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Performing trust: Social media, reputational labor, and economic legitimacy in Indonesia's informal errand economy

Lia Hilyatul Masrifah[1*]

[1]*Department of Islamic Communication and Broadcasting, Institut Al Fithrah Surabaya, Surabaya, Indonesia*

[*]*Corresponding author*
Email address: liahilyatul@alfithrah.ac.id
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ABSTRACT

This study examines how informal errand service providers (*jasa suruh*) in Indonesia construct and sustain economic legitimacy on social media in the absence of institutional support and formal regulation. It conceptualizes this condition as a digital gray space, where legitimacy is generated through collective social verification rather than institutional recognition. Drawing on Roy's gray space concept (2005), Pierre Bourdieu's social capital theory (1986), and Aihwa Ong's porous sovereignty framework (2006), this study observed seven *jasa suruh* accounts across Instagram, WhatsApp, and personal websites, and conducted in-depth interviews with 20 participants, comprising nine providers and eleven users in urban Java. Three main findings emerged. First, digital visibility simultaneously facilitates trust formation and market access while increasing reputational risk. Second, social capital functions both as an entry mechanism into the informal economy and as a disciplinary force that intensifies the reputational vulnerability of workers lacking institutional protection. Third, the absence of formal governance shifts transactional and reputational risks onto individual workers and users, thereby reproducing structural precarity. This study contributes to digital communication sociology, informal labor studies, and urban informality by demonstrating that social media functions as a performative infrastructure of legitimacy that is communicatively constructed, institutionally unprotected, and inherently fragile.

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Introduction

The informal economy plays a central role in urban development in developing countries. Hart (1973) first described informal activity as an independent way for people to earn a living. Later studies showed that informality is a key part of modern urban life, not just a temporary phase (Chen, 2012; Williams & Lansky, 2013). Roy (2005) redefined informality as a gray space created by selective state regulation, where the line between legal and illegal remains unclear. This idea, originally used to study physical urban spaces like settlements and street markets, forms the basis for this study's focus on digital communication environments.

Indonesia provides an acutely relevant empirical context. Statistics Indonesia (BPS, 2024) recorded 84.13 million informal workers in 2024, constituting approximately 59.17 percent of the total employed population, with significant concentration. Indonesia offers a strong context for this study. In 2024, Statistics Indonesia (BPS) reported 84.13 million informal workers, making up about 59 percent of the workforce, with many based in Java's cities. At the same time, Indonesia had over 139 million active social media users (We Are Social & Meltwater, 2024). These conditions have created a unique communication system that lets informal workers organize economic activities without formal platform rules. *Jasa suruh* services are a clear example: individual providers use Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok to offer errand and assistance services without formal platforms, contracts, or dispute-resolution systems.

These services range from single-person accounts to small service groups, but all operate in a gray area that is neither fully legal nor institutionally protected. TaskRabbit in which algorithmic management, centralized payment mediation, and rating systems institutionalize trust (Srnicek, 2017; Van Doorn, 2017; Wood et al., 2019). Indonesian-specific studies have similarly concentrated on formal gig economy platforms (Permana, Izzati, & Askar, 2023; Octavia, 2022). Social capital research has examined how trust networks facilitate coordination in informal settings (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000), though with limited application to digitally mediated labor contexts. Studies of platform reputation systems demonstrate how digital feedback mechanisms govern worker behavior and user trust (Tadelis, 2016; Gandini, 2021), yet these analyses presuppose platform infrastructures that *jasa suruh* services explicitly lack.

This study addresses a clear research gap: informal digital economies that use social media without platform governance have not been studied in detail. Most existing frameworks assume formal platforms or focus on physical informality, so they do not explain how legitimacy is built in digital settings. The key question how trust, reputation, and economic coordination develop and break down without any institutional or algorithmic governance remains largely unanswered, especially in Indonesia's cities where informal work and social media use are both high.

The main contribution of this study is to show that digital gray space is a real and distinct extension of Roy's (2005) framework into digital economic settings. In contrast to physical gray spaces, where legitimacy can become stable over time, digital legitimacy is fragile and must be constantly maintained through communication. If providers stop this work, their legitimacy quickly fades. This finding updates the original framework. The study also applies Bourdieu's (1986) social capital theory to digital labor, showing that digital reputation is built unevenly and acts as a form of capital, not as a shared resource as

Putnam (2000) suggested. These points form the study's main theoretical contribution.

