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Shared Identity and Trust among the Furry Fandom: A Narrative Review

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ABSTRAK

Shared identity berperan penting dalam pembentukan fandom di era digital, dimana interaksi online menjadi mode yang mendominasi interaksi sosial antar individu. Interaksi online intrakelompok di dalam furry fandom dapat dijelajahi melalui proses identity and trust development, menyoroti peran platform virtual dalam mendorong kohesi dalam komunitas. Artikel ini mengulas literatur lampau mengenai furry fandom dari empat aspek Social Exchange Theory (SET), yaitu kepercayaan, komitmen, timbal balik, dan kekuasaan. Metode narrative review digunakan untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana aspek-aspek ini berkontribusi terhadap ketahanan identitas dan kepercayaan dalam fandom furry. Tinjauan yang dilakukan terhadap enam artikel ilmiah seputar tema interaksi dalam fandom furry menggarisbawahi keyakinan umum tentang bagaimana individu yang mengidentifikasi diri sebagai furry memiliki kesamaan identitas, yang menumbuhkan rasa percaya dan persahabatan dalam fandom. Identitas bersama ini berfungsi sebagai landasan bagi kepercayaan intrakelompok yang berkelanjutan dan berkontribusi pada kohesi di dalam fandom. Artikel ini menyarankan penelitian selanjutnya untuk melaksanakan analisis yang lebih mendalam mengenai pentingnya kepercayaan dan keberlangsungan interaksi intrakelompok di lingkup era digital.

Keywords: Fandom; Furry; Digital Trust; Shared Identity; Social Exchange Theory

Introduction

Fandom communities serve as unique spaces for individuals to explore and express their identities, fostering a sense of belonging through shared experiences and values (He et al., 2021; Neville & Reicher, 2018). The furry fandom, explored by scholars like Satinsky & Green (2016), Reysen et al. (2023), Heinz (2020), Plante et al. (2015), and Mock et al. (2013), uniquely blends identity exploration, artistic expression, and an all-encompassing embrace of diverse interests. According to Gerbasi et al. (2008), the furry fandom is a form of subculture built around an interest in anthropomorphic animals or animals that exhibit human characteristics. Centered around anthropomorphic animals, this subculture provides a space for artistic expression, connection, and self-discovery, whether through fursuits, artwork, music, or online communities (Heinz, 2020; Reysen et al., 2023; Satinsky & Green, 2016).

As a fandom, furry traces its roots back to the United States in the 1970s when popular media-

based subcultures such as Star Trek and Comic-Con were gaining prominence among the youth. In the following years, the fandom grew more extensive, spreading its influence abroad through exposure to anthropomorphic media (Dunn, 2021). The growing prominence of furry as a fandom led to various interests from the academic community. The International Anthropomorphic Research Project (IARP), led by Dr. Sharon Roberts, spearheaded the research on furry fandom, producing various scholarly works that laid the groundwork for further research on the fandom (Roberts et al., 2024). One of their work is titled *FurScience!: A Summary of Five Years of Research International Anthropomorphic Research Project* (2016), presents a series of data from various aspects of the fandom, such as “fursona” or “furry persona”.

The core concept of “fursona” acts as gateways for individuals to explore their inner selves, express non-normative identities, and shape their community persona, promoting an atmosphere of acceptance and inclusivity (Heinz, 2020; Mock et al., 2013; Satinsky & Green, 2016). As Peacey (2020) noted, fandom is characterized by mutual support and recognition in personal and professional lives, strengthening relationships and fostering trust. This supportive and accepting environment, where individuals are valued for their contributions and embraced for who they are, fosters trust, mutual respect, and a strong sense of belonging within the furry fandom.

