South American Publishing

SAP Netnography. 2026;4:273
doi: 10.62486/net2026273

REVIEW

Digital communities in transition: a narrative review of platform migration, deplatforming, and community resilience

Comunidades digitales en transición: una revisión narrativa de la migración entre plataformas, la desplataformización y la resiliencia comunitaria

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Submitted: 14-06-2026 | Revised: 23-07-2026 | Accepted: 01-09-2026 | Published: 02-09-2026

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ABSTRACT

Digital communities increasingly move across platforms as ownership changes, moderation decisions, technical restrictions, account suspensions, and bans alter the infrastructures on which collective life depends. This narrative review examines how communities reconstruct identity, norms, archives, leadership, trust, and continuity during platform migration and deplatforming, and considers the implications for digital ethnographic research. Relevant literature published between 2020 and 2026 was identified across major academic databases and scholarly discovery platforms. Fifteen core studies were examined, with additional literature used to contextualise the findings. The synthesis was organised around migration triggers, migration trajectories, and processes of community reconstruction. Three recurring patterns were identified. First, governance, ownership, and moderation changes act as migration triggers whose effects depend on their visibility, reversibility, and perceived legitimacy. Second, migration is rarely a single event: communities fragment, multi-home, disperse, or partially reconstitute across infrastructures. Third, reconstruction is uneven, with identity and belonging often preserved more readily than archives, routines, or leadership structures. The review conceptualises community resilience as continuity through transformation and proposes an infrastructure-as-field perspective for studying cross-platform social life. This framework is intended as a methodological guide for comparative research rather than as a validated model.

Keywords: digital ethnography; platform migration; deplatforming; community resilience; cross-platform communities; digital infrastructure

RESUMEN

Las comunidades digitales se desplazan cada vez más entre plataformas a medida que los cambios de propiedad, las decisiones de moderación, las restricciones técnicas, las suspensiones de cuentas y las prohibiciones modifican las infraestructuras de las que depende la vida colectiva. Esta revisión narrativa examina cómo las comunidades reconstruyen la identidad, las normas, los archivos, el liderazgo, la confianza y la continuidad durante los procesos de migración y desplataformización, y considera sus implicaciones para la investigación etnográfica digital. Se identificó literatura relevante publicada entre 2020 y 2026 en las principales bases de datos académicas y plataformas de descubrimiento científico. Se examinaron 15 estudios centrales y se utilizó literatura adicional para contextualizar los hallazgos. La síntesis se organizó en torno a los factores que desencadenan la migración, las trayectorias de desplazamiento y los procesos de reconstrucción comunitaria. Se identificaron tres patrones recurrentes. En primer lugar, los cambios de gobernanza, propiedad y moderación actúan como desencadenantes de la migración, cuyos efectos dependen de su visibilidad, reversibilidad y legitimidad percibida. En segundo lugar, la migración rara vez constituye un acontecimiento único: las comunidades se fragmentan, mantienen presencia simultánea en varias plataformas, se dispersan o se reconstituyen parcialmente. En tercer lugar, la reconstrucción es desigual, ya que la identidad y el sentido de pertenencia suelen preservarse con mayor facilidad que los archivos, las rutinas o las estructuras de liderazgo. La revisión conceptualiza la resiliencia comunitaria como continuidad a través de la transformación y propone una perspectiva de la infraestructura como campo para estudiar la vida social entre plataformas. Este marco se plantea como una guía metodológica para la investigación comparativa y no como un modelo validado.

Palabras clave: etnografía digital; migración entre plataformas; desplataformización; resiliencia comunitaria; comunidades multiplataforma; infraestructura digital

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INTRODUCTION

Digital communities are shaped by the infrastructures that host them, and those infrastructures are now unusually volatile. Ownership transfers, moderation policy revisions, application programming interface (API) restrictions, changes to recommendation and ranking systems, and revised access rules can alter a community's visibility, discoverability and economic viability within weeks.

