

## **Fandom Communication And Participatory Culture In Digital Platforms: A Systematic Literature Review**

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### **Abstract**

This study aims to examine informal fandom as a form of interdisciplinary communication within digital media, synthesizing how participatory culture and platform-mediated fan practices have been conceptualized across the academic literature. The findings benefit scholars in communication science, media studies, and platform studies by providing an integrated analytical framework that bridges participatory culture theory, audience studies, and digital media research. This study employed a qualitative Systematic Literature Review method using three Boolean search strings on the Scopus database, limited to English-language peer-reviewed articles published between 2015 and 2026. Following PRISMA-based screening, 40 articles were included in the final thematic synthesis. Four analytical themes were identified: communicative community formation in digital fandom, participatory fan production as audience communication practice, platformed fan communication and digital labor, and contestation as communicative authority negotiation. A key tension identified is the contradiction between participatory communicative agency and platform power, including algorithmic visibility, datafication, and commercialization of fan communication. This review positions informal fandom as an analytical bridge within interdisciplinary communication scholarship, linking participatory culture theory, audience studies, and platform-mediated communicative practices. The findings contribute operational indicators for future empirical research on informal fandom, including loose affiliation, repeated digital interaction, affective attachment, platform-mediated visibility, participatory production, and symbolic meaning-making as measurable dimensions of audience communication in digital platforms.

*Keywords: Informal Fandom, Participatory Culture, Platformed Fandom, Fan Labor, Interdisciplinary Communication, Systematic Literature Review*

## **1. Introduction**

Digital media has transformed the relationship between audiences, media texts, and cultural production. Audiences increasingly act as active participants who interpret, circulate, modify, and reproduce meanings within digital environments. From an interdisciplinary communication perspective, this communicative transformation involves intersecting fields including communication science, media studies, cultural studies, and digital sociology. This transformation is closely related to Jenkins' (2006) The concept of convergence culture is one in which audience participation shapes the relationship between media industries and users. Through social media, online communities, and user-generated content, audiences participate in cultural practices that shape identities, relationships, and collective narratives (Bury, 2017; Jang, 2022; Min et al., 2019).

In this article, informal fandom is operationally defined as a fluid, affective, and platform-mediated form of fandom that emerges through repeated audience interaction without necessarily depending on formal membership, institutional organization, or stable community boundaries. It may appear through comment sections, hashtag participation, meme circulation, fan labor, shared interpretation, and spontaneous responses to media texts or celebrities. Unlike formal fan clubs, informal fandom is marked by loose affiliation, emotional attachment, everyday participation, and symbolic meaning-making across digital platforms (Bury, 2017; Jenkins et al., 2016; Min et al., 2019).

Participatory culture provides an important theoretical lens for understanding informal fandom. Jenkins' (2006) argues that convergence culture enables audiences to participate in the circulation and interpretation of media content, while Jenkins et al. (2016) emphasize that participation involves shared practices, collaboration, and collective meaning-making, not only technical platform use. Fans exemplify this by creating content, remixing materials, interpreting texts, and building collective knowledge within digital environments.

However, participatory culture theory should not be applied uncritically. Fan participation is increasingly organized through platform affordances, algorithmic visibility, fan labor structures, and the commercialization of fan engagement. Studies on Chinese online fandom show that fan practices mutate in response to social media logic - platformization, datafication, and gamification capture fan affect as

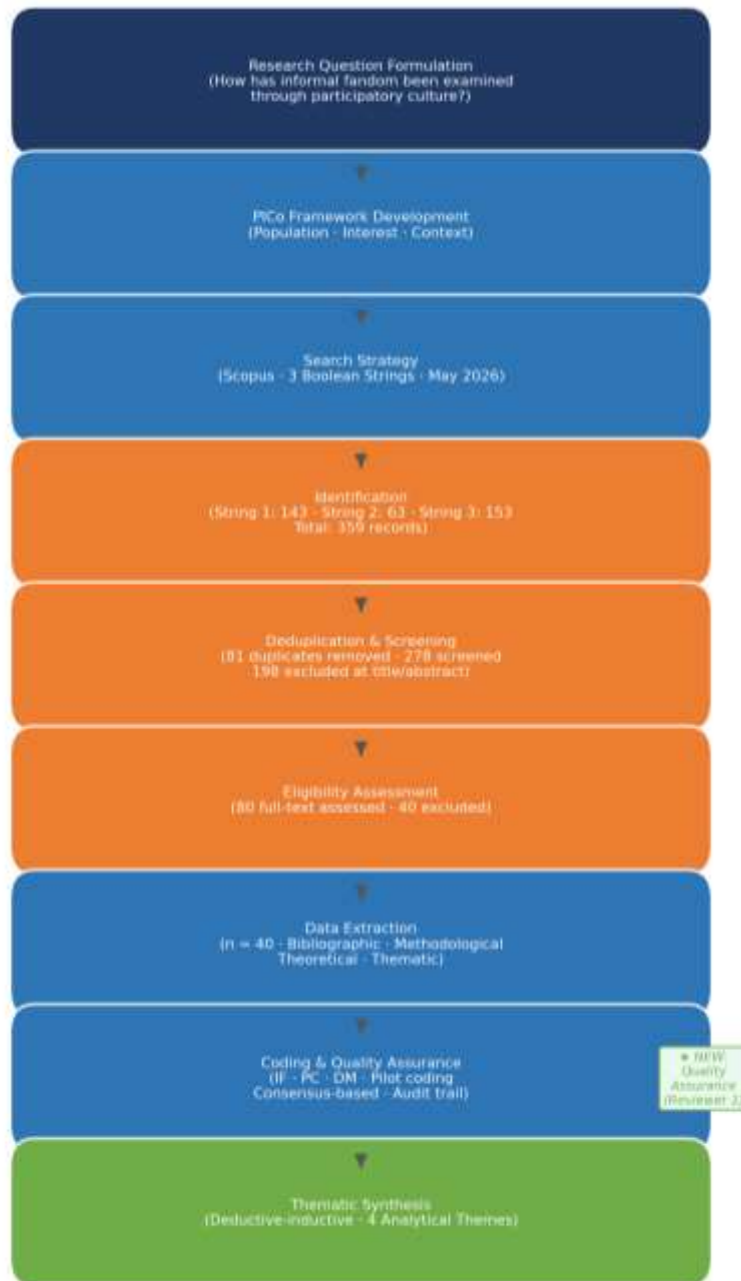
productive labor (Cui & Wu, 2025; Yin, 2021; Zhao, 2026). Informal fandom is thus simultaneously participatory and platformed: fans are active, but their participation is structured by digital infrastructures and political economies.

