

LUCAS, TORIE E., M.A. *Wolves, Dragons, and Ponies... Oh My!: Fursonas and Stigmatization in the "Human" World.* (2017)
Directed by Dr. Gwen Hunnicutt 112 pp

The "furry fandom" is a broad term that generally refers to a subculture in which members have shown a deep invested interest in anthropomorphic or zoomorphic creatures and artwork. A "furry" is referred to as an individual who cultivates a "fursona," which is a unique character that is personified through an anthropomorphic or zoomorphic creature exhibiting both human and animal characteristics. These "fursonas" are typically exemplified through cartoon avatars and other forms of artwork and costuming. Current research centered on the furry fandom is quite limited and primarily focuses on psychological frameworks regarding identity formation. For the purposes of this study, I utilized a broader understanding of identity cultivation, management, and concealment within a stigmatized subgroup, by incorporating sociological constructs based around identity performance and anthropological conceptions of masking. This study encompasses qualitative responses from ten self-identified "furries." The information gained from these participants helps to support and substantiate previous research findings, while also broadening the scope of identity formation within a peculiar subgroup.

“WOLVES, DRAGONS, AND PONIES... OH MY!": FURSONAS AND
STIGMATIZATION IN THE “HUMAN” WORLD

by

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A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Greensboro
2017

Approved by

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Date of Final Oral Examination

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My committee chair, Dr. Gwen Hunnicutt, and my committee members Drs. Steve Kroll-Smith and Arielle Kuperberg.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	Page
I. INTRODUCTION	1
Statement of Research Questions.....	3
Furry Chronological Timeline	4
The Furry Fandom Now.....	12
Furry Demographics	15
II. REVIEW OF SCHOLARSHIP ON FURRY SUBCULTUE.....	19
The Furry Community and Stigmatization	19
Identity and Identity Formation in the Fandom	23
The Furry Fandom Compared to Other Fandom	24
Other Furry Literature.....	27
III. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES.....	29
Understanding Identity.....	29
Understanding Masking.....	37
Understanding Queer Theory.....	40
Understanding Stigma.....	42
IV. METHODS	52
Qualitative Interview Collection.....	52
Demographic Information.....	55
Feminist Research Methodology	56
Participant Observation.....	57
Confidentiality	57
V. FINDINGS	59
Cultivation of Fursona	61
Dual Identity Management	64
Fursuit Masking	68
Experiences with Stigma.....	72
Management of Stigma	74
Limitations	78

VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION.....80

 Identity80

 Masking.....85

 Stigma88

 Conclusion91

REFERENCES95

APPENDIX A. QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....105

APPENDIX B. OBERSERVATION GUIDE107

APPENDIX C. JOURNAL GUIDE109

APPENDIX D. VERBAL PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM110

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

From classics such as *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Wolf Man* to modern day television shows like *True Blood* and *Teen Wolf*, with a few dozen superheroes and *Disney* movies in between, a myriad of creatures that combine both human and animal characteristics have existed in our entertainment industry for decades (Sherry, 2009). Predating their foray to the silver screen and televisions everywhere, some amalgamation of human and animal creatures have existed in various cultures throughout recorded history (Sherry, 2009). Ancient Egypt, Greek mythology, and Native American customs all incorporated these human-animal hybrid creatures into their daily belief systems and structures (Sherry, 2009; Slater, 1968; Daston and Mitman, 2005). Many individuals even anthropomorphize their pets, believing they possess some human-like qualities and emotions (Franklin, 1999). While these cultural representations permeate daily life, some individuals have chosen to take this imagery further, adopting an alter ego based on a fusion of human and animal dimensions.

“Furries” and the “furry fandom” are quite broad terms that generally refer to a subculture in which individuals have shown a deep invested interest in anthropomorphic creatures and artwork. For the purposes of this study, a “furry” is defined as an individual

who has a deep appreciation for anthropomorphic¹ and zoomorphic² artwork (Healy and Beverland, 2013). These individuals further cultivate a “fursona,” which is a unique character that is personified through an anthropomorphic creature exhibiting both human and animal characteristics (Gerbasi, Conway, Paolone, Privitera, Scaletta, Higner, and Bernstein, 2008). Individuals utilize these “fursonas” in a variety of ways, from creating and dispensing artwork, to interacting online within a large internet community, to fabricating and wearing fursuits depicting their characters, and attending conventions throughout the world.

However, mainstream culture and media sources tend to portray furies and the furry fandom in a negative light. Television shows such as *CSI*, *My Strange Addiction*, and *True Life* have all presented furies as deviants who are predominantly interested in the fandom for sexually explicit reasons (Roberts, 2015). While some individuals have openly acknowledged their interests in the sexual aspects of the furry community, a majority of individuals claim this is not their primary intent (Roberts, 2015). Moreover, current research around the furry fandom is quite limited and has rarely been acknowledged within mainstream scientific journals (Gerbasi et al., 2008). Due to this lack of acknowledgement, furry voices are effectively lost and marginalized, which reduces the likelihood that this subculture will experience acceptance from mainstream society.

¹ non-human animal with human characteristics

² human with non-human animal characteristics

The under-researched furry subculture provides a unique opportunity to investigate identity formation, management, and concealment. Indeed, the furry fandom provides a particularly dramatic occasion to examine the intricate ways in which bodies, dress, and social contexts shape identities. The furry community also provides an opportunity to analyze the ways identities can be masked and how stigmatized identities are negotiated. Typically, social communities and leisure activities provide an outlet for individuals to cope with stress and stigmatization within their daily lives (Mock, Plante, Reysen, and Gerbasi, 2013; Reysen, Planta, Roberts, and Gerbasi, 2015). The furry fandom, however, is a stigmatized leisure community in and of itself (Mock et al., 2013). Analyzing how persons who participate in the fandom regulate stigmas, specifically through identity concealment techniques such as masking, can provide valuable insight into identification and regulation of self.

Statement of Research Questions

For furrries, participation in the furry subculture requires establishing a second, anonymous identity (Gerbasi et al., 2008; Mock et al., 2013; Reysen et al., 2015). As a consequence, furrries manage two self-contained personas; one is subcultural and the other is “real life” (Mock et al., 2013; Reysen et al., 2015). There is limited research on the ways that furrries negotiate these dual identities as they move through social life. This study investigates the negotiation of “dual” social identities among individuals who participate in the furry subculture. A snowball sample of active participants in the furry subculture were interviewed to investigate the following research questions: 1) How do individuals who participate in the furry subculture cultivate and manage their dual

identities of public self and fursona? 2) How does the act of masking allow individuals who participate in the furry subculture to broaden the range of presentation of self and species that would be otherwise limited in everyday “unmasked life”? 3) How do individuals who participate in the furry subculture manage the stigmatization of being labeled a deviant?

Furry Chronological Timeline

The creation and establishment of the furry fandom is largely attributed to a few key individuals, events, and organizations throughout the early to mid 1980's (wikifur.com). However, when beginning the chronological mappings of the furry fandom, it is important to acknowledge how prevalent anthropomorphic characters have been throughout the decades preceding the furry community. A multitude of works, such as those by Lewis Carroll (Alice in Wonderland) and C.S. Lewis (Chronicles of Narnia) provided vivid and popular images of anthropomorphic characters (Sherry, 2009). Television shows and movies, such as The Looney Toons or Disney's Robin Hood, provided yet another visual embodiment of these anthropomorphic creatures (Patten, 2012). Most of this chronological timeline has been gathered from wikifur.com, which is managed by a team of furry identified individuals with the goal of maintaining the most comprehensive and up-to-date information regarding the furry fandom and its beginnings. Due to the dearth of scholarship on the furry fandom, Wikifur is the primary source available that specifically and completely list the major milestones within the fandom.

The Cartoon/Fantasy Organization

While the furry fandom did not get its named start until the 1980's, many individuals who first established the fandom have traced their initial interests and fellowship with likeminded people as far back as the 1960s (Patten, 2012). Groups of teenagers and college aged individuals would get together to watch different cartoon television shows or movies that interested them. It is from these common friendly meetings, that a few individuals in Los Angeles in 1977 would come to establish a club solely devoted to their love of anime³ named the The Cartoon/Fantasy Organization (Shaw, n.d.).

The Cartoon/Fantasy Organization, or C/FO for short, also produced a publication that would be sent to its members and those interested in the same genre throughout different parts of the United States. Through this publication and interest in the group's mission, different chapters of C/FO began sprouting up in many major cities ("Cartoon/Fantasy Organization", n.d.). Each chapter began adopting their own unique mascots, which typically served as their identifiers within the community ("Cartoon/ Fantasy Organization", n.d.). These mascots were imaginative characters from alien lands, such as the *Skiltaire*, a species of weasel-like alien creatures ("Skiltaire", n.d.).

A group of individuals within the C/FO decided that their interests were far more focused on anthropomorphic characters found in anime versus many of the other prominent science fiction troupes, such as robots and other futuristic technologies. These individuals eventually branched off from the C/FO and created new meetings around

³ Japanese cartoons

their main interest in anthropomorphic characters (“Cartoon/ Fantasy Organization”, n.d.).

Amateur Press Associations (APAs) and Fanzines

During the expansion of the C/FO, amateur press associations or APAs and other fanzines were becoming increasingly popular. The popularity of these publications grew primarily because they were relatively inexpensive to manufacture and distribute. There were a variety of APAs solely devoted to anthropomorphic characters. Each APA explored a plethora of tales and adventures plucked from the collaborative imaginations of different artists throughout the United States (“Amateur Press Association”, n.d.). Many APAs incorporated anthropomorphic characters into their narratives. *Rowrbrazzle* is often attributed as the first publication specifically for “furrries” (“Rowrbrazzle”, n.d.) This APA became so popular, the waitlist was estimated to be around three years long (“Rowrbrazzle”, n.d.). While many of these publications have long since ended, they paved the way for furry artwork and an immense focus on the ability to create and illustrate wonderfully imaginative worlds and characters (“Amateur Press Association”, n.d.).

The Internet

During the late 1970’s to 1980’s, access to the internet became available throughout many colleges and universities. This accesibility to the internet provided the opportunity for the creation of different forms of online game play, including Multi-User Dungeons, or MUDs for short (“MUD”, n.d.). These areas were created for multi-user virtual world play and interaction. These worlds were primarily word-based and allowed

for users to have interactions with objects, rooms, and in limited part, other users (“MUD”, n.d.). MUDS were essentially the first legitimate step toward correspondence between multiple people in real time within the same virtual reality. From MUDS came MUCKs, which were primarily made up of role-play, social interaction centric virtual text-based worlds (“MUCK”, n.d.). FurryMUCK was launched on North Carolina State University servers through TinyMUCK in 1990, by a group of computer science majors and continues to be the longest running MUCK to date (“History of FurryMUCK”, n.d.). FurryMUCK allowed users to directly interact with each other, creating anthropomorphic characters and new worlds all with a few strokes on a key board. While it is difficult to discern exactly when “fursonas” were established as a main staple within the community, furry role-play on MUCKs and MUDs could be the basis for this well utilized practice. This new form of interaction allowed for the furry community to grow rapidly and paved the way for other furry centric MUCKs to get started. TapestriesMUCK became the largest furry based MUCK, at its peak bringing in 800 connections a night (“Tapestries MUCK”, n.d.).

ConFURence

With the establishment of inclusive and open furry fanzines and the spread of the internet and the ability to connect with others throughout the country, came more individuals interested in what had been dubbed the “furry fandom”. While some furry merchandise could be found at larger Sci-Fi conventions, the need for a furry specific event became a focal point for the evolution of the fandom (“ConFURence”, n.d.). With a larger group of people looking for furry artwork and publications, the decision for a more

specialized convention came in 1989 (“ConFURence”, n.d.). Mark Merlino⁴ started the first furry centric convention known as ConFURence (“ConFURence”, n.d.). It took place in 1989 in a Holiday Inn in Costa Mesa, California. The initial dry run convention, aptly named *ConFURence Zero*, had an attendance of only 65 people (“ConFURence”, n.d.). Each year after, the convention continued to grow, with maximum attendance at the 1998 convention with 1,200 attendees (“ConFURence”, n.d.). The conference staff and board practiced an extreme inclusive motto and did not create or enforce rules about conduct at these annual conventions. Over the years of ConFURence’s existence, many other furry conventions around the United States, as well as Germany, began sprouting up, such as Further Confusion, Anthrocon, Mephit Furmeet, and EuroFURence (“ConFURence”, n.d.; “Anthrocon History”, n.d.). To date, there are estimated to be 80 conventions and large meets occurring around the world annually (“List of Furry Conventions”, n.d.).

Stigmatization of the Furry Fandom

While the furry fandom has existed since the 1980’s, it was not until the late 1990’s and early 2000’s that it was recognized within the larger mainstream media (Gerbasi, Conway, Paolone, Privitera, Scaletta, Higner, and Bernstein, 2008). The stigmatization of the fandom is mostly credited to a few key events/portrayals of the furry fandom within mainstream media. These images (spectacles) introduced and calcified a sexually deviant label onto the furry body and subculture. The earliest reference of the

⁴ A former member of C/FO and creator of the *Skiltaire* alien species. (“ConFurence”, n.d.)

fandom as a sexually deviant subgroup could be seen in *MTV's Sex Y2K* episode entitled "Furries and Plushies." This episode followed different furries and their sexual experiences within the fandom and at a furry convention ("Furries and Plushies", n.d.). This stigmatized view of the furry fandom ignited a firestorm and paved way for the stigmatized community to be scrutinized further.

In March 2001, *Vanity Fair* published an article about the furry fandom entitled "Pleasures of the Fur." This article further promoted the sexual stereotype of the furry fandom and went into explicit detail about what some individuals did at conventions (Gurley, 2001). Citing terms such as "yiffing," "scratching," and "yiff piles," which were primarily focused around sexual acts committed while in a fursuit. The article tagline was "It's sex, it's religion, it's a whole new way of life" (Gurley, 2001). The reporter, George Gurley, accompanied furries to an annual convention called Midwest Fur Fest. His article centers around the exploits of a few different furries at the convention and their deeply explicit tales of how they found the furry fandom, what interested them most about the fandom, and their perverse desires related to furry (Gurley, 2001).

Following the *Vanity Fair* article, the now infamous, *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* show aired a furry based episode in their fourth season in 2003 (Roberts, 2015). The episode follows the main detectives as they investigate the murder of an individual who also happened to be a furry ("Fur and Loathing", n.d.). The episode unfolds as a strange journey into a world filled with sexual orgies and fetishes, all while characters wore fursuits. One of the main furry characters in the episode was a man, who dressed up like female cat named "Sexy Kitty." The interrogation of "Sexy Kitty" plays

out like a freak sideshow at a carnival. The team parades “Sexy Kitty,” fursuit, lingerie, and all, through the police station to interrogate them about the crime. The image of the furry fandom painted within the *CSI* episode is very similar to that of the *Vanity Fair* article and *MTV’s SexY2K* episode. Not only was *CSI* an extremely popular television program at the time, but this was also the first look at the furry fandom for many individuals (Roberts, 2015). Even now, in 2017, fourteen years after the *CSI* episode first aired, it is often brought up in discussions with many furry identified individuals, as a point of frustration (“Fur and Loathing”, n.d.). Throughout this study, I experienced this same frustration. Whenever I would mention my thesis focus to outsiders not associated with the fandom, the *CSI* episode would often be brought up as a point of reference.

This stereotyped image of participants within the furry community has evolved past daytime and primetime scripted television shows to modern news media. In December 2014 at *Midwest FurFest*, a furry convention in Chicago, a chlorine bomb was set off in a stairwell in the middle of the night, which resulted in 19 people being injured (Roberts, 2015; Howl, 2015). The convention hotel had to be completely evacuated, resulting in hundreds of individuals standing outside in the middle of winter in Chicago, for many hours. Convention attendees were still dressed in their fursuits, half dressed in fursuits, or barely dressed at all, including a small group of people dressed in leather fetish gear. The scene was quickly swarmed by many news agencies and became a huge media spectacle. *MSNBC* covered the event in a broadcast the next day, however, instead of covering the event in a serious manner, the news team chose to poke fun at furries (Roberts, 2015). One female reporter laughed so hard at learning what a furry was during

this coverage, she had to run off camera (McNally, 2014). The entire incident was seen as a massive joke to many news stations, merely creating a gawk piece to pull in viewers (McNally, 2014).

