



From Market to Platform: The Adaptation of Culinary MSME Traders in the Gig Economy Ecosystem in the Digital Economy Era

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of the digital economy, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has fundamentally transformed business patterns for Culinary MSME Traders in Indonesia. This study explores how traditional traders adapt to digitalization, the economic impacts of digital platforms, transformation challenges, and the collaboration between MSMEs and the gig economy ecosystem. Using a qualitative approach, the research involved in-depth interviews with two Culinary MSME Traders who transitioned to digital platforms and collaborated with gig economy services. The findings indicate that prior to digital adoption, trading was limited by direct interactions, narrow consumer reach, and unstable income. Following the shift to digital media (WhatsApp, Facebook, and e-commerce), traders experienced increased efficiency, broader market expansion, and improved income stability. Furthermore, collaboration with gig economy couriers, such as ShopeeFood and GoFood, significantly streamlined distribution processes. However, despite these benefits, traders face persistent obstacles, including limited digital literacy, internet costs, and a decline in traditional social market interactions. In conclusion, while digital transformation poses certain challenges, it has overall enhanced business sustainability and merchant welfare, fostering a more.

Keyword: *Digital Economy, Culinary MSME Traders, Business Models, Gig Economy.*

ABSTRAK

Pesatnya pertumbuhan ekonomi digital, yang dipercepat oleh pandemi COVID-19, telah mentransformasi pola bisnis pedagang UMKM Kuliner di Indonesia secara fundamental. Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana pedagang tradisional beradaptasi dengan digitalisasi, dampak ekonomi dari platform digital, tantangan transformasi, serta kolaborasi antara UMKM dengan ekosistem gig economy. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, penelitian ini melibatkan wawancara mendalam dengan dua pedagang UMKM Kuliner yang telah beralih ke platform digital dan berkolaborasi dengan layanan gig economy. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa sebelum adopsi digital, kegiatan perdagangan terbatas pada interaksi langsung, jangkauan konsumen yang sempit, dan pendapatan yang tidak stabil. Setelah beralih ke media digital (WhatsApp, Facebook, dan e-commerce), para pedagang mengalami peningkatan efisiensi, perluasan pasar, dan stabilitas pendapatan yang lebih baik. Selain itu, kolaborasi dengan kurir gig economy seperti ShopeeFood dan GoFood secara signifikan mempercepat proses distribusi. Namun, terlepas dari manfaat tersebut, pedagang masih menghadapi kendala seperti literasi digital yang terbatas, biaya internet, dan berkurangnya interaksi sosial di pasar. Sebagai kesimpulan, meskipun transformasi digital menghadirkan tantangan tertentu, secara keseluruhan hal ini telah meningkatkan keberlanjutan bisnis dan kesejahteraan pedagang, serta mendorong ekosistem ekonomi digital yang lebih inklusif bagi UMKM kuliner.

Keyword: *Ekonomi Digital, Pedagang UMKM Kuliner, Pola Usaha, Gig Ekonomi.*



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1. Introduction

The development of information and communication technology has triggered major changes across various aspects of life, including the trade sector. The emergence of the digital economy has brought significant transformation to the ways people conduct transactions, interact, and carry out economic activities. In Indonesia, this phenomenon has also influenced the business patterns of traditional traders who previously relied on conventional market systems. Whereas buying and selling activities used to take place face-to-face and were limited to specific areas, traders are now adapting by utilizing digital platforms to expand their market reach and improve business efficiency amid changing consumer habits.

The COVID-19 pandemic became a key driver in accelerating digitalization among business actors, including Culinary MSME Traders. Restrictions on social interaction and declining market visits pushed traders to seek alternative solutions to sustain their businesses. Digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and e-commerce have become primary tools for reaching customers virtually. This transformation has not only changed the way transactions are conducted but also altered how traders manage their businesses, engage with customers, and design promotional strategies.

In addition, the rise of the gig economy—characterized by flexible, short-term, and on-demand work facilitated by digital platforms—has become an integral part of this transformation. Collaboration between Culinary MSME Traders and gig economy workers, such as delivery couriers from GoFood, GrabFood, and ShopeeFood, has created a new ecosystem that supports digital commerce. This interdependence enables traders to expand their service reach, improve delivery efficiency, and integrate into broader digital value chains, highlighting the growing importance of platform-based labor in sustaining small-scale enterprises.