Despite growing scholarship on digital fandom, the concept of informal fandom remains conceptually fragmented across separate case studies discussing digital fandom, online fandom, fan communities, anti-fandom, fan activism, fan labor, and platform practices. These discussions are rarely synthesized under the explicit analytical lens of informal fandom (Ahn & Roy, 2026; Driessen et al., 2024; McInroy & Craig, 2020; Xie et al., 2025) Furthermore, existing studies have not sufficiently examined how informal fandom bridges community studies, participatory culture, platform studies, and fan labor research, each of which captures only a partial view of the phenomenon.

This systematic literature review synthesizes Scopus-indexed studies published between 2015 and May 2026 to answer: How has informal fandom been examined through the perspective of participatory culture in digital media? More specifically, this review is grounded in interdisciplinary communication science by examining how communication processes, digital media structures, and participatory practices intersect in shaping informal fandom as a communicative phenomenon across platforms. Three sub-questions guide the review: **(RQ1) How is informal fandom conceptualized? (RQ2) How does participatory culture explain audience practices? (RQ3) What major themes and tensions emerge across the literature?**

## **2. Method**

This study employed a qualitative Systematic Literature Review (SLR) focusing on mapping conceptual developments, theoretical perspectives, methodological tendencies, and emerging themes. Rather than conducting a statistical meta-analysis, the review synthesizes how informal fandom has been examined through participatory culture. Figure 1 illustrates the complete methodological workflow.



Source: Authors (2026)

**Figure 1.** Methodological Workflow from Research Question Formulation to Thematic Synthesis.  
Source: Authors (2026)

## 2.1 PICo Framework

The PICo framework, consisting of Population, Phenomenon of Interest, and Context, was adopted to structure the review focus and search strategy. PICo was selected because this review does not examine intervention effects, comparison groups, or measurable outcomes, but instead synthesizes how the phenomenon of informal fandom is conceptualized and discussed across academic publications. In qualitative and evidence synthesis studies, PICo is commonly used to guide the formulation of review questions and to clarify the relationship between the population or problem, the phenomenon of interest, and the context of inquiry (Aromataris et al., 2024; Munn et al., 2018)

In this review, PICo was used as a conceptual scoping tool, not to define empirical participants directly. The unit of analysis is academic publications, namely Scopus-indexed journal articles and review articles, not individuals. Therefore, the Population element refers to the study population or audience context represented in the reviewed publications, not the direct participants of this review.

This distinction was made to avoid ambiguity and to clarify that the review analyzes published academic studies rather than collecting data from fans or digital audiences directly.

**Table 1.** PICo Framework

<b>Component</b>	<b>Operational Meaning</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Population</b>	Study population/audience context in reviewed publications	Digital audiences, fans, online fan communities, and social media users in fandom-related practices. Unit of analysis = academic publications.
<b>Interest</b>	Phenomenon of interest	Informal fandom, participatory culture, audience participation, fan production, UGC, meaning-making, collective identity, affective engagement.
<b>Context</b>	Review context	Digital media, social media platforms, online communities, and internet-based fandom environments.

Source: Authors (2026)

## 2.2 Database and Search Strategy

Systematic searches were conducted exclusively in the Scopus database (broad interdisciplinary coverage in communication, media studies, and cultural studies). The search was conducted in May 2026; therefore, studies published in 2025 and early 2026 were included if already indexed.

Three Boolean search strings were employed. Strings 1 and 2 were the original strings targeting explicit "informal fandom" and "digital fandom" discussions. String 3 was added in the revised search to expand coverage of platform fandom, social media fandom, fan communities, user-generated content, and audience participation terms used interchangeably in the literature without always referencing "informal fandom" explicitly.

**Table 2.** Search Strings and Boolean Components

<b>String</b>	<b>Boolean Components</b>
<b>String 1</b>	"informal fandom" AND "participatory culture" AND "digital media"
<b>String 2</b>	"digital fandom" AND "participatory culture" AND "social media"
<b>String 3</b>	("online fandom" OR "social media fandom" OR "platform fandom" OR "platformed fandom" OR "fan community" OR "user-generated content" OR "audience participation") AND ("participatory culture" OR "participatory practice*" OR "participant*") AND ("digital media" OR "social media" OR "digital platform*" OR "online platform*" OR "online communit*" OR "new media")

Source: Authors (2026)

## 2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Eligibility criteria were predefined to ensure conceptual relevance. Exclusion reasons were operationalized explicitly: articles were excluded if they (a) did not discuss fandom or fan practices at all, (b) discussed social media without fandom dimensions, (c) were not peer-reviewed journal articles, (d) were not in English, (e) lacked full-text access, or (f) were published outside 2015–2026.

