

“Community-Building among LGBTQ+ Fursuiters”

Introduction

Furries are members of a fan community defined by their enthusiasm for anthropomorphic animals. In this fandom, participants often express themselves in social situations with other furries through their “fursonas,” which are typically representations of the wearers as anthropomorphic animals, but they could also be original or existing characters that have separate identities from the wearers. Fursuiting can function as a form of escapism for many furries (Beverland and Healy 2013, 228). About one fourth of the members of the fandom own at least partial fursuits, which typically include the head, tail, and paws of the animal they are embodying, though a smaller portion of the fandom owns full suits which cover the wearer’s entire body (Plante et al. 2016, 35). Fursuiting creates a new form of communication in which interactions are mediated through the fursuit and character rather than through direct conversations or discussions over social media, allowing for escapism (Liu 2017). Playing a role by embodying a character and wearing a fursuit allows for a new way of interacting with the world for those who suit and interact with the suiter.

Despite being a mode of escapism for those in the fandom, fursuiting is a stigmatized hobby. The furry fandom is misunderstood by the mainstream, often seen and portrayed as hypersexual, which has led to the group being described as a stigmatized fan community (Mock et al. 2013, 113). In a similar fashion, the LGBTQ+ community is portrayed as hypersexual by conservative media outlets, which suggests a connection between the two communities. According to research from the International Anthropomorphic Research Project, Furries are actually more likely to identify as non-heterosexual than the general population (Plante et al. 2016, 83). Because the furry fandom is already stigmatized by the mainstream, members of the

fandom perceive the space as more welcoming to other stigmatized individuals, such as members of the LGBTQ+ community (Heinz 2020). Though there is a lack of data on the connection between fursuiting and LGBTQ+ identity, this connection can be inferred when viewing other sources from related fields. My research seeks to explore how performance and stigma interact in the building of relationships within the furry fandom, more specifically LGBTQ+ fursuiters who face stigmatization both due to their deviant leisure activities and deviant sexualities and genders.

Research Questions

In order to understand how relationships form in the context of stigma based on both identity and leisure activities, I will use LGBTQ+ fursuiters as a case study. I ask how performance through fursuiting influences community-building among LGBTQ+ fursuiters in the face of stigmatization for gender or sexual identity and leisure activities, and why this activity is more popular among LGBTQ+ individuals because they are already stigmatized. Community-building among stigmatized groups is often important for the well-being of the group members, and in this community, relationship-building can be mediated through the role of one's fursona.

Significance

Overall, my thesis will address the role of performance in human interactions and self-formation, as well as how performing while stigmatized changes the ways in which those interactions take place. Researching how performance, in this context of animals, facilitates community-building among LGBTQ+-identified individuals will provide a deeper understanding of why performance is helpful in creating an atmosphere where connection is encouraged. This is

especially interesting because the performed characters often have different personalities from their performers, which could reveal information about perceived barriers to connection among stigmatized individuals. In the similar context of cosplaying, the author argues that cosplay removes barriers to possibly daunting social interactions by allowing the cosplayer “to protect their sensitive self inside the fantasy character” (Winge 2019, 78). Pursuers can protect themselves by interacting with others as their characters, so they can avoid negative attention that is directly targeted toward them, but they often are still maintaining characteristics of themselves while in-costume. Understanding how performance leads to building connections contributes to anthropological knowledge about how relationship-building occurs and what factors are important to allowing for connections to be made.

My thesis will also contribute to knowledge about the role of escapism through performance and promoting belonging. Because this specific form of escapism is stigmatized, my analysis will provide an interesting dimension to studies of why and how people are drawn to certain forms of escapism. Though previous research has addressed that deeper involvement in leisure can reduce stress for stigmatized groups, the deeper connection between those who are already stigmatized participating in stigmatized hobbies has not been written about at length (Mock et al. 2013, Plante et al. 2014). Stigmatized leisure acting as escapism from stigma seems to be counterintuitive, so my research will address why stigmatized leisure can be an attractive form of escapism. My research will also contribute to knowledge about how humans choose to cope with stigma. The information collected in this research will advance knowledge about how performance can be an important factor in allowing stigmatized people to come together in community to mitigate the stresses of stigma faced in everyday life.

