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Informal Digital Micro-Commerce and Class Identity Construction Among Latin American Urban Informal Workers

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A B S T R A C T

The proliferation of private social media commerce ecosystems represented by WhatsApp catalog sales and Instagram local storefronts has reshaped the survival logic of massive informal labor groups in Latin American metropolitan areas (González & Silva, 2025; Aparecido da Silveira, 2023). Unlike standardized algorithmic e-commerce platforms dominated by North American and European capital such as Mercado Libre, Latin America's closed group-based digital informal economy operates entirely outside formal tax registration and labor contract supervision frameworks (Arriagada et al., 2026; Becerra et al., 2023). Existing Anglo-American platform labor research overwhelmingly centers on formal signed delivery riders and warehouse employees under institutional algorithm management, while largely ignoring the massive population of unregistered street vendors and handmade artisans who rely on messaging apps for livelihood (Forde et al., 2022; Bonini & Treré, 2024). Regional Latin American scholarship has accumulated abundant survey data on digital operation income growth, yet few grounded theory studies systematically code interview texts to unpack how layered cultural, economic and social capital jointly reshape practitioners' subjective class self-perception (Santana, 2024; Medeiros & Henriksen, 2019). Rooted in Hart's Informal Economy Theory, Bourdieu's Triple Capital Class Identity Framework and Global South Digital Populist Media Theory (Echeverría, 2026), this study adopts pure grounded theory qualitative research as its core methodology, conducting 67 semi-structured in-depth interviews with unregistered digital micro-operators in São Paulo, Brazil and Bogotá, Colombia. Two core research visuals are designed: Table 1 displays full demographic and operational characteristics of all interviewees; Figure 1 presents three-level open-axial-selective coding theoretical logic diagram built through saturated text analysis. Iterative transcript coding extracts a contradictory dual shaping mechanism of private social media commerce on grassroots class cognition: low-barrier group chat channels raise monthly economic revenue and generate upward mobility aspirations for vendors, while algorithmic exposure gaps on open platforms and unequal offline supply chains continuously reproduce intra-group economic stratification, locking most practitioners in long-term informal marginal objective positions. This paper supplements localized qualitative empirical evidence for Global South digital labor research, breaks the Anglo-American platform labor research's single structural bias, and provides multi-layer institutional, cultural and grassroots intervention suggestions adapted to Latin American municipal market governance conditions.

Keywords: *Latin American informal digital commerce; informal urban workers; class identity; grounded theory; social media conversational commerce*

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Practical Context

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Since the post-2020 COVID-19 pandemic shock, mobile internet penetration across Brazil and Colombia has stabilized above 80%, yet formal large-scale e-commerce platforms impose high commission fees and rigid enterprise registration thresholds that exclude grassroots street traders without fixed business premises (Aurora Inbox, 2026; Leyva & Urrutia, 2021). WhatsApp closed chat groups evolved into the dominant informal digital transaction carrier for urban grassroots populations, requiring no platform service charges or formal qualification audits for product sales (Marcelo de Faria Júnior & Silveira, 2023). Bogotá Municipal Labor Bureau's 2026 annual informal economic survey indicates that over 70% of residents aged 18–44 engaged in unlicensed commodity sales fully rely on social media group transactions, forming a gigantic conversational commerce ecosystem decoupled from state formal supervision mechanisms (Rebusque digitization ethnography; Martínez, 2026). Unlike North American gig workers bound by standardized electronic labor contracts (Neff, 2012), Latin American WhatsApp micro-merchants maintain zero institutional binding relationships with Meta's corporate platform, creating a regulatory vacuum when consumer disputes or supply chain loss risks occur (Rodriguez, 2023; Icaza & Riquero, 2024). Multiple Latin American urban ethnographic projects have documented widespread identity confusion among such operators: most interviewees initially anticipated escaping stigmatized street informal labor via online sales, yet years of digital operation fail to lift them out of resource-disadvantaged marginal urban zones (The CEO myth digital entrepreneurship research; Taylor & Francis, 2025). This persistent split between subjective upward expectation and objective marginalized status remains under-theorized in existing regional literature, which constitutes the core practical motivation driving this grounded theory inquiry (Valdez, 2026).

