
Illusory Freedom and Fragile Social Protection: Digital Discourse of Indonesian Ride-Hailing Drivers

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Abstract

The study aims to examine how ride-hailing drivers articulate issues of income instability, unfair deductions, and employment classification in digital public spaces, and how these narratives reflect broader power relations in the gig economy. This study employs a qualitative netnography approach, supported by grounded-theory-informed analysis. Data were collected from 200 publicly accessible comments on high-engagement YouTube videos discussing ride-hailing drivers' demands for fair compensation. The data were coded inductively to identify recurring discursive patterns, which were then interpreted using Foucault's theory of neoliberal power and governmentality. No interaction was made with platform users, and identifiable elements were removed to ensure ethical compliance. Findings reveal four dominant discourses: (1) financial precarity resulting from operational cost burden and volatile income; (2) perceptions of unfair and opaque platform deductions; (3) employment status ambiguity caused by the use of "*mitra*" (partner) terminology despite platform control resembling employer-employee relations; and (4) strong expectations for state intervention due to drivers' limited bargaining power. These interconnected themes demonstrate that precarity is not incidental but engineered through algorithmic management and risk externalization. The study introduces two conceptual contributions to gig work literature: administrative exclusion, where employment ambiguity becomes a mechanism to deny access to social protection, and collective compensation, where driver communities compensate for institutional absence. The findings highlight the need for adaptive social protection policies and clear regulatory frameworks for gig workers.

Keywords: gig workers, ride-hailing drivers; netnography; social protection; platform labor

1. Introduction

To ensure workers' safety, coverage under social protection schemes is increasingly vital. Social protection comprises public measures that safeguard individuals and families from economic and social hardship (World Bank, 2025). Serving as a social safety net, it supports global poverty reduction. Yet, the International Labour Organization (ILO) reports that over 80% of people in low-income countries (LICs) still lack access to such systems. In Indonesia, the Chief Executive Officer of the Social Security Administration Agency for Employment stated that about 92 million of 120 million

workers are registered, but only 32 of 52 million contributors remain active due to low social protection literacy (Tempo, 2025). These challenges are closely tied to domestic economic instability.

Indonesia's economic quality remains low, limiting its capacity to create decent jobs. Consequently, underemployment has risen, with informal employment exceeding formal jobs. In 2021, the informal sector made up over 58% of the workforce, while only 41% were in formal employment (Septiani et al., 2025). The insecurity faced by these workers highlights the precarity of their livelihoods and the growing constraints on their "right to live" (Mahadika & Pradana, 2025). This disparity reflects unequal power relations in the economic system that hinder informal workers' access to social protection.

According to Foucault (1982), power shapes behaviour by compelling individuals to follow rules set by authorities through specific conditions. It operates through five interrelated forms: sovereignty, discipline, biopower, governmentality, and neoliberalism (Duarte & de Assis César, 2024). These concepts help explain why informal workers remain excluded from social protection. Under sovereignty, rulers control actions through law, coercion, and punishment. In the disciplinary phase, institutions internalize social values to regulate individuals. Foucault's genealogy of power then extends to state control over populations through statistical regulation of life, death, and reproduction, known as biopower (Foucault, 2007, 2008). In governmentality, individuals appear free but are shaped to meet institutional norms and job demands (Dean, 2010; Foucault, 2008; Lemke, 2001). Finally, under neoliberalism, power follows market logic and self-entrepreneurship, making competition and self-responsibility key control tools. Thus, informal workers seem autonomous in flexible jobs but actually face high risks, especially in the gig economy.

The gig economy represents a new configuration of power in which neoliberal governmentality replaces traditional labor relations. Through regimes of truth emphasizing flexibility and entrepreneurship, gig platforms construct subjects who perceive themselves as autonomous, even though their labor, time, and value are algorithmically controlled. Informal workers are characterized by the absence of social insurance coverage and the dominance of gig work defined by job flexibility. Gig workers thus constitute one of the most significant groups excluded from social protection. The gig economy has emerged as a product of the on-demand economic model, which depends heavily on crowdwork and platform-mediated labor. This system fosters precarious conditions marked by income instability and limited employment opportunities (Shepherd, 2025; Uchiyama et al., 2022)

