

Digital Platform Power and Social Development in the Global South: A Systematic Literature Review

Amalia Susilowati

¹Department of Social Development and Welfare, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences,
Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Background: Digital platforms increasingly mediate welfare, services, finance, labour, and entrepreneurship, while research on platform power remains fragmented and Global-North dominated. Gap: Platform political economy, algorithmic governance, data extraction, and inclusion are rarely integrated with development theory or Global South evidence. Objective: This study maps these gaps and develops a structural synthesis. Method: An interpretive systematic review of 30 Scopus-retrieved scholarly publications (journal articles and scholarly books/book chapters) published in 2010–2025 used PRISMA reporting and thematic–geographic coding. Results: Algorithmic governance dominated (18; 60%); resistance (9; 30%), infrastructure (8; 27%), and data colonialism/digital sovereignty (7; 23%) followed. Five studies (17%) engaged development theory; four (13%) focused directly on the Global South. Conclusion: The review develops a four-dimensional typology rather than a validated causal model. Implications: The framework extends dependency, developmental-state, and capability perspectives and guides future empirical testing.

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Corresponding Author:

Amalia Susilowati

Department of Social Development and Welfare, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas
Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Email: amaliasusilowati@mail.ugm.ac.id

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 General Background and Research Context

Digital transformation has become an important component of social development strategies across the Global South. Digital platforms increasingly mediate welfare distribution, financial inclusion, public-service delivery, e-commerce, labour markets, and entrepreneurial activity [1]–[4]. These systems are therefore more than technological tools: they can reorganize relations among states, markets, and citizens by shaping access to markets, services, information, and opportunities [5], [6]. At the same time, platform infrastructures can concentrate ownership, standards, data, and decision-making authority.

Critical digital political economy research highlights platform concentration, algorithmic control, surveillance, and data extraction as sources of asymmetric power [9]–[11], [18]–[20]. These perspectives complicate the more optimistic ICT4D emphasis on access and opportunity [2], [3], [7]. The central issue is consequently not whether digitalization is beneficial or harmful in the abstract, but how the institutional arrangements surrounding digital infrastructures shape development outcomes.

1.2 Specific Problem, Previous Studies, and Research Gap

Previous studies provide important but partially disconnected insights. Platform political economy emphasizes ownership, market concentration, and infrastructural control [5], whereas research on algorithmic governance examines automated decision-making, classification, surveillance, and algorithmic management [11], [18], [20], [23]. Data-colonialism scholarship focuses on the extraction and commodification of social data [10], while ICT4D and capability-oriented work emphasizes access, participation, agency, and human development [2], [8], [16]. Despite these advances, the literature rarely explains how these dimensions operate together as structural conditions of social development. The gap is particularly important for the Global South, where digital expansion can occur alongside historical dependency, uneven institutional capacity, and rapid institutional change. The review also reveals a geographical problem: the available corpus is dominated by North American and European cases, limiting the basis for generalizing claims about developing-country contexts. The present study therefore treats its Global South propositions as theoretically derived and empirically provisional rather than as established causal conclusions.

1.3 Research Questions and Objectives

To address the identified gap, the study asks three research questions: RQ1: What thematic dimensions of digital platform power dominate the existing literature? RQ2: To what extent does the literature connect digital platform power with social development theory, and what geographical and conceptual gaps remain? RQ3: How can the reviewed evidence be synthesized into a structural framework that generates empirically testable propositions for Global South contexts? The corresponding objectives are to map the dominant dimensions of platform power, assess their integration with development theory and geographical coverage, and develop a cautious structural typology that can guide future empirical research.

1.4 Novelty and Contribution

The study contributes in three ways. First, it connects platform political economy with classical development theory by treating digital infrastructures as structural variables rather than peripheral tools. Second, it integrates infrastructural domination, algorithmic governance, data colonialism, and digital resistance into a single configurational framework instead of treating them as isolated phenomena. Third, it places the geographical imbalance of the literature itself at the center of the analysis and identifies the need for empirical validation in specific Global South settings. The contribution is

conceptual: the propositions developed below are derived from literature synthesis and should be tested rather than interpreted as empirically confirmed relationships.

