



Destigmatization in the Furry Fandom: A Case Study on the X University Self-organization in China

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Abstract. As a popular subculture among the Z generation, Furry Fandom has recently become a topic of mainstream media coverage. Previous research on Furry Fandom suggests that furry fans suffer from strong social stigma often perpetuated by negative or inaccurate media portrayals as sexual deviant, socially awkward, or bestiality fetish, and sometimes they stigmatize themselves. Nevertheless, in China, less social stigma has been observed about Furry Fandom. Paradoxically, furry fans in China even exhibit self-deprecation inside and outside the communities. Taking the Furry self-organization at X University in Beijing, China, as an example, this paper used the Process Tracing Case Study Method and conducted in-depth online interviews with the administrator of the self-organization to investigate the factors causing this phenomenon. As a comparative social study, firstly, the study introduces a general overview of the Furry Fandom as a new subculture in China and the differences between the portrayal of western and Chinese mainstream media sources. Secondly, the study reviews prior studies specifically on the stigmatization of the Furry Fandom, and the study introduces the methodology. Thirdly, self-organization is introduced and analyzed as an empirical case study of the existence and development of Furrries in China. Finally, the limitation of this research and suggestions for the future study are given in the conclusion. This study fills a research gap regarding Furry Fandom in China.

Keywords: Subculture · Stigmatization · Furry Fandom · Case study

1 Introduction

Recently Furry Fandom has been in the limelight to be reported as a new subculture among the Z generation by the Chinese mainstream media [1]. Furry Fandom is a collective name given to individuals who have a distinct interest in anthropomorphic animals, such as cartoon characters. A Furry is a person who identifies with the Furry Fandom culture [2]. The characteristic of furry activities is the creation of animal characters called fursona (a portmanteau of “furry” and “persona”) that represent themselves and various communication activities using them as avatars.

Initially, Furry Fandom began as a small offshoot between the Science Fiction Fandom and the Underground Comic Communities in the 1970s and has now grown via the

Internet into a large, friendly community with 1.4–2.8 million furies worldwide [3]. Although Furry Fandom is usually featured in activities and conventions with individuals wearing fursuits in the physical world, it is now primarily an online subculture [4]. It is believed that the acceptance of Furry Fandom in China began in the 2000s, and there are currently about 300,000 to 400,000 furies in China. Thus, through the Internet in recent years, Furry Fandom has become a popular subculture among Chinese youth [5].

Furry Fandom is about creation, friendship, and communities. However, Numerous negative stigmas exist about furies, often perpetuated by negative or inaccurate media portrayals of furies as sexual deviants, socially awkward, or people with an unusual (e.g., fursuits) or, in some places, illegal (e.g., bestiality) fetish [6]. Other research has shown that the Furry Fandom consists of several different subgroups. Some of these groups have been shown to experience stigma from both the general population and from the Fandom itself. Furies are stigmatized by the media; they sometimes stigmatize themselves.

Unlike the tendency of media bias in western society, Furry Fandom in China was reported as a new way for young people to cope with stress. China Network Television, with over 17 million followers on the second largest social media platform (Sina Weibo) in China, has reported the furies as people with social anxiety disorder, explicitly describing the effect and meaning of fursuits. For instance, the furry as an interviewee is unable to fall asleep without his fursuit, and young people as furies in China suffer from social stress, so they have to escape into the subculture world.

Although the Fandom is negatively reported, there is no stigmatization of furies observed in China. Despite several stereotypes about Furry Fandom portrayed by media, most furies would like to share their identity with peer even at the first time they meet each other. Some elder individuals simply take furies as a group of caring people who love animals. This phenomenon of fandom in China, which is different from that of Western society, is worth researching.

Taking the Furry community at X University in China as an example, this paper uses the Process Tracing Case Study Method to investigate the reasons for this phenomenon. This study will enhance understanding of this new subculture and prompt the development direction of Furry Fandom in China.

2 Literature Review

Most studies on Furry Fandom thus far have been conducted by a team named FurScience under International Anthropomorphic Research Project (IARP) [7]. Considering furies as a homogenous group with members sharing characteristics consistently [8], IARP has paid attention to furry identity, stigmatization, anthropomorphism, etc., from the perspective of social psychology [9]. Besides these topics, Dunn [10], Satinsky, and Green [11] have focused on the aesthetic study of costume, dress, and furry arts. In addition, Heinz [12] has researched the intersectionality between furies and LGBT+, and Silverman [4] studied Furry Fandom from the perspective of the queer study.