Ride-hailing drivers, for instance, constitute one of the most vulnerable groups within the gig economy. They typically come from low-income households, earn minimal wages, and lack access to social protection, as platforms categorize them as independent "partners" rather than employees (Fielbaum & Tirachini, 2021). Furthermore, previous studies have revealed the complex structures within ride-hailing systems. Platform owners exercise full control over vehicle booking services through pricing mechanisms, while drivers remain uncertain about the fairness of these policies despite their ostensibly "linear" relationship with the platform. In addition, there are no regulations governing working hours, and drivers are compelled to follow algorithmic instructions to avoid penalties from customers (Rosenblat, 2018). This study challenges previous assumptions about the constraints faced by drivers. It seeks to expand the discussion on the symbolic concept of independence contained in the

term “partner” (*mitra*), which in practice represents an ambiguous concept. This terminology reflects an unacknowledged and unequal power relationship between the platform and drivers within the existing legal framework.

This article pursues two main objectives. First, it seeks to unpack the ambiguous legal status of ride-hailing platforms as a discursive mechanism of exclusion. Second, it emphasizes the socio-cultural dynamics that emerge within ride-hailing driver communities. Theoretically, this study introduces the concepts of “administrative exclusion” and “collective compensation,” and employs Foucault’s neoliberal theory as an analytical lens to examine ride-hailing issues. Ultimately, this research aims to understand how the socio-cultural dynamics of ride-hailing communities unfold as drivers navigate economic precarity within the gig economy.

2. Research method

To achieve the research objectives, this study employed a netnography approach (Kozinets, 2020; Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024) supported by grounded theory–informed analysis. This design enabled an inductive examination of how Indonesian ride-hailing drivers express concerns about rights, benefits, and working conditions in online discourse without imposing a predefined theoretical lens. The literature review was conducted in two phases: an initial review to identify conceptual and empirical gaps in gig-work studies, and a second iterative review after coding to refine interpretation and position findings within existing scholarship. This approach ensured that theory emerged from the data rather than being imposed on it.

A digital ethnography/netnography approach enables this study to observe how narratives of labor precarity, partnership status, and demands for fair compensation are constructed and contested publicly. In this research, digital ethnography was operationalized by collecting naturally occurring conversations from YouTube comment sections, one of the most active online arenas where ride-hailing drivers and the public openly discuss platform deductions, eligibility for benefits, and expectations toward state intervention. The analysis centers on how commenters frame drivers’ rights, how they interpret platform power and employment status, and how these interpretations shape perceptions of justice within digital labor governance.

The study relies solely on publicly accessible data, and no interaction with users occurred during data collection. Following ethical guidelines for netnography (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024), identifiable elements such as usernames and timestamps were removed, and quotations are paraphrased when needed to avoid traceability. Because the data are publicly available and non-interventional, formal ethics board approval was not required. This approach ensures protection of anonymity while preserving the authenticity of discourse.

This study draws data from publicly accessible digital platforms where discussions about ride-hailing work and labor rights are most active. YouTube was selected as the primary field site because it functions as a public arena in which gig workers, customers, and the broader public openly debate issues such as platform deductions, eligibility for benefits, and the ambiguity of “partner” versus “employee” status. A total of 200 comments from high-engagement YouTube videos discussing

drivers' demands for THR (holiday allowance) and unfair platform policies were collected. These comment threads serve as spontaneous discourse spaces where platform labor relations are negotiated in real time.

In accordance with institutional research ethics regulations, studies that utilize only publicly available data are exempt from mandatory ethics board review. This research adheres to core ethical principles of digital ethnography, including maintaining user anonymity, ensuring methodological transparency, and limiting data usage strictly to material that is already openly accessible in the public domain.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Overview of Data Composition

A total of 200 YouTube comments were extracted from the most-engaged videos discussing ride-hailing labor issues and workers' demands for fair compensation. Only comments that explicitly referred to employment status, benefits eligibility, deductions, and solidarity practices were included, while spam, off-topic posts, and bot-generated comments were excluded. Data saturation was achieved at the 170th comment, in which no new codes or discursive variations emerged. Table 1 summarizes the dataset characteristics. Word frequency analysis shows dominant terms such as "ojol", "mitra", "thr", and "kerja", indicating that the discourse heavily revolves around compensation disputes and employment classification