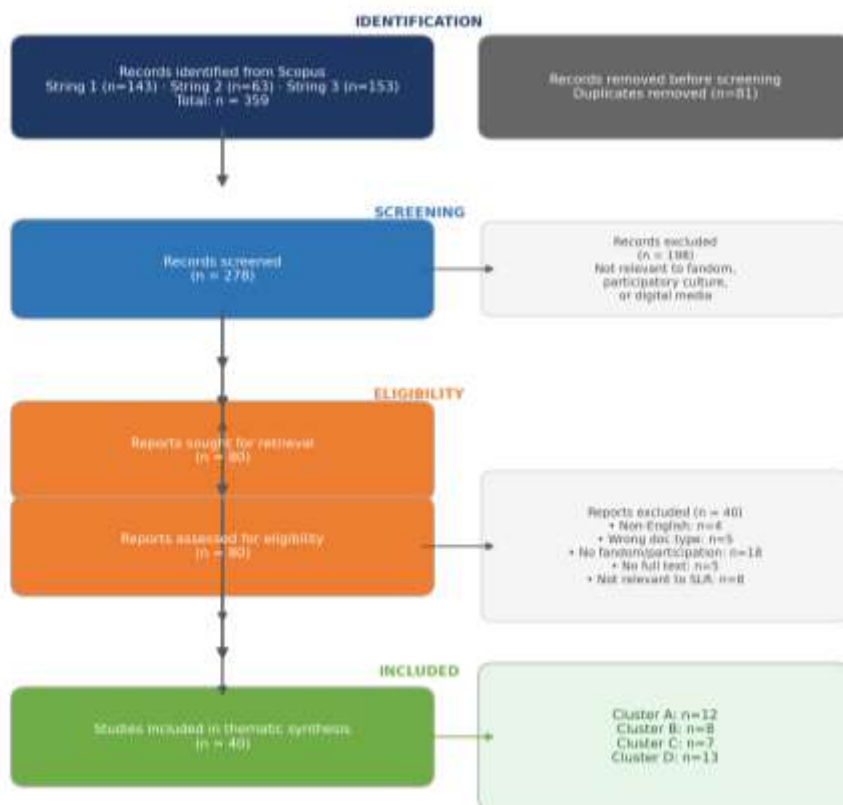
**Table 3.** Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

<b>Category</b>	<b>Inclusion Criteria</b>	<b>Exclusion Criteria</b>
<b>Database</b>	Indexed in Scopus	Not indexed in Scopus
<b>Publication Type</b>	Peer-reviewed journal articles and review articles	Conference papers, theses, dissertations, editorials, book reviews
<b>Publication Period</b>	Published between 2015 and 2026	Before 2015 or after 2026
<b>Language</b>	English only	Non-English publications
<b>Research Focus</b>	Discusses informal fandom, digital fandom, online fandom, fan communities, platform fandom, or related fan practices	Does not discuss fandom or any fan-related practices
<b>Theoretical Focus</b>	Addresses participatory culture, audience participation, fan production, UGC, meaning-making, or audience practices	No connection to participatory culture or digital fan engagement
<b>Context</b>	Situated in digital media, social media, online platforms, or internet-based fandom	Exclusively offline without any digital media connection
<b>Accessibility</b>	Full-text accessible	No full-text access or retracted articles

Source: Authors (2026)

#### **2.4 Article Selection Process**

Initial searches identified 359 records (String 1: n=143; String 2: n=63; String 3: n=153). After removing 81 duplicates, 278 unique records were screened at the title, abstract, and keyword stages. A total of 198 records were excluded during initial screening. The remaining 80 records were assessed in full text; 40 were excluded (Non-English: 4; wrong document type: 5; no fandom/participation discussion: 18; no full text: 5; not relevant: 8). The final corpus comprises 40 studies. Figure 2 illustrates the complete selection process.



**Figure 2.** PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram of the Article Selection Process  
Source: Authors (2026), adapted from Page et al. (2021)

### 2.5 Data Extraction and Coding Framework

Data extraction captured bibliographic, methodological, theoretical, and thematic characteristics. The coding framework classified articles by Informal Fandom coverage (IF), Participatory Culture coverage (PC), and Digital Media context (DM). Operational definitions were added for each category level (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Coding Framework with Operational Definitions

Variable	Category	Operational Definition
IF Coverage	Direct	The study explicitly discusses informal fandom / digital fandom as the main focus.
	Partial	Study discusses fandom-related practices as part of a broader argument.
	Indirect	The study addresses fan phenomena through adjacent terms without labeling them as fandom.

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Operational Definition</b>
<b>PC Coverage</b>	<b>Absent</b>	The study does not discuss fandom or fan-related practices.
	<b>Direct</b>	The study explicitly applies participatory culture as a theoretical framework.
	<b>Partial</b>	The study addresses participation descriptively without full theoretical engagement.
	<b>Indirect</b>	The study discusses participatory elements implicitly.
<b>DM Context</b>	<b>Present</b>	Study situated in digital media, social media, or online platforms.
	<b>Partial</b>	Study examines both online and offline contexts.
<b>Audience Practice</b>	<b>Production</b>	Dominant form of audience practice discussed.
	<b>/</b>	
	<b>Interaction</b>	
	<b>/</b>	
	<b>Circulation</b>	
<b>RQ Relevance</b>	<b>/</b>	The research question the article primarily addresses.
	<b>Meaning-making</b>	
	<b>/</b>	
	<b>Identity / Affect</b>	
	<b>RQ1 / RQ2 / RQ3</b>	

Source: Authors (2026).

## **2.6 Quality Assurance**

To ensure coding consistency, a pilot coding exercise was conducted on five randomly selected articles to refine the coding template and operational definitions. All 40 articles were then coded independently by both authors, and disagreements were resolved through consensus discussion, following consensus-based thematic synthesis. (Thomas & Harden, 2008). An audit trail documented all coding decisions. Since this is a qualitative thematic synthesis rather than a quantitative meta-analysis, formal inter-rater reliability statistics were not calculated; instead, consistency was maintained through explicit operational definitions, iterative discussion, and systematic cross-checking.

