

Research Article

Ethical Partnership Governance in Platform-Based Service MSMEs: Implications for Service Quality and Operational Performance

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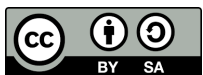
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Abstract: The growth of the digital economy has made service MSMEs increasingly dependent on platforms that regulate commissions, visibility algorithms, ratings, and sanctions, so that the issues of fairness, transparency, and accountability are determinants of operational stability. The problem of this research is how ethical partnership governance affects the quality of service and operational performance of platform-based service MSMEs. The purpose of this study is to analyze the mechanisms of the influence of distributive and procedural justice, policy transparency, and accountability on operational behavior and service quality. Methods: qualitative research with a descriptive phenomenological approach; semi-structured in-depth interviews with 25 owners/managers of MSMEs platform-based services in Surabaya (F&B delivery, cleaning/service, creative services), were analyzed thematically and strengthened by triangulation and member checking. The findings show that the four dimensions of governance form "partnership certainty" that reduces uncertainty, stabilizes operational decisions (management of service hours, capacity, order priority), and maintains service consistency. Service quality is most evident through responsiveness, empathy, real-time communication, and service recovery capabilities. However, the mechanism weakens when performance evaluation is overly based on customer ratings without considering field constraints, triggering the perception of inequality and defensive strategies that can reduce service flexibility. Conclusion: ethical partnership governance improves operational reliability and service quality, especially through partnership certainty, with the need for more contextual performance assessment. The implication is that the platform needs contextual evaluation and appeals channels that are responsive and clear.

Keywords: Certainty Of Partnership; Customer Rating; Digital Platforms; Ethical Partnership Governance; Operational Performance

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1. Introduction

The development of the digital economy in the last five years has significantly changed the business landscape of service MSMEs. Digital platforms such as food delivery services, service marketplaces, reservation applications, and various other application-based platforms have become the main infrastructure that connects MSME actors with consumers directly. Platform-based business

models enable transaction efficiency, expanded market access, and integration of payment systems and logistics in a single digital ecosystem (Yu & Sekiguchi, 2024). In this case, MSMEs are no longer just independent business actors but part of a digital partnership network governed by the platform's governance mechanism.

Despite offering growth opportunities, partnership relationships between service MSMEs and platforms are often characterized by inequality of bargaining power. The platform has control over the commission structure, visibility algorithm, rating system, and account penalty and suspension mechanisms. Several recent studies have shown that when the algorithm-based monitoring and evaluation process is perceived as less transparent, the affected parties tend to consider the process to be unfair. Conversely, increased transparency can strengthen perceptions of procedural and distributive justice, and this perception of fairness plays an important role in explaining the consequences of attitudes and behaviors in employment/partnership (Bujold et al., 2022). In addition, recent studies on fairness in algorithmic governance confirm that the perception of procedural injustice has the potential to lower the commitment and stability of cooperation in the platform ecosystem [3].

These problems are becoming increasingly relevant for service MSMEs, where service quality and operational consistency are the main determinants of business reputation. In the application-based services sector, service quality is proven to be influenced by the dimensions of reliability, security, system performance, and maintenance of product/service quality (Koay et al., 2022). Cost pressures due to high commissions, unbalanced promotion policies, or unilateral changes in rules have the potential to disrupt the operational stability of MSMEs, which ultimately impacts the quality of service received by customers. Thus, ethical partnership governance functions not only as an instrument of compliance but also as a determinant of operational performance.

Several studies on platform governance have shown that governance designs that combine control mechanisms, technology support, and transparency can increase participation and value creation by business partners (Zhang et al., 2025). However, most studies focus on the perspectives of platform companies or gig workers, while those that specifically place service MSMEs as the organizational units of analysis remain limited. In addition, research on service quality and operational performance in the context of platform-based services generally does not correlate these variables with the dimensions of partnership ethics and fairness. In other words, the integration between the perspective of ethical partnership governance and the operational outcomes of service MSMEs has not been explored empirically.

The research gap can also be seen from the dominance of studies conducted in developed countries with relatively established digital regulatory structures. In the context of developing countries, where MSMEs have a dominant role in the economy and the level of dependence on digital platforms is quite high, empirical evidence on the relationship between partnership governance and business performance is still limited. This condition shows the need for research that is able to explain how the perception of fairness, transparency, and accountability in digital partnership relationships affects the operational stability and service quality of MSME services.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze how ethical partnership governance affects the operational performance and service quality of platform-based MSME services. In particular, this study explores the experiences and meanings of MSME actors related to the dimensions of distributive justice, procedural justice, policy transparency, accountability mechanisms, and how these dimensions are perceived to affect the reliability of operational processes and the quality of services provided to customers. Through a descriptive phenomenological approach, this study seeks to identify essential themes that explain the mechanistic pathway from partnership governance practices to changes in service behavior and daily operational decisions.

This research makes several contributions. Theoretically, this study expands the organizational governance literature by integrating the ethical perspective of platform partnerships with operational management and service quality in the context of service MSMEs. Empirically, this study presents evidence on the relationship between fairness governance and measurable operational outcomes. Practically, the results of this research can be the basis for platform providers to design more transparent and equitable partnership policies, as well as assist MSMEs in strengthening internal governance systems to be more adaptive to the dynamics of digital platforms. Thus, ethical partnership governance is positioned as a strategic factor that supports the sustainability and competitiveness of MSMEs in platform-based services.

2. Literature Review

In the last five years, OJT (Organizational Justice Theory) has been increasingly used to explain black box problems and uncertainties in algorithm-based governance that are relevant to the context of platform-based service MSMEs, because the rules of the game (commissions, promotions, visibility, penalties) are largely determined by digital/algorithmic systems. For example, research on fairness in algorithmic management shows that the disclosure of information about how algorithmic management procedures/features work can change the perception of fairness, and fairness itself is understood through the dimensions of organizational fairness (distributive, procedural, and informational) (Mirbabaie et al., 2025). Recent literature shows that transparency in algorithm-based governance is related to an increasing perception of fairness; In fact, fairness can serve as a mechanism that explains how transparency influences behavioral responses (e.g., resistance) in the context of platform-based work/partnerships (Semujanga & Parent-Rochelleau, 2024). Similar findings also emerged in the context of algorithmic decision-making, where perceived fairness was influenced by the transparency and design interventions of the system's communication (Ochmann et al., 2024).