Deplatforming, the suspension of accounts, communities or networks, is the sharpest expression of this volatility, but it is not the only one, and it is rarely an isolated platform act. Regulatory change can operate as an upstream trigger: after the passage of FOSTA and SESTA in the United States, several platforms closed forums used by sex workers, and sex workers were systematically deplatformed or shadowbanned in ways that affected their safety, their advocacy and their access to community support.(1)

Enforcement has also become increasingly automated, and research on algorithmic moderation shows that such systems remain opaque, difficult to audit, and political in their effects because they adjudicate speech at scale.(2) The cultural consequences are distributed unevenly. Queer users have been pushed into 'digital closets' through combinations of censorship, shadowbanning and platform-enabled harassment, even as the same platforms historically supplied anonymity, community and space for self-expression.(3)

Empirical research on communities confirms that infrastructural change reorganises rather than simply erases collective life: fandom migration is catalysed by intersecting policy, design and community factors and produces social fragmentation and lost content alongside new settlements,(4) while Reddit's quarantining and banning of r/The_Donald and r/Incels reshaped activity, composition and discourse on the destination sites to which their members moved.(5)

The problem this literature poses is conceptual as well as empirical. Community research has long treated the platform as the container of the community, which makes cross-platform movement difficult to describe: when the container changes, the object of study either dissolves or is quietly redefined as a different case.

Terminology compounds the difficulty, because platform studies, digital ethnography, communication research, deplatforming scholarship and migration research describe overlapping phenomena with different vocabularies: exit, switching, banning, dispersal, relocation to alternative technologies, and multi-homing.

This review therefore adopts a narrative design. Its research question is twofold: how do digital communities reconstruct identity, norms, archives, leadership, trust and continuity when they migrate or are deplatformed, and how can netnography be reconfigured to treat infrastructure change as part of the ethnographic field rather than as external context?

METHODS

This study was conducted as a structured narrative review because the literature on platform migration and community continuity is conceptually diverse and does not use a single methodological vocabulary. The review focused on how infrastructural disruption changes community organisation and on the methodological implications for studying social life across platforms.

Search and source selection

Relevant literature published between 2020 and 2026 was identified across Scopus, Web of Science, OpenAlex, Semantic Scholar, and Crossref. Search terms combined platform migration, deplatforming, moderation, account suspension, ownership and infrastructure change with online communities, resilience, continuity, identity, norms, trust, leadership, archives, digital ethnography, and cross-platform or multi-sited research. No formal language restriction was applied.

Publications were retained when they provided substantive empirical or conceptual evidence on how communities respond to infrastructural disruption or move between digital platforms. Fifteen studies formed the core body of evidence, while an additional set of contextual sources was used to situate the findings within broader debates on platform governance, moderation, marginalised communities, and digital ethnographic practice.

Data extraction and synthesis

Information was charted on study design, population, setting, platform transition or disruption, methodological approach, reported outcomes, and limitations. The core literature was

compared thematically across three domains: migration triggers, migration trajectories, and the reconstruction of identity, norms, archives, leadership, trust, and community continuity.

Because the evidence base combined different study designs and levels of source detail, the synthesis was interpretive rather than statistical. Full-text sources were prioritised when available, while more limited records were used cautiously to map conceptual patterns. No prevalence estimates or pooled effects were calculated.

RESULTS

Migration triggers and their conditions

Across the studies, migration is triggered by governance, ownership, and moderation decisions whose consequences depend on how visible, contestable, and reversible they are. Fandom participants describe migration catalysts that combine policy, design, and community factors, and they experience migration as socially disruptive, producing fragmentation and lost content alongside new settlements.(4)The deplatforming of the Proud Boys on Twitter reduced the use of group-specific hashtags and disrupted internal retweet engagement, yet it did not reduce the promotion of extremist content, weaken information-sharing networks, or diminish attachment to the group; engagement with broader audiences increased instead.(6)

Reddit's quarantining and banning of r/The_Donald and r/Incels similarly reduced posting activity, active users, and newcomers on destination sites, while individually migrated users posted more often, a pattern attributable more to self-selection than to behaviour change; for r/The_Donald, toxicity and radicalisation signals increased after migration, whereas for r/Incels content changes were largely non-significant.(5)Deplatformed conspiracy theorists accommodated, bypassed, and reframed their exclusion, and in doing so converted stigma into a new form of conspiratorial capital and status.(7)The Base's encrypted chatrooms show deplatforming triggering communicative resilience, collaborative discovery of new methods, and a performative strategy of persistent presence that reinforces group identity and social capital.(8)

