

**Community and Malleable Identity in the Furry Fandom**

by

Selina Tyne Heidinger

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the social and personal aspects of identity creation in the furry fandom – a fandom centred around anthropomorphic characters. Based on data collected from 25 online interviews of furry community members, I learned that furies challenge and create social norms outside of the mainstream to find belonging within the furry fandom. The various furry spaces populated by members (e.g., furry-specific websites or conventions) encourage the safe exploration and assertion of identities that may be maligned in other spaces. The data is analyzed in two broad categories: external elements addressed in the sections on norms and belonging; and internal dynamics examined in the sections on fursona (anthropomorphic avatar) embodiment and identity. This thesis concludes that furies construct malleable identities through the creation and use of fursonas, and based on one interviewee's assertion, fully explores the concept of identity as a form of collaborative fiction.

## Acknowledgements

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## Section 1: Introduction

### This Study

I have always struggled to feel connected to humans, to understand them, to identify with them. I attribute this to being part of my personal experience with autism. On the other hand, I find it far easier to understand, care for, and feel a sense of kinship with non-human animals. Learning human body language and social conventions is an ongoing battle for me that requires active observation and analysis, whereas the body language and emotions of non-human animals feels more natural to me, clicking in my brain without having to make an effort to train myself in their manner. Facial expressions are exhausting for me to maintain throughout the day as I attempt to carefully consider each and every one during performances of human engagement. My human ears twitch at sudden, startling noises, and strong emotions evoke a sense of far more bestial phantom ears moving in response. I am more likely to feel connected with anthropomorphic characters when I consume entertainment media; their body language is often familiar, meaning I do not have to struggle as much with analyzing human facial expressions and tone of voice. To me, the furry fandom (a fandom centred around anthropomorphic characters) felt like a community celebrating anthropomorphism, depicting themselves and the stories they wish to tell through a lens both human and non-human. I find furries (members of the furry fandom) extremely fun to engage with and be around, and the

opportunity to analyze them and learn from them—not because I must, but because I really want to—was simply fun and it resonated with me.

The furry fandom is a deeply interesting example of identity formation, self-discovery, and a community that aids in the exploration and validation of identity. Learning from furies provides insight into individual furies, the furry community, and how these topics on identity may also be addressed when looking at non-furies. This research focuses on a niche community, but the subject and the outcomes can be applied to other groups. The furry fandom has its own unique aspects, but it is not entirely removed from other communities, and the degree of difference or overlap will vary. While this same topic can be studied by researching a different community, the specifics of how furies engage with identity are valuable to scholarship on identity.

My main research question for this study centred around if/how the creation and use of fursonas impacted a furry's sense of self, and the ways in which furies identify. The question itself was whether the process of self-reflection and the performance of one's fursona played a role in further identity creation outside of the fandom. I was particularly interested in whether the embodiment of alternative species impacts relationships with human identity and vice versa. How do individuals conceptualize human identity after spending time embodying non-human species?

Through this study, I came to the conclusion that—to borrow from one of the interviewees—identity is a work of collaborative fiction, and that its formation and ongoing creation is challenged, defined, and reinforced each day within the furry community. I will first

introduce my research, and describe the furry fandom, my methodologies and positionality within. I will then introduce the interviewees, followed by an exploration of major themes that emerged in this work. Finally, drawing upon insights from the interviewees, I suggest that the formation of identity is a form of collaborative fiction, and that the furry fandom provides safe spaces within which to negotiate, create, and recreate identity that may be maligned in other spaces. This thesis contributes to scant current scholarship on furies and explores identity formation within this fan-based group.

Who/What is a Furry?

The furry fandom is a community of people who enjoy anthropomorphic characters. These are non-human characters that incorporate human attributes. The furry fandom is particularly focused on anthropomorphized non-human animals and creatures, both real and imaginary. However, anthropomorphized characters in general are not limited to creatures and can include the inanimate or abstract. When I asked interviewees what it takes to be considered a furry, the majority said it only requires enjoying anthropomorphic characters and personally identifying as a furry. The distinction of how one identifies is important. Anthropomorphic characters are highly popular and were found in many forms of media across the world far before the inception of the furry community. Such characters can be found in mythology, fables and fairytales, television, modern and ancient works of art. Not all fans of media containing anthropomorphism are a part of the furry fandom, as they do not specifically

identify as such. The specificities of who are furies and what that label entails varies between members of the fandom, so it must be understood that any generalizations will not apply to the entirety of the community. This study instead aims to understand a few furry individuals and compare their commonalities and differences to add insight into the fandom and its members.

Fandom is an essential part of this study, and the ways it is defined differ amongst academics. In his book introducing readers to fandom studies, Duffet defines fandom as, “a way of identifying oneself on a deep level as being a fan and enacting that role (e.g. ‘My fandom for manga cartoons’).”<sup>1</sup> This particular definition does not align with my own views on the word fandom, or with the way I have seen it used by others inside and outside of furry fan spaces. While fandom can be used the way Duffet describes, I have mainly used and observed the word to primarily be in reference to a collective of specific fans. This is closer to Duffet’s definitions of ‘fan base’ and ‘fan community,’<sup>2</sup> but I feel it is more representative of the language used in fan spaces I have observed and by this study’s interviewees.

To me, a fandom is primarily a community based around members self-identifying as enthusiasts or followers of a particular media, person, or activity. This does not, however, necessitate active participation and interaction amongst community members. Some individuals may identify as part of a fandom while engaging with the community in a more passive fashion. This was the case with some of my interviewees. They would scroll through fandom webpages without participating in activities or conversations, often labelling

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Duffet, *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 293.

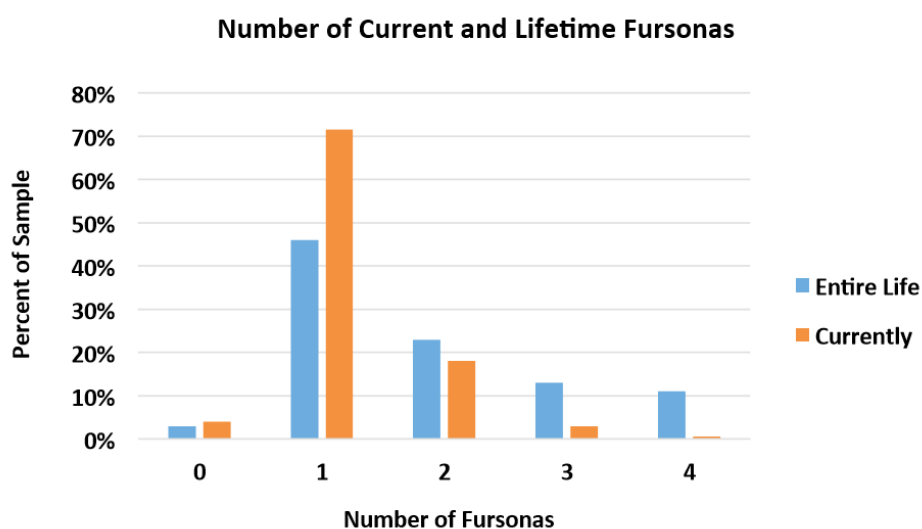
<sup>2</sup> Duffet, 293.

themselves as “lurkers” as opposed to more social participants. Being a lurker did not prevent these individuals from common furry fandom activities (i.e., designing a fursona, commissioning artwork, consuming furry media, etc.), and they still identified themselves as furies. They still considered themselves as part of the fandom, despite possibly feeling on the fringes of it. I will use furry fandom/community interchangeably in this thesis.

There is no one singular definition of a furry or of the furry community. People will categorize, identify, and conduct themselves in different ways. This section is meant to be a brief overview of some key definitions, terms, and generalizations for anyone unfamiliar with what is known to many as the furry fandom. My descriptions are based upon my own experiences and observations both during and before this study, as well as information gained from conducting the interviews with furies. This study does not intend to find a broad truth that can be applied to the fandom at large, but rather to examine the particularities of a handful of individual members to better understand trends within the fandom. Their responses may echo the experiences and narratives of others and be a useful peek into the community.

Furies often consume, create, and socialize over what they consider to be furry media. This is not limited to one particular work or genre, but an array of media containing anthropomorphic characters. Typical examples of ‘furry’ media include 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century works such as *Pokémon*, *Beastars*, and Disney's *Robin Hood*. However, some members of the community may also consider older examples like *Little Red Riding Hood* or the anthropomorphic figures within Egyptian mythology to be forms of furry media. Even if a work is not often considered explicitly furry, it can still inspire furry art and discourse within the fandom.

The creation of a fursona is a popular practice within the fandom, and a focal point of my research. The term ‘fursona’ is a portmanteau of the words ‘furry’ and ‘persona’, and it is used to describe an anthropomorphic character representing an individual fandom member. These characters can range in their degree of anthropomorphism and contain one or more real or imagined creatures. A person may have a single fursona, concurrent fursonas, or change fursonas over time, with the vast majority of furies having at least one fursona (see Table 1).<sup>3</sup> Some furies I interviewed deeply connected and identified with their fursonas, while others saw them as casual avatars for online profiles.



(Table 1. Number of Current and Lifetime Fursonas.<sup>4</sup>)

These fursonas inspire much of the art within the furry community. Art is a central piece of the fandom, often revolving around fursonas, OCs (original characters), or fan art of existing

<sup>3</sup> Courtney N. Plante et al., *FurScience! A Summary of Five Years of Research from the International Anthropomorphic Research Project* (FurScience, 2016), 70.

<sup>4</sup> Plante et al., *FurScience!*, 70.

characters. Furry art typically uses visual mediums, such as drawing and costume design, though it can also include other forms like writing and world building. There is an entire industry of furry art and significant encouragement of, and preference from the community for individual artists over large corporations. Some art is freely shared online, while other works are private or based on commissions. It is possible for some artists to make a living doing commissions for furies, and artists may even turn to furry art to make money without actually identifying as furies themselves. Figure 1 is an example of art done by a furry artist who primarily works on art commissions from furies and kindly allowed me to add this picture to my thesis. The significance of art in the community has been clear in my own experience and in my conversations with this study's interviewees. Many of the furies I spoke to were very excited to show me art they had of their fursonas and to delve into the history of how they acquired art of their fursonas and the reasoning behind details in the design. Art is a major fixation in fandom with the sharing, purchasing, and creation of art, and the prevalence of fursonas encourages members to seek out or create fursonas of their own.



*(Figure 1. A character drawn by a furry artist. Krafty)*

Fursonas are extremely creative and imaginative artistic representations of the self. A fursona may function as the avatar for someone's interactions in the community, influencing how others think of that person. It can be a combination of what individuals believe best represents themselves and how they wish to be perceived by others, which was seen during the interviews and will be discussed later. Furrries often have depictions of their fursonas to share with others, to use as a basis for online identities, or to use for personal enjoyment. Even if an individual does not have a visual representation of a fursona, they may still have distinct and detailed imaginings of this character. Fursonas combine how furrries wish to be perceived, how others see them, and what form of character feels 'right' as a self-representation.

Furry art does not need to abide by any sort of template, but there is a very common and distinct style that is recognizable even to those only vaguely aware of the furry community. This style has taken clear inspiration from American and Japanese cartooning. Some members will even take a pre-existing character from a show to use as a base model when making their own character and change elements such as the colours and clothing to make it distinct from the original. This method can be useful if a particular show is one's inspiration for joining the furry fandom, and it increases the accessibility of fursona creation by reducing/eliminating the artistic complexities in character design, the barrier of artistic skill in that particular medium, and the cost of commissioning an artist.

This overview of furies and the furry fandom is not exhaustive or a definitive guide to the topic, but it hopefully provides a good basis for understanding the rest of this thesis. As stated earlier, there will be similarities and differences between individual furies or smaller groups within the fandom.

## Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This study focuses on members of the furry fandom, but it is also a study of identity formation and understanding. As such, it is important to consider scholarship examining fandom, furies, and/or identity. All of these topics tie together here, but the current literature and theory I incorporate often do not tackle all of these elements at once. The following is an outline of some of the relevant scholarship.

Online spaces feature heavily in the furry fandom and in this study, so I will draw from anthropology to conceptualize 'digital' in current and future research. Media anthropologist Daniel Miller defines 'the digital' as "everything that can be reduced to the outcome of binary coding."<sup>5</sup> Tom Boellstorff is a digital anthropologist who conducted an ethnography in the virtual world of Second Life. How anthropology approaches theorizing the digital is addressed by Boellstorff, particularly in a critique of the "the false opposition of the digital and the real."<sup>6</sup> He notes that, "conflations of physical with real and digital with unreal, even in rhetorical passing, have devastating consequences for addressing the reality of the digital. Much more than slips of the conceptual tongue, these conflations reflect deep-seated assumptions about value, legitimacy, and consequence."<sup>7</sup> The online lives of this study's interviewees are just as real as their offline lives, and I do not wish to minimize these experiences. In addition, viewing the digital as real aids in analyzing how digital and online experiences impact the lives of furries and contribute to their understandings of reality.

When considering the subject of social norms and identity, I find it useful to include an examination of the process of naturalization. The work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu can be drawn upon here, particularly with his notion of *doxa*.<sup>8</sup> This is a conceptualization of the way in which arbitrary classifications are naturalized. Socialization and repetition solidify arbitrariness

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<sup>5</sup> Daniel Miller, "Digital Anthropology," in *The Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, ed. Felix Stein (2023), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Tom Boellstorff, "For Whom the Ontology Turns: Theorizing the Digital Real," *Current Anthropology* 57, no. 4 (2016): 387.

<sup>7</sup> Boellstorff, 387-88.

<sup>8</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge University Press, 1977).

into unquestioned beliefs that are taken for granted. Societal structures—such as rules, norms, and ideas—are internalized, becoming a system of unconscious dispositions known to Bourdieu as *habitus*.<sup>9</sup> Once acknowledged, *habitus* gives way to conscious social practices. These societal structures, no longer unconscious and taken for granted, orthodoxy (established status quo) or heterodoxy (alternatives to the established order). This creates the potential for ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ ways of being, a common topic when discussing furies. In addition, Bourdieu’s writing presents an avenue for understanding the reification of norms and how alternatives form. This is significant to this study as a means of conceptualizing the ways furies establish, reify, and challenge norms inside and outside the furry community.

The philosopher Judith Butler is another important author I consider when discussing solidifying and challenging norms. Butler’s writing on gender can be used to analyze other aspects of social norms and identity. For this thesis, I have focused on their work regarding gender as repeated performances.<sup>10</sup> To Butler, gender is a social fiction and identity constructed over time through repeated acts. This echoes Bourdieu’s *doxa*, with norms becoming naturalized through repetition. “Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed.”<sup>11</sup> This framing allows for both the construction and deconstruction of gender norms. Considering gender to be a series of acts leaves room for variation and broad changes across individual and larger societal contexts.

