

BREAKING DOWN STEREOTYPES: A LOOK AT THE PERFORMANCE OF SELF-
IDENTITY WITHIN THE FURRY COMMUNITY

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BREAKING DOWN STEREOTYPES: A LOOK AT THE PERFORMANCE OF
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ABSTRACT

BREAKING DOWN STEREOTYPES: A LOOK AT THE PERFORMANCE OF SELF- IDENTITY WITHIN THE FURRY COMMUNITY

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The furry fandom has recently gained considerable exposure in the mass media. Furrries are individuals who have an interest in anthropomorphic animals and are occasionally portrayed in the media as a socially or sexually deviant subculture. Through an ethnographic study of a local furry group, I discovered that this portrait of the group is misleading. The existential sociology and symbolic interactionist perspectives allows us to see, furrries as people who use their personal, social, and cultural resources to develop their “fursonas” to express personality traits that they normally cannot divulge. Furrries create fursona based upon their chosen animal characteristics. Furrries see fursonas as their real or constructed personalities. Through regular group meetings, furrries

interact with each other and develop their fursonas socially. The process of developing a fursona evolves over time. Furrries locate themselves socially and culturally as fans, similar to those in sports and comics. In a Goffmanian sense, furrries' group activities are performances that, like those of clowns and drag queens, can be experimental and theatrical.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Taboo is a television series that appears on National Geographic and follows people who are either members of a subculture or take part in an activity that society deems as being odd, strange, or taboo (Abraham 2012). Being taboo means that society has forbidden any involvement in said activity due to some outstanding moral issue. The following is the opening dialog from the episode ‘Secret Lives’ that aired in January 2012:



Figure 1. Courtney as his fursona “Nuka”

(Narrator) “As human beings we share the planet with other species. Some are feared; many are loved. Some people who love animals so much may feel the need to become one. In Canada, 24 year old psychology student Courtney Plant is hard at work. To most observers, he is just a typical PhD student, but Courtney has a secret alter ego” (Abraham 2012).

(Courtney) “I’m a 24 year old adult whose hobby is to dress up as a blue cat on the weekends. I wanted to actually... be able to wear from head to toe...um... look like what I do in my head” (Abraham 2012).

(Narrator) “Courtney is a furry, one of a growing number of people who believe that they are part human and part animal. He feels the need to get in touch with his inner kitten called Nuka” (Abraham 2012).

(Courtney) “Putting on the full fur suit for Nuka is unbelievable. When I’m Courtney I’m shy I’m nervous I don’t like having a lot of attention on me. Courtney is the stressed out grad student trying to work on a PhD. I prefer Nuka, he is mischievous and playful. When I’m in my *fursona* I don’t mind people looking at me, I’m okay with it. I don’t feel so embarrassed to...have everyone’s eyes on me. I won’t try to defend the fact that it’s a strange hobby but it’s no more strange than I think some of the other hobbies people have. But ultimately to try and moralize it, to say it’s right or wrong, is umm...wrong. Furrries are people who say why not? Why can’t I still do that?” (Abraham 2012).

There are numerous definitions of the furry phenomenon. These definitions vary and can be quite complex. Luc Reid - writer, columnist, and blogger - defines a furry as someone who has “enthusiasm for and identification with anthropomorphic animal characters” (2006:122). I define anthropomorphic animals as animals that possess human-like features either through physical resemblance or through actions. For example, the most well-known anthropomorphic characters include Bugs Bunny, because he talks and acts like a human. In contrast, Adam Earnhardt, assistant professor of communication at Youngstown State University, says that furrries are people who are “interested in fictional, anthropomorphic animal characters. Furrries wear elaborate costumes that resemble animals but express human personalities, emotions, and other human-like characteristics” (2011: 289).

TYPES OF FURRIES

There are other definitions of furrries (WikiFur 2012). The following is a list of the different types of furrries as cited by WikiFur, which is a user-controlled website where members are allowed to publish facts or information about the furry fandom. There are

three different types of furies: those with cartoon and art interest, those who have a spiritual connection with animals and those who simply dress the part.

Cartoon and Art Interest

Most furies are interested in cartoon animals that act like and/or resemble humans. This interest can also extend into video game characters and drawings that are extremely popular in Japan. “Numerous comic books and other media are based on furry characters, and fans of such media sometimes attend conventions, much as other media fans do” (Kendall 2002:45). The type of cartoons can range from Disney characters to sexualized porn based animal drawings (Ceilán 2009). Most American children can remember watching Disney movies before they could even walk and can tell you what their favorite movie and character is from the large collection. For many furies, Disney characters started their interest in anthropomorphic animals (Kendall 2002). The pornographic animal characters are vastly different from your usual hand drawn animal characters. These characters usually have large sexualized body parts and are in seductive positions reminiscent of human pornography (Kammeyer 2008). These characters even have sexually suggestive names like “Fetish the Fox”. However, not all of furry drawings are sexual. Most are to show the animal aspects of their fursona.

Spiritual Connection

Cynthia Ceilán, a writer who focuses on cultural oddities, says that furies are people “who simply feel a greater affinity with animals than with people. Others believe that they are animals trapped in human bodies” (2009: 93). This part of the furry community feels like they have a spiritual connection with animals and feel as though

they are animals at heart instead of human beings. While this makes up a very small percentage of the furry community, some do believe that they are actually an animal that is stuck in a human body (Ceilán 2009). Many furies feel like this is a lifestyle, similarly to being transgendered, which they cannot ignore nor help feeling this way (Parson 2009). Since many of these members feel like they are animals on the inside instead of humans, they may have issues socializing with other furies.

Dressing the Part

Lastly, there are people who elaborate their interest in anthropomorphic animals by dressing as animals. Within this type of furry, two subtypes emerge: those who dress like animals (i.e. wearing tails, cat ears, and full animal suits) and those who dress like animals as part of a sexual fantasy. The former type of furry is much more common than the latter; however when the media is covering furies, it prefers to focus on those who engage in sexual activities while dressed as animals. This has created significant outrage in the furry community and created a very large anti-furry community as well.

Those who like to dress as animals for the fun of it or for self-expression comprise a large proportion of the furry community. Parker, Munier, and Reynolds (2011), describe this type furry clearly. “Furies are human beings who identify so strongly with furry animals that they don furry costumes and show off their animalistic characteristics at events” (Parker et al. 2011: 46). Zack Parsons, a Chicago writer, says, “The iconic image of a furry is a man inside a sports mascot-like suit with big furry paws and a cartoon face” (2009: 158-9). Dressing like an animal can range from wearing ears and a tail to a full on custom-made furry costume of the animal they identify themselves with (Ceilán 2009). These costumes are generally handmade and can be very expensive

since it can take hours to complete a full suit. While in costume, most furies like to participate in online forum groups or attend meetings with other local furies (Reid 2006). The furry community also hosts many *confurences* (as they often spell it) where individuals can meet up, buy and sell costumes, collect artwork, and participate in charity events (Earnhardt 2011). In 2008, the Guinness Book of World Records recognized the largest furry fan club, Anthrocon, as the largest annual furry gathering, which had 2,489 furies in attendance (Guinness World Records 2008).

Much like other subculture in our society, furies also have what some would call a dark side. Some members of the community like to engage in sexual activities while being dressed up in their animal costumes. Eva Christina, writer and film-maker, says that “people with this fetish have a close connection to a particular animal, like to dress up as one and/or like to have sex with stuffed animals” (2011: 206-7). According to Jafar Mahmud, Director of the Self-Discovery Centre, “fetishism is an exaggerated interest in a particular part of the partner’s body or in some inanimate object for sexual stimulation and satisfaction” (2008: 123). *Yiffing* is the name given to the fetish of having sex while dressed in a full fur suit (Reid 2006). The media like to focus much of their attention on this aspect of furies. Magazines such as *Vanity Fair* and *Wired* have printed stories that focused on this aspect of the furry lifestyle. “Not surprisingly, many non-yiff furies don’t consider yiff furies part of the furrydom at all, and they sometimes resent the attention yiff receives from the general public, fearing that yiff gives the impression that all furry activity is erotic” (Reid 2006:122-3). All of this so-called negative attention has launched an anti-furry community that is very popular online. It will be interesting to see how non-yiffing furies react to those who participate in yiffing.

Anti-Furry Community

The anti-furry community has many followers, and it does not take much looking online to find websites that are devoted to spreading the anti-furry message. Cole Stryker (2011), freelance writer and media consultant, wrote a book based on the popular website 4chan and described their attacks on furies. 4chan's users like to attack various online subcultures and focus on furies often, even though a large amount of furies use 4chan and have a special furry thread posted every Friday (Stryker 2011). Ceilán (2009) points to two highly visited sites, GodHatesFuries.com and TrueChristian.com, whose users are very open about their thoughts on furies. Upon investigating the first website, I found nothing more than an online forum where people discuss their hatred for furies. The manager of the site does nothing to induce discussion: it happens all on its own. The second website, TrueChristian.com, had a lawsuit filed against it and is no longer available. There are other sites such as AntiFurryCoalition.org that offers resources such as "Five Steps for Staying Furry Free" and "No Furry Zone" stickers and coloring sheets for children (2009). A war over freedom of speech and expression is being waged online.

Since there are so many different types of furies it can be hard to establish one exclusive definition of a furry. I am defining a furry as someone who has an interest in anthropomorphic animals. This definition allows for all the different types of furies to be subsumed under one common trait.

MASS MEDIA COVERAGE OF FURRIES

The media has not been very welcoming towards the furry subculture, especially television media. All forms of the media like to focus on the sexual aspects that are

associated with the group. As stated previously, some members of the furry subculture participate in *yiffing* or the act of having sex while in full fur costumes. Since this is an exotic sexual fetish, the media likes to focus their attention on the topic because it makes for good television.

Television

Three television shows have featured the furry subculture: MTV's *True Life: Sex2K* (Herwick and Stone 2003), *CSI's Fur and Loathing* (Lewis 2003) and National Geographic's *Taboo: Secret Lives* (Abraham 2012).

True Life is a documentary that follows the life of teenagers and young adults who are going through difficult times, have medical problems, interesting hobbies or odd obsessions (Herwick and Stone 2003). *Sex2K* was an episode that followed young adults who were involved in unusual sexual fetishes. Of course, the only fetish I remember from that show was yiffing. I define yiffing as two furies engaging in sexual intercourse while wearing their fursuits. The entire segment on furies only talked about the sexual aspects of being a furry. The episode showed nothing but people in furry costumes having sex with one another. It went into detail that explained how the costumes have a place that shows sexual parts while being in full costume. As you can imagine, the furry community was extremely upset about this portrayal because it is very one-sided and demeaning.

Sex2K aired in January 2003 and by the end of the year, another television series had an episode featuring furies. This time, however, it was aimed at a much larger audience. The episode of *CSI* entitled "Fur and Loathing" aired in October 2003 and targeted the sexual aspects of being a furry (Lewis 2003). The main theme centered on the murder of a man in a raccoon suit. The investigators are lead to a furry convention

where they find a bunch of furrries participating in a large furry orgy. Once again, the furry community was outraged. Not only did the writers of *CSI* focus on the sexual aspects of being a furry, they wrongly depicted what occurs at furry conventions and also associated furrries with Halloween. Nine year later, National Geographic featured furrries on the very popular series *Taboo*. *Taboo* is a documentary that follows people who participate in rituals, hobbies, or anything that society might label taboo (Abraham 2012). This particular episode was entitle *Taboo: "Secret Lives"* and featured Courtney, the graduate student and furry mentioned at the beginning of this thesis. Unlike the previous two shows, *Taboo* did a wonderful job covering all aspects of being a furry, from the reason why people decided to join the culture to why some people participate in the sexual aspects of being a furry. The furry community was overall supportive of this episode because it told the whole story and did not focus solely on yiffing.

Print Media

Similar to television portrayals, the print media has not been very kind to the furry community. This type of media also likes to illustrate the idea of furrries coming together and having huge orgies while in full fur suits. Two magazines in particular have caught the attention of the furry community: *Vanity Fair* and *Wired*.

Vanity Fair is a very popular women's magazine that focuses on fashion and popular culture. In March 2001, contributing writer George Gurley wrote a piece that followed the life of a furry. Entitled 'Pleasures of the Fur', the article began thus: "Welcome to the world of "furrries": the thousands of Americans who've gotten in touch with their inner raccoon, or wolf, or fox" (Gurley 2001 par. 1). While the article did provide some truthful information on the furry community, the author did pick a furry

who participated in yiffing. The article also mentioned the subculture of plushies, “the word for a person who has a strong – usually erotic – attachment to stuffed animals” (Gurley 2001), and associated plushies with furies when, in fact, the two groups are vastly different from one another.

Wired is a popular online-only magazine about technology and its effect on society. In 2007, the magazine featured a very short article entitled “His Wife? A Horse” which featured a story that the author found online and thought was funny enough to share (Gauger 2007). “The furry community is the perfect storm: lonely, tech-savy, sexually deviant, verbose, outcast, resentful, and blessed with enormous amounts of free time and an unflagging motivation to write and write and write and write” (Gauger 2007 par. 2). The author goes on to share a story about a furry who wanted to marry a horse. Later the author realizes that the man is not a furry, but is a zoophile. Zoophile is someone who is sexually attracted to live animals (Christina 2011). Just as *Vanity Fair* related furies to plushies, *Wired* incorrectly related furies to a zoophile.

