoverability, algorithmic visibility, reputational metrics, and consumer transactional data. This infrastructural dependency subjects resource-constrained migrant business owners to steep commission arrangements and opaque, externally governed rule-making frameworks. This structural vulnerability is further compounded by localized, migrant-specific contextual factors, including linguistic barriers, restricted capital access, regulatory limits, and legal precarity in the host country. Consequently, the research reframes digital transformation from a purely managerial efficiency paradigm into a critical conflict of data power and corporate hegemony. Finally, the paper outlines practical coping mechanisms deployed by migrant entrepreneurs to mitigate platform reliance and foster direct consumer loyalty, while providing strategic recommendations for policy-makers and non-governmental organizations to cultivate more equitable and resilient environments for inclusive digital development.

**Keywords**

Digital Colonisation; Platform Capitalism; Hospitality SMEs; Migrant Entrepreneurship; Platform Dependence; Data Colonialism; Digital Inclusion; Asymmetrical Power Dynamics; Thailand.

## Introduction

### Background of the Study

The shift toward digital systems has steadily reordered how economic activity is arranged within the hospitality sector, largely through the spread of platform-based infrastructures that mediate visibility, transactions, and customer relations. Digital platforms have moved beyond being optional promotional channels to serve as central intermediaries that actively determine how businesses are found, judged, and reached by consumers. In segments such as dining and accommodation—where search engines, ranking algorithms, and review mechanisms significantly affect consumer choices—platforms have become ingrained in everyday market participation (Yilmaz, 2025). The sector's digital transition has become a major driver of operational productivity and improved guest experiences. This change affects internal hotel procedures and transforms how guests interact with services. Integrating advanced technologies—like voice-controlled assistants and Internet of Things (IoT) devices—has reduced service frictions, enabling staff to focus on delivering higher-quality, more tailored guest experiences (Anwar, Deliana, & Suyamto, 2024).

While digitalisation is often framed in terms of efficiency, innovation, and improved customer service, growing scholarship highlights that these shifts also reconfigure control over data, market entry, and value distribution. Platforms increasingly centralise vital business functions—such as customer acquisition, price exposure, and reputational assessment—within systems governed externally. As a result, small and medium enterprises (SMEs), especially those with limited resources, can become more dependent on third-party infrastructures to reach markets while retaining minimal authority over strategic choices (OECD, 2021).

These dynamics are particularly acute for Myanmar-owned hospitality firms in Thailand. Such businesses often face constrained capital, limited formal support, and uneven digital and language skills. Although platforms lower visibility and customer-access barriers—enabling quicker entry into competitive markets—participation can subject firms to commission arrangements, ranking algorithms, and data imbalances that are opaque and hard to influence (Migration, 2022). Thus, platforms are attractive for their rapid exposure and low entry thresholds, yet reliance on these third-party systems can burden migrant entrepreneurs who typically lack resources to absorb fees, build proprietary digital tools, or contest opaque platform decisions. The concern extends beyond mere technology adoption to how platform-mediated intermediation reshapes power relations in everyday business practices (Srnicek, 2017).

The concept of digital colonisation provides a useful analytical lens for this phenomenon. It describes a condition where digital infrastructures, data architectures, and regulatory norms are controlled by dominant external actors who extract value from local participants (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Srnicek, 2017). In hospitality, this shows up in commission-driven pricing, ranking algorithms, review systems, and platforms retaining customer data rather than the businesses themselves. As owners grow more dependent on these systems, their operational independence becomes increasingly constrained (Zervas, Proserpio, & Byers, 2017).

Thailand is a globally prominent tourism destination, with Pattaya standing out as a major tourist centre that contributes noticeably to the economy and enjoys wide international recognition. Pattaya's location within the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC)—an initiative focused on creating a high-value tourism and economic zone—further underlines its strategic importance (Phumpa, Satchapappichit, & Phanniphong, 2022). Thailand also supports a sizeable platform-based and gig economy spanning social media, e-commerce, food delivery, and freelance platforms. E-commerce and app-enabled food delivery are notable contributors to national output: in 2021, micro-vendor e-commerce—often run informally—was estimated at roughly USD 11 billion (about two percent of GDP), while the food delivery sector recorded a gross merchandise value near USD 4 billion (Sutassanamarlee, Chandam, Suttisome, Lek-Uthai, & Jamme, 2024).

Consequently, Thailand's hospitality market is highly competitive, with over 1,000 online travel agencies and booking platforms contesting market share. Such saturation drives price-based competition and squeezes margins, posing significant entry barriers. Established firms continue to invest heavily in marketing and technology to retain advantage, which further marginalises smaller platforms (Ken Research Private Limited, 2025). Digital infrastructures—like online maps, delivery apps, booking engines, and social media—have become embedded in daily practices of residents and tourists. Small businesses that are offline or poorly ranked may find it hard to translate foot traffic into sustained demand. Yet effective digital engagement demands time, digital skills, and experimentation. Myanmar entrepreneurs therefore face a dual pressure: a digital presence is necessary to compete, but building that presence is mediated through systems that shift risk to businesses while concentrating value at the platform level (Kenney, 2016).

## Problem Statement

Public and policy narratives often portray digital platforms as empowering tools for small firms. However, the lived realities of many hospitality operators reveal a more ambivalent picture. While platforms can ease customer acquisition, they may simultaneously erode margins through commission structures, incentivise discounting, restrict direct customer contact, and make visibility dependent on opaque algorithms (Srnicek, 2017; OECD, 2021; Couldry & Mejias, 2019). For Myanmar-owned hospitality businesses in Thailand, these effects may be amplified by migrant-specific vulnerabilities. In a fast-moving tourism environment, consumers increasingly prioritise efficiency and service effectiveness, driving digital adoption. Periods of social isolation have also accelerated technological uptake in hospitality. Consequently, hotels must stay responsive to changing customer demands and integrate emerging technologies strategically to innovate and adapt (Yang et al., 2024).

This creates a structural tension between the promise of inclusion through digital access and the reality of dependency on platforms. Despite the importance of this issue, research examining digital colonisation at the level of migrant-owned hospitality firms in Southeast Asia remains limited. Existing studies often frame digital transformation as a managerial issue or treat digital colonialism as a macro-level critique, giving less attention to how owners who rely on platforms experience these dynamics. This study fills that gap by exploring how Myanmar entrepreneurs in Thailand understand and manage platform dependence in hospitality. It treats the problem as both economic and relational—asking not only about costs but also how platforms alter owners' capacity to foster loyalty, plan strategically, and control the customer interface. This broader framing matters because sustained viability in hospitality depends on more than immediate transaction.

## Research Objectives and Questions

The main aim of this study is to investigate the effects of digital colonisation on Myanmar-owned hospitality enterprises operating in Thailand. Specifically, the research seeks to determine the degree of platform dependence, assess its impacts on profitability and business autonomy, identify obstacles affecting digital participation, and explore strategies owners use to manage or lessen that dependence. The study is directed by five questions: (1) To what degree do Myanmar-owned hospitality businesses in Thailand rely on digital platforms? (2) How does reliance on platforms affect profitability, pricing approaches, and operational authority? (3) What barriers—such as language constraints, digital skills gaps, regulatory limits, and restricted capital—shape these businesses' digital experiences? (4) How do commissions, ranking algorithms, review systems, and data imbalances reproduce aspects of digital colonisation? (5) What practical measures are being used to develop more resilient and less dependent modes of digital engagement?

## Significance of the Study

This study holds theoretical significance by linking the concepts of digital colonisation and platform capitalism to a specific service-sector context. It contributes empirically by examining a group that remains highly visible within local economies yet is underrepresented in existing scholarship: Myanmar hospitality entrepreneurs operating in Thailand.

The study is also practically significant because it offers insights that may assist business owners, non-governmental organisations, and business support agencies in recognising the often-overlooked costs associated with platform dependence. Finally, its policy relevance lies in demonstrating that inclusive digital development extends beyond merely providing technological access; it also requires the creation of more equitable conditions for platform participation.

The study is also significant methodologically because it demonstrates how a critical theory of digital power can be translated into an enterprise-level research design. Concepts such as data extraction and infrastructural dependence are often discussed in abstract terms. By applying them to hospitality operations, the thesis shows how critical digital theory can be made empirically usable in qualitative small-business research.

