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## Friendship Is Manly: The Brony Fandom And The Challenge Of Masculinity

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FRIENDSHIP IS MANLY: THE BRONY FANDOM AND THE CHALLENGE OF MASCULINITY

By

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of


Doctor of Philosophy

Grand Forks, North Dakota

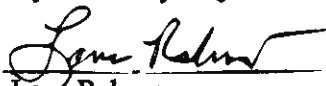
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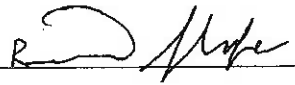


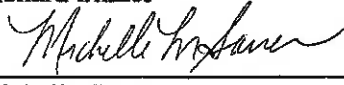
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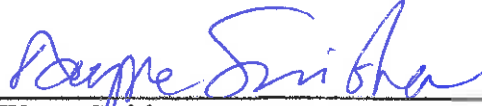
  
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April 28, 2016

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Mahala, Betty, and Samuel  
Love does not begin to describe your support.

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the cultural phenomenon of Bronies, adult, mostly male, fans of the show *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*. When large numbers of grown men like a show designed for little girls, how do they contend with the challenges presented by the culturally accepted norms of masculinity? Do these fans disclose their love of ponies to others, if at all? An online mixed methods survey conducted in 2014 looks at how Bronies interact with the show, other fans, and non fans. While some Bronies are cautious about disclosing their fondness for ponies due to potential harassment, there is potential movement growing within the fan community that is slowly changing constructions of masculinity which fosters community and inclusivity.

This project explores issues of masculine identity management in four sections. The first segment examines how Bronies experience harassment for being public fans. Secondly, how do secretive members of the fandom maintain their traditional masculine identity through self monitoring techniques like “The Stable.” Third, how are conceptions of masculinity changing in environments where hypermasculinity and ponies intersect, such as the case of military Bronies. Finally, the Brony fandom is aiding in the creation of a new framework of masculinity that distinguishes itself as a more inclusive gender construct separating itself from hegemonic masculinity.

## Chapter I

### Introduction

#### Pony Prologue

This dissertation explores an emerging masculinity with an unlikely genesis stemming from a television program called *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*. I call this developing form of masculinity “concordant masculinity” which defines itself through harmony by means of collaboration and agreement without coercion or appropriation of other gender norms. This form of masculinity varies from other structures of the term in that it allows for greater gender fluidity and a wider array of gender performances while further fracturing contemporary understandings of traditional masculinity. Simultaneously, concordant masculinity does not dismiss or marginalize other types of masculinity as previous constructs have a tendency to do. Moreover, compromise is a key component in this framework of masculinity because it grants individuals the ability to perform their gender without reprisal or shaming and acknowledges difference by means of inclusion, not exclusion.

The embodiment of this new masculinity has its beginnings in the Brony fandom. A Brony, for this project, is defined as a young adult man between the ages of 18 to 35 who engages in fan activities relating to *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*. These activities range from watching episodes of the television show and creating fan art to attending *My Little Pony* conventions and cosplaying as ponies. Bronies present a conundrum to conventional

understandings of masculinity. Their existence perplexes many people because they cannot understand how young adult men could genuinely enjoy colorful ponies talking about friendship issues and sharing their feelings with each other.

This new masculinity construct begins upon discovering the name of their fandom. The Brony moniker is a portmanteau of “brother” and “pony.”<sup>1</sup> Even within the name of the fandom members are finding community within a brotherhood of pony fans. Bronies are defying expectations of traditional masculinity which purports young men should herald physical strength, emotional stoicism, and rugged individualism as worthwhile goals. While many Bronies embrace and exhibit a number of the values that *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* presents, there a number of fans who feel conflicted with their masculinity while occupying a feminine space. Even the most ardent male fans confront these matters of gender identity which suggest they are surrendering their masculinity when trespassing in a more feminine realm. A number of these issues Bronies face and elements of concordant masculinity are present in a convention adventure I had while conducting research on the fandom.

In 2014 I was invited to present a panel regarding my research at the Bay Area Brony Spectacular (BABSCON) in San Francisco. I met Ralph after landing in Denver for a connecting flight. He admired the Twilight Sparkle plushie protruding out of my backpack and struck up a conversation lasting until we reached the hotel. There we met a couple of Ralph’s friends, including Dave. Who treated all of his friends to lunch, including myself, even though we had never met before. At lunch, Luke, who chose not to openly display anything *My Little Pony* on

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<sup>1</sup> Watercutter, Angela. “My Little Pony Corrals Unlikely Fanboys Known as ‘Bronies.’” *Wired* June 9, 2011 Accessed from <http://www.wired.com/underwire/2011/06/bronies-my-little-ponys/>

his person started discussing his convention agenda. He was ecstatic because it was his first pony convention, but also enthusiastic to “score” with women each night.

In order to save money on the trip, I arranged to split hotel room costs with a young woman from Los Angeles. When we met, she hinted that she would probably not be present for most of the convention and was going to be busy with her own thing. This did not concern me because we did not know each other. After my panel however, when I walked into the room after my panel presentation, I noticed “something had happened.” There was a young man asleep in bed while my hotel roommate was in the shower. Moderately embarrassed I quickly retreated. This moment of intimate intrusion was not a onetime occurrence. In fact, almost every time that I came into the hotel room there was a different young man in a similar situation. I ignored this until, stumbling around in the dark early Monday morning I tripped over Luke’s winter vest on the floor. Next to his vest was my roommate’s convention badge. At that moment, everything became crystal clear to me. The name printed on my roommate’s convention badge was “Fuq Me.” I did not make the connection the first time I first met her. Apparently, she was arranging meetings with convention attendees for certain services in our hotel room. It was then that I realized at a convention where friendship is magic, I roomed with a sex worker and met a young man imposing his masculinity in a perceived feminine space.

Individuals in the story illustrate some of the characteristics concordant masculinity employ and depict contradictions some fans must still contend with in their own gender performance. Ralph and Dave, represent some positive aspects about the fandom and concordant masculinity. Ralph illustrates just how quickly a fan of the show will identify with

another fan and begin conversing with them if the situation arises. Many fans of the show are friendly and want to share their friendship with others and be helpful whenever possible. Ralph initiated a conversation with me in the middle of a busy Denver airport after noticing my handmade Twilight Sparkle plushie. We talk about various things while waiting to board the flight, building a friendly bond in the process. Additionally, we help each other find ground transportation to the convention hotel. Dave, another complete stranger to me, illustrates more inclusive actions by inviting me to lunch and even pays for my meal just because I was tagging along with Ralph. Showing kindness and generosity toward strangers is a hallmark of what this fandom represents, as many of them try to adhere to the messages of friendship the cartoon attempts to portray. This is a point I will illustrate as going against the norms of traditional masculinity where cooperation or collaboration is not a high priority, let alone talking about purple and pink ponies.

Secondly, the depiction of Luke and his actions at the hotel illuminate some of the internal conflict happening within members of the Brony fandom. He is a young man attending a *My Little Pony* convention where a number of like-minded individuals openly confront gender expectations by liking “a show for little girls” and yet still feels the need to reinforce his “manhood” by finding women for sexual purposes. Luke still fears that his masculinity is in a state of crisis because he is surrounded in a seemingly feminine space. Furthermore, there is also the possibility that Luke may not genuinely adhere to notions of the show and was only looking to get what he wanted from others over the course of the weekend. My roommate also provides nuance to the experience in that she was fan of the show who quite possibly may have been there reinforcing traditional masculinity with her activities. However, she could be familiar

with the types of individuals who attend fan conventions and knew of a possible way to exploit those perceived weaknesses like Luke had.

Finally, it demonstrates my own perceptions and limitations in terms of involvement with the fandom. Previous experiences with local meetup groups and Brony conventions provide insight into how fans interpret the show for themselves and, to a degree, how they implement those messages in their own lives. On the other hand, this familiarity may have also hidden possible contradictions occurring within the fandom from my sight. This anecdote does position me in the fandom as someone immersed in Brony culture and I recognize my own limitations. I knew from the outset that I would probably meet helpful and kind fans because it is what I anticipate at pony conventions. However, the contradictions present in Luke highlight some of the critical underpinnings within the fandom which will be fleshed out in this project.

All of these points have a bearing on this endeavor as this project examines the changing notion of traditional masculinity as it confronts a popular subculture like the Bronies and the impact the fandom has on how society views contemporary gender roles. Generally, this research looks at how the fandom is affecting prevalent understandings of traditional masculinity that stress individualism, competitiveness, and various forms of domination, including the physical, mental, and sexual varieties. Specifically, the questions this study seeks to answer include: Who are Bronies and what challenges do they face because they are fans of *My Little Pony*? How do Bronies negotiate with their masculinity if they are insecure with disclosing their fandom with others? Finally, how does the construction of concordant

masculinity begin to alter conceptions of hegemonic masculinity when conventional assumptions of gender composition carry the same importance?

