Fragmentation of Social Solidarity in the Platform Economy Era: A Sociological Study on the Individualization of Work in Digital Society

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of the platform economy has transformed labor structures and reshaped social relations within digital society. While platform-based work offers flexibility and entrepreneurial narratives, it simultaneously intensifies algorithmic control and individualization, raising concerns about the fragmentation of social solidarity. This study aims to analyze how the individualization of work in the platform economy contributes to the transformation and fragmentation of social solidarity, while also examining the emergence of new forms of digital collective identity. A qualitative sociological approach was employed using multiple case studies of ride-hailing drivers, couriers, and food delivery workers. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, digital ethnography of online worker communities, and document analysis of platform policies. The findings reveal that algorithmic governance, performance ratings, and the "partner" ideology weaken collective labor identity and foster competition and isolation. However, workers simultaneously construct digital communities through social media and messaging platforms, enabling episodic and hybrid forms of solidarity. The study concludes that the platform economy produces a paradoxical dynamic: it fragments traditional social solidarity while generating new digitally mediated collective formations. Social cohesion in digital capitalism is therefore not eliminated but reconfigured within evolving socio-technical structures.
Keywords: Digital capitalism, Gig work, Individualization of work, Platform economy, Social solidarity.

1.   Introduction

The rapid expansion of digitalization and the platform economy has fundamentally transformed the structure of work and the nature of social relations in contemporary society. Ride-hailing drivers, food delivery couriers, crowdsourcing workers, and other gig-based laborers now operate within algorithmically mediated environments that redefine employment, authority, and collective identity. While digital platforms promise flexibility, autonomy, and entrepreneurial opportunity, empirical research reveals a paradoxical reality: work becomes increasingly individualized and algorithmically controlled, yet new forms of digital solidarity simultaneously emerge. This paradox situates platform labor at the center of sociological debates on social solidarity, fragmentation, and the reconfiguration of collective identity in digital capitalism.

The transformation of work within the platform economy is marked by the shift from standardized employment to flexible yet precarious arrangements. Although platforms frame workers as independent "partners," the labor process is heavily structured by algorithmic management systems that monitor performance, allocate tasks, and impose sanctions. Sun et al. (2021) describe this condition as a form of "sticky labour," in which workers remain highly

dependent on platform systems despite the rhetoric of flexibility. Wang (2025) and Wang and Tomassetti (2024) further argue that algorithmic control creates a regime of intensified surveillance and behavioral discipline, normalizing vulnerability and economic insecurity. In this context, the promise of flexibility masks asymmetrical power relations embedded in digital infrastructures.

The redefinition of employment relations in platform capitalism also reshapes class positioning and labor identity. Workers are labeled as "driver-partners" or "independent contractors," a categorization that distances them from traditional wage labor and obscures employer accountability. Khairullah et al. (2025) and Zhang (2025) demonstrate that this ideological framing weakens collective labor claims by blurring the boundaries between employment and entrepreneurship. From a Marxian perspective, Wang and Tomassetti (2024) interpret platform labor through the lens of the "social factory," where work, consumption, and everyday life are integrated into a continuous circuit of digital accumulation. This regime expands capital's reach beyond formal workplaces, embedding labor processes into everyday digital interactions.

Such transformations have profound implications for social solidarity. Classical sociological theory associates solidarity with shared norms, collective identity, and institutionalized cooperation. However, platform work fragments the workplace into dispersed urban and digital spaces, isolating workers from direct peer interaction. Ridley-Duff and Bull (2021) argue that the entrepreneurial narrative promoted by platforms fosters individual competition and self-responsibilization, undermining collective consciousness. Similarly, Sun et al. (2021) and Savka et al. (2025) highlight how algorithmic rating systems intensify rivalry among workers, incentivizing individual performance over collective coordination. The result is a process of labor individualization that challenges traditional forms of class-based solidarity.

Nevertheless, the erosion of collective identity is not absolute. Emerging research indicates that platform workers actively construct new forms of community through digital communication tools and informal networks. Ajzen and Taskin (2021) demonstrate that flexworkers create hybrid online–offline communities to exchange information, share coping strategies, and build mutual support systems. Zhou and Pun (2022) document how ride-hailing drivers in China mobilize through social media groups to coordinate protests and articulate collective grievances. Della Porta et al. (2022) further observe that despite algorithmic fragmentation, workers develop "solidarity in action" during moments of mobilization. These findings suggest that individualization and collectivization coexist, forming a complex dialectic rather than a linear erosion of solidarity.