Table 1. Dataset Overview

Word	Frequency	Theme	Code
ojol	90	Employment status	pekerjaan
mitra	80	Employment status	kebijakan
thr	79	Employment status	kebijakan
kerja	44	Employment status	pekerjaan
minta	36	Commission deductions	tuntutan
driver	33	Employment status	pekerjaan
potongan	30	Commission deductions	kebijakan
aplikasi	29	Commission deductions	penyedia
karyawan	28	Employment status	pekerjaan
aplikator	27	Commission deductions	penyedia
demo	26	Role of the state	tuntutan
pemerintah	25	Role of the state	tuntutan
Perusahaan	17	Commission deductions	tuntutan

Word	Frequency	Theme	Code
online	17	Employment status	pekerjaan
sistem	13	Employment status	tuntutan
pendapatan	12	Financial conditions	dampak
pajak	12	Commission deductions	tuntutan
penumpang	12	Commission deductions	dampak
gojek	11	Employment status	pekerjaan
buruh	11	Financial conditions	pekerjaan
bensin	5	Financial conditions	dampak
penghasilan	4	Financial conditions	tuntutan

Source: Author's own work (2025)

Across the four emergent themes, financial precarity, unfair deductions, ambiguous employment status, and expectations toward state intervention, comments show that gig work is experienced not as a flexible income source but as a form of economically dependent labor controlled by platform systems. These interconnected themes collectively illustrate that drivers' income instability is not accidental or situational, but shaped by the platform's rules, algorithmic controls, and lack of institutional protection.

To illustrate how the four themes connect empirically, theoretically, and structurally, a cross-theme analytical matrix was developed to synthesize the findings of this study (Table 2). This matrix maps each theme against its interpretive meaning, showing how public discourse reflects emotional, economic, and political struggles embedded in gig work. The table shows that financial precarity is not merely an income problem, but a condition produced by platform cost-shifting; deductions are not isolated complaints, but a form of digital extraction sustained by opaque algorithms; employment ambiguity is not conceptual confusion, but a discursive mechanism that legitimizes the absence of labor rights; and expectations toward the state reveal that precarity persists due to regulatory inaction. By bringing these dimensions together, the matrix serves as a conceptual bridge between descriptive findings and deeper theoretical discussion, demonstrating that gig work precarity emerges not from individual failure, but from structural arrangements of platform power and weak institutional protection.

Table 2. Cross-Theme Analytical Matrix

Theme	Analytical Interpretation
Financial Conditions	Comments reveal strong emotional narratives surrounding financial hardship: low daily earnings, half of the income spent on fuel and loan repayment. Many drivers describe being “trapped by the system,” working long hours without access to social protection (health

Theme	Analytical Interpretation
	insurance, paid leave, holiday allowance). This indicates a gig poverty trap, economic dependency on the platform without basic social safety nets. Some comments reflect macroeconomic awareness, linking drivers' declining income to reduced consumer spending, weakened digital commerce, and geographic inequality in demand (Java vs. non-Java regions). These insights suggest the need for adaptive social protection policies, such as micro social security schemes or digital savings features integrated with gig platforms, and cross-sector policies that link ride-hailing and MSME digital empowerment
Commission Deductions	The discourse shifts from demanding holiday allowances to highlighting structural unfairness in revenue sharing. Comments frequently mention that platform deductions are too high (30–35%), far above what is perceived as fair (10–20%). As a result, drivers' net earnings are eroded by operational expenses (fuel, maintenance, data plans, loan repayment). The lack of transparency in commission and algorithmic calculations creates a sense of exploitation. In public discourse, deductions are described as “digital robbery,” reflecting a perceived structural injustice between platform owners (capital holders) and drivers (labor providers). This theme points to the need for transparent revenue sharing, commission caps, and independent algorithm audits.
Employment Status	Public comments reveal conceptual confusion over whether drivers should be considered “partners” or “employees.” Many reject drivers' claims for benefits on the basis that they are partners, not employees. However, others argue that platform control, through algorithmic penalties, incentives, and performance targets, resembles an employer–employee relationship. The “partner” terminology becomes superficial, as drivers lack control over fares, working hours, or commissions, resulting in no rights but full responsibility. The debate highlights the need for a new regulatory classification in the digital economy, such as dependent contractor status, which acknowledges a hybrid form of work.
Role of the state	The public expresses strong expectations for state intervention, regulating platform commissions or even establishing a state-owned ride-hailing alternative. Yet some argue that the state should not interfere in private business. This tension reveals the ambiguous role of the state in the digital economy. The narrative of “the state is absent