When platforms implement partnership governance that is considered fair and transparent (e.g., clear commission rules, appeal/dispute mechanisms are accessible, proportionate penalties, and operational information is not suspended), MSMEs will assess the partnership relationship as more legitimate and predictable. This condition in turn improves process compliance, coordination stability, and service consistency, which is reflected in operational performance (timeliness, process reliability, output consistency) and ultimately increases service quality. However, businesses that rely on platforms face power asymmetry, where platforms can change rules, designs, and market access mechanisms, while businesses bear the consequences of operations and revenue. The latest systematic review confirms that platform governance shapes the behavior of dependent business actors through the regulation of market access, visibility, and opportunities, while creating the risk of dependency and vulnerability (Gawer, 2021).

Recent research shows that IT-based governance mechanisms are designed to increase complementmentor satisfaction, and that satisfaction is important for complementmentors to contribute to innovation and value co-creation in the platform ecosystem (Petrik & Mikusz, 2025). Relevance for service MSMEs: IT support and governance design can increase operational certainty (e.g., order flow certainty, compliance standards, and evaluation mechanisms), which then has implications for service quality.

A study in the Journal of Management and Organization (IPB) found that strategic partnerships and the use of information technology are related to the sustainability of MSMEs, confirming that the quality of partnerships and digital support are important factors for business resilience (Nur Widyanti et al., 2025).

Platform Economy and Service MSMEs

Platform economy refers to the form of digital market organization in which a platform acts as an intermediary that facilitates interaction, matching, and transactions between groups of users in an ecosystem. Instead of traditional pipeline models that linearly deliver value, platforms orchestrate networks of actors (e.g., consumers and service providers, customers and merchants, or buyers and sellers) through participation rules, interface design, and data-driven coordination mechanisms. The latest literature confirms that digital platforms and ecosystems are new forms of organizations that coordinate the constellation of economic actors through externality and complementarity mechanisms, thus enabling the creation and capture of value in digitally mediated markets. However, this structure also has implications for the distribution of value and power dynamics between actors, as platforms have a central role in setting rules for participation, managing digital interfaces, and determining access to market resources. Platforms not only facilitate economic interaction, but also reshape business models, value creation patterns, and power relations in the digital economy (Fu et al., 2021) (Jacobides et al., 2024).

Konsep two-sided market dan ciri khas bisnis dua sisi

The concept of a *two-sided market* refers to a market structure in which a platform serves two groups of users who are interdependent and generate value through mutual interaction. The value received by one side of the market increases as the participation of the other side increases, resulting in what are known as *cross-side network effects*. In this context, the platform's strategic decisions cannot be analyzed from just one side of the user, because pricing policies, incentives, and cost structures on the one hand will affect participation and value on the other.

In environments with network effects, platforms often apply *optimal subsidization* strategies, i.e., providing subsidies or incentives to one side of the market to accelerate network growth and strengthen competitive position (Dou & Wu, 2021). This strategy aims to reach the critical mass of users so that the network effect can work optimally.

Further, in the dynamics of a competitive two-sided market, the pricing structure and innovation investment on the platform are determined not only by operational costs, but also by strategic considerations in maximizing cross-border interaction (Wang et al., 2023). In a two-sided market, platforms can simultaneously adjust subsidy policies and innovation investments to increase user participation and strengthen value creation in their ecosystem. This reflects the typical character of a two-sided business, namely the mutual dependence between pricing strategies, service development, and the intensity of participation on both sides of the market. Thus, in the platform economy, the cost structure and monetization mechanism are often designed to be asymmetrical, since the main goal is not simply to earn direct revenue from each side, but to optimize the overall value of the network created.

Recent research on algorithmic management shows that digital platforms not only act as intermediaries for transactions but also actively shape the politics of demand through algorithm-based control mechanisms (McDaid et al., 2023). On an application-based platform, algorithms regulate demand distribution, set allocation priorities, and monitor the performance of supply-side actors on an ongoing basis. This mechanism creates a form of remote control that affects the way business actors respond to orders, manage working hours, determine participation strategies, and even adjust service standards to align with the logic of the platform system. Thus, algorithm-mediated order flow is not a neutral process, but rather a governance instrument that shapes the operational decisions and economic behavior of partners in the platform ecosystem.

Reliance of service MSMEs on the platform

In practice, many MSMEs (delivery-based culinary, small accommodation, health & beauty services, creative services, and application-based household services) are dependent on the platform because it provides (i) market access, (ii) transaction infrastructure (payments, promotions, search), and (iii) reputation mechanisms (ratings/reviews) that affect customer acquisition. Recent systematic reviews confirm that platforms can lower entry barriers, but at the same time create vulnerabilities because business continuity is heavily influenced by platform policies, algorithms, and governance (Yu & Sekiguchi, 2024).

In Indonesia, the findings of a study also showed that the adoption of service applications (e.g., food delivery applications) is part of the MSME strategy, although the adoption behavior and considerations of business actors may differ from the assumption of the general technology adoption model. This is important because it shows that the relationship between MSMEs and platforms is not solely a matter of technology use, but concerns market dynamics, costs, and risks in the platform ecosystem.

Platform-dependent entrepreneurship (PDE): MSMEs as platform-dependent entrepreneurs

The literature refers to business actors who rely on market access and key resources on platforms as platform-dependent entrepreneurs (PDEs). Different from conventional entrepreneurship, PDE operates in a structure whose rules of the game are set and can be changed by the platform; These dependencies create specific risks, such as visibility uncertainty, changes in commission/promotion policies, or access restrictions (e.g., account restrictions).

Case-based empirical studies also show that PDE is not always passive. They can make strategic adaptations to maintain business continuity when facing changing platform access and control mechanisms. These findings reinforce the assumption that platform dependency is a dynamic issue that impacts operational decisions, rather than just sales channel choices (Nzembayie et al., 2024).

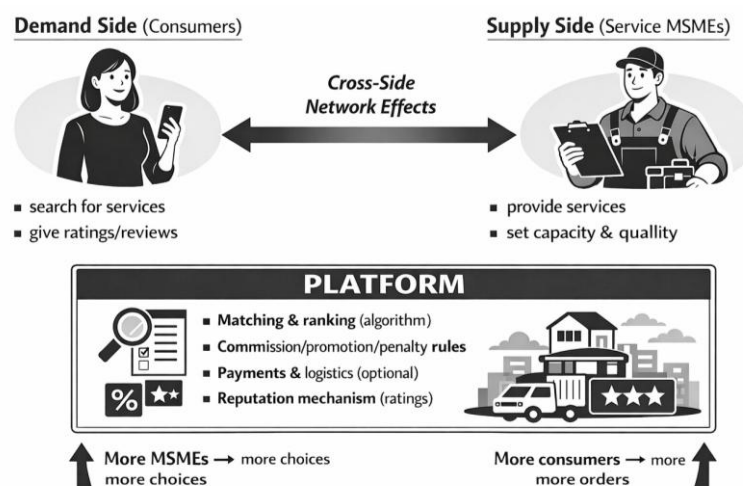


Figure 1. Partnership Governance Framework on the Two-Sided Platform of MSMEs Services.

