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Deeper leisure involvement as a coping resource in a stigmatized leisure context

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Although leisure involvement can be a resource for coping with stigmatization, some forms of leisure are themselves stigmatized. One such stigmatized leisure context is the furry fandom, a diverse group of people that create anthropomorphic animal identities. Drawing on the minority stress model and symbolic self-completion theory, we examined survey responses of 3473 members of online furry communities. Greater involvement in the furry community was associated with higher levels of well-being. This association was statistically explained by greater disclosure of furry identity and an indirect path through feelings of self-acceptance and affiliation with the furry fandom linked to greater disclosure of furry identity. Results suggest how deeper leisure involvement helps to counteract minority stress and cope with a stigmatized leisure identity.

Keywords: stigmatization; coping; furry fandom

Bien que les loisirs adressent en certains cas la stigmatisation, certaines formes de loisirs comme le « fandom furry » sont aussi stigmatisés. Composé de gens diversifié, la participation au « fandom furry » crée des identités grâce à des animaux anthropomorphes fictifs. Nous appuyant sur le modèle de stress minoritaire et la théorie de l'autocomplément symbolique, nous avons examiné les réponses au sondage de 3,473 membres du « fandom furry ». Une participation active dans cette communauté de loisirs a été associée à des niveaux plus élevés du bien-être. Selon les chercheurs cette association positive est statistiquement liée à une plus grande divulgation de l'identité « fandom furry ». Les résultats démontrent comment la participation des loisirs profonds contribue à contrer le stress minoritaire et faire face à l'identité stigmatisée de loisirs.

Mots-clés: stigmatisation; d'adaptation; « fandom furry »

Introduction

Recent research illustrates that leisure can be an important context for coping with the harmful consequences of stigmatization (e.g. Iwasaki, Bartlett, MacKay, MacTavish, & Ristock, 2008; Jones, & McCarthy, 2010; Outley & McKenzie, 2007). However, some

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forms of leisure are considered deviant and thus stigmatized (e.g. Franklin-Reible, 2006; Williams, 2009). One stigmatized leisure context is the *furry fandom*, a diverse leisure interest with a focus on creating anthropomorphic (i.e. human-like) animal identities (Gerbasi et al., 2008). We look to models that help explain the impact of stigmatization on well-being (Meyer, 2003) and ways of coping with stigmatized identity (McKenna & Bargh, 1998) to better understand how members of this stigmatized leisure group use leisure involvement itself to maintain well-being despite the stigmatization of their leisure interests.

Stigmatization refers to the devaluation of an individual or group identity (Goffman, 1963) and a substantial body of research documents the structural and interpersonal processes that create hardship for those who are stigmatized (e.g. Adams, Biernat, Branscombe, Crandall, & Wrightsman, 2008; Dressler, Oths, & Gravlee, 2005; Meyer, 2003). However, feeling rejected by the larger society can lead stigmatized group members to connect themselves more strongly with the minority group, and subsequently provide members with an enhanced well-being (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Jetten, Branscombe, Schmitt, & Spears, 2001). Participation and connection to leisure based groups is one source of well-being (Wann, 2006). Recent research outlined how leisure is a potential resource for coping with various forms of stigmatization related to sexual orientation, ethnicity, or physical conditions. For example, Iwasaki and colleagues found in a study of sexual minority (e.g. gay or lesbian) adults, Aboriginal individuals coping with illness, and people with physical impairments, that recreation and leisure participation provides a sense of community and social integration (Iwasaki, MacKay, MacTavish, Ristock, & Bartlett, 2006).

Sexual minority-focused sport groups provide a context for socializing with other sexual minorities and enhance sense of belonging (Jones & McCarthy, 2010; van Ingen, 2004). In a study of older African American women who participated in a card-playing group, the group provided not only a forum for socializing and relaxation but also an outlet for discussing daily hassles, including discrimination (Outley & McKenzie, 2007). In sum, leisure involvement offers stigmatized individuals a potential coping resource through companionship, relief from distress and mood enhancement (Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993; Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000).

Although leisure offers a potentially valuable context for coping with stigmatization, some forms of leisure are stigmatized. Deviant leisure is often associated with illegal or transgressive activities (Stebbins, Rojeck, & Sullivan, 2006) such as auto theft (Drozda, 2006), sadomasochism (Franklin-Reible, 2006) and vampirism (Williams, 2008). However, there are other forms of leisure stigmatized, not because of their association with criminal behaviour or moral censure, but because people who engage in these activities are considered immature, irrational, or asocial, such as comic book fans (Lopes, 2006) or *Star Trek* fans (Cusack, Jack, & Kavanaugh, 2003). If involvement in the furry fandom is stigmatized, the nature of that stigmatization is probably more like what people who engage in leisure related to fantasy experience (e.g. *Star Trek* fans) rather than the nature of stigmatization of leisure that is illegal or transgressive.