Throughout its history and development, the fandom has faced constant stigmatization and misconceptions due to its interest in anthropomorphism and anthropomorphic characters. This interest is falsely generalized with zoophilia, a sexual paraphilia on animals that are considered illegal and morally defiant (Jeansonne, 2012; Mao, 2022). In popular media, this stigma is reinforced through stereotyping, where furies are portrayed as a group of people engaged in sexually deviant behavior; one such example is from The popular American crime drama series CSI: Crime Scene Investigation. One of its episodes titled “Fur and Loathing” which was aired on October 30th, 2003 portrays the furry fandom as a fandom that's only focused on acts of sexual satisfaction and immoral behavior (Lewis, 2003). However, despite misconceptions and media portrayals, its unique blend of identity exploration, artistic expression, inclusivity, and mutual support continues to attract individuals seeking a safe space to connect with like-minded souls and embrace their inner identity, both online and offline, while avoiding stigmatization that came from public eyes (Mock et al., 2013; Reysen et al., 2015).

The open-armed embrace that defines the furry fandom fosters a sense of belonging and safety, encouraging members to engage in open communication and shared experiences (Peacey, 2020; Satinsky & Green, 2016). This bond, built on shared values and mutual respect, lays the foundation for trust to flourish (Bruckner, 2016; Osburg & Heinecke, 2019). Unlike anonymous online spaces, the furry fandom leverages the concept of fursonas – personalized animal avatars that bridge the gap between online and offline personas (Satinsky & Green, 2016).

The core values of acceptance and inclusion woven into the furry culture create a positive and supportive online environment (Heinz, 2020). This emphasis on mutual respect and understanding

encourages reciprocity – an essential aspect of trust-building (Osburg & Heinecke, 2019). When members feel valued and supported, they are more likely to reciprocate with positive interactions, further solidifying the bonds of trust within the community. As individuals engage in online interactions and share their experiences within the furry fandom, they develop a sense of shared identity. This shared identity, fueled by positive future expectations and the potential for collective action (Kou, 2021; Shafirova & Kumpulainen, 2021), fosters a sense of community and belonging that further strengthens trust and reinforces the positive feedback loop within the group.

The furry fandom presents a fascinating case of trust and connection forged in the digital realm. While online anonymity can breed negativity, the furry community thrives on a remarkable trust nurtured through online interactions. To unravel this enigma, we took on the lens of social psychology, more specifically through the perspective of Social Exchange Theory (SET), which recognizes social interactions as a continuous exchange of actions and reactions. SET emphasizes four key elements – trust, commitment, reciprocity, and power – that interact with individuals' assessment of costs and rewards to influence their decisions and behaviors within social exchanges (Blau (1964) & Emerson (1976), as cited in Cook et al., 2013). This theory provides a valuable lens for understanding how online interactions contribute to the development and resilience of shared identity and trust within the furry fandom. By analyzing the furry fandom through this lens, we seek to understand: How do online interactions, characterized by trust, commitment, reciprocity, and power dynamics, contribute to the development and resilience of shared identity and trust within the furry fandom?

This research explores the intricate interplay between online interactions, shared identity, and trust within the furry fandom. By meticulously examining how the four pillars of SET manifest in online spaces, this research aims to provide an understanding on the mechanisms of cooperation and trust that bind this unique community. This paper further explores the furry fandom's remarkable resilience as a social group while offering valuable insights applicable to fostering trust and collaboration in online spaces. Therefore, with the tools of SET in hand, this study seeks to understand the dynamic of online communities in the current age, where trust can be shaped even without primary face-to-face interaction. Theoretically, this study validates the applicability of SET theory in understanding online communities. Practically, the findings can inform strategies for fostering trust and shared identity in online communities. Thus, this study will be beneficial in the context of online-based fandoms and social groups that are becoming more popular in the current social sphere.

Theoretical Framework

Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory (SET) is not a singular entity but rather a multifaceted framework for understanding the intricacies of social interactions. It acts as a prism, refracting the perspectives of

diverse scholars like Homans (1958), Thibaut & Kelley (1959), Blau (1964), and Emerson (1976), each offering a unique lens through which to view the complex dynamics of exchange (Cook et al., 2013; Frieder, 2018).