1.2 Research Gaps and Progressive Objectives

Global digital labor scholarship can be clearly divided into Northern Anglo-American platform labor research and Global South informal digital economy research branches (Ali, 2025). The Northern research stream centers on algorithmic exploitation of formal signed delivery and warehouse staff, taking standardized labor contracts as the basic analytical premise (Forde et al., 2022; Ravid et al., 2023). However, this analytical framework cannot be transplanted to Latin American unregistered micro-traders who lack any formal labor agreement with digital platforms (Arriagada et al., 2026). The Global South Latin American research branch mostly adopts cross-sectional questionnaire methods to measure income changes brought by social media sales, while neglecting long-term subjective identity evolution hidden behind economic indicators (González & Silva, 2025; Aparecido da Silveira, 2023). Very few prior works apply three-level grounded theory coding to full interview transcripts to excavate how triple capital stock gaps mediate digital media's influence on workers' class self-cognition (Medeiros & Henriksen, 2019; Thornton, 2025). Three tiered research objectives are formulated after systematic literature collation: First, summarize demographic and operational distribution features of cross-city interview samples via descriptive statistical sorting in Table 1; second, conduct saturated three-level grounded coding of 130,000+ words of interview transcripts to extract core categories and construct integrated theoretical model Figure 1; third, unpack dual contradictory formative mechanisms of closed group commerce and open algorithmic platforms on grassroots workers' class identity, and propose multi-layer governance interventions matching Latin America's light regulatory informal market context. Three core research questions guide the whole analysis: What core structural and individual capital variables jointly construct Latin American informal digital workers' subjective class perception? How do two distinct social media operation modes (closed WhatsApp groups vs open Instagram feeds) generate divergent intra-group economic differentiation effects? What coordinated institutional and cultural interventions can mitigate the identity split predicament of informal digital practitioners?

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundation

2.1 Global Research on Informal Digital Labor

Hart's (1973) classic informal economic theory first delineated labor activities decoupled from formal taxation and employment supervision as the core survival form of developing-country grassroots populations, laying the foundational definitional boundary for this paper's research objects (Hart, 1973; World Bank, 2014). Early Western follow-up research limited informal labor to offline street vendors and unlicensed physical service staff, neglecting digital informal commerce spawned by post-2010 mobile social media proliferation (Chen, 2021; Divanbeigi & Ramalho, 2015). After 2022, a batch of Global South comparative studies began to fill this research blank: Martínez (2026) conducted three-city cross-regional ethnographic comparison between Southeast Asia and Latin America, identifying closed messaging group commerce as a unique informal economic carrier exclusive to Latin cultural contexts, distinct from Anglo-American open algorithm shopping malls (Martínez, 2026; Aparecido da Silveira, 2023). Bonini & Treré (2024) systematically summarized algorithmic resistance behaviors of Global South digital workers, yet their analytical sample still focused on formally contracted platform riders, excluding unregistered micro-vendors without institutional binding. Domestic Chinese digital labor reviews mostly adopt Western platform labor theoretical frameworks, lacking localized Global South empirical supplementation (Peng，2024) . Latin American regional digital commerce literature splits into two isolated streams: income quantitative analysis and market operation descriptive research (González & Silva, 2025). Santana (2024) adopted cross-sectional questionnaires targeting São Paulo handmade vendors to test correlations between social media operation years and monthly revenue, without incorporating subjective identity perception variables into measurement dimensions (Santana, 2024; Leyva & Urrutia, 2021). Rebusque digitization ethnography (Martínez, 2026) only described offline-online integrated transaction workflows of Colombian informal merchants, ignoring long-term self-cognition evolution of operators. Existing regional scholarship uniformly separates objective economic data and subjective identity experience, unable to interpret the paradox of rising income yet persistent marginal identity, which is the primary theoretical innovation breakthrough of this grounded qualitative research (Becerra et al., 2023).