Many past studies have looked closely at how digital transformation helps make Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) more competitive. Zhao (2021) says that digital technology helps businesses work more efficiently, gives them access to bigger markets, and makes small companies more competitive. Tambunan (2020) also points out that digital transformation offers big chances for Indonesian small and medium businesses to connect with more customers, but there are still big differences in how digitally literate people are and how ready businesses are to use technology. Other research has also shown that the rise of the gig economy is a major result of digitalization, showing how digital platforms support flexible work arrangements and change the way businesses operate today (Yuliantina et al., 2025).

Although these studies offer useful information about how small businesses are becoming more digital and how the gig economy is growing, they usually look at these two topics on their own. Most research on small and medium businesses looks at things like using new technology, how well their businesses are doing, and ways to market online. But when it comes to the gig economy, studies usually look at how flexible jobs are, how workers are treated by platforms, and how they are cared for. Because of this, not much focus has been on understanding how small traditional food business owners are dealing with changes in technology at the same time as they are taking part in the gig economy by working with people who use digital platforms.

This study fills this gap by looking at digital transformation and the gig economy as linked processes instead of separate things. This study is different from earlier ones because it looks at how using digital platforms affects more than just marketing and how transactions happen. It also examines how these platforms change the way businesses work together with food delivery couriers, digital marketing freelancers, and other service providers who rely on platforms. This study adds to the increasing body of work on digital platform economies by showing how traditional informal businesses get involved in larger platform systems.

From a theoretical point of view, this study builds on the idea of platformization of work, as discussed by Srnicek in 2017, and shows that not just platform workers, but also traditional traders play a key role in these systems that are driven by platforms. From a practical point of view, the results show that improving digital skills and making online platforms easier to use for small businesses should also include rules that understand how small businesses and gig workers rely on each other to help create a more inclusive digital economy. The aim of this study is to look at how business practices have changed for small and medium-sized culinary traders after they started using digital platforms, to understand the social and economic effects of this change, and to explore how working with gig economy participants helps keep their businesses running smoothly in the modern digital economy.

2. Method

This study used a qualitative case study method to better understand how small and medium-sized culinary business owners adjust to digital changes and get involved in the gig economy system. The reason for selecting a case study design was that it allows researchers to examine contemporary social phenomena

in their real-life context and to capture the complexity of participants' experiences through various sources of evidence. The study took place on Jalan Susuk, Padang Bulan, Medan, Indonesia, which is an area where many small food businesses have set up shop. These businesses have started using digital tools over time, but they still carry on with their traditional market activities as well. This place is a good spot to look at how old business methods work together with new online business models.

Research participants were chosen through purposive sampling based on three criteria: first, traders who had moved from only doing business offline to using digital platforms; second, traders who were still actively running both traditional and digital businesses; and third, traders who were open to sharing their experiences about adapting to digital tools and transforming their businesses. Based on these criteria, two Culinary MSME Traders were chosen as the main informants. Even though there weren't many people taking part, qualitative research focuses more on getting detailed and meaningful information rather than on having a large group to represent everyone.

Data were gathered using three different methods: detailed interviews, watching without joining in, and reviewing written records. The detailed interviews took place in person and followed a semi-structured set of questions. Each interview looked into how participants' businesses were running before they started using digital tools, why they wanted to use digital platforms, the steps they took to adjust, the effects they noticed on their economy and society, the difficulties they faced while changing, and how they worked with people in the gig economy like food delivery drivers and digital marketing experts. The interviews were about 60 to 90 minutes long and were recorded using audio before being written down exactly as they were spoken, with the participants' permission.

The observer watched from a distance at each business location to record how the business runs every day, how customers interact, how digital tools are used, how food is delivered, and how services from online platforms are included in the usual way the business operates. Field notes were written right after each observation session to record important details that couldn't be gathered through interviews by themselves. The documentation included pictures of the business places, digital menus for ordering, advertisements shown on social media, and other business documents that the participants chose to share willingly. These documents helped confirm and back up the information gathered from interviews and observations.

