
Digital Inequality and Social Stratification in the Era of Platform Society: A Sociological Analysis of Urban Youth in Indonesia.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between digital inequality and social stratification in the context of platform society among urban Indonesian youth using a qualitative interpretive approach with a critical-constructivist paradigm. Through a multi-site case study in South Jakarta, North Jakarta, and Depok with 30–40 informants aged 18–30 years, data were collected via in-depth interviews, participant observation, focus group discussions, and document studies. Data were then analyzed using thematic analysis, Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, and Bourdieu's field analysis. The findings reveal that digital inequality operates in layers at the level of physical access, skills gaps, and socio-economic benefits that cumulatively reinforce the existing class structure. The platform society ecosystem is proven to function as a social reproduction engine through three simultaneous mechanisms: algorithmic, habitus, and political economy. This study introduces the concept of digital habitus stratification to explain how class-structured digital dispositions are internalized transgenerationally, and the Platform-Mediated Social Reproduction model as a new analytical framework. The findings also identify the hierarchies of platform capitalism that lock lower-class youth into digital precariatization and class-based segregation of information ecosystems. This research concludes that solutions to digital inequality require transformative-ecological policies that address the broader structural roots of social inequality.

Keywords: digital inequality, platform society, social stratification

INTRODUCTION

The 21st-century information and communication technology revolution has fundamentally transformed global social structures, not only technologically but also in power relations, resource distribution, and social mobility mechanisms. The concept of platform society, introduced by Van Dijck, Poell, and De Waal (2018), explains how platform-based digital infrastructure has become the foundation of contemporary social, economic, and political organizations. Within this framework, global technology corporations act as institutional actors that shape the logic of social interaction through algorithmic mechanisms that are not entirely transparent. Similarly, Castells describes the emergence of a network society, a society whose cohesion depends on digital connectivity (Mubarok, 2025). However, digital expansion has also given rise to paradoxes in the form of unequal participation and access, giving rise to discourse on digital inequality as a major structural issue in the contemporary era.

Globally, digital inequality is recognized as a serious challenge to sustainable development. Despite significant increases in internet penetration, its distribution

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remains unequal across countries and social groups. This inequality is multidimensional, encompassing disparities in access, digital skills, quality of use, and socio-economic benefits. Mafaza et al. (2025) distinguish between the global divide, the social divide, and the democratic divide to explain the reproduction of social hierarchies through digital media, while Wood et al. (2020) emphasize digitalization as a new form of capital within modern stratification structures. Thus, digital technology functions as a mechanism for accumulating benefits for empowered groups, while deepening the marginalization of vulnerable groups.

In the Indonesian context, the massive growth of internet users does not automatically translate into an increase in the quality of digital participation. Infrastructure disparities, unequal digital literacy, and the concentration of access in urban areas highlight significant structural inequalities. Digital capital is increasingly integrated with economic, social, and cultural capital, as explained in Bourdieu's (1986) theory of social reproduction. Consequently, individuals from higher socioeconomic backgrounds have greater opportunities to access, utilize, and accumulate benefits from the digital ecosystem, while disadvantaged groups are at risk of multiple exclusions (Cotter, 2021).

Indonesia's social stratification, shaped by the intersections of class, gender, ethnicity, and geography, is increasingly digitalized. Digital economic platforms create new opportunities while simultaneously shaping new hierarchies of work and capital accumulation, as explained in the concept of platform capitalism (Sadowski, 2020; Yasmine et al., 2025). Algorithm-based employment relations often place workers in subordinate positions with limited social protection. In this context, the question of social mobility becomes crucial: do digital platforms open up spaces for emancipation or reproduce inequality with a new face.

Indonesian urban youth occupy a strategic position within this dynamic. Although often assumed to be homogeneous digital natives, their digital participation capabilities and quality are strongly influenced by their socioeconomic backgrounds and educational institutions. Differences in digital habitus result in significant variations in how technology is utilized, both productively and consumptively. Cities, as social spaces, also exhibit unequal digital geographies, where access to innovation ecosystems and the digital economy is concentrated among high-net-worth groups. This situation emphasizes that digital inequality is part of the broader reproduction of social stratification.