Gab's affordances, including minimal moderation, anonymity, microblogging architecture, and a crowdfunding model, fostered an ideologically eclectic far-right community united by shared fears of persecution by 'Big Tech'.(9)Survey evidence from Gab, Parler, Truth Social, and Rumble users indicates that those temporarily or permanently banned from mainstream sites are unlikely to leave those sites altogether, complicating any assumption of clean exit.(10)

Trajectories: fragmentation, multi-homing, and partial reconstitution

Migration is therefore better described as a trajectory than as an event. Communities fragment, multi-home, disperse, partially reconstitute, and sometimes widen rather than abandon their mainstream presence. Cross-platform users active on both Twitter and Parler during the 2020 US Presidential Election displayed differing levels of network homophily by degree centrality, higher toxicity in heterogeneous networks than in homogeneous ones, and distinctive discourse communities shaped by social identity dynamics.(11)The migration of self-identified 'TikTok Refugees' to RedNote produced twelve cross-cultural communication strategies, with friendly content quality facilitating successful interaction while sustainable engagement remained challenging.(12)

Evidence from Tumblr's December 2018 adult content ban indicates a mass influx of users to Twitter who re-formed community around the keyword 'NSFW', with 'porn' predicted by keywords advertising nudity for sexual consumption and 'NSFW' correlating with accounts presenting nudity as one part of a broader online presence.(13)De-platformed content creators who use nudity and sexuality as expression, networking, and income describe their relationship with Instagram and TikTok as 'corpo-civic', caught between work and social space and between corporate ownership and public use, and they face persistent difficulty building, managing, and engaging communities in precarious spaces.(14)

The Italian sex-positive collective Primogemito experienced systematic content removal, account banning, and shadowbanning on Instagram, alongside a lack of transparency in moderation policy that generated uncertainty and self-censorship, and it responded with algospeak, media surfing across platforms, and coded language.(15) Chinese slash fanfiction communities sustained cultural resilience through cultural enclosure, border-crossing platform-switching, and social media activism, even as slash writing and reading faced increasingly stringent regulation.(16)

Grassroots feminist livestreaming on Douyin illustrates a parallel dynamic: confrontatio-

nal feminist pedagogy attracted censorship, and after platform deletion, fan-operated 'clipped accounts' preserved and recirculated content through tactical remixing and censorship evasion, sustaining operations via affiliate marketing and converting an individual influencer into a distributed network.(17) Transfems forced off platforms by transphobic hostility experienced digital solastalgia, distress at observing a platform's character erode over time, and their perceptions of locality and space shaped disengagement strategies and community structures.(18)

Uneven reconstruction: identity, archives, and leadership

Cultural reconstruction is uneven across dimensions. Identity and belonging frequently consolidate around shared exclusion, whereas archives, interaction routines, and leadership are redistributed or lost. The Proud Boys case shows attachment and information-sharing networks surviving deplatforming even as group-specific hashtag use declined.(6) Conspiracy theorists converted exclusion into collective identity and status, with conferences facilitating shared experiences of deplatforming and a collective identity based on exclusion.(7) The Base's persistent presence strategy reinforced group-based identities and accrued social capital.(8) Gab's community coalesced around a novel techno-social victimology.(9)

By contrast, fandom migration produced lost content and social fragmentation,(4)and the r/The_Donald and r/Incels cases show activity and newcomer declines on destination platforms even as individual users posted more.(5)The Chinese feminist livestreaming case shows archives being preserved through decentralised, fan-operated clipped accounts rather than through formal institutional continuity,(17)and the transfem case shows community structures and disengagement strategies being reshaped by digital solastalgia.(18)The Primogemito case shows visibility being maintained through adaptive evasion rather than through stable presence.(15)Taken together, these findings suggest that resilience is better conceptualised as continuity-through-transformation than as the survival of a bounded group.

