

Platform adaptation across institutional regimes: A comparative study of Uber in the United States and Turkey

Kurumsal rejimler arasında platform uyumlanması: Uber'in Amerika Birleşik Devletleri ve Türkiye'de karşılaştırmalı incelemesi

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Abstract

Digital platform organisations are often portrayed as globally scalable, yet national institutional environments shape their structures and strategies. Drawing on institutional theory, this study examines how Uber Technologies Inc. adapts its business model, governance, and organisational boundaries across contrasting regulatory regimes. The paper compares the firm's responses in the United States and Turkey, two contexts characterised by different regulatory trajectories. Using qualitative document analysis of legal decisions, regulatory texts, corporate disclosures, and media sources, the study analyses adaptation across four dimensions: regulatory strategy, platform governance, labour intermediation, and organisational positioning. The findings show that adaptation is contingent rather than uniform. In the U.S., prolonged regulatory ambiguity enabled continued operation and organisational learning through reframing, boundary renegotiation, and the gradual integration of regulatory expectations into contractual and technological systems. In contrast, Turkey's centralised intervention-imposed constraints prompted strategic retrenchment and role redefinition, with Uber abandoning labour intermediation and repositioning itself as a digital interface for licensed taxi drivers. The study highlights retrenchment and organisational reconfiguration as underexamined forms of platform adaptation in restrictive institutional environments.

Keywords: Digital Platforms, Institutional Regimes, Organisational Adaptation

Jel Codes: L22, L51, M10

Öz

Dijital firmaları çoğu zaman küresel ölçekte ölçeklenebilir iş modelleri olarak sunulsa da örgütsel biçimleri ve stratejileri kurumsal ve düzenleyici çevreler tarafından derinden şekillendirilmektedir. Kurumsal teoriye dayanan bu çalışma, Uber Technologies Inc.'nin iş modelini, yönetim yapısını ve örgütsel sınırlarını farklı düzenleyici rejimler karşısında nasıl uyarladığını incelemektedir. Makale, farklı düzenleyici gelişim süreçleriyle karakterize edilen Amerika Birleşik Devletleri ve Türkiye'deki örgütsel tepkileri karşılaştırmaktadır. Hukuki kararlar, düzenleyici metinler, kurumsal açıklamalar ve medya kaynaklarına dayanan nitel doküman analizi yöntemiyle, uyum süreci dört boyutta analiz edilmektedir: düzenleyici strateji, platform yönetimi, emek aracılığı ve örgütsel konumlanma. Bulgular, uyumun tekdüze değil, bağlamsal ve aşamalı olduğunu göstermektedir. ABD'de uzun süreli düzenleyici belirsizlik, şirketin faaliyetlerini sürdürmesine ve yeniden çerçeveleme, sınırların yeniden müzakere edilmesi ve düzenleyici beklentilerin sözleşmesel ve teknolojik sistemlere kademeli olarak entegre edilmesi yoluyla örgütsel öğrenme geliştirmesine olanak tanımıştır. Buna karşılık Türkiye'de merkezi müdahale önemli kısıtlar getirmiş, stratejik geri çekilmeye ve rolün yeniden tanımlanmasına yol açmış; Uber emek aracılığı faaliyetini terk ederek lisanslı taksi sürücülerini için dijital bir arayüz olarak yeniden konumlanmıştır. Çalışma, kurumsal olarak kısıtlayıcı ortamlarda stratejik geri çekilme ve örgütsel yeniden yapılandırmanın yeterince incelenmemiş platform uyum biçimleri olduğunu vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dijital Platformlar, Kurumsal Rejim, Örgütsel Uyumlanma

JEL Kodları: L22, L51, M10

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Introduction

Digital platform organisations have become prominent organisational actors across sectors such as transportation, accommodation, and delivery, reshaping how markets are coordinated and how services are provided. By mediating exchanges through digital infrastructures, platforms promise rapid scalability, flexibility, and cross-border expansion with limited reliance on physical assets. As a result, platform-based business models are often portrayed as inherently global and technologically transferable across national contexts.

At the same time, platform expansion has generated significant regulatory conflict. Because platform activities frequently do not align with established legal categories, firms often operate in regulatory ambiguity. Prior research, largely grounded in institutional and regulatory perspectives, emphasises how such ambiguity enables experimentation, legal contestation, and negotiated governance, allowing platforms to continue operating while institutional arrangements evolve. This stream of work has produced important insights into how platforms adapt through framing strategies, litigation, and incremental organisational adjustment. However, this literature also exhibits important limitations. Existing studies predominantly focus on contexts in which regulatory ambiguity persists, implicitly treating negotiated adaptation as the dominant trajectory of platform expansion. Far less attention has been paid to institutional environments characterised by rapid, decisive, and exclusionary regulatory intervention—settings in which ambiguity collapses and platform organisations can no longer sustain their original organisational configurations. As a result, current accounts offer only a partial understanding of platform adaptation by under-theorising decline, exit, and enforced organisational reconfiguration as outcomes of institutional constraint.

In sectors such as urban transportation, these institutional conditions are not limited to formal regulation; they are embedded in the material organisation of service provision itself. Taxi markets are structured through licensing systems, entry barriers, and collective actor arrangements that determine who may legally operate and how competition is governed. These structural features vary substantially across national contexts and shape the strategic repertoire available to platform entrants. Accordingly, taxi regimes can be understood as meso-level institutional infrastructures that mediate the interaction between platform organisations and state authorities, influencing both the persistence of regulatory ambiguity and the likelihood of institutional closure. Moreover, taxi governance in the United States is relatively fragmented and often negotiated across municipal jurisdictions. In contrast, the Turkish system is organised around scarce and highly protected licenses, strong incumbent coordination, and more centralised enforcement. Such differences condition whether platforms can pursue boundary negotiation and gradual accommodation or instead confront rapid institutional closure.