The study develops its analytical framework from three interconnected theoretical bodies. Urban informality, grounded in Roy's concept of gray space, defines the analytical space in which *jasa suruh* practices operate. Porous sovereignty (Ong, 2006) explains the structural conditions selective state regulatory absence that produce and sustain this space. Critical social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000) explains the mechanisms through which actors negotiate trust and legitimacy within it. From this synthesis, the study proposes the concept of social-media-mediated informal economy: informal economic coordination operating through social media platforms without formal platform governance, in which economic legitimacy is produced performatively through communicative practices rather than secured through institutional guarantees.

The study addresses three interrelated research questions. First, through what communicative mechanisms do *jasa suruh* providers construct and sustain economic legitimacy in the absence of platform governance and formal regulatory protection? Second, how does the scale of digital visibility shape the differential distribution of trust, market access, and reputational vulnerability among providers? Third, what structural conditions reproduce the precarity of informal digital service workers and users within Indonesia's regulatory environment? Together, these questions frame an investigation of legitimacy production as a communicative, structural, and politically situated process within the digital gray space of urban Indonesia.

Method

This study employed an interpretive qualitative approach grounded in social constructivism. Rather than treating legitimacy as an objective condition, the study approaches it as a socially constructed process shaped through. This study used an interpretive, qualitative approach grounded in social constructivism. It treats legitimacy as something built through interaction, communication, and digital visibility, not as an objective fact (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research aimed for a conceptual understanding of how informal economic coordination works in digital settings, rather than trying to represent the whole population (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2018). The primary analytical clusters Surabaya-Sidoarjo and Yogyakarta were selected as the richest sites for trust-construction practices at mid-scale visibility, based on preliminary observation of account activity and provider accessibility. Malang and Solo were incorporated to expand the range of service types and communication styles within the small-to-mid visibility range. The inclusion of a high-visibility service coordinator operating primarily through website and WhatsApp channels in the Greater Bekasi area was deliberate rather than incidental: this case was selected precisely because it represents the analytically distinct configuration of organized urban informality at a high-visibility scale, a configuration absent in the primary Javanese clusters. Without this case, the analysis would lack empirical grounding for claims about large-scale reputational risk dynamics. The multi-site design, therefore, reflects analytical logic rather than geographic representation, consistent with Marcus's (1995) framework for multi-sited qualitative inquiry.

A total of 20 informants participated: 9 service providers and 11 users of *jasa suruh* services. Out of twenty informants, twelve came from the main Surabaya-Sidoarjo and Yogyakarta clusters, five from Malang and Solo, and three from the high-visibility coordinator's network in Bekasi. This distribution gave more weight to the main sites but also covered the full range of visibility levels. Providers were identified through publicly accessible social media accounts; users were recruited through referral networks. Purposive sampling prioritized informants based on their visibility and operational complexity. Snowball sampling extended access to trust-failure cases and high-visibility account operators. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached.