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<sup>9</sup> See note 8 above.

<sup>10</sup> Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519-531.

<sup>11</sup> Butler, 527.

Identity, gender or otherwise, may then be understood as mutable. Butler states: “If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style.”<sup>12</sup> In this thesis, I draw upon the idea that various identities can be delineated and redefined. It is important to interrogate the origins and mechanisms of identities, even when they appear as obvious, natural realities.

The parallels between furry identity and gender identity have been noted by others, though the approaches have varied. Some furies do not feel entirely human, potentially identifying with other species and feeling discomfort with their human body. According to the work done by researchers in Furscience, furies identifying as non-human animals are associated with decreased self-esteem and life satisfaction.<sup>13</sup> A psychology study by Gerbasi et al. has proposed a “Species Identity Disorder,” based upon the psychiatric label of gender identity disorder.<sup>14</sup> However, the article was criticized for pathologizing furies, and using a diagnosis that pathologizes homosexuality and transgender people.<sup>15</sup> I believe the identity of ‘human’ can be understood through the lens of Bourdieu and Butler, where socialization and

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<sup>12</sup> Butler, 520.

<sup>13</sup> Sharon E. Roberts et al., “The Anthrozoomorphic Identity: Furry Fandom Members’ Connections to Nonhuman Animals,” *Anthrozoös* 28, no. 4 (2015): 533–548

<sup>14</sup> Kathleen C. Gerbasi et al., “Furies from A to Z (Anthropomorphism to Zoomorphism),” *Society & Animals* 16, no. 3 (2008): 197–222.

<sup>15</sup> Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, “Furies and the Limits of Species Identity Disorder: A Response to Gerbasi et al.,” *Society & Animals* 19, no. 3 (2011): 294–301.

behaviour reify and challenge norms. This approach avoids pathologizing those seen to be deviating by not treating human identity as a natural constant.

Fursonas are an obvious example of identity performance within the furry community. A character is created and embodied that represents the furry's self and the various identities they connect to or wish to convey. Despite the apparent focus on non-human animals, and the deep connection some furies feel to non-human animals, it should be noted that fursonas are anthropomorphic representations, which means humanness is still centred. Theatre scholar Marla Carlson asserts that, "performing an animal identity provides a way out of human norms that have become unduly restrictive and often enough has nothing at all to do with animals."<sup>16</sup> These anthropomorphic characters can thus serve as challenges to humanness and particular human norms, but they are not doing away with humanity entirely. Furies still adhere to many human norms, communication, and ways of being. Most fursonas have characteristics associated with humans, such as human speech, technology, physical features/biology, and worldbuilding based around human societies. Which mainstream norms are challenged and which are upheld provides insight into prevalent values and ideology within the furry fandom.

The term "collaborative fiction" is taken from an interviewee known here as Greg. The interviewee was not necessarily drawing this term from current scholarship, but it can still be examined through similar terminology. Gary Fine is a sociologist who studied roleplaying games and spoke of them as being collective fantasy. He notes that in these roleplaying games "...each fantasy world is a fairly tight transformation by the players of their mundane, shared

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<sup>16</sup> Marla Carlson, "Furry Cartography: Performing Species," *Theatre Journal* 63, no. 2 (2011): 191–208.

realities.”<sup>17</sup> These fantasies are “a social world that is not inherently meaningful but is *made* meaningful by the significance given to it by its participants.”<sup>18</sup> In this thesis, I take the term “collaborative fiction” outside of what is typically understood to be the realm of fantasy. If the lens of collaborative fiction is applied to naturalized identities, then we have historically bound and socially negotiated fictions/fantasies that are given meaning when treated as significant by collaborators. Fine also appears amenable to a similar broadening of the scope of collective fantasy, writing, “To the extent that all meaning is shared, the study of collective fantasy has implications for the creation of other worlds of meaning, recognizing of course the lack of impact of this social world on other spheres of life.”<sup>19</sup>

Scholarship on furies is relatively new, with most of it published over the last decade. The largest set of quantitative data on furies spanning numerous topics is the work of the International Anthropomorphic Research Project, also known as Furscience. This team of researchers from Canada and the United States has compiled data from thousands of furies over multiple surveys. These surveys were done online or at furry conventions and a compilation of the Furscience findings was published online in 2016. The topics covered in this research are varied and include data on demographics, psychology, participation in the fandom, fursonas, and many other areas. Since then, Furscience has conducted further studies on these topics and added the data to their website.<sup>20</sup> This is a fantastic resource for data on the furry

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<sup>17</sup> Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 3.

<sup>18</sup> Fine, 231.

<sup>19</sup> See note 18 above.

<sup>20</sup> “Research Findings,” *Furscience*, <https://furscience.com/research-findings/>.

fandom. Almost half of my interviewees referenced or recommended Furscience. I am unsure what influence participants' familiarity with this work had, with six of them noticeably using phrases I recognized from those studies, such as fursonas being an "ideal self."<sup>21</sup> However, it does make sense that some furies who are interested in participating in research on the community would already have encountered and engaged with a large research project such as this. The vast majority of the work published on furies or including the topic of furies has focused on quantitative data derived from the Furscience studies and has been cowritten by their research members.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, scholarship on fandom needs to be considered. To begin with, Henry Jenkins (1995) discusses utopianism in his work on queer members of the *Star Trek* fandom. Queer fans latched on to the sci-fi setting and utopian vision for humanity's future, which carried the potential to feel and witness a utopian universe for queer people. The significance of this was noted by Jenkins, who stated, "Such utopian fantasies can provide an important first step towards political awareness, since utopianism allows us to envision an alternative social order which we must work to realize ('something positive to look forward to') and to recognize the limitations of our current situation (the dystopian present against which the utopian alternative can be read)."<sup>23</sup> The connection between queer fans and utopianism can also be observed in the furry fandom. The furry community has a large queer population, and the acceptance of

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<sup>21</sup> Plant et al., *Furscience!*, 74.

<sup>22</sup> "Publications," *Furscience*, <https://furscience.com/publications/>.

<sup>23</sup> Henry Jenkins, "Out of the Closet and Into the Universe: Queers and Star Trek," in *Science Fiction Audiences: Watching Star Trek and Doctor Who*, eds. Henry Jenkins and John Tulloch (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 1995), 242.

various genders and sexualities, as well as the ability to present the self through a specialized character/avatar, affords a utopian setting for them to both engage in and consume.

Fandom is not a one-way relationship between producers and consumers. Fans both create their own media and influence the mainstream or canonical media of which they are fans. One example would be the *Star Trek* queer community that Jenkins examined. A group banded together, writing letters and campaigning for the producers of *Star Trek* to include queer representation and storylines in upcoming episodes. The push for representation did not entirely work at that time, and fans were given ambiguous nods to homosexuality that were controversial amongst the fandom. Some members then turned to slash fiction—fan-made works centering on homosexual pairings between characters—that “presented itself as a response to the failure of the letter-writing campaign: ‘Our motto is: If Paramount can’t give us that queer episode, just make it so!’”<sup>24</sup> It should be noted, Jenkins published this work in 1995, and *Star Trek* has actually added queer characters to shows in the series since that time. Fans have the ability to impact the production of media and create their own media and communities centred around these fan-made works.

Fans create, share, consume, and socialize through fan-made media. Within the furry fandom, furrries design fursonas, purchase fanart, and create their own media to share and gather around. Jenkins describes such actions thusly:

[It] blurs the boundaries between producers and consumers, spectators and participants, the commercial and the homecrafted, to construct an image of fandom as a cultural and social network that spans the globe. Fandom here becomes a participatory

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<sup>24</sup> Jenkins, “Out,” 264.

culture which transforms the experience of media consumption into the production of new texts, indeed of a new culture and a new community.<sup>25</sup>

The furry community draws from a multitude of different sources including various novels, comics, shows, and other media, some of which are fan-made. At this point, even the larger media productions can include furies who grew up wanting to tell furry stories or professionally draw furry art. There is little to distinguish producer and consumer, and furies are very active in the production of furry media. Groups of fans can form around fan-made media, building new communities. Fans are not passive consumers, but active participants and creators.

The creative works of fans also have the potential for activist or political purposes. A lack of satisfying, representative works can inspire communities to make their own. Jenkins proposes a type of 'textual poaching' where he views "fans as readers who appropriate popular texts and reread them in a fashion that serves different interests..."<sup>26</sup> This understanding can be applied to many different scenarios, and it easily fits with the topic of furies. Many of the interviewees for this study were members of marginalized communities and/or felt as though they did not fit into societal norms; this may inspire fans to reinterpret media and create meaningfully representative works, leading discourse to areas neglected by mainstream media. The agency of fans is highlighted in this understanding, and I believe this to be a critical aspect to studying fandom. As Grant and Random Love have written, "While Jenkins' formulation of fandom has been criticised as being overly utopian, and focused on the resistant possibilities of

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<sup>25</sup> Henry Jenkins, "'Get a Life!': Fans, Poachers, Nomads," in *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012), 20.

<sup>26</sup> Jenkins, "Get a Life," 23.

fandom, we argue that these elements of fandom have been crucial for many artists and writers.”<sup>27</sup> Fans have the agency and power to lead discourse for their own purposes, rather than being stuck passively consuming texts pushed by hegemonic forces.

Scholarship examining fandom, and especially that studying furies, is a relatively recent field. The works I have surveyed on identity or fandom tend to focus on theory, while available research on furies has thus far primarily focused on quantitative data. This study derived the majority of its data from qualitative sources and tries to discuss furies in a more narrative form than previous research to better understand the community itself and processes of identity formation within. The critical points I use from this literature revolve around the validity/agency of the furry fandom and a framework for understanding how social norms and identity are constructed, reified and challenged. Fursonas, online spaces, and online communities are all treated as real, with tangible impacts on furies’ lived experiences and conception of reality. Furies are not mindless consumers, but creators in their own right with political motivations and a push towards idealized realities for queer members. The furry bodies and spaces have their own norms—at times conflicting with mainstream societal norms—that are in a constant process of redefining social norms and identities.

## Methods

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<sup>27</sup> Catherine Grant and Kate Random Love, “Introduction: Fandom as Methodology,” in *Fandom as Methodology: A Sourcebook for Artists and Writers* (London: Goldsmiths Press, 2019), 5.

I conducted a series of qualitative interviews with members of the furry community over the span of two months in 2022. These interviews serve as a basis for my ethnographic research and its ultimate direction. I chose to use qualitative interviews in an attempt to retain the individuals within the data. I believe that interviewees are not numbers to be lost amongst a massive dataset, but rather they are people with their own thoughts and experiences. Qualitative interviews allow for a more personal connection with interviewees and encourage a focus upon interviewees' voices and narratives. In addition, qualitative interviews excel in their adaptability, which provides the opportunity to shift questions and topics to areas relevant to each individual participant. This centering on people is useful when taking an ethnographic approach to research that seeks to understand people's lived experiences.

I was granted approval to conduct interviews from the Research Ethics Board at the University of Manitoba in 2021, and a total of 25 people were interviewed online for this study. Recruiting participants was done through posting advertisements online and through word of mouth. All interviewees had to be English-speaking, self-identified furrries, 16 years of age or older, and able to connect over Zoom meetings. Some interviewees chose to have the camera on during the interview, and others were more comfortable with it off. There was a significant range in the length of interviews between the participants. Some interviewees flew through my basic questions with no elaboration or introduction of new areas of conversation, and we finished the interview in about half an hour. On the other hand, some interviewees overflowed with information and happily discussed my questions and related topics for three and a half hours.

It was important to me that the participants all have pseudonyms to protect their privacy. The furry community unfortunately suffers from stigmatization, and I do not wish to inadvertently 'out' anyone. At the same time, some of the participants are artists or well-known figures in the fandom, and I wanted there to be an option so that their words may be correctly attributed to them, if they so desired. The result was that interviewees chose or were assigned a name with the option of using their fursona name. Fursonas can serve as an anonymous online identity meaning their identities are as protected as they wish through their own actions online. Over half of the participants chose to use complete or partial fursona names as readily available pseudonyms.

Leading up to my research, I involved myself in activities typically seen within the community. The intention was to further familiarize myself with the fandom, and to have my own experiences to contextualize interviews. I began to create digital artwork of furry characters since the community is so heavily focused on art. I had already consumed many of the popular shows that furies engage with, so I spent time casually perusing online furry spaces to accustom myself to the jargon, running jokes, common activities and interactions. These online spaces included mainstream and furry-specific blogs and forums where furies interacted and expressed themselves. All of this helped to affirm my interview questions and made it easier to connect with participants during the interviews.

I decided to create a fursona as part of my fandom familiarization (see Figure 2 and Figure 3). I had considered potential fursonas prior to deciding to research furies, so I already had a workable foundation. I tried to incorporate myself into the personality and physical characteristics, wanting it to be recognizable as me to myself and anyone who knows me. While

my research was giving me the push to attempt a design, it still felt as though I had to get it 'right' to properly declare it a fursona. Thankfully, I landed on a design I really enjoyed and could relate to on some level.



*(Figure 2. My fursona playing videogames)*



*(Figure 3 My fursona drawing at the kitchen table.)*

## Positionality

My position within the furry fandom prior to this research was what some would call furry-adjacent (while others call it a furry in denial). I had already watched the major furry movies and shows. I had braved questionable websites to binge manga translations when seasons of the anime just weren't coming out fast enough. I had spent an alarming portion of my life reading fanfiction that explicitly draws upon furry tropes. And most tellingly, I had already decided a few years ago that if I ever made a fursona it would *obviously* be a raccoon, and I had an entire breakdown of exactly why that would be the basis for my fursona. One day it dawned on me: I could research the furry fandom. I lit up with excitement and an air of defiance against the dreary topics people seemed to expect me to choose.

This study has been influenced by who I am, with the potential positives and negatives that come with that. Aspects of my own identity as a queer, autistic, university student in my 20s play a role at every point of progress during this project. It has impacted how I approached the fandom, how I interacted with participants, how I understand the data I have collected, and the conclusions I have drawn in my analysis. During the interviews and analysis, my mind often made instant connections to my own experiences within the queer community and to queer scholarship. This is not a bad thing, but it is important to recognize that this has impacted the path of the conversations and my ultimate findings. I have tried to be aware of my own biases throughout this project, but while I have attempted to lessen some of the impact, it is not my

goal to remove myself from the research entirely. The final product of this study is a direct result of it being undertaken by me.

