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Platform critical toponymy: A reflexive extension of Bourdieu's Theory of Practice for 21st-Century Critical Toponymy

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Abstract

Toponyms are not passive labels. They are arenas where spatial inscription, social memory, and distributive struggle converge. Although existing critical toponymy offers profound insights, it is being unsettled by a new historical condition: the platformization of place naming. This article proposes platform critical toponymy, a new paradigm of critical toponymy grounded in a reflexive extension of Bourdieu's theory of practice. By introducing three recursive mechanisms—platformization, datafication, and algorithmic governance—it reconstructs the *field-capital-habitus* triad to analyze how digital platform infrastructures reorganize the conditions under which toponyms are assigned, remembered, contested, and governed, and to advance data sovereignty, algorithmic accountability, and the democratization of naming rights. This paper (a) traces how critical toponymy expanded from colonial naming and identity recovery to heritage commodification and digital inscription, exposing the field's persistent urban normativity and Global North bias; (b) reconceives the field as a multi-scalar ecology in which state standardization, platform ranking, corporate branding, and local inscription overlap rather than simply oppose one another; (c) treats naming capital as a convertible and auditable asset composed of institutional, economic, cultural, social, and platform-symbolic forms, and clarifies the conditions under which such conversion is legitimized, contested, or blocked; and (d) reconceptualizes habitus as an evolving, politically and technologically mediated disposition shaped by official, commercial, community, platform-mediated, and academic rationalities. The paradigm is tested through four cross-contextually comparable cases. The article concludes by proposing that future research take data sovereignty, algorithmic accountability, participatory mapping, and the democratization of naming rights as its core concerns.

Introduction

Toponyms are seemingly minor objects. They appear as neutral way-finding tools, yet they condense the history of conquest and settlement, the process of state formation, the rise and fall of commercial brands, strategies of collective memory, and, increasingly, the operational logic of digital platforms. Critical toponymy therefore does not study place names for their own sake. It studies how, when a place is named, renamed, or unmapped, a society decides whose language, whose history, and whose authority count as legitimate. Over the past two decades, the field has consolidated into a genuinely interdisciplinary endeavor, bringing together human geography, anthropology, linguistics, urban studies, heritage studies, Indigenous studies, and political theory around a shared concern with naming power (Grounds, 2001; Gutiérrez-Mora and Oto-Peralías, 2022). Yet the maturation of the field has also exposed its limits. Many influential accounts remain anchored in the nation-state and postcolonial frameworks. Indispensable as these frameworks are, they struggle to grasp a world in which naming is simultaneously centralized through state standardization, fragmented through platform interfaces, financialized through sponsorship contracts, and localized through user-generated content. This article develops a new paradigm of critical toponymy—platform critical toponymy—and places these shifts at the center of analysis rather than treating them as mere topical extensions.

The argument begins with a set of convergent social changes that, since the early 2010s, have unfolded across both the Global North and the Global South. Urbanization intensifies the tension between standardized administrative naming and the cultural claims of layered, dense cities (Moshoadiba, 2026). Neoliberal governance extends naming-rights contracts from sports venues and transport hubs into everyday urban vocabulary (Rose-Redwood et al., 2019). Digital mapping platforms and social media turn the naming of places into a continuous, editable, rankable, and monetizable practice (Graham, 2007; Matuszczyk et al., 2025). At the same time, global movements for truth, reconciliation, and Indigenous self-determination have made the recovery of colonized toponyms one of the most consequential cultural struggles of our time (Reshmi, 2026; Ngabonziza and Rosendal, 2026). These changes do not replace the old dynamics of colonialism, nationalism, and capitalism. They intensify, automate, and reconfigure them. The core question of this article is therefore not whether platforms are good or bad for Toponyms. It is how platformization reorganizes the conditions under which places are named, remembered, contested, and governed.