## 2.7 Thematic Synthesis

Thematic synthesis followed Thomas and Harden's (2008) three-stage procedure: initial coding, development of descriptive themes, and generation of analytical themes. The process combined deductive coding (guided by the IF-PC-DM framework and research questions) and inductive coding (allowing analytical themes to emerge from patterns across articles), ensuring the synthesis remained grounded in the data rather than predetermined categories.

## 2.8 Bias Mitigation

To mitigate confirmation bias, eligibility criteria were predefined; coding used explicit operational definitions; all thematic decisions were discussed between authors; and the addition of String 3 explicitly extended coverage to different terminologies used for informal fandom. These measures ensure themes reflect data patterns rather than assumptions held in advance.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Characteristics of Included Studies

The final corpus includes 40 studies published between 2015 and 2026. Studies were grouped into four thematic clusters. The complete characteristics are presented in Table 5.

**Table 5.** Characteristics of Included Studies (n = 40)

No	Author (s) & Year	Context	Method	IF	PC	D M	Thematic Focus
<b>Cluster A: Digital Fandom, Online Community, and Informal Fan Formation (n=12)</b>							
1.	<b>Bury (2017)</b>	Online fandom, platforms	Conceptual/ interview	Direct	Partial	Present	Platform affordances and community formation
2.	<b>Min et al. (2019)</b>	Korean Wave, Latin America	Qualitative	Direct	Partial	Present	Transcultural fandom, affinity space

<b>No</b>	<b>Author (s) &amp; Year</b>	<b>Context</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>IF</b>	<b>PC</b>	<b>D M</b>	<b>Thematic Focus</b>
3	<b>McInroy &amp; Craig (2018)</b>	SGMY youth, online fandom	Mixed methods	Direct	Partial	Present	Identity milestones in online fandom
4	<b>McInroy &amp; Craig (2020)</b>	Online fandom, SGMY youth	Qualitative/survey	Direct	Partial	Present	Identity development, safety, belonging
5	<b>Pulvera (2021)</b>	Filipino BIGBA NG fandom	Textual analysis	Direct	Partial	Present	Online community and fan cultural capital
6	<b>Shafirova &amp; Kumpulainen (2021)</b>	Brony fandom translation	Case study	Direct	Direct	Present	Collaboration and identity work
7	<b>Kim H.J. (2021)</b>	K-pop/BTS during COVID-19	Essay/case study	Direct	Direct	Present	Pandemic fandom community
8	<b>Jang (2022)</b>	Latin American K-pop pandemic	Qualitative	Direct	Direct	Present	Fandom publics and digital revival
9	<b>Kang et al. (2022)</b>	K-pop collaboration network	Network analysis	Direct	Partial	Present	Fandom collaboration patterns
10	<b>Zhang (2025)</b>	Bilibili danmu	Qualitative/content	Direct	Partial	Present	Nostalgia ,

No	Author (s) & Year	Context	Method	IF	PC	D M	Thematic Focus
		community					criticism, negotiation
1	<b>Maulina et al. (2025)</b>	K-drama Indonesian women	Ethnographic	Direct	Partial	Present	Fandom identity, urban women
1	<b>Jaworowicz-Zimny (2025)</b>	Japanese Hallyu fans	Content/ethnography	Direct	Partial	Present	Transnational fandom and intimacy
<b>Cluster B: Participatory Culture, Fan Production, and Meaning-Making (n=8)</b>							
1	<b>Baruch (2021)</b>	Transnational fansubbing	Cultural analysis	Partial	Direct	Present	Digital labor and alternative values
1	<b>Whiteside (2024)</b>	Taylor Swift fandom	Rhetorical analysis	Direct	Direct	Present	Fan argumentation and Easter egg meaning-making
1	<b>Kim, Chapel &amp; Sollier (2021)</b>	BTS fans, YouTube	Lexical bundle analysis	Partial	Direct	Present	Fan practices and informal language learning
1	<b>Yang, Zhu &amp; Wu (2024)</b>	Fan philanthropy, China	Survey (n=700)	Partial	Direct	Present	Dual identity and civic engagement

No	Author (s) & Year	Context	Method	IF	PC	D M	Thematic Focus
1	Xie et al. (2025)	The King's Avatar, China	Case study	Direct	Direct	Present	Transmedia storytelling and fan production
1	Saiyinjia et al. (2025)	LinaBell fandom, Weibo	Content analysis	Direct	Direct	Present	Creative fan work and parakin bond
1	Li, Wu & Wu (2025)	Fan philanthropy, social media	Survey/quantitative	Partial	Direct	Present	Group identification and collective action
2	Ahn & Roy (2026)	Hallyu fansumers	Conceptual/cultural	Direct	Direct	Present	Fansumers as cultural transmitters

**Cluster C: Platformed Fan Practices, Fan Labor and Operational Participation (n=7)**

2	Yin Y. (2021)	Chinese digital fandom	Ethnography/interview	Direct	Partial	Present	Emotional capitalism and fan datafication
2	Yin & Xie (2024)	Chinese fandom, Weibo	Ethnography	Direct	Direct	Present	Platformized language games
2	Wang E.N. (2024)	Chinese netizens, censorship	Digital ethnography	Indirect	Direct	Present	Algorithmic folklore and