To make sure the results are trustworthy, this study used methodological triangulation by checking information from interviews, observations, and written records. Interview statements about changing the business, using digital platforms, and working with people in the gig economy were carefully compared with what was seen in the field and written records. Any issues found during the analysis were discussed again with the participants to make sure all the information matched up and was correct.

Table 1. Characteristics of Research Informants.

No	Initial	Information
1	AB	Male Batagor seller, 25 years old, has been selling for 4 years
2	IG	Female fried chicken geprek seller, 44 years old, has been selling for 6 years

The data that was gathered was looked at using a method called thematic analysis. The researchers started by writing down all the words from the interviews, and then they used open coding to find important pieces of information. Similar codes were then put together into larger themes that show business transformation, adapting to digital changes, effects on society and the economy, difficulties faced, and teamwork in the gig economy environment. The main ideas kept getting better by looking at different sources of information together, which helped make sure the analysis was consistent and made the results more reliable.

3. Results and Discussion

This study was conducted on Jalan Susuk, Padang Bulan, near the exit from the USU campus development area. This area was chosen because there are still many Culinary MSME Traders operating in conventional markets, but they are beginning to experience changes in their business patterns due to the development of the digital economy. The heterogeneous community environment, with various types of small and medium-sized businesses, makes this location relevant for studying the dynamics of traders' adaptation to digital technology. In this area, interactions between Culinary MSME Traders and gig economy

workers, such as food delivery couriers and freelance digital service providers, are also visible, creating a dynamic ecosystem that supports the transition toward digital-based trading.

The subjects in this study were Culinary MSME Traders who conducted trading activities both directly in the market and through digital platforms. The number of data sources was not determined based on quantity, but rather on the quality and depth of information obtained, in accordance with the characteristics of qualitative research which emphasizes understanding meaning rather than calculating numbers. Therefore, informants were selected purposively by considering their experience in running a business amid the digital economy.

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach, with the aim of understanding how Culinary MSME Traders adapt to technological developments and identifying the forms of transformation that occur in their business activities. The focus of the study is on changes in transaction patterns, marketing strategies, and the socio-economic impacts that arise from the shift from conventional trading systems to the use of digital platforms. The study also explores the role of gig economy collaborations in facilitating these changes, particularly how partnerships with platform-based workers contribute to operational efficiency and customer engagement.

In general, this study describes that the digital economy era has brought significant shifts in the business patterns of traditional traders. Activities that were previously conducted entirely face-to-face are now shifting towards the use of communication technology and social media. This transformation not only affects economic aspects, such as market reach and sales efficiency, but also has an impact on the patterns of social interaction between traders and consumers, as well as between fellow traders.

Therefore, this study seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of the adaptation and transformation process of traditional traders amid the challenges of digitalization. The results are expected to serve as consideration for the government, academics, and the public in developing digital-based economic empowerment strategies that still pay attention to the socio-cultural values of Culinary MSME Traders. Furthermore, this study is expected to contribute to the broader understanding of how gig economy ecosystems integrate with the informal trade sector in Indonesia.

A. Business Conditions Before the Digital Era

Before entering the digital economy era, the business patterns of Culinary MSME Traders in the market were still completely dependent on direct interaction between sellers and buyers. Based on interviews with both sources, trading activities were carried out conventionally by opening stalls in the market every day and waiting for buyers to come. The entire buying and selling process was done face-to-face, from bargaining, selecting goods, to making cash payments.

The first informant revealed that the marketing strategies used at that time were still quite simple. To attract buyers, merchants relied solely on traditional methods such as neatly arranging their goods, quoting prices verbally, and offering discounts to loyal customers. As stated by the first informant:

“Before utilizing digital platforms, I simply waited for customers to come directly to my shop. I promoted my products through direct communication and relied on regular customers.” (AB, interview, 2025). The second informant shared a similar experience, stating that promotion was conducted only through direct communication or word of mouth. “Most of my customers came because they were recommended by friends or had purchased from me before. At that time, I did not use online platforms for promotion.” (IG, interview, 2025).

Technological limitations mean that traders' market reach is limited to consumers who come to their location. This results in significant income fluctuations, especially when market conditions are slow, the weather is bad, or on certain days when there are fewer buyers. In addition, competition among traders in the market area is quite fierce due to the large number of sellers offering similar products.