Still, the study on the stigmatization of Furry Fandom is a large part of the academy. The Furry Fandom has been found in past research to be a stigmatized target. According to IARP, current mainstream media sources continually connect the fandom with sexual deviance around fursuits or animals, which is not a representative image of the entire

population [9, 13, 14], such as television shows (CSI: Crime Scene Investigation episode ‘Fur and Loathing in Las Vegas’), films (Plushies and Furrries), and even news stations. There was an impressive extent of furrries who felt that the furrries are depicted adversely by the media overall. In recently collected survey data with 1579 members of the Furry Fandom, preliminary analysis demonstrated that 47% of the furrries believe that the average person, not identified with the Furry Fandom, has an opinion of furrries that ranges from somewhat unfavorable to highly negative [15]. They are at greater risk of depression, anxiety, and suicide, and their mental well-being is under concern.

Plante and his colleagues [16] found that furrries may not be comfortable with disclosure of their furry identity to others out of fear of experiencing stigma. Also, Lucas utilized identity cultivation, management, and concealment within a stigmatized subgroup by incorporating sociological constructs [17]. This finding supported the current research around the furry community and much of the literature about identity and stigmatization. Additionally, Simpson points out that although furrries may suffer from stigma and prejudice, it also influenced their lives and their abilities to cope with life stressors.

Combining post-humanism and fan studies, instead of taking furrries as a homogeneous furry group like most previous studies, Austin subdivided furrries into hobbyists and lifestylers on top of the research of IARP. The study points out that a solid bond with Furry Fandom makes individuals more defenseless against stigma to some extent. However, the limitation of the research is that, as with other studies on stigmatization, when it is investigated, devalued groups are frequently hesitant to report that they have been survivors of disparagement. A portion of the furrries in this study, even though data was anonymously collected, may feel that they would have rather not revealed defamation as they would have rather not supported negative generalizations from outside the community. Additionally, because many grumbled about others causing ‘show’, they might not have any desire to be viewed as ‘causing dramatization’ themselves. Eventually, this phenomenon makes stigmatization even harder to be detected.

3 Methodology

As a strategy to study causal mechanisms and hypothesis testing in a single case research design, the Process Tracing Method has gained some ground in recent years. Initially formulated by Alexander George in Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences, with Andrew Bennett in 2005, Process tracing is a research method for tracing causal mechanisms using detailed, within-case empirical analysis of how a causal process plays out in an actual case [18]. It is used to examine correlations between independent variables (X) and dependent variable outcomes (Y), addressing causality in single cases.

This paper adopts the Process Tracing Method to analyze the case of Furry self-organization at X University in Beijing, China on the following grounds. First, Chinese furry fans are very secretive, and very few furrries come out in public. Thus, it is difficult to conduct a large sample collection, and a case study is suitable. Second, developing as a robust community in China, this Furry self-organization is a typical and representative case. Third, the author has conducted long-term field observations of this organization and a large amount of first-hand material is therefore available.

4 The Existence and Development of Furrries in China: An Empirical Case Study

This study was conducted at the beginning of 2022 to trace the case of Furry self-organization at X University in Beijing, China for 6 months. The research materials were obtained from the author's online interviews with the administrator of the self-organization on a month-by-month basis during that period. On average, the interviews were conducted once a month for one hour each time. The materials were obtained through in-depth interviews.

The Furry self-organization at X University was established in 2020, mainly by a QQ group (which is one of the most frequently used social media among university students in China), with currently 42 members, including graduates and current students. The self-organization started from a message on the online campus confession wall [19]:

“Because there is a message asking about Furry Fandom on the confession wall, and then my classmate who knows that I am a furry fan told me...was like there is someone on the confession wall looking for furry groups. That is why I know there was no existing community for furrries. So I create one, and then more and more people join the group gradually.”

Usually, communication in the self-organization is online. Group members share posts, videos, pictures, and comments about not only Furry Fandom but also the latest comics information and furry characters they fancy. In the group, some members focus on content creation regarding Furry Fandom, including literature and art, some like surfing on Weibo, Bilibili, and Twitter, viewing content about Furry Fandom such as fursuits making, and others follow a YouTuber who creates videos about Furry Fandom, doing live video streaming. In sum, the administrator concludes that: “Each one is very distinctive in his/her way.”

