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Exploring fandom as information practices: a phenomenographic pilot study of Chinese K-pop music fans

Chengling Li and Somsak Sriborisutsakul

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Abstract

Introduction. This paper reports a pilot study exploring how Chinese K-pop music fans experience information practices across multiple digital platforms. The study forms part of a doctoral project that adopts a phenomenographic approach to examine fandom as an information-rich phenomenon situated within constrained socio-technical contexts.

Method. Six participants were investigated through online observation, solicited diaries, and semi-structured interviews.

Results. Analysis revealed four qualitatively different ways in which participants experienced information practices, ranging from non-recognition of informational engagement to purposeful, meaning-laden, cross-platform navigation.

Conclusion. The findings advance the theoretical development of the information practice perspective by extending its application to leisure domains. This study also lays the groundwork for future research to develop a comprehensive outcome space that captures fans' varied ways of experiencing information practices and to explore how socio-technical and regulatory constraints shape their information practices.

Introduction

South Korean popular music (K-pop) has become one of the most significant global cultural flows within the broader Korean Wave (Hallyu). In mainland China, however, K-pop fandom operates within distinctive social and technical constraints. The ‘Great Firewall’ blocks access to most international platforms (Zhang & Fung, 2017); the unofficial ‘Korean Ban’ of 2016 limited the exposure of the Korean Wave (Zhang & Fung, 2017; Zhang & Negus, 2020; Sun, 2022); and the 2021 “‘Clean and Bright’ Fandom Chaos Regulation’ introduced further regulations on online fan activities (Cyberspace Administration of China, 2021). Despite these restrictions, over 100 million K-pop fans remain active in China (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, 2023), forming sophisticated fan communities through local platforms such as Weibo and WeChat.

While studies have examined Chinese K-pop music fans as transcultural consumers or K-pop products consumers (Zhang & Fung, 2017; Park & Yoo, 2019), platform users (Zhang & Negus, 2020), a multilingual community (Song & Feng, 2022), and fan labourers (Sun, 2022), little attention has been given to how they experience fandom as information practices—how they seek, interpret, and share information within constrained environments. Consequently, this pilot study aims to explore the qualitatively different ways in which Chinese K-pop music fans experience information practices as part of a larger phenomenographic project.

Theoretical background

Information practice, epistemologically rooted in social constructionism, explores how people engage with information in socially and contextually situated ways (Savolainen, 2007; Given et al., 2023). Within leisure, much of this work has been framed through Stebbins’ (2007) serious leisure perspective (Demasson et al., 2016; Cox et al., 2017; Price, 2017; Vesga Vinchira, 2019; Mansourian, 2020). While this framing offers valuable insights, it risks reinforcing a bias that legitimises leisure only when it resembles work. Leisure, whether casual or serious, should be understood as an experience in its own right (Gallant et al., 2013; Kizhakkethil, 2020). Any leisure activity can be approached in different styles, and most activities offer varying levels of skill or behavioural involvement for participants (Shen & Yarnal, 2010). In fact, Stebbins (2007) does not explicitly categorise fans as serious leisure practitioners.

Fandom, as distinct from serious leisure, encompasses a range of activities including language translation (Song & Feng, 2022), data manipulation on digital platforms (Zhang & Negus, 2020), tactical information interpretation (Forcier, 2022), intentional promotional content creation (Guo, 2022), playing platformized language games (Yin & Xie, 2024), and informal learning (Wu et al., 2024). These intricate actions deserve scholarly attention that goes beyond viewing fandom as merely playful or hedonic.

Methodology

This study employs phenomenography (Marton, 1981, 1986; Åkerlind, 2025) to map the variation in how Chinese fans experience information practices. The second-order perspective of phenomenography, which centres on participants’ own conceptions, is well-suited to identifying how information is differently understood and enacted across fandom experiences.

Marton and Säljö originated phenomenography as a research approach in the 1970s (Marton & Säljö, 1976; Marton, 1981, 1986). Its contemporary iteration has evolved into a qualitative methodology for investigating both variation and commonality in how people experience phenomena (Åkerlind, 2025). Here, meaning refers to the holistic way a phenomenon is understood or experienced, while structure refers to the structure of awareness that shapes such understanding or experience. Generally, by comparing participants’ experiences at a collective level, phenomenographers identify a set of categories that represent the different ways of experiencing (or understanding) the same phenomenon. These categories are then organised into an outcome space that provides

a structured representation of the range of possible ways a phenomenon can be experienced. However, as shown in Figure 1, phenomenographers vary considerably in how they analyse the structure, meaning, and relationships among different ways of experiencing (Yu, 2019; Åkerlind, 2025). Consequently, there is no single standardised procedure for analysing phenomenographic data.