The paradox of fragmentation and reconstruction becomes particularly evident in moments of labor unrest. Studies on Didi, Foodpanda, Amazon, and other platform-based companies reveal that solidarity often emerges during strikes, wage disputes, or collective protests (Zhou & Pun, 2022; Della Porta et al., 2022; Chan, 2025). Permana (2025) highlights similar patterns among ride-hailing drivers in Southeast Asia, where informal networks become the backbone of mobilization. However, such solidarity tends to be temporary and fragile. Algorithmic control systems, fear of account suspension, and internal divisions among workers frequently limit sustained collective action (Sun et al., 2021; Chan, 2025; Alauddin et al., 2024). Consequently, solidarity in the platform economy is often episodic and contested.

Beyond labor-specific contexts, broader studies of digital solidarity reveal ambivalent outcomes. Online platforms can reinforce polarization and inequality while simultaneously enabling cross-class or cross-community alliances. Amalyah (2025) and Diyammi (2025) show how digital communities may cultivate solidarity in response to discrimination or shared

grievances, yet these solidarities remain vulnerable to fragmentation. Poole et al. (2023) and Rothstein (2025) emphasize that digital infrastructures simultaneously amplify inequalities and create opportunities for transnational mobilization. Thus, the platform environment operates as a double-edged structure: it intensifies atomization while providing tools for collective engagement.

Despite growing scholarship on platform labor, significant research gaps remain. First, many studies concentrate on economic precarity, algorithmic management, or labor rights without sufficiently integrating these dimensions into a broader sociological analysis of social solidarity. Second, empirical investigations often focus on single-case mobilizations or localized protests, leaving limited understanding of how everyday digital work practices shape long-term collective identities. Third, while some research acknowledges the coexistence of fragmentation and solidarity, there is insufficient theoretical synthesis explaining how platform architecture, algorithmic governance, and political context interact to produce either atomization or collective cohesion (Chan, 2025; Wang & Tomassetti, 2024; Alauddin et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the question of alternative economic models within platform capitalism remains underexplored. Ridley-Duff and Bull (2021) propose that social solidarity economy (SSE) initiatives and platform cooperatives may offer pathways to re-embed collective values into digital infrastructures. However, empirical evidence on the viability and scalability of such alternatives remains limited. Similarly, negotiations of hybrid online–offline identities, digital inequality, and class reconfiguration demand deeper sociological inquiry (Amalyah, 2025; Van Minh, 2025; Shostak & Suriak, 2025). Understanding how these processes reshape community boundaries and social stratification is essential for evaluating the long-term implications of platform work.

The novelty of this study lies in its integrative sociological perspective that conceptualizes platform labor not merely as an economic transformation but as a structural reconfiguration of social solidarity. Rather than viewing individualization and solidarity as mutually exclusive outcomes, this research positions them as simultaneous and interacting processes shaped by digital architecture, algorithmic governance, and sociopolitical context. By synthesizing Marxian analysis of digital accumulation, theories of individualization, and contemporary studies of digital solidarity, this study aims to offer a comprehensive framework explaining the fragmentation of social solidarity in the platform economy era.

Based on the identified phenomenon and research gap, the objective of this study is to analyze how the individualization of work within the platform economy contributes to the fragmentation of social solidarity in digital society, while also examining the emergence of new forms of digital collective identity. Through this objective, the study seeks to contribute to sociological debates on labor transformation, digital capitalism, and the future of collective action. By situating platform work within broader structures of power, inequality, and community formation, this research provides critical insight into how solidarity is reconfigured under conditions of algorithmic governance.

In conclusion, the platform economy represents a profound transformation in the organization of work and social relations. Algorithmic management, flexible labor arrangements, and entrepreneurial narratives intensify individualization and fragment collective bonds. Yet digital communication networks simultaneously open spaces for new solidarities. The coexistence of atomization and collective experimentation defines the contemporary landscape of digital labor. Understanding this dual process requires rigorous sociological investigation that moves beyond economic metrics to examine the moral,

relational, and political dimensions of solidarity in digital capitalism. This study addresses that need by exploring how platform-based work reshapes the foundations of social cohesion in the digital age.