Table 1. Core-study contributions by thematic cluster.

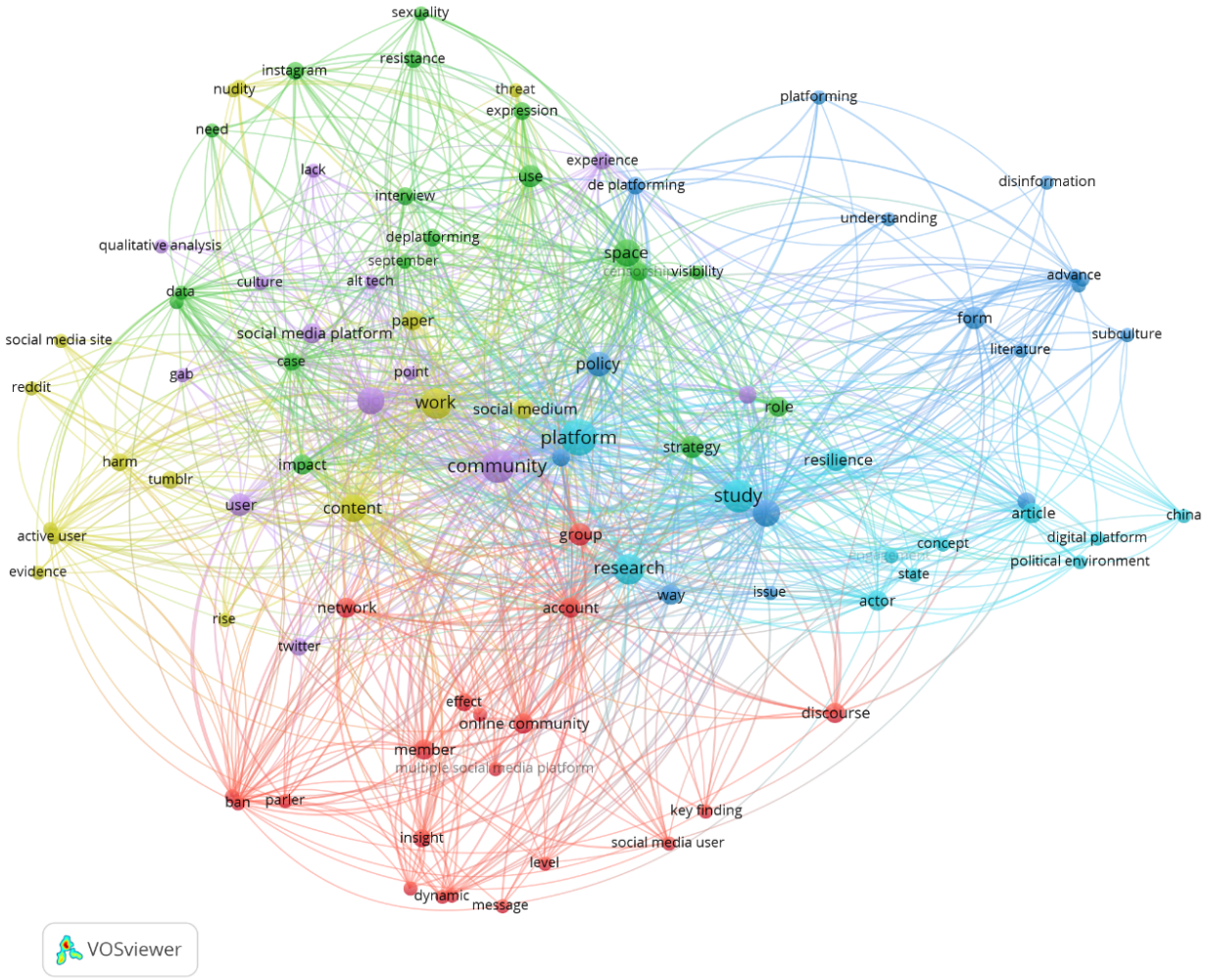
Cluster	Recurring contribution
Migration triggers and their conditions (4-6,10)	Policy, design, ownership and moderation decisions trigger movement; outcomes depend on visibility, contestability and reversibility of the intervention
Cohesion and identity under deplatforming (6-9)	Attachment, information-sharing networks and collective identity frequently survive, intensify or re-form around shared exclusion
Trajectories, multi-homing and dispersal (11-14,16)	Clean exit is rare; fragmentation, multi-homing, cross-cultural adaptation and partial reconstitution predominate
Archives, leadership and platform space (4,15,17,18)	Preservation and leadership shift to decentralised, evasive or lost forms; affective attachment to platform space shapes disengagement