Second Life, a virtual world, allows users to essentially live a *second life*, furries have the ability to create avatars that mimic their fursonas (Martey and Consalvo, 2011). While *Second Life* sounds like a valuable opportunity to exercise one's creativity and get to experience "life" through one's fursona, there are many individuals in this virtual community who react to furries in violent ways. Specifically, as Roberts (2015) points out: "there was a furry *death camp* (reminiscent of the Holocaust in its conception) where furries could be *disemboweled*" (p. 156). Roberts (2015) goes on to discuss how sayings like "yiff in hell, furfag" or "the only good furfag, is a dead furfag," have become popular internet memes shopped throughout social media sites, such as *4Chan*, *Reddit*, and *YouTube*.

Finally, on whitehouse.gov there is a petition calling for the president to "regulate and monitor the furry fandom." With the last lines of the petition reading "It won't be long before these people will get tired of role playing as animals, they will go for the real thing. One of these days, they will go for our pets. Please make being a furry illegal before it gets any worse" ("Regulate and Monitor the furry fandom." 2013). While the petition has only garnered 51 signatures, this kind of attention shows how furries are seen as threatening to some people, presumably resulting from their negative media portrayals.

The Furry Fandom Now

Throughout the decades, the furry fandom has grown exponentially, primarily due to the internet (“Furry fandom,” n.d.). While the internet is a key facet of the fandom, it is not the only focal point that has contributed greatly to the furry culture today.

Conventions, fur meets, and the furry economy (fursuits, artwork, etc.) all play vital parts within the makeup of the fandom (“Furry fandom,” n.d.). The furry fandom is a multi-faceted interconnected group of people all united under a key interest in anthropomorphic animals. Much of the information gathered for an accurate look at the fandom, as of now, has been gathered through my first hand experiences, observations, and discussions with those in the furry community.

Internet

With the spread of internet accessibility, furry based social media websites have been created, such as *FurAffinity*. These sites provide those within the community the ability to reach out to other furies around the world. These social media sites are extremely popular within the community; FurAffinity has over 14,000 users (furaffinity.com). Forums like these provide their users the opportunity to share their artwork, writings, fursuits, and daily emotions with others in the fandom. FurAffinity also allows those within the fandom to meet other furies both, within their local areas and worldwide. However, FurAffinity is not the only social media site that allows furies to interact with each other. *Twitter* and *Facebook* also have large furry populations who utilize social media to live out their experiences as their fursona. Hashtags such as “#FursuitFriday” often trend weekly within the community on Twitter. Social media

allows for those within the fandom to put themselves and their fursuits on display for others to see and comment on.

Conventions

Coupled with the strong presence of online forums and social media, furry conventions have grown considerably. Anthrocon, which is held in Pittsburgh is now considered the largest furry convention, bringing in 7,308 attendees in 2016 (“Anthrocon History,” n.d.) Conventions now have become large social gatherings for thousands of furies from around the world. For many, these occasions serve as the main opportunity to wear fursuits and act out their fursonas (“Furry fandom,” n.d.).

Philanthropy is a main component throughout not just furry conventions, but also many local furry groups as well (“Charity” n.d.). Charity fundraisers and non-profit causes have been continually utilized as a positive way to present the fandom to the general public. With charity work beginning at Anthrocon in its inaugural year, it has grown to be considered a main staple at every furry convention. That first Anthrocon raised \$2,200 dollars for Therapy Dogs/K9 Friends (“Anthrocon History,” n.d.). Since 1997, just under \$2,000,000 dollars has been raised at different furry conventions around the world (“Charity,” n.d.). These funds typically go to non-human animal related causes, such as humane societies, animal rescues, zoos and aviaries, military K9 placement programs, and pet therapy programs (“Charity,” n.d.). In 2015 alone, just under \$300,000 dollars were raised for a variety of programs (“Charity,” n.d.). This total does not reflect the countless hours of community service and fund raising local furry groups do within

their own areas. For instance, furrries from the Triangle Furs⁵ organized a fundraising team for Relay for Life 2016 in Onslow County, NC. “Furrries for a Cure,” comprised of 15 members, raised \$7,764 over the course of a few months (“Furrries for a Cure,” 2016).

Local Fur Meets

Local fur meets are a way for local furrries to meet up and interact with one another and explore the community around them (“Furmeet,” n.d.). Many furry groups take part in park meets, bowling meets, meets at local museums, and animal sanctuaries, as a way to get everyone involved and have some fun with likeminded people (“Furmeet,” n.d.). These events also give furrries a great opportunity to interact with the public and present a more positive image of the furry fandom. These groups attend many local charity events, child centric events, and other public places to have fun and encourage creativity and imagination with all they come in contact with (“Furmeet,” n.d.). Throughout my research, I had the opportunity to go to a few fur meets in Raleigh, NC and Charlotte, NC. These events provided vital connections and information I needed to continue my research and interview process. Many of the individuals interviewed for this thesis, were found through local events and meets.

Furry Economy

The furry economy is comprised of fursuits, artwork, stories, and accessories (“Furry fandom,” n.d.). At every convention there is a room called the “Dealer’s Den,” where independent vendors sell a variety of items such as tee shirts, art prints, stickers, books, fursuit accessories, and commission information for potential fursuits (“Dealer’s

⁵ The local fur group in Raleigh, NC

Den,” n.d.). In addition, every convention includes an “Artist’s Alley,” a large area where different furry artists can take commissions on artwork such as fursona badges⁶, full illustration commissions⁷, and also reference sheets⁸ (“Artist Alley,” n.d.).

Fursuit makers are the individuals who physically craft fursuits. Fursuits usually consist of a combination of foam, faux fur, and resin. Fursuits can be purchased in a variety of stages, from just purchasing a tail or paws to a full fursuit that covers a person from head to toe (Plante et al. 2016). While only a small minority of the fandom is comprised of people who own and wear fursuits, this tends to be the most identifiable aspect of the furry fandom (Plante, Reysen, Roberts, Gerbasi, 2016). Full fursuits can cost anywhere from a few hundred dollars to upwards of a few thousand dollars, depending on the maker, materials used, and the intricacies of the character (“Fursuit,” n.d.).

Furry Demographics

The demographic data here is taken from “Fur Science: A Summary of Five Years of Research from the International Anthropomorphic Research Project” (Plante, Reysen, Roberts, Gerbasi, 2016). This data is the most current and comprehensive furry centered collection to date. While other data sets do exist, this set is the only one to be collected and monitored by accredited psychologists and sociologists. These social scientists make up a research organization known as the International Anthropomorphic

⁶ Name tags with busts of fursona characters

⁷ Fully illustrated pictures of fursonas

⁸ Blueprint illustrations that show all of the markings of a furry character utilized for other artwork

Research Project or IARP (“Anthropomorphic Research Project,” n.d.). The data utilized was collected from furry conventions, in addition to, demographic data collected from furry forums and websites. These surveys encompass demographic, lifestyle, mental, and emotion based questions. The findings presented here include data taken from over 15,000 furies over the past five years (Plante et al., 2016) .

Of the 15,000 respondents polled, nearly 75% reported that they were under the age of 25⁹ (Plante et al., 2016). The average age range of convention goers was around 22 to 25 years of age. When asked about race, 83.2% identified as white with 2.1% identifying as black, 2% Asian, 3% Hispanic, 3% East Indian, and 9% “Other” (Plante et al., 2016). The distribution of biological sex within the fandom favors males, whom make up 72.4% of the fandom, over females whom make up 27.4% (Plante et al., 2016). The researchers also chose to ask questions regarding gender identity and expression, 67.1% said they identified as masculine, 23.3% said they identified as feminine, and 10% said they identified as genderqueer/non-binary (Plante et al., 2016). Sexual orientation was presented on a seven-point scale ranging from exclusively heterosexual to exclusively homosexual (Plante et al., 2016). According to the seven-point scale, only 23% of individuals within the fandom identified as exclusively heterosexual, while 13% identify as exclusively homosexual (Plante et al., 2016). The other 64% of respondents identified they were bisexual to some degree (Plante et al., 2016). LGBT persons are strongly represented within the furry community, especially compared to a 2014 CDC poll of the United States population, which reports 96% of respondents suggesting they

⁹ For these studies no minors were included within research data.

were heterosexual, 1.6% identifying as homosexual, and only .7% identifying of bisexual (Ward, Dahlmer, Galinsky, & Joestl, 2014).

The data collected for “Fur Science: A Summary of Five Years of Research from the International Anthropomorphic Research Project,” also collected information about fursuit ownership (Plante et al., 2016). Of those polled in regards to their fursuits, 27% owned ears, 48.1% owned tails, 25.9% owned paws, and 16.7% owned heads (Plante et al., 2016). For actual fursuits, 18.5% own partial fursuits, which consist of a head, paws, and a tail, while only 13% owned a full fursuit (Plante et al., 2016). However, over 50% indicated that they had “not yet” purchased a fursuit, but were planning to. Fursuits are not owned by a majority of those within the furry community, yet they are still considered the most identifiable aspect of the community as a whole (Plante et al., 2016).

In “Fur Science” (2016) respondents were asked to rate the importance of different activities within the furry fandom, on a scale of one to seven. The two most important aspects of the fandom that emerged were “art” and “community,” followed by “conventions,” “internet groups,” and “acceptance,” respectively (Plante et al., 2016). At its roots, the furry fandom is built around enthusiasm and appreciation for anthropomorphic artwork, cartoons, stories, and comics (Gerbasi et al., 2008). Like social media and virtual worlds, artwork provides furies with another outlet to exercise identity and “live” through and legitimate their fursonas (Healy and Beverland, 2013). On social media sites such as FurAffinity, commissioned and original artwork is the focal point of a furry’s homepage. It is through artwork that a fursona is imagined and brought to life. According to Plante et al. (2016), around 65% of those polled claimed they had online

interactions with furries weekly, with 30% saying they had interactions “several times per day”.

The furry fandom provides a unique opportunity for individuals to create new fantastical identities, within the virtual and real worlds. While the group has been highly stigmatized within the modern media, there are many aspects of the community that have not been acknowledged within social science arenas. The chronological timeline and evolution of the fandom over the recent decades provides a valuable opportunity to understand and interpret how identity, itself, has been modified and conceptualized with the introduction of new technologies, such as the internet.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF SCHOLARSHIP ON FURRY SUBCULTURE

When discussing the furry fandom and any scholarly works centered around the furry community, it is important to note that a majority of the research produced is attributed to the International Anthropomorphic Research Project (“Anthropomorphic Research Project,” n.d.). This research project is comprised of psychologists, anthropologists, and sociologists from the United States and Canada, who’s main goal is to create a more appropriate and realistic image of the furry fandom for the social science community.

The Furry Community and Stigmatization

Much of the current research surrounding the furry fandom has been in direct response to the stigmatization the group often experiences within news media and television (Howl, 2015). Current studies surrounding the fandom attempt to promote a more positive view of the community, by critiquing the use of a few outliers who do not fully represent the opinions of the entire group (Gerbasi et al., 2008). Researchers from the IARP have questioned many of the stereotypes presented within mainstream media. Breaking down the furry community and how the group, as a whole, responds to stigma can help provide a solid framework for understanding the furry identity and identity formation. The first major study of the fandom appeared in 2008 (Gerbasi et al., 2008). The intent behind this study was to compare stereotyped information regarding the furry

community that had appeared within the media, both on television and in news print, to real life furry identification. Specifically, the study attempted to question the stereotypes seen in the *HBO* television show *Entourage*, which first aired in 2007 (Gerbasi et al., 2008). The research group analyzed specific demographic (gender, sexuality, occupation) and personality characteristics (interests, species identification) of individuals within the fandom in an attempt to discern fact from stigmatized fiction (Gerbasi et al., 2008). The main stereotypes addressed within the study were:

1. Males are more likely to be furies than females;
2. furies recall liking cartoons more as children than others;
3. furies like science fictions more than others;
4. common furry species are wolf and fox;
5. male furies wear both beards and glasses more than other males;
6. furies are employed in computer or science fields;
7. furies wear fursuits;
8. a preponderance of male furies are homosexual;
9. furies consider themselves less than 100% human;
10. furies would be 0% human if possible;
11. furies are perceived as having behaviors common to personality disorders; and
12. furies have specific kinds of connections to their species which parallel aspect of gender identity disorder (Gerbasi et al., 2008, p. 204).

The findings showed that of the 203 respondents, only three of the possible stereotyped ideations tended to be true (Gerbasi et al., 2008). Specifically, furies who participated in this study were predominantly male (86%), acknowledged they had liked cartoons more as children than others, and that respondents were also more likely to favor science fiction more than their peers not associated with the fandom (Gerbasi et al., 2008). Gerbasi's (2008) research provided valuable information regarding the fandom, in addition to suggesting some possible ways to approach research within the furry community in the future.

Much of the research after Gerbasi's (2008) article revolves around identity formation and concealment. In a 2013 study, Plante, Reysen, and Gerbasi focused on exploring the relationship between socio-structural specific characteristics of the in-group, including group differences, self-esteem, and identity concealment. This study was one of the first to acknowledge some of the negative implications of identity concealment; however, the researchers suggest that the group's endorsement of these varying forms of concealment can affect and mediate the negative emotional responses and stresses that accompany this masking technique (Plante, Reysen, and Gerbasi, 2013).

In a second 2013 study, Mock, Plante, Reysen, and Gerbasi examined how leisure involvement within a stigmatized minority group can affect individuals within the group. Stigmatization regarding the furry fandom is described in ways similar to previous research, citing specific television show portrayals and magazine articles that cast furies as sexual in nature (Mock, Plante, Reysen, and Gerbasi, 2013; Gerbasi et al., 2008; Plante, Reysen, and Gerbasi, 2013). Results from Mock, Plante, Reysen, and Gerbasi's (2013) study suggested that greater involvement within the furry fandom, a leisure activity, was associated with higher levels of life satisfaction. Mock, Plante, Reysen, and Gerbasi (2013) also found that this deeper involvement within the fandom allowed for individuals to be more accepting of their furry identities and membership within the community. In some cases, this deeper acceptance of one's furry identity actually led to greater frequencies of disclosure of one's furry identity to outsiders not associated with the furry fandom (Mock, Plante, Reysen, and Gerbasi, 2013). Finally, the results showed that a deeper connection within the furry community allowed for individuals to mediate

stress and cope with their stigmatized identities (Mock, Plante, Reysen, and Gerbasi 2013).

A 2014 study completed by Plante, Roberts, Reysen, and Gerbasi, explored how different groups understood and exhibited prosocial behaviors and global citizenry. Global citizenry is understood as an identity that utilizes prosocial behaviors to improve the world (Plante et al., 2014). Plante et al. (2014) placed a very specific focus on the social interactions and identity developments typically seen within strongly knit fan communities, such as the furry fandom. Plante et al. (2014) hypothesized that with the global influence present within the furry fandom and its focus on prosocial behaviors, such as the practice of inclusiveness and fund raising at furry events, furries would be more inclined to see themselves as global citizens. The first study, which consisted of 1,568 participants' survey responses, showed that those within the fandom, "were more likely to identify themselves as global citizens than participants in the comparison group" (Plante et al., 2014, p.54). The researchers went on to state that "this effect was partially mediated, both by furries' greater global awareness and perception of their normative social environment as valuing global citizenship, which, in turn, was associated with greater prosocial attitudes" (Plante et al., 2014, p.54-55). Plante et al. (2014) went on to replicate the same findings with a group of undergraduates in an introduction to psychology class. There proved to be a positive correlation between global awareness and global citizenry in both groups. While the results were found in both groups, these findings do provide valuable information about how those within the furry community conceptualize and interpret their place within a global society.

Identity and Identity Formation in the Fandom

Other furry research focuses primarily on psychological theories, such as social identity theory and optimal distinctiveness theory (Reysen, Plante, Roberts, and Gerbasi, 2015; Roberts, Plante, Gerbasi, and Reysen, 2016). Much of the research aims to determine if there is a link between in-group out-group dynamics and identity formation within the fandom (Reysen et al., 2015). Reysen and colleagues (2015) found that individuals who identified as furry and believed the group provided an optimal level of distinctiveness from other leisure groups, expressed higher degrees of in-group identification. This same study found that the furry fandom provides and satisfies specific psychological needs of belonging, inclusion, and distinctiveness for its strongly identified members (Reysen et al., 2015).