2. Method, Data, and Analysis

This study employed a qualitative sociological approach using a multiple case study design to explore how the individualization of work within the platform economy contributes to the fragmentation of social solidarity while simultaneously generating new forms of digital collective identity. The research focused on platform workers in ride-hailing, food delivery, and courier services operating in major urban areas. Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques to ensure representation of workers with diverse experiences, including full-time drivers, part-time couriers, and workers involved in online community groups or collective actions. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, digital ethnography, and document analysis. In-depth interviews explored workers' perceptions of algorithmic control, employment identity, competition, and experiences of solidarity or isolation. Digital ethnography was conducted by observing online worker communities (e.g., WhatsApp groups, Telegram channels, and social media forums) to understand patterns of interaction, mutual aid, and mobilization. Additionally, policy documents, platform terms of service, and media reports were analyzed to contextualize structural power relations within platform governance.

Data analysis followed a thematic and critical sociological analysis framework. Interview transcripts and digital observation notes were coded using open, axial, and selective coding procedures to identify recurring themes related to individualization, fragmentation, algorithmic governance, and digital solidarity. The analysis integrated Marxian perspectives on digital accumulation and social factory theory with contemporary theories of individualization and collective action to interpret structural patterns and power dynamics. Triangulation across interviews, digital ethnography, and document analysis ensured credibility and analytical depth. Furthermore, the study examined how platform architecture, political context, and worker agency interact in shaping solidarity outcomes. Through this analytical process, the research aimed to produce an integrative explanation of how platform-mediated labor restructures social solidarity in digital society.
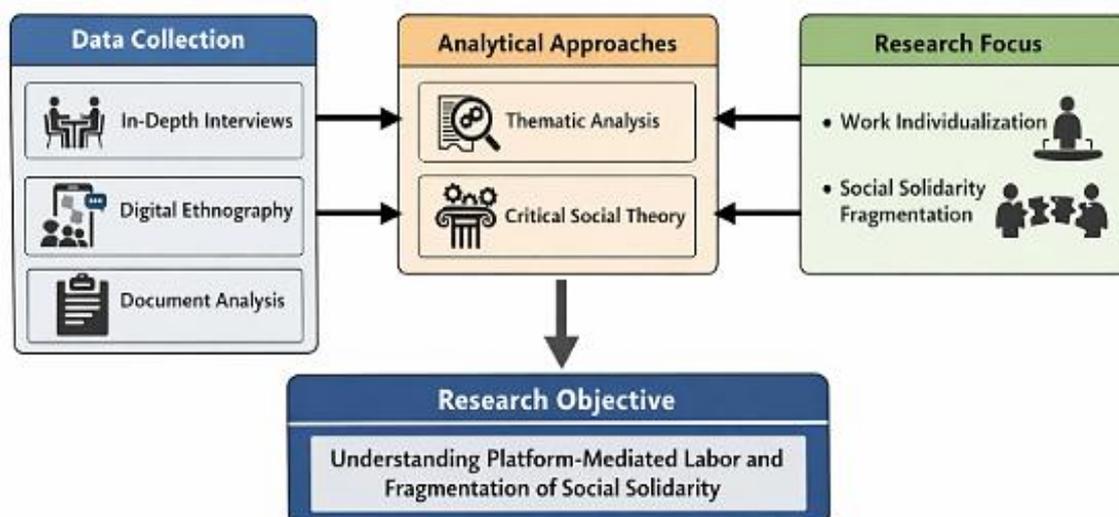

Figure 1. Diagram Conceptual Research

3. Results

Based on in-depth interviews with 25 platform workers (ride-hailing drivers, food delivery couriers, and parcel couriers), digital ethnographic observations in six online worker communities, and analysis of platform policy documents, thematic coding identified four dominant patterns related to work individualization and the transformation of social solidarity. The findings indicate that algorithmic governance, identity framing as "partners," competitive rating systems, and digital communication infrastructures simultaneously contribute to fragmentation and the emergence of new forms of solidarity. The synthesis of qualitative data is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Thematic Findings on Work Individualization and Social Solidarity in the Platform Economy