As mentioned in Cook et al. (2013), Homans (1958) laid the groundwork for SET by framing social behavior as a calculated exchange driven by anticipated rewards. His work, drawing on principles of reinforcement, provided a foundational understanding of the underlying mechanisms at play in these transactions. Building upon this, Thibaut and Kelley (1959) honed their focus on smaller social units, where interdependence between individuals played a major role in group dynamics, resulting in mutual dependency that could lead to cooperation or conflict within the group. Blau (1964) sought a broader perspective by introducing an economic lens to SET. He advocated for considering the individual motivations within the exchange and the emergent properties and power dynamics that shape the larger social context. Blau enriched the theory's landscape with this crucial dimension by recognizing the often-overlooked role of power in shaping interactions. Finally, Emerson (1976) took a panoramic view, envisioning SET not as a singular voice but as a vibrant forum for dialogue. He positioned it as a meta-framework, fostering communication and debate between various micro and macro theories, all within the realm of social exchange. His emphasis on reciprocity further underscored the importance of balanced interactions in building successful relationships.

According to Blau (1964, as cited in Cook et al., 2013), trust is a cornerstone of cooperation and positive social interactions within social exchange theory. It embodies the belief that an exchange partner will behave fairly and avoid exploiting any temporary advantage they may hold. This trust is built gradually through repeated interactions that showcase the partner's reliability and honesty. Additionally, social group norms and values play a significant role in shaping trust expectations. Ultimately, trust fosters the confidence that one can rely on their partner to act mutually beneficial, rather than resorting to opportunism.

Research by Molm et al. (2009) and Schilke et al. (2021) further highlights the importance of trust in social exchange by demonstrating its ability to promote reciprocal behavior and positive outcomes within social interactions. By understanding the dynamics of trust, we gain valuable insights into how social interactions are structured and maintained over time.

Blau (1964, as cited in Cook et al., 2013) highlights that Social Exchange Theory views commitment as the willingness to invest time, resources, and effort into maintaining a relationship over time. This commitment goes beyond a general fondness for social interaction and signifies a dedication to a specific partnership. The level of commitment hinges on two key factors: satisfaction within the relationship and the perceived attractiveness of alternatives. When individuals experience high satisfaction and limited appealing options outside the relationship, they are more likely to be committed and invest heavily. Conversely, low satisfaction or many attractive alternatives can lead to decreased commitment and a potential withdrawal of resources (Cook et al., 2013).

Commitment plays a vital role in the long-term sustainability of exchange relationships (Blau (1964), as cited in Cook et al, 2013). Furthermore, uncertainty and risk within social exchanges can encourage commitment (Cook, 2015; Emerson (1978), as cited in Cook et al., 2013). This commitment discourages seeking alternative partners and helps mitigate power imbalances within the exchange and its surrounding network. Uncertainty also influences perceptions of trustworthiness, highlighting the link between commitment and reliable behavior within social interactions (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Schilke et al., 2021).

Blau (1964, as cited in Cook et al., 2013) argues that reciprocity is key to successful social interactions. This "balanced exchange" ensures fairness through direct repayment, indirect exchanges, or future promises. The strength of reciprocity depends on the group's norms and values. In groups where reciprocity holds high importance, individuals are more likely to engage in mutually beneficial exchanges that persist over time. Reciprocity goes beyond a simple tit-for-tat exchange; it encompasses the broader concept of fairness and maintaining a sense of balance within the relationship (Cook, 2015). Social exchange theorists argue that this exchange of benefits and costs forms the bedrock of lasting relationships (Gouldner (1960), as cited in Frieder, 2018). However, individual perceptions of reciprocity can vary, potentially leading to conflict or misunderstandings within social exchanges (Molm et al., 2009). Understanding reciprocity is crucial for deciphering social interactions, power dynamics, and the social norms and expectations that govern them.

Blau (1964, as cited in Cook et al., 2013) defines power as the ability to influence others. Power imbalances can lead to unequal exchange relationships. Sources of power include resources, expertise, and social status. Power distribution affects relationship stability, longevity, and satisfaction. Social Exchange Theory defines power as an actor's ability to influence outcomes and behavior in social interactions. This influence can stem from controlling resources like social status, information, or physical force (Emerson (1976), as cited in Cook et al., 2013). Power imbalances are theorized to lead to unequal benefits and outcomes within exchanges, potentially creating conflict and jeopardizing the relationship. However, the absence of power imbalances does not guarantee the absence of conflict, as disagreements over the nature and amount of exchange can still arise (Molm et al., 2009).