2. METHOD

The study uses an interpretive systematic literature review (SLR) designed for theory-building. The SLR provides transparent identification and selection procedures, while the interpretive component allows the synthesis to compare concepts and mechanisms across heterogeneous studies [25]–[28]. The critical realist orientation is used specifically as an epistemological guide for looking beyond observable descriptions toward underlying generative mechanisms. It does not constitute a separate research method; rather, it informs the interpretation of recurring structural mechanisms in the reviewed literature [28], [29]. Configurational reasoning is then used to examine how the four dimensions may interact rather than assuming a linear causal sequence. This relationship among SLR, interpretive synthesis, critical realism, and configurational reasoning is therefore sequential: systematic identification and screening establish the corpus; interpretive and critical-realist reading guide mechanism identification; configurational synthesis integrates the mechanisms into a theoretical framework.

2.1 Research Design and Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis is the publication included in the final review corpus. The study is not a field survey and therefore has no human respondents, research location, or participant sample. Instead, the data source is published scholarly literature. The review follows a theory-building logic: it seeks conceptual patterns and structural mechanisms rather than statistical generalization [25], [26], [28]. The coding instrument was a structured extraction matrix recording publication characteristics, thematic dimensions, geographical focus, and engagement with development theory. Coding was iterative: the four dimensions were refined through repeated comparison with the reviewed texts rather than imposed as fixed categories at the outset. The final corpus was selected through criterion-based screening rather than probabilistic sampling. Because the study uses published bibliographic materials and no human participants or private personal data, informed consent was not applicable.

Methodological trustworthiness was strengthened through explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria, a documented PRISMA screening pathway, thematic and geographic coding, and transparent separation between observed review patterns and theoretical propositions. No inter-coder reliability coefficient was calculated because the study was conducted as an interpretive synthesis by a single analytical team. No formal risk-of-bias instrument was applied; this is acknowledged as a limitation.

2.2 Search Strategy, Data Sources, and Selection Procedures

The literature search was conducted using the Scopus database because of its broad multidisciplinary coverage and indexing controls, which are appropriate for research spanning digital technology, information systems, political economy, and development studies. The review window covered publications from 2010 to 2025. The search protocol

was designed to identify literature addressing the intersection of digital platforms, platform power, algorithmic governance, data extraction, and social development, with particular attention to the Global South.

Because the original Scopus search-history record was not retained, the historical search date and the exact Boolean string entered during the original search cannot be independently verified from the materials available for this revision. To maintain methodological transparency, this manuscript therefore reports a reconstructed search protocol based on the conceptual scope, eligibility criteria, and terminology consistently applied in the review. The reconstructed protocol should not be interpreted as a verbatim historical record of the original Scopus search. The representative search structure was: TITLE-ABS-KEY(("digital platform*" OR "platform econom*" OR "platform capitalism" OR "platform power") AND ("algorithmic governance" OR "data colonialism" OR "data extraction" OR "digital political economy") AND ("social development" OR development OR welfare OR "public policy" OR "state capacity" OR "Global South" OR "developing countr*" OR "emerging econom*")). Search fields were Title, Abstract, and Keywords.

No country-level geographic filter was imposed as a mandatory Scopus search criterion. Instead, geographic relevance was assessed during screening and coding. This was intended to avoid excluding studies examining transnational platforms, global infrastructures, or comparative processes involving both Global North and Global South contexts. The term Global South was treated as an analytical and geopolitical category rather than as a fixed list of countries [30].

The search and screening pathway resulted in 124 records identified for screening, 68 reports assessed for eligibility, and 30 publications included in the final synthesis. The final corpus therefore comprised 30 scholarly publications published between 2010 and 2025.

