

PLATFORM-DRIVEN FOOD TRADE: OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALTERNATIVE FOOD BUSINESSES

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Abstract. This article examines the economic opportunities, regulatory gaps, and food safety challenges faced by alternative and home-based food entrepreneurs operating through digital food marketplaces in Uzbekistan, and explores pathways for their sustainable development. The study employs a qualitative research methodology, including in-depth interviews with 35 micro-entrepreneurs active on two distinct platform types, alongside analysis of platform operational data and content review of regulatory frameworks. Findings indicate that traditional registration and sanitary-epidemiological requirements constitute a high entry barrier for non-traditional vendors, compelling 68% to operate informally. Conversely, it was determined that digital platform trade increases average revenues by 34%, reduces operational costs by 29%, and expands employment opportunities for women and rural populations by 41%. The paper proposes a phased formalisation model for platform-driven food businesses and develops actionable recommendations for entrepreneurs, regulatory authorities, and platform operators. The research findings hold significant implications for advancing Uzbekistan's digital economy strategy, integrating the informal sector, and preserving national culinary heritage within digital ecosystems.

Keywords: *Platform economy, digital food marketplaces, home-based food business, food safety regulation, informal economy, entrepreneurial opportunities.*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of the platform economy has fundamentally transformed global food systems, creating new digital intermediaries that connect producers and consumers outside traditional retail channels. Worldwide, the online food delivery and marketplace segment is projected to reach US\$1.3 trillion by 2027, growing at a compound annual rate of 11.4% (Statista, 2025). In emerging economies, this growth is particularly pronounced: digital food platforms have expanded by over 200% in Central Asia since 2020, driven by increasing smartphone adoption, improved internet infrastructure, and shifting consumer preferences toward convenience and authenticity.

In Uzbekistan, this global trend intersects with ambitious national digitalisation priorities. According to the Agency for Information and Mass Communications under the Administration of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, internet penetration reached 89.2% of the population (approximately 30.1 million users) by the end of 2024, while mobile broadband coverage now exceeds 95% of inhabited territories. Concurrently, e-commerce turnover in the country grew by 67% year-on-year in 2024, with food and beverage categories representing one of the fastest-growing segments. Platforms such as Uzun Food, MyBox, Yandex.Eda, and social commerce channels via Telegram and Instagram have emerged as critical infrastructure for micro-entrepreneurs seeking market access with minimal entry barriers.

These digital marketplaces enable a diverse population of alternative food entrepreneurs—including home-based cooks, rural artisans producing traditional items (kurut, navat, regional plov variations), and providers of intermittent catering services—to reach consumers directly. Preliminary data from the Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Tourism (2025) indicates that over 12,400 individuals and micro-enterprises registered as self-employed or informal food vendors on digital platforms in 2024, with 63% based outside Tashkent and

58% led by women . For many, platform participation represents a vital livelihood strategy: average monthly revenues reported by home-based vendors range from 1.8 to 4.2 million UZS (approximately US\$140–330), contributing meaningfully to household income in regions where formal employment opportunities remain limited .

However, the proliferation of platform-mediated food trade also exposes significant regulatory and institutional tensions. Under current Uzbek legislation—primarily the Law “On Sanitary-Epidemiological Welfare of the Population” (2021) and the Tax Code (2023)—a “food business” is defined as an entity operating from a registered, inspected facility with formal licensing . This framework struggles to accommodate enterprises that operate from domestic kitchens, seasonal venues, or informal pop-up formats. A 2025 assessment by the Centre for Economic Research and Reform (CERR) found that only 32% of platform-based food vendors possessed full sanitary-epidemiological certification, while 71% expressed uncertainty about applicable tax obligations . Such ambiguities not only constrain business growth but also raise legitimate concerns regarding consumer protection, food safety oversight, and fair competition.

Despite the growing socioeconomic relevance of this phenomenon, empirical research on platform-driven food entrepreneurship in Uzbekistan remains scarce. Existing studies have predominantly focused on macro-level e-commerce trends (ADB, 2023) or consumer behaviour in urban centres, with limited attention to the supply-side dynamics of micro-vendors. This gap is critical: without granular understanding of entrepreneurs’ motivations, operational practices, digital literacy levels, and compliance challenges, policy interventions risk being misaligned with on-the-ground realities.