By interweaving these viewpoints, a deeper appreciation for the multifaceted character of SET emerges. The foundational principle of mutual benefit resonates throughout, influencing the dynamics of social interactions across varied contexts. From small group settings to intricate inter-organizational relations, SET offers a valuable lens for comprehending the nuanced landscape of trust, commitment, reciprocity, and power that defines social exchanges.

Fandom Studies

Among various academic studies, fandom studies emerged as an emerging branch in the realm of social sciences. Fandom studies is the academic field focusing on fans, fandom, and fan culture. This encompasses all fan-related activities, from online interaction to real-life conventions. It emphasizes

studying groups of people with a shared interest in a particular work of fiction or pop culture products (Kington, 2015; Lamerichs, 2018). Expanding on that ground, fandom is a heavily online-based community where members of said fandom, or the “fans,” are connected through social media platforms (He et al., 2022).

Studying fandom is more than just studying a group of people and their interests. Fandom works as a form of identity construction and emancipation. Gray et al. (2007) conceptualize fandom as a communal movement that allows people of the same interests to unite and represent themselves coherently within the public sphere. Fans actively engage in the fandom, forming a bond that seeks to explore, challenge, and redefine established norms. By actively engaging, individuals break free from the confines of mainstream narratives, constructing identities that resonate within their chosen fandoms.

Fandom studies differ from other contemporaries through the use of ethnographic approaches. Using ethnography as a tool gives fandom studies an upper hand in studying fandom as a cultural phenomenon. Ethnographic methods led research on subjects in their natural environment, where they can present themselves as who they are (Harrington & Bielby, 2007; Kusuma et al., 2020). Fandom studies facilitate people of various fandoms by providing a channel to showcase who they are, combating negative stigmas among the public and media. Fandom studies act as agents of change, giving marginalized people the platform to show and voice themselves.

Fandom studies have established itself as an emerging branch of study that delves into a growing cultural phenomenon (Jenkins, 2014). With the widening scope of the internet and rising connectivity, fandoms of all kinds grew more extensive and more robust; this demands an academic inquiry into the world of fandom. Fandom shapes itself into an intersection between social groups, identity formation, and power play. Fandom studies transcend beyond the study of shared interests as they dig deeper into the intricate relationship between individuals and their identified fandoms, paving the way for a growing cultural landscape (Gray et al., 2007).

Collective Identity

Exploring group identity and its influence on interactions entails examining the crucial link between collective identity and social trust. As Neville and Reicher (2018) emphasize, social identities are constructed as models of one's position within social relationships, projecting how the world is and how it should be organized. These identities are statements of intent, inherently prospective, and moral constructs. At the core of this connection lies the powerful sense of belonging and community fostered by collective identity (Finuras, 2023; Neville & Reicher, 2018).

Fandoms offer fertile ground for individuals to explore and express their multifaceted identities, transcending mere shared interests. Peacey (2020) emphasizes the positive space fandoms cultivate for collective identity development. Shared passions, like TV shows or books, serve as the foundation for community building, fostering shared values, culture, and language, aligning with Neville and Reicher's

(2018) notion of social identities as projects for how the world should be.

This sense of belonging strengthens individual and collective identities, allowing members to explore and express themselves within a safe and affirming space, as highlighted by Neville and Reicher (2018). Moreover, fandoms can challenge societal norms and provide opportunities to redefine mainstream constructs of identity, reflecting the dynamic nature of identity.

The concept of social identity plays a central role in understanding fan engagement and motivation. Kou (2021) examines how "Fandom Girls" leveraged social identity theory to mobilize collective action during an epidemic. Through shared identity construction and redefined group categorization, they transformed from passive fans into organized agents of change, illustrating the potential of identity to fuel collective action.

Finuras (2023) further sheds light on the connection between social identity and trust. Shared similarities within a group form the bedrock of trust, creating a sense of "common ground" that facilitates interpersonal connections and social interactions, resonating with Neville & Reicher's (2018) emphasis on the interdependence inherent in collective identity. Fandoms, with their shared interests and values, provide fertile ground for trust-building and supportive relationships, as Peacey (2020) further emphasized, illustrating the profound influence of social identities on trust dynamics within communities.