Online Media

The Internet contains so much information these days it is impossible to say that you have covered every publication available. The Internet serves as the basis for the furry community where thousands upon thousands of websites, blogs, forums and pages include information on the subculture. I have chosen one website to feature here, simply because furies maintain the site and the site contains such great information on all types of furies.

WikiFur (2012) is a freely editable database that provides information on or about furies. Furies are in sole control of what information is available and have done a

wonderful job of keeping information current. They also state that this is not the place for disagreements and only want information from creditable sources. WikiFur recognizes all types of furies and does not discriminate one form or the other. This is also the best source to find any regularly. In summary, the mass media coverage of furies leans towards the spectacular. My sociological study will attempt to be more objective and will focus on the everyday life and activities of furies. This study will also show the inaccuracies of the media's portrayal of who furies are all about.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Several social and behavioral sciences have examined the relationship between people and animals. They include sociology, psychology, and anthropology. Of these, only sociology and psychology have looked at furies in particular. I will review this literature and then highlight the sociological writings relevant to designing my study of furies.

HUMAN AND ANIMAL RELATIONSHIPS

Until recently, the discipline of sociology has largely ignored the relationship between humans and their nonhuman animal companions. There a number of books and articles, however, that apply mainstream sociological concepts to understanding of this relationship.

Self-Identity

Clinton Sanders (1990) studied the relationship between owner and animal and discovered how much influence a person's animal has on their owner's identity. Sanders bases much of his analysis on the concepts of the self and identity. He is interested in how humans create these concepts for their nonhuman companion animals.

A person's companion animal says a lot about that person to society. A few decades ago, if a person owned a pedigreed dog or cat, they were associated with an expensive and lavish lifestyle, while a person who belonged to the lower class and owned an animal was considered to be behaving inappropriately (Sanders 1990 and 2003). For

many, the breed of animal people selected for companionship can reflect the owners' personality. For example, many people think that those who own dogs are fun and outgoing people, while those who own cats are more independent. Owning animals can also help the owner to become more social because the animal can provide social encounters that may not have happened without their animal (Sanders 1990 and 2003).

Humans also create bonds with their animals, often giving them a name and personality (Sanders 1990 and 2003). People will often bring up their animals in conversations and treat them as though they are members of the family. Sanders (1990) found that most people feel as though they can have a conversation with their animal and know what their animals are thinking. Many owners feel as though their animals are their children and will listen to them without any interference (Sanders 1990).

Zoologists also agree with the idea of animals being surrogate humans (Bryant 1979). Zoology is the study of the animal kingdom and follows biology very closely (Bryant 1979). Bryant found the same findings as Sanders when discussing the relationship between humans and their nonhuman companion animals.

Sanders examined the relationship between humans and their nonhuman companion animals and how that animal can reflect the identity of their owners. I believe that this idea will help when trying to understand how members of the furry subculture self-identify as animals. My research question, therefore, is: What does a person's fursona say about their self-identity as a furry versus their non-furry self-identity?

The Presentation of Self

Goffman (1959) created the theory of dramaturgy to describe how people create and display themselves to society. Dramaturgy theory states that everyone is an actor and

performs different selves depending on who makes up their audience. The self changes which role to perform based on the audience (Goffman 1959).

Many people use virtual communities to explore who they are and to find others who share their interests (Jacobs 1992). The Internet can be an escape from society and allows people to create other self-identities. “Through its performances, the self strives to convey an identity consistent with the expectations formed by the audience and with the situation, or stage that frames the interaction” (Robinson 2007: 96).

All actors display a front stage and back stage self. The front stage is the self that the actor performs in order to please the audience and receives criticism from the audience based on the performance (Goffman 1959). The back stage self can be true to the performance they want to project and does not have to worry about receiving any criticism (Goffman 1959). Through the use of instant messaging, chat rooms and video messaging, actors can create several different front stages while still maintaining their back stage self (Robinson 2007).

Goffman said that people are actors who take on different roles and perform those roles based on their audience (1959). Many furies describe how they keep their furry identity a secret from family members and friends due to the fear of reticule. By observing how furies are able to perform several self-identities at once, we may gain a better understanding of how a person develops his/her back stage self. My research question, therefore, is: How do members of the furry community perform several different selves in different situations?

AN EXISTENTIAL APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING FURRIES

The concept of *everyday life* is the basis for existential sociological thought (Kotarba and Johnson 2002). The individual is at the center of this idea and is viewed as responsible for creating, defining, and responding to the social world around them based on the actual situations in which they find themselves. The individual is an active agent in everyday life, but whose activities are always shaped by the contingencies of social relations. Rational as well as non-rational/affective features of everyday life experience contribute to the individual's actions. Since the self is at the center of existential sociology, it seems only fitting that there is a concept called the existential self. Kotarba and Fontana (1984) define the existential self as: "The existential self refers to an individual's unique experience of being within the context of contemporary social conditions, an experience most notably marked by an incessant sense of becoming and an active participation in social change" (Kotarba and Fontana 1984: 225). This concept allows researcher to understand how people developed their self-identity within the social world (Kotarba and Johnson 2002). Instead of producing only dry, academic studies, existentialism allows researchers to use sociology as an art form (Kotarba and Johnson 2002). Through a sophisticated research, we can gain a better understand of how emotions effect and play a role in our everyday lives and the decisions that we make. We gain knowledge about a subject through experiencing their everyday life and understanding how their identity affects the outcome of their society (Kotarba and Johnson 2002).

Existential sociology allows the researcher to understand how the individual creates his/her fursona. Behind every fursona are the feelings associated with that animal.

Researchers can also begin to understand why some furries feel the need to have two self-identities, one that revolves around the greater society and the other around the furry society. My research questions, therefore, are: How does the furry experience affect the becoming of self? What is the everyday life of a furry

SOCIAL SCIENCES

To date, there have been no academically published, sociology studies on furries. I am not sure why sociologists have not approached the topic of furries. Perhaps the subculture is so new that there has not been enough time to conduct research.

Sociology of Furries

Courtney or Nuka (as he is known in the furry world) from the show *Taboo* is a current psychology Ph.D. student in Canada who is currently studying furries. He is a member of the International Anthropomorphic Research Project (IARP) along with several other professors from Canada and the United States. This group travels to furry conferences throughout the year and gathers survey data on “both furries and non-furries to better understand the furry community” (IARP 2012:1). Since IARP and Courtney are still in the process of collecting longitudinal data, I decided to exclude their data from my research so that I do not publish any of their data before they have a chance to do so.

However they have published a psychology article that I cite later in the study.

A few informal blogs and websites provide sociological data on furries. David Rust (2002), a graduate of the University of Minnesota and website designer, conducted the first sociological study of furries. He has made all of his work available, including methods and findings, on his personal webpage. Alex Osaki (2008), graduate of the University of Colorado at Boulder and researcher, inspired by Rust’s work, decided to

start the Furry Research Center. After collecting data for a few years, Osaki presented his work online and provides a much more academic product than Rust's due to the strengths of his methods and statistical abilities. Lastly, Kyle Evans (2008), a graduate of Deakin University, did a replica study of Rust's and took into account Osaki's findings as well. He does a nice job of comparing all three study's findings and establishes more credibility for Rust's work.

All three of the studies were quantitative in nature and were only available in English. They also all posted their surveys on furry forums and message boards; Rust (2002) however, also made his surveys available at furry conventions and local meetings. Demographics made up the majority of questions asked with only a few questions focusing on furries interests.

In terms of demographic characteristics, most of the findings reflect one another, but there are some differences found between the studies. It appears that furries tend to be white (94% Rust, 83.4% Osaki and 87.5% Evans), males (85% Rust, 80% Osaki and 81.5% Evans), and live in North America (97% Rust, 76.35% Osaki and 78% Evans). Furries also appear to be young in nature with the majority being between the ages of 18 and 35 years old (Rust 2002, Osaki 2008 and Evans 2008). Osaki (2008) and Evans (2008) also included how many years the respondents have been actively participating as furries. They both found that the majority (56.7% Osaki and 78% Evans) have participated in the furry subculture between 0 and 5 years. Between 6 and 10 years of membership had quite a drop off in participation (29.9% Osaki and 14% Evans) as well as being an active member for over 11 years (13.4% Osaki and 7% Evans).

One area where the authors differed greatly was on the religion of the participants. Rust (2002) found that Agnostic/Undecided (33%) represented the common furry. He also found that 18% were Christians, 10% were Atheists and 31% made up the Other category, which grouped the remaining religions together. Rust also had 8% of his participants decide not to answer that question. Osaki (2008) found that the remaining categories were very close in participation: 23.7% Agnostic, 21.5% Atheists, and 25.9% Christian. Evans (2008) found that Agnostic/Undecided (34%) represented the overall common furry. He also found that 20% were Atheists, 28.5% were Christians, and 17.5% were Other. Osaki's findings were slightly different from the others because he found Other (28.6%) represented the overall common furry. Even though many different religions make this category, perhaps it shows that furries tend to stay away from mainstream religions.

When looking at occupation and education, a distinct pattern emerged. All three authors found that student (31% Rust, 42.5% Osaki and 53.2% Evans) was the number one occupation of respondents. This finding corresponds with 'some college' as the highest level of education completed (42% Rust, 38.2% Osaki and 40% Evans). However, with that knowledge, one would assume that the majority would not have a high income, but there are conflicting views on this. Rust (2002) found that 50% of responders made between 10 and 50 thousand a year while only 35% made less than 10 thousand a year. Evans (2008) found the opposite with 65.5% making less than 10 thousand a year and 31% making between 10 and 50 thousand a year. The difference between the two findings may have to do with the years the researchers collected their data. Evans collected his data during a downward sloping economic time, while Rust's

was during a neutral economic time. Osaki (2008) did not provide any information on annual income.

The next area the authors focused on was relationships and sexual orientation. Once again, there is one discrepancy between Rust's and Evans's findings on relationship status. Rust (2002) found that the majority (56%) of participants were in a relationship while Evans (2008) found the majority (55%) to be single. There could be an issue with the fact that Rust also interviewed furry convention goers as well as online. Convention goers may be older in age, since you have to drive or fly to attend, making them more likely to be involved romantically. Osaki (2008) did not ask about relationship status. The authors also found that the majority of participants tend to be bisexual (48% Rust and 36% Osaki). Evans (2008) found that heterosexuals were the majority (39%), but also listed bisexual as the second most common answer (32%). These findings go against the stereotype that all furies are homosexual.

The last area the authors focused on was sexual interests of furry members. As demonstrated by the media, many people believe that people become furies so that they can engage in sexual activities while being dressed as an animal (Gurley 2001 and Gauger 2007). Evans (2008) and Osaki (2008) asked the participants about their sexual interests in joining. Both found that the majority (46% Evans and 51.4% Osaki) had little to no interest in the sexual aspects of being a furry. All three authors ask about being involved in zoophilia (2% Rust, 17.2% Osaki and 17% Evans) and plushophilia (0.3% Rust, 8.4% Osaki and 7% Evans) since both have strong sexual involvements. Rust's findings seem to be very different from the others, perhaps because he interviewed some

of his participants in person and they did not want to admit to being involved in either sexual fetish.

Critique. While these authors provide the only demographic data on furies currently, certain issues with their studies exist. First, all three authors used surveys to gather their information. While you can collect a lot of information this way, it is not very extensive and only holds quantitative value. You cannot ask any why or how questions when using a survey and therefore, you only gain a small amount of information. Qualitative methods will expose any underlying meanings or issues.

Secondly, I feel as though the samples may not be representative of all furies. Obtaining a representative sample is hard to do when there is little literature on the subculture. However, Rust (2002) did try his best to encompass the entire subculture by surveying members online, at conventions and at local meetings. While qualitative methods do not provide generalizable data, it does provide more information about a small group of the overall subculture.

Third, all of the authors ask questions about the sexual activities that are associated with the group. I understand that they may have done so to illustrate that only a small percentage of the group holds true to the stereotypes. However, some members may have read the questions first and refused to answer any questions because the authors asked about their sexual activities. I have decided to stay away from any questions about sexual activity so that all participants felt comfortable answering interview questions.

Lastly, all three of the authors are furies themselves. This does give them insider knowledge to the subculture, but it could also cause a biased view. While I highly doubt that any of the authors are guilty of this, sometimes when researchers are studying a

group they belong to, they may change figures or findings that they disagree with. By having an outsiders view, I can provide an unbiased study because I have no connection with the subculture at all. I have nothing to gain from any of the results I find.

After reading and analyzing, all of this information I wonder what furries are like in person. My research question, therefore, is: What type of personality/characteristic traits do furries have?