## Scope and Key Terms

This study focuses on Myanmar-owned restaurants, cafés, guesthouses, and related hospitality enterprises operating in Thailand that actively utilise digital platforms for sales, bookings, reviews, payments, and promotional activities. It does not aim to provide a statistical representation of the entire sector; instead, it offers an interpretive analysis of the lived experiences of business owners.

Within this thesis, digital colonisation is defined as a form of asymmetrical dependence arising from the external ownership of digital infrastructures, data systems, and governing rules. Platform dependence refers to businesses' reliance on third-party digital systems for market visibility, transactional processes, and access to customers.

## Literature Review

### Usage and Justifications of Colonisation and Colonialism

The terms colonisation and colonialism carry substantial analytical and political weight, especially in contexts with histories of imperial domination. Their academic use therefore requires clear definition, careful justification, and avoidance of purely metaphorical deployment. In this study, these terms are not intended to equate contemporary digital platforms directly with historical territorial conquest. Rather, they serve as frameworks to analyse asymmetrical structures of control, extraction, and dependency embedded in digital infrastructures. In digital scholarship, terms like digital colonialism and digital colonisation describe circumstances where dominant corporations or externally controlled digital systems exert control over data, visibility, communication channels, and market access in ways that recreate dependency and extractive value relations (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Srnicek, 2017).

The term "colonisation" does not imply physical occupation but refers to the spread of infrastructural and economic control into everyday digital life. The justification for using these concepts rests on observed patterns in the hospitality sector: Myanmar-owned firms in Thailand rely substantially on externally governed digital platforms for visibility, customer access, rankings, reviews, and transactions while having limited control over algorithms, customer data, and commission rules. The study argues these conditions go beyond simple "digital adoption" or "platform use," reflecting structural asymmetries in which platforms mediate market participation while extracting value and consolidating control.

More neutral terms—digital dependence, platform intermediation, platform governance, and technological dependency—are also applicable and are used throughout the thesis to balance the analysis and avoid rhetorical excess. However, relying only on neutral language risks understating the power imbalances within platform economies. While dependence describes the state of reliance, it does not fully capture wider dynamics of value extraction, infrastructural dominance, data enclosure, and asymmetric rule-making highlighted by critical platform scholarship. For this reason, the study adopts a calibrated conceptual approach combining critical and neutral terminology—employing terms like platform dependence, asymmetrical digital participation, data asymmetry, and platform capitalism alongside digital colonisation—to preserve analytic clarity without ideological overstatement. This balance bolsters academic credibility by showing the terminology is used analytically rather than rhetorically.

### Digital Colonisation and Data Colonialism

Couldry and Mejias (2019) frame data colonialism as a contemporary phase of appropriating life through data extraction. This perspective is valuable (Yilmaz, 2025) because it shifts focus away from treating technology as neutral progress and instead highlights ownership relations embedded in digital systems. Colonial logics have been reconfigured through technological infrastructures and data-driven systems. These evolving power structures reproduce asymmetric dominance over Global South contexts through platform monopolisation, infrastructural expansion, and large-scale data extraction—paralleling earlier patterns of imperial control in technologically mediated forms. Data colonialism clarifies how transnational tech firms appropriate and commodify user data, echoing historical resource extraction under colonial regimes (Liu & Song, 2026).

Nothias (2025) notes that digital colonialism has gained currency because it captures how technological dependence, data extraction, and control over digital infrastructures reproduce unequal relations between dominant digital hubs and peripheral locales. For this study, the literature's key point is that dependency is shaped not just by limited access but by the terms and conditions under which access is granted (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). Digital data colonialism describes how big tech firms—like Meta and Google—extract, measure, and monetise user data in ways reminiscent of exploitative resource appropriation. Closely related is surveillance capitalism, an economic model that treats human experience as a raw material for data-driven accumulation (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). Data produced via human–technology interactions is processed and monetised to build predictive systems that anticipate and shape behaviour—becoming a major revenue source for corporations (Srnicek, 2017).

Digital data colonialism and surveillance capitalism are deeply woven into modern life, making them difficult to avoid as individuals increasingly rely on AI-mediated conveniences such as smart devices and autonomous systems. Users therefore become part of a reinforcing cycle where they are simultaneously sources of data, subjects of behavioural prediction, and consumers within digital markets (Ilyas, 2022). In business settings, digital colonisation appears when firms must operate within external digital ecosystems that dictate market terms while ownership of behavioural data, visibility tools, and strategic interfaces stays concentrated with platform providers (Kellogg & Valentine, 2021). This dynamic is especially important in hospitality, where customer relationships, reputation, and repeat business are strategic assets. When platforms take primary control over these assets, businesses may maintain high activity levels yet be strategically disadvantaged (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

Platform Capitalism and the Power of Intermediation

Digital platforms can be understood as business models that facilitate value-creating interactions between producers and consumers. They provide the technical and organisational infrastructure needed for online transactions, enable exchanges among independent actors, and coordinate market activity. Platforms were advanced by disruptive technology firms—such as Facebook and eBay—and by companies that digitally transformed traditional industries, like Uber and Airbnb (Foster, 2024). Though platforms often start within specific niches, they leverage scale, existing user bases, and rich data to expand across services, sectors, and markets. This scaling is driven by network effects and substantial financial backing—often "patient capital" focused on capturing long-term platform rents over immediate profitability (Rahman & Thelen, 2019).

Srnicek (2017) portrays platforms as business models structured around data extraction and network dynamics. Once a platform becomes the dominant intermediary, it sets interaction terms and appropriates value from exchanges. Kenney (2016) similarly describes the platform economy as a reorganisation of sectors around digital intermediaries rather than direct exchange. In hospitality, this suggests that visibility, ranking, trust-building, and customer conversion are increasingly mediated by digital infrastructures—delivery apps, booking sites, mapping services, and review platforms (Filieri, Alguezaui, & McLeay, 2015).

Scholars also point to opacity: business owners know rankings matter but often cannot decipher the algorithms that determine them. This opacity leads to reactive management—firms may discount prices, invest in paid promotions, or spend disproportionately on review management without clear evidence of sustained benefits. Thus, platforms do more than enable transactions; they actively shape and govern market conditions (Möhlmann & Zalmanson, 2017).

## Origin and Definition of SMEs

According to Ensari & Karabay (2014), SMEs are the enterprises which are adjuvant, independent which employ less than a number of employees. Regarding with the size and category of SMEs, Berisha & Pula (2015) mentioned that the term used for the enterprises' category not into the large enterprises. Some refers as small enterprises, some used the term as small and medium enterprises, whereas some mentioned as micro, small and medium enterprises. El Madani (2018) also stated that there is no clear definition of SMEs which leads exorbitant frivolity in SMEs' policies which is also accepted by Chittithaworn et.al ( 2011). According to Berisha & Pula (2015), SMEs definitions differ accordance with three different flanks; by international institutions, national laws and industry definitions which is also agreed by (El Madani, 2018).

Chittithaworn et.al (2011) mentioned about definition of SME by Institute For Small and Medium Enterprises Development enterprises in Thailand by categorizing 3 sectors; Production (Agriculture Processing, manufacturing and mining), Trading (Wholesale and Retail) and Service. The following table shows the categorized type of SMEs in Thailand;

| | | Value Asset | Employees |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Production** | | medium size not exceeding 200 million bath<br><br>small size not exceeding 50 million bath | medium size not exceeding 200 employees<br><br>small size not exceeding 50 employees. |
| **Trading** | Wholesale | medium size: not exceeding 100 million<br><br>small size not exceeding 50 million | medium size not exceeding 50 employees<br><br>small size not exceeding 15 employees |
| | Retail | Medium size: r not exceeding 60 million<br><br>small size not exceeding 30 million. | medium size not exceeding 30 employees<br><br>small size not exceeding 15 employees |
| **Service** | | medium size not exceeding 200 million bath | medium size not exceeding 200 employees |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | small size not exceeding 50 million bath. | small size not exceeding 50 employees |

**Table 1 Definition of SMEs by Institute for Small and Medium Enterprises Development enterprises in Thailand (Norlaphoompipat, 2008)**

Digital Transformation in Hospitality SMEs

Hospitality literature often presents digitalisation as a route to greater efficiency, personalised services, and improved convenience. Research on smart hospitality and digital change shows that online interfaces, mobile tech, and data-driven marketing are integral to modern hospitality (Sigala, 2018). Yet digital maturity among micro and small hospitality firms is uneven (OECD, 2021). Many adopt digital tools within financial and organisational constraints, resulting in partial transformations that leave firms reliant on external platforms because they cannot build or sustain proprietary digital systems (Sigala, 2018). Therefore, platform dependence should be seen not simply as choice but as an outcome of resource limitations. Firms lacking capacity to create multilingual websites, customer databases, or fulfilment systems may be compelled to rely on third parties even when this reduces autonomy (Cutolo & Kenney, 2021). This necessitates a critical political-economy perspective in addition to a managerial one.