This study addresses these gaps through a qualitative comparative analysis of Uber's operations in the United States and Turkey. While Uber is frequently cited as an archetypal case of platform scalability and regulatory contestation, its experience in Turkey followed a markedly different trajectory. Rather than prolonged negotiation and incremental adjustment, Uber encountered judicial intervention that suspended its core ride-hailing operations and compelled a fundamental redefinition of its organisational boundaries. Treating Turkey as a critical comparative case enables a systematic examination of the conditions under which platform experimentation gives way to institutional closure.

Drawing on institutional theory, this paper examines how contrasting regulatory regimes shape platform adaptation across multiple organisational dimensions, including governance arrangements, labour intermediation, and organisational positioning. By comparing Uber's responses under conditions of regulatory ambiguity in the United States and regulatory closure in Turkey, the analysis highlights how institutional authority, enforcement intensity, and legal finality condition the scope and direction of platform organisation. By integrating macro-level institutional analysis with meso-level sectoral dynamics, this study demonstrates how licensing systems and enforcement structures directly shape platform trajectories. The objective is to explain why the same digital platform organisation followed sharply divergent organisational trajectories across national contexts. By examining how institutional ambiguity and institutional closure structure platform adaptation, the study advances a more conditional understanding of platform growth, retrenchment, and reconfiguration, emphasising the central role of national institutional environments in shaping organisational survival and transformation in the platform economy.

Theoretical background

Digital platforms as organisational forms

Digital platforms constitute a distinct organisational form centred on intermediation between multiple user groups through digital infrastructures. Rather than producing goods or services directly, platforms coordinate exchanges—such as transportation, labour, or content—while extracting value from these interactions (Kenney & Zysman, 2016; Srnicek, 2017). This intermediary position enables rapid market expansion, often with limited ownership of physical assets.

A defining feature of platform organisations is their reliance on algorithmic coordination rather than traditional managerial hierarchy. Key organisational functions—including task allocation, pricing, monitoring, and performance evaluation—are embedded in software systems, allowing platforms to exercise control while maintaining formal distance from service provision (Schor & Vallas, 2020). This architecture supports platforms' self-presentation as neutral technological infrastructures rather than active organisational actors. However, scholarship increasingly challenges this claim of neutrality.

Platforms design and enforce rules that shape economic behaviour, allocate risk, and define participation, positioning them as powerful organisational actors with evolving governance structures and boundaries (Kenney & Zysman, 2016). This tension between intermediation and control becomes particularly salient in regulatory contexts, where platforms seek to leverage their organisational ambiguity to limit regulatory exposure.

Institutional theory and national regulatory regimes

Institutional theory provides a foundational lens for understanding why organisations behave differently across national contexts. Institutions are commonly conceptualised as comprising regulative, normative, and cognitive elements that structure organisational behaviour by defining what actions are legally permitted, socially acceptable, and taken for granted (Scott, 1995, 2014). From this perspective, national regulatory regimes shape not only the formal constraints faced by firms but also their strategic interpretations and responses.

Comparative institutional scholarship emphasises that countries vary substantially in how regulations are formulated, enforced, and contested. Some institutional environments are characterised by regulatory ambiguity, where rules are unclear, fragmented, or inconsistently enforced, allowing organisations greater interpretive flexibility. Others exhibit institutional closure, marked by clear legal categorisation, strong enforcement mechanisms, and limited tolerance for organisational experimentation. These differences have significant implications for firm behaviour, particularly for novel organisational forms that do not fit neatly into existing regulatory frameworks.

The United States and Turkey represent analytically useful contrasts in this regard. While both are large, complex economies with active state involvement, they differ markedly in legal traditions, enforcement intensity, and the role of courts and regulators in resolving institutional ambiguity. Prior research highlights that firms operating in emerging or hybrid institutional contexts often face higher institutional distance and greater uncertainty, which can constrain strategic choice and limit organisational experimentation (Tatoglu et al., 2022).

Institutional theory also underscores that organisations are not passive recipients of regulatory pressure. Instead, they actively interpret, negotiate, and sometimes contest institutional demands. However, the scope for such strategic action is shaped by national institutional configurations. In contexts where regulation is fragmented and enforcement is contested, firms may engage in prolonged negotiation and legal challenge. In contrast, in contexts where regulatory authority is centralised and enforcement is decisive, organisations may be compelled to adapt more rapidly and fundamentally.

Drawing on these insights, this study conceptualises platform adaptation through a comparative institutional framework that distinguishes between institutional ambiguity and institutional closure. Institutional ambiguity refers to regulatory environments characterised by fragmented authority, contested legal classification, and inconsistent enforcement, which grant organisations interpretive flexibility and scope for experimentation. Institutional closure denotes contexts in which legal categorisation becomes definitive, and enforcement is decisive, sharply constraining organisational discretion.

These contrasting institutional conditions shape how platform organisations engage in sensemaking, boundary work, and institutional work, producing distinct adaptation trajectories. This framework anchors the comparative analysis by linking national institutional regimes to observable organisational outcomes in platform governance and organisational configuration.

Beyond macro-level institutional differences, sectoral regulatory architectures also shape how institutional ambiguity and closure unfold. In urban transportation, taxi regimes function as meso-level institutional structures that mediate the relationship between platform organisations and state authority. Licensing systems, entry barriers, and incumbent coordination influence both regulators' capacity to enforce rules and incumbents' ability to mobilise against new entrants. Where licensing authority is fragmented and enforcement decentralised, regulatory ambiguity may persist, allowing platforms greater scope for experimentation. Conversely, in contexts characterised by centralised licensing, high asset capitalisation, and strong incumbent organisation, institutional closure may occur more rapidly. Integrating these sectoral dynamics strengthens comparative institutional analysis by linking national regulatory regimes to the material and organisational structures that sustain them (Thelen, 2018).