Another research study, focused on how anthropomorphic and zoomorphic applications can help researchers understand and infer identity formation within the furry fandom (Roberts, Plante, Gerbasi, and Reysen, 2015). Roberts, Plante, Gerbasi, and Reysen (2015) believed that individuals who identified as furry were more likely to anthropomorphize animals, giving them human-like traits. Results from this study focused on three specific findings, “liking animals, a spiritual connection to animals, and identification as animals” (Roberts et al., 2015, p. 540). The findings suggested that merely liking animals did not affect one’s wellbeing, however when someone claimed to have a deeper spiritual connection to animals, there appeared to be a positive association with psychological wellbeing (Roberts et al., 2015). In the reverse, when someone claimed to identify as an animal (literally believing they are an animal trapped inside a

human body, also known as *therian*), there seemed to be a negative association with wellbeing (Roberts et al., 2015). The authors postulated that this could be due to some form of species identity disorder, which was first introduced and described in Gerbasi's pivotal 2008 study (Roberts et al., 2015).

In keeping with this understanding of identity, Roberts, Plante, Gerbasi, and Reysen recently released a 2015 study specifically oriented towards informing health professionals about the furry fandom and offered advice regarding the best ways to approach interacting with individuals who identify as furry. The focus of this article was on understanding in-group support mechanisms, regulation of self within the fandom, and identity concealment (Roberts et al., 2015). More specifically, discussing how the tendency of clinical personnel to urge some form of dis-identification with the stigmatized identity could actually damage one's well being further (Roberts et al., 2015). Meanwhile, a deeper identification with and greater support from the furry community was actually more conducive to positive mental health (Roberts et al., 2015).

The Furry Fandom Compared to Other Fandoms

There are a number of similarities and differences between the furry fandom and other fandoms, such as anime, bronies, and fantasy sports (Roberts, Plante, Reysen, and Gerbasi, 2016). Researchers with the IARP created two different studies, one focused on studying the perceived stereotypes of the anime fandom and the second was focused on determining if there were specific prejudices attached to the furry, brony, and anime fandoms.

Anime fans share a fascination with Japanese animation (Reysen, Plante, Roberts, Gerbasi, and Shaw, 2016). Anime has often been cited as having similar stereotypes to the furry fandom, specifically a sexually deviant obsession with pornographic materials, such as tentacle porn or hentai porn (Reysen et al., 2016). Anime fans usually manifest their appreciation for Japanese animation through artwork and costuming, mirroring the ways in which the furry fandom expresses their interests (Reysen et al., 2016). Reysen and colleagues (2016) found that, of 24 distinct stereotypes related to the anime fandom, only nine proved to be true, with two others showing some level of consistency. These findings are consistent with the findings of Gerbasi's (2008) study of furry fandom stereotypes. The similar findings between Reysen et al. (2016) and Gerbasi's (2008) studies suggested that other fandoms similar to the furry community also experience inconsistent stereotyping.

The "brony" fandom is a fan community, often comprised of males, built around a deep interest in the television show *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (Roberts, Plante, Reysen, and Gerbasi, 2016). While this interest is similar to the furry fandom, in that *My Little Pony* features anthropomorphic ponies, not all bronies are considered furries (Roberts et al., 2016). Furies take their interests further than bronies, because they create their own fursonas and characters, whereas most bronies are just interested in a specific show with anthropomorphic characters (Roberts et al., 2016). Bronies are often sexualized, much like the furry fandom and the anime fandom (Roberts et al., 2016; Reysen et al., 2016). Media coverage, such as the *Howard Stern Show*, connected bronies to a sexual preoccupation with cartoon ponies (Roberts et al., 2016).

Fantasy sport fans “create and manage fictitious sport leagues by drawing from current play rosters in their league of interest” (Roberts et al., 2016, p. 43). Research on fantasy sport fans has been minimal, as this group is relatively new, only becoming solidified within the last decade (Roberts et al., 2016). Roberts et al.’s (2016) research revealed that those within the fantasy sports fandom viewed members within their own group more favorably, while “they rated anime fans negatively, and they rated furies and bonies even more negatively” (Roberts et al., 2016, p. 50). Roberts et al. (2016) also found that respondents tended to view those within their fandom more positively when compared to those in other fandoms. Roberts et al. (2016) further go on to suggest that anime fans, while negatively viewed, tend to be more accepted because anime and anime cosplay have become fairly mainstream within the past few decades. Furies and bonies tend to share the brunt of the negative stereotypes associated with cartoon fandoms, primarily because much of the information disseminated is negative and sexually stereotyped (Roberts et al., 2016).

Every furry article referenced to this point has been connected with the IARP. While this research project has attempted to provide a more positive outlook of the fandom there are some potential problems that persist with their research methodology. For example, the findings for all of these studies are taken from surveys. These surveys are dispensed at different furry conventions throughout the United States or via online social media websites (Gerbasi et al., 2008; Plante, Reysen, and Gerbasi, 2013; Mock et al., 2013; Reysen et al., 2015; Roberts et al., 2015). Surveys can provide valuable opportunities to get great insight about a plethora of subjects and issues, but the questions

have to remain primarily closed-ended. Closed-ended questions by definition limit the range and depth of responses that can be collected. In Gerbasi's study (2008) some of the questions regarding how respondents identified themselves were too vague; for example: "Do you consider yourself to be less than 100% human?" and "If you could become 0% human, would you?" These survey questions were further limited by only providing answer choices on a scale of zero to six. Deeper questions like these call for a much more thorough exploration of what the individual even conceptualizes as "100% human" or "0% human."

Other Furry Literature

A 2013 study conducted by Healy and Beverland, incorporated and analyzed personal blogs and websites from 40 different self-identified furies. The study focused on specific themes regarding identification, belongingness, and why these "consumers" were drawn to zoomorphism as a means of self-authentication (Healy and Beverland 2013). Within the narratives analyzed, three common and distinct themes were found: escape, healing, and power (Healy and Beverland 2013). Healy and Beverland (2013) found that many furies utilized their "fursonas" as a means to heal feelings of isolation within the modern world. Healy and Beverland (2013) also found two specific practices that provided the highest level of self-authentication within the fandom: creating and wearing an actual fursuit and public performance displays of animal characteristics and behavior.

In 2016, Healy and Beverland explored the tension between being acceptable to the mainstream while also remaining subculturally authentic. Qualitative interviews and

content analyses revealed three overlapping typologies furry-identified individuals used to describe their furry identities to people not associated with the fandom (Healy and Beverland 2016). The first typology identified is *reframing*. Healy and Beverland (2016) defined *reframing* as a conscious attempt to situate furry activities within mainstream accepted practices, more specifically as artistic or creative expression. The second typology cited by Healy and Beverland (2016) focused on the act of *spiritualizing* or utilizing language conducive to spiritual enlightenment to describe one's engagement with the fandom. Spirituality can also be inferred through furies suggesting that their chosen fursona species is a spirit guide or spirit animal, often citing teachings from various religions or cultural references to support these characteristics and symbols (Healy and Beverland, 2016). Healy and Beverland (2016) found a third typology where individuals would downplay identity within the furry fandom by suggesting it was merely a fun or *playful* way to pass the time.

While Healy and Beverland's 2013 and 2016 studies are unique from the other survey-based studies focusing on the fandom, they only utilized personal blogs, social media based profiles, and some limited forms of qualitative interviews. I believe in-depth interviews could provide more insight on the furry identity as a whole. Concentrating on how those who identify as furry experience and interact with in-group members and out-group others could provide richness and depth on how one develops a new alternate identity and the mediation of a stigmatized identity.

CHAPTER III

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Current research regarding the furry fandom is predominantly rooted in psychological assessment theories (Reysen et al., 2015; Roberts et al., 2015; Plante et al., 2013; Mock et al., 2013). For the purposes of this research, I chose to utilize a broader range of frameworks incorporating sociological theories of regulation of self, stigmatization, and subgroup analysis. Further, I chose to branch out into other disciplines incorporating the anthropological concept of masking and feminist queer theory. In doing so, I attempted to illuminate the ways in which bodies, dress, and social contexts shape identities, while also focusing on the ways dual identities are managed and the mechanisms by which stigmatized identities are negotiated.

Understanding Identity

When constructing a foundational understanding of identity, especially within a sociological framework, we must explore and critique how identity has been conceptualized both traditionally and more recently, especially with the introduction of the internet. The internet provides boundless opportunities for identity exploration and management. By incorporating both traditional and contemporary studies, I will be able to craft the most comprehensive and encompassing view of identity as it relates to the furry community and fursona development.

Goffman's Presentation of Self

Goffman's (1959) presentation of self focuses on the dramaturgical model of social life or how social interaction can be understood in terms of a theatrical performance. These everyday interactions are arranged into specific arenas in which we learn to function according to those around us, how we wish to portray ourselves, and how we actually are. Goffman identifies each space by utilizing terms associated with theatre, specifically front stage and back stage.

The front stage is where individuals formally perform and adhere to conventions, because the performer knows they are being watched. They craft their performance according to their audience by attempting to meet the conventions and norms associated with the viewers at hand. These spaces encompass an area where the actor is being observed and can range from eating dinner, to attending social events, to sitting in a classroom. Society dictates norms that govern how we act and present ourselves to those around us (Goffman, 1956). These rules are an integral part of how we understand and conceptualize society. When discussing the front stage, Goffman (1956) places a great deal of emphasis on setting, appearance, and manner.

Setting is understood as the geographical layouts that "supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played out before, within, or upon it" (Goffman, 1956, p.22). Goffman (1956) further suggests that the setting and context are an indispensable aspect of the front stage, because your act begins and ends within that specific setting. Each new setting brings about new acts, faces, and performances according to the setting, meaning, and context behind the setting (Goffman, 1956). For

example, there is a difference between how one would presumably act in a classroom versus a social party. Setting plays an intrinsic role in how those who identify as furry think and act, as well as whether or not they will reveal their furry identities to people not associated with the fandom (Healy and Beverland, 2016). Furry conventions, for instance, provide furies with a setting that is conducive to their furry identity. The way furies act within these pro-furry spaces can be completely different from how they act in work, school, and non-furry social environments. The non-furry actors within a setting can also affect how furies choose to divulge their furry identity, if they choose to do so at all (Healy and Beverland, 2016). By interpreting the motivations and values that are important to the viewers within a particular setting, furies will craft a specific description about the fandom that is most palatable (Healy and Beverland, 2016). Understanding how setting is perceived by those within the furry community can play an integral role in conceptualizing the management of dual identities.

Goffman (1956) suggests that appearance tells the audience about the performer and signifies specific social statuses, as well as the roles the performer might play (i.e. uniforms). Within the furry fandom, a fursuit can signify a variety of things that a regular human appearance might not fully extend. Species, coloration, and bodily appendages, such as wings or horns, can all convey different characteristics and symbols pertinent to a fursona or character (Healy and Beverland, 2013). With the introduction of masking and identity concealment, furies are able to achieve a completely new identity, separate from their daily life persona.

Manner refers to how we interact with others and the way we convey ourselves to others during that interaction (Goffman, 1956). Utilizing facial expression, gestures, posture/body language, we are able to portray a range of emotions from happiness to sadness. These emotional expressions allow others to decide how to interact with us (Goffman, 1956). Gestures, such as handshakes or hugs, assist with the interpretation of relationships with others. Body language can be conscious or unconscious responses to the settings and other actors around us, such as shivering when it is cold or cowering when afraid. While these varied ways of relating to manner can be easily interpreted or conveyed during daily life, most are unavailable to people inside a fursuit. For a person inside a fursuit, gestures, body language and especially facial expressions can be muddled or hidden. In these situations, individuals in fursuits have to figure out inventive ways to communicate emotion. From extremely exaggerated movements and emotions to subtler cues, actors in fursuits learn to adjust their thought processes and body language according to their outward dress.

When discussing front stage, it is also important to discuss how furries must manage conflicting front stage performances for multiple identities. While some characteristics of their daily life persona may become a part of their fursona, there tends to be specific exaggerations or changes in the way they present themselves within the furry community (Healy and Beverland, 2013). While shifting between different acts and performances is a common practice within the presentation of self, furries are incorporating completely new identities altogether. These new identities show the extent to which dress, manner, and setting can dramatically affect how an actor and their

audience perceive themselves, while taking an imaginative and inventive step toward broader perception and self fulfillment.

The back stage signifies the time when the actor really gets to be themselves (Goffman, 1956). The backstage area is where the actor gets to remove their mask and truly be their self without others watching or judging. It provides the actor a place and opportunity where they are no longer required to act for those around them. With regards to the furry fandom, the front stage and backstage concepts provide a unique opportunity to see the juggling of multiple identities. These concepts can provide insight into how individuals interact and behave within a multiplicity of social spheres while attempting to regulate, monitor, and differentiate identities.

Social Identity Theory

A majority of the existing furry literature, disseminated by the IARP focuses on social identity theory (SIT) (Reysen et al., 2015; Plante et al., 2014). Social identity theory has been combined with a variety of other theories such as relative deprivation theory and identity theory, in an attempt to broaden how social identity is perceived and understood (Stets and Burke, 2000; Hogg, Terry, and White, 1995; Mummendey, Kessler, Klink, and Mielke, 1999). While these different theories are important to expanding the focus of social identity and identity formation, at the current juncture a deep discussion of these applications would muddle the focus of this thesis and work. I will instead focus this review on how social identity theory is applicable to the furry fandom and discuss the major components relevant to furry identity.

Social identity theory's primary focus is on the ways individuals perceive and understand themselves in relation to the groups in which they belong (Hogg, Terry, and White, 1995; Stets and Burke, 2000; Mummendey, Kessler, Klink, and Mielke, 1999; Reysen et al., 2015; Abrams and Hogg, 1990). Hogg, Terry, and White (1995) describe social identity theory in basic terms as: "a social category into which one falls, and to which one feels one belongs, provides a definition of who one is in terms of the defining characteristics of the category- a self-definition that is a part of the self-concept" (p. 259). These different group memberships are perceived as social identities within the members' mind, which are representative and constitutive of how one should interpret themselves (Hogg et al., 1995). Social identities are also used to identify, perceive, and understand those around us (Hogg et al., 1995; Stets and Burke, 2000; Mummendey, Kessler, Klink, and Mielke, 1999; Reysen et al., 2015; Abrams and Hogg, 1990).

Utilizing social identity theory and self-categorization theory, Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje (2002) focused on "the different conditions under which issues of selfhood and identity are affected by the groups to which people belong" (p. 162). When discussing group identity versus individual identity and how both are influenced by outside forms of identity threat, commitment to the group becomes the focal point (Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje, 2002). Ellemers et al. (2002) distinguished types of perceived threat, either to individual identity or group identity, and the effect that it has on those who perceive that threat. Throughout the analysis of perceived threats (both to individual and group identities), it becomes increasingly evident that one's commitment or lack of commitment to a group will ultimately impact how the individual navigates

their identities and potential threats to their identities (Ellemers et al. 2002). Focusing on those who exhibit high levels of commitment to group identity and threats directed at those groups, Ellemers et al. (2002) suggests “a more collective coping response among those who are committed to the group will lead them to display even stronger group affiliation, expressing their loyalty to the devalued group” (p. 176).

Commitment is integral to the furry identity and membership within the furry fandom. As previously discussed, Mock et al. (2013) found that a greater commitment to the group was associated with higher levels of life satisfaction and acceptance of one’s furry identity. Multiple studies have found that deeper levels of commitment to the furry identity can provide ways to mediate stress and arm its members with adequate coping mechanism to navigate the stigmatization of the furry community (Mock et al., 2013; Roberts et al., 2015; Plante et al., 2013; Healy and Beverland, 2016).

Identity and the Internet

The internet has had a tremendous impact on how individuals perceive, interact, and share information with others. Social media allows people from all over the world to be able to connect with each other at the touch of their fingertips. With the internet, we are able to craft how we want others to see us. Websites such as *Facebook* or *LinkedIn* provide us with the ability to create an image of ourselves that we see most appropriate to the situation at hand.

