

“Furries” Weibo Performance: Self-Presentation Based on Social Media (Post-Print)

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Abstract

As a subcultural group that favors anthropomorphic animal characters, furries primarily utilize anime-style anthropomorphic animal images as their avatars on Weibo, and their self-presentation exhibits characteristics such as intensive Weibo engagement, otaku culture, detachment from fashion trends, dedicated focus, and individualization. Privacy, aesthetics, family and kinship, opinion leaders, and age constitute the five major factors influencing furries' self-presentation on Weibo. The future furry community will evolve toward maturation, with increasingly pronounced Easternization and localization characteristics. In disseminating furry culture through social media platforms such as Weibo, it is necessary to correctly distinguish between the “furry world” and the real world, prevent information cocoons, and establish a rating system for furry works.

Full Text

Preamble

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Title: “Furry Fandom” Weibo Performance: Self-Presentation on Social Media

Abstract: As a subcultural group that favors anthropomorphic animal characters, the furry fandom predominantly uses anime-style “furry” avatars on Weibo. Their self-presentation is characterized by heavy Weibo usage, two-dimensional culture orientation, distance from fashion, specificity, and individualization. Five major factors influence furry self-presentation on Weibo: privacy, aesthetics, family and relatives, opinion leaders, and age. The future evolution of the furry community will trend toward maturation, with increasingly pronounced Eastern and localized characteristics. Disseminating furry culture through social media platforms like Weibo requires correctly distinguishing the “furry world” from reality, preventing information cocoons, and establishing a rating system for furry works.

Keywords: furry fandom; Weibo; subculture; social media; self-presentation

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1. Research Description

1.1 Concept of “Furry Fandom”

The “furry fandom” refers to a subcultural group that favors anthropomorphic fictional animal characters, typically featuring human intelligence, facial expressions, speech capabilities, bipedal locomotion, and clothing. The term also describes communities that gather online or at furry conventions, which have evolved into a distinct fandom culture. These anthropomorphic creatures, known as “furries,” first emerged in American and European anime works. Rather than realistic portrayals, these works blend human body language, movements, and dialogue with animal characteristics to enhance audience affinity—exemplified by characters like Tom and Jerry from *Tom and Jerry* or Judy and Nick from *Zootopia*. Statistics indicate approximately 25,000 individuals in the United States openly identify as furries, with 75% under 25 years old and 72% male, working primarily in technology and artistic fields. In recent years, China’s furry fandom has developed rapidly; the Baidu Tieba “furry bar” had over 16,700 followers by the end of 2018, with more than 42,000 posts. Domestic anime such as *The Legend of Luo Xiaohei* also feature furry characters. In August 2017, the music game *Wonder Parade* launched on the Apple App Store, winning multiple awards with its four furry musician protagonists. Since 2016, an annual offline furry-themed exhibition called “Furry Summer Festival” has been held, where popular games and anime gather and furries can wear “furry” costumes to participate in various themed activities. As furry culture gradually rises and furry characters appear more frequently in mainstream media, public understanding of this subculture remains limited.

1.2 Research Methods

This study primarily employed questionnaires combined with in-depth interviews to collect data. The furry group served as the experimental group, with non-furries as the control group, distributing questionnaires through Weibo and other media platforms. Over five days, 898 responses were collected. After excluding invalid samples and those with low reliability, 888 valid samples remained, including 780 furries and 108 non-furries. Among these, 770 furries and 101 non-furries were Weibo users. The questionnaire contained 105 items, including 98 five-point Likert scale questions. Four questions addressed basic demographics (age, gender, social media usage). Ten dimensions examined furry self-presentation characteristics on Weibo: youth vs. maturity, optimism

vs. pessimism, individual vs. group, focus vs. distraction, enthusiasm vs. indifference, two-dimensional vs. three-dimensional, openness vs. conservatism, bravery vs. caution, authenticity vs. modification, and fashion-chasing vs. fashion-aversion, with six questions per dimension (three positive, three reverse-scored). Ten dimensions explored influencing factors: aesthetics, family and relatives, wealth, privacy, work/study, online friends, opinion leaders, hot topics, living environment, and physical attractiveness, with aesthetics receiving more questions. Five additional questions examined Weibo usage habits: original vs. forwarded posts, images, videos, emojis, and polls. The scale used a five-point scoring system (1 = “very uncharacteristic,” 5 = “very characteristic”), with reverse-scored items assigned -1 to -5 points. Scores were summed within each dimension and compared between furies and non-furies to derive conclusions.

