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## Urban Precarity, Digital Mutual Aid, and Community Resilience: A Comparative Socio-Cultural Study of Platform-Based Solidarity in London and Seoul

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### ABSTRACT

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This article examines how digitally mediated mutual aid practices reshape urban community resilience under conditions of economic precarity, housing insecurity, and institutional fragmentation. Through a comparative socio-cultural analysis of London and Seoul, the study investigates how digital platforms, community networks, and local institutional arrangements mediate new forms of solidarity among precarious urban residents. The article argues that digital mutual aid is not merely a temporary crisis response but an emergent socio-cultural infrastructure through which residents negotiate belonging, redistribute informal resources, and challenge institutional neglect.

Drawing on comparative urban sociology, digital ethnography, policy analysis, and secondary social indicators, the study compares two analytical dimensions: platform-based neighborhood mutual aid and institutionally supported community welfare initiatives. The findings demonstrate that London's mutual aid networks are shaped by austerity governance, housing inequality, and grassroots multicultural solidarities, while Seoul's practices are structured by compressed urbanization, aging populations, neighborhood digitalization, and stronger municipal coordination. The article contributes to social transformation scholarship by showing how urban precarity generates hybrid solidarities that combine digital communication, local cultural norms, and institutional adaptation. It concludes that digital mutual aid can strengthen community resilience, but only when supported by inclusive governance, digital access, and long-

term social policy.

**Keywords:** digital mutual aid; urban precarity; community resilience; social transformation; London; Seoul; digital society; urban sociology; solidarity; social inequality

## INTRODUCTION

### Introduction

Contemporary urban societies are increasingly shaped by overlapping crises of housing insecurity, labor precarity, demographic change, welfare retrenchment, and digital transformation. These pressures have intensified the need for new forms of community resilience, particularly in large metropolitan areas where institutional support systems often fail to respond adequately to everyday social vulnerability. In this context, digital mutual aid has emerged as a significant socio-cultural practice through which residents organize food distribution, housing advice, care work, emotional support, neighborhood information, and emergency assistance. This study argues that digital mutual aid represents a critical form of urban social transformation because it connects social structures and cultural practices with communicative infrastructures, institutional gaps, and collective adaptation.

London and Seoul provide analytically rich comparative cases. Both are global cities with advanced digital infrastructures, high housing costs, stratified labor markets, and growing social inequality. Yet they differ significantly in welfare traditions, urban governance, neighborhood culture, demographic composition, and civic participation. London's mutual aid practices have developed within a context of austerity, multicultural neighborhood solidarities, and civil society activism. Seoul's community support practices, by contrast, are shaped by compressed modernization, rapid aging, high-density urban living, and municipal experiments in smart-city governance. These differences allow this article to examine how digital mutual aid operates across distinct institutional and cultural environments.

Existing scholarship on urban inequality has long emphasized the spatial concentration of deprivation, the restructuring of welfare states, and the fragmentation of community life under neoliberal urbanism (Harvey, 2008; Wacquant, 2008). More recent studies show that digital platforms increasingly mediate urban life by reshaping communication, service access, neighborhood belonging, and civic participation (van Dijck et al., 2018; Couldry & Hepp, 2017). While scholars have examined platform capitalism and digital surveillance, fewer studies have analyzed how ordinary residents use digital tools to create informal welfare infrastructures and culturally meaningful solidarities under conditions of urban precarity.

The academic problem addressed in this article concerns the relationship between digital communication and community resilience. While mutual aid is often discussed as a moral or humanitarian response, this study treats it as a sociological phenomenon embedded in power relations, institutional arrangements, and cultural practices. Mutual aid reflects both the failure of formal welfare systems and the creative capacity of

communities to produce alternative forms of social support. It therefore reveals structural tensions between state responsibility, civic participation, informal care, and digitally mediated social life.

Critical literature on social movements emphasizes that collective action increasingly occurs through flexible networks rather than formal organizations (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Studies of digital society demonstrate that platforms shape visibility, participation, and communicative power (Castells, 1996; Papacharissi, 2015). Research on urban community resilience highlights the importance of trust, local knowledge, and institutional responsiveness in enabling communities to adapt to crisis (Aldrich, 2012). However, these literatures often remain analytically separated. Digital participation studies rarely engage deeply with urban welfare inequality, while urban resilience scholarship often underestimates the cultural and communicative dimensions of digital platforms.