Term co-occurrence analysis

The VOSviewer term co-occurrence analysis identified 94 terms organised into six interconnected clusters. The network was highly cohesive, with platform emerging as the most connected term (13 occurrences; total link strength = 198), closely followed by community (11 occurrences; total link strength = 197), study (11 occurrences; total link strength = 189), research (9 occurrences; total link strength = 141), work (9 occurrences; total link strength = 130), analysis (7 occurrences; total link strength = 125), and content (7 occurrences; total link strength = 124).

The six clusters reflected overlapping thematic areas rather than isolated domains. One cluster concentrated on groups, members, networks, online communities, and discourse; another brought together space, strategy, censorship, interviews, and platform-specific practices. A third was oriented toward policy, analysis, deplatforming, and its consequences, while a fourth grouped content, harm, and platform migration across services such as Tumblr and Reddit. The fifth cluster was centred on community, users, content moderation, and social media platforms, whereas the sixth connected platform, research, resilience, actors, and the broader political environment. The dense interconnections among these clusters indicate that platform migration and deplatforming are embedded in a broader research structure linking community reorganisation, content governance, user adaptation, and resilience rather than constituting isolated processes.

Figure 1. VOSviewer network visualization of term co-occurrence in the reviewed literature.



DISCUSSION

The core findings of this review converge on a view of platform migration as a governance-driven, trajectory-shaped, and unevenly reconstructive process. This convergence is consistent with supporting literature that situates deplatforming within broader platform governance and algorithmic moderation debates; supporting sources are used here to triangulate interpretation rather than as independent corroboration, and where a supporting source was available only at abstract level this is flagged in the comparison itself. Algorithmic moderation systems remain opaque, difficult to audit, and political in their effects,(2)and this opacity is directly implicated in the self-censorship and uncertainty reported by deplatformed communities such as Primogemito.(15)

The finding that deplatforming can strengthen rather than weaken group cohesion(6-8) resonates with supporting work on cross-platform information operations, which shows that alternative platforms are used to counter perceived censorship by established platforms and to sustain strategic narratives.(19)It also aligns with research on radical mobilisation on Telegram, where deplatforming pressures pushed radical actors to establish new channels and where direct appeals and populist blame games increased message retransmission.(20)

The trajectory-shaped character of migration identified in the core studies is echoed in supporting scholarship on digital sex work after the Social Media Safety Act, which describes choreographic leadership and audience mobilisation across mercurial media platforms as a performative and sustained form of labour.(21)The finding that de-platformed creators rely on hybrid friend/customer relationships and face precarious community membership(14)is consistent with supporting work on the ‘digital closet’, which documents how corporate policies, algorithmic biases, and

platform-enabled harassment push queer users into constrained visibility.(3)

The uneven reconstruction of archives and leadership observed in the study set (4,17) parallels supporting evidence on participatory censorship in Chinese fandom, where uncertainty about censorship fostered divergent imaginaries and peer-based moderation that strengthened political control in the absence of the state.(22)It also connects to supporting work on Intersectional Multi Micro Media, which shows actors building cross-platform repertoires that prioritise autonomy and visibility on their own terms while operating within platforms that embody the very inequalities they contest.(23)

The netnographic implications of these findings are substantial. Supporting methodological work argues that conventional ethnography tied to physical sites cannot capture populations dispersed across public, semi-private, private, online, and offline spaces, and proposes staged, ethics-attentive, multi-platform protocols in which hashtags, platform recommendations, symbolic codes, and cross-platform pathways are treated as field signs rather than recruitment tools.(24)