The same interviews may have gone in completely different directions had they been facilitated by an alternative interviewer. There were a few instances where this was obvious. One example is when a participant was outright flirting and trying to impress me throughout the interview. This awkward exchange led to me trying to defuse comments and bring the discussion back on track. The same participant may have drastically diverged in their responses with someone else, but it is impossible to know exactly how this changed the data. A particular factor influencing all the interviews is my being autistic. My social interactions in the moment and my understandings of them upon reflection are all impacted by this. At one point I thought I had annoyed or upset a participant, but upon listening back to the recording, I now think they had been playfully teasing me. At the time, this changed how I proceeded in the interview, and ultimately, I have no way of knowing the correct interpretation of this moment, if there even is such a thing as 'correct' social interactions and understandings. All I can do is report how I see things to the best of my ability. Qualitative interviews allow for varied interactions and responses, a back and forth between interviewer and interviewee, and for emotions to carry significance. This results in a beautiful diversity of data, but it also adds complications. Further studies interviewing the furry community and conducted by a range of people would be wonderful to help fill in the picture in a way that is impossible for merely one study.

Conducting interviews was genuinely an incredibly fun experience. On an academic level, I find the subject fascinating and rife with potential for exploration. On a personal level, none of the conversations felt taxing, and many of them were enjoyable. There were some

people I can imagine myself visiting as friends. A few interviews devolved (elevated) into just a couple of queer people hanging out, with all the laughter, easy cultural shorthand, and instant connection that implies.

### Other Considerations

I purposely avoided asking questions regarding sex or kink unless a participant brought up such topics first. The furry community is heavily associated with sexual content, and this has played a role in some of the stigmatization, both in what I have seen and heard from the community. There is furry pornography, and some members do engage in sexual acts that include their furry identity, but it would be inaccurate and insultingly reductive to treat these elements as the be all and end all of the community. I did not want to be seen as an outsider reducing the fandom to just sex. Some interviewees delved into kink and furry pornography, while others did not address sex at all. If the sexual aspects of the fandom were relevant to a participant's identity and primary experiences as a furry, they were openly discussed, but not every person has the same experiences or is comfortable talking about sex.

The usage of the word queer is due to my own personal preference and a desire to stay true to this project. Queer encompasses a wide array of identities while minimizing the placing of people in boxes, beholden to a litany of letters. When discussing gender and sexuality in Canada, the current acronym commonly used is along the lines of 2SLGBTQIA+, with some variation. It still often relies upon a plus sign, because—despite the mouthful—not everyone is

represented within it. Which letters are included, and in what order, creates an unfortunate debate about the hierarchy of identities within the community. Most importantly for this study, this acronym is highly contextual and does not reflect how queer identities are understood or represented in other various communities across the world. Additionally, I do not believe using an acronym of particular, concrete identities reflects the malleability of identity that I argue for within this thesis. Queer can all at once be a rejection of binary categories,<sup>28</sup> empowerment through the reappropriation of a slur,<sup>29</sup> representation of political/activist sentiments,<sup>30</sup> and function as its own specific identity.<sup>31</sup> However, I am aware that some people are against the reclamation of 'queer' and/or bear trauma connected to it. In one-on-one conversations, I normally try to be aware of this and adjust accordingly, but this thesis is addressing a wider audience, and there is no singular term I can use that would be appropriate for everyone. I hope that this choice does not alienate readers.

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<sup>28</sup> April Scarlette Callis, "Bisexual, Pansexual, Queer: Non-Binary Identities and the Sexual Borderlands," *Sexualities* 17, no. 1–2 (2014): 63–80.

<sup>29</sup> Adam D. Galinsky et al., "The Reappropriation of Stigmatizing Labels: The Reciprocal Relationship Between Power and Self-Labeling." *Psychological Science* 24, no. 10 (2013): 2020–29.

<sup>30</sup> Amy Gray and Serge Desmarais. "Not All One and the Same: Sexual Identity, Activism, and Collective Self-Esteem." *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality* 23, no. 2 (2014): 116–22. doi:10.3138/cjhs.2400.

<sup>31</sup> Shoshana K. Goldberg et al., "Exploring the Q in LGBTQ: Demographic Characteristic and Sexuality of Queer People in a U.S. Representative Sample of Sexual Minorities." *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity* 7, no. 1 (2020): 101–12. doi:10.1037/sgd0000359

## Section 2: The Interviewees

The following brief descriptions of some of the interviewees are meant to familiarize readers with the people being mentioned and provide insight into their lives before the next section examining my findings. I have written descriptions of the interviewees in the past tense because my interviews only captured a tiny slice of a moment within their ever-changing lives. Who they are/were then, now, and in the future may be completely different. How they presented themselves in these interviews may differ from other social contexts, and a single interview cannot provide a thorough picture of a person's life and internal being. I have done the best I can in this study to understand the snapshots of interviewees lives I have been privileged to be given. These short introductions are in alphabetical order based on chosen pseudonyms, and the next section deals more robustly with the content of these interviews.

**Alex** was an 18-year-old German man who saw being a furry as a part of his self but did not consider it a part of his identity. He was adamant that being part of the furry fandom is no different than being a fan of more normalized interests, such as sports. To him, being a furry is “nothing more than a hobby.” Alex described himself as shy and introverted and spoke of his struggles with self-confidence and how taking part in the furry community helped him. It seemed as though he still saw himself on the outskirts of the fandom, critical of other fandom members, using the word ‘character’ instead of fursona, and feeling that his more right-wing political views would not be accepted within the fandom. Alex's character was a rat wearing leather – drawing from his attraction to men in leather and his own desire to wear it. The

fandom was important to him both as a sexual outlet and as a chance to be a part of friend groups.

**Aster** was the first interview I conducted for this study. He was a gender-fluid, non-binary interviewee raised in a conservative environment in the United States who began to explore sexuality, gender, and being a furry upon entering college. His fursona was a shapeshifting snow leopard, allowing him to express and represent himself with feminine, masculine, and androgynous bodies through a single character. Aster was autistic, and having a fursona helped him understand his sexuality, gender, and kinks by linking his mental states to a physical form he could picture. I was shocked by the sheer amount of worldbuilding Aster put into the background and story of his fursona. The interview was quite long, with Aster enthusiastically talking about furies, his own life, and his interests. Humour and jokes were almost constant throughout, though that didn't take away from the seriousness of discussions concerning trauma and repression.

**Audy** was an aromantic, cisgender man from the United States who saw himself as being on the fringes of the fandom. He originally created his fursona as a character for his friend's book before realizing it functioned as a representation of his idealized self, which he considers an important aspect of fursonas. The creation process of this character has played an integral role in his own journey of self-discovery and led to the realization that he is aromantic. Audy believed that fursonas constantly evolve and change with people and their perceptions of themselves.

**Aurum** was a cisgender man from the United States who used a fursona of a slugcat, a species from his favourite video game. While he had created other characters before, the slugcat was the first one he felt an attachment to and deemed a proper fursona. He was in the Brony fandom, but once the show ended and the community began to die down, he transitioned into the furry fandom. Aurum saw being a furry as an important aspect of himself. He felt more outgoing in the furry community and found it easier to talk to people online who had furry avatars and profile pictures.

**Datura** was a transgender woman living in the United States who was in the ongoing process of creating a fursona. She had a history with dissociative identity disorder and was trying to incorporate all of her alters in the design. Her original fursona was an opossum, but she realized that the fursona did not feel 'right.' Designing a fursona was complicated due to dysgraphia, resulting in arm cramps and pain while holding a pencil. It prevented her from drawing ideas. She would instead use music associated with the mindset she was previously in while creating her fursona to trigger the memory of the design progress, allowing her to build upon it. The process of creating a fursona inspired her to question her gender identity and begin transitioning.

**Fletcher** was a furry artist with two main fursonas, a cat-rabbit (cabbit) and a fox-dragon. The cabbit had more human characteristics and Fletcher more directly related to the character. The fox-dragon was more animalistic and was a fun character used to reflect themselves. Having these characters provided an opportunity to express things they wished they could express offline. When I asked about identity, Fletcher gave three identifiers: Christian, queer, and furry. Being a furry was considered an impactful aspect of their identity, but not

necessarily an integral one. They felt that being in the furry community and having fursonas increased their self-confidence.

**Greg** was a university student studying math who came across as very nervous in our interview, speaking quickly, stuttering, and frequently apologizing. The puma fursona was designed as an exaggeration of personal qualities they saw in themselves, extremely socially awkward and an amazing mathematician. They spoke about their being a furry, saying, “this interest just feels like a weird, innate part of, like, who I am.” They felt that being in the furry fandom was a formative experience and that the fandom was a silly place where people can learn to be more comfortable with their own differences and the differences of others.

**Giggly Dergon** was an intensely sweet individual. The chosen pseudonym, Giggly Dergon, was meant to be a cute way of saying ‘giggly dragon,’ and a large portion of our conversation revolved around a love of cuddles and being someone others can depend on. The soft voice and open desire to give and receive platonic intimacy stood out, particularly coming from a masculine-presenting individual. Giggly Dergon grew up attending Unitarian Universalism services each Sunday and recounted having a gay teacher there and attending their wedding. The theme of love, acceptance, and community seemed to be a life-long focus.

**Gwaion** was one of the older interviewees; he was a spouse, a father, and had an established career in engineering. He was aware of his older status amongst furries, as someone in his mid-thirties, and figured he started off in the community as a grey muzzle. He was interested in anthropomorphic art in college, but only joined the community recently. Gwaion wanted to improve his mental well-being and find a work-life balance, and he decided

he wished to commit time and money into his enjoyment of anthropomorphic art. His fursona represented a perfect version of himself he could aspire towards while working on his health and fitness. He was excited to buy more art commissions of his fursona, expand on the design and lore of it, and was planning on saving money for a fursuit. One of the downsides he saw to joining the fandom later in life was juggling his priorities when it came to time and money.

**Gwyn** was an autistic transwoman in the United States who had aspirations of becoming a voice actor. She was very excited to analyze herself and decided to join the study as she saw it as a chance to learn about herself. She brought the nervous and intense energy I recognize in some people with autism, flipping between staying in control of or barreling through a novel social situation. Of the interviewees who chose to have their camera on during our talk, Gwyn was the only one to wear fursuit or costume pieces. This included wolf ears, a tail, and a red cloak referencing the story of *Little Red Riding Hood*. She felt she was divided between two modes, the gay, queer, furry mode, or the mask. Masking is a common way for neurodivergent individuals to try to fit in with society by mimicking neurotypical traits and behaviours. Here, Gwyn's usage of the word 'mask' also seems to include her queer and furry identity. In her words: "I always feel like I'm either myself or I'm not. And I'm kind of pretending to be a human."

**Hale** was a transman studying Fine Arts at a university in Canada who was unsure if he felt comfortable taking on the label of furry. He tied identifying as a furry to whether or not he was fully 'out' as a furry, though he did expect that he would become increasingly involved with the community once he moved in with his boyfriend who was a furry. Despite feeling on the outside of the community, he had designed himself a furry avatar and friends of his had

defaulted to referring to him by his avatar's name even in-person. His avatar was a shiba inu dog breed, which he thought might be a desire to represent his Japanese heritage from his grandmother. He was very excited to analyze furry art and was using pictures he took of furies as his muse for an in-progress art piece.

**Knox** was a genderfluid furry artist who had been a member of the community since 1999. Creating furry art was his primary source of income and had clients around the world. He used the same name as his fursona in daily life and considered being a furry an important part of his identity. He discovered the fandom in college, but said he was always a furry for as far back as he could remember; he just did not know the word for it. Knox considered being a furry to mean a person who is a fan of any media where animals are anthropomorphized. We had a great discussion that went for two and a half hours as he was happy to talk about any and every aspect of the furry fandom.

**M** was a Chinese-American transwoman who used a foxtaur as her fursona. She deeply connected her fursona's design and behaviour to her Chinese heritage and her conversion to Judaism. It was important to her that her cultural values were represented in her fursona, and she saw the character as an idealized version of herself. She said that she and some of her friends would like to physically become their fursonas, but that she felt too connected to her heritage and human traditions to take on the label of therian. I asked her how important she felt her identity as a furry was, and she ranked it above her job but below being queer.

**Syd** did not use a definable creature for a fursona, but instead took aspects of multiple creatures until they found the closest amalgamation that could function as a representation of

their system as a whole. I inquired about the number of alters and was told they do not keep count as they felt that would be disrespectful to the current alters and the alters yet to be discovered. Our discussion was highly interesting, and Syd came across as very analytical and thoughtful. They felt that the furry fandom attracted many in the queer community because they were already part of a maligned outgroup, meaning there was no sense of normalcy to lose, and they were less resistant to finding interests deemed abnormal. The notion that the furry fandom is a very open community was disputed, with them saying they tended to instead see “awkward defensiveness” from people who are “self-conscious of it as kind of a maligned subcommunity.” I asked if there was anything important they wanted me to take away from the interview, and they turned it back onto me saying I would find the important pieces in my analysis of all the interviewees’ transcripts. They ended the conversation, “I don't have the bigger picture. I only have my own.” This interview was very long, but it was incredibly interesting to hear Syd’s thoughts, experiences, and analyses surrounding being a furry.

**Thad** was an online content creator who considered being a furry a very important part of his identity. Maintaining success as a content creator was stressful for him, and while he enjoyed being commissioned for music (often by furies looking for songs to go along with their fursonas) the posted music did not perform as well online, creating pressure to post less fulfilling content. The pressure to always gain more followers online left him feeling burnt out, and while he figured he was getting better at not caring about those pressures, he said his friends were still caught up in the mentality of grinding for online success. His fursona was a happy-go-lucky husky that did not suffer from his issues with mental illness, and he spoke about fursonas as being idealized selves. He was very active in the furry community both online and

offline, attending over 100 local gatherings and three conventions in two years. His friends were all furies, but even though they all had that in common he said that not all of their interactions revolved around the furry fandom. Social anxiety was a significant problem for him, and he was unsure if his social struggles with non-furies were due to them not being in the community or just his generalized anxiety. Thad considered the huge online community of furies to be a positive part of the fandom for people struggling to make in-person connections. He wanted for there to be less romanticization about the furry community, however, and emphasized that the fandom is not a magical cure for mental illness.

