Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication
https://ejournal.ukm.my/mjc
Volume 42(3) 2026: 455-470

Establishing Netnographic Procedures in Studying Chinese Queer Fandoms: A Critical Reflection

WEIWEI CAO*
JAMALUDDIN AZIZ
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Online queer fandom is a prevalent and controversial topic that has attracted scholars' attention in recent years across the interdisciplinary fields of media communication, youth communities, and gender expression. Netnography has been widely used in research on online queer fandom and has contributed to a comprehensive understanding of online queer fan cultures. However, the methodological challenges arise when applying netnography to culturally and politically sensitive contexts. Netnography may carry Western-centred assumptions about online visibility, fan identity, and gender expression, and these assumptions may obscure the understanding of the nuances in queer fandom that are shaped by platform censorship, local gender discourse, and fan culture itself. Therefore, a reflexive approach to netnography is needed for studying online queer fandom in non-Western contexts. Based on previous studies and our own experience of applying netnography in studying Chinese online queer fandom, this study identifies the methodological challenges related to platform governance, coded fan language, internal fan conflicts, and the epistemic authority of scholars. In response to these challenges, we propose four principles for revising netnography: platform literacy, contextual literacy, ethical reflexivity, and discourse-centred, situated interpretation. These principles encourage researchers to approach netnography as a reflexive practice. This study is therefore not only a methodological reflection on the netnographic study of Chinese online queer fandom, but also provides insights for research on other culturally specific, politically sensitive, and platformised digital communities and cultures.

Keywords: *Netnography, online queer fandom, participatory culture, platform censorship, ethical reflexivity.*

INTRODUCTION

In the digital era, online queer fandom has become an important site for scholars to examine how audiences, especially the youth, negotiate gender identity, affect, and media texts in digital environments. "Queer fandom" refers to LGBTQ+ communities and fans engaging in non-normative identity expression and the participatory consumption of queer media content (Llewellyn, 2022; O'Meara, 2024). Therefore, queer fandom is located at the intersection of research on youth community, media, and gender, which reflects the increasingly interdisciplinary development of fan studies (Booth, 2018). Previous research shows that queer fandom can create spaces in which to challenge patriarchal and heteronormative gender norms (Allen, 2022). Since online queer fandom is shaped by platform governance and socio-political context, it may lead to inequalities that relate to social issues (Floegel, 2022). As a result, studying online queer fandom requires in-depth and context-sensitive observation of both the digital practices and related socio-political conditions.

*Corresponding author: p119558@siswa.ukm.edu.my
E-ISSN: 2289-1528
https://doi.org/10.17576/JKMJC-2026-4203-24
Received: 20 May 2026 | Accepted: 15 August 2026 | Published: 30 September 2026

Netnography is frequently used in studies of online queer fandom because of its focus on online communities and related digital practices. As an ethnographic method conducted in online environments, netnography is a qualitative research method specifically designed for the study of online cultures (Kozinets, 2002). Through immersive observation or participation, netnography allows researchers to capture online fan practices with which queer fandom negotiates with hegemonic norms and forms unique cultures (Yang, 2026; de Moura et al., 2026). These research practices can also trace how fan practices evolve alongside technological shifts, such as fans' use of algorithms to promote queer content (Ask & Sihvonen, 2026). Additionally, netnographic and digital ethnographic studies reveal the patterns of queer fan discourse, as well as the affective and digital labour that fans invest in their practices (Canavan, 2021; Wu et al., 2025). Therefore, netnography is a valid and useful method for studying online queer fandom.

However, although netnography is well-suited to the study of online queer fandom, it is not a universal method that can be directly applied across contexts. Indeed, netnography enables researchers to move beyond geographical boundaries and conduct immersive observation within online queer fan communities. This does not mean that researchers are exempt from the influence of geo-cultural and technological factors. When uncritically applied through generalising or Western-centred assumptions, netnography may obscure locally situated meanings and reproduce existing epistemic inequalities within academic discourse (Milan & Treré, 2019; Purnama, 2026). For example, the digital platforms where online queer fans practice is neither neutral nor universal. Platform governance can shape fans' expressions of queer content, and such intervention is often embedded in specific geopolitical contexts. For instance, in the Chinese digital environment, fans who produce queer content have to negotiate with platform censorship mechanisms endorsed by heteronormativity in Chinese society (Ye & Zhao, 2023). Therefore, when studying online queer fandom in specific sociocultural contexts, the use of netnography cannot rely solely on universal methodological assumptions of the online field.

Especially when using netnography to study Chinese online queer fandom, researchers are not dealing with general online communities but with a digital field shaped by multiple factors, including web censorship, local gender discourse, and fans' queer culture. For example, in mainland China, the web censorship is not only a filtering mechanism driven by the state's values, such as heteronormativity and harmony, but also a form of participatory censorship, in which platform reporting functions are internalised by queer fan communities (Wang & Tan, 2023). This form of participatory censorship shapes fans' discursive patterns of gender expression because of the need to avoid being reported and censored. In order to resist content restrictions imposed by censorship mechanisms, fans have developed their own coded languages and subcultural fields that resist both algorithmic and social moderation based on gender norms (Wang, 2026; Ye & Zhao, 2023). Therefore, although netnography provides a valid framework for studying online fandom as a general term, its application to Chinese online queer fandom raises specific methodological challenges for the assumptions that treat online communities as accessible and culturally comparable fields.

