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Negotiating identities in the furry fandom through costuming

ABSTRACT

This article examines how identities are negotiated and performed through costuming within the furry fandom community. Using ethnographic research methods, including participant observation augmented by demographic surveys and in-depth interviews at two fur conventions, we explore how individuals' gender, sexual and anthropomorphic identities are produced through costuming at fur conventions. The findings reveal a vast spectrum of identities within the fandom; costuming and 'dressing-up' enable individuals, particularly men, opportunities to explore and express aspects of identities through animal performance. The body, as Judith Butler has argued, is a 'variable boundary' with a permeable surface – making it a site where gender is repeatedly performed. Costuming and manipulating the body is a material interpretation of gender – that is, a repeated action of the body within clothes. The effect of gender is produced through the 'stylization of the body' and percolates through material and embodied gesture and habitus. While gender non-conformists in North America may experience limitations with regard to their visible expression in everyday society (both perceived and in 'policing' behaviours), the furry fandom community is an accepting and tolerant space for negotiation and experimentation with gender through costuming and body modification. Furries perform gender and negotiate ambivalences about these identities through the costume.

1. In online venues and at fur conventions, members of the furry fandom refer to costumes as anthropomorphic; however, costumes are also zoomorphic in that they are representations of animals.

2. Terminology was picked up and learned during observational research at two fur conventions.

INTRODUCTION

The lobby flows with eccentricity. Tailed individuals rush to greet one another, temporarily abandoning luggage carts donning wolf and fox masks. Others wear suits, costumed head to toe as faux fur animals with large, cartoonish eyes. Tigers, llamas, bunnies and unicorns dance in an open ballroom to electronic music. Others engage in video games on hotel couches, chat online or explore the pool area. The remaining hotel guests gawk at the menagerie, bewildered by the unforeseen crowd and energized human-animals.

This spirited picture of place and identity expression depicts a relatively new phenomenon: furry fandom conventions. Fur conventions attract individuals who identify with animal personalities. Ascribing human attributes to non-human creatures, furries create and assume anthropomorphic[1] identities. With nearly 40 conventions per year, these gatherings usually have a few hundred participants, but can have upwards of 5000 attendees.

Past research on furries has primarily focused on demographic information from conventions. The present study adds qualitative accounts and personal stories from a number of individuals active in the furry community. Observations, surveys and interviews collected at the home institution and at conventions reveal the productive aspects of the fandom by providing individuals a space for creativity, acceptance and identity exploration.

Terminology

Over conference weekends, *furries*[2] (members of the furry fandom) celebrate their inner animal or *fursona*, by dressing up as animal-like creatures. Some, however, remain in everyday dress. Tails and ears are common among those who opt out of the full *fursuit*. *Fursuiters*, the costume designers, work with furries to construct custom-designed, faux fur outfits. Furries wear either full or partial suits. A partial suit consists of the head, hands, feet and tail. Large, cartoonish eyes fill the faces, a decorative detail of fursuits, which underscores the animals' 'cuteness'. Convention spaces have *fursuit lounges* – that is, places where individuals escape to remove costumes. Lounges allow privacy and keep furries from breaking their animal performance in a more public space. Since fursuits are typically bulky, may have large tails, and obstruct vision and hearing, some suiters walk with *handlers*. These individuals guard furries from obstacles and harassment.

Social life of fur conventions

Friends reunite after weekends apart and individuals who interact through the furry cyber network meet in person. Conventions provide a wealth of opportunities for attendees – panels of experts facilitate discussions on topics like animal natural history, hydrating while in fursuit, fursuit construction, and fiction writing; nightly raves encourage dance parties; parades bring a dramatic flair as fur-suited individuals theatrically display their costumes; and vendor rooms attract artists and fursuiters to sell personalized animal badges, fursuits, and anthropomorphic art and design.

When not attending fur conventions, furries interact through other means. Some meet up at science fiction or anime conventions and others organize meets within their towns, allowing intimate, sometimes costumed, socialization. Online websites foster consistent communication. Sites like SecondLife, WikiFur, FurAffinity and F-List report upcoming fur conventions,

provide links to furry art, and enable virtual role-playing and joint story-writing. Websites foster sharing of pictures and postings and allow individuals to create virtual avatars to interact with other furries online.