**Thunder** was a British man who defined himself as a transhumanist and saw fursonas as perfect versions of people. He was extremely excited at the thought of fursuiting and figured he would wear it every day if he had one. The community aspect of the fandom was very important to him, and he enjoyed offline and online interactions. At one point he said, "That's what being a furry's about, in my opinion, though: making good friends, having a good time." The easy connection he experienced with other furies was not extended to non-furies, as he worried that a non-furry friend might secretly be against furies. This worry stemmed from the stigma he has seen and felt. Thunder was open about being a furry to people outside of the fandom, and, with an air of bravado, said that he was not scared of being attacked or receiving hate, and he saw himself as a guardian who would keep others safe.

**Yammy** was a Chinese and White American living in the United States with a career in information technology (IT). They were non-binary and used two fursonas. The main one was a species of Eurasian grass snake they chose to represent their racial identity, explaining that they primarily related to their Chinese side as the White side of the family was not present in their

life. The secondary fursona was a “worksona”, a duck mascot for their IT business. Yammy entered the furry community at the age of 9 but did not make a fursona until 16 years later. They attributed their increased involvement in the furry community to seeking out online groups during the COVID 19 lockdowns. While having a fursona was not a requirement to be in online furry spaces, they felt awkward being the only one without a proper fursona. Having a greater disposable income with the establishment of a career allowed them to purchase a commissioned work of art of their fursona. Buying art was important to Yammy as they wanted to support small artists, particularly those who are transgender or of a marginalized race. Much of our conversation turned to labour rights, issues affecting racialized minorities, activism, and the history of the furry fandom.

Some of the interviews I conducted were packed with information and provided a deeper look at the interviewees, while others were more limited and shallower. There were some trends with the interviewees: most were from the USA; many of them were queer; most identified themselves as white; and the vast majority were in their 20s. I did not acquire the same information from everyone, with some never addressing race, age, etc. I was able to get a sense of some personalities, but it is difficult to say much after a single interview. I tried to depict a look into their lives and highlight them as people in this section, and hopefully these introductions and the upcoming discussion will aid in humanizing them to readers.

### Section 3: Norms and Belonging

Section 3 is where I begin to present my findings from the interviews with a focus on norms and belonging. In “Normality and Stigma” I examine interviewees’ desire to be seen as normal and the impacts of challenging mainstream social norms. “Gatekeeping” looks at one way in which furies maintain some of the social norms within the furry community. “Intimacy and Belonging” centres on relationships and the sense of community within the furry fandom.

### Normality and Stigma

During the interviews, multiple participants expressed that they wished for the furry community to be seen as ‘normal’ by non-furies. Some participants were quite adamant about this, forcefully asserting that furies are normal, regular people. A few even specifically told me to write in my thesis that furies are normal. This desire to reduce the stigma directed towards the fandom by positioning furies as relatable, benign people is understandable, but normality can be a complicated subject.

My interview with Alex repeatedly returned to the topics of normalcy, shame, and stigma without me prompting him. This conversation was interesting due to the fervour in his words and the harshness he displayed towards fellow furies. Alex would insult furies and elements of the fandom, such as fursuits and using the word ‘fursona,’ but at the same time, he was quick to assure me that he and most furies are normal. There was a defensive energy to this as he positioned himself within the category of normal while simultaneously decrying any furry behaviour that he deemed too eccentric as abnormal. He did not like the stigma directed

towards the fandom, but to me he seemed to be trying to establish himself as 'not one of *those* furries'.

There were notable quotes from Alex during his interview that I feel exemplify his attitude towards the furry fandom. At one point he stated, "I hate seeing fursuit conventions like on my Twitter timeline, because I feel like my heart is stopping out of cringe." The modern usage of the word 'cringe' to indicate second-hand embarrassment upon witnessing something shameful/awkward is used here. He is having a visceral negative reaction to seeing furries publicly act in blatant and 'abnormal' ways. There is a potential element of internalized stigma and shame in his words where he views furry activities and membership as something meant to be private and kept secret.

There was a particular moment where I challenged Alex. He entered the fandom extremely concerned that people would judge him for his leather fetish, but eventually learned to be more comfortable with himself and wearing an entire outfit made of leather in public. I pointed to his own self-consciousness concerning standing out in public and how he judges fursuiters. After laughing in disbelief, he asserted that the situations were entirely different. He continued on to say, "I don't want to bully furries *per se*. I met lots of *great* people who are furries themselves" but that he took issue with many furries, complaining, "They rub their hobby, like, directly under your nose." My mind immediately turned to glaringly similar statements I have heard over the years as a member of the queer community. There is this notion that one can be absolved or deny homophobic/transphobic behaviours and beliefs by saying they have no issue with the community itself, but with it being 'shoved in their face.' There is this supposedly acceptable degree of abnormality so long as it does not stand out or

interfere with the status quo. The visibility of abnormality during activities like fursuiting forces people to confront their biases, and for Alex this turns into aggression and a desire to distance himself. While a few others I interviewed spoke about furies being normal, Alex was the only one to shame furies for outward and enthusiastic fandom participation.

The value judgement made within the distinction between normal and abnormal needs to be examined. Normal never seems to just mean typical or average. Instead, it is burdened by contextual, societal expectations of right and wrong, where abnormality can suddenly become a category of derision and shame. These categories can be arbitrary, conflicting, and undergo an unending process of being redefined. Social norms are constructed and become naturalized through repetition, as seen in the writings of Butler and Bourdieu.<sup>32</sup> It is important to acknowledge this process to avoid assuming norms are biological universals, and any deviation from accepted norms could be deemed 'unnatural,' as this can drive dehumanizing and harmful rhetoric. Rules and expectations are not inherently wrong, but they can be damaging. Alex's preoccupation with being considered normal may be taken as emblematic of fears of the alienation, persecution, and social shaming that can come with abnormality.

I would argue that some degree of abnormality is to be expected. It would be astounding if an individual met every arbitrary standard, and even then, individual and societal expectations change over time. I understand why some of the participants urged me to write that furies are normal, but that is a complicated request. It would be disingenuous to say that my research has shown that furies meet all social norms. If I take 'normal' to mean typical,

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<sup>32</sup> Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*; Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution."

rather than socially acceptable, then it would also be wrong to say there were no abnormalities within my sample. Despite this, I would love to play a role in helping normalize the community. When I say that, I mean that I would like for there to be a reduction in stigma and an increase in social acceptance of the furry fandom. Their atypicality does not need to single them out for shame or condemnation. Being abnormal is normal.

Some of the participants embraced the status of furies as abnormal and had no interest in assimilating or toning down the fandom. Instead, the eccentricity and freedom from certain norms were viewed as positives. Yammy was one such participant; they were concerned about the possibility of corporatization and sanitization of the furry community pushing out small, independent artists. The discussion led to a focus on the sexual side of the fandom. As an example of sanitization, they referenced the ban the website Tumblr placed on adult content in 2018, and that it resulted in many artists losing their platforms overnight. Interspersed by laughter, Yammy declared, “I pay my respects to like the really extreme fetishistic like furies, because they keep the advertisers away.” There was this fear of advertisers pushing websites to restrict previously allowed content, and that it would both damage livelihoods and remove online communities. They continued, “I want people to be, like, sexual freaks. I want there to be a space for them.” The label of ‘sexual freaks’ might be seen as pejorative in other contexts, but that wasn’t the case here. When being deemed abnormal is the desired consequence, being a freak is a badge of honour.

I loved the enthusiasm and humour Yammy brought to this conversation. There was no need for them to make jokes when the situation itself carried a level of absurdity. At one point they said, “[The sanitization is] what I’m worried about. I have a feeling we’re moving towards

that way, anyways. So, I think like, really, I just have my role to stay connected with the freaks and support them where I can.” While there were giggles over consuming furry pornography as a means of rebelling against large corporations, the sentiment behind it felt honest. There was a sense of duty to support artists to protect the community, and this is something echoed by other interviewees. Art is the backbone of the furry fandom—sexual or not—and helping artists is something many are happy to do.

I dearly hope I do not offend anyone who participated in this study or the wider furry community when I hesitate to apply the term ‘normal’ to the furry fandom. In many ways the community does not conform to the mainstream standard or ideals, often purposely challenging social norms. However, that does not mean I believe they should be condemned. Abnormality or deviating from social norms is not inherently harmful. Nothing I have seen or heard from the community has convinced me that they are particularly dangerous or deserving of social shaming. I will clarify, the furry community is going to have dangerous individuals and groups, but this is not something innate to furies, and having a small portion of problematic members is something I would expect to find in other fandoms/communities. Furies do not need to be normal to be owed the same dignity and rights as others.

The furry fandom is a stigmatized group subjected to online and in-person ridicule and attacks. I avoided asking about traumatic experiences unless the interviewee brought up the subject first. Because of this, I did not talk to everyone about their experiences with stigma. Nevertheless, almost all the participants mentioned stigma or negative perceptions from non-furies at some point. A few people brought up a gas attack that occurred in 2014 at a furry

convention.<sup>33</sup> While not all furies necessarily have personal stories about receiving hate or harassment, it does seem to be an issue on many of their minds.

Some of the interviewees had anecdotes of specific incidents where they were targeted for being furies. Thad's friend group has had people drive past screaming at them, and one incident where a couple people shot BB guns at them. Thunder told me about a bar where local furmeets were held that banned furies after a change in management, despite these gathering taking place there for years. He also had issues with people reacting negatively to him and throwing insults like 'freak' or 'animal fucker.' Riku Odakaya has been subjected to death threats and slurs online to the point of becoming desensitized to them, saying that furies are "an easy target because they're so stigmatized online. These are the people you poke fun at, so it is socially acceptable to poke fun at them."

At the time of the interviews there was a particular bout of misinformation being spread, and participants seemed both exasperated and incredulous. People latched on to the idea that schools were providing litter boxes for students identifying as furies and it was quickly disseminated online. A couple interviewees specifically blamed Joe Rogan for his role in spreading the rumour on his podcast.<sup>34</sup> This misinformation gained enough traction that some

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<sup>33</sup> Jennifer Swann, "CSI Fur Fest: The Unsolved Case of the Gas Attack at a Furry Convention," *Vice*, February 10, 2016, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/kwxj39/the-mystery-of-who-launched-the-chlorine-gas-attack-at-a-midwest-furry-convention>.

<sup>34</sup> Alaina Demopoulos, "Joe Rogan Admits Schools Don't Have Litter Boxes for Kids who 'Identify' as Furies," *The Guardian*, November 4, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2022/nov/04/joe-rogan-school-litter-boxes-kids-furies-gender> <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2022/nov/04/joe-rogan-school-litter-boxes-kids-furies-gender>.

politicians in the USA began to weaponize it and school officials have had to deny the rumour.<sup>35</sup>

One of the interviewees, Gwaion, even said his dad fell for the lie. He said that politicians have gone from attacking a marginalized group (the queer community) to attacking a smaller, similar, less understood marginalized group (furries). The fervor behind this claim has not died down since the interviews, with it continuing to persist despite repeated denials.<sup>36</sup>

The political condemnation of furries in schools took a turn in early 2024 that was both concerning and utterly bizarre. A bill was introduced in Oklahoma:

Students who purport to be an imaginary animal or animal species, or who engage in anthropomorphic behavior commonly referred to as furries at school shall not be allowed to participate in school curriculum or activities. The parent or guardian of a student in violation of this section shall pick the student up from the school, or animal control services shall be contacted to remove the student.<sup>37</sup>

Whether or not this bill is passed, it is highly concerning that it would ever be introduced in the first place. Furries have become a target for politicians looking to score political points, and I am worried this may lead to increased stigma and attacks on the community. It is dangerous for

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<sup>35</sup> Tyler Kingkade et al., “How an Urban Myth About Litter Boxes in Schools Became a GOP Talking Point,” *NBC News*, October 14, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/misinformation/urban-myth-litter-boxes-schools-became-gop-talking-point-rcna51439>; Isabella Grullón Paz, “Litter Boxes for Students Who Identify as Furries? Not So, Says School Official,” *The New York Times*, January 24, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/23/us/politics/michigan-litter-box-school.html>.

<sup>36</sup> Brooke Kruger, “Yorkton School Division Debunks Rumours Around ‘Furries,’ Washrooms, Sex Education,” *Global News*, September 15, 2023, <https://globalnews.ca/news/9961462/yorkton-school-division-debunks-rumours-sex-education/>; John Russell, “Fox Host Claims Schools are Installing Litterboxes for Students in Bizarre Rant,” *LGBTQ Nation*, August 24, 2023, <https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2023/08/fox-news-hosts-cant-quit-pushing-lie-about-student-furries-using-cat-litterboxes>.

<sup>37</sup> HB 3084, 59th Leg., 2nd Sess. (O.K. 2024).

politicians to validate and campaign upon hate. In addition, if a law of this nature was enacted, it would be stripping furies of their right to education.

The disdain directed at furies echoes the narrative being weaponized against the queer community. There is this fearmongering where people deem an identity as invalid or wrong and then politicize washroom usage. Aster called the litterbox rumour a transphobic dog whistle, a stance also echoed by others.<sup>38</sup> Rules regarding washrooms can act as barriers for people with identities deemed 'deviant,' preventing them from presenting their identity publicly and asserting that they do not belong. Furies may not be actually using litterboxes in schools, but being the source of public derision and having rules and legislation devalue and constrain their identity can be harmful.

Members of the furry fandom can be subjected to discrimination and malicious rhetoric due to their furry identity. As such, it is not surprising that some of the interviewees were preoccupied with the topic of stigma. Stigma can be detrimental to both physical and mental health, though the impact varies across individuals and various stigmatized groups.<sup>39</sup> Attacks on individuals and the group as a whole have real consequences, from personal well-being to the ability to exist in public spheres. When the interviewees expressed a desire to be seen as normal, I believe they were primarily speaking against the stigmatization of the furry fandom.

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<sup>38</sup> Bethania Palma, "How Furies Got Swept Up in Anti-Trans 'Litter Box' Rumors," *Snopes*, January 30, 2023, <https://www.snopes.com/news/2023/01/30/how-furies-got-swept-up-in-anti-trans-litter-box-rumors/>.

<sup>39</sup> Catherine Haslam et al., "Stigma," in *The New Psychology of Health: Unlocking the Social Cure* (London: Routledge, 2018), 63-83.

## Gatekeeping

The furry fandom is not without its own culturally constructed social norms, despite the subversion of some mainstream norms. Members of the furry fandom ostracize furies who are seen as engaging in unacceptable behaviour or promoting unacceptable ideologies. I do not wish to romanticize the fandom or imply that I agree with all individual furies or furry groups. Furies are diverse and the community has its own clashes between members. There are no official rules to identifying as a furry, and anyone can be a member. Individuals and organizations within the fandom thus impose unofficial standards upon furies to reinforce norms.