Based on these concerns, this research aims to critically examine the methodological challenges of netnography and to propose a reflexive approach for studying Chinese online queer fandom or broader online communities. The research questions are: What methodological challenges emerge when netnography is applied to study specific contextualised online communities like Chinese online queer fandom? How does a specific context complicate the interpretation of queer fan practices? How can netnography be

revised as a more reflexive, culturally sensitive, and ethically responsive method? This research adopts a reflexive methodological critique that combines a selective reading of existing netnographic queer fandom studies with our own research experience of applying netnography to study Chinese online queer fan communities. This study proposes a revised reflexive netnography, which argues that netnography should not be understood as a methodological tool with universal assumptions but as a reflexive, culturally situated, and ethically accountable practice, thus contributing to methodological discussion in queer fandom studies.

LITERATURE REVIEW OR RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Netnography in Online Fandom Studies

Netnography is a qualitative method designed for studying online communities and cultures, and it is suited to the study of online fandom. As an ethnographic approach conducted in online environments, it emphasises researchers' immersive observation, contextual field notes, and ethical engagement (Kozinets, 2002). In online fandom studies, researchers often conduct immersive observations of fan communities, and they may even become members of these communities and participate in fans' communication; thus, they can understand fans' collective identities, affective interaction, and the process of meaning-making (Azzahra & Aras, 2025; Dewi et al., 2024; Perkins, 2010; Salzano et al., 2017). For example, researchers can capture fans' different identity constructions through immersive observation of their discursive styles and levels of community engagement (Perkins, 2010). They observe how fans co-create visual culture through shared media and trace the multi-platform shifts in contemporary fandom (Dewi et al., 2024). Therefore, netnography is recognised in academia as a valid and effective method for studying online fandom.

However, netnographic fandom research may reproduce universalising assumptions that treat online fandom as culturally generalisable and readily interpretable. Such assumptions may overlook culturally situated fan practices by rendering some marginalised digital communities and reproducing existing epistemic hierarchies in digital scholarship by applying Western-centred frameworks (Chen et al., 2024; Purnama, 2026). Additionally, the assumption that fans' interactions and discourse can be generally interpreted through surface-level texts is increasingly challenged by highly localised coded fan language. For example, fans often encode their language based on their knowledge of algorithms and local censorship mechanisms to avoid the attention and observation of outsiders (Wang & Tan, 2023; Wang, 2026), so researchers who do not notice the coded language may neglect important data sources. Therefore, what researchers can observe can be conditioned by platform architecture and fans' strategy to utilise platforms (Yin, 2020). To conclude, contemporary netnographic research on fandom often takes place in digital environments that are localised and technically mediated.

Online Queer Fandom as a Site of Identity, Affect, and Participation

Online queer fandom, as a cultural circle constituted by marginalised fan communities, is an important space for the youth communities to express their gender and sexuality. McInroy and Craig's (2020) research on sexual and gender minority youth shows that online fandom communities contribute to the members' identity development. Additionally, participants in queer fandom may be queer individuals in their offline lives, but they may also be fans who engage with non-normative cultural practices such as creating and reading fan fiction and fan-

re-edited videos, as well as leaving comments or interpretive responses to these cultural productions (Duggan, 2022; McInroy et al., 2022; de Moura et al., 2026). Studies of online queer fandom, such as fan fiction, suggest that these practices can provide spaces for the reworking of heteronormative media texts and queer expressions (Duggan, 2022). Therefore, the fans' queer expression can be both realistic and fictional, which indicates that queer fans' identity is not stable. According to Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (1990), queer fan identities and desires can be understood as performative. The identities are repeatedly produced through fan practices of queer reading and appropriation of media texts. In this sense, online queer fandom offers an important empirical site for examining the subversive potential of contemporary youth culture.

Online queer fandom is also a space where fans build affective attachments of belonging, desire, and intimacy. Through shared media interests and cultural practices of gender expression, such as tagging, fan fiction writing, and collective interpretation, online queer fandom creates affective bonds among fans who recognise one another through similar tastes of non-normative preferences. These bonds help queer fans form community identity and may provide a sense of belonging, especially for young people whose gender or sexual expressions are marginalised by dominant gender norms (Kumar, 2021; Thomson et al., 2021). Also, the queer fans produce emotional meanings around media texts and characters that express their desire and emotional attachment towards celebrities or cultural productions. For example, research on Chinese real-person slash fandom shows that fans' emotional investment can become a form of digital labour which generates affective value for their community and makes the fandom's commercial value visible for the stakeholders in the entertainment industry (Wu et al., 2025). In this sense, online queer fandom offers a crucial site for studying fans' affect investment and related digital labour.

As a form of participatory culture, online queer fandom demonstrates that fans are active participants in reproducing media content instead of passive consumers. Based on Jenkins's theory of textual poachers (2012) and participatory culture (2015), fans rewrite and reinterpret media texts, which function as participatory practices to co-create cultural productions. These practices indicate that fandom can be understood as a creative space where fans construct community, queer cultures, and unique discourses. This perspective has been widely applied in studies of online queer fandom (Duggan, 2022; McInroy et al., 2022; Wang & Tan, 2023; Zheng, 2024). For example, research on online fandom communities argues that community-generated LGBTQ+ content functions as a space where fans produce alternative forms of queer visibility (McInroy et al., 2022). Similarly, studies of fan fiction show that these fan-generated texts provide readers possibilities for constructing imagined identity and self-understanding beyond gender norms. However, these queer contents are shaped by regionally specific negotiations with media censorship and commercialisation (Duggan, 2022; Wang & Tan, 2023). Therefore, online queer fandom is an important research object of the studies of media, culture, and gender because it not only reveals how fans as participants actively produce alternative content but also how their practices are shaped by structuralised inequalities, platform control, and commercial exploitation.

These previous studies suggest that online queer fandom is located at the intersection of media studies, cultural studies, and gender studies and has been established in existing scholarship as a valid and productive empirical site. As a research method designed to investigate online communities and related cultural practices, netnography is therefore well-suited to examining fans' interactions and creation and negotiation of queer content. Its wide application in fandom research further supports its relevance for studying digital queer

fandom. However, in the process of conducting netnography, the understanding of online queer fandom needs to be contextualised because it is shaped by specific platforms and socio-political conditions.