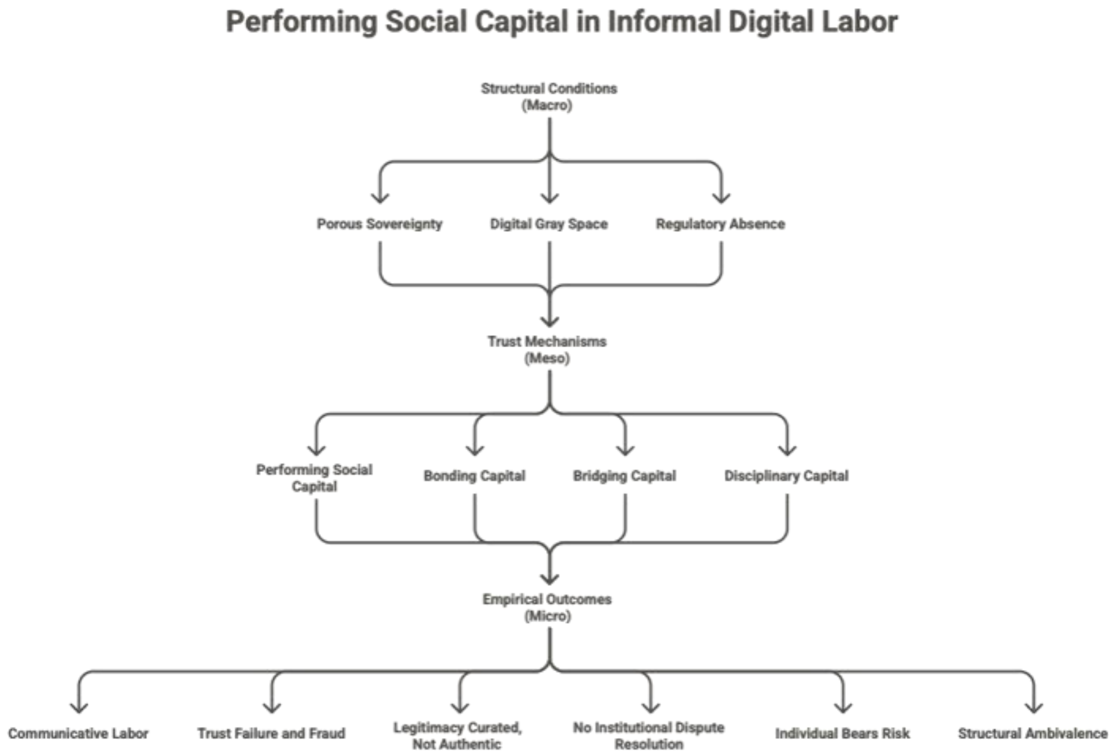
Analytically, thematic convergence became apparent after approximately the fourteenth interview, at which point emerging codes including visibility-based trust differentiation, communicative labor burdens, and reputational precarity ceased to generate substantively new dimensions. The remaining six interviews, conducted across different provider scales and user types, confirmed rather than extended the established analytical patterns, providing what Braun and Clarke (2022) describe as empirical confidence in the thematic framework rather than additional thematic development. The decision to continue beyond apparent saturation to twenty interviews was deliberate, reflecting the multi-site design's requirement to ensure adequate representation across different visibility clusters rather than a single uniform context.

Data collection took place from January to April 2026 using semi-structured interviews and digital observation. Interviews lasted 45 to 75 minutes and were done in person, by phone, or through WhatsApp voice notes. Questions covered trust-building, risk and conflict management, visibility, and reputational vulnerability. Follow-up questions helped clarify themes like communicative pressure, trust failure, and labor precarity. Digital observation focused on seven public *jasa suruh* accounts on Instagram, WhatsApp, and websites, looking at communication, documentation, and trust-building as a way to support the interview findings (Hine, 2015).

Data analysis followed reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2022) through iterative stages of familiarization, coding, theme construction, review, and interpretive refinement. An abductive analytical logic was employed: empirical findings and theoretical frameworks were interpreted in continuous dialogue rather than through rigid deductive application (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Validity was strengthened through source triangulation between providers and users, method triangulation between interviews and digital observation, and partial member checking with key informants. All participants provided informed consent; identities were anonymized through pseudonymization, given the sensitivity of operating within informal economic arrangements operating in a regulatory gray zone. Digital observations were limited to publicly accessible content in accordance with digital research ethics guidelines (Franzke et al., 2020).

Results and Discussion

This study mainly asks how *jasa suruh* providers build and maintain economic legitimacy without formal platform rules, contracts, or verification systems. The findings from seven accounts and twenty interviews show that this process is not random. Instead, providers use structured communication, digital visibility,



documentation, and consistent interaction to replace formal credibility.

Account names are displayed as publicly available to enable independent verification by readers and reviewers. Follower data are based on observations conducted during the data collection period. Interview participants' identities were anonymized separately using initials, in accordance with the ethical considerations described in the Methods section. Accounts with limited followers in the Greater Jakarta area were used to illustrate the personal-informal cluster rather than to represent geographic locations within the original research design. The inclusion of Santo Suruh (Bekasi) reflects the maximum variation sampling logic: this account was selected to represent the high-visibility organized cluster, which is analytically necessary for the three-tier visibility comparison central to the study's argument, rather than as a geographic site within the original research design.

