Comparative Analysis of Independent Food Delivery Platforms: Empowering Food Movement Values

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Abstract

Food insecurity remains a persistent issue in the United States, affecting approximately 10-15% of households, with marginalized communities disproportionately impacted. Food security focuses on ensuring consistent access to adequate and nutritious food. In contrast, the food movement, which encompasses principles of food justice and food sovereignty, addresses these disparities by advocating for equitable access to healthy food and empowering communities to shape their food systems. Our study investigates how independent food delivery platforms (indie) align with food movement values by selecting and analyzing a random sample of 50 US-based platforms out of a total pool of 489. Our findings reveal that while many platforms demonstrate strong alignment with food security principles, particularly in terms of accessibility and nutritional quality, significant gaps remain in anti-racist practices, community control, and sustainability efforts. We offer design recommendations and policy insights to help indie platforms promote equity, inclusivity, and sustainability, ultimately advancing more equitable food systems and addressing systemic challenges in food insecurity.

CCS Concepts

• Human-centered computing \rightarrow Human computer interaction (HCI);

Keywords

 $food\ sovereignty, food\ justice, food\ security, food\ delivery\ platforms$

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1 Introduction

Food insecurity has long been a persistent issue in the United States, with approximately 10–15% of households experiencing it as of 2021 [14]. Over the past two decades, this figure has remained relatively stable, yet the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the problem significantly. During the early stages of the pandemic, food insecurity rose by 32.3% [8], with marginalized communities bearing the brunt of this increase. For example, African American adults in Mississippi experienced food insecurity rates of 53.7%, compared to 36.4% for Caucasian adults [14]. These disparities underscore the intersection of race, socioeconomic status, and access to food, highlighting systemic inequities that have deepened in times of crisis.

Food delivery platforms play an increasingly crucial role in food access, particularly in urban and underserved areas. However, mainstream platforms such as DoorDash, UberEats, and Grubhub have been criticized for exacerbating food injustices rather than alleviating them. Their reliance on global supply chains has created food deserts in urban areas, where access to fresh produce is severely limited due to centralized distribution models [6]. In addition, these corporate platforms tend to prioritize profit over community needs, often marginalizing small-scale food producers and undermining traditional agricultural practices essential for local food sovereignty. Such models reinforce inequities by excluding lowincome consumers and marginalized restaurant owners while limiting consumer choices to businesses that can afford to participate. This disconnect between food availability and access threatens the core principles of food security, defined as having physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food [11].

In contrast, independent food delivery (indie) platforms offer a potential alternative that aligns more closely with food movement principles. The food movement, which encompasses food justice and food sovereignty, offers a framework for addressing food insecurity and promoting equitable food systems. Food justice advocates for dismantling systemic barriers that prevent marginalized communities from accessing healthy and culturally appropriate food [3]. It emphasizes anti-racism and equity, aiming to create a food

system that is not only accessible but also inclusive and just. Meanwhile, food sovereignty extends this vision by advocating for the rights of communities to define their food systems, prioritize local agricultural practices, and resist the pressures of globalized food markets [13]. Together, these frameworks critique the corporate dominance of food systems and argue that true food security cannot be achieved without addressing the underlying power imbalances.

Indie platforms—often operated by local businesses or community-led initiatives—have the potential to better align with these food movement values. Unlike mainstream platforms, which focus on profit maximization, indie platforms are often designed to serve local communities by prioritizing neighborhood restaurants, fostering economic resilience, and addressing specific geographic needs [10]. By operating at a smaller scale, these platforms can tailor their models to support local food ecosystems, integrate sustainable practices, and engage directly with communities in ways that corporate platforms often overlook.

Despite their potential to reshape the food delivery landscape, indie platforms face significant challenges in scaling operations and tailoring services to local communities. Research suggests that a lack of customizability in off-the-shelf software and the siloing of technology have hindered the growth and effectiveness of these platforms [10]. Additionally, mainstream services have created barriers for marginalized groups, such as price gouging, exploitation of couriers, and the exclusion of local restaurants from their networks. These challenges highlight the need for a critical examination of how indie platforms can better align with food movement values and contribute to equitable food systems.