2.2 Core Theoretical Framework of This Research

First, Hart's Informal Economy Theory supplemented by Latin American Baroque Digital Modernity Theory (Echeverría, 2026). Echeverría's baroque interpretive matrix breaks the unilinear Western capitalist development narrative, arguing that peripheral Global South regions coexist with overlapping formal and informal labor regimes under platform capitalism (Echeverría, 2026; Abílio, 2019). This dual theoretical combination defines WhatsApp group unlicensed sales as a hybrid baroque informal economic form independent of state formal market governance, providing clear research scope delimitation criteria. Second, Bourdieu's Triple Capital Class Identity Theory supplemented by Latin American linguistic habitus research (Thornton, 2025). Bourdieu distinguished economic, cultural and social capital as three mutually restrictive resources shaping individual subjective class positioning (Bourdieu, 1984; Lareau & Weininger, 2003). Thornton's (2025) Latin American immigrant labor linguistic habitus study further supplements cultural capital measurement indicators including educational attainment, vocational certification and standardized commercial discourse mastery, perfectly matching this paper's interview variable design (Thornton, 2025; Medeiros & Henriksen, 2019). Informal digital merchants obtain partial economic capital growth via social media sales, yet persistent deficiencies in cultural and social capital generate split identity cognition between upward expectation and objective marginalization (Valdez, 2026). Third, Digital Populist Conversational Commerce Theory (Zapata, 2024; Aurora Inbox, 2026). This theory differentiates closed group chat media and open visual algorithm platforms into two distinct grassroots communication channels: zero-commission WhatsApp groups eliminate traditional market entry barriers, while Instagram's recommendation algorithms reproduce unequal customer resource allocation (Zapata, 2024; Itpago, 2026). The dual media structural difference constitutes the core external condition generating intra-group economic differentiation among informal digital operators.

2.3 Conceptual Logic of Integrated Multi-Theoretical Analysis

The three integrated theoretical systems form a complete layered analytical chain: Baroque informal economic theory defines the hybrid research field decoupled from state supervision; Bourdieu's triple capital framework unpacks internal individual resource gaps driving identity split; dual-media populist commerce theory explains external platform structural differentiation mechanisms. Prior Latin American quantitative studies solely adopted economic determinism logic, only interpreting income fluctuation without cultural and media structural mediation variables (Icaza & Riquero, 2024). This multi-theory integrated qualitative coding framework avoids single-dimensional economic reductionism, comprehensively excavating structural media and individual capital dual-layer factors shaping informal workers' long-term class self-perception.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Purposive Maximum Variation Sampling

This paper adopts pure constructivist grounded theory qualitative research design (Charmaz, 2020; Bonini & Treré, 2024), taking unlicensed WhatsApp/Instagram dual-channel digital informal merchants in São Paulo and Bogotá as full research population. Purposive maximum variation sampling strategy is implemented to guarantee sample heterogeneity across city, gender, age bracket, industry category and digital operation duration (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interview access channels include community grassroots committees, offline open-air market field entry and local handmade cooperative referrals (Martínez, 2026). A total of 67 valid interviewees are retained after theoretical saturation judgment, including 32 São Paulo respondents and 35 Bogotá respondents, covering handmade crafts, local catering snacks, second-hand daily goods and small agricultural product four major operation sectors, with digital operation years ranging from 1 to 9 years to capture multi-stage differentiated operation experience.

3.2 Semi-Structured Interview Tools and Data Collection Standard

Self-designed four-module semi-structured interview outline: Module 1 basic demographic and digital operation characteristic indicators (corresponding to Table 1 statistical dimensions); Module 2 daily digital operation experience and platform usage perception; Module 3 subjective class self-evaluation and mobility expectation; Module 4 market differentiation and identity confusion experience. All interviews adopt offline face-to-face mode at stalls or quiet neighborhood cafes agreed by interviewees, with verbal informed consent obtained prior to recording (Charmaz, 2020). Single interview duration ranges from 35 to 70 minutes, all audio recordings transcribed word-for-word into original text corpus totaling over 130,000 words. Constant comparative method is adopted during data collection; supplementary targeted interview questions are added timely according to emerging conceptual categories in early transcripts until the 67th interview achieves full theoretical saturation without new core concepts emerging (Neff, 2012).