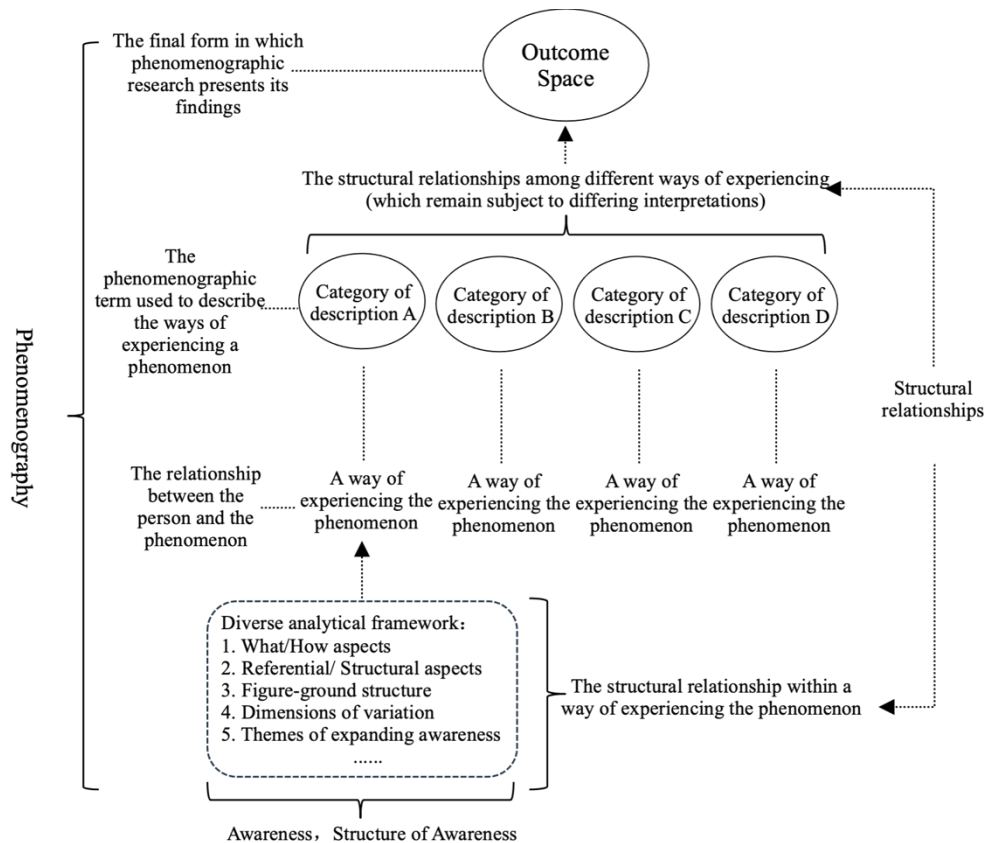


Figure 1. Phenomenography and Its Analysis

Research design

The research project received ethical approval from Chulalongkorn University (COA No. 261/68). Six Chinese K-pop music fans were recruited through purposive sampling. All participants resided in mainland China and were actively engaged in K-pop fandom communities. Data were collected over three weeks using three complementary methods:

- Online observation was conducted over two weeks to examine fans' visible information practices on digital platforms to which the researcher had been granted access. The researcher followed fans' personal accounts on platforms including Xiaohongshu, Weibo, Douban, Bilibili, Douyin, QQ Music, Kugou, Xianyu, Instagram, and X. Additionally, by adding participants as friends, the researcher observed the fans' WeChat Moments. Visible digital traces related to information practice were recorded via screenshots.
- Solicited diaries were used, in which participants described daily fandom activities, platforms used, and reflections on 'information' during the observation period.
- Semi-structured interviews lasting 45–60 minutes were conducted to investigate participants' conceptions of information and associated activities.

Research analysis

Observational data were excluded from the analysis as the researcher recognised that they reflect the researcher's perspective rather than participants' perspectives, which is inconsistent with the phenomenographic second-order perspective.