Visibility scale as a structural determinant of trust

Digital visibility does more than signal popularity. It shapes how trust develops, determines who must prove their reliability, and affects the reputational risks that providers face. The empirical findings described here are based on an analysis of social media account activity, longitudinal review of account records, and in-depth interviews with both providers and users of *jasa suruh* services in Central Java, Surabaya, Sidoarjo, and Bekasi. The data showed three main patterns based on the visibility scale, each with its own way of building legitimacy. Among small-scale accounts such as @al_faruqq0 (289 followers) and @yantosuruh (416 followers), legitimacy is anchored in social proximity rather than public validation. New customers approach transactions with a baseline level of distrust, requiring providers to actively neutralize skepticism through resource-intensive measures such as video-call identity verification, willingness

Table 1. Characteristics of Social-Media-Based *Jasa Suruh* Accounts and Analytical Paflerns

No	Account	Followers	City/Region	Service Type	Content Regularity	Trust-Building Mechanisms	Dominant Analytical Themes
1.	@ suruhkitaaja.co	772	Malang	General errand services (shopping, queuing, document delivery)	High (3–4 posts/ week)	Real-job videos, WhatsApp testimonials, use of local language	Locality-based trust; high flexibility ("anything-as-a-service")
2.	@suruhkami.solo	6.6K	Solo	Daily errands, student services, event logistics	Moderate (≈2 posts/ week)	Local branding, Javanese language, student collaborations, visible service performance	Local responsiveness; community engagement; narrative-based trust
3.	@al_faruqq0	289	Magelang–Temanggung–Yogyakarta	Casual odd jobs	Low–moderate (1–2 posts/ week)	Humorous content, fast interaction	Personal familiarity; humor-driven legitimacy
4.	@yantosuruh	416	Greater Jakarta	Household and goods-related errands	Low (≈1 post/2 weeks)	Simple videos emphasizing honesty and reliability	Minimal formalization; legitimacy through moral simplicity
5.	@jasa.suruh.sda.sby	5.3K	Sidoarjo–Surabaya	Home cleaning, assistance services, multi-task errands	Moderate (irregular but consistent)	Price transparency, receipts, real-service documentation	Practical problem-solving; locality-based connectivity; transparency as trust
6.	@tohelp.serba.bisa	4.8K	Malang	Multi-purpose daily and urgent services	Moderate (regular but not daily)	Direct WhatsApp access, brand affiliation, interactive engagement	Hybrid bonding–bridging social capital; semi-institutional trust

No	Account	Followers	City/Region	Service Type	Content Regularity	Trust-Building Mechanisms	Dominant Analytical Themes
7.	Santo Suruh (Website & WhatsApp)	44.2K*	Bekasi and surrounding areas	Daily errands, moving services, full home cleaning, niche services	Low (non-social-media-centered)	Video proof of work, transparent pricing, formal payment systems	Organized urban informality; moral economy; non-platform gig work

Source: Primary data collected through fieldwork observations (January to April 2026) and systematic monitoring of social media accounts by the researcher.

to accept minimal down payments, or mobilizing mutual acquaintances as informal guarantors. A provider in Central Java described this condition directly: new customers typically remain suspicious prior to any transaction, requiring providers to repeatedly demonstrate trustworthiness through direct personal engagement. The structural implication is unambiguous: the entire evidentiary burden rests with the provider, because no pre-existing public reputation infrastructure exists to perform this work automatically.

This situation is more than an inconvenience. It creates a real barrier to entry with direct economic effects. Providers who lack communication skills, steady access to technology, or strong networks face disadvantages, even if they offer good service. For example, a provider from Surabaya who had recently moved from a rural area described struggling to attract customers despite offering competitive rates. Without friends or family in the city to offer personal recommendations, she found that new customers often insisted on lengthy video calls or requested proof of previous transactions before agreeing to even small tasks. Meeting these demands required both time and technical resources that she sometimes lacked, especially when her phone connection was unreliable.