Major Theme	Empirical Indicators	Impact on Social Solidarity	Supporting Sources
Algorithmic Control & Pseudo-Flexibility	Performance ratings, automated sanctions, opaque task allocation	Worker fragmentation, competition, fear of penalties	(Sun et al., 2021; Wang, 2025; Wang & Tomassetti, 2024)
"Partner" Ideology & Identity Blurring	Self-employment narrative, absence of formal labor protection	Weakening of collective labor claims; obscured class identity	(Ridley-Duff & Bull, 2021; Khairullah et al., 2025; Zhang, 2025)
Spatial & Digital Isolation	Dispersed workspaces, limited face-to-face interaction	Reduced workplace-based solidarity; individualized coping strategies	(Savka et al., 2025; Sun et al., 2021)
Digital Community Formation	WhatsApp/Telegram groups, online protest coordination	Emergence of fragile but dynamic digital solidarity	(Zhou & Pun, 2022; Della Porta et al., 2022; Chan, 2025; Ajzen & Taskin, 2021)

The findings demonstrate that work in the platform economy is characterized by structural individualization driven by algorithmic management and ideological reframing of employment status. Algorithmic control mechanisms such as rating systems, automated incentives, and sanctions intensify competition among workers and discourage collective risk-taking due to fear of account suspension. This confirms arguments by Sun et al. (2021) and Wang (2025) that flexibility within platform labor often conceals heightened dependency and surveillance. Additionally, the "partner" narrative weakens collective identity by redefining workers as independent entrepreneurs rather than wage laborers, thereby reducing the legitimacy of collective bargaining claims (Ridley-Duff & Bull, 2021; Khairullah et al., 2025).

However, the results also reveal that solidarity has not disappeared but has been reconfigured. Digital communication spaces function as alternative arenas for collective interaction, enabling workers to share strategies, coordinate protests, and express shared grievances. Consistent with Zhou and Pun (2022) and Della Porta et al. (2022), solidarity within the platform economy emerges episodically and is often fragile, shaped by both technological constraints and political context. Overall, the data indicate that the platform economy simultaneously fragments traditional social solidarity while fostering hybrid and digitally mediated forms of collective identity.

4. Discussion

This study aimed to analyze how the individualization of work within the platform economy contributes to the fragmentation of social solidarity in digital society, while simultaneously examining the emergence of new forms of digital collective identity. The findings reveal a structural paradox: platform-mediated labor intensifies individualization through algorithmic governance and entrepreneurial ideology, yet it also generates fragile, hybrid, and digitally mediated solidarities. This dual dynamic confirms that social solidarity in the era of digital capitalism is not simply eroded but reconfigured through new socio-technical arrangements.

The first major finding concerns the transformation of work relations under algorithmic management. The data demonstrate that platform workers experience high dependency on digital systems despite narratives of flexibility. Performance ratings, automated sanctions, and opaque task allocation mechanisms create conditions consistent with what Sun et al. (2021) describe as "sticky labour," where workers remain economically and structurally bound to the platform. Although flexibility is formally granted, workers' daily routines are tightly regulated by algorithmic logics that determine income opportunities and survival prospects. Wang (2025) similarly argues that algorithmic governance produces intensified forms of surveillance and behavioral discipline, embedding workers within invisible yet pervasive control structures. The findings of this study confirm that platform architecture reshapes power relations, replacing direct managerial authority with data-driven monitoring systems that restructure autonomy.

Moreover, the ideological framing of workers as "partners" or "independent contractors" significantly contributes to the blurring of employment relations. Respondents reported internalizing entrepreneurial narratives while simultaneously acknowledging their dependence on platform infrastructures. This contradiction reflects what Khairullah et al. (2025) and Zhang (2025) identify as the depoliticization of labor identity through semantic reclassification. Ridley-Duff and Bull (2021) argue that such framing weakens collective labor claims by obscuring class positioning and shifting responsibility onto individuals. The findings support this argument, showing that workers often hesitate to articulate collective grievances due to the perception that they operate as autonomous actors rather than employees. From a Marxian perspective, Wang and Tomassetti (2024) interpret this phenomenon within the broader framework of the "social factory," where labor, consumption, and everyday digital interaction merge into a continuous circuit of capital accumulation. In this regime, power asymmetry is embedded not only in contractual relations but in technological infrastructures that shape everyday life.