## Contemporary Myanmar Since Late 2020

In late 2020, Myanmar held general elections seen as part of a democratic transition, with tentative economic recovery despite COVID-19 disruption. However, on 1 February 2021 the Tatmadaw seized power in a military coup, alleging electoral fraud and removing the elected government before its inauguration. This event precipitated a severe political and humanitarian crisis marked by arrests, repression, and killings of peaceful protesters. The instability caused a sharp economic downturn and fragmentation of state authority. Many young civilians mobilised into armed resistance, joining various ethnic armed organisations that have contested military rule historically (Sui Tang, 2025).

Initially, the military appeared to hold most institutional power, leading analysts to predict limited prospects for resistance and suggesting that significant change would depend on splits within the military (Han & Khemanitthathai, 2026). After the coup, Myanmar’s justice system became overtly militarised and repressive. Judicial reforms stalled as the junta consolidated power via the State Administration Council (SAC) established on 2 February 2021. Under the SAC, legal changes, judicial appointments, and special courts curtailed civil and political rights, including fair trial guarantees. Myanmar’s contemporary militarised criminal justice system operates as a political control instrument, with dissenters subjected to harassment, arbitrary detention, prosecution, prolonged sentences, extrajudicial killings, and capital punishment (Thar Yar & Jefferson, 2026).

## Migrant Business in Thailand

As a leading ASEAN economy, Thailand has long drawn substantial foreign labour to support its export-oriented growth model. Since the 1980s, export-led development created steady demand for low-cost, low-skilled workers in labour-intensive sectors like manufacturing and construction. Meanwhile, the domestic workforce has shifted toward semi- and high-skilled jobs, producing labour shortages in lower-skilled areas. Migrants from neighbouring countries—especially Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos—have filled these roles (Chaichanavichakit, 2016). Campbell (2016) notes Thailand has been a principal destination for Myanmar migrants due to proximity, higher wages, and consistent labour demand across sectors such as construction, garments, domestic work, fisheries, and services. Myanmar's political crisis has led to increased cross-border displacement into Thailand; although precise figures are limited, estimates suggest tens of thousands crossed the border after the 2021 coup, aligned with phases of intensified violence (Banki, 2025; Han & Khemanitthathai, 2026).

## Migrant Entrepreneurship and Digital Inclusion in Thailand

Migrant entrepreneurship literature shows businesses started by migrants often arise from a mix of necessity and opportunity (Ram, Jones, & Villares-Varela, 2017). By creating enterprises in host countries, migrants can avoid barriers to formal employment, generate income, and gain economic autonomy. These businesses supply culturally relevant goods and services and contribute to local market diversity. Immigrant entrepreneurship supports social cohesion and integration by building ties with local customers, suppliers, and institutions; successful ventures become social spaces where immigrant and host communities interact (Barber, Salley, & Sciortino, 2024; OECD, 2021). Migrant entrepreneurs draw on transnational networks, cultural capital, and community trust, yet face obstacles like limited credit access, regulatory hurdles, and social exclusion (Beckers & Blumberg, 2013).

In Thailand, UN and IOM migration reports highlight migrants' economic contributions alongside unequal living and working conditions (Barber, Salley, & Sciortino, 2024). Research on migrant digital skills indicates digital inclusion hinges on access, literacy, language, and confidence (Migration, 2021). These realities explain why Myanmar-owned hospitality firms may engage platforms differently than well-capitalised local chains. Platform engagement occurs within contexts where owners often have limited bargaining power, shaping strategic choices and outcomes (Kellogg & Valentine, 2021). Thus, digital tools can facilitate market entry while reinforcing dependency. Digital migration literature shows that digital systems combine practical opportunities with infrastructural biases (Cutolo & Kenney, 2021; Madianou, 2019). In hospitality—where trust, reputation, and personal recommendations matter—platforms standardise relational strengths into metrics and rankings, eroding advantages small firms might otherwise leverage for survival (Ert, Fleischer, & Magen, 2016).

## Research Gap and Conceptual Framework

The literature reveals three linked gaps. Firstly, hospitality studies do not always address the power relations embedded in digital transformation. Last, but not the least, digital colonization research tends to operate at a macro level and rarely follows its mechanisms into everyday business operations. Finally, migration research in Thailand documents vulnerability and digital skills concerns but rarely analyzes migrant-owned firms in platformed service markets by addressing those gaps by examining Myanmar-owned hospitality businesses through a framework that links platform structures, mechanisms of extraction and control, contextual moderators, and business outcomes.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework developed from the literature.

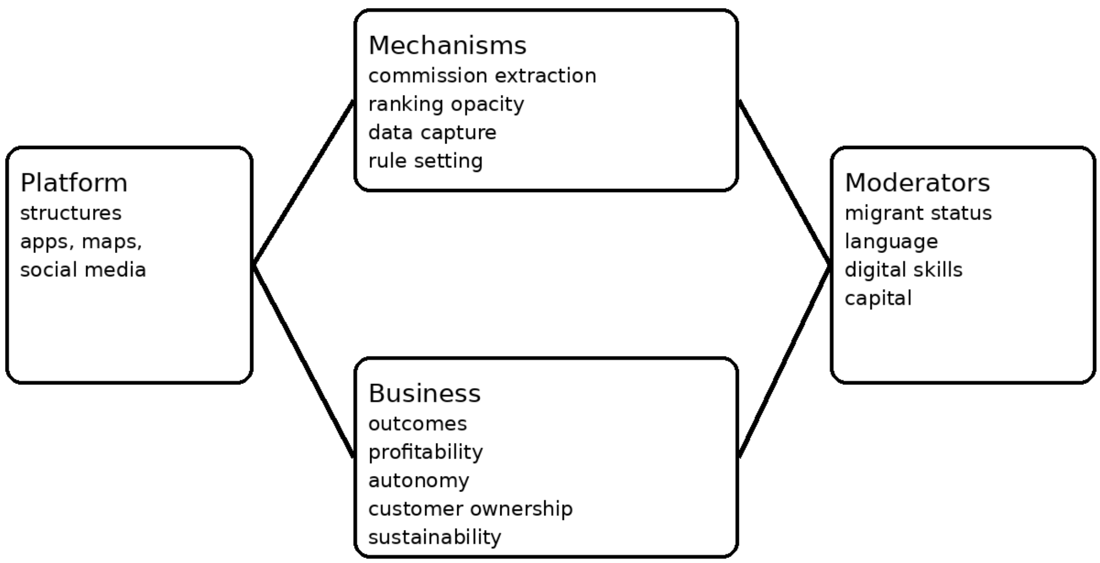


**Figure 1 Conceptual framework for analysing digital colonisation in migrant-owned hospitality businesses. (Drawn by author)**

### Empirical Synthesis

Overall, the literature suggests platform dependence is most acute when three conditions overlap: (1) customer journeys are heavily mediated by digital search and review systems; (2) businesses lack resources to create independent digital alternatives; and (3) the sector depends on trust and rapid responsiveness. Hospitality meets all three. Consumers increasingly use digital tools to search, compare, and evaluate services while small firms often cannot match the scale of platform marketplaces. Service quality is translated into visible ratings that influence future demand (Zervas, Proserpio, & Byers, 2017). Thus, the sector is not merely utilising platforms; it is being reorganised by them.