Platform governance, regulation and algorithmic control

A growing body of research examines how platform organisations govern economic activity and interact with regulatory institutions across jurisdictions. Unlike traditional firms embedded within established sectoral regulations, platforms often enter markets without a clear legal classification, enabling them to operate in regulatory grey zones (Cherry & Aloisi, 2017). This ambiguity facilitates rapid expansion while deferring or contesting regulatory obligations.

One widely documented governance strategy involves regulatory avoidance, in which platforms frame themselves as technology companies rather than service providers to circumvent labour, safety, and licensing requirements (Dubal, 2019). This framing is often accompanied by selective compliance, lobbying, and public discourse that emphasise innovation, efficiency, and consumer choice. In many cases, platforms rely on courts rather than regulators as their primary arenas of governance, making litigation a central mechanism for negotiating regulatory boundaries.

Platform governance is not exercised solely through legal and discursive strategies. Internally, platforms rely heavily on algorithmic management as a mode of organisational control. Rather than using formal managerial hierarchies, platforms embed rules governing pricing, matching, monitoring, and access into digital systems that structure participant behaviour (Zuboff, 1988; Rosenblat, 2018). These algorithmic systems function as governance devices, shaping how work is performed and how authority is exercised within platform ecosystems.

Research on algorithmic management emphasises that algorithms are not neutral tools but socio-technical systems reflecting organisational priorities and assumptions (Kellogg et al., 2020). Design choices related to ranking, pricing, onboarding, and deactivation encode governance rules that regulate participation, often with limited transparency or recourse. As such, governance in platform organisations operates through both formal institutional engagement and technical control embedded in code.

Regulatory responses to platform governance vary across national contexts. These responses are also shaped by sector-specific regulatory traditions and incumbent structures, which determine the arenas in which governance conflicts unfold and the degree of flexibility available to platform organisations. Rahman and Thelen (2019) argue that platform regulation is shaped by fragmented authority structures, producing uneven outcomes. While some jurisdictions tolerate prolonged experimentation, others intervene decisively. Courts play a critical role by adjudicating disputes over classification, responsibility, and control, thereby either sustaining regulatory ambiguity or contributing to institutional closure.

From an organisational learning perspective, algorithmic systems also function as repositories of institutional memory. As platforms encounter regulatory challenges, they may modify governance embedded in code to reflect new constraints or strategic priorities. For example, changes in onboarding requirements, pricing rules, or access mechanisms can serve as indirect forms of regulatory compliance without overt organisational restructuring. The scope for such algorithmic adaptation, however, depends on institutional context: regulatory ambiguity allows greater flexibility, whereas institutional closure constrains experimentation and redirects governance toward compliance.

Taken together, this literature highlights that platform governance is inherently multi-layered, combining legal, discursive, and algorithmic mechanisms. Governance outcomes, therefore, depend not only on organisational strategy but also on national institutional regimes that shape how and where governance is exercised. This integrated perspective is essential for understanding why the same platform organisation adopts divergent governance configurations across countries.

Organisational adaptation and learning under institutional pressure

Institutional theory has long emphasised that organisations do not respond mechanically to regulatory demands but instead interpret, negotiate, and strategically respond to institutional pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Scott, 2014). From this perspective, adaptation is not limited to compliance or resistance; rather, it involves ongoing processes of meaning-making, boundary definition, and organisational learning. This insight is particularly salient for platform organisations operating across heterogeneous national regulatory regimes, where institutional signals are often ambiguous, contested, or unevenly enforced.

Organisations facing institutional pressure must first interpret regulatory signals before responding. Weick's (1995) theory of sensemaking highlights that organisations enact their environments through interpretation, framing, and retrospective rationalisation. Regulation, in this view, is not an objective constraint but a socially constructed signal whose meaning emerges through interaction with courts, regulators, media, and other stakeholders.

For platform organisations such as Uber, regulatory environments are especially difficult to interpret because their activities frequently fall between existing legal categories. This ambiguity creates space for divergent interpretations of what the firm "is" (e.g., a technology company vs a transportation provider) and which obligations apply. Organisational adaptation, therefore, begins not with compliance but with interpretive work – defining the nature of the organisation, its responsibilities, and its boundaries in relation to the state.

Adaptation under institutional pressure often involves boundary work, through which organisations redefine the scope of their activities, responsibilities, and relationships with external actors. Abbott (1995) and Vaughan (1999) conceptualise boundary work as a process by which organisations actively construct distinctions between domains (e.g., market vs regulation, technology vs service provision) to maintain autonomy and legitimacy.

In the context of platform organisations, boundary work may involve redefining who is considered part of the organisation (e.g., drivers as independent contractors rather than employees), what constitutes the firm's core activity (software provision versus service delivery), and where accountability resides. These boundary configurations are not fixed; they evolve in response to institutional feedback. When regulatory challenges intensify, organisations may redraw boundaries – either expanding them to accommodate new obligations or narrowing them to limit exposure.

Beyond interpretation and boundary maintenance, organisations may engage in institutional work – purposeful actions aimed at creating, maintaining, or disrupting institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Platform organisations often undertake such work through legal challenges, lobbying, public discourse, and strategic partnerships. Importantly, institutional work does not presuppose success; rather, it highlights how organisations experiment with different strategies as they learn which approaches are viable within a given institutional context.

Prior research suggests that platform organisations are particularly active institutional entrepreneurs because their business models depend on regulatory categorisation (Kaplan, 2008). By framing themselves as neutral technological intermediaries, platforms seek to influence how regulators and courts perceive their activities. However, the effectiveness of such framing strategies depends heavily on national institutional contexts, including enforcement capacity, legal traditions, and the political salience of the sector. Importantly, these contexts are partly constituted by industry-specific governance arrangements that shape coalition-building, enforcement credibility, and the perceived legitimacy of platform activity.

Organisational adaptation is inherently a learning process. Regulatory interventions, court rulings, and enforcement actions provide feedback that shapes subsequent organisational responses. Rather than converging toward a single "best" model, organisations may develop context-specific adaptations as they learn which configurations are viable in different institutional environments.