Psychology of Furies

As in sociology, there is surprisingly little research on furries published. Gerbasi, Paolone, Higner, Scaletta, Bernstein, Conway, and Privitera (2008) are the only psychologists who have studied furries. It seems their work has established a model upon which future work in psychology can be conducted. Their definition of furry “is a person who identifies with the Furry Fandom culture. Furry Fandom is the collective name given to individuals who have a distinct interest in anthropomorphic animals such as cartoon characters” (Gerbasi et al. 2008: 198). The study tried to test the truth behind furry stereotypes and examined individualities traits of furries. Being this was from a psychology background, the authors also looked to see if the furries had any type of personality disorders or gender identity disorders.

There were three groups involved in the study: furry participants, non-furry participants and control participants. The first two sets of participants were found at a furry convention and the control participants were college students. All three groups answered the demographic questions of The Convention Survey, which also included a section on furry-identity that was only available for the furry and non-furry participants. All three groups were given a 45-item Personality Checklist where the furry and non-

furry participants had to check what traits applied to the typical furry. The control group checked what traits applied to the typical college student.

Gerbası et al. (2008) found that most of the stereotypes about furies did not hold to be true. Only three stereotypes proved true: “males are more likely to be furies than females, furies recall liking cartoons more as children than others, and furies like science fiction more than others” (Gerbası et al. 2008: 204). Out of the 19 personality disorder questions that were asked, only one question (“has odd or unusual thoughts about daily situations”) was more likely to be answered by a furry than by a college student. The authors also went into detail about self-perception and the furry identity. They were able to establish a furry typology from the two self-perception questions: “Do you consider yourself to be less than 100% human? If you could become 0% human, would you?” (Gerbası et al. 2008: 213). If a furry answered yes to both questions, he/she had certain traits that were comparable to those who have gender-identity disorder.

Gerbası et al. (2008) ended their study by stating the issues that arose. Since they are the first psychologists to study furies, there is no other data to compare their results with in order to prove sound research. There needs to be a replica study to justify their findings. They were able to compare their studies to several unpublished studies from other universities that seemed to agree with their findings. One such study comes from the University of California, Davis that posted a small amount of their findings on their Live Journal website where others could keep up with the progression of the study (Rossmassler and Wen 2007).

Critique. Since this was the first and only psychology study on furies, the authors understood that they had some issues with their study. Gerbası et al. (2008) stated that a

comparison study would justify their findings. I also found it to be an issue that the authors almost assumed that there is something mentally wrong with furies. The authors gave them personality tests and thought that some of the members might have gender-identity disorder. Instead of assuming that something is mentally wrong with the members of the subculture, I want to gain an understanding of how they developed their furry identity. Instead of focusing on what types of personalities they have, I want to explore how and why they became a furry. I also want to understand why the majority of furies are males. My research questions, therefore, are: How do we explain the interest/engagement in furies by gender? And, how do the members develop their individual Furry identities?

Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism is a very wide-ranging concept in order to fit certain aspects of the animal identity. Serpell (2003) defines anthropomorphism “as the attribution of human mental states (thoughts, feelings, motivations and beliefs) to nonhuman animals” (p. 83). This definition relates back to many of the different definitions already identified throughout this study. Serpell breaks down the idea of anthropomorphism by humans and animals. Closely related to Sanders’s (1990) and Bryant’s (1979) findings on the relationship between humans and animals is the human side of anthropomorphism. Humans use anthropomorphism to relate our companion animals back to humans (Serpell 2003). The human traits we give to companion animals such as personalities and the ability to communicate with us are perfect examples of how we create anthropomorphic animals. However, on the animal side, anthropomorphism is slowly turning all animals into companion animals (Serpell 2003). Those that cannot adapt lose their habitats and

protection from humans. Serpell (2003) gives the example of how wolves and African wildcats (both responsible for domesticated dogs and cats) are slowly losing their numbers, while domesticated dog and cat populations are out of control.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

The purpose of this study is to examine the ways people create and nurture self-identities in the furry subculture. Put differently, the focus of this research is how furries perform the idea of being a furry. The intricate ways they establish and create their second identities say a lot about the way that the Internet is changing how we perceive ourselves and create new social bonds. I chose an ethnographic approach to examine the group and learn about their subculture. During this study, I used two styles of data collection: observations and interviews.

CURRENT STUDY

I decided to begin my research with observations in order to get a good feeling of how the group members interact with one another. Before I made my first observation, I located a furry group online, contacted the member in charge, and expressed my plans to him. He allowed me to attend the next meeting for the group and was able to introduce myself and explain my thesis. I told the group that I would observe the group and interview any members who were willing to participate in my research. I promised confidentiality to all members who participated. This group meets once a month at a local park and gave me permission to attend all meetings. I was only able to attend three meetings due to schedule conflicts and changes in locations of the meetings. During my observations, I observed how the members interacted with each other and with on-

lookers. I was able to take notes as well as interact with the group. I also wanted to know how they perform their fursona and what the official and unofficial rules are of the group. These observations occasionally coincided with interviews as well.

The second half of my research focused on interviewing group members. I informed the group of my intentions to interview some of them and had a sign up list for those members who are interested. All interviews took place either at the monthly meetings or via email. The interview questions ranged from how they learned about the furry subculture to aspects of their individual fursonas. Since the media have tagged the subculture as being sexually deviant, I have decided to stay away from any questions that involved their sexual activities or habits entirely. In total, I had 28 members participate in interviews and conducted four interview sessions. Of the 28, only 17 completed every interview that took place and answered every single question. The other 11 members still participated in a few of the interviews and their answers were kept for data since each interview session had an independent theme associated with each question set. When interviews were done over email, I was careful to make sure not to over read an answer. If I had any questions about whether a statement was sarcastic or not, I made sure to go back to the person and ask them exactly what they meant. After I gathered all interviews I did a content analysis to see what themes or trends emerged and then would type interviews accordingly.

Ethnographic Description

I will describe the group through an ethnographic framework. An ethnography is “an analysis of people’s lives from their own perspective. In ethnography, the researcher focuses more on meanings than on activities” (Thio 2005: 24). This method allows me to

understand the cultural phenomena I am studying. This idea goes hand in hand with symbolic interactionism because both theories feel that you learn from things around you. “Symbolic interactionism is a microsocial perspective in sociology that views social life as a shared, symbolic meaning system. Emphasis is placed upon the ways in which words, gestures, and labels influence both individual behavior and social processes” (Boudreau and Newman 1993: 17-18). What a better way to learn about the culture of a group than by immersing oneself in it? After each interview set, I compared everyone’s responses to see if there were any conflicting responses. Each time I found a conflicting response, I made a note of it and made sure to include all of the different responses in each section. Regardless of the number of members who felt a certain way on a topic, I include every perspective so that I would not leave out a particular feeling or understanding of a question.

Typology

I designed a typology to focus attention on important differences among furies such as the choosing of their fursona animal. A typology is “a systematic method for classifying similar events, actions, objects, people, or places, into discrete groupings” (Berg 2009: 230). Typological analysis also encourages the researcher to seek and display specific features of each type of identity. This also helps the reader to visually see differences in the types of animals used for member’s fursonas.

Process Models

Process models describe how a group accomplishes a particular practice or task. It allows the researcher to get an in depth look at how groups perform tasks differently from

one another. For example, one of the processes that I examined was how to do being a furry. By examining this phenomenon, I obtained an understanding of what it means to be a furry and how furries display that they are furries. By looking at this phenomenon in a process model, one can better understand how going from step to step is crucial in the development of a fursona.

CHAPTER FOUR: HOW TO BECOME A FURRY

Becoming a furry is a very complex process that varies across members. No two furies will have the same experience when becoming a member of the furry fandom because each person may have different ideas of what they want to get out of the fandom.

BECOMING A MEMBER

While many furies go through the entire process below, some stop at step one or two and still consider themselves to be a furry. Some members may also switch the order of the steps so that they are openly a furry before they obtain any type of fursuit.

Regardless of what order or which step the members chose to stop at, once a member has created a fursona they are considered to be a furry by the larger fandom.

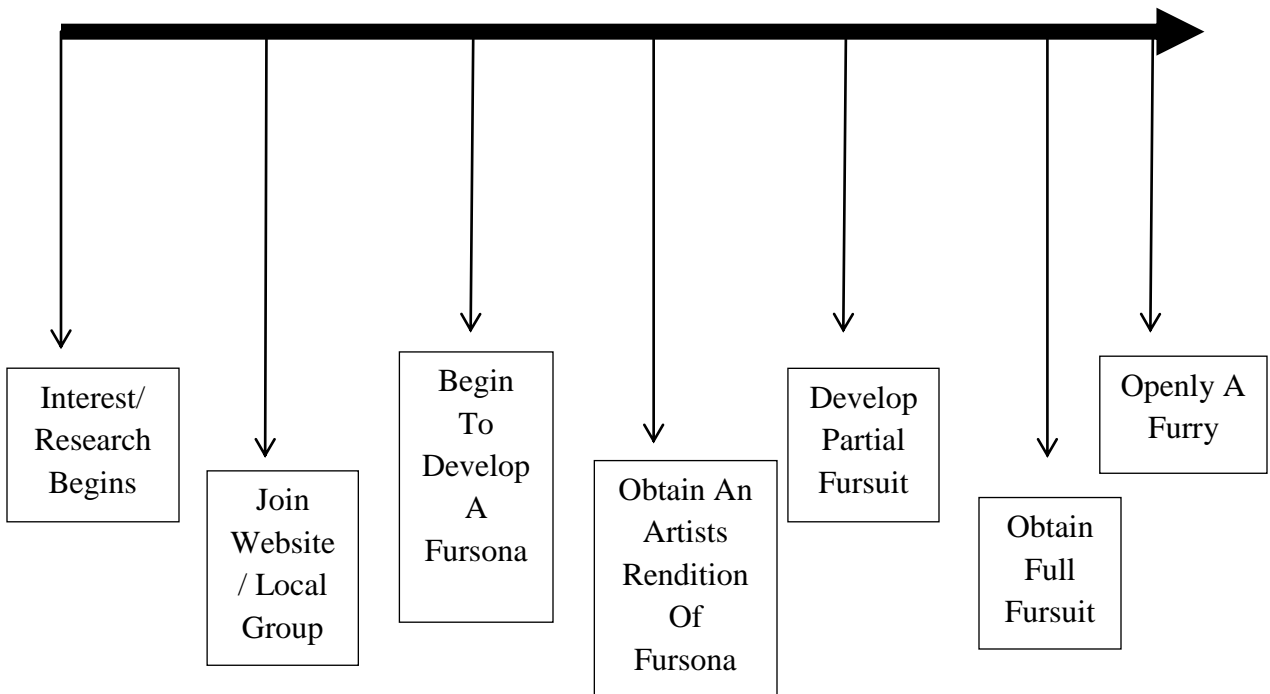


Figure 2: How to Become a Furry

Interest/Research Begins

The first step in developing a fursona or deciding to become a furry is generating interest in the fandom. There are many different outlets that allow members learning about furies such as school, friends, adult art, the Internet, art, social gaming, family members, television, and Second Life. For example, <http://www.furryfandom.info/> is a website devoted to newcomers to the furry fandom. It provides information on how the furry fandom was started, conventions and even costumes. Similar to other interests, members typically begin to research their newfound interest online. Since the fandom mainly evolved online, there are hundreds of websites devoted to furies. While researching online, members can view fursona art, read forums and chat with other furies. Many book series dedicate their plots to the adventures of furies, which allow newcomers another venue from which to learn. Once the person has done research, the next step is to join a website or local group that specializes in the furry fandom. For example, most of the furies I interviewed found The Southern Furies website while browsing the Internet for furry groups.

Join Website/Local Group

The second step of becoming a furry is joining a furry website or local group which allows the newcomer to meet and interact with others who are interested in the fandom. This also helps the person to gather more in-depth information about the fandom and to get answers for any questions or concerns they may have. Step two is where I learned the most information about the fandom during my research because searching the web does not compare to interacting with others who are extremely knowledgeable about the fandom. For example, once I found my group's local website, I soon found out that

there were several other groups that meet in different cities across the state. Information about local groups, conventions and chat rooms are the most vital information a newcomer can receive about the fandom and most of this can be hard to find unless you know where to look. Usually before attending a meeting, a furry will get to know others from the group through online interaction. This helps to lessen the fear of meeting a bunch of new people face-to-face. For example, before I attended my first meeting, I got in contact with two members to introduce myself and learn about the group before I attended a meeting.

Begin To Develop A Fursona

Once a newcomer has decided that they want to join the fandom, the next step is to create a personal fursona. A fursona is the persona or personality that a member wants to display and uses an animal(s) that they feel best describes their new persona. I go into more detail on the selection of their animal(s) fursona in the next section. Some members only have one fursona while others may have six or seven that they like to switch from depending on their mood. Developing a fursona usually does not happen overnight; it can take a week to months depending on how serious the person is about creating their fursona. For example, Justin told me that his fursona took a while because he could not figure out what the right animal for his personality was. I later discuss how Justin finally figured out what animal was right for him. Each fursona has an animal or *creature* that represents it, along with a unique name and personality. I use the term creature because some fursonas can be half-animal, half-plant or even half-mystical animal. For example, in the show *Taboo* that I open with, one of Nuka's friends is a dog-plant hybrid. Once the

person has created their new fursona many of them turn to artists to turn their thoughts into reality.