Literature Review

To better understand the role of performance in community-building in the face of stigma, I utilize theories of selfhood as a basis because performance influences the self and vice versa. Goffman describes interactions that occur within everyday life as performances that comprise specific roles for specific people (Goffman 1959). Mauss also describes selfhood, but he does so by arguing that a person's position in society is defined by their interactions with others because various notions of self arise from different cultural contexts (Mauss 1985). Turner corroborates Mauss and builds upon Goffman in his analysis of performance in arguing that theatrical performances by actors are "reflexive," meaning that the actor will learn more about themselves by playing a role in a play (Turner 81, 1987). Fursuiting is a mode of reflexive performance, as a fursona usually reflects some characteristics of the person wearing the costume, meaning that fursuiting is also a form of performing a form of self. I theorize that fursuiting can also affect the way in which an individual views themselves. Because fursuiting can occur outside of spaces specifically designated as performances, fursuiting is a mode of interaction that can lead to stigma because the fursuiters are taking on an unexpected role while in-costume.

Continuing with the theme of stigma and identity, queer theory in connection with conceptions of stigma is essential to understanding performance in the face of stigma and how stigmatized groups form community with one another. Goffman defines stigma as "a special discrepancy between virtual and actual social identity," making stigma an attribute defined by relationships with others (Goffman 1986, 3). Virtual social identity refers to the character that a person is supposed to have in society, but actual social identity is a person's true character, so differences between the two can cause conflict and confusion (Goffman 1986). If a person

cannot live up to the expectation of being, for example cisgender and heterosexual, they will face stigma due to their inability to fill the role expected of them. Butler's explanation of taboos related to non-heterosexual sex and aligning oneself with a different gender than prescribed reflect the ways in which Goffman argues that stigma functions because people who inhabit these identities are transgressing social roles, making them targets of discrimination (Butler 1990). The inability of fursuiters and LGBTQ+ individuals to fit their virtual social identities leads to them experiencing stigma for their leisure activities and their sexual or gender identities.

Due to their connection to self-expression and marginalization, studies of subculture and fandom, particularly those related to expression of identity with clothing, also ground my research. Williams describes many possible definitions of subculture, but common threads occur throughout many of the definitions: non-normativity, marginalization, and the concepts of an ingroup and outgroup (Williams 2011). Subcultures today are also seen as coming from an individual choice to align oneself with the subculture, rather than being categorized into one (Williams 2011, 6). However, I argue that there is a mix of choice and pressure that leads to alignment with a particular subculture. Analyses of various music subcultures characterized by clothing further the understanding of how marginalization can pressure people to choose to align themselves with certain subcultures (Williams 2011, Peters 2010). Fan groups are also characterized as a type of subculture in some circumstances, especially those that inhabit their identities as fans through costuming, which can be stigmatized due to the perception of cosplay as "cringe" (Williams 2011, Winge 2019). Winge argues that cosplay functions as a form of self-expression that allows for escapism from daily life (Winge 2019). Discussions of how subculture allows for escape by bringing together like-minded people who may be stigmatized relates to

how the furry fandom can be a space that allows for community-building among LGBTQ+ individuals.

Additionally, other studies of the furry fandom inform my analyses of how performance and stigma interact with one another. Mock et al. describe fursuiting as a stigmatized hobby because it is viewed as deviant and hypersexual by the mainstream (Mock et al. 2013). However, fursuiting is also described as a mode of escape from negative forces in life (Carlson 2011, Healy and Beverland 2013, Liu 2017, Plante et al.). Carlson and Liu elaborate on the idea of escapism by arguing that performance is what makes escapism possible (Carlson 2011, Liu 2017). Plante et al.'s analysis is particularly important to understanding escapism through leisure involvement because their study analyzes the ways in which other socio-structural characteristics, such as sexuality, impact self-esteem in relation to fursuiting (Plante et al. 2014). Similarly, Mock et al. describe how deeper involvement in the furry fandom can contribute to mental well-being (Mock et al. 2013). Heinz furthers the analysis of performance and escape by broadening her focus to include those who perform their fursonas online, not just those who fursuit, and she ties escapism in the fandom as escaping from stigma related to gender and sexual identity (Heinz 2020). Taken together, one can begin to form a picture of how fursuiting facilitates community building among stigmatized individuals with the results of these studies. Furry studies encompasses a broad range of topics, but there is a gap yet to be filled regarding the specific connection between LGBTQ+ fursuiters, stigma, and community-building through performance.