To answer this question, the article advances a deliberate, reflexive adaptation of Bourdieu's theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Bourdieu's concepts of field, capital, and habitus have proven valuable for toponymic research because they move beyond the binary of state domination versus grassroots resistance (Paunonen, 2009). Yet the classical formulation also has three limitations. First, it tends to reify the field as a stable national or institutional space. Second, it underestimates the speed and opacity with which capital circulates through data, rankings, and algorithmic recommendations (Palese, 2026). Third, it presents habitus as a durable disposition without fully explaining how automation, regimes of visibility, and digital literacy reshape it. This article does not discard Bourdieu. Rather, it treats his framework as an open theoretical architecture that must be revised through dialogue with platform studies (Sahamies, 2025), decolonial thought (Misco, 2025; Moshoadiba, 2026), science and technology studies (UNGEGN, 2025), feminist and queer critique (Pecorelli, 2023; Moshoadiba, 2026), and research on digital sovereignty (Native Land Digital, 2025). The resulting paradigm is designed for use across a range of national contexts. It does not assume that any single institutional arrangement—whether Western liberal pluralism or a state-led model—is the normative standard.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. The next section reconstructs the intellectual trajectory of critical toponymy across three stages and identifies a fourth stage: platform critical toponymy. Section three elaborates the theoretical foundations of platform critical toponymy and its implications for field, capital, and habitus. Section four presents the analytical framework, specifying its components and causal relations. Section five applies this framework to four case studies selected for their comparative leverage rather than their representativeness. Section six draws out the global implications of the paradigm, with particular attention to digital sovereignty and participatory governance. Section seven, the final section, concludes and proposes a research agenda.

The intellectual trajectory of critical toponymy: From colonial naming to platform inscription

Any paradigm claim must first take stock of existing achievements. Critical toponymy has passed through at least three recognizable stages, each shaped by the political and intellectual concerns of its time.

The first stage emerged in the late 1980s and continued through the 1990s. It centered on colonial naming and imperial symbolic orders (Cohen and Kliot, 1992; Nash, 1999). Influenced by postcolonial theory and critiques of Orientalist knowledge, scholars treated toponyms as instruments through which colonial administrations naturalized foreign sovereignty. Classic cases are revealing. In colonial Singapore, British authorities renamed streets after officials, replacing local Chinese and Malay naming traditions with a visible iconography of imperial authority (Yeoh, 1992). In colonial South Asia, the imposition of English names disrupted local geographies of belonging (Addleton, 1987). In North America and the Pacific, explorers' names were inscribed over Indigenous territories whose own toponymic systems encoded ecological knowledge, kinship, mobility, and spiritual connections (Stokes, 1999; Shuai et al., 2026). These early studies established an enduring insight: place naming is never a neutral descriptive act, and maps are never politically innocent surfaces.

The second stage, from roughly 2000 to 2015, deepened the field through engagement with cultural memory and spatial justice. Researchers began to treat renaming as a practice of redress and identity reconstruction rather than merely a tool of domination (Alderman, 2000; Kearney et al., 2009). In post-apartheid South Africa and the United States (Alderman, 2003; Guyot and Seethal, 2007; Grounds, 2011), street renaming became a means of reclaiming public space from regimes of institutionalized racial hierarchy (Tretter, 2011; Swanepoel, 2019). In post-socialist Europe, the removal of Soviet-era names expressed a restored longing for pre-socialist national pasts, although it sometimes produced new exclusions (Light, 2004; Marin, 2012; Kadmon, 2013; Light and Young, 2014a). This stage also brought critical toponymy into closer dialogue with heritage studies, memory studies, and urban social movements. It generated a powerful ethical vocabulary—recognition, restitution, counter-mapping, and the right to the city—and made the agency of marginalized groups visible (Thotse, 2010; Light and Light, 2014a; Mamvura et al., 2018). Yet its limitations also became clear. The identity-recognition framework often assumed that a community possessed a single, recoverable voice, even though many naming conflicts involved internal disagreement over whose memory should prevail (Jiang, 2019). Moreover, the framework remained strongly biased toward English and European cases, making it difficult to recognize the specificities of political and cultural conditions elsewhere (Dahamshe, 2022).