Due to the online and relatively clandestine nature of the subculture and despite the blossoming popularity of fur conventions, little academic research has examined the culture of these conventions, and more specifically, how ideas about identity are (re)negotiated and performed through dress. We lack an understanding of why individuals, especially men, are drawn to these conventions. What are their motivations to dress and interact in fur animal costume? We do not know what life experiences have drawn people to the costumed subculture and what contributes to continued investment in the community. Culture, as Dick Hebdige has argued, is a dialectic of process and product (1979: 5), and fur conventions are similarly dialectical places of tenuous negotiations. Conventions are ephemeral, yet the community lives indefinitely as a cyber-culture; costumes are dynamic, yet fixed and limited because of their heavy material form; identities are simultaneously masked and authentically expressed through costume.

This research focused on the multiple identities expressed by participants during their animal performances at conventions. Through this lens, we aim to better understand the social, psychological and cultural underpinnings that produce the costumed culture of the furry fandom.

Literature review

Academic literature lacks detailed information about the furry subculture; however, research in the field recently garnered more attention. Gerbasi et al. aimed to understand what is meant when someone states, 'I am a furry'. Following biting critiques of furries in popular media, the study examined and analysed validity of stereotypes. Surveyed at a fur convention, participants were asked questions including age of entry into the furry culture and gender or species identity (Gerbasi et al. 2008). Proving stereotypes, most participants were male, enjoyed cartoons as kids, were interested in science fiction, and had statements paralleling gender identity disorder or gender dysphoria as described by the DSM-5.[3]

Plante et al. examined the furry fandom, using the stigmatized minority subculture as a means to examine intergroup differences, identity conceal-ment, and self-esteem (2013). Through surveys at a fur convention, Plante et al. discussed ways in which individuals manage stigmas through concealment strategies. Findings demonstrated a relationship between perceived perme-ability of fandom walls and willingness for identity concealment. Although identity concealment could have maladaptive effects for furries, individuals in the subculture are likely to conceal their identity if they perceive that others believe being a furry is a choice.

Alex Osaki developed the Furry Survey in 2008 (WikiFur 2014). Annually posted to furry message boards, the survey reached thousands of respond-ents. The survey found that the majority of the group is male and put the average furry age at 23 with about a third of the fandom represented between the ages 15 and 19. While people might think furries feel strongly 'animal', 78.1% of respondents identified as very human. In terms of sexuality, 22.1% identified as homosexual, 32.3% identified as heterosexual, and 35.2% as bisexual. Reflecting public stereotypes, 86.7% mentioned that the public sees sex as a major part of the fandom. However, only 13.9% answered that this

3. The DSM-5 is the current classification for mental disorders in the United States.

reflected their own views. Furries largely communicate over the Internet. The survey illustrated this by the exceedingly large 95.3% of respondents saying the online community is very important in their involvement. While furries are primarily known for their elaborate fursuits, about 80% of furries do not own suits, as they are pricey and as individuals have other reasons to stay active in the community. The specific appeal of anthropomorphism and the motivations for dressing up and convening at conventions remain to be better understood.

Dress is influenced by cultural ideals and standards, making it an important site of cultural production and identity negotiation. Bodies are modified in all cultures, enabling the surface to play 'symbolic, communicative and aesthetic roles' (Wilson 2003: 3). Elizabeth Wilson contends that there is 'a widespread human desire to transcend the [human] body's limitations', and furries epitomize this desire with elaborate production of the non-human (2003: 3) (Figure 1). Bodies are covered, reshaped and remade into animal and otherworldly forms.

Appearance management involves all five senses and anchors individuals to society; people use aesthetics of dress to express their identities and interpret visual information displayed by those around them (Kaiser 1997). While groups vary in the freedom allowed to individual expressive styles, each culture has a standard of expected conformity. The 'code of dress', where fabric, texture, colour and pattern comprise the basic elements, is an iterative and constant process (Davis 1992: 25). Individuals use this constantly changing code to communicate aspects of their person. However, clothing is context

Figure 1: Costume displayed during the fursuit parade at Further Confusion. The individual's fursona combines multiple animals (tiger, deer, dragon and peacock) into a hybrid embodiment.

dependent and has high social variability through the signifier–signified relationship (Davis 1992). Appearance messages are embedded in context, shift based on the wearer's identity, and carry different meanings for different people (Kaiser 1997). As in the furry fandom, the costume has disparate symbolic meanings for the wearer, the other fandom participants, and cultural outsiders.