This learning is often non-linear. Early strategies based on regulatory ambiguity may be abandoned when institutional closure occurs, while previously rejected configurations may re-emerge under new constraints. For multinational platform organisations, this can result in differentiated organisational forms across countries – despite a shared technological core. Such variation challenges assumptions about platform scalability and highlights the limits of global standardisation in the presence of strong institutional heterogeneity.

Taken together, the literature on sensemaking, boundary work, and institutional work suggests that organisational adaptation should be understood as an interpretive and experimental process shaped by ongoing interaction with institutional environments. For platform organisations operating across national borders, adaptation is not merely a matter of legal compliance but a process of redefining organisational identity, governance structures, and operational boundaries in response to institutional feedback.

This perspective provides a theoretical foundation for examining how the same platform organisation—Uber—adopted divergent organisational configurations in the United States and Turkey. While both contexts posed regulatory challenges, differences in institutional ambiguity, enforcement intensity, and legal closure created distinct learning environments, leading to fundamentally different adaptation trajectories.

Research gap and contribution

Despite a rapidly expanding literature on digital platforms, regulation, and organisational governance, several important gaps remain. First, much existing research examines platform regulation within single-country contexts, limiting our understanding of how platform organisations adapt across heterogeneous institutional environments. Comparative studies remain relatively scarce, particularly those that examine sharply contrasting regulatory outcomes for the same firm.

Second, while prior work has documented regulatory conflicts involving platforms, less attention has been paid to organisational adaptation as a learning process. Studies often focus on whether platforms comply with or resist regulation, rather than how they interpret institutional signals, experiment with organisational boundaries, and revise their strategies over time. As a result, adaptation is frequently treated as an outcome rather than an ongoing process shaped by feedback and interpretation.

Third, research on platform governance has tended to emphasise legal classification and labour relations, with less systematic attention to how platforms reconfigure their business models and governance structures under conditions of institutional closure. In particular, there is limited understanding of how platforms respond when regulatory ambiguity collapses and continued operation under existing models becomes untenable.

This study addresses these gaps by offering a comparative institutional analysis of Uber's organisational adaptation in the United States and Turkey—two contexts characterised by markedly different regulatory trajectories. By examining how Uber navigated prolonged institutional ambiguity in the United States and decisive regulatory intervention in Turkey, the study demonstrates that platform adaptation is neither uniform nor linear. Instead, it is shaped by national institutional regimes that condition the scope, direction, and form of organisational learning.

The study contributes to the literature in three main ways. First, it extends research on digital platforms by conceptualising them as adaptive organisational actors whose structures and boundaries evolve in response to institutional pressure. Second, it advances institutional theory by showing how regulatory ambiguity and closure generate distinct learning environments that produce divergent organisational outcomes. In doing so, the study develops a multi-level institutional perspective that connects national governance structures with sectoral regulatory regimes, demonstrating how industry-specific licensing systems and incumbent organisations shape the conditions under which ambiguity persists or collapses. Third, it enriches platform governance scholarship by illustrating how adaptation occurs not only through legal and discursive strategies but also through organisational and technological reconfiguration.

Research questions and analytical approach

This study adopts a qualitative, theory-driven comparative design rather than a hypothesis-testing approach. Accordingly, the analysis is guided by the following research questions:

- 1: How do digital platform organisations adapt their governance structures and organisational boundaries across contrasting institutional regimes?
- 2: How do conditions of institutional ambiguity and institutional closure shape platform strategies, organisational learning, and adaptation outcomes?
- 3: Why does the same platform organisation adopt divergent organisational configurations across national contexts?

These questions are examined through qualitative document analysis and cross-case comparison, enabling theoretical generalisation rather than statistical inference.

Methodology

Research design and context

A comparative qualitative case study design was employed to examine how a platform organisation adapts its business model and organisational boundaries across contrasting institutional regimes. A comparative design is appropriate because it holds the focal organisation constant (Uber) while varying the national institutional context, enabling us to identify how differences in regulatory ambiguity and institutional closure shape organisational responses. The study follows an interpretive approach and aims for theoretical generalisation rather than statistical inference.

Uber was selected as the focal case because it represents a paradigmatic digital platform organisation whose operations have been repeatedly shaped by regulatory contestation. The United States and Turkey were selected as analytically useful contrasts due to their markedly different regulatory trajectories. The United States represents a context characterised by institutional ambiguity—fragmented regulatory authority and prolonged legal contestation. In contrast, Turkey represents institutional closure, where decisive regulatory intervention constrained Uber's core operations and prompted reconfiguration. This contrast provides analytic leverage to examine how platform adaptation varies under different institutional conditions. In addition to formal regulatory authority, the analysis also considers sectoral regulatory structures—such as taxi licensing regimes, entry barriers, and enforcement arrangements—as meso-level institutional features shaping the persistence of ambiguity and the likelihood of institutional closure. Moreover, the analytical dimensions function as qualitative research variables that structure data coding and cross-case comparison (See Table 1).

Table 1: Analytical Dimensions Guiding the Comparative Analysis

Analytical Dimension (Construct)	Conceptual Meaning	Empirical Indicators
Institutional Condition	Degree of regulatory ambiguity vs closure	Court rulings, enforcement actions
Regulatory Strategy	How Uber engages the state	Litigation, compliance, exit
Platform Governance	Control embedded in contracts and algorithms	Pricing rules, access control
Labor Intermediation	The platform's role in organising work	Worker classification, licensing
Organisational Boundary Configuration	Definition of firm scope and responsibility	Market exit, re-entry, role redefinition
Adaptation Outcome	Resulting organisational form	Continuity, retrenchment, reconfiguration

Source: Author

Data collection and sources

Qualitative document analysis of publicly available sources was used to capture both institutional responses and Uber's organisational positioning over time. Document-based data are particularly suitable for this research context because platform–state interactions, regulatory decisions, and corporate framing strategies are frequently articulated through formal and public records. Data were collected iteratively across both cases and included:

1. Legal and judicial documents: court rulings and decisions relevant to Uber's operating status and classification
2. Government and regulatory publications: statements and decisions from relevant authorities
3. Corporate communications: Uber press releases, blog posts, and official public statements
4. Media coverage: national and international reporting on regulatory disputes and market reconfiguration
5. Industry and expert commentary: reports and analyses that contextualise regulatory developments.