This pattern matches Granovetter's (1985) idea that economic action is embedded in social relationships. When formal guarantees are missing, trust depends on personal networks. However, not everyone has the same access to these networks. Providers who move often, have fewer social connections, or are new to cities face higher costs to prove their legitimacy. These costs are not visible in market logic but have a real impact on their daily work.

Mid-scale accounts @suruhkami.solo, @jasa.suruh.sda.sby, and @tohelp.serba.bisa demonstrate a qualitatively different pattern. Through consistent transaction documentation and accumulated testimonials, the burden of proof shifts from the provider to their digital history. A provider in Sidoarjo confirmed that once sufficient documentation existed, new customers sent payments without extensive prior questioning. Trust is built through public records rather than personal connections, making transactions with strangers possible without prior direct contact. This constitutes what Luhmann (1979) would recognize as a transition from personal trust, grounded in familiarity and repeated interaction, to system trust, in which confidence is placed in observable institutional-like structures rather than specific individuals. The digital track record functions as a surrogate institution, performing the verification and credentialing work that formal regulatory bodies perform in regulated labor markets.

At the highest visibility level, exemplified by Santo Suruh in Bekasi, trust operates under a structurally different logic. High visibility strengthens economic legitimacy while simultaneously intensifying reputational risk. A coordinator in Bekasi noted that a single customer complaint shared publicly online can rapidly damage a reputation built over years. The same digital social capital that enables market entry becomes a permanent source of structural vulnerability. This asymmetry between the slow accumulation and the rapid destruction of reputational capital reflects what Sztompka (1999) describes as the fragility of trust as a social mechanism: trust takes extended time and consistent performance to build, but can be destroyed almost instantaneously by a single credible public challenge. In the absence of formal dispute resolution mechanisms, this fragility is not a correctable market imperfection but a constitutive feature of how legitimacy operates in informal digital labor markets.

The tyranny of visibility and the structural inseparability of communicative and productive labor

The Surabaya data show another important pattern: the pressure to stay visible online. When providers go silent for a few days, customer inquiries drop quickly because inactivity is seen as a sign of unreliability. Legitimacy does not build up as a lasting asset. Providers must keep working to maintain it. Digital presence is not just a marketing choice. It is necessary for economic survival.

This dynamic produces a structural inseparability between communicative labor and productive labor that has significant theoretical implications. The concept of communicative labor, the work of maintaining presence, managing impressions, and producing relational credibility, has been discussed in the context of digital platforms by Coté and Pybus (2007), who argue that under conditions of digital capitalism, communication itself becomes a form of value-generating labor. The present findings extend this argument to an informal market context where no platform operator extracts value from communicative labor, yet workers remain equally compelled to perform it. The compulsion does not originate from algorithmic design but from the social expectations structurally embedded in how customers evaluate provider reliability. The result is identical: communicative labor is unpaid, unrecognized in any formal accounting of work, and yet economically indispensable.

These patterns resonate with broader debates on digital labor precarity and platform capitalism, where scholars have argued that the digitalization of work creates new forms of insecurity and shifts the burden of reputation management onto individual workers. The findings here suggest that even in informal non-platform markets, the logics of visibility and reputation reproduce many of the risks usually associated with formal platform economies, leading to a structurally persistent form of precarity that transcends algorithmic control and is sustained by socially internalized norms.

The problem is compounded by a temporal asymmetry between accusation and clarification that structurally disadvantages providers. In Central Java, a provider's delayed response due to device failure prompted immediate public accusations of fraud before any explanation was possible. This is not an exceptional case reflecting individual misfortune; it reveals the structural condition of reputation management in informal digital markets. Accusations spread through social networks faster than factual clarifications can follow, because the affective charge of a fraud allegation activates sharing behavior more reliably than a subsequent correction.

Research on misinformation diffusion by Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral (2018) demonstrates that false information spreads significantly faster and farther than true information on social media platforms, with direct implications for how reputational damage operates in informal digital labor contexts. No appeals mechanism exists, no procedural protection against the interval between accusation and response, and no institutional actor whose function is to ensure that corrections receive equivalent circulation.