For migrant-owned firms, market dependence and social vulnerability intersect importantly (Ram, Jones, & Villares-Varela, 2017). A business may rely on platform infrastructures for visibility but lack the language skills or legal capacity to dispute account decisions or optimise digital operations (Cutolo & Kenney, 2021). The result is asymmetrical participation: not merely slower digital progress but unequal engagement in digital environments. The literature supports treating platform adoption as both economic and political.

Another insight is the cumulative nature of platform dependence. Reliance on one intermediary often spills into other domains: ratings on one platform can influence searches elsewhere; platform-driven demand can change staffing and operating hours; paid promotions can alter customer expectations on pricing and discounts. Over time, firms align operations with the platform's temporal and structural logic. This cumulative dynamic explains why dependence can grow even when owners are dissatisfied (Kellogg & Valentine, 2021).

## Methodology

### Research Design

The study adopts an interpretivist qualitative case-study design. This approach is appropriate because the research questions concern how owners understand and negotiate platform dependence in context. The case is defined as Myanmar-owned hospitality businesses operating in Thailand under conditions of digital intermediation. A qualitative design allows attention to meaning, strategy, and lived experience rather than reducing dependence to a single measurable variable.

### Population and Sampling

The target population consists of Myanmar entrepreneurs who own or co-own restaurants, cafes, guesthouses, small hotels, or related hospitality businesses such as Online sales platform users in Thailand. Purposive sampling is suitable because the study needs participants who actively use digital platforms and are directly involved in business decisions. Snowball recruitment can supplement this process where trust networks are important. Variation should be sought in business type, location, and level of platform reliance so that the study captures a range of digital experiences. A semi-structured interview questions with over 30 sub questions covering demographic data, business background, platform dependence, profitability & pricing, reviews, ranking & visibility, confidentiality of customer data, barriers & Vulnerabilities, Coping and Dependence reduction, finally with reflection of using digital platforms accordingly. Concatenation of interview questions were rationalized during the interview process according to the very personal status and responses of each respondent. Researcher put an effort of creating affinity with respondents and making them of answering the interview questions with confidence which would be kept confidentially.

## Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews serve as the primary method of data collection in this study. This approach enables consistent exploration of key research issues while maintaining the flexibility required to investigate emergent concerns, such as unfair reviews, hidden platform costs, or language barriers encountered through digital dashboards and support systems. A typical interview examines areas including business history, motivations for platform adoption, perceived benefits, commission structures, ranking pressures, digital competencies, customer relationship management, and future business strategies. Where appropriate and ethically permissible, interviews may be supplemented with screenshots of menus, booking pages, or promotional interfaces to provide additional contextual insight.

The study was conducted in Thailand, focusing on regions with significant Burmese immigrant populations. These areas were selected based on their concentration of Burmese-owned businesses, which provided a rich and diverse pool of entrepreneurial activities for the research. Specific regions included major urban centers like Bangkok and its surrounding areas, where many Burmese immigrants have established small and medium-sized enterprises

The following table shows the interviewees of this research.

| Pseudonym | Business type | Location | Main platforms | Years |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Khine Zar Mon | Restaurant Consultant | Bangkok | Grab, Facebook,Tiktok | 4 |
| Su Su Haling | Restaurant | Bangkok | LINEMAN, Grab | 4 |
| Kyaw Htet Lin | Guesthouse | Bangkok | Booking site, Facebook, Trip.com | 4 |
| Joe | Restaurant | Bangkok | Grab, Lineman | 3 |
| Win Thant Htun | Small hotel | Bangkok | Booking site, Bolt,Agoda | 3 |
| Thida Soe | Delivery kitchen | Bangkok | Grab, TikTok, Facebook | 2 |
| Kyaw Myint | Restaurant | Bangkok | Grab, Line, TikTok, Facebook | 2 |
| Imran | Restaurant | Bangkok | Grab, Lineman | 2 |
| Ohn Khaing | Klassique | Bangkok | Booking.com, Expedia, Trip.com | 3 |
| Bunny Poe | Online Sales | Bangkok | Grab, Lineman, TikTok | 5 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Fatima | Restaurant | Bangkok | Lineman, Grab | 4 |
| Peter | Restaurant | Bangkok | Lineman, Grab, Facebook | 2 |
| Zaw Zaw | Restaurant | Bangkok | Facebook, TikTok, Lineman | 2 |
| Htut Kyaw Win | Restaurant | Bangkok | Lineman, Grab, Facebook | 3 |
| Myint Moe | Restaurant | Bangkok | Lineman, Grab, Facebook, TikTok | 3 |
| Ei Khine Zin | Tour Company | Bangkok | Trip.com, Booking.com, Agoda | 3 |
| Sint Yadana | Food Stall | Bangkok | Lineman, Facebook | 2 |
| Candy Pink | Online Food Sales | Bangkok | Facebook, TikTok | 2 |
| Hussein Perfumes | Dubai Perfumes Sales | Bangkok | TikTok Shop | 3 |
| Dr. Wint Wah | Tour Company | Bangkok | Trip.com, Booking.com, Agoda, TikTok | 2 |

**Table 2 Interview Participants of the research**

The data collection for this study was carried out over a three-week period, specifically in Last week of March to Second week of April. This timeframe was carefully chosen to align with the availability of respondents, ensuring their participation without disrupting their daily business operations and Songkran holidays. Conducting the research within this short but intensive period allowed the researcher to maintain focus and consistency throughout the interviews and data collection process.

Interviews were conducted in-person or through online platform; Google Meet, depending on the respondent's availability and preference. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the topics. The researcher recorded all interviews (with consent) in written form to ensure accurate transcription and analysis.

Out of 20 interviewees, nearly the same percentages of male and female; 55% and 45%, 9 restaurant owners, 1 Restaurant Consultant, 3 Guesthouse and Small Hotel Owners, 2 Tour Company, 1 Food Stall and 4 Online Sales. Core formation of sample selections were using snowball sampling; however, this method was using for an appurtenance of purposive sampling in order to avoid monolithic sample that can happened with snowball sampling.

Written record of interviews was manually transcribed as a safeguard of the context and meaning of respondents' answers. In order to eliminate the discrepancies and equivocation in the transcripts, researchers double-checked with respondents to gain accurate data of respondents' understanding. This diligent approach aided for the data reliability and subsequent analysis.

### Data Analysis

This study adopts thematic analysis as its primary analytical approach. Following transcription and, where necessary, translation, the researcher engages in repeated readings of the data to develop initial codes, organise these codes into broader categories, and subsequently refine them into themes that directly address the research questions. The analytical process is both inductive and theoretically informed. While concepts such as value extraction, algorithmic opacity, data asymmetry, and business autonomy provide interpretive guidance, the resulting themes remain firmly grounded in participants' lived experiences and narratives.

Cross-case comparison is particularly valuable within this research design because it enables the examination of whether platform dependence is experienced differently across business types or operational channels. For instance, a guesthouse may encounter visibility pressures in ways that differ from a delivery-oriented food business. Such comparisons can reveal both the shared mechanisms of digital colonisation and the context-specific ways in which these mechanisms are shaped by distinct local business models.

### Trustworthiness, Ethics, and Limitations

The credibility of the study can be strengthened through the use of verbatim participant quotations, systematic documentation of coding procedures, and member checking where appropriate. Transferability relies on providing rich, contextually detailed descriptions that enable readers to assess the applicability of findings to other settings. Ethical considerations include obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, employing pseudonyms, and avoiding lines of inquiry that may expose participants to legal, financial, or economic vulnerabilities. The study is constrained by its qualitative scale, the potential for self-reporting bias, and the continually evolving nature of platform governance rules. However, these limitations do not undermine the validity of the research design; rather, they delineate the interpretive boundaries within which the findings should be understood.

Researcher reflexivity is particularly significant in this study, given that digital colonisation serves as a critical theoretical lens. The researcher must remain cautious not to impose predetermined conceptual categories onto participants' narratives. Reflexive memoing can serve as an important methodological tool for differentiating between participants' explicit accounts and the researcher's subsequent theoretical interpretations. This is especially crucial in contexts involving migration, legal precarity, and livelihood concerns, where the ethical responsibility associated with representation is substantial.