Thus, the study of digital inequality in the context of platform society among urban Indonesian youth is crucial academically and policy-wise. A critical sociological approach is needed to understand how technology is embedded in historically specific power relations and social structures. This research starts from the assumption that digital inequality is not a natural consequence of individual differences, but rather a product of socio-structural processes that can be identified and intervened. Focusing on urban youth allows for an analysis of the dynamics of inequality reproduction within a generation that will determine the direction of Indonesia's future socio-digital transformation.

METHOD

This research uses an interpretive qualitative approach with a critical-constructivist paradigm, which views digital inequality as a product of power relations and social processes that can be identified and transformed. The design used is a multiple-site case study combined with Berger and Luckmann's (1966) social phenomenology and Fairclough's (1992) critical discourse analysis, to capture digital inequality at the level of subjective experience and broader discourse structures. The

research was conducted in three locations representing the spectrum of socio-spatial stratification in Jakarta: elite areas (South Jakarta), marginal-dense areas (North Jakarta), and peri-urban areas (Depok) involving 30–40 informants aged 18–30 years who were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling until data saturation was achieved.

Data were collected through four complementary techniques: semi-structured in-depth interviews (60–90 minutes), participant observation including digital ethnography (Hine, 2015), focus group discussions (4–6 people per group), and a study of national digital policy documents and informants' social media content. Analysis was conducted in layers using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis using NVivo, Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, and Bourdieu's field analysis, which mapped informants' digital capital, habitus, and social position. Data validity was ensured through triangulation of sources and methods, member checking, and prolonged engagement over approximately eight months in the field.