As discussed earlier, the advent of the internet was a pivotal point of expansion for the furry fandom. The internet provides us with the ability to become whomever we choose to be, including completely different people or creatures altogether. Furries are a

unique subgroup, but they are not the only subgroup with specific interests that are relevant to their virtual social environment (Martinez, 2011; Martey and Consalvo, 2011). Martey and Consalvo (2011) analyzed 211 individuals within *SecondLife* in an attempt to understand how individuals present themselves within this virtual realm, drawing on an understanding of the looking-glass self and Goffman's dramaturgical model. Researchers found that those within the study took active steps in managing their appearance and behaviors in accordance with the specific themed world utilized (Martley and Consalvo, 2011). The researchers suggested, "This involved interpreting the expectations of the quest providers (the researchers), maintaining their own sense of self identity in a new space, managing uncertainties about joining a group of strangers, and then responding to the evolving dynamics of that group" (Martley and Consalvo, 2011, p. 178-179). While the focus was not on the furry population, this study does provide an encompassing view of how individuals utilize the internet as a way to craft and manage identities in new and inventive ways. Furrries are unique in their identity formation, because their created identities transcend virtual reality and can be physically lived out in daily life through the utilization of costumes and social gatherings.

Studying this virtual/lived reality can provide valuable insight on how furrries can be understood within a broader cultural scheme. Putova (2013) analyzed the mystical elements and unearthly beings incorporated into a variety of cultures, specifically comparing shamans with post-modern self-identified furrries online. Putova (2013) describes shamans as liminal healers whom exercise ecstatic freedom and usually possess more than one soul. Furrries, in comparison, are described as virtual beings who can

possess freedoms and abilities to cultivate liminal identities that function far outside the constraints of normative modern society (Putova, 2013). An example of this can be seen in a furry's ability to exist outside the standard gender binary. Furrries often exhibit high levels of gender and species fluidity, primarily due to the ability to completely costume and mask their human identities. Cyberspace provides unlimited opportunities for the creation of identity and cultivation of new facets of life, which may not be possible within structured reality. The furry fandom is a unique subgroup, positioned primarily within a millennial virtual reality, which allows for a greater expression and exercise of a fantastical anthropomorphic identity and species-being. "The indefiniteness of cyberspace is near to transcendence that cannot be exactly defined, classified and its objective existence cannot be determined. Furrries can achieve a special status here that differs from majority society and they can discover and create new structures of life" (Putova, 2013, p. 247).

While identity is an extremely dense topic, this brief discussion presents how identity is conceptualized within current furry fandom research. Furry identification can be a difficult concept to comprehend for the non-furry. However, for those who have chosen to embark on this identity quest, there are many ways in which this newly cultivated fursona can be achieved.

Understanding Masking

I have discussed how appearance and costume are utilized to present furry identity and how identity concealment has been continually addressed in regards to the stigmatization of the fandom. However, the anthropological understanding of masking

has not been acknowledged within the current literature. Pollock (1995) discusses how masks and the act of masking work, implying that masking should be viewed as a transformative process, which signals identity characteristics or changes in identity. Pollock (1995) positions masking in a sense that it is more than just an image, it is an act in which the human actor assumes the identity of the mask. Pollock (1995) also suggests that the identity and characteristics of the mask can be interpreted by the mask-wearer. This description of the relationship between the mask and mask-wearer aligns with the basic understanding of how individuals within the fandom regulate and legitimate their fursonas (Healy and Beverland, 2013).

Healy and Beverland (2013) discussed how wearing fursuits can be a way to legitimate one's furry identity. These same masking practices have been an integral part of many cultures and customs throughout the ages (Grimes, 1975). Masking has been utilized from masquerades and theatrical performances during the renaissance, as spiritual transcendence, ceremony, and storytelling, as a form of rebellion and dissent, to the creation of death masks to memorialize infiniteness of the end of life (Grimes, 1975; Pratten, 2008; Kasfir, 1998; Werbner, 1984; Reed, 2005; Ware, 2001). Masks allow the wearer to embody the power of the mask and this manifestation becomes visible for observers (Pollock, 1995). For those within the furry fandom, the donning of a fursuit provides the power to become something else. The suit and the actions of the suit-wearer become the focus of attention, rather than the suit-wearer themselves. Fursuits are similar to other masking rituals and maintain the same power structures instilled through the masking process. However, those outside the furry community may not observe the

power that the fursuit gives to the wearer. It is something the general public cannot properly mediate so it is seen as subversive, deviant, and alienating (Roberts, 2015). While those within the suit want to literally transform into this character, they still value dignity and understanding of their humanness. Some outsiders see the wearing of a fursuit much like an invitation to violate, because the othered body no longer resembles the human self (Roberts, 2015).

Grimes (1975) discussed how masks are viewed and understood throughout time within the Western world. They are seen as entertainment, in the case of clowns or theatrical garb (Grimes, 1975). Masks are seen as dubious forms of concealment, such as the white masks worn by the Ku Klux Klan or robbers (Grimes, 1975). The masks, however, are merely superficial in the sense that the wearer of the mask and the outsider observing the mask can immediately decipher and understand the intent behind the mask (Grimes, 1975). In the case of a fursuit, the physical act of putting on the suit is transformative. The wearer literally sheds their human identity in choice for their assumed fursona. To the public outsider with limited understanding of the act, the donning of a fursuit is essentially the choice to become deviant. It is misconstrued as something suspicious. To the outsider it is hard to reconcile why one would want to identify as something other than human. To a furry, it is a way to shed the problems, struggles, and anxieties of their daily existence in the freedom of transformation (Healy and Beverland, 2013). In that transformative act, the furry is not attached to their occupation, their ascribed or achieved status, or their name, but rather they can become

whomever they choose. Their creativity and fantasy are made manifest in one (usually very expensive) garment.

Understanding Queer Theory

While utilizing traditional and established sociological, anthropological, and psychological frameworks can be useful and adequate for an understanding of identity formation and symbolism, the furry fandom is a non-traditional identity that does not necessarily fit within these dated models. Identity has been discussed in terms of situation, perception, and interpretation, however all current frameworks position identity in a space that is innately human. The boundaries of our humanity are taken for granted. What happens to these frameworks when species identity becomes a central tenet within one's identity framework? In order to fully interpret the furry experience and the many facets of the fandom, it may be helpful to integrate queer theory into this analysis. Queer theory allows for the blurring of traditional boundaries constricting identity and identity performance (Somerville, 2014; Osborne, 2001). Queer theory's primary objective is to question and critique the political and theoretical processes at work when defining and categorizing sexual identities (Somerville, 2014). It acts as the simultaneous rejection of normative essentialist ideology, as well as, championing for an understanding of sexual identity and performance that is fluid and malleable, rather than fixed and unchanging (Osborne, 2001).

Queer theory imbues us with the power to question how boundaries within sexualities are created and maintained (Namaste, 1994). Somerville (2014) suggests, "To 'queer' becomes a way to denaturalize categories such as 'lesbian' and 'gay' revealing

them as socially and historically constructed identities that have often worked to establish and police the line between the ‘normal’ and the ‘abnormal’” (p. 203). It provides us with an alternative answer, one that gives us the skills to negotiate borders of sexual identity and allows these borders to be contested and changed (Blackmore, 2011; Namaste, 1994). While queer theory is usually applied primarily to non-heteronormative marginalized sexuality, it is also important to understand that sexuality is a key facet of identity. Identity is such a broad encompassing term, yet often viewed as fixed to traditional forms of identity development.

Examining the furry identity through a queer perspective provides an opportunity to better interpret behavior, identification, and performance through a more encompassing and freed lens. The furry identity exists outside of a realm of historically accepted identity performance, thus it is non-normative and difficult to fully understand within the more traditional identity frameworks. The various examples of stigmatization of the furry community discussed earlier illuminate multiple concerns regarding how the furry is conceptualized within a mainstream society and the implications of this stigma on furies’ interpretation of self and orientation within a broader societal context. These various examples show how the furry (fursuited) body is automatically read as a perversion. The perverting of the furry body poses a variety of questions: How and why are the furry body so easily physically and sexually dehumanized and violated? With the absence of the immediately identifiable body (race, gender, age), do the violent readings of the furry body increase? Can the stigmatized furry identity be de-stigmatized through the acceptance of “queer” identities and performances? While many of these questions

could take a lifetime to answer, it does show how important it is to utilize a non-traditional understanding of the furry identity as read through a queer theory lens.

Understanding Stigma

When discussing the multiple implications of stigma, it is imperative to first understand how stigma is defined and understood. Since stigma was first questioned and explored further, many social scientists have attempted to discern and appropriate the definition of stigma in a variety of differing ways (Link and Phelan, 2001; Major and O'Brien, 2005; Frable, Platt, and Hoey, 1998; Pachankis, 2007; Smart and Wegner, 1999; Crocker, 1999). For the purposes of this thesis, Link and Phelan's (2001) explanation proves to be the most comprehensive and applicable: "we apply the term stigma when elements of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination co-occur in a power situation that allows the components of stigma to unfold" (p. 367). In order to legitimately discuss and critique how the stigmatization of the fandom functions and the mental and emotional implications of that stigma, we must first understand how the study of stigma and its components began to take shape.

Goffman's Stigma

Goffman's (1963) *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* provides an integral framework to understanding how stigma began to be applied within social science. To begin, Goffman (1963) describes stigma as being "an attribute that is deeply discrediting" (p. 3). However, Goffman calls for an understanding to be on social relationships and how those relationships are perceived through a cultural standpoint versus the physical attribute itself. Goffman (1963) then goes on to say "by definition, of

course, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination...” (p. 5). This discrimination and the ability to treat others as less than human can be perfectly illustrated through the interactions some furies have with outsiders. Examples of these commonplace interactions include those outside the fandom mocking, defacing fursuits, or physically challenging people for identifying as “furry”. Taking into account the different instances of stigma experienced by furies, such as the news coverage of the Midwest FurFest 2014 chlorine bomb, different experiences with derogatory phrases on the internet such as “yiff in hell furfag,” and the overall mocking of the fandom and degradation throughout many media formats, it becomes increasingly evident how easy it is to dehumanize a group of people merely for an unusual interest (Roberts, 2015; McNally, 2014).

Goffman (1963) identifies three different types of stigma: stigma of character, physical stigma, and stigma of group identity. Stigma of character traits refers to any known “blemishes of individual character.... for example, mental disorder, imprisonment, addiction, alcoholism, homosexuality, unemployment, suicidal attempts, and radical political behavior” (Goffman, 1963, pg. 4). Physical stigmas can be seen, such as physical deformities. “Tribal stigma” or stigma of group identity comes in the form of “race, nation, and religion, these being stigma that can be transmitted through lineages and equally contaminate all members of a family” (Goffman, 1963, p. 4). The furry identity can be applied to all three of these types of stigma in some way. The stigma of character and stigma of group identity are the most applicable, however physical stigma can be seen in the voluntary wearing of a fursuit in a public sphere.

A major focus throughout Goffman's (1963) work is understanding how *normals* (people who are perceived to be without stigmas) and the stigmatized interact within the same social settings. The interactions are shaped by the perceptibility of the discrediting characteristic or deformity and how others interpret and react to this stigma (Goffman, 1963). Goffman (1963) discusses these responses in differing fashions. For example, strangers avoiding the stigmatized or attempting to not acknowledge the stigma or not being able to detect the stigma at all (Goffman, 1963). With those known or "intimate" with the stigmatized, they can become sympathetic normals or inducted into the group merely by association, as in the case of family, relatives, or closely knit friends (Goffman, 1963).

Goffman (1963) explores the individual characteristics of each type of stigma and how they are all linked through similar sociological features. He goes on to discuss how social control through stigmatization can affect deviance, suggesting that some forms of deviance can be accepted within society as long as it stays within specific limits and boundaries (Goffman, 1963). As previously mentioned, many of the researchers involved with current furry studies are focused on creating positive views of the furry fandom (Gerbasi et al. 2008; Plante et al., 2013; Mock et al., 2013; Roberts et al., 2015; Reysen et al., 2015; Plante et al., 2016). Some of these efforts are in direct response to the media's perpetuation of stereotyped images of the furry community and its members (Gerbasi et al., 2008). While some of these researchers are furies themselves, which Goffman (1963) suggests can create bias, most of the researchers are not actually furies, rather they are sympathetic normals. These sympathetic normals wish to advocate for the furry

community and hope for a more positive and holistic view of the fandom to be acknowledged and understood.

Other Stigma Research

The concept of stigma has been discussed, applied, and studied throughout a variety of social science arenas (Link and Phelan, 2001; Major and O'Brien, 2005). While these different utilizations have allowed for a large body of work, it has also created some potential problems for the study in general. With each application of the word "stigma" or "stigmatization", a different definition has been introduced (Link and Phelan, 2001). There is no concrete definition for "stigma" or consensus on the effects of stigma (Link and Phelan, 2001). While many social psychologists tend to believe that stigmas are internally embedded and influential throughout every part of the stigmatized person's existence, others believe that the experiences of stigma are situation based (Major and O'Brien, 2005; Crocker, 1999). For the purposes of this research, situation-based interpretations of stigma have proved to be the most applicable.

Labeling

Link and Phelan (2001) critique the use of terms such as attribute or mark when describing stigmas, primarily because these terms insinuate there is validity in one's stigma. However, utilizing the term "label," allows for more interpretation and exploration as to how these stigmatized markers are influenced and affixed within a social and cultural setting. Link and Phelan (2001) go on to discuss how labels are linked to stereotypes, suggesting "this aspect of stigma involves a label and a stereotype, with the label linking a person to a set of undesirable characteristics that form the stereotype"

(Link and Phelan, 2001, p. 369). Stereotypes and labeling allow for the polarization of “us” and “them,” further isolating stigmatized persons (Link and Phelan, 2001).

Labeling theory is a key tenet in understanding and evaluating stigma and deviance through a sociological lens. Becker (1963) describes the act of labeling and deviance as a social phenomenon: “Social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders” (p.9). The act of labeling deviance is placed solely on the observer (Becker, 1963). The naming of an act as deviant is influenced by multiple factors and is ever-changing. Social setting, context, actors involved, and values of a culture can all dramatically affect how an act is inferred and read as deviant (Becker, 1963). These power dynamics create arbitrary terms for acceptance and understanding of othered difference.

The fursuited body is seen as deviant, even though it is not breaking any formal laws (Roberts, 2015). It is the physical act of being different and manifesting this difference through outward dress that is labeled and seen as deviant. Typically, those outside of the furry community first encountered the furry identity through extremely stereotyped images of the fandom portrayed in the media, such as the *Vanity Fair* article or the *CSI* episode (Roberts, 2015). With these perverse oversimplifications of the fandom at the forefront of many people’s minds, it can be extremely difficult for furries to divulge their identities to those not associated with the fandom. By understanding the importance of the terms utilized and the implications of their meanings, we can gain a

much more accurate understanding of the normative and acceptable behaviors dictated by cultural ideas.

In understanding labeling, it is necessary to acknowledge the importance of power and systems of power that must be in place in order for stigmatization to occur. “Stigma is entirely dependent on social, economic, and political power- it takes power to stigmatize” (Link and Phelan 2001, p. 375). Societal norms and accepted behaviors are dictated and controlled by powerful institutions and groups. The act of labeling itself is a power dynamic, the ones in power have the ability to identify the wrongness in the powerless others.

Collective Representations

When discussing situation-based and social stigmas, it is important to acknowledge collective representations, which are “shared beliefs or shared systems of meaning” (Crocker, 1999, p. 91). These collective representations may take the form of stereotypes, understandings of a group’s position within the social hierarchy, or why a group’s values are central to the group (Crocker, 1999). Since collective representations can differ group to group, situations can be experienced and understood differently according to one’s group affiliations and ideologies.

By understanding how these collective representations affect and influence a situation, we can then discern how those within the situation interpret one’s stigma and the relevance of that stigma. Healy and Beverland (2016) discussed how furries attempt to disclose their furry identity to outsiders through playing on different collective representations that appeal to the person they are disclosing their identity to. When

disclosing their furry identities to others, furies positioned their actions within creative, artistic, spiritual, and playful mediums which made the furry identity more palatable for non-furies (Healy and Beverland, 2016).