The third stage, from the mid-2010s to around 2020, expanded the field's empirical and methodological scope. Researchers documented the commercialization of naming rights, urban neighborhood branding, the erasure of working-class memory through gentrification, and the use of GIS, large datasets, and computational methods in the study of toponymic distribution (Mitchelson et al., 2007; Rusu, 2020; Light and Young, 2014b; Rose-Redwood et al., 2019). This was also the stage at which critical toponymy

became most global in its citation practices. Studies from around the world showed that struggles over naming could not be reduced to a single story of colonial encounter or postcolonial reaction. Yet this diversification did not resolve two persistent blind spots. The first is urban normativity: research has remained overwhelmingly concentrated on the commercialization of naming rights, urban neighborhood branding, the gentrification-driven erasure of working-class memory, and the use of GIS and large datasets. The second is a platform-oriented blind spot: it analyzes digital platforms merely as convenient data sources rather than as constitutive actors in naming itself.

The fourth stage, emerging since about 2020, is the germination of the platform critical toponymy paradigm. To overcome the second blind spot, the platformization of place naming becomes necessary. Platformization refers to the gradual reorganization of cultural, administrative, and economic activities around a relatively small number of digital infrastructures that combine centralized data collection with decentralized content production (Graham, 2007). In the toponymic context, it means that a growing share of naming, searching, reviewing, translating, ranking, and remembering takes place through interfaces controlled by private companies. Platforms do not simply display official maps. Through user-generated neighborhood names, search rankings, review economies, algorithmic translation, targeted advertising, and government data-sharing arrangements, they generate alternative geographies. The result is a proliferation of naming authorities and a diffusion of accountability. When a platform suggests a commercial neighborhood name, mis-translates an Indigenous place name, or removes a contested name from search results, it does more than transmit information. It participates in the distribution of symbolic and material resources. A critical toponymy adequate to this situation cannot stop at the observation that power is everywhere. It must develop concepts that distinguish different forms of power, identify their institutional locations, trace their mutual conversions, and assess their effects on differently positioned groups. This is precisely where Bourdieu's theory of practice, properly extended, becomes indispensable. Its great strength lies in refusing both technological determinism and voluntarist celebration: platforms, states, corporations, and communities are understood as actors embedded in relations of force, but also as producers of classifications that can be challenged.

Toward platform critical toponymy: Extending Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice

The core theoretical move of this article is to extend rather than replace Bourdieu's triad of field, capital, and habitus (Bourdieu, 1990). The classical reading conceives the field as a structured space of positions, capital as cumulative resources that can be deployed and converted, and habitus as a durable but revisable system of dispositions generated by shared conditions of existence. This architecture is especially well suited to toponymic research because naming is at once institutional, material, cultural, and embodied. Names are authorized by law, financed by investment, memorized through education, displayed on signs, searched on platforms, and spoken in daily life. No single disciplinary vocabulary can capture all of these dimensions.

The first extension concerns the field. The toponymic field should not be conceived as a self-enclosed national arena in which the state and civil society occupy fixed positions. It is better understood as a layered and partly porous ecology composed of at least five interdependent sub-fields: the state-administrative field (legislation, standardization, public signage); the market-commercial field (branding, real estate, naming rights); the cultural-heritage field (museums, schools, archives, community organizations); the platform-digital field (maps, applications, algorithms, data contracts); and the local-counter-hegemonic field (oral traditions, graffiti, protest, social media, local usage). These fields are not neatly bounded. A municipal planning bureau may enter the commercial field by auctioning naming rights (Light and Young, 2014b). A platform may enter the heritage field by digitizing archives (Graham, 2007). An Indigenous organization may operate simultaneously in legal, cultural, and platform fields (Native Land Digital, 2025). What matters analytically is not whether boundaries exist, but how actors mobilize the rules of one field to gain advantage in another.

This relational conception avoids two common errors. The first is statism, which assumes that every consequential naming event is the emanation of centralized policy. The second is platformism, which treats digital infrastructure as an autonomous determinant of social life. In practice, platformization often strengthens the state by providing new tools for surveillance and centralized mapping, while simultaneously weakening the state's monopoly by allowing corporations and users to produce competing geographies. The relevant question is therefore one of articulation: in a given naming event, how do platform and local actors align or conflict?

