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Cross Cultural Communications

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Furry Club Final Paper

I decided to have my topic for this class be about the Furry Club due to the fear and uncomfortableness I have felt toward this club ever since I first heard of it. I had learned that the club called itself The Anthrophobic Animals Appreciation, but was commonly called the Furry Club throughout campus. I had a fear of joining the club was also a reason as I knew the more uncomfortable I was the more fieldnotes I could get out of this club. I had this fear come from thinking people were going to look at me negatively for being a part of the furry club or think I was a furry. I participated in this group by going to club events such as an art jam, cosplay, and potluck event. Within these events, I would talk to the furries asking them questions about why they joined the club and about themselves as a person. I have examples of engaging in conversations with members and what I saw in the club from my field notes. I found this club through the class due to how our professor mentioned this as a past topic in class and having our professor be the advisor for the club. I also chose this because of the growing debate around this club on campus since it was very controversial among people I knew. Many discussions were being made on the club with people's reactions towards them tabling being to make fun of them as a group. The main themes I found in the furry club were a clear connection to fursonas, fursuits, hugging, sexuality, gender, privacy, and stem majors.

. A fursona was a new term I found that described what a person's furry identity was. This concept of identity is found within this idea of fursonas due to how this label helped

people acknowledge what furry character someone was. I would hear people use their furry's name in the club rather than their real one showing how strongly they identified with their fursonas rather than their human self. I had felt weirded out at first by the use of their names thinking people just had strange names, but I later noticed that it was their fursonas, not their real ones. An example I witnessed in the club of this was when people continually asked each other what fursonas they were and the person would bring a drawing of theirs. I saw people get excited when discussing their fursona and people engaged in asking more questions like why they chose it or the name of their fursona. I became more aware of my identity as a non furry as a result of how I didn't have a fursona prepared to identify with the community. This awareness made me feel isolated from time to time as I couldn't engage as well with the community about this topic. My feelings became more positive toward the group later on because of how I thought the furry club was something not sexual than the media portrays.

During the first meeting presentations were done on demystifying the furry community by discussing what the whole concept of being a furry was. I discovered that furries were interested in the idea of antropobic animals which are animals that have characteristics similar to humans. A quote from my field notes states "I started to understand that they were interested in these animals not in a weird way, but more interested in their animals' perspective. The more they talked about their persona the more I learned how this isn't necessarily something to look at negatively but rather a niche"(Field notes 1, September 23, 8 pm). I got rid of a previous assumption of seeing furries as a fetish, but seeing them for what they are, which is a hobby or interest from talking to them. I changed my assumption from thinking negatively of furries to an understanding that saw furries were interested in the animal's perspective as found in the quote because of how I learned what the club was about. Hearing that people enjoyed interacting with

their furry characters online through sharing art, board, and video games changed my perspective of them. I had seen these interactions in Discord from the furry club who shared these interests with images or playing with one another. I reflect on this presumption of seeing furies as a fetish as a misunderstanding made in the public so when I had a better understanding of the quote it made me look towards them positively. I now look towards the group as people who had just different hobbies than me rather than people who were just strange.

I saw a theme of fursuits (that is, the clothes you put on in order to become your furspersona), of the furry club in the way people engaged in wearing them. This theme differed from my cultural background back home because at home anything that is too different from mainstream society is seen as deviant. I found this in my adolescence as friends and family would make fun of people who had fursuits in public. I also noticed that my friendship groups in college were ridiculing fursuits when we walked by the club during tabling, as they were freaked out. I saw the value of fursuits due to how people prized their fursuits and wanted to show them off. I saw this value when people discussed the costs of either making or buying their fursuits with one another. I heard the furies engage in comparing with one another fursuits and express excitement in buying their next one. One example of the costs of fursuits being discussed was when I heard a furry member mention the average cost of a fursuit being around 1,000 dollars for the complete suit. I had less positive feelings toward the furies after hearing about the costs because of how I viewed them as rich kids spending money on unnecessary things. I became self-aware of my own lower economic background as a result of hearing the costs reminding me of how we were different financially. This understanding of fursuits shaped how I participated since I wasn't willing to wear one of these suits, just because I couldn't. Fortunately, a lot of people didn't own fursuits because of the price, so my participation wasn't necessarily different