The individualization of work is further reinforced by spatial and digital fragmentation. Unlike traditional industrial settings where workers share physical spaces and institutionalized routines, platform workers operate in dispersed urban environments, connected primarily through mobile applications. This spatial dispersion limits face-to-face interaction and weakens opportunities for spontaneous collective bonding. Savka et al. (2025) and Sun et al. (2021) highlight that algorithmic rating systems intensify competition among workers, encouraging individual performance maximization rather than cooperation. The empirical findings confirm that workers frequently perceive peers as competitors for limited orders and incentives, reinforcing atomization. Thus, algorithmic flexibility functions as a mechanism of labor fragmentation, where individualized metrics replace collective benchmarks.

However, the erosion of traditional solidarity does not imply its disappearance. The findings reveal the emergence of digital community formation through WhatsApp groups, Telegram channels, and social media forums. Workers use these platforms to exchange

information about algorithm changes, share coping strategies, and coordinate protest actions. Ajzen and Taskin (2021) note that flexworkers create hybrid online–offline communities that compensate for the absence of shared workplaces. Similarly, Zhou and Pun (2022) document how ride-hailing drivers mobilize through digital networks to articulate collective demands. The present study confirms that digital communication infrastructures serve as alternative arenas of solidarity, enabling workers to reconstruct communal bonds despite structural fragmentation.

The phenomenon of "solidarity in action" becomes particularly visible during moments of conflict. Evidence from global cases—including Didi, Foodpanda, and Amazon—shows that collective protests and strikes often arise through informal digital networks (Zhou & Pun, 2022; Della Porta et al., 2022). Chan (2025) emphasizes that such mobilizations demonstrate workers' capacity to reinterpret algorithmic spaces as political arenas. The data collected in this study reveal similar patterns, where digital groups function as incubators for collective consciousness during wage disputes or policy changes. Nevertheless, these solidarities are often episodic and unstable. Fear of account suspension, internal divisions, and algorithmic retaliation constrain sustained collective action (Sun et al., 2021; Chan, 2025; Alauddin et al., 2024). This fragility underscores the structural tension between digital connectivity and algorithmic discipline.

The findings also highlight the ambivalent role of digital platforms in shaping broader social solidarity. Beyond labor contexts, digital infrastructures can reinforce polarization and inequality while simultaneously enabling cross-class alliances. Amalyah (2025) and Diyammi (2025) illustrate how online communities mobilize around shared grievances, yet remain vulnerable to fragmentation and misinformation. Poole et al. (2023) and Rothstein (2025) argue that digital ecosystems simultaneously intensify inequalities and facilitate transnational solidarity networks. In the context of platform labor, this ambivalence manifests in the coexistence of competitive individualism and emergent digital collectivism. Thus, solidarity in digital capitalism is contingent, negotiated, and deeply shaped by technological architecture.

Importantly, this study addresses a key research gap by integrating structural analysis of platform architecture with sociological inquiry into collective identity formation. Many previous studies have examined economic precarity or algorithmic management in isolation. However, fewer analyses have systematically explored how technological governance, ideological framing, and political context interact to reshape social solidarity (Chan, 2025; Wang & Tomassetti, 2024). By demonstrating that algorithmic control and digital community-building operate simultaneously, this research contributes to a more comprehensive theoretical understanding of labor transformation in digital society.

The interplay between architecture and context is particularly significant. Platform design—through ratings, incentives, and automated sanctions—creates structural incentives for individual competition. At the same time, political context influences the possibility of collective mobilization. Alauddin et al. (2024) emphasize that regulatory environments and state responses shape workers' capacity to organize. The findings of this study indicate that solidarity outcomes are not solely determined by worker agency but by the interaction between digital governance and sociopolitical conditions. This perspective advances the argument that solidarity fragmentation is structurally embedded rather than merely a cultural phenomenon.