Members of the *furry fandom*, also known as *furries*, are a diverse community of artists, writers, musicians, gamers and role-players with an interest in creating anthropomorphic animal identities (Gerbasi et al., 2008). With roots in the science-fiction community, this interest in anthropomorphism manifests itself in diverse ways: artwork of bipedal animals with human intelligence, the wearing of elaborate *fursuits* (full-body suits of fake fur that resemble mascot costumes) or paraphernalia such as faux animal ears and tails at furry

conventions, or representing oneself as an anthropomorphic animal in online communities such as *Second Life* (Brookey & Cannon, 2009; Gerbasi et al., 2008; Hemp, 2006; Jones, 2006). The vast majority of those who claim a furry identity are male and often have sexual orientations other than heterosexual (Gerbasi et al., 2008).

Media portrayals of the furry fandom have been largely stigmatizing and sexualized (Kendal, 2008). For example, one episode of the popular television show *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* featured a bizarre fictional furry convention (Zuiker, Stahl, & Lewis, 2003). Furies were portrayed engaging in a “furple,” with the script describing the scene as “[people in fursuits] rubbing and wiggling,” with sexual overtones and making “obscene animal groaning noises.” The furry fandom is inaccurately portrayed as a fetish in such media examples, either indirectly or directly implying that furies are plushophiles through scenes such as the above or statements such as “I’ve heard of some guys getting off in some weird ways, but humping an animal suit?” (Zuiker, Stahl, & Lewis, 2003) despite the fact that fewer than 15% of furies own a full fursuit (Plante, Gerbasi, Reysen, & Scaletta, 2011) and fewer than 10% of all furies express any interest in plushophilia (Plante & Gerbasi, 2010). Little research has been conducted with members of the furry community to assess their perceptions of stigmatization or potential consequences of these media portrayals, but there is some evidence that members of the furry fandom are likely to be reluctant to disclose their affiliation and often encounter a negative response when they do (Altman, 2010). In recently collected survey data with 1579 members of the furry fandom, preliminary analyses demonstrated that 47% believe that the average person, not identified with the furry fandom, has an opinion of furies that ranges from somewhat unfavourable to extremely negative (Plante, Gerbasi, Reysen, & Scaletta, 2011).

How might members of the furry fandom reconcile the potential for leisure involvement to ameliorate the negative consequences of stigmatization with the stigmatization of the furry fandom itself? We begin by outlining a model of minority stress that helps to explain how stigmatization can lead to reduced well-being. We then contrast the potential mechanism suggested in the minority stress process for the ways stigmatization may diminish well-being with a proposed model that draws on research on coping with concealable stigma to inform this dilemma of how deeper leisure involvement, even when a particular form of leisure may be stigmatized, helps people counter the minority stress process. The *minority stress* model helps to explain how stigmatization has a negative impact on psychological well-being (Meyer, 2003). Drawing on sociological and psychological theory, Meyer outlines how persistent negative societal cues that one is inferior contribute to a sense of alienation from society, known as anomie (Durkheim, 1951). On an interpersonal level, stereotypes, prejudice and negative evaluation from others become internalized and lead to negative self-evaluation, consistent with symbolic interaction theory (Stryker & Statham, 1985). These distal and proximal processes are internalized as a negative self-concept that, among other stigmatized groups, namely, sexual minorities, is linked to poorer mental health than those with a more positive sense of individual identity and connection to the broader community (Herek, Cogan, Gillis, & Glunt, 1997).

In keeping with the minority stress model, a longitudinal study with over 2000 sexual minority adults has shown that diminished self-worth helps to explain the negative effect of internalized homophobia on mental health (Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 2009). Regarding the role of decreased belongingness in the minority stress model, research with other disadvantaged social statuses (e.g. racial/ethnic minority status) shows lower levels of well-being and greater perceived isolation (Meyer, Schwartz, & Frost, 2008). Given these potential disadvantages, it may seem that one way to manage a stigmatized identity is to conceal it

when possible. However, concealing a stigmatized identity requires vigilance that can lead to preoccupation and anxiety about disclosure (Pachankis, 2007), and this preoccupation can be cognitively taxing, leading to intrusive thoughts (Smart & Wegner, 1999) and poorer mental health (Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009).

Thus, the minority stress model suggests stigmatization has negative consequences for well-being through negative messages that diminish perceived connections to society, negative interpersonal interactions, with additional stress and anxiety for those with concealable stigma. This suggests that activities and leisure participation that enhance a sense of collective belonging, self-acceptance and relief from concealing a stigmatized identity may help to meet the affiliation and identity needs for people coping with stigmatization and contribute to enhanced well-being. We outline below empirical support for a model that counters the minority stress process.