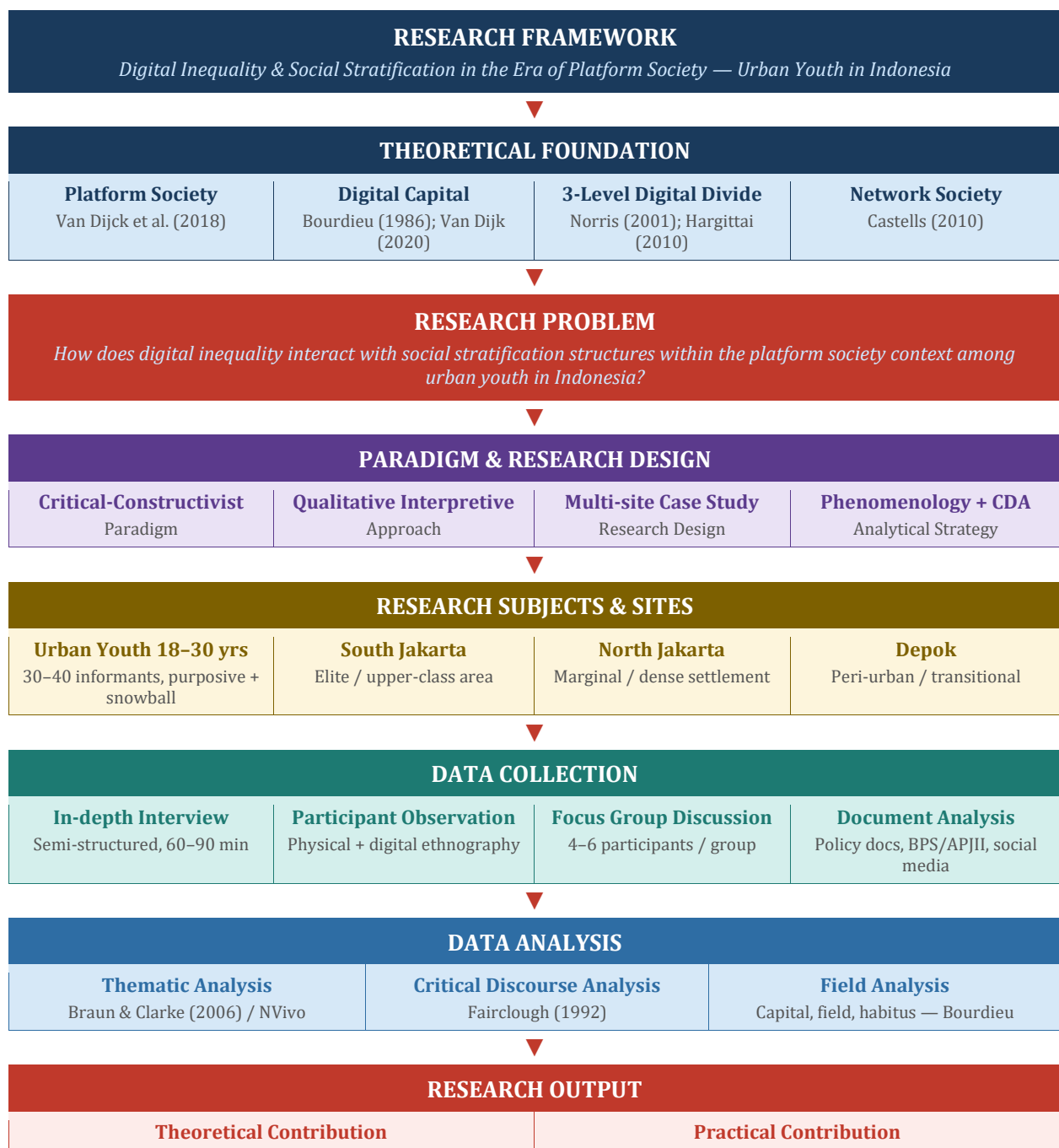


Figure 1. Conceptual Research Diagram

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Reproduction of Digital Inequality as a New Mechanism of Social Stratification Among Indonesian Urban Youth

1. The Three-Layered Structure of Digital Inequality and the Accumulation of Class Capital

The findings of this study reveal that digital inequality among Indonesian urban youth is not a single, linear phenomenon, but rather operates in layers across three overlapping and mutually reinforcing levels. At the first level, the physical access gap remains very pronounced: lower-class youth from North Jakarta typically use mid-range smartphones with limited data-based internet connections, while their counterparts in South Jakarta use premium devices with unlimited fiber optic broadband access at home. This confirms Graham & Dutton's (2021) argument that material disparities in technology access remain the initial foundation that determines the trajectory of subsequent digital inequality, even though national smartphone penetration has statistically surpassed 70 percent. At the second level, the digital skills gap emerges as a far more determinant stratification factor than mere physical access; upper-middle-class youth demonstrate computational thinking skills, critical information curation, and productive platform utilization that are qualitatively different from the reactive-consumptive usage patterns that dominate lower-class groups. This skill differentiation does not emerge spontaneously, but rather is a product of class-structured digital socialization: young people from highly educated families are exposed to production-oriented technology practices from an early age through their home environment, friendship communities, and prestigious schools that provide a comprehensive digital literacy ecosystem. At the third level, which Yatno (2025) calls the outcome divide, it was found that even when access and skills are relatively equal, the ability to convert digital activities into tangible socio-economic benefits remains highly unequally distributed along pre-existing class lines. Informants from the upper middle class consistently succeed in transforming their digital networks into internship opportunities, freelance projects, international scholarships, and high-value social capital, while informants from the lower class, despite being equally active on the same platforms, tend to be trapped in a cycle of content consumption without significant capital accumulation. This three-layered reality empirically confirms Bourdieu's conceptual framework that digital technology has become a new arena for the reproduction of capital, where the initial advantages possessed by dominant classes are efficiently translated into digital advantages that then produce further socio-economic advantages in a self-reinforcing cumulative cycle (Robinson et al., 2020; Amalyah, 2025).