To strengthen credibility, insights are triangulated across these source types and prioritised materials that directly document regulatory actions, legal categorisation, and organisational responses. Table 1 summarises the primary data categories and their analytical purpose.

Data analysis

The data were analysed using a theory-informed coding strategy combining deductive and inductive elements. Based on the theoretical background, I developed concepts to guide the first round of coding, including institutional ambiguity, organisational framing, boundary work, institutional work, and organisational reconfiguration. I then iteratively refined codes as the analysis progressed.

The analysis proceeded in three stages:

1. Within-case temporal analysis: For each country, documents were organised chronologically to trace how regulatory signals evolved and how Uber's organisational responses changed in relation to key institutional events (e.g., court decisions, enforcement actions).
2. Process tracing of adaptation mechanisms: Institutional feedback is linked to observable organisational changes, focusing on shifts in framing (e.g., "technology platform" claims), boundary definitions (scope of operations, responsibilities, relationships to drivers/taxis), and operational configuration.
3. Cross-case comparison (pattern matching): Two cases are compared to assess whether observed patterns aligned with the theory-driven expectations. This stage showed how similar organisational strategies produced different outcomes across regimes and how the institutional environment conditioned adaptation trajectories.

In this study, organisational learning is identified empirically through repeated adjustments in framing, boundary definition, and operational configuration following institutional feedback, rather than through internal managerial accounts.

Validity, reliability, and ethical considerations

Several procedures were used to enhance the rigour of the analysis. First, legal, regulatory, corporate, and media sources are used to reduce reliance on any single narrative. Second, documents are analysed in temporal sequence, enabling process tracing and strengthening causal inference by linking organisational responses to specific institutional events. Third, the analytical framework and coding categories were derived from established literature, improving transparency and replicability.

As the study relies on publicly available documents, it does not involve human subjects or identifiable personal data. Nevertheless, sources are treated carefully, and official, verifiable records are prioritised when making claims about regulatory outcomes. A key limitation of document-based research is that it captures publicly articulated positions rather than internal deliberations. While this design is appropriate for analysing institutional interactions, regulatory outcomes, and observable organisational responses, it does not provide direct access to internal managerial deliberations, strategic debates, or sensemaking processes within Uber Technologies Inc. As such, the analysis focuses on how institutional pressures become visible through formal organisational actions rather than on the internal cognitive and strategic processes that shaped these responses. This limitation reflects both the confidentiality of firm-level decision-making and the comparative design of the study. Future research could complement document-based analysis with interviews, ethnographic approaches, or process-tracing methods to better capture how platform actors interpret institutional signals and formulate strategic responses under conditions of uncertainty.

To support the comparative process analysis, Table 2 summarises key regulatory and institutional events affecting Uber's operations in the United States and Turkey between 2013 and 2019, alongside the corresponding institutional conditions and organisational responses. The table provides a chronological overview that informs the comparative findings presented in the next section:

Table 2: Institutional Conditions and Platform Adaptation Over Time: Uber in the United States and Turkey (2013–2019)

Year	Country	Key Regulatory / Institutional Event	Institutional Condition	Uber's Organisational Response
2013–2014	United States	Uber enters multiple U.S. cities amid unclear regulatory classification	Institutional ambiguity	Rapid market expansion; framing as a "technology platform" rather than a transportation provider
2014–2016	United States	Local and state-level regulatory disputes; fragmented enforcement across jurisdictions	Institutional ambiguity	Continued operations; litigation used as a governance strategy; incremental adjustments to platform policies
2016–2018	United States	Court cases and policy debates regarding driver classification (employee vs independent contractor)	Institutional ambiguity	Selective compliance; contractual reframing of driver relationships; preservation of core platform model
2019	United States	The passage of California's Assembly Bill 5 (AB5) clarifying worker classification	Partial institutional closure	Strategic resistance and legal challenge; organisational experimentation continues rather than full model abandonment
2014	Turkey	Uber launches operations without explicit regulatory authorisation	Institutional ambiguity (initial)	Market entry; platform framed as a digital intermediary
2015–2017	Turkey	Increasing regulatory scrutiny, objections from taxi associations, and court cases initiated	Transition toward institutional closure	Continued operation amid growing uncertainty; limited scope for regulatory negotiation
2018	Turkey	Court ruling leading to the suspension of Uber's core ride-hailing services	Institutional closure	Exit from original operating model; cessation of core platform services
2019	Turkey	Uber re-enters the market as a digital interface for licensed taxi drivers	Institutional closure	Organisational reconfiguration; boundary contraction; alignment with existing regulatory framework

Source: Author

Findings

Adaptation through ambiguity: Uber in the United States (2013–2019)

Uber's U.S. trajectory between 2013 and 2019 illustrates how a platform organisation can sustain growth and operational continuity through institutional ambiguity, using legal contestation and interpretive framing as mechanisms of organisational adaptation (As summarised in Table 1). During this period, Uber expanded into multiple cities while regulatory classification remained contested across jurisdictions. Court cases, policy debates, and regulatory initiatives occurred simultaneously, without producing a single definitive national framework.

A key structural feature underpinning this ambiguity was the fragmented and locally governed taxi licensing regime in the United States. Licensing authority is typically held by municipal or state-level bodies, resulting in heterogeneous regulatory standards across jurisdictions. This institutional fragmentation created space for interpretive flexibility, allowing Uber to enter markets while regulators debated whether existing taxi licensing frameworks applied to digital intermediation platforms. In many cities, incumbent taxi regulation focused primarily on medallions, insurance, and local operating permits, allowing Uber to position itself outside the traditional taxi licensing framework by framing its role as technological intermediation rather than transportation provision (Pollman & Barry, 2017; Edelman & Geradin, 2016).