Addressing these questions will come in a number of steps, which will progressively examine issues surrounding traditional forms of masculinity to the development of concordant masculinity and its underpinnings through a critical-cultural mixed methods approach to research. Beginning with an appraisal of how some members of the fandom may or may not openly participate in pony related activities or inform others of their involvement at all. Statistical data derivative of a survey in 2014 investigating possible factors influencing those decisions, including age, gender, and self disclosure are analyzed. Second, a look at the push-back from society deeming Bronies a deviant group and methods exercised against fans, by individuals and the media in an attempt to keep the borders of gender in check. Third, due to potential reprisal, some Bronies are not comfortable openly discussing about their fan activities. This section will investigate various methods of self monitoring they implement along with the creation of “the Stable,” which some fans use to keep their fandom a secret. The fourth section involves a contingency of Bronies who are also members of the armed services. This portion looks at how members of the military and ponies can coexist without losing their masculine identity despite the seemingly strange juxtaposition of unicorns and uniforms. Finally, how this fandom gives credence to the creation of concordant masculinity. A new framework of masculinity which considers itself masculine even when participating in forms of femininity without being wholly feminine or attempting to appropriate those feminine spaces. Overall, this project analyzes how Bronies contend with traditional forms of masculinity while engaging in fan activities and how their new form of masculinity breaks away from traditional



conventions of gender. For this project I define traditional masculinity as a gender performance perpetuating the notion that young men must be physically dominating over their environment and women, they must keep their emotions under control or show no emotion at all to prevent an image of weakness, and the concept of competitive individualism over cooperative achievement which is particularly popular in North America. Before approaching these sections of analysis, an examination of *My Little Pony* and the fandom emerging from the newest generation of the toy line and television program is required. Following that discussion is a look at the controversy surrounding the fandom and why many people consider Bronies a threat to traditional forms masculinity and a perversion of gender roles.

### **Historical Overview**

In 1983 Hasbro introduced a toy line by Bonnie Zacherle called *My Pretty Pony*.<sup>2</sup> The initial designs of the equines featured “realistic” colors and proportions of typical pony breeds, but were later changed to pastel colored bodies complete with a “cutie mark” applied to the pony’s flank for identification purposes.<sup>3</sup> The ponies would continue on as a popular series of dolls with brushable manes and tails throughout the 1980’s and 1990’s. In recent years, the ponies are seeing a resurgence of popularity. This is partially due to a reboot of the 1980’s cartoon show currently airing on *Discovery Family*, the family entertainment channel co-owned

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<sup>2</sup> “Person of Interest: Bonnie Zacherle, Creator of ‘My Little Pony’” *Examiner* Nov. 10, 2013 Accessed from <http://www.examiner.com/article/person-of-interest-bonnie-zacherle-creator-of-my-little-pony>

<sup>3</sup> “MLP through the Years” *Hasbro* Accessed from [https://web.archive.org/web/20121114085112/http://www.hasbro.com/mylittlepony/en\\_US/parents/through-the-years.cfm](https://web.archive.org/web/20121114085112/http://www.hasbro.com/mylittlepony/en_US/parents/through-the-years.cfm)

by Hasbro.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the *My Little Pony* franchise continues to expand and garner the toy company millions of dollars in new sales and an animated movie premiering in 2017.<sup>5</sup>

Remaking an older franchise for younger generations to enjoy is nothing new; however, it is interesting to discover who is helping that revival take place. An influx of new supporters from a demographic not traditionally known for enjoying the candy colored equines emerged within the fan base. Consisting of teenage boys and young adult men, this group was not only watching the show, but also buying the merchandise, and creating fan art across a wide range of mediums. Additionally, these fans “simply aren't afraid to admit to enjoying a show that is innocent, colorful, and funny.”<sup>6</sup> They are comfortable in letting others know about the magic of friendship without worrying about how peculiar others might view their activities.

As the popularity of the show continues to grow, Bronies are steadily creating fan conventions worldwide with the sole purpose of celebrating everything concerning the *My Little Pony* franchise. BronyCon, their biggest annual convention, garnered an attendance of ten thousand people over a three day period in 2015.<sup>7</sup> News of young men coming together in large groups at one place to celebrate a particular genre like science fiction or anime is nothing new. But when that same number of people can unite to collectively praise the merits of a

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<sup>4</sup> “Hub TV Network Scores Record High Audience With Outstanding Performance of Special Royal Wedding of the Year on ‘My Little Pony Friendship is Magic’” *Hasbro* April 24, 2012 Accessed from <http://investor.hasbro.com/releasedetail.cfm?releaseid=666931> Evidence of the popularity growth can be seen in the ratings numbers published by Hasbro after the two part season finale in 2012. At the time of this publication, the channel was still known as *The Hub* prior to Hasbro relinquishing control back to Discovery Communications in 2014.

<sup>5</sup> “Hasbro 3q Results Climb, Helped by Tax Adjustment” *Yahoo Finance* October 21, 2013 Accessed from <http://finance.yahoo.com/news/hasbro-3q-results-climb-helped-tax-adjustment-105057980--finance.html> Dornbush, Jonathon, “Hasbro sets ‘My Little Pony’ Movie for 2017” *Entertainment Weekly* October 20, 2014 Accessed from <http://www.ew.com/article/2014/10/20/my-little-pony-movie-2017>

<sup>6</sup> Littleshy [pseud.]. “What is a Brony” *Whatisabrony* December 12, 2014 Accessed from <http://whatisabrony.com/>

<sup>7</sup> “Convention History” BronyCon January 30 2015 Accessed from <http://bronycon.org/about/convention-history/>

television show themed around unicorns and friendship there tends to be a few curious onlookers. Angela Watercutter describes the growing popularity of fandom this way:

Every nerd has a favorite TV show they watch religiously and know inside and out. But *My Little Pony* seems like an unlikely object of fanboy love. Since the show debuted last fall on cable channel Hub TV [now Discovery Family], it's attracted a growing number of male fanatics... In addition to watching the show, these teenage, twenty- and thirtysomething guys are creating pony art, posting fan videos on YouTube and feeding threads on 4chan.<sup>8</sup>

The increasing popularity of the show is bringing the fandom slowly into the mainstream of popular culture. As a result, characters and references from *My Little Pony* and the Brony fandom now appear in television programs such as *Bob's Burgers*, *The Colbert Report*, and even during a commercial spot for the National Football League during Super Bowl XLIX.<sup>9</sup>

## Problems with Ponies

Despite the growth in mainstream recognition, negative reactions toward the Brony fandom exist. A number of media outlets openly criticize Bronies as social outcasts who are attracted to a "deviant lifestyle."<sup>10</sup> Several pundits say they feel confusion and disgust at the notion of young adult men enjoying something marketed toward young girls between the ages

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<sup>8</sup> Watercutter, Angela. "My Little Pony Corrals Unlikely Fanboys Known as 'Bronies.'"

<sup>9</sup> Mintz, Dan, "The Equestrianauts," *Bob's Burgers* Season 4, Episode 17, directed by Tyree Dilihay Aired April 13, 2014 Sethisto [pseudo.]. "Stephen Colbert Shouts Out to Bronies" *Equestria Daily* August 1, 2011 Accessed from <http://www.equestriadaily.com/2011/08/stephen-colbert-shouts-out-to-bronies.html> Calpian [pseudo.]. "Ponies in the Super Bowl!" *Equestria Daily*, February 1, 2015 Accessed from <http://www.equestriadaily.com/2015/02/ponies-in-superbowl.html>

<sup>10</sup> Treaway, [pseudo.]. "FOX Attacks Bronies" *Youtube* 3:12 June 17, 2011

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fqEDIFfy4Yg> Darksaber64x.[pseudo.]. *Redeye on 'Bronies'*. *Youtube* 2:45 June 17, 2011 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fi27530dDCc> OOPH [pseudo.]. "Bronies: Adult Men Who Like My Little Pony and Why It Disturbs Me" *SDMomfia*, June 11, 2011 Accessed from <http://sdmomfia.com/2011/06/bronies-adult-men-who-like-my-little-pony/> All of these entries have a common theme that considers Bronies a plague to society as a whole because they disrupt popular conceptions of gender roles.

of four and ten. As Madeline Davies points out, the fandom does not receive a lot positive reports about their events from either the media or society at large:

Much like the press, the public hasn't exactly been kind to the brony. At best, the subculture gets written off as extremely dorky—a group of fedora-sporting nerds who live in their parents' basements and spend all their time watching cartoons, making fan art and getting into pedantic arguments about *My Little Pony* on the internet. At worst, they're accused not only of clapping, but of being pedophiles because, really, who else besides little girls would be *this* interested in a children's show aimed at a young female audience?<sup>11</sup>

Truncated examples of these reactions by the general public occur during an audience reaction program called the *The People's Couch*, on the television network *Bravo*, depicting various audience members reacting to segments from the documentary *Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony*. The episode includes viewers making statements such as, "I am all for being gay, but that is too gay" or imply that fans have sexual fetishes for the ponies<sup>12</sup> Additionally, news commentators such as Dave Glover claim that, "Bronies are... grown men who stay home from work and have now started filing for disability...because they have become obsessed with My Little Ponies."<sup>13</sup> Accusations like these by the mainstream media can create social stigmas for members of the Brony fandom by marginalizing their behavior as abnormal.