Obtain Artist's Rendition

Art is extremely popular in the furry fandom because without art one could not fully express their fursona. By obtaining an art rendition of their fursona, a furry can show others how their fursona would look if they were able to physically become it. It is also important because many of the animals that members like to use for their fursonas do not exist in everyday life, such as a dragon or unicorn. Obtaining an artist's rendition is fairly easy to do because there are so many artists in the fandom. Some charge a small fee to draw, but many others will either do it free or will trade drawings or parts of fursuits instead of money. The drawings can range from a dollar to a hundred dollars depending on the time and detail that was put into it. Furry conferences are the number one place to obtain a drawing because many artists attend and sell their work. While at a furry conferences, many artists set up booths where furies can stop by and talk about how they want their fursona to look with the artist. Once a member has a drawing of their fursona, they usually attach it to a lanyard and wear it around their neck so that other members can see what their fursona looks like. This step can also be the final step for some members as stated earlier.

Many furies continue on to develop a fursuit, but some do not. Financial factors can come into play since suits are very expensive. Sometimes a fursuit is simply not necessary. Some furies skip the next two steps and jump to the final step in their development of a fursona. For example, Justin developed his fursuit before obtaining an artist's rendition of his fursona. Furies will jump around steps for many different reasons

such a money struggles with the cost of a suit, being more artistic than others or owning a partial fursuit such as cat ears before even fully developing their fursona.

Develop Partial Fursuit

The fifth step in becoming a furry is the development of a partial fursuit. A partial fursuit can contain ears, a tail and even paws. Many of the members choose to stop at this step because the price of a full fursuit can be very expensive. Brandon, a full time student, informed me that some full fursuits can cost almost \$2,000 dollars and since many members only have part time jobs, it can take years to save up for a full suit. If you are a cat, ears and a tail can run anywhere from \$20 to \$75 depending on how realistic they look. There are other benefits to only having a partial suit such as being comfortable on a hot summer day. Another huge benefit is the cost of a partial suit. For example, Glen said that he “would like a full one to truly fill my character, however owning a partial [suit] has given me a better sense of my surroundings while suiting and it’s much cooler in the heat.” I had the opportunity to put on a member’s full fursuit and it got so hot inside so quickly that I felt like I was going to pass out. It is also much easier to converse with others because in a partial suit it can be hard to hear someone through their headpiece. Some members such as Zack, who is a river otter, prefer a partial suit to a full suit:

“I have to say I prefer my partials. Since I own both things I can say [what] I absolutely love about a partial are [that] I have more freedom of movement and independence. While I love my full suit I need a hand getting it on and off and some of my movement is restricted plus it takes more maintenance. With my partial it’s easy enough to suit up alone and take off by myself, I also have completely unrestricted movement that allows me to do more things like longboard and ski. I usually suit with my partials for the convenience of not always needing a hand. However full suits can be just as user friendly it just depends on the design. My next full suit will be much more user friendly than my last so I’ll have to see if my opinion changes”.

Even though a partial suit has many advantages, many furies feel the need to have a full suit. Several members expressed their need to connect with their fursonas by stepping into the skin of their fursonas. For example, Betty said that “it helps with the mental image of being an [anthromorphic].”

Obtain Full Fursuit

For the lucky minority of furies, approximately 30%, who get to own a full fursuit, the rewards are worth the time and sacrifice it took to finally obtain one. A few of the members use their fursuits to give back to the community by visiting children in the hospital. What young, sick child does not love a big black lab coming into their room to talk and play with them? For me, I feel like this is something that many anti-furies do not understand. Brian, a black lab, told me that he has always loved helping other and being a furry gave him another opportunity to do so. When members are able to put on their full suits, it is as if they have become someone entirely new. Their fursonas can take on a life that they normally do not get to display. For example, when Ryan is only in his partial suit of a tail he is still very much human and only displays a little of his fursona. When he steps out in his full fox suit, it is as if a new person has just entered the area that is much more talkative and open than before. However, I do want to say that not all furies want to own full fursuits and many are happy with their partial suits. There is no status difference between those who own full suits and those who own partial suits. Those who want full suits but cannot afford them yet do look up to those who have full suits. For example, Slater, who is a horse, said “I want a full suit so I can look like I feel on the inside.”

Openly a Furry

The final step is to *openly* consider one's self to be a furry. I use the term *openly* very loosely because even though some members may define themselves as furies, they may not be able to express this openly and completely. Family members and co-workers are the two groups to whom many furies cannot show their fursonas to in fear of ridicule and judgment. For example, one member cannot discuss his furry lifestyle with his co-workers because he works in the public education field and does not want his co-workers to Google the term furry and see all of the misinformation that the Internet contains on the fandom. Considering one's self to be a furry means that the person has created a fursona accepts their new lifestyle and interacts with other furies. There are different levels of involvement within the fandom just like any other hobby or fandom. Being a furry to one person may mean that they are involved in the fandom for only a few hours a week where someone else might consider themselves to always be a furry no matter who is around them or what they are doing. Either way, once a member has a fursona and displays that fursona, they are considered to be a furry by the fandom.

Summary

Becoming a furry is not an easy or quick process. It commonly takes a few days to several months to develop a person's fursona. The process typically starts with research or the joining of a local furry group. The longest stage in the process is developing a fursona because finding the right animal or combination of animals. Once the person has their fursona completed in their mind, the final steps include obtaining an artist's rendition, a partial fursuit and/or a full fursuit. Not all furies follow these steps in this order; some may skip steps completely such as opting to own a partial fursuit only.

CHAPTER FIVE: ACCOMPLISHING MEETINGS

Similar to other groups, the Southern Furrries hold monthly meetings. They accomplish many different tasks while at their meetings such as announcements, celebrating birthdays, and other monthly activities. Meetings tend to last roughly 3-4 hours and mainly comprise of fun, food, and friendship.

FURRY MEETINGS

This process model illustrates the typical activities that take place at a Southern Furrries monthly meeting. While at these meetings, most of the groups physical interactions take place and I am able to observe their behavior towards one another without causing any disturbance. I have broken the meeting down into six different areas, with each area display a different side of the group.

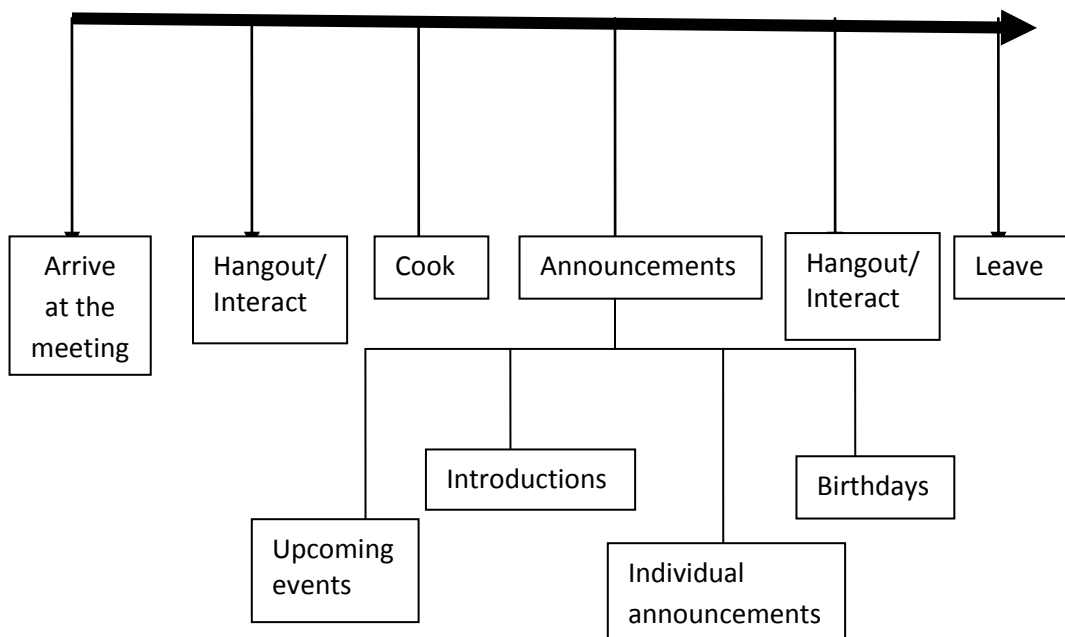


Figure 3: Meeting Process

Arriving at the Meeting

During the first weekend of each month, the Southern Furies hold a group meeting at a local public park. The park has two separate pavilions that the public can reserve for any type of gathering or event. Normally, the group reserves the larger pavilion that is surrounded by walking trails, picnic areas and the playground. Most of the other park attendees can see the group's interactions and activities, and children will occasionally come up and ask to take a picture with one of the members who are wearing a fursuit. Most of the furies do not mind the children at all and enjoy being able to show a positive attribute of the furry lifestyle. On rare occasions, the group will have to assemble in the smaller pavilion if someone has already reserved the larger one. This pavilion is located in its own section of the park and is secluded from most other park goers. As one member, Ryan stated, he "prefers the smaller pavilion because it is surrounded by nature." At either pavilion, the members arrive at different times with each member bringing an item of food for the picnic. While everyone is arriving, most of the members hang out under the pavilion and interact with one another.

Hanging Out/Interacting

According to the Southern Furies website, the point of having meetings is for members to interact with each other and to get to know one another. Since many furies hide their fursonas from their families, coworkers and friends, the meetings allow them to express themselves openly and in the company of accepting others. For example, Betty must keep her fursona a secret while she is at work due to fear of ridicule and judgment. She feels free to express her fursona at the meetings and can wear ears or a bunny tail if she wants.

The pavilion, the large picnic area, contains a number of picnic tables, barbeque grills and even a large swing. Most of the furries walk around, talk with others or sit around a computer watching YouTube videos or browse furry websites. They discuss how their week has been, how work has been going or enjoy the YouTube videos. During this time, some furries will put on their fursuits or show off any additions they have made to their outfits. For example, one of the male furries had just received a new tail for his fox suit and enjoyed showing it off. Most of the interaction at the meeting is similar to that of any group of friends hanging out and talking with one another. At one meeting, for example, many of the members like to sit around catching up with one another on what is going on this week for them or how their family is doing. For example, Betty shared that she had a cancer scare, but thankfully was doing great and was cancer free. The meetings also allow new furries in the area to come out, feel accepted and gain some new friends. For example, I was present when a new member attended his first meeting. Once everyone knew his name and that this was his first meeting, which they found out during announcements, they welcomed him to the group and many members went over to introduce themselves.

Cooking

While most members are hanging out, two or three members are busy cooking hamburgers or hotdogs for everyone. They are typically older members, between 30 and 40 years of age. However, from time to time a few of the younger members cook as well. Whoever feels like cooking that day gets to take charge of the grill. All attending members are asked to bring some type of food so that one member does not get stuck paying for everything. Members bring items such as hamburgers, hotdogs, buns, chips,

drinks, cookies, paper cups, and paper plates. If a member does not bring an item, no one really says anything because the members know that some cannot afford to do so. It appears that once cooking is finished it means that it is time for announcements.

Announcements

The Southern Furrries are a highly organized group and hold different events each month. During each meeting, Betty is in charge of the announcements, which are made either in the middle or at the end of the meeting. Betty is an older member who is highly respected by her fellow members and is highly organized herself. There are four different topics that are discussed during the announcements: upcoming events, introductions, individual announcements and birthdays. The first topic covers what upcoming events the group has planned for the next month. Events include charity events, Christmas in July, additional meetings, conferences and other activities. For example, several of the members participate in children's hospital charities by dressing up in their fursuits to visit. It makes the children happy to see big furry animals coming to visit them while getting treatments. The group also has additional meetings during the month to take care of upcoming meetings and more technical details of the group such as trips to fur conventions. They also participate in Christmas in July, where the group goes to an indoor theme park for the day and has fun while being in the fursuits. During this portion of announcements, members chime in with their thoughts, feelings or questions about any given event. For example, a member asked if anyone had found a bracelet that was missing after the last meeting. When things get a little too loud or out of control, Betty gets everyone back on track with one big yell. For example, at my second meeting the

group got every excited and talkative about the upcoming event of Christmas in July. To get everyone back on track and finish the announcements, Betty gave a big yell of QUIET and everyone slowly stopped talking so that she could finish.

The second topic or area of discussion is what the members like to call “introductions.” This is when members form a large circle and take turn telling everyone about themselves. Each member will say what number in the circle they are, their name, their furry name or names, what animal or animals they are and if they are new to the group. For example, a member might say the following: “Number 32, my name is Chris, my fursona name is Alka, and I am a Labrador retriever.” When they begin introductions, whoever is first will start counting with number one and then each person after will continue to count so that they have an idea of how many members attended the meeting. This exercise really made the group stand out to me because it allows each member to have the spot light on him or herself and makes it easier for new members to feel welcomed. Some members are of course much louder and more energized than others with their introductions. For example, there are several members who are constantly shouting out during announcements. Either they are putting in their thoughts about what was just said or just make funny comments out loud. Betty is always able to get them back on track by asking everyone to please be quite so that she can finish.