A study of online involvement among members of stigmatized groups shows how interaction with others who share the same stigmatized identity can initiate a process of demarginalization, essentially undoing the minority stress process. For members of diverse stigmatized groups (e.g. illicit drug use and sadomasochism), participation in an online newsgroup had beneficial consequences for identity and well-being (McKenna & Bargh, 1998). The more participants were involved in posting on a discussion board related to their interests, the more important that newsgroup was for participants' identity, namely, participants valued their interaction with other newsgroup members more and also cared more about how other newsgroup members perceived them. In turn, greater investment in the newsgroup was associated with higher levels of self-acceptance, fewer feelings of alienation and greater likelihood of disclosing their stigmatized status to family and friends as a result of newsgroup participation.

These findings are consistent with symbolic self-completion theory, which postulates that identity expression in one context increases identity commitment and thus promotes identity expression in other contexts (Gollwitzer, 1986; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). In other words, there was a desire to fully express and have validated in everyday life a stigmatized identity that had been expressed and enhanced in an online environment with others who shared the same stigmatized identity. Consequently, greater involvement in the stigmatized community led to increased self-acceptance and affiliation with that group, with consequences for identity disclosure in everyday life. We might also expect enhanced well-being with greater disclosure of the stigmatized identity due to less vigilance devoted to concealing (Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009).

In this paper, we examine the ways that involvement with the furry fandom can be a resource for coping with stigmatization that may be associated with the leisure identity of being a furry. Consistent with previous research on leisure as a coping resource in general (Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993; Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000; Wann, 2006), and as a resource for coping with stigmatization in particular (Iwasaki et al., 2006; Jetten et al., 2001), we expected that greater leisure involvement in the furry fandom would be associated with higher levels of well-being. The minority stress model (Meyer, 2003) describes how stigmatization leads to internalization of negative messages about the stigmatized identity, a sense of isolation, motivation to conceal the stigmatized identity, and ultimately, negative consequences for well-being. We test a model of counteracting minority stress that suggests increased leisure involvement will lead to enhanced self-acceptance and sense of affiliation leading to greater disclosure of the stigmatized identity in everyday life (McKenna & Bargh, 1998; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982), and that these processes will statistically explain the association of furry fandom leisure involvement with well-being.

Method

The various components of the model for counteracting minority stress tested in this study were assessed with responses by members of the furry fandom to survey questions and scales that measure degree of leisure and fandom involvement, affiliation, identity disclosure and well-being. This methodology allowed us to test the basic patterns and associations suggested by our model and the model's applicability to a large number of participants in the furry fandom.

Data collection

Participants in the study were drawn from a sample of 4338 visitors to various furry websites (e.g. artwork sites, regional forums and newsfeeds). The vast majority of individuals in this sample were from North America (78%), with the remainder from Europe (16%), Australia (3%) and 66 other countries. Participants were recruited from a number of furry websites (art and social websites, local forums, furry news websites and a furry Wikipedia site) and were directed to an online survey link. The survey assessed demographic characteristics, the degree and nature of involvement in the furry community, and more general psychological questions about well-being, identity, attitudes toward and identification with animals, and dehumanization. For the most part, when participants had missing data, they tended to skip entire scales or sections of the survey. Thus, those with missing data were excluded from the analyzes. In addition, analyzes were only conducted with those who identified as members of the furry fandom since some degree of identification with the furry fandom would be required for the processes related to minority stress or its undoing to apply to well-being, leaving a final sample size of 3473. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 61 with an average age of 23 ($SD = 5.97$) and were primarily male (83%).

Measures

Demographics

Age was self-reported in years. Participants reported their *sex* in response to the options of female (16%), male (83%), female-identified transsexual (0.75%) and male-identified transsexual (0.93%). For the purposes of analysis sex was coded as female and female-identified transsexual = 1 and male and male-identified transsexual = 0. *Education* was measured with nine response options ranging from "some high/secondary school" to "advanced degree." This variable was coded as university degree or higher = 1 (19%) and less than university degree = 0. It is worth noting that with a large proportion of college-age participants, in addition to those who reported university degree or higher, 51% reported some college education.

Since we were interested in examining leisure involvement in general and involvement in a fandom in particular, we included in the survey a leisure involvement scale (Kyle, Absher, Norman, Hammitt, & Jodice, 2007) and a fan involvement scale (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010) with phrasing of items tailored to members of the furry fandom. These two scales formed the basis of the leisure involvement measure used in the present analyzes and the self-acceptance and affiliation measure discussed below. The measure developed by Kyle and colleagues (2007) consisted of a 15-item multifaceted construct of the nature of leisure involvement with sub-scales of attraction (e.g. "*Being part of the furry fandom is one of the most enjoyable things I do*"), centrality (e.g. "*I find a lot of my life is organized around being part of the furry fandom*"), social bonding (e.g. "*Participating in the*

furry fandom provides me with opportunity to be with friends”), identity affirmation (e.g. “*When I’m part of the furry fandom I can really be myself*”) and identity expression (e.g. “*Participating in the furry fandom says a lot about who I am*”), with participants rating endorsement of items on a five-point scale from “1 = Strongly Disagree” to “5 = Strongly Agree.”