2.3 Definition and Scope of the Global South

The Global South was treated as a contested analytical and geopolitical category rather than a fixed geographical list. Following Dados and Connell [30], the concept captures societies shaped by historical and contemporary relations of economic, political, and institutional inequality. Accordingly, studies were considered relevant to the Global South when their empirical setting, theoretical focus, or development context directly addressed countries or regions commonly situated within this category. The review did not use an exhaustive country-name filter during the database search; geographic relevance was determined during title/abstract screening, full-text assessment, and coding. This distinction is important because platform infrastructures and data flows frequently operate across national boundaries.

2.4 PRISMA Procedure, Eligibility, and Analytical Coding

The search produced 124 records. After title and abstract screening, 56 records were excluded because they were technical, commercially descriptive, or conceptually peripheral to development concerns, leaving 68 records for full-text assessment. Thirty-eight were then excluded after eligibility assessment, resulting in 30 publications in the

final synthesis. Inclusion required substantive engagement with digital platforms, algorithmic systems, or data infrastructures and their implications for governance, political economy, welfare, or development. Studies focused only on technical efficiency, consumer behaviour without structural analysis, or non-analytical opinion were excluded. The review included scholarly publications identified through the Scopus search, including peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly books or book chapters represented in the search corpus. The review was reported using PRISMA 2020 principles [27]. For each included publication, the coding matrix recorded whether infrastructural domination, algorithmic governance, data colonialism/digital sovereignty, and digital resistance were primary, secondary, or absent themes, together with geographic focus (Global North, Global South, or comparative/transnational) and explicit engagement with development theory.

Because the review is interpretive and theory-building, the analysis emphasizes thematic synthesis rather than effect-size aggregation. The final synthesis distinguishes three levels of evidence: (1) descriptive patterns directly observed in the corpus; (2) interpretive relationships among recurring concepts; and (3) propositions that extend those patterns into a framework for future empirical testing. This distinction is important because only four of the 30 studies directly concern Global South settings.

The PRISMA pathway is summarized in Figure 1. The 124 identified records, 68 full-text assessments, 38 exclusions, and 30 included publications are internally consistent with the final corpus used in all subsequent tables and analyses.

3. RESULTS

This section presents the characteristics of the final corpus and the main thematic, developmental, and geographical findings. The results are reported descriptively first; their theoretical interpretation is developed separately in the Discussion section.

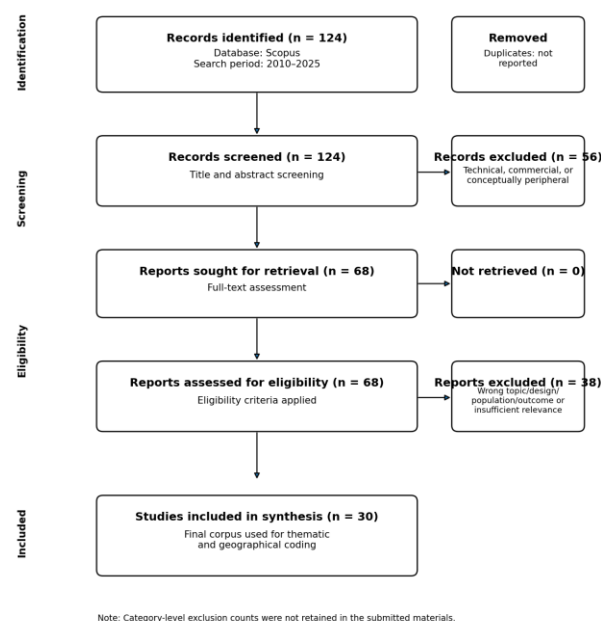


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram for the systematic review process

Table 1. Thematic distribution of digital platform power dimensions (N = 30)

Dimension of Digital Power	Primary Focus (n)	Engagement (%)
Algorithmic Governance	18	60%
Infrastructural Domination	8	27%
Data Colonialism / Sovereignty	7	23%
Digital Resistance	9	30%
Explicit Development Theory	5	17%

3.1. Thematic Distribution of Digital Platform Power

Algorithmic governance is the most prominent thematic dimension: 18 of the 30 publications (60%) identify algorithmic systems, automated decision-making, computational regulation, algorithmic management, or related forms of digital control as a primary analytical focus. The reviewed studies address predictive systems, welfare eligibility, content moderation, platform labour, surveillance, and automated classification [11], [18]–[20], [23].

