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Self-Creation of Other-Than-Human Identities: A Netnographic Analysis of Identity Labels in the Alterhuman Community on Tumblr

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Abstract

The paper discusses the alterhuman community composed of individuals who, despite having human bodies, identify as other-than-human. Such identities range from earthly animals to mythological or otherworldly beings such as elves, dragons, aliens or angels, or even immaterial ideas. While alterhumanity is not inherently an online phenomenon, the community is based mainly online, which allows them to discover labels that describe their identities and discuss their lived experience with non-humanity. The paper is based on a project completed in 2021. This research explores the phenomenon of alterhuman identity, including but not limited to otherkin, therian or plurals, focusing on non-human identities. The study looked at the ways in which members of this community produce and use labels which aid in categorizing one's experience. Through observational netnography with elements of content analysis of existing data gathered from identity labels included in self-introductions on 200 Tumblr blogs, the paper examines the relationship between identifying as alterhuman and being part of (other) social minorities.

Keywords: personal identity, alterhuman, Internet-based communities, non-human identities, netnography

1. Introduction

My name is Adriel and I was a (fallen) angel

I used a masculine form, with short black hair, dark eyes, and pale skin. I had a rather athletic physique, but I was of average size. I had two wings and I remember them being quite large. They were navy blue from the top with pale blue undersides, and they turned pure black after I fell. ...

After falling, I remember feeling lost, betrayed, and furious. Though I know I eventually grounded myself again, the anger remained through it all. I may have started going by Azriel in order to distance myself from my previous life. ...

I was often sarcastic and cocky, enjoying the thrill of flight and of victory. Though I tried to be compassionate, my temper often got in the way of this, and it, unfortunately, meant I struggled to make close friendships. The angels who did stay I remember fondly, and hope to find them again in this life. ...[1]

In an apostrophe to the alterhuman community, one of its members states: "Your identity doesn't exist for other people" (therianimal, 2022)—it does not depend on others' approval, nor does it require legitimization or, in other words, being "valid" to be useful to someone. In some very inclusive communities, online personal identities are presented in a form of short strings of "microlabels"—hyperspecific terms that describe very particular experiences with gender, sexuality, mental health, and racial, ethnic or religious identity (*Microlabel*, 2023). Such labels often transcend the common understanding of various personal identity categories (e.g. "xenogenders," which are gender identities outside of the concepts of masculinity and femininity, going beyond the human understanding of gender; see *Xenogender*, 2023).

This paper aims to investigate experiences of exclusion of other-than-human beings.[2] While the focus is mostly on non-human identities (e.g., otherkin, therian, and so on), this work is not limited to only this facet of the alterhuman community. Since this community on Tumblr attaches great importance to identity labels, especially in the self-introduction parts of their blogs, this research looks into what types of labels are common for alterhuman beings. Self-bestowed labels are a useful tool, helpful with exploring and understanding one's own identity, and the way their identities make them different from the

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[1] The quote comes from a self-introduction from one of the studied blogs with original spelling preserved. All such quotes cited in this paper have been anonymized (including heavily redacting them to assure their unsearchability).

[2] Not all alterhumans are comfortable with being referred to as "person" because for many non-humans it insinuates a certain level of humanity which they do not identify with. This paper will use the following terms instead: "entity", "being" or "individual", as more inclusive terms that are often preferred by the community and its members.

rest of the society, as well as an accessible source of information on the variety of most influential experiences in the lives of the members of this very globally scattered community.

2. Not wholly human

"Alterhuman" is an umbrella term for any experience that is "beyond the scope of what is traditionally considered 'being human'" (Alt+H, 2019).[3] This may mean feeling a strong connection to other-than-human beings on a psychological, spiritual or philosophical level, feeling as if one was born in the wrong—human—body (often described as being "transspecies," similar to the transgender experience), having memories of another entity in one's past life, and many more. This term was preceded by "otherkin," which denotes identifying as various fantastical or mystical creatures (Scribner, 2013, p. 24). According to Orion Scribner (2012, p. 26), the earliest use of the term "otherkin" was in the early 1990s. "Alterhuman" is, however, a rather recent term, coined in 2014 (phasmovore, 2014b), and although it has not initially gained much traction (vagabond-sun, n.d.), it is now considered broader and more inclusive to the variety of other-than-human experiences.[4] This change was a consequence of a discussion on whether "otherkin" can function as a general term for all other-than-human identities (House of Chimeras, 2021; phasmovore, 2014a), such as therian (individuals who identify as, usually, earthly animals or sometimes plants), factkin and fictionkin (those who identify as real people or fictional characters, respectively), as well as otherheartedness (strongly identifying *with*—instead of *as*—another being), copinglink (identifying as alterhuman as a form of coping mechanism for mental illnesses and disorders or trauma); or non-human alters in plural systems,[5] and many more. This list is by no means exhaustive since the various kinds of other-than-human experiences are vast and new labels and microlabels are being continuously created; however, it catalogues the most commonly encountered identities in the alterhuman community.

