

# FURRY FANDOM AS FOLK CULTURE

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## Abstract

The furry fandom can be classified as an art community centered around anthropomorphic creatures and zoomorphic humans. The contemporary cultural movement of furies in the United States is situated within the politics of technological development and the re-thinking of folk culture. Research on furies has mostly centered on the psychological and demographic aspects of community members or has strongly emphasized empowerment through membership in the community through costuming and identity formation. However, little academic literature has been done on how mainstream culture has informed socialization in the community and media perception of the identity of the community. By conducting in-depth interviews, questionnaires, and participant observation with community members, I investigated how the community both resists and reflects (or reproduces) larger cultural movements. In this article, I will demonstrate how neoliberal and postmodern cultural assemblages can be found throughout the furry community. Research on the furry community, a mostly online Western community founded on openness and tolerance, reveals how people across generations are engaging in hobbies and developing new identities within the context of a continued accumulation of capital in the Global North.

## Introduction

Although research on the furry fandom has accelerated over the last couple of years due to interest from the fields of sociology, psychology, and consumer studies, research situating the furry fandom as a cultural movement in the West in its current socio-political context has not been covered as heavily as questions of identity, general experience, and comparison to other fandoms.<sup>1</sup> In this article, research done over the length of a year will be examined and analyzed from an interdisciplinary perspective to see how the furry fandom compares to current cultural movements such as postmodernism and neoliberalism. Postmodernism is a cultural movement or set of movements that push beyond pre-defined or linear narratives of progress and development (modernity) and often reject positivism, creating a space for interpretation, the subjective, and critical

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<sup>1</sup> Sharon E. Roberts, et al., "Clinical Interaction with Anthropomorphic Phenomenon: Notes for Health Professionals about Interacting with Clients Who Possess This Unusual Identity," *Health & Social Work*, 40, no. 2 (May 2015): e42-e50, doi: 10.1093/hsw/hlv020.; Courtney N. Plante, et al., "'More than Skin-Deep': Biological Essentialism in Response to a Distinctiveness Threat in a Stigmatized Fan Community," *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 54, no. 2 (2015) 359-370, Doi: 10.1111/bjso.12079; Michael John Healy and Michael B. Beverland, "Unleashing the Animal Within: Exploring Consumers' Zoomorphic Identity Motives," *Journal Of Marketing Management*, 29, no. 1-2 (2013): 225-248, doi: 10.1080/0267257X.2013.766233.

discourse.<sup>2</sup> In the furry community, for example, an aesthetic that definitively identifies a work as claimable by the community by the sheer view that it is “furry,” depends on who is defining the aesthetic. *Zootopia* (2016), an animated film by Disney, for example, has been identified within the community as noticeably fitting the aesthetic since it has animals behaving in human-like ways. However, the film *The Secret Life of Pets* (2016), another animated film by Illumination, was identified by my participants as either fitting that aesthetic or not, and a following debate ensued. *The Secret Life of Pets* and *Zootopia* have similar ideas - there are furry animals that are behaving in human-like ways - but the context of both movies and what they meant as being identifiable as furry was what was the center of debate by community members I talked with.

The current furry movement emerges out of this postmodern context as well as out of the hyper-accumulation of capital in the Global North, also referred to as neoliberalism. Neoliberalism can be understood in the context of “the emergence of more flexible modes of capital accumulation, and a new round of ‘time-space compression’ in the organization of capitalism.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, neoliberalism involves the alienation of the means of production, living in a universe of consumer brands, and emphasizing the individual over

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<sup>2</sup> Frederic Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” in *Media and Cultural Studies Key Works*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1984), 485.

<sup>3</sup> David Harvey, “The Argument,” in *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1989), vii.

the group in attaining success; we can dissect the idea of this economic and political ideology and see whether it can apply to the experience of being in the furry community.