Our paper aims to address these gaps by examining the alignment of indie platforms with the principles of food justice, food sovereignty, and food security [7]. Through an analysis of 50 platform websites, we explore their missions, operational approaches, and stated goals to assess how well they support or deviate from advancing equity, sustainability, and community empowerment. A critical component of food movement goals is ensuring reliable access to food, and food delivery systems play an essential role in achieving this. While mainstream services often prioritize profit maximization, indie platforms hold the potential to contribute more effectively to a more equitable food landscape. However, little is known about how these platforms align with food movement values. To address this gap, we will address the following questions:

- RQ1: How do existing indie platforms align with food system principles?
- RQ2: What opportunities exist for indie platforms to better support the food movement?

Our study makes three key contributions. First, we provide an empirical analysis of indie food delivery platforms' alignment with food movement principles, building on prior work that maps these platforms and explore their operations [10]. Second, we offer conceptual insights into the specific areas where these platforms align with or deviate from food justice and food sovereignty values, providing a nuanced understanding of their role in promoting equitable food systems [7]. Third, we outline practical recommendations for how indie platforms can improve their support of food movement goals.

2 Methodology

To select platforms for our review, we drew from a previous research study that mapped the landscape of indie platforms in the United States. Liu et al. derived their initial data set of 495 platforms by aggregating information from multiple sources, including news articles, automated web searches, mobile app marketplaces, trade organizations, and direct collaborations with platform operators [10]. Six platforms without functional websites were excluded from the final pool. Then, we conducted a random sampling of this dataset, selecting 50 U.S.-based indie platforms. This represented approximately 10% of a dataset of 489 platforms. Manual web scraping was then conducted for the selected 50 platforms to extract relevant information.

Following the web scraping, we conducted a competitive review to evaluate the platforms' operations, missions, and alignment with the principles of food security, food justice, and food sovereignty. We reviewed and compared these platforms across nine principles, derived from our knowledge and past scholarship of food movement goals [7].

The evaluation framework for food systems has three primary dimensions: **food security**, **food justice**, and **food sovereignty**. Each dimension encompasses a set of principles that assess specific aspects of food systems.

(1) Food Security Principles:

Food security principles ensure that food systems provide sufficient, accessible, and affordable food for all individuals [11]. These principles include:

- Accessibility: This principle examines whether platforms are making food available to low-income households and other vulnerable populations. It evaluates how these systems reduce barriers to accessing essential food items.
- Affordability: This principle assesses the pricing strategies employed by platforms to ensure that food remains economically inclusive. It focuses on whether these strategies enable individuals from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds to afford necessary food items.
- Nutritional Quality: This principle evaluates the prioritization of healthy and nutritious food options. It examines whether food systems emphasize the availability of items that promote public health and well-being.

(2) Food Justice Principles:

Food justice principles assess the degree to which food systems address systemic inequities and prioritize fairness for marginalized communities [3]. These principles include:

- Equity in Access: This principle measures how food systems provide equitable service to marginalized and underserved communities. It considers whether these groups receive adequate attention and resources.
- Community Engagement: This principle evaluates the mechanisms through which food systems enable community input and participation. It examines whether individuals have opportunities to influence decisions and shape the development of food-related initiatives.
- Anti-Racist Practices: This principle assesses the integration of anti-racist principles into the operations, outreach,

and culture of food systems. It examines whether platforms actively work to dismantle racial inequities within their processes.

(3) Food Sovereignty Principles:

Food sovereignty principles focus on empowering communities to regain control over their food systems and ensuring sustainability in food production and distribution [13]. These principles include:

- Local Sourcing: This principle examines the prioritization of local producers and suppliers within food systems. It evaluates whether platforms support regional economies and foster self-reliance by sourcing food locally.
- Community Control: This principle assesses the opportunities provided to community members to participate
 in governance and decision-making processes. It examines whether food systems encourage local stakeholders
 to influence policies and practices.
- Sustainability Practices: This principle evaluates the promotion of sustainable agricultural methods and environmental stewardship. It focuses on whether food systems prioritize practices that enhance long-term ecological and social resilience.