Dress, and costumes in particular, are wearable art (Eicher et al. 2000). With fabrics as the medium, individuals can play with texture and design to fashion a particular aesthetic. Costumes differ from everyday dress in that they may function to conceal rather than flaunt an individual's identity. Adorning costumes as identity exploration, however, may generate greater confidence. Certain colours and patterns may put the performer in the character's mind set. When furries put on their animal costumes, they hide their human identity and skate into their animal performance.

Through clothing choices, individuals seek to communicate personal characteristics and identities alongside collective, community identities. Fred Davis (1992), and later, Kaiser et al. (1995), have argued that fashion change is promulgated by ambivalence and negotiation of tenuous identities. Clothing helps navigate ambivalences. In navigating masculinity versus femininity, for example, individuals may emulate the opposite gender through clothing or combine gender specific items to become androgynous. Despite this mixing of feminine and masculine styles, society has imposed 'expressive constriction … on the male side' (Davis 1992: 41). While females are permitted to dress in more androgynous or masculine styles without pushing gender norms, males traditionally have less flexibility. Experimenting with feminine dress, males dramatize cross-gender tensions. Expectations for male dress could serve as an impetus drawing more males into the furry fandom – the safe walls of the convention create what Denise Green and Susan Kaiser have termed a 'transformative space' – that is, a place where individuals may experiment with dress identities, ultimately affecting everyday dress (2011). Masks visually conceal the face and costumes do the same for bodies, which may enable men to freely explore and experiment with dress, gender and sexuality without societal reprimand.

Costuming subcultures, for example the cosplay community, can serve positive functions (Chen 2014). They allow a better understanding of human behaviour and psychology, provide a temporary release from everyday pressures, foster confidence, and allow individual self-awareness. Costuming worlds form a utopia – they present 'an alternative reality that functions as a more humane and democratic society than the real world' (Chen 2014: 22). The furry fandom could serve similar psychological roles, allowing fans to interact with accepting, like-minded individuals, develop creativity, and experience the 'ideal' community – close, creative, imaginative and sensitive. Interacting with these costuming communities, gender non-conformists experience the acceptance they miss in everyday life.

RESEARCH METHODS

After receiving research approval from the university's Institutional Review Board for research with human subjects, researchers recruited three furries at the home institution through flyers and Facebook postings. Additionally, they decided to attend two fur conventions: Furpocalypse in Cromwell, Connecticut; and Further Confusion in San Jose, California. The first author

attended the conventions and conducted ethnographic fieldwork. She was allowed personal interaction and involvement with the activities typical to fur conventions and kept observational and reflective notes in a field notebook. In addition to observations, she handed out surveys to event attendees, which asked general demographic information including age, gender identity, sexual orientation and fursona. Demographic questions were left open-ended to let research participants respond using their preferred terminology. Before individuals completed surveys, an oral script was used to explain the purpose and goals of the study. The script disclosed the use of the demographic information, explained that taking part was voluntary, and noted that they could leave questions blank. Participants provided verbal consent.

After surveys were completed, research participants were asked if they would like to participate in a semi-structured interview about their personal experiences (Appendix A). Those interested read and signed a written consent form. Participants provided consent for use of interview responses, audio recording and photography. Interviews were semi-structured, audio recorded and later transcribed. A total of 21 interviews were conducted: eight during Furpocalypse, ten at Further Confusion, and an additional three with students at the authors' university. All participants were eager to talk about the fandom and explain its positive role in their lives. It was difficult to approach individuals in costume as some refuse to speak English (i.e., they do not wish to break character) and because they were often running off to costuming events. At Further Confusion, more individuals in fursuit were approached and recruited for interviews. Five of the ten interviewees were in costume, one was a puppeteer who used his puppets as an external costume, and one had toyed with costuming in the past.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Upon arrival at both fur conventions, the hotels were inundated with fursuits, cosplay costumes and other quirky outfits. Fursuit parades took place and exhibited the fandom's diverse creativity and craftsmanship. In the morning, few furries roamed the hotel in suit. By afternoon, creative fursuits and cosplay outfits showed a significant presence among guests. At night, individuals remained in fursuits, sometimes adding fetishistic touches, such as harnesses, collars, black leather face masks, and zippered body suits, especially during nightly raves.