The third topic covers any individual announcements that members want to share with the group. These announcements include such topics as art gift raffles, bracelets for sale, back massages for sale, asking for rides and observing sociology graduate students such as myself. For example, one of the few girl members always announces that she is

offering massages for one dollar and makes sure to say that this means only back massages. Another example is when I was given the floor to speech about doing my research on the group. I was able to share with everyone why I was here, what I was collecting and answered any questions any members might have for me. One member does art raffles during each meeting where he will announce what numbers, based on your number in the circle, won a drawing from him. If your number is drawn then you get to pick what type of a picture you want him to draw for you. Once individual announcements are done, the group moves onto topic four which is the celebration of birthdays. The group celebrates that particular month's birthdays during the first meeting of the month with cake that a member has made. The birthday members gather in the middle and everyone sings "Happy Birthday" to them followed by eating cake. They celebrate everyone's birthdays because they feel that is what friends and families do and they consider everyone there to be their friends and family. This normally concludes announcements unless Betty or another long time member has forgotten something that needs to be said.

Once announcements are completed, members of the group continue to hangout and interact with one another. As the meeting starts to wind down, members begin to make their rounds saying good-bye to everyone. The Southern Furrries are very kind and always give hugs when someone is leaving. For example, whenever I start to say my goodbyes it takes me almost 30 minutes to do so because everyone wants a hug and wishes me personally goodbye. I always make sure to say good-bye to Betty because she is one of my biggest supporters and is always so nice and welcoming. She and I always have a talk before I leave and catch up on how everything is going in one another's lives.

They sometimes like to say a big group good bye as people are walking back to their cars. Betty and Louis start to clean up the area and pack up anything that was left behind before calling it quits for the day. Once the pavilion is clean and back to normal, the meeting is over for that day.

Summary

Holding a furry meeting is not as easy as just showing up to their meeting spot. It takes many people time to organize and make sure that everything is running smoothly. Once everyone has arrived, a selected member will start cooking lunch while the others hang out with one another. Half way through the meeting is time for announcements. During this time a selected member of the group will discuss the upcoming events, lead the introductions and birthdays and give time for individual announcements. After announcements are over, everyone goes back to hanging out, eating and having a good time. Once it is time to leave, members start to clean up and say their good byes until next time.

CHAPTER SIX: FURRY AND SELF-IDENTITY

A huge part of becoming a furry is the development of your fursona. This can be a complex process that does not happen overnight. An outsider observer may think of a furry's fursona merely as a performance because many of the member's personalities change when in costume. However, some members say that they are always a furry no matter who is around and that their fursonas are just a better way of showing who they really are.

PERSONA VERSES FURSONA

People are not born to be furies. Sociologically, we assume that one *becomes* a furry (Kotarba and Johnson 2002). Developing the self is a process that takes time and is created through interaction with the society and culture in which a person live (Kotarba and Johnson 2002). Some furies use their fursonas to express emotions that they feel like they cannot express when not in their fursonas such as outgoingness. They only use their fursonas when in the company of those they feel most comfortable around, which for some is everyone regardless of the situation while others are very cautious about to whom they expose their fursonas.

Outgoing Furies in Contrast to Shy

Many of the members found this question to be very insightful because many had never thought about how their furry and non-furry personas differ. They were furies who

were very shy when not in their fursona, but became extremely outgoing and the life of the party while in their fursona. For example, Van, who associates with a wolf, was one of the first people to approach me during my second observation and quickly became very talkative with me:

“I have a shy nature and at time feel the pressures of the world are too much and feel the need to crawl into a hole and disappear for a while. [But while in my fursona] I am artistic, creative, a person who loves to push the envelope on creative experience. I also like entertaining people, giving away smiles and laughs”.

This self is similar to a circus clown who brings laughter and a smile to their face because they have so many wonderful memories from their childhood when they attended the circus (Carmeli 2001). Van is trying to promote the same heartwarming excitement with his fursona by promoting entertainment and smiles. While many of the members expressed this innate shyness to me, some shared a different view on having opposite personality traits.

Some of the members talked about using their fursona personality as a social lubricant because it makes them feel more confident. Members may use their fursona to test out the waters and see what type of person they are dealing with before exposing their full furry side. This way the person can still display their fursona and be open and friendly, but keep their furry side a secret until they have gotten to know the person better. Justin is the member who introduced me to the idea of using one's fursona as a social lubricant: “My fursona is merely a social lubricant for getting to know people better and make more friends without being negatively judged.” Justin is able to turn the furry part of his fursona on and off at will. He has been a furry for

some time now and has been able to fully accept his furry's social position within society such as with his family.

No Fears While in Their Fursona

One of the strongest themes that I routinely heard in interviews was the fear of being judged by others. Almost every member I spoke with told me stories about the backlash they received when disclosing their fursonas to a family member, friend or co-worker. Two of the members described to me how they felt safe to express their true self while in their fursona. The best way to describe their feelings is to relate it to gays who must hide their true identities while being around people who do not agree with their lifestyle. They feel free and safe when they are in the safety of likeminded people. For example, Seth, who associates with Siberian Huskies, feels he can fully express himself with his furry friends: "It is not so much that I change my personality - I guess I could say I feel more comfortable showing more of it when I'm in my fursona with my friends because I know I won't be made fun of for it or treated any differently at least in a negative manner." This feeling of safety is similar to what Kotarba, Fackler and Nowotny (2009) found when studying the Latino music scene. They found that gay Latinos felt the safest when in gay night clubs because they were surrounded by other gays and those who were comfortable with Latino gays. We all have this feeling of safety within our own group of friends; although most people do not have to completely hide a side of their life due to the fear of judgment.

Multi-Personality

Some furies can display two or more different fursonas depending on the situation, one member stood out to me. Matt, a very smart and talkative furry, told me about the six different fursonas that he currently has. This is very similar to the concept of mutable self

where the self can adjust to rapid change in social interaction (Zurcher 1977). “The Mutable Self is a self-concept which affords the individual: full recognition of the four components of self (physical, social, reflective, and oceanic) and, consequently, an openness to the widest possible experience of self” (Zurcher 1977: 35-36). I think it is important for me to share with you how he describes in vast detail each one of his fursonas. Each of his fursonas is somehow related to one another and most likely to his true persona. The relationship between his persona and his fursonas is similar to that of archetypes. Archetypes are items that are modeled after an original type, in this case his persona, and then form a pattern based off that original type (Larson 2004). You will notice below how each one of his fursonas can be related to each other:

“I have six characters and six suits. There are common grounds with them and my human self. All are Catholic, straight, Eagle Scouts, politically aligned with me; all are my size and weight. I am a big guy but I don't care, I really do not have self-image issues.

Now each of them has different facets of the things that make me unique as a person.

Sly - Eastern Timber Wolf - My first and strongest Fursona, is more of a super-ego of me in the sense that he is me pretty much, but he is also able to cut loose be silly here and there, able to talk to women. It took me wearing the suit for a long time to be able to talk to women. I used to be so bashful I would blush five shades of red when a pretty woman would say hi to me. Eventually I realized I didn't need the suit because Sly was me and I didn't need the suit to be him. Sly is a little more assertive and a little more aggressive than I am and in certain social situations he would be really rough around the edges, as I am told I can be sometimes. Sly carries himself with more bravado than I would as a man. He could be a rough and tumble biker in a motorcycle club. That having been said, Sly is very intelligent. Sly is unafraid to show his intelligence.

Star - Alaskan Husky - Second Fursona - Another super-ego, but this one a lot more laid back. He is a dreamer and likes to cuddle. He is more of the softer parts of my psyche. He is also a trickster in a good way - A good hearted and good humored trickster and party animal. Inside this suit I have done such silly stuff I never would have dreamed I would act the way I have in him. Star is the kind who would go to a party and by the night's end, he is wearing a lampshade on his

head. But all that having been said, in the end he is a rock. He will be there for the people he loves no matter how much he has to sacrifice or lose in the process. The name Star is of Dutch origins and according to baby naming sites has two meanings: scholar or shelter. The second, Shelter is more true for Star. Star is intelligent but hides it a bit because he would rather get along with more people, than to show off who he is. Star would be quiet until he hears the heavy metal music play and he has a little to drink, then he becomes the social butterfly.

If Star and Sly were in the room together I think they might not get along. Star would probably think Sly is a slightly aggressive jerk and Sly might think Star was being deceptive and aloof.

Gene - German Shepherd - Third Fursona - Another Super Ego. This one is more of my Catholic roots. In fact if I had my way, I would like to get a shepherds crook, a brown robe and a crucifix to wear with him and call him "Gene the Good Shepherd." He is not evangelical, as in wanting to push everyone's face into religion, but only wants to create awareness to it. He is also friendly. He just wants everyone to love everyone and have a good time.

Pete - Sugar Glider Petaurus breviceps - Fourth Fursona - Pete is another super ego. Pete is another sort of trickster but he is good hearted about it too, also like Star, Pete is also a bit more into snuggling and cuddling. Pete also wants to be like Fonzie a bit though. He wants just a little more attention in the room than Star would want. He not only wants to act charming, he wants to actually be charming though.

Bobby - American Beaver - Fifth Fursona - I haven't really had a lot of time to fully explore Bobby. Bobby is a bit more of a get along with everyone type that I have been trying to incorporate into my personality.

L.S. - Giant Panda - Sixth Fursona - L.S. has a Chinese name but he is as American as I am. The name comes from the list of names that the Smithsonian Zoo had for the baby Panda born in 2004. L.S. which means "Dragon Mountain" or "Dragon Hill" was one of six names that made the final vote for the baby that came to be called Tai-Shan (or Great Mountain.) L.S. is large, a presence in a room, likes to see others and get hugs and acceptance. I guess it is part of who I am to a good degree. L.S. is like Star, Sly, will give everything to save those he loves, but L.S. has the added strength to add to his resolve whereas Star and Sly will take on adversaries with more mind, intelligence and wit. This is not to say L.S. is not intelligent. If I could compare him to a character from Star Trek the Next Generation, L.S. would have most in common with Lieutenant Worf. Strength, justice, honor, equity are the pillars that define L.S".

Not only do all six fursonas have different personalities, but they also all share a common tie with his non-furry persona. Each of Matt's fursonas has a certain trait that Matt would like to

have, but for one reason or another cannot express. I find great interest in Matt because each one of his fursonas is a completely different type of animal, which you normally do not see. Commonly, a furry will only have at most two different fursonas and are similar in animal type.

PERFORMANCE OF FRONT AND BACK STAGE

When I was developing this question, I was afraid that I would not have enough information on each member to generalize my findings. Luckily, I was completely wrong. Most members are extremely well educated and have a vast amount of knowledge that covers many different areas. Many know of Erving Goffman and his theory of dramaturgy, which made this question extremely telling. I approached each member with the idea that many people are what Goffman considers to be actors. Each person has a front stage, the personality we present to our audience, and a back stage, the personality we consider our true self. My initial thoughts were that all members would say that they did have a front and back stage, one being their non-furry self and the other being their fursona. However, I found three different types of performances throughout the furry fandom.

One Stage Performance

The first type of performance is what I will be referring to as a *one stage performance*. A *one stage performance* occurs when a person does not perform a front and a back stage, but instead has only one stage in which they are constantly performing. These members are those who feel like their non-furry self and their fursona are one in the same. Rob, who is a dragon, shared his thoughts with me about having two personas. “Both personalities are the same: lazy, playful, jokingly vain, and affectionate.” Alan,

who is a panda, shared a very similar view to Rob. “I’m outgoing, reasonable, and lend a hand whenever I can. My fursona and I are pretty much alike in personality. I try not to have a dual personality as much, since the fursona is about me.” Both of the men went into further detail about how they did not think that they could handle having two different personas. For all the members in this group it is far easier to just be who they are, no matter who is around. These members may not necessarily tell everyone that they are furies, but their actions and behaviors do not change regardless of who is their audience.

Front and Back Stage Performances

The second type of performance fits Goffman’s theory of dramaturgy perfectly. Each member in this group has two different personas that they alternate in terms of the audience in front of them. All three performance types were distributed fairly equally in the group. Ryan, who is a fox, gave a detailed reason as to why he feels like he needs two separate personas:

“I’d describe my fursona as being playful, kind, helpful, somewhat wise, and I’ll admit I love to cuddle with friends. My normal personality though, is like, helpful, and I feel I’ve got some wisdom. I do try to keep my furry-ness a secret from my family, as I mentioned, however that’s not the reason my fursona and not-fursona personalities are different. It’s mostly because I’m trying to fit into social norms and because I’m still trying to get over a lifetime of shyness. I’ve gotten pretty far in just two months though, judging by how I’m answering this”.

I find it interesting that it was not only the fact that he is keeping his fursona a secret from his family, but also that he is aware of the social norms in our society. He does not want to deal with the criticism of his lifestyle from society.