Theme	Analytical Interpretation
	in protecting new digital workers” emerges as a critique of weak platform labor regulation. Responses to driver protests are divided: some see it as legitimate collective action, others as irrational. This indicates weak representation and fragmentation among gig workers, pointing to the need for formal collective representation (digital cooperatives or unions) to enable legitimate negotiation processes.

Source: Author’s own work (2025)

3.2 Financial Conditions and worker well-being

The first dominant theme highlights drivers’ financial precarity and shown in Table 2. Comments consistently describe how daily earnings are absorbed by operational costs such as fuel, vehicle installment payments, and loan repayments, leaving drivers with little to no disposable income. Instead of portraying ride-hailing work as flexible and profitable, commenters narrate the experience as one of survival, where drivers must extend their working hours merely to “break even.” Emotional expressions such as “*sekarang penumpang juga sepi jadi potongan 35% juga habis ke biaya Operasional*” illustrate a sense of being trapped in a cycle of economic vulnerability. The discourse frames gig work (the drivers) not as a choice, but as a constrained necessity, driven by limited employment alternatives and declining consumer spending (Abraham et al., 2024).

The condition forces drivers into a mode of labor intensification, working longer hours or accepting more rides merely to break even (Bokányi & Hannák, 2020; Fielbaum & Tirachini, 2021). Comments such as “*hari ini dapat 100 RB, 50 RB buat potongan pinjol, sisanya buat isi bensin buat makan, ya mana cukup...*” illustrate that platform labor does not improve economic mobility; instead, it creates what can be described as a gig poverty trap, where workers remain economically dependent on the platform (Qiao et al., 2023). Importantly, this cost structure serves the platform’s business model: by transferring operational risks and expenses to drivers, the company maximizes profit while minimizing labor liability. Income instability, therefore, is not caused by individual shortcomings, but by risk externalization and revenue internalization embedded in platform design (Bokányi & Hannák, 2020). Therefore, precarity is not incidental. It is engineered into the labor model.

The dynamics observed in the comments can be understood through Foucault’s concept of governmentality, where power does not operate through coercion, but by shaping individuals’ conduct and self-regulation (Foucault, 1995, 2008). Rather than explicitly forcing drivers to work longer hours or accept unfavorable conditions, the platform designs rules, incentive schemes, and algorithmic metrics that nudge drivers to discipline themselves. Drivers internalize these expectations, believing that low income or financial failure is a consequence of their personal inadequacy or lack of effort, thereby shifting responsibility away from the platform (Wood et al., 2019). This reflects biopower (Foucault, 1978b), where power governs not only work processes but drivers’ everyday rhythms: when to be online, how much to work, and which orders to accept. The platform structures the economic possibilities of drivers’ lives while maintaining the narrative that drivers are “independent partners.” Through this logic, precarity becomes normalized and legitimized; drivers adjust their behavior to meet

algorithmic demands without recognizing that their dependency and economic vulnerability are orchestrated by the platform's managerial power (Schor et al., 2020). In this sense, precarity is not accidental, it is produced and sustained through the subtle technologies of power embedded in platform design.