Platform Governance, Coded Language, and Ethical Considerations in Digital Culture Research

Online fields are shaped by platform governance and the coded language of certain communities, which complicate the use of netnography. First, netnography often relies on online traces that are already filtered or amplified by digital platforms. Digital platforms are not neutral containers because their affordances, algorithms, content moderation, and commercial logics decide whether the content is visible or not (Gillespie, 2018). Studies of digital platform governance show that platforms can manipulate the access or visibility of user-generated content through algorithms and regulations (Zeng & Kaye, 2022). Second, users in digital communities often construct coded language to avoid platform filtering and to make boundaries against outsiders (Sullivan et al., 2025; Ye & Zhao, 2023). For example, Ye and Zhao (2023) identified Weibo users' language coding practices to "evade detection" and "expand interpretability" under Chinese web censorship. Additionally, research on digital culture may raise ethical issues when accessing public online data. Although some content is technically public, the publicity does not mean permission for direct quotation. Especially in sensitive communities, exposing online traces may produce vulnerability and misunderstanding. Thus, consideration of privacy and harm is emphasised when conducting netnographic methodology (Demant & Moretti, 2024; Wang & Liu, 2021).

To conclude, conducting netnography requires researchers' contextual engagement and methodological adjustment (Costello et al., 2017; Kessler et al., 2023). However, the discussions about revising netnography are rarely systematically integrated into the netnography application for Chinese online queer fandom, where platform censorship, local gender discourse, fan-coded language, and ethical risks intersect. This research gap suggests the need for a reflexive netnographic approach that positions the researchers not as neutral observers but as cultural translators and knowledge producers whose positions, academic literacy, and ethical decisions shape how Chinese online queer fandom is represented in academic research.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a reflexive methodological critique to examine the challenges of applying netnography to Chinese online queer fandom. Instead of conducting a traditional netnography to analyse a specific queer fandom, this study critically reflects on the process and performance of using netnography in queer fandom studies, particularly in Chinese digital space, which is shaped by platform censorship, sociopolitical constraints, and fan cultures (Huang, 2025; Ye & Zhao, 2023; Zheng, 2024). This reflection emerged from our own research experience of methodological uncertainties and challenges when navigating how to validly and ethically engage with culturally situated and platform-regulated queer fan communities, because their practices complicate the conventional netnographic assumptions about what can be accessed, observed, and interpreted online (Wang et al., 2026; Wang & Tan, 2023). This reflexive methodological critique is based on two types of materials. The first is a selective critical reading of how netnography has been used in existing studies relevant to online queer fandom and netnography itself. The second is our own experience of long-term observation and research on Chinese online queer fandom. The purpose is not to produce a

comprehensive empirical mapping of research or a systematic literature review of Chinese online queer fandom, but to identify methodological problems and propose a revised reflexive netnography.

Chinese Online Queer Fandom as a Productive Case

Chinese online queer fandom is used here as a methodological case to critically examine the challenges of conducting netnography. First, Chinese online queer fandom is situated in multiple marginalisations. It emerges from a non-Western context, and even though the online queer fandom is in the context of mainland China, it is marginalised by heteronormativity and by mainstream fan culture under hegemonic gender discourse (Yang & Xu, 2016; Yin & Xie, 2024). This indicates that Chinese online queer fan communities can be understood as sensitive communities. If netnographic research is based on the assumption that online spaces are simply public and freely observable, the application of netnography may generate offence or harm to sensitive communities that are studied (Demant & Moretti, 2024). Second, Chinese digital platforms enforce web censorship and content moderation endorsed by state hegemonic gender discourse, such as heteronormativity, so Chinese online queer fandom does not simply resist censorship but also negotiates with or even cooperates with censorship to "survive" (Zheng, 2024).

Also, in response to these multiple marginalisations, Chinese queer fans also construct coded language to communicate with community members and to negotiate visibility with platforms (Ye & Zhao, 2023). This kind of queer fandom requires researchers' understanding of the fans' linguistic codes and the related meanings of their language. On the one hand, the Chinese online environment as a field is complicated by queer fans' interaction with platform censorship mechanisms under the pressure of content filtering and deletion, which is different from the assumption of an open and liberating online world. On the other hand, Chinese online queer fandom is a culturally specific and politically sensitive site shaped by platform governance, local gender discourse, and fans' coded language. Therefore, Chinese online queer fandom brings together methodological challenges, thus offering a productive case to reflect on the assumption limitations and necessary revision of netnography.

Sources of Methodological Reflection

This reflexive methodological critique is informed by two main sources: a selective reading of existing netnographic studies about online fandom and our own netnographic engagement with Chinese online queer fandom. In reading existing studies, this study does not focus primarily on their empirical findings but on how netnographic methods are used. Specifically, it examines how scholars define their research objects (specific online fandoms), how these objects are situated within particular sociocultural media contexts, how data are collected and analysed, and whether the studies demonstrate sufficient awareness of contextualisation. These sources help reveal and examine the assumptions and challenges involved in netnographic research, and they provide the basis for reflecting on the second type of material. The second type of material includes our netnographic research experience on Chinese online queer fandom, including immersive observation and participation of platformised queer fan cultures. Our netnographic practice process reveals the difficulties of discovering, interpreting, and representing queer fandom in a censored, platformised, and culturally specific digital environment. These two sources allow the research to reconsider netnography as a situated and reflexive research practice rather than a fixed methodology.