Some individuals make allegations that Brony behavior goes beyond atypical and begin to question a fan's gender such as Charles Wickelus who denounces the idea of Bronies challenging masculinity. Wickelus does not view their actions as progressive social change;

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<sup>11</sup> Davies, Madeleine "I Was the Weirdest Person at BronyCon 2014" *Jezebel* September 2 2014 <http://jezebel.com/i-was-the-weirdest-person-at-bronycon-2014-1616532065>

<sup>12</sup> Martinez, Abby, "The People's Couch: What?! Bronies." Web Video 2:54 October 21, 2013 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ypFG0IJqeXk>

<sup>13</sup> Treaway, [pseudo.]. "FOX Attacks Bronies"

rather he sees their conduct as a retreat from the hearty challenge of manhood and claims that they are absconders of manliness. “The men who identify as ‘Bronies’ are not challenging anything at all, but men who are so psychologically weak that they need a portal to their childhood where they fantasize about being a little girl.”<sup>14</sup> Wickelus is not alone in his position as John Kass conducted interviews with a number of young women “of childbearing age” (women in their early twenties according to Kass) in 2013 to get their thoughts on the Brony fandom. One interviewee responds, “I consider it a very bizarre thing to be proud of...and it just doesn't seem very masculine to me. ... I think you can do Harry Potter. But Bronies ... that's taking it a bit too far.”<sup>15</sup>

Responses like these from media outlets collectively point to issues of maturity and physical ability suggesting Bronies are lacking in these areas. They perceive Brony behavior somehow detracts from a young man's masculinity. Yet there still remain delineations about acceptable norms for being manly while still actively participating in a fandom depending on the genre. The implication being a fan of a media franchise is fine, so long as that media text does not encroach against appropriate gender standards. Precepts regarding gender norms and acceptable gender roles are regularly enforced across social institutions from an early age and continue throughout life as many fans must contend with these conditions at home, in school,

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<sup>14</sup> Wickelus, Charles, “Bronies: The Men Who Love ‘My Little Pony’ are Losers” *Return of Kings* February 2, 2014 Accessed from <http://www.returnofkings.com/28416/bronies-the-men-who-love-my-little-pony-are-losers>

<sup>15</sup> Kass, John. “Bros Filling the Void - With ‘My Little Pony’.” *Chicago Tribune*. August 9, 2013 Accessed from [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2013-08-09/news/ct-met-kass-0809-20130809\\_1\\_bronies-little-pony-twilight-sparkle](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2013-08-09/news/ct-met-kass-0809-20130809_1_bronies-little-pony-twilight-sparkle)

and other public places in their daily lives from parents, peers, and authority figures or face the negative consequences for their transgressions.<sup>16</sup>

Younger fans, in many instances, face severe cases of bullying and several schools place sanctions on students for openly enjoying *My Little Pony*. In 2014, a nine-year-old boy from North Carolina was barred from bringing a “Rainbow Dash” backpack to school on the accusation that it was a “trigger” for bullying.<sup>17</sup> The school thought that it was more of an issue that the boy had brought a pony backpack rather than the fact other children were bullying him for having one. A second incident in 2014 involving another North Carolina boy made headlines when he attempted suicide by hanging himself with a belt after classmates told him “he was gay for liking Pinkie Pie” (one of the main characters) and shamed him for liking the television show.<sup>18</sup> Incidents like these expose the notion that an unwritten violation of masculinity is taking place when a young man enjoys something that strays from commonly held social expectations of masculinity and their actions are met by some form of gender policing.

As a result of institutional sanctions and bullying described above, some Bronies may not be willing to share their enjoyment of *My Little Pony* with close friends or relatives due to a largely negative understanding of Bronies because of their perceived gendered offenses.

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<sup>16</sup> Pascoe, Cheri, *Dude, You're A Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School* (Los Angeles, University of California Press 2007), 18

<sup>17</sup> Grisham, Lori. “School Bans 9-Year-Old Boy’s My Little Pony Backpack” *USA Today* March 18, 2014 Accessed from <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2014/03/18/my-little-pony-backpack-banned-school-north-carolina/6565425/> Williams, Sean “My Son Loves My Little Pony: At 7 He already Knows That’s Not OK” *Slate* March 20, 2014 Accessed from [http://www.slate.com/articles/life/family/2014/03/grayson\\_bruce\\_was\\_bullied\\_for\\_his\\_my\\_little\\_pony\\_backpack\\_no\\_wonder\\_my\\_son.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/life/family/2014/03/grayson_bruce_was_bullied_for_his_my_little_pony_backpack_no_wonder_my_son.html)

<sup>18</sup> WTVD “Child Attempts Suicide After Being Bullied at School for Being a Fan of ‘My Little Pony’ WTVD-TV February 4, 2014 Accessed from <http://abclocal.go.com/wtvd/story?id=9418200> Goldman, Carrie “11-Yr-Old Bullied Brony Fighting for His Life After Suicide Attempt; How You Can Help *Chicago Now* February 2, 2014 Accessed from <http://www.chicagonow.com/portrait-of-an-adoption/2014/02/11-yr-old-boy-bullied-for-being-a-brony-fighting-for-life-after-suicide-attempt-how-you-can-help/>

Compounding those charges against a Brony's masculinity coupled with the potential stigma of shame for failing to follow gender norms leave many fans in a conundrum. Will these fans choose to openly defy gender norms by engaging fan practices in public or will they heavily self monitor their actions along the lines of expected gender practices while secretly enjoying ponies in private? Regardless of whether a Brony is private or public fan about their fandom, their participation in the fandom is changing commonly held perceptions of masculinity.

## Chapter II

### Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

#### My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic and Bronies

Getting a sense of what Bronies derive from the program requires a review of the cartoon show and some of its themes. Lauren Faust, who is associated with other animation projects such as *The Powerpuff Girls*, *Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends*, and *The Iron Giant* was the creative mind behind the rebooted ponies.<sup>19</sup> Faust's creative control over the ponies separates it from previous generations of the cartoon by removing contemporary surroundings like the second and third generations and set the current generation of ponies in a fantasy land called Equestria where the citizenry live under the rule of Princess Celestia.<sup>20</sup> Celestia not only rules over the land as the monarch but also has the responsibility of raising and setting the sun every day. She is not the only member of royalty in the show as her younger sister, Princess Luna, is in charge of raising the moon and Princess Cadence rules over the Crystal Empire.<sup>21</sup>

Episodes primarily focus on the six protagonist ponies who reside in the town of Ponyville. The group consists of Applejack, Pinkie Pie, Twilight Sparkle, Rarity, Fluttershy, and Rainbow Dash which the fandom dubs "the Mane Six" due to their prominence in the show's storyline.<sup>22</sup> Each of these ponies possesses a specific friendship trait which is collectively a part

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<sup>19</sup> "Lauren Faust." *Internet Movie Database*. October 27, 2015 Accessed from <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0269260/>

<sup>20</sup> Faust, Lauren, writer. "Friendship Is Magic Part 1." In *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*. Discovery Family. October 10, 2010.

<sup>21</sup> McCarthy, Megan, writer. "A Canterlot Wedding Part 1." In *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*. Discovery Family. April 21, 2012.