In addition, (although not everyone has their fursona), the group is where they use their “fursona” to express themselves. Through the way of communicating in fursona, they also introduce their fursona to one another simultaneously. When they meet offline, they still call each other by their fursona's names instead of real names, even if there are non-furrries in their presence. There are also offline communication activities. Collective activities are held at the beginning of every semester, “We organize a campus orientation for new students. If there had been no pandemic, we would have taken new members to visit some famous tourist attractions in Beijing.”

Sometimes they have meals, play a board game, and study offline at the library together, which is organized separately inside or outside the group. However, the number of furrries who are willing to participate in offline activities is pretty fixed, ranging from a quarter to about one-third.

Since the university does not officially confirm the furry self-organization, the self-organization also recruits members through a unique way besides word of mouth and social networks: “And classes. Some elective classes also increase the opportunities. We can distinguish furrries by the hangings, mascots, or phone wallpapers.”

The administrator will directly accost the student and confirm if he/she is furry in person, starting with the conversation with entry points of the distinct accessories.

When it comes to the question of why not apply to the university to set up an official furry club, the administrator told the author that not only because the application procedure was complex, but there was also a huge contradiction here: “The main concept of a club is a lot of members getting together and communicating with each other, but as a subculture furries always prefer small communities, especially senior furries who like to communicate deeply in a small community.” The club is synonymous with gregarious individuals, while the furry organization has unique characteristics gathering online, concentrating on their areas. The organization is characterized with both inclusiveness of uniqueness and social exclusiveness.

As for the future outlook, despite the increasing coverage, commercial element, and documentaries of furries on the internet, it is hard to imagine the furry community will grow much larger as a whole. Just like the contradictory characteristics shown in the self-organization, it is possible to consider that the group will split into smaller ones as it grows. Moreover, the furry self-organization will also develop as a small community in the future, but the interpersonal relationship inside the community will be relatively close and further enhanced.

5 How to Remove Stigma: Case-Based Analysis

As a participant of Furry Fandom, the administrator also approves that the stigmatization of Furry Fandom is extremely low-level in China. By analyzing the above case, the paper aims to answer: Why the stigmatization of Furry Fandom is rarely observed in China. In particular, there are internal and external factors as follows.

5.1 Internal Factors——The Essence and Actions of the Group

5.1.1 Affirm the Furry Identity

Furries need to “remind” and “prove” themselves to confirm their furry identity since the Furry Fandom as a subculture has blurred cultural boundaries in China. Furries use some “self-deprecation” on purpose to highlight their difference from others (especially non-furries), expressing their special characteristics. For instance,

“They post bullet-screen comments like ‘beware of furries’ under some farm videos on video sharing websites. In the US, most of the time, bestiality in the Furry Fandom is reported by the media, but furries in China conduct self-exposure. Maybe we just take it as a joke, but many of us love to play this kind of punch line”

These self-deprecate comments online not only satisfy furries seeking for cultural identity but also fulfil the curiosity of individuals outside the Furry Fandom. Eventually, memes like this were established over time and used by more and more non-furries. This also increases the stereotype of the Furry Fandom community in a jovial way.

5.1.2 Needs for Concealment

Being fearful of predicted resistance, they proactively hide their furry identity in the physical world of real life, and they are cautious about protecting their culture. They neither tell their parents nor take the initiative to tell strangers outside their peer group regarding Furry Fandom.

“There aren’t a lot of furies who tell parents their identity. At least, no one in our group did. I just heard about it, that kind of (parents) are ideal.”

Concealing their identity from others seems contradictory to their seeking for identity. However, it is not hard to understand their motivation: Less exposure under the spotlight, less attention from others outside the fandom.

5.1.3 Idealistic and Warm Nature

Investigating their setting traits of fursona, this study found that most furies are mild and tolerant, expecting for a better self and a better world. The fursona is representative of the ideal self. Most furies in the organization combine the favorable traits in their fursona. Take the administrator’s fursona “Bailan” for instance.

“Since I like watching Tokusatsu, I prefer combining furies with hero I chose the dragon image for my fursona because the dragon is known to be a very strong species in Chinese mythology. I hope I can be strong so that I can help people who are weaker than me and bring happiness to them.”

Concentrating on the creation of fursona, furies barely have substantial harm and never care about political attempts. The warm and tolerant image of furies is difficult to be hated and will not incur intentional suppression from government or society.