## Background

The furry community, although it generally does not fit neatly into an exact definition, has been characterized by researchers as the “collective name given to individuals who have a distinct interest in anthropomorphic animals,” and by some members of the community roughly the same as liking artwork focused on human-like animals or creatures.<sup>4</sup> The origin of the furry community is difficult, if not impossible, to pin down: although some of my participants had the same answers relating to the same kind of origin of furry, many answers varied on exact times and dates, and participants were generally unsure of the community’s origins. When talking with unofficial furry historians who chronicle furry culture as a hobby, their own answers differed among time periods and what marks the start of the conception of furry. Participants traced different origins of the community including the beginning of Disney cartoons starring anthropomorphic animals, the start of the Internet, and the first furry convention. Specific works were also cited such as *The Lion King* in the 1990s and *Robin Hood* in the 1980s. Generally, it can

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<sup>4</sup> Kathleen C. Gerbasi, et al., “Furries from A to Z (Anthropomorphism to Zoomorphism),” *Society and Animals*, 16, (2008), 198, <http://www.animalsandsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/gerbasi.pdf>; Author’s interviews, 2017.

be agreed that the conceptions of furry differ in time periods, with a vague separation between a prehistoric idea of furry that was celebrated in ancient polytheistic religions and the contemporary conception of furry that began in the 1960s with furry comics like fanzines. The current furry community is not limited to the United States; it is a community that spans continents regardless of language barriers. Additionally, interactions within the community can range from online interactions (such as websites or apps like Discord, Twitter, Amino, etc.) to offline interactions (like conventions, meet-ups, and club meetings), with the level of socialization being roughly the same, if not conducted differently.

## **Methods**

Within the year of research conducted, various quantitative and qualitative methods were utilized for data collection. For quantitative methods, two surveys were published online, with the first being published on a popular messaging board, and the second being passed around a specific subset of community within furry fandom. The survey included multiple questions on demographics and short and long answer questions on identity, stereotyping, community characteristics, etc. and garnered a total of more than 250 responses in the first survey and more than 150 responses in the second survey. Since the survey was available exclusively in English, and the responses were generated on a convenience sample basis rather than a random sample, applicability of these results for the entire community is limited.

Regardless, results of the survey can offer interesting insights to some of the perspectives of the community that have not been considered before.

The various levels of social interaction in the furry community demand a nuanced approach to conducting qualitative methods. Individual and group interviews as well as participant observation were administered both online through Google Hangouts, Skype, and various social media sites, and offline at conventions, meet-ups, and face-to-face interactions. A series of semi-structured interviews were done with individual participants and in groups, with the latter's questions being more interpretive than individual questions. For example, individual questions were asked, "Have you ever been to a convention? What is it like?" while groups were asked to "Talk about gender in the community." This was used as a way to prompt discussion among the group, rather than just getting a single answer from each individual participant.

For the various conventions attended, I also asked and was mostly able to volunteer for the conventions, being able to attend both as a convention-goer as well as a helper in running the convention. When interacting with communities for research, it is important to practice reciprocity when possible, or the practice of actively giving back to the community studied in research. Other than volunteering, the completed thesis was also posted for free on the website Academia.edu, and some of the demographic results from the survey were made available to participants by being posted on the messaging board the original survey was posted on.

Other ethical issues that were tackled were issues of positionality, communication with participants, and anonymity. Positionality is understood as the research divulging their position in a study so readers can understand how this position may affect the aspect, collection, and interpretation of data in a study.<sup>5</sup> As someone who is a White American, pansexual, non-binary person with anxiety, I believe I had certain access (and restriction) to the community because of my identity, and this must be considered with the interpretation of my results. In addition, when contacting and communicating with my participants, some of them formally dropped out or did not respond to my inquiries. Considering that they did not explicitly tell me that they did not want me to not use our discussion, and that their dropping out was due to external factors rather than interpersonal conflict, I have elected to include their discussions in my data still. Lastly, maintaining anonymity of participants was a major priority, as some members are not open about their identity in every social circle, so all names and some dates of reference have been changed.

These methods yielded results that, although they may not be definitively applicable to the entire furry community, does offer some perspective on the experiences of some members. This is especially true when we talk about community members' experiences in the context of current cultural movements like neoliberalism and postmodernism.

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<sup>5</sup> Dongxiao Qin, "Positionality," *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies*, Wiley Online Library, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/9781118663219.wbegss619>.

## Promoting (and Being) Furry

The majority of data collected and used to interpret ideas of neoliberal values and postmodern aesthetic in the community were from participant observation, textual analysis, and interviews. Data included observation of convention and community activities at both furry and non-furry conventions. Additionally, there were data from individual participants, group conversations, and analyzing business cards collected from the artist's alley at a large and small convention. Individual interviews and observation of convention and community activities were used as the primary source of analysis in relating values within the community to values composed in neoliberalism.