<sup>22</sup> Lewis, Ethan. "My Little Pony, Mane-Six Characters" *Den of Geek* December 16, 2012 Accessed from <http://www.denofgeek.us/tv/my-little-pony-mane-six-characters/35886/my-little-pony-mane-six-characters>



of the Elements of Harmony.<sup>23</sup> The Elements of Harmony consist of honesty, laughter, generosity, loyalty, kindness, and magic. Combining these elements creates a source of power with the ability to defeat any foe, as long as the ponies are unified in their goal.<sup>24</sup> Examples requiring the Elements of Harmony over the course of episodes include, taking on Nightmare Moon who wants to rule Equestria and permanently block out the sun, defeating the spirit of chaos named Discord who randomly creates anarchy throughout the domain, and battle creatures that escape from their prisons in Tartarus.<sup>25</sup>

The Elements of Harmony are a major plot thread throughout the series; however, they represent a last resort for pony problems. A majority of the episodes involves the ponies coming together as friends and collaborating to overcome the conflicts that befall them using those same elements in a more implied sense. These are “slice of life” episodes which discuss different friendship issues people of any age contend with on a daily basis. Subject matter in these episodes usually deals with issues such as gossip, jealousy, and bullying.<sup>26</sup> Plots within these episodes do not provide a quick and easy solution to the issue at hand, but examine the trials and errors an individual may experience when encountering these kinds of problems. Ponies not only learn from their mistakes, but in the first four seasons of the show they recount

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<sup>23</sup> Faust, Lauren, writer. "Friendship Is Magic Part 2." In *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*. Discovery Family. October 22, 2010.

<sup>24</sup> Larson, M.A., writer. "Return of Harmony Part 2." In *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*. Discovery Family. September 17, 2011.

<sup>25</sup> These events happen in the following episodes: Faust, Lauren, writer. "Friendship Is Magic Part 1." In *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*. Discovery Family. October 10, 2010. Larson, M.A., writer. "Return of Harmony Part 2." In *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*. Discovery Family. September 17, 2011. McCarthy, Megan, writer. "Twilight's Kingdom Part 1." In *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*. Discovery Family. May 10, 2014.

<sup>26</sup> These events happen in the following episodes: Rogers, Amy Keating, writer. "Bridle Gossip." In *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*. Discovery Family. December 10, 2010. McCarthy, Megan, writer. "Green Isn't Your Color." In *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*. Discovery Family. March 11, 2011. Morrow, Cindy, writer. "One Bad Apple." In *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*. Discovery Family. November 24, 2012.

the lessons they learn. Summarizing what the lesson a pony learns occurs through writing individual letters to Princess Celestia about their experiences. Season four introduces a friendship journal, replacing the individual letters for purposes of posterity of the collective friendship.<sup>27</sup>

While these ponies are the embodiment of their respective friendship traits, they are not without their flaws. For example, even though Rainbow Dash represents the Element of Loyalty, she is brash, competitive, and will cheat to win a contest.<sup>28</sup> Rarity embodies the Element of Generosity, yet she is often depicted as greedy, smug, and overly dramatic.<sup>29</sup> Making mistakes and having faults instead of having the right answers all of the time is strength for the show because it presents the characters as multidimensional. Acknowledging these shortcomings, these ponies rely on each other to get through situations rather than taking on the world alone or portraying perfect, all knowing, pristine models of good behavior.

Drawing comparisons to the fables of Aesop or Jean de La Fontaine where animals in the wild exemplify human behaviors and illustrate the consequences of those traits in their allegories, the program provides lessons of universal values on relationship building and friendship making.<sup>30</sup> As Bethan Jones notes:

These are all, one might argue, lessons that valuable for young girls who are fans navigating early years of school and community; however it is not just young girls who

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<sup>27</sup> Faust, Lauren, writer. "Friendship Is Magic Part 2." Haber, Josh., writer. "Castle Mane-ia." In *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*. Discovery Family. November 30, 2013.

<sup>28</sup> Rogers, Amy Keating, writer. "Fall Weather Friends." In *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*. Discovery Family. January 28, 2011.

<sup>29</sup> McCarthy, Megan, writer. "Sweet and Elite." In *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*. Discovery Family. December 3, 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Robertson, Venetia Laura Delano, "Of Ponies and Men: My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic and the Brony Fandom," 21

are fans. A growing fanbase is comprised of male fans of the series, of a variety ages and from a range of backgrounds. Referred to as Bronies, these fans also take lessons from the show.<sup>31</sup>

Stories like these provide examples of early life struggles, but also touch on something more universal that appeals to the adult audience. Character building through life lessons is often cited by fans as one of the key facets to their enjoyment of the show.<sup>32</sup> But where did Bronies come from and how did the fandom become so large?

Bronies cite different origin stories for how the fandom came into being. Claire Burdfield attests the fandom came from the comics and cartoon board on the image sharing site known as *4chan* before spreading out to their own online spaces such as *Equestria Daily*, one the fandom's most popular news sites.<sup>33</sup> As the fandom's popularity grows, the number of detractors denouncing Bronies increases along with it. But why are there voices of disdain for Bronies? What is it about this fandom in particular that draws the amount of negative attention that it does? Anne Gilbert suggests it is who the fans are that plays a role in the controversy:

A boy watching something not for boys, not for everyone, and choosing an aggressively feminized, presumably inferior, product can be understood as relinquishing power, giving up his position as the default, normative audience. A grown man choosing a young girl's program is even more notable. Thus Bronies present a challenge by not conforming to expectations of audience behavior and liking content they were not meant to like.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Jones, Bethan. "My Little Pony, Tolerance is Magic: Gender Policing and Brony Anti-Fandom," 120

<sup>32</sup> Fallon, Kevin. "Inside the Bizarre World of 'Bronies' Adult Male Fans of 'My Little Pony'" *The Daily Beast*. May 1, 2014 Accessed from <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/05/01/inside-the-bizarre-world-of-bronies-adult-male-fans-of-my-little-pony.html> Kirkland, Ewan. "My Little Pony: A Transcultural Phenomenon" *Journal of Popular Television* 3(1) 2015 93-97, 94-95

<sup>33</sup> Burdfield, Claire. "Finding Bronies – The Accidental Audience of My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic." *Journal of Popular Television* 3(1) 2012 127-134, 130

<sup>34</sup> Gilbert, Anne. "What We Talk About When We Talk About Bronies."

Gilbert's rationale points to the fact that young men engaging in a media text that tailors itself toward a young female demographic is disturbing on the basis that they are occupying an inappropriate space on the basis of their gender. Such a disruption raises questions that suggest fans have some underlying deviant motive for enjoying the show because men finding entertainment in a show for little girls appears unnatural.

Furthermore, this perception of deviancy male fans must contend with appears unique to Bronies as their choice of media consumption creates a cause of concern for individuals outside of the fandom. Mikko Hautakangas denotes:

In popular discussion, on the Internet as well as the mainstream media, Bronies have been met with sneering and controversy: men's interest in something so obviously 'childish and girlish' seems to call for some kind of explanation. Is it a sexual fetish? Are they gay? Or are they just 'trolling'? The apparent out-of-placeness of Bronies speaks volumes about naturalized gender norms, and how they are related to our everyday media cultures.<sup>35</sup>

Accusations implying Bronies are immature men or sexual predators provide enough rationale for outsiders to find contempt in these fans. Venetia Robertson suggests that many of these adverse reactions toward the Brony community result from, "an assumption that there is something sick, wrong, or 'creepy' about the way Bronies subvert expectations surrounding gender, age, and the consumption of media."<sup>36</sup> The "unnaturalness" of Bronies somehow merits the ridicule they receive because they supplant commonly held assumptions of gender.

Suppositions of "creepiness" that Robertson refers to are a contributing factor to the stigma surrounding Bronies. Drawing contrasts between the intended audience and a

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<sup>35</sup> Hautakangas, Mikko. "It's OK to Be Joyful? My Little Pony and Brony Masculinity." *Journal of Popular Television* 3(1) 2012 111-118, 112

<sup>36</sup> Robertson, Venetia Laura Delano, "Of Ponies and Men: My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic and the Brony Fandom," 27

subsection of the audience who engages in the media text justifies the belittlement fans receive is. Indictments against the fans can be severe and feature the discomfort many antagonists have about the gender issues Bronies represent. Gilbert contends that opposition to the fandom attempts to marginalize male fans because their media consumption makes it difficult to compartmentalize their gender because it does not conform to standards of masculinity:

Accusations of pedophilia are perhaps extreme –and rare– but it is worth noting that for some outsiders, it is easier to categorize grown men who love *My Little Pony* as predatory sexual deviants than it is to consider what a genuine, nonthreatening affection for *FiM* might say about contemporary formations of masculinity.”<sup>37</sup>

Allegations against the fandom do put the fandom in a negative light and it is difficult to understand how Bronies genuinely enjoy occupying a presumed feminine space. That paradox presents a dilemma for many people who cannot comprehend how gender is not a fixed definition and how people have a tendency to polarize their notions of gender.