The ability to regulate the behaviour of furies is limited. Furies will shame problematic members and ban them from websites and social events, but this does not include all social spaces. For instance, a mainstream social media site might not ban furies who rely on dog whistles or avoid explicitly breaking terms of service. Additionally, those who are banned may create their own groups of like-minded furies with their own websites and social events. There is, however, an effort in the larger furry community to maintain a welcoming and accepting community with safe spaces for members, and this requires the removal of individuals threatening to normalize or enact bigotry and unacceptable behaviour.

While the furry fandom may be commonly presented as leaning to the political left, this is an oversimplification,<sup>40</sup> and there are individuals and groups with fascist views or who may

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<sup>40</sup> Plant et al., *Furscience!*, 18.

identify with or celebrate Nazism. Some furry spaces ban individuals expressing these views or associating with such groups, and there are furry groups that have been expressly created with the purpose of combatting Nazism in the fandom. One example of this would be the group, Antifa Furies. A member of Antifa International—which inspired the creation of Antifa Furies—told *Vice* that Antifa Furies had reached out to her for advice, but she believed furies were not prepared to combat Nazism with violence or lawbreaking, stating, “It's not for people who wanna hold a sign or sign a petition. It's for people who are willing to do whatever is necessary to stomp out fascism.”<sup>41</sup> Banning or shaming Nazi furies may drive them out of certain furry spaces, but it does not address underlying contributors to radicalization or prevent them from forming their own spaces. These issues are larger than just the furry fandom and require widespread action.

A video went viral in August 2023 of a violent altercation at a furry gathering on a California beach.<sup>42</sup> A furry and his boyfriend were banned from the event “because of death threats and harassment campaigns to the members... along with affiliation with the Furry Raiders, a known Neo Nazi Furry group.”<sup>43</sup> The boyfriend was repeatedly told to leave when he showed up and began filming the event, but he ignored the orders. A furry shouting at him

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<sup>41</sup> Allie Conti, “Even Furies Are Fighting Fascists,” *Vice*, February 8, 2017, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/78we5z/even-furies-are-fighting-fascists>.

<sup>42</sup> mutated\_animal, “Furry Beats up a Nazi with a Megaphone,” *r/PublicFreakout*, August 2023, video, [https://www.reddit.com/r/PublicFreakout/comments/15pt3hr/furry\\_beats\\_up\\_a\\_nazi\\_with\\_a\\_megaphone/](https://www.reddit.com/r/PublicFreakout/comments/15pt3hr/furry_beats_up_a_nazi_with_a_megaphone/).

<sup>43</sup> Patch O’Furr, “Furry Beach-Off: The Truth About a Fight with a Megaphone at a California Meet,” *Dogpatch Press*, August 17, 2023, <https://dogpatch.press/2023/08/17/furry-beach-fight/>.

through a megaphone lashed out as the boyfriend grabbed the megaphone. The furry allegedly struck him with that megaphone before being tackled and arrested. The incident drew the attention of larger, non-furry news sources, though some of the reports were mocking, reduced furies to being a fetish, and/or ignored the context of why the attack occurred.<sup>44</sup>

This altercation is an example of what can occur when issuing bans is not enough of a deterrent. A furry-run news blog clarified the editor's opinion on the confrontation:

This isn't a story of furies confronting nazis using nazi symbols and trying to do hate crime [*sic*] at the event. It was inside conflict with people who refused to take "no" after bans. They happened to be a past nazi-sympathizer and enabler who wanted control to undermine healthy gatekeeping. It was up to the community to handle their intrusion after police wouldn't. That's about behavior more than politics, but can still count as community defense. If people want to cheer for punching nazis, it's smart to consider the cost and try to avoid giving them what they want.<sup>45</sup>

The notion of healthy gatekeeping in the fandom is an integral piece of deplatforming bigotry and fascism and preventing them from consuming the community. This is an ongoing process of reinforcing unofficial standards in order to maintain a safe space for members. While gatekeeping is not the perfect solution, it does have a role in reducing the exposure furies have to dangerous situations and rhetoric.

It can be important to limit the reach of extremist talking points and influence within the fandom to prevent the radicalization of members. Those who greatly identify with being a furry are more likely to internalize the values of the community,<sup>46</sup> so a shift in general values

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<sup>44</sup> See note 43 above.

<sup>45</sup> See note 43 above.

<sup>46</sup> Courtney N. Plante et al., "'One of Us': Engagement with Fandoms and Global Citizenship Identification." *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* 3, no. 1 (2014): 49–64. Doi: 10.1037/ppm0000008.

could have serious repercussions. The existence of Nazi furies may seem surprising or ridiculous even, but it should be taken seriously. Many of the interviewees in this study had a history of being isolated, repressed, stigmatized, or self-hating. These feelings are part of why furies can be vulnerable to radicalization. Feeling like an outcast—for being a furry, or queer, or many other possible reasons—plays a role in this. A common path towards Nazism was outlined in an article (Dunn 2021) interviewing Deo, a furry working towards anti-fascism and the reformation of Nazi furies. It was explained:

For Nazi furies, the “outcast” component is crucial. As Deo told me, a lot of furies find their way into these hate groups when they’re young and still figuring themselves out. Many are closeted and hold inward resentment to their queerness. Nazi furies use “degeneracy”—a word deployed in the Third Reich to describe a stain on society that needed to be purged to secure a white homeland—to draw a dividing line between themselves and other furies. These young, could-be-Nazi furies see openly queer people who share their same weird interest in cartoon animals. Because they have not accepted their own identity and are psychologically pliable, older Nazi furies can steer their inward resentment outward. They can take a stance: “Being furry is fine, sure, but we shouldn’t be degenerates.” The process that follows is a cultlike descent into brotherhood, blood and soil, and (what’s most feared) possibly acts of violence.<sup>47</sup>

While there is this potential for radicalization, I still believe the furry fandom can have a protective affect against such forces. If a central factor is the feeling of being an outcast, it stands to reason that becoming part of a community could mitigate this risk.

The link between community and radicalization has been examined elsewhere. Feddes et al. outline four psychological needs that may contribute to radicalization if these needs are not met; these are the needs for identity, justice, significance, and sensation.<sup>48</sup> Their

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<sup>47</sup> Kameron Dunn, “What’s Going on with Those Furry Nazis?” *Slate*, November 18, 2021, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2021/11/nazi-furies-deradicalization-efforts.html>.

<sup>48</sup> Allard Feddes et al., *Psychological Perspectives on Radicalization*, (London: Routledge, 2020).

description of the need for identity can easily be applied when examining the furry fandom. Belonging to a social group is tied to one's identity and sense of self, and belonging to a group perceived positively can increase self-esteem, whereas a negatively perceived group may decrease self-esteem.<sup>49</sup> Low self-esteem from a lack of belonging or being a part of a stigmatized group can leave a person vulnerable to radicalization. Feddes et al. note, "As with any social group, an extremist group can be attractive to a person, as it can provide them with safety, attachment, and self-esteem."<sup>50</sup> People belonging to multiple groups are more resilient to radicalization, as their identity needs are met, they feel more connected to society, and they are exposed to diverse beliefs and values.<sup>51</sup>

I return to Alex at this juncture; however, I must first clarify that I am in no way accusing him of Nazism. That would be an extreme and inaccurate interpretation of our conversation. Alex is an example of a furry who seemed ashamed of his identity and aggressively differentiated himself from other furies over their politics and public visibility. The distinction made of him being a 'normal' furry in comparison to the 'abnormal' ones echoes the sentiments of more radical furies. Deo's description of the inner resentment that can turn outward was reflected in some of Alex's comments and his derision for some furies. He did not want to be associated with the community, stating, "I really don't want to identify myself as LGBT because I really hate this left to left-extremist community, which I'm- which is like the main reason I don't really, like, call myself a furry."

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<sup>49</sup> Feddes et al., 73.

<sup>50</sup> See note 49 above.

<sup>51</sup> Feddes et al., 117.

Alex considered himself to be a centrist and was vehemently against “wokeism” and the general left-wing orientation he perceived in the fandom. I did not challenge him on his political views—particularly because that would have destroyed any rapport I had built with him—but he was still pre-emptively defensive about his personal politics: “Like, I have left wing opinions: I have right wing opinions- *which are both totally fine!*” It seemed he was primed for judgement against him. Alex disagreed with the gatekeeping done by the furry community, complaining, “if you, like, mentioned the *slightest* hint that you have any sort of like republican right-wing views they *murder* you, and you are shunned out of every social circle...” Though Alex clarified, “Like, that never happened to me personally, because I- I don't blab out my political opinions. Um, at least not in the fandom themselves. But if they'd heard or read some opinions I've wrote somewhere else, like on forums for example, they would totally kill me.”

I find the example of Alex to be an interesting look at the topics of gatekeeping and community belonging. The complaint that typical gatekeeping involves murder should not be taken literally, and I doubt Alex believes he would be in physical danger if his right-wing views were discovered, especially because he only participates in the fandom online. In a more abstract manner, the social shaming and exclusion from furry spaces could be interpreted as the murder of his furry self. A fursona infamous across the community could be banned from their furry social spaces, no longer allowed to exist and embody that self in that sphere. Alex said he did not have offline friends, but he did have furry friends on the internet. He is already an isolated person feeling on the edge of the community, so banning him from spaces could have a large impact on his wellbeing. His concern over being perceived as even slightly out of line with the dominant political thought can be interpreted as fear over the potential loss of his

only friends or his ability to exist in furry spaces. There are many ways such a circumstance could play out. A few possibilities are that he could make a new fursona and hide his identity, he could leave the fandom entirely, or he could move to more right-wing online spaces and make a place for himself there. Gatekeeping itself has the potential to increase bitterness, aggression, and social isolation, leading to greater vulnerability to being radicalized. That is not to portray all people being banned purely as victims, but rather to acknowledge the complexity of the situation.

Furry communities have their own social norms, as would be expected from any subculture. While extremism and hate can be alarming, I do not believe it is reflective of the majority of furies. It is hardly a surprise to encounter hate on the internet, or pockets of fascism in social groups. There are furies taking action against fascism and the community tries to self-regulate and moderate itself to protect members by upholding social norms and maintaining a safe environment. Social norms are neither inherently good nor bad, and they are constantly being renegotiated and enacted. Gatekeeping is not a perfect solution, and the protection it offers some community members can come at the cost of isolating others, increasing their risk of radicalization. However, the problems within the furry fandom are not occurring within a vacuum. Members are multifaceted and experience numerous factors online, offline, and internally. Upholding norms is a complex process that cannot be reduced to a singular action, and changes are constantly occurring over time whether intended or not.

## Intimacy and Belonging

One topic commonly brought up by the furies I interviewed was a desire for platonic intimacy and an appreciation for characters and fursonas that looked cute, fluffy, and huggable. The stereotype that furies are purely a sexual community can make it surprising to hear that platonic intimacy was a topic at all to those unfamiliar with the fandom. Intimacy as a concept can take many forms, with people expressing and appreciating closeness in a variety of ways for a variety of relationships. I want to avoid implying that however one categorizes intimacy, whether it be romantic, platonic, sexual, etc., that there are greater or lesser degrees of significance. These aspects of the furry community can all be celebrated without creating a hierarchy or being defensive about the sexual aspects of the fandom.

There are some examples of the focus on platonic intimacy in my interviews. Thad considered the “huggability” of his fursona to be an important factor and spoke of strangers coming up to the fursuited members of his friend group for hugs and pictures. Yammy felt that one of the major positives of the furry community is the willingness to express platonic love, which they saw as lacking in the USA. Giggly Dergon directly identified through intimacy as a hugger, a cuddler, a person who will freely give and receive head pats, etc. The furry community is highly open to these desires and expressions, and that is one of the prime reasons Giggly Dergon valued the community and has remained in that space. These are not the only instances where platonic intimacy was discussed, but they are representative of common sentiments.

Physical intimacy can play a role in fursona creation and furry interactions even though the community is purely virtual for many members. A fluffy character may be associated with pleasant, tactile sensations, inspiring a fursona design that incorporates such physical elements to make the character appear huggable. It is telling of the individual and of the community values that furies can find it important to design a self-representation that prompts a desire in others to interact physically with it. Furies interacting with each other may give virtual hugs, head pats, etc. through words, images, or, in the case of VR (virtual reality), gestures. The desire for physical touch and connection is not negated by being a highly online space.

Many of the interviewees spoke of being shy, isolated, or growing up in a repressive environment. The furry community was an opportunity to connect with others, experiment with identity, and feel a sense of belonging and of community. Time in the furry fandom tended to coincide with increases in self-confidence, in both those with furry friends and those without. This was often attributed to being in an open environment or creating a fursona. The self-reflection and self-discovery involved in creating a fursona allowed some to feel surer about their identity, and the welcoming, anonymous gatherings of people with a shared interest made socializing easier.

Despite the stigma felt by furies, greater involvement and identification with the furry community can increase the wellbeing of members.<sup>52</sup> At the same time, perceived stigma can

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<sup>52</sup> Steven E. Mock et al., "Deeper Leisure Involvement as a Coping Resource in a Stigmatized Leisure Context," *Leisure/Loisir* 37, no. 2 (2013): 111–126.

drive furies to further identify with the fandom where they feel they belong.<sup>53</sup> It should be noted that “for members of stigmatized fan groups, belonging to the fan group is more meaningful than acceptance from outside groups.”<sup>54</sup> While the fandom may be subjected to hate, it offers a safe space for some people who already experience stigma. Some of the interviewees pointed to the large number of queer furies as an example of people who feel and experience discrimination coming together as a community where they are safe and can be unapologetically outside societal norms. One of the interviewees, Wade, said he would be “hard pressed to find another group as accepting as furies since we're all made of society's outcasts.” Being outcasts together helps create a sense of belonging and of community that might be lacking elsewhere. It is understandable that feeling validated and accepted by a community could improve wellbeing.

The furry fandom can function as a way to develop connections with others. Dunn, a furry PhD student studying furies, explained, “Furies' strange and intense fascination in cartoon animals leaves many feeling lonely. Furies are also overwhelmingly LGBTQ-identifying, so this dual outcast status of queer identity and nerdy fixation leads furies to form community with one another where we can express ourselves in unique, furry-specific ways.”<sup>55</sup> The furry community can carry the comfort of belonging to a group and having the intimacy of shared

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<sup>53</sup> Andrew Michael Tague, Stephen Reysen, and Courtney Plante. “Belongingness as a Mediator of the Relationship Between Felt Stigma and Identification in Fans,” *The Journal of Social Psychology* 160, no. 3 (2020): 324–331; Catherine Haslam et al., “Stigma,” *The New Psychology of Health: Unlocking the Social Cure* (London: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>54</sup> Andrew Michael Tague, Stephen Reysen, and Courtney Plante, “Belongingness,” 329.