Center Stage Performance

The final type of performance is what I refer to as a *center stage performance*. *Center stage performance* is when a person's performance is somewhere in the middle of the front and back stage. They are aware of their audience, but still perform some of their back stage self. Many of the members in this performance may display their fursona more prominently depending on who is their audience. Slater, who is a horse, describes this type of performance: "My outward real life personality does not change. It only senses open and closed minded settings and attempts to adjust my outward actions accordingly. When I am in an open minded setting, I feel safe and can let the real me be me. Many furry gatherings make a safe environment to be yourself in." This type of performance may be for those members who are slowly working their way to a *one stage performance*. The members are trying to get a view of how society is going to respond to them if they do choose to display their fursonas at all times.

TYPES OF FURRY IDENTITY

An important feature of the world of furies is the reasons why members choose very specific animals for their fursonas. I categorized the animals chosen by what animal family they belonged to in the animal kingdom. This would allow me to see if similar chosen fursonas would have related personalities or not. I have three main families of animals: feline, canine and weasel, along with two subcategories that are comprised of several different animal families. The other category is comprised of animals that I only had one individual with that animal. It would not be right of me to make assumptions based off of only one fursona of a bear or horse. The second subcategory I have is entitled hybrid/shifter. This particular group of fursonas does not belong to any one animal family, as it is made up of shifters or hybrids. Fursonas that are made up of

several different types of animals all at once are known as hybrids. A shifter is someone who has a fursona that shifts to different animals depending on their mood or situation.

By looking at the makeup and characteristics of each animal family, I hope to shed light on reasons why individuals chose these animals or feel a connection to these animals so much that they wish to create an additional persona. I also am exploring the idea that individuals who share the same fursona act similar and have similar personalities. I spent a great deal of time with these individuals trying to learn the underlying meanings, if any, to what their fursona says about them as a person.

Different Breeds, Gender and Amount of Involvement

The makeup of each animal family says a lot about the type of people who chose to associate with those animals. The first family of animals is the feline family, which is comprised of four members whom are all males. After talking to some members it appears that felines tend to be females rather than males in the fandom, therefore, my results may be skewed. Justin, a very talkative and open member, told me that: “females are usually always cats. I don’t know if that’s because females like cats more or what.” Even though I have no females who belong to this animal family, the lack of female involvement in this study does reflect the greater makeup of the fandom (IARP 2012). There are several different breeds that make up the feline group including a Siamese, black house cat, tiger, and lynx. As you can see, the different breeds round out the feline animal family nicely by including your everyday house cat to large, aggressive, wild cats.

The second family of animals is the canine family, which is the largest family represented with five members who are male and female. The canine group is similar to

Table 1: Types of Furry Identities

Types of Animals	<i>Feline</i>	<i>Canine</i>	<i>Weasel</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Hybrid/Shifter</i>
How many in group	4	5	2	4	2
Different breeds	Siamese, black house cat, tiger, lynx	fox, wolf, Siberian husky, black lab	Ferret, river otter	Bunny, Panda, Horse, Dragon	fox, hyenas, domestic dogs, tiger
Male/Female	Males	Both	Males	Both	Both
Characteristics	cute, playful, mischievous, ADD, grace, power, formidable, appears harmless	playful, curious, benevolent, mischievous, wise, majestic, proud, beautiful, creative, outgoing, friendly	ADHD, like shiny object, take and hide, playful, squeak	cute, playful, loving, lazy, beautiful, dominate, submissive, eat and sleep a lot	nutty, jokesters, trashy, loyalty, playful, joyful
Characteristics similar to real, wild animal?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes and no	n/a
Reasons for choosing the animal	friends input, similar traits, had as a pet	deep interest in animal, similar traits, had as pet	friends input, similar traits, grew up with animal	similar traits, deep interest in animal	similar traits

the feline group in popularity throughout the fandom, according to many members, with most members belonging to one of these two groups. Van, a rather shy member, shared with me that: “many males chose a canine for the fursona because we just aren’t that creative when it comes to expressing ourselves.” Several different breeds make up the canine group including a fox, wolf, Siberian husky and black lab. Similarly to the feline group, the different breeds encompass the entire canine family.

The third family of animals is the weasel family. This is the smallest of the three main families of animals with only two members who are both males. Once again, the characteristics of the group are consistent with the overall fandom, according to members of the group. Perhaps, females do not choose animals from this family because, like myself, they are afraid of weasels or rodents or do not like the animals in general. There are only two different species in this category: ferret and North American river otter.

The fourth family of animals is labeled as other since I only had one animal from each animal family. I did not want to generalize about these fursonas individually; therefore I have grouped them together. This category is made up of four members, both male and female, with animals such as a bunny, panda, horse and dragon. At the group's monthly meetings, there are over 75 members and many of them would fit into this category, they simply choose not to participate. For example, there are approximately 10 or more members in this group alone who are dragons; however, only one dragon offered to participate

The last family of animals is hybrid/shifter. This category is labeled as such because these fursonas use multiple animals or consider themselves to be shifters. There is one female and one male that make up this group. Fox, hyenas, domestic dogs, and tigers are just a few of the animals that they like to change into or will mold with another animal to form one fursona. For example, Kelly who is a shifter, says: "I change my animal depending on what my mood and feelings are." While observing members at the meetings, I have noticed that many people take on a different animal depending on how they are feeling that day.

Characteristics of Fursona

While interviewing the members I asked them to describe their fursona characteristics and then I decided if those matched that of the real wild animal. For the feline family, the following words were used to describe their fursonas: cute, playful, mischievous, ADD, grace, powerful, formidable and appearing harmless. From these words, an overall theme of appealing to others while still maintaining power can be seen. For example, Kris, who associates with a Lynx, shared his feelings on the animal with me: "It appears harmless and playful, most of the time it is. But in times of need that cute little ball of fun is suddenly every bit of the formidable wild animal its bigger cousins are." I would say that these characteristics do match the real, wild animals very well, which demonstrates that these members have taken the time to get to know the behavior of their animal.

The canine family is similar to the feline family in the way that the members related their fursonas characteristics to that of the real animal. The following words were used to describe their fursonas: playful, curious, benevolent, mischievous, wise, majestic, proud, beautiful, creative, outgoing and friendly. An overall theme of helpful and proud can be seen in these descriptions. Brian, whose fursona is a black Labrador, said that the best thing about being a furry was the ability to: "bring a smile to people's faces, having fun with children and charity work." From interviewing and hanging out with this particular group of members, it appears that they are individuals who are willing to help anyone and want to be known as a good people.

The third group is that of the weasel family who can be characterized as: ADHD, like shiny objects, takes and hides things, playful and squeaky. Even though there are only two members in this group, these members were very talkative and provided me

with tons of information. An overall theme of fun and spontaneous can be seen from this group. Justin, whose fursona is that of a ferret, explains how he is similar to a ferret: “I have the attention span of a gnat from my ADHD, I’m always rooting through peoples’ personal belongings, I get flustered from virtually everything and I like shiny objects. All ferrets have ADOS – attention deficit...Oooooo shiny”! This particular family is not for those who are shy or quite while in their fursonas.

The fourth group is the other category that is made up of a bunny, panda, horse and dragon. The following words were used to describe them: cute, playful, loving, lazy, beautiful, dominate, submissive, eat and sleep a lot. It is hard to put an overall theme to the characteristics for this group since it is comprised of different animals. Even though some of the animals in this group are not very popular in this particular furry group that does not mean that the members behind these fursonas are not passionate about their choices. Slater, whose fursona is a horse, explains his passion for horses: “As time passed in real life, I began to notice things that I have always done as related to horses. Soon I felt an attachment inside of me to horses that I still haven’t been able to explain, even to myself.” I love the passion that is felt between the individual and the animal.

The final group is the hybrid/shifter category that has the following characteristics: nutty, jokesters, trashy, loyalty, playful and joyful. Similar to the other group, the hybrid/shifter group does not have an overall theme for the characteristics since it is comprised of different animals. Fred, a hybrid of several different animals with the canine family, shared his feelings within me about why he has multiple sides to his fursonas: “Hyenas seem to fit my outward personality and let more furies accept me as the mess, nutty seeming guy I am. The domestic canine is more of a respect because I

share the same loyalty and playfulness but can be quite tough if cornered.” I am surprised that more furrries do not fall into this category because I feel that I would have difficulty choosing just one animal to describe my personality.

Reasons for Choosing the Animal

During interviews, I asked members how or why they chose the animal they did for their fursonas. Four main reasons were continuously brought up in discussion: similar traits, friends input, deep interest in animal or had as a pet/grew up with animal. The most common response was that they shared similar personality traits or actions with the animal. For example, when Ryan first became a furry he associated himself with cat: “I was playful, curious, a little hyper at times and relaxed at others.” Many members seem to relate the outward characteristics of the animal to how they respond in social situations.

Interestingly, some of the members could not decide for themselves what animal they should be and asked for their friends’ input. Justin explained to me how he chose such a unique animal: “quite honestly, because my friends said I was. I truly lack any form of creativity and originality, so they made my original fursona for me.” Another member, Wayne, knew he wanted to be some time of cat, but needed help figuring out what kind: “I was talking with a furry friend about it while trying to figure out what I am ... whether I had stripes or spots ... I was thinking some sort of big cat and he would simply say, no you’re a house cat.” It can be difficult for some to truly understand how others view them and therefore need the help of a friend to decide which animal best suits their personality.

The third reason why some of the members chose certain animals was based on a deep interest in that animal. It is not hard to imagine that members of the furry fandom love animals of all kind and take a deep interest in their lives. Van shared with me his interest in wolves: “Long before I knew of furrries, I always had a particular affinity for animals, and wolves in particular. I found them to be majestic, beautiful, proud and amazing. I, in many ways, admire certain traits the animal possesses.” This response was very similar to other members like Louis, whose fursona is that of a South China Tiger: “I collect tiger things, prefer feline characters in comics and movies, and I have been known to make cat noises without realizing it.” I feel like this reasoning could help outsiders relate to furrries because almost everyone has some deep interest or collection that they take pride in.

The last reason steams from the individual having the animal as a pet or growing up around the animal. We all know people who consider themselves to be a dog or cat person, and furrries just take that love a step further. Zack, whose fursona is a river otter shared his story with me: “I’ve lived next to water my whole life and there used to be some in my area until development drove them away. The last time I ever saw one in my area I was swimming in my lake and it came up to me in the water and I felt a deep connection and chose it for my fursona.” You could really feel his passion for the animal during the interview and it made me think about how passionate many of us are about the animals that we live with.

Similar Personalities

One of my main goals on developing this typology was to see if furrries who share the same fursona animal have similar personalities or self-identities. Even though it may be

hard to see, I can say that each and every furry has a unique personality. Yes, there are some members who share the same animal who have some similar traits but, they are not exactly alike. That would be like saying that peanut butter and jelly are the same. They may go well together, but they are two distinct foods. Van did a great job of summarizing this idea for me: "People are still just people, acting like the individuals they are, but with a little bit of something extra as a fur. I've met wolves who were shy, others outgoing, some territorial, some open to anyone, some kind, and yes, even some that were cruel. But regardless of the breeds or species, I've noticed that everyone tends to act rather differently." So for those who think that just because someone is a fox, they are going to act like every other fox they have met, is wrong. Just like each person has his or her own personality so does each furry.

INTEREST AND ENGAGEMENT IN FURRIES BY GENDER

When I first started collecting data, I quickly noticed that a large number of furies weremale. As I gathered more data and compared my information with others work in the field, I realized that males seemed to dominate the fandom. This phenomenon caught my addition because I could not understand why this interest in particular was more suited towards males than females. I decided that the best way to find an answer would be to ask the members for their thoughts. Thankfully, all of the members I asked had useful reasons as to why females tend to avoid the fandom.

More Males Use the Internet

According to Hu, Zhang, Dai and Zhang (2012), males believe that they are more knowledgeable and use the Internet more than females. This was the first issue brought up when discussing the topic. Seth shared his views with me on why he feels this is true:

“I would guess it would have something to do with the male population dominating the Internet population and since a lot of people discover out fandom thought the Internet more males than females would discover us simply because more of them are on the internet.” If the research holds true that males tend to use the Internet more than females, it does not explain the lack of participation by females completely. Even though the furry fandom is popular online, there is still a large number of books and art on the fandom where females could develop their interest.

Number of Males is Intimidating for Women

The second explanation for the gender difference is due to sheer number of males in the activity. Wayne expressed his opinion on the matter by saying: “if I recall, IARP suggested at the Furry Fiesta panel this year that females see how many males there are and become either intimidated there are so many or uninterested because there are so few females.” IARP was discussed earlier and is the panel that Ph.D. student Courtney or Nuka, as he is known in the furry world, is working on. Other academics have found similar results as IARP throughout the Internet. Herring (2003) found that women who used the Internet were more likely to feel overwhelmed and harassed both sexually and non-sexually. However, this does not explain why some females stay in the fandom. I believe it has less to do with harassment or fear and more to do with the number of male participants being so great. It can be very overwhelming in any situation for a woman to enter a predominately-male field.

Similar to Certain Gendered Job Industries

This idea ties into the next explanation of gender differences within the fandom. Wayne also expressed his belief that the difference in male and female participation in

the fandom is similar to certain job fields that are heavily one-gender dominated. “I can just assume that it is a social circle that seems to be easier for males to enter than females for one reason or another. Similar to how males dominate certain job industries while females dominate others.” This on-gendered dominate career field can be seen through the science community. While there is no real reason that more men enter the science world over woman, some believe it has to do with family support (Buday, Stake and Peterson 2012). Perhaps, females are not as supported by their families to enter fandoms because it is not what society expects of females.