Figure 1. It emphasized that the platform regulates two-sided interaction through digital mechanisms (ranking, commission, reputation), so that MSME market access depends on the rules and design of the platform.

Ethical Partnership Governance in Platform-Based Service MSMEs

Ethical partnership governance in platform-based service MSMEs can be understood as a set of rules, mechanisms, and decision-making practices that govern platform-partner relationships by emphasizing fairness, transparency, and accountability. In the platform ecosystem, partnerships are not only in the form of formal contracts, but also rules of the game that are realized through digital system design, such as commission policies, promotion schemes, ranking mechanisms, order access arrangements, and rating-based assessment processes. Therefore, a strong conceptual foundation for assessing the ethics or not of partnership governance is Organizational Justice Theory, which describes justice into several dimensions, especially distributive justice (justice of results), procedural justice (justice of process), and informational justice. (Wiseman & Stillwell, 2022)

The ethical dimension is also stronger when associated with two principles of digital governance that are often of concern in algorithm-based systems, namely transparency and accountability. Transparency does not only mean that information is available, but also the extent to which the platform reveals relevant aspects of the evaluation and assessment process, decision-making criteria, and policy consequences for partners. Studies on fairness in algorithmic management confirm that variations in forms of transparency can result in different perceptions of fairness, so that governance that appears informative is not necessarily perceived as fair if the information does not answer aspects that are considered important by partners (e.g., questionable reasons for decisions or procedures). In line with that, empirical research shows that transparency in algorithm-based supervision/assessment practices can influence behavioral intentions (e.g., exit intentions), and that these effects work through the justice dimension (e.g., procedural justice or distributive justice as a mediator) (Bujold et al., 2022).

Meanwhile, accountability emphasizes who is responsible and accountability mechanisms when platform system decisions have negative consequences for partners, such as orders dropping dramatically due to ranking changes, incentive cuts, or penalties that are considered disproportionate. The literature on algorithmic accountability emphasizes that technical systems cannot be held morally or legally accountable. Therefore, governance needs to ensure the existence of actors or entities that can be asked for justification, audit and review procedures, and correction mechanisms (remedy) when errors or adverse impacts occur (Horneber & Laumer, 2023) The principle of transparency-accountability is also widely recognized as the basis for responsible algorithmic system governance, especially to reduce decision opacity and protect affected parties (Cheong, 2024)

For service MSMEs, the urgency of ethical partnership governance is increasingly high because the rules of the platform often operate as a form of remote control that affects the

flow of requests and operational behavior of partners. The study of algorithmic management on service platforms highlights that platforms can manage partner requests and responses through algorithmic mechanisms and control devices, so that partners are encouraged to adjust service strategies, timing, and order response methods to align with the platform's system logic (McDaid et al., 2023). Therefore, when the rules change unilaterally or are not accompanied by adequate explanations, MSMEs face operational uncertainty that can lead to a decrease in service quality.

In practice, ethical governance is not always synonymous with less control, but fair, explainable, and accountable control, accompanied by support that enables MSMEs to maintain service standards. Studies on platform ecosystems confirm that IT-based governance mechanisms (e.g., monitoring, reputational badges, and IT support) can reduce slackness behavior and encourage value co-creation. This means that the right governance design can direct partner behavior without triggering destructive resistance (Zhang et al., 2025) (Nur Widyanti et al., 2025).

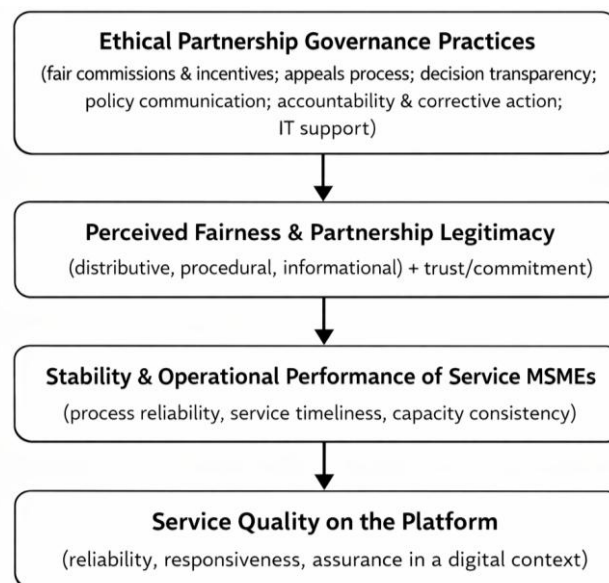


Figure 2. Ethical Partnership Governance Framework.

The above framework provides a logical bridge when MSMEs assess partnership governance as a form of fair, transparent, and accountable cooperation, so that operational uncertainty tends to decrease and service coordination becomes more stable, and in turn, this stability strengthens operational performance and makes it easier for MSMEs to maintain consistent service quality. This argument is also in line with the findings that transparency and fairness in algorithmic management relate to behavioral reactions through justice mechanisms, as well as that accountability is necessary to manage the negative impact of algorithmic systems on affected parties.

Operational Performance of Service MSMEs

Operational performance in service MSMEs refers to the level of success of the business in carrying out daily service processes efficiently, reliably, and consistently to meet customer needs. In the operations management literature, operational performance is generally understood as the achievement of internal processes that are reflected in cost, quality, speed/accuracy of service, flexibility, and reliability (process dependency), which are dimensions that directly determine customer experience and business competitiveness (Alfalla-Luque et al., 2023).

In MSMEs with platform-based services, operational performance becomes crucial because demand comes in a fluctuating pattern (influenced by the platform system), service standards are converted into digital metrics (ratings, response times, cancellations), and minor disruptions to the operating process are quickly visible to customers and impact reputation. This makes it necessary to measure operational performance to emphasize indicators that are close to the service process (process-based measures), not just financial indicators (Akmal, 2021).