This study adopts a reflexive thematic methodological analysis to discuss the two types of material. In the analytical process, the materials are examined through a set of methodological questions of content visibility, fan identity, interpretation, and research ethics: What does netnography assume about online visibility? How does it define queer fan communities and participation? How is fan-generated content interpreted? How is public online data ethically used? How does the researcher's positionality shape interpretation? Through these questions, this study critically and thematically identifies the challenges and problems currently faced by netnographic research on online queer fandom and aims to propose corresponding methodological adjustments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses the methodological challenges that emerged from applying netnography to the study of Chinese online queer fandom. Chinese online queer fandom is shaped not only by platform governance and censorship but also by coded fan language, internal fandom boundaries, and unstable expectations of privacy and visibility. What researchers encounter on digital platforms is visible content shaped by platform mechanisms, fan practices, and community-specific norms, and how the queer fandom is presented relies on the researcher's positionality. The following discussion examines the challenges of conducting netnography in studying such a complicated digital field. Therefore, this study suggests that the application of netnography should be reconsidered in relation to specific sociocultural and platform contexts; thus, it is necessary to revise netnography as a reflexive, culturally situated, and ethically responsive practice.

Methodological Challenges in Applying Netnography to Chinese Online Queer Fandom

a. Platform Governance and the Limited Digital Expression

When conducting netnography, the assumption that digital platforms are open and liberating spaces is challenged, especially when the context is closely related to local platform censorship mechanisms. In the Chinese online environment, the visibility of content is manipulated by web censorship and algorithmic visibility of digital platforms (Ye & Zhao, 2023; Yin & Xie, 2024; Zeng & Kaye, 2022). Based on our research experience, when searching keywords on Weibo, researchers may miss certain terms because fans often use abbreviations, homophones, or deliberate misspellings to protect queer content from being deleted or filtered (Ye & Zhao, 2023). Also, Weibo posts removed through sensitive word filtering or users' reporting usually no longer appear in search results. Sometimes, fans' reposts may be searched, but the original post has already been deleted, especially in discussions of sensitive topics such as explicit sexual content or political issues. Therefore, omission of research data may be caused not only by content deletion through platform censorship but also by fans' deliberate reduction of visibility to avoid deletion. Conversely, since fans often make use of platform algorithms and engage in traffic-oriented reposting and commenting (Yin, 2020), some posts with repetitive reposts and comments may be pushed to the top of search recommendations. These algorithmically privileged contents may form a dominant discourse, but this does not necessarily mean that they are the most representative materials for research.

In this sense, in the Chinese online environment, queer fandom is not naturally or fully visible. Platform censorship and recommendation mechanisms both shape the visibility of content of queer fandom. What researchers encounter is the visible content that has already

been filtered through platform mechanisms and the invisible content that has been coded by fans. Researchers may mistakenly assume that what is invisible is non-existent, or rely on visible engagement metrics, such as the number of reposts, likes, and comments, to make purposive sampling. Therefore, the first challenge for netnography is that the digital field may not be a freely accessible and fully observable space but has already been shaped by platform governance, which determines what becomes visible and searchable.

b. Coded Fan Culture and the Threshold of Ethical Access and Interpretation

Queer fans' coded language shows that researchers' access to online communities is not only technical but also cultural access (Forberg & Schilt, 2023). Even if researchers can enter the field, this does not mean that they can fully understand the queer fandom within the field. Chinese queer fans often construct coded language not only to negotiate with web censorship endorsed by heteronormativity but also to make boundaries of fan communities (Wang, 2024; Ye & Zhao, 2023). As a result, the coded language that reflects heteronormative norms, censorship pressure, and internal fan knowledge can only be clearly understood by fans within certain communities. For example, fans often pair same-sex characters or celebrities and create specific names for the pairings, such as 巍澜 (Weilan), referring to the pairings of two male protagonists in a TV series adapted from Chinese *danmei* (Boys' Love) fiction, Guardian (2018). However, the fans do not explicitly label or tag the names as same-sex romantic relationships in the queer content they released on social media platforms, which shows the ambiguous attitudes of Chinese society towards queer content (Song, 2024).

Additionally, fans produce memes derived from their queer readings of cultural products or from celebrities' own interviews. Some memes with seemingly simple captions circulate frequently in queer fans' everyday communication, such as "From that moment on, I felt something was not quite right," a celebrity's joking remark that fans have interpreted as his awareness of fans' pairing between himself and another same-sex celebrity. As researchers entering the field, we may not always immediately recognise the intertextual references or source material behind fans' queer expressions. This may not only lead to omissions during data collection but also result in misinterpretations of fan discourse.

Coded fan language also implies internal negotiations, conflicts, and boundary-making among queer fan communities. Although previous research on Chinese online queer fandom mainly focused on the conflicts between queer fans and platform governance as an external censorship (Wang, 2026; Wang & Tan, 2023; Zheng, 2024), conflicts also operate within fandom because fan communities cannot be understood as a homogeneous whole. For example, existing studies have observed that some fans may be solo fans of a particular celebrity and have conflicts with CP (couple pairing) fans who pair this celebrity with another same-sex celebrity (Wang & Ge, 2023; Zhou et al., 2023). Moreover, based on our research experience, CP fandom itself is internally differentiated. Not every fan equally likes both celebrities or characters in a pairing. For instance, in a top-bottom patterned pairing, some fans may support only one side of the pairing and instrumentalise the other, becoming solo fans of the top or the bottom. These different fan positions even lead to intense conflicts. Such nuances have rarely been fully addressed in previous studies, and overlooking them may result in vague categorisation or misinterpretation of fan communities.