One of the ways opposition to the fandom accomplishes this accusation of deviancy is by suggesting Bronies are the problem rather than the media text. Claims stating that the show is not meant for men are, as Jones indicates, a supporting point the opposition uses to rationalize their derisions:

Brony anti-fandom, in contrast, is focused upon the fans of the text, rather than the text itself. *MLP:FiM* is not in itself a bad text. It is however, *a bad text for men* and Brony anti-fandom is striking in the ways it takes up this specifically gendered stance against male fans of the series.<sup>38</sup> [emphasis original]

Fandoms usually receive mockery for the media texts they consume, however, in the case of Bronies the attacks focus on the fans themselves over the text. Antagonisms toward the fan

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<sup>37</sup> Gilbert, Anne. “What We Talk About When We Talk About Bronies.”

<sup>38</sup> Jones, Bethan. “My Little Pony, Tolerance is Magic: Gender Policing and Brony Anti-Fandom,” 121

community for being men raises questions about how these antagonists view gender performance and masculinity.

Despite the number of criticisms against the fandom there are journalists and academics that are more sympathetic toward the fandom by promoting the positive aspects Bronies are known for. Ewan Kirkland acknowledges both the productive points of the fans while also showing compassion toward the community and the challenges they face. “While high profile media institutions have expressed revulsion towards this audience, more sympathetic commentators have pointed to the friendly inclusivity of the fandom, its creativity, and the ways in which Bronies are challenging the gender boundaries of popular culture consumption.”<sup>39</sup>

Despite voices trying to assuage public fears about Bronies there still remains the caveat that fans are not the threat that people may perceive them to be. Many of the same people who attempt to show fans as progressive young men choosing to openly confront the issues of gender, these same individuals are drawing delineations separating Bronies from mainstream society. Anne Gilbert illustrates the point:

Though academic coverage treats Bronies’ behaviors as part of their fan identity, mainstream articles reveal a persistent desire to pathologize fans. Even in an era in which fan practices, geeks and media subaltern cultures are increasingly appropriated by mainstream media, Bronies provide an illustration that acceptance to these practices can be conditional. Though Bronies profess to performing a radical version of masculinity, their mediated rhetoric and the descriptions of their community by outsiders indicate that they have, rather appropriated markers of Brony participation into conventional gender identities and that efforts to describe Bronies for mainstream

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<sup>39</sup> Kirkland, Ewan. “My Little Pony: A Transcultural Phenomenon”, 94

audiences are focused on sorting these fans into familiar categories of normalcy and deviance.<sup>40</sup>

After reviewing a number of articles written by popular media outlets showing sympathy to the fandom, journalists still often depict Bronies as lacking in aspects that would provide them greater legitimacy in the eyes of society. Gilbert concludes that, “Bronies are, in other words, depicted as inhabiting a diminished social position: they do not possess markers of economic power—a job, their own home—nor do they have power over their own sensibilities, needing addictive habits in order to face the world.”<sup>41</sup>

Research on this particular fan community is somewhat limited in my understanding due to its recent emergence into popularity. The academic research that does exist about the Brony community does not delve deeply into the fan tendencies that this dissertation wishes to explore. Numerous research articles discuss various aspects of the fandom; what Bronies mean for media consumption or how fans are portrayed in the media by those on the outside looking in.<sup>42</sup> Research articles cover facets about the fandom, but they do not address the concerns of the fans directly. Bronies are not given a voice to explain themselves or their experiences. Research on the fandom primarily covers statistical information through large data sets which merely quantify results, denying their participants a chance to speak in their own words.

Patrick Edwards and Marsha Redden and an informal fan generated study called the “State of the Herd Report” represent the closest research that attempts to understand

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<sup>40</sup> Gilbert, Anne. “What We Talk About When We Talk About Bronies.”

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Gilbert, Anne. “What We Talk About When We Talk About Bronies.” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 2015 20(1), Robertson, Venetia Laura Delano, “Of Ponies and Men: My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic and the Brony Fandom.” *International Journal of Cultural Studies*. 17.1 21-37 (2014), Jones, Bethan. “My Little Pony, Tolerance is Magic: Gender Policing and Brony Anti-Fandom.” *Journal of Popular Television* 3(1) 2015 119-125

members of the fandom.<sup>43</sup> Edwards and Redden's work primarily looks at the demographic makeup of Bronies. Their work outlines a typology discussing five differentiating types of Brony fan behavior. These types include what the Edwards and Redden call "hidden" and "secret" Bronies (these two typologies consist of 36% of their sample population) who do not wish to divulge their appreciation for the show or interact with other fans. They claim that:

[Secret Bronies] receive a strong sense of moral guidance from MLP ([*My Little Pony*]) [and] are dedicated and engaged fans, however, they do not share their "Bronyhood" with family and friends. Their initial reactions were more negative and they tended to discover MLP by accident. With respect to personality they were more introverted. ... [Hidden Bronies] do not display dedicated and engaged fan behaviors (few outward signs). They are not deeply engaged in the Brony Community and find little guidance from MLP. They are unable or unwilling to share their "Bronyhood" with family and friends and tend to discover MLP by accident. With respect to personality they are more introverted.<sup>44</sup>

Edwards and Redden point out the existence of a subsection within the fandom that is reserved about their pony activities. Secret and hidden Bronies do not disclose their appreciation for *My Little Pony* to close family members and some will not even engage with other fans online. What stands out in this evaluation of these two subsections is the inability of these fans to share their appreciation for the show in the age of social media where sharing videos and pictures an individual enjoys has become commonplace.<sup>45</sup> However, this study does not take the next step in exploring the motives behind these subsections of the fandom and their rationality behind those decisions regarding privacy.

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<sup>43</sup> Edwards, Patrick and Marsha Redden, "Brony Study," *Brony Study* Accessed from <http://www.bronystudy.com/index.html>; CoderBrony *Herd census*

<sup>44</sup> Edwards and Redden "Brony Study"

<sup>45</sup> Bennett, Lucy. "Patterns of Listening Through Social Media: Online Fandom Engagement with the Live Music Experience" *Social Semiotics* 22.5 545-557, 2012, 547



The second research study, the “State of the Herd Report” is an informal statistical collection of fan activities including merchandise purchases, meetup attendance, and fan fiction writing. While the project is informal, it does contain a large sample population of over eighteen thousand participants and provides a rich data set. However, the report fails to discuss any kind of interpretive significance behind the numbers that it collects. In regards to both surveys, the primary problem with the generalized findings is that they are not indicative of the total fan population and their proclivities. Both studies provide numbers that indicate the activities Bronies enjoy publicly or keep hidden from other people, but they do not go into the fan’s justification behind these activities. Other researchers look at how the community tries to construct their identity through the media text and other fans or how the participatory culture within the fandom is contributing to the show’s authorship.<sup>46</sup>

Part of the problem residing particularly within these statistical research projects is that the existing instruments implement “catch all” responses to the questions being asked of the respondents. Participants are still classified into categories they may not entirely fit into due to the lack of textual response. This project will give those respondents a voice by allowing them an opportunity to convey their feelings and rationale for their actions which provides a richer explanation of the data.

Bronies must confront issues that face any new fan community. However, one point that is unique to this particular fandom in that they must contend with issues of gender identity

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<sup>46</sup> Robertson, Venetia Laura Delano, “Of Ponies and Men: My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic and the BronyFandom.” Johnson, Derek. (2013) Participation is Magic, in *A Companion to Media Authorship* (eds J. Gray and D. Johnson), Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, UK

for transgressing into a feminine sphere that encourages friendship, collaboration, and open emotions. Additionally, they must also deal with the stigmas many fandoms in the past had encountered before the mainstream media became more accepting of them. The latter point will be addressed first by looking at how fandoms operate and how society as a whole perceives them.

## **Fandoms**

Being an enthusiast of a athletic competitions or participating in a hobby is widely considered a regular social practice in western society as many people follow specific professional sports teams or have particular television shows they prefer to watch.<sup>47</sup> Part of the reason an individual continues participating results from finding pleasure from the entertainment that the media text provides.<sup>48</sup> An audience member's engagement with a media text can range from passive enjoyment for the sake of amusement to impassioned involvement that consumes a large portion of their lives (e.g. time, energy, money).<sup>49</sup> This latter part of the spectrum of media engagement is where the most fervent fans are found. These individuals will often heavily engross themselves in a specific team or program. They habitually analyze the details of a sports transaction or potential plot developments of their favorite television program.