While Uber's founding narrative and early product positioning were explicitly transportation-oriented, the organisation consistently advanced an alternative organisational identity in regulatory arenas: it asserted that it was not a transportation company but a technology firm "operating a marketplace" that enables riders to request drivers through software. This framing appeared in press releases, legal filings, and contractual language over time. This positioning also sought to place Uber outside traditional taxi licensing regimes, which had historically regulated dispatch companies, fleet operators, and medallion-based transportation providers rather than digital intermediaries.

The empirical record shows that this framing was not merely symbolic; it became a central resource in legal proceedings that shaped Uber's U.S. operating environment. In the O'Connor proceedings, the organisation characterised the relationship with drivers as a licensing relationship, arguing that drivers were effectively "our customer" for the software: "...they are our customer, where we license to them our software, and we receive a fee for doing that" (O'Connor v. Uber Technologies Inc., 2015). This

statement demonstrates how Uber described its role as limited to software provision in formal legal settings.

At the same time, court records show that judges and plaintiffs questioned this classification. Legal challenges focused on the extent of the platform's control over pricing, access, and driver behaviour. The court questioned why a firm that claims to "only provide software" would control key elements of the exchange, such as pricing, qualification, termination, and surge pricing: "So if they're only providing software, why would they be concerned with who's buying it... Why would they have control over the pricing... Why are they setting the rates by which drivers are getting compensated? Why do they have a right to terminate drivers...?" (O'Connor v. Uber Technologies, Inc., 2015). These exchanges illustrate that institutional actors did not uniformly accept Uber's claims; instead, they examined operational practices.

Uber's adaptation under ambiguity, therefore, took the form of incremental boundary configuration, rather than model abandonment. The documentary trail indicates that Uber adjusted policies and language over time—shifting its contractual and rhetorical framing toward "driver-partners," emphasising "working with" rather than "working for," and revising terms to reinforce the idea that Uber "does not provide transportation" (Uber Terms & Conditions, 2017). These are best understood as learning-oriented responses to institutional feedback: Uber refined the organisational narrative through repeated exposure to regulatory contestation.

At the same time, Uber's platform governance mechanisms complicated its autonomy claims. The O'Connor record shows Uber asserting unilateral discretion over compensation: "Uber is at liberty to charge the referral rate it deems appropriate" (O'Connor v. Uber Technologies Inc., 2015). Plaintiffs also emphasised that offering flexibility in hours does not negate employment-like dependence: "There's nothing unusual about a company claiming that its workers aren't employees simply because they can work as much or as little as they choose" (O'Connor v. Uber Technologies, Inc, 2015). The point here is not to relitigate employment classification per se, but to demonstrate that Uber's adaptive pathway in the United States was shaped by prolonged ambiguity in legal categorisation. Under that ambiguity, the organisation could continue operating while simultaneously refining and framing policies in response to ongoing disputes, consistent with the institutional ambiguity mechanism outlined in the theoretical framework.

Importantly, even the settlement trajectory in 2019 reflects adaptation without definitive closure on classification. The settlement included monetary and non-monetary relief, as well as policy clarifications (e.g., tipping and deactivation). Still, it did not resolve the larger classification question in a way that would shut down Uber's model. This reinforces the broader pattern: under U.S.-style ambiguity, platforms can absorb institutional pressure through iterative modification and negotiated stabilisation rather than being forced into structural exit or concrete transformation.

More broadly, the persistence of fragmented taxi licensing systems prevented rapid institutional consolidation. Regulatory authority remained distributed across multiple levels of government, enabling Uber to negotiate, litigate, and adapt incrementally across jurisdictions rather than confronting a single decisive regulatory settlement.

This pattern suggests that regulatory ambiguity enables platform experimentation and negotiated governance (Kenney & Zysman, 2016; Pollman & Barry, 2017; Edelman & Geradin, 2016). Existing studies emphasise how platforms leverage legal uncertainty to contest classification and delay compliance while continuing operations. The present analysis extends this literature by illustrating how prolonged ambiguity facilitates organisational learning not only through legal strategies, but also through the gradual embedding of regulatory expectations into contractual arrangements and technological systems. This suggests that, in the U.S. case, regulatory ambiguity serves as a learning environment in which platform organisations iteratively reconfigure governance rather than merely resist regulation.

Adaptation through exit: Uber in Turkey (2013–2019)

As Table 1 further illustrates, Uber's experience in Turkey followed a sharply different trajectory, marked by rapid institutional closure after an initial phase of market success. When Uber entered the Turkish market in 2014, it experienced swift consumer adoption, particularly in Istanbul and other large metropolitan areas. Similar to its early expansion elsewhere, Uber benefited from unmet demand, ease of use, and price advantages relative to traditional taxi services. At this stage, Uber's platform technology and service logic functioned effectively within the Turkish urban mobility landscape. However, unlike in the U.S., Uber's growth in Turkey quickly triggered intensified resistance from

incumbent taxi associations, transforming market competition into a broader legitimacy crisis. This escalation reflected structural features of the Turkish taxi regime, which is characterised by limited and highly valuable licenses, strong incumbent coordination, and centralised regulatory authority. Taxi permits are scarce and often treated as quasi-property rights, increasing political and economic resistance to new entrants and intensifying pressures on regulators to protect existing market actors (Thelen, 2018; OECD, 2019).

These institutional conditions shaped the nature of contestation. Rather than focusing on labour classification or employment status, regulatory debate in Turkey centred on licensing, market order, and the protection of regulated transport services. The absence of fragmented authority reduced the scope for prolonged legal contestation and interpretive flexibility. As a result, Uber faced a more unified and decisive regulatory environment compared to the United States.