When we first entered the field, we also carried a generalised assumption of fan communities as treating them as a whole. This assumption was corrected after more sustained and in-depth observation of queer fans' boundary-making through coded language. The internal boundaries within fandom show that fan interactions and discourses are shaped

by specific positions, preferences, and affective investments. A generalised interpretation not only reveals a lack of understanding of fan culture but may also offend fans. If researchers are unfamiliar with the coded language that indicates the boundaries within fandom, they may misclassify fan identities and violate fans' own understandings of privacy. So, such a possible misinterpretation is not merely an analytical error but also can become an ethical problem in the sensitive queer fan communities.

In terms of queer fans' understanding of privacy, the boundary between public and private in queer fandom is unstable and context-dependent. Some fan-produced content may be publicly posted, but this does not mean that fans expect it to be exposed in academic spaces. This content is often produced for queer fandom's internal communication, especially when it involves expressions of queer desire or sexual innuendo as sensitive topics. For example, we observed that in Chinese online queer fandom, some fans occupy multiple identities as both solo fans and queer fans of celebrities. These fans may emphasise the principle of "keeping the fantasy within a circle" (Zhang, 2021) and do not want queer fantasies to be publicly visible and disturb the celebrities, since these fantasies subvert the mainstream social discourse of heteronormativity. Meanwhile, queer fans may promote queer content's visibility to the public. For instance, CP pairing that has gained broader public visibility and popularity is regarded as valuable by queer fandom. In this sense, publicly available does not necessarily mean ethically available, while community-specific does not necessarily mean circulation-resistant. To conclude, the second challenge of using netnography is not only accessing the data but also understanding the cultural codes, fandom boundaries, and ethical expectations behind it.

c. Researcher Interpretation, Positionality, and Epistemic Power

The final challenge is the researcher's interpretive authority in defining fan identities, translating local concepts, and producing academic knowledge about online queer fandom, which may lead to power inequalities between researchers and the queer fans. First, some studies of queer fandom tend to connect queer fan practices with fans' real-life LGBTQ+ identities (Fielding, 2020). This seems to produce a "common sense" that fans' online identities and offline identities are separate but strongly connected, or even correspond to each other. When we initially defined "queer fandom," we also used the term "queer" through its conventional definition that largely originated from a Western-centred context and assumed that it might indicate fans' real-life sexual or gender identities. However, in the Chinese digital context, fan identities may be multiple, fluid and performative. For example, a fan may have heterosexual romantic fantasies about a celebrity while also engaging in queer readings of the romantic relationship between that celebrity and another celebrity of the same gender. This does not mean that the fan has a fixed sexual orientation in real life, whether normative or non-normative. Although theories and concepts of queer and fan studies originating from a Western-centred context are valuable as shared academic languages, they cannot be directly applied to different sociocultural contexts, such as Chinese online queer fandom. The issue is about how the theories and concepts are localised and critically adjusted in relation to Chinese digital fan fandom (Tang, 2023).

Additionally, fans may be resistant to scholarly identities and academic outputs (Fiesler & Proferes, 2018). Scholars collect and analyse data, and make publications, therefore holding power in interpreting data and producing knowledge. However, fans may not have equal opportunities to respond or correct how their culture is represented in academic

publications, so the research communication is not two-way. In other words, scholars may unintentionally create an epistemic hierarchy when they translate fan culture into academic knowledge, while fans have limited participation in this process. During our online fieldwork, we observed that some queer fans discussed particular fandom phenomena and their related academic publications on social media platforms. A considerable number of these fans mentioned that they did not fully understand academic studies or felt that scholars had misinterpreted fan practices. But these views are difficult to communicate back to scholars through channels of equal dialogue.

When we engaged in participant observation and positioned ourselves as members of the fan community, we became better able to understand why some fans were resistant to what they perceived as "misreadings" in academic publications. For instance, some studies on Nisu culture, a practice that became increasingly visible in Chinese online queer fandom in the 2020s, may initially define it in relatively simple terms as the gender reversal of male celebrities or characters (Guo, 2025; Hu et al., 2023). However, for Nisu fans, Nisu does not merely mean gender swap, and some fans may even reject the idea that Nisu should be understood merely as feminisation. These subtle differences in definition often create a disconnect between academic research and actual fan practices, which may lead fans to question whether scholars really understand queer culture. Therefore, the researcher's positionality is a question of epistemic responsibility.

A Revised Reflexive Netnography

The methodological challenges require the application of netnography to be revised as a reflexive practice of platform literacy, contextual literacy, ethical reflexivity, and discourse-centred and situated interpretation. First, platform literacy requires researchers to understand how platforms manipulate what can be said, seen, and circulated (Duffy & Meisner, 2023). In other words, when entering an online field, researchers need to understand platform governance, affordances, and mechanisms of visibility. These factors not only determine where researchers can find the needed data but also help explain how queer fandom is shaped differently across specific platforms. For example, if a study aims to observe sexually sensitive topics in Chinese online queer fandom, Weibo bot accounts that function as anonymous forums may be an appropriate data source (Wang, 2026). By contrast, for studies needing data of fans' queer image-text re-creations, LOFTER may be a more suitable data source (Zhang, 2025). Therefore, when conducting netnography, researchers need not only to know the platforms' governance, affordances, and visibility but also to understand how the platforms are positioned within a specific fandom.

Second, researchers need to develop contextual literacy and continuously evaluate potential ethical issues. Researchers should understand coded language, local gender discourses, fandom boundaries, and internal negotiations within fandom. During long-term immersive observation or participation in queer fandom, researchers should comprehensively understand the sociocultural contexts and fan discourse and fandom conflicts, as well as the community-specific understandings of offensive content and shared common sense (Song, 2024; Wang & Tan, 2023; Ye & Zhao, 2023). In other words, contextual literacy requires researchers to understand not only what fans say, but also how, why, and where they say it. In this process, researchers also need to engage in continuous ethical reflection and situate netnography within specific fan communities' expectations of content visibility and their privacy (Demant & Moretti, 2024). It is necessary to continuously evaluate whether data should be directly quoted, whether reverse searchability should be avoided,

and whether translation preserves original meanings. Also, researchers can adopt strategies such as anonymisation, paraphrasing, and composite description to protect the fans' privacy. Therefore, ethical decisions in netnography should be based on how visibility, searchability, and exposure are understood within the specific fan community.