<sup>55</sup> Kameron Dunn, “What’s Going on with Those Furry Nazis?” *Slate*, November 18, 2021, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2021/11/nazi-furies-deradicalization-efforts.html>.

experiences and group-specific expressions. The potential harms of loneliness and isolation may be mitigated through community involvement and connection.

Coming together as a community to find belonging and strength is not limited to the furry fandom. Jenkins writes on this:

These fans often draw strength and courage from their ability to identify themselves as members of a group of other fans who shared common interests and confronted common problems. To speak as a fan is to accept what has been labeled a subordinated position within the cultural hierarchy, to accept an identity constantly belittled or criticized by institutional authorities. Yet it is also to speak from a position of collective identity, to forge an alliance with a community of others in defense of tastes which, as a result, cannot be read as totally aberrant or idiosyncratic. Indeed, one of the most often heard comments from new fans is their surprise in discovering how many people share their fascination with a particular series, their pleasure in discovering that they are not "alone."<sup>56</sup>

Fandoms can bear the brunt of stigma, but their shared identity as members of the fandom is protective, and potentially even empowering.

Experiencing connections with others and the feeling of belonging can be a significant drive to entering and engaging with the furry community. Some furies feel like outsiders or are already being stigmatized, and the fandom can provide a community with shared interests, experiences, and appreciation for acceptance. Once in the community, the longing for various forms of intimacy can inspire creativity in the enactment of intimacy and how furies communicate this desire. Finding acceptance and being part of a community where stigmatized identities can be embraced can increase self-confidence, in spite of the stigma directed at furies—which only increases feelings of fandom identification. Furies identifying and engaging

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<sup>56</sup> Henry Jenkins, "'Get a Life!': Fans, Poachers, Nomads," in *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012), 23.

with the community can feel less isolated, and these connections/intimacies and sense of belonging can increase wellbeing. The potential for personal growth, healing, and interconnectedness is a very positive aspect of the furry fandom.

I end this section by noting that social norms inform categories of belonging, with stigmatization and othering as possible consequences for perceived abnormalities or incongruities. Furthermore, the sense of belonging or of isolation can have a real impact on people's wellbeing. In my next section, I focus on the topics of identity and fursona embodiment. Having examined the overtly social elements in Section 3, I turn to the internal aspects of furry experience. This next section primarily analyzes how fursonas influence identity and furies' sense of reality.

## **Section 4: Fursona Embodiment and Identity**

Learning about the Self

Fursonas are a fascinating instance of people exploring, establishing, and asserting identity. Other popular fandoms still include cosplay and creating OCs (original characters), but the furry fandom has a particular focus on self-representations. The interviewees had a wide variety of methods for creating a fursona. For some, it was an in-depth exercise of reflection and self-discovery, while for others it was quick and casual. Inspiration was drawn from things

such as favourite media, nicknames, personality quirks, physical characteristics, and many other elements of the individual. Fursonas act both as representations of the self and presentations for others.

I asked all the interviewees if they thought having a fursona was an important part of being in the furry community. Some spoke about the importance instantly and enthusiastically, but most took a more moderate approach to the question. According to most of the interviewees, having a fursona may be helpful or important, but it is not a necessity. The advertisement for my research specifically mentioned fursonas, so it is possible that it contributed to all of the participants having at least one fursona or similar animal character.<sup>57</sup> However, according to Furscience, “Creating a fursona is one of the most universal behaviours in the furry fandom,”<sup>58</sup> so it is not surprising this was the case for my study. Fursonas may not be considered a necessity, but they are still ubiquitous within the fandom.

Furry fandom spaces provide a safer way to explore, test, and embody identities. Most online interactions are anonymous, the community tends to be highly open towards queer identities, and fursonas allow for creative representations of oneself. It can be safer and less intimidating than playing with identity or challenging societal norms offline. Overt displays of

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<sup>57</sup> Some of the interviewees chose different terminology – OC, avatar, dreamsona, or default sona – instead of fursona. Despite this, there was not a noticeable difference in the way they used these creations and representations in comparison to others who felt a similar degree of connectedness with the community.

<sup>58</sup> Plante et al., *FurScience!*, 51.

being in a marginalized group can be dangerous and carry the risk of hardship, so having a safe space is important.

Creating a fursona offers a chance to freely explore gender in exciting ways. People can choose how they wish to present without the same degree of social or physical confines that are on the offline human body. Their experiences with having and creating fursonas aided some of the interviewees in exploring gender identity and coming to consider themselves transgender, non-binary, or genderfluid. Butler analyzes gender through the lens of 'performance,' where gender is constructed and subverted through the repetition of acts.<sup>59</sup> Fursonas can also be understood as performances of gender, allowing furies to explore how they wish to express gender, and playing a role in shaping how they conceive their own identities.

Aster represents his genderfluid and non-binary identity through a shapeshifting fursona. This fursona is a singular character who is able to change form and present androgynous, masculine, or feminine through both first and secondary sex characteristics. It gives him the freedom to fluidly represent himself without the same limits as a physical body. Aster described: "Their presentation shifts to fit my identity at any given moment." It should be noted as well that Aster does not change his offline gender presentation. Having a fursona provides a concrete visual for an inner self that is not always apparent.

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<sup>59</sup> Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519-531.

Aster's fursona acts as a reflection of his own relationship to gender. The vast worldbuilding for this character creates a continuous story that can change as Aster himself changes over time. The shapeshifting powers of his fursona were initially a curse, with the masculine side being the monstrous form. Religious trauma, growing up in a repressive environment, and a traumatic incident once he began to explore his sexuality all played a role in this negative depiction. Gender, sexuality, and kink all intersect for Aster to the point that he does not see them as separate. This monstrous form was masculine and sexually dominant, while the feminine form was sexually submissive. The taboo of BDSM and perceiving sexual domination as something monstrous within himself shaped his fursona. Over time, Aster became more confident and accepting of this side of himself through self-reflection and help from a romantic partner. This change has also impacted his fursona, "For a while they've seen this shape-shifted and larger form as more of a curse, but now they have come around to it being less that and more just a tool. Which, hello my gender identity!" Aster's fursona changes with him over time as his gender and his relationship to gender evolve.

The act of creating a fursona proved to be enlightening for some of the interviewees as they opened themselves to a possibility outside cisnormativity. For some, the connection between fursona creation and transgender identity was explicit. One of the interviewees, Datura, expressed:

I'm like looking at [my fursona design], and something didn't feel right. And so, eventually I sat down and I looked at all the stuff that just didn't feel right about it. And in turn, I realized all the stuff I didn't like, was stuff I didn't like in myself, and it tended to be more masculine-leaning things. So eventually I- that's kind of the real thing that kind of triggered me into like, 'I might be trans' and- and start transitioning.

These realizations may have eventually occurred to her even if she was not a furry, but I do think it is important to this thesis that they happened in this context. Creating the personal representation of a fursona necessitates a certain amount of self-reflection. It takes the abstract sensation of something feeling 'right' and inspires analysis and exploration until that feeling is satisfied. This is an active process where people create a self that feels right, even if that self does not align with how they have identified in the past.

The furry fandom is an incredibly open space for exploring and expressing sexual and romantic identities and attractions<sup>60</sup>. Art, roleplay, events, discussions, and many other interactions in the community include sexuality and romance, though the content allowed or encouraged in specific spaces varies. For example, a website may allow art depicting romantic and sexual attraction as long as it does not include anything deemed pornographic. The general community is highly open and encouraging of various sexualities, genders, and kinks, allowing for safe exploration and expression.

There are, of course, limits to this, with members policing and restricting forms of sexual expression they do not want within the community. NSFW (not safe for work) websites and social areas will have rules and guidelines for acceptable behaviour. One significant example is how the furry fandom makes a distinction between sexualizing anthropomorphic characters and zoophilia. If a member is seen promoting zoophilia, they may be banned from various sites

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<sup>60</sup> While this is under the heading of Sexuality, it is important to distinguish between 'sexual' and 'romantic.' In common discussions, sexuality is often treated as an umbrella term. For example, an individual may be commonly identified as gay, but that could be further broken down into terms such as asexual and homoromantic or any number of various asterisks that apply to simplified labels.

and in-person events. The furry community may be more open than some others regarding sexuality and sexual content, but it still has its own rules and norms that it upholds.

The furry fandom helped some of the interviewees explore sexuality either through their fursonas or just being in a sex-positive environment. For Audy, developing his otter fursona' physical characteristics, personality, and background prompted self-reflection and the realization that he was aromantic. Additionally, his relationship with sexual acts was impacted by consuming furry media. A particular moment Audy recounted was when he happened across artwork of a cow fursona, and it reinforced his breastfeeding kink. This kink was then in turn added to the worldbuilding and background for his own fursona. Audy the human and Audy the otter both affect each other, evolving over time. He was certain his fursona would continue to change with him, stating, "Fursonas are a thing that I feel are constantly evolving and changing, just like ourselves." He continued, "I will continue to discover things about myself until the day I die, and my sona will reflect that your personality is nebulous, and you will never truly know everything about yourself." Self-discovery was a central theme in my interview with Audy, and being a furry has played a large role in the ongoing development of his identity, romantically and sexually.

Exposure to furry sexual content can have a normalizing effect on forms of intimacy that might otherwise be degraded or considered taboo. This conversation was brought up in particular by the interviewee, Duck. He opened himself up to the BDSM activity of pet play and he found comfort in the idea of having someone controlling him, in allowing himself to let go and have someone else take care of him. Initially, he and his girlfriend had reservations about this form of intimacy, but they saw more of it and gradually changed their minds. Duck said that

the couple “resonated with it more and more because it almost normalizes those things that we usually feel a discomfort towards.” He spoke very highly of sex-positivity and was critical of mainstream ideas around sexuality:

I think they have a very, like, a very narrow mindset on what is a sexual gratification, and what is right and wrong, and what is sex and isn't sex, and I think that black and white look at the way that that is kinda defeats a lot of positives that could come out of it, because I personally see it as an experience. I see it as something that you share with people to get to know them better.

Various forms of sex and intimacy can be normalized through exposure to and information about these acts, for someone like Duck, this is understood as a good thing that encourages connection.

Not all of the interviewees were in favour of the sexual openness of the furry community. It can be seen as something uncomfortable or another factor in the stigma against furies. Thad was conflicted on how to positively represent furies, “I used to definitely want [representation], sort of like show how cool the community is like how wholesome it is, like interactions like for the regular people. But I think more and more I've sort of seen how, I guess, like the NSFW side sort of seems to be sort of like swept under the rug, even though it's like- it's like sort of worth mentioning.” According to Thad he did not take part in this side of the fandom, and he was worried, “I think like if you tried to show that side, it would cause so many like more public issues than we have already.” The furry community has both sexual and non-sexual aspects, and to present it as though there is no sexual elements to it would be disingenuous.

There is a fine line here that is difficult to tread as a researcher. I do not want to perpetuate negative stereotypes or insult members of the fandom. Gwaion was blunt about

how research on furies needs to expand from sexual topics, “There's been lots of focus on, of course, sexuality. And of course, the various learning disorders that seem to be associated with the fandom. Those seem like they've almost been explored to death at this point.” There is recent research examining and conceptualizing sex in the furry fandom. One study proposed furry sexual motivation is a form of “erotic target identity inversion (ETII): sexual arousal by the fantasy of being the same kinds of individuals to whom they are sexually attracted” and dubbed this phenomenon the mouthful of a word, autoanthropomorphozoophilia.<sup>61</sup> This in turn prompted a response and further study that aimed to simplify the topic by instead viewing furry sexuality as a conditioned fetish.<sup>62</sup> My study is not aiming to figure out why some furies might be sexually attracted to anthropomorphized characters, but rather how they think of themselves and how their identities change over time and within the furry fandom.

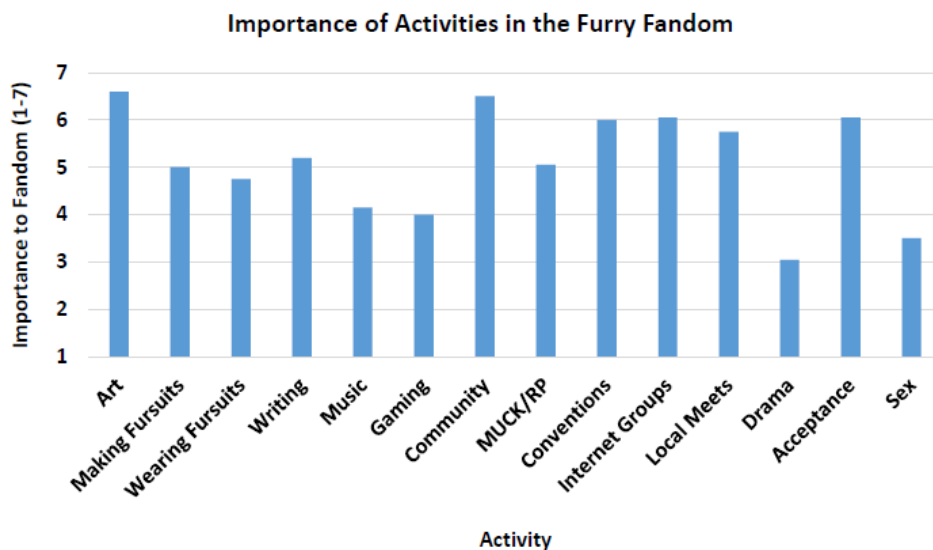
The sexual side of the furry fandom is an important aspect, but it is hardly the be all and end of the community. Furies surveyed by FurScience rated the degree of importance various activities have in the fandom, and the top activities wound up being ‘art’ and ‘community’, with sex not nearly as important (see Table 2).<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Kevin J. Hsu and J. Michael Bailey, “The ‘Furry’ Phenomenon: Characterizing Sexual Orientation, Sexual Motivation, and Erotic Target Identity Inversions in Male Furies,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 48, no. 5 (2019): 1349–1369.

<sup>62</sup> B. Terrance Grey, “Furry Sexuality: Conditioned Fetishes a Better Explanation Than Erotic Target Identity Inversion,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 49, no. 1 (2020): 49–52.

<sup>63</sup> Courtney N. Plante et al., *FurScience! A Summary of Five Years of Research from the International Anthropomorphic Research Project* (FurScience, 2016), 26.



