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X TO BLUESKY PLATFORM MIGRATION: GOVERNANCE AND COMMUNITY

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Introduction

The results of the 2024 U.S. Presidential election led millions of X (Twitter) users to move to other platforms, following Musk's support for president-elect Trump (Cooper, 2024). Most users fled to Bluesky, driven by a desire for a community space with greater transparency, stronger moderation policies, and less hate speech (Di Placido, 2024). While online platform migrations happen regularly (e.g., Hou & Shiau, 2019; Jeong et al., 2024), they are not always this acute or this large. Therefore, this migration presents a unique case study for building online platform migration theory. To that end, the present study tests a communication-focused framework of social media platform migration by surveying former X/Twitter users ($N = 200$) who are now on Bluesky, about their reasons for migrating.

Theoretical Framework

Research has uncovered various motivations for online platform migrations. For instance, users have left Facebook for its (lack of) fulfillment of social needs and poor system quality, and moved to Instagram because of its attractiveness as an alternative, peer influence, and critical mass (Hou & Shiau, 2019). More recently, a migration from Twitter to Mastodon was driven by increasing negative sentiment toward Musk's leadership and more positive impressions of Mastodon (Jeong et al., 2024).

While the present study will also investigate a specific migration (from X to Bluesky), the goal is to theorize platform migration from a media and communication perspective, building on media system dependency theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976), expectancy violation theory (Burgoon & Hale, 1988), migration theory (Lee, 1966), and critical mass (Markus, 1987). See Figure 1 for full theorized model.

The proposed framework begins with the *media system dependency* model (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976), which argues that audiences depend on media to understand their social world, and that this need is heightened during times of change and conflict in society. The 2024 U.S. Presidential elections presented a case of great potential societal change, as the country weighed electing their first female president

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against re-electing a highly controversial former president. At this time, the public relied more heavily on social media, particularly X (McClain et al., 2024), for information and communication.

However, given the political effect on X itself (Collier, 2024), users may have experienced *expectancy violations* on the platform. From interpersonal communication, the expectancy violations model (Burgoon & Hale, 1988) proposes that individuals enter any interaction with expectancies of each other. When those expectations are (negatively) violated (e.g., one person insults the other), it arouses increased attention to the relationship, and leads to assessments of whether the communicator is rewarding enough to continue interacting with. In the case of X, users might experience expectancy violations in the form of increased hateful comments due to shifting policies on the platform. Users then had to decide if the platform is still rewarding enough to continue using, or if they should migrate elsewhere.

The study of platform migration is built on earlier theory of physical human migration (Lee, 1966), which focuses on factors that “push” individuals from their current location and factors that “pull” individuals to a more desirable location. This has been adapted to a push-pull-mooring framework for the study of migration between online platforms (Zengyan et al., 2009), with “mooring” factors being obstacles to migration, such as setup costs. For the migration from X, *push factors* seem to be dissatisfaction with platform policies and a toxic communication environment, while *pull factors* seem to be Bluesky’s stronger moderation policies and lower tolerance for hate speech.

Although other studies (e.g., Hou & Shiau, 2019) have identified *critical mass* as one type of pull factor, it is theorized here as a mooring factor that moderates the relationship between push/pull factors and migration. Markus (1987) theorizes that critical mass is a crucial threshold for the useful adoption of a communication technology. Importantly, no user benefits from a great platform if no other user joins it. Thus, push and pull factors may not be enough to motivate migration of social media platforms, if the loss of community is too high. Rather, once enough of a network collectively decides to leave (as in the recent move from X to Bluesky), critical mass could trigger the push and pull factors to lead to migration.

Hypotheses

H1: Greater media system dependency predicts greater likelihood of encountering platform expectancy violations.

H2: Increased platform expectancy violations predict greater likelihood of platform migration.

H3: The relationship between platform expectancy violations and platform migration is mediated by a) push factors and b) pull factors.

H4: The relationships between a) push factors / b) pull factors and platform migration are moderated by critical mass.