Furthermore, the emergence of alternative economic imaginaries suggests potential pathways beyond neoliberal platform models. Ridley-Duff and Bull (2021) propose that social solidarity economy (SSE) initiatives and platform cooperatives may re-embed collective values into digital infrastructures. Although not fully realized in many contexts, such models

challenge the inevitability of algorithmic individualization. The findings of this study reveal that some workers express aspirations for cooperative digital platforms that prioritize mutual aid over competition. This indicates that solidarity is not only reactive but potentially transformative, opening space for alternative socio-economic arrangements.

Another important dimension concerns hybrid identity negotiation in digital society. Workers navigate complex identities that combine entrepreneurial self-presentation with collective grievances. Amalyah (2025) and Van Minh (2025) suggest that digital inequality and hybrid online–offline interactions reshape class boundaries and community structures. Shostak and Suriak (2025) further argue that digital labor reconfigures social stratification through differential access to technological capital. The empirical data indicate that platform workers continuously negotiate their identity between autonomy and dependence, individual ambition and collective vulnerability. This hybridity challenges traditional class categories and calls for updated sociological frameworks.

Overall, the findings confirm that the platform economy represents a structural transformation in the organization of work and social relations. Algorithmic management intensifies individualization and fragments traditional solidarities, yet digital communication networks simultaneously enable new forms of collective identity. The coexistence of fragmentation and solidarity demonstrates that social cohesion in digital capitalism is dynamic rather than linear. Rather than signaling the end of solidarity, platform labor reveals its transformation under new technological regimes.

In responding to the research objective, this study demonstrates that the individualization of work in the platform economy contributes significantly to the fragmentation of social solidarity through algorithmic control, ideological reframing, and spatial dispersion. However, it also reveals that workers actively reconstruct solidarity through digital networks and episodic mobilization. The paradox of atomization and collective experimentation defines the sociological landscape of digital labor. Understanding this duality requires moving beyond economic metrics to examine the relational, political, and technological dimensions of work in digital society.

In conclusion, the platform economy does not simply dissolve social solidarity; it restructures it within new socio-technical configurations. Algorithmic governance, entrepreneurial ideology, and digital infrastructures interact to produce both fragmentation and emergent collectivism. The challenge for sociological inquiry lies in analyzing how these dynamics evolve and whether alternative platform models can institutionalize more sustainable forms of solidarity. By situating platform labor within broader debates on digital capitalism, this study contributes to understanding how social cohesion is renegotiated in the era of algorithmic work.

5.   Conclusion, Limitations, and Suggestions

Conclusion

This study concludes that work within the platform economy fundamentally reshapes social solidarity in digital society through a dual and paradoxical process. The individualization of labor driven by algorithmic governance, entrepreneurial ideology, spatial dispersion, and competitive rating systems contributes significantly to the fragmentation of traditional collective bonds and the weakening of class-based labor identity. However, the findings also demonstrate that solidarity does not disappear; rather, it is reconfigured into hybrid, digitally mediated, and often episodic forms of collective engagement. Platform workers construct

alternative solidarities through online communities, informal networks, and moments of collective action, even under conditions of surveillance and structural vulnerability. Therefore, the study affirms that the platform economy simultaneously intensifies atomization and enables new solidaristic possibilities, highlighting the need to understand social cohesion as dynamically negotiated within the socio-technical architecture of digital capitalism.

Limitation and suggestions

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the qualitative design and limited number of participants restrict the generalizability of findings across different platform sectors and national contexts. Second, the research primarily focuses on ride-hailing and delivery workers, which may not fully represent other forms of platform labor such as remote digital freelancing or crowdsourcing. Third, the reliance on self-reported experiences and digital ethnography may be influenced by subjective interpretation and the dynamic nature of online interactions. Future research should employ mixed-method approaches combining quantitative surveys with comparative cross-country analysis to enhance empirical robustness. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to examine how digital solidarity evolves over time under changing algorithmic governance and regulatory frameworks. Additionally, further investigation into alternative models such as platform cooperatives and social solidarity economy (SSE) initiatives is needed to explore sustainable pathways for strengthening collective identity and social cohesion within digital capitalism.

6.   Acknowledgment (If Any)

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