The second extension concerns capital. Bourdieu distinguished economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital, each convertible under specific conditions (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). For toponymic research, it is useful to distinguish five forms. (a) Institutional-political capital: the authority to designate, regulate, and enforce names through legal, planning, or administrative procedures. (b) Economic capital: funds invested in land, infrastructure, advertising, and naming rights. (3) Cultural capital: historical knowledge, linguistic competence, heritage expertise, and curatorial authority. (c) Social capital: networks of trust, community organizations, trans-local solidarities, and political alliances. (d) Platform-symbolic capital: the visibility, ranking, metadata, credibility, and data-derived influence generated through digital infrastructures (Graham, 2007; Kitchin and Dodge, 2011; Plantin, 2018). This fifth form is not synonymous with online attention. It denotes a specific mechanism through which visibility is converted into legitimacy, and legitimacy into economic or political value.

Platform critical toponymy must therefore study not only the accumulation of capital but also its conversion under platform conditions. Cultural capital may be accumulated through academic research, then converted into tourism revenue through platform promotion, and subsequently into political capital when the government adopts it as a symbol of regional identity. Conversely, a commercial name may gain platform visibility through advertising expenditure, then be mistaken by tourists for the official name, and eventually reshape local residents' linguistic habits (Li and Feng, 2015). Every conversion is a site of struggle because it changes who benefits from the name. The key question is not whether conversion occurs—it is inevitable—but whether it is transparent, participatory, and reversible.

The third extension concerns habitus. Classical habitus captures how actors internalize the structure of the field and thereby reproduce or subtly transform it (Bourdieu, 1990). In struggles over Toponyms, however, habitus cannot be reduced to a pre-digital way of being. It is continually reshaped by platform interfaces that favor certain vocabularies, formats, and visual genres; by algorithmic recommendations that determine which names are searchable; by data literacy, which enables some actors to audit rankings while excluding others; and by the affective experience of seeing one's place misrepresented or made visible online. This article therefore proposes the concept of platform-mediated habitus: the practical sense formed through the interaction of cultural memory, economic incentives, and digital mediation.

Platform-mediated habitus explains why groups affected in similar ways often respond differently to the same renaming event. State officials may prioritize readability, administrative consistency, and political branding. Developers may prioritize marketability, novelty, and brand synergy. Long-term residents may prioritize continuity, familiarity, and emotional attachment. Young digital users may prioritize shareability, cosmopolitan distinction, and ironic subversion. Indigenous peoples and minority groups may prioritize linguistic sovereignty, epistemic recovery, and intergenerational transmission (Kearney and Bradley, 2019). None of these responses is simply authentic or inauthentic. Each is a historically formed practical sense that responds to the structured opportunities and constraints of platform society.

Analytical framework: A recursive model of platform-mediated toponymic change

The paradigm consists of six interacting components: layered fields, convertible capital, differentiated habitus, naming practices, recursive effects, and normative evaluation. The underlying logic is as follows: toponymic change arises from the encounter of actors' resources and dispositions within a given field configuration, and its outcomes recursively modify the very fields, capital, and habitus that produced them (Fig. 1). Unlike linear models of renaming, this framework treats causality as circular, contingent, and observable at multiple scales.

The first component is field configuration. Every naming event should be located within a multi-scalar ecology: from the transnational scale—international law, colonial heritage, platform corporations, global tourism—through the national scale—language policy, cultural policy, administrative law—to the regional and local scales: municipal planning, neighborhood history, community networks, and platform use. A layered analysis guards against misleading interpretations. A dispute over a local street renaming that is entangled with national heritage policy and platform visibility cannot be understood merely as a neighborhood disagreement. Conversely, the implementation of a national toponymic policy that depends on municipal financing and local acceptance (Ndlovu and Erasmus, 2026) cannot be reduced to state ideology alone.

The second component is capital structure. Researchers should map not only who holds authority but also what resources each actor can mobilize, how those resources are accumulated, and which

conversions are possible. A key conversion matrix should ask: who converts institutional capital into platform visibility? Who converts cultural capital into economic revenue? Who converts social solidarity into legal or political recognition? Who is denied conversion because of language barriers, lack of archival access, poor connectivity, or limited algorithmic literacy? This matrix brings to light inequalities that remain invisible when one counts only official power or only popular resistance.

