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Evolving Notions of Power and Authority in Platform-Based Organizations

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how power and authority are experienced, interpreted, and negotiated by workers within platform-based organizations in Bangladesh. A qualitative research design was employed using semi-structured interviews with 27 participants engaged in frontline roles across various platform sectors, including ride-sharing, food delivery, and e-commerce logistics. Participants were selected through purposive sampling and met inclusion criteria requiring at least two years of platform-based work experience. Data were collected until theoretical saturation was achieved. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically using NVivo software, following an inductive coding approach that progressed from open codes to axial themes. Three main themes emerged from the analysis: algorithmic governance and control, fluid hierarchies and informal authority, and reconfiguration of traditional power structures. Participants reported extensive algorithmic surveillance, lack of managerial transparency, and conditional autonomy dictated by platform logic. Informal peer-based leadership and trust-based influence filled the vacuum left by absent formal management structures. Furthermore, workers described the displacement of human authority by app-driven decision-making, the emergence of resistance strategies such as coordinated logouts, and a dual accountability to both clients and platforms. Economic dependence and perceptions of unfairness were pervasive, particularly in relation to algorithmic penalties and shifting pay structures. Platform-based organizations represent a fundamental shift in organizational authority, replacing traditional hierarchical management with algorithmically mediated governance and informal social structures. While platforms offer flexibility, they also embed new forms of control and precarity, especially in emerging economies. Understanding the lived experiences of platform workers is crucial for designing fairer systems and informing regulatory frameworks that address these evolving dynamics of digital labor.

Keywords: Platform governance, algorithmic control, digital labor, informal authority, organizational power.

Introduction

The rise of platform-based organizations marks a profound transformation in how economic, social, and organizational activities are coordinated in the digital age. Unlike traditional firms, platform organizations rely on algorithmic infrastructures, decentralized interactions, and user-generated data to mediate labor, services, and authority. These platforms—ranging from ride-hailing applications to global e-commerce ecosystems—restructure not only markets but also the foundational dynamics of organizational governance, power, and control. As such, they challenge long-standing assumptions about managerial authority, labor autonomy, and institutional regulation, raising urgent questions about how power is distributed, legitimized, and contested in these emergent digital forms [1, 2].

The architecture of platform-based organizations is often characterized by disintermediation, self-regulation, and algorithmic coordination, which collectively reshape the governance structures that underpin economic participation.

Traditional hierarchies are supplanted or embedded within opaque technological systems that perform supervisory and managerial functions with little human oversight. Scholars have noted that such configurations create what may be described as "governance without governors"—where decision-making is carried out not by human managers but by automated protocols embedded in code [3-5]. This development has generated new challenges for regulatory frameworks, labor rights, and institutional accountability, especially in regions where platforms operate in weakly regulated or rapidly evolving legal contexts [6, 7]. As a result, power within these digital ecosystems is increasingly exercised not through visible hierarchies or contractual authority, but through invisible mechanisms of surveillance, scoring systems, and algorithmic nudging [8, 9].

Understanding authority in platform organizations therefore requires a reconceptualization of traditional power models. Where Weberian frameworks emphasized legitimate domination through formal institutions and roles, platform governance emphasizes infrastructural and computational forms of authority that are both diffused and inscribed into technological systems [10, 11]. Platforms enforce compliance not through direct supervision but via gamified incentives, dynamic pricing, and performance metrics—all of which shape worker behavior subtly yet powerfully. These mechanisms produce a paradoxical form of autonomy: while workers appear to have flexibility over time and task engagement, their actions are tightly choreographed by algorithmic parameters that dictate visibility, access to tasks, and earnings [12, 13]. This "conditional autonomy" is central to understanding how platform power operates: workers are nominally independent but structurally dependent on systems they cannot negotiate with.