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[3] According to the person who coined the term "alterhuman" (phasmovore, 2014b), it was not originally meant to be used as a synonym for "non-human" (X-RDS, 2023b) because the latter is more narrow in meaning. However, since the differences between various terms are rather subtle and their proper application can in some cases be based on technicalities, this paper uses "non-human," "other-than-human," and "alterhuman" interchangeably.

[4] Other similar terms have been proposed in the meantime: alterbeing, otherbeing, Other+, and so on (*Alterhuman*, 2023), however, they are used less frequently.

[5] "Plurality" or "multiplicity" often refers to dissociative identity disorder (DID), which is a disorder that, according to the DSM-V, is often linked to severe trauma early in childhood development (American Psychiatric Association, 2022, pp. 334–335). Plurals often call the collective of their identities "systems", and their other personalities—their "alters" or "headmates".

3. Social Media

Online profiles that we might come across on our Facebook walls or X (formerly known as Twitter) timelines are short and concise: we are meant to presume who the user is by reading all of the information that they shared in the profile summary just below their picture, as well as the content posted on the profile. Facebook in particular provides a rather small amount of specific types of affordances in building an online profile: a form with prepared questions about one's education, current occupation, relationships, and similar life experiences and milestones (see Arfini et al., 2021). Additionally, Facebook is very community-oriented or, more specifically, interaction-oriented, compared to services that provide a space for writing online diaries such as blogs and microblogs (mainly Tumblr and Pillowfort). This is not to say that Facebook or X cannot perform a similar function but that those services are more restrictive, with strict moderation of content or, in the latter's case, character limits per post. Tumblr, on the other hand, attempts to provide a space for sharing more free-form content while utilizing a much less advanced algorithm for curating the users' experience.

Krzysztof Abriszewski (2017), in his interpretation of audiophile internet forums from the perspective of Berger's and Luckmann's "Social Construction of Reality," views such a forum as an example of a dynamic symbolic universe. As such, it forms and formulates knowledge, and offers, among others, validations, arguments, counterarguments and countervalidations during interactions with other users (2017, p. 140). That is facilitated by the immateriality and interactive nature of Internet websites, such as forums, Facebook groups or microblogging platforms. Such an environment lends itself to expressing one's personality and experiences by allowing its users to hide behind a nickname and freely partake in discourses, roaming around various personal blogs, becoming a member of scattered and fragmented communities at will, and detaching from them a moment later (see Kończykowska & Ziemna, 2021).

Tumblr, on the other hand, is a microblogging website, which gathers all personal blogs on a single platform and allows interactions between users. As it is a social media network, the users can interact with each other by commenting under a post, sharing new or unoriginal content (the latter is known as „reblogging" —the original posts get shared, often with added commentary from other users), and sending direct messages. The users can also follow blogs or tags as well as block them, which results in curating one's dashboard.

Tags are a crucial form of communication on Tumblr. Besides assigning a thematic category to content in the form of descriptive tags (which describe the content of a post), it is common to use that space for commentary tags, which facilitate sharing opinions, reactions, and meta-commentary in a less public manner. The latter are used as a method of replying to the original post without the commentary getting added to the post itself —in other words, commentary

tags do not become a part of the original post when it is further reblogged, so their content can be more personal.[6] The former is used for categorizing posts, which facilitates the searching process and allows for curating one's dashboard by filtering the available content. Due to the affordances available on Tumblr, it seems to be the most appropriate medium for gathering information on personal experiences, next only to private blogs and, perhaps, forums, whose popularity has significantly decreased with the emergence of other kinds of social media. The relative lack of popularity among the mainstream, the users' belief in the absence of an algorithm that curates each dash (for example, neil-gaiman, 2023), and the perceived anonymity provided by the website (mainly through nicknames) all seem to support the practice of treating the platform as an equivalent of a personal diary by its users.

4. Categories and the self

Social interactionism claims that interactions between an individual and their environment influence people's behaviours as well as their sense of identity. For G. H. Mead, the self is a social process divided in two phases: the "I" and the "me." Mead (1972) defines the difference as follows: "The 'I' is the response of the organism to the attitudes of the others; the 'me' is the organized set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes" (p. 175). The way others view me through the relationship of other actors (such as my family, my surroundings, rules that function in my country) to myself —is what constitutes "me." The "I" appears for a short moment in reaction to a stimulus: "The 'I,' then, [...] is something that is, so to speak, responding to a social situation which is within the experience of the individual" (p. 177). The responses of "I" are changing dynamically, often differing from reactions to similar situations from the past, but the "I" exists only during the present, in the time of taking action, never knowable in the moment. However, through retrospection we can gain consciousness of our selves: "It is only after we have acted that we know what we have done; it is only after we have spoken that we know what we have said" (p. 196), and it is only when apprehended in memory and objectified that the "I" becomes knowable—through the "me" (p. 174). The "me" is the more passive and continuous phase; it is conventional and habitual, and those habits, "those responses which everybody has" are necessary for the individual to be a member of a community (pp. 197–198). However, only together the "I" and the "me" constitute a whole self.