Concealable Stigmas

Goffman (1963) discusses how individuals, who have stigmas that are not easily discernable or concealable, must learn how to mediate and hide their stigmatized attribute from those known and unknown to the individual. The stigmatized must learn appropriate spaces in which their stigma must be hidden or negotiated in accordance with the social norms and mores ascribed to the immediate setting and context. The furry fandom provides an excellent opportunity to explore how individuals with concealable stigmatized affiliations negotiate different settings and experiences.

Research dealing with concealable stigmas focuses on the emotional experiences of one with a concealable stigma (Smart and Wegner, 1999; Pachankis, 2007; Frable, Platt, and Hoey, 1998). For instance, Smart and Wegner (1999) analyzed the mental processes and emotional responses individuals with concealable eating disorders experienced when discussing eating disorders. Their results showed that while a stigmatized individual may appear comfortable and at ease, they are actually experiencing an inner struggle to maintain secrecy (Smart and Wegner, 1999). The results focus on the stages of secrecy suppression, suggesting that one will attempt to not think about their concealable stigma, primarily because a preoccupation and thought about that stigma can make it difficult to maintain an agreeable outward demeanor (Smart and Wegner 1999). More specifically, the researchers stated that “we can infer from our

findings that people try to make their secret cognitively accessible only to the extent that it serves the function of further maintaining the secrecy” (Smart and Wegner, 1999, p. 483). This conflict with maintaining a level of secrecy can be seen with those in the fandom, especially when directly faced with having to hide specific parts of their furry identity, such as their friends, going to conventions, or going to local meet-ups.

Pachankis (2007) discussed the emotional stressors experienced by those attempting to conceal a stigma, including “having to make decisions to disclose one’s hidden status, anxiously anticipating the possibility of being found out, being isolated from similarly stigmatized others, and being detached from one’s true self” (p. 328). It is suggested that the cognitive and affective responses a person might experience when attempting to conceal a stigma can range from preoccupation and suspiciousness to anxiety, depression, hostility, avoidance, guilt, and shame (Pachankis, 2007). Further, Pachankis (2007) discussed how the self-evaluation process can leave one having a negative or ambivalent view of self and/or diminished self-efficacy. These responses are primarily experienced when an individual is isolated from similar others and thus unable to effectively understand and identify themselves within a greater whole (Pachankis, 2007).

Frable, Platt, and Hoey (1998) explored the impact that finding similar others can have on those with concealable stigmas. Studying Harvard students, researchers found that those with a concealable stigma experienced lower levels of self esteem and happiness as compared to those with visible stigmas and those without a stigmatized identity (Frable, Platt, and Hoey, 1998). However, when those with concealable stigmas

engaged with similar others there was a marked improvement and positive effect on their self-esteem and happiness levels (Frable, Platt, and Hoey, 1998). The researchers also found that centers and organizations that attempted to empower those with concealable stigmas, such as LGBT centers, eating disorder centers, and financial aid can be an integral tool (Frable, Platt, and Hoey, 1998). For the furry community, the internet and social media websites can provide the same opportunities for connections and relationships between furies. These pro-furry spaces provide furies with the opportunity to engage with others who are similar to them, promote the values of the furry community, and provide acceptance and support for those struggling within the real non-furry world.

What Does All of this Mean?

While this literature review compiles a broad amount of information from multiple theoretical frameworks, it illustrates how many possibilities the furry fandom can bring to our academic pool of knowledge. Expanding the realms of identity performance and management, both within the virtual and “real” world, calls into question what it means to be human and how humanness should be perceived within an ever-changing society. While the furry fandom is a leisure activity, it allows its members to explore themselves on a much deeper level, supporting a renunciation of the superficial human world in favor of a more imaginative personification of self. By utilizing forms of masking, furies are able to break away from their typical human faces and symbolically transform into their chosen fursona. Masking provides the ability to conceal one’s human face and identity, further allowing the mask wearer to fully immerse themselves within

their characters, while also maintaining some anonymity. The furry fandom is a stigmatized group. Its members create a valuable support system based on acceptance. This support system and the level of commitment by its members help to mediate the negative implications of the stigmatized identity. There are multiple aspects of the fandom that can support, trivialize, and expand on current academic literature. While not all of the questions I have posed within the current literature will be answered, I hope that the ideas and concepts addressed will open up a new realm of possibilities for future research endeavors.

CHAPTER IV

METHODS

I chose to label this thesis as an “exploratory qualitative research endeavor.”

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals who identify as furry, in an attempt to gain more insight on their individual experiences within the fandom. Semi-structured interviews provided more flexibility, allowing for the researcher to follow-up on any markers or interesting responses that emerged during the conversation (Smith, 1995). Researchers who conduct qualitative interviews are able to not only ask questions to respondents, but to also observe how these individuals physically and emotionally react to the questions being asked and their own answers (Warren, 2004).

Qualitative Interview Collection

My sample consisted of ten participants, each of whom identified as a furry and were currently active within the furry community. For my study, “furry” was defined as an individual who cultivates a “fursona,” taking on the identity of an anthropomorphic creature. Anthropomorphic creatures refer to individuals who exhibit both human and animal characteristics (Gerbasi et al., 2008).

After this study was approved by the institutional review board at the University of North Carolina Greensboro, participants were recruited through a snowball sample. To prepare for this research, I sought out individuals within the fandom, who offered to

introduce me to more of their acquaintances within the community. Due to the reclusive nature of the furry fandom, it could be quite difficult to secure a sample that would be willing to fully disclose their experiences to an outsider. Utilizing a snowball sampling approach provided me the opportunity to form trusting relationships with each participant who then conveyed their confidence in my intentions to the next participant, which set the stage for a more comfortable trusting interview process (Cohen and Arieli, 2011). I conducted these interviews through Skype or in person, depending on the availability of the participant.

In order to recruit and meet new potential participants and gain more exposure to the furry fandom, I chose to attend two different furry conventions. At these conventions I conducted field observations within public common areas, in addition to maintaining a daily journal about my experiences each day. The information gathered was used to expand my own knowledge about the furry community and aided in the development of my qualitative questions. I specifically chose two popular furry conventions, which have the largest attendance records on the east coast. The first was *Furry Weekend Atlanta (FWA)*, which is held in the southeastern part of the United States and *Anthrocon*, which takes place in the Northeast. According to their websites, *Furry Weekend Atlanta* had 3,431 attendees and *Anthrocon* had 7,310 attendees in 2016. I also attended “furmeets” in Raleigh and Charlotte, North Carolina throughout the months of data collection. “Furmeets” are scheduled events at various locations, such as dinners or cookouts, which provide furries within these areas the chance to hang out and get to know each other.

For the qualitative interviews, my sample consisted of suiters, makers, and artists, all of which had cultivated and maintained specific fursonas. “Suiters” are the performers who wear the fursuits at conventions or different community and charity events. “Makers” are those who professionally fabricate the fursuits for money. Some suiters choose to make their own fursuits, primarily due to the cost of getting a professional suit, which can be quite high. “Artists” are those within the fandom who are paid to craft one of a kind artwork depicting different “fursonas”. This artwork is usually commissioned and put on display throughout various social media sites, fandom specific websites, and conventions. These different categories are not mutually exclusive, many makers and artists are also suiters.

Indeed, for the purposes of this study, only those individuals who had an active dual identity- fursona and persona- were interviewed. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by hand. Once transcriptions were finished, I color coded each according to five chosen themes dealing with discovery of the fandom, joining the fandom, experiences within the furry community, experiences with outsiders in regards to the fandom, and demographic information. Breaking down the questions and answers into these thematic categories allowed me to create a more holistic and representative image of one’s experiences discovering and joining the fandom, as well as, experiences once in the fandom. The themes were specifically crafted to fully navigate and answer my specific research questions.

Demographic Information

My sample was primarily comprised of professional adults in their mid twenties to mid thirties, with one individual being in their mid-fifties. Plante et al. (2016) found that according to their data collected over five years, the average ages for furies were between 23-years old to 27-years-old, however all of these samples excluded minors. Seven of my participants (70%) identified as male and three of my participants (30%) identified as female. One participant identified themselves as transgender, male identifying. This gender distribution is similar to the findings of Plante et al. (2016), with 72.4% of their samples identifying as male and 27.4% identifying as female. Also, 60% of my sample identified themselves as LGBT, while 40% identified as heterosexual. Three participants identified as bi-sexual and three participants identified as gay or lesbian. Plante et al. (2016) found that under 25% of furies identified as exclusively heterosexual, while the other 75% identified within a five-point spread of bi-sexual (62%) or homosexual (13%).

Participants within my sample had careers ranging from military, fire, and police service, to computer and data programming, nursing, and architecture. One participant left her corporate job as a graphic designer for a prominent children's clothing company to pursue her own business as a furry and visual artist. This demographic information shows how those within the furry fandom do not belong to one predominant demographic background or makeup. The furry community is incredibly diverse. This diversity in interests and backgrounds can provide a plethora of information regarding how each individual navigates the community differently.

Feminist Research Methodology

In constructing the methodological framework for this study, it seemed most important to utilize a qualitative feminist research methodology. More specifically, this meant practicing my own reflexive understanding of my positionality, as a researcher, and the position of my participants. In acknowledging the context of the research relationship, we were able to work together to break down some of the power dynamics, allowing for a more fluid exchange of ideas, opinions, and experiences.

As a researcher, it was difficult to maintain a complete outsider perspective for lack of information and understanding, however, a complete insider perspective would have fostered potential biases (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). It was imperative to maintain a liminal position within the greater collective. Dwyer and Buckle (2009) focus on the importance of utilizing the space between, instead of functioning within the binary of insider-outsider. They utilize Aoki's (1996) work around what it means to bridge the gap between insider and outsider, to exist within a liminal space. "A space of paradox, ambiguity, and ambivalence, as well as conjunction and disjunction" (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009, p. 61). Researchers cannot fully remain on the outside, because they attain knowledge through researching and shaping their understanding of the group they are studying. Researchers cannot be an insider, because they have to be able to acknowledge themselves as researchers. If they do not make this distinction, they could experience some inner identity and role struggle or stress, which is problematic for practicing research (Acker, 2000).

In order to maintain this liminal identity, it was necessary to continually reflect on my work, interactions, and experiences throughout the research process. Coupled with a reflexive thought process, I had to learn to recognize and listen to the voices of my participants and focus on the information they divulged during the interview process, as well as, the information that was left unspoken. By instilling an understanding of positionality, voice, listening, and reflexivity within my own research and practice of my craft, I was able to create an engaging conversation for my participants and myself.

Participant Observation

In conjunction with the qualitative interviews, I was provided the opportunity to wear a fur-suit at each convention and interact with the public and other suiters. After each suiting session, I wrote about my experiences and observations (See Appendix B and Appendix C). Incorporating ethnographic research provided clarity about the subject on a much more intimate level that just interviews alone may not offer (Warren, 2004). Physically suiting-up provided me the opportunity to connect and relate to my sample on a very different level, which laid the foundation for a deeper level of trust that is essential within this community. Connecting in this way brought me much closer to the thoughts and feelings of the participants within this subculture (Whitehead, 2005).

Confidentiality

In order to ensure the comfort and confidentiality of the participants, I provided confidentiality statements and a verbal consent form (See Appendix D). Verbal consent added a further level of confidentiality, because legal names were never exchanged throughout the research process. While participants were asked general questions about

occupations and daily routines, fursona identifiers were changed or omitted as needed to protect the identity of each participant. Each participant chose a pseudonym, which was attached to their interview and transcript for the entirety of the study. At no point were the participants asked any real world information, which could link their human world identities to the furry fandom or their fursona.

My primary goal was to provide a safe environment in which the participants felt comfortable enough to share their own experiences and emotions. Through my interviews, I gained a deeper insight on identity creation and formation, management, and concealment within a stigmatized community. My line of questioning focused on the duality of the persona and the fursona, their experiences within the furry fandom, as well as, the effect the furry fandom has had on their daily life and functioning (See Appendix A).

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS

At the beginning of each interview, I asked the participants to briefly define, in their own words, what the furry fandom was. Definitions utilized set the scene for how one conceptualizes the fandom and how one positioned themselves within the community. Kitty, a 25-year-old female jaguar suggested that: “In a nut shell, the furry fandom is a group of artists. They range from what you would think, they use colors and digital art to artists that perform, that create music, that do sculptures, things that people don’t even think about doing. They’re a very creative group.” This emphasis on a variety of forms of creativity can further be expanded on by Cal, a 34-year-old kitsune. He explained the furry fandom saying, “It’s a giant collection of people that in some way, shape, or form share some common interest, even though it comes from many different angles... and that’s enough for them to all get along and share in the whole overall experience of it.” Each participant attempted to utilize their own experiences in their definitions, often citing friendship, creativity, and “fun” within their explanations.

Before attempting to answer how individuals experience and navigate their furry identities, it is necessary to first understand how my participants initially discovered the furry fandom. Up to 90% of participants within this study referred to the importance of the internet as a primary source for information. The internet allows for members all over the world to connect to one another, utilizing social media and websites such as

Furaffinity and *DeviantArt* to disseminate artwork and videos directly related to their experiences and interests. Lefty, a 25-year-old male bunny described his discovery of the fandom saying:

Growing up, I was really interested in anime and they had these things called ‘nekos,’ which are basically animal characters...they have cat ears and a tail... Much later in life, I actually found the furry community just by chance really. I did a little browsing online and just kind of stumbled across it and I found it really fascinating.

Hodor, a 30-year-old male wolf, expressed a similar experience while searching the internet: “I just stumbled across *FurAffinity* on a random freaking search and thought, ‘hey this is really cool... I’m going to sign up for this.’” Marie, a 24-year-old female dog said, “I thought it was really awesome that people could create different kinds of costumes and wear three-dimensional forms of their own artwork.”

Charlie, a male furry in his fifties explained he found the furry fandom through his previous career as a mascot at a theme park and his love of making elaborate Halloween costumes. After creating multiple Halloween costumes, one of which became the mascot of a local train museum, he said “I started looking online trying to find costume makers.” Stumbling upon a website for an anime convention, he found people discussing furies. Charlie went on to say, “Then I started researching furies and realized my costume was a sort of fursuit. I started looking more into it and found a local group on *Facebook*... So I decided to check it out.”

At least three participants explained they were initially introduced to the fandom by a friend, who was also a furry. Aaryan, a male jaguar in his mid-twenties said, “I was

about 9-years-old and I had friend... he told me he was a furry and I had no clue what that was. He showed me *FurAffnity*. He gave me one of his old accounts and I found artwork I really liked and I decided that I wanted to join the community.” Shawn explained a similar introduction: “I actually was sent a video from a friend of mine and it was of some furies dancing and I thought it was fun.” While their modes for discovering the fandom varied, the creativity and uniqueness within the fandom proved to be a predominant factor within one’s continued interest in the community upon initial discovery.

Cultivation of Fursona

The initial stage of intrigue proved to be quite important to the eventual membership within the fandom, however the actual act of joining the fandom was usually observed through the creation of one’s fursona. The fursona acts as one’s primary source of identification within the fandom and can allow for a variety of presentations of self. When asked about how the participants cultivated their fursonas, 100% of my sample said that their primary fursona exhibited many of their daily life persona’s characteristics and personality traits. For instance, Aaryan said, “it was a perfect representation of myself, if I could take that form”. Hodor discussed his primary fursona saying, “I will say that when I get into character with him, I act like myself”. Marie described her character as the embodiment of her life struggles saying “I grew up in the badlands, essentially, and she encompasses that... the rough skin you get from living in certain neighborhoods.” Tah, a 30-year-old male dog described how his character is influenced by his own traits: “I try to take the best traits I see in myself and exaggerate them further, like kindness and

happiness...he's just me The process of creating a fursona is a continual evolution, there is no fixed character. Many of my participants discussed how their characters had evolved past their initial designs. Some participants went through a deeper research process to decide upon a species and what specific traits were most important. Wolf Lady, a female furry artist, who has been in the fandom for 15 years said, "originally my fursona was a wolf, because I connected with wolves. As I started to discover more about my personality, different canine animals started to become incorporated with my character." Kitty discussed her research process when creating a character: "that one took me a lot of research to do.... I wanted to know the differences between the leopard and jaguar, so I knew what to aesthetically do with her as a character."