As discussed prior, neoliberalism can be divided into several contexts: political and economic. For the economic dimension, this can be seen in how capital is accumulated more quickly than ever and more ways than before.<sup>6</sup> For the political dimension, it creates an environment encouraging individual decision and thought over group movement. This idea of emphasizing the individual can also be defined as individualism, a new concept that Guignon believes is a new concept of self-actualization that is based more on a commitment to finding our true selves by self-reflecting on our own past experiences than religious insight.<sup>7</sup> For example, most participants in in-depth interviews said that their experience in the community changed

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<sup>6</sup> Harvey, vii.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Guignon, *On Being Authentic* (London: Routledge, 2004), 162-167.

their life for the better and gave them the opportunity to be more of themselves. Fursuiting, or costuming in a suit based on a furry character, is one of the many ways that people express more of their “true selves” in the community. Emily Satinsky and Denise Green outline this in their research on identity exploration in the community through fursuiting.<sup>8</sup> One of my participants, RikuMu, says that it feels “like I can actually [be] more extroverted through the community and ...I can at least express myself a lot better and somewhat relax and be someone who I’d like to be.” Additionally, the ability for those to choose their fursona (or furry persona), change it at will, and define what it means to them and what qualities of it reflect them show how this new adoption of self-determination in recent decades has served to change the functions of art.

Fursona art can not only be considered in relation to the political aspect of neoliberalism, as it also can be related to the economic dimension. The economic aspect of neoliberalism, specifically the commodification of ideas and intellectual property (especially art), can also be found within the furry community. Some people will pay others to create art of their fursona. These are broadly called commissions and place a value on the conception of a fursona. Commissions are highly popular within the fandom, but representations of one’s fursona can be done in other ways: making pre-made and custom fursuits, selling pre-made furry

characters referred to as “adoptables” and custom furry characters in the form of Telegram stickers, laminated badges, online profile pictures, and other pieces. In my own experience, my first art of my fursona, Jay the Black Bombay Cat, was done as a gift from a friend; my first actual commission was done almost a year later and done by a cheaper and high-quality Tumblr artist. Success of artists in commissions can heavily depend on who one knows in their social networks rather than their talent and prices, although a consistent narrative of artists being able to find success based on their ability is presented alongside the admitted reality that success can be minimal for many, many artists.

The success of artists depends on many factors, but an important note to keep in mind is that, unlike organizations for business professionals or doctors, the community of furry artists do not have a formal structure that they use to promote artists. Instead, I observed that popular art websites like Fur Affinity, Tumblr, DeviantArt, etc. and streaming sites like Rabbit, among others, are used as places for artists to begin and organize their business. Artists can also promote themselves offline through meet-ups, club meetings, with informal networks, and at booths for small to large conventions. The promotion of artists for possible commissions (or general publicity) can be used as an example to understand the dimensions of postmodernism.

I looked specifically at how this kind of promotion was done by doing a systematic sample of all the business cards from an artist’s alley of a large attendance anime

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<sup>8</sup> Emily Satinsky and Denise Nicole Green, “Negotiating Identities in the Furry Fandom through Costuming,” *Critical Studies in Men’s Fashion*, 3, no. 2 (2016): 107-123, doi: 10.1386/csmf.3.2.107\_1.

convention and a vendor's hall of a low attendance furry convention. After collecting all available business cards that were displayed at a certain time and day of the convention, I randomly picked five cards from each pile to analyze individually while keeping in mind what may be considered a modern aesthetic and a postmodern aesthetic. A "modern" aesthetic would focus on practical appeals, in this case the practical appeal would be clearly defining what an artist's services are (see Figure 1a-b). Frederic Jameson defines postmodern as a form of "aesthetic production integrated into commodity production generally... an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation."<sup>9</sup> A postmodern aesthetic appeal, then, focuses on the appeal to senses rather than logic as a modern, practical appeal would (see Figure 2a-b).