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[6] Tags can be seen by the original poster, the reblogger and those who access the post directly through the reblogger's blog. They are not visible under other users' reblogs of the post. Using tags as a method of commentary, thus, limits engagement with the reblogger's thoughts—the only way to interact with them is by screenshotting the tags and posting the picture in another reblog.

A similar approach to social constructivism is represented by John Turner, whose Self-Categorization Theory is based on the concept of self-stereotyping —a process of applying categories to one's self (Turner & Reynolds, 2012, p. 442). This occurs in two circumstances, differentiated by the context of group membership: "[w]ork from this perspective emphasizes the role that social identity salience (i.e., the definition of the self in terms of group membership shared with other people) plays in the stereotyping process. One crucial determinant of salience is fit, the degree to which a social categorization matches reality" (Haslam et al., 1999, p. 810), which occurs in two aspects. The first one is the comparative fit, for which "[s]hared social identities provide the frame of reference for the perceived intragroup similarities and differences that form the comparative basis of personal identity" (Reynolds & Turner, 2006, p. 242). Therefore, by the nature of their atypical identities, the alterhuman individuals notice their differences from others, both human and non-human. The second aspect is the normative fit, which refers to "the shared norms, beliefs, and world-views from which the meanings of personal identities are constructed" (2006, p. 242). Accordingly, what the alterhumans as a group believe (for example, what qualifies as an other-than-human identity, what are appropriate and inappropriate displays of alterhumanity, and so on) makes them a collective with common characteristics. The basis of those two processes is called depersonalization, which Haslam (2004) defines as "the process of self-stereotyping through which the self comes to be perceived as categorically interchangeable with other ingroup members" (p. 30). In consequence, the "psychological distance between self and other" is shortened, while simultaneously demarcating polarity between the in-group and the out-group (Onorato & Turner, 2002, p. 155). This leads to stereotyping of both parties —the in-group and the out-group —by each individual on either side of the interaction (especially in case of a conflict), focusing on the most common characteristics of each group, and viewing themselves through the lens of those particular traits.

However, when creating labels which properly describe their identities, alterhumans seem to be most concerned with the in-group normative fit—finding others who understand what they are going through. Thereby, discovering new identity labels and comparing one's life experiences with those categories creates what Hacking (1996) calls a "feedback loop"—a causal relation between people and their descriptors. The basis of such feedback loop is constituted by the concept of *acting under a description*, which —simply put —refers to an action that an individual intends to perform under that description (Hacking, 1998, p. 235). However, an appearance of new descriptions opens up the way for new ways to act: "[w]hen new intentions become open to me, because new descriptions, new concepts, become available to me, I live in a new world of opportunities" (1998, p. 236). In other words, finding a label that describes one's identity leads to a transformation of the self and opens up new possibilities which this information provides.

5. Methods

This paper's aim is to enquire into the alterhuman community and possible experiences of exclusion which may accompany this identity. For this reason, this study examines social groups such entities may belong to through their usage of labels in the self-introduction sections on their blogs. Such information is often provided in the most visited parts of one's blog, mainly the blog's description, a variation of "about me" pages, including pinned posts at the top of the webpage, and the so-called "carrds" linked on the blog.

The data has been gathered throughout the entirety of May 2021. The collected data consists of information provided by Tumblr users from first 200 blogs which were found by searching by the "otherkin" tag. Initially, the project was mainly interested in otherkinity, which is the reason for choosing that particular tag. However, during the coding process it became clear that the relations between various other-than-human identities are more complex and intertwined than originally assumed. For this reason, this paper will resort to certain generalization of all alterhuman experiences (unless indicated otherwise) based on observations and information gathered from analyses and research conducted by the members of the community itself (this will be further explicated in the Discussion section).

The general content of the blog has not been taken into consideration because of the structure of the website, which has a limited search function and includes infinite scrolling in its design. This does not allow for finding information manually, especially on very active blogs that are several years old. An exception has been made for blogs with no mentions of the users' kintype (the type of non-human identity) in the description, "about me" pages or carrds, as long as the contents of their blogs are dedicated to their alterhuman identity and the blog itself has been found through browsing the "otherkin" tag.