In the case of Bronies, individuals outside the fandom may not recognize what "all the fuss is about" concerning the situations and experiences of ponies because they do not

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<sup>47</sup> Jenkins, Henry. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. (New York: Routledge 1992), 1; Bird, S. Elizabeth, *The Audience in Everyday Life: Living in a Media World*. (New York: Routledge 2003), 51

<sup>48</sup> Fiske, John, *Television Culture*. (New York: Routledge 1987), 19

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 19

comprehend why adult men would place any interest in a show marketed toward the demographics of little girls. As a result, many fans receive ridicule for their enthusiasm over these media texts. Henry Jenkins explains some of the negative connotations that fans receive:

Many of these stereotypes seem to have been attached to the term “fan” from its very inception. “Fan” is an abbreviated form of the word “fanatic” which has its roots in the Latin word “fanaticus.” In its most literal sense, “fanaticus” simply meant “Of or belonging to the temple, a temple servant, a devotee” but it quickly assumed more negative connotations.<sup>50</sup>

The dedication of these individuals may appear as borderline obsession over the object of their affection and being described as a fanatic can carry negative consequences. However, there are many television sports networks such as *ESPN* and *Fox Sports* that devote their resources to individuals who follow athletic events of all kinds. These networks cater to this kind of audience by offering them all of the scores, highlights, and news regarding their favorite teams and players 24 hours a day, complete with advertisements addressing their potential wants and needs.<sup>51</sup> Yet in spite of this, there are other types of fans (Trekies, Otakus, Whovians, etc.) still looked down upon for their devotion to a specific media text.<sup>52</sup> Their fondness for these fictional stories and characters often results in derision from outsiders because their fan related activity is often viewed as childish, inane, or strange. Part of this disdain by outsiders could stem from the fact that characters within these media texts are not corporeal and fans of these media texts are finding pleasure in a world of fantasy rather than sport. (This is an interesting

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<sup>50</sup> Jenkins, Henry, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, 12

<sup>51</sup> Jenkins, Henry, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York: New York University Press 2006) ,47

<sup>52</sup> Benzecry, Cladio. “Opera Thugs and Passionate Fandom” *Contexts* 11.3 40-45 2012, 45 Jenkins, Henry, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (Routledge New York 1992),10

argument considering the numbers of these same nay-saying individuals involved in fantasy sports and the lengths that they may go to win their office fantasy league.)

While some would suggest that having a hobby is healthy, many people see excessive consumption or preoccupation with a media text as bizarre and worrisome behavior for individuals to have.<sup>53</sup> Jenkins states:

The stereotypical conception of the fan, while not without a limited factual basis, amounts to a projection of anxieties about the violation of dominant cultural hierarchies. The fan's transgression of bourgeois taste and disruption of dominant cultural hierarchies insures that their preferences as seen as abnormal and threatening by those who have a vested interest in the maintenance of these standards.<sup>54</sup>

Fans often receive ridicule for their behavior because it oversteps an arbitrary standard of acceptable consumption of an activity ('fan' is derived from 'fanatic' after all). Therefore, this view of excessiveness contributes to the negative reputation which even Jenkins admits may be present in some fans.

There are fans who will regularly memorize chunks of dialogue, talk about favorite episodes with fellow fans, and speculate over fan-generated theories pertaining to a media text. These active aspects of fandom fall into the cultural production of media that Stuart Hall and Julie D'Acci describe.<sup>55</sup> Fans show a tendency to read deeper into a media text than a casual viewer and generate their own perceptions about meanings within a given text. These theories and conclusions stem from Hall's notion of "encoding/decoding" which claims that

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<sup>53</sup> Verma, Nimal, Meeta Jain, and Pritam Roy. "Assessment of Magnitude and Grades of Depression Among Adolescents in Raipur City, India." *International Research Journal of Medical* 2.5 10-13 (2014), 11;

<sup>54</sup> Jenkins, Henry, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, 17

<sup>55</sup> Hall, Stuart "Encoding/Decoding" *Culture, Media, Language*. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, Paul Willis eds. London:Hutchison, 1980; Dacci, Julie. *Television After Tv: Essays On A Medium in Transition*. Eds L. Spreigel and J. Olson Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004

media texts will fall into one of three general categories an audience generates after consumption.

These three categories are preferred, negotiated, and oppositional readings. Each one of these categories discusses how viewers translate the message of the media text into their own understanding and context. Preferred (or hegemonic) meanings are those that closely mirror the intentional meaning behind the content made by the media producers. Negotiated and oppositional readings take this same media text and alter it into something that suits the fan. There are instances in which interpretations might totally go against the intentions of the production company. Hall explains:

it is possible for a viewer perfectly to understand both the literal and the connotative inflection given by a discourse but to decode the message in a globally contrary way. He or she detotalises the message in the preferred code in order to retotalise the message within some alternative framework of reference.<sup>56</sup>

One position to glean from Hall's theory is how individuals negotiate these meanings and present their alternate renditions of the original texts. Some individuals will pose an investigative analysis of the meanings behind the media text or suggest alternative outcomes to how the show's writers could resolve character conflicts. The most common arrangements of these altered meanings come in the form of fan fictions in which characters are romantically paired with each other in ways the original media text never intended. They create whole scenarios in which the characters may fall in love, get married , or indulge in moments of unbridled passion as they interpret the character might do.

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<sup>56</sup> Hall, Stuart "Encoding/Decoding" *Culture, Media, Language*, 517

This type of textual reading by fans is part of what Stanley Fish describes as an interpretive community.<sup>57</sup> In his argument, Fish determines that similarly trained (read: educated) readers will reach similar interpretations (though not always exact to each other) of a text if certain interpretive methodologies are preemptive to the reading. Fish's argument concerns itself with academic literary criticism; however, Janice Radaway takes Fish's case beyond the "high culture" of literature and positions it with readers of romance novels. Radaway suggests readers (or in this project, fans) have their own criteria for interpretation of a text, even though they are on different literary levels (reading comprehension, education, time and place of the reader) than Fish implies.<sup>58</sup> Despite the fundamental differences in which fans interpret the text, they can still discuss how various plot points and character actions affect their understanding of the media text. Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis found in their study of audience for the television program *The Cosby Show* that, "many viewers were so engaged with the situations and the characters on television that they actually read beyond the scene or program they were discussing and speculated about the character's future actions as if they were real people."<sup>59</sup> Fans creating stories based on their favorite characters may appear to be abnormal behavior to outsiders because they may view this kind of activity as pointless and silly. However, their interpretation of characters and themes does carry its own scholarly weight. Researchers like Jenkins see the fan as something more than the obsessive nerd collecting merchandise and arguing over "Han Solo or Greedo shot first" debate found in online

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<sup>57</sup> For a complete analysis of interpretive community literary criticism see, Fish, Stanley, *Is There A Text in This Class?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1980)

<sup>58</sup> Radaway, Janice, "Interpretive Communities and Variable Literacies: The Functions of Romance Reading" *Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies* Eds. Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson (Berkeley: University of California Press), 469

<sup>59</sup> Sut Jhally and Lewis, Justin. *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences and the Myth of the American Dream* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992) 19

fan forums. He elaborates on this point of fan intellectualism, “a lot of fans carry a large amount of intellectual capital around with them. They are very good critics; they are very good theorists.”<sup>60</sup>

In light of this alternate perception of fans, many companies are taking fan feedback into account in their content creation and some even offer creative avenues for fans to elaborate on their theories. Derek Johnson describes how the producers of *Battlestar Galactica* allow fans the ability to generate their own stories and publish them on the show’s website through a “video maker toolkit.” He explains, “This kit contained a collection of establishing shots, visual effects, sound effects, and stock cut away scenes, inviting fans to combine these professional materials with their own original footage to generate new *Battlestar* content.”<sup>61</sup> Despite these new considerations production companies utilize to encourage audience involvement, people outside of these fandoms may still feel that the behavior of fans is still shameful and excessive.