from that of many others, but I did engage in wearing accessories of the fursuits rather than the full thing. A quote from my field notes states “The person with the claws said I am just probably trying to figure things out still but just a furry inside my soul. They gave me the claws to try on which I did and I felt uncomfortable with them on my hands but I tried to play along to satisfy their desire.” (Field notes 2, September 25th, 8 pm). I had a sense of pressure from myself to fit into this community by wearing this gear as found in the field notes showing a sense of desire to fit into the community. Since I felt like an outsider, that encouraged my participation to grow in the club by being more willing to do things I wouldn’t have thought of if I wasn’t in a community aligning with these interests. When I fit in by wearing furry accessories I felt more included and it changed my feelings about being one of them rather than an outsider. Another quote from my fieldnotes states “I got more comfortable when we talked together as I understood another human was there. Hearing the voice of the other person made me know that they were friendly because of their voice. The furies being silent made me uncomfortable as I couldn’t identify who they were at first but the more I heard them talk in their fursuits I felt more at ease.” (Field notes 10, November 18th, 9 pm). I know my habits of mind occurred because of how in my mind I was uncomfortable when it was silent. I started to notice a habit of my mind to get wary when around a quiet background as found above. I noticed empathy occur in this quote as I remembered the furies were human through their voice making me feel less uncomfortable.

Another theme I found was the idea of hugging which was a common part of the community since people enjoyed hugging one another. I saw members of the club hug each other often, always asking for permission to hug as they liked to express affection towards one another. I found the physical sense of affection to be very important as hugging was one of the ways they expressed their friendships or showed they cared for one another. This happened when I

witnessed members hugging everyone they knew who came inside the meeting and then starting a conversation afterward. I found an implicit rule regarding hugging was to always ask whenever people were in their fursuits to hug beforehand. I heard this from a presentation done about furry conventions where the club told us that people could get overwhelmed in a fursuit when someone receives a hug. I viewed this as an implicit rule because of how the club mentioned that this is an unspoken rule that furries know around conventions. I found this happened due to how people knew how hard it is to walk and see inside the fursuit. I heard your vision can be blurred causing you to become more anxious as you cannot sense your surroundings as well. Yet the feeling of being one with their fursona was so strong that they decided to continue doing this. I heard club members mentioning how others had gone up to them before to hug without asking and how they didn't know who it was because they were inside the suit. Members mentioned keeping a certain distance from the fursuit so the fursuiters could have a better way of seeing them. I became aware of my feelings of respect towards the community as they cared about others' boundaries. I also felt more comfortable around everyone since they genuinely cared about the safety and feelings of members of the club. This brings a concept of empathy since people had empathy with one another by caring about others being by putting up rules to make sure everyone was comfortable. I saw a ritual of hugging occur as well in meetings as the furries asked for hugs from members of the community. I asked why this was a common act and they mentioned that many furries entail hugging as they like to be affectionate towards one another or like the feeling of a physical touch. I know this is a ritual for a friendship cue since members of the club engaged in this when seeing each other in person as a way of saying hello. I noticed people running up to one another to hug as enthusiastically as if they hadn't seen each other for a long time. I saw this as a type of hugging as a group style because