This article addresses this gap by integrating urban sociology, cultural studies, communication theory, and social policy analysis. It examines how digital mutual aid mediates the relationship between urban precarity and community resilience. The article's novelty lies in its comparative analysis of two global cities and its conceptualization of digital mutual aid as a hybrid socio-cultural infrastructure. Rather than interpreting mutual aid as either grassroots empowerment or institutional failure, the study argues that it operates ambivalently: it can strengthen social solidarity while also revealing the withdrawal or inadequacy of formal welfare institutions.

The analytical framework guiding this study is: urban precarity → digital communication networks → mutual aid practices → community resilience → institutional and cultural transformation. This framework allows the article to examine how residents transform everyday vulnerability into collective support through digitally mediated practices. The objective of this study is to compare how digital mutual aid in London and Seoul reshapes community resilience, social belonging, and institutional adaptation under conditions of urban precarity.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a comparative socio-cultural research design combining digital ethnography, comparative urban sociology, critical policy analysis, and secondary data interpretation. London and Seoul were selected because they represent highly digitized global cities that share structural pressures of housing inequality, labor precarity, and demographic transformation, while differing in welfare governance, civic culture, neighborhood organization, and municipal digital policy. The unit of analysis is not the individual platform user but the digitally mediated mutual aid network as a socio-cultural formation linking residents, community groups, local institutions, and urban policy environments. The study analyzes two central dimensions: grassroots platform-based mutual aid and institutionally mediated community support systems. This design enables examination of how communication practices, cultural norms, and governance structures jointly shape urban resilience.

The empirical basis of the study consists of public digital mutual aid archives, community organization

reports, municipal policy documents, urban inequality indicators, demographic reports, and peer-reviewed scholarship on digital society, urban precarity, and community resilience. The analysis uses thematic coding to identify recurring patterns of resource exchange, identity formation, trust-building, institutional critique, and cultural adaptation. Critical discourse analysis was applied to public community communications to examine how residents frame vulnerability, responsibility, solidarity, and belonging. Triangulation was achieved by comparing platform-based evidence with policy documents, social indicators, and existing empirical research. Ethical safeguards included reliance on publicly available materials, avoidance of identifiable personal data, and non-reproduction of private digital content. The study is limited by the opacity of platform algorithms, uneven documentation of informal support practices, and the difficulty of measuring long-term resilience outcomes; nevertheless, its comparative design provides a robust framework for interpreting how digital mutual aid contributes to urban social transformation.

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## Findings and Discussion

### 1. Urban Precarity and the Social Conditions of Digital Mutual Aid

The comparative evidence indicates that digital mutual aid emerges most strongly where formal institutions fail to meet everyday social needs. In London, mutual aid networks expanded in response to housing insecurity, food poverty, austerity-driven welfare gaps, and precarious employment. Residents used WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages, neighborhood forums, and community spreadsheets to coordinate food deliveries, rent advice, childcare assistance, and emergency support. These practices reflected the long-term consequences of welfare restructuring and urban inequality.

In Seoul, digital mutual aid developed within a different but equally significant structure of vulnerability. High housing costs, aging populations, social isolation, and competitive labor markets shaped neighborhood-based support practices. However, Seoul's stronger municipal digital infrastructure allowed some community support practices to become linked with local government initiatives, welfare centers, and smart-city communication systems. This produced a more institutionally coordinated model of digital assistance compared with London's more grassroots and fragmented networks.

The comparison demonstrates that mutual aid is not simply spontaneous generosity. It is shaped by structural inequality, institutional capacity, and cultural expectations of community responsibility. London's model reflects a civil society response to welfare retrenchment, while Seoul's model reflects a hybrid interaction between community practice and municipal governance. This distinction is theoretically important because it shows that digital solidarity is never purely digital. It is embedded within local histories of urban governance, class inequality, and social policy.

These findings extend urban sociology by showing that digital communication has become a crucial mediating infrastructure in contemporary urban survival. Digital mutual aid transforms fragmented vulnerability into communicative visibility. People who might otherwise remain institutionally invisible become connected through neighborhood networks, shared needs, and collective problem-solving. However, this visibility is uneven because

digital participation depends on language skills, technological access, trust, and social confidence.

## **2. Cultural Practices of Solidarity and the Transformation of Urban Belonging**

Digital mutual aid reshapes urban belonging by transforming strangers into temporary communities of care. In London, multicultural neighborhoods produced solidarities across ethnic, religious, and class differences, particularly where local residents framed mutual aid as a moral response to inequality. Community kitchens, food distribution networks, and neighborhood WhatsApp groups created forms of everyday multicultural cooperation. However, these solidarities were often fragile because they depended heavily on volunteer labor and uneven local resources.