The main dimensions of operational performance in service MSMEs

The main dimension of operational performance in service MSMEs is generally understood as a set of operational priorities that show how well the service process is executed to produce efficient and valuable services for customers. In the operations literature, operational performance is often measured through a combination of several core dimensions, especially cost, quality, delivery/lead time, flexibility, and often dependability/reliability, because these dimensions are closest to the daily service process and most quickly perceived by customers (Lee, 2021).

- a. **Cost efficiency.** The cost dimension assesses the ability of MSMEs to carry out service processes with the use of resources economically and productively. In service MSMEs, costs do not only mean total expenses, but also involve cost efficiency per transaction or per service, labor, supporting materials, daily operational costs, and coordination costs. The operating literature places cost as an important performance dimension because process improvements (e.g., reduction of waste, workflow structuring) typically lead to more controlled costs, so MSMEs have room to maintain prices, improve quality, or expand services without burdening the cost structure (Lee, 2021).
- b. **Quality (service/process quality).** In service, quality is mainly reflected in the consistency of service, namely, the minimum of errors, low complaints, service conformity with standards, and a stable customer experience. Quality is a key operational dimension because a service product is difficult to separate from the delivery process; in other words, a bad process almost always appears as poor quality. In the study of operational performance, quality is a key dimension because it is directly related to customer satisfaction and business reputation, which in services are often the determinants of demand sustainability (Lee, 2021).
- c. **Speed and accuracy of service (speed/lead time & delivery performance).** This dimension describes the ability of MSMEs to fulfill services quickly and on time according to customer promises/expectations. In practice, the measures that are often used are response time, service cycle time (lead time), and accuracy of fulfillment (on-time delivery). The literature places lead time/delivery as a core part of operational performance because service customers typically value certainty and speed, especially when the need is immediate (e.g., on-demand services). Operationally, improvements in speed/accuracy usually demand process simplification, queue reduction, and better capacity coordination (Csiki et al., 2023).
- d. **Flexibility.** Flexibility shows the ability of MSMEs to adapt to changing demand or variations in customer needs without degrading quality and without raising costs excessively. In service MSMEs, flexibility can be in the form of the ability to adjust service hours, change service packages, increase capacity when crowded, or reset fulfillment priorities. In the modern operating literature, flexibility is seen as important as the business environment becomes increasingly dynamic; Flexible MSMEs tend to be more resistant to fluctuations in demand and operational disruptions (Yousuf et al., 2021).
- e. **Dependability/reliability.** Reliability emphasizes consistency, whether MSMEs are able to maintain process standards and meet service promises stably over time. This is not just a one-time fast, but often quick and rarely missed. In operation logic, dependability is important because customers not only pursue speed, but also certainty, and certainty reduces the risk of complaints, cancellations, and rework that ultimately adds to costs. Because of this, many studies place dependability as part of operational performance priorities alongside quality, cost, flexibility, and lead time/delivery (Csiki et al., 2023).

Performance measurement studies (including in the context of Indonesian MSMEs) also emphasize that non-financial indicators, especially internal processes and customers, need to be involved so that performance truly reflects the condition of the business as a whole, not just the final financial results. It aligns with an operational performance approach that is based on process dimensions such as cost, quality, timeliness, flexibility, and reliability (Akmal, 2021).

Relevant operational indicators for MSMEs platform-based services

A study in the Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing discusses how platform-based digital connectivity (access to real-time information and upstream-downstream connections) helps MSMEs improve responsiveness and performance in a turbulent environment. This

reinforces the argument that the measure of operational performance in a platform-based business should capture the real-time and coordination aspects of services (Rajala & Hautala-Kankaanpää, 2023) The following is a summary of commonly used and easy-to-operate indicators.

Table 1. Dimensions and indicators of operational performance of service MSMEs (adaptation for the context of the platform).

Dimensions	Operational Definition	Measurable Indicators (proxy) on Platform-Based Service MSMEs	Rujukan (last 5 years)
Cost	Efficiency of resource use in Operating service processes	costs per order, packaging/transport costs per transaction, percentage of commission costs to margin	Cost-based operational meta-measures (Alfalla-Luque et al., 2023)
Quality	Consistency of service quality and minimum errors	Complaint rate, order/service error, average rating, return/refund rate	Quality-performance relationship and the need for non-financial measures (García-Fernández et al., 2022)
Speed/Delivery	Speed of fulfillment and timeliness of service	Order Receipt Response Time, Order-to-Complete Time, On-Time Rate, Cancellation Rate	Delivery size/speed as a component of operational performance (Alfalla-Luque et al., 2023)
Dependability	Process stability when demand variations are high	Consistency of lead time during peak hours, stability of PMM & stock/service capacity, and rate of recurring delays	Strengthening the role of governance for process stability (Saunila et al., 2024)
Flexibility	Capacity adaptability/service variation	The ability to increase operating hours, increase HR capacity when crowded, a variety of menus/service features, and multi-channel fulfillment	Flexibility is a frequently used dimension of operational performance (Alfalla-Luque et al., 2023)
Process innovation (optional)	Process improvement to improve productivity & quality	Adoption of digital tools (POS/dashboards), standardization of service SOPs, automation of record-keeping, improvement of workflows	Digital transformation related to measurement & performance systems (Cosa & Torelli, 2024)

Based on this description, it can be interpreted that the operations of platform-based MSMEs are greatly influenced by digital connectivity, where operational performance indicators need to capture real-time responsiveness and end-to-end (upstream-downstream) service coordination during the service fulfillment process. Therefore, the replacement indicators chosen should represent the main stages of service (order receipt, processing, and settlement) as well as the quality of coordination in dynamic demand conditions.

Service Quality in Platform-Based Service MSMEs

Definition of service quality in the context of platform-based services

In conventional services, service quality is generally understood as a customer's assessment of the extent to which the services received meet or exceed expectations, which is commonly explained through the dimensions of SERVQUAL (reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and physical evidence). However, in platform-based service MSMEs, customer experience is not only determined by the service provider, but also by the platform mechanism, ranging from applications and interfaces, ordering and tracking systems, notifications, payments, to ratings or reviews. Therefore, service quality in this context is hybrid, including digital service quality (e-service quality) formed from customer interaction with systems or platforms, and the quality of service execution in the field by MSMEs/partners when fulfilling orders.