## **Social Construction**

To understand how these stigmas are created and attached to Bronies, it is important to explore how society believes that such a fandom conflicts with the “nature of reality.” This research argues that one avenue of explanation is found social constructionism. This theory contends that knowledge builds itself upon an *a priori* notion of gender norms. However, a subject’s conception of reality is different based upon their acquired knowledge. With this in

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<sup>60</sup> Jenkins, Henry, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*, 13

<sup>61</sup> Johnson, Derek *Media Franchising: Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries* (New York: New York University Press 2013) 221-222; The hyperlink for this website no longer exists but a news article about the toolkit can be found here. Mosher, Mark “Make Your Own Episode with the Battlestar Galactica Toolkit” *Modulate This* March 17 2007 Accessed from [http://www.modulatethis.com/2007/03/mak\\_your\\_own\\_ep.html](http://www.modulatethis.com/2007/03/mak_your_own_ep.html)

mind, more pervasive versions of reality can emerge that contend with others for dominance. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman suggest, “Among the multiple realities there is one that presents itself as the reality par excellence. This is the reality of everyday life. Its privileged position entitles it to the designation of paramount reality.”<sup>62</sup> Richard Young and Audrey Collin further delineate this characterization which helps lay the foundation of understanding in this project. They suggest that, “[social constructionism has] a social rather than individual focus.”<sup>63</sup> This adaptation of social constructionism helps eliminate (but not completely) the relativist argument that social construction relies on the individual’s interpretation of knowledge by proposing that the generally acceptable practices of a society are negotiated between social institutions and the privileged members of a society. This, in turn, creates general understandings of knowledge and how social institutions regulate that knowledge.

For the scope of this project, the social construction of gender examines how western society and Bronies construct their knowledge of masculinity and gender. What makes it difficult here is that social construction and the interpretation of gender performance have similar histories and their theories, on occasion, run parallel. At the very least, this section will begin to introduce how social construction produces our sense of gender in the next section.

The crucial point of social construction is the idea that knowledge is not *a priori* in nature. This suggests that essentialist arguments for the nature of things have no solid foundation for their rationales. This means nothing can just come into existence or “just be that

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<sup>62</sup> Berger, Peter and Luckman, Thomas, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 21

<sup>63</sup> Young, Richard and Collin, Audrey, “Introduction: Constructivism and Social Constructionism in the Career Field” *Journal of Vocational Behaviour* 64.3 2004 373-388, 376



way.” Numerous factors influence how knowledge disseminates across cultures. The concept of gender follows a similar template. There is no static definition to the concept of gender. Judith Lorber and Susan Farrell contend that, “...gender categories are institutionalized cultural and social statuses. These statuses or social locations shape every individual’s life from birth.”<sup>64</sup> The way human beings employ their desired gender in their everyday routines reinforces the acceptable statuses of gender through their practices. Candace West and Don Zimmerman explain, “Doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures.’”<sup>65</sup> They argue that the routine practices individuals incorporate into their gender are the result of political decisions. Whether the individual is conscious of these decisions is debatable. Individuals are usually aware through various social institutions such as family and school what appropriate behaviors should accompany their gender. The key aspect to doing gender relates to behavior or performance of the individual in their everyday life. How a person expresses him/herself through dress, speech, and action can reflect his/her gender to others who may or may not communicate their gender in the same manner.

It is the perception that if individuals perform contradictorily to their prescribed gender, it is fault of the individual for failing to conform, not the fault of society’s perception of the gender role. West and Zimmerman suggest, “If we do gender appropriately, we simultaneously sustain, reproduce, and render legitimate the institutional arrangements that are based on sex category. If we fail to do gender appropriately, we as individuals- not the institutional

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<sup>64</sup> Lorber, Judith and Farrell, Susan, “Introduction” *The Social Construction of Gender* Eds. Judith Lorber and Susan Farrell, (London: Sage 1991),8

<sup>65</sup> West, Candace and Zimmerman, Don “Doing Gender” *The Social Construction of Gender* Eds. Judith Lorber and Susan Farrell (London: Sage 1991), 14

arrangements- may be called into account.”<sup>66</sup> This regulation of gender norms within social institutions sets the parameters of gender consistency that individuals should strive to maintain, otherwise the onus of failure falls on the individual for deviating.

This perception of failure as individuals in their gender practices is the subject of this research, as Bronies appear to “fail” to adhere to socially imposed gender-based predilections. This research postulates that these fans are engaging in an open confrontation with societal ideas of what is gender appropriate. West and Zimmerman claim that, “to ‘do’ gender is not always to live up to normative conceptions of femininity or masculinity; it is to engage in behavior at the risk of gender assessment.”<sup>67</sup> By engaging in this fandom, Bronies put their gender at risk through continuing practices of fan activities that conflict with common connotations of masculinity such as dressing up in pony costumes and portraying the character at conventions or writing fan fiction about the pony characters in different situations.<sup>68</sup> Most Bronies are aware that they are challenging the generally accepted conceptions of gender because they realize their pastime is atypical of their male demographic.

This contradiction of masculinity and fan activity also has the potential to generate stigma for Bronies. Erving Goffman’s concept of stigma subjugates an individual “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one.”<sup>69</sup> Mark Stafford and Richard Scott alter Goffman’s meaning of stigma as “a characteristic of persons that is contrary to a norm of a

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 33

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 23

<sup>68</sup> Lamerichs, Nicole. “Stranger than Fiction: Fan Identity in Cosplay” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 7, 2011 Accessed from <http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/246/230>; Bonnstetter, Beth. And Ott, Brian. “(Re)Writing Mary Sue: Ecriture Feminine and the Performance of Subjectivity” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 31.4, 2011 342-367, 349

<sup>69</sup> Link, Bruce and Phelan, Jo. “Conceptualizing Stigma” *Annual Review of Sociology* 27.1. 2001 363-385, 364

social unit... a belief that a person ought to behave in a certain way at a certain time.”<sup>70</sup> Bronies receive these stigmas through their socially contradictory practices of engaging with a media text that targets “little girls.” This stigma does not occur instantly it must have certain interconnecting concepts align in order to take hold. Bruce Link and Jo Phelan propose that stigma generates when five factors merge. They claim:

In the first component, people distinguish and label human differences. In the second, dominant cultural beliefs link labeled persons to undesirable characteristics-to negative stereotypes. In the third, labeled persons are placed in distinct categories so as to accomplish some degree of separation of ‘us’ from ‘them.’ In the fourth, labeled persons experience status loss and discrimination that lead to unequal outcomes. Finally, stigmatization is entirely contingent on access to social, economic, and political power that allows the identification of differentness, the construction of stereotypes, the separation of labeled persons into distinct categories, and the full execution of disapproval, rejection, exclusion, and discrimination.<sup>71</sup>

In this project, there will be an examination of how these components of stigma affect Bronies and their fan practices. How do these dominant cultural beliefs concerning the activities of young men influence Bronies to disclose their pastime to others or not?

## **Gender**

During the course of this research into the Brony fandom, the first question often asked by those just learning about the fandom is, “why would a bunch of grown men have an interest in a television show for little girls?” This question is often shortly followed by another that (in one variation or another) asks if Bronies “are gay.” Why does the act of participation in the Brony fandom seem to automatically call a person’s sexuality into question? How are the terms

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 364-365

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 367

“little girls” and “gay” articulated in this context. Analyzing these questions from outsiders provide a valuable insight into how western society views gender performance.

First, is the assumption that only little girls would show an interest in colorful equines that deal with friendship issues in a fantasy world. Second, individuals beyond the target audience engaging with a media text that does not follow the typical themes considered normative for their gender suddenly raises questions regarding their sexuality.<sup>72</sup> The questions primarily focus on how Bronies are “performing their gender.” They suggest that Bronies appear to be surrendering their masculinity through the act of enjoying something “mainstream society” regards as feminine. Their willful enjoyment of the cartoon show seems to violate an unspoken social norm regarding the high level of inappropriateness relating to the mixing of “pastel ponies” with dominant notions of masculinity. Judith Butler suggests:

Gender is not exactly what one “is” nor is it precisely what one “has.” Gender is the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place along with the interstitial form of hormonal, chromosomal, psychic, and performative that gender assumes. To assume that gender always and exclusively means the matrix of the “masculine” and “feminine” is precisely to miss the critical point that the production of that coherent binary is contingent, that it comes at a cost, and that those permutations of gender which do not fit the binary are as much a part of gender as its most normative instance.<sup>73</sup>

As Butler proposes, gender is not something inherent or even stable. The concept of gender is a constantly changing and contested notion that evolves over time.<sup>74</sup> There are numerous

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<sup>72</sup>McKay, Jim, Mikosza, and Hutchins, Brett. ““Gentleman, The Lunchbox Has Landed”: Representations of Masculinities and Men’s Bodies in the Popular Media” *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities* Michael Kimmel, Jeff Hearn, Raewyn Connell eds. London: Sage, 2005 ,281

<sup>73</sup> Butler, Judith, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 42