Financial precarity among ride-hailing drivers is not a result of individual weakness or poor financial management, but a direct consequence of a platform model that shifts operational risks and costs to workers while controlling income opportunities through algorithmic design. This suggests that improving welfare cannot rely solely on drivers' personal coping strategies, but requires structural intervention (Christie & Ward, 2019; Hong et al., 2020). Policy responses should therefore include micro-social protection instruments tailored to digitally mediated work, such as contributory schemes for health and employment benefits that are proportionate to fluctuating income (Khan et al., 2023; Yaroshenko et al., 2024). Transparency in revenue-sharing mechanisms and independent auditing of platform deductions are also critical to prevent unilateral fee manipulation (C. Köbis et al., 2021). Additionally, automatic savings mechanisms or income-stabilization features within the application could mitigate the volatility of daily earnings. Finally, enabling collective representation, through digital cooperatives or recognized gig-worker associations, would enhance negotiation power and reduce asymmetries between platforms and workers (Gaganpreet Singh Shah, 2025). These policy directions highlight that protecting gig workers' welfare means addressing the structural conditions that produce precarity, not merely improving individual resilience.

3.3 Unfair deductions and algorithmic exploitation

The second theme centers on public frustration toward platform deductions, which are perceived as unfair and excessive. Table 2 shows that comments frequently mention that a substantial portion of each trip fee is retained by the platform, lowering drivers' actual take-home earnings. Many commenters express disbelief over deductions that they perceive as disproportionate to the effort expended, describing that drivers "*banyak kewajiban2 yg harus di lakukan jik kita sbg mitra ,untung lebih banyak aplikasi drpada mitra.*" The discourse reveals a shift from temporary claims (e.g., holiday bonuses) toward a more fundamental demand, the return of income that drivers perceive as rightfully theirs (Peticca-Harris et al., 2020). Some comments explicitly frame the deduction as an act of digital exploitation, noting that drivers receive only the residual amount after application fees, taxes, and operational costs are subtracted. The comment thread also reveals dissatisfaction with the lack of transparency: drivers describe not understanding how the platform calculates the percentage or why the amount fluctuates, suggesting that earnings are controlled by algorithmic mechanisms rather than personal effort (Pidoux et al., 2024).

Importantly, deductions are not experienced as routine business fees; they are perceived as structural extraction of value, where profit is generated not from service efficiency, but from reducing driver compensation (van Doorn & Badger, 2020). The opacity of revenue sharing, fluctuating take rates, and the absence of a clear method for calculating deductions heighten the perception of exploitation. Rather than functioning as a neutral administrative mechanism, deductions become a financial architecture that reproduces economic dependency, ensuring that increased labor effort does not translate into increased income but into higher platform revenue

The dynamics of platform deductions can be further understood through Foucault's (1978) notion of disciplinary power, which operates not through direct coercion but through subtle mechanisms that shape individuals' behavior. In ride-hailing work, the platform does not need to physically supervise drivers; instead, the algorithm continuously monitors acceptance rates, customer ratings, and response times, quietly directing drivers toward behaviors that optimize platform profit (Chen et al., 2020). Incentive schemes and penalty warnings function as disciplinary signals, pushing drivers to internalize platform expectations or risk losing access to orders (Hsu et al., 2024). This reflects Foucault's concept of self-regulation, where power becomes most effective when individuals discipline themselves in anticipation of surveillance. Moreover, deductions serve as a distribution of power and knowledge: the platform monopolizes data regarding demand, pricing, and order allocation, while drivers remain excluded from the logic behind fee calculations. The opacity of the algorithm creates an asymmetric power relationship, where the platform governs earnings and opportunities without accountability. Therefore, the algorithm operates not as a neutral technological tool, but as an instrument of control that silently governs labor and legitimizes economic extraction.

The issue of platform deductions illustrates that unfair income distribution is not an incidental problem but a structural consequence of platform design and algorithmic governance. Because drivers lack visibility into how deductions are calculated, they are unable to assess whether the revenue-sharing model is fair or exploitative (Chakravarty, 2021). Therefore, improving driver welfare requires institutional rather than individual solutions. Regulatory frameworks should mandate algorithmic transparency, including independent audits of deductions and incentive structures, ensuring that platforms cannot manipulate take rates unilaterally. Government could also impose a maximum allowable percentage for platform commissions to prevent excessive extraction (Li & Wang, 2025). Additionally, platforms should be required to disclose deduction breakdowns in real time and to provide drivers with an accessible appeal mechanism when they suspect unfair treatment or inconsistencies in income allocation (Christiyono et al., 2024). These measures shift power away from opaque platform control and toward accountable, equitable labor relations, reframing gig work as a legitimate form of employment rather than an exploitable digital commodity.