The third component is the differentiation of habitus. The framework identifies at least five rationalities: a state-led rationality concerned with readability, identity construction, and administrative order; a market-oriented rationality concerned with brand value, investment, and consumer experience; a community-defensive rationality concerned with memory, attachment, and cultural survival (Shields, 2023); a platform-mediated rationality concerned with ranking, virality, metadata, and user engagement; and an academic counter-hegemonic rationality concerned with evidence, contextual interpretation, and structural critique. These are ideal types rather than fixed identities. A single person may shift between them, and collective actors may combine them strategically.

The fourth component is naming practices themselves. The framework distinguishes four modalities. (a) Lexical reconstruction: the creation or substitution of linguistic forms, including translation, transliteration, exoticization, simplification, and language revitalization. (b) Functional transfer: the transfer of a name from one object, era, or use to another, as when a historical name becomes a tourism brand or a commercial name becomes a public landmark. (c) Contestation of meaning: struggles over commemoration, identity, and historical judgment, including demands to remove names associated with colonialism, racism, dictatorship, or injustice. (d) Platform re-inscription: the editing, geo-tagging, ranking, visual framing, and algorithmic representation of names in digital space (Bucher, 2018). These modalities frequently overlap, and their points of intersection are where the most consequential changes occur.

The fifth component is recursive effects. Toponymic change does not merely reflect power; it reorganizes the conditions of power. Renaming may restructure field rules by changing planning procedures or platform policies. It may redistribute capital by altering a place's visibility and marketability. It may reshape habitus by changing what residents regard as normal, legitimate, or worth remembering. These recursive loops explain why struggles over toponyms often outlive the particular decisions that triggered them. A single street renaming can become a precedent, a tourism brand, a data point, a legal template, or a community tradition.

The sixth component is normative evaluation. A critical paradigm cannot remain purely descriptive. It must assess the legitimacy of place-naming processes against principles that can travel across contexts: transparency of authority and procedure; inclusivity of affected communities; recognition of linguistic and historical diversity; accountability for commercial and algorithmic influences; reversibility where irreversible harm may result; and protection of vulnerable groups from symbolic domination. These principles are not imposed as a universal model. They are intended as deliberative standards that

can be adapted to different constitutional and cultural environments while retaining a shared commitment to spatial justice.

Cross-context applications: Four scenarios of platform-mediated naming

The strength of a paradigm lies in its capacity to generate comparative insight, not in the number of cases it can label. The four cases selected here are not a representative sample; they are a set of contrasting mechanisms. The first is the renaming of a historical prefecture in China in the context of regional tourism development. The second is the platform-assisted recovery of Indigenous toponyms in Canada. The third is the corporate renaming of sports and transport infrastructure in North America and Europe. The fourth is the platform controversy over, and digital recovery of, toponyms in post-apartheid South Africa. Together, they show that platformization operates through different institutional mediations while generating analogous struggles over conversion, visibility, and recognition.

The first case illustrates the conversion of historical-cultural capital into a platform-mediated regional identity. In 1987, the former Huizhou prefecture was administratively renamed Huangshan City (Ji, 2018), after one of China's most iconic mountains. This decision was not a simple act of cultural erasure. It also reflected a strategic effort to consolidate a regional brand, attract investment, and create a legible administrative unit. The historical name Huizhou carries dense cultural capital: commercial history, architectural heritage, scholarly traditions, and a widely recognized regional identity. Its administrative removal threatened to sever important links among place, memory, and institutional continuity. Yet in the decades that followed, Huizhou heritage was not destroyed; it was selectively redeployed. Local governments, tourism operators, and cultural institutions mobilized Huizhou symbolism to add depth and distinction to the Huangshan brand (Ji, 2020). The result is a layered toponymic landscape in which administrative names, global tourism brands, historical regional identities, and platform-generated representations coexist and compete. Platformization has transformed this old tension into a new economy of visibility. Tourism platforms rank attractions, hotels, and experiences on the basis of searchable keywords, customer reviews, and visual content. Huangshan tends to benefit from global recognizability and search-engine optimization, while Huizhou circulates as a marker of cultural distinction among more specialized audiences. This produces a convertible asymmetry: Huangshan gains platform-symbolic capital through mass visibility, while Huizhou gains cultural capital through curatorial and academic legitimacy. The dispute is no longer only about which name is historically accurate. It is about which form of value should be converted into tourism revenue, regional identity, and political recognition. Platform critical toponymy therefore asks not only whether heritage is preserved, but also which heritage is made visible, to whom, under what ranking logic, and with what distributive effects.