Institutional closure materialised through judicial intervention. In October 2019, the Istanbul 10th Commercial Court of First Instance ruled that Uber's activities constituted unfair competition (*haksız rekabet*) and ordered the cessation of its operations. The decision explicitly stated that the court ruled in favour of "Uber faaliyetlerinin durdurulmasına" because the platform disrupted the regulated transportation market. The decision also included restrictions on digital access, with reports noting that access to Uber's website and mobile application was blocked within Turkey (Istanbul 10th Commercial Court of First Instance, 2019). The reasoning behind the decision emphasised compliance with licensing requirements and the protection of the regulated market order, rather than technological classification or platform governance.

Following the ruling, Uber's core ride-hailing model ceased operating. Drivers and affiliated transportation firms withdrew from the platform, and some reports indicated financial distress among companies that had previously worked within the Uber ecosystem. Therefore, the platform's operational network is rapidly contracted. Uber's subsequent response took the form of organisational reconfiguration rather than incremental adjustment. Rather than contesting classification further, Uber later re-entered the Turkish market in a significantly altered form, positioning itself as a digital interface exclusively for licensed taxi drivers. This re-entry strategy entailed a contraction of organisational boundaries: Uber relinquished control over service provision and aligned its operations with the incumbent regulatory framework. In this sense, institutional closure operated not only through legal prohibition but through the enforcement of licensing compliance as a boundary condition for market participation.

A notable feature of the Turkish case is the selective nature of institutional scrutiny. Whereas labour classification and worker status became central axes of contestation in the United States, these issues were largely absent from regulatory debate in Turkey. This contrast suggests that licensing regimes shape not only market entry conditions but also the dimensions of platform governance that become institutionally salient (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012).

Taken together, the Turkish case demonstrates that when institutional ambiguity collapses, organisational learning is compressed into a short time horizon. Uber was compelled to abandon its original platform logic and reconfigure its market role to regain legitimacy. Growth, under such conditions, proved reversible, and platform "death" manifested not as technological failure but as institutional exclusion. The findings underscore that identical platform technologies can generate radically different organisational outcomes depending on how institutional environments define legitimacy, enforcement, and regulatory salience – supporting the study's comparative expectations regarding institutional closure and organisational adaptation. The centrality of taxi licensing shaped the scope of regulatory attention, directing institutional enforcement toward entry control and competitive order while leaving broader platform governance and labour concerns relatively underdeveloped.

While much of the platform literature focuses on negotiated adaptation, this finding resonates with emerging work on regulatory backlash and platform exclusion in institutionally restrictive contexts (Cusumano et al, 2019; Thelen, 2018). Unlike settings characterised by regulatory bargaining, the Turkish case demonstrates how centralised authority and decisive enforcement can terminate experimentation, compelling platforms to abandon core organisational functions.

Discussion

This study set out to explain why the same digital platform organisation – Uber – followed sharply divergent trajectories across national contexts. While much of the existing literature on digital platforms emphasises regulatory ambiguity, institutional experimentation, and negotiated governance as defining features of platform expansion, the findings demonstrate that such dynamics are neither universal nor

durable across institutional contexts. In contrast to dominant accounts that treat negotiated adaptation as the expected outcome of platform–regulator interaction, this study shows that platform trajectories are highly contingent on the persistence or collapse of regulatory ambiguity.

Table 3: Comparative Institutional Contexts and Platform Adaptation Outcomes

Dimension	United States	Turkey
Institutional structure	Fragmented	Centralised
Regulatory condition	Ambiguity	Closure
Primary arena	Courts	Courts + enforcement
Dominant regulatory concern	Labor classification	Licensing & market order
Organisational strategy	Framing & litigation	Exit & reconfiguration
Adaptation mode	Iterative learning	Compressed adaptation
Outcome	Continued operation	Platform exclusion

Note. The table summarises the contrasting institutional regimes and corresponding platform adaptation pathways identified through qualitative document analysis.

Source: Author

Existing research on platform governance typically emphasises how regulatory uncertainty enables platforms to contest classification and adapt incrementally while maintaining core intermediation functions. The comparative synthesis presented in Table 3 qualifies this view by demonstrating that such adaptation pathways are conditional rather than universal. When regulatory ambiguity persists, platforms may engage in iterative learning and boundary renegotiation. However, when ambiguity collapses and institutional closure occurs, these adaptive mechanisms are foreclosed, producing sharply different organisational outcomes.

By foregrounding institutional closure as a distinct and consequential phase in platform–regulator interaction, this study contributes to the literature by moving beyond dominant frameworks that focus primarily on ambiguity and negotiated governance. Whereas prior research often assumes that contestation produces gradual institutionalisation, the findings show that abrupt closure can fundamentally redirect platform trajectories. This shifts analytical attention from continuous adaptation toward discontinuous organisational transformation and exit as central outcomes of platform governance.

The Turkish case is analytically decisive because it represents a context in which institutional ambiguity did not persist. Rather than prolonged contestation between regulators, courts, and platform actors, Uber encountered rapid and decisive institutional closure. Judicial intervention eliminated interpretive flexibility by categorising Uber's activities as unlawful under the existing transportation regime and by restricting access to the platform. This outcome foreclosed further experimentation and rendered Uber's original business model untenable. In doing so, the Turkish case challenges the implicit assumption in much of the platform governance literature that regulatory outcomes emerge primarily through extended negotiation and gradual institutionalisation. Instead, it demonstrates that ambiguity is a context-dependent phase that may collapse abruptly, compelling platforms to exit or fundamentally redefine their organisational boundaries.