Methodology and Analysis

In order to collect data on the connection between performance, stigma, and community-building in the furry fandom, I will begin to collect my data in online spaces through participant

observation. Participant observation online will allow me to receive a background in the social interactions in the fandom that I am researching, as well as allowing me to participate in an aspect of my subjects' experiences because interactions on the Internet are integrated with interactions in the "real world" (Sade-Beck 2014, 48). I will conduct participant observation on the social media websites Twitter, FurAffinity, Mastodon, and Instagram, all of which are public websites, from mid-January to mid-May 2023. I will make separate accounts for my research on these websites, and I will state that I am a researcher in my screen names. The Internet is a place in which members of the fandom often connect with each other outside of conventions, which can be cost-prohibitive, so including the Internet as a site of my research will be essential to understanding how community-building in the fandom takes place (Heinz 2020, 23). I may also see people "fursuiting" online by roleplaying their fursonas, which is another form of public animal embodiment that could be important to include in my final analysis. During my observation, I will only interact with people who state that they are adults or at least 18 years old in their bios, and I will only take notes on interactions that I observe between those over the age of 18. I will focus my observations on interactions between those who identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community, but I can see interactions between cisgender heterosexual individuals and LGBTQ+ individuals providing important insight surrounding stigma, so I will not exclude these conversations from my observation.

During my participant observation online, I will also distribute a survey using Qualtrics with the primary purpose of recruiting interviewees. However, the survey will also collect demographic information about the population that I will be studying, and the long form answers will allow me to briefly learn about the individual's relationship to fursuiting. The survey will provide me with a broader overview of LGBTQ+ fursuiters' perspectives on community-

building that I would not be able to elucidate through several interviews. The survey will be distributed on the websites where I am conducting participant observation and be answerable between January 31 and March 8, but I will focus on promoting the survey between January 31 and February 17. The survey should take between 15 and 20 minutes to complete. At the end of the survey, if those taking the survey are interested in being interviewed, they can provide me with an email address that I can use to reach out to them and plan an interview time. I will select my interviewees from the pool by choosing those who self-identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community and who have fursuited at least twice in the last year. I will prioritize those who have fursuited for longer periods of time. I will also consider the gender, sexual, and racial diversity of those who I am interviewing to ensure that I have a representative and diverse population.

In order to understand the data from my participant observation and survey more in-depth, I will also conduct semi-structured interviews with five to seven fursuiters who identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community on Zoom. Potential interviewees will be emailed and asked about their interest following an email script including my consent script as an attachment. Emails will be deleted after the interview is conducted. I expect that most of my interviewees will be between the ages of 18-30 years old due to the amount of young people in the fandom, but I am not opposed to interviewing someone older than 30. I will password protect the Zoom meeting room, and I will enable the waiting room. Only audio will be recorded to my password-protected computer. I will read an informed consent script rather than obtain a signature because the only document connecting my interviewees to my project would be the consent form signature. My interviews will allow me to learn about these people's personal relationships to fursuiting and identity in-depth, and I will receive context for interactions that I will observe

online or in-person. These interviews will take 45-60 minutes, and I plan to conduct them between February 10 and March 5.

Participant observation at a convention will also be important to gathering data because conventions are important sites for fursuiters to meet up and connect with one another due to fursuiting being encouraged in these spaces. I will conduct in-person participant observation at the Fur the More convention from March 10-12, 2023, taking place at the Hyatt Regency Crystal City in Arlington, Virginia. At the convention, I will be able to interact with fursuiters in-costume and learn more about fursuit performance through panels I will attend while there. While there is not yet a schedule for the event, I plan to attend fursuit-focused events, such as the parade, the dance contest, and panels about how to fursuit. Interacting with fursuiters while they are in-character will help me understand how performance in a fursuit normally occurs and how connections are formed between those in- and out-of-costume.