The 11-item fan involvement scale (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010) was designed as a single-factor measure, but much like the leisure involvement scale (Kyle et al., 2007), this scale contained multiple aspects of fan involvement such as centrality (e.g. “*I have rescheduled my work to accommodate my furry interest*”), social bonding (e.g. “*I want to be friends with people who like furrries*”), identity (e.g. “*I strongly identify with being a furry*”), as well as broader acceptance of the furry fandom (e.g. “*When furrries are popular, I feel great*”) and participants rated their endorsement of these items on a seven-point scale from “1 = Strongly Disagree” to “7 = Strongly Agree.”

To determine how the items from the leisure involvement scale and fan involvement scale related to each other, a principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation was conducted. Factor analysis of all items from the leisure involvement and fan involvement scales combined showed that they formed four factors with Eigenvalues greater than one. Results of a varimax rotation of the solution showed that the two greatest Eigenvalues were for variables that formed our measure of leisure involvement (Eigenvalue = 3.55; 14.18% of the variance) and the measure of self-acceptance and affiliation (Eigenvalue = 6.00; 24.00% of the variance) for the present analyzes. Each item included in these two new measures had a factor loading of $|0.50|$ greater (see Appendix A).

Leisure involvement

Our assessment of *leisure involvement* consisted of a five-item measure drawing on two items from the centrality subscale developed by Kyle and colleagues (2007) and three items relating to the centrality aspect of the fan involvement scale (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010) (Appendix A). Items for this measure related to the degree of investment of time and resources to involvement in the furry fandom. Since these items were measured on different scales, they were standardized before being combined as a single measure ($\alpha = 0.82$).

Self-acceptance and affiliation

The factor analysis described above also led to the creation of an eleven-item measure of self-acceptance of one’s furry identity and affiliation with the furry community drawing on four items from the attraction and identity sub-scales developed by Kyle and colleagues (2007) and seven items related to centrality, social bonding and enjoyment of broader acceptance of the furry fandom from the fandom scale (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010) (Appendix A). Responses to these items were standardized and combined to form a single measure ($\alpha = 0.93$).

Identity disclosure

For this study, we created a three-item measure of degree of disclosure of involvement in the furry fandom to friends, family, and other people in daily life (e.g. work, school). Participants responded to these three items on a five-point scale ranging from “1 = No one knows” to “5 = Most people know.” The mean of responses to degree of disclosure in each of these domains was calculated to form a single measure ($\alpha = 0.74$).

Well-being

To measure *self-esteem*, participants responded to six items (e.g. “Currently I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others”) on a seven-point scale ranging from “1 = Strongly Disagree” to “7 = Strongly Agree” ($\alpha = 0.83$; Rosenberg, 1965). For *life satisfaction*, participants rated the question “How happy are you at present with your life as a whole?” on a scale from “0 = Totally Unhappy” to “10 = Totally Happy” (van Praag, Frijters, & Ferrer-i-Carbonnel, 2003).

Data Analysis

Analyses began with the calculation of descriptive statistics. Next, for each well-being measure, namely, self-esteem and life satisfaction, we constructed two linear regression models to examine the association of well-being with leisure involvement and the potential role of self-acceptance/affiliation and identity disclosure as serial mediators. Control variables of age, sex and education level were included in Model 1, with the potential mediators of self-acceptance/affiliation and identity disclosure added in Model 2.

Statistical tests of mediation help to show how a third variable may function as a potential explanatory mechanism between two other variables. In their citation classic, Baron and Kenny (1986) outline a multiple step process outlining criteria required to demonstrate mediation. The steps included showing a statistically significant association between a focal variable (main predictor of interest) and a criterion variable (main outcome of interest), or the *c* path. In a series of additional tests, it was necessary to show significant associations between the focal variable and the mediator (*a* path), the mediator and the criterion variable (*b* path) and a reduction in the magnitude of the original association between the focal variable and the criterion when the mediator was partialled out (*c'*). Although this process was highly generative, recent innovations suggest alternatives to the Baron and Kenny approach to mediation.