In general, conditions before the digital era describe a trading system that is still highly dependent on physical interaction, the presence of customers at the location, and market stability. This situation is also evident in the interview results. One informant explained:

“When the market is quiet or the weather is bad, my sales drop because customers rarely come to the shop.” (AB, interview, 2025).

B. Transition to the Digital Economy Era

Major changes began to occur when the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020. Restrictions on social activities and a decline in market visitors caused traders to experience a significant drop in income. This situation became a turning point for some traders to start adapting to digital technology. The first informant, a fried chicken vendor, revealed that he began learning to use digital platforms such as WhatsApp and Instagram in 2020 with the help of his son, who is more tech-savvy. He stated:

"My son taught me how to use WhatsApp and Instagram during the pandemic. At first, I found it difficult because I wasn't used to technology, but little by little I learned how to promote my products online." (IG, interview, 2025).

As his business grew in popularity among USU students, he decided to join GoFood to reach more customers. Meanwhile, The second informant, a batagor vendor, explained that he began using WhatsApp and ShopeeFood in 2021 because traditional sales methods were no longer sufficient to increase his income. He stated:

"I joined ShopeeFood because many customers suggested ordering online. After using the platform, more people can find my products without having to come directly to the market." (AB, interview, 2025).

Based on the interview, he felt that only operating his business at the market location was not increasing his income. As a result, the second interviewee expanded and increased his sales through marketplace marketing and also received suggestions from customers who could not come directly to the market. Both had similar reasons for making the transition: to maintain the sustainability of their businesses amid uncertain economic conditions.

This adaptation process did not happen instantly. In the early stages, merchants experienced confusion in operating digital features. Both interviewees acknowledged that the adjustment process was difficult in the early stages. One interviewee explained:

"I felt confused when using the digital payment system and managing online orders at the same time, but over time I began to get used to the process." (IG, interview, 2025).

However, economic necessity and support from their surroundings enabled them to gradually adapt. This phenomenon shows that the pandemic has accelerated digital transformation, even for businesses that were previously unfamiliar with technology. In addition, the role of family and customers has also been a significant external factor in driving behavioral change among traditional merchants.

C. Changes in Business Models and Social Interaction

After switching to digital platforms, both interviewees experienced significant changes in how they run their businesses. Buying and selling activities are no longer limited to physical market spaces, but have expanded into the digital world through social media and marketplaces. They have started to utilize product photos, item descriptions, and communication via instant messaging to serve buyers.

The first interviewee (the fried chicken seller) explained that she can now reach buyers from outside the city, even from areas that were previously out of reach. The first informant explained that using digital platforms expands their customer reach beyond the local market area. They stated:

"Before using online platforms, most of my customers were students and local residents. After joining GoFood, I started receiving orders from customers living in other areas who had never visited my kiosk before." (IG, interview, 2025).

This demonstrates that digital platforms have enabled merchants to reach a broader consumer market and increase the visibility of their businesses. By uploading product photos on social media, the promotion process has become easier and faster. This has directly resulted in an increase in the number of customers and more stable income compared to before.

Meanwhile, the second source (a batagor seller) said that selling activities now involve additional tasks such as packaging and shipping goods, which were not done before. The second informant also explained how daily business operations have changed since switching to a digital platform:

“Now I not only prepare food for customers who come in person, but I also carefully pack orders for online delivery. Managing online orders has become part of my daily routine.” (AB, interview, 2025).

The work patterns of traders have become more dynamic because they no longer just wait for buyers at their stalls but also actively market their products online. In this context, digitalization has proven to have created a new business model that is more flexible, efficient, and oriented towards a wider market reach.

However, these changes have also had an impact on social interaction patterns. Both sources agree that relationships between traders in the market are not as intense as they used to be, both informants stated that social interactions among vendors have changed since the implementation of digital platforms. One informant explained:

“In the past, vendors would usually take the time to chat while waiting for customers. Now, everyone is busy handling online orders and checking their phones.” (IG, interview, 2025).

However, digital communication has also created new forms of interaction. As noted by another informant:

“We still communicate with other vendors, but now we more often share information through WhatsApp groups and discuss online promotional strategies.” (AB, interview, 2025).