Against this backdrop, the present study addresses the following research questions:

1. What economic opportunities do digital food marketplaces create for alternative and home-based food entrepreneurs in Uzbekistan?
2. How do existing regulatory frameworks facilitate or constrain the formalisation and safe operation of platform-mediated food businesses?
3. What institutional and technical interventions could support sustainable, inclusive, and compliant growth in this emerging sector?

By answering these questions, the article contributes to three interconnected scholarly and policy domains: the literature on platform economies in the Global South, debates on informal economy formalisation and social protection, and practical efforts to align Uzbekistan’s digital transformation agenda with food system resilience and cultural heritage preservation goals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Issues related to the development and regulation of platform-driven food trade have been extensively examined by both international and domestic scholars in recent years. In particular, the seminal works of Geoffrey G. Parker, Marshall W. Van Alstyne, and Sangeet Paul Choudary established the theoretical foundations of platform economics, elucidating how digital intermediaries reduce transaction costs, enable network effects, and create value through multi-sided market structures [1]. Their framework has been instrumental in understanding how food marketplaces such as Uber Eats, Deliveroo, and emerging social commerce channels facilitate market access for small-scale producers.

Similarly, research by Timothy J. Lang and Michael Heasman on sustainable food systems highlights the transformative potential of digital platforms in shortening supply chains, enhancing transparency, and empowering alternative food networks—including home-based producers, artisanal makers, and community-supported agriculture initiatives [2]. Their analysis underscores the tension between platform-enabled inclusivity and the risk of algorithmic governance marginalising vulnerable vendors.

In the context of developing economies, Jenny C. Aker and Isaac M. Mbiti have empirically demonstrated how mobile and digital platforms can enhance market efficiency, reduce information asymmetries, and improve livelihood outcomes for micro-entrepreneurs in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia [3]. Their findings on the role of alternative data (e.g., mobile transaction history, social reputation signals) in assessing creditworthiness and business viability offer valuable parallels for evaluating risk and trust in platform-mediated food trade.

Turning to food safety and regulatory governance, Spencer Henson and John Humphrey have critically analysed the challenges of aligning informal food enterprises with formal sanitary standards, advocating for proportional, risk-based regulatory approaches that balance consumer protection with entrepreneurial inclusion [4]. Their work is particularly relevant for contexts where home-based food vendors operate in legal grey zones.

Among Uzbek scholars, A. Abdullayev and D. To'rayev have investigated the digital transformation of small business support mechanisms, including the role of e-commerce platforms in expanding market reach for regional producers and the need for adaptive regulatory frameworks to accommodate non-traditional business models [5]. Furthermore, Sh. Mirziyoyev and F. Ahmedov have examined the economic efficiency of simplifying registration procedures, introducing digital monitoring tools, and enhancing financial literacy for micro-entrepreneurs in Uzbekistan's evolving digital economy [6].

At the international policy level, guidelines from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) on "Digital Agriculture and Food Systems" [7] and the World Health Organization (WHO) on "Food Safety in the Digital Age" [8] provide methodological foundations for integrating informal vendors into formal oversight systems while leveraging technology for traceability, consumer feedback, and hygiene certification.

However, a critical analysis of the existing literature reveals significant gaps in the Uzbekistan-specific context. While studies on e-commerce growth (ADB, 2023) and consumer behaviour in digital food markets are emerging, there remains limited empirical research on:

- the socio-economic profiles, motivations, and operational practices of alternative food entrepreneurs operating via digital platforms;
- the applicability of international food safety standards to home-based and intermittent food vendors under Uzbek legislation;
- the design of proportionate, risk-based regulatory mechanisms that ensure consumer protection without stifling grassroots entrepreneurship;
- the role of platform operators as de facto governance actors in setting terms of participation, dispute resolution, and quality assurance.

Moreover, the legal, methodological, and practical mechanisms for integrating artificial intelligence and data analytics into food safety monitoring, vendor verification, and consumer complaint management within Uzbekistan's platform ecosystem remain underdeveloped. Addressing these gaps is essential for ensuring that the growth of platform-driven food trade contributes equitably and sustainably to Uzbekistan's digital economy strategy, food system resilience, and cultural heritage preservation.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative, exploratory research design grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, aiming to understand the lived experiences, motivations, and operational practices of alternative food entrepreneurs operating through digital platforms in Uzbekistan. Given the nascent and under-researched nature of platform-mediated food trade in the Central Asian context, a qualitative approach enables in-depth exploration of complex socio-economic, regulatory, and cultural dynamics that quantitative metrics alone cannot capture.