The second case concerns the digital recovery of Indigenous toponyms in Canada (Geographical Names Board of Canada, 2025). Across the country, Indigenous communities, researchers, and governments use digital mapping, crowd-sourced databases, and educational platforms to recover names that were

suppressed, misspelled, or replaced during colonization. This is one of the most promising developments in contemporary critical toponymy because it mobilizes platform affordances to redress historical epistemicide. Yet the same infrastructure introduces new risks. Platform naming systems typically require standardized text fields, coordinate precision, and fixed administrative categories, which may be incompatible with Indigenous toponymic practices. Algorithmic translation and geo-coding may reproduce colonial pronunciations. Corporate data governance may prevent communities from controlling how their knowledge is stored, shared, and monetized. Digital visibility may also attract extractive tourism or unwanted state surveillance. The Canadian case thus illustrates both the promise and the limits of platformization. Indigenous organizations mobilize social and cultural capital to challenge official naming authority, while developing community-led digital atlases and language platforms. These initiatives transform naming practice from a one-way act of state recognition into a process of data sovereignty and epistemic restitution (Blockchain for Indigenous Rights International, 2019). At the same time, they reveal that digital tools are not neutral vehicles of liberation. They are fields governed by corporate terms of service, data-protection law, and design conventions. Platform critical toponymy must therefore support Indigenous data-governance principles such as Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (OCAP), while ensuring that digital recovery does not become a substitute for legal recognition, land rights, or substantive self-determination.

The third case is the corporate renaming of sports venues and transport hubs in North America and Europe. Naming-rights contracts have turned stadiums, arenas, and train stations into temporary brand assets whose names change with sponsorship cycles. From a classical critical perspective, this process exemplifies the commodification of public space: corporate capital purchases symbolic visibility, private brands enter residents' everyday language, and collective memory is fragmented by market fluctuations (Berg, 2011; Vuolteenaho et al., 2019). The platform era, however, intensifies this in subtle ways. Teams and sponsors use social media to manufacture consent around rebranding. Platforms monetize search traffic and merchandise through branded toponyms. Fans and users create counter-names, parodies, and digital campaigns that travel far beyond the stadium. This case exposes the asymmetry between institutionalized economic capital and platform-mediated symbolic capital. Sponsors may legally acquire naming rights without automatically converting them into cultural legitimacy. Communities may reject corporate names and continue to use older local forms. Conversely, platform virality may allow a contested name to gain visibility well beyond its actual local acceptance. The key question is not whether corporate naming should be banned, but how to regulate the conversion of public naming rights into private brand equity. Participatory governance (Light and Young, 2014b) may require a public-interest test, mandatory community consultation, revenue redistribution, time limits, protection for names of high historical significance, and transparent disclosure of algorithmic promotion.

The fourth case concerns the platform controversy over, and digital recovery of, toponyms in post-apartheid South Africa. Local governments replace colonial and apartheid-era names with Indigenous leaders and anti-apartheid symbols, sparking contests both online and offline. Conservatives see this as a break with historical continuity, but platform critical toponymy shows that the struggle is co-produced by administrative authority, the algorithmic preference of tourism platforms for "safe" colonial names,

gentrification capital (Reades et al., 2018), and community demands for data sovereignty (Native Land Digital, 2025). Platformization does not automatically decolonize. Platforms such as Google default to colonial cartographic hierarchies, demoting new names to unofficial aliases, while user-generated content inadvertently reinforces old colonial imaginaries (Matthew, 2007; Plantin et al., 2018). Young digital natives and language activists challenge algorithmic inertia through open-source mapping and social media. By crowdsourcing correction databases, promoting Khoisan pronunciation, and creating counter-hegemonic digital memorial spaces, they form a contradictory, platform-mediated habitus (Laxamana and Parker, 2023). State officials emphasize narratives of reconciliation and standardization. Tourism platforms cater to the search habits of international visitors. Oppressed communities demand cognitive restitution and the digitalization of linguistic sovereignty. Global users circulate the struggle as a transnational symbol. This embodies a postcolonial tension. Rather than judging authenticity, research should analyze how actors mobilize institutional, cultural, and platform-symbolic capital to contest naming authority under algorithmic governance, and assess whether this leads toward a just spatial order. Such work requires an interdisciplinary combination of colonial archives, algorithm audits, digital ethnography, and participatory data governance.