Expectations by Society

Expectations from our society play a major role in the type of activities we join. By following society’s expectations, we feel accepted and part of the society around us. Ryan feels this may be the reason why more males participate in the furry fandom than do females:

“When I started thinking about this, I started noticing there are hardly any females who would bench press at the gym I go to, even when it’s packed full. At my work, hardly any females purchase fishing supplies or hunting supplies. When you think about it, society expects bench-pressing to be a male thing, same with hunting and fishing. Society expects females stick with things like yoga, bodyweight exercises and cardio equipment in the gym and for spots and outdoors, they are expected to be into running, jogging, or walking than anything else under that category. Similarly, society has begun to expect furies to be males. So I assume that the sole reason for the gender imbalance is because of the expectations of society”.

I think that Ryan is on to something here because as I stated in the last section, societal expectations are for each genders to work in particular job fields when there is no practical real reason why both genders could not work there. An example of social expectations based on gender can be seen in Padavic and Butterfield (2011), who examined lesbian families and parenthood. The authors found that regardless of the males absent, society would always label one of the females the mother and one the father because both genders are expected

in a family. Social expectations are hard to live down because we are accustomed to them and have been brought up to accept them without questioning.

Summary

Chapter five examined a number of topics related to self-identity. Many furies feel that their fursonas allow them to be less shy or have no fear in social situations. The fursona gives them the courage to act differently in situations in which they would normally be very shy or afraid to interact with others. Some furies even take on having multiple fursonas so that they can apply each fursona to a different social situation.

I wrote in detail about Goffman's theory of dramaturgy which states that we are all actors performing on a stage. Our performance is based upon who is in the audience resulting in a front stage, what we act for the audience, and a back stage, which is our true self. I argued that some furies fit Goffman's theory perfectly while others do not. Some perform what I call a *one stage performance* where the individual is constantly performing his true self, no matter who is in the audience. Lastly, some individuals perform what I call a *center stage performance* where a person's performance is somewhere in the middle of the front and back stage. They are aware of their audiences, but still perform some of their back stage self with caution.

I also discussed the types of animals that the furies use for their fursonas. I listed five main animal families that the members fell into; feline, canine, weasel, other, and hybrid/shifter. Each family has their own type of characteristics that the members feel like they portray. From these characteristics, I showed how their fursonas related to the real life wild animals. I also described how each member chose their animal and found that they did

so by talking with friends, owning the animal as a pet, having similar traits, growing up around the animal or by having a deep interest in the animal.

Lastly, I discussed the interest/engagement in furies by gender. There is a low proportion of females to males in the fandom. The members suggested several reasons as to why this may be: more males use the Internet, the number of males in the fandom is intimidating for women, the gap is similar to certain gendered job industries, and the societal and cultural expectations for women.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE EVERYDAY LIFE OF A FURRY

The life of a furry is no different from anyone else's, except for partaking in *fur time*. *Fur time* is the time a person spends doing furry related tasks such as looking at furry websites, chatting with other furs, working on their fursuits or hanging out with other furies. The amount of time a furry spends in *fur time* can vary from only once a week to everyday all day. For example, when talking to Kris about how much time he spends doing furry related activities, he said he only spends about an hour a day:

“It's a hobby. A lot of times my focus is on work and school so I may visit a few furies sites and spend perhaps 15-30 minutes a day. Other times I get involved in a forums conversation of such and I might spend an hour a day. For me personally, it is a secondary hobby and a way to socialize and befriend people I know I will get along with. By comparisons my video game hobby eats up far more time”.

For others, being a furry is not something you do, but rather is something you are from the inside. Van is one of the furies who feels like he is always a furry no matter the time, day or who is around:

“Furry isn't really something you DO. It's a term defining an interest. It's kind of like asking a sports fan how much time a day do you spend being a sports fan. It's not as if they or I turn on our interest on demand. If asked if we are, the answer is, we are. But I don't stop being a furry when I eat my eggs and bacon, and yet such activity would hardly be considered a furry action”.

Regardless of how much time one spends doing *fur time*, most of their lives are no different than anyone else's. Outsiders want to believe that they spend their whole day in their fursuits participating in sexual rituals, but that is not generally the case. Seth, who is

a Husky, said it best by stating: “I wouldn't say my everyday life is much different than anyone else's besides the occasional fun stroll in costume with friends I have a pretty normal life.” Just because someone is involved in a hobby or fandom does not mean that they are not normal people who do normal things like going to work, school or taking care of a family. Louis described what some people think a furries day might be like, but is not:

“The same as everyone else's. I wake up, put my paws on one legging at a time and then prance about in the fields until the sun comes down. I kid, I kid. I wake up, go to work, come home and play video games or I hang out with friends. The only difference would be that I get on furry related sites and talk to other furries. But that is no different than a sports fan talking to other sports fans online”.

Perhaps, critics wish that furries' lives were different from their own so that they could have a basis for criticizing furries, but no widespread differences exist. Everyone does something during their day that makes them unique, whether it is ordering two Grande coffees without milk, wearing no make-up in public or wearing a fursuit. Furries have just found a way to stand out in an otherwise boring world.

WHAT PROBLEMS DO FURRIES FACE

Being a furry is not a simple pastime that others understand and accept. Many observers do not understand the furry lifestyle and how it creates problems for furries. Issues come with the territory of being a furry and I wanted to explore the issues with which they deal. Many members I talked with were dealing with different sorts of issues, whereas a select few have no issues at all. Below I go into detail about the problems they face and why they believe that they are the target of this negativity. In the following section, I will discuss how the members handle their critics.

Stigma from the Media

One of the most prominent issues that furies must deal with is handling the stigma that the media has created. In most of the media coverage on the fandom, the group is displayed as a sex orientated group who like to engage in sexual activities while in their fursuits. This type of action can be seen on television shows such as *CSI* and MTV's *True Life: Sex2K*. Numerous members were very vocal on this issue because they are constantly defending themselves from it. Van discussed his feelings with me and was extremely passionate about how unfair the media can be sometimes. "The biggest problem is the blatant discrimination and misinformation surrounding furs these days. Thanks to bad reporting, misrepresented information and a lack of careful consideration, being "ousted" as a fur at work could result in immediate termination." Lisa, one of the few girl members also shared her thoughts with me. "I face the fact that it's kinda hard to show it in public since everybody thinks of us as a big sex group. But we are not, we are better than that by creating things, having events, recognizing people's birthdays and helping each other out when needed. We are all just a big family." It was hard to listen to their story of being targeted as this evil sex crazed group, when all they have is a very passionate and spiritual view towards animals.

Something Weird

Since our society does not accept the furry lifestyle, many furies feel that society judges them as being weird or an outcast. Several members shared the feeling of constantly being stared at by others while out in their ears or tails. Alan explained how even before he joined the fandom, he felt like he was judged based upon his personality. "Discrimination, judgment and raised eyebrows. Unfortunately, it was like that for me growing up long before I joined the fandom. Most of the time, people may push you

away from them just because you're different. You can still live out a normal life and people would still look at you from a whole different perspective." Sometimes, the furry fandom is also linked with other Internet fandoms that are also deemed different. Justin discussed how the furry fandom has been linked to the My Little Pony Fandom. "More recently, the high rise of the My Little Pony fandom has decided to merge itself with the furry fandom. Albeit, it's only a small, yet very decadent percentile of the collective that act as our vox populi, which is how we get such a horrid reputation for being repugnant heathens" . As more Internet fandoms are created, the newer ones try to latch onto older fandoms that are more established and better known. This action only brings the group more grief as they are continued to be label different and weird.

Drama within Group

Even though the furry fandom is a close network of friends, and they think of themselves as a family, there is still drama within the group. For some of the older members who have grown with the fandom, the younger furrries can cause drama due to their immaturity. Steven, who is in his mid-thirties, shared that: "there is a lot of drama at times," even though their furry group is quite small when compared to groups around the country. He goes on to say that he does not like the younger furrries because they can cause unnecessary drama. Wayne, a younger furry, explained that while drama is high in the group, he manages to stay out of it because he: "seems to get along with everybody." Drama is common to any group because not everyone is going to get along. While sharing my experience trying to get involved with another city's furry group, the Southern Furrries explained to me that the other furry group is very self-centered and only

lets their friends enter the group. Therefore, the drama is not just within the individual groups, but also is across the different furry groups.

Family Non-Understanding

With the way the media spins the furry fandom, it can be very difficult for furries to tell their families about their membership. Approximately, two-thirds of the members I talked with shared that they could not tell their families about being a furry due to the fear of ridicule and misunderstanding. Zack, a longtime member, explained his hesitation in telling his father about being a furry: “I do hide the fact I’m a furry from my father as he would not approve of it all that much. The avoidance helps keep my life simpler and save me from an awkward conversation, not that it would change much since everyone else in my family knows what I’m up to.” Wayne and Ryan also stated that they could not tell their families because they were both very conservative in their ways and would not listen to their side of the story, rather believing the media instead. Since the media are everywhere, it is easy for a family member to Google the term furry and find dozen of websites that might mislead them as to what a furry really is. For example, they might see the episode of CSI that displays furries as a group that participates in orgies or read the article *Vanity Fair* published that also described furries as a purely sexual group.

Balancing a Double Life

Whereas only a few members shared that they have to balance a double life due to the fear of judgment, this feelings is widely noted online. Justin explains his feeling on keeping his fursona a secret: “no one but my closet friends know. Not even the family I live with knows what I do. Worrying about being judged or lumped into the misconception of what furries are, if anyone finds out.” It can be extremely hard for these

furries because they constantly have to switch who they are based upon their surroundings and changing audiences. The fear of slipping or someone finding out is greater due to the Internet and social media. While some furries do not consider themselves as living a double life; if their jobs found out about the fandom they could be terminated immediately. For example Van, who works in the educational field, said that he could get fired for being a furry because his district has a strict policy on participating in anything that can be deemed sexual.

Difficulty Associating with Other Humans

Even though this is not a popular issue within the furry fandom, some members feel as though they cannot relate to humans or their furry counterparts. Fred, who associates with the canine family, is the only member to express this feeling: “for me being more of a therian, or animal spirit currently in a human body in my belief, it’s hard to associate with many other humans. Even most furries I find myself far displaced from.” This feeling can be hard to understand for most outsiders and even some furries since it is not very popular across the larger fandom. However, more people are becoming open to the idea of others feeling like they are trapped in the wrong body. For example, this idea of being trapped in the wrong body is becoming a very normal experience.

No Problems

There are those lucky few who experience no issues being a furry. Kris, a very outgoing and younger furry, shared that he is lucky when it comes to having issues:

“I really don’t face any problems. I’m lucky. I’m an outgoing guy who is known for being a good and selfless problem. When I finally do inform people I’m a furry it is carefully and only after they begin to know me. I also do so completely

without shame because there is nothing for me to be ashamed of. My family knows, my friends know, and my work associates know”.

Even though there were only two members in The Southern Furrries who felt like they experienced no issues as a result of being a furry, the trend of acceptance is spreading throughout the fandom. While the Internet can cause problems for fandoms, it can also be a place for others to educate themselves on what the fandom is truly about.

HOW TO HANDLE CRITICS

It is important to understand how furrries handle their critics because it is a negative issue that is attached to the group. I have listed below common strategies for handling their critics.

Educating Critics

The most popular way to handle someone who is criticizing or making fun of furrries is to educate them. Instead of arguing and creating a bigger issue, most of the members talked about sharing information with the person on the fandom. Louis, who is a predominate member in the group, went into great detail about the information that he shares with outsiders:

“The first method, if the audience is receptive enough to listen, is to point out that humans are in fact anthropomorphic animals. Humans are merely tailless monkeys who speak, walk on two legs and wear clothes. All we are doing is theorizing about what the outcome would be if you start out with a different animal than a monkey. Secondly, is to point out that there is already a largely excepted furry presence in the world such as talking animals in stories from Aesop’s fables to the latest movie from Disney, in artwork from the animal headed Gods of ancient Egypt, to the velvet paintings of dogs playing poker and let’s not forget sports mascot costumes”.

He gives great historical examples of how furrries are all around and have shared a place on the Earth with us since the dawn of time. Many other furrries said that they simply

discuss how people should not believe everything they see and hear from the media and what the fandom means to them. For example, Van, who is a speaker at furry conventions, believes that you should: “set the record straight with logic and reason and if nothing else, remind them of the line their parents probably told them about as kids saying don’t believe everything you see on television.” Education can go a long way with some people who are willing to listen. Unfortunately, there will always be those who do not care to listen and want to believe what they see as the truth.

Avoid

The second most popular way to handle critics is to avoid them. People can get very nasty when it comes to furies and members chose to just avoid the situation completely so that it does not escalate into something bigger. Van will avoid the person if educating them will not work:

Sometime “I get a monumental bonehead who has just decided to believe what they have chosen to believe based on what little evidence they have gleaned and who will not listen to reason or intelligence. When I run into such individuals, the best course is to simply leave an ignore them. These are the ones who are well known to take anything said directly out of context and as such are the most dangerous to furies”.