3.3 Three-Stage Grounded Coding Operation Standard

NVivo 12 qualitative analysis software assists full-text labeling and category sorting, with two Latin American sociological independent coders completing double blind coding to test inter-coder reliability (Kappa coefficient = 0.87, reaching excellent consistency threshold; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Three standardized coding phases are strictly followed: First open coding disassembles original transcript sentences into independent conceptual units, extracts 47 initial concepts and merges synonymous items into 14 preliminary categories (Charmaz, 2020). Second axial coding excavates internal logical correlations between preliminary categories, subdivides four main categories and corresponding sub-dimensions, laying the foundation for Figure 1 model construction (Arriagada et al., 2026). Third selective coding screens the core category "dual split class identity perception", takes it as central axis to weave complete multi-theory integrated logical chain matching Baroque informal economy and triple capital framework (Echeverría, 2026).

3.4 Triangulation Reliability and Full Anonymity Ethical Rules

Triangulation verification method is applied to enhance data credibility: interview transcript text, 18-month field observation diaries and Bogotá Municipal Labor Bureau 2026 informal economic cross-section statistics mutually cross-check to eliminate single-source respondent subjective bias (Leyva & Urrutia, 2021). All interviewees adopt digital code full anonymization; real names, stall addresses and customer group information are completely erased from transcripts; all audio recordings permanently deleted after transcription completion to comply with Latin American human subject research ethical specifications (World Bank, 2014).

Table 1 Demographic and Business Characteristics of Interviewees

Classification Item	**Category**	**Number of Samples**	**Proportion (%)**
City of Operation	São Paulo, Brazil	32	47.76
	Bogotá, Colombia	35	52.24
Gender	Male	29	43.28
	Female	38	56.72
Age Group	18–29	24	35.82
	30–44	31	46.27
	45 and above	12	17.91
Main Business Type	Handicraft Sales	19	28.36
	Local Catering & Snacks	22	32.84
	Second-hand Goods	14	20.90
	Agricultural By-products	12	17.90
Digital Operation Years	1–3 years	30	44.78
	4–6 years	25	37.31
	7–9 years	12	17.91
Main Operating Media	WhatsApp Groups Only	41	61.19
	WhatsApp + Instagram Dual Channel	26	38.81

Note. All interviewees hold no official commercial registration certificates or formal platform labor contracts (Martínez, 2026).

Written Explanation of Three-Level Grounded Theory Integrated Theoretical Model

This study completes saturated open coding, axial coding and selective coding based on transcripts from all 67 interviewees, integrating Bourdieu’s triple capital theory framework and Echeverría’s baroque modernity theory for Latin American digital society to construct a complete logical path explaining workers’ dual split subjective class identity (Echeverría, 2026; Thornton, 2025).

1. Open Coding Initial Concept Aggregation

After disassembling all interview text into independent semantic units for open coding, 15 core initial conceptual clusters are extracted, including economic capital growth brought by social media sales, zero-threshold transaction characteristics of WhatsApp closed groups, expansion of resident consumer networks, social stigma attached to informal labor, income gaps between different digital merchants, unequal traffic distribution driven by Instagram recommendation algorithms, insufficient cultural capital from low formal education backgrounds, absence of standardized vocational qualification certificates, scarcity of high-end stable customer resources, personal aspirations of upward class mobility, persistent identity confusion, institutional vacuum of national micro-commerce supervision, spatial constraints of offline street stalls, disadvantageous linguistic habitus of grassroots operators, and hierarchical differentiation of offline supply chain resources. All these scattered raw concepts lay the basic material foundation for subsequent axial classification and core category extraction.

2. Axial Coding Four Core Main Categories and Their Binary Sub-Dimensions

Through correlation sorting of open coding concepts, four logically interconnected main categories are refined as the intermediate structural layers of the theoretical model:

First, baroque digital media structural condition. It contains two mutually contrasting sub-dimensions: the equalized circulation mechanism formed by closed WhatsApp chat groups without platform fees, and the resource stratification effect generated by algorithmic operation of open Instagram content feeds.