*(Table 2. Importance of activities in the furry fandom<sup>64</sup>)*

This is an interesting finding, though I would note that the category ‘sex,’ to my own interpretation, sounds like the physical act of engaging in sex and therefore would not include sexual expressions and content that participants considered art. A 2022 paper examined “if furries should be theorized as a sexual subculture, with fandom elements, or as a fandom with sexual elements.”<sup>65</sup> The authors concluded “When assessed relative to non-sexual motivation, sexual motivation was found to be virtually unrelated to furry identification, suggesting that sexual interest is tangential to furries’ social identity as fans.”<sup>66</sup> Sex and sexual content exists in the furry fandom, but, to furries, it is not the most important thing about being a furry.

<sup>64</sup> Courtney N. Plante et al., *FurScience! A Summary of Five Years of Research from the International Anthropomorphic Research Project* (FurScience, 2016), 26.

<sup>65</sup> Thomas R. Brooks et al., “‘Chasing Tail’: Testing the Relative Strength of Sexual Interest and Social Interaction as Predictors of Furry Identity,” *The Journal of Sex Research* (2022): 1–12.

<sup>66</sup> Brooks et al., “Chasing Tail,” 9.

The furry fandom can be a great space for members to explore sexuality and identity. The fandom generally does not shy away from sex, but there are also non-sexual activities and spaces. Both of these aspects need to be accounted for in order to have a fuller understanding of the community. Members of the fandom have different things they get out of being part of the community, and focusing solely on sexuality perpetuates the myth that being a furry is inherently sexual. At the same time, the importance and beauty of sexuality should not be downplayed or demonized. The fandom offers a safe environment for self-discovery and aids members in continually defining and redefining their identities.

Learning about the self can take many forms, with endless aspects of each person and identities interplaying. I have focused upon gender and sexuality in this thesis as those are pieces of identity that were commonly referenced in my interviews. It should be noted, though, that furies learning about themselves are not limited to these topics. Syd, an interviewee, strongly connected being a furry to this learning, “For me, it has a lot to do with what symbols resonated my own self-expression. How I see myself, how I discover what I think of myself through the symbols that I use to identify myself.” Fursonas can function as self-explorations exercises, and they are highly encouraged and celebrated in the fandom.

Self-exploration and defining identity can be important to understanding oneself. The furry community tends to skew younger, and of the adults in the fandom (those over 18), almost 75% are under the age of 25.<sup>67</sup> In my study, the interviewees often said they entered the fandom as a teen or young adult. Many of them entered the fandom upon pursuing secondary

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<sup>67</sup> Plante et al. *Furscience!*, 4.

education or moving away from their childhood homes. It is not a surprise that people are joining the fandom in this transitional period entering adulthood. Identity formation is a continual process throughout a person's life, though. There can be times of change or uncertainty where people may experience an 'identity crisis' as they struggle to realign themselves. However, even without a full-blown identity crisis, identity is still being constantly renegotiated. New personal and social elements keep people in a state of change, though that is not always readily apparent. The furry fandom can be a place for people to discover and redefine identity, which is of particular use to those struggling with or new to self-reflection and assertion of identity.

### Representing the Self

One draw to creating a fursona is the desire to have a personalized avatar that can be used to distinguish the individual. These identifiers can be intensely important to furies, equal to or greater than the value they place upon their human identities.<sup>68</sup> Creating one might entail having a unique design or adding elements that reflect the particular individual. There are countless possible designs for fursonas. Due to the shifting nature of identity and the multitude of factors that can make up an individual, choices must be made in how one wishes to be

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<sup>68</sup> Stephen Reysen et al., "Optimal Distinctiveness and Identification with the Furry Fandom," *Current Psychology* 35, no. 4 (2016): 638–642.

represented. Fursonas can be idealized selves, exaggerated representations, or completely different characters.

Having a fursona involves the perceptions of others. Fursonas are often the only visual furries know of each other online. These images inform how others perceive these individuals. Aspects such as species, body language, facial expression, attire, colour pallet, art style, etc. all carry meaning. How well one's intended meaning is conveyed would vary, but the cultural shorthand employed by community members would help. I would point to fursonas as performances (which I base on Butler's work),<sup>69</sup> constructing and deconstructing meaning within their community. It is not a new concept that people communicate aspects of themselves through visual appearance, however, fursonas are an interesting example. Crucially, the creative potential of fursonas as communicative representations is not beholden to the same limits as the physical human body.

Fursonas can afford a greater degree of social communication to some than the human body. This was pointed to by some of the interviewees. Aster said, "I would argue my fursona probably communicates me better than me..." Fletcher put it, "Instead of seeing what they look like you're hearing from them. This is how I want to be perceived, and this is how I want to express myself. I think you get to see a fuller version of who they are than if you saw someone walking down the street." There are many aspects of a person that are invisible to observers in day-to-day life, and sometimes the physical form communicates something the person does not

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<sup>69</sup> Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519-531.

want others to perceive. Fursonas are a conscious choice to control what will be perceived, though those symbolic messages may not be interpreted as intended.

Fursonas are typically based on one or more real or mythical non-human creatures, and that choice can bear meaning for the person creating the fursona and for people who witness it. The meaning can be personal, or it can be a widespread association. There is never total control in how a fursona will be interpreted, as is the case with any artform. The furry community has some common meanings as its own subculture, and members may choose to play into those or not. The symbolic language of fursona design influences how furries are perceived and how they represent themselves.

Anthropomorphic creatures and representations are not unique to the furry community, and this can be found throughout human history. As the interviewee, Knox, said, "I think it's literally a part of the human condition. We already anthropomorphize other things from the sun to the wind, to the toad that you see hopping across the road." He continued, "It's a combination of expressing oneself and learning about the world, and then expressing what you've learned about the world around you and how you fit in it." Fursonas and furry media are just another example of this tendency.

Some of the interviewees took into account common meanings behind their chosen creatures when designing fursonas. Greg noted, "you're using like the metaphor of like whatever species you've chosen to depict them as to like highlight, or like, communicate more, like, efficiently some aspect of them." Knox also considered fursona design as shorthand to help people categorize individuals. This communication could be seen more clearly in some designs

than in others. Returning to Knox, his current fursona is a mixture of boarder collie and dragon. There are common associations with these creatures that build character without people actively engaging with him. He is trying to convey that this character is intelligent, loyal, and energetic, to name a few traits. There is no guarantee these aspects will be communicated, but they were considerations he made when creating a fursona he has now had for over a decade.

Three of the participants spoke about their experiences with plurality, multiple personalities, or alters,<sup>70</sup> states of being and experiences that are not usually conveyed to others through the human body. None of them approached these experiences in the same way, but they all took their alters into consideration when attempting to create a singular fursona. It is interesting that they all desired to have a singular character, though that could be partially attributed to online sites encouraging the use of a specific avatar as well as making it easier for others to identify someone with consistent representation. The task of self-representation through the creative form of a fursona provides the opportunity to showcase selves normally invisible to the outside world.

Miko chose a form entirely derived from a separate identity, depicting this one aspect of a self that is normally invisible and inaccessible to others. This was Miko's dreamsona, a figure with features closely related to a lion that only existed within lucid dreams that seeped into reality. The extreme vividness of the dreams led to them seeking help through therapy when false memories distorted Miko's grasp on reality. Even though there was a clear desire to

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<sup>70</sup> There was no consensus on terminology, how they thought about plurality, or how they spoke about themselves. I have decided to use the terms favoured by these different interviewees rather than applying one set of vocabulary across all interviews.

keep the two identities separate, this dreamsona was still the focus for a self-representation. Of the interviewees with experiences in plurality, Miko was the only one to choose a representation reflecting a singular self.

Datura had not settled on a final design, but she was trying to create three distinct characters within one. She described the process as “When I'm in *this* mindset, I tried to design a perfect fursona. Then in *this* mindset I tried to design a perfect fursona. And then in *this* mindset I tried to design a perfect fursona. And then I kind of mashed ‘em all into one.” The goal was not to create three separate fursonas to use at different times, but to design a character that depicts an experience of three in one.

It is interesting to note that while Datura was seeking a design to represent three identities, she was also actively working to move away from these experiences. She was the only one to take on the label of dissociative identity disorder, and she said it was something she struggled with “a long time ago.” This meant her experiences were explicitly framed through the lens of disorder. She explained, “It was pretty much lying to myself, until the lie became true, and then- and then things spiraled out of control, like, which me am I?” Although she said this was a thing of the past, she did clarify that she still has relapses where she will enter one of the three mindsets. The attempt to both embrace these identities while also distancing herself from them resulted in a contradiction apparent in the interview. In Datura’s explanation of fursona creation she faltered, “Every day I would just think of something different like, ‘I like this, but it doesn't feel right,’ because it- it almost felt like I was leaving the other two out, and then the next day it felt like I was leaving the other two out, and it's... I- I shouldn't say the

other two, because it- it's all me. I- I gotta remember that." She quietly laughed in a manner that did not express happiness.

Syd chose an entirely different strategy from Datura or Miko by entirely embracing all alters within their system as valid. In stark contrast, they spoke using the pronoun "we," though they slipped every now and then into the pronoun "I". This decision to use plural pronouns appeared to be a very conscious choice to legitimize the alters. At the start of the interview, I asked how they identified, and they responded, "an ambiguously numbered blob of identity, of shifting forms and expressions." Throughout our discussion Syd mentioned various forms they have experienced, both animate and inanimate. The multitude and variety of shifting forms understandably made having a singular representative image difficult. Using a representation only befitting one form "would just be all sorts of awkward and confusing. Wouldn't feel right." Eventually, they "stumbled upon" a form that worked: "It was a shape. A shape and an image that kind of existed to be a median form and didn't stand for anything except us collectively."

Representing oneself can be a daunting task on its own without the added complication of incorporating multiple selves into the equation. To a certain extent, I posit this is the case for all people. Identity can be highly contextual and intersectional varieties of a different person for various temporal, spatial, social, and internal situations. The accounts of the interviewees experiencing forms of plurality almost feel like solidifications of ephemeral selves. A single fursona cannot represent every aspect of an individual, leaving some pieces behind while others are emphasized until a form is found that somehow feels 'right' or representative enough.

The notion of a fursona feeling 'right' kept appearing throughout this study. It first appeared when I made my own fursona. I wanted it to be a proper fursona, and that meant that I sought a form I felt reflected me and satisfied something in my brain seeking a 'right' depiction of myself. In my interview with Thunder, he explained it, "Yeah, you don't wanna just create a random ass character you don't feel connected to at all, you know. You want it to *resonate* within you." I really appreciated this wording for the phenomenon. It is as though the fursona is vibrating at the same frequency as my internal self, and in my chest, I feel them sync together. This will not be the same for every furry, but I believe it provides valuable insight into the experiences of some. Feeling 'right' is an abstract concept that is difficult to put into words, but I have come to understand it as the sense of a fursona resonating with an internal self.

Fursonas are representations of the self where various identities are curated and creatively incorporated in the design of a character until it communicates that illusive internal self. The human body can be altered, decorated, and positioned as an assertion of identity and social communication, but there are limits in its ability to convey how individuals conceive of themselves. Fursonas have much more freedom as creative representations and provide more control over each communicative element, though how successful they are at communicating their intended meanings will vary. I do not think the examples of furies with plurality trying to find singular self-representations are entirely foreign to individuals without these experiences. My reading of these situations is of people trying to navigate self-representation with the added complexity of multiple selves with multiple identities, rather than a singular self with various identities. It may be more complex, but it is not a completely different process. Miko wanted to represent a self that was invisible to others. Datura and Syd wanted a representation

that felt 'right' to multiple selves. Fursonas can never represent every aspect of furies, so they are purposeful decisions in the core elements of people until a resonant form is created.

## Embodying Fursonas

Embodying fursonas can impact sense of self and perception of reality. That sounds quite dramatic, but the scope of this impact varies between furies. Some of the interviewees I spoke with felt a strong connection to their fursona bodies, at times even more so than their human bodies. This was not the case with everyone, and those experiencing that connection each viewed it differently. Taking on the role and the form of fursonas can alter perceptions in minute or significant ways. These embodiments are particularly of significance with repetition, as the repeated performances change and shape individual and community perceptions.<sup>71</sup>

I regard the human and the fursona body as both real in this thesis, though that is not an opinion shared by all of the interviewees. The physical and the digital both have substance and impact upon each other, and automatically downplaying either one limits scholarly potential to conceptualize and examine the current world. Bollestroff notes that avatar embodiment is real as, "it is one way subjects can possess virtuality... [and] is always a form of emplacement."<sup>72</sup> Additionally, fursonas can be both virtual and physical—with fursuiting allowing for the creation of a physical body—further muddying common distinctions between

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<sup>71</sup> Butler.

<sup>72</sup> Bollestroff, 396.

real and unreal. The physical can also be considered unreal at times, with play and fantasy as an example.<sup>73</sup> For some, fursuiting can be deemed play, and therefore unreal. However, I would still avoid diminishing the impact that these repeated performances and embodiment can have on sense of self and reality.

A common hypothetical in the furry community, and one that I posed to the interviewees, is whether or not a person would want to physically become their fursona. Throughout my own life I have encountered many instances of people asking each other what superpower they would want. The question is generally understood as playful and casual. It inspires humour, self-reflection, and worldbuilding. There was a range in the seriousness with which the interviewees took me questioning them about becoming their fursonas. Some played in the space, excitedly asking questions and worldbuilding with me (e.g. Can I change back? Is it this world or one designed for my fursona's unique physical body? Would a clandestine organization kidnap me?). Some treated the question very casually—much like queries into desired superpowers—while others carried a weight and seriousness in their responses. A few interviewees genuinely felt a desire to have the physical body of their fursonas.

Thunder loved the idea of changing his physical body with new technology, with mechanical augmentation to better humans, and he also saw the appeal of becoming his fursona. He was incredibly enthusiastic about fursonas in general and saw them as perfect versions of oneself. There was this sense of pure joy radiating off him when he spoke about fursuiting. However, once I asked him about physically changing into a fursona body, he grew a

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<sup>73</sup> Bollstroff, 387.

bit somber, sighing before saying, "I feel different, you know, I don't want to be a human. You know what I mean? I guess I'm kind of a bit depressed about it, you know. I'm always going to be stuck in this depressing human body." I followed up, asking what he thought he would gain from having a fursona body. He slightly hesitated, "Just- I'd feel a lot better about myself, you know. I'd feel like I'm the true me."