Finally, in response to the challenge of researchers' defining fan identities and interpretation of queer fan-produced content, we argue that revised netnography can move from identity extraction to discourse-centred interpretation. A discourse-centred approach allows researchers to examine queer fandom without defining fans merely by translating local practices into pre-existing Western concepts of queer identities in this research field (Zhao, 2021). Since the identities of digital queer fans, especially Chinese queer fans, are often uncertain and fluid (Zhou et al., 2023), researchers should avoid making absolute claims about "who these fans are" but focus on "how these discourses operate" by analysing how queer fan discourse is produced, circulated, and negotiated. This approach enables research on online queer fandom to better respond to non-Western sociocultural contexts.

In the process of interpretation, researchers also need to reflect on their own positionality and academic power. As discussed above, scholars may unintentionally create an epistemic hierarchy, which may offend fans and prevent their voices from being heard. This requires scholars to reduce such power inequalities through sustained immersion, cultural understanding, and respect when conducting netnography. Jenkins (2006) uses the term "aca-fan" (a combination of "academic" and "fan") to describe a researcher who also participates in the fandom they study. In this study, an aca-fan position refers to our prior participation in Chinese digital queer fandom, which provides insider knowledge of culturally situated fan identities, coded language, and community expectations of privacy. Zhou and Zhang (2026) similarly identify aca-fandom as an ethical and interpretive position in netnographic research on Chinese *danmei* fandom. However, this position also requires reflexivity. As participants in queer fan culture, aca-fan researchers may reduce the power imbalance between scholars and fans, as they can give voice to fans in their academic publications (Hansal & Gunderson, 2020). However, researchers' fan identity should be handled carefully. We recognised that our fannish identities could shape the selection and interpretation of data in ways that were not immediately apparent to us, which may limit our critical distance and introduce unacknowledged interpretive biases. Therefore, although an aca-fan position can help eliminate the distance between researcher and fandom and make this distance and interpretive power visible, researchers should apply this position carefully and try to balance the two identifications as both researchers and fans.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this study redefines netnography as a contextualised, ethically grounded, and reflexive practice for future research on online queer fandom or broader communities. We argue that netnography remains valuable for studying online queer fandom, but its application to culturally specific queer fandom requires critical revision. This study shows that queer fandom is shaped by platform affordances and governance, local gender discourses, and fan cultural practices. So the queer expressions that are often used as research data are frequently platformised and culturally coded (Duffy & Meisner, 2022). Therefore, netnography cannot rely on universal assumptions about the accessibility, visibility, and interpretability of online fandom. Based on previous studies and our own research experience, this study identifies four methodological challenges: platform censorship and

algorithms that shape the visibility of data; coded fan language rooted in local sociocultural contexts that requires researchers to decode meaning; internal fan negotiations and expectations of visibility that complicate research ethics; and the epistemic authority of scholars, which may produce power inequalities and misinterpretations. In response to these challenges, we propose four principles for revising netnography: platform literacy, contextual literacy, ethical reflexivity, and discourse-centred, situated interpretation. These principles encourage researchers to approach netnography as a reflexive practice of understanding and interpreting digital queer fandom or broader communities within specific sociocultural and platform contexts.

This study is therefore not only a methodological reflection on the netnographic study of Chinese online queer fandom but also offers insights for research on other culturally specific and platformised digital communities. Methodologically, it revises netnography as a reflexive practice. Empirically, it demonstrates how Chinese online queer fandom is shaped by platform governance, coded language, intra-fandom negotiations, and unstable expectations of visibility. Theoretically, it shifts the analysis of queer fandom from identity-centred to discourse-centred interpretation, allowing researchers to examine how queer content is produced and negotiated instead of identifying queer fans in a non-Western context through Western-centred frameworks. However, this study also has limitations. Its methodological reflection is mainly grounded in the researchers' experience of studying Chinese online queer fandom. Therefore, the proposed reflexive netnography is not a universal model applicable to all forms of online fandom. Nevertheless, it could be understood as a situated methodological reflection that offers possible insights for studies of digital culture and communities. Further studies may examine how reflexive netnography can be developed in other contexts and how netnography can be combined with other methods to address the complexity of digital communities better.

BIODATA

Weiwei Cao is a PhD candidate at the Centre for Research in Media and Communication, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, 43600 UKM Bangi, Selangor. Her research areas include fandom, gender, media and popular culture. Email: p119558@siswa.ukm.edu.my

Jamaluddin Aziz (PhD) is an Associate Professor in Critical Media Studies at the Centre for Research in Media and Communication, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, 43600 UKM Bangi, Selangor. His areas of research interest include media and culture, critical theories, gender, screen studies, discourse analysis, digital and environmental humanities. Email: jaywalk@ukm.edu.my

REFERENCES

Allen, A. K. (2022). It's not my fault I help girls realize they're lesbians: Compulsory homosexuality as communication in online Wentworth fandom. In R. O'Meara, T. Dwyer, S. Taylor, & C. Batty (Eds.), *TV transformations and transgressive women: From Prisoner: Cell Block H to Wentworth* (pp. 363–392). Peter Lang. https://doi.org/10.3726/b15823

Ask, K., & Sihvonen, T. (2026). Memefication of game fandom on TikTok: Playful engagements with sounds, bodies, and algorithmic affordances. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, *47*. https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2026.2911