As most of them are now focused on managing their own online orders. Nevertheless, social interaction has not completely disappeared, but has undergone a transformation from face-to-face interaction to digital network-based interaction. Merchants now communicate more frequently through WhatsApp groups or social media to share experiences and promotional strategies.

The integration of gig workers into traders' daily operations illustrates the emergence of a hybrid labor system. Culinary MSME Traders no longer operate in isolation but depend on platform-based intermediaries to connect with consumers. This condition aligns with the concept of "platformization of work," where economic activities-both trade and labor-are mediated by digital technologies (Srniczek, 2017).

D. Challenges and Adaptation Strategies

Although digital transformation offers many advantages, merchants still face various challenges in the adaptation process. The biggest challenges lie in digital literacy and technical skills in using online platforms. The first interviewee (a woman who sells ayam geprek) expressed difficulties in managing her catalog, responding to customer messages simultaneously, and understanding the digital payment system. The first informant explained that adapting to digital technology is not a simple matter, especially when it comes to managing business operations online. He stated:

“I often find it difficult to respond to customer messages while preparing food orders. Sometimes I get confused about how to use the digital payment system and update product information in the app.” (IG, interview, 2025).

Meanwhile, the second interviewee (a man who sells batagor) complained about limited internet signal and high data costs. The second informant highlighted the technical and financial challenges associated with internet access. He explained:

“The internet connection isn't always stable, and I have to spend extra money on mobile data plans so I can keep receiving online orders.” (AB, interview, 2025).

Especially for merchants with limited income. In addition to technical obstacles, new economic challenges have also emerged, such as adjusting prices to include delivery costs and managing time between market activities and online order fulfillment. In response to these challenges, To address these challenges, both informants developed various adaptation strategies. One informant stated:

“When I don’t understand how to use a certain feature on the app, I ask my children for help or watch tutorial videos online.” (IG, interview, 2025).

The other informant explained:

“I often discuss things with fellow merchants who are already familiar with the online platform. We share information with each other about promotions, the app, and customer service.” (AB, interview, 2025).

Both interviewees have adapted in various ways, such as teaching themselves through the internet, asking for help from family members, and discussing with more experienced fellow merchants.

Interestingly, a new spirit of collaboration has emerged among market traders. They help each other create sales accounts, share promotional methods, and even recommend customers to one another. This phenomenon shows that even though social interactions have shifted to the digital space, the values of togetherness and mutual cooperation remain intact. Digital adaptation is not only a technological process, but also a form of social and collective learning in traditional economic environments.

E. Social and Economic Impact

The interview results show that digitization has a positive impact on business sustainability and improved economic welfare for Culinary MSME Traders. The positive impact of digitalization is evident in the experiences of both informants. One informant explained:

“After joining GoFood, my sales have become more stable because customers can place orders even if they don’t come directly to the market.” (IG, interview, 2025). Similarly, another informant stated: “My income has increased compared to before because more people can find my products through the online platform.” (AB, interview, 2025).

This spirit of cooperation is reflected in the interview responses. One interviewee stated:

“We help each other set up online accounts and teach one another how to use digital apps. If someone is having trouble, the other vendors usually try to lend a hand.” (IG, interview, 2025).

Through the use of digital platforms, sales reach has become wider, operating hours more flexible, and income more stable. Some traders have even managed to gain regular customers from outside the region, which was previously impossible to reach through conventional systems or direct transactions in the market.

However, on the other hand, these changes have also shifted the social order in the market. Although there are economic benefits, the interviewees acknowledge changes in patterns of social interaction. One interviewee stated:

“In the past, I used to chat more with customers and fellow merchants. Now, most communication takes place via cell phones and online apps.” (IG, interview, 2025).

Another informant added:

“Face-to-face interaction has decreased, but communication with customers has become faster through WhatsApp and online platforms.” (AB, interview, 2025).

The direct interaction that used to be a hallmark of traditional markets has begun to decline. Relationships between traders and customers are no longer as intense as they were in the past because most communication is now conducted online. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily eliminate the social aspect, but rather changes its form into a more efficient digital interaction that still has a familial feel.

Thus, digital transformation among traditional merchants has not only impacted the economic aspect but also the social dynamics of the market community. Merchants have demonstrated a high level of adaptability in facing change, while also showing that technology can be a means of empowering the local economy if supported by adequate digital literacy.

