Understanding How Migrants Leverage Online Spaces to Express, Evolve, and Enhance Their Cultural Identities

About the Project

This project examines how permanent and temporary migrants, refugees, and undocumented migrants utilize online platforms to navigate their cultural identities, forge social connections, and advocate for their rights. Migrant-led digital communities have become indispensable spaces for preserving cultural heritage, accessing vital resources, and building resilience amid migration challenges. Our scoping review details insights into the digital tools and platforms migrants use and their roles in fostering cultural identity expression, cultural identity evolution, and socio-economic advancement. In addition to identifying opportunities, the review addresses significant barriers. Structured searches across major academic databases yielded 8,662 studies, of which 1,648 duplicates were removed. The remaining studies underwent rigorous multi-stage screening using Covidence software, including title and abstract reviews (6474 excluded), followed by full-text assessments of 536 studies sought for full-text retrieval. After resolving discrepancies and ensuring compliance with eligibility criteria, 124 empirical studies were included in the data extraction stage. Overall, findings underscore the essential role of digital spaces in empowering migrants, offering practical support, and fostering cultural and social integration. At the same time, they highlight critical gaps, particularly for underrepresented migrant groups and the untapped potential of emerging technologies. By systematically mapping the existing literature, highlighting research gaps, and proposing actionable strategies, this review offers a robust foundation for fostering inclusive and empowering digital ecosystems designed to meet migrants' needs.

Key Findings

Descriptive Findings—Extracted Data.

- Research on online migrant communities has grown steadily since the early 2000s.
- Migrants often use social media platforms (e.g., Facebook) to organize collectively, followed by specific websites (e.g., MissyUSA) and messaging/video apps.
- Migrants' online communities serve diverse roles, most commonly information sharing, social/emotional support, and community building.
- Migrants use online communities to share content, promote traditions, and communicate in native languages, preserving cultural identity.
- Online communities help migrants blend home and host cultures, fostering hybrid and transnational identities through digital interaction.
- Migrant communities online build social capital and enable political activism, empowering resource access and advocacy.

Emergent Themes—Content Analysis.

- ***Social Media and Acculturation.*** Social media platforms like Facebook and WeChat help migrants bridge cultural gaps, preserve heritage, create bicultural identities, and adapt to new environments. However, overreliance can limit face-to-face integration and reinforce cultural silos within co-ethnic groups.
- ***Diaspora Identity and Activism.*** Digital platforms enable diaspora communities to maintain cultural identity and advocate for their rights. Migrants use tools like Facebook and

Twitter to raise awareness and challenge misinformation, but barriers like surveillance, censorship, and the digital divide hinder participation.

- ***Digital Resilience and Social Support.*** Online spaces provide emotional and practical support, acting as virtual "homes" for displaced migrants. They facilitate access to health resources, community networks, and traditions, though digital access gaps and misinformation pose challenges.
- ***Transnational Communication and Networks.*** Migrants use digital platforms to maintain cross-border ties and share bilingual resources. However, over-reliance on virtual networks can weaken local integration in host societies.
- ***Cultural Integration and Digital Spaces.*** Digital tools support intercultural exchanges, helping migrants integrate and blend cultural identities, particularly among younger migrants. However, structural barriers like discrimination and surveillance limit inclusivity.
- ***Empowerment Through Online Communities***. Online spaces empower migrants through resource-sharing, advocacy, and economic opportunities like crowdfunding. Yet, systemic inequalities, low digital literacy, and internal hierarchies restrict participation.

Research Gaps.

- Refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented migrants remain understudied.
- Research focuses mainly on mainstream platforms, overlooking niche and emerging technologies like decentralized apps and regional online tools.
- There is a limited exploration of how gender, socioeconomic status, and digital literacy affect engagement.
- More research is needed to understand how misinformation erodes trust or how surveillance discourages participation in migrants' online communities.
- There is insufficient study of how online engagement shapes generational shifts in cultural identity.
- Little research exists on AI, virtual reality, and decentralized tools for migrant advocacy and empowerment.

Policy Implications

- **Equitable Digital Access**: Governments should prioritize affordable internet access, digital literacy programs, and culturally relevant resources to ensure migrants, particularly vulnerable groups like refugees and undocumented individuals, can participate fully in online spaces.
- **Data Privacy and Security**: Robust data protection laws are essential to safeguard migrants from surveillance, censorship, and exploitation, especially in authoritarian contexts where online engagement poses significant risks.
- **Community-Led Platforms:** Initiatives should empower migrants to co-create and manage digital spaces that reflect their unique needs, fostering ownership, security, and inclusivity.
- **Support for Niche Technologies**: Encouraging the adoption of emerging tools like decentralized platforms can enhance privacy, resilience, and advocacy opportunities for migrant communities.

Further Information

For the full report, visit https://osf.io/7p9wu/.

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