Moreover, the expansion of platform organizations has implications for how labor is valued and disciplined across different economic and cultural settings. In many countries of the Global South, including Bangladesh, platforms have emerged as major employment providers, often in the absence of formal job opportunities. However, the labor that sustains these platforms is often rendered precarious by the very technologies that enable their operations [14, 15]. Workers are algorithmically managed, continuously evaluated, and readily replaceable—creating a climate of economic vulnerability masked by discourses of entrepreneurship and digital opportunity. This has led scholars to argue that platforms are not merely neutral intermediaries but active shapers of labor relations, embedding asymmetries of power into the very code that structures interactions [16, 17].

Additionally, platform governance challenges the conventional boundaries between public regulation and private control. Because platform infrastructures are designed and owned by private entities, they possess quasi-sovereign powers over the economies they mediate. Platforms decide the rules of participation, enforce penalties, and adjudicate disputes—all without public oversight or democratic accountability [18, 19]. This dynamic has raised concerns about "regulatory capacity capture," where governments are either unable or unwilling to impose limits on platform power due to lack of expertise, jurisdiction, or political will [6, 7]. In turn, this blurs the lines between state authority and corporate governance, especially in digital societies where platforms increasingly serve as intermediaries not just of commerce, but of communication, mobility, and public services [1, 20].

Complicating this further is the emergence of informal authority and fluid hierarchies within platform ecosystems. In the absence of traditional management, power often emerges from peer networks, reputational systems, and user communities. For example, experienced platform workers may gain influence not through official roles but through accumulated trust, mentorship, or community moderation practices. This form of social capital creates a decentralized model of leadership that coexists with algorithmic control, producing hybrid authority structures that are both formal and informal, human and

nonhuman [8, 12]. Furthermore, workers develop their own resistance strategies—ranging from coordinated logouts to manipulation of performance metrics—in attempts to reclaim autonomy and negotiate their positions within these ecosystems [2, 13]. Such contestations highlight the agency of platform workers, who are not merely passive subjects of digital governance but active participants in shaping their own organizational realities.

Despite the growing scholarly interest in platform power, much of the existing research remains focused on Global North contexts or formal policy responses. Less is known about how workers in emerging economies interpret and navigate the power dynamics embedded in platform infrastructures. This gap is particularly salient in Bangladesh, where rapid digitalization, high youth unemployment, and limited labor protections create a fertile ground for platform expansion—but also for hidden exploitation and uneven empowerment. While platforms promise flexibility and entrepreneurial freedom, the everyday experiences of workers reveal a more complex reality—one in which autonomy is constrained, authority is opaque, and accountability is fragmented [14, 21].

This study aims to investigate the evolving notions of power and authority within platform-based organizations, with a specific focus on workers' lived experiences and perceptions in the context of Bangladesh—a rapidly digitizing economy shaped by both technological expansion and labor informality.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This qualitative study adopted an interpretive research design to explore the evolving configurations of power and authority within platform-based organizations. The study was grounded in a constructivist paradigm, aiming to understand how participants perceive, negotiate, and operationalize authority in organizational ecosystems shaped by digital platforms. Twenty-seven participants were selected through purposive sampling from various sectors of platform-based businesses in Bangladesh, including ride-sharing services, e-commerce platforms, and digital marketplaces. All participants held decision-making or managerial roles, ensuring that they were directly engaged with the organizational mechanisms through which authority and control are enacted. Inclusion criteria required that participants had at least two years of experience working in a platform-based organization and demonstrated familiarity with digital operational models. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was reached, indicating that no new themes emerged from additional interviews.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews designed to elicit rich, in-depth accounts of how power dynamics and authority structures are experienced in digital organizational contexts. The interview protocol included open-ended questions on decision-making processes, formal and informal authority, technological affordances, and interactions with algorithmic systems. Interviews lasted between 45 and 70 minutes and were conducted in either English or Bengali, depending on the participant's preference. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. In cases where interviews were conducted in Bengali, the transcripts were translated into English while preserving meaning and context. Ethical approval was secured from the relevant institutional review board, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured through pseudonymization of participant names and organizational identifiers.