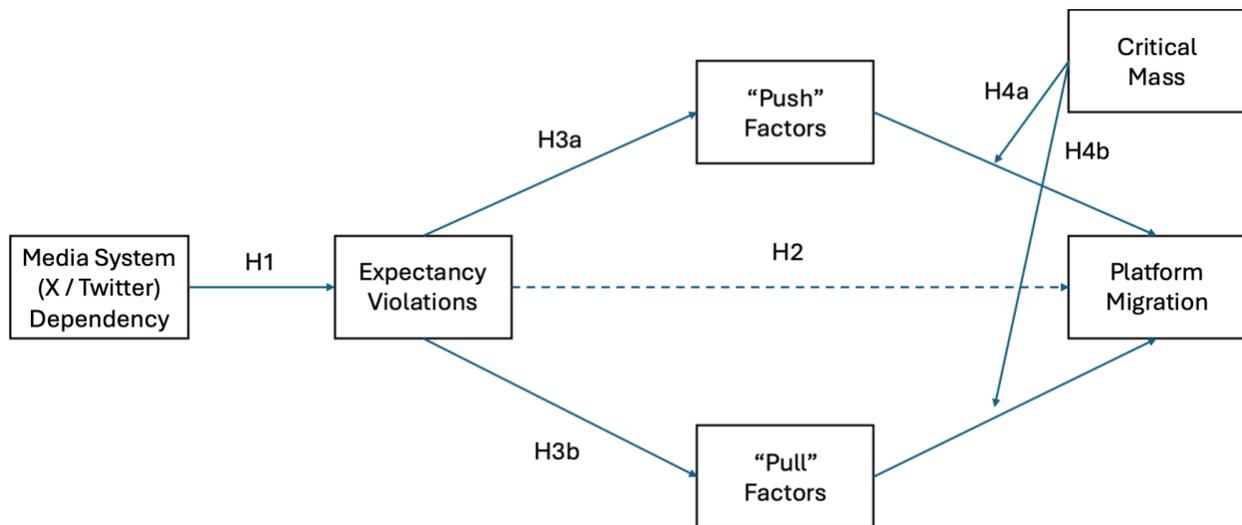


Figure 1. Theoretical model.

Method

Participants ($N = 200$) are current Bluesky users who also are or were X/Twitter users, age 18 and older. They are being recruited from Bluesky to take an online survey about their X/Twitter and Bluesky experiences, and will be paid \$5 through Prolific's "Bring Your Own Participants" program.

Each participant will first be screened with three questions: Whether they are a Bluesky user, whether they are or were an X/Twitter user, and whether they at least partly left X/Twitter for Bluesky. Answering no to any item will deem them ineligible. Eligible participants will then be asked about their media use, platform expectations, push and pull factors of X/Twitter and Bluesky, and questions about their network.

Media system dependency is measured with 12 items from Kim and Jung (2017) with the stem "How much do you depend on social media for the following purposes?" on a 5-point scale (1 = Not at all useful – 5 = Very much), e.g., "To know what is going on in the world."

Expectancy violations are measured using the 12 media systems dependency items, but rating how well each platform meets their expectations: "How well does [X (Twitter) / Bluesky] meet your expectations for each of these purposes?" on a 5-point scale (1 = Much worse than expected – 5 = Much better than expected).

Push factors and *pull factors* will be collected from a sample of Bluesky posts about X/Twitter. These posts will be collected via Communalytic spanning November 1 2024 – December 31 2024 (to capture the post-election migration), with the following keywords: "twitter", "X", "bird site," and "bluesky." Posts will be coded for reasons for leaving X/Twitter (push factors) and/or for joining Bluesky (pull factors). The most common reasons for each factor type will be measured for importance on a 5-point scale (1 = Not at all important – 5 = Very important).

Critical mass is measured with an adapted version of Hou and Shiao's (2019)'s three 5-point Likert items, e.g., "Most of my X/Twitter network is using Bluesky."

Survey data will be analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM) to test the full platform migration model and its hypothesized relationships.

Project Status

The project received funding in January 2025, and as of February 2025, it is under review for university ethics approval. All Communalytic data and survey data will be collected and analyzed in time for presentation at AoIR 2025 in October.

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