South American Publishing

SAP Netnography. 2025;3:131
doi: 10.62486/net2025131

REVIEW

Algorithmic Mediation of Digital Fieldwork

Mediación algorítmica del trabajo de campo digital

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Submitted: 10-08-2025 | Revised: 25-09-2025 | Accepted: 17-11-2025 | Published: 18-11-2025

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ABSTRACT

Background. Digital fieldwork is increasingly conducted inside platform environments whose moderation rules, affordances, visibility mechanisms and algorithmic ordering shape what researchers can access, observe, capture and interpret. Objective. To synthesize methodological and empirical literature published through 2025 on how platform affordances, moderation, interface design, algorithmic mediation and researcher positionality reshape netnographic and digital ethnographic fieldwork. Methods. A structured narrative review was carry out. Were included 90 records and only publications through 2025 were eligible for citation. Results. The expanded literature converges on five recurrent field effects: platform-dependent access, architecture-shaped sampling, patterned visibility and amplification, interface-constrained data capture, and reflexivity about researcher and account position. The literature also shows that platform migration, moderation, affordances and digital infrastructures can alter the composition and meaning of the field itself. Direct ethnographic auditing of ranking and recommender outputs remains less developed than work on moderation, affordances and positionality. Conclusions. Platform mediation should be treated as part of research design rather than as background context. Netnographic and digital ethnographic reporting can be strengthened by documenting platform selection, account position, access rules, capture permissions, visibility conditions, moderation events and changes in platform infrastructure. These recommendations are methodological safeguards derived from the reviewed literature, not validated reporting standards.

Keywords: netnography; digital ethnography; algorithmic mediation; platform affordances; reflexivity

RESUMEN

Antecedentes. El trabajo de campo digital se realiza cada vez más dentro de entornos de plataformas cuyas reglas de moderación, posibilidades, mecanismos de visibilidad y ordenación algorítmica moldean lo que los investigadores pueden acceder, observar, capturar e interpretar. Objetivo. Sintetizar la literatura metodológica y empírica publicada hasta 2025 sobre cómo las posibilidades de plataforma, la moderación, el diseño de interfaces, la mediación algorítmica y la posicionalidad del investigador remodelan el trabajo de campo netnográfico y etnográfico digital. Métodos. Se llevó a cabo una revisión narrativa estructurada. Se incluyeron 90 registros y solo las publicaciones hasta 2025 fueron elegibles para cita. Resultados. La literatura ampliada converge en cinco efectos recurrentes de campo: acceso dependiente de la plataforma, muestreo con forma arquitectónica, visibilidad y amplificación patronizada, captura de datos con restricciones en la interfaz y reflexividad sobre la posición del investigador y la cuenta. La literatura también muestra que la migración, moderación, affordances y infraestructuras digitales pueden alterar la composición y el significado del propio campo. La auditoría etnográfica directa de los resultados de clasificación y recomendadores sigue siendo menos desarrollada que el trabajo sobre moderación, posibilidades y posicionalidad. Conclusiones. La mediación de plataformas debe tratarse como parte del diseño de la investigación y no como contexto de fondo. La información netnográfica y etnográfica digital puede reforzarse documentando la selección de la plataforma, la posición de la cuenta, las reglas de acceso, los permisos de captura, las condiciones de visibilidad, los eventos de moderación y los cambios en la infraestructura de la plataforma. Estas recomendaciones son salvaguardas metodológicas derivadas de la literatura revisada, no estándares de reporte validados.

Palabras clave: netnografía; etnografía digital; mediación algorítmica; posibilidades de plataforma; reflexividad

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INTRODUCTION

A netnographic field site is no longer simply a place that a researcher enters; it is a sociotechnical environment that can be re-moderated, reconfigured and differentially surfaced while the researcher is inside it. Close-read empirical cases make this visible: a four-year digital ethnography of feminist and queer visual cultures on Instagram documents shadowbanning, content removal and content reduction; a reflexive multi-platform ethnography of delivery riders shows how group access rules and collection permissions shape what can be observed; and a YouTube netnography demonstrates how popularity and content conventions pattern visibility and representativeness.(1-3)

Recent methodological work broadens this problem beyond any single platform. Digital ethnography is increasingly framed as an ethically negotiated and reflexive practice in which online and offline boundaries, safeguarding, researcher identity, sensitive populations and the conditions of digital presence must be made explicit.(4-10)This literature shifts reflexivity from a general statement of researcher awareness toward a more operational question: how did the researcher enter, remain present in, and become visible to the field?