I had a sense of sexuality being a big theme in the club due to how many members had identified with a different sexuality than is found in other clubs. I got a sense of this from presentations on the first day when the officers of the club mentioned how interconnected the furries are with the LGBT community. This helped me identify more with the community since we shared elements similar to one another. I felt my participation experience was a lot easier because of how relatable the people were and the other types of discussions we were able to have regarding this topic. We had discussions about lgbt shows we liked and our experience as lgbt people in the school. This also eliminated my assumption that the furry community would be mostly heterosexual men as the way I envisioned this before. I found a concept of group style as well since the furries as a group engaged in talking about their sexuality and was a common trait shared among the group. A quote from my field notes states “Hearing different elements of gay culture be incorporated into the club. This made me have an easier time connecting to the people in the club by talking about that side of myself and the different slang that comes with this community.”(Field note 3, September 31st, 6 pm. When I learned about this segment of the furry club with the majority being similar to me I had more empathy toward the community by understanding that people make fun of them for being strange in their mind. I realized that being a furry was just an interest they could not control and they should not be afraid to be who they are no matter if people think it's weird. I knew about this understanding of people seeing me as strange for my sexuality so seeing the way the furry community was viewed at UC Berkeley. The fact that the community had to deal with this hate on campus made me feel more connected because of my similar struggles helping me identify with the community. I had a difference by knowing how I used to see myself as not having anything in common with the club and now feeling like one of their own. Another quote from my

field notes states “ I heard people mention being gay by saying they have a boyfriend. I thought people felt comfortable mentioning their sexuality as there was an open environment as people were accepting towards these parts of people’s lives”.(Field notes 4 October 7th, 8 pm). I found sexuality in the quote related to identities as people were able to relate to one another in the sense of sexuality. The quote explains how I viewed it as an open environment for everyone with almost everyone in the club identifying with a sexuality different from heterosexual. I viewed the importance of sexuality as being a part of the many identities in the club as the furies explained their love interests or the people they were seeing. I noticed these people as mentioned in the boyfriend part of the quote were different from those talked about normally in clubs composed mostly of heterosexuals.

The theme of gender was one I found in the furry community as some people use different pronouns like they/them or identify as trans. I was aware of myself in society because of how I started to understand different gender pronouns by using them to respect others. This made me aware of myself in society since I identified as cisgender so my experience as that type of person shaped my misunderstanding of assuming pronouns among the members of the community. I had a previous assumption of this club being mostly made up of a bunch of cisgender men so this eliminated the way I thought of the furies. I began to notice these different pronouns during the first meeting since people established themselves with pronouns, a concept I was still new to. I have an example from my field notes that states “More lgbt elements started to show up in the club as well because of how mentions of pronouns came up with a lot more they/them people ”(Field notes 5, October 13th, 8 pm). When I heard they/them pronouns it made me understand the importance of pronouns in the group's culture as they came up many times even after the first meeting. I understood the repetitiveness of pronouns like they/them

throughout the meeting because it showed a connection of non-binary being a label that was common among the community. I heard the furries also mention the idea of how even their fursona is non-binary as well to represent them as a person. I saw it as a way of expressing who they feel like they are on the outside differently since they felt their outside appearance didn't depict who they were. I understood the transgender side as well since people also solely used the pronouns they felt best represented the month outside like he/him and she/her rather than the one they were assigned at birth. I also saw this come in their fursuits which sometimes would have a boy and girl version of them to represent two sides of themselves rather than just one character representing them as a whole. Finding this connection towards gender helped me realize the ideology communication pattern of asking for pronouns routinely when meeting a new person was different from how I interacted with people outside this club. I would usually just hear people saying more pronouns of he/him or she/her instead of this new pronoun introduced to me. I had started thinking more about how to understand pronouns as a concept because this was new to me as I learned how to properly ask people their pronouns before talking which I have gained from this club.

I had found a theme of privacy in the club as many people wanted to keep their identities a secret. This happened when I heard people didn't want pictures to be taken of members of the club by the public in case of revealing their identity to the whole school. A quote from my field notes states "I got caught off guard when a person took a picture of the officers during the presentation which was a big no for privacy reasons. I was behind this person so I witnessed how an argument happened about deleting that photo to protect the officer's identity"(Field notes 5, October 13th, 8 pm). I know the privacy related to boundaries as this was a way to initiate that furries had put these rules as a way to keep everyone safe. The example shows them because of