For this study, the non-participant observational netnographic approach has been utilized. Furthermore, to see what kind of labels the users identify with and whether there are any significant co-occurrences, computer-assisted content analysis has been conducted on the data gathered from self-introductions provided by the blogs' owners. Additionally, the inductive approach to coding the data has been employed. The goal was to keep those categories open for those labels that the author of this paper has not encountered before. By creating most of the codes during the coding process itself, this approach allows for careful reading of the users' words without restricting their freedom of naming their experiences with chosen labels. For this very reason the original spelling, punctuation, and grammar in each quoted statement made by the users have been left unchanged.

Tumblr.com has been chosen as an exemplificatory medium because of both its structure, the affordances it provides, and prevalence of labels usage within

the community that, besides Facebook groups, Discord servers, or Reddit's sub-reddits, seems to be one of the biggest post-mailing lists collectives which does allow for interactions between the users (as opposed to Wiki pages and other websites that focus on gathering knowledge and resources). Nevertheless, unlike some other social media platforms, Tumblr provides a possibility to use nicknames and remain anonymous and does not force interactions. It also facilitates a wide range of types of content (text, photos, videos) and is characterized by a lesser focus on follower count and other types of audience interaction measurement.

It is crucial to note that since the data has been gathered from online sources through desk research, it may not always be up to date. Verifying the date of some content was not possible because it was not timestamped. Additionally, during this research process same blogs were archived or entirely deleted from the website. In a few instances, the users themselves acknowledged that the labels they used to identify with had changed or they stopped identifying as alterhuman altogether—in such cases, the most up to date information has been used.

6. Results

Alterhuman individuals experience discrimination for their atypical personal identities, often pathologized and equated to a mental disorder (Proctor, 2019, p. 90). Moreover, many users identify with labels that point to them being part of other social minorities: gender, sexual, racial, ethnic, religious, and linked to health issues: disability, neurodiversity, and mental illnesses. 57,5% of users stated this membership directly through labels. Additional 21% indicated a potential membership indirectly, mainly through gender neutral pronouns and neopronouns which might suggest gender identity outside of the male-female binary; some users identify as pet regressors—a form of age regression (but as pets), which one of the users in this study defined as a nonsexual practice used as "a coping/relaxing headspace," which suggests mental health struggles.[7] Less than a quarter of users (21,5%) did not mention being a part of any minority. It is worth pointing out that it does not necessarily mean that they are or are not members of any (un)privileged group. Some users shared very little personal information, limiting it to their pronouns and age.[8]

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[7] Scientific literature on age regression, often called "agere," is very limited; most information comes from personal accounts (e.g. Alex, 2020). Age regression is usually described as a response to traumatic experience or psychiatric disorders (see O'Donovan et al., 2022).

[8] The purpose of providing such personal information as specifying one's age or describing oneself with the "adult"/"minor" categories is to protect minors from inappropriate interactions with adult users—a practice often undertaken by minors themselves. In other words, some personal information, such as age or pronouns, is often mentioned for such pragmatic reasons.
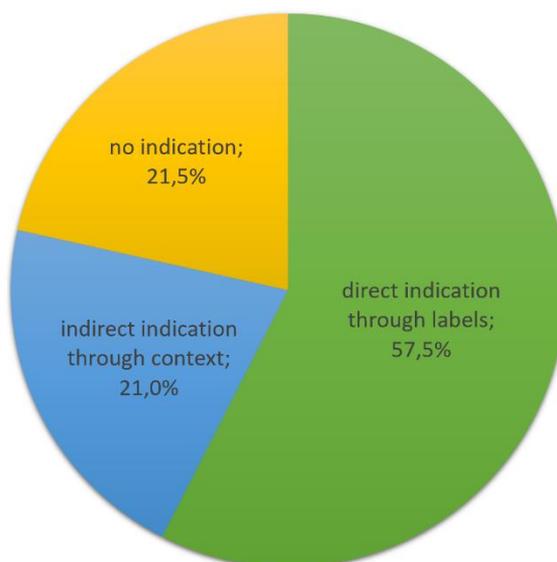
Chart 1: Indication of belonging to social minority groups

Additionally, some users provided a "DNI" (Do Not Interact) or "BYF" (Before You Follow) section. Such sections can suggest various life experiences; for example, while asking nazis not to follow one's blog is a fairly common practice on Tumblr, mentioning, for instance, "pro-ana" (content promoting anorexia and unhealthy weight loss) is less frequent, which might indicate personal struggles with the eating disorder. However, it has been decided that this data is too ambiguous and leaves too much to interpretation to qualify the user into the previous two categories.