Azzahra, C. G., & Aras, M. (2025). Construction of social reality in Korean pop culture fan community: A netnography study on Instagram and Twitter. *Fashion, Style & Popular Culture*. https://doi.org/10.1386/fspc_00353_1

Booth, P. (Ed.). (2018). *A companion to media fandom and fan studies*. Wiley. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119237211

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203824979

Canavan, B. (2021). Post-postmodern consumer authenticity, shantay you stay or sashay away? A netnography of RuPaul's Drag Race fans. *Marketing Theory*, *21*(2), 251–276. https://doi.org/10.1177/1470593120985144

Chen, Z. T., Cameron, J., & Liu, N. X. (2024). Fandom as method: Decolonising research on social media communications through Chinese transnational fandoms of a Japanese Olympic figure skater. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, *53*(3), 402–427. https://doi.org/10.1177/18681026241255134

Costello, L., McDermott, M.-L., & Wallace, R. (2017). Netnography: Range of practices, misperceptions, and missed opportunities. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *16*(1), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917700647

de Moura, V., Moura, B. M., de Souza-Leão, A. L. M., & Hermann, V. (2026). Toot or boot? Drag celebrification and fannish performativity in the Brazilian RuPaul's Drag Race fandom. *Brazilian Administration Review*, *23*(1), e250131. https://doi.org/rqh8

Demant, J., & Moretti, A. (2024). Intrusiveness and the public-private divide in netnography: A situated, structured approach for ethical research in the context of closed, group-based, or hidden social media behavior. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *23*, 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069241257937

Dewi, A. K., Febriana, P., Sinduwiatmo, K., & Togayev, S. S. (2024). Visual culture in boyband K-pop: Netnographic insights into global fan communities. *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Advanced Research in Social and Economic Science (ICARSE 2023)* (pp. 276–288). Atlantis Press. https://doi.org/rqh9

Duffy, B. E., & Meisner, C. (2023). Platform governance at the margins: Social media creators' experiences with algorithmic (in)visibility. *Media, Culture & Society*, *45*(2), 285–304. https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437221111923

Duggan, J. (2022). Worlds . . . [of] contingent possibilities: Genderqueer and trans adolescents reading fan fiction. *Television & New Media*, *23*(7), 703–720. https://doi.org/gqphgn

Fielding, D. M. (2020). Queernormativity: Norms, values, and practices in social justice fandom. *Sexualities*, *23*(7), 1135–1154. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460719884021

Fiesler, C., & Proferes, N. (2018). Participant perceptions of Twitter research ethics. *Social Media + Society*, *4*(1), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118763366

Floegel, D. (2022). Porn bans, purges, and rebirths: The biopolitics of platform death in queer fandoms. *Internet Histories*, *6*(1–2), 90–112. https://doi.org/gn6qnh

Forberg, P., & Schilt, K. (2023). What is ethnographic about digital ethnography? A sociological perspective. *Frontiers in Sociology*, *8*, Article 1156776. https://doi.org/gsw7s5

Gillespie, T. (2018). *Custodians of the internet: Platforms, content moderation, and the hidden decisions that shape social media*. Yale University Press. https://doi.org/hrs5

Guo, Q. (2025). Nisu reconfiguration: Establishing gender-reversed fan-celebrity fantasies in Chinese society. *Feminist Media Studies*, *25*(4), 827–842. https://doi.org/p7md

Hansal, S., & Gunderson, M. (2020). Toward a fannish methodology: Affect as an asset. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, *33*. https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2020.1747

Hu, T., Zou, C., & Wang, E. N. (2023). A male idol becoming a girl? Nisu fans' sexual fantasy about male stars. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, *41*. https://doi.org/rqjc

Huang, B. (2025). A Chinese queer subtitling community's digital visibility management: An alternative approach. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, *31*(3), 898–916. https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565251335414

Jenkins, H. (2006). *Fans, bloggers, and gamers: Exploring participatory culture*. New York University Press.

Jenkins, H. (2012). *Textual poachers: Television fans and participatory culture* (20th anniversary ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203114339

Jenkins, H., Ito, M., & boyd, d. (2015). *Participatory culture in a networked era: A conversation on youth, learning, commerce, and politics*. John Wiley & Sons.

Kessler, M., Marino, F., & Liska, D. (2023). Netnographic research ethics in applied linguistics: A systematic review of data collection and reporting practices. *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics*, *2*(3), Article 100082. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rmal.2023.100082

Kozinets, R. V. (2002). The field behind the screen: Using netnography for marketing research in online communities. *Journal of Marketing Research*, *39*(1), 61–72. https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkr.39.1.61.24390

Kumar, S. (2021). 'Carmilla' fandom as a lesbian community of feeling. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, *36*. https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2021.2007

Llewellyn, A. (2022). A space where queer is normalized: The online world and fanfictions as heterotopias for WLW. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *69*(13), 2348–2369. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2021.1940012

McInroy, L. B., & Craig, S. L. (2020). It's like a safe haven fantasy world: Online fandom communities and the identity development activities of sexual and gender minority youth. *Psychology of Popular Media*, *9*(2), 236–246. https://doi.org/pq5m

McInroy, L. B., Zapcic, I., & Beer, O. W. J. (2022). Online fandom communities as networked counterpublics: LGBTQ+ youths' perceptions of representation and community climate. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, *28*(3), 629–647. https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211032377

Milan, S., & Treré, E. (2019). Big data from the South(s): Beyond data universalism. *Television & New Media*, *20*(4), 319–335. https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476419837739