## Findings and Discussion

### Theme One: Platforms as Necessary Infrastructure

The findings suggest that digital platforms are widely regarded by business owners as essential infrastructures rather than discretionary marketing instruments. Participants consistently identified platforms as the primary gateway through which customers initiate their search for services. Accordingly, visibility is no longer determined solely by physical location but is increasingly contingent upon a firm's digital presence within platform ecosystems.

This transformation reconfigures the conditions of market participation. Businesses that are absent from, or poorly positioned within, digital systems may encounter restricted customer reach despite maintaining a physical presence. As a result, engagement with platforms appears less as a strategic option and more as a prerequisite for operational viability. Although platforms enable access to customers, such access remains conditional upon externally governed infrastructures, indicating a form of platform dependence in which visibility is mediated rather than directly controlled or owned.

> "If we are not on the app or on Facebook, many people do not even know we are here. They search on the phone first, not on the street." (Kyaw Myint; Imran; Peter; Fatima, Restaurant Owners) & (Kyaw Htet Lin; Win Thant Htun; Ohn Khaing , Guest House & Small Hotel Owners)
>
> "Joining the platform helped us, but after some time I realised that our daily visibility depended on rules we did not control." (Kyaw Myint; Imran; Peter; Fatima; Zaw Zaw; Myint Moe, Restaurant Owners), (Sint Yadana; Candy Pink; Bunny Poe; Hussein Perfumes, Online Sales Platform Users), (Thida Soe; Delivery Kitchen)

The quotations generally highlight the pivotal role of digital platforms as gatekeepers of market visibility within the contemporary hospitality and small business landscape. Participants consistently indicate that processes of customer discovery have shifted from physically grounded, location-based encounters to digitally mediated search practices, thereby positioning platform presence—such as mobile applications and social media—as a prerequisite for being "visible" in the marketplace. In this regard, platforms function not merely as promotional instruments but as critical infrastructures that structure access to demand.

At the same time, the accounts reveal a fundamental tension between access and control. While initial engagement with platforms may expand customer reach and increase transaction volume, business owners appear to develop growing dependence on forms of visibility that are mediated by opaque rules, algorithmic processes, and ranking systems beyond their direct influence. This dynamic produces a condition in which routine operational outcomes—such as bookings, orders, and revenue streams—are contingent upon externally governed, privately controlled systems.

In summary, the findings point to a shift from digital inclusion as a source of opportunity to platform dependence as a structural constraint. Although participation broadens market access, it simultaneously constrains business autonomy by limiting control over visibility and, by extension, key business outcomes.

### Theme Two: Extraction Through Fees and Discount Pressure

The second theme highlights the disparity between gross sales figures and actual business income. Participants consistently emphasised that a high volume of orders does not necessarily result in substantial profitability. Commission fees, promotional discount requirements, packaging expenses, and service-related deductions frequently erode profit margins. Consequently, platform performance may create a misleading perception of success when business owners focus primarily on sales volume without assessing net financial returns.

This pattern reflects a central mechanism of digital colonisation, whereby value is appropriated at the point of intermediation. While businesses undertake the labour of production and service delivery, platforms extract a share of each transaction as the cost of accessing digitally mediated demand. In response, business owners often adopt adaptive strategies such as increasing prices, reducing portion sizes, or engaging in forms of self-exploitation in order to maintain platform visibility.

The financial implications extend beyond immediate reductions in income. Diminished profitability can constrain a firm's capacity to invest in equipment, maintain workforce stability, develop products or services, and establish independent digital channels. In this way, present-day extraction undermines future autonomy, illustrating how platform economies can entrench small businesses in cycles of recurring dependence.

> "Busy days are not always good days. We sell more, but after fees and promotions, not much is left." (Kyaw Myint; Imran; Peter; Fatima, Restaurant Owners), (Sint Yadana; Candy Pink; Bunny Poe; Hussein Perfumes, Online Sales Platform Users) , (Thida Soe; Delivery Kitchen)
>
> "The app helps bring customers, but the app also eats our margin. We cannot simply pass all of that cost to customers." & (Kyaw Htet Lin; Win Thant Htun; Ohn Khaing , Guest House & Small Hotel Owners), (Ei Khine Zin, Tour Company)
>
> This is confidential! But we have to pay certain amount for commission fees and also have to fulfil the requirement of their promotion accordance in mixture with Thai public holidays policy and Myanmar holidays. (Kyaw Myint, Peter; Restaurant Owners), (Thida Soe; Delivery Kitchen)

The quotations generally illuminate a structural disconnect between transaction volume and actual profitability within platform-mediated business models. Participants consistently report that increases in sales—commonly interpreted as indicators of success—do not necessarily translate into substantive financial returns once platform-related costs are taken into account. Commission fees, compulsory participation in promotional schemes, and additional operational expenditures (such as packaging and service modifications) significantly compress profit margins, thereby obscuring the underlying economic performance of the business.

More fundamentally, the accounts reveal processes of value appropriation through platform intermediation. While businesses generate demand through their labour, production, and service provision, platforms extract a share of each transaction as a condition of access to digitally mediated markets. This dynamic produces a constrained pricing environment in which business owners are unable to fully pass increased costs onto customers, compelling them instead to absorb financial pressures internally.

The quotations further highlight a range of adaptive, yet often unsustainable, strategies adopted in response, including price recalibration, cost minimisation, and intensified labour input. Generally, these findings suggest that platform participation can create an appearance of growth while simultaneously eroding profitability, thereby reinforcing cycles of economic dependence and constraining long-term business sustainability and autonomy.

### Theme Three: Algorithmic Opacity and Review Anxiety

A third theme concerns the uncertainty generated by platform ranking systems and public rating mechanisms. Participants recognised that factors such as response times, customer reviews, visual presentation, promotional activities, and cancellation rates may influence their visibility on digital platforms; however, they often lacked clear understanding of how these variables are weighted or algorithmically combined. This produces a continuous need for adaptation in the absence of complete information, positioning the platform as both a marketplace and an evaluative authority.

Public review systems further intensify this pressure by transforming subjective customer experiences into quantifiable and highly visible performance metrics that shape future demand. Within the hospitality sector, where trust and reputation are critical assets, negative ratings can continue to influence customer perceptions long after the original service issue has been resolved. As a result, business owners may perceive that their digital reputation is controlled by platform systems that provide limited opportunities for transparency, negotiation, or contestation.

> "Sometimes restaurants made photo changes, answer fast via platforms, and run promotions, but they still do not understand why ranking moves up or down." (Khine Zar Mon, Restaurant Consultant)
>
> "One unfair review can stay online and affect new customers more than our explanation does." & (Kyaw Htet Lin; Win Thant Htun; Ohn Khaing, Guest House & Small Hotel Owners), (Kyaw Myint; Imran; Peter; Fatima, Restaurant Owners)

The quotations generally highlight the opacity and unpredictability of platform-based ranking and review systems in shaping business visibility and reputation. Participants indicate that, despite actively engaging in recommended optimisation practices—such as enhancing visual presentation, maintaining rapid response times, and participating in promotional activities—they remain uncertain about how these efforts translate into ranking outcomes. This lack of transparency suggests that algorithmic evaluation functions as a “black box,” constraining users’ capacity to strategically manage and anticipate their digital performance.

Moreover, the accounts underscore the disproportionate influence of public review systems in constructing business reputation. Individual customer evaluations, including those perceived as unfair or unrepresentative, are converted into enduring and highly visible performance indicators that significantly shape future demand. In a sector where trust is a critical asset, such reviews can outweigh business attempts to contextualise or resolve service issues, reinforcing the perception that reputational control is externally determined.

In summary, the findings demonstrate how platform-based evaluative mechanisms generate persistent uncertainty and operational pressure. Businesses are compelled to engage in continuous, reactive adjustments while lacking meaningful transparency, avenues for contestation, or substantive control over the systems that govern their market positioning.

## Theme Four: Weak Customer Ownership and Data Asymmetry

Participants also identified a more subtle form of platform dependence: the limited ability to establish direct ownership over customer relationships. Although transactions are facilitated through digital platforms, customer information and behavioural data often remain confined within platform ecosystems. This restricts businesses' capacity to cultivate repeat engagement without continuously paying for renewed access to customers.