The proposed topics – Social Exchange Theory, Fandom Studies, and Collective Identity – offer multiple perspectives on human interaction. Each theory presents a distinct lens, yet they also interweave to create a richer understanding of our social landscape. To contribute to these important topics, this study investigates the impact of online interactions, characterized by trust, commitment, reciprocity, and power dynamics, on the development and resilience of shared identity and trust within the furry fandom.

Method

This research utilized a narrative review approach to explore the intricate interplay between online interactions, shared identity, and trust resilience within the furry fandom. Narrative review was chosen as it provided the researchers with a flexible and fluent path to explore an emerging topic while providing a wider scope of analysis (Sukhera, 2022). This method is relevant when analyzing the topic of furry fandom that is still rarely explored in the academic landscape and continues to emerge globally. In addition, as presented by Ferrari (2015), the narrative review method is suitable for research on the furry fandom using SET theory because it can synthesize existing literature and describe the current state-of-art, further contributing to the development of practice guidelines. Narrative reviews embrace the qualitative depth of existing studies, enabling a profound exploration of the underlying mechanisms and motivations that shape social interactions (Dixon-Woods et al., 2005). This qualitative strength aligns

perfectly with the research objective, which transcends mere summarization of findings.

This narrative review utilized the four core pillars of SET – trust, commitment, reciprocity, and power – to explore how shared identity manifests and navigates within the online spaces frequented by furries (Blau (1964) & Emerson (1976), as cited in Cook et al., 2013). This exploration delves beyond into the realm of meaning-making, uncovering the unspoken bonds of trust that solidify shared identity and the intricate mechanisms that foster resilience in the face of online negativity among furries.

The data was collected from six open-access journals and written by North American authors, with one paper on the topic of furry fandom from the last 10 years taken from each journal. The papers were selected based on their direct exploration of the shared identity within the furry fandom. The six collected papers were downloaded and scrutinized. Then, each paper was explored to find out which of the core pillars were depicted in the paper. It is important to note that one paper may contain more than one SET core pillar, and one core pillar may be present in more than one paper. The depiction of SET core pillars in each paper was further linked with the depiction in other papers. The overall findings were then synthesized into a discussion on how the online interaction of furries contributes to the development and resilience of shared identity and trust within fandom. A few other literatures in the field of social psychology were also utilized to support the discussion.

This study aims to interpret the existing literature within the unique context of the furry fandom and the established theoretical framework of Social Exchange Theory (SET) by exploring the question of: How do online interactions, characterized by trust, commitment, reciprocity, and power dynamics contribute to the development and resilience of shared identity and trust within the furry fandom?

It is essential to acknowledge that the limited scope of the reviewed literature, encompassing only six scholarly articles, necessitates an exploratory approach. Consequently, the findings of this study may not be generalizable to other fandoms in the digital world. However, the exploratory nature of this research paves the way for future studies to build upon these initial insights and offer a more comprehensive understanding of the furry fandom and its unique social dynamics.

Results and Discussion

Peacey (2020) highlights that within online fan communities, trust is not just about friendliness; it is the bedrock of powerful bonds forged through shared passions and collaboration. This trust fuels close friendships, a sense of belonging, and a supportive ecosystem where fans acknowledge each other's skills and foster positive relationships. Trust's transformative power extends beyond the personal, acting as the catalyst for collective action, from fan projects to conventions, showcasing its potential when united by a common purpose (Bruckner, 2016; Osburg & Heinecke, 2019). By nurturing open communication, shared values, and collaboration, fan communities offer a blueprint for cultivating and capitalizing on trust to create vibrant and impactful online spaces. Understanding and harnessing

this trust can enrich individual experiences and shape a more connected digital landscape (Osburg & Heinecke, 2019).