Compared to other approaches, the Baron and Kenny approach has relatively lower power to detect effects (Hayes, 2009). Rather than testing multiple paths independently, more recent approaches have shown that the indirect effect through the *a* path and *b* path can be modelled as the product of those two paths (Hayes, 2009; Shourt & Bolger, 2002). The Sobel test is one way of modelling that indirect effect based on the product of the *a* and *b* paths related to an estimate of the standard error of *ab*, although this approach is limited by the required assumption of normality for the sampling distribution of the indirect effect (Hayes, 2009). Bootstrapping is a method of repeatedly sampling and resampling with replacement from the data on hand to create a resample that is then used to estimate the *a* and *b* paths and their product (Hayes, 2009). This process is repeated (e.g. 1000 times), creating a distribution of the indirect effect (*ab*). The distribution of the indirect effect is then sorted from smallest to largest, allowing for the creation of a percentile-based confidence interval avoiding the assumption of normality required with the Sobel test and allowing the construction of a confidence interval (e.g. 95%), which, if not containing or crossing zero, could be said to be statistically significant (Hayes, 2009).

Thus, the PROCESS SPSS macro (Hayes & Preacher, in review; Hayes, Preacher, & Myers, 2011) was used to test the multiple mediator models and the nature of these models is depicted in Figure 1. This approach used bootstrapping to calculate estimates with 95% confidence intervals of the total effect, or *c* path (association of leisure involvement with well-being), direct effect, or *c'* (association of leisure involvement with well-being partialling out the mediators) and indirect effects of involvement with well-being through

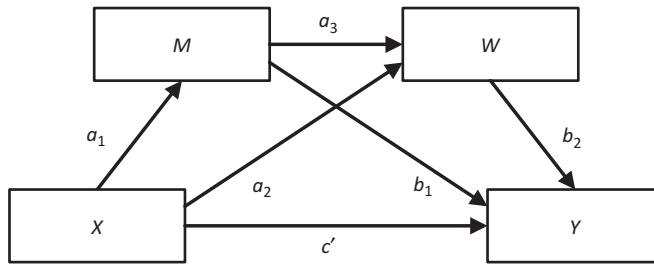


Figure 1. Serial mediation model of total effect, direct effect and indirect effects of a predictor, X , on Y through the mediator variables M and W .

the serial mediators of self-acceptance/affiliation and identity disclosure ($M1 + M2$ or $a_1a_3b_2$). This method also allowed an examination of the indirect paths through each individual mediator ($M1$ or a_1b_1 , $M2$ or a_2b_2). A parallel set of all analyzes described was conducted with a regression-imputed data set to account for missing data (analyzes not shown), and the patterns of associations were the same. Thus, analyzes with the non-imputed data set were reported.

Results

Since the items used to construct the leisure involvement measure were standardized, the mean for this measure was close to zero ($M = -0.00$, $SD = 0.76$). As with the involvement measure, items that made up the self-acceptance/affiliation measure were standardized ($M = 0.01$, $SD = 0.76$). The average level of furry identity disclosure across the social contexts of friends, family and others in daily life was 2.69 ($SD = 1.06$). Participants reported disclosing their furry identity to at least some of their friends ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.31$), but rates of disclosure to family ($M = 2.34$, $SD = 1.42$) or others in daily life ($M = 2.06$, $SD = 1.19$) were below the mid-point. In terms of well-being, participants reported levels of self-esteem ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 1.34$) and life satisfaction ($M = 6.21$, $SD = 2.20$) above the mid-point for each measure.

Regression analyzes showed that age was not significantly associated with self-esteem, female and female-identified transsexual participants had significantly lower self-esteem ratings than male and male-identified transsexual participants and that those with a university degree or greater had significantly higher self-esteem ratings than those who did not (see Table 1, Model 1). The higher participants' leisure involvement ratings were, the greater their self-esteem, controlling for demographic characteristics (see Table 1, Model 1). Of the potential mediators, self-acceptance/affiliation was not significantly associated with self-esteem, but the more participants disclosed their furry identities, the greater their ratings of self-esteem were (see Table 1, Model 2). The association of leisure involvement with self-esteem was also reduced to a non-significant level with the addition of these potential mediators (see Table 1, Model 2).

Regression analyzes with life satisfaction as the criterion variable showed that age was negatively associated with life satisfaction, sex was not significantly associated with life satisfaction and those with a college level education or greater had significantly higher life satisfaction ratings than those who did not (see Table 2, Model 1). The higher participants' furry fandom leisure involvement ratings were, the greater their life satisfaction, controlling for demographic characteristics (see Table 2, Model 1). Of the potential mediators,

Table 1. Unstandardized coefficients for regression models showing association of demographics, furry fandom leisure involvement, self-acceptance/affiliation and identity disclosure with self-esteem.