2. Hidden Stratification in Platform Practices and Algorithmic Mechanisms

A close analysis of social media platform usage practices reveals dimensions of stratification that operate through mechanisms far more subtle and hidden than mere differences in technical access. The platform choices made by young people from different class backgrounds do not simply reflect free individual preferences but are

systematically structured by a digital habitus internalized through long-term class socialization. Upper-middle-class youth tend to strategically diversify their platform use: LinkedIn for professional identity construction, Instagram for managing social capital and class aesthetics, and niche platforms like Substack or GitHub for accumulating reputation within symbolically valuable communities. Lower-class youth, on the other hand, are more concentrated on platforms offering immediate gratification like TikTok and Facebook, not because of a cognitive inability to use more production-oriented platforms, but because their social ecosystems lack role models or structural incentives to adopt different usage patterns. This phenomenon conceptually corresponds to what Bourdieu (1984) called "taste as a marker of class"—where distinction in digital consumption serves as an effective mechanism of class differentiation precisely because it appears to be a free expression of personal preferences, thus obscuring their structural determination. Furthermore, the algorithms of dominant platforms have been found to actively reinforce existing patterns of stratification through a logic of content personalization that is essentially the logic of social bubble reproduction: young people already connected to upper-middle-class networks are increasingly exposed to high-value content and connections, while those outside these networks are increasingly isolated in a different information ecosystem (Fathilah et al., 2025; Cini, 2023). This algorithmic mechanism operates what Merton (1968) in a different context called the "Matthew effect"—small initial advantages accumulate cumulatively to produce enormous disparities in the long run (Pignot, 2023). This finding has significant theoretical implications: it suggests that nominally open and universal platform infrastructures actually contain architectures of inequality hidden behind seemingly neutral and democratic interfaces.

3. The Intersectionality of Gender, Class, and Digital Inequality

The gender dimension of digital inequality emerges as one of the most striking and theoretically compelling findings in this study, given its complex intersections with class and location variables. Lower-class young women in North Jakarta face multiple pressures that create deeper digital exclusion than their male counterparts from the same social class: in addition to material limitations in access to devices that are often shared with other family members, they also face gender norms that limit the space and time they can spend using digital technology, as well as domestic role expectations that erode the time available for digital skill development. A stark contrast is found among upper-middle-class young women in South Jakarta, who exhibit the most active and productive digital user profile in the entire study sample: they utilize platforms to build content-based businesses, develop economically valuable personal brands, and access international professional networks with a level of facilitation far exceeding that of their male counterparts from the same class. These findings empirically challenge the single narrative of "women as a digitally vulnerable group" that often dominates policy discourse, demonstrating that gender does not operate independently but is always mediated by class to produce very different digital experiences. From a feminist digital sociology perspective, these results confirm Hamidah et al.'s (2025) argument that technology is not gender-neutral but is always inscribed by existing gender relations, with the added dimension that these gender scripts are class- and context-specific. In the peri-urban community of Depok, a different pattern was found: young women from the lower middle class demonstrated a level of utilization of digital economic platforms, particularly marketplaces and reseller platforms, that far exceeded that of their male peers, reflecting pragmatic economic adaptation strategies within the context of structural limitations. These women's digital strategies in Depok paradoxically

demonstrate creative agency amidst limitations, yet at the same time reflect the internalization of gender norms that place disproportionate responsibility for family finances on women. This intersectional complexity demands a far more nuanced approach to digital policy than generic digital literacy programs that are insensitive to these intersecting gender-class differences.

4. Digital Habitus Stratification: The Trans-Generational Reproduction of Digital Inequality

The most significant theoretical contribution of this first point is the identification of what this study conceptualizes as "digital habitus stratification," the process by which class-based dispositions toward digital technology crystallize into habitus structures that then reproduce social inequality transgenerationally (Zheng & Walsham, 2021). Unlike previous conceptualizations of digital inequality, which tend to emphasize external structural variables such as infrastructure and policies, the concept of digital habitus stratification emphasizes how digital inequality is internalized into individuals' cognitive, affective, and practical dispositions through socialization processes that occur within families, schools, and class-structured play communities. In-depth interview data consistently shows that lower-class informants not only have more limited digital access and skills, but also have a horizon of digital aspirations that is structurally limited by their social environment: they tend to view digital platforms as arenas for entertainment and communication, rather than as infrastructure for production and capital accumulation, not because of individual unwillingness, but because they have never been exposed to production-oriented models of digital use in their everyday social ecosystem. The implications of this finding are very serious for the national digital inclusion agenda: programs that focus solely on providing physical access and technical skills training without addressing the habitus dimension will prove inadequate, because the available infrastructure and skills will not be utilized equally as long as the class-structured digital habitus remains untransformed. This finding also resonates with the results of contemporary research in the sociology of education which shows that the introduction of technology in schools without accompanied by pedagogical transformation oriented towards critical empowerment tends to reproduce existing class inequalities with new media (Peker, 2025). From a policy perspective, these findings underscore the need for a transformative-ecological approach to digital inclusion: not simply distributing devices and connections, but holistically transforming the social ecosystems in which lower-class youth grow, including through the revitalization of schools as spaces for the formation of emancipatory digital habitus. More broadly, the digital habitus stratification identified in this study can be understood as a contemporary manifestation of mechanisms of social reproduction long identified by critical sociology: technology changes, However, the logic of reproducing class inequality through the formation of subjective dispositions continues to operate using new, different media in each historical era. These findings thus contribute to the development of a critical digital sociology that not only describes digital inequality but also identifies the mechanisms of its reproduction that operate at the deepest levels and are most difficult for conventional policies to intervene.