Phenomenographic analysis is fundamentally inductive and iterative (Voutsina & Stott, 2023). Accordingly, the interview and diary data were analysed through an iterative process of condensing and comparing until a set of preliminary categories of description was identified. As a pilot study, the analysis was limited to presenting these preliminary categories and did not extend to the further development of an outcome space.

Preliminary findings

Analysis revealed four qualitatively distinct ways in which Chinese K-pop music fans experienced information practice:

Category 1: Experiencing no engagement with information

In this way of experiencing, participants perceived their activities, scrolling through feeds on Xiaohongshu or watching videos made by fans on YouTube, as pure entertainment. Information was invisible within their awareness. Fandom was a leisure space centred on affective enjoyment rather than engagement with information, as recorded by participant P01 in her diary (see Table 1).

Solicited Questions	Diary entries of Participant P01 (July 06)
Recall and describe: Which platforms do you use today? What activities do you perform related to the K-pop fandom?	I used Xiaohongshu and YouTube to engage in fandom.
Briefly describe: your thoughts and feelings about why you did it or how you understand these activities.	Today, Natty [a K-pop idol] injured her foot and did not attend the Waterbomb Music Festival. I felt very desperate, and then I spent some time on YouTube watching fan-cams [fan-recorded videos].
Briefly describe: any activities or aspects that you consider related to the term 'information'.	I don't really have any thoughts today.

Table 1. Diary excerpts from Participant P01 illustrating Category 1

Category 2: Experiencing information attributes

In this way of experiencing, participants recognised certain fandom content (e.g., posts, updates, statistics) as information, distinguishing between official and unofficial sources, as reported in participant P02's diary (Table 2).

Solicited questions	Diary entries of participant P02 (July 08)
Recall and describe: Which platforms do you use today? What activities do you perform related to the K-pop fandom?	I listened to music on QQ Music and watched performance stages on Bilibili.
Briefly describe: your thoughts and feelings about why you did it or how you understand these activities.	I suddenly heard a nice song, so I went to watch the performance stage [of this song].
Briefly describe: any activities or aspects that you consider related to the term 'information'.	The video content was related to 'information'.

Table 2. Diary excerpt from Participant P02 illustrating Category 2

Category 3: Experiencing information as embedded actions

Participants perceived their activities related to information, including translation, reuploading [□ □], data compilation, communication with other fans, trading photocards of idols, and sharing videos. In the interview, participant P04 further elaborated on her diary reflections, explaining how she regarded her translation from Korean or Japanese into Chinese and reuploading activities (which means downloading content from international platforms and then reuploading it to local platforms) as information-related practices, as follows:

In your diary, you mentioned that you think reuploading, translating, and chatting with other fans who support the same idol [□ □] are all information-related. Can you explain more about that? (Researcher)

Well, when I saw that question, I thought about which of my daily activities are related to information. First of all, I thought about my identity. I'm basically a blogger who does translation and reuploading. So that definitely includes things like reposting videos, photos, and updates from international platforms. Those are kinds of things related to information. And also, for things like translating variety shows from Korean to Chinese or from Japanese to Chinese, I'd say that's a kind of information integration. Like, every time I post about Eunhyuk and Donghae's schedules, like when they go to or leave work, I don't just repost updates from a single fan site. I usually compile several fan sites, and I don't post just one person either. I always include both of them together.

As for translation, it's more evident. It always involves gathering and integrating information, especially recently, with all the comeback activities going on. For example, when a variety show airs, I start cutting the clips, translating them, and then quickly check and polish the translation before uploading it again. So yeah, I really think that's all related to information.

And also, chatting with fans who support the same idol feels related to information too. The reason I wrote that part in my diary is that, through talking with them, I get a sense of what's happening in the fandom. Because if I'm always busy reuploading and translating, I will not usually pay attention to what's going on in the fandom. But after chatting with them, I kind of catch up on what's happening. Sometimes, when I'm not in a good mood, I also talk to them a bit. It's a way to vent my feelings, I guess. So, for me, I think these kinds of things are closely related to information. (P04)

Category 4: Experiencing engagement with information as meaningful action through navigating multiple platforms

In this way of experiencing, participants deliberately navigated multiple platforms to collect, verify, and synthesise information, which suggested a socially situated form of information literacy. At the same time, this way of experiencing imbued their fandom activities with personal and social meaning. Evidence for this way of experiencing information practice comes from the diary entries of participant P03:

Recall and describe: Which platforms do you use today? What activities do you perform related to the K-pop fandom? (Solicited questions in Instructions for Participants Recording Diaries)

This morning, in the proxy-purchasing [] group I run, one fan saw a post on Xiaohongshu. It was reposted from Olive Young Korea and Instagram, saying that SEVENTEEN's Vernon had just been announced as a new brand ambassador for a skincare product and that the brand would launch an online promotion on Olive Young starting July 1. After seeing it, I first searched for more related posts on Xiaohongshu to check the purchase details, then I went on Instagram to check the brand's official account, and finally, since the announcement was quite recent, I also checked Vernon's big fan site on Weibo to confirm the repost source and details. Based on the official information from Olive Young, I determined the approximate prices and products, categorised them, and reported the details to the proxy-purchasing group. (Diary entries of participant P03, June 30)

Briefly describe: your thoughts and feelings about why you did it or how you understand these activities. (Solicited questions in instructions for participants recording diaries)

I did this because I feel that each platform has its own advantage: Xiaohongshu is usually the entry point, Instagram gives you the brand's first-hand updates, and the Weibo fan site organises idol-related news in a more timely and accurate way. Cross-checking across multiple platforms not only ensures the information is reliable but also prevents me from missing details that Xiaohongshu posts might omit. It also helps me plan the group members' purchases more efficiently. (Diary entries of participant P03, June 30)

Briefly describe: any activities or aspects that you consider related to the term 'information'? (Solicited questions in instructions for participants recording diaries)

Basically, the whole process of collecting information on Vernon's endorsed products, checking the brand event date, and comparing details across different platforms is all about 'information'. It's really about gathering, verifying, and integrating advertising- and event-related information. (Diary entries of participant P03, June 30)

Together, these categories illustrate a spectrum ranging from non-recognition of information to purposeful, meaning-laden engagement.

Discussion

Fandom as socially situated information practices

This study demonstrates various ways that fans experience information practices. The variation, particularly category 1, supports Cox's (2012) argument that while information is embedded in all social practices, not all are inherently information orientated. Category 2 provides empirical backing for Davis (2015)'s view that, within social media contexts, the terms 'information' and 'content' can be used interchangeably.

In Category 3, fans perceived translation activities as information related. This finding adds a new dimension to the study of fans as information users, which has not been reported in previous research (Vesga Vinchira, 2019; Forcier, 2022). It also demonstrates the methodological contribution of the phenomenographic second-order perspective, which requires researchers to bracket assumptions and approach the phenomenon from participants' viewpoints.

In Category 4, fans enacted a sophisticated way of experiencing information practices by leveraging an entire platform ecosystem to locate and validate information for sustained engagement with transcultural fandom. This way of experiencing can be situated in relation to Lloyd's (2011, 2024) view of information literacy as a social practice enacted within socio-cultural settings. Fans' information practices involve navigating multiple platforms, which supports Waugh's (2018) observation that such practices are not confined to a single platform. However, most prior studies have focused on a single platform, such as Weibo (Guo, 2022) or Twitter (Forcier, 2022), potentially resulting in a limited understanding of fans' information practices. This approach may not adequately reflect today's reality, in which, from fans' perspectives, any single platform functions merely as one of many tools for fans engaging with information. Consequently, such studies may overlook how platforms situated within socio-cultural settings further shape these practices.

This pilot study maps four distinct ways in which Chinese K-pop fans engage with information, ranging from affective enjoyment to purposeful, meaning-laden cross-platform practices. These findings contribute to the theoretical development of information practice by extending its application to leisure domains shaped by socio-technical and regulatory constraints. Future work will involve a larger group of participants to develop a comprehensive outcome space that captures the full range and structural relationships of fans' ways of experiencing information practices and to elucidate how social and technological constraints, including digital platforms and cyberspace governance, shape these practices.

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About the authors

Chengling Li is a PhD candidate in the Department of Library Science, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand. Her research interests include information practice and phenomenography. She can be contacted at 872921159@qq.com. ORCID: 0009-0003-9743-746X

Somsak Sriborisutsakul is an associate professor in the Department of Library Science, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand. He can be contacted at somsak.sr@chula.ac.th.

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