In the digital service literature, the quality of electronic channels is often operationalized through the e-service quality framework, such as E-S-QUAL, which emphasizes efficiency, fulfillment, system availability, and security and privacy. This framework is widely used in application-based services because it is able to capture the quality of the system experience that conventional SERVQUAL does not fully afford. Correspondingly, in application-based ride-sharing services, service quality is formed across *touchpoint* platforms, service providers, and other parties in the ecosystem, where the reliability and responsiveness of the platform, as well as the competence and empathy of the provider, have been shown to influence the satisfaction and sustainability of service use (Lim et al., 2022). The findings in the context of ride-hailing also confirm the need to integrate the online aspect (e.g., platform responsiveness and structural assurance) and the offline aspect (provider competence/empathy), as both contribute to user satisfaction and loyalty (Thaithatkul et al., 2021).

Dimensions of service quality and its adaptation into platform services

The adaptation of the service quality dimension in platform-based service MSMEs can be explained as follows.

- a. Reliability. On the platform, reliability not only means that the service is completed as promised, but also includes consistency in order fulfillment under dynamic demand conditions, taking into account timeliness, minimization of errors, and process stability (e.g., orders are not frequently canceled). In application-based services such as food delivery, reliability is treated as an important dimension of service quality related to satisfaction and intention to reuse (Wu et al., 2024).
Adaptation of platform indicators: on-time delivery/service, service error rate, cancellation, and fulfillment consistency from the customer's perspective.
- b. Responsiveness. In the platform ecosystem, responsiveness stands out as customers expect a quick and real-time response, through order confirmations, status updates, chat/phone responses, complaint handling, and speed of issue resolution. A study of service MSMEs that serve customers through social media (as a platform channel) shows that *responsiveness* is a priority for improvement in the evaluation of the quality of online services (Mantala & Irawan, 2024).
Adaptation of platform indicators: response time (chat/confirmation), speed of complaint handling, clarity of order status information, and response SLA.
- c. Assurance. In application-based services, the assurance dimension intersects with a sense of security and trust, including the perception of transaction security and data/privacy protection. Therefore, the security aspect is often positioned as part of the quality of digital services that affects satisfaction and reuse behavior (Wu et al., 2024).
Adaptation of platform indicators: verification/partner identity, policy clarity (refund/compensation), payment security, data security, and certainty of service standards.
- d. Empathy. In digital/platform-based services, the dimension close to empathy often emerges as interactive services, namely the ease of interacting, getting help, and receiving supportive responses from the provider/customer service, which has been shown to contribute to customer psychological responses (e.g., trust and perceived risk) and engagement behavior. This reinforces the argument that on online channels, empathy often manifests as a quality of interaction and a willingness to help when there is a problem (Fan et al., 2022).

Adaptation of platform indicators: the quality of communication, the ability to adapt to demand, as well as the customer's perception that the provider cares and helps.

- e. Physical evidence (Tangibles) in the context of the platform. In platform-based services, physical evidence is not only physical facilities, but also digital tangible, where the quality of the profile/storefront display, service photos, clear price information, and neatness of service attributes (packaging, work equipment, uniforms/partner attributes if any). In services such as food delivery, aspects related to the quality of the product/service received (e.g., food/packaging quality) are also positioned as an important part of the service experience (Wu et al., 2024). Adaptation of platform indicators, including quality of information/digital storefront, quality of packaging/equipment, and suitability of service outputs with descriptions on the platform.

The following table 3 summarizes the adaptation of the dimensions of SERVQUAL's service quality to the context of platform-based service MSMEs, where the customer experience is shaped by service execution as well as interaction through applications. Each dimension is briefly described as relevant to the fast-paced and digitally documented character of the service. In addition, this table presents examples of indicators that are easy to operationalize and align with metrics commonly available on the platform (e.g., ratings, complaints, SLAs, and repeat orders).

Table 2. Adaptation of the Quality of Service Dimension to the Context of the Platform.

Dimension of service quality (SERVQUAL)	The Meaning of Platform-Based Service MSMEs	Indikator yang Mudah Dioperasionalisasi (platform- friendly)
Reliability	Consistency of order fulfillment as promised (time, results, minimum errors)	On-time rate, cancellation rate, error/redo rate, repeat order (as a consistency signal)
Responsiveness	Real-time response speed during the service process	Chat/confirmation response time, complaint handling time, response SLA, and status update clarity
Insurance	Sense of security/trust in the competence of the provider + transaction security	Trust rating, security-related complaints, privacy/security indicators, and refund certainty
Empathy	Care and quality of communication during interaction & problem solving	Communication satisfaction scores, first contact problem resolution, and sentiment reviews related to hospitality
Tangible	Physical evidence + digital proof (profile/storefront) and quality of service output	Quality of photos/descriptions, complaints related to packaging/equipment, suitability of output vs description

3. Materials and Method

Research Design

This study uses a **qualitative** design with a **descriptive phenomenological** approach. The approach is based on the **experience and meaning of** platform-based MSME service actors related to partnership governance, such as policy transparency, commission/incentive fairness, as well as sanctions and appeal mechanisms. Its main focus is to understand how the experience is perceived to affect **service quality** and **operational performance** in day-to-day practice. The analysis was carried out by compiling **structural** and **essential descriptions** of the phenomena experienced by participants to capture *lived experiences* and formulate the essence of shared experiences (Englander & Morley, 2023). To maintain a phenomenological orientation, the study uses a **thematic** approach by organizing significant statements into essential units of meaning and themes that emerge consistently from the participants' experiences.

Research Context

This research was carried out in **the city of Surabaya**, with the consideration that Surabaya is a center of economic activities and services in East Java and has a high level of use of digital platforms in the MSME sector. The research context focuses on **MSMEs of platform-based services**, namely MSMEs that market and receive service requests online through digital applications/channels, so that the experience of partnerships with platforms (e.g., commission/incentive rules, service policies, and sanction mechanisms) becomes an important part of daily operational practices. The research subjects include MSMEs in several service fields that are commonly run through the platform, namely **Food & Beverage**, **cleaning/repair** (e.g., laundry and service), and **creative/design services**.

The number of participants in this study is **25 people**, with the main informant in the form of **MSME owners or managers**, because they have direct experience in managing services, interacting with platform policies, and making operational decisions. In this study, the **unit of analysis** is a **platform-based service MSMEs** as a business entity that carries out service and operational processes in the platform ecosystem. Meanwhile, **the informant unit** includes **MSME owners/managers** as the main source of data, and **customers** as supporting informants (when involved) to enrich understanding of service quality experiences from the user side, especially related to responsiveness, service reliability, and complaint handling.