I held a focus group with several furry artists and showed them the cards and asked how they marketed themselves. They were also fans of using social media to market themselves as the postmodern business card had done, but when asked which one they personally favored the most they chose the modern business card because, according to Shark, "it definitely serves a purpose." However, Liz agreed that the postmodern card was effective because "it's very minimal, it's got all the information you need and it's easy to just look at..."<sup>10</sup> Clearly branding in the furry community, like any other community, must strike a

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<sup>9</sup> Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," in *Media and Cultural Studies Key Works* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1984), 485.

<sup>10</sup> Author's focus group interview, 8/2017.

balance between a practical appeal and an aesthetic appeal. Although furry artists are also branding themselves through creating their own business cards and networking online for commissions through watermarks such as those I observed through blog sites like Tumblr and art streaming, they are also adjusting their prices in order to be commissioned as in any other market.<sup>11</sup>

Getting commissions is difficult no matter which medium is used, although it may be relatively easier to get business at a furry convention rather than at an anime convention due to sheer size: Anthrocon, the largest furry convention in the world, brought in more than 8,407 in 2018 according to their official Twitter account, but Anime Expo, the largest anime convention just in North America, brought in 110,000 this year.<sup>12</sup> This discrepancy could be a reason why some artists may want to advertise their services at smaller furry conventions rather than larger anime conventions—"if [the convention size is too big] people just pass over you," Liz says. Romani, one of the artists included in the focus group discussing business cards, also said that her sales were much better at the smaller anime conventions than the large anime conventions by far. Profitability is not the main focus of the furry community; indeed, trying to define the main focus of the furry community around a sole activity

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<sup>11</sup> Author's interview, 9/2017.

<sup>12</sup> Anthrocon, Twitter post, 8 July 2018, 2:06 pm, <https://twitter.com/anthrocon/status/1016066000918401025?lang=en>; Anime Expo, "Anime Expo 2018 Continues to Thrill Fans as They Celebrate Japanese Pop Culture," *Anime Expo*, 10 July 2018, <http://www.anime-expo.org/2018/07/10/anime-expo-2018-continues-thrill-fans-celebrate-japanese-pop-culture/>.

would be falling into the trap of trying to create boundaries for it. Instead, it is an avenue some members have chosen to take as a supplement to their current job or as their sole source of income.

## **Discussion**

Furry art's competitive commission market and networking-based system of new artists enabled the commodification and promoted individualism by one's furry persona as a piece of art that can be displayed to others for identification. For example, it is widely known that in the fandom, you can be whatever species you would like--although there is an inside joke that everyone starts off as a fox or wolf, the truthfulness of this idea is rarely seen to be true. Many participants I spoke with varied with their first fursonas, and while some did have the same species, the design of the species varied widely enough that species seemed to be more as a background for socializing, while it seemed that the focus was on a persona that one could look at and call "unique." The acceptability of uniqueness has its boundaries in every community, of course, and the definition of uniqueness tends to vary with who is using it at the time, but the ultimate goal of representing yourself to face the community as an individual and not just as a species group member can reflect the individualistic aspects of the community.

However, the idea that the furry community is completed based around individualism is not always true. Some participants said that they were only involved in the community because their

partner or friends were. There were multiple times at meet-ups and other social events that I found myself meeting people who said they were more involved because of their dating partner or friend group—I cannot say yet whether they remained active in the community if these relationships ended. There were also multiple times that I heard stories of people that chose their fursona at random or because a friend chose it for them. For example, one participant I spoke with recalled games where people could spin a wheel to determine their fursona, rather than through intense or light introspection. Of course later on they could add individual details onto their design if they so choose, but having an independently conceived and designed fursona is not a rule one must follow to be active with it in the furry community. Although the furry community can be a place for individual identity exploration, for some it is more a place for leisure and socializing with others.

Marketization of art in the furry community is not an absolute observation either; for fursona depictions, for example, members of the community are still able to make their own art, receive it as gifts from friends, and make their own from free outlines online. So, although marketization is prevalent in the community, it cannot be said that someone must be prepared to spend money in order to be involved in the community and/or create a visual identity that people generally adopt. Additionally, some artists are interested in starting businesses to make a living off selling furry art, but that does not mean the center of the community is around that motivation. Experiences of marketing in the community

can differ from person to person and group to group, so neoliberal values of commodifying ideas do not completely encapsulate everyone's experience.