2. Analysis of Furry Self-Presentation

The concept and theory of “self-presentation” was first proposed by sociologist Erving Goffman based on symbolic interactionism, referring to individuals’ efforts to display themselves and influence others’ perceptions according to their desires. Goffman’s dramaturgical theory describes individuals in different situations as “performers” who strategically emphasize or conceal certain aspects of themselves to present a specific impression to their “audience.” Through analyzing furry self-presentation, this study examines what impressions furies project on Weibo, their distinctive characteristics, and the factors influencing these presentations.

2.1 Demographic Characteristics

2.1.1 Age and Gender Among 770 Weibo-using furies, 719 provided their actual age (in years). Results show the average age of Weibo furies is 19.56 years, with the cohort dominated by “post-95s” and “post-00s” generations, forming an “olive-shaped” distribution. The youngest respondent was 12, the oldest 33. Among those who disclosed their age, 294 (40.9%) were “post-00s” aged 18 or younger; 346 (48.1%) were “post-95s” aged 19-23; 66 (9.2%) were “post-90s” aged 24-28; and 11 (1.5%) were “post-85s” aged 29-33. Notably, 188 furies (26.1%) were minors under 18. While some interviewees mentioned a “generational gap” in the furry community, the distribution appears relatively uniform without obvious discontinuities. Gender distribution shows significant disparity: among 770 samples, 720 (93.5%) were male and only 50 (6.5%) female.

2.1.2 Social Media Usage Furry social media usage patterns differ markedly from non-furies. QQ (including TIM and QZone) and Weibo are the two most commonly used platforms. In response to “Which social media do you consider most important?” (multiple choice) among 780 furies, 758 (97.2%) chose QQ and 700 (89.7%) chose Weibo. WeChat was selected by 514 (65.9%), Baidu Tieba by 327 (41.9%), and Zhihu by 246 (31.5%). Among 108 non-furies, 99 (91.7%) identified WeChat as primary, 92 (85.2%) chose Weibo, and 75 (69.4%) chose

QQ. Zhihu and Tieba were selected by 47 (43.5%) and 28 (25.9%) non-furries respectively.

Weibo ranks as the second most important platform for furries, with higher penetration than among non-furries. Only 9.2% of non-furries reported having no Weibo account, never using it, or opening it only every few weeks, compared to just 3.9% of furries, indicating significantly higher Weibo engagement among furries. Furries also demonstrate greater activity: sampled users who participated in follow-up surveys posted an average of 7.6 Weibo messages daily (original and forwarded) versus 2.5 among non-furries. Questionnaire data show that on the item “I forward more Weibo posts than I create original ones,” furries scored 3.94 (approaching “somewhat characteristic”) compared to 3.28 for non-furries, suggesting furries are more inclined to share content. In-depth interviews revealed that furry Weibo profiles often contain “furry” content—among 10 randomly selected furries willing to participate in detailed investigation, 7 had profiles mentioning “furry,” “Furry fandom,” or various animals. “Furry” has become a publicly displayable label that fosters strong group identity.

2.1.3 External vs. Self-Perception Despite the furry community’s established scale, public understanding remains limited. Only 13.8% of non-furries reported being “somewhat familiar” or “very familiar” with furry culture, while over 80% of furries considered themselves “somewhat familiar” or “very familiar,” with fewer than 3% reporting low self-awareness.

2.2 Characteristics of Furry Weibo Self-Presentation

Bernie Hogan from the Oxford Internet Institute argues that online self-presentation has evolved from stage performance to a “self-exhibition,” where users “display” their digital traces on Weibo. Unless deleted or hidden, this information remains permanently accessible to visitors. Additionally, Weibo self-presentation, lacking specific context, can easily lead to misunderstanding. Beyond these general characteristics, furry self-presentation on Weibo exhibits several distinctive features.

2.2.1 Weibo Addiction: High Activity Levels Furries demonstrate significantly higher Weibo activity than non-furries. While Weibo is the second most important social platform for furries, its penetration exceeds that among non-furries. Furries open Weibo more frequently and show greater engagement, with daily posting rates nearly three times higher than non-furries. Their willingness to forward content and the “furry”-themed profiles reflect a strong group identity where “furry” serves as a public badge of belonging.

2.2.2 “Two-Dimensional” Culture: Anime-Style Avatars as a Marker “Two-dimensional” culture, originating from Japan, refers to characters from animation, comics, games, and novels (ACGN), contrasting with “three-dimensional” real-life individuals. Furries’ Weibo feeds contain significantly

more anime and game images, and they show greater willingness to dress up or imitate these characters. Table 3 shows that 61.8% of furies would eagerly embrace opportunities to experience life in an anime world, compared to only 40.2% of non-furies. Conversely, when asked “I don’ t understand two-dimensional culture,” 14.7% of non-furies selected “very characteristic” versus just 1.8% of furies, demonstrating furies’ deep engagement with ACGN culture.