No	Author (s) & Year	Context	Method	IF	PC	D M	Thematic Focus
							interpretive labor
2	<b>Xiao &amp; Ahadzadeh (2024)</b>	Celebrity fan community	Qualitative content	Direct	Partial	Present	Fan leaders and contribution
2	<b>Zhao Y. (2026)</b>	Data fans, gamification	Ethnography/interview	Direct	Direct	Present	directives Metrication and playbour
2	<b>Cui &amp; Wu (2025)</b>	Platform-mediated fandom	Interview/observation	Direct	Direct	Present	Operationality and platform strategies
2	<b>Oh, Seol &amp; Hwang (2026)</b>	Hallyu fans, migration	Grounded theory	Partial	Partial	Present	New media and pop culture migration
<b>Cluster D: Contestation, Anti-Fandom, Activism, and Authority</b>							
<b>Negotiation (n=13)</b>							
2	<b>Barnes &amp; Middlemost (2022)</b>	Anti-fandom, political memes	Meme analysis	Direct	Direct	Present	Anti-fandom and civic action
2	<b>Liao, Koo &amp; Rojas (2022)</b>	Chinese fandom nationalism	Survey	Direct	Partial	Present	Idol adoration and fandom nationalism
3	<b>Cho M. (2022)</b>	BTS fans and BLM	Cultural report	Direct	Partial	Present	K-pop, race, and transcultu

No	Author (s) & Year	Context	Method	IF	PC	D M	Thematic Focus
3	Ravell (2023)	#RIPJK Rowling, Twitter	Thematic content analysis	Direct	Direct	Present	Political activism Fandom, authorship, and hashtag critique
3	Song (2023)	Chinese fandom nationalists	Ethnographic mixed	Partial	Indirect	Present	Digital truth-making and political participation
3	Wang & Tan (2023)	Digital queer fandom, China	Digital ethnography	Direct	Direct	Present	Participatory censorship and commercialization
3	Driessen et al. (2024)	Fan citizenship, fanspiracies	Conceptual	Direct	Direct	Present	Politics and participatory cultures in crisis
3	Peterse et al. (2024)	QAnon, Trump, fandom	Roundtable	Indirect	Partial	Present	Political fandom and new territories
3	Phoborisut & Park (2024)	Thai K-pop activism	Qualitative	Direct	Direct	Present	K-pop skills transfer to political activism
3	Luo & Li (2024)	Queer fandom,	Mixed/topic modeling	Partial	Indirect	Present	Participatory censorship

No	Author (s) & Year	Context	Method	IF	PC	D M	Thematic Focus
		ensorship					p, authoritarian rule
3	Shahin & Hou (2025)	#StopAsianHate activism	Mixed methods	Partial	Direct	Present	Celebrities, fans, and hashtag activism
3	Vizcaíno-Verdú & Contreras-Pulido (2024)	Cross-platform hatredom	Mixed/NLP	Direct	Partial	Present	Hatedom and affective aversion
4	Han & Zhu (2026)	Chinese fans, K-pop/K-pol	Comparative qualitative	Direct	Partial	Present	Strategic nationalism in transnational fandom

**Source:** *Authors' coding results (2026). IF = Informal Fandom; PC = Participatory Culture; DM = Digital Media Context.*

### 3.1.1 Overview of Distribution

Most studies were published between 2022 and 2026 (n=26; 65%), with peak concentration in 2024–2025 (n=15; 38%), indicating rapidly growing scholarly attention to platformed fandom, fan labor, and participatory culture in digital media. Geographically, East Asian contexts dominate (n=18; 45%), followed by global/transnational contexts (n=9; 22.5%), Latin America (n=4), and Southeast Asia/Oceania (n=4). Methodologically, qualitative empirical approaches prevail (n=22; 55%), followed by conceptual/theoretical papers (n=6), mixed methods (n=5), quantitative surveys (n=5), and computational approaches (n=2). Platforms addressed include Chinese platforms (Weibo/Bilibili; n=12), Twitter/X (n=7), multi-platform (n=9), and YouTube/TikTok/Facebook (n=6).

### *3.1.2 Critical Appraisal*

A thematic quality appraisal reveals four limitations in the corpus: (1) dominance of single-platform qualitative case studies limits cross-platform and cross-cultural generalizability; (2) the field lacks longitudinal studies tracking how informal fandom evolves over time; (3) conceptual engagement with participatory culture varies greatly across studies, some use it as a theoretical framework, others descriptively; and (4) quantitative evidence remains limited. These patterns should be kept in mind when interpreting thematic findings.

### *3.2 Theme 1: Informal Fandom as a Fluid Digital Community Formation*

The first theme shows that informal fandom is conceptualized as a fluid, affective, and digitally mediated community sustained through repeated online interaction, shared affect, and symbolic belonging rather than formal membership. Studies on K-pop fandom, K-drama fandom, brony fandom, Filipino fandom, and SGMY youth fandom demonstrate that informal fan communities operate through emotional attachment, transnational connection, identity expression, and parasocial relationships (Bury, 2017; Jang, 2022; H. J. Kim, 2021; Maulina et al., 2025; Min et al., 2019; Shafirova & Kumpulainen, 2021)

Bury (2017) shows that platform affordances shape community quality, participants felt a stronger community on listservs and LiveJournal than on Facebook or Tumblr. Kang et al. (2022) reveal that K-pop fandom collaboration networks are reciprocal but stratified. McInroy and Craig (2018, 2020) demonstrate that online fandom communities serve as critical identity development spaces for SGMY youth, providing discovery, validation, safety, and belonging, functions extending well beyond media consumption. Maulina et al. (2025) show K-drama fandom enables the construction of an "empowered female fan" identity distinct from stereotypical fangirl images. Together, these studies indicate that informal fandom is better understood as a digital community formation shaped by shared media objects, affective attachment, and platform-mediated interaction rather than formal organizational boundaries.