Global implications: Toward digital sovereignty in and through naming

The paradigm developed here speaks to global debates because platformization is not confined to any single political system. Its mechanisms operate across different regimes, even when their institutional expressions differ. In liberal democracies, the central tension is often between corporate platform power and pluralistic participation. In state-centric systems, concern may focus on the alignment of state and platform governance. In postcolonial and Indigenous contexts, platformization may reinforce extractive cartography or support epistemic restitution. What these contexts share is the need to reconceive toponyms as infrastructures of recognition rather than merely administrative outputs.

The first global implication is that data sovereignty must become a core concern of toponymy. Place-name databases are rarely neutral repositories. They embed decisions about spelling, language, scale, ownership, accessibility, and update frequency. When states or platforms control these databases without community participation, they may inadvertently reproduce colonial hierarchies. When communities control them, data governance can become a means of cultural survival (Couldry and Ulises, 2019). Future research should support community-owned naming archives, interoperable multilingual datasets, security protocols for sensitive knowledge, and international standards that respect rather than flatten linguistic diversity.

The second implication is that algorithmic accountability must be embedded in toponymic governance. Platforms should disclose how place-name information is ranked, translated, promoted, and corrected. Public institutions should not outsource authoritative naming decisions to proprietary systems with opaque standards. Researchers should develop platform audits that trace how names travel from official designation to search results, and from community usage to tourism representation. Algorithmic

accountability is not an anti-technology stance. It requires that the rules shaping symbolic visibility be contestable, reviewable, and democratically legible (Palese, 2026).

The third implication is that participatory mapping must move from a methodological aspiration to an institutional practice. Participatory mapping can help reconcile the need for standardized way-finding with the recognition of plural histories. Yet participation is easily reduced to consultation after decisions have already been made. More robust approaches involve communities in agenda setting, data production, interpretation, verification, and correction. They also require funding, training, and long-term institutional support rather than one-off workshops. Participation is not legitimate merely because it is inclusive; it is legitimate when it changes the distribution of authority.

The fourth implication is that naming rights should be treated as a qualified public trust. The commercial naming of public infrastructure is not inherently illegitimate. It can finance cultural and social infrastructure. But when naming rights are sold without safeguards, the public loses control over a shared symbolic resource. A balanced framework should distinguish names of high historical and cultural significance, which deserve stronger protection, from ordinary commercial signs, which may be subject to different rules. It should also require contractual transparency, community impact assessments, and renegotiation mechanisms. Finally, the paradigm reframes the relationship between heritage and development. Heritage is often presented either as an obstacle to growth or as a resource to be exploited. Platform critical toponymy proposes a third position: heritage is a relational practice through which communities negotiate continuity under changing conditions. Development need not mean the erasure of historical names, just as preservation need not mean freezing language in an invented past. The key is to ensure that the conversion of heritage into economic value is governed by the principles of reciprocity, accountability, and community benefit. Its normative commitment emphasizes supporting inclusive and participatory processes for the exercise and conversion of naming authority, rather than advocating for a single universal model of naming practice.

Conclusion and discussion

Several emerging lines of research follow. (a) Longitudinal studies should track how names circulate over time across official records, platforms, and everyday usage. (b) Comparative studies should examine how different state-platform arrangements shape naming conflicts in Global North and Global South contexts. (c) Platform audits should investigate the ranking, translation, and monetization of toponymic data. (d) Interdisciplinary approaches should combine archival research, oral history, ethnography, spatial analysis, and computational social science, without allowing any single method to claim an epistemic monopoly. (e) Scholars should collaborate with communities to develop governance models that protect vulnerable groups while supporting the legitimate commercial and creative uses of naming.