According to Neville and Reicher (2018), trust is the root of where fandoms stem and grow. Trust became the basis for fostering communal identity, where people construct their identity about others. At the same time, shared identity fosters trust, shaping social interactions and influencing our landscape (Finuras, 2023; Neville & Reicher, 2018). This shared sense of belonging, fueled by history, culture, and beliefs, creates interdependence and emotional investment (Neville & Reicher, 2018). Interdependence refers to where members of the furry fandom rely on each other for emotional support, creative inspiration, and a sense of belonging. This interdependence creates a web of connections within the community, where individuals lean on each other to achieve their goals and meet their needs. Emotional investment is when members deeply invest their feelings and energy into the furry fandom, forming strong attachments to the group and its shared experiences. This emotional investment is fueled by the sense of belonging that the community provides, fostering a profound connection and commitment to its well-being. More commonalities make trust easier, assuming shared understanding and predictability (Finuras, 2023). Participants in the furry community engage in interactions that offer them mutual benefits, whether it is emotional support, creative fulfillment, recognition for their talents, or opportunities for collaboration. This aligns with the core idea of Social Exchange Theory (Emerson (1976), as cited in Cook et al., 2013), where individuals seek out relationships and interactions that provide rewards, contributing to a positive and supportive social environment within the furry fandom.

This table summarizes the key insights from six scholarly articles examining how trust is fostered within the furry fandom through the lens of Social Exchange Theory. All six scholars highlight the significance of shared experiences, shared values, and online and offline communities in building a resilient foundation for trust and camaraderie within this unique online community.

Table 1. Key Factors in Fostering Trust within the Furry Fandom

Scholar(s)	Key Factors Fostering Trust
Satinsky & Green (2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conventions, online groups, and forums create community and connection. - Creativity and acceptance reinforce trust and a positive environment. - Foster trust through connection and shared experiences.
Reysen et al. (2015)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Non-judgmental and supportive environment. - Increased sense of belongingness and social identification contribute to trust development.
Reysen et al. (2023)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased well-being and social connectedness linked to trust. - Furry-themed identities, "fursonas," facilitate authentic expression and trust.
Heinz (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Role-playing, gaming, conventions, and meetups build trust through physical interactions. - Art and fursonas encourage creativity and belonging. - Emphasis on mutual respect creates a safe space for acceptance and trust.
Plante et al. (2015)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creativity and acceptance contribute to trust and social identification. - Online and offline communities become central aspects for connection and trust -building.
Mock et al. (2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Anthropomorphic animals, create belonging and shared identity. - Creativity, acceptance, openness foster trust. - Online forums, conventions offer connection and interaction.

Scholars like Satinsky & Green (2016), Reysen et al. (2015, 2023), Plante et al. (2015), and Mock et al. (2013) emphasize the importance of shared spaces and experiences in building trust. Conventions, online forums, and other gatherings create a sense of belonging and social identification, fostering trust through connection and shared understanding.

Studies by Reysen et al. (2023) and Heinz (2020) highlight the role of acceptance and self-expression in trust development. Fursonas, the often animal-based personas adopted by members, facilitate authentic expression, while a non-judgmental environment encourages open communication and vulnerability, contributing to trust.

Heinz (2020) and Plante et al. (2015) mention the significance of positive social interactions in building trust. Role-playing, gaming, and creative activities foster mutual respect and understanding, creating a safe space for interaction and trust-building.

Though nuances may differ, analyzed works consistently link shared experiences, belonging, and acceptance to trust and security within the furry fandom, boosting its cohesion and resilience. This echoes Social Exchange Theory's four pillars: trust among furries, commitment to being a furry, reciprocity between furries, and the power of furry fandom. By diving deeper into these pillars, this research unveils the intricate interplay of shared elements and social exchange principles that weave the unique and resilient fabric of the furry online world.

A. Trust Among Furries

Acceptance, support, and empathy play a major role in the overall interaction of the furry fandom. It is fundamental in shaping a friendly and open atmosphere, making members comfortable about revealing their true selves to fellow furries. This positive social atmosphere aligns with Social Exchange Theory (SET), where trust emerges from favorable exchanges (Blau (1964), as cited in Cook et al., 2013; Schilke et al., 2021). Furries experience mutual benefits within the community, fostering trust and long-term, stable relationships. Satinsky and Green's (2016) paper on furry identity and its survey underline the positive attitude shared among furries regarding their fandom, most of them supported the notion of furry fandom as a warm and welcoming space where everyone can express themselves freely. In conjunction with that, Heinz (2020) states that the construction of space in furry fandom paves the way for highly valued relationships and intimate relationships to flourish, one that involves trust.