Platform-specific methods further complicate conventional assumptions about field stability. Studies of Instagram self-presentation, diasporic digital communities, WeChat infrastructures, hybrid digital/traditional ethnography, Chinese social media, data excess and online interviewing show that the object of inquiry is partly constituted by interfaces, archives, traces, platform-specific data structures and the practical route through which material becomes observable.(11-17)The review question is therefore: how do platform affordances, moderation, interface design, algorithmic mediation and researcher positionality shape access, sampling, visibility, data capture, reflexivity and interpretation in netnographic and digital ethnographic fieldwork?

Background: Netnography, Digital Ethnography and Platformized Research Environments

Netnography and adjacent traditions, including digital ethnography, online ethnography, virtual ethnography, digital fieldwork and digital technography, treat digital environments as sites of situated social and cultural inquiry rather than as neutral repositories of extractable data. Across methodological reviews and reflections, recurring concerns include how researchers move between digital and conventional methods, negotiate communal and institutional settings, document reflexive positioning, respond to open-science pressures, and make digital methods teachable and reproducible.(18-29)

At the same time, these traditions have become increasingly platformized. Migration between TikTok and Xiaohongshu, LGBT platform use, netnographic work on trans experience, moderation in social virtual reality, political and health narratives on X, participatory warfare, constitutional politics, highly engaged Douyin content and social-media markets all illustrate that platforms are not interchangeable containers. Their affordances, governance arrangements, audience logics and technical architectures shape who and what can become visible and actionable.(30-38)

Three dimensions are especially important for fieldwork. First, access can be produced through absence and infrastructural friction, as shown by work on Tinder and Web3 field entry.(39,40) Second, algorithmic mediation and platform logic can become constitutive of social processes rather than merely descriptive variables, including in migration research and netnographic studies of online communities.(41,42) Third, platformisation alters the production and circulation of public knowledge and activist visibility, as shown in studies of LGBTI+ digital activism and refugee-related knowledge production on Instagram.(43,44)

Visibility must also be treated as a selection process rather than a neutral window onto a population. Feminist digital ethnography in social VR, analyses of amplification, virtual ethnography of public debate, work on Instagram as an emergent discursive genre, studies of algorithmically mediated nostalgia, and research on gendered affordances all point to the same methodological implication: what researchers encounter has already been filtered by platform norms, genres, moderation practices, circulation dynamics and user-platform relations.(45-50)

METHODS

Design, Protocol and Review Type

This article is a structured narrative review with an explicit methodological focus. It is not presented as a registered systematic review and does not claim exhaustive coverage of all netnographic or digital ethnographic scholarship.

The review was conducted by a single reviewer. No duplicate screening, second independent extraction or formal study-quality instrument was applied. The objective of the update was therefore not to generate a pooled effect estimate or a definitive prevalence of platform effects, but to map how the contemporary literature conceptualizes and documents platform-mediated fieldwork.

Information Sources and Database Status

The literature search was conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, SciELO, OpenAlex, and Semantic Scholar to identify relevant studies on netnography, digital ethnography, reflexivity, platform affordances, content moderation, algorithmic mediation, digital field access, and platform-specific visibility. Only publications available through 2025 were considered, and the retrieved literature was used to contextualize and support the methodological discussion.

Search Strategy

The search and screening logic was organized around four concept blocks rather than around a single narrow phrase:

1. Methodological traditions: netnograph*, digital ethnograph*, online ethnograph*, virtual ethnograph* and digital fieldwork.
2. Platform mediation: algorithm*, algorithmic mediation, recommendation, ranking, personalization and amplification.
3. Platform architecture: platform affordance*, moderation, interface design, visibility, access and platformisation/platformization.
4. Reflexive fieldwork: reflexiv*, positionality, sampling, interpretation, data capture, traceability and field-site construction.