F. Collaboration between Culinary MSME Traders and the Gig Economy ecosystem in supporting digital trading activities.

Market traders who previously ran their businesses conventionally are now beginning to form partnerships with platform-based workers. This collaboration has emerged as a form of adaptation to changes in consumption patterns and distribution systems in the digital economy era, where technology acts as the main link between producers and consumers.

In the context of this study, this form of collaboration is evident through the involvement of Culinary MSME Traders with various gig economy players. Findings from the interviews indicate that collaborating with gig economy workers has become a crucial aspect of running a business. One interviewee explained:

“Delivery couriers help me serve customers who live far from my kiosk. Without them, I wouldn’t be able to reach many customers outside the market area.” (IG, interview, 2025).

Such as delivery couriers from the GoFood, GrabFood, and ShopeeFood platforms, as well as freelancers who play a role in digital marketing, product photography, and social media management. Through these partnerships, merchants can expand their market reach, improve service efficiency, and overcome space and time constraints in the sales process.

Another interviewee highlighted the practical benefits of using a platform-based service:

“Since joining ShopeeFood, I no longer have to worry about delivering the food myself because the couriers handle the distribution process. This gives me the opportunity to focus more on preparing the food and serving customers.” (AB, interview, 2025).

More than just an operational aspect, this collaboration also shows the formation of a new, interdependent economic ecosystem. The informants also recognized this mutually beneficial relationship. According to one dealer: Couriers also make money from customer orders, and delivery services are essential to our company.

"We back one other via the platform." (interview, IG, 2025).

Merchants utilize flexible labor to support their business activities, while gig economy workers earn income from these trading activities. This relationship illustrates the phenomenon of —platformization of workl as described by (Srnicek, 2017), where economic activities—both trade and employment—are mediated by digital technology.

4. Conclusion

This study reveals that the development of the digital economy has brought significant changes to the business patterns of traditional traders on Jalan Susuk, Padang Bulan, near the exit from the direction of the USU campus development. Before the emergence of digital technology, buying and selling activities were carried out directly, with a market reach limited to visitors who came to the location. However, since the COVID-19 pandemic and the increased ease of access to information technology, merchants have begun to adapt by utilizing various digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and online marketplaces as a means to promote and sell their products.

This transition has had a positive impact on increasing income, expanding marketing areas, and improving time efficiency in running businesses. Traders who previously only served buyers around the market can now reach customers from outside the area. In addition, the relationship between traders and consumers has become more dynamic and flexible because communication can be done online without space and time limitations.

However, this digitization process also poses new challenges. Some of the obstacles encountered include limited technological capabilities, increased costs for internet access, and decreased social interaction among traders in the market. Although togetherness in the market environment has begun to decline, social relationships among traders continue to be maintained through new forms of cooperation and sharing of experiences in digital marketing activities.

Overall, this study confirms that the shift from conventional trading systems to digital platforms is a positive adaptation by Culinary MSME Traders to technological advances. This transformation not only

contributes to the sustainability of businesses, but also serves as a strategic step in improving and strengthening the economic resilience of communities in an ever-evolving digital economy.

This study also highlights that traditional traders have become part of a broader gig economy ecosystem through their reliance on delivery couriers, freelance digital marketers, and platform-based logistics systems. Their economic sustainability is thus interconnected with the flexibility and dynamics of platform labor. Future policies should therefore consider both traders and gig workers as integral components of the digital economic transformation.

In order to guarantee that MSMEs can sustainably participate in the ecosystem of the digital economy, government assistance programs should place a priority on enhancing their technological accessibility, digital literacy, and training in platform-based businesses.

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Finally, the author hopes that the results of this research can provide benefits and positive contributions to the development of knowledge, particularly in the study of the transformation of traditional merchants in the digital economy era.

6. Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest in conducting the research or in writing the article entitled —From Market to Platform: The Adaptation of Culinary MSME Traders in the Gig Economy Ecosystem in the Digital Economy Era.”

The entire research process, data analysis, and manuscript preparation were carried out independently and objectively, without any influence or personal interests, institutions, or other parties that could affect the results of this research.

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