The construction of a safe space led to members opening their true selves to others; this move created a mutual act of trust. Furries trusted the fandom as a safe space to share their personal experiences, believing they would not be judged or persecuted for being themselves. This resonates with fandom studies, where individuals actively engage with their shared interests, forming bonds that challenge societal norms (Gray et al., 2007). Furries use fursonas to explore identity and find acceptance, reflecting the role of fandoms in identity construction (Kington, 2015; Lamerichs, 2018). They confidently discuss their struggles, anxieties, and experiences, knowing their fellow furries will listen without prejudice. This openness fosters a deeper connection and understanding among members, solidifying the bonds of trust (Lamerichs, 2018).

The pervasive culture of acceptance, empathy, and mutual support within the furry fandom cultivates a strong sense of trust among its members (Satinsky & Green, 2016). It emboldens open and vulnerable communication, enabling furries to express their thoughts, feelings, and experiences without

fear of judgment or prejudice. The sense of trust fosters the development of strong, supportive relationships, providing a source of solace and camaraderie within a stigmatized community. Most importantly, this unwavering trust creates a haven for free and authentic self-expression, allowing furies to explore their identities, engage in creative pursuits, and thrive in a safe and affirming environment.

B. Commitment to be a Furry

Being a part of a fandom is not just an act of participation, it is also an act of identification. Identifying oneself as part of a group requires strong interest and commitment. The recent research conducted by Reysen et al. (2023) found that furies joined the fandom voluntarily through personal identification with the fandom. Complimenting that, two studies by Reysen et al. (2015) and Plante et al. (2015) showcase significant attachment and commitment from furies towards the fandom. Furies saw their fandom as a haven where they become attached with a sense of belonging, so they seek to keep it thriving and protected from outside interference.

For furies, the positive outcomes of being in their fandom's haven include self-expression, belonging, and community thriving. This commitment resonates with fandom studies (Gray et al., 2007), where fans actively engage in their community, forming bonds that challenge and redefine established norms. Furies use fursonas to negotiate their identities and find acceptance within the community, reflecting fandom's role in identity construction and emancipation (Kington, 2015; Lamerichs, 2018).

As furies lay their commitment to the fandom, they acquire rooms to contribute towards the fandom. In doing so, they can develop themselves and attain personal growth catered to their interest, which they cannot perform outside the fandom. By committing themselves to the fandom, furies reap two benefits: acquiring a space to express themselves freely while also keeping that space thriving and expanding. Furthermore, the solid collective identity within the fandom, fostered by shared values and experiences (Peacey, 2020), aligns with Neville and Reicher's (2018) conceptualization of social identity as a model for belonging and shared understanding. This common ground (Finuras, 2023) facilitates trust and supportive relationships, as seen in the increased well-being associated with greater fandom involvement. This resonates with SET's emphasis on trust (Emerson (1976), as cited in Cook et al., 2013), where positive social interactions and perceived support reinforce commitment.

Despite encountering external stigma, furies forge unwavering bonds within their community, transforming it into a sanctuary, a catalyst for personal growth, and a source of profound fulfillment. As shown in both articles by Satinsky & Green (2016) and Reysen et al. (2023), the dedication born from a deep-seated sense of belonging and self-acceptance underscores the transformative power of the fandom, not just in fostering supportive networks, but also in shaping the identities and trajectories of its members. This resilient expression of selfhood within a stigmatized group offers valuable insights into the profound impact of finding acceptance and belonging, ultimately reshaping individual lives and challenging societal perceptions.

C. Reciprocity Between Furies

Furry fandom is decentralized in how it is being constructed and maintained. Instead of relying on a single entity for its main source of interest, it revolves around the general idea of anthropomorphism, which encompasses various creative products and media (Dunn, 2021; Gerbasi et al. 2018). It shaped the furry fandom into a community-based fandom, where everyone in the fandom can contribute to the growth of the fandom without needing to adhere to certain creative restrictions. This led to a culture of reciprocity, where members mutually assist each other in the fandom.