Platform Society and the Restructuring of Social Relations, Identity, and Mobility of Indonesian Urban Youth

1. Digital Segregation and the Paradox of Platform Society Connectivity

Research findings in the second dimension reveal that the platform society ecosystem not only reproduces existing social stratification but actively restructures the

patterns of social interaction, identity formation, and mechanisms of social mobility of Indonesian urban youth in ways that have not yet been fully identified in the existing digital sociology literature. Participant observation over an eight-month period and analysis of informants' social media content reveal a theoretically compelling paradox: digital platforms create the illusion of universal connectivity that transcends class boundaries, while at a deeper level they actually reproduce intensified social segregation through invisible algorithmic curative mechanisms. While youth from different social classes share a common presence on the same platforms, they essentially inhabit fundamentally different ecosystems of information and social relations: the content that fills the Instagram feeds of a young man from a professional family in Kebayoran Baru and a young man from a laboring family in Penjaringan is algorithmically curated to reinforce, rather than connect, separate social worlds. This phenomenon can be conceptually understood through the "filter bubble" theory of Luhuringbudi et al. (2025), which states that this dramatic intensification coincides with the improvement of machine learning platforms' capabilities in predicting and managing user preferences with increasing precision. However, this research finding adds a sociological dimension that Pariser overlooked: the filter bubble in Indonesia operates not only based on individual content preferences, but systematically based on social class signals encoded in digital behavior—type of device used, connection quality, spending patterns in marketplaces, and check-in locations—so that the algorithm essentially operates a digitalized social stratification system. FGD data consistently shows that informants from various class backgrounds have almost no shared digital cultural references beyond the most massive viral content, reflecting the depth of segregation in the digital information ecosystem. This condition has serious implications for social cohesion: if digital public spaces that should function as arenas for deliberation and cross-class meetings instead operate as machines of segregation, then the social prerequisites for a functional democracy face an increasingly serious threat. These findings thus strengthen and extend Castells' (2009) argument on "mass self-communication" by showing that in developing countries like Indonesia, the expansion of digital infrastructure has the potential to exacerbate existing social fragmentation rather than promote broader social integration (Al Makmun, 2024).

2. Stratified Digital Self-Presentation and the Production of Social Hierarchies

An analysis of the digital identity formation patterns of Indonesian urban youth reveals a dynamic that can be sociologically conceptualized as "stratified digital self-presentation," a practice of self-presentation in digital spaces that is systematically structured by social class position and that in turn cyclically reproduces and validates this social hierarchy. Upper-middle-class youth consistently manage their digital identities as long-term investment projects integrated with broader social mobility strategies: their choice of profile photos, content aesthetics, vocabulary, and virtual communities are all carefully calibrated to communicate a high level of cultural and social capital to relevant audiences. This sophisticated digital identity management—which some upper-class informants explicitly describe as "personal branding"—reflects the internalization of market logic into self-presentation practices that Goffman (1959) identified in face-to-face interactions, but which have now undergone dramatic intensification and formalization within platform ecosystems (Rachmaniah, 2025). In contrast, lower-class youth tend to use platforms primarily as spaces for authentic, uncalculated self-expression, which in the short term may appear to offer greater freedom from performance pressures, but in the long term actually results in lower digital capital accumulation because it does not contribute to the building of a reputation