3 Findings

3.1 Current Alignment of Indie Platforms with Food System Principles (RQ1)

Table 1 includes a subset of 10 platforms selected from the 50 randomly sampled for detailed analysis. We selected this subset for illustrative purposes based on their representativeness and diversity in alignment with food system principles. Many platforms exhibited similar alignment patterns across food security, food justice, and food sovereignty, so we prioritized those with distinct approaches to avoid redundancy while ensuring a meaningful discussion of variations in alignment. Additionally, we considered diversity in business models and operational strategies to highlight the different ways indie delivery services integrate food system principles. By selecting these 10 platforms, we aimed to capture broader trends while maintaining a generalizable and rigorous analysis.

Our findings revealed that only two out of these 10 platforms (and eight out of 50 overall) fully align with one of the food system principles, specifically food security. Furthermore, food security exhibited the strongest overall alignment among the platforms. All 10 platforms support aspects of accessibility and nutritional quality by promoting local businesses, which enhance food accessibility within local areas, and offering diverse local cuisines, which we considered nutritionally superior to snacks or instant food.

In this study, affordability was measured by the absence of delivery fees, as platforms that offer free delivery reduce cost barriers for consumers. While incorporating food prices alongside delivery fees could provide a more comprehensive affordability assessment, this would introduce significant complexity. Given the variability in restaurant pricing, regional food cost differences, and the diverse range of menu items offered across platforms, establishing a standardized affordability metric would be challenging. By focusing on delivery fees, we aimed to maintain a clear and comparable affordability criterion across all platforms. However, we acknowledge

this as a limitation and suggest future research could explore affordability more comprehensively by considering both food prices and delivery costs.

Additionally, food justice was only partially aligned with eight out of 10 platforms in Table 1 (and 25 out of 50 platforms overall). Partial alignment typically involved fulfilling one or two principles of food justice, but not all three. Most platforms aligned with community engagement (eight out of 10), as highlighted by explicit mentions on their websites of partnerships with local restaurant owners and the hiring of drivers to assist with operations. Notably, Kosher24 was the only platform in both the sample and overall study to align with equity in access, as it explicitly catered to the needs of marginalized populations by offering kosher food options. However, only one platform exhibited alignment with anti-racist practices, as evidenced by the inclusion of diverse cuisines, ensuring cultural representation beyond a single race or ethnicity.

Regarding food sovereignty, eight out of 10 platforms in Table 1 (and 25 out of 50 platforms overall) demonstrated partial alignment by fulfilling only one of the three principles. Most notably, these platforms supported community control by incorporating feedback forms on their websites and offering accessible customer service. However, none of the platforms aligned with the principle of local sourcing, as they primarily sourced food from restaurants without ensuring that those restaurants partnered with local producers. This reflects a missed opportunity to support local farmers and food producers. Similarly, none of the platforms aligned with sustainability practices, which would require not only sourcing food sustainably but also adopting environmentally conscious operations, such as reducing carbon footprints and ensuring the recyclability of delivery materials such as plastic bags and food containers.

In particular, platforms that demonstrated alignment with food sovereignty also aligned with food justice, suggesting that achieving food justice could facilitate progress toward food sovereignty. However, these gaps in alignment underscore significant limitations in the ability of indie platforms to fully integrate food sovereignty goals into their operations. This reflects missed opportunities to promote more equitable and sustainable food systems and highlights the need for additional steps to address these shortcomings comprehensively.

3.2 Current Challenges and Opportunities for Indie Platforms to Better Support the Food Movement (RO2)

3.2.1 Food Security. One of the key strengths of current indie platforms is their accessibility. These platforms enhance access to food in local areas, particularly in rural regions that mainstream food delivery services often overlook. The presence of these indie platforms facilitates access to food, whether through local restaurants or grocery stores, making it more convenient for consumers to obtain the food they need. All of the indie platforms analyzed demonstrated a commitment to improving accessibility for marginalized communities, effectively addressing gaps in food access that exist within these populations.