The species chosen are primarily selected because they embody some specific characteristics that hold a special meaning to the individual. Previous research discussed the spiritual connectedness some furies feel with their fursona (Gerbas et al., 2008; Roberts et al., 2015; Healy and Beverland, 2013; Healy and Beverland, 2016). My findings presented that a similar idea resonated with multiple participants. Lefty described his connection to bunnies: "They've always kind of been there. I may not have always noticed. I feel like it's my spirit animal in a sense." Wolf lady further echoed these same sentiments saying, "the character that I made is more of a spiritual connection for me... It is an extension of me." Further elaborating on the connections between individual and their chosen species, respondents often reflected upon specific characteristics ascribed to the species they identified most with. For instance, Hodor talked about one of his alternate shepherd dog fursonas: "He represents the loyalty that I

have as a person.” Cal discussed the mystical elements behind the Japanese kitsune, a fox spirit: “they’re tricksters... they’re not good or bad, they’re just kind of there... they remind me of myself”

All of my participants discussed cultivating multiple characters, each serving a different purpose or function. Some utilized their multiple fursonas as ways to act out different parts of their personalities or individual traits, while others merely created other characters to serve as medium for their own artist expression. Kitty, who is a writer, creates different characters to work into her stories. She said, “Whenever I create a character, I take one tiny piece of my personality and I blow it up. I create an entire character around it. Whether it is a good characteristic or a bad one.” Marie discussed the mystical back stories created for one of her characters: “my wolf sona has a pendant that she wears that encases her demon spirit who is like... Her inner demons that we all have and sometimes she makes an appearance and it’s like anger in it’s worst form.” Cal discussed his multiple characters: “I have them if I want to create different costumes... or stories... but the kitsune is more personal.” Charlie described his four different fursonas and corresponding fursuits, each exhibiting different aspects of himself. From playfulness to sophistication, each character brings out a different aspect of Charlie that resonates with him in some way. He further said, “Whichever fursona I take on and suit as depends on the venue. I change my personality to suit the venue. That’s why some are good for conventions and some are not.”

The creation of multiple fursonas allows for a much broader presentation of self, allowing the individual to explore and represent smaller aspects of their personality that

they may not be able to fully express within daily life. The fursona becomes the central component to one's membership within the furry fandom, while one does not necessarily have to create a fursona to participate within the furry fandom, it is the most symbolic and widely practiced enactment of one's furry identification. Cultivating one's fursona takes creativity, passion, and imagination. The furry identity can take the shape and species of whatever the individual wishes, from mythical creatures from lore or religion to man's best friend.

Dual Identity Management

Fursonas also function as a means to maintain some amount of distance between one's furry identity and real life persona. For instance, Kitty said she keeps these identities separate primarily for her own safety. She explained by saying, "Because there are some people that I have had that really really like me as a performer and my character... they will try to follow me places.... Not necessarily people in the fandom, but outsiders too." Tah echoed a different sentiment in relation to the separateness between persona and fursona: "if I do that, it no longer becomes an escape for me.... if I blend my two halves together it will become boring." By providing this duality, Tah is able to completely escape from his real life and daily struggles. This escapist sentiment was also reiterated by Marie who said, "conventions are an escape, because I can just go away for the weekend and be with friends and be myself and do what I want." Multiple respondents utilized this same understanding of the fandom, an escape from daily life. This finding corresponded with Plante et al.'s (2016) findings, which suggested that "most furies agree that their fandom participation is motivated, at least in part, by the

fact that it allows them the chance to escape the ‘routine’... nature of day-to-day life.” (p. 41). These findings are also similar to those of Healy and Beverland (2013), who found that participation within the fandom is motivated, at least in part, by an escapist mentality. It is a way for those within the furry community to branch out from their daily life struggles and become someone or something more or different than their daily life personas.

When I asked my respondents about the number of outsiders who know about their furry involvement, I was quite surprised by how many do not necessarily keep it a secret from their close friends and family. For instance, Marie who is a fursuit maker suggested it was difficult for her to hide her furry identity primarily because she is a fursuit maker. She said, “It’s kinda hard to hide it when people come to visit the house and bits and pieces of fur are strewn throughout.” She then went on to say, “My mom thought it was weird at first. She jokingly asked what she did wrong, but once she saw the artwork and suits I was making... she thought it was awesome that someone could make things like that.” Wolf lady said a bulk of her family knew about her furry identity, because her primary job is furry artwork. Lefty said, “my family has no idea what a furry is.... When I came up with a fursona- my family just always viewed me as the crafty one who liked to make things, like costumes... they weren’t weirded out by it.”

While some of my participants expressed their positive experiences divulging their identities to their outside family, some expressed no desire to tell their family about their furry identity at all. Tah thought about telling his family, but he said, “I would rather them live in their own little world and not think less of their son. They could think it’s

really cool, but I just can't bring myself to tell them. Generationally, it just doesn't make sense." He also went on to say, "I'm worried about what my sister would think ... how that could affect my involvement and communication with my nephews and niece." Cal also expressed a similar sentiment, suggesting that he did not want to share that side of himself with his conservative family. Cal said, "My family is super conservative... I mean, they don't even know I'm bi. They are used to me traveling anyways. When I go to conventions, I just write it off as I am going to visit friends." When discussing how they felt about maintaining these secrets, they both thought it had become second nature. While Tah and Cal expressed some discomfort in keeping their furrries identities hidden from their families, both suggested that the benefits of not divulging their identities were far more important.

However, when it came to divulging their furry identity to coworkers, a majority (80%) of those within my sample suggested that they attempt to keep those identities separate. Hodor said, "my current job no one knows about it... I don't really broadcast it... I'm just like meh. I don't really want to deal with that." Tah who is an active military serviceman said "that is a part of personal life that I do not want to enter into my professional sphere. It can be distracting professionally. I'm there to do a job... there is such a stigma attached to anything non-hyper-masculine within the military." Cal, who works as a firefighter expressed a very similar outlook in regards to his desire to maintain distance between his masculine fireman persona and his furry identity. Marie, who works in healthcare, specifically rehabilitation services, stated a very similar concern for maintaining separate spheres of functioning. Shaun, a police officer and military veteran,

suggested the opposite mentality, saying those he works with do know about his furry involvement and do not really seem to care.

All ten participants used similar descriptions of how they manage their persona and fursona, suggesting they viewed their fursonas as part of themselves. Cal and Tah used the word “compartments” to explain how they understood their furry identities and their personas. Rather than the two identities functioning independently of one another, they are viewed as different compartments of the same person. Tah suggested, “They are different compartments within myself. I don’t necessarily switch one part of myself off to turn another part on.” Cal said, “I don’t view my identities as separate. The only thing I feel like I have to repress in public is the touchier feely side. My personality is always still there; it’s just more toned down.”

The creation of a fursona and the subsequent cultivation of that identity can take time and energy. There is no fixed identity within the furry fandom. Those who participate in the community often create and maintain multiple fursonas and change these characters and traits as they grow and change as people. However, 100% of my sample suggested their fursonas were similar to their daily life personas. While there can be differences between fursona and persona, most appeared to be surrounding species and imagined physical appearance. Managing these multiple identities did not appear to be difficult for my participants, as they often cited their fursonas were anthropomorphic embodiments of their daily life personas.

Fursuit Masking

Fursuits are the most identifiable aspect of the fandom, even though only about 13% of furies polled actually owned a full fursuit, with around 25% saying they owned a partial fursuit (Plante et al., 2016). Full fursuits, cover the complete body and encompass a body suit, head, hand paws, feet paws, and sometimes a tail, while a partial fursuit usually consists of a head, hand paws, and sometimes feet paws and a tail (Plante et al., 2016). For this thesis, 90% of my sample owned a fursuit, with 60% owning more than one fursuit. Charlie owned the most fursuits within this sample, with ten full suits. Aaryan was the only participant within this sample who did not previously own a fursuit. However, he is currently making payments on a full suit and in the process of finding a fursuit maker for another full suit.

Of those who did own a fursuit, seven participants (70%) made at least one of their own fursuits. Marie and Kitty are both professional fursuit makers. When asked about how long it took to make a fursuit, Marie and Kitty both suggested it could take up to 100 hours if not more to complete one full fursuit. According to those within my sample, prices ranged anywhere from around \$500 to \$600 for a partial to over \$2,000 for a full fursuit. While these prices are an average estimate, some fursuits within the community can sell for upwards of \$9,000 with the most expensive suit publically auctioned in the history of the furry community selling at just under \$12,000 (“\$11,575 fursuit sale brings comments from Furbuy and seller PhoenixWolf,” n.d.). Marie suggested that fur material alone can range from \$20 to upwards of \$100 per yard. She said, “There are even specialty fibers that some suits might call for that are around \$100

per square foot.” On top of the fur alone, Marie goes on to say, “you have glue, your sewing machine, which is a huge cost, surgers, scissors, cutting board, rotary cutters, it all adds up really quickly”.

Furries also commission various types of artwork, from simple sketches and icons to highly detailed works that can take hours to complete. Wolf Lady and Marie are both furry artists, who complete a variety of artwork for commissioners. Wolf Lady discussed a comprehensive listing of her prices, from simple sketches and icons, which cost anywhere from \$25 to \$60, taking two to three hours, to more complex highly detailed illustrations which start around \$110, but can go upwards of \$250 or more, taking up to forty hours to complete. Wolf lady said “it’s a very time consuming process, but a very enjoyable one.” Marie charges anywhere from \$25 to \$32 dollars an hour for artwork, with prices ranging according to mediums and details. Marie also creates custom stuffed animals of personal characters, which can take anywhere from five to fifteen hours to complete. These stuffed renderings of characters require her to think outside the box: “I literally take a two-dimensional image and magically make it three-dimensional, with my mind.”

While art can play an integral role in the creation and exploration of a fursona, fursuits also provide a physical opportunity to live out furry artistic creations. Advances in animatronics and different structural features allow for a blurring of lines between human body and furry mask. Incorporating articulating jaws to simulate mouth movement, with the structuring of padding, and the utilization of stilts, advancements in fursuits allow for a reinterpretation of realness. Aaryan for example discussed how he

plans to incorporate stilts into a future suit, “as far as stilts go, I just really wanted something that would make me look taller.” By incorporating stilts with this particular character, which is a more aggressive form of himself, Aaryan is able to completely simulate a different being entirely. Also, by incorporating scars and piercings, Aaryan is able to create a visual representation of the battles he has waged within himself throughout his life. Charlie has LED lights affixed in the eyes of many of his suits, which can cause them to completely light up blue and red. Charlie also discussed his desire for a quad suit. Quad suits further expand on animalistic characteristics by forcing the wearer to hunch over and simulate the act of walking on four legs.

In conjunction with species performance furry costuming also provides the ability to manipulate one’s visual appearance and act to reflect the gender presentation of their choosing. For instance, Kitty, who is a female has a male saber cat character partial suit. Even though this is a partial suit, it can still provide the opportunity to conceal her face and general appearance in favor of the more masculine character. Tah has a female full suit character: “She is a representation of my feminine side, she is flirty and sultry. She makes me feel balanced and allows me to portray those characteristics that I cannot exhibit in daily life. She is a form of empowerment for me.” While Cal does not yet have a fursuit of his female character, he does get art and other works commissioned of her. He says, “She is a representation of more of my athletic and dominant side, she is an apex predator. She’s a bird of prey and she represents my strength for... not really taking crap for things. Once things start getting bad, I summon her in myself.” Within the fandom, gender, species, and identity are all fluid, ever evolving outward representations of how

one thinks, feels, and experiences the world around them. This provides furies with the opportunity to create powerful and mystical creatures to escape, empower, and channel one's frustrations and challenges into corporeal form.

With the acquisition of the fursuit comes the actual wearing of said suit. Kitty's description of wearing a fursuit is the most descriptive: "easiest way I can explain this is lock yourself in a car on a hot day for about twenty minutes and then put a coat on and try and move. It is miserable in these suits. You cannot see, you cannot feel things, and you can't hear really well." Most of the other respondents echoed this same sentiment, often citing how hot and heavy the suit can actually become. Given how uncomfortable these suits actually are, I wanted to understand what the draw to wearing them actually is. Kitty said "When I am in suit, I become a completely different person, because I am now my character. I can do things differently than I could as a normal person. Let's face it, I'm a giant cat. I can get away with certain things in a fursuit that you can't really get away with in public." When asked to further explain, she went on to say, "I have done some charity events.... This little girl came over and petted me and hugged me and had the best day ever, because I was a cat and I was something she could associate with easily."

A reading of the furry identity should incorporate a much richer and deeper understanding of its position within society, reality, and humanity. The social identity perspective utilized by the IARP, restricts how furry identity is contextualized, specifically, because this categorical staged framework only extends to human identification (Reysen, 2015; Plante et al., 2015; Mock et al., 2015). However, furry identification is much more, furry exists within a liminal space, complicating the assumed

fixedness of lived reality, protesting the boundaries of positionality and identity. The fabrication and wearing of a fursuit further legitimates and corporealizes the individual's fursona, allowing for bodily performance and achieved transformation. Fursuit performance and identification is not limited to just the human body and expression. It provides the opportunity for the human body to disappear in favor of something fluid and malleable in the hands of the wearer.

Experiences with Stigma

When discussing the stigmatization of the furry fandom, a few key events were discussed at length within this thesis, including mainstream media's interpretation of the fandom and its centric focus on a sexually deviant image (Roberts, 2015). Every participant within my sample specifically brought up the *CSI* episode that dealt primarily with furies in a furry orgy, usually suggesting it was a key moment that solidified the negative furry image within the general public. Kitty discussed the stereotyped image of "yiffing" or people having sexual intercourse while in fursuit: "for roughly 90% of the fandom it is just a stereotype... for the majority of us, it's like taking a brand new Lamborghini and spray painting it a different color, would somebody out there? Probably, but not a majority of us." Cal was active in the fandom when this stereotype began being perpetuated. He said, "before those images were out there... not a lot of people knew who we were, there wasn't enough internet out there to really propagate the furry image to the general public. It was a small group, there were trolls, but not many." Now with the image of furry more widely disseminated, many worry for the impact it could have on themselves and their experiences with others.

With this stigmatized image of the furry, also comes the opportunity to delegitimize the furry costumed performer. Marie said, “I think they think that because you’re dressed as an animal that it is okay (to invade personal space), because they can’t see your face... to them you’re not a person, you’re a thing they can play with and touch and do whatever they want to.” Marie further explained experiences she has had where she felt sexually violated:

Mostly every time it’s been by women. Like, we were standing outside of our hotel and doing pictures once before with these people and as they were walking away they slapped me on the behind. Then, we had another set of women who were at a bar across from the convention and they were asking if my chest was real or if it was fake or if they could find out. So yeah, definitely comments if not actually touching, always outsiders definitely no one in the fandom.

While not all experiences are sexual in nature, two other respondents described instances in which they were physically violated. Tah talked about an experience in a public setting in which a grown man yanked on his tail, propelling him backward. “The dude flat out grabbed my tail and dragged me about ten feet, by my tail.” While friends out of suit confronted the man and his actions, this event still shows how easily those within suit can be dehumanized. That physical event ruined the rest of the experience that day for Tah. He said, “I am still extremely angry about that confrontation and if I were to see the guy today, I would probably punch him in the face.” The suit that Tah was wearing at the time cost around \$3,500. He went on to say, “I had no visibility and did not know anyone was coming up behind me like that. I had no way to defend myself or dissolve the situation.”

Kitty described a similar experience, in which a teenager came up behind her and grabbed the ear of her fursuit head, attempting to pull the head off. She said, “He thought he would be cool and pull my fursuit head off. He came up behind me and grabbed my ear and just yanked it.” I, myself, as a researcher, had a similar experience during my first fursuit participant observation session. While in suit at a convention, someone came up on the side of me, outside of my field of sight and yanked on my ear. I could not hear her coming and the momentum of yanking my ear thrust my entire head down jerking me forward, I almost fell to the ground. The fursuited body is othered and viewed as something that can be accosted without repercussions. These examples perfectly illustrate how easily the furry beneath the suit becomes invisible and opened for violation from the general public. While not all experiences are negative, the negative ones tend to stick out more.