### *3.3 Theme 2: Participatory Culture, Fan Production and Audience Meaning-Making*

The second theme shows that participatory culture explains how audiences move beyond passive consumption toward production, circulation, interpretation, and meaning-making. Saiyinjiya et al. (2025) demonstrate how Chinese fans collectively constructed LinaBell's character on Weibo through fan art, fanfiction, and memes, creating a parakin bond with a character lacking any official backstory. Xie et al. (2025) show that transmedia storyworlds in The King's Avatar fandom

emerge from inter-fandom negotiations on social media platforms rather than top-down industry design. Whiteside (2024) reveals that Taylor Swift fans' Easter egg hunting constitutes a distinctive rhetorical process privileging intellectual engagement over factual resolution.

Fan participation also extends into civic and linguistic dimensions. Kim et al. (J. O. Kim, 2021) show BTS fan communities on YouTube constitute informal language learning environments. Yang et al. (2024) demonstrate that Chinese fan philanthropy creates dual identities for fans as celebrity supporters and as civic actors. Baruch (2021) positions transnational fansubbing as digital labor, generating social recognition and alternative community values. Ahn and Roy (2026) conceptualize fans as "fansumers" and cultural transmitters within algorithmically structured environments. These findings show participatory culture in informal fandom encompasses not only creative production but civic engagement, labor, and cultural circulation.

### ***3.4 Theme 3: Platformed Fan Practices, Fan Labor, and Operational Participation***

The third theme highlights that fan participation is shaped by platform structures and digital labor regimes. Yin and Xie (2024) introduce "platformized language games" to describe how fan communities adapt communicative practices to social media logic, programmability, connectivity, and datafication. Cui and Wu (2025) argue for an "operationality" perspective: fans engage in cross-platform activities, data curation, and visibility management as fandom strategies. Zhao (2026) shows gamification and metrification transform data fans' participation into "playbour," enjoyable labor that simultaneously generates platform value.

Yin (2021) demonstrates that Chinese digital fandom datafies emotional labor, transforming affect into a measurable resource under emotional capitalism. Wang E.N. (2024) reveals how algorithmic folklore fans' everyday theories about platform algorithms constitute interpretive labor that inadvertently reinforces state and platform governance. Xiao and Ahadzadeh (2024) reveal that fan leader hierarchies organize collective contributions analogous to neoliberal labor management. These studies collectively show that informal fandom operates within and through platform capitalism.

### ***3.5 Theme 4: Contestation, Anti-Fandom, Activism, and Authority Negotiation***

The largest cluster (n=13) shows that informal fandom is not always celebratory. Barnes and Middlemost (2022) show that anti-fandom of the Australian Liberal Party produces civic humor and imagined community through meme production. Ravell (2023) demonstrates how Harry Potter

fans used #RIPJKRowling to symbolically kill off J.K. Rowling as an author in response to transphobic rhetoric. Phoborisut and Park (2024) show Thai K-pop fans transferred digital coordination skills to the 2020 student uprising. Shahin and Hou (2025) demonstrate how BTS fans amplified #StopAsianHate despite provocateur attempts to co-opt the hashtag.

Participatory censorship emerges as a distinctive East Asian contestation mechanism. Wang and Tan (2023) show BL fandom in China developed jubao (reporting) as community governance, internalizing platform and state norms. Luo and Li (2024) demonstrate how online fandom communities facilitate authoritarian rule through peer-based censorship. Song (2023) reveals how Chinese fandom nationalists create synergies between pop-cultural and political truth-making. Driessen et al. (2024) and Petersen et al. (2024) show that fan practices and conspiracy culture have merged in contemporary political life, with participatory tools deployed in both progressive and reactionary movements. These findings demonstrate that participatory culture contains both productive and conflictual dimensions.

### **3.6 Cross-Thematic Pattern:**

Cross-cluster analysis reveals four interrelated dimensions of informal fandom: community formation, participatory practice, platform mediation, and contestation. Table 6 presents the coding distribution across clusters.

**Table 6.** Cross-Tabulation of IF × PC × DM by Study Cluster

<b>Cluster</b>	<b>IF Direct / Central</b>	<b>PC Direct / Central</b>	<b>DM Present</b>	<b>Main Pattern</b>
<b>Cluster A: Community Formation (n=12)</b>	12	3	12	Informal fandom as a fluid online community and affective belonging
<b>Cluster B: Fan Production (n=8)</b>	4	8	8	Fan production, meaning-making, and participatory cultural practices
<b>Cluster C: Platformed Practices (n=7)</b>	5	4	7	Platform logic, fan labor, operability, and datafication

Cluster	IF Direct / Central	PC Direct / Central	DM Present	Main Pattern
<b>Cluster D: Contestation (n=13)</b>	9	6	13	Fandom as a site of critique, activism, and symbolic negotiation
<b>Total (n=40)</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>40</b>	IF consistently dispersed; DM universal; PC varies in operationalization

*Source: Authors' coding results (2026).*

**Abbreviations:** IF = Informal Fandom; PC = Participatory Culture; DM = Digital Media Context.

Three patterns emerge. First, all 40 studies are in digital media contexts (DM=40/40). Second, informal fandom is discussed through related terms in most studies rather than the explicit label "informal fandom" (IF Direct=30/40), confirming analytical fragmentation across the literature. Third, participatory culture is unevenly operationalized: Cluster B is almost exclusively defined by direct PC engagement, while Cluster D varies between participatory culture and political mobilization frameworks. These patterns together indicate that informal fandom should be understood as a participatory cultural formation shaped by online interaction, fan creativity, affective belonging, platform mediation, and symbolic contestation, where platform mediation enables community formation, community formation enables participatory production, and that production is inevitably contested and negotiated.