Next is affordability. Currently, many indie platforms employ pricing strategies that do not consider the financial constraints faced by low-income households, leading to high delivery fees and

X

JackRabbit Deliveries

Indie Food Delivery Platforms	Food Security			Food Justice			Food Sovereignty		
	Accessibility	Affordability	Nutritional Quality	Equity in Access	Community Engage- ment	Anti- Racist Practices	Local Sourcing	Community Control	Sustainabilit Practices
Kosher24	1	×	✓	/	✓	×	×	√	×
Take Out Today	✓	×	✓	×	✓	×	×	✓	×
Hot Shots Magnolia	✓	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×
KNG Delivery	✓	✓	✓	×	✓	×	×	✓	×
Iowa Eatz	✓	×	✓	×	✓	×	×	✓	×
Sidecar Delivery	✓	×	✓	×	✓	×	×	✓	×
Delivery.com	✓	×	✓	×	✓	✓	×	✓	×
Food Express	1	✓	1	×	✓	×	×	✓	×
FOOD Richmond Hill	1	×	1	×	×	×	×	×	×

Table 1: Evaluation of Indie Platforms Based on Food Security, Food Justice, and Food Sovereignty Principles

food prices that are often prohibitive. This lack of affordability can exacerbate food insecurity, as families may be forced to choose between purchasing food and meeting other essential needs. To improve affordability, food delivery platforms should implement tiered pricing models that offer discounts or subsidies for low-income customers and explore partnerships with local governments or nonprofits to provide financial assistance [2]. Moreover, transparent pricing strategies that clearly communicate costs can help build trust and encourage usage among economically vulnerable populations [12]. By prioritizing affordability, food delivery platforms can play a significant role in enhancing food security for low-income households.

Nutritional quality is another critical aspect of food security that indie platforms have begun to address by providing access to healthier, cooked food options. These platforms demonstrate the potential to prioritize nutrition in a way that larger competitors often overlook. However, more can be done to ensure that consumers consistently have access to nutritious meals. For instance, indie platforms can expand partnerships with local farms and health-focused restaurants to offer fresh, high-quality ingredients and meals [5]. Additionally, introducing nutritional guidelines for listed food options could help promote healthier choices for users. By building on their existing efforts, indie platforms can play a pivotal role in improving dietary habits and advancing food security for vulnerable populations.

3.2.2 Food Justice. Achieving equity in access within food delivery platforms requires a customer-centered approach that directly addresses the diverse needs of marginalized populations. For example, Kosher24 stood out as the only platform in the study to align with equity in access, explicitly catering to underserved communities by offering kosher food options. This tailored approach highlights the importance of recognizing and addressing specific cultural and dietary restrictions faced by different groups. To bridge current gaps, indie platforms must prioritize inclusive hiring practices that reflect the demographics of the communities they serve and develop

targeted outreach campaigns to raise awareness about available resources [1]. By providing inclusive services, such as culturally relevant food choices and accessible payment methods, platforms can ensure that marginalized customers are not excluded from accessing nutritious meals.

Additionally, effective community engagement is essential for ensuring that food delivery platforms are responsive to the needs of marginalized populations. Currently, many initiatives lack meaningful participation from community members, such as the absence of feedback forms, resulting in a disconnect between the services offered and the actual needs of these populations. Furthermore, there are often insufficient mechanisms for community input, such as advisory boards, which limits residents' ability to influence service delivery. To enhance community engagement, food delivery platforms should establish community advisory boards to facilitate ongoing dialogue and implement participatory design processes that involve residents to empower individuals to advocate for their food rights.

Another significant gap is the lack of comprehensive anti-racist training and policies within these organizations. Current indie platforms do not have formal anti-racism frameworks or training programs that address systemic racism and its impact on food access. This absence can result in a workforce that lacks the necessary awareness and skills to engage with marginalized communities effectively. Additionally, there is often insufficient collaboration with community partners, which limits the ability of food delivery platforms to understand and respond to the unique needs of diverse populations. To address these shortcomings, indie platforms must establish clear anti-racism policies and provide mandatory training for all staff that focuses on understanding systemic inequities and fostering cultural competency. Furthermore, building partnerships with local community organizations can enhance the effectiveness of these initiatives by ensuring that services are informed by the lived experiences of those they aim to serve [4].

