



Otherkin and Therian in the Virtual Space: Communicating Identities of the Private and Public Self

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Keywords: Appearance, identity, Otherkin, Therian

With the advent of the Internet came a new (virtual) space for human interaction. In virtual communities, Internet users may seek and share information while also creating and building relationships (Hagel, 1999). In creating new channels and methods for social interaction, presentation, and self-expression (Kirmayer, Raikhel & Rahimi, 2013), the Internet provides particularly important tools for identity “re-negotiation and construction” (Diamandaki, 2003, p. 1). The Otherkin comprise a community of individuals who believe that their souls are non-human (Kirby, 2012). According to Kirby (2012), who has studied the Otherkin, and Scribner (2013), a participant in the community, people who are Otherkin identify with mythical creatures (e.g., fairies, elves, etc.). Closely related to Otherkin are Therians, who believe they have the soul of an animal (Scribner, 2013). Much like other subcultures studied by scholars, the Internet acts as a place for the generation or acquisition of information pertaining to the Otherkin subcultural identity, and for social interaction (O’Callaghan, 2015). Many of the specificities found in the Otherkin and Therian communities that are related to identity have been examined, such as the notion that media/fiction often contributes to the details used in identity construction or understanding (Kirby, 2012). However, there is a gap in the literature on the dress and appearance behaviors related to identity construction of the Otherkin and Therian subcultures.

The following questions guided the study: (a) how do Otherkin and Therian individuals use virtual spaces to develop a sense of self?, and (b) what signifiers are utilized to communicate the Otherkin and Therian identity in public and private spaces? With the aim to analyze Otherkin and Therian selfhood through dress and appearance, a symbolic interactionist and dramaturgical perspective were used to inform the approach of this study. However, due to the exploratory nature of this topic, a grounded theory methodology was utilized under this direction. Though looking specifically for discussions of the public and private self, a grounded theory methodology allowed for a more flexible observation and analysis of patterns and themes.

To understand the active use of a virtual space, and aspects of the self and appearance, video blogs (vlogs) produced by Otherkin and Therians were analyzed. The researcher found vlogs on YouTube, using the key terms “Otherkin” and “Therian” with selected applied filters. Twenty individuals who discussed aspects of the self were analyzed. The 118 videos examined ranged from 21 seconds to 26 minutes and 38 seconds. Data were transcribed and analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding. Initial coding resulted in 64 categories. Data were interpreted until three larger themes emerged from the data.

Individuals within the sample comprised 14 females and 6 males. Actual or perceived ages of individuals ranged from 11 to 30 (mean=17). There were 5 Otherkin, 9 Therian, and 6 Therian-Otherkin. The vlog names are used in the following section to identify the individual. The first theme that emerged was the *use of the virtual space to build community and a support network*. Vloggers shared personal stories and offered advice about appearance and behavior. This was evident with The Last of the Wilds' (16, female) first video, in which she states, "this channel will be to help educate." In the second theme, *dress was used as a means to feel more connected to the community and to negotiate presentation of the true self*. This theme applied to the Therians (n=14), but was less evident with the Otherkin (n=1). For example, after donning a tail, Coy Howl (13, female), who identifies as a Therian and an Otherkin, stated "I like this tail, because it's really fluffy and really big, and it makes me feel like a Therian." While Mskatie1357 (18, female), expressed "I feel the energy from that fox is gonna help become even more closer to my spirit animal, which is a fox." The last theme was the *disconnection and censure from society as a result of expressing the true self*. For many of these individuals, they experienced both subtle negative remarks and physical bullying as a result of expressing the non-human identity through appearance. Faye (17, female) explained, "the first day that I actually started wearing my tail—like on me, instead of a backpack at school—I had pennies thrown at me. Actually just multiple change."

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, these individuals used dress to signify a subcultural identity, which was negotiated and acted out in both the virtual community and offline spaces. Similar to the Otherkin in O'Callaghan's (2015) findings, the vloggers in this study utilized the virtual space to exchange information about identity construction, extending the discussion into aspects of appearance. In order to gain a more in depth analysis on dress, future scholars should conduct interviews with individuals in the Otherkin and Therian communities. Other implications and limitations of the study will be addressed.

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