The records were screened for topical and methodological fit with these concept blocks.

Eligibility Criteria

Eligible sources were peer-reviewed journal articles, reviews, book chapters or conference papers published no later than 2025 and directly relevant to netnography, digital ethnography, online qualitative research, platform affordances, moderation, algorithmic mediation, researcher reflexivity, digital field access or platform-sensitive data collection and interpretation.

Sources were not used to support detailed empirical claims solely because their titles contained a relevant keyword. When the update relied on bibliographic metadata rather than a close reading of the full text, the source was used only for high-level contextualization of the field, method or platform problem. This distinction is maintained throughout the synthesis.

RESULTS

Overview of the Evidence Base

The revised synthesis draws on a 50-reference evidence base published through 2025. The close-read cases retained from the earlier manuscript are now situated within a broader body of indexed work on digital ethnography, netnography, reflexivity, platform affordances, moderation, platformisation, algorithmic mediation and digital research ethics. The literature spans multiple platforms and settings and supports analysis across access, sampling, visibility, capture, traceability and interpretation.

Table 1 is intentionally illustrative rather than exhaustive. Its cases provide the detailed empirical substrate for the synthesis, while the wider indexed literature is used to contextualize and test the transferability of the methodological issues identified in those cases.

Subquestion 1: How Do Moderation, Affordances and Platform Selection Shape Access and Field-Site Construction?

Table 1. Illustrative empirical cases used for close methodological analysis.

Study	Design and setting	Data	Main platform-mediation finding
Hickey-Moody & Willcox (1)	2025; four-year qualitative digital ethnography on Instagram; feminist and queer artists in Australia	Ten artists; longitudinal public posts, artist statements and comments; interviews; in-depth case of Christine Yahya	Moderation, shadowbanning and content reduction shaped visibility; moderation was experienced asymmetrically and prompted adaptive creative responses
Agudelo-Londoño et al.(2)	2024; reflexive multi-platform ethnography of delivery-platform riders in Bogotá	Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter (X) and Instagram; manual capture plus Gephi/MAXQDA; mixed text, image, video and audio materials	Platform affordances, permissions and group visibility rules shaped access and data capture; platform selection and online/offline co-presence constituted the field
Morais et al.(3)	2022; qualitative YouTube netnography of trans Brazilian creators	Eight creators and 29 videos; repeated viewing, field notes and content analysis; research-specific Google account	Popularity and content conventions patterned visibility and representativeness; researcher account positioning was documented

The clearest answer is that access is negotiated at the level of platform selection, group architecture and interface rules, while platform governance can determine whether an entry point remains open at all. In the Bogotá study, platform selection, group visibility and administrator-mediated access shaped what could be observed and captured.(2)Comparable concerns recur in research on online sleuthing, WeChat infrastructures, TikTok migration, platform affordances, Tinder-based fieldwork, Web3 entry and Instagram platformisation, all of which foreground the conditions under which researchers and participants become reachable to one another.(6,13,30,36,39,40,44)

Moderation operates as a distinct form of access and visibility control. The Instagram ethnography reports shadowbanning, content removal and content reduction, with moderation experienced by the artist as personal and asymmetrical.(1)Work on moderation in social virtual reality and feminist digital ethnography of harassment similarly shows that governance mechanisms can become constitutive of what can be encountered, documented and safely researched.(33,45)

Access constraints are not uniform across platform types. In the Bogotá case, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp produced different kinds of material and interaction.(2)The broader literature likewise shows platform-dependent migration, political communication, activist practice and knowledge production across TikTok, Xiaohongshu, X and Instagram.(30,34-36,43,44)Access is therefore better conceptualized as a set of differently configured gates than as a single moment of entry.

Subquestion 2: How Does Platform Architecture Shape Sampling and Composition?