Management of Stigma

Previous research on the furry fandom and concealable stigmas have focused around how stigmatized individuals cope with the stress associated with one’s stigma label (Mock et al., 2013; Reysen et al., 2015; Roberts et al., 2015; Frable, Hoey, and Platt, 1998). Mock et al (2013) specifically looked at how individuals within the furry community mediate the stressors associated with a stigmatizing label. Mock et al. (2013) found that deeper involvement with the fandom and the support system created through the fandom can positively affect life satisfaction and self-acceptance. Social networks are a significant part of the fandom. Of my sample, all participants suggested that at least 75% of their friend group is made up of other furies, with some saying up to 90% to

98% of their friends are furry. Throughout my sample, every single respondent discussed the friends or significant others they would not have met without the furry community.

Many participants suggested their reasoning for having so many friends within the fandom revolved around their interests in the community itself. Kitty said:

I have met some amazing people, some people that I call family, more than friends, because they have been so amazing and impacted my life so much. For instance, my mate has fallen ill and gone through a lot of medical problems lately. I have had some really good furies in my life that actually stepped up and really helped me out when I needed it. And in the end, it actually probably saved us from being out on the street a couple times.

Lefty explains, “I have a lot more friends that I hang out with that are furies, because we... you know... it’s easier to hang out with others who.... share a common hobby with you.... you don’t really have to pretend to be anything you’re not.” This desire to associate with similar stigmatized others perfectly aligns with much of the stigma literature discussed earlier (Smart and Wegner, 1999; Pachankis, 2007; Frable, Platt and Hoey, 1998). Frable, Platt, and Hoey (1998) found that those with concealable stigmas were more likely to experience lower levels of self-esteem and happiness when isolated, however with the introduction of similar others, there was a marked improvement in self-esteem and happiness levels. Also, in regards to identity threat, those who exhibit a higher level of commitment to a group identity are more likely to develop collective coping responses (Ellemers et al., 2002). Within the furry fandom, greater associations with similar others could be interpreted as a way of committing further to the community (Mock et al., 2013).

According to Plante et al. (2016), of their sample, more than 60% of those dating or married within the fandom found their significant other in the furry community. Within my sample, 90% of respondents suggest they had met their significant others through the furry fandom in some way, either through other friends within the community or via the internet. When I asked Hodor about the impact the fandom had on him meeting his significant other, he responded, “hands down the fandom has a big bearing on that. I would not have met her if it wasn’t for the fandom.” Hodor and his significant other lived in different states when they originally met through a mutual friend in the furry community. Shawn is married to his partner, whom he met while at a furry convention. Shawn said, “some of the strongest relationships I have ever seen with people, in general, have come from them both being members of the fandom. Some of their strongest points have been by creating characters that complement each other... when they come together they become something more.” It is unmistakable that those within my sample truly connect, appreciate, and love their friends and family within the furry community.

When asked about the impact of the furry fandom, many said the community made them more accepting and confident individuals. Hodor said, “as far as how it’s changed me, I’m more accepting. I’ll be honest, I was born into a very very strict Roman Catholic family...I don’t think that way at all. I would say that is because of the fandom. It has made me very non-judgmental and very accepting.” Kitty talked about growing up as a gay identifying individual in a community where homosexuality was not discussed: “it wasn’t even that my family seemed to anti-gay, it just seemed like no one talked about it...through the fur fandom, I have actually found that I am not as weird for being gay,

like I thought... it has given me the confidence to be openly gay and be okay telling people.” Tah said, “it has made me more accepting of me... it has made me realize that all of the aspects of me should be embraced rather than ashamed and hidden away. It made me love me for who I am, flaws and all.” Aaryan talked about his experience, “I started off afraid to speak, afraid to be wrong... and I realized I should be able to ask questions, basically that’s what the furry fandom did for me... it allowed me to have a voice. I found a group of people who accepted me for me.” From these statements, it is obvious that the fandom has had a positive impact on those within my sample. The furry fandom has endowed its members with a special gift, from finding support, acceptance, and loving friends to teaching self-love and acceptance of one’s personhood.

Healy and Beverland (2016) explored the ways in which furries divulge their furry identity to outsiders, primarily by framing the furry identity in a more palatable and accepting light for those outside of the fandom. I found similar answers from those within my sample. Kitty says, “I normally call myself an entertainer or a costume performer.... I’m normally very picky about my words because I want to explain the fandom in the best light I can.” Aaryan discussed how he and his friends explain the fandom to those in the public: “we are basically a group of people who like anthropomorphic animals, some of us view them more as spirit guides.” These explanations of the furry fandom are quite similar to the examples utilized within Healy and Beverland’s (2016) discussion and critique. Incorporating themes such as creativity, spirituality, and playfulness allow for furries to be positioned within a broader scheme of presentation of self that is accepted

within our current societal context in an attempt to distance themselves from the stigmatized narrative.

The furry community provides the opportunity to escape from the daily struggles of life and have fun and fellowship with similar others. It is a vacation from reality and a chance to explore and experience aspects of one's own personality, created or ascribed, in an attempt to find more fulfillment out of life and all it has to offer. While the stigmatization of the fandom and some of the negative experiences felt can impact one's day, the commitment to the furry identity and the friends found within the community help mediate the stresses and strains associated with the furry identity.

Limitations

This study is exploratory and focused on a small sample population of ten individuals. For the purposes of my research, I utilized snowball sampling to recruit participants. The furry fandom is a tight-knit group who are wary of outsiders primarily because the stigmatized images that have been forced upon them by the mainstream media (Mock et al., 2013; Reysen et al., 2015). Therefore, snowball sampling proved to be the most effective form of sampling to access a hard to reach population. There were some limitations with snowball sampling, however. First there is bias in the selection process. These biases were expected, primarily because the sample was not randomly selected, but instead chosen due to membership in a specific social context (Browne, 2007). Next, snowball samples are not representative of the entire population. The main intent behind my study was to explore narratives regarding the fandom, which have not

been properly utilized in current research. These results can not be generalized to the entire furry subculture.

Part of this research included an ethnographic component. I was given the opportunity to actually “suit-up” at different furry conventions to observe and interact with furies. This provided a direct experience of wearing a fur-suit, which allowed me to relate to my sample population and provide an added layer of legitimacy during the interview process. Participant observation can have some potential limitations though, specifically in regards to how much information can be properly gathered and analyzed. Additionally, I had to keep in mind that there is an added layer of identity concealment in the act of wearing a fursuit. The main issue for concern was my identity, as a researcher, being concealed due to the suiting element. In these situations, I immediately introduced myself as a researcher, who is trying on a suit for research purposes.

With qualitative interviews in a primarily closed off subculture, I had to find ways to continually legitimize myself and my research. Television shows and media outlets have attempted to interview individuals within the fandom in a way that typically positions furies in a very negative condemning light. This research sought to minimize, rather than reinforce, this stigma. Qualitative interviews provide specific challenges in regards to reliability and validity. I tried to eliminate any potential concerns or apprehension about the interview process and information disclosed by establishing a respectful rapport with participants.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This thesis was framed as an exploratory research endeavor focusing on the furry fandom. By incorporating current literature from a variety of disciplines, my aim was to create a comprehensive and encompassing view of the furry fandom as an identity. The furry identity contains many mechanisms and facets which provide the opportunity to create, manifest, and live through an imagined anthropomorphic character. This thesis explored three specific questions: 1) How do individuals who participate in the furry subculture cultivate and manage their dual identities of public self and fursona? 2) How does the act of masking allow individuals who participate in the furry subculture to broaden the range of presentation of self and species that would be otherwise limited in everyday “unmasked life”? 3) How do individuals who participate in the furry subculture manage the stigmatization of being labeled a deviant? Each question expanded on current literature and incorporated qualitative responses from lived experiences in an attempt to broaden the understanding of the furry identity.

Identity

When discussing the cultivation and management of a furry identity, all participants (100%) suggested that their primary fursonas were representations of who they believed themselves to be. When asked about specific choices in species and

physical appearance, participants cited spiritual connections and symbolism as their main motivators. Roberts and colleagues (2016) found that when individuals within their sample identified a spiritual connection with animals, there appeared to be a positive association with psychological wellbeing. This spiritual connectedness with animals was specifically mentioned numerous times throughout my sample and often cited as a way to describe what it means to be a furry.

Fursonas are ever-changing aspects of one's identity. Around 60% of my sample said they have changed or improved their initial fursona designs and traits since first entering the community. The creativity in the furry fandom is limitless and provides the opportunity for many to explore new avenues of self and lived experience. Reysen et al. (2015) found that belongingness within the furry community and the overall distinctiveness of the subculture were significant factors for its members and their continued participation in the community. Roberts et al. (2015) further elaborated on the importance of the furry fandom for its members, citing that it creates a safe supportive environment for individuals to feel free to be themselves, while also providing the opportunity to find the social and emotional support needed to function in daily life. My findings echo similar sentiments. Those within my sample showed continued love and support for the furry fandom, specifically due its appreciation and encouragement of creativity and individuality. In addition, all 100% of my participants discussed how the furry community creates an atmosphere of acceptance and appreciation for all members.

Of my sample, 80% of participants discussed their desires to keep their daily life persona separate from their furry identity, specifically in regards to work and some

interactions with friends and families. Those who wished to keep distance between their daily life persona (occupation, family, and friends) and furry identity cited professionalism, cultural values, and privacy as their primary reasons to maintain separation.

The management of the front stage self in these situations can be understood as a direct way to avoid the labeling of deviance (Goffman, 1956). Context proved to be the most important aspect in regards to whether the participant chose to divulge their identity or maintain it's secrecy. In order to maintain one's daily life persona, it can be easier to completely conceal the stigmatized identity altogether. Plante et al. (2013) found that those within the furry fandom often advocate for identity concealment as a way to navigate and alleviate any potential stressors associated with a stigmatized identity. Group endorsement of identity concealment can also help to mediate any stress associated with the act of identity concealment, itself (Plante et al., 2013).

With my sample, those who cited their decisions to maintain separation often suggested that this ability has become second nature. The ability to maintain separation is not seen as difficult or straining, but rather integral to maintaining one's selfhood and front stage with specific audiences. Smart and Wegner (1999) discussed how individuals with concealable stigmas mediate their discomfort when directly confronted with their stigma. Their findings were similar to the ones found in my own sample. Those within my sample discussed trying to completely disassociate from their furry identities within their work environments, in order to maintain their daily life personas. Those who did not

divulge their furry identities to their families suggested they tried to suppress their furry identity in certain situations in an attempt to mediate further stress.

In the event participants chose to divulge their furry identities to family and friends, they often cited specific ways they would go about discussing their involvement in an attempt to make their membership appear more palatable to outsiders. Healy and Beverland (2016) found similar results differentiating narrative retellings into three distinct categories: reframing, spiritualizing, and playful interpretations. Each of these categories were cited by different participants within my study, further solidifying and expanding Healy and Beverland's (2016) claims. While each individual goes about managing their identities differently, it is obvious that the navigation and management of a stigmatized identity takes skill and tact to fully achieve.

When discussing identity formation within our current cultural climate, it is imperative to acknowledge the impact of the internet and the connectivity it provides. Cyberspace has unlimited opportunities for the creation of identity and cultivation of new facets of life, which may not be possible within structured reality. Martey and Consalvo (2011) analyzed identity appearance within virtual worlds, finding that those who create new identities online take active steps to present themselves in new inventive ways. Their appearance in these virtual worlds typically signal group involvement and other aspects of one's self. The creativity Martey and Consalvo (2011) found reflects how the internet provides a new imagined opportunity to create identities that can be similar or different from one's real self. The internet served as a catalyst for the furry fandom, providing a virtual opportunity to live through created or imagined identities, much like Martey and

Consalvo (2011) discussed. Putova (2013) explored the ways in which furies serve as mystical creations, because they can possess freedoms and abilities to cultivate liminal identities that function far outside the constraints of normative modern society. My participants further expanded on these ideas by discussing the created life histories, abilities, characteristics, and appearances of their chosen anthropomorphic characters. Further, with the incorporation of costuming, such as fursuits, a virtual identity can take on a tangible corporeal form in the real world.

Queer theory can be utilized here to understand how furry identity challenges and transcends the traditional boundaries for identity development. The furry identity exists outside of a realm of historically accepted identity performance, thus it is non-normative and difficult to fully understand within the more traditional identity frameworks. Queer theory allows for the critique and blurring of those traditional boundaries which constrict identity and identity performance (Somerville, 2014; Osborne, 2001). Examining the furry identity through a queer perspective provides an opportunity to better interpret behavior, identification, and performance through a more encompassing and freed lens. My participants provided the perfect opportunity to elaborate on this need for a broader fluid interpretation of identity performance. My sample challenged traditional frameworks and labels by expanding on how identity performance can be understood in daily life. Furies are unique in their identity formation, because their created identities can transcend virtual reality and be lived out in reality through the utilization of costumes and social gatherings (such as furmeets and conventions). Fursuits provide a level of

gender, identity, and species fluidity that can break through the normative barriers affixed to unmasked life.

While identity is a complicated and broad ranging topic to discuss, it is imperative to understand how those who identify as furry can be situated within our current academic and cultural spheres. The furry identity challenges current frameworks, while also promoting a new inventive way to express oneself within the digital age. The navigation of dual identities can be difficult, however for those within the furry community there are a variety of mechanisms utilized, which make the process less stressful and easier to maintain.

Masking

Fursuits provide the opportunity to broaden the range of presentation of self and species, which would not be possible during everyday “unmasked” life. The human body beneath the fursuit is concealed and transforms into something unique and mystical. My participants described how their multiple characters each embody different aspects of the participants themselves. Fursuits provide the opportunity to explore gender and bodily fluidity on a grand scale. All participants (100%) in this study also discussed technological and structural features of their fursuits, such as articulating jaws, body padding, and stilts, which allow for a more dramatic transformation and blur the lines between human body and their assumed furry identity.

Pollock (1995) focused on the transformative power a mask imbues to the mask wearer. The mask wearer has the ability to interpret the characteristics and behaviors of the creature the mask represents. Healy and Beverland (2013) found similar findings in

regards to those within the furry fandom. Those within the furry community utilize costuming and the behaviors manifested while costuming as a way to authenticate their furry identities (Healy and Beverland, 2013). My participants discussed how the act of wearing a fursuit creates specific freedoms and eliminates the typical boundaries associated with unmasked life. Interactions with others while in fursuit, can authenticate one's furry identity and experiences in a variety of ways.

The power dynamics, between actor and observer, within the act of masking are the central focus of the entire exchange (Grimes, 1975). The mask wearer must be able to fully articulate and immerse the observer in the character they are attempting to portray, while the observer must be able to acknowledge the transformation and the meaning behind the masking event (Pollock, 1995; Grimes, 1975). Grimes (1975) described how these power exchanges can differ according to context and setting. For those in fursuit, conventions and furmeets provide the perfect setting to act out their imagined fursonas. In those specific settings, there will be a receptive audience of like-minded individuals who will embrace and adequately interpret the intention behind the wearing of a fursuit. Those within my sample suggested that many other events and interactions, usually situated around imaginative children and adults outside of the furry fandom, can provide ample opportunities to explore their furry identities and provide outsiders with a glimpse into the furry fandom. Participants discussed going to fund raising events, community events centered around holidays, and local children's parks as prime opportunities to promote their fun-loving family friendly characters to outside others.

Goffman (1959) expressed the importance of manner in regards to daily interactions, more specifically focusing on how we utilize body language and facial expressions to portray a range of emotions and thoughts. Fursuits mask the human body and thus mask many gestures and responses that would be easily discernable in unmasked life. Those in fursuit must learn how to exaggerate physical movements in order to fully communicate with others. In these situations, a fursuiter's front stage performance is intricately crafted and practiced in an attempt to portray the character in a desired light, while fully communicating and interacting with the observers around them. Those within the furry fandom place specific importance on the act of masking. It provides an opportunity to not only act out, but experience a fantastic realness that cannot be achieved in everyday unmasked life.

Fursuits provide the opportunity to act and present one's self in ways that would not be accepted or understood in everyday life. Some participants discussed the ability to be playful and silly while in fursuit, breaking away from typically accepted social boundaries. All participants expressed a love for interacting with others while in suit, such as giving hugs, acting as their assumed species, or making observers smile. While there are some positive aspects to wearing fursuits around outsiders, there are also some negative experiences which need to be addressed. Three of my participants discussed sexual, verbal, and physical harassment from outsiders in deep detail. These experiences ranged from being groped, to being mocked, physically grabbed, and violently pulled. While my participants suggested the positive experiences compensate for the negative ones, the violation of a fursuited body needs to be explored further.