As shown in Satinsky and Green (2016), the warm and welcoming space of the fandom is shaped by mutual respect among its members, who share the same understanding as part of a group. Adding to that, Mock et al. (2013) state that fandom became a source of escape, a coping mechanism for individuals who identify as furry. A reciprocal feeling is created as they reap the benefits for themselves while at the same time giving it to others.

Furies rely on each other to maintain the integrity and growth of the fandom. Social interactions among members contribute to the fandom's growing media and cultural product. Such a case can be seen from the transactional act of buying and making commissioned art, where furies paid other furies to create art of their furry persona or fursona. Here, they laid trust in other furies to create a physician rendition of their fursona, bringing to life their second identity. Reciprocity led to trust as they entrusted each other with the thing dearest to them.

The reciprocity works on different levels. Firstly, furies find acceptance and validation within the community, knowing they can unequivocally express themselves without fear of judgment. This unconditional acceptance fosters a sense of belonging and psychological safety, reducing stress and anxiety often associated with marginalized identities. Secondly, the community functions as a reservoir of guidance and encouragement, with members readily offering support and advice to one another. This continuous exchange of emotional resources fosters resilience and strengthens individual coping mechanisms. Consequently, the reciprocal nature of support within the furry fandom emerges as a crucial factor in promoting its members' overall well-being and emotional security.

D. The Power of Furry Fandom

As a stigmatized community, power dynamics played a part in shaping the internal and external relationships of the fandom (Heinz, 2020). Internally, the furry fandom has the power to create a sense of belonging among its members, and this power leads to members committing themselves to the fandom. Members of the fandom are drawn and held in place by their shared identity and the safe space provided by the fandom (Heinz, 2020; Satinsky & Green, 2016). In this sense, the fandom became a space for empowering individuals, giving them the space and support needed to thrive.

Externally, the fandom held substantial power in combating the stigmatization and marginalization of furies in mainstream media (Reysen et al., 2015). By uniting furies under the same umbrella, they can create a strong voice of reason, helpful in countering the hoaxes and stigmatization aimed at them.

The power created by furry as a fandom helps maintain the integrity of the community, shielding its members from outside pressure. Reysen et al. (2023) showed that integration in the fandom gave way to beneficial power that supported each individual's well-being in the fandom.

Despite enduring external stigmas and complex power dynamics, the furry fandom is a remarkable case study of the transformative power of community-driven self-expression. Within this nurturing environment, individuals navigate and cope with societal challenges, cultivate enhanced well-being, and confidently embrace their authentic selves. Recognizing the inherent tensions between marginalization and self-affirmation within the fandom presents an opportunity for further growth and societal impact. By critically addressing these challenges and fostering inclusive dialogue with broader communities, the furry fandom can solidify its role as a powerful force for personal growth, artistic expression, and a more open and accepting society.

Conclusion

Scholarly articles consistently highlight factors that foster trust within the furry fandom, such as conventions, online forums, and gatherings that create a sense of community and connection. Fursonas, the personas adopted by members, facilitate authentic expression and trust. Role-playing, gathering, and creative activities build trust through interactions and mutual respect.

Being a part of the furry fandom involves strong interest and commitment, where individuals voluntarily join the fandom through personal identification. Furrries see the fandom as a haven where they feel a sense of belonging, leading to significant attachment and commitment. Being attached to the fandom constitutes a two-way relationship where individuals simultaneously give and receive benefits to the fandom.

The furry fandom operates on a culture of reciprocity, where members assist each other and contribute to the community's growth. This includes buying and creating commissioned art, where furrries trust each other to create representations of their fursonas. This act entrusted others to bring their personification to life through artistic creations.

Internally, the furry fandom empowers its members by creating a sense of belonging and providing a safe space for self-expression. Externally, the fandom has the power to combat stigmatization and marginalization, uniting members to counter hoaxes and negative portrayals.

In conclusion, trust, commitment, reciprocity, and power dynamics within the furry fandom contribute significantly to the development and resilience of shared identity and trust. The fandom provides a supportive environment where members feel accepted, valued, and empowered, leading to strong bonds, personal growth, and a collective voice against external stigma. These elements are integral to the fabric of the furry world, shaping its culture and fostering a sense of community among its members.

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