that can be converted into economic benefits. This difference in the temporal orientation of digital self-presentation—between calculated, long-term investment versus uncalculated, immediate expression—is one of the most concrete manifestations of the class-structured differences in digital habitus that have been conceptualized previously. Participant observation data in digital spaces reveals that lower-class youth who occasionally attempt to adopt upper-middle-class aesthetics and self-presentational strategies often experience what can be called “digital misrecognition”—the inability to read the digital cultural codes prevailing in the social ecosystem of the upper class, resulting in inauthentic self-presentation without generating the expected social capital benefits. This phenomenon directly resonates with Bourdieu's concept of “cultural doping,” which describes the inability of the lower classes to operate the cultural capital of the upper classes even when they have access to its artifacts. These findings collectively contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how digital spaces do not simply reflect existing social stratification, but rather actively produces them through mechanisms of misrecognition that obscure the structural conditions behind what appear to be individual differences in abilities and tastes.

3. Platform Capitalism and the Precariatization of Young Digital Workforce

The political-economic dimension of the platform society ecosystem in Indonesia yields the most theoretically provocative finding in this entire study: digital economy platforms, rhetorically constructed as a medium for democratizing market access and empowering grassroots economics, actually operate as exploitative infrastructures that selectively benefit those with sufficient capital, whether economic, social, or digital. A close analysis of the experiences of informants involved in platform economy ecosystems such as Tokopedia, Shopee, Gojek, and TikTok Shop reveals a sharp stratification between three layers of actors: platform owners and investors who extract value from the entire ecosystem without bearing operational risk; middle-class merchants and content creators who have successfully built profitable businesses by optimally utilizing platform infrastructure; and the bottom layer, consisting of gig workers, couriers, and small resellers who provide labor and risk but capture a highly disproportionate share of the value from the entire value chain. This three-tiered structure conceptually aligns with what Sitompul et al. (2025) describe as the logic of “platform capitalism,” a new model of capital accumulation that exploits users’ data, labor, and social networks through digital infrastructure that presents itself as a neutral mediator. What distinguishes this research finding from Srnicek’s analysis is the emphasis on how position within the platform capitalism hierarchy is largely determined by pre-existing social and digital capital, creating an accumulative cycle in which those with existing capital can use the platform to accumulate more, while those without sufficient initial capital are trapped in subordinate positions that benefit the platform but do not generate significant accumulation for themselves. Young, lower-class informants working as platform couriers and digital product resellers consistently describe work experiences characterized by extreme income uncertainty, the absence of social protections, and a sense of powerlessness in the face of sudden changes in algorithms or platform policies that could destroy their sources of income. This condition reflects what Standing (2011) conceptualizes as the “precariat,” a new class characterized not only by economic insecurity, but by the instability of social identity and the absence of predictable life narratives, which in the context of Indonesia’s platform economy takes on a culturally and structurally specific face. The deepest paradox identified is that the lower-class youth who are most dependent on platforms for income are also the most vulnerable to platform arbitrariness and have the least power to negotiate their position

within the ecosystem, creating a condition of structural dependency that precisely replicates with new mediums pre-capitalist labor relations characterized by extreme power imbalances.