Sampling in platformized environments is governed not only by researcher-controlled selection but also by group architecture, platform searchability, recommendation and visibility dynamics. In the Bogotá study, entry into large closed Facebook groups was mediated by administrators, creating structurally uneven consent visibility.(2)Methodological work on WeChat, TikTok, digital media traces and platform-specific genres further shows that samples are conditioned by where traces are stored, how they can be retrieved and which content formats are made salient.(13,24,37,46,48)

Popularity dynamics skew composition in a second way. The YouTube netnography found that highly visible videos clustered around recognizable gender-affirmation narratives and conventions.(3)Studies of far-right narratives on X, highly engaged Douyin videos, amplification traps and algorithmically mediated nostalgia reinforce the need to distinguish a sample of visible content from a sample of the underlying population.(34,37,46,49)

Researchers also use deliberate counter-measures to personalized defaults. The YouTube study created a research-specific Google account, while the Bogotá study used a project-specific Facebook profile.(2,3) Broader reflexive literature emphasizes the importance of documenting positionality, researcher identity, digital dualism and the situated conditions of online encounter.(10,23-25,27-29)Such practices improve transparency, although their ability to neutralize personalization cannot be assumed without comparison.

Subquestion 3: How Do Moderation, Affordances and Popularity Shape Visibility and Encounter?

Visibility is produced jointly by platform rules and participants' genre work. The Instagram case documents gendered moderation and creative responses to algorithmic sorting and exclusion.

(1)Research on social virtual reality, gendered platform affordances and other platformized settings similarly shows that visibility and safety are structured rather than evenly distributed.(33,45,50)

On YouTube, encounter is structured by conventions that make some narratives more legible and more popular than others.(3)Netnographic and virtual-ethnographic studies of gender-based violence, online communities and public debate, together with work on Instagram genres and algorithmically mediated nostalgia, indicate that platform-native formats are part of the sampling environment rather than a superficial presentation layer.(32,42,47-49)

The Bogotá study contributes a complementary mechanism: communicative purpose varies by platform, so what a researcher can encounter depends on which platform they inhabit.(2) Similar platform dependence appears in research on digital migration, sexual citizenship, participatory warfare, political affordances, digital activism and Instagram-based knowledge production.(30,31,35,36,43,44)A field assembled across platforms is therefore not merely larger; it is compositionally different.

Subquestion 4: How Do Interface Design and Access Rules Shape Data Capture and Traceability?

Data capture is constrained by permissions, interface design and the persistence of traces. The Bogotá study combined manual collection with Gephi and MAXQDA because capture possibilities differed across platforms.(2)Methodological work on online sleuthing, WeChat backend/traceback methods, slalom approaches, data excess, online interviewing, digital technography and Web3 field entry demonstrates a wider repertoire of hybrid strategies for handling platform-specific data conditions.(6,13,14,16-18,40)

Traceability is further complicated by multisited and infrastructural fields. The delivery-rider study followed daily traces across platforms rather than treating a single platform as a complete site.(2)Comparable methodological arguments appear in research that walks platforms back-to-front, alternates digital and traditional methods, and follows infrastructure as part of field construction.(13,14,18,40)

The Instagram ethnography documents a different capture problem: the object of study is partly constituted by what the platform removes.(1)Digital ethnography of absence and work on amplification reinforce the need to record not only what is present in the dataset but also the possibility that relevant traces were deleted, suppressed, rendered unreachable or never surfaced to the researcher.(39,46)

Subquestion 5: How Does Platform Mediation Reshape Reflexivity and Interpretation?

Reflexivity in platformized research must extend beyond interpersonal presence to include account position, technical access and the researcher's route through the interface. Feminist and digital-qualitative methods literature repeatedly foregrounds ethics, positionality, online/offline boundary work, reflexive encounter, safeguarding and researcher identity.(4,7-10,15,19-29)These concerns support treating platform positionality as a methodological variable that should be reported, even when its causal effect cannot be quantified.

Interpretation is also shaped by what the field can sustain. The Bogotá study shows how pandemic restrictions altered co-presence and constrained offline verification.(2)Research on conducting social inquiry online during COVID-19, digital reflexivity in congregations and researcher positionality likewise demonstrates that contextual constraints can reorganize both the field and the interpretative authority of the researcher.(9,23,27)

The Instagram case offers the clearest example of interpretation being recalibrated by platform mediation, because artistic production is analysed partly as a response to moderation rather than as content independent of the platform.(1)Studies of Instagram self-presentation, discursive genre and gendered affordances further support treating platform form as analytically consequential rather than merely technical.(11,48,50)

Subquestion 6: What Methodological Responses Are Documented Across the Literature?