Results: Surveys

A total of 42 surveys were distributed at Furpocalypse and 152 at Further Confusion for a total of 194 respondents. At both conventions, surveys revealed that males outnumbered females (62% male and 24% female at Furpocalypse, and 77% male and 16% female at Further Confusion). Remaining individuals listed various gender identities: gender queer, trans female, trans male, trans male and female, non-binary, fluid gender, male but female when in costume, and ambiguous. These reported genders highlight a range of gender identities, with a noticeable skew towards male identification.

Like gender identity, both conventions revealed an array of sexual orientations. A relatively small percentage of individuals at Furpocalypse identified as heterosexual (17%), with the majority listing non-heterosexual orientations such as gay (27%), bisexual (29%), pansexual (10%), queer (5%), heteroflexible (2%), demisexual (2%), lesbian (2%), asexual (2%), varied (2%) and

unsure (2%). Survey respondents at Further Confusion were mostly bisexual, gay or straight (24% each), closely followed by pansexual (10%). The remaining participants again listed a range of orientations: heteroflexible, homoflexible, asexual, unsure, no response, grey-a, demisexual, 90% straight, floater, lesbian, trysexual, bicurious and zoosexual. Each orientation made up 1–3% of the surveyed population. Results demonstrate fluidity and diverse sexual orientations.

Discussion: Acting in costume

Interviews and observations revealed the fursuit's ability to evoke creativity. Interview participant, Vincent[4] felt the fursuit allowed people to bring out desired personality characteristics. If he had a suit, he would be 'a little bit more out-there and expressive', he explained (Vincent, 31 October 2014, interview). He saw his shyness as prohibitive, whereas the fursuit would allow him to come out of this shell and be who he wanted to be. While he explained that he could only dance in public with alcohol, the fursuit would let him loosen up and dance freely. Lindz similarly described the fursuits' likeness with alcohol, especially among the socially introverted. 'For many people, getting into costume undoes all these straps and rubber-bands and handcuffs that they might have grown up with. For my friend, the differences were day and night', he explained (Lindz, 16 January 2015, interview). When wearing his zebra costume, Lindz found that he was:

> able to have fun on a level that is very akin to drinking alcohol … under the mask of alcohol it is very easy to dance. You could say the same thing about costuming. It's like a drug and the brain responds to it. I can be somebody else and in being somebody else, all those lessons I've learned can be pushed aside.
>
> (16 January 2015, interview)

Shelby's comments reflected these sentiments. She saw most furries as shy by nature, but:

> when they put on the suit, it lets them completely dissociate from all the social inhibitions they feel when they're 'normal.' Some people become a lot more extroverted, friendly, and actually want hugs from other people. In their regular lives, that wouldn't be the case at all.
>
> (3 November 2014, interview)

She felt that taking on new personality characteristics reflected who she wanted to be. If they did not feel the awkwardness in social situations, they would act 'bright, bubbly, happy, and excited' like they do when in fursuit. Lindz elaborated – since the fursuit is so claustrophobic, people 'can do nothing but try to claw [their] way out and be in front of people. It naturally lends itself to [people] wanting to be in contact' (16 January 2015, interview).

The fursuit provides an opportunity to play out contradictions and poke fun at social 'norms'. Take for example, Charles (Figure 2), dressed as a dragon, feline and fairy hybrid. The wings and fur add softness to an otherwise sharp-clawed, dark and fearsome-looking costume. Feline animals tend to be associated with femininity and are sexualized within the fandom; however, this costume feels far from 'feminine' despite playing with symbolic

4. Names are either individuals' government issued name or fursona name. All names used in this article were agreed upon with the interview participant.

Figure 2: Further Confusion interview participant, Charles dressed in his self-constructed fursuit.

references to femininity. This costume illustrates a playful approach to negotiations of identity tensions, such as that between masculinity and femininity. Large razor sharp claws, a soft black and dark purple coat, and piercing eyes form a look both welcoming and frightening.