Infrastructural domination is a primary focus in 8 studies (27%), indicating less attention to ownership, platform concentration, infrastructure dependency, and ecosystem control than to algorithmic processes. Data colonialism or digital sovereignty is a primary focus in 7 studies (23%), while digital resistance appears as a primary focus in 9 studies (30%). These categories are not mutually exclusive, so their percentages do not sum to 100%.

Digital resistance is examined through data-justice initiatives, algorithmic accountability, labour mobilization, regulatory experimentation, and demands for alternative or public digital infrastructures. Overall, the corpus is therefore concentrated on governance-level manifestations of digital power, while infrastructural and developmental dimensions receive comparatively less sustained attention.

3.2. Engagement with Social Development Frameworks

Only 5 of the 30 studies (17%) explicitly connect digital platform power with established development frameworks such as dependency, state capacity, or welfare governance. Most studies approach digital systems through democracy, competition, ethics, corporate governance, algorithmic fairness, or inclusion without explicitly theorizing digital infrastructures as structural conditions of development.

This pattern indicates a developmental-theory gap. Even where welfare automation or algorithmic targeting is discussed, the analysis tends to emphasize bias, transparency, or inclusion rather than institutional autonomy, domestic value capture, state capacity, or long-term development strategy. The result supports the need for a synthesis that links governance-level concerns with infrastructure and political economy.

3.3 Geographical Concentration and Epistemic Bias

Geographical coding shows a pronounced Global North concentration: 22 studies (73%) focus predominantly on North American or European cases, 4 (13%) directly focus on Global South settings, and 4 (13%) are comparative or transnational. Percentages sum to 99% because of rounding.

Table 2. Geographical focus and developmental engagement.

Category	Number of Studies	Percentage
Global North (US/Europe)	22	73%
Global South	4	13%
Comparative / Transnational	4	13%
Explicit Engagement with Development Theory	5	17%

3.4 Conceptual Fragmentation Across Dimensions

Only 3 of the 30 studies explicitly connect platform ownership or infrastructural structures with algorithmic forms of control. Similarly, discussions of data colonialism rarely overlap with welfare governance. This separation indicates that macro-level data extraction, infrastructure ownership, and administrative-level algorithmic decision-making are commonly studied as distinct problems.

The corpus consequently provides limited direct evidence about how these dimensions interact within particular development contexts. The finding supports the construction of a configurational framework, but it does not by itself establish that the proposed mechanisms operate with the same strength across Global South countries.

3.5 Summary of Results

Taken together, the review identifies three robust descriptive patterns: algorithmic governance dominates the literature; explicit integration with development theory is limited; and the evidence base is geographically concentrated in the Global North. These results justify a theoretical synthesis but also require caution: the four-dimensional framework is derived from the literature and remains to be empirically tested, particularly in Global South settings.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Structural Typology of Digital Platform Power in Social Development

The results indicate that the literature treats digital power through partially separated governance, infrastructural, data, and resistance lenses. The discussion therefore proposes a structural typology in which four mechanisms are analytically distinct but mutually conditioning. This is a theory-building synthesis, not an empirically validated causal model.

4.1.1 Infrastructural Domination as a Structural Condition

Digital platforms increasingly function as foundational infrastructures for socio-economic participation, including cloud services, payment systems, logistics, marketplaces, and data storage. Where development strategies depend on infrastructures governed by transnational firms, institutional autonomy may become mediated by external technical standards and commercial rules. This extends dependency theory into the digital era by shifting attention from commodity dependence toward infrastructure, standards, and platform ecosystems [5], [12], [13]. Proposition P1: Greater dependence of national development systems on externally governed digital infrastructure is theoretically associated with greater structural dependence and weaker infrastructural autonomy.