The broader significance of platform critical toponymy lies in its contribution to spatial justice. Toponyms are among the smallest units of cultural politics, yet they are also sites where macro-

historical forces become legible in everyday life. To study naming in the platform age is to ask who has the right to make space meaningful, who profits from that meaning, whose language is made visible, and whose knowledge is erased. Also, this study has several limitations. As a reflexive theoretical synthesis, it clarifies the field-capital-habitus extensions that platform critical toponymy requires, yet it does not empirically test how those mechanisms operate in live platform infrastructures. The four cases were chosen for comparative leverage rather than representativeness, and reliance on published English-language sources risks reproducing the very Anglophone and Global North bias the paradigm seeks to diagnose. Future work should ground the framework in longitudinal platform audits, application programming interface (API)-based tracing of ranking and translation outputs, community-led multilingual archives, and co-designed participatory research that lets affected communities, not just published scholarship, calibrate the framework's claims.

Declarations

Ethical Approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by the author.

Informed Consent

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by the author.

Author Contribution

Conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, writing—original draft, writing—review and editing, and funding acquisition: Xiaomei Ji. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Data Availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this research as no data were generated or analyzed.

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Figures

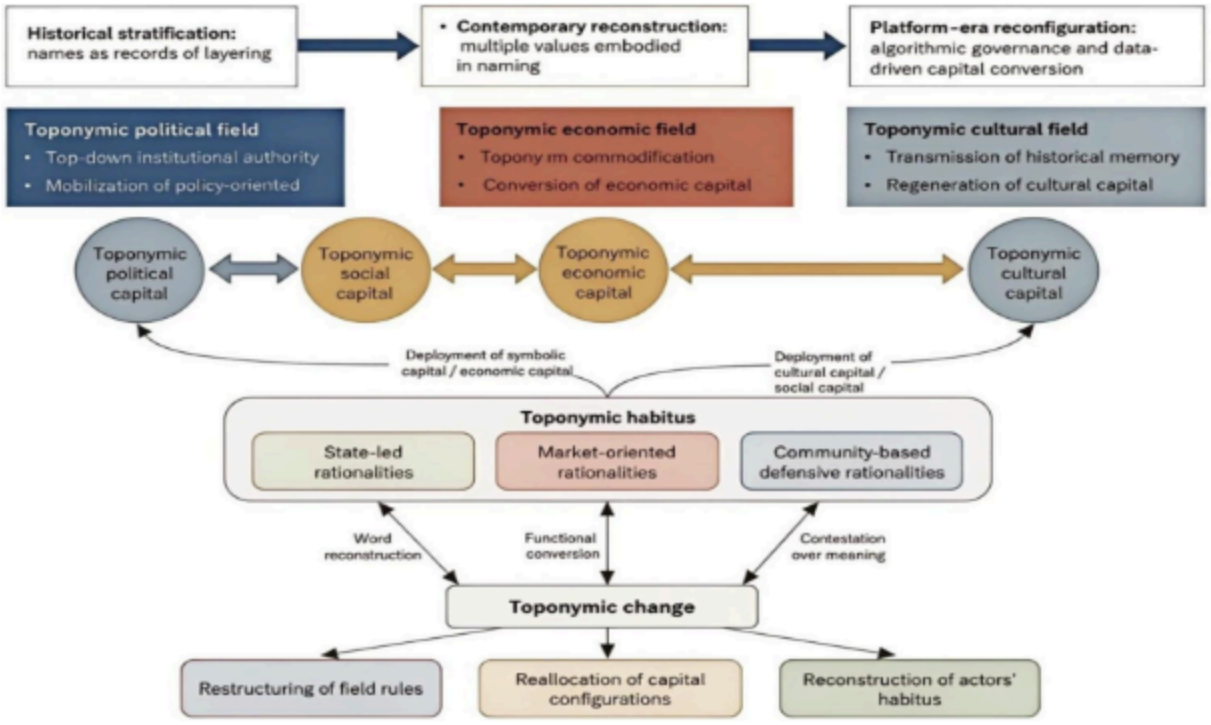


Figure 1

Analytical framework of toponymic change in the platform era