O'Meara, D. (2024). Mainstreaming gays: Critical convergences of queer media, fan cultures, and commercial television, Eve Ng (2023) [Review of the book *Mainstreaming gays: Critical convergences of queer media, fan cultures, and commercial television*, by E. Ng]. *Journal of Digital Media & Policy*, *15*(1), 134–135. https://doi.org/rqjf

Perkins, A. (2010). Identification in popular music: A netnographic exploration of online fan communities. *Proceedings of the Australian and New Zealand Marketing Academy Conference*. http://anzmac2010.org/proceedings/pdf/anzmac10Final00030.pdf

Purnama, D. H. (2026). The virtual identity and global epistemic inequality on social media: A reflective bibliometric analysis. *Cogent Social Sciences*, *12*(1), Article 2629632. https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2026.2629632

Salzano, D., Addeo, F., Napoli, A., & Esposito, M. (2017). Paideia between online and offline: A netnographic research on fan fiction communities. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, *9*(3), 207–235. https://doi.org/10.14658/PUPJ-IJSE-2017-3-9

Song, Q. (2024). Translational queer fandom under "han-xu" politics in China: A case study of the Wanwan subtitling group. *Linguistica Antverpiensia, New Series – Themes in Translation Studies*, *23*. https://doi.org/10.52034/lans-tts.v23i.784

Sullivan, J., Zuser, T., & Bi, W. (2025). Discursive expression of football fandom in China: Language, creativity and digital community. *Soccer & Society*, *26*(3), 533–545. https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2024.2446856

Tang, J. L. (2023). Shipping on the edge: Negotiations of precariousness in a Chinese real-person shipping fandom community. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, *26*(3), 293–309. https://doi.org/10.1177/13678779231159148

Thomson, R., Bragg, S., O'Riordan, K., Asaleh, K., Gahnstrom, R., & McGeeney, E. (2021). *Digital intimacies and LGBT+ youth: Celebration, equity and safety* (Version 1). University of Sussex. https://doi.org/10.20919/9780995786264

Wang, D., & Liu, S. (2021). Doing ethnography on social media: A methodological reflection on the study of online groups in China. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *27*(8–9), 977–987. https://doi.org/10.1177/10778004211014610

Wang, E. N. (2024). Participatory censorship with illusory empowerment: Algorithmic folklore and interpretive labor beyond fandom. *Social Media + Society*, *10*(4), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051241295800

Wang, E. N., & Ge, L. (2023). Fan conflicts and state power in China: Internalised heteronormativity, censorship sensibilities, and fandom police. *Asian Studies Review*, *47*(2), 355–373. https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2022.2112655

Wang, S., Wang, N.-C., & Lee, W.-C. (2026). Methodological and ethical considerations in LGBTQ-focused online ethnographic research: A systematic review and a human-centered framework. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *25*, 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069251411167

Wang, Y. (2026). Queer bots of their own? The digital toilet girls, boys' love vernacular, and online censorship in China. *Feminist Media Studies*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2026.2660245

Wang, Y., & Tan, J. (2023). Participatory censorship and digital queer fandom: The commercialization of boys' love culture in China. *International Journal of Communication*, *17*, 2554–2572.

Wu, G., Jiang, J., & Wang, X. (2025). Dual exploitation and the long tail effect: The affective labor of Chinese real person slash fan production. *Television & New Media*, *26*(6), 719–735. https://doi.org/10.1177/15274764251324474

Yang, L., & Xu, Y. (2016). Danmei, Xianqing, and the making of a queer online public sphere in China. *Communication and the Public*, *1*(2), 251–256. https://doi.org/gr55cc

Yang, S. L. (2026). Queer survivalscapes under platformisation: Navigating heteronormative power in Chinese digital space. *Consumption Markets & Culture*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2026.2652299

Ye, W., & Zhao, L. (2023). "I know it's sensitive": Internet censorship, recoding, and the sensitive word culture in China. *Discourse, Context & Media*, *51*, Article 100666. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2022.100666

Yin, Y. (2020). An emergent algorithmic culture: The data-ization of online fandom in China. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, *23*(4), 475–492. https://doi.org/gnfx4f

Yin, Y., & Xie, Z. (2024). Playing platformized language games: Social media logic and the mutation of participatory cultures in Chinese online fandom. *New Media & Society*, *26*(2), 619–641. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211059489

Zeng, J., & Kaye, D. B. V. (2022). From content moderation to visibility moderation: A case study of platform governance on TikTok. *Policy & Internet*, *14*(1), 79–95. https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.287

Zhang, L. (2025). Online moving of Chinese boys' love fans: A platform ecology perspective. *Platforms & Society*, *2*, 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1177/29768624251320367

Zhang, M. (2021). "Keep the fantasy within a circle": Kai Wang and the paradoxical practices of Chinese real person slash fans. *Celebrity Studies*, *12*(2), 346–351. https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2020.1765074

Zhao, J. J. (2021). Introduction: Global queer fandoms of Asian media and celebrities. *Feminist Media Studies*, *21*(6), 1028–1032. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1959374

Zheng, X. (2024). Chinese media production and fandom between queerbaiting and "survival instincts." *Media, Culture & Society*, *46*(7), 1437–1453. https://doi.org/g9v93k

Zhou, O. T., & Zhang, M. (2026). Using netnography to study Chinese social media: A methodological reflection. In M.-Y. T. Rawnsley, Y. Ma, & G. D. Rawnsley (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of Chinese media* (2nd ed., pp. 59–69). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003362500-6

Zhou, W., Zhang, Y., Li, Y., Sun, Q., & Yang, Z. (2023). The mechanism of CP fandom behaviors among Chinese young adults: A grounded theory study. *Behavioral Sciences*, *13*(1), Article 30. https://doi.org/10.3390/bs13010030

Zhou, Y. (Director). (2018). *Guardian* [TV series]. Youku.