4.1.2 Algorithmic Governance as an Operational Mechanism

Algorithmic governance translates infrastructural capacity into everyday decision-making through classification, prediction, optimization, and automated allocation. Prior research shows that algorithmic systems can reshape organizational control and social sorting [11], [19], [20], [23], [31]. From a developmental-state perspective, this matters because administrative capacity may increasingly depend on computational systems whose design and maintenance can involve private actors. The capability approach adds a second dimension: when algorithms influence access to welfare, credit, employment, or public services, they may affect not only access but also agency and the conversion of resources into substantive freedoms [8], [16]. Proposition P2: When algorithmic systems mediate welfare and socio-economic participation, computational classification can reshape state capacity, accountability, and the distribution of substantive opportunities.

4.1.3 Data Colonialism as a Value-Extraction Mechanism

Infrastructural and algorithmic systems continuously generate behavioural and transactional data. Data-colonialism scholarship conceptualizes the appropriation of social data as a structural process of value extraction [10]. In development contexts, this raises questions about who captures value generated within domestic digital ecosystems, where data are stored and processed, and whether domestic institutions retain regulatory and fiscal capacity. Proposition P3: Where transnational platforms capture and monetize data generated within national development ecosystems, domestic value creation may become structurally decoupled from domestic value capture.

4.1.4 Digital Resistance as a Transformative Counter-Force

Digital power is not uncontested. Resistance can include civil-society mobilization, platform-worker organization, data-governance reforms, algorithmic accountability, data-localization measures, and public digital infrastructure. These practices can be interpreted as attempts to restore agency, institutional autonomy, and collective control rather than as isolated reactions. Proposition P4: Institutionalized forms of digital resistance can alter the structural effects of infrastructural dependence and data extraction by expanding institutional and collective capacity to govern digital systems.

4.1.5 Integrative Configuration: Simultaneity of Digital Power

The four dimensions should not be interpreted as a linear sequence. Infrastructural arrangements create conditions for algorithmic governance; algorithmic systems intensify data generation and extraction; data accumulation can reinforce platform centralization; and resistance can intervene at each stage. The relevant relationship is therefore configurational rather than strictly sequential. Proposition P5: Digital platform power reconfigures social development through the simultaneous interaction of infrastructural domination, algorithmic governance, data extraction, and resistance rather than through isolated mechanisms.

4.1.6 Theoretical Contribution

The typology makes three conceptual contributions. First, it places digital infrastructures inside development theory as structural variables. Second, it connects dependency theory, developmental-state theory, and the capability approach with platform political economy. Third, it produces propositions that can be empirically tested rather than presenting the framework as an established causal model. The capability approach is especially important because it shifts the analysis from simple access toward substantive freedoms, agency, opportunities, and capability conversion. Algorithmic categorization can constrain these dimensions when people cannot understand, contest, or overcome computational classifications that affect access to welfare, finance, employment, or services [8], [16].

4.2 Compressed Development and Digital Infrastructural Dependency

Classical developmental-state theory emphasizes institutional coordination, bureaucratic capability, and strategic intervention [14], [15]. In rapidly digitizing settings, digital infrastructure can be adopted before domestic technological and regulatory capacities have fully consolidated. The resulting dependence should be treated as a theoretical possibility supported by the literature rather than a universally demonstrated feature of the Global South. Future empirical research should test whether external infrastructure ownership, procurement dependence, or technical standards actually reduce policy autonomy in particular countries.

4.3 Algorithmic Governance and the Transformation of State Rationality

Algorithmic governance can transform how states define, measure, and administer development problems. Predictive categorization may improve administrative efficiency, but it can also move discretionary decisions toward computational models whose assumptions are difficult to inspect or contest. This does not necessarily mean that state authority disappears; rather, state authority can be reorganized through digital intermediaries. The development implication is therefore a question of accountability, institutional capacity, and the distribution of agency.