#### 4. Discussion

The findings show that informal fandom is discussed through interconnected but unevenly defined pathways. Although reviewed studies address digital fandom, online fan communities, audience participation, and participatory culture, informal fandom is rarely a distinct theoretical category. It appears through digital fandom, online fandom, fandom publics, anti-fandom, platform-mediated fandom, and fan labor. Figure 3 maps the four dimensions of informal fandom emerging from this synthesis.

Figure 3. Conceptual Framework: Informal Fandom as Platformed Participatory Culture in Digital Media

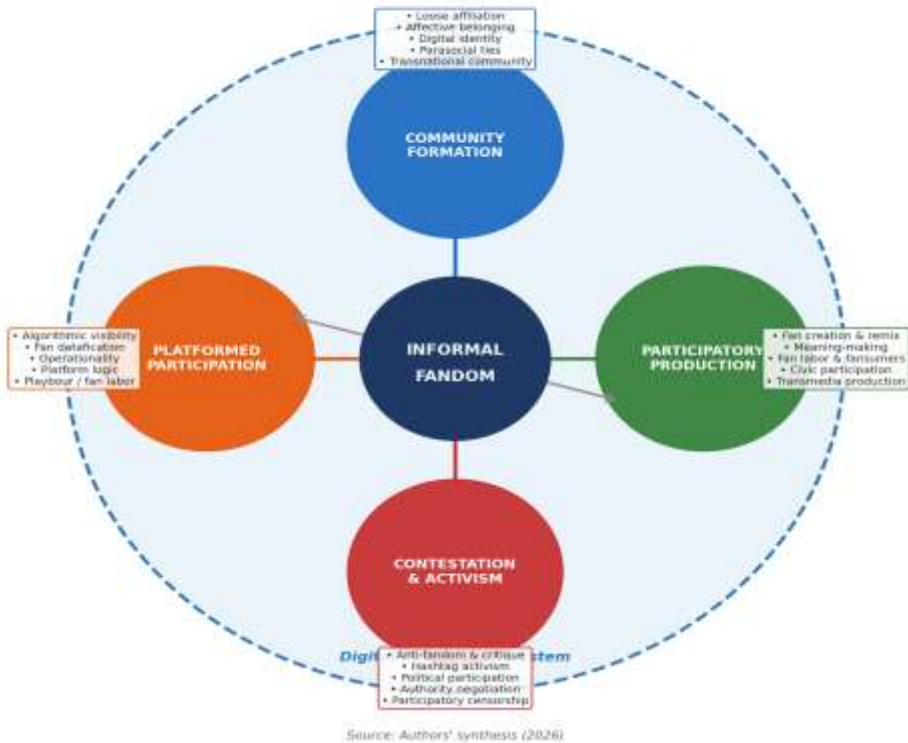


Figure 3. Conceptual Framework: Informal Fandom as Platformed Participatory Culture in Digital Media.

Source: Authors' synthesis (2026)

#### 4.1. Conceptualizing Informal Fandom in Digital Media

The findings indicate that informal fandom is conceptualized through two overlapping pathways. The community-based pathway understands fandom as an online community sustained by shared affect, repeated interaction, and symbolic belonging: Bury (2017) shows that community emerges through specific platform affordances rather than shared interest alone; Jang (2022) shows how K-pop fandom publics become consequential in digital space; and Kim H.J. (2021) and Kang et al. (2022) demonstrate complex collaborative structures sustaining K-pop community.

The practice-based pathway understands fandom through what audiences do rather than formal membership. Maulina et al. (2025), Min et al. (2019), and Jaworowicz-Zimny (2025) show fandom formed through digital participation, identity expression, and shared media practices. McInroy and Craig (2018, 2020) demonstrate that fandom provides

identity development spaces extending far beyond media consumption. These findings support Jenkins et al.'s (2016) argument that fandom develops through informal communities built around shared practices rather than formal belonging. Informal fandom's distinctiveness lies in being simultaneously structurally open, not requiring institutional membership, and affectively dense, generating strong emotional investment and shared symbolic repertoires.

#### **4.2. *Participatory Culture and Audience Practices***

Participatory culture explains informal fandom through production, circulation, interpretation, collaboration, fan labor, and meaning negotiation. Fans are positioned not as passive consumers but as active participants who create, remix, circulate, and reinterpret meanings within digital environments. The synthesis shows that this extends from creative participation. (Saiyinjiya et al., 2025; Whiteside, 2024; Xie et al., 2025) to civic engagement (Phoborisut & Park, 2024; Shahin & Hou, 2025; Yang et al., 2024) labor (Baruch, 2021) and cultural circulation (Ahn & Roy, 2026).

However, the finding that participatory culture is unevenly operationalized across the corpus suggests a theoretical gap: some studies engage deeply with Jenkins' framework while others use participation descriptively. This uneven engagement may explain why informal fandom remains fragmented across the literature; different studies are implicitly describing the same phenomenon without a shared theoretical anchor.

#### **4.3. *Affective, Platformed, and Contested Dimensions***

The synthesis confirms three critical dimensions. First, affect is not secondary to participation but constitutive of informal fandom: emotional attachment, parasocial relationships, and shared media objects sustain fan communities that persist even during crises. Baker's (2022) theme park fandom via COVID-19; Kim H.J.,(2021). Second, informal fandom is increasingly shaped by platform structures: Yin and Xie. (2024), Cui and Wu (2025), and Zhao (2026) show that fan practices mutate in response to platform logics of datafication and visibility. Third, informal fandom contains both productive and conflictual dimensions: fans admire, produce, critique, reinterpret, and contest meanings simultaneously.