5.2 External Factors——Social Conditions and External Circumstances

5.2.1 Affinity with Traditional Chinese Culture

Animal anthropomorphism and therianthropy can be found in the earliest Chinese myths and legends. According to Chinese mythology, Nvwa, an ancient goddess with a human face and snake body, created Chinese people with yellow clay. Besides the nature worship, the tribal totems of Chinese primitive societies are the expression of worship of fantasy animals, like the totem of Emperor Yan——long (Chinese dragon). In addition, in the subsequent Chinese classical literature, some texts blur the line between humans and animals as the main characters. The most famous ones are tales of the miraculous since the Six Dynasties Period (220–589 CE). For instance, *Legend of the White Snake*, *Renshi Zhuan* (by Shen Ji-ji), *the Stories of Man and Tiger* (by Jingliang Li), and *Duzichun* (by Fuyan Li). There is a crossover between traditional Chinese culture and Furry Fandom culture, and to some extent, the Chinese cultural environment affirms the Furry Fandom and influences the localized characteristics of furry in China. For instance, the performance of dragons is different from that of Western dragons in the fandom.

5.2.2 Immaturity of Social Conditions

As a late-Modernization Country, western subcultures came into China after the Chinese economic reform. In the 1980s, the prevalence of neoliberalism in western societies, the dramatic changes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and the Marketization Reform in China led to great systemic changes all over the world. In the late 1990s, the Chinese Internet entered the pioneering period, and the Internet began to gradually enter the world of social life, constructing a new way of life for the Chinese people [20]. As the new Internet media entered the lives of young people, a variety of youth-subcultural factors came in and directly shaped the lifestyles of young people, such as Otaku, hackers, as well as the Furry Fandom. The modern scientific and technological revolution has brought about drastic social changes, and the cultural generation gap has become a phenomenon. On the one hand, it is difficult for the adults to condemn the Furry Fandom when they do not know enough about it. On the other hand, young people use subcultures to call a shot, so it is less likely to have disapproval of the fandom.

5.2.3 Peace with the Political Environment

As a type of subculture, the Furry Fandom does not contradict the mainstream values advocated by the Chinese government. The subcultures of Chinese youth have only been represented since 1985, and these cultures often deviate from the mainstream culture. The authority and state press in China often praise those artists who toe the Party line while castigating those who flout officially delimited rules and values. For instance, Cui Jian, who pioneered Chinese rock music, was suppressed by the government because he participated in a protest in 1989 and his political songs. Moreover, somewhat paradoxically, hip-hop as a global music genre—known for its resistance to the dominant ideology—is tamed and sanitized to serve both the local market and Chinese nationalism [21]. Because the creation of furies has nothing to do with politics, the suppression of furies is rare by the government.

6 Conclusion

Unlike in western societies, the stigmatization of the Furry Fandom presents a low level in China. By analyzing the case of the Furry self-organization at X University in Beijing, this study identified factors of the Furry Fandom that contribute to this phenomenon, which can be divided into internal and external ones. From the internal aspect, furies in China need to draw clear cultural boundaries to affirm their furry identity but also need concealment from the public simultaneously. Additionally, the creation of furry identities is usually idealistic and warm, making them mild and approachable. From the external aspect, the Furry Fandom culture is affinitive with traditional Chinese culture to some extent which makes it acceptable to the Chinese mainstream. Also, the modern scientific and technological revolution brought generation gaps, which led to the immaturity of this culture. Finally, the Furry Fandom concentrates on creating self-expression instead of political issues, so the Furry Fandom stays at peace with the current political environment.

This study only demonstrates the lack of severe social stigma for furry in China owing to the localized nature of Furry Fandom in China and the current Chinese social

environment. But it does not mean that the Furry Fandom in China will not face the threat of stigmatization in the future. Just as “beware of furrries” has been maliciously used and popularized by non-furrries, individuals who do not know furrries are more likely to learn about this subculture through such sarcastic and derogatory descriptions. As the Furry Fandom develops further, how to avoid possible stigmatization will probably become a significant challenge in the future.

Also, the limitations and the sample selection biases are evident within this study, which prompt the need for further research on other aspects of the Furry Fandom in China. One of the limitations of the research is that specific circumstances of using fursona to perform themselves are unrevealed. It is necessary to conduct further participant observation and online ethnography. Moreover, it is better to focus on subdivided conditions both online and offline as well as the combination and interaction of different media. In addition, the balance of maintaining the contradictory condition is still worth exploring. The relevance of performing fursona character and self-construction has also not been investigated yet. Last but not least, the affinity between furrries and LGBT+ is verified in the self-organization, similar to the prior studies. Intersectionality of subculture identity and LGBT+ identity may contribute to culture study and gender study, which also needs more further studies.

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