4. Platform-Mediated Social Reproduction: Analytical Model and Theoretical Implications

The overall synthesis of the findings in the two main points of this research allows for the formulation of a more comprehensive analytical model of the relationship between digital inequality and social stratification in the context of Indonesian platform society, which goes beyond existing models in the literature. The proposed model, which can be called the "Platform-Mediated Social Reproduction Model," argues that the platform society ecosystem in Indonesia operates as a highly efficient social reproduction machine precisely because it is able to transform the structural conditions of inequality into a series of seemingly free and meritocratic individual choices. Unlike the technological determinism model that sees platforms as exogenous forces that come from outside and change the social structure, this model emphasizes the co-construction between platform logic and existing social structures: platforms do not simply reflect or reproduce existing inequalities, but actively reconfigure them in new formats that have their own unique dynamics and mechanisms of reproduction. Specifically, this model identifies three main mechanisms through which platform society reproduces and intensifies social stratification: first, algorithmic mechanisms that operate stratification through content curation and the formation of class-based social networks; second, the habitus mechanism that internalizes class-structured digital dispositions into youth subjectivity; and third, the political-economic mechanism that positions youth within the platform value chain hierarchy based on their initial capital. The implication of this model for the future digital sociology research agenda is the need for studies that simultaneously capture all three mechanisms, as interventions that target only one mechanism without considering the others will tend to be ineffective in producing meaningful structural change. From a practical perspective, the overall findings of this study confirm that digital inequality in Indonesia is a socio-structural problem that requires a multi-level and transformative policy response, not merely a technical solution in the form of infrastructure provision or partial skills training. This condition demands policy reforms that simultaneously address platform regulations to prevent the exploitation of digital labor, school curriculum reforms to facilitate the formation of emancipatory digital habitus across classes, and the development of digital infrastructure that is truly geographically and socially equitable. At a more fundamental level, this study argues that solutions to digital inequality in Indonesia cannot be separated from solutions to broader social inequality because both are manifestations of the same logic of social reproduction operating through different mediums in different eras. Thus, this research not only contributes to digital sociology as a sub-discipline, but also to the sociology of inequality and social stratification more broadly, by showing that the era of platform society does not give rise to entirely new dynamics of stratification, but rather provides a new arena and new mechanisms for processes of social reproduction that are already very well known sociologically.

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that digital inequality among Indonesian urban youth operates as a multi-layered stratification system that operates simultaneously at the levels of physical access, skills gaps, and socio-economic benefits that cumulatively

reinforce each other along historically entrenched class lines. The platform society ecosystem is proven not to function as a democratizing force for social opportunities as claimed by technoutopian narratives, but rather operates as a social reproduction machine that converts structural inequality into new, more subtle digital formats that are more difficult to intervene through conventional policies. The concept of digital habitus stratification formulated in this research shows that class-formed dispositions toward technology are internalized into youth subjectivities through socialization in families, schools, and communities, so that digital inequality is not only structural-external but also subjective-internal and trans-generational. The platform's algorithmic mechanisms are found to actively operate class-based social segregation through the logic of content personalization, so that the nominally open and universal digital space actually contains an architecture of inequality hidden behind its seemingly neutral interface. An analysis of the platform economy ecosystem identifies a three-tier hierarchy between platform owners, middle-class merchants, and lower-class gig workers, confirming Srnicek's logic of platform capitalism, where position within the hierarchy is largely determined by initial capital, locking lower-class youth into deepening precariatization. The intersectional dimension of gender and class reveals that lower-class young women face the deepest digital exclusion due to the multiple pressures of material limitations and gender norms, a contrast that demands digital inclusion policies that are sensitive to the gender-class intersection simultaneously. The Platform-Mediated Social Reproduction Model, formulated as a major theoretical contribution, identifies three simultaneously operating mechanisms—algorithmic, habitus, and political economy—that together explain how platform society reconfigures, rather than eradicates, the logic of social reproduction long identified in classical stratification literature. The most pressing policy implication is the need for a transformative-ecological approach to digital inclusion: regulating exploitative platform practices, reforming school curricula to shape emancipatory digital habitus across classes, and building digital infrastructure that is equitable both geographically and socially. Epistemologically, this research validates the relevance of the critical-constructivist sociological approach in studying digital phenomena, by demonstrating that the combination of thematic analysis, Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, and Bourdieu's field analysis can uncover dimensions of inequality that are not captured by conventional quantitative approaches. At a more fundamental level, solutions to digital inequality in Indonesia cannot be separated from solutions to broader social inequality, as both are manifestations of the same logic of social reproduction that operates through different media in each historical era. This research as a whole contributes to the development of a critical digital sociology of Indonesia that not only describes existing phenomena but also produces knowledge that can inform more just and emancipatory social transformation. Platform society is thus not simply a new technological context, but a defining sociological arena where the stakes for the future of social justice for Indonesia's urban youth are being waged and must be fought for.

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