Stigma

As discussed throughout this thesis, the furry fandom is a stigmatized social subgroup. Multiple media portrayals of the furry community have solidified a deviant stereotyped label for the fandom, which has been difficult to completely overcome (Roberts, 2015; Gerbasi et al., 2008; Mock et al., 2013). Those within the furry community have had to learn new ways to combat negative interpretations and stereotypes. All of the participants within this study discussed how the stigmatization of the community has affected them directly. They explained how they learned to combat the negative stereotypes by dispensing accurate information about the furry fandom and surrounding themselves with similar others.

Goffman (1963) identifies three different types of stigma: stigma of character, physical stigma, and stigma of group identity. The furry identity can be applied to all three of these types of stigma in some way. The stigma of character and stigma of group identity are the most applicable, however physical stigma can be seen in the voluntary wearing of a fursuit in a public sphere. The voluntary choice to take on a physical stigma seemed to be a very important point to explore throughout my interviewing process. Those within my sample suggested many ways in which they believe voluntarily taking on a physical stigma is worth the potential for negative experiences. Many suggested that the ability for identity concealment provided an added layer of comfort, which helped to mediate any negative experiences associated with wearing a fursuit in public. Also, utilizing the terms Healy and Beverland (2016) proposed, those within my sample suggested that wearing a fursuit around outside others allowed them to exercise their

creativity, playfulness, and connectedness with their character on a much grander scale. The escapist mentality also appears to come into play in these situations, because these interactions provide the opportunity to completely become someone else. The fursuit provides the perfect opportunity to become the being one truly believes themselves to be. This freedom provides those within fursuit a great way to express themselves through far different means than they would be able to in everyday unmasked life. The positive experiences within these situations appear to far outweigh the possibly for negative interactions.

Social identity theory provides the opportunity to expand on how individuals conceptualize and interpret their own personhood in relation to the groups in which they belong (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Hogg et al., 1995; Stets and Burke, 2000; Mummendey, Kessler, Klink, and Mielke, 1999; Reysen et al., 2015; Abrams and Hogg, 1990). Social identity theory is also used to understand how individuals within a certain group mediate the stress associated with specific threats to the group or individual identity (Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje, 2002). Multiple studies have found that deeper levels of commitment to the furry identity can provide ways to mediate stress and arm members with adequate coping mechanism to navigate the stigmatization of the furry community (Mock et al., 2013; Roberts et al., 2015; Plante et al., 2013; Healy and Beverland, 2016). In addition, Frable, Platt, and Hoey (1998) found that engagement with similar other has a positive effect on emotional and mental wellbeing for individuals who experience concealable stigmas. My participants suggested that at least 75% of their friend groups are comprised of other furies. Every respondent said they enjoyed

interacting with other furies, because they did not have to conceal their furry identity. They were able to connect with others on a much deeper level, specifically because of their shared interests within the furry community. By surrounding themselves with like-minded individuals, furies are able to craft a strong and prominent daily support system, which can acknowledge and help validate each others' interests and concerns.

When discussing the stigmatization of the furry fandom, it is important to acknowledge how labels and stereotypes can drastically affect the image of an individual or subgroup. Link and Phelan (2001) discussed how labels create a polarization between "us and them." The furry fandom is often viewed as strange and confusing for outsiders. When outsiders have little to no accurate information regarding the furry community, they often utilize exaggerated stereotypes seen in the media to interpret intentions. While these interpretations are extremely inaccurate, it is difficult for those not associated with the community to differentiate between fact and fiction. Researchers focused on adequately understanding and interpreting the furry fandom are utilizing their platform to dispense factual information about the subculture for outside others (Gerbasi et al. 2008; Plante et al., 2013; Mock et al., 2013; Roberts et al., 2015; Reysen et al., 2015; Plante et al., 2016). By dispensing information about the intricacies of this peculiar subgroup, these researchers hope to provide a more encompassing view of the furry community that can be helpful to other researchers or clinical personnel (Roberts et al., 2015; Gerbasi et al. 2008). Becker (1963) discussed how deviance is ever-changing and can be impacted and altered according to a variety of social factors. With adequate information dispensed

about the furry community, some of the stigmas attached to the subgroup could be alleviated or disappear altogether.

While this thesis is quite broad and covers a range of topics and discussion points, there is much more to the furry fandom that has not been discussed here. The furry community is a broad ranging group with membership all over the world from varying backgrounds and diverse viewpoints. This thesis set out to specifically look at key aspects of the furry fandom and how it connects with current sociological, psychological, and anthropological frameworks. My findings supported the current research around the furry community and much of the literature about identity and stigmatization. This thesis also attempted to break away from the traditional identity literature and bring to light many of its shortcomings within our current cultural and technological climate. The furry identity illuminates the need for a much more in-depth and sweeping view of what identity is within our generation and culture today.

Conclusion

The goal of this research was simply to get a glimpse at the possible scenarios and experiences that have not been fully explored in past furry research. The furry subculture provides a unique opportunity to explore how alternative identities are created and managed in tandem with daily life personas. Also, it produced a valuable look into how identity concealment is maintained through masking and further elaborates on the freedom that masking entails. This study attempted to fill an important gap in the existing literature. It further provided a valuable opportunity to analyze themes and aspects of a fandom that has been primarily closed off and continually stigmatized throughout

mainstream media. This is a unique fandom that effectively contributes to identity literature, the anthropological concept of masking, and stigma analyses.

The small body of research surrounding the furry fandom is primarily comprised of quantitative survey data and content analyses. While survey methods can provide some valuable information regarding large populations, the information collected is primarily comprised of closed-ended questions. Quantitative closed-ended survey questions narrow the focus of current furry studies. This thesis was centered on in depth qualitative interviews conducted with individuals who identified as “furry”. Given the dearth in current qualitative literature engaging the fandom, I had a valuable opportunity to explore a variety of themes and provide the furry voice the chance to be heard. Face-to-face interviews, allowed for a safe controlled space in which the researcher and the participant were able to freely discuss and explore ideas and experiences that are too complex for survey questions. This mode of data collection also allowed for the opportunity to ask follow-up questions regarding certain statements or explanations, which provided new ideas or themes not previously considered.

It was important to engage the current literature and question what else can be done to bring the marginalized furry voice to the mainstream. While current mainstream media sources, such as television shows, movies, and even news stations, continually connect the fandom with sexual deviance, this is not a representative image of the entire population (Gerbasi et al., 2008; Howl, 2015). The stigmatization attached to membership and engagement within the fandom can create a multitude of stressors and obstacles. In response to this stigmatized image, many individuals within the fandom

advocate for identity concealment and clear separations between individual fursonas and human daily life personas (Plante et al., 2013; Roberts et al., 2015). This specific study provides a valuable opportunity to see how identity is performed and suppressed within multiple arenas simultaneously.

The current literature surrounding the fandom and its members provided a valuable foundation to build my own questions and ideas regarding identity creation, management, and concealment. By focusing on works from Goffman's representation of self and stigmatization, I attempted to ground my study in traditional sociological thought, while also expanding on current frameworks, through the utilization of queer theory and masking, to incorporate new forms of chosen and achieved identity. This research helped to investigate an area of social life that has not yet been explored. Commitment to the community, the utilization of supporting friendships, and the overall acceptance of the furry subculture, all played into how furies negotiate the stigmas attached to the fandom. This study provided a singular opportunity to encounter a peculiar subgroup that provides its members the opportunity to create an identity that can be completely independent of one's daily human life persona.

Call for Further Research

While this study did support and expand upon current literature surrounding the furry fandom, identity, and stigmatization, there were many questions that could not be fully answered. The limitations and selection biases evident within this study prompt the need and urge for further research. There is much to be discussed in regards to the formation of furry identity and how the traditional identity concept has shifted within

recent decades. The information provided here is just a glimpse into the potential research pool waiting for further exploration.

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APPENDIX A

QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Share with me how *you* would define the furry subculture?
2. How did you find the furry fandom?
3. What were your initial thoughts about the fandom when you discovered it?
4. Tell me about how someone comes to create or adopt a fursona and what that process was like for you?
5. Why did you choose the fursona you did?
6. Do you only have one fursona or multiple?
7. What are the major characteristics of your fursona that you enjoy most?
8. What do you get out of engaging in/with the fandom? (i.e. social outlet, hobby, relaxation, leisure activity)
9. How has your involvement with the furry subculture impacted your everyday existence, such as work, family and friendships?
10. What aspects of the fandom do you engage in? (social media, cons, role play, etc.)
11. Do you own a fursuit?
 - a. If so, did you purchase it? Craft it yourself?
 - b. If no, why?
12. Do you feel you are a different individual when you participate in the subculture?
 - a. Can you describe any changes you see in yourself when you are engaged with the fandom versus your persona in daily life?
13. Has identifying as a furry impacted you in some way?
 - a. If so, how?
14. What kinds of interactions have you had with outsiders in regards to the fandom?
15. Do you let people outside of the fandom know about your membership in the fandom or your fursona?
 - a. If not, why?
 - b. If so, who and why?
16. Do you let those in the fandom know your real identity?
17. How do you think the furry fandom is portrayed in the media?
 - a. Do you think is an accurate depiction? Why/Why not?
 - b. Were you aware of any forms of stigma regarding the fandom before you joined?
18. How do you deal with the public's assessment of the furry community? Do you think public opinions have changed over time? Or remained the same?
19. If you have a fursuit, do you enjoy suiting at private events or public events more?
 - a. Why?
20. Can you tell me a bit about your demographic background? (Describe your race, class, gender, and sexual identity)
21. Give me a general description of your occupation. No names or locations.

22. Do you think your engagement with the fandom has impacted your daily life persona?

APPENDIX B
OBSERVATION GUIDE

Observation Guide

Date: _____

Beginning Time: _____

Ending Time: _____

Location: _____

Area: Convention Hotel

Setting (Physical Area)

Examples: Number of people in area; Energy level in area

Setting (Social)

Example: Amount of interactions in locations; Groups around; Noise levels of groups

Broad Group Information

Interactions (Specific)

Examples: Group numbers; Interactions with General Public; Physical touching (i.e. hugging vs. distance); Length of interaction

Group Behavior

Examples: Energy of group; Noise level; Mood of group

Conversations

Examples: Subject matter; summaries if relevant; interesting quotes

Group Dynamics

Examples: Everyone participating; dominant persons; exclusive vs. inclusive

Specific Participants

Appearance (Physical)

Examples: Wearing fur-suit; Species of fur-suit; Type of suit (Full/Partial); Not wearing
fur-suit

Communication

Examples: Speech vs. Non-Speech; Squeaking; Body language; Confidence level

Performance

Examples: Changes in physical posture; Maintaining character in fur-suit; Energy level;
Uniqueness; Interactions with others

Personal Thoughts/Questions

APPENDIX C
JOURNAL GUIDE

Journal Guide (Auto-Ethnography)

Date: _____

Location: _____

Length of Time in Fur-Suit: _____

Initial Reaction to Wearing Fursuit

Physical

Example: Fatigue; Maneuverability; Hearing; Visibility; Comfort in Suit

Communication

Examples: Body language; Non-vocal communication; Vocal communication

Interactions with Others

Examples: Body language, problems with communicating with others; Others in fursuit?

Emotional

Examples: Feelings about experience and limitations; Performance, Appeal

Revelations and Questions

APPENDIX D

VERBAL PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Participant Consent Form

If at any point you have questions during the reading of this consent form, please ask. Any questions will be answered by the researcher to the best of their abilities.

What is the study about?

This is a research study. Research studies include only volunteers and offer all volunteers the right to end participation at any given point during the research process. If at any point throughout the process you wish to not answer a question or wish to end the interview, you have the right to do so.

This study focuses on the experiences of individuals who identify as “furry,” created a fursona, and actively engage in the furry fandom. More specifically, this study will be looking at how individuals create and maintain their fursonas and how those individuals experience and deal with stigma from others outside of the fandom.

During the process of this study, if any new information comes up during the process of this study, you will be informed and provided all necessary information if the information might affect your willingness to continue participation in the project.

What you will be asked to do if you agree to participate

You will be asked to take part in an oral one on one interview. This interview will last no longer than two (2) hours depending on the information you choose to provide. Please keep in mind that you have the freedom to choose not to answer every question asked. You have the freedom to end the interview at any point if you feel uncomfortable or feel it is a constraint on your time.

After the two (2) hour interview, you may be asked to meet for a follow up interview at a later date. This follow up interview will not exceed one (1) hour. If you do not want to participate in a follow up interview, you have the freedom to decline. If at any time you do not feel comfortable in the follow up interview, you have the freedom to end the interview.

Interviews will be recorded with a digital recorder and may take place face-to-face or via Skype call, depending on which you prefer. If you start an interview, but wish to continue on a later date, you have the option to do so.

Why is the researcher asking you?

You are being asked to participate in this study, because your insight and experiences within the furry fandom are unique and can provide a great deal of new information about the creation of a new identity (fursona) and what is required to maintain this identity. Specifically, you will be asked about how you manage both a daily life persona and your fursona. Also, you will be asked about how you experience and deal with any possible stigmatization of the furry fandom and its members.

This study requires that all participants be at least 18 years of age or older. If you are under the age of 18, please inform the researcher.

Possible good things that may come out of this study

This study will introduce new and expanded information about the furry fandom and its members. At this time, there are no direct benefits for the participants in this study.

Is there any audio/video recording?

Interviews will be recorded during the interview by Torie Lucas. In an attempt to protect your identity, once this interview has been typed out “word for word” the recording will be destroyed. Audio recordings help to ensure there are no missed words, also by recording the interview, interviews will be smoother with little interruption or repetition. However, since your voice may be identified by anyone who listens to the recording prior to destruction, your confidentiality in the words you say cannot be guaranteed, although the researcher will try to limit access to the recording.

Possible risks that may occur in this study

It has been determined that there are minimal risks. Some emotionally sensitive information may be asked during the interview, however remember that you do have the freedom to refuse to answer or stop the interview at anytime. The information that you potentially tell the researcher will be included in a study that can be accessed by the public. Your identity(ies) are very important to the researcher. You will be asked to choose an alias name, which will serve as your name throughout every part of the study. All information and copies of interviews will be stored on a specific external hard drive and locked in a secure location, known and accessed only by the researcher. You will not be asked any information that will identify your real name or other personal information. Your real fursona name will not be attached to your answers. However, you will be asked to describe your fursona and its specific characteristics (species, traits, colors, etc.), however if the information is too specific that you will be identified, it will not be included within the study.

Will you get paid anything? Will it cost you anything to participate?

Participation in this study is voluntary and will not cost you anything. Compensation for your time is not offered.

All of your questions

Torie Lucas has answered all of your current questions about your participation within this study. If you have any further questions, please ask or email the researcher (information sheet presented to you has all pertinent contact information for the researcher). Any other concerns or complaints regarding the study, the benefits, or the risks associated with participating in this study can be discussed with Dr. Gwen Hunnicutt, who may be contacted at (336) 334-3705.

Leaving the study

You have the freedom to leave the study at any time. In the event you choose to leave the study, any information regarding you or your experiences will be destroyed and not included within the study. There will be no penalty or unfair treatment if you choose to leave. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are not held to any expectations by the researcher.

Your Personal Information

As stated earlier, your real name and fursona will not be attached to your answers at all. Also, any specifically identifying characteristics of your fursona will not be include, unless you say otherwise. Your alias will serve as your name for the entirety of this study. You will not be asked to divulge your real name in any capacity. All information obtained during this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. Please note that absolute confidentiality of data provided through Skype/WedEx cannot be guaranteed due to the limited protections.

Study Approval

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro Institutional Review Board makes sure that any studies conducted with people follow federal rules and guidelines. The methods for this study have been approved by this review board.

Your rights while in this study

If you have any concerns about your rights, how you have been treated, if you have any questions, have any recommendations, or what more information please contact the Office of Research Compliance at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. The main office number is (336) 256- 1482.

By proceeding with the interview, you are agreeing that the information within this consent form has been read by you or to you, you fully understand what has been discussed, and are open and willing to consent to take part in the study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By proceeding with this study, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older and are agreeing to participate.