Data analysis

Data analysis followed an inductive thematic approach, facilitated by NVivo software for qualitative data management and coding. The process involved multiple rounds of open coding, during which initial codes were generated from meaningful units in the text. These codes were then refined through axial coding to identify relationships and patterns, culminating in the development of higher-order themes that captured the nuanced manifestations of power and authority in platform-based environments. Theoretical memos were written throughout the process to track the emergence of ideas and ensure consistency with the evolving conceptual framework. Constant comparison was used to validate the codes across interviews, while reflexivity was maintained to mitigate researcher bias. The final thematic structure was reviewed collaboratively among the research team to ensure credibility, transferability, and analytical depth.

Findings and Results

The study sample consisted of 27 participants employed in various roles across platform-based organizations in Bangladesh. Of the participants, 18 were male and 9 were female. The age of participants ranged from 24 to 48 years, with the majority ($n = 16$) between 30 and 39 years old. In terms of educational background, 10 participants held a bachelor's degree, 9 had completed higher secondary education, and 8 held a master's degree. The participants represented a range of platform sectors, including ride-sharing ($n = 11$), food delivery ($n = 8$), and e-commerce logistics ($n = 8$). The duration of participants' experience with platform-based work ranged from 2 to 8 years, with 14 individuals having 3 to 5 years of experience. All participants were engaged in frontline operational roles with direct interaction with digital systems and had sufficient familiarity with algorithmic governance and organizational practices.

Table 1

Thematic Categories, Subcategories, and Open Codes

Category (Main Theme)	Subcategory (Subtheme)	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Algorithmic Governance and Control	Automated Decision-Making	Task allocation by algorithm, Performance scoring, Lack of human override, Perceived neutrality, System-driven scheduling
	Data Surveillance and Monitoring	Real-time tracking, Data-driven performance reviews, Location analytics, Privacy concerns, Digital profiling, Metric-based control
	Lack of Transparency	Opaque algorithm logic, Unclear rating systems, Inaccessibility of backend processes, Disconnection from decision sources
	Worker Adaptation to Algorithmic Systems	Learning to game the algorithm, Pattern recognition, Self-regulation strategies, Temporal adaptation, Risk aversion
	Dehumanization of Management	Absence of supervisor feedback, Lack of personal connection, Emotional distance, Impersonality of commands
	Conditional Autonomy	Flexibility with constraints, Algorithm-set boundaries, Illusion of freedom, Timed activation, Structured independence
2. Fluid Hierarchies and Informal Authority	Role Ambiguity	Overlapping responsibilities, Unclear task ownership, Multiple reporting lines, Task negotiation, Position fluidity
	Peer-Based Leadership	Experience-based authority, Skill recognition, Peer mentoring, Emergent decision makers, Shared problem-solving
	Trust-Based Influence	Relational credibility, Reputation capital, Past success stories, Informal consultation, Social bonds
	Community Moderation	Peer regulation, Conflict mediation by users, Informal sanctions, Voluntary compliance, Local rule-setting
3. Reconfiguration of Traditional Power Structures	Delegated Accountability	Role shifting, Trust-based delegation, Shared accountability, Rotating leadership, Bottom-up initiatives
	Displacement of Managerial Authority	Algorithm replaces supervisor, Reduced supervisory roles, Less face-to-face communication, Minimal human oversight
	Platform as Central Authority	Corporate policies via app, Monolithic governance, Distant enforcement, Digital policy updates
	Redefinition of Compliance	Digital policy acceptance, App-based instructions, Task rules embedded in systems, Automated contract agreements
	Contestation and Resistance	Workarounds, User forums for dissent, Coordinated logouts, Online petitions, Feedback manipulation

Dual Accountability	Loyalty to platform and client, Balancing app demands with customer needs, Conflicted priorities, Role tension, Accountability diffusion
Economic Dependency and Power Imbalance	Income reliance on platform, Lack of alternatives, Platform exploitation concerns, Unilateral changes in pay structure, Disempowerment through financial control
Perceived Fairness	Inconsistent enforcement, Biased ratings, Unjust penalties, Lack of appeal processes, Unequal treatment