	Frequency	Percentage	Percentage (valid)
LGBTQIA+	98	49,00	85,22
Mental Illnesses and Disorders	56	28,00	48,70
Disability	13	6,50	11,30
People of Color	7	3,50	6,09
Religious minorities	5	2,50	4,35
DOCUMENTS with code(s)	115	57,50	100,00
DOCUMENTS without code(s)	85	42,50	-
ANALYZED DOCUMENTS	200	100,00	-

Table 1: Minority groups membership

Out of all users who directly stated their underprivileged status, nearly a half is LGBTQIA+. Almost a third struggles with mental illnesses or disorders, with the biggest group (over ¼) being neurodivergent. The remaining 12,5% include individuals who mentioned being disabled (6,5%), POC (3,5%) or a religious minority (2,5%).
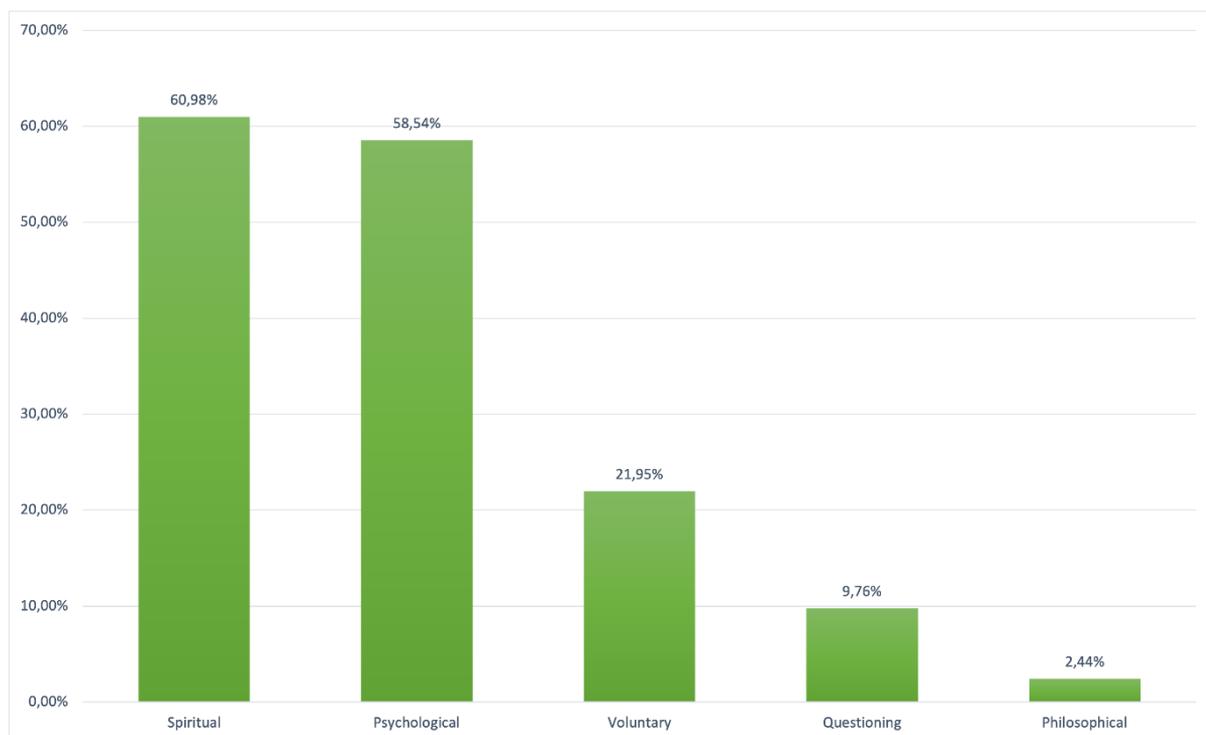

Chart 2: Reasons behind non-human identity

Although a high number of individuals struggle with their mental health, it is not the primary reason behind their non-human identity (which is important to mention, because the community as a whole does struggle against such understanding of alterhumanity, see Proctor, 2019, p. 90). Out of 41 users who stated why they identify as alterhuman, the majority, that is nearly 61%, indicate spirituality as the main reason: their non-human identity stems from such beliefs as reincarnation and past lives lived as non-human beings. Almost 60% point to psychological reasons which span from the feeling of being born in the wrong body to the so-called "shifts"—changes in one's mental state, behaviour,

and ways of experiencing the world typical to that of another creature[9] (for example, a person who identifies as a dog—a dogkin—claims to experience phantom limbs such as a tail or dog ears alongside a difference in hearing ability and their general behaviour becoming more instinct-driven and dog-like). Only four individuals in this group indicated their non-human identity to be closely related to their mental health state, mainly being alterhuman as a result of experienced trauma. Nearly 20% would call their alterhuman identity "voluntary" and all of those users consider themselves copinglinkers (one identifies additionally as "kin for fun," which means a voluntary alterhuman identity embraced for personal entertainment (*KFF*, 2023)[10]). 29,26% out of all those who stated their reasons (which is only 6% out of all 200 blogs) admit to their non-human identity being a coping mechanism in managing their mental health, mainly as copinglink or endel (defined as "[a] nonhuman self-identifier to describe one's identity being caused by, rooted in, or influenced by [a] delusion": strawberrybabydog, 2021). Almost 10% of the users at the time of the study were questioning their identity and considering calling themselves alterhuman. 2,44% claim for the reason to stem from philosophical beliefs. Those individuals, however, did not elaborate on those philosophies.