Participants and Sampling Techniques

The selection of participants was carried out by purposive sampling, namely selecting the most relevant informants who have sufficient experience to explain the phenomenon of platform partnerships in service MSME operations. This process can be continued with snowball sampling, which involves asking for recommendations from the initial participants to find other participants who have specific experiences (e.g., having received sanctions or having appealed), so that the variety of experiences can be accommodated. The number of participants in this study is 25 owners /managers of platform-based MSME services in Surabaya, with a variety of business fields including Food & Beverage, cleaning/repair (e.g., laundry and service), and creative/design services.

Participant criteria are set so that the data obtained is loaded and in accordance with the research objectives, namely:

1. MSMEs have been active on the platform for at least 6 months, so that participants have sufficient experience related to platform policies and dynamics
2. Have adequate service activity, such as at least 50 orders in the last 90 days or equivalent similar activity indicators
3. Representing a variety of service characters, especially delivery (Food & Beverage) and home service (cleaning/repair), as well as creative services
4. Representing variations in partnership experiences, such as having experienced sanctions/appeals vs. not, as well as variations in service performance as reflected in relatively high vs medium ratings. The determination of these criteria helps the research to capture the spectrum of participants' experiences more comprehensively, while supporting the achievement of theme saturation (the pattern of the experience and the main theme begin to repeat).

The types of data used include primary data and supporting data. Primary data is obtained through semi-structured in-depth interviews with MSME owners/managers as the main informants, as well as customers as supporting informants when needed to enrich the perspective of service quality. Supporting data is obtained through relevant documentation (where available), such as notification of policy changes, commission/incentive information, evidence of sanctions and appeals processes, or order performance summaries, which serve to reinforce context and triangulate the interview findings.

Data collection was carried out through interviews that allowed participants to share their experiences in detail, especially related to policy transparency, fairness of value sharing, sanction and appeal mechanisms, as well as their implications on service quality and operational performance. The research instrument used was a semi-structured interview arranged based on the focus of the research, so that the exploration led to three main domains: (1) participants' experiences in platform partnerships and perceptions of ethical governance practices; (2) changes in service behavior and practices related to service quality (e.g. response to customers, complaint handling, and service consistency); and (3) consequences on day-to-day operational decisions (e.g., management of service times, cancellations, capacity, and strategies to maintain performance when demand fluctuates). During the interview process, the researcher also compiled field notes to capture context, emphasis, and nonverbal aspects that did not always appear in the transcript.

Data analysis was carried out thematically within the framework of descriptive phenomenology. The analysis process begins with the transcription of the interview, then repeated reading to understand the context of the participants' experiences. Next, the researcher identifies significant statements, encodes them to form a unit of meaning, and groups these units of meaning into themes that represent a pattern of shared experience. The final stage of analysis is the preparation of an essential description that summarizes what the participants experienced and how the experience took place in the context of platform partnerships, thus producing key themes that explain the relationship between ethical partnership governance and the service quality and operational performance of platform-based service MSMEs.

Research Validity and Ethics

To maintain the quality of the findings (trustworthiness), this study applies several strategies. First, source triangulation is carried out, which involves comparing information from MSME owners/managers with relevant supporting data (e.g., policy documentation, platform notifications, or evidence related to sanctions/appeals if available), as well as customer perspectives if involved, so that interpretation does not rely on one point of view. Second, the study applied member checking by confirming the summary of the results of the interview or the initial themes to several participants so that the meaning captured by the researcher was in accordance with the intention of the informant. Third, the researcher compiles a trail audit in the form of a record of the data collection and analysis process (e.g.,

coding decisions and theme formation), and conducts peer debriefing when possible through discussions with fellow researchers to minimize interpretation bias. In addition, researchers maintain procedural consistency (e.g., the use of uniform interview guidelines and field recordings) so that the research process can be traced and accounted for.

In terms of research ethics, this research was carried out by prioritizing participant protection. Before the interview, the researcher explains the objectives, procedures, and use of research data, then obtains the participant's consent (informed consent). The confidentiality of identity and business information is maintained through the use of informant codes, as well as restrictions on data access only for research purposes. Participants are given the right to refuse to answer certain questions **or** terminate participation at any time without consequences. All data (recordings, transcripts, and documentation) are stored securely, and the results are presented in aggregate or narrated without revealing the identity of the individual or sensitive details that could harm the participants.

4. Result and Discussion

Participant Overview and Context

This study involved 25 participants who own/manage MSMEs platform-based services operating in the city of Surabaya. Participants' business fields include Food & Beverage (delivery), cleaning/repair (laundry and service), and creative/design services. All participants meet the criteria as active actors on the platform, so they have direct experience interacting with platform policies (e.g., commissions/incentives, service rules, complaint handling, and sanctions and appeal mechanisms). This section provides an important context for understanding how partnership governance practices are perceived and experienced in daily operational routines.

Theme Findings

The descriptive phenomenological analysis aims to formulate essential themes that describe participants' experiences related to ethical partnership governance and its impact on service quality and operational performance. In general, the findings can be grouped into two broad groups, namely (1) participants' experiences related to the dimensions of ethical partnership governance, distributive justice, procedural justice, policy transparency, and accountability, and (2) the impact mechanism of these dimensions on service quality and reliability of operational processes.

Main Theme 1: Distributive Justice as a Determinant of Work Motivation and Operational Stability

Experiential focus: the fairness of the division of value (commissions, incentives, penalties) and their consequences on daily decisions. The findings show that participants generally rate the current commission structure, incentive schemes, and penalties to be relatively reasonable and acceptable as a consequence of platform-based partnerships. This perception of fairness makes some partners feel that there is still room to maintain work motivation and maintain service standards. However, under certain conditions, there is a perceived inequality, especially when the platform assesses the partner's performance almost solely from customer ratings without taking into account real obstacles in the field (e.g., weather, congestion, delays from other parties, or operational situations beyond the control

of the partner). This situation creates an imbalance in the sharing of consequences, as operational risks are borne more by the partners, which ultimately has the potential to disrupt operational stability and encourage adaptive behavior (e.g., more selectively accepting orders or installing time buffers) to avoid rating downgrades and penalties.

Main Theme 2: Procedural Fairness in the Application of Rules and Sanctions

Experience focus: consistency of rule enforcement, equality of treatment, and predictability of platform decisions. The findings suggest that participants generally view partnership procedures as fair and predictable because the ground rules have been established from the start. Participants also positively assessed the platform's practices of communicating procedural changes in advance before they are implemented, so that partners have time to adjust to how they work and prevent errors. In addition, the gradual implementation of sanctions, from light to severe sanctions, is perceived to increase a sense of justice because it provides an opportunity for partners to improve performance before they are subjected to more serious consequences. Overall, this condition strengthens operational certainty and supports consistency of service behavior in implementing platform standards.