Variables	Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Constant	4.18**	0.09	4.26***	0.09
Age	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Sex	-0.19	0.06	-0.28***	0.06
Education	0.55***	0.11	0.63***	0.11
Leisure involvement	0.11***	0.03	-0.03	0.04
Self-acceptance/Affiliation	—		0.01	0.04
Identity disclosure	—		0.30***	0.03
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	0.01		0.04	

Note: *n* = 3473; ***p* < 0.01, ****p* < 0.001.

self-acceptance/affiliation was not significantly associated with life satisfaction, but the more participants disclosed their furry identities, the greater their life satisfaction ratings were (see Table 2, Model 2). The association of leisure involvement with life satisfaction was reduced to a non-significant level with the addition of the potential mediators (see Table 2, Model 2).

Examination of multiple mediators

The total, direct and indirect effects of leisure involvement with well-being were estimated with the PROCESS SPSS macro using 10,000 resample bootstrap confidence intervals (Hayes & Preacher, in review). The total effects (i.e. association of leisure involvement with well-being) and direct effects (i.e. association of leisure involvement with well-being partialling out the potential mediators) have been demonstrated with the regression analyzes shown above (see Table 1 and Table 2). For mediation analyzes with self-esteem as the criterion variable (see Figure 2), the pathway of leisure involvement to self-esteem through self-acceptance/affiliation was not statistically significant, since the bootstrapped confidence interval encompassed zero (see Table 3; M1). The pathway of leisure involvement to

Table 2. Unstandardized coefficients for regression models showing association of demographics, furry fandom leisure involvement, self-acceptance/affiliation and identity disclosure with life satisfaction.

Variables	Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Constant	6.23***	0.15	6.35***	0.16
Age	-0.02**	0.01	-0.03***	0.01
Sex	0.09	0.10	-0.03	0.10
Education	1.07***	0.18	1.17***	0.18
Leisure involvement	0.21***	0.05	0.04	0.07
Self-acceptance/Affiliation	—		0.01	0.07
Identity disclosure	—		0.39***	0.05
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	0.02		0.03	

Note: *n* = 3473; ***p* < 0.01, ****p* < 0.001.

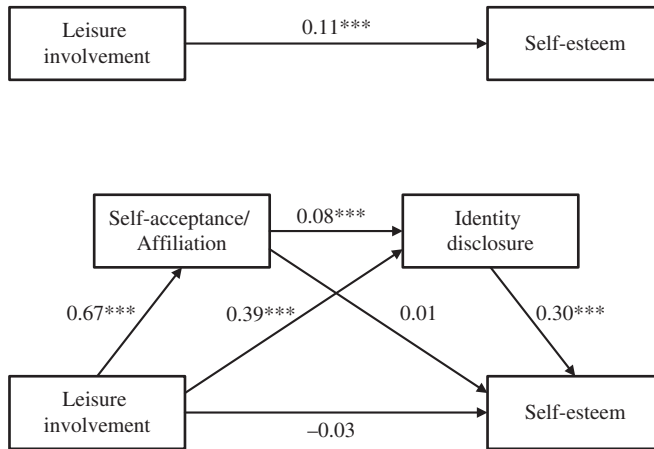


Figure 2. Model of the bootstrapped total effect, direct effect and indirect effects for self-esteem. Note: *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 3. Bootstrap analysis of total effect for association of leisure involvement with self-esteem, direct effect and indirect effects through self-acceptance/affiliation and identity disclosure.

	Estimate	SE	Confidence interval	
			Lower limit	Upper limit
Total effect	0.110	0.030	0.052	0.169
Direct effect	-0.030	0.042	-0.113	0.053
M1: Self-acceptance/Affiliation	0.008	0.029	-0.050	0.065
M2: Identity disclosure	0.117	0.015	0.089	0.148
M1 + M2	0.015	0.005	0.006	0.026

Note: Lower limit and upper limit denote the boundaries of a 95% confidence interval (CI).

self-esteem through identity disclosure was statistically significant since the bootstrapped confidence interval did not encompass zero (see Table 3; M2), suggesting that part of the association of leisure involvement with self-esteem was explained by greater disclosure of the furry identity. An examination of the serial mediation model in which the pathway of leisure involvement predicting self-esteem first through self-acceptance/affiliation and then subsequently through identity disclosure showed that the indirect effect through both mediators was statistically significant (see Table 3; M1 + M2), suggesting that the association of leisure involvement with self-esteem was also partially explained by links through self-acceptance/affiliation leading to identity disclosure and higher self-esteem. This final pathway supports the hypothesis that leisure involvement's counteraction of minority stress effects on furries' self-esteem is mediated by identification with the furry community and disclosure of that identity.