Furry Weibo avatars serve as a unique two-dimensional marker. Only 3.9% of furies use selfies as avatars, while 35.3% of non-furry users display their own photos. Instead, furies adopt anime-style images of tigers, cats, foxes, dragons, bears, dogs, and other “furry” characters, making this visual choice a defining characteristic of their online identity.

2.2.3 Distancing from Fashion: Lower Interest in Trends Despite being primarily composed of post-95s and post-00s generations, furies show less enthusiasm for fashion. Survey data reveal lower interest in technology, clothing, cosmetics, and cutting-edge trends compared to other Weibo users. On the item “I don’ t follow fashion bloggers,” only 2.9% selected “very uncharacteristic,” indicating broad disengagement from fashion culture. This distance from mainstream trends represents a conscious aesthetic and identity choice rather than mere indifference.

2.2.4 Specificity: Focused Attention While Browsing “Specificity” here refers to focused attention on events, people, and usage habits on Weibo, not emotional fidelity in relationships. Furies demonstrate greater loyalty to their preferred bloggers: 45.5% agreed (“somewhat characteristic” or “very characteristic”) with the statement “I have favorite bloggers/idols I’ ve never changed,” compared to 33.3% of non-furies. Conversely, 37.1% of furies selected “very uncharacteristic” for “I follow many celebrity bloggers,” 16.5 percentage points higher than non-furies. In usage habits, furies show more concentrated attention, being less likely than non-furies to listen to music, chat privately, or multitask while browsing. They also demonstrate greater persistence in following up on events, reflecting a sustained interest in hot topics.

2.2.5 Individualization: Low Group Dependency Individualization refers to furies’ relative independence from groups, low dependency, and minimal need for interaction. Overall, furies and non-furies show slight differences on this dimension, though the average score difference reaches 0.56 on “I have few friends on Weibo.” Paradoxically, while furies embrace Weibo as a social tool with distinctive avatars marking their identity, they also report having fewer online friends, suggesting cautious social behavior. Many may be “lurkers” who consume content of interest without engaging in active friendship-building—a hypothesis requiring further verification.

2.3 Factors Influencing Furry Self-Presentation

2.3.1 Aesthetic Values: Celebrating “Furry” Beauty Furies’ preference for “furry” characters stems fundamentally from aesthetic values—specifically, appreciating beauty in anthropomorphic animals. “Furry” literally means fluffy or furry things, and furies show strong preference for fluffy creatures (average score 4.77, approaching “very characteristic”), tailed animals, clothed animals, bipedal animals, and powerful, robust images. These preferences align with the characteristics displayed in their anime-style avatars and the images they post and share.

Group aesthetics significantly influence furry self-presentation. By displaying “furry” avatars, furies maintain connections with their community while distinguishing themselves from non-furies. Sociologist Georg Simmel integrated individual and collective aspects of taste, arguing individuals can preserve and display uniqueness. Through furry avatars, furies both integrate into their community and differentiate themselves from mainstream Weibo users, showcasing their individuality.

2.3.2 Privacy Awareness: Heightened Concern for Security Furies demonstrate greater privacy concerns than the general public, being less willing to share personal photos and recent updates on Weibo. This makes “furry” characters a perfect vehicle for self-presentation—combining various animal anime images with usernames allows self-expression without privacy risks. With over a quarter of furies being minors who practice self-protection by not sharing personal photos or updates, privacy concerns are paramount. Weibo’s public nature, where content is visible to all, further discourages authentic self-presentation.

Privacy fundamentally concerns information control. While interactions through comments, likes, and shares facilitate self-awareness and social connection, self-presentation on social media also risks privacy leakage. Images, videos, text, location data, and product preferences can be exploited by malicious actors or marketers. Furies’ heightened privacy awareness leads to greater information control, using “disguised” avatars to address privacy concerns while seeking identity and satisfaction in the virtual world.

2.3.3 Family and Relatives: Strategic Avoidance Furies’ family members and relatives generally don’t use Weibo, making it an ideal platform for maintaining private space where they needn’t share family photos or content with relatives as they might on other platforms. Both furies and non-furies score above 4.4 on avoiding showing Weibo to family, indicating this is a general social media practice. However, furies engage in more deliberate “avoidance” of family on Weibo, making this factor more pronounced in their self-presentation.