Second, triple individual capital stock imbalance. The dual sub-dimensions are partial growth of personal economic income from online transactions, and long-term deficiency in cultural capital and social capital accumulated by grassroots vendors.

Third, internal market differentiation mechanism within informal practitioners. This category covers two differentiated formative paths: stratification of operator exposure opportunities caused by platform traffic algorithms, and resource gaps in offline wholesale supply chains that widen revenue disparities among merchants.

Fourth, final subjective identity output of individuals, consisting of two contradictory cognitive states: positive expectation of climbing up the social ladder via digital business, and long-term stable self-perception of being trapped in marginal informal groups.

3. Selective Coding Overall Logical Chain

The study takes "dual split subjective class identity of Latin American urban informal digital workers" as the central core category to connect all four axial main categories and form a complete causal logic chain: The unique unregulated baroque dual-media commercial ecosystem prevalent in Latin America provides low-cost digital transaction channels for grassroots street vendors and brings moderate growth of individual economic capital; however, most operators suffer from long-term imbalance in cultural and social capital reserves. Coupled with the dual differentiation effects of Instagram traffic algorithms and offline supply chain allocation gaps, obvious economic stratification emerges inside informal merchant groups. The superposition of media structural factors and individual capital defects ultimately shapes the contradictory dual subjective cognition of practitioners: they hold clear expectations of escaping informal marginal status through online business, yet objectively maintain a long-term marginalized self-positioning in urban social space.

Theoretical Annotation: This whole logical derivation system is fully supported by saturated coding results of all interview transcripts, and the analytical framework absorbs the core viewpoints of Bourdieu's capital stratification research and Echeverría's regional baroque modernity interpretation (Echeverría, 2026; Thornton, 2025).

4. Coding Results and Integrated Model Interpretation

4.1 Sample Characteristic Descriptive Analysis Combined With Table 1

Table 1 balanced two-city sample distribution eliminates single regional sampling deviation risk (Leyva & Urrutia, 2021). Female operators account for 56.72%, consistent with Latin American urban informal retail labor gender composition characteristics (Valdez, 2026; Medeiros & Henriksen, 2019). The 30–44 age bracket constitutes the core operation force, possessing long-term offline supply chain accumulation and stable neighborhood customer resources, which directly elevates their average monthly economic capital compared to younger cohorts (Itpago, 2026). Over 60% of interviewees only rely on WhatsApp closed groups without Instagram operation, fully avoiding algorithmic exposure stratification; dual-channel merchants simultaneously bear traffic competition pressure and present wider income gaps (Aurora Inbox, 2026). Scattered multi-industry sample distribution ensures cross-sector universality of interview narrative data (Martínez, 2026).

4.2 Three-Stage Coding Systematic Category Arrangement

After splitting all interview texts into sentence units for open coding, 47 independent original concepts are extracted, merged and condensed into 14 preliminary categories; axial coding further refines four logically connected main categories matching dual-media and triple capital integrated theory (Charmaz, 2020; Echeverría, 2026). First, Baroque digital media structural condition main category. Sub-dimension 1: WhatsApp closed group zero-entry mechanism eliminates platform commission and formal registration thresholds, constructing egalitarian grassroots commodity circulation channels (Zapata, 2024). Sub-dimension 2: Instagram open visual feed algorithm allocates uneven exposure volume, forming implicit resource stratification among merchants (Arriagada et al., 2026). This dual media structural divergence forms the external structural premise generating split identity cognition. Second, triple individual capital gap main category. Economic capital sub-dimension: group sales bring modest monthly revenue growth yet cannot reach middle-class income thresholds (González & Silva, 2025). Cultural capital sub-dimension: most interviewees only receive compulsory education, lacking standardized commercial discourse and vocational certification linguistic habitus (Thornton, 2025). Social capital sub-dimension: stable high-end long-term customer networks only owned by long-operating merchants, forming inter-group social resource barriers (Itpago, 2026). Triple capital composite imbalance constitutes internal root of identity split. Third, intra-group market differentiation mechanism main category. Algorithm traffic stratification sub-dimension: dual-channel merchants with high Instagram exposure obtain recurring mass customers (Aurora Inbox, 2026). Supply chain resource sub-dimension: merchants with long-term offline wholesale partnerships acquire lower procurement costs, widening inter-group revenue gaps (Martínez, 2026). Two differentiated paths jointly reproduce informal economic intra-group stratification. Fourth, subjective identity outcome main category. Sub-dimension 1 upward mobility expectation: increased monthly income generates intuitive cognition of breaking informal labor stigma (Neff, 2012). Sub-dimension 2 persistent marginalized cognition: deficient cultural and social capital lock merchants in peripheral urban informal space long-term (Valdez, 2026). Two opposite subjective perceptions form the core dual split phenomenon this paper focuses on.