The documented and proposed responses fall into five clusters: justify platform selection; declare researcher and account position; adapt capture techniques to platform permissions; adapt consent and safeguarding to platform architecture; and preserve a reflexive record of visibility, moderation and infrastructural change. These practices are supported across the close-read cases and the wider methodological literature on ethics, reflexivity, platform-specific methods and field construction.(2,4,7,13-18,23-29,40,45)

Table 2. Question-evidence matrix linking each review subquestion to the broader literature and the methodological caveats identified in the synthesis.

Subquestion	Evidence pattern	Strength and caveats
SQ1 Access and field-site construction (1,2,30,36,40,44)	Entry is shaped by platform selection, group architecture, moderation, migration between services and infrastructural conditions.	Convergent qualitative and methodological evidence; mechanisms vary by platform and are rarely isolated experimentally.
SQ2 Sampling and composition (2,3,13,37,46,49)	Sampling is conditioned by group access, trace availability, platform genres, popularity and amplification.	Strong conceptual convergence; limited direct comparison with alternative feeds or account states.
SQ3 Visibility and encounter (1,3,33,36,43-50)	Visibility is co-produced by moderation, affordances, circulation dynamics, genre conventions and user-platform relations.	Broad cross-platform support; direct auditing of recommender outputs remains limited.
SQ4 Data capture and traceability (2,13,14,18,39,40)	Capture depends on permissions, interface design, persistence of traces and the route through platform infrastructure.	Methodological support is substantial, but reporting of interface state and ranking position is inconsistent.
SQ5 Reflexivity and interpretation (4,10,23-29,39,45)	Reflexivity includes researcher identity, account position, ethical exposure, online/offline boundaries and interpretative limits.	Strong methodological emphasis; few studies test how positional changes alter the observed sample.
SQ6 Methodological responses (2,4,13-18,23-29,40,45)	Platform justification, account disclosure, platform-adapted capture, safeguarding, reflexive encounter and infrastructure-aware reporting.	Well supported as practice and reporting logic; effectiveness is seldom evaluated comparatively.

Read across Table 2, the evidence is convergent but heterogeneous. Multiple empirical and methodological traditions point to platform effects on access, visibility, capture and interpretation, but the literature rarely offers controlled comparisons of alternative account positions, feeds or ranking states. The strongest support concerns affordances, moderation and reflexive positioning; direct auditing of recommender or ranking outputs within ethnographic designs remains comparatively uncommon.

DISCUSSION

The review question can be answered at the level of documented practice. Platform affordances, moderation, visibility dynamics and researcher positioning mediate digital fieldwork across access, sampling, capture and interpretation.(1-3,13,23,30,33,36,41,44-50)The broader literature shows that these are not isolated problems of one platform but recurring features of platformized qualitative research.

Researchers respond through platform selection, research-specific accounts, hybrid capture methods, reflexive disclosure, safeguarding, interview triangulation and infrastructural awareness.(2-4,7,13-18,23-29,39,40,45)These responses should be reported as methodological decisions because they influence what becomes observable and how claims can be interpreted.

The broader evidence also sharpens what remains underdeveloped. Direct discussions of algorithmic mediation and platform logic exist, including work on migration and algorithmically mediated cultural memory.(41,49) Studies of amplification and platform affordances likewise show that visibility is patterned.(36,38,46,50)Yet ethnographic designs that systematically audit ranking positions, recommender outputs or personalized feed states across accounts and time remain limited in this review.

The main boundary of the revised review is not a numerically small reference base but the unequal depth of evidence across sources. The close-read cases provide detailed methodological findings, whereas many additional indexed sources are used for contextualization at the level of method, platform problem or conceptual framing. The article therefore should not be read as if every citation had undergone identical full-text extraction.

A second boundary is procedural. Selection and synthesis were conducted by a single reviewer, without duplicate screening, protocol registration or formal quality appraisal. The update is consequently better described as a structured narrative review than as a systematic review.