7. Discussion

Not fitting in is a fairly common feeling that accompanies alterhumanity. The human world may feel strange and foreign, with rules and ways of being centered around being human.

> From my earliest memories I had a sense of being other, not belonging, not being human. My skin didn't fit right and I had to learn the rules of this place and these people and play a role to fit in, but it all felt unnatural. My mother even used to call me a changeling, and she was only half joking.

The process of discovering their alterhuman identities is rather solitary and personal. The most common reasons indicated by the users are either spiritual or psychological (see Chart 2), the latter referring mainly to being transspecies or experiencing shifts or phantom limbs; the former (usually)—to reincarnation. Mentions of those reasons suggest a considerable amount of effort put into

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[9] "Shift" is a very broad term used most commonly by otherkins and therians in reference to experiences which bring a being closer to their other-than-human identity. For example, as Scribner (2013) explains, "[d]uring a mental shift, a therianthrope's way of thinking temporarily changes to resemble that of her animal side more than her human side," (p. 22) while a perception shift is "[a]n event in which a therianthrope's senses temporarily become more like those of his animal side, and/or his senses become heightened" (p. 28).

[10] In the non-human community, those who use the term "kin for fun" (KFF) are often considered as misguided individuals who misrepresent the specific experiences of being otherkin (a-dragons-journal, 2021; aestherians, 2020; fluffnstuffq, 2021). According to this discourse, KFF delegitimizes those experiences by treating a personal identity too lightly, and forcing them out of labels by using them incorrectly (Irkeneon, n.d.).

self-reflection to unravel feelings and experiences of the self, which are not commonly discussed in the open offline due to the human society's potential adverse reaction.

The past, according to Hacking (1998), is indeterminate because it is revised retroactively:

> When we remember what we did, or what other people did, we may also rethink, redescribe, and refeel the past. [...] I do not mean only that we change our opinions about what was done, but that in a certain logical sense what was done itself is modified. As we change our understanding and sensibility, the past becomes filled with intentional actions that, in a certain sense, were not there when they were performed. (pp. 249–250)

Such redefinition of the past is noticeable in what the users describe as their "awakenings" (what made them realize that they were alterhuman):

> When I began exploring online I quickly found the otherkin community and it clicked immediately. I'd been experiencing phantom limbs at that point for a couple years, and dreams which seemed like memories for even longer.
> I stumbled across a [name redacted] website [dedicated to otherkinity] [...]. As I was reading I realized that a lot of [username redacted]'s [...] experiences lined up [...] to my own [...]. [S]uddenly a lot of things were falling into place [...]. [They] had an explanation that fit.

A noticeably common trend among the users is finding out about alterhumanity from the online community. As Page states on his blog, the community is quite reliant on online communication: "both because of how scattered we tend to be, and how we tend to not be geographically-focused in where our communities are divided, instead being more mindful towards the interpretation or details of experience and identity" (who-is-page, 2021b). The Internet can be a valuable resource for seeking support and for exploring one's identity, searching for more accurate labels or creating new ones, and interacting with beings who understand and share their experiences (a similar direction to the one often taken by LGBT+ people, see, e.g., Austin et al., 2020; Lucero, 2017). When such resources are found, one can learn of other-than-human identities and become aware of their own alterhumanity, which did not fit any previously known categories of experience. Their actions and feelings of the past become objectified and thematized, categorized into new labels—in Meadian terms, the "I" becomes knowable through the "me." Having taken the attitudes of human others, instead of "adjusting one's self," they choose "fighting it out," and by self-asserting oneself becoming "a definite self" (Mead, 1972, p. 193).

In the self-introduction part of their online profiles, the users have absolute control over their auto-presentation—others can only learn as much information about them as they consciously choose to share. They can state their identities directly, in a definite, indisputable manner and be taken seriously by other members of the in-group (even if humans sometimes fail to respect them,

both offline as well as online, through trolling or being an "anti"[11]). However, while the alterhuman community is certainly supportive of nearly all identities, it is not entirely free of conflict. Certain labels cause discord over their validity. Thus, some users used to participate in "grilling" to confirm the legitimacy of their identities.