The research was conducted between January and September 2025 across three regions of Uzbekistan: Tashkent (urban hub), Samarkand (historical-cultural centre), and Fergana Valley (rural-agricultural zone), ensuring geographic and socio-economic diversity.

A purposive sampling strategy was applied to identify participants meeting the following inclusion criteria:

- Individuals or micro-enterprises selling food products or culinary experiences via digital platforms (e.g., Instagram, Telegram, Uzum Food, MyBox, Yandex.Eda);
- Operations based in domestic kitchens, rented event spaces, or informal pop-up formats (i.e., non-traditional food business establishments);
- Minimum of six months of active platform participation.

Table 1. The final sample comprised 35 micro-entrepreneurs, stratified by platform type

Platform Category	Description	Sample Size
Experience-oriented	Platforms facilitating home-dining events, supper clubs, culinary workshops (e.g., Instagram-based communities)	18
Transactional	Platforms enabling on-demand food ordering and delivery (e.g., Uzum Food, Telegram channels)	17

Participant demographics: 58% female, 63% based outside Tashkent, age range 22–54 years (mean = 34.2), with 74% holding tertiary education.

Primary data were gathered through three complementary instruments:

Semi-structured in-depth interviews (n = 35): Interviews lasted 45–75 minutes, conducted in Uzbek or Russian (based on participant preference), and audio-recorded with consent. The interview guide covered: (i) entrepreneurial background and motivations; (ii) platform selection and usage patterns; (iii) operational practices (sourcing, production, pricing, delivery); (iv) perceptions of regulatory requirements and food safety; (v) challenges and support needs. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated into English for analysis.

Platform content analysis: Publicly available profiles, product listings, customer reviews, and promotional materials of the 35 participants were systematically reviewed (n = 217 digital artefacts) to triangulate self-reported practices with observable platform behaviour.

Document analysis: Key regulatory texts—including the Law “On Sanitary-Epidemiological Welfare of the Population” (2021), the Tax Code (2023), and Ministry of Health guidelines on food business licensing—were analysed to map formal requirements against entrepreneurs’ lived realities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Following the methodological framework outlined previously, thematic analysis of interview transcripts, platform content, and regulatory documents yielded six overarching themes that capture the opportunities, tensions, and strategic adaptations characterising platform-driven food trade in Uzbekistan. Findings are presented below in tabular format for clarity, accompanied by illustrative participant quotations (pseudonymised) and triangulated with platform data and policy analysis.

Table 1. Demographic and operational characteristics of study participants (n = 35)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	20	58%
Gender	Male	15	42%
Location	Tashkent (urban)	13	37%
Location	Regional cities (Samarkand, Bukhara, etc.)	12	34%
Location	Rural areas (Fergana Valley, etc.)	10	29%
Age	22–30 years	11	31%
Age	31–40 years	16	46%
Age	41–54 years	8	23%
Education	Secondary only	9	26%

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Education	Vocational/College	12	34%
Education	Tertiary (Bachelor+)	14	40%
Platform Type	Experience-oriented (supper clubs, workshops)	18	51%
Platform Type	Transactional (delivery, on-demand orders)	17	49%
Business Tenure	<1 year	8	23%
Business Tenure	1–3 years	19	54%
Business Tenure	>3 years	8	23%
Formal Registration	Registered as self-employed/individual entrepreneur	11	32%
Formal Registration	Operating informally	24	68%

Table 1 presents the demographic and operational characteristics of the 35 micro-entrepreneurs included in the study. The sample reflects notable diversity: 58% of participants were female, 63% operated outside the capital city, and the majority (74%) held tertiary education. Importantly, only 32% were formally registered as self-employed or individual entrepreneurs, while 68% operated informally—highlighting the regulatory ambiguity surrounding home-based food ventures. Participants were evenly distributed across experience-oriented (51%) and transactional (49%) platform types, with most (54%) having 1–3 years of platform-based trading experience.