This mechanism bears a surface resemblance to Rani and Furrer's (2021) analysis of algorithmic management in formal platform economies, in which behavioral compliance and visibility are governed by centralized systems operated by identifiable platform owners. The present findings, however, require a critical corrective. In social media-based *jasa suruh*, there is no equivalent centralized governance mechanism. Socially internalized platform logics shape expectations, responsiveness norms, and standards for testimonial accumulation that perform equivalent disciplinary functions without the institutional visibility, accountability, or even the nominal governance structures that formal platform management provides.

The burden falls entirely on individual workers without corresponding structural support, compensation, or protection. The disciplinary apparatus is real and materially consequential, but its operators are diffuse, its rules are informal, and its effects are entirely individualized. The evidence does not show that digital social capital only empowers or only disciplines workers. Both effects occur simultaneously and cannot be separated. Digital social capital helps workers join the market and find opportunities, but it also increases personal risk, removes institutional protection, and means that any communication mistake can seriously damage a provider's reputation.

Trust failure, stratified social capital, and the constitutive absence of institutions

Cases of trust failure reveal the curated and strategically produced nature of digital legitimacy with particular analytical clarity. A user in Central Java experienced fraud after transferring payment to a personal shopping account populated with positive testimonials. To analyze the chronology of testimonials in this and similar cases, The researcher conducted a content analysis of publicly available testimonial records over time, tracking the sequence and timing of posts and identifying instances in which older complaints were removed or obscured by subsequent positive feedback. This methodological approach, combined with digital ethnographic observation of account activity, enabled systematic tracing of how testimonial displays were managed and manipulated. A chronological examination of the account revealed that earlier complaints had been strategically displaced from the account's primary display by newer, positive content.

This case demonstrates that the appearance of legitimacy within the digital gray space can be deliberately manufactured through selective visibility management. Publicly displayed reputation need not correspond to the actual condition of transactional relations. Digital legitimacy is performative in the technical sense introduced by Butler (1990) and subsequently extended to social and institutional contexts: it is produced through repeated communicative acts rather than reflecting any pre-existing condition. The performance can be sustained independently of the reality it purports to represent.

When trust mechanisms fail, no formal institution is available to mediate disputes or compensate losses. Defrauded users lack accessible pathways for dispute recovery. Providers facing public accusations lack procedural mechanisms for defense or formal clarification. Conflict resolution depends entirely on individualized negotiation within the same digital public sphere where reputational damage has already occurred. This is not a governance failure that can be corrected by a minor regulatory adjustment. It is a constitutive feature of the digital gray space: the absence of formal institutional mediation is not incidental to how this market operates but integral to its structure. Webb et al. (2009), analyzing informal economies more broadly, argue that institutional voids, the absence of legitimate third-party enforcement, are not merely background conditions but active structural forces that shape market behavior, trust strategies, and risk distribution among participants.

The patterns of trust failure are not evenly distributed across the user population. Experienced participants have developed stratified evaluative practices: assessing not only testimonials but account consistency, longitudinal interaction patterns, and anomalies in testimonial chronology that might indicate strategic content management. This evaluative competence constitutes a form of accumulated digital capital. However, it is unevenly distributed. Newer or less digitally literate users remain systematically more vulnerable to strategically curated reputational facades. The result is a two-tier user population stratified not by formal economic position but by accumulated digital experience, a form of information asymmetry that structurally advantages established providers and experienced users over newcomers to the market.

This inequality is not just about individual digital skills. Bourdieu (1986) explained that capital is built through accumulated effort. Building a digital reputation needs digital skills, steady access to technology, communication ability, and time spent staying visible. Not everyone has these resources, and their distribution reflects earlier differences in education, income, and social networks. Early advantages grow over time. Trusted providers gain greater recognition, attract more customers, and can invest further in their reputation. Those without these early advantages face higher entry costs, must do more to prove themselves, and need to reassure customers more often, even if their service is good.

This finding challenges the optimism in Putnam's (2000) social capital theory. Putnam separated bonding capital (trust within close networks) and bridging capital (trust built through public reputation). These types fit the *jasa suruh* context. However, Putnam's framework does not explain why these forms of capital are unequally distributed or why bridging capital often perpetuates existing inequalities. Bourdieu's view that capital arises from earlier accumulation and operates within power structures better explains this. Digital reputation does not create equal trust for everyone. Instead, it hides old social hierarchies inside new technology, making them harder to see and challenge.