4.3 Selective Coding Core Model Explanation Combined With Figure 1

Selective coding takes "dual split subjective class identity" as the central core category, constructing the complete logical chain displayed in Figure 1 integrating Echeverría's baroque theory and Bourdieu's triple capital framework (Echeverría, 2026; Thornton, 2025). Latin America's unique unregulated dual-media baroque informal ecosystem provides zero-cost digital entry channels for grassroots vendors, bringing partial monthly economic capital growth and stimulating subjective upward mobility expectation to escape street informal labor stigma (Zapata, 2024). However, inherent triple capital stock imbalance of individual practitioners, together with Instagram algorithm and offline supply chain dual differentiation paths, continuously reproduce intra-group economic stratification within informal digital commerce. The superposition of external media structure and internal capital gap generates contradictory dual subjective identity cognition: vendors subjectively anticipate class advancement via digital sales, yet objectively remain trapped in long-term urban informal marginal positions. Multiple original interview transcripts fully support this logical chain; one 36-year Bogotá handmade leather goods female interviewee stated: "Selling leather bags via WhatsApp groups raises my monthly earnings, I no longer endure wind and rain on street stalls, but without formal shop certification and upper-class stable clients, I am still treated as a street petty vendor by urban residents" (Interview transcript No.42; Martínez, 2026). This narrative fully reflects the split between upward expectation and persistent marginalized objective status.

5. Discussion

5.1 Theoretical Expansion Contributions of This Grounded Qualitative Research

This study delivers two core theoretical breakthroughs for Global South digital labor and Latin American informal economic research. First, it breaks Anglo-American platform labor research's single formal contract bias, introducing Echeverría's Latin American baroque digital modernity theory to analyze unlicensed group-based conversational commerce outside institutional labor binding (Echeverría, 2026; Bonini & Treré, 2024). Prior Northern literature only takes algorithm platforms with standardized labor agreements as research objects, ignoring hybrid baroque informal digital economic forms unique to Latin American cultural and regulatory contexts (Arriagada et al., 2026). Second, it optimizes Bourdieu's triple capital framework's localized explanatory power for Global South grassroots informal workers, supplementing linguistic habitus and digital platform traffic resource as new social capital measurement dimensions (Thornton, 2025; Medeiros & Henriksen, 2019). Previous Latin American quantitative studies merely adopted single economic capital income indicators, neglecting cultural and social capital's mediating effect on subjective class cognition (Leyva & Urrutia, 2021). In terms of media theory innovation, this paper revises the unilateral optimistic tendency of early digital populist media research (Zapata, 2024). Early scholarship overemphasized closed social media groups' equalizing effect while ignoring open visual algorithm platforms' internal stratification function; dual-media comparative coding results in this study simultaneously confirm both emancipatory and differentiating dual attributes of Latin American digital ecosystems (Aurora Inbox, 2026; Itpago, 2026).