So can we say that there is such a thing as a furry aesthetic? Furry can be related to postmodern ideas since its application and aesthetic can differ from person to person, as exhibited through discussions of business cards promoting furry artists. Sometimes, the aesthetic of cards collected were designed to draw attention to the artist themselves rather than their services, and leave the possible patron to consider for themselves what they wish to think of the information given. Other times, however, the cards took on more of a functional feature by focusing on the services the artist provides. From my group interview with furry artists, I have found that if there was a furry aesthetic, it would be defined by the combining of these aesthetic and functional strategies to present a business persona that matches community needs and expresses the artist's individual style. Ultimately, blending both features tended to be the most effective in marketing, since it both promoted one's services and separated them from the rest of the competition. Whether community artists will continue to advocate for a strategy of using both practical and visual-centered appeals in their business promotion is yet to be known as the community grows exponentially each year.

## **Conclusion**

Characteristics of recent movements like neoliberalism and postmodernism can be viewed by looking in-depth at the behaviors

and ideology of fandoms like the furry community. The furry community exhibits some qualities of neoliberalism by propagating individualism, commodifying ideas, and decentered art markets. This can be seen by their ideas that being in the community is a personal experience, the idea of a furry persona or fursona can be purchased, and there is no set structure of hierarchy for how the community functions socially or financially. Of course, saying that the furry community only involves these qualities would be giving a half-truth—although the community is decentered, people find community in the identity, and the artists gift friends with art or offer free outlines for people to make their own fursonas. Thus, the community resists a complete inception into neoliberal politics and society by treasuring group identity and exchanging or gifting art.

The postmodern values of furry art and behavior are reflected in the debate over what constitutes a furry aesthetic. What characterizes something as “furry” varies from person to person, and generally no authority is stronger over another in the community. The subjective view one has of what art can be called “furry” is then championed, although one can find discourse within the community that argues that even though the view can be subjective, movies like *Zootopia* are much more targeted and made for the furry community than *Secret Life of Pets*, possibly due to *Zootopia*'s open marketing and the reputation of its animation studio, Disney, as historically providing works that have become inspirations for style and expression within the fandom. Thus, debates over the

aesthetic may not have a definite conclusion, but selective works are openly embraced and accepted as furry depending on their context.

In addition to debates over the furry aesthetic, marketing oneself using both modern and postmodern aesthetics was discussed in-depth in reviews of business cards taken from a large, anime-centered convention and a small, furry-centered convention. While the business card from the large convention sought to distinguish itself from the competition by presenting an interesting and vague sense of the artist, rather than explicitly discussing their services, the business card from the small convention attempted to persuade patrons by presenting the various services it offered. Postmodern art tends to focus more on the aesthetic or feeling and expression of art rather than its function like modern art does, according to Jameson.<sup>13</sup> Blending both together to promote one's services was generally agreed by one of my interview groups as the best approach for marketing. Postmodern aesthetic is therefore present in the community, but like neoliberalism, does not entirely encapsulate the experience of being in the fandom.

Research about the furry community has increased significantly over the years due to the proliferation of the community, the visibility of the community, and community projects like the International Anthropomorphic Research Project. As we move forward with better understanding how consumption, youth culture, and art communities have changed in recent history, taking into account how they can relate to

broader movements in Western culture (or, if one wants to, global cultures) can offer insight into how these broader movements function and affect those on the ground level. From what my research has suggested in the furry fandom, this effect has been mixed, but noticeable. Members both replicate and resist values and behaviors of both neoliberal and postmodern movements, revealing the complexity of human nature.

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<sup>13</sup> Jameson, 485.

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Figure 1a-b. As we can see, this card's front and back are meant to catch the eye with a calming blue color, but also pop out in its white text that details the services that the business provides. This card could be considered modern rather than postmodern because unlike a postmodern aesthetic, the modern aesthetic emphasizes the functionality of the object that it is examined through: the card tells you its services and provides contact information.



Figure 2a-b. The card's focus on visuals rather than stating its services speaks to a devotion to aesthetic in marketing appeals, rather than a simple presentation of services. In fact, the card does not even explicitly outline the exact services the artist can render; it is suggested that the consumer can find out themselves if they want to pursue the artist as a patron by following their social media, and even dictate the services they receive if they so choose.