Wanting to become one's fursona has the potential to garner negative reactions and act as a marker for perceived abnormality. M brought up on her own that she and her friends would like to physically become their fursonas. The revelation was accompanied by the rapid swinging of the camera, as she fidgeted with her phone in a nervous tick that seemed to appear when she was uncomfortable. This was not something she would usually bring up unless she knew someone was (she used finger quotes) "safe." I was privileged to this knowledge because she figured we would never talk to each other again. She considered it a private matter and said she does not speak about it very often. When I asked about it being private she explained, "Well, so on a physical level, like, that kind of desire isn't actionable. Like, you can't actually implement it in real life," and that "...for most of my social relationships, it's irrelevant." I asked how she felt about keeping this aspect of herself a secret from people in her life, if it bothered her or if she was fine with it. She was unbothered and said there was nothing her rabbi or boss would do differently if they knew she wanted to be her fursona. Therefore, the irrelevance she spoke of made it a social non-issue. Looking at this idea of it being non-actionable and thus irrelevant in most social contexts, it makes sense to me that these desires would be kept secret. There is very little to be possibly gained from confiding this in most social relationships and not

everyone is “safe,” so it seems prudent to avoid the potential and unnecessary risk of negative reactions.

Gwyn was concerned about being negatively judged for her experiences perceiving reality and the boundary between wolf and human. Her thoughts on the matter bore tacked on disclaimers and serious or half-joking pleas for tolerance. I asked her about feeling closer to humans or non-human animals. She cut off her own knee-jerk response and paused to collect her thoughts, “...Don't make fun of me, but there are times where, like, I look in the mirror, and *I see a wolf* instead of what's actually there.” She explained, “If you've ever had those out-of-body experiences, that's exactly what I'm talking about. But you don't- I don't see my human self all the time; I see something else. Which sounds concerning now that I say it like that. Um, please don't report me to any mental institute.” It is not my place to judge the validity of someone's lived experiences, and my nerdy self rather finds such accounts to be fascinating and exciting. Many of the interviewees used fursonas as online avatars or roleplayed with them, but this was a degree of embodiment where the interviewee was actively aware of shifts in their perceptions of reality.

I would also like to examine fursona embodiment through the example of the interviewee, Matt. Matt saw his being a furry as a part of his spiritual connection to nature and life as a whole. He used a few different characters online, with one he considered to be his main fursona. According to him, the others were him putting on a character, while his main fursona was himself. He identified “very, very closely” with his fursona. Matt had fursuited before, and I asked him what he had gotten out of those experiences. He stumbled a bit trying to express himself extemporaneously, but recounted:

It's- It's hard to explain. It's a nice- It's a nice feeling overall. Especially when you when you look in the mirror because it's like, 'Oh! It's me!' and it's- it's nice to see. It's- it's a very... I don't know the right- I don't know what the right word for this is, but it's a very, like, welcoming experience. It's like, 'Oh, it's me! And I- I look like this,' and it- it kind of puts some- like a reality to the perception.

I asked if he would call fursuiting affirming, and he lit up and said that was the word he was trying to remember.

Interestingly, Matt immediately backtracked. 'Affirming' was the word he wanted to use to express his feelings, but he wanted to draw a distinction between his experiences and of those seeking gender affirmation. Affirmation is a commonly used word when discussing the lives of transgender, non-binary, or genderfluid people, and he was quick to downplay his own affirmation as a furry. He said to take the word affirming "with a grain of salt" and that gender affirmation would probably be more important to someone than his experiences with fursuiting. He declared, "I could take this or leave this," and then further clarified that he was talking in the context of his fursuit. I have seen discourse online surrounding whether or not being a furry is a valid identity and of the same importance as gender identity. I am not surprised that Matt was quick to clarify that he felt gender affirmation was more significant, as this can be a very heated issue.

I would not, however, minimize the importance of being a furry in Matt's life. He uses his fursona's name as his own, to the point where only his family calls him by his birth name. He laughed a bit, "I consider it more authentic than like the other name at this point." The use of the fursona name meant that "This person is my friend, and they know who I am. So, it's less of the name and more of like what the meaning of the name carries." Using this name was a repeated reminder that Matt could be open about himself with that person. Additionally, Matt

was the only interviewee to specifically call being a furry spiritual, and he felt it was significant that he chose being a furry out of all the other community or spiritual options available. He clarified that the quote, "I could take this or leave this," was in regard to fursuiting, so I would assume he does not feel the same about being a furry in general. I wish I had thought to ask about that in the moment. Being a furry and being his fursona seemed to be of great importance to Matt.

Both Matt and Gwyn are interesting instances of furies embodying their fursonas. There is this common element of looking in the mirror and perceiving a different reality. Gwyn felt outside of her human body, and Matt physically covered his human body with his fursona's. The involuntary nature of Gwyn's visions coincided with a sense of unease, though I am unsure if that unease was due to anxiety surrounding the experiences or the possible reactions of others. Matt's experiences were done purposefully and, in his words, put a "reality to the perception." He gave this representation of an internal self a physical reality and felt affirmed when he saw it reflected in the mirror. The mirror was showing him. Neither Matt nor Gwyn spoke of feeling dissatisfied having a human body, unlike Thunder who saw himself as being "stuck." I wonder if having a fursuit would ease some of Thunder's dissatisfaction by providing a source of affirmation for that "true me" he desired. Matt and Gwyn were special in the direct nature of their experiences with embodiment, whereas others may only experience that on an abstract level.

There were other examples of interviewees discussing perceptions of reality with their fursonas, though these were often treated as throw-away comments. Aster mentioned the influence of having pictures of fursona avatars online. He gave a light chuckle, "I'll be

interacting with my group specifically of furry friends, and it *almost* feels like a conversation between our characters.” These glimpses into the effect of embodying fursonas might feel casual or insignificant to those experiencing them, but they showcase how fursonas impact perceptions of reality, the self, and how furies relate to each other.

Experiences questioning the boundary between human and non-human were sometimes framed in a negative manner by interviewees and associated with mental illness. Gwyn prefaced her thoughts with a plea for me to not ridicule her. After that, she continued on to request I not report her to a mental institution. An even more blatantly negative view on mental health and connecting to non-human animals was provided by Thunder. I asked if he felt connected to humans, and he replied, “I’m not just gonna go off the deep end and be like, ‘Oh, I’m an animal! Agh!’” He then laughed at his dramatization of going ‘off the deep end.’ It is not my intention to diagnose anyone or to dismiss others’ realities as invalid or a form of illness. The label of mental illness and the mockery of mental illness risks further stigmatizing individuals with these experiences.

The separation between human and non-human is called further into question by those identifying as Therians or Otherkin. Therians, Otherkin, and furies are all different groups, but there is some overlap between them. Therians and Otherkin identify as non-human animals or mythical creatures mentally, spiritually, or physically. Other interviewees who did not share these types of experiences spoke quite respectfully—and at times hesitantly—about therians or people who identify as non-human animals. There was a sense that it is a delicate matter and some people on the outside of it do not want to be offensive. One example is Greg, who already knew the term therian, and nervously tried to conceptualize the different ways of

thinking and being between furies and therians. This was explained as the “extended fiction” of being a furry:

Here's “me” as a character. It's very different from like the- you know, in real life like, ‘Here's me the person who is like engaging in this act of, like, collaborative fiction’. And that's what I was kind of getting at, I think. For a lot of people, it's not so much an active collaborative fiction and it's not really- I guess it's probably not my place to, like... tell them what to do? Even though I don't totally understand it.

In this understanding, Furies engage in an understood collaborative fiction while therians experience it as their reality. None of the interviewees took on the label of therian, so it would be difficult to do in-depth analysis of the topic. However, one survey found that 35% of non-therian furies did not feel completely human, and that 39% of them would be 0% human if able.<sup>74</sup> This is still a significant portion of the furry fandom, and it warrants examination.

Greg's idea of fursonas as collaborative fiction is a compelling train of thought. A fursona might be a representation of the self, but that does not mean it *is* the self. Despite this, furies play in this space of make believe. They roleplay as their fursonas while embodying these non-human representations. There is a performance of roles while occupying the ambiguous state of both human and non-human. The participants understand fursonas as fictional, but these experiences still bleed into their reality, or the fiction that is identity.

Furies embody their fursonas with varying degrees of seriousness, and these experiences impact perceptions of reality. Some furies see fursonas as true selves that are more accurate than the human body, and taking the opportunity to embody fursonas can inspire a sense of affirmation. How individuals perceive reality can shift as fursona and human

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<sup>74</sup> Plante et al., *FurScience!*, 114.

blur. Fursonas may be thought of as fictional creations, as collaborative fiction amongst community members, but that does not invalidate them. Identity and roles are already fiction we treat as real. Thus, reality is malleable, changing over time and between people. Embodying fursonas can inspire some of these changes, and furies determine the degree to which they take these shifts as serious.

## Conclusion

### Review of Findings

Members of the furry fandom grapple with stigma directed at their perceived abnormalities. Some furies already deviate from mainstream social norms outside of the fandom, and this can be repressive and isolating for them. The furry community functions as a space for people who feel like outcasts to find community and a sense of belonging, and while joining the fandom comes with the risk of experiencing more stigma, the individual does become part of a community. These social bonds and community identity can have a protective effect and bolster general well-being. Stigma is then not isolating, but a shared experience that further deepens ties to the community.

In general, ostracization and social shaming from within one's own group, whether it be furry or non-furry, can drive people to find other communities. A person who feels outcast from

mainstream society might seek a group that will accept them. For some, this is the furry community. While furry fandom is accepting of some deviations from common social norms, it still upholds its own set of norms. The pattern may then repeat itself, and an individual who is shamed and ostracized turns to other groups that will accept them, potentially leaving them vulnerable to radicalization. There is a frequent desire for acceptance, validation, and community, and I do not believe this is limited to furies. Challenging norms is not inherently good or bad, but rather an expected piece of the constant renegotiation that norms undergo. Societal rules and expectations are not eternal or universal. Furies are an example of how some norms are challenged while others are reinforced, both within the furry fandom and wider communities.

The furry community can be a space to safely embrace some of the 'abnormalities' that might otherwise be frowned upon. Furies can play with identity and presentation without some of the offline constraints, both physical and social. This allows for members to explore identities and to represent themselves in ways that feel right or that resonate with them. Having safe spaces can be vital to the well-being of those with marginalized identities, by allowing them to represent themselves and embody their identities, to flourish rather than be constantly subjected to or weary of backlash.

The act of creating a fursona can aid in exploring, asserting, and establishing identity. Furies' identities and fursonas can change over time, with the two influencing each other. Identity can shape fursona design, and fursonas can impact how furies identify. People are constantly in flux, and fursona creation can provide a method of self-discovery and nurture a sense of assuredness, as people grapple with these changes. Fursonas may communicate how

furries see themselves and how they wish others to perceive them. The act of designing a fursona is also an act of communication. A fursona makes internal elements of the individual visible through purposeful decisions that curate the multitude of aspects within a person until it feels right. Embodying this representation of one's 'true,' aspirational, or inner self can be an affirming experience.

The embodiment of fursonas has the capacity to influence perceptions of reality and the self. The boundaries of human identity are challenged by representing the self through anthropomorphism, and this challenge can be taken even further when those representations feel real. Perceiving the self and other furries through fursona bodies can become involuntary. Many furries only know each other online as these avatars, but they still form meaningful relationships and experience intimacy. These connections can occur purely through these anthropomorphic selves. To some, their fursona body can feel more 'real' than their human body, or a truer form of their selves. The boundary between fursona and human varies between individuals and can change over time.

## Final Thoughts

The furry fandom is a fascinating site for studies into community and identity. The interplay between human and non-human, and the prominence of identity creation within the furry community drove much of my research focus. The interviews painted a picture of a community with its own norms challenging mainstream beliefs while exploring and embracing

identities otherwise maligned. I found personal enjoyment engaging with this topic and hearing the words of the participants. Each interview gave me a glimpse into the interviewees' worlds, carrying profound value. There appeared to be a lack of furry voices in scholarship addressing furies at the time of this study. This is part of why I chose to take a qualitative approach with interviews, and why I focused on the stories of the interviewees in this thesis.

I wish to draw attention to Greg's idea that fursonas are a collaborative fiction. I find this quite insightful, and I would like to expand that thought to the broader concept of identity. There is no limit to how we define and categorize ourselves, to how we make sense of ourselves, others, and reality. Some identities may be widespread and naturalized, but that does not mean they will always exist unaltered. People challenge and reinforce identities each day through acts/performances. Identities can be understood to be categorized and defined through collaborative fiction. However, this is not always recognized as such, and some identities are naturalized, believed to be unchanging biological realities. Overall, I consider the thought of identity as collaborative fiction to be the most compelling and meaningful result derived from this study.

Further research would be beneficial to the study of the furry fandom. This particular study only involved interviewing each furry once, and I think changes in identity and sense of self would be better examined through a series of follow-up interviews over time. Additionally, many of my observations and conclusions are not just confined to furies, and it would be academically intriguing to see how they compare to other groups, or if they would remain the same with different samples from the furry fandom. The interviewees in this study often

expressed interest in research on furies, and I believe many in the community would welcome continued research done in an understanding and respectful manner.

## Glossary

**BDSM:** Bondage Domination (or discipline) Submission (or sadism) and Masochism is an umbrella term for a subculture and activities encompassing a wide variety of behaviours both sexual and non-sexual that play with interpersonal power dynamics.

**Fandom:** a community based around self-identification as enthusiasts or followers of a particular media, person, or activity.

**Furry:** an individual who appreciates media containing anthropomorphized characters and self-identifies as a member of the furry fandom.

**Fursona:** an anthropomorphic character often used as an avatar or means of self-representation by individual members of the furry fandom.

**Fursuit:** a costume of furry characters worn by furrries. Fursuits can be partial or full-body attire. The word is used both as a verb and a noun.

**NSFW:** a common initialism for the phrase Not Safe for Work. This is used to indicate inappropriate or explicit content that may feature violence, pornography, slurs, or other forms of potentially disturbing content. In the context of furry sites and events, NSFW is most commonly used to distinguish sexually explicit content.

**OC:** an initialism standing for original character. OC's can be found in many art spaces and particularly in fandoms where one may create an original character with borrowed motifs or in-universe designs and backgrounds. Some people grow very attached to their OC's.

**Otherkin:** an individual who identifies on a mental, spiritual, and/or physical level with an imaginary or mythological creature.

**SFW:** a common initialism meaning Safe for Work. This is based on an unregulated, casual rating system to flag content as appropriate or not. SFW content is deemed appropriate to be viewed or engaged with in polite spaces, such as the workplace. It's counterpart, NSFW, indicates inappropriate content.

**Therian:** an individual who identifies on a mental, spiritual, and/or physical level with a non-human animal or creature. Some therians may also consider themselves furies or they may be just drawn to furry spaces as they seem safer.

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