From a capability perspective, algorithmic classification matters because access to resources is not identical to the freedom to convert resources into valued ways of living [16]. A welfare or employment system can be technically accessible while still narrowing substantive opportunities through opaque eligibility or ranking rules. This extends the capability approach by identifying algorithmic classification as a possible conversion factor that shapes agency and opportunity.

4.4 Data Colonialism and Structural Decoupling of Value

Data extraction provides a bridge between platform infrastructures and development political economy. Couldry and Mejias conceptualize data colonialism as the appropriation of social life for data-driven value creation [10]. In the present synthesis, the developmental question is who captures the economic, institutional, and informational value generated from data. The proposition is not that all cross-border data flows are

exploitative; rather, the literature suggests that persistent asymmetries in data control can create risks for domestic value capture and digital sovereignty.

4.5 Digital Resistance as Institutional Negotiation

Digital resistance should be understood as a range of institutional and collective responses rather than only activist opposition. Regulatory experimentation, public digital infrastructure, data-localization policies, labour organization, and algorithmic accountability can change the conditions under which platforms operate. This interpretation is consistent with the broader literature on data justice and algorithmic accountability and supports treating resistance as part of development transformation rather than an external interruption.

The interaction between platform power and institutional resistance is likely to vary across political and administrative contexts. The review therefore does not claim that resistance automatically produces greater autonomy; instead, it identifies resistance as a mechanism through which institutional actors may renegotiate platform dependence.

4.6 Implicit Resonance with Rapidly Digitizing Southeast Asian Contexts

The framework is potentially relevant to Southeast Asian settings where digital payments, platform labour, e-commerce, and digital public services are expanding rapidly. However, the review does not provide sufficient country-specific evidence to demonstrate the proposed mechanisms in Southeast Asia. The region is therefore presented as a future empirical testing ground, not as a confirmed case of the framework. Comparative research could examine whether infrastructure dependence, algorithmic governance, data extraction, and resistance operate differently across Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, or other rapidly digitizing economies.

4.7 Reframing Social Development Theory

The synthesis suggests that digital transformation should be incorporated into the analytical vocabulary of social development. The key question is no longer simply whether digitalization increases access, but how infrastructural ownership, algorithmic classification, data control, and institutional resistance shape substantive freedoms, state capacity, welfare governance, and domestic value capture. This reframing moves beyond a binary digitalization-is-good-or-bad narrative toward a structural analysis of the conditions under which digital systems can support equitable and sustainable development.

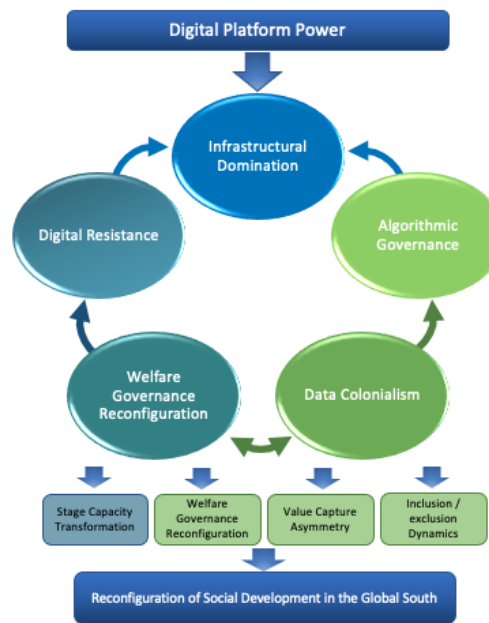


Figure 2. Structural configuration of digital platform power in social development trajectories in the Global South.