Similar patterns were found with the analyzes of life satisfaction as the criterion variable (see Figure 3). First, the pathway of leisure involvement to life satisfaction through self-acceptance/affiliation was not statistically significant (see Table 4; M1). The pathway of leisure involvement to life satisfaction through identity disclosure was statistically significant (Table 4; M2), suggesting that part of the association of leisure involvement with life satisfaction was explained by greater furry identity disclosure. Finally, an examination of the serial mediation model in which the pathway of leisure involvement predicting life

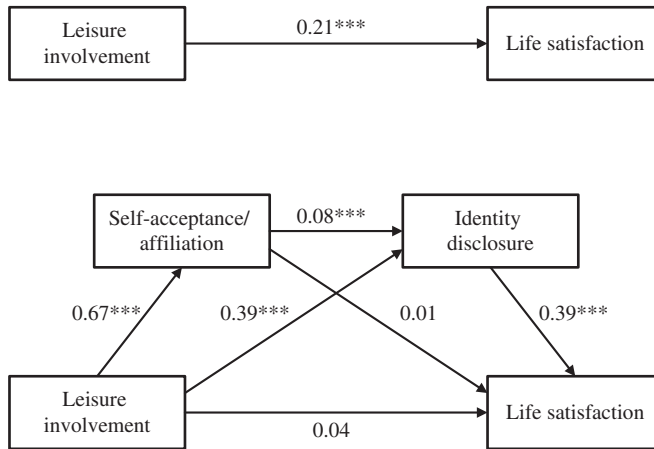


Figure 3. Model of the bootstrapped total effect, direct effect and indirect effects for life satisfaction.

Note: *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 4. Bootstrap analysis of total effect for association of leisure involvement with life satisfaction, direct effect and indirect effects through self-acceptance/affiliation and identity disclosure.

	Estimate	SE	Confidence interval	
			Lower limit	Upper limit
Total effect	0.209	0.049	0.113	0.305
Direct effect	0.043	0.069	-0.093	0.178
M1: Self-acceptance/Affiliation	-0.005	0.048	-0.099	0.090
M2: Identity disclosure	0.148	0.023	0.107	0.197
M1 + M2	0.019	0.007	0.008	0.035

Note: Lower limit and upper limit denote the boundaries of a 95% confidence interval (CI).

satisfaction first through self-acceptance/affiliation and then subsequently through identity disclosure showed that the indirect effect through both mediators was statistically significant (see Table 4; M1 + M2), suggesting that the association of furry fandom leisure involvement with life satisfaction was also partially explained by links through self-acceptance/affiliation leading to greater identity disclosure and then greater life satisfaction. In sum, analyzes with both aspects of well-being, namely, self-esteem and life satisfaction, showed that higher levels of leisure involvement were associated with greater well-being. This association was statistically explained by greater disclosure of a potentially stigmatized leisure identity and also by a process that potentially operates through the serial mediators of self-acceptance/affiliation leading to greater disclosure of a stigmatized leisure identity (a furry identity) in everyday life.

Discussion

Drawing on the minority stress model (Meyer, 2003) as well as theory and research that helps explain how minority stress might be overcome (Branscombe et al., 1999; Jetten et al., 2001; McKenna & Bargh, 1998; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982) we examined the ways leisure involvement may help people with a potentially stigmatized leisure interest,

namely, the furry fandom, maintain or enhance well-being. The minority stress model outlines how stigmatization has a negative impact on individual identity and contributes to a sense of isolation with harmful effects for well-being (Meyer, 2003). The psychological distress associated with concealing an invisible stigmatized identity compounds this stressful process (Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009).

Our results showed that greater leisure involvement was associated with higher levels of well-being and this association was explained through two pathways. First, the association of leisure involvement with well-being was partially explained by greater disclosure of furry identity in everyday life. Second, the association of leisure involvement with well-being was also partially explained with serial mediation suggesting that deeper involvement enhanced self-acceptance of furry identity and affiliation with the furry community, leading to more frequent disclosure of furry identity.

These findings contribute to our understanding of leisure as both a potential source of stigmatization as well as a coping resource. Previous research has shown that for those with a stigmatized identity, leisure provides an important context for socializing, building a sense of belonging (Iwasaki et al., 2008) and enhancing mood (Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993; Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000; Wann, 2006). Results from the present study build on these patterns by showing potential mechanism for how involvement in a leisure community and development of a sense of belonging contribute to well-being. That the association of leisure involvement with well-being was partially explained by disclosure of a potentially stigmatized identity in everyday life is consistent with research showing the psychological costs of concealing identity (Pachankis, 2007; Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009).

Furthermore, the links shown between leisure involvement, self-acceptance and affiliation, and disclosure of a stigmatized identity enriches our understanding of how leisure involvement, sense of belonging and well-being are connected for members of a stigmatized leisure identity group. McKenna and Bargh (1998) showed that for those with a stigmatized identity, greater/deeper/more frequent involvement with those who shared that stigmatized identity lead to greater self-acceptance, increased affiliation and, subsequently, to greater disclosure of identity in everyday life, in keeping with a process of symbolic self-completion (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). The present findings extend that line of research by showing the potential consequences for well-being of the symbolic self-completion process among those with a stigmatized leisure identity.