<sup>74</sup> We have seen some changes over time in the perception of same gender relations by the general public in Gallup polls. Saad, Lydia, “U.S. Acceptance of Gay/Lesbian Relations is the New Normal” *Gallup* May 14, 2012 Accessed from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/154634/acceptance-gay-lesbian-relations-new-normal.aspx>; WZZM

examples such as fashion and color attributions that change the parameters of acceptable behaviors to an individual's gender. Yet there are some activities that appear more fixed than others or specific violations of performance more egregious. These perceived violations stem from the alleged regulatory nature of gender performance. This idea here is "boys should act like men" and "girls should be ladylike" that pervades western culture.<sup>75</sup> These statements emphasize how gender should be performed and provide generalized outlines for these behaviors, even though their full attainment or realization cannot occur. Butler explains how such manifestations are impossible:

If gender is a norm, it is not the same as a model that individuals seek to approximate. On the contrary, it is a form of social power that produces the intelligible field of subjects, and an apparatus by which the gender binary is instituted. As a norm that appears independent of the practices that it governs, its ideality is the reinstituted effect of those very practices. This suggests not only that the relation between practices and idealizations under which they work is contingent, but that the very idealization can be brought into question and crisis, potentially undergoing deidealization and divestiture.<sup>76</sup>

The practices and idealizations of gender Butler mentions here are disrupted when individuals stray from those social expectations. The continuation of routine social practices seek to make gender static and proscribe specific roles while creating binary functions suggesting divisions between sexes. This bifurcation provides the rationalization for specific characteristics to be more palatable to social gender norms. The existence of Bronies upsets this binary by going against common perceptions of gender because they are enjoying something that is "supposed to be enjoyed only by little girls." By confronting this binary, Bronies, whether they know it or

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"Being Gay Becoming More Acceptable to a Majority of Americans" WZZM-TV February 27, 2014 Accessed from <http://www.wzzm13.com/story/news/features/2014/02/26/gay-opinions-in-america/5851013/>

<sup>75</sup> Kimmel, Michael. *Guyland* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 7; Shaw, Susan, "Gracious submission: Southern Baptist Fundamentalists and women." *National Women's Studies Association Journal* 20.1 (2008): 51-77, 60

<sup>76</sup> Butler, Judith, *Undoing Gender*, 48

not, are reconfiguring the notions of what is masculine through their participation in the fandom. Young men singing songs about friendship and dressing up as pastel ponies is not generally considered manly by many people outside the fandom. The basis for this argument derives itself from the societal notions that men should be suppressing their emotions or participating in physical activities such as sports.<sup>77</sup> Outsiders may see this behavior as a threat to the prevailing notions of gender, deriding those who participate. Butler believes, “To veer from the gender norm is to produce the aberrant example that regulatory powers may quickly exploit to shore up the rationale for their own regulatory zeal.”<sup>78</sup> This suggests that veering from normative practices of gender violates the rules of hegemonic performances which can result in instances of bullying or other marginalization practices to curtail others from engaging in the behavior.

Notions of gender are not fixed and are constantly in dispute by members of society, both consciously and unconsciously. There are exceptions to these unwritten rules of gender performance which suggest that because performance is not static, there are moments or characteristics that do not fit neatly within expectations and should not be discounted.<sup>79</sup> Raewyn Connell maintains, “Psychological research suggests that the great majority of us combine masculine and feminine characteristics, in varying blends, rather than being all one or all the other. Gender ambiguity can be an object of fascination and desire, as well as disgust.”<sup>80</sup> This vagueness tends to raise the ire of those who only see gender as an essential binary,

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<sup>77</sup> Kimmel, Michael. *Guyland* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), Kimmel provides a number of insights into how young males are ostracized for not conforming to the culture of their high schools.

<sup>78</sup> Butler, Judith, *Undoing Gender*, 52

<sup>79</sup> Hogan, Maureen. and Pursell, Timothy. “The ‘Real Alaskan’: Nostalgia and Rural Masculinity in the ‘Last Frontier.’” *Men and Masculinities* 11.1 63-85, 2008, 68

<sup>80</sup> Connell, Raewyn *Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 4

especially since Bronies begin to blur those lines even further than before. Connell summarizes it this way:

So we cannot think of womanhood or manhood as fixed by nature. But neither should we think of them as simply imposed by the outside, by social norms or pressure from authorities. People construct themselves as masculine or feminine. We claim a place in the gender order – or respond to the place we have been given – by the way we conduct ourselves in everyday life.<sup>81</sup>

Through this realization that gender is not a fixed status we can transition from how gender prescribes and performs into the specific characterizations of masculinity that Bronies perform and confront resulting from their enjoyment of ponies against social norms.

## **Masculinity**

One of the biggest contentions regarding the Brony community is the notion that male fans have, in some way, surrender their masculinity because they enjoy something society believes is inherently feminine. This claim stems from how Hasbro tailors the toy line and the television show for young girls. When individuals involve themselves in something like *My Little Pony* it is automatically recognized as feminine in the binary perceptions of gender.

In order to understand how society creates this association we must look at a basic understanding of masculinity as defined by Harvey Mansfield through the notion of masculine stereotype:

The basic stereotype is surely that men are aggressive, women are caring. This is what you would first think of and perhaps also the basis of the others. That men are promiscuous in sex, women faithful or at least unadventurous, follows the same stereotype. So too do the beliefs that men are hard, women soft; men assertive, women sensitive; men seek risk, women security; men are frank, women are indirect; men take

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<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 4

the lead, women seek company; men don't cry, women do; men are aloof, women sympathetic; men are cold, women warm; men boast and show off, women are modest; men are forceful, women persuasive and seductive; men are loud, women quiet; men are laconic, women are loquacious; men are stoic, women complain.<sup>82</sup>

Mansfield's explanation of the masculine stereotype provides a strong foundation for the definition of traditional masculinity this project argues against. Within his definition there are a number of gender binaries stressing the need for men to be adventurous, self-confident, and independent while women seek security, are unassuming, and reliant on others. By following this template as a guide for masculinity, men feel the need to be a provider and defender. Yet, this role is not strictly for the protection of their own interests, it also perpetuates the influence of traditional masculinity.

However, there is more to the definition of 'masculine' than simply 'not-feminine' and there we must recognize that there are multiple forms of masculinity which constantly contest each other. In order to understand the dominant concepts of masculinity surface there is a need to look at Raewyn Connell and James Messerschmidt's landmark work on "hegemonic masculinity" because it serves as a launching pad to understand how modern masculinity theory operates.<sup>83</sup> In their original conception for the theory, Connell and Messerschmidt purport that hegemonic masculinity, "was first proposed in reports from a field study of social inequality in Australian high schools; in a related conceptual discussion of the making of masculinities and the experience of men's bodies; and in a debate over the role of men in

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<sup>82</sup> Mansfield, Harvey. *Manliness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 23

<sup>83</sup> Connell, Raewyn and Messerschmidt, James *Masculinities*. "Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept" *Gender and Society* 2005 19:6 829-859, 830.



Australian labor politics.”<sup>84</sup> After many years of utilization and critique Connell and Messerschmidt revisit their original work and maintain their original suppositions:

Multiple patterns of masculinity have been identified in many studies, in a variety of countries, and in different institutional and cultural settings. It is also a widespread research finding that certain masculinities are more socially central, or more associated with authority and social power, than others. The concept of hegemonic masculinity presumes the subordination of nonhegemonic masculinities, and this is a process that has now been documented in many settings, internationally.<sup>85</sup>

Even with the multiple interpretations of masculinity spread across the globe, there still appears to be a central notion of masculinity that incorporates physical strength and relational success with women.<sup>86</sup> Messerschmidt contends, “the form of masculinity in a given historical and society wide setting that structures and legitimates hierarchical gender relations between men and women, between masculinity and femininity, and among men.”<sup>87</sup> These historical and structural reifications of gender often times happen within our social institutions and they include family, the military, and athletics.<sup>88</sup> Each of these social systems demonstrates, in their own way, the “proper” performance of masculinity. Due to the nature of these institutions, the historical regulation of masculinity has become a study of social and political interests. Connell argues:

[The] definitions of masculinity are deeply enmeshed in the history of institutions and of economic structures. Masculinity is not just an idea in the head, or a personal identity. It

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 830

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 846

<sup>86</sup> Pascoe, Cheri, *Dude, You’re A Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School*, (Los Angeles, University of California Press 2007), 4

<sup>87</sup> Messerschmidt, James. “Engendering Gendered Knowledge: Assessing the Academic Appropriation of Hegemonic Masculinity” *Men and Masculinities*. 15 (1) 56-76, 2012, 58

<sup>88</sup> There are a myriad of articles and books describing how these masculinities were historically regulated. Here are a few. Connell