



## The Furry Fandom: constructing a costumed society for identity exploration

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Abstract: This paper examines the social-psychological influences of dress within the furry fandom. Using observations, surveys, and interviews at two fur conventions, I explore how individuals' various identities are developed through costuming. The results reveal a spectrum of identities within the fandom; costuming and "dressing-up" enable individuals to safely explore, express, and negotiate these identities through as-animal performance.

Introduction: Fur conventions attract individuals who identify with animal personalities.

Ascribing human attributes to nonhuman creatures, furies create and assume anthropomorphic identities. *Furies* dress in *fursuits*, representing their inner animal or *fursona*. *Fursuiters*, the costume designers, construct custom-designed, faux-fur suits. Conventions offer panels, raves, fursuit parades, and vendor rooms and encourage interaction between like-minded individuals.

Appearance messages are embedded in context, shift based on the wearer's identity, and carry different meanings for different people (Kaiser, 1997). In the furry fandom, the costumes hold disparate meanings for the wearers, other fandom participants, and outsiders. Costumes conceal an individual's identity; however, the costume design and the compatibility of the piece of art can give the actor confidence. Certain colors and patterns put the performer in the character's mindset and encourage a strong performance. When furies put on their fursuits, they skate into their animal performance. Assuming their seldom-displayed animal personalities, furies use the costume to build confidence in their various identities.

Fashion change is promulgated by ambivalence and negotiation of tenuous identities. In navigating the masculine versus feminine dichotomy, society has imposed "expressive constriction...on the male side" (Davis, 1992). Expectations for male dress could serve as an impetus drawing more males into the furry fandom—the convention creates a safe space, and masks of animal costumes provide means of concealment, enabling men to experiment with dress, gender, and sexuality without societal reprimand.

Through my research, I aim to understand the social-psychological underpinnings that define and structure the furry fandom. I hope to display ways in which dressing up helps furies cope with personal and social concerns. Further, I intend to demonstrate ways in which the fandom allows furies to develop creativity and assume more confident images of themselves. I hope to understand the construction of furry conventions as safe spaces that free individuals from outside judgment and castigation and that allow an unfettered arena for drama and play.

Research Methods: After receiving research approval, I attended two fur conventions: Furpocalypse in Cromwell, Connecticut and Further Confusion in San Jose, California. I conducted ethnographic fieldwork through interaction and involvement with the activities typical to fur conventions. I kept observational notes, surveyed attendees on demographic information,

and conducted interviews about individual motivations and experiences. Participants orally consented to take the survey and read and signed a consent form before the interview.

Results and Discussion: During the conventions, I collected 194 survey responses and conducted 21 interviews. The majority of participants were between 18 and 26 years old, however both conventions had a range of ages. Surveys revealed a gender skew toward males (62% male at Furpocalypse and 77% male at Further Confusion) and other fluid gender identities. Most interview participants were either gay or bisexual with slightly fewer reporting heterosexuality. The remaining responses demonstrated diverse sexual orientations. Participants reported a variety of professions, levels of educational achievement, and fursonas.

During interviews, furies repeatedly stressed the accepting and fun-loving nature of the community by expressing how age, sexual, gender, and animal identities are taken at face-value. Surrounded by like-minded people dressing in animalistic constructions, assuming opposite gender roles, and exploring sexual interests, furies further develop their own interests, explore and define their identities, and receive therapeutic interactions.

Furies display their humanness through elaborate costumes, while concurrently expressing nonhuman character traits. In addition to navigating dichotomies between old and young, masculine and feminine, and androgynous and singular, furies explore the human-animal boundary. Through costuming, individuals explore and express identities—they act as animals, pressure the gender binary, and explore artistic and creative abandonment.

As explained by interviewed fursuiters, individuals use the fursuit as a means to hide from social anxieties and insecurities. While the suit allows them to conceal certain traits, it also allows furies to gather experience in reciprocal social interaction. This allows them the confidence to come out of their shell while in costume, and transfer that to coming out of their shell when the costume is shed.

Costumes allow people to hide their everyday identity and take on a new persona. Interview participants explained how the fursuit allows them to abandon reclusive or awkward tendencies and assume confidence, often in ways akin to drinking alcohol. If individuals typically hold back for fear of judgment, the costume allows them to try on a different role or personality. It might be who they wish they could be or it might be the exploration and playful dramatization of different characters.

Having experienced negative situations because of perceived “differentness,” family conflicts, social stressors, or mental disorders, many of the interviewed furies feel an absence of love and acceptance in their outside lives. Themes emanating from anthropomorphic costumes foster a community of tenderness. The human-animals create a wall, drawing sensitive interactions and obscuring human tensions. Furies in costume readily accept and seek hugging and petting. Through their costumed animal performance, they elicit the support, closeness, and physical touch that they have missed for various reasons outside of the fandom.

#### References:

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