In order to analyze my data, I will be conducting textual analysis. I will look for themes across my interviews and notes on participant observation experiences. I will also code my interview transcripts to look for certain themes. Though I am unsure of what I will discover through my research, I anticipate that relationships with others in the fandom, experiences with stigma, and what performance provides to fursuiters will be key themes of my data.

Ethics

Because I will be collecting private identifiable information during my research, I will need to ensure that my data is secured. While conducting participant observation on social media and in-person, I will take handwritten notes in a composition notebook that will be stored in a locked suitcase. All handwritten notes will be shredded upon acceptance of my thesis.

Information from the surveys will be stored on Qualtrics, which can only be accessed by the system administrators and I. My interviews will be conducted on Zoom, and only the audio will be recorded, with permission, to my password-protected computer. I will turn off settings that upload the recordings to Zoom's cloud. The Zoom meeting room will be password protected, and I will enable the waiting room. Only the interviewee will receive the passcode and link to the room. I will also delete the emails containing this information after the interview is complete. The recordings will be uploaded to my Bryn Mawr OneDrive within 48 hours of completing each interview, then deleted from my computer. I will work off the transcription provided by Zoom to create my transcript, and for this reason, I will ask my interviewee to change their name to a pseudonym or something that cannot be identified or linked back to them. I will edit the transcriptions in a Word document in my Bryn Mawr OneDrive within a week of the interview, then I will delete the recording from OneDrive, then empty the trash. The transcripts will be deleted from my OneDrive account upon the acceptance of my thesis, and I will empty the trash after deletion to ensure that they are permanently deleted.

In addition to securing my data, I will take measures to protect my participants' identities. My primary measure of protecting the identities of my participants will be assigning pseudonyms to both my participants and their fursona(s). I will use these pseudonyms in my notes and interview transcriptions, as well as the final write-up. I will not be storing a list of names or social media handles of my participants. I will not use full descriptions of participants' fursonas and fursuits in my thesis; if I find describing an aspect of the fursuit necessary, I will use general terms like the species name, or I will describe specific details without including other information. When describing my online observations in my thesis, I will not quote posts, but I will paraphrase data to prevent readers from tying a quote to a specific poster. When describing

interactions between multiple parties, I will use pseudonymous social media handles for each participant in my notes and my thesis. If I interview someone who I have interacted with online, I will use a different pseudonym for the social media handle and the interviewee, as well as their fursona(s) if necessary.

Because I am interviewing people who participate in stigmatized leisure activities and who claim a stigmatized gender or sexual identity, some of the information that I collect could risk my interviewees' reputations. However, due to the importance of learning more about the connection between stigmatized leisure and stigmatized identities in performance, this information will be important to collect, and my protective measures should be sufficient to protect this sensitive data. Conversations about stigmatized identities also often bring up emotional topics, so I will emphasize to my participants that they can take a break or ask me not to record certain information at any time.

Conclusion

Despite the stigma that fursuiters can face when their identity as a furry is known outside of the fandom, the furry community is a space designed for building relationships between people who share a hobby that is typically a positive experience for its participants. Performance allows for connections to be made without barriers that would otherwise prevent interactions. LGBTQ+ furries are doubly stigmatized for their deviant sexual and gender identities, but the furry community has been a place where they can build relationships with a lessened fear of homophobia and transphobia (Heinz 2020). Though LGBTQ+ fursuiters are one specific group that utilizes performance to build connections to protect themselves from stigma, the information learned from research into this community will reveal broader truths related to how performance

informs interactions with the world and how connections can be formed among stigmatized individuals. How selfhood is influenced by stigma and performance is another important facet of this project that will contribute to knowledge surrounding human interactions. Understanding community-building between LGBTQ+ fursuiters in the face of stigma will reveal aspects of why people seek out specific social groups and conduct themselves in different ways in different contexts.

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