3.3 Employment status ambiguity: "Partner" or employee?

The third theme reveals a discursive tension surrounding the employment status of ride-hailing drivers in Table 2. Many commenters argue that drivers should not demand benefits such as holiday pay because they are classified as mitra (partners), implying that they are not entitled to employee-like rights. Phrases such as "*kalau mau THR ya jadi karyawan*" reflect the normalization of this distinction within public perception. Despite being called "independent partners," drivers have no autonomy over pricing, working hours, or deductions, three core dimensions of genuine independence (Fielbaum & Tirachini, 2020). However, other comments problematize the partnership model by pointing out that the platform controls key aspects of drivers' work through penalties, incentive rules, and algorithmic order assignment. These commenters highlight that, despite the label of partnership, drivers do not have equal bargaining power and must follow platform-imposed rules to avoid de-prioritization or account suspension (Kamim & Khandiq, 2019).

The ambiguity of classification produces a paradox: drivers carry full responsibility for operational and financial risks (fuel, maintenance, insurance), while platforms bear no corresponding legal responsibility for labor protection (benefits, minimum income, social security) (Schor, et al 2020). Therefore, debates over THR are not about seasonal compensation but about recognition of the true employment relationship. Ambiguity becomes a structural mechanism that enables platforms to extract labor value without assuming the obligations of an employer. In this model, ambiguity is not accidental. It is economically functional

The ambiguity of employment status can be further interpreted through Foucault's (1977) concept of discursive power, where language becomes a tool that shapes how individuals understand themselves and their position within a system of power. By labeling drivers as "partners," the platform constructs a narrative of independence and equal collaboration, even though drivers have little control over pricing, order allocation, or income determination (Fielbaum & Tirachini, 2020). This discursive framing encourages drivers to internalize the idea that they are autonomous entrepreneurs rather than workers entitled to labor protections. According to Foucault (1977), power is most effective when it produces identities rather than imposes restrictions, when individuals voluntarily accept the roles assigned to them. In this case, the label "partner" functions as a technology of normalization, making drivers perceive claim-making, such as demanding social protection or benefits, as inappropriate or even illegitimate. The partnership terminology therefore does not describe reality; it actively shapes it, enabling platforms to retain the advantages of employer control while avoiding the legal and ethical responsibilities tied to employment.

The ambiguity surrounding the employment status of ride-hailing drivers is not a neutral classification choice, but a strategic mechanism that allows platforms to benefit from labor dependency while avoiding the legal obligations associated with employment (Sun et al., 2024). As long as drivers remain labeled as "partners," they occupy a structurally disadvantaged position: they assume full financial and operational risk, yet lack access to basic labor protections such as paid leave, health insurance, or holiday allowances (Fielbaum & Tirachini, 2020). Addressing this issue requires structural reform rather than individual adaptation. Policy intervention should consider the recognition of an intermediary legal category, such as dependent contractor, which acknowledges both autonomy and dependency, ensuring that platforms provide minimum social protection without fully classifying drivers as employees (Hong, et al 2020). Regulatory frameworks should also mandate transparency in contractual terms and platform control mechanisms, guaranteeing drivers the right to understand how decisions regarding pricing, penalties, and incentives are made (Fielbaum & Tirachini, 2021; Jeronimo et al., 2022). Ultimately, redefining the legal status of gig workers is essential to ensure that labor protections align with the realities of platform-mediated work, rather than the narratives constructed to justify it.

3.4 Role of the state and public expectations for regulations

The fourth theme captures the public's expectation for government intervention in regulating platform practices, particularly regarding deductions and drivers' bargaining power as shown in Table 2. Several comments explicitly criticize what is perceived as an "absent state," suggesting that the government has failed to protect gig workers despite the rapid expansion of digital labor markets.