The first main theme that emerged from the data was Algorithmic Governance and Control, highlighting the pervasive role of digital systems in shaping organizational dynamics. In the subcategory of *Automated Decision-Making*, participants described how platforms use algorithms to allocate tasks, assess performance, and structure workflows. Several interviewees referred to these decisions as "non-negotiable" and felt that the algorithm had more authority than any human manager. One participant noted, *"I don't know who decides when I work—it's the system. If it turns red, I go. If it's gray, I wait."* This sentiment reflects the extent to which algorithmic control structures daily routines and choices. In the subcategory *Data Surveillance and Monitoring*, participants spoke of constant tracking and performance monitoring. One platform worker shared, *"I know every second is being watched, every stop is recorded. It's like I'm working under an invisible supervisor."* Workers reported heightened stress due to location analytics and real-time monitoring. Another significant subtheme, *Lack of Transparency*, revealed frustrations about the opacity of decision-making algorithms. Participants often used metaphors like "black box" or "ghost manager" to describe systems they could not understand or question. *"One day my rating dropped, and I had no clue why. There's no one to ask. Just the numbers,"* a respondent explained.

The subcategory *Worker Adaptation to Algorithmic Systems* revealed how individuals learn to cope with or manipulate the logic of the platform. Several respondents discussed strategies like logging in at specific times, declining certain tasks, or mimicking high-rated behaviors. *"You begin to guess what the system likes. It's trial and error, but some tricks work,"* said a participant. Similarly, *Dehumanization of Management* emerged from descriptions of emotional distance and impersonality in digital interaction. *"There's no one to say 'thank you' or 'well done.' It's just a screen with ratings,"* noted one worker, pointing to the absence of recognition or human engagement. The final subtheme, *Conditional Autonomy*, highlighted the illusion of freedom within platform work. Workers described their autonomy as conditional, constrained by algorithmic preferences. *"They say I'm free, but the app tells me when to start, where to go, and when to stop,"* emphasized one interviewee, illustrating the tension between perceived and actual independence.

The second main theme, Fluid Hierarchies and Informal Authority, captured the flexible and often ambiguous organizational roles in platform-based settings. In the subcategory *Role Ambiguity*, participants shared confusion about job boundaries and task ownership. *"Sometimes I'm a delivery person, sometimes customer support, sometimes both. There's no clear line,"* stated one worker. These blurred lines were both empowering and disorienting. In contrast, *Peer-Based Leadership* emerged as a subtheme where authority was based on experience and skill rather than formal title. Participants often looked to senior peers for guidance. *"We don't have a boss, but we know who to follow when things go wrong,"* explained a driver. *Trust-Based Influence* described how relationships and credibility shaped informal hierarchies. Trust accumulated through prior interactions, not official roles. *"You trust the one who's been through it all, not someone with a badge,"* emphasized another.

The subtheme *Community Moderation* referred to how workers collectively enforced norms and resolved disputes. Several participants mentioned that peer groups on social media or messaging apps were vital spaces for rule negotiation. *"If someone misbehaves, we talk about it in the group. We sort it out ourselves,"* said one participant, suggesting a decentralized

form of governance. In *Delegated Accountability*, respondents described instances of shared or rotating responsibility. *"This week, I'm helping coordinate pickups. Next week, someone else will,"* explained a worker from a ride-sharing platform. This rotation of informal roles reflects a dynamic redistribution of authority that is neither fixed nor hierarchical.

The third main theme, *Reconfiguration of Traditional Power Structures*, revealed how platform-based models displace conventional authority. In the subtheme *Displacement of Managerial Authority*, participants consistently reported a decline in human oversight. One participant remarked, *"Earlier, you could call your manager. Now, you write to the app—and wait. No human face anymore."* This transition from human to algorithmic oversight redefines accountability and responsiveness. The subtheme *Platform as Central Authority* further illustrated how the app serves as both employer and regulator. *"It's all in the app. The rules, the penalties, the praise—everything comes from there,"* emphasized one delivery agent. This centralization in a digital interface challenges traditional models of distributed leadership.