how an argument occurred which showed how willing they were to fight to keep everyone anonymous in the club. I noticed this was different from my sense of privacy as I view myself as more of an open person willing to let people know I was in the club. I had felt that privacy was not important to me but saw a huge change in the club where everyone was watching new members on their phones. I had noticed anonymity in the club through the discord in which people don't use their real names or photos of themselves on their own. I was the only one on the discord to differ as I used my face photo and people noticed when I mentioned who I was on the discord. Another quote from my field notes states "I noticed people were a little nervous around me possibly because I express myself as an ally rather than one of them. I thought it could happen due to how much tracking of who is a furry in the club with people trying to troll them in the past and make a joke out of them. I had never noticed so much fear of being a part of the community; the only other comparison I can think of is the queer community"(Field notes 7, November 3rd, 8 pm). I became self-aware of similarities to myself through the quote since I was afraid of being outed for being a part of the furry club. Growing up queer was also common in my community to want privacy or not want to be outed to the world. This distrust was common in my community growing up as people were afraid of their family finding out which had a similar sense at UC Berkeley where the furries were afraid of their friend finding out showing a parallel. I noticed this parallel was represented much more through how furries hid their furry merch as well they had from their friends and family who didn't know their secret. I saw the furry items included stickers, plushies, necklaces, earrings, and rings. I saw items were hidden in hoodies by covering them up to avoid detection from the public or friends who didn't know this secret. People would state the purpose to me that they were afraid of classmates finding out as

well in their classes. I heard instances of people finding out people were furies because in the past people viewed their items near their backpacks making them feel judged.

The theme of stem majors showed up during practices among the members of the club with discussions from one another. This occurred when I would hear conversations with members of the club discussing aspects of their major like concepts of coding such as Python which was a practice among many furies. I would not understand a lot of this so this practice would cause me to be alienated from time to time. My alienation made me feel like it would be harder to connect since I had little in common with the club at first. My field notes have some mentions of this by stating “I talked to the group about their interests in computer science and other STEM fields since many from the club were majoring in that.”(Field notes 9, November 9th). During these talks, I would adapt to the conversations of stem fields by trying to put the little knowledge I had of these subjects into practice. The interest I found was not just in the major because of how people belonging to other clubs on campus relate to stem fields like participating in coding teams. This was a common practice in the club as well since a lot of us were college students so our first questions were always asking what major and year a person was. This common practice at our university was found to either cause some closeness or separation depending on how similar the major was. People took an interest in my major which I noticed among this practice in conversations since they didn’t understand what it was. My field notes also have another part that states “There was a huge number of males who were tech majors that talked about these classes or concepts which was hard for me to relate to” (Field Notes 4, October 5th). The practice of discussing tech majors as found in the fieldnotes had me not be able to relate to similar job interests since we had completely different paths. I heard some having tech internships in big tech companies and talking about the work they did which I had no

idea what this work meant. An example was a software engineer which I had to google afterward to find out what this was showing a huge complete difference we had. major being completely different caused me to have any similar classes we were in or have taken.

Overall the main narrative I saw was furries having great importance in many themes including fursonas, fursuits, hugging, sexuality, gender, and privacy. I found the idea of fursonas prevalent because of how people kept this as a way to identify themselves. People used fursonas as a way to introduce themselves to one another instead of using their real-life names. I saw fursuits cause some uncomfortableness inside of me due to how unwilling I was to dress in them to participate since I thought some people would judge me unfairly. I found hugging to be a part of this community due to this being the way they showed affection to one another. I saw sexuality be a theme as well because of how many people identified with different spectrums of them in the club. I noticed an open environment for sexuality since people were telling others about their gay relationships which would normally not be told in other clubs I was a part of. Another theme I found was gender with the number of nonbinary and transgender folks in the club making up a majority with pronouns such as they/them. The other theme I found was privacy through how closeted people were about their furry identities by fearing others would unfairly judge them for their interests. The last theme I saw was stem majors because a lot of people in the club had similar interests in these areas found through the practices of discussing these topics. A complete alienation happened because of this difference in majors making it hard to relate back to these people among practices of talking about coding. The implications I learned from this is to not judge a group before getting to know them. As I was looking towards this club negatively at first, but at the end got to relate or understand our differences with one another causing me to now look at any other future groups from this type of perspective. I can also now

dispel any negative stereotypes about the furry club since I have now talked to others around me in a more positive way about this organization.