The contrast with the United States highlights how organisational adaptation is conditioned by regulatory intervention. Consistent with prior studies that emphasise negotiated governance under regulatory uncertainty, the United States case illustrates how fragmented authority and prolonged contestation enable platforms to adapt without abandoning their core organisational logic. In the U.S., adaptation unfolded as an iterative learning process in which the organisation refined its boundaries without abandoning its core platform logic. In Turkey, by contrast, organisational learning was compressed rather than incremental. Once institutional closure occurred, Uber's response was not further experimentation but boundary contraction: withdrawal from the market followed by re-entry only through a substantially altered organisational form aligned with incumbent regulatory arrangements.

This comparative evidence contributes to institutional and organisational theory by demonstrating that adaptation is shaped not only by institutional differences across countries but also by the sequencing and speed of regulatory intervention. Existing work has emphasised institutional diversity; however,

the findings suggest that temporal dynamics—particularly the duration of ambiguity—constitute a critical but underexamined mechanism shaping organisational outcomes.

A further contribution of the Turkish case lies in revealing the selective nature of institutional intervention. Unlike the United States—where labour classification and worker autonomy became central axes of contestation—these issues remained largely absent from regulatory debate in Turkey. Institutional scrutiny focused instead on licensing, market order, and the protection of incumbents. This divergence underscores that institutional closure does not imply comprehensive regulation across all dimensions of platform activity. Rather, closure reflects context-specific regulatory priorities that determine which organisational features become salient and actionable. Platform governance, therefore, cannot be understood through a single regulatory lens; it is structured by national institutional configurations that privilege certain concerns while rendering others peripheral. Moreover, it also shows that platform regulation is not only uneven in intensity but also selective in scope. Different institutional environments prioritise distinct dimensions of platform activity, thereby producing heterogeneous governance outcomes even when the underlying technology remains constant.

Existing platform research often associates scalability with network effects and technological standardisation; the findings here qualify this view by demonstrating that scalability ultimately depends on institutional acceptance and enforcement regimes. Despite deploying the same technological infrastructure, algorithmic systems, and service logic, Uber encountered radically different institutional responses that reshaped its organisational trajectory. The Turkish case reveals the limits of technological determinism in platform strategy narratives. Scalability is not merely a function of network effects or standardised technology; it is contingent on institutional acceptance. Platforms may scale rapidly in the face of ambiguity, but their survival ultimately depends on whether institutional environments permit continued operation. This insight contributes to the broader digital strategy literature by integrating institutional embeddedness into explanations of platform scalability. Rather than treating scalability as an inherent technological property, the findings demonstrate that it is a politically and institutionally mediated process.

The divergent outcomes observed across the two cases are further illuminated by the structural characteristics of their respective taxi regimes. In the United States, taxi regulation is organised at the municipal level through fragmented licensing systems. It often involves medallion-based entry controls, but lacks centralised coordination across jurisdictions. This fragmentation created regulatory pluralism and inconsistent enforcement, allowing Uber to exploit this variation and sustain operations through litigation and reframing. By contrast, Turkey's taxi regime is characterised by highly restricted license allocation, significant capitalised plate values, strong incumbent coordination, and centralised enforcement capacity. Taxi licenses function not merely as operational permits but as politically and economically protected assets. These structural features reduced institutional flexibility and increased incumbent mobilisation, contributing to rapid judicial intervention and institutional closure. Incorporating these sectoral institutional dynamics clarifies why regulatory ambiguity persisted in one context but collapsed in the other, thereby strengthening the comparative institutional explanation advanced in this study.

Taken together, these findings advance a more nuanced understanding of platform adaptation. As illustrated in Table 2, digital platforms do not simply diffuse across markets; they are reconstituted by institutional environments that define legitimacy, enforcement, and closure. Platform decline or exit should therefore be understood not as market failure or technological inadequacy, but as a possible outcome of institutional exclusion. By positioning Turkey as a critical case, this study demonstrates that organisational outcomes in the platform economy are shaped as much by institutional closure as by innovation and growth.

Conclusion

This study examined how digital platform organisations adapt across contrasting national institutional regimes by comparing Uber's trajectories in the United States and Turkey. By adopting a comparative institutional perspective and treating Turkey as a critical case, the findings demonstrate that platform adaptation is neither uniform nor technologically determined. Instead, organisational outcomes are shaped by whether regulatory ambiguity persists or collapses into institutional closure, which conditions the scope, direction, and tempo of adaptation.

The study advances platform and institutional theory in three ways. First, it conceptualises institutional closure as a distinct mechanism shaping platform adaptation, emphasising the role of regulatory finality and enforcement speed rather than regulatory pressure alone. Second, it shows that identical platform technologies can yield sharply divergent organisational trajectories across national contexts,

challenging technologically deterministic accounts of platform scalability. Third, it reframes platform exit and retrenchment as outcomes of institutional exclusion rather than market failure, extending existing accounts of platform governance beyond negotiated adaptation.

The findings also open several avenues for future research. First, the comparative analysis highlights the importance of sector-specific institutional arrangements—such as taxi licensing regimes—in shaping platform adaptation. Future work could extend this approach by systematically comparing sectoral governance structures across countries to better understand how institutional architecture conditions platform entry, legitimacy, and survival. Second, further research could examine how institutional closure unfolds over time, exploring whether closure represents a terminal outcome or a temporary phase that may later give way to renegotiation and re-entry under revised organisational forms. Third, integrating micro-level perspectives, including managerial decision-making and organisational sensemaking, would provide deeper insight into how platform actors interpret institutional signals and recalibrate strategic responses under uncertainty. More broadly, this study suggests that platform governance should be analysed as a dynamic and context-dependent process shaped by the interaction between technological innovation and institutional structures. By shifting attention from continuous adaptation to discontinuous transformation, the analysis contributes to a more conditional and historically grounded understanding of digital platform evolution.

Ultimately, platform trajectories are not determined by technology alone but are structured by institutional environments that enable, constrain, or foreclose organisational possibilities. Recognising the decisive role of institutional closure shifts the analysis of platform governance away from assumptions of inevitable expansion toward a more contingent and politically embedded understanding of digital market evolution.

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