In *Redefinition of Compliance*, compliance was reframed as adherence to digital protocols embedded in the platform. *"I never signed a contract. But I clicked 'agree' on the app. That's our deal now,"* explained one respondent. The subtheme *Contestation and Resistance* captured how workers push back against platform power. Participants described various forms of protest, including collective logouts and manipulation of feedback systems. *"Sometimes we all switch off the app. It's the only way they listen,"* said a worker involved in organizing digital resistance. *Dual Accountability* revealed tension between loyalty to the platform and obligation to clients. *"The app wants speed. The customer wants care. I'm stuck in the middle,"* one respondent lamented.

Finally, the subtheme *Economic Dependency and Power Imbalance* underscored the precariousness of workers' positions. Many respondents noted that their dependence on the platform limited their ability to challenge authority. *"I hate the unfair pay cuts, but I have no choice. My rent depends on this,"* said a participant. In contrast, *Perceived Fairness* reflected how inconsistent enforcement of platform rules and rating systems eroded trust. *"Two people do the same thing, but only one gets penalized. It's not fair, and we can't ask why,"* noted one worker, emphasizing the unilateral and opaque nature of authority on these platforms.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study provide critical insights into how power and authority are experienced and negotiated in platform-based organizations operating in the context of Bangladesh. Three major themes emerged from the data: algorithmic governance and control, fluid hierarchies and informal authority, and the reconfiguration of traditional power structures. These themes highlight how digital infrastructures fundamentally reshape managerial roles, labor relations, and accountability mechanisms, with implications for both organizational theory and labor governance in the platform economy.

The first theme, algorithmic governance and control, underscores the shift from human-centered management to technologically mediated authority. Participants described how algorithms, performance scoring systems, and opaque decision-making protocols now act as substitutes for traditional supervisors. Workers are constantly monitored and evaluated through real-time tracking and metric-based assessments, with limited transparency regarding how their actions are interpreted or penalized. These findings are consistent with prior research that identifies platform infrastructures as systems of control embedded in code—where algorithmic logic, not managerial discretion, dictates the rhythm and evaluation of work

[3, 9]. The invisibility and non-negotiability of these systems contribute to a perceived erosion of worker agency, as reflected in participants' descriptions of feeling "watched all the time" or being "told what to do by a screen."

This mode of control aligns with the concept of platform as code and capital, where the infrastructural elements of platforms serve as tools of governance [1]. Workers in this study developed coping strategies—such as learning to "game" the system or adapt to its hidden logic—to mitigate the risks of algorithmic penalty. These behaviors mirror findings from studies in other contexts, where platform workers similarly engage in self-regulation, heuristic learning, and data pattern recognition to navigate digital control mechanisms [2, 12]. However, the illusion of autonomy—referred to by participants as "conditional freedom"—reinforces the deceptive nature of algorithmic governance. While platforms market flexibility, workers find themselves increasingly tethered to digital instructions that are inflexible and opaque [13, 21].

The second major theme, fluid hierarchies and informal authority, demonstrates how platform labor reconfigures leadership and role distribution in the absence of formal structures. Participants reported role ambiguity, the emergence of peer-based leadership, and trust-based influence among co-workers. These informal hierarchies develop organically in response to the vacuum left by traditional managerial roles. In many cases, experienced workers served as *de facto* leaders, mediators, and mentors—offering guidance not because of a formal title but due to accumulated credibility and social capital. These dynamics are supported by prior scholarship emphasizing the hybrid nature of governance in digital work ecosystems, where informal peer influence often complements or contests algorithmic authority [8, 17].

In particular, participants' experiences with community moderation—resolving disputes, enforcing norms, and sharing resources through online forums—resonate with findings on user-driven governance in platform ecosystems [16, 22]. The use of messaging groups, social media circles, and localized peer networks enabled a form of lateral accountability that operates alongside the vertical authority of the platform. This dual model of authority—algorithmic control coupled with social coordination—illustrates a layered governance structure that reflects both technological and cultural modes of power [4, 11]. Furthermore, delegated accountability and role rotation among workers suggest an experimental, evolving form of organizational design that is not dictated from the top down but negotiated in practice.