The so-called "grilling" or "questioning" was, as Page explains, "a form of cyber-hazing used to remove what is described as 'fluff' and 'roleplayers' from groups" (who-is-page, 2021a). This practice used to be much more common, especially on websites other than Tumblr, for example in mailing lists or on Facebook (it has not vanished entirely yet, though it is now a significantly less accepted behaviour). Though the intention might have been to protect the community and its members from, for example, the aforementioned trolls or individuals who were not deemed as "legitimately" alterhuman, nowadays it is seen as a harmful and misguided practice (strawberrybabydog, 2021b; who-is-page, 2021c). During the process of grilling, the individual would have been required to do extensive research on the being they identify as (whether it is a wolf, a demon, or Sonic the Hedgehog), and present the community with the fruits of such labour. The being's identity would have most likely been accepted as alterhuman, as long as their proof of their non-human identity did not break the laws of what Proctor (2018) calls "the Otherkin science": "a socially constructed combination of abstract physics, psychology, metaphysics, and ancient belief that renders other-than-human identification thinkable in a contemporary Western paradigm" (p. 487). For example, claiming to experience "P-shifting" —physically changing shape to resemble one's kintype—would have been criticized and might have even resulted in public shaming, while "M-shifts" (mental shifts which result in behaviour more typical for the being one identifies as) were deemed perfectly reasonable (2018, pp. 485–487).

With grilling came positioning oneself as an expert. According to Proctor (2018, p. 490), alterhumans (particularly otherkin beings) would engage in boundary work, which is a rhetorical style used by scientists "for purposes of constructing a social boundary that distinguishes some intellectual activities as 'non-science'" (Gieryn, 1983, p. 782). As Proctor (2018, p. 490) further explains, this style echoes in the practice of "grilling" in the alterhuman community, through "exclu[sion of] rivals from within by defining them as outsiders with labels such as 'pseudo', 'deviant' or 'amateur' (Gieryn, 1983, p. 792) —for example, those

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[11] Broadly speaking, in Internet slang an "anti" is someone who is opposed to a particular community, belief or sometimes behaviour. In the context of alterhumanity, antis openly challenge the legitimacy of other-than-human identities in online discussions (*Antikin*, 2023).

who identify as "kin for fun" would be considered "fakers" or trolls (fluffnst-uffq, 2021), just like those who identify with non-traumagenic plurality[12] (e.g., griffinsystem, 2022; the central nervous system, 2022).

There is a key difference which separates traditional modes of creating expertise from the Internet ways of generating and accumulating knowledge, especially on identity. The latter stem from analysing one's own lived experiences, rather than having someone from the out-group (like myself) interpret their experiences for an academic paper. The alterhumans do not need scholars to generate such knowledge for them, nor to (re)define their existence. The new systems of accumulated expertise, to use Giddens' (1991) nomenclature, are sets of knowledge shared by many separate individuals who create it independently from each other and are often later gathered in the form of so-called "master-posts" (a system of links, frequently gathered on private blogs on Tumblr, redirecting a user to other resources off-site), collected in the Alterhuman Archive, in Discord servers, or in carrds, and referenced on online encyclopaedias such as the Otherkin Wiki or Pluralpedia. Due to the fact that the topic of alterhuman identities has been of interest to few academic researchers (although it has been gathering more attention in recent years), some beings resort to taking the matter into their own hands (or other appendages) and conducting studies on their own (i.e., a recently closed survey which will later be used to publish a book on alterhumans (who-is-page, 2023)). While the scientific value of such community science is disputable, depending on what demarcation criteria for scientific and non-scientific knowledge are chosen, the studies themselves may provide knowledge which would be otherwise difficult to obtain—the community is more enthusiastic and willing to be subjects of research conducted by the in-group than by someone from the out-group.

There is a significant co-occurrence of alterhumanity and other identities, notably LGBT+ and mental illnesses and disorders, which has been noticed by the members of the community who analysed quite extensively, including conducting community-wide surveys (to list a few: azuremist, 2023b; goddamnitlopori, 2020; pantomorph, 2019; PinkDolphin, 2020; scaled-silence, 2021). In a very interesting post on the intersection of alterhumanity and being queer, vagabond-sun states that non-human identity is inherently transgressive in a manner similar to queerness. Queer, as it states, pushes the boundaries of various social norms, by "recogniz[ing] that your gender identity—that is, the way you *express yourself*, the way you *relate to other people*, and the way *other people percieve you* **cannot** be untangled from other social categories." (sic, vagabond-sun, 2019). For alterhumans, too, those other social categories are very much intertwined with their non-human identities. Gender seems to be particularly

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[12] Since DID is a disorder associated with trauma, particularly in early childhood (American Psychiatric Association, 2022, pp. 334–335), the idea of plurality being caused by other factors apart from traumatic experience used to be—and still sometimes is—quite controversial and for a long time has been a source of discord in the plural community.

significantly influenced. The mere fact that one of vagabond-sun's preferred pronouns is "it," which humans would find quite uncomfortable to use, speaks of purposeful dehumanization of its self in a way that, despite the usual human intuition, is not and does not need to be derogatory. Such non-normative pronouns force humans to view it in ways that fit with how it views itself. Moreover, one of the users whose blog was used in this study even states directly: "My gender identity and alterhuman identity are very closely intertwined." As they explain:

> Growing up, I never took interest in anything that seemed to be made with the intention of appealing to a specific gender. [...] It never made sense to me, but it also felt like it didn't apply to me, like everyone was caught up in a weird dance I felt no desire to join. [...]
>
> I couldn't relate to Barbie dolls or fashion because I took no interest in human bodies. My body never looked the way I felt, no matter what I wore. Where's the fun in pretending to be exactly what everyone already perceives you to be?
>
> I disliked cars and trucks, and robotic things, and pretty well any media explicitly geared towards boys and only boys. Not just because I already had a negative association with boys thanks to bullies at school. Boys' media just seemed so saturated with machines, and machines are man made, associated only with humans. I could not relate to anything strictly human.
>
> I only ever took interest in performing my assigned gender when high school bullies and societal/religious brainwashing convinced me that I had to in order to be accepted and attract a mate, which we're all led to believe we're worthless without. But even then, my feline core never changed. And I liked to roleplay as a boy and flirt with my female friends to remind myself that I had not surrendered completely to the pressure of gender.
>
> And, of course, those boys I roleplayed as were animal in one way or another.
>
> I'm thrilled to understand myself now as non-binary. And it's remarkable to look back and see how intimately my alterhumanity influenced that.

While beings who identify with xenogenders, that is, gender identities which cannot be contained to human understanding of gender (*Xenogender*, 2023), are often met with ridicule, the non-humancentric identities, as pointed out by Christine Feraday (2014), are often "practiced by a population of marginalized people whose voices are regularly silenced" and can be seen a challenge to cisheteronormativity, "requir[ing] us to examine deeply ingrained ideas about gender and attraction" (p. 9). Alterhumanity encompasses a wide variety of beings and concepts some individuals identify as. It is not unlikely for a fictionkin being to have their gender identity influenced by the fictional character they identify as. Similarly, a being who identifies as a dog could perceive their gender through a more animalistic perspective and a non-human entity such as, for example, a spacekin—as related to space (e.g. astrogender). Aside from the study conducted for this paper, the answers to online polls on this relation with

gender by members of the alterhuman community provide similar results (for instance, some answers in scaled-silence's survey [2021] mention having no concept of human understanding of gender, as well as different gender and social roles of animals compared to humans). Furthermore, the so-called "neurogenders" denote gender identities which are linked to one's neurotype (neurological type—referring to neurodivergence): "a gender or experience of gender that is so heavily influenced by one's neurodivergence that one's gender and neurodivergence cannot be unlinked" (*Neurogender*, 2023). For example, in the case of autismgender, the claim is that, since autism is linked to a different cognition of the world, the perception of various social categories will also be influenced by this neurotype (*Autigender*, 2023). The link between autism and alterhumanity is, thus, based on a similar assumption, on top of a connection with non-humanity inherent to the autistic experience and portrayal in media (azuremist, 2023b, 2023a; see also Ziemna, 2020).

Additionally, valuable insight might be brought by the stated reason behind non-human identity. A significant number of beings state that such a reason may be related to their mental health. One of the studied users shares their belief that their therianthropy is a result of mental disorders and an "odd upbringing", but "[it] is not inherently unhealthy." Oftentimes, alterhumanity co-occurs also with plurality. The overlap is especially common with otherkinity (anomalymon, 2024) and its history dates back to an online mailing list from 1999 (Scribner, 2012, p. 51). This connection is frequent enough to have inspired the coinage of the term "alterhuman" (X-RDS, 2023).

While for a long time alterhuman beings rejected the idea that their non-human identities may be linked with their mental conditions, in recent years some beings started to embrace this connection in cases such as psychosis and delusions influencing their sense of self (which during this study gained a new label: "endel"). For others, alterhumanity can be a form of coping mechanism. In one case of an ex-otherkin, being "angelkin was an escape": it was "an obsession with a past life. It was creating an identity out of a past I was using to cope with." However, alterhumans firmly assure that being other-than-human does not innately fulfil that role (e.g., flock-of-changes, 2017), nor that is it inherently linked with mental illnesses. It is a way of being alternative to the typical human one.

8. Conclusion

Alterhumanity is a complex personal identity which heavily influences the sense of self. Not being human while occupying a fully human body contributes to feelings of not fitting in and exclusion and may lead to discrimination if one decides to "come out" and embrace this identity publicly. Such identities are often taken to be a sign of mental illness or an attention-seeking behaviour—even more so now, with a new wave of young people online identifying as

other-than-human on social media, primarily TikTok. The goal of this paper was to examine experiences of exclusion of entities who do not identify as human as well as to explore how alterhumanity can be intertwined with other social minority groups, as exemplified by the other-than-human community on Tumblr.

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