In Seoul, community solidarity was shaped by neighborhood familiarity, age-based vulnerability, and cultural expectations of care. Digital tools were often used to identify elderly residents living alone, distribute local information, and connect residents with district-level support. The cultural logic of solidarity in Seoul was less explicitly activist than in London but more closely tied to neighborhood order, local welfare coordination, and intergenerational responsibility.

The comparative evidence suggests that digital mutual aid creates new forms of urban belonging but does so through culturally specific moral vocabularies. In London, belonging is often articulated through diversity, anti-austerity critique, and grassroots justice. In Seoul, belonging is more frequently expressed through neighborhood responsibility, social stability, and care for vulnerable residents. These differences show that solidarity is not universal in form; it is culturally interpreted and institutionally mediated.

Theoretically, this finding contributes to debates on social capital and community resilience. Digital mutual aid strengthens bonding ties among residents who share immediate needs, but it can also create bridging ties across social differences. Yet the effectiveness of these ties depends on institutional recognition. Where local authorities support community initiatives, digital mutual aid can become part of a broader resilience infrastructure. Where institutions withdraw, mutual aid risks becoming an informal substitute for social rights.

## **3. Communication Platforms, Power, and Inequality**

Digital platforms shape not only how mutual aid is organized but also who becomes visible, credible, and reachable. In London, platform-based mutual aid relied heavily on decentralized communication tools. This enabled rapid mobilization but also generated problems of coordination, misinformation, duplication, and exclusion. Residents without digital access, stable housing, English-language proficiency, or community trust were often less able to benefit from mutual aid networks.

In Seoul, more formalized digital infrastructures enabled better coordination between residents and local welfare systems, but they also risked bureaucratizing community support. Digitally mediated welfare systems can improve efficiency while simultaneously excluding those who lack digital literacy, particularly elderly residents and migrants. Thus, digital inclusion becomes a central condition of equitable community resilience.

This study therefore challenges celebratory accounts of digital solidarity. Platforms do not automatically democratize care. They organize participation through unequal communicative capacities. Those with higher digital literacy, social capital, and linguistic confidence often become coordinators, while the most vulnerable residents may remain dependent recipients or invisible outsiders. This reflects broader sociological concerns about symbolic power, communicative inequality, and digital stratification.

The institutional implication is clear: digital mutual aid requires public investment in digital inclusion, community translation, data ethics, and local coordination. Without these supports, digitally mediated solidarity may reproduce the very inequalities it seeks to address. Community resilience must therefore be understood as both cultural and infrastructural.

#### 4. Institutional Adaptation and the Politics of Informal Welfare

A major finding of this study is that digital mutual aid creates pressure for institutional adaptation. In London, mutual aid networks exposed the limits of austerity governance by revealing unmet needs in food security, housing, health access, and social care. Some local councils collaborated with community groups, but coordination remained uneven. Mutual aid became politically significant because it made institutional absence visible.

In Seoul, municipal institutions were more actively involved in neighborhood support systems, particularly through local welfare centers and digital information channels. This enabled more stable coordination but also raised questions about whether community solidarity becomes absorbed into administrative governance. The Seoul case shows that institutional support can strengthen mutual aid, but it may also reduce grassroots autonomy.

The comparative evidence suggests that the relationship between mutual aid and the state is ambivalent. Mutual aid can challenge institutions by exposing social neglect, but it can also supplement institutions by filling service gaps. This dual role creates a political tension: when mutual aid becomes normalized, governments may rely on unpaid community labor rather than addressing structural inequality.

This finding contributes to social policy scholarship by demonstrating that informal welfare practices are increasingly mediated by digital communication. The boundary between formal welfare and informal support is becoming blurred. Digital mutual aid should therefore be understood as part of a changing welfare ecology in which citizens, platforms, community organizations, and local governments jointly produce social support.