Limitations of the present study include its cross-sectional nature, precluding causal claims. Also, our measures of leisure involvement were subjective, and behavioural measures may show which kinds of leisure involvement are particularly important for the processes described in the current research. Measures of perceived stigmatization of the furry fandom were not available for the present analyzes and it is likely that the pattern of results may be particularly important for those with greater levels of perceived stigmatization compared to those with less perceived stigmatization. Finally, we propose that the utility of the models we tested would be strengthened by replication with other stigmatized leisure interests.

The present study has implications for both future research on stigmatized leisure communities and for clinical practice. Future research on stigmatized leisure groups should focus on the medium of involvement – whether participation in the community is digital or “real-world.” Given the motivation to hide a concealable stigmatized identity to avoid stigma, it may be next to impossible for people with these stigmatized identities to discover a community of like-minded others. For many furies the internet is a crucial part of their involvement in the community, both in their day-to-day involvement but also in their discovery of the community in the first place (Plante, Gerbasi, Reysen, & Scaletta,

2011). Future research should focus on the importance of the internet to the discovery of and involvement in stigmatized leisure groups and whether the extent to which community involvement is primarily online moderates leisure involvement's counteraction of minority stress.

Perhaps more important, the current research has implications for clinical practice. Belonging to a stigmatized recreational group is likely to be perceived as being volitional, which may lead well-intentioned clinicians to suggest leaving such communities to clients experiencing symptoms related to minority stress. Interviews with furies at a regional convention reveal that, indeed, many furies attending counselling for various conditions (e.g. depression, social anxiety) felt that clinicians were instructing them to leave the furry community which, for them, was the only place they experienced acceptance and where they did not have to conceal their identity (Plante, Roberts, Gerbasi, & Reysen, 2012). The current research suggests that an alternative approach, encouraging greater involvement and identification with the stigmatized community in a leisure context, may prove more effective in the treatment of clients and, perhaps more importantly, may be more appealing, and thus more likely to be implemented by clients.

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Appendix A: Rotated component matrix

SCALE dimension Item	Component loadings ^d			
	Self-acceptance/affiliation	Involvement	Identity revelation	Social involvement
Ego involvement scale (Kyle et al., 2007)				
Attraction				
Being part of the furry fandom is one of the most enjoyable things I do	0.60	0.34	0.18	0.34
Being part of the furry fandom is very important to me	0.69	0.39	0.18	0.23
Being part of the furry fandom is one of the most satisfying things I do	0.59	0.40	0.22	0.25
Centrality^a				
I find a lot of my life is organized around being part of the furry fandom	0.28	0.70	0.18	0.29
Being part of the furry fandom occupies a central role in my life	0.37	0.65	0.17	0.26
Social bonding				
I enjoy being part of the furry fandom with my friends	0.28	0.21	0.05	0.76
Most of my friends are in some way connected with the furry fandom	0.04	0.27	0.04	0.79
Participating in the furry fandom provides me with opportunity to be with friends	0.16	0.23	0.15	0.82
Identity affirmation				
When I'm part of the furry fandom I can really be myself	0.48	0.07	0.43	0.39
I identify with people and images associated with the furry fandom	0.54	0.12	0.39	0.29
When I'm a part of the fandom I don't have to be concerned with the way I look	0.29	-0.01	0.61	0.06
Identity expression				
You can tell a lot about a person by seeing them in the furry fandom	0.04	0.20	0.79	-0.01
Participating in the furry fandom says a lot about who I am	0.36	0.29	0.69	0.10
When I participate in the furry fandom, others see me the way I want them to see me	0.28	0.12	0.66	0.15
Fanship scale (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010)				
I have rescheduled my work to accommodate my furry interest	0.09	0.73	0.07	0.17
I am emotionally connected to being a furry	0.68	0.38	0.12	0.07
I spend a considerable amount of money on being a furry	0.15	0.71	0.07	0.22
I do not devote much energy to being a furry	0.40	0.50	0.11	0.06
I want everyone to know I am connected to furies	0.39	0.36	0.19	0.07
I would devote all my time to being a furry if I could	0.54	0.42	0.25	0.05
I would be devastated if I were told I could not be a furry	0.71	0.21	0.18	0.01
I strongly identify with being a furry	0.78	0.26	0.14	0.17
When furies are popular I feel great	0.65	0.07	0.26	0.03
Being a furry is part of me	0.78	0.18	0.14	0.14
I want to be friends with people who like furies	0.66	0.02	0.25	0.25
Percentage of variance explained	24.00	14.18	11.15	10.96

Extraction method: Principal component analysis.

Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalization.

Note: ^aOne centrality item was inadvertently omitted during programming of the online survey (i.e. "To change my preference from the furry fandom to another recreation activity would require a major rethinking").