This aligns with the core studies' demonstration that infrastructure change is itself ethnographic data: the Proud Boys case shows platform architecture and moderation events shaping cohesion,(6)the r/The_Donald and r/Incels case shows migration events reshaping activity and discourse,(5)and the Chinese feminist livestreaming case shows platform deletion producing decentralised preservation networks.(17)

Supporting work on algorithmic sacredness and algorithmic pluralism further suggests that moderation functions as an extractive political economy that appropriates, classifies, and filters minority expression, with minority religious traditions structurally exposed because they are too small, too polysemic, and too fragmented to extract policy concessions.(25)This resonates with the core finding that deplatforming may backfire by strengthening beliefs and standing within subcultures.(7)

The review's findings also connect to supporting work on digital pathways of culture, which shows platforms functioning as algorithmically governed infrastructures that shape cultural visibility, narrative authority, and aesthetic norms, producing reinterpretation, hybridity, and contestation.(26)

This is consistent with the core observation that migration is a trajectory rather than an event, and that communities adapt through multi-homing, dispersal, and partial reconstitution.(11-13) Supporting work on disinformation by design shows how platform filtering and evidence collages facilitate the transformation of contested rumours into disinformation campaigns across platforms,(27)echoing the core finding that deplatforming does not reduce the promotion of extremist content(6); this source was available to us only at abstract level, so the parallel is suggestive rather than confirmatory.

Supporting work on antifeminist discourse in the Spanish manosphere, based on multi-platform digital ethnography, shows how misogynist communities shape social perception through memetic and digital social practices,(28)a comparison that points in the same direction as the review's argument that infrastructure change must be treated as part of the ethnographic field rather than as external context, but that rests here on an abstract-level record and should be read as indicative only.

More generally, several supporting sources were consulted at abstract level, so the convergences reported in this section are interpretive resonances rather than independent corroboration.

The VOSviewer map suggests that platform migration and deplatforming are embedded within broader processes of community reorganisation, content governance, user adaptation, and resilience. Rather than appearing as a simple movement from one service to another, migration is positioned within a socio-technical environment in which platform rules, visibility, access, and moderation can alter community boundaries, patterns of interaction, and forms of collective persistence. The overlap between clusters also suggests that political and extremist communities, fandom and sexuality-related spaces, content moderation, and cross-platform movement are not separate lines of inquiry, but intersecting dimensions of how communities respond to infrastructural change. From this perspective, platform migration can be understood as a multidimensional process involving both technological relocation and the reconfiguration of social relationships and community practices.

Limitations

This review draws on a relatively small and heterogeneous body of literature, with strong representation of politically salient and English-language cases.

The depth of source access also varied across the sources, which limited verification of study-level methodological details and may have reduced the precision of cross-case comparisons.

As a narrative review, the search was designed to support conceptual synthesis rather than exhaustive coverage. Relevant work from less visible platforms, languages, and regional contexts may therefore be under-represented. The infrastructure-as-field framework is a sensitising model derived from the reviewed literature and requires empirical testing across different communities, legal settings, and forms of platform change.

CONCLUSIONS

Platform migration is better understood as an ongoing social process than as a single move from one service to another. Communities respond to infrastructural disruption through fragmentation, multi-homing, selective reconstruction, and the redistribution of archives, leadership, and interaction routines.

For digital ethnographic research, this means that infrastructure should be treated as part of the field itself. Moderation events, access changes, technical affordances, and platform transitions can alter both the composition of a community and the evidence available to researchers.

The infrastructure-as-field perspective proposed in this review offers a practical basis for studying continuity across platforms, but it remains a conceptual framework rather than a validated model. Comparative and longitudinal research is needed to determine which forms of continuity persist across different communities and infrastructural conditions.

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FUNDING

No financing

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None

AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTIONS

Drafting – original draft: Dimas Pratama Wicaksono, Ayu Lestari Kurniawan.
Writing–review and editing: Dimas Pratama Wicaksono, Ayu Lestari Kurniawan.