The fursuit is a place to negotiate materially atop the body. Research participant, Shelby, was in the process of questioning her sexual orientation and acknowledged the fursuit as a realm of experimentation. People wearing the fursuit can experience 'a complete 180 flip', she explained. 'They feel so much more comfortable with themselves and that's really the greatest thing. People welcome you with open arms and feel like they can be themselves without any kind of restraint' (Shelby, 3 November 2014, interview). Through dressing up, coming up with new character identities, and by interacting with others with like interests, furries are able to explore their sexuality and their creativity through their costuming and social interactions.

Kouva added that fursuits affect personalities. They 'have a freeing aspect. You can dress up and be something else and everyone is accepting of that', he said (Kouva, 31 October 2014, interview). As a military worker, Kouva had to manage three personalities: civilian, uniformed official and furry. Since he felt the role of furry most closely represented his true self, as it embodied his relaxed side, dressing in costume would let him remove himself from his other two personalities and meld into his laid-back self.

Kouva stated that furries in costume try to act like the character they have created through their fursona. However, in the process, individuals subconsciously mix in personality traits associated with their everyday personality. This results in a final product that is 'very them'. Thus dressing in the fursuit, Kouva felt the process served as 'a means of finding yourself' (31 October 2014,

interview). In addition to freeing individuals to act more outgoing or take on different character roles, Kouva also commented that the suits may actually serve as a shell for some, hiding insecurities. For Nikita, costuming had this effect. After struggling with an anxiety disorder since adolescence, she encountered difficulties, particularly in social situations. By wearing the suit, she built herself an enclosure – she still attended social gatherings at conventions, but no one expected her to talk. Her silent, yet theatrical, participation helped her cope with the social anxiety. Additionally, petting the fur on her costume reminded her of her dog, allowing further relief.

Kat believed that wearing her costume made her more outgoing. Normally shy and low-key, she only opened up once she knew someone. When wearing her Fursuit, she could be outgoing without constructing normal social ties. At conventions, people enjoyed Kat's character. By putting on a second face and performing her fursona, she made people smile and attracted a following of friends. While she did not notice a huge difference between how she acted in and out of costume, she said that the costume made interaction easier. She expressed the belief that how she acted in the fursuit actually reflected her 'true self' (Kat, 1 November 2014, interview).

Just as individuals expressed the fursuit's ability to create a barrier and allow anonymity and confident self-expression, Omni-Beast explained puppets' similar effects. He described his own experiences with puppetry: 'I could be an actor and a coward at the same time. I could perform the character and hide behind the stage. If they like it, great. If they don't, they have no idea who's back here. Some people need that at first' (Omni-Beast, 18 January 2015, interview). By putting a wall between the performer and the audience, the performer feels welcome to open up and explore characters without personal or directed judgement.

Discussion: Positive role of the fandom

Almost every interview participant repeatedly stressed the accepting, welcoming and warm community created during conventions and among the fandom. This is similar to Denise Green and Susan Kaiser's ethnographic findings from the Burning Man festival, a similar environment outside of 'everyday life' where people, especially men, are able to experiment with appearance in relatively dramatic and expressive means (2011). Furries interviewed for this study often discussed challenges in experimenting with gender nonconforming dress and alternative masculinities in their everyday life. As a result, some developed insecurities and had trouble with social interactions, bullying, depression and anxiety. Within the context of their families, some articulated feelings of alienation and longed for outside acceptance for their sexual identities. In each story, individuals explained how the furry fandom helped them overcome these struggles. Through costuming and interacting within the safe walls of the convention or with the Internet, furries meet like-minded individuals with similar experiences. Research participant, Omni-Beast, explained that the fandom became a sort of free therapy session – people accepted each other at face value and openly listened as other furries discussed traumatic pasts and ongoing anxieties.

When asked to describe what he gets out of the fandom, Timothy mentioned the open-mindedness and hospitableness within the fandom. 'There's a lot of kindness and fellowship that I don't see a lot of other places', he said, echoing the opinions of other furries interviewed for this study.

Additionally, the open and welcoming environment allowed him to experience something completely divergent from his everyday life and from normal social interactions: 'the novelty of it is nice to indulge in sometimes. It's refreshing to just pretend and use your imagination' (Timothy, 12 January 2015, interview) When asked why he thought the individuals in the furry community were so kind to one another, he responded:

> The furry fandom is generally made up of people who have had trouble with some social interaction or who have very unique interests compared to people in other groups. It being a community largely of people with that common aspect causes them to be very empathetic, very humble, very happy to just share their experiences and be kind to each other.
>
> (Timothy, 12 January 2015, interview)

Since he felt that many furries have experienced bullying or social harassment in their everyday lives, they end up 'determined not to do that to other people', and in turn, bring a warm, loving outlook to the group (Timothy, 12 January 2015, interview).