4.8 Practical and Policy Implications

The framework has practical and policy implications for governments, regulators, and institutions implementing digital-development programs. First, infrastructure procurement and platform partnerships should be assessed not only for efficiency but also for implications for institutional autonomy, interoperability, data control, and long-term dependence. Second, algorithmic systems used in welfare, credit, labour allocation, or public services require transparent governance, contestability, and human oversight so that administrative efficiency does not undermine substantive freedoms or agency. Third, data-governance arrangements should consider domestic value capture, lawful data use, and the capacity of public institutions to negotiate with transnational platforms. Finally, public digital infrastructure and regulatory experimentation may provide institutional alternatives where dependence on private platforms becomes excessive. These implications are derived from the theoretical synthesis and should therefore be treated as policy directions for further evaluation rather than empirically validated prescriptions.

4.9 Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the framework. First, the review relied on Scopus as a single database, which may exclude relevant scholarship indexed elsewhere or published in local and regional outlets. Second, the search was restricted to English-language scholarship, creating a risk of linguistic and epistemic bias. Third, only four of the 30 included studies directly focused on Global South settings, so the framework should not be interpreted as an empirically established description of all Global South contexts. Fourth, the corpus contains mixed scholarly publication types, and no formal risk-of-bias or quality-appraisal instrument was applied. Fifth, thematic coding was interpretive and did not include an inter-coder reliability coefficient. Sixth, P1–P5 are theoretically derived propositions and were not empirically validated. Finally, the original

Scopus search-history record, including the exact historical search date, verbatim Boolean query, and any country-level search filter, was not preserved in the materials available for this revision. The manuscript therefore reports a reconstructed search protocol and explicitly avoids presenting unverified historical details as if they were original search records.

4.10 Directions for Future Research

Future research should empirically test P1–P5 in specific Global South countries using comparative case studies, interviews with policymakers and platform workers, administrative or platform data, policy-document analysis, and mixed-method designs. Country-level studies should examine how infrastructure ownership, algorithmic classification, data extraction, and institutional resistance interact under different regulatory and state-capacity conditions. Comparative work across Southeast Asia, Africa, Latin America, and other Global South regions could also test whether the proposed configuration travels across institutional contexts or requires contextual modification. Future reviews should expand beyond Scopus, include multilingual scholarship where feasible, and apply explicit quality-appraisal procedures to strengthen the evidence base.

5. CONCLUSION

The study examined how digital platform power is represented in the literature on social development and how fragmented findings can be synthesized into a structural framework. The review of 30 publications identified three main descriptive patterns: algorithmic governance is the dominant thematic focus; explicit engagement with development theory is limited; and the evidence base is strongly concentrated in the Global North, with only four studies directly focused on Global South settings. These findings answer the research questions by showing that platform power is studied mainly through governance and algorithmic lenses, while infrastructure, data extraction, resistance, and development theory remain insufficiently integrated. The study therefore develops a four-dimensional typology of infrastructural domination, algorithmic governance, data colonialism, and digital resistance, expressed through five theoretical propositions (P1–P5). These propositions extend dependency theory toward digital infrastructure, connect algorithmic governance with developmental-state capacity, and deepen the capability approach by showing how computational classification may affect agency, opportunity, and capability conversion. Practically, the framework suggests that governments and institutions should consider digital sovereignty, infrastructure procurement, algorithmic accountability, data governance, public digital infrastructure, and mechanisms for contesting automated decisions when designing digital-development policies. The limitations discussed above qualify these conclusions: the review relies on a single database; includes English-language scholarship; contains only four Global South-focused studies; includes mixed publication types; does not report a formal quality-appraisal score; involves interpretive coding subjectivity; and does not empirically validate P1–P5. The exact historical Scopus search date and verbatim country-list query were also not preserved in the submitted materials. Future research should therefore conduct country-level

empirical tests using interviews, administrative data, policy analysis, or comparative case studies in specific Global South settings. Such studies can assess whether the proposed mechanisms actually affect state capacity, welfare inclusion, domestic value capture, institutional autonomy, and substantive freedoms, and under what contextual conditions.

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