#### **4.4. *Platform Power, Algorithmic Visibility, and Fan Labor***

A key insight emerging from this review is the tension between participatory agency and platform power, a dimension underemphasized in Jenkins' (2006) original participatory culture framework. Algorithmic visibility operates as a mechanism through which platform power shapes informal fandom. Yin and Xie (2024) show fans create idiosyncratic language games based on the selective appropriation of connectivity and data-driven metrics. Wang E.N. (2024) demonstrates that algorithmic

folklore fans' everyday theories about algorithm operation become interpretive labor that paradoxically reinforces platform governance. Zhao (2026) reveals gamification manufactures consent by transforming data fans' participation into playbour: enjoyable, self-directed, yet generating commercial value.

Fan labor adds another dimension: Baruch (2021) shows that fansubbing creates community while collaborating with commercial enterprises; Ahn and Roy (2026) show fansumers operate as cultural transmitters within algorithmically structured environments; Xiao and Ahadzadeh (2024) reveal fan leader structures replicate neoliberal management, and Yin (2021) argues that Chinese digital fandom datafies emotional labor. Together, these findings suggest a stronger claim than Jenkins' acknowledgment of unequal participation: informal fandom is systematically organized by platform capitalism in ways that monetize affective engagement and direct participatory energy toward commercially productive ends. This does not negate fan agency, but means informal fandom cannot be adequately understood without attending to the political economy of its platforms.

#### ***4.5. Tensions, Contradictions, and Theoretical Contribution***

The synthesis reveals four tensions within informal fandom. (1) Participation vs. exploitation: fans derive genuine satisfaction, but their participation generates commercial and political value for platforms and states. (2) Community vs. conflict: informal fandom produces strong affective communities that are simultaneously sites of exclusion, toxicity, and polarization (Song, 2023; Vizcaíno-Verdú & Contreras-Pulido, 2024; Zhang, 2025). (3) Creativity vs. commercialization: fan production generates cultural creativity embedded in commercial logics of visibility and the platform economy. (4) Informality vs. organization: informal fandom generates complex structures, including fan leader hierarchies and collaboration networks (Kang et al., 2022; Xiao & Ahadzadeh, 2024). Recognizing these tensions prevents both utopian accounts of fan creativity and dystopian accounts of fan exploitation. Informal fandom is contradictory by nature, generating both genuine community and commercial capture simultaneously.

This review contributes to fan studies, digital media studies, and participatory culture studies by positioning informal fandom as a distinct but undertheorized concept. Its analytical novelty lies in bridging participatory culture theory, platform studies, audience studies, and affective community research into a single framework. Unlike presumption (focused on economic production), fan labor (focused on exploitation), or digital fandom (descriptive), informal fandom emphasizes

the fluid, platform-mediated, and collectively constituted nature of contemporary digital audience participation. Compared with Jenkins (2006), who saw convergence culture enabling fan creativity, this review shows that informal fandom also involves systematic capture of that creativity by platform capitalism, extending, complicating, and critically advancing the participatory culture framework.

Several gaps remain: informal fandom is underdeveloped as an analytical category; platform-fandom relationships need deeper examination in Global South contexts; longitudinal studies are almost absent; and mixed-methods comparative research is needed.

## **5. Conclusion**

This systematic review synthesized 40 Scopus-indexed studies (2015–2026) using three Boolean search strings to examine how informal fandom and participatory culture have been conceptualized in digital media research. The review shows that informal fandom remains dispersed across related terms but can be synthesized into four analytical dimensions: community formation, participatory production, platformed participation, and contestation.

### ***5.1 Operationalization of Informal Fandom***

A key contribution is the identification of operational indicators for future research. Based on synthesis of 40 studies, informal fandom can be identified through: (1) loose affiliation participation without formal membership or stable group boundaries; (2) repeated digital interaction sustained engagement through platform-specific practices; (3) affective attachment emotional investment in media texts, celebrities, or communities; (4) platform-mediated visibility reliance on digital platforms for fan practice visibility; (5) participatory production active creation of fan content or meanings; (6) symbolic meaning-making shared interpretive practices constructing collective meaning; and (7) absence of formal membership participation not requiring official joining or credentialing. These indicators can guide future quantitative and comparative empirical research.

### ***5.2 Theoretical Contribution***

This review repositions informal fandom as an analytical bridge between participatory culture, audience studies, platform studies, and cultural studies. Participatory culture should not be understood only as creative participation, but as a contested field shaped by affect, identity, platform power, visibility, fan labor, and authority negotiation. Informal fandom provides a productive lens for how contemporary audiences create, circulate, negotiate, and contest meanings within digital media, one

that critically extends Jenkins' (2006) framework by foregrounding platform capitalism as a structural condition of contemporary fan participation.

### **5.3 Limitations**

This review has several limitations. The search was limited to Scopus (excluding Web of Science, Google Scholar, and domain-specific databases); only English-language publications were included, excluding relevant scholarship in Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Indonesian; only three search strings were used, possibly missing studies using different terminology; thematic synthesis was used rather than formal quality appraisal, so findings represent conceptual mapping rather than causal evidence; and the corpus is dominated by single-platform qualitative case studies from East Asia, limiting cross-platform and cross-cultural generalizability. Publication bias toward English-language, Scopus-indexed journals may further underrepresent Global South scholarship.

### **5.4 Future Research Directions**

Future research should: (1) develop quantitative instruments to operationalize the informal fandom indicators proposed in Section 5.1; (2) conduct longitudinal studies tracking informal fandom evolution across platform changes and algorithm updates; (3) undertake cross-platform comparative studies (e.g., same fandom on Weibo, Twitter, TikTok, Discord) to understand how platform affordances shape fan participation; (4) expand to Global South contexts outside East Asia (Southeast Asia, South Asia, Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa); (5) examine algorithmic visibility and platform governance in contexts where state power intersects with platform capitalism; (6) develop mixed-methods studies combining digital ethnography with network analysis; and (7) develop an integrated theoretical framework, potentially "platformed informal fandom" systematically integrating all four dimensions identified in this review.

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