Whether because of bullying or other challenging social issues growing up, Shelby noticed increased involvement among people with mental health issues like depression or anxiety. By surrounding themselves with accepting, interested and non-stigmatizing people, furries 'can take a step back from their issues', she explained (Shelby, 3 November 2014, interview). Danielle provided a personal account of her depression. Nine years prior to the interview, her brother committed suicide, and six years later, her dad did as well. With an unsupportive mom and after turning to drugs and self-injury, Danielle found in the furry fandom a community through which she could release her grief and openly express her struggles with depression and as a transgender female.

Discussion: Sexual orientations in the fandom

Shelby reflected on the accepting nature of the community with regards to variable sexual orientations.

> Everyone is really friendly, accepting, and open to people exploring their interests. A lot of people get a sense of comfort out of their fursonas and being able to dress up and express themselves that way. That makes them more comfortable exploring their sexual identity and orientation.
>
> (Shelby, 3 November 2014, interview)

Timothy thought that the community might host more diverse sexual orientations because of the predomination of men: 'since it is mostly men', he explained, 'it's possible that they're more open to bisexuality just because of need'. Because the community encompasses a number of fetishes, sexuality is expressed more liberally than might be observed in other social groups. As Timothy believed, this could cause people to 'be more flexible or to experiment with other sexual orientations' (Timothy, 12 January 2015, interview).

Research participant, Legion Lynx, stressed how astute the community is with regard to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) struggles: 'it's a very understanding place for different orientations or identities … Okay,

you're transgender, that's cool. Okay, you're a fox, that's cool too. They just let people have fun and are happy about it' (Legion Lynx, 1 November 2014, interview). People may be attracted to the fandom because of the encouraging and open atmosphere with regard to non-conforming gender and sexual orientations. Research participant, Tes, agreed, remarking that queer individuals who are uncomfortable with or discriminated against because of their sexual identity are able to come to the furry community and put on a new face. By adorning a costume, they can assign their 'gayness' to the animal rather than to themselves. Danielle felt that the animal identity created a safe distance for individuals to experiment with expressions of masculinity, femininity, and various sexualities within the context of animal identities and costumes.

Lindz, who had been involved with the fandom for many years, explained that the early days, 'were a gay parade'. He believed that the costumes, prettiness of the animals, and flamboyance of the performance attracted queer men during the early development of the fandom. The costumes may embrace a camp aesthetic of extreme exaggeration and playful contradiction, making men into, 'more than they actually are'. He saw this as an elevation of themselves above a 'normal and mundane life that they might not be all that happy with' (Lindz, 16 January 2015, interview). Queer men may enjoy the flexibility of expression made possible by colourfully cartoonish animal costumes, which simultaneously express aspects of masculinity and femininity. Within the fandom, furries experience overwhelming acceptance and find a place to experiment with gender and sexual identity. While 'normal' society might shun certain orientations or sexual displays, conventions and virtual furry communities allow open expression and exploration.

Discussion: Male bias in the fandom

Previous surveys, as well as our surveys and observations, suggest a male bias in the fandom. Research participants had their own interpretations of the male bias. Timothy proposed that the fandom might be male dominated because so much of the community revolves around the Internet.

> It might just be a venue that appeals to men more … the men have been a bit more of a demographic in video games and online games which gives you exposure to the online world and the likelihood of getting involved in the furry community.
>
> (Timothy, 12 January 2015, interview)

Additionally, he felt the sexual side would preferentially appeal to men. Lindz agreed that the sexual aspects of the fandom, especially early on, could have skewed the gendered bias. He also believed men to be more pressured to display heterosexual masculinities through dress and the sartorial code is more limiting in the everyday world, which made the fandom that much more alluring to men. Lindz explained that the fandom was very sexually open when it began, and this may have deterred women.