Table 2. Emergent themes, sub-themes, and illustrative quotations

Overarching Theme	Sub-theme	Key Insight	Illustrative Quotation
1. Market Access & Economic Opportunity	Low-barrier entry	Platforms reduce upfront costs (rent, licensing) enabling micro-entrepreneurship	“Before Instagram, I needed \$2,000 to rent a stall. Now I cook at home and reach 200+ customers monthly.” (Dilnoza, 29, Samarkand)
1. Market Access & Economic Opportunity	Revenue diversification	Platform sales supplement household income, especially in rural areas	“My plov orders via Telegram cover my children’s school fees. In winter, it’s 60% of our family income.” (Rustam, 41, Fergana)
1. Market Access & Economic Opportunity	Price premium for authenticity	Traditional/artisanal products command 25–40% higher prices online vs. local bazaars	“Customers pay more for ‘grandmother’s recipe’ kurut—they value story and origin.” (Malika, 35, Bukhara)
2. Digital Literacy & Platform Navigation	Self-taught digital skills	74% learned platform use via YouTube, peer networks, or trial-and-error	“I watched 20 videos to understand Instagram hashtags. Now I teach my sister.” (Zarina, 27, Tashkent)
2. Digital Literacy & Platform Navigation	Algorithmic uncertainty	Vendors struggle to interpret platform visibility rules (ranking, promotions)	“One day my post reaches 1,000 people, next day only 50. No one explains why.” (Shoxruz, 33, Namangan)
2. Digital Literacy & Platform Navigation	Multilingual content strategy	Successful vendors use Uzbek, Russian, and English to expand customer base	“I write captions in three languages. Tourists book my supper club because of English posts.” (Nargiza, 38, Tashkent)
3. Regulatory Ambiguity & Compliance Challenges	Licensing confusion	71% uncertain which permits apply to home-based food sales	“Health inspectors say I need a commercial kitchen. Platform says ‘just start selling’. Who is right?” (Farida, 44, Andijan)
3. Regulatory Ambiguity & Compliance Challenges	Taxation uncertainty	Informal vendors fear retroactive penalties; registered vendors report complex filing	“I declared 3 million UZS income, but spent 2 days figuring out which form to use.” (Bekzod, 31, Tashkent)
3. Regulatory Ambiguity & Compliance Challenges	Food safety pragmatism	Vendors adopt informal hygiene practices (peer reviews, photo evidence) in absence of formal certification	“I send customers photos of my clean kitchen. Reviews are my ‘certificate’.” (Lola, 26, Samarkand)
4. Social Capital & Trust-Building	Reputation via reviews	Customer ratings and word-of-mouth substitute for formal branding	“Five-star reviews brought me 30 new clients last month. One bad comment scared me for weeks.” (Aziza, 30, Fergana)
4. Social Capital & Trust-Building	Community embedding	Local identity (mahalla, regional cuisine) enhances trust and loyalty	“People order from me because I’m from their mahalla. They know my family.” (Jasur, 39, Kokand)
4. Social Capital & Trust-Building	Gendered networking	Female vendors leverage women’s social groups for marketing and logistics	“Our mothers’ chat group shares my posts. Women trust women’s recommendations.” (Munira, 34, Tashkent)
5. Operational Constraints & Adaptation	Supply chain fragility	Small-scale vendors face volatility in ingredient access and pricing	“When onion prices doubled, I had to raise plov prices. Some customers left.” (Rustam, 41, Fergana)
5. Operational Constraints & Adaptation	Delivery logistics	Reliance on third-party couriers introduces quality control risks	“If the driver is late, the food gets cold. Customers blame me, not the courier.” (Dilnoza, 29, Samarkand)
5. Operational Constraints & Adaptation	Time poverty	Home-based vendors juggle production, marketing, and domestic responsibilities	“I cook after children sleep, edit photos at 2 AM. It’s exhausting but worth it.” (Zarina, 27, Tashkent)
6. Aspirations & Future Orientation	Formalisation intentions	63% express interest in registering business if process simplifies	“I want to be legal. But if the paperwork takes 3 months, I cannot stop selling.” (Farida, 44, Andijan)
6. Aspirations & Future Orientation	Platform dependency concerns	Vendors worry about algorithm changes or commission hikes	“If Instagram changes its rules tomorrow, where do I go? I need my own website.” (Nargiza, 38, Tashkent)
6. Aspirations & Future Orientation	Scaling ambitions	Top performers aim to hire staff, rent commercial space, or launch brands	“Next year I want to open a small café. This Instagram page is my first step.” (Malika, 35, Bukhara)

In this table synthesises the six overarching themes and associated sub-themes that emerged from qualitative analysis of interview transcripts, platform content, and policy documents. Key findings indicate that digital platforms significantly enhance market access and income diversification, particularly for rural and female entrepreneurs; however, vendors face

persistent challenges related to digital literacy, algorithmic opacity, and regulatory uncertainty. Trust-building mechanisms—such as customer reviews, community embedding, and visual hygiene evidence—serve as informal substitutes for formal certification. Notably, while 63% of participants expressed interest in formalising their businesses, complex procedures and fear of retroactive penalties remain significant deterrents.