From a critical perspective, this represents one of the clearest manifestations of digital colonisation. While business owners provide the service and maintain customer interactions, platforms retain control over the underlying relationship. Over time, this dynamic can make business growth increasingly costly, as firms are required to repeatedly purchase visibility rather than accumulate long-term loyalty through direct access to their own customer data and relationships.

This issue is particularly significant within the hospitality sector, where repeat patronage often carries greater long-term value than one-time customer acquisition. Small businesses frequently rely on familiarity, word-of-mouth recommendations, and trust-based relationships for sustainability. When these relational assets become enclosed within platform ecosystems, firms may remain operationally active yet face significant challenges in generating cumulative value beyond the intermediary structure.

> "We serve the customer, but the relationship belongs to the platform. We do not really keep the customer." (Kyaw Myint; Imran; Peter; Zaw Zaw; Fatima; Myint Moe, Restaurant Owners)
>
> Good word-of-mouth can reach to half a million a day, but bad word-of-mouth reach to more than 3 million that can drag down either to restaurants or hotels to lower sales and bad occupancy (Khine Zar Mon; Restaurant Consultant, Restaurant Chain Management Trainer)

The quotations generally reveal the limited capacity of businesses to cultivate and retain direct customer relationships within platform-mediated environments. Participants emphasise that, although they provide the service and engage directly with customers, the underlying relationship—along with associated data and communication channels—remains controlled by the platform. This constrains firms' ability to transform individual transactions into sustained customer loyalty, necessitating repeated reliance on paid platform access to re-engage the same clientele.

From a critical perspective, these accounts illustrate a central mechanism of value enclosure within platform economies, whereby relational assets are appropriated and retained by intermediaries rather than accumulated by the businesses themselves. Consequently, business growth becomes increasingly transactional and cost-dependent, rather than relational and cumulative.

The quotations further highlight the intensified and asymmetrical effects of digital word-of-mouth within platform ecosystems. Customer feedback, particularly negative evaluations, can disseminate rapidly and widely, exerting disproportionate influence on reputation and demand. Finally, these findings demonstrate how platform control over customer relationships and reputational circulation constrains long-term value creation, reinforcing dependency and limiting the development of autonomous, trust-based business sustainability.

### Theme Five: Adaptive Resistance and Hybrid Strategies

The fifth theme complicates an exclusively pessimistic interpretation of platform dependence. Participants described various strategies aimed at reducing reliance on digital intermediaries. Some encouraged repeat customers to place orders directly through messaging applications, telephone communication, or QR codes included with deliveries. Others utilised social media storytelling and community-based networks to cultivate brand recognition beyond platform-based search systems. Although these strategies do not eliminate platform power, they demonstrate forms of practical agency exercised within structurally constrained environments.

This finding is analytically significant because it suggests that responses to digital colonisation are not characterised by complete withdrawal from platform ecosystems, but rather by processes of selective hybridisation. Business owners continue to engage with platforms while simultaneously attempting to reclaim greater control over specific aspects of the customer journey.

> "We include our direct number with each order. If the customer likes us, next time we try to speak with them directly." (Sint Yadana; Candy Pink; Bunny Poe; Hussein Perfumes, Online Sales Platform Users), (Thida Soe; Delivery Kitchen)
>
> We did attach the paper when the customer order in order to give us a good rating and in case any issue, contact our restaurant to do necessity measures. (Kyaw Myint, Imran, Fatima ; Restaurant Owners)
> After the guest staying with us, we did randomly send survey links to the guest if they provide their email in order to track our whole service values. Duty Manager's email is also included in survey links. (Win Thant Htun, Kyaw Htet Lin ; Guest house and hotel executives)

The quotations generally underscore the strategic initiatives undertaken by business owners to partially reassert control over customer relationships within platform-mediated environments. Participants describe a range of practical tactics—such as sharing direct contact information, encouraging post-transaction communication, and gathering customer feedback through independent channels—designed to reduce exclusive reliance on platform infrastructures. These practices seek to transform one-off, platform-generated transactions into sustained, direct relationships managed outside intermediary systems.

Importantly, the accounts do not suggest a wholesale disengagement from platforms, but rather the adoption of a hybrid model of digital engagement. Businesses continue to rely on platforms for visibility and customer acquisition, while simultaneously cultivating parallel channels for customer retention, service recovery, and relationship development. This approach reflects a form of bounded agency, whereby actors operate within structural constraints yet actively pursue greater autonomy over specific aspects of the customer journey.

Conclusively, the findings indicate that platform dependence is neither total nor uncontested. Instead, it is continuously negotiated through incremental and adaptive strategies that enable businesses to balance the advantages of digital access with efforts to reclaim relational control and support long-term value creation.

**Theme Six: Emotional Labour and Temporal Strain**

A further pattern identified in the findings relates to the emotional and temporal demands associated with platform participation. Participants described the constant need to respond promptly to customer messages, monitor reviews, update menus, track promotional campaigns, and remain continuously attentive to platform notifications. As a result, maintaining a digital presence requires forms of labour that extend beyond core hospitality activities such as food preparation, hosting, cleaning, or staff management. This labour often remains invisible because it is fragmented into small yet recurring acts of attention throughout the day.

For small migrant-owned businesses, these demands can be particularly burdensome, as owners frequently occupy multiple roles simultaneously, including manager, marketer, customer service representative, and platform operator. The emotional strain is further intensified when negative reviews or sudden declines in platform visibility produce immediate financial consequences. Digital colonisation, therefore, should be understood not only as a process of economic extraction but also as one involving the appropriation of time, attention, and affective labour.

> "Even after closing the shop, I still check the phone because one review or message can affect tomorrow's sales. The work does not end when the customers leave." (Kyaw Myint; Imran; Peter, Restaurant Owners) , (Sint Yadana; Candy Pink; Bunny Poe; Hussein Perfumes, Online Sales Platform Users) , (Thida Soe; Delivery Kitchen)
>
> After closing shop, we are still checking the platforms either on phone or tablets cos one customer reviews can either pull up or drag down the next sales (Khine Zar Mon; restaurant consultant, Restaurant Chain Management Trainer)

The quotations generally accentuate the intensification of continuous, platform-mediated labour that extends beyond the core service activities of hospitality businesses. Participants emphasise that sustaining a digital presence necessitates ongoing monitoring of messages, reviews, and performance indicators, often beyond formal working hours. This produces a condition of temporal unboundedness, in which business owners remain persistently responsive to digital interactions due to their direct implications for future sales.

The accounts further illuminate the affective dimension of this labour. Customer feedback—particularly in the form of reviews—carries immediate financial consequences, generating sustained pressure to remain vigilant and reactive. For small, migrant-owned enterprises, where owners frequently perform multiple operational roles simultaneously, these demands intensify both workload and psychological strain.

Finally, the findings indicate that platform participation involves not only economic engagement but also the extraction of time, attention, and affective labour. This broadens the conceptualisation of digital colonisation beyond purely financial mechanisms, encompassing the appropriation of everyday temporal rhythms and the erosion of boundaries between work and personal life.

## Discussion

The empirical material presented across the thematic analysis provides consistent support for conceptualising digital colonisation as an infrastructural and routinised process embedded in everyday platform use, rather than as an overt or coercive form of control. Participants' accounts of visibility dependence indicate that market access is increasingly mediated through platform architectures, where being "discoverable" requires sustained engagement with mobile applications and social media systems. However, as reflected in the data, such access remains conditional and governed by largely opaque rules, thereby reshaping not only how businesses reach customers but also how performance is evaluated and rewarded.

The findings further reinforce the analytical distinction between digital access and digital autonomy. While participants clearly benefit from expanded reach and higher transaction volumes, their experiences with commission structures, promotional obligations, and limited pricing flexibility reveal constrained control over the terms of exchange. The recurring observation that increased sales do not translate into meaningful profitability directly illustrates this imbalance. In parallel, concerns regarding algorithmic ranking and review systems support the argument that reputation—an essential asset in hospitality—is increasingly constructed and governed within platform ecosystems rather than by businesses themselves.

