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UCT study finds Uber and Airbnb centralise power, deepen inequality



Keegan Steyn

Photo: Supplied

A University of Cape Town (UCT) study on the workings of the platform economy – with companies like Uber, Airbnb and other digital platforms as part of a larger shift in capitalism

itself – has found that these platforms don't just connect buyers and sellers; they reshape how work is organised, how value is created and who holds power in the economy.

In simple terms, while these platforms promise flexibility and opportunity, they often centralise control. Workers carry more risk, while platforms control data, set the rules and take a share of every transaction. Over time, this model can deepen inequality rather than reduce it.

Titled "*Understanding some social implications of the global platform economy: A critical social theory study of Uber and Airbnb in the context of South Africa*," PhD graduand in [Information Systems](#) Keegan Steyn's dissertation argues that digital platforms are not neutral tools of innovation; they are economic systems that reorganise society in ways that benefit some groups more than others.

"We are living through a moment where digital platforms are transforming almost every sector – transport, hospitality, media, retail and even education. They are often celebrated as disruptive and progressive. But I was interested in looking beneath the surface. Who gains long-term power? Who becomes more dependent? What happens to workers' rights and economic security? In a country like South Africa, where inequality is already severe, it felt important to examine whether digital capitalism is addressing those challenges, or amplifying them," said Steyn.

With this study, Steyn hopes to shift the conversation from "innovation at all costs" to a more thoughtful discussion about power and fairness in the digital economy.

"Digital platforms are often treated as inevitable, as if this is simply the future. My research shows that these systems are shaped by political and economic choices. They can be regulated, redesigned and governed differently. The goal is not to reject digital progress, but to ensure that it serves society more broadly rather than concentrating wealth and power," he added.

The platform economy affects millions of people, from gig workers to small businesses to consumers.

Steyn argued that the platform economy is not theoretical but has visible effects in cities and communities. For example, in Cape Town and other parts of South Africa, the growth of short-term rental platforms like Airbnb has coincided with rising property prices and increased pressure on housing availability in certain neighbourhoods.

"When homes shift from long-term rental markets to short-term tourist accommodation, it can reduce supply for residents. Over time, especially if left unregulated, this contributes to displacement and affordability challenges. What makes this particularly important is that these platforms were often welcomed and even promoted as drivers of tourism and entrepreneurship. The benefits were visible and immediate. The unintended consequences: housing pressure, rising costs and community disruption emerged more slowly.

"If we do not critically examine how these systems work, we risk normalising a model of work that is unstable and highly unequal. This work helps policymakers, business leaders and the public understand the deeper structures behind digital services so that future economic development is both innovative and just," said Steyn.

One of the most significant shifts highlighted in his research is the recent shift in markets towards a structured approach around platforms that go directly to customers at global scale. In the past, businesses competed within relatively open market systems. Today, many industries operate inside digital ecosystems controlled by a small number of firms that determine visibility, pricing mechanisms, data access and even reputation through ratings.

“This changes the nature of entrepreneurship itself. While platforms create access and opportunity, they also define the rules of participation. Businesses and workers may appear independent, but their success is often deeply dependent on algorithms, platform policies and data they do not control. Understanding these structural dynamics is essential. Without that awareness, innovation can easily become dependency, and growth can be constrained by forces that remain largely invisible,” said Steyn.

Steyn will graduate for his PhD in Information Systems from UCT’s [Faculty of Commerce](#) on Wednesday, 1 April 2026 at the Sarah Baartman Hall.

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