Main Theme 3: Policy Transparency as a Source of Certainty in Operational Decision Making

Experience focus: access to information, clarity of calculations, and communication of policy changes. The findings show that participants feel a good level of transparency because the information from the platform, including commissions, incentives, penalties, ratings, and performance requirements, is easily accessible, understandable, and predictable. Participants rated the information provided as not only available, but also reasonable and consistent with the reality on the ground, thus reducing confusion in carrying out the service. This reinforces the sense of certainty in the partnership and helps participants plan operational activities (e.g., setting service hours, order priority, and capacity management) more targeted, while supporting the consistency of the quality of services provided to customers.

Main Theme 4: Accountability and Appeal Mechanisms as a Safeguard for Trust and Service Recovery

Experience focus: access to information, clarity of calculations, and communication of policy changes. The findings show that participants feel a sense of accountability in the partnership because the platform provides a mechanism that allows decisions to be questioned and corrected. Participants cited the existence of an appeal/appeal channel, explanation of sanctions, and support when a complaint dispute occurs as an indicator that the platform not only makes decisions unilaterally, but also opens up room for clarification. This condition strengthens the partner's sense of security and trust, while helping to maintain service continuity because partners have procedural referrals when facing problems that have the potential to disrupt operations and service quality.

Main Theme 5: Impact Mechanisms: From Ethical Governance to Operational Reliability and Service Quality

Experiential focus: a path that connects the four dimensions of governance to outcomes. The series of participants' answers showed that governance practices that were judged fair,

clear, transparent, and accountable formed a sense of certainty in partnerships. The fairness of commissions, incentives, and penalties strengthens work motivation, while rules set from the beginning and changes informed before they take effect make the work process more predictable. Accessible and reasonable information transparency also helps partners understand performance standards, so they can customize the way they work without having to experiment.

This certainty then flows to operational reliability and service quality. With gradual sanctions and the existence of an appeal channel and support during complaint disputes, partners feel more secure in making operational decisions and maintaining service consistency. However, participants also marked vulnerable points, namely, under certain conditions, when the assessment relies heavily on customer ratings without considering field constraints, a sense of inequality arises that can drive defensive strategies (e.g., more selectively accepting orders or changing work rhythms) that have the potential to disrupt operational stability and consistency of service quality.

Main Theme 6: Quality of Service on the Platform: Empathy and Responsiveness as the Face of Service

Experience focus: strong, readable service quality through real-time communication and complaint handling. Previous participants' answers showed that service quality in the context of the platform is mainly understood through the consistency of service and the accuracy of the response to customers. Because partnership governance is considered quite clear, starting from the rules set from the beginning, changes that are informed before they are enforced, to the transparency of information, both commissions, incentives, and penalties, which are easy to understand, partners feel more able to maintain a work rhythm and respond to customers stably, so that the quality of interaction and service fulfillment tends to be more maintained.

However, participants also marked service quality hotspots in certain situations, especially when service ratings rely heavily on customer ratings without considering field constraints. This condition can cause a sense of inequality and psychological pressure that has an impact on service behavior, for example, becoming more defensive, more selective in accepting orders, or installing security strategies that can ultimately reduce the flexibility and responsiveness of services. Thus, service quality is perceived to be strongest when the governance of the platform is not only transparent and accountable, but also provides room for a more contextual assessment of the operational reality of partners.

Synthesis of Impact Mechanisms

Based on the findings in the series of themes, a summary of the plot is presented in the following Figure 3.

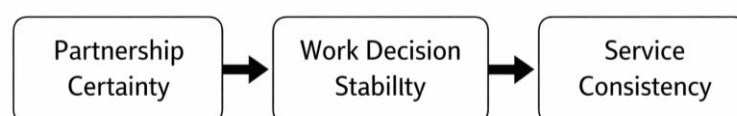


Figure 3. A series of flows based on research findings.

Based on Figure 3 and the findings of the research, it is concluded that the four dimensions of governance, namely distributive justice, procedural justice, policy transparency, and accountability, together form a sense of certainty in partners. This certainty arises because:

- a. Commissions, incentives, and penalties are considered relatively reasonable so that partners feel that their efforts and operational costs are covered
- b. The basic rules are established from the beginning, and procedural changes are always informed before they take effect
- c. Performance and consequence information (commissions, incentives, penalties, ratings) is easily accessible, understandable, and considered reasonable
- d. There is an appeal channel and complaint dispute support that allows platform decisions to be clarified or corrected. This combination makes the partner better able to predict the consequences of his actions, so the burden of uncertainty decreases and trust in the partnership increases.

This certainty has an impact on daily operational behavior. Partners find it easier to plan service hours, manage capacity, prioritize orders, and adjust work procedures according to platform standards without having to experiment. In situations like this, the reliability of the operational process tends to be better maintained because the work rhythm becomes more stable and the disruption can be handled with clear procedural references. The impact is reflected in the quality of service experienced by customers, especially through the consistency of service fulfillment and the accuracy of responses in real-time communication, including when dealing with complaints. In other words, clear and accountable governance not only shapes a perception of fairness but also creates operational conditions that allow partners to maintain the quality of interactions and service recovery more consistently.

However, participants also identified vulnerable points that could weaken the mechanism, especially when performance appraisals rely too much on customer ratings without considering field constraints that are beyond the control of partners. In this condition, operational risks are perceived to be borne more by the partner, while negative consequences can arise even if the cause is situational. This perception of inequality encourages some partners to take defensive strategies, such as being more selective in accepting orders, adding time buffers, or adjusting work rhythms to protect performance and avoid penalties. This strategy helps reduce the risk of sanctions, but at the same time has the potential to reduce the flexibility and responsiveness of services, so that the consistency of service quality and operational stability can be compromised in certain situations.

4.4. Discussion

This study confirms that ethical partnership governance in platform-based service MSMEs works mainly through the formation of partnership certainty, which then affects daily operational decisions and service quality consistency. The findings on each theme show that the ethical dimensions of governance do not stand alone, but rather reinforce each other in creating a predictable work environment. From the platform side, this certainty is crucial because the service process is fast, digitally documented, and service results are very easily translated into customer assessments (ratings/complaints), which have a direct impact on order access and incentives.