The empirical evidence also highlights the enclosure of customer relationships as a central mechanism of dependence. Participants' reflections that they "serve the customer" without "owning the relationship" underscore how platforms retain control over data and repeat engagement. This dynamic aligns with the broader proposition that digital participation may generate transactional activity without facilitating cumulative value creation. At the same time, the strategies described—such as sharing direct contact information, encouraging off-platform communication, and collecting independent feedback—demonstrate forms of bounded agency. While these practices do not dismantle platform power, they indicate ongoing efforts to negotiate and partially reconfigure dependence through hybrid engagement approaches.

Importantly, the temporal and affective dimensions of platform participation further extend the analysis beyond economic extraction. The necessity for continuous monitoring, rapid responsiveness, and attentiveness to reviews illustrates how platforms appropriate time, attention, and emotional labour. The blurring of boundaries between working and non-working hours, as described by participants, highlights how digital infrastructures reorganise the everyday rhythms of business operations.

The findings also deepen engagement with migration-focused scholarship by demonstrating how platform dependence intersects with migrant-specific vulnerabilities. Language barriers, regulatory uncertainty, and limited access to institutional support constrain the ability of migrant entrepreneurs to interpret, challenge, or strategically optimise platform systems. These conditions intensify the asymmetries embedded within platform capitalism, rendering dependence more difficult to mitigate.

Taken together, the evidence substantiates the argument that platform capitalism and digital colonisation function as mutually reinforcing dynamics. Platform capitalism elucidates the mechanisms of value extraction—through commissions, ranking systems, and data control—while digital colonisation captures the broader structural condition in which such mechanisms become normalised and entrenched. The findings demonstrate that participation in platform economies is simultaneously enabling and constraining: it provides essential market access while limiting autonomy, redistributing value, and embedding businesses within externally governed systems beyond their control.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

### Conclusion

The empirical evidence derived from participant quotations and thematic analysis substantiates the study's central claim that digital transformation in the hospitality sector is simultaneously enabling and constraining. While platforms clearly expand market access—enabling Myanmar-owned businesses in Thailand to engage with broader consumer bases—the findings consistently indicate that such access is conditional, governed by opaque systems of ranking, review, and visibility. Participants' accounts of fluctuating rankings, reliance on applications for customer discovery, and the persistence of platform-controlled reputations collectively support the argument that market participation is increasingly structured by external digital infrastructures rather than by firms themselves.

Concurrently, the findings reveal a persistent imbalance between economic activity and value capture. Narratives of high transaction volumes accompanied by limited profitability—driven by commission fees, promotional requirements, and additional operational costs—demonstrate how value is systematically extracted through platform intermediation. These observations reinforce the interpretation of platform capitalism as a system in which businesses generate demand and perform service labour, while platforms appropriate a disproportionate share of transactional value. This argument is further strengthened by evidence of relational enclosure, whereby business owners "serve" customers without retaining direct access to them, thereby constraining opportunities for long-term loyalty formation and cumulative growth.

Importantly, the evidence also captures the temporal and affective intensification associated with platform participation. Participants' need for continuous monitoring, rapid responsiveness, and sustained engagement with digital systems indicates that platform dependence extends beyond financial dimensions to encompass the appropriation of time and emotional labour. This supports a broader conceptualisation of digital colonisation as a process embedded in routine practices, rather than as an overt or exceptional form of domination.

However, the findings do not depict business owners as passive actors. The adaptive strategies identified—such as facilitating direct communication, utilising social media for relationship-building, and adopting hybrid engagement models—reflect forms of bounded agency within structurally constrained environments. These practices suggest that platform dependence is negotiated rather than absolute, even if such negotiations rarely disrupt underlying power asymmetries.

Taken together, the analysis demonstrates that platform participation produces a paradoxical condition: it is both indispensable for market access and generative of structural vulnerability. The distinction between digital access and digital autonomy is therefore critical. While many businesses achieve enhanced visibility and transactional growth, they remain constrained in their capacity to control pricing, retain customer data, and secure sustainable profitability. In this context, the broader implication is that digital inclusion alone is insufficient as a pathway to empowerment. Instead, the long-term sustainability of small, migrant-owned hospitality enterprises depends on their ability to engage with digital platforms while mitigating dependence—through margin protection, the development of parallel customer channels, and the incremental reclamation of control over key elements of the business ecosystem.

**Answers to the Research Questions**

The following are the answer for the research questions stated in Chapter 1;

Firstly, Myanmar-owned hospitality businesses operating in Thailand may develop significant dependence on digital platforms for customer acquisition and market visibility. Furthermore, while this dependence can expand customer reach, it may simultaneously weaken pricing power and reduce net profitability. Moreover, key constraints include language barriers, uneven levels of digital literacy, limited financial resources, algorithmic opacity, and difficulties in converting platform users into direct repeat customers. Last, but not the least, digital colonisation can undermine long-term business sustainability by making growth dependent on digital infrastructures that business owners do not control or own. Finally, participants respond to these challenges through hybrid strategies, including encouraging direct orders, building communities through social media platforms, and engaging in selective use of digital intermediaries.

**Recommendations**

Business owners should prioritise calculating accurate net margins for individual products or services rather than relying solely on gross sales figures. They should also invest in developing low-cost direct channels, such as messaging-based ordering systems, QR-code menus, basic websites, and repeat-customer incentive programmes. Non-governmental organisations and business-support agencies should implement migrant-sensitive digital training initiatives that address platform literacy, pricing strategies, review management, and data stewardship. Policymakers may also consider interventions aimed at improving transparency in fee structures, strengthening dispute-resolution mechanisms, and expanding multilingual access. Additionally, platform companies should be encouraged to offer fairer support systems for micro-enterprises and provide clearer explanations of ranking algorithms and review processes.

However, while individual business strategies may help reduce certain forms of dependence, structural asymmetries cannot be resolved through entrepreneurship alone. Training initiatives without broader reforms to platform conditions may simply produce more skilled participants within the same unequal system. Likewise, regulatory interventions without parallel investments in local capacity building may have limited impact. A coordinated and multi-level approach is therefore necessary.

## Practical and Theoretical Implications

The practical implications of this study suggest that digital strategies for small hospitality firms should be assessed not only in terms of growth but also through the lens of control. A business may experience increased digital sales while simultaneously becoming more vulnerable if it is unable to retain customer relationships or protect profit margins. For support organisations, this indicates that training initiatives should extend beyond basic social media usage to include platform literacy, pricing analysis, and the development of direct customer channels.

From a theoretical perspective, the concept of digital colonisation becomes particularly compelling when grounded in everyday business practices. The concept need not remain confined to geopolitical analysis; it can also explain how local enterprises operating within routine service markets repeatedly transfer value and decision-making authority to digital intermediaries while appearing to participate in technological innovation. This expands its relevance for future research on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), migration, and platform-mediated labour.

The study further suggests that future theoretical development should pay greater attention to small business infrastructures. Existing scholarship often prioritises users, workers, or states, yet many everyday interactions with digital power are mediated through small firms that must absorb platform pressures while continuing to deliver services. Incorporating SMEs into critical digital theory can therefore contribute to both entrepreneurship studies and platform studies.

Another important implication concerns the concept of resilience. Within entrepreneurship research, resilience is frequently framed as a desirable capacity to adapt under conditions of pressure. However, this thesis argues that resilience should be interpreted more critically when digital platforms dictate the terms of adaptation. A business that continually adjusts to algorithmic rankings, commission fees, and promotional demands may appear resilient while, in practice, absorbing the costs of an unequal system. A critical perspective therefore shifts attention from whether entrepreneurs can adapt to questioning why such continuous adaptation is required and who ultimately benefits from it.

## Contribution to Academic Knowledge

This study makes a substantive contribution to the literature on digital transformation by reframing it as a question of power, rather than viewing it solely through the lens of technological adoption. Whereas much hospitality research foregrounds efficiency and innovation, this study demonstrates that engagement with digital platforms redistributes control over visibility, pricing, data, and customer relationships, thereby reshaping the structural conditions of market participation.

The research advances theoretical understanding by incorporating perspectives from digital colonisation and platform capitalism into an enterprise-level analytical framework. It illustrates how mechanisms such as algorithmic governance, data asymmetries, and commission-based models are embedded within routine business practices. In doing so, the study extends the concept of digital colonialism beyond macro-level critique, situating it within the everyday economic realities of small businesses.