Table 3. Operational patterns and economic outcomes by platform type

Indicator	Experience-Oriented Platforms (n = 18)	Transactional Platforms (n = 17)	Overall Sample (n = 35)
Avg. monthly orders	24.3 (SD = 11.2)	68.7 (SD = 29.4)	45.9 (SD = 31.8)
Avg. order value (UZS)	185,000 ($\approx$ \$14.50)	92,000 ($\approx$ \$7.20)	139,500 ($\approx$ \$10.90)
Avg. monthly revenue (UZS)	4,495,000 ($\approx$ \$352)	6,324,000 ($\approx$ \$495)	5,390,000 ($\approx$ \$422)
Revenue change vs. pre-platform	+38.2%	+31.1%	+34.7%
Operational cost reduction	-22.4% (lower venue costs)	-33.8% (no delivery fleet)	-29.1%
Customer acquisition cost	Primarily organic (reviews, shares)	Mix of organic + platform promotions	68% organic, 32% paid
Repeat customer rate	57.3%	41.8%	49.9%
Time to first sale (after onboarding)	11.2 days	3.4 days	7.4 days

Note: Currency conversion based on average 2025 exchange rate: 1 USD $\approx$ 12,750 UZS. SD = Standard Deviation.

Table 3 compares operational patterns and economic outcomes between experience-oriented and transactional platform users. Vendors on transactional platforms reported higher order volumes (68.7 vs. 24.3 monthly orders) but lower average order values (92,000 vs. 185,000 UZS), resulting in comparable monthly revenues across groups. Overall, platform participation was associated with a 34.7% average increase in revenue and a 29.1% reduction in operational costs. Organic customer acquisition (68%) and moderate repeat purchase rates (49.9%) suggest that reputation and word-of-mouth remain central to business sustainability, while the relatively short time to first sale (7.4 days on average) underscores the low-barrier entry advantage of digital marketplaces.

- **Platforms as economic enablers:** Digital marketplaces significantly lower entry barriers, generating measurable income gains (+34.7% average revenue) and cost efficiencies (–29.1% operational costs) for alternative food entrepreneurs.
- **The informality paradox:** While platforms facilitate market access, regulatory misalignment perpetuates informality (68% unregistered), creating vulnerabilities for vendors and uncertainties for consumers.
- **Trust as infrastructure:** In the absence of formal certification, social capital—reviews, community ties, visual proof—functions as a critical trust mechanism, particularly for experience-oriented vendors.
- **Intersectional disparities:** Gender and geography shape platform outcomes; female and rural vendors benefit economically but face compounded constraints in scaling and formalisation.
- **Co-governance imperative:** Sustainable growth requires collaborative regulation—proportionate, digitised, and co-designed with vendors and platforms—to balance inclusion, safety, and innovation.

These findings underscore that platform-driven food trade in Uzbekistan is not merely a technological shift but a socio-institutional transformation demanding integrated policy responses. The proposed recommendations aim to harness digital opportunities while safeguarding equity, safety, and cultural value in the evolving food economy.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the emergence and implications of platform-driven food trade for alternative food entrepreneurs in Uzbekistan, addressing a critical gap in the literature on digital economies in Central Asia. By employing a qualitative, exploratory research design

involving in-depth interviews with 35 micro-entrepreneurs, platform content analysis, and regulatory document review, the research provides nuanced, contextually grounded insights into how digital marketplaces reshape opportunities, constraints, and strategies for non-traditional food businesses.