Avoidance is the easiest way to handle some people and not create a scene. When someone is not willing to back down with their criticism, some furies like Wayne, will smile and say: “different strokes for different folks.” Many members talked about not feeding into the attacker by letting it seem like they are not a bother or upsetting them. For example, Kris who is a Lynx, shared his strategy on how to avoid close minded people:

“If someone is completely close minded and just wants to cause trouble I just politely excuse myself from the conversation while wishing them well. No parting shots, no mad, just agree to disagree and take a neutral path out of the

conversation and go about your day. If you act respectable it is them that will look bad, not you”.

Most members seem to agree that the last thing you should do is feed into the attack and sink down to his or her level. By being civil with the person regardless of how they handle the situation, you will always come out the winner.

Do Not Let it Bother Me

Similarly to avoiding critics is also not letting them bother you. Sometimes that can be easier said than done, but a few furies explained that this was the best course of action. Ryan, who is a multi-tailed fox, said: “I just shrug it off usually. There’s no point trying to argue with a critic in my opinion. They won’t take the opinion of who they’re critiquing very easily.” Likewise, Lisa, who is one of only three females in the study, explained how she just ignores them: “I don’t bother myself with people that judge a book by its cover. Most people hear furry and think sex but they need to pick up the book, turn a page and read closer and understand what we stand for instead of just assuming.” Steven and Kelly feel like there will always be: “haters out there” and “the only approval they need is their own.” Some members handle critics more easily than others and try to lead by example by walking away from the situation. At the end of the day, a bully is always going to be a bully until someone has the courage to stand up for what they believe in.

Summary

The everyday life of a furry is really no different from anyone else’s life. The only difference is that they engage in what I call *fur time* which is the time spent during furry related activities such as chatting with other furies or checking out furry websites. Some

members expressed that they are always in *fur time* because being a furry is not something they quit being. Other only spend a few hours a week participating in *fur time*.

Even though they spend their days relatively similar to everyone else's, they do have problems to deal with. Being a furry sometimes comes with issues that have to be dealt with. Problems that furry face are stigma from the media, being labeled as something weird, drama within the group, families not understanding, leading a double life and having a hard time associating with other humans.

Learning how to handle criticism is something that furies must learn early on. While a few members expressed never having to deal with criticism, the majority has dealt with issues before. Most of the furies handled their critics by educating them about furies, avoiding them all together or by not letting their negative comments get to them.

CHAPTER EIGHT: LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

There are several limitations to this study. I review these limitations and suggest what future research could do to enhance this study and learn more about the furry fandom.

LIMITATIONS

Since this is the first qualitative study directed to the furry fandom, there are several limitations to this study. One of the main issues is the sample size of furies that were interviewed. Out of the 28 furies who initially signed up, only 17 completed every interview that took place. The lack of participation may be caused by the already negative stigma that the media has associated with furies, which in turn caused the participants to be wary of the study. Other issues may have been the in-depth questions that required the participants to look inside themselves and gain an understanding of why and how they became a furry. To overcome this limitation, future research may want to give the participants some type of incentive to participate. In addition, future ethnographic research should describe furry groups in a range of social settings and situations.

Another limitation is that this study only covered one local fandom group from one of the largest cities in America. Their feelings may not be generalizable to other furies from different cities and states. Since this was a qualitative study, the findings are not generalizable to the entire universe of fandom. Nevertheless, the overall composition of the group, e.g., the proportion of males to females and age profiles, compare well with

other descriptions in the literature (IARP 2012). Further research should be comparative and based upon the finding presented here on comparing.

The last limitation is the lack of prior research studies on this topic. While others such as Rust (2002), Osaki (2008) and Evans (2008) have collected survey data on furies; their research was never academically published. The IARP (2012) holds the only academically published work on the furry fandom and is still in data collection for their longitudinal study. However, similar to the work of Rust, Osaki and Evans, IARP is focusing on quantitative data. There is a need for more qualitative data to be collected on the furry fandom.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this research was to gain an understanding of the furry fandom, find out what it means to be a furry, and examine how furies handle self-identity within their chosen fursonas. Furies are people who have some interest in anthropomorphic animals. I define anthropomorphic animals as animals that possess human-like features either through physical resemblance or through actions. By using Erving Goffman's theory of dramaturgy, the concept of a fursona was deconstructed and was related to the creation of the self and self-identity. An ethnography study allowed for an in-depth look into how a person learned of the furry fandom, developed their fursona and present and/or hid their fursona based on their audience.

Gaining an understanding of the furry fandom was crucial for this research because the fandom is made up of several different types of furies. There are those who are interested in the artistic aspects, those who have a spiritual connection with animals, those who like to dress the part and those few who participate in the fandom for the

sexual aspect. The fandom is constantly at battle with the media for representing the fandom as a highly sexualized group and must also deal with anti-furries who like to bully furries based on the sole issue of them being a furry. The fandom has several ways of handling attacks such as educating their attacker, avoiding them or simply trying to not let the negativity get to them.

After gaining an insight on the fandom its self, what it truly means to be a furry comes to light. The development of a fursona takes time and thought and rarely happens overnight. Deciding to become a furry can be a long process in which the person may or may not begin Internet research, join a local group or website, develop his or her fursona and obtain a fursuit (partial or full). When choosing the animal or animals for a fursona, the member puts a lot of thought into what personality traits the animal(s) has and what they want to be seen as. Overall, a furries life is really no different from anyone else's except for *fur time* which is the time spent doing furry related activities. *Fur time* can be related to the time a sports fan spending watching games or a car fanatic spends working on their sport car.

Lastly, the development of self-identity within the fandom is a complex process. A member's persona and fursona tend to differ because they use their fursona to portray those emotions such as outgoingness that they feel like they cannot normally display. Some members only show their fursonas when they feel safe around their audience. Many members stated that they are always in their fursonas because they are always a furry, regardless of who is around. Although furries argue that being a furry is not something they do, it is something they are, sociologically we can say that becoming a furry is a social construction.

APPENDIX A

The following is a list of important terms used by furrries to communicate with each other and to establish a sense of self-identity. They are defined as the members have defined the terms in the fandom.

GLOSSARY OF FURRY TERMS

1. Anthro – short for anthropomorphic animal
2. Anthropomorphic animal - animals that possess human-like features either through physical resemblance or through actions
3. Back stage – where the performer can be their true self without an audience watching
4. Center stage performance - is when a person's performance is somewhere in the middle of the front and back stage. They are aware of their audience, but still perform some of their back stage self.
5. Fandom – is a group of fans of a particular activity or interest that develops a subculture based upon that activity or interest
6. Front stage – where the performer performs based on who their audience is
7. Fur – is short hand for a furry.
8. Furcon – is a convention that is specifically for the furry fandom.
9. Furry – someone who has an interest in anthropomorphic animals
10. Fursonas – is a created persona for their furry animal, similar to a personality.

11. Fursuit – is the costume that many furries wear to display their fursonas.
12. Non-yiff – is when a furry does not take place in sexual intercourse involving fursuits.
13. One stage performance - is when a person does not perform a front and a back stage, but instead has only one stage in which they are constantly performing. These members are those who feel like their non-furry self and their fursona are one in the same.
14. Plushophilia – someone who has sexual interest in stuffed animals
15. Yiffing – is when two furries engage in sexual intercourse while wearing their fursuits.

APPENDIX B

SUMMARY OF OBSERVATIONS

During the course of this study, I conducted three major observations of the Southern Furies. The following are summary statements of those observations.

March 3, 2012

A few days ago I was invited to attend a furry meeting that was taking place a few minutes away from where my parents live. I had only talked to one of the members through email about attending and didn't even know his/her real name. I decided it would be best to bring along a friend (Brittani) so that if something went wrong (I don't know what I thought would go wrong) I had someone else there with me.

When we arrived, there were already 15 members there, all just hanging out and cooking some BBQ. I approached the first person I saw and introduced myself and they suggested I go and speak with who they considered to be in charge. I quickly found "Betty" * and told her why we were there and she said that normally they have announcements towards the end of their get together and that's when she would introduce me. Brittani and I sat around for about an hour with no one really talking with us (we didn't exactly approach anyone either) and I honestly thought that this wasn't going to work out. I told "Betty" that we were going to have to leave early since I still had to drive back home and it was getting late. She said that she would go ahead and do the announcements early so that I

would have a chance to let everyone know what I was doing. Their group is highly organized if I do say so. Everyone gathered around when she started talking. She shared upcoming events, announced whose birthdays were this month and then introduced me. Once I told everyone what I was there for and would be doing for my thesis they welcomed me with open arms. Everyone came up to me and started talking about things I should know about furies. I had a signup sheet for those who were interested in being by me and I was surprised to get 18 people to sign up! We ended up staying for about another hour and a half because everyone wanted to talk to me.

I noticed that once they knew that I was not there to ask them about anything sexual or deviant, they were willing to help me. I can understand why they would be so hesitant about me since I don't exactly look like a furry (most were wearing some type of tail or ears).

Some of them even got into their full fursuits for me and they were awesome! A fursuit is basically a costume of their fursona. Fursona is the personality they take on that helps them portray the animal of their choosing. To the awesome person with the steampunk rabbit outfit...freaking amazing! Seriously one of the coolest things I've ever seen.

I'm hoping to join the "Southern Furies" * group again when they meet next. I have also just emailed interview questions to everyone who is participating and am waiting to receive all of them back. By emailing them the questions, it allows the participants to take their time and answer as many or as few questions they feel comfortable with.

* indicates a pseudonym being used

April 1, 2012

This was the second furry meeting that I would be attending and it took place at the same park as the previous meeting. Once again I brought along my friend Brittani for moral support and she is always down for an adventure. I was a little nervous for this meeting because it was on April Fool's Day and I didn't know if this was going to be a big thing for the group to participate in (turns out it wasn't).

The meetings are generally four hours long, but people usually start arriving an hour before the meeting to make sure that the pavilion is not being used by anyone else. I decided to show up half way through the meeting so that more furies would be there and so I wouldn't be interrupting their normal routines. Normally, Betty runs the meetings since she is one of the older members, but as she announced at the last meeting, she has a new job and has to work on Sundays. Another older woman named Cindy took her place and didn't miss a beat.

When I first arrived, there were members who weren't at the last meeting who gave me odd looks. However, I was quickly met with hellos from the other members and was asked how my research was coming. I must say that I'm very happy that everyone in this group is so open and welcoming towards me, it makes my job so much easier. I sat down at one of the picnic benches with my notepad and just took notes over what other members were doing. Of course some of the more open furies quickly came and sat with me. We talked for almost the whole meeting about my research, college, jobs, furies, and the Internet in general. They are so open and willing to share with me.

While I was talking, I was able to notice what the other members were doing around me. Many had brought their laptops and were looking things up, occasionally calling people over to watch a video or read an article. Another group of males, who haven't really accepted me yet, were off to the side smoking from a hookah someone had brought. A few of the older members were gathered around the BBQ pit, talking and cooking food for everyone. Everyone else was just kind of going around, talking with everyone.

Once it was time for announcements to start everyone gathered around under the pavilion. Cindy was in charge today and started with whose birthdays we were celebrating today. Each month, either Cindy or Betty, brings a cake with the names of everyone who has a birthday that month. We all sang Happy Birthday to them and then ate some cake while announcements continued. I should say that the cake was in the shape of a penis, something that didn't surprise the group. Each month the birthday cake is in the shape of a different body part. I don't know why, but everyone laughed at it.

The rest of the announced centered on upcoming events, movie nights, and my research. When it was my turn to speak, I introduced myself again for those who weren't there last month and explained my study. A few of the members who I had interviewed already told everyone that I was very professional about everything and a really nice person. I told everyone that I had consent forms ready and that they could take them home, look over them, and then scan or mail them to me once they were signed. I also said that if they have any questions or issues with the consent form to please contact me or my chair professor.

About 20 members took the consent forms and asked when I would be sending more questions. I told them I would be sending a few more out that night and that they could take as much time as needed getting them back to me. When the meeting was over I told everyone good-bye and received tons of hugs from the group. They are a very fun and interesting group to hand out with.

May 5, 2012

This was my third meeting to attend and by now, I have gotten to know some of the members. When Brittani and I arrived, Betty was in the middle of doing announcements, which were happening earlier than normal due to the heat that day. She waved to us as we walked up and finished her announcement. During so, Betty introduced me again for those who were not at the last meetings and said that my work could be trusted. This made me feel so excited and honored that they are enjoying my questions and me! I once again told the group about my work and myself and had a signup sheet available.

After the announcements, I had a few new members come up and volunteer to work with me. I also had some of the regulars come and talk to me about how things were going and even offered me to put their costume paws on, which of course I did. Some of the guys are going to send me pictures of their full fur suits so that I can show everyone what I am talking about.

Due to the heat and humidity that day, the meeting was already winding down after about an hour and half. I said my good byes to everyone, which can talk a while when everyone wants a hug. The next meeting is going to take place at a member's house and it's a pool party! I'm super excited about this!!!

APPENDIX C

PICTURES



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