Commenters call for concrete intervention, such as regulating platform deductions or even creating a state-owned ride-hailing alternative, reflecting the belief that only institutional authority can counter the overwhelming power of digital platforms (Zhong et al., 2022). In contrast, another segment of the discourse argues that state intervention would inappropriately interfere with private business, framing platform, driver relations as a purely commercial transaction between two independent parties

The polarization reveals a fundamental insight: drivers operate within a structurally unequal labor arrangement where they lack negotiating power, yet the platform frames the relationship as voluntary and market-based (Christiyono et al., 2024; Qiao et al., 2023; Wulansari et al., 2024). Because individual drivers cannot negotiate or influence platform policies, state intervention becomes imagined as the only mechanism capable of restoring balance. Therefore, regulation is not seen as optional or ideological (Christiyono, et al 2024). It is framed as necessary to correct power asymmetries and protect gig workers' rights within the digital labor economy.

The lack of state intervention can be interpreted through Foucault's concept of neoliberal responsibilization (Hamann, 2009), which describes how responsibility for welfare is shifted from institutions to individuals. In the context of gig work, platforms construct the narrative that financial security, insurance coverage, and income stability are personal matters, that drivers must manage their own risks, pay for their own social protection, and accept market fluctuations as part of being "independent partners" (Huang, 2023; Schor, et al 2020). This discourse aligns with a neoliberal logic in which the state withdraws from direct involvement and allows market mechanisms to dictate labor conditions, employing only soft or minimal regulation (Hamann, 2009). By framing welfare as individual responsibility rather than collective obligation, both platforms and the state avoid accountability for worker protection (Wright, 2012). In this way, absence is not a lack of power, but a form of power: the state governs by disengaging, allowing precarity to persist under the guise of autonomy and entrepreneurial freedom. Therefore, the withdrawal of the state becomes an active mechanism that sustains unequal labor relations

Public expectations regarding state intervention underscore that platform governance cannot be left solely to market dynamics. The absence of regulation enables platforms to determine labor conditions unilaterally, leaving gig workers structurally unprotected (Christiyono, et al 2024; Huang, 2023). To address this gap, governments should establish a dedicated regulatory framework for gig workers, such as a dependent contractor classification, which formally recognizes the hybrid nature of platform labor, neither fully independent nor traditionally employed (Christiyono et al., 2024; Muhyiddin et al., 2024). Minimum labor rights should be guaranteed regardless of employment classification, including access to social security schemes, caps on platform commissions, and legally recognized mechanisms for collective bargaining. Beyond regulation, the state can also foster digital public infrastructure, such as a state-supported ride-hailing alternative or digital cooperatives, to reduce platform monopolies and enhance workers' bargaining power (Hafiz, 2021). These measures position the state not as a passive spectator to market forces, but as an active mediator ensuring fairness and accountability within the digital labor economy. Ultimately, regulating gig work is not only a matter of labor law, but of digital social justice

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study reveals that the precarity experienced by ride-hailing drivers does not stem from individual shortcomings but from structural mechanisms embedded in platform governance. Through netnography of online public discourse and virtual interviews, four interconnected patterns emerged: financial vulnerability, unfair and opaque commission deductions, ambiguous employment status, and expectations for state intervention. These themes collectively show that platform labor is characterized by dependency, limited bargaining power, and the transfer of operational and economic risks onto workers.

The discourse demonstrates that the term “partner” functions as a discursive strategy that legitimizes the absence of labor protection while sustaining the illusion of autonomy. Drawing from Foucault’s perspective, platform control operates through subtle and normalized mechanisms, algorithmic monitoring, incentive structures, and responsabilization, which lead drivers to internalize responsibility for risks that are structurally produced. Therefore, gig-work precarity is not incidental; it is engineered and maintained through power embedded in digital labor platforms.

The study contributes two conceptual insights. First, administrative exclusion, where ambiguity in employment classification becomes a mechanism to deny access to labor rights and social protection. Second, collective compensation, where drivers’ solidarity and protest emerge as a response to institutional absence and asymmetric power relations. Practically, the findings underscore the urgency of regulatory reform, particularly the establishment of an intermediary worker classification (such as dependent contractor), minimum labor protection, algorithmic transparency, and commission caps. Platforms, the state, and regulators must recognize that digital labor is not merely a commercial partnership, but a labor relationship requiring accountability.

Future research may examine cross-platform comparisons or explore the role of digital cooperatives as alternative governance models for platform labor. Understanding gig work through the lens of power and institutional responsibility opens broader implications for designing fair, inclusive, and socially sustainable digital labor ecosystems.

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