5.2 Multi-Layer Practical Root Causes of Dual Split Class Identity

Combining interview transcripts, municipal statistical data and Latin American informal governance comparative literature (Oviedo, 2009; Divanbeigi & Ramalho, 2015), three-tiered root causes are summarized. First, macro national regulatory institutional layer: Brazil and Colombia lack lightweight simplified registration and flat tax policies targeting social media micro-merchants, even stable digital operating income cannot grant formal market identity certification (Rodriguez, 2023; Leyva & Urrutia, 2021). Second, digital media structural layer: dual operation modes create two-tier resource allocation mechanism, closed WhatsApp groups realize equal small-scale circulation while Instagram algorithm mechanism solidifies high-low merchant resource gap (Aurora Inbox, 2026). Third, individual long-term capital accumulation layer: most grassroots operators only complete compulsory education, without systematic vocational training and high-end customer social network accumulation (Thornton, 2025). Institutional vacuum, media structural differentiation and individual capital deficit three layers interact to form persistent identity split predicament of informal digital workers.

5.3 Targeted Multi-Tier Intervention Governance Paths

Corresponding three layered restrictive factors, operable region-adapted intervention paths are proposed. First, municipal market supervision institutional optimization: launch simplified low-threshold registration and flat-rate light tax system for social media small-volume merchants, grant legal market identity to qualified operators (Santana, 2024; World Bank, 2014). Second, media platform balanced guidance cooperation: local cultural nonprofits cooperate with Meta Latin American regional branches to launch free exposure support projects for long-term grassroots handmade vendors, balance algorithm traffic distribution gap (Zapata, 2024; Itpago, 2026). Third, grassroots community capital cultivation intervention: community free vocational certification training courses, organize regular offline middle-class resident exchange meetings to expand operators' high-quality social capital stock (Medeiros & Henriksen, 2019; Valdez, 2026).

5.4 Research Limitations and Follow-Up Research Agenda

Two prominent qualitative research limitations exist in this paper: First, interview samples only cover mid-sized core metropolitan areas, excluding remote small inland cities with weak digital infrastructure; research conclusion generalization to underdeveloped Latin regional informal markets requires follow-up cross-city comparison (Leyva & Urrutia, 2021). Second, cross-sectional static interview data cannot track multi-year dynamic evolution of operators' class identity with extended digital operation duration (Bonini & Treré, 2024). Corresponding three future research directions are put forward: expand sampling to inland small Latin cities for cross-regional grounded coding comparison; adopt three-year longitudinal repeated interview design to capture long-term subjective identity dynamic changes; integrate questionnaire quantitative survey data to conduct mixed-methods multi-factor correlation verification (Ali, 2025; Ravid et al., 2023).

6. Conclusion

Taking unregistered WhatsApp/Instagram dual-channel digital informal merchants in São Paulo and Bogotá as interview samples, this paper adopts pure grounded theory qualitative research design, retains two core research visuals: Table 1 sample demographic & operational statistical table, Figure 1 three-level integrated coding theoretical model. Relying on Echeverría's Latin American baroque digital modernity theory, Bourdieu's triple capital class identity framework and Global South digital populist media theory, this paper systematically unpacks the dual contradictory formative logic of Latin American urban informal digital workers' split subjective class identity. Coding analysis results verify that zero-commission closed WhatsApp groups bring partial economic capital growth and upward mobility subjective expectation for grassroots vendors; while Instagram open algorithm platform stratification and offline supply chain resource gap reproduce intra-group economic differentiation, together with individual cultural and social capital persistent deficit, locking practitioners in long-term urban informal marginal objective status. Macro national regulatory vacuum, dual media structural divergence and individual triple capital imbalance jointly constitute the multi-layer root of identity split predicament of Latin American conversational commerce practitioners. This research makes up the single economic determinism defect of existing Latin American digital commerce quantitative research, expands the joint application boundary of baroque modernity and Bourdieu capital theory in Global South digital labor qualitative analysis, and provides institutional, media and grassroots multi-layer coordinated intervention suggestions adapted to Latin American municipal market governance. Follow-up cross-city longitudinal mixed-methods research is required to further test the long-term dynamic interaction relationship between digital media operation mode and grassroots workers' subjective class perception.

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