Jasa Suruh as informal care: Infrastructure, structural precarity, and the limits of digital governance

Beyond trust and legitimacy, the findings raise three related structural questions about how informal digital labor fits into wider social issues in Indonesian urban society. First, how does the absence of formal institutional protection shape the work conditions and vulnerabilities of *jasa suruh* providers? Second, in what ways does the growth of informal digital services address gaps in Indonesia's care infrastructure, especially for families separated by internal labor migration? Third, how do unequal distributions of digital capital and reputation influence access, risk, and outcomes for both providers and users within these informal markets? Explicitly addressing these questions clarifies the analytical focus and provides a framework for discussion and assessment.

The most analytically unexpected finding concerns the social function that *jasa suruh* practices have assumed. Interview data reveal that a significant user group consists of domestic migrant workers employed in major urban centers, Jakarta, Surabaya, who use errand services to arrange food delivery, healthcare assistance, and daily support for elderly or dependent family members in their regions of origin. A migrant worker employed in Jakarta described using *jasa suruh* to deliver food and assist with healthcare needs for elderly parents living alone in Solo. This finding fundamentally reframes the analytical category of the service. *Jasa Suruh* cannot be understood merely as an urban convenience service for time-constrained students or professionals. It has evolved into an informal care infrastructure that fills structural gaps left by internal labor migration in the context of inadequate formal social welfare provision.

The analytical significance of this observation extends beyond the descriptive. It introduces a dialectical irony with structural weight. The same porous sovereignty in Ong's (2006) terms, the uneven application of regulatory regimes across economic sectors that leaves informal digital workers structurally unprotected, also generates, through its failure to develop adequate social welfare and caregiving infrastructure for geographically dispersed families, the conditions that create sustained demand for their services. State absence operates on both sides of the transaction simultaneously: in regulatory protection for providers and in social welfare provision for families separated by migration. Informal digital labor is therefore not simply filling market niches left open by incomplete market development. It is compensating for systematic and ongoing failures in state social provisioning. This is consistent with Meagher's (2010) argument that, in sub-Saharan African contexts, informal economic networks do not simply supplement formal welfare systems but actively substitute for them, masking state failure while perpetuating structural vulnerability among informal workers.

The growth of social media-based services without corresponding institutional protections is not a transitional condition awaiting correction through market maturation or regulatory updating. It is, as Thieme (2018) similarly observed across multiple Global South economies, a structural tendency in which informality functions not merely as a survival strategy but as a product of deliberately limited institutional support for emergent labor forms. The flexibility that allows *jasa suruh* providers to meet diverse urban needs working outside conventional hours, handling irregular requests, avoiding fixed operational costs, and the precarity that makes their labor economically insecure are not separate phenomena in tension with each other. They are two expressions of the same structural condition. Standing (2011), in his analysis of the global precariat, argues that flexibility celebrated by employers and market advocates is precisely the mechanism through which labor protections are dismantled, and risks are transferred from capital to workers. The *jasa suruh* context demonstrates this logic operating at the micro-level of informal digital service provision.

Indonesia's existing labor regulations were designed for employment relationships defined by formal contracts, identifiable employers, and fixed workplaces. None of these characteristics applies to labor in social media-based services. This regulatory mismatch is not a matter of lag awaiting self-correction through administrative updating. It reflects what Ong (2006) theorizes as the structural tendency of states operating under neoliberal conditions to respond to informal labor through selective tolerance rather than formal incorporation, maintaining informality as a zone of productive ambiguity that serves capital interests without requiring the state to assume responsibility for worker protection. The present data provide no indication that recognition of social media-based informal labor within formal Indonesian regulatory frameworks is imminent or that institutional incentives for such recognition currently exist.