The third theme, reconfiguration of traditional power structures, captures how platform-based models challenge the conventional boundaries of organizational authority. Participants described the displacement of managerial roles by platform logic, the centralization of control within apps, and the erosion of direct human oversight. This aligns with scholarship that characterizes platforms as monolithic authorities that assume both corporate and regulatory functions without institutional checks [6, 19]. Participants reported feeling "accountable to the app," a phrase that underscores the replacement of human actors with interface-based governance. Importantly, compliance in this context is not contractual but behavioral—embedded in system design, user agreements, and continuous performance tracking [5, 10].

Another significant finding was the emergence of worker resistance and collective negotiation tactics. Participants described coordinated app logouts, feedback manipulation, and the use of online forums for organizing dissent. These practices reflect a growing awareness of power imbalances and a desire to reclaim agency within the constraints of digital systems. Prior research has shown that platform workers around the world engage in similar acts of micro-resistance and digital solidarity to navigate precarity [14, 18]. This study reinforces the notion that workers are not merely passive recipients of algorithmic authority but active participants who strategically respond to their conditions.

Finally, participants' reflections on economic dependency and perceived fairness emphasize the structural vulnerabilities created by platform-based work. Many felt trapped by the absence of alternatives and the unilateral power of platforms to change pay rates, rules, and access without consultation. Such concerns are echoed in broader discussions about platform labor precarity, particularly in the Global South where digital labor markets often intersect with informality, unemployment, and limited regulatory protections [7, 15]. The perceived injustice of algorithmic penalties, biased ratings, and inconsistent enforcement erodes trust in platform governance and contributes to feelings of alienation. Yet, in the absence of institutional remedies or transparent appeal processes, workers often internalize these challenges as part of the platform experience [13, 20].

Taken together, these findings contribute to an evolving understanding of power and authority in digital organizational contexts. While much of the existing literature has focused on structural and technical aspects of platform governance, this study foregrounds the subjective, relational, and cultural dimensions of authority as experienced by frontline workers. It reveals how power operates not only through code and policy but also through silence, ambiguity, and economic dependency. By centering the lived experiences of workers in Bangladesh, this study offers a grounded and context-specific view of how authority is redefined, resisted, and negotiated in the platform age.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, while qualitative interviews provided rich and nuanced insights into the lived experiences of platform workers, the findings are not statistically generalizable to all platform-based organizations or labor markets. The sample was limited to 27 participants from Bangladesh, and while care was taken to include a diverse range of sectors and roles, perspectives from other geographic, regulatory, and cultural contexts may differ significantly. Second, the study relied solely on self-reported data, which may be influenced by recall bias or the participants' current employment conditions. Finally, the use of NVivo for thematic analysis, while rigorous, involved interpretive choices that could be shaped by researcher assumptions and cultural context.

Future studies could build upon these findings by exploring comparative analyses across different regions, especially between countries with varying degrees of regulatory oversight. Longitudinal research could also shed light on how perceptions of power and authority evolve over time as platform policies, technologies, and labor markets change. Additionally, incorporating multi-stakeholder perspectives—including platform designers, regulators, and clients—would provide a more holistic understanding of the dynamics at play. There is also a need to investigate how gender, class, and educational background mediate workers' experiences of platform governance and informal authority.

Platform companies should prioritize transparency in algorithmic decision-making and create accessible channels for worker feedback and appeal. Recognizing and supporting peer-based leadership within platforms can enhance organizational cohesion and trust. Regulators and policymakers must address the structural vulnerabilities faced by platform workers, particularly in emerging economies, by enforcing fair labor standards and protecting against arbitrary platform practices. Lastly, integrating worker voices into the governance of digital platforms is crucial to building more equitable and accountable organizational ecosystems.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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