**Table 1. Comparative Matrix of Social Structures, Cultural Transformation, and Societal Outcomes**

Variable	Case 1: London	Case 2: Seoul	Empirical Evidence	Analytical Interpretation
Social Structure	High housing inequality, austerity, multicultural	High-density urbanization, aging population, labor competition	Urban inequality and demographic reports	Different vulnerabilities generate different mutual aid needs

	precarity			
<b>Institutional Context</b>	Fragmented local welfare and strong civil society activism	Stronger municipal coordination and digital governance	Local policy documents and welfare initiatives	Institutional capacity shapes mutual aid effectiveness
<b>Communication Platforms</b>	WhatsApp, Facebook, neighborhood forums	Municipal apps, local platforms, community networks	Public digital mutual aid archives	Platform choice affects coordination and inclusion
<b>Cultural Practice</b>	Grassroots multicultural solidarity	Neighborhood responsibility and intergenerational care	Community reports and public communications	Solidarity is culturally embedded
<b>Identity Dynamics</b>	Residents become activists and care coordinators	Residents become neighborhood welfare participants	Digital discourse analysis	Mutual aid reshapes civic identity
<b>Transformation Outcome</b>	Politicization of welfare gaps	Institutionalization of community care	Comparative policy evidence	Mutual aid can challenge or supplement institutions
<b>Social Risk</b>	Volunteer exhaustion and digital exclusion	Bureaucratization and elderly digital exclusion	Secondary research and policy reports	Resilience requires inclusive governance

The table demonstrates that digital mutual aid operates as a hybrid socio-cultural infrastructure. In London, its transformative power lies in grassroots mobilization and political critique. In Seoul, its strength lies in institutional coordination and neighborhood-based care. However, both cases reveal that digital mutual aid cannot replace redistributive social policy. Its value lies in strengthening relational resilience, not in substituting for welfare rights.

## Theoretical Propositions

### **Proposition 1: Urban precarity strengthens digital mutual aid when formal institutions fail to provide adequate everyday support.**

Digital mutual aid emerges most visibly where residents experience unmet needs. However, its growth should not be interpreted only as community empowerment; it also signals structural inequality and institutional insufficiency.

### **Proposition 2: Digital platforms transform community solidarity by converting local vulnerability into**

### **communicative visibility.**

Platforms allow residents to identify needs, distribute resources, and form temporary communities of care. Yet visibility remains unequal because participation depends on digital literacy, language, trust, and social capital.

### **Proposition 3: Community resilience depends on the interaction between grassroots solidarity and inclusive institutional support.**

Mutual aid is most transformative when institutions recognize, support, and protect community initiatives without absorbing or exploiting unpaid civic labor.

### **Proposition 4: Digital mutual aid produces cultural transformation by redefining urban belonging as a practice of relational responsibility.**

Residents become connected not only through shared territory but through digitally mediated obligations, care practices, and collective problem-solving.

## **CONCLUSION**

This article examined how digital mutual aid reshapes community resilience and urban social transformation in London and Seoul. The comparative analysis demonstrates that mutual aid is not simply a spontaneous response to crisis but a socio-cultural infrastructure produced through the interaction of urban precarity, digital communication, institutional capacity, and cultural norms of solidarity.

The main finding is that digital mutual aid transforms urban vulnerability into collective action, but its outcomes differ across institutional and cultural contexts. In London, mutual aid reflects grassroots resistance to austerity, housing inequality, and welfare fragmentation. It strengthens multicultural solidarity while exposing institutional neglect. In Seoul, mutual aid is more closely connected to municipal coordination, neighborhood care, and digital governance. It enhances organized community support but risks bureaucratization and digital exclusion.

The article contributes theoretically by conceptualizing digital mutual aid as a hybrid form of communicative welfare. It extends social transformation scholarship by showing that digital platforms do not merely facilitate communication; they reorganize social responsibility, civic identity, and community belonging. Empirically, the comparison demonstrates that urban resilience depends not only on local solidarity but also on institutional responsiveness and equitable digital access.

The policy implications are significant. Governments should not treat mutual aid as a substitute for welfare provision. Instead, they should support community networks through funding, digital inclusion programs, multilingual communication, ethical data practices, and participatory governance. Social policy must recognize that resilience is relational, cultural, and institutional.

This study is limited by its reliance on public digital materials and secondary indicators. Future research should incorporate longitudinal ethnography, interviews with mutual aid participants, and

comparative analysis across additional global cities. Further studies should also examine how artificial intelligence, platform governance, and data-driven welfare systems may reshape community solidarity.

Ultimately, this article argues that digital mutual aid reveals both the fragility and creativity of contemporary urban life. Under conditions of precarity, residents develop new communicative practices of care, belonging, and resistance. These practices do not eliminate structural inequality, but they illuminate how communities negotiate survival and transformation within digitally mediated cities.

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