In distributive justice, participants generally accept the structure of commissions, incentives, and penalties as reasonable, so they feel they still have a sufficient basis to maintain motivation and service standards. This strengthens the argument that the perceived value sharing is commensurate with the workload and operational costs, which can support the commitment of MSME actors in maintaining service quality. However, the findings also point to a sensitive spot when platforms assess performance almost solely through customer ratings without considering field constraints. Here, distributive fairness is no longer understood simply as how much the commission is, but rather whether the consequences are distributed proportionally to factors that the partners can control. When ratings are the only reference, operational risk shifts more heavily to the partner, giving rise to defensive strategies such as selectively accepting orders or installing time buffers. This strategy is rational from a revenue protection standpoint, but it has the potential to reduce service flexibility and disrupt process reliability.

On procedural fairness, the findings show that the basic rules established from the outset, the changes in procedures that are informed before they are enforced, and the sanctions that are applied gradually shape the perception that the partnership procedure is fair and predictable. This is important because on platform-based services, rule uncertainty often triggers operationally costly trial-and-error. The research findings corroborate that clear and gradual procedures leave room for improvement for partners, so they tend to maintain consistency of service behavior. In practice, procedural certainty makes it easier for partners to maintain a work rhythm and suppress operational disruptions that usually arise due to misinterpretations of rules or the application of sanctions that feel sudden.

The findings on policy transparency make it clear that the quality of governance in the eyes of partners is largely determined by the ease of accessing, understanding, and predicting platform information, including commissions, incentives, penalties, ratings, and performance requirements. Participants emphasized that good transparency is not only about the information available, but also about making sense and being consistent with the reality on the ground. When such transparency is realized, partners do not need to work in uncertainty; They can plan service hours, manage capacity, and adjust order priorities in a more targeted way. Thus, policy transparency serves as a bridge between the platform's system and the operational behavior of partners, ultimately helping to maintain process reliability and consistency of service quality.

In the accountability dimension, the findings show that the existence of an appeal/appeal channel, explanation of sanctions, and support during complaint disputes function as a buffer for partner trust while strengthening service recovery capabilities. This mechanism confirms that the platform's decisions are not completely final and can be corrected through certain procedures. The impact is an increased sense of psychological security and procedural certainty when disruptions occur, such as customer complaints that have the potential to lower ratings or trigger penalties. With accountability, partners have a clear reference for action, so they are better able to maintain operational continuity and still provide stable service response amid digital reputation risks.

A synthesis of impact mechanisms across all themes shows that governance that is considered fair, procedural, transparent, and accountable forms a partnership climate that reduces uncertainty, strengthens a sense of security, and makes the consequences of

operational actions more predictable. In this climate, partners find it easier to manage micro-operational decisions, ranging from setting working hours, allocating resources, selecting orders, to handling complaints, without having to constantly make decisions based on speculation. This stability of operational decisions in turn supports process reliability and service quality, especially in the most prominent aspects of platform-based services, namely consistency of service fulfillment, responsiveness, and empathy in real-time communication.

At the same time, this study shows that the mechanism can be weakened when the performance evaluation system is not contextual enough, especially if customer ratings become the dominant indicator without considering field constraints. In these conditions, even though procedures and transparency are considered good, partners still feel inequality because negative consequences can occur due to factors beyond their control. These findings are important because they indicate that ethical governance on the platform is not only determined by the existence of rules and information, but also by how performance and consequences assessments are applied fairly and contextually. When assessments are non-contextual, partners tend to adopt defensive strategies that may protect short-term performance, but potentially reduce service flexibility and disrupt service quality consistency.

Overall, this discussion emphasized that ethical partnership governance plays a role as a foundation that allows MSMEs to maintain operational reliability and service quality consistently. The findings of the study also provide a practical message that strengthening governance ethics is not enough only through transparency of information and neat procedures, but needs to be complemented by more contextual performance evaluations, for example by considering evidence of field constraints or verification mechanisms in the event of a downgrade in ratings/complaints, so that the balance of risk between platforms and partners is maintained and service quality can be maintained sustainably.

5. Implications and Limitations of the Research

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study confirm that ethical partnership governance in platform-based service MSMEs mainly affects the quality of services through the formation of partnership certainty, which arises when distributive and procedural justice, policy transparency, and accountability are perceived to be consistent and predictable, so that uncertainty is reduced and partner operations are more stable. However, its effectiveness is vulnerable when performance evaluations rely too heavily on customer ratings without considering the realities of the field, as the perception of fairness is also determined by the contextuality of the assessment and the distribution of consequences to factors that are within or beyond the control of the partner. This operational certainty and stability then strengthen the consistency of service quality, especially through responsiveness, real-time communication, empathy, and service recovery capabilities.

Practical Implications

Platforms need to implement a more contextual performance assessment (not only rating-based) with additional indicators, but also proven clarification mechanisms, communication of rule changes before they take effect, gradual sanctions, and a fast and clear appeal/complaint handling process. MSMEs/partners need to strengthen service SOPs that

emphasize quick response and proactive communication, conduct operational documentation to anticipate complaints/appeals, and manage capacity and monitor internal metrics to ensure consistent service quality. Local stakeholders need to direct assistance to platform-based operational literacy and facilitate dialogue/mediation so that the practice of evaluation and dispute support is fairer and more sustainable.

6. Research Limitations

This study is contextual because it uses a descriptive phenomenology with 25 participants of platform-based MSMEs in Surabaya, so the findings are not intended for statistical generalization to all platform MSMEs in Indonesia, especially in areas with different demand, competition, and infrastructure characteristics. The findings also depend on the participants' perceptions and narratives, so that potential memory bias or emphasis on certain experiences is still possible even after triangulation and member checking. In addition, studies have not detailed the dynamics between service categories (e.g., delivery vs home service) that can affect performance standards and perceptions of fairness. Finally, the issue of dominance of customer ratings was not objectively tested with platform log data, so the influence of factors beyond the control of the partner (weather, congestion, delays by other parties) is still interpretive based on the participants' experiences.

7. Future Research

Follow-up research can use a quantitative design or mixed methods to test the influence of the ethical partnership governance dimension on service quality and operational performance with large-scale surveys combined with platform log data (e.g., delays, cancellations, complaints, ratings). The next study also needs to examine the contextuality of ratings by examining the influence of situational factors (weather, peak hours, congestion, third parties) as well as the effectiveness of contextual assessment/verification. In addition, the research can be extended across cities and compare service types to identify the most decisive governance dimensions in each category.

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