3.2.3 Food Sovereignty. In the realm of food sovereignty, local sourcing is a critical principle that emphasizes the prioritization of local producers and suppliers. Currently, many indie platforms struggle to effectively integrate local sourcing into their operations. While some platforms may feature local products, there is often a lack of consistent partnerships with local farmers and producers, which limits the availability of fresh, locally sourced food options. Additionally, the logistics of sourcing locally can be challenging, leading to reliance on larger suppliers that may not prioritize local agriculture. To improve local sourcing, food delivery platforms need to establish strong, ongoing relationships with local producers, ensuring that their offerings reflect the diversity and richness of the local food landscape. Implementing transparent sourcing practices and promoting local products through marketing can also enhance consumer awareness and support for local agriculture [9]. By prioritizing local sourcing, these platforms can contribute to the resilience of local food systems and empower communities.

Community control is another key aspect of food sovereignty that allows community members to influence food system governance and decision making. Currently, indie food delivery platforms lack mechanisms for meaningful community involvement in governance, which can lead to decisions that do not reflect the needs and desires of the communities they serve. This absence of community control can result in a disconnect between the services offered and the actual needs of local populations. To enhance community control, indie platforms should establish advisory boards that include community members, allowing them to provide input on service offerings, pricing, and other critical decisions. Additionally, implementing participatory processes that engage community members in the development of policies and practices can foster a sense of ownership and accountability.

Lastly, sustainability practices are vital for promoting environmental stewardship and ensuring the long-term viability of food systems. However, many indie platforms currently fall short in this area, often prioritizing convenience over sustainable practices. For instance, the use of single-use plastics and non-recyclable packaging is prevalent, contributing to environmental degradation and waste. To improve sustainability practices, food delivery platforms must adopt eco-friendly packaging solutions and implement strategies to reduce food waste, such as partnering with local organizations to donate surplus food [9]. Additionally, promoting sustainable agriculture by sourcing from farmers who employ environmentally friendly practices can enhance the overall sustainability of the food system. By prioritizing sustainability, indie platforms can not only contribute to environmental health but also align their operations with the principles of food sovereignty, fostering a more resilient and equitable food system for all.

4 Next Steps and Conclusion

This late-breaking work analyzed 50 independent food delivery platforms to explore their alignment with food movement principles. While the findings reveal partial alignment, particularly with community engagement and community control, significant gaps remain in areas such as equity in access, anti-racist practices, local sourcing, and sustainability practices. To strengthen their support for food movement goals, indie platforms should consider

implementing equitable pricing strategies, such as affordable delivery fees; increasing focus on local sourcing by partnering with restaurants that source from local producers; engaging deeply with communities through mechanisms for feedback; embedding antiracist practices by promoting diverse cuisines and hiring workers from varied backgrounds; and adopting sustainable food production and distribution practices. By addressing these opportunities, indie platforms can become powerful allies in advancing the food movement and contribute to the broader transformation of food systems.

To enhance alignment with food movement principles, interventions at multiple levels are essential. First, indie platforms should prioritize local sourcing by building partnerships with local producers and suppliers, ensuring their offerings reflect the diversity of local agriculture. This can be achieved through transparent sourcing practices and by promoting local products in their marketing efforts. Second, fostering community control is essential; platforms should establish mechanisms such as advisory boards to enable community input, allowing residents to shape service offerings and governance decisions. Engaging community members in participatory processes fosters a sense of ownership and accountability, ensuring platforms address local needs effectively. Third, sustainability practices must be prioritized by adopting eco-friendly packaging and implementing strategies to reduce food waste, such as donating surplus food to local organizations.

Beyond platform-level interventions, policymakers can play a critical role in addressing systemic challenges faced by indie platforms. By implementing supportive policies, such as funding for technological upgrades, providing incentives for sustainable practices, and facilitating partnerships with local stakeholders, governments can help these platforms align more effectively with food movement principles. Additionally, forming strategic alliances between progressive and radical food movement advocates and indie platforms can amplify social pressure, driving systemic change and strengthening their collective impact on food systems [10].

In conclusion, while indie platforms hold significant potential to advance food movement values, critical gaps persist in their alignment with the principles of food security, food justice, and food sovereignty. Addressing these gaps requires a multi-pronged approach: platforms must prioritize local sourcing, community control, and sustainability practices, while policymakers and food movement advocates must work collaboratively to provide structural support and drive systemic change. These combined efforts will enable indie platforms to better serve their communities and contribute to a more just and sustainable food landscape. A collective commitment to these principles is essential for fostering a food system that is inclusive, sustainable, and just for everyone.

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