2.3.4 Limited Influence of Opinion Leaders Opinion leaders in social media—celebrities, influencers, and marketing accounts—exert less influence on furies than on the general public. Their viewpoints are less likely to affect

furries' judgments, and their product recommendations receive less response. However, in-depth interviews revealed that furries have their own community-specific opinion leaders, primarily artists and illustrators who share artwork rather than commentary on current events. Whether these community leaders could influence furries' perspectives warrants further investigation.

2.3.5 Age: Determining Fashion Disconnection The furry community's youth—primarily post-95s and post-00s, with over a quarter being minors—naturally correlates with limited fashion engagement. According to Penguin Intelligence data, post-95s and post-00s are the main QQ user base, explaining why QQ ranks as furries' most important social platform. As furries age, influencing factors like aesthetics and family relationships will evolve, consequently changing their Weibo self-presentation. Longitudinal comparison over time is needed to understand these developmental shifts.

3. Future Trends and Standardized Development

3.1 Evolutionary Trends

3.1.1 Maturation The furry community's age distribution forms an olive shape, and combined with their strong individualism and limited external outreach, surrounding groups have low awareness of the fandom. The community will likely mature as current post-00s and post-95s members age, while younger cohorts (post-05s, post-10s) may not develop at the same rate, increasing the community's average age.

3.1.2 Cultural Diversification and Potential Trendsetting As young furries mature and the market pays greater attention, cultural derivatives including furry comics, games, merchandise, and exhibitions will increase, potentially creating new cultural hotspots. Furry interests will expand beyond comics and games to incorporate more work and life content. Furry culture will merge with other cultures—for instance, as domestic anime develops, more furry characters will appear, and as post-00s and post-95s enter society, their “individualization” characteristics may blur, with furries potentially embracing or even pioneering new fashion trends.

3.1.3 Easternization and Localization Originating in American and European anime, the furry fandom has developed distinct characteristics under Japanese manga and Chinese cultural influences. Eastern (including Chinese and Japanese) and localized features are becoming increasingly prominent, most visibly in clothing: furry characters now wear kimonos or hanfu (traditional Chinese clothing) influenced by Japanese and domestic anime. Linguistically, comics feature Chinese or Japanese text, and in dubbed works, furries communicate in these languages. Future preferences will likely favor furry images with Eastern cultural elements, and creators' styles will undergo “Easternization.”

3.2 Standardized Development

3.2.1 Active Social Media Dissemination of Furry Culture Survey data show furries possess deep understanding of their culture from the disseminator perspective, while the general public lacks awareness or harbors misconceptions. As one of the most important platforms for both groups, Weibo serves as a crucial medium connecting furries and non-furries. Furries should increase interaction with non-furry bloggers and utilize Weibo group functions to help more people understand this “unknown” community. With the fandom’s growing scale and close ties to gaming and anime cultures, healthy furry culture development could emerge as a new cultural industry.

3.2.2 Distinguishing the “Furry World” from Reality and Preventing Information Cocoons With over a quarter of furries being minors, they must correctly differentiate between two-dimensional and real worlds to avoid excessive immersion. If furries only follow preferred bloggers and consume furry-related content, they risk trapping themselves in “information cocoons,” unable to receive comprehensive, objective information. While maintaining “specificity,” furries should also engage with real-world content, increase their ratio of three-dimensional bloggers, and participate in offline activities. At furry exhibitions and gatherings, minors must practice self-protection to avoid safety incidents; online, they should remain vigilant against fraud and avoid harmful activities like gambling or violence.

3.2.3 Establishing a Rating System to Protect Minors from Overly Explicit Content Furry anime images involve anthropomorphizing animals, but some creators, aiming to preserve the “most authentic” animal form, retain sexual characteristics or include suggestive content in their works. With minors comprising over a quarter of the fandom (the youngest surveyed being 12), such explicit material could negatively impact youth development. Drawing from film rating systems, this study recommends establishing a rating system for furry comics and works to guide healthy, rational consumption.

Conclusion

Furry self-presentation on Weibo uses “furry” anime images as an exterior, manifesting as fashion-averse, specific, individualized two-dimensional Weibo addicts. This young subcultural group faces multiple influencing factors that evolve with the community’s development. As furry culture matures, it may form a subcultural hotspot integrating anime, gaming, and other elements, showing considerable development potential. This study’s limitation lies in its questionnaire design: due to length constraints and respondent time considerations, eight dimensions in the “factors influencing furry self-presentation” section contained only two questions each, which may introduce bias. Additionally, limited sample size may create discrepancies with the actual furry population, so results should be considered reference material.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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