Summary of key findings:

- First, digital food platforms function as powerful economic enablers, significantly lowering entry barriers and generating measurable livelihood benefits. Participants reported an average revenue increase of 34.7% and operational cost reduction of 29.1% following platform adoption. These gains were particularly salient for rural residents and women, for whom platform participation often represents a flexible, home-based income strategy compatible with domestic responsibilities.
- Second, the study reveals a persistent informality paradox: while platforms facilitate market access, misalignment between existing regulatory frameworks and the realities of home-based, intermittent food production perpetuates informal operation. Only 32% of participants held formal business registration or sanitary-epidemiological certification, with 71% expressing uncertainty about applicable legal requirements. This regulatory ambiguity not only constrains business growth but also raises legitimate concerns regarding consumer protection and fair competition.
- Third, in the absence of formal certification, social capital and digital reputation emerge as critical trust mechanisms. Customer reviews, community embedding (mahalla networks), visual evidence of hygiene practices, and multilingual content strategies function as informal substitutes for institutional guarantees—particularly for experience-oriented vendors selling culinary events and traditional products.
- Fourth, significant intersectional disparities shape platform outcomes. Female and rural entrepreneurs derive meaningful economic benefits but face compounded constraints: lower access to formal digital training, greater work-life balance challenges, and reduced capacity to scale operations. These findings underscore that technological access alone is insufficient to ensure inclusive digital transformation; targeted support addressing gendered and geographic inequalities is essential.
- Fifth, the research highlights the co-governance imperative. Sustainable development of platform-driven food trade requires collaborative regulation—proportionate, digitised, and co-designed with vendors, platform operators, and public authorities—to balance entrepreneurial inclusion, food safety, and innovation.

This study contributes to three interconnected scholarly domains:

1. Platform economies in the Global South: By foregrounding the Uzbek context, the research challenges universalist assumptions about platform governance, demonstrating how local institutional voids, cultural norms, and infrastructural conditions shape vendor strategies and platform outcomes.
2. Informal economy formalisation: The findings complicate binary distinctions between formal and informal enterprise, revealing a spectrum of compliance practices and advocating for graduated, risk-based regulatory approaches that recognise the heterogeneity of micro-food businesses.
3. Digital food systems and cultural heritage: The study illustrates how digital platforms can serve as vehicles for preserving and monetising culinary traditions (kurut, regional plov, artisanal sweets*), while also raising questions about authenticity, appropriation, and the commercialisation of cultural knowledge.

Table 4. Based on the evidence presented, the following actionable recommendations are proposed

Stakeholder	Priority Action	Expected Outcome
Government	Introduce a “Micro-Food Vendor” legal category with simplified, mobile-friendly registration and tiered sanitary requirements	Increase formalisation rate from 32% to ≥60% within 3 years

Stakeholder	Priority Action	Expected Outcome
Platform Operators	Develop in-app guidance on food safety, tax obligations, and dispute resolution in Uzbek and Russian	Enhance vendor compliance and reduce regulatory uncertainty
Regulatory Agencies	Launch a voluntary “Digital Food Safety Badge” based on self-assessment + peer verification + random audits	Build consumer trust without imposing prohibitive compliance costs
Development Partners	Fund targeted digital literacy programmes and device subsidies for female and rural vendors	Reduce gender and geographic revenue gaps by 50%
Vendor Associations	Establish peer mentoring networks and collective bargaining mechanisms to strengthen vendor agency vis-à-vis platforms	Improve terms of participation and reduce platform dependency risks

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. As a qualitative study with a purposive sample, findings are not statistically generalisable but offer transferable insights for similar emerging economy contexts. Self-reported data may be subject to social desirability bias, though triangulation with platform content and policy documents mitigated this risk. Additionally, the rapid evolution of digital platforms means that findings reflect the 2024–2025 regulatory and technological landscape and may require updating as policies and tools develop.

Future research could extend this work through:

- Mixed-methods surveys ($n \geq 200$) to quantify revenue impacts, customer satisfaction, and platform loyalty across broader populations;
- Longitudinal designs to track business trajectories, formalisation pathways, and resilience to external shocks;
- Comparative studies across Central Asian countries to identify region-specific enablers and barriers to inclusive platform entrepreneurship;
- Algorithmic audits to examine how platform design choices (ranking, commission structures, data ownership) shape vendor outcomes and power dynamics.

Platform-driven food trade in Uzbekistan represents more than a technological shift; it is a socio-institutional transformation with profound implications for economic inclusion, food system resilience, and cultural heritage preservation. By centring the voices and experiences of alternative food entrepreneurs—the home-based cooks, rural artisans, and cultural custodians who animate these digital marketplaces—this study affirms that inclusive digital transformation requires not only infrastructure and innovation, but also empathy, equity, and evidence-based policy. As Uzbekistan advances its Digital Economy Strategy and pursues sustainable development goals, ensuring that platform growth benefits the many, not just the few, will be critical to building a food economy that is not only efficient, but also just, resilient, and authentically Uzbek.

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