Empirically, the study offers novel insights by examining Myanmar-owned hospitality enterprises operating in Thailand, highlighting how platform dependence intersects with migrant-specific constraints, including language barriers, regulatory uncertainty, and limited access to resources. It further develops the concept of asymmetrical digital participation, demonstrating that digital inclusion does not necessarily equate to enhanced autonomy.

Methodologically, the study operationalises critical digital theory within a qualitative SME research design, providing a grounded approach for analysing platform-mediated power in service-sector contexts.

**Future Research**

Future research could undertake comparative analyses across different national groups, business sizes, and geographic locations, extending beyond Thailand to include specific provinces and cities such as Chiang Mai and Mae Sot. Such comparisons may provide deeper insights into how contextual differences shape experiences of platform dependence. In order not to be self-reporting bias, future researcher need to use anonymous surveys, combine self-reports with objective data and ask respondents neutral or indirect questions.

Future scholars may also examine how platform dependence varies between accommodation providers and food-service businesses, or adopt mixed-method approaches to test whether a high proportion of platform-generated revenue is associated with weaker margin stability. Additionally, participatory research involving migrant business owners would be particularly valuable in identifying practical alternatives to one-sided forms of platform dependence.

**Final Reflection**

Digital inclusion is frequently framed as a universal remedy for economic participation and development. However, this thesis offers a more critical perspective by arguing that inclusion under unequal conditions may reproduce vulnerability rather than alleviate it. For migrant-owned hospitality businesses, a more equitable digital future depends not only on access to technological tools but also on access to rights, bargaining power, and viable alternatives to platform dependence.

The challenge is not to reject digital platforms entirely, but to question the assumption that participation alone is sufficient. The central objective is to develop forms of participation that enable migrant-owned businesses to remain visible and competitive without relinquishing disproportionate amounts of value, knowledge, and control. Achieving this requires the collective involvement of entrepreneurs, civil society organisations, regulators, and platform companies.

Accordingly, this research paper positions the hospitality shop, café, or guesthouse/hotel and also online sales platforms as an important site for understanding contemporary digital politics. The experiences of these small businesses reveal broader dynamics within the digital economy: connectivity may be genuine, beneficial, and economically necessary, yet it can still be structured through unequal relations of ownership and dependence.

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# Appendix A.

## Sample Research Interview Questions

**Study Title**

**The Impact of Digital Colonization on the Local Hospitality Sector of Myanmar Owners in Thailand**

**Interview Method**

Semi-structured interview

**Target Participants**

Myanmar owners or owner-managers of hospitality businesses in Thailand, such as restaurants, cafés, guesthouses, food stalls, or related service businesses that use digital platforms for promotion, booking, delivery, reviews, or payment.

**Purpose of the Interview**

This interview aims to explore how Myanmar-owned hospitality businesses in Thailand use digital platforms and how those platforms affect business visibility, profitability, customer relationships, operational control, and long-term independence. The interview also seeks to identify barriers to digital participation and the strategies owners use to manage or reduce dependence on third-party platforms.

**Mode of Interview**

Face-to-face / phone / online meeting ( Google Meet)

**Please read or listen to the following information carefully:**

1. **Voluntary participation**
   Your participation is completely voluntary. You may choose not to answer any question, and you may stop the interview at any time without any negative consequences.
2. **Purpose of the study**
   The purpose of this study is to understand how digital platforms shape the business experiences of Myanmar-owned hospitality enterprises in Thailand.
3. **Confidentiality**
   Everything you share will be treated confidentially. Your name, business name, and any identifying details will not be used in the final report unless you explicitly agree. A pseudonym or code will be used instead.
4. **Use of information**
   The information collected will only be used for academic research purposes.

5. **Recording**
   With your permission, this interview will be audio-recorded to ensure accuracy. If you do not want to be recorded, I will take written notes only.
6. **Risks and benefits**
   There are no major risks expected from participating, although some questions may feel sensitive if they relate to business challenges. You may skip any question you do not wish to answer.
7. **Right to withdraw**
   You may withdraw from the interview at any point before the data is finalized for analysis.

**Participant Demographic and Business Information Form**

Complete before the main interview or at the start.

**A. Participant Profile**

1. Participant code: _________
2. Date of interview: _________
3. Location of interview: _________
4. Interview mode: Face-to-face / Phone / Online
5. Gender: _________
6. Age range:
   [ ] 18–24
   [ ] 25–34
   [ ] 35–44
   [ ] 45–54
   [ ] 55 and above
7. Nationality/Ethnic background: _________
8. Preferred interview language: _________
9. Length of time living in Thailand: _________

**B. Business Profile**

10. Type of business:
    [ ] Restaurant
    [ ] Café
    [ ] Guesthouse
    [ ] Food stall
    [ ] Other: _________
11. Business location in Thailand: _________
12. Number of years operating this business: _________
13. Number of employees: _________
14. Main customer groups:
    [ ] Myanmar community
    [ ] Thai customers
    [ ] Tourists

[ ] Mixed
[ ] Other: _________

15. Digital platforms currently used:
    [ ] Facebook
    [ ] LINE
    [ ] Google Maps
    [ ] Grab
    [ ] Foodpanda
    [ ] Agoda
    [ ] Booking.com
    [ ] TikTok
    [ ] Instagram
    [ ] Other: _________
16. Main use of digital platforms:
    [ ] Promotion
    [ ] Delivery
    [ ] Booking
    [ ] Payment
    [ ] Reviews/reputation
    [ ] Customer communication
    [ ] Other: _________

**Theme A: Business Background and Digital Entry**

1. Can you tell me about yourself and your business?
2. How did you first begin using digital platforms for your business?
3. Which digital platform do you use most now, for what purpose?

**Theme B: Platform Dependence**

4. How important are digital platforms to the daily running of your business?
5. Roughly how much of your business comes from digital platforms compared with direct or walk-in customers?
6. What do you think would happen if your main platform stopped working or your business became less visible online for a week?

**Theme C: Profitability, Pricing, and Operational Control**

7. How do platform fees, commissions, or advertising costs affect your profits?
8. Have digital platforms influenced the prices, discounts, or promotions you offer?
9. Have platforms changed the way you manage daily operations?

10. Overall, do digital platforms help your business grow, or do they mainly increase pressure and costs?

**Theme D: Reviews, Rankings, and Visibility**

11. How important are online ratings, reviews, and rankings for your business?
12. Do you understand how platforms rank, recommend, or display your business to customers?
13. Have you ever changed your business practices because of reviews, ratings, or ranking systems?
14. Have you ever experienced unfair reviews, sudden drops in visibility, or unexplained account problems?

**Theme E: Customer Data, Control, and Digital Power**

15. Who do you think has more control over customer access and information: your business or the platform?
16. Do you feel that platforms own the customer relationship more than you do?
17. In what ways do digital platforms benefit your business?
18. In what ways do digital platforms reduce your independence or control?
19. Do you think platform rules are fair for small Myanmar-owned hospitality businesses in Thailand?

**Theme F: Barriers and Vulnerabilities**

20. What difficulties do you face when using digital platforms?
21. How do language, legal documents, or administrative requirements affect your ability to use these platforms?
22. Have you ever had problems contacting platform support or solving account or payment issues?
23. Do you think Myanmar business owners face additional difficulties compared with other business owners in Thailand?

**Theme G: Coping Strategies and Reducing Dependence**

24. What strategies do you use to reduce dependence on third-party digital platforms?
25. How do you encourage customers to return directly rather than through a platform?
26. Have you tried using your own digital channels, such as Facebook, LINE, TikTok, Instagram, or a website?

27. What kinds of support would help your business become less dependent on large digital platforms?

**Theme H: Reflection and Closing**

28. Looking at your overall experience, do digital platforms empower your business more, or control it more?
29. What would a fair digital business environment look like for Myanmar-owned hospitality businesses in Thailand?
30. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with digital platforms that we have not discussed?

**Closing Script**

Thank you very much for sharing your time and experiences. Your insights are very valuable for this research and will help improve understanding of how digital platforms affect Myanmar-owned hospitality businesses in Thailand.

As a reminder, your information will be kept confidential and used only for academic purposes. If you would like, I can also provide a summary of the study after it is completed.

Thank you again for your participation.