The distributional consequences of this institutional absence is not uniform across the user population. As documented in Section Trust Failure, Stratified Social Capital, and the Constitutive Absence of Institutions, differences in users' capacity to evaluate providers map directly onto differences in vulnerability to fraud and trust failure. This constitutes a form of digital inequality that cannot be adequately addressed through individual-level literacy interventions alone. The structure of informal digital markets is organized in ways that preserve informational advantages with established actors and reproduce vulnerability among newcomers. Attributing this vulnerability primarily to individual deficits in digital literacy, without addressing the governance conditions that produce and sustain informational asymmetry, commits what C. Wright Mills (1959) identified as the characteristic error of individualism: translating structural problems into personal troubles, thereby displacing political responsibility onto individual insufficiency. Platform operators who enable this form of economic activity within their technical infrastructures, such as Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok, derive commercial value from the network effects generated by informal economic activity while bearing no formal governance responsibility for the conditions it produces. This gap between commercial benefit and governance responsibility is not incidental; it is, under current regulatory arrangements, structurally guaranteed.

Given the persistence of this digital inequality, a range of interventions merit consideration at both policy and platform levels. Policymakers could establish basic consumer protection mechanisms for informal service markets, such as accessible complaint channels, provider verification systems, and moderated public feedback repositories, to reduce the impact of fraudulent testimonial manipulation. Digital literacy initiatives could be expanded to include targeted modules for evaluating digital trust markers, reading testimonial chronologies, and recognizing signs of reputational manipulation specific to informal digital labor.

At the same time, platform operators could be encouraged or required to develop features that increase transparency and reduce information asymmetry for example, by offering optional third-party verification badges for service providers, improving detection and flagging of testimonial manipulation, or providing template-based contracts for transactions conducted through their messaging and social media infrastructures. Research and pedagogy in this area should foreground not only skills for navigating informal digital economies, but also the broader sociotechnical and governance frameworks that shape risk and opportunity in these markets.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that social media-based *jasa suruh* services in urban Indonesia constitute a distinctive form of digital informal labor. In this context, economic legitimacy is constructed and sustained through ongoing communication, yet remains fragile. In the absence of primary channel regulations, social media serves as the primary mechanism through which providers establish trust, utilizing digital visibility, documentation, testimonials, and consistent interaction. This phenomenon is conceptualized as a digital gray space, representing a unique but constrained arrangement that warrants further investigation in diverse contexts. Unlike physical legitimacy, digital legitimacy is transient and requires continuous effort by providers to sustain it. Social capital within this system is not collectively shared; rather, it accumulates unevenly, benefiting those with initial advantages and creating obstacles for others. Consequently, social capital functions both as an economic asset and as a disciplinary mechanism, transferring risk onto individual workers.

The findings further indicate that *jasa suruh* services have assumed unanticipated social functions, including providing informal care for families affected by labor migration. The persistent precarity experienced by workers is attributed to selective state inaction rather than organic market expansion. Addressing these challenges requires more than incremental policy adjustments. Instead, social media platforms should be recognized as substantive economic infrastructures, necessitating clearly defined responsibilities for both the state and platform operators. While this study, centered on urban Java, provides an initial foundation for this argument, additional research across other regions and sectors is necessary to substantiate these claims and enhance their policy relevance.

Several limitations of this study require explicit acknowledgment. First, the empirical scope is geographically restricted to urban Java, specifically Surabaya-Sidoarjo, Yogyakarta, Malang, Solo, and Bekasi. It does not represent rural areas, other Indonesian islands, or national contexts where informal digital labor may operate under different conditions. Second, the sample of twenty informants, while adequate for thematic saturation within an interpretive qualitative framework, does not permit generalization regarding the statistical distribution of trust practices or labor conditions among all *jasa suruh* providers and users.

Third, the temporal scope, with data collected between January and April 2026, reflects a particular moment in a rapidly evolving informal digital economy. Longitudinal research is necessary to determine whether the trust dynamics and precarity conditions identified here persist, intensify, or change as these services develop. Fourth, the researcher's positionality as an Indonesian academic embedded in the urban Java context facilitated access and rapport but may have influenced the analytical categories used. Reflexive thematic analysis and partial member checking were employed to mitigate, though not eliminate, this potential bias.

Declaration of Ownership

This article is my original work.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest to declare in this article.

Ethical Clearance

This study was approved by the institution.

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