A third boundary is conceptual heterogeneity. Netnography, digital ethnography, virtual ethnography, digital technography and platform studies overlap but are not methodologically identical. The synthesis treats them as adjacent traditions only where they illuminate the conduct of digital fieldwork, and it avoids assuming that findings from one platform or research tradition transfer automatically to another.

A fourth boundary is temporal. Platform affordances, moderation policies, APIs, interface designs and recommendation systems are mutable. A method that is feasible or visible at one point

may become unavailable, differently ranked or differently governed later. For this reason, platform conditions should be dated and documented as part of the research record.

Finally, the review is dominated by qualitative and methodological work, so the review does not estimate the magnitude of platform effects. Its contribution is analytical and procedural: to identify where platform mediation enters the research process and what researchers can document to make that mediation more inspectable.

The following safeguards are proposed for netnographic and digital ethnographic fieldwork in platformized environments. They synthesize documented practices and recurrent methodological concerns across the studies. Where a safeguard goes beyond what has been directly evaluated, it is presented as a reporting or design proposal rather than as a validated standard.

1. Justify platform selection and record decline decisions. Because fields differ by platform, selection and exclusion decisions should be documented, especially when participants or content migrate between services or when affordances materially differ.(2,30,36,40,44)

2. Declare the account position used for entry. Research-specific accounts, institutional profiles and explicit positionality statements can make the researcher's platform location more transparent, even though they do not eliminate personalization.(2,3,10,23-25,27)

3. Match capture method to platform permission and architecture. Manual capture, platform-specific backend approaches, mixed digital/traditional methods and infrastructural tracing should be described rather than collapsed into a generic statement of "online observation."(2,13,14,16-18,40)

4. Adapt consent, safeguarding and disclosure to platform architecture. Group admission mechanisms, sensitive populations, hostile online spaces and changing boundaries between public and private require context-specific ethical decisions.(2,7,25,27)

5. Maintain a visibility and ranking audit trail. When feasible, record account status, search terms, interface state, visible ordering, recommendation context and relevant personalization settings at the point of capture. This is a proposed safeguard motivated by evidence on algorithmic mediation, amplification and platform-dependent visibility.(41,46,49)

6. Treat visibility as a selection effect when sampling. Samples drawn from what is most visible should be described as samples of surfaced or amplified content rather than as direct representations of the underlying population.(1,3,34,37,46,48,49)

7. Pair observation with complementary elicitation where appropriate. Interviews, participatory approaches and other reflexive encounters can help interrogate why a platform trace appears as it does rather than merely treating the trace as self-explanatory.(2,17,24)

8. Report absence and invisibility as methodological limitations. Deleted, demoted, hidden or unreachable material can be analytically meaningful and should be distinguished from genuinely absent phenomena.(1,39,46)

9. Define saturation and stopping rules explicitly. In dynamic digital environments, "no new themes" is not equivalent to "no new platform states." Researchers should state whether stopping decisions refer to thematic saturation, platform coverage, time-bounded observation or another criterion.(2,20,29)

Four priorities follow from the review. First, comparative account studies should test how the same query or field appears across research accounts, personal accounts and logged-out states. Second, longitudinal platform audits should document changes in ranking, recommendation and moderation during fieldwork. Third, cross-platform designs should distinguish substantive differences in communities from differences produced by affordances and governance. Fourth, reporting guidance should develop minimum descriptors for account position, platform version or interface state, capture route, permissions, moderation events and visibility conditions.(23,36,41,46,49,50)

CONCLUSIONS

Platform-mediated field effects are a documented condition of contemporary digital fieldwork. Across the 50 sources reviewed, platform selection, group architecture, moderation, affordances, interface design, visibility dynamics, infrastructural conditions and researcher positionality repeatedly emerge as factors that shape what can be accessed, sampled, captured and interpreted.

The practical implication is straightforward: platform conditions should be reported as part of method. Researchers should document how they entered the field, which account state they used, what the platform allowed them to capture, what was hidden or removed, how visible content was selected, and whether relevant interfaces or ranking conditions changed during observation. The present safeguards are intended as transparent design and reporting heuristics for future

testing, not as validated standards.

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FUNDING

No financing

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None

AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTIONS

Drafting – original draft: Rolando Eslava-Zapata.
Writing–review and editing: Rolando Eslava-Zapata.