Another research participant, Azulupei, believed that more men participated in the fandom because it provides an accepting space for people of different sexual orientations. 'It goes back to being free to express yourself', he began. 'The way the world works, men are supposed to be masculine … They get to the fandom and there's a mix of super masculine, super feminine, gay, and straight. They get to be who they want' (Azulupei, 24 November 2014,

interview). Thus, men who do not feel they fit into societal gender roles are able to explore this tension within the safe space of the furry fandom. Reflecting on gendered preferences in dress, another participant, Chris, remarked that women tend to be more attracted to anime because they get to display their femininity through beautiful gowns or through skimpy outfits. Since furries cover up more of the body than cosplayers, males might be more drawn to the costuming side of the furry fandom. Experimenting with flashy textiles and colours, males challenge notions of gender conformity and express masculinity in a new and typically unaccepted way. Research participants noted that all versions of masculine expression are welcomed within the subculture.

Like Azulupei, Omni-Beast felt that the male bias stemmed from modern North American society's expectations of masculinity. Fashion studies scholars have theorized a variety of strategies employed by men to 'negotiate boundaries between what is 'safe' and what is 'dangerous' (Green and Kaiser 2011; Kaiser 2013: 145–46; Rinallo 2007). Popular media, friends, family members, and other cultural forms encourage men to be macho, closed off and self-absorbed. They are encouraged not to 'invest too much in other creatures or plants because that may be interpreted as weakness', Omni-Beast explained (18 January 2015, interview). Women, however, are expected to be nurturing and considerate, allowing them to be more open to animal and artistic appreciation. Omni-Beast felt personally threatened by these gender stereotypes. Persecuted and harassed by schoolmates for his interests in art, acting, puppetry and larger women, he struggled with his identity and self-confidence growing up. Since males with these interests might get bullied or mocked, they find an outlet in the furry fandom. Interacting both online and at conventions, furries step away from their public self – that which they exhibit in everyday life – and explore and experiment with their private self.

Figure 3: Further Confusion interview participant, Chris displaying his self-constructed March Hare fursuit during the Masquerade.

Some furries even poke fun at traditional masculinities through their costumes, as demonstrated by Chris in Figure 3. A number of symbols of Euro-masculinity are present in the ensemble: a top hat, waistcoat and trench coat with brass buttons. The cane and grey facial hair show how ideas about traditional masculinity intersect with other subject positions like age and generation. These costumes are a kind of camp performance of an imagined masculine identity – one that is undermined through exaggeration. The furry fandom provides people of all gender associations a secure environment for playful critique, self-expression and experimentation with masculinity.

CONCLUSION

As demonstrated through survey responses, the furry fandom is hugely diverse with regard to age, sexual orientation and gender identity. This diversity encourages the development of many sub-cultures and niches within the fandom, explored in the physical world at conventions and through the virtual world online. Due to the welcoming, accepting and fun-loving nature of the community, character traits, identities and desires are taken at face-value. Individuals can dress in distinct styles, play with colour combinations, and exhibit new accessories. Surrounded by people dressing in creative, animalistic constructions, assuming opposite gender roles, or exploring sexual interests, individuals further develop their own interests, explore and define their identities, and receive therapy and separation from difficult experiences and exclusion in outside life.

Through interviews, furries demonstrated their tendency to push societal norms. Eicher et al. have theorized dress as 'a product and process that distinguishes human beings from other animals' (2000: 4). While these ideas are salient among all cultures, they pose an interesting dilemma in the furry fandom. Furries display their humanness through elaborate costumes while concurrently aiming to express their non-human character traits. In addition to navigating dichotomies between old and young, masculine and feminine, androgynous and singular, furries explore the tensions between human and animal. Through the process of costuming, individuals explore and express identities – they act in a variety of human-animal ways, pressure the gender binary, and explore with artistic and creative abandon. Playing with the body's permeable surface, furries use their costumes to explore and perform various identities and genders (Butler 2006). Just as Susan Kaiser described appearance management in dress, the fursuit's aesthetic allows the individual to manage their appearance and convey a desired identity (Kaiser 1997).

Fur conventions are heavily skewed towards male participants, and these males drastically vary in sexual orientation. Goldman described troubles among young boys who defy gender stereotypes and although attitudes towards homosexuality have softened recently, it remains less acceptable to be a gender-nonconforming boy than a gender non-conforming girl (2012). Rieger and Savin-Williams found that gender non-conformity, regardless of sexual-orientation, has a significantly stronger negative effect on individuals' psychological well-being than sexual orientation alone (2011). While there has been a shift towards cultural respect for LGBT individuals, gender non-conformists still face difficulties. Since male furries gravitate towards traditionally feminine activities such as dressing-up and looking at cute animals, interviews revealed that expressing such feminine masculinities has caused individuals difficulty with friends, families and communities. However, these experiences are different in the fandom: gender non-conforming men are able to publicly express

and play with their gender identity through an anthropomorphic one. The physical and virtual spaces provide an intervention and a therapeutic arena separate from the discriminatory 'outside'. Further, dressing in feminine, lavish fursuits facilitates engagement with femininities, which in turn could allow more comfort in sexual orientations, as is seen in drag (Simpson 2009). As many interview participants noted, the furry fandom is a safe space for exploration of gender identity without fear of harassment. These findings contrast those of Plante et al. – furries are able to explore various identities through the fandom and its accouterments – the opposite of concealment (2013).

Assuming their seldom-displayed animal personalities, furries use the costume to build confidence in both their human and animal identities. The fursuit and the fur convention allow furries to express their private or secret self (Eicher 1981; Kaiser 1997; Miller 1997). Bold colours, sexualized costumes and fantasy make up this appearance. They show the extreme version of this self at fur conventions and cut back when presenting their public self. In addition to representing the private self through dress, they also represent their private self through a process of self-reflection when exploring and experimenting with animal identities. Males are able to construct a full embodiment of their identity. Through creative and colourful costumes, gender and sexual identities challenge fashion norms of masculinity.

The anthropomorphism employed both in full fursuit and in ears and tails donned by furries bring a sense of 'cuteness' to the fandom. The cute factor of the animals brings about a sense of understanding, love and empathy. Since many furries have experienced negative situations because of their perceived 'differentness' or because of their sexual or gender identities, they feel an absence of love and acceptance. Through the furry fandom, they get in touch with these hallmarks. The animals and themes emanating from cartoonish depictions foster a community of gentleness and love. Sensitized because of their differences and negative experiences, the human-animals create a wall, drawing sensitive interactions, and separating human tensions from the situation. Through their costumed animal performance, they elicit support and closeness. Expressions of gender identity are embodied and adorned through anthropomorphic experimentation. Fur conventions are an unfettered arena for drama and play, providing a safe space for individuals to experiment with identities free from outside judgement and castigation.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR FUR CONVENTION ATTENDEES

Interviews will be conducted in a conversational style. Depending on the direction of the conversation, we might not touch on all questions. If participants ever seem hesitant or uncomfortable, I will remind them that answering the questions is voluntary and they may skip questions or drop out of the study at any time.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR FURRIES

1. How did you get involved with the fandom?
2. Did you know people in the fandom before you joined? Did you join alone?
3. Why do you go to fur conventions? What is your favourite part?
4. What do you get out of being in the fandom?
5. Do you feel accepted here?

6. Who do you go to conventions with?
7. How often do you go to conventions? How do you choose which you go to?
8. How do you stay active in the fandom when not at conventions?
9. How do you feel when you aren't wearing your costume? How do you feel wearing it?
10. Does the anonymity of the fursuit allow you to act differently? If so, how?
11. How did you choose your fursona? Do you always dress in the same costume?
12. Did you make your own costume? If yes, when did you learn to sew? Did you learn to sew for the conventions?
13. Do you only wear your costume at conventions? If so, why don't you wear it at other times? If you could, would you?
14. How do you fund these costumes and travelling for conventions?
15. What sort of connection do you feel with this animal? Do you identify with it? How human do you feel?
16. Is it possible for people to have more than one fursona? For these individuals, do you think they feel connections with multiple animals or combine the animals for other reasons?
17. How do you feel about furries who combine fursonas?
18. How do you feel in 'normal' society?
19. Do you act differently at conventions and during normal life?
20. Do your non-furry friends and family know that you participate in these conventions? How do you think they would react if you told them?
21. Do you try to hide your furry identity in any way?
22. If you have told these people, how did they react to your involvement in the fandom?
23. How do you think furries are portrayed in the media?
24. What could be done to change the negative perceptions?
25. How would you define your sexual identity and sexual orientation? Do you think many of the other furries here have similar identities and orientations or represent a broader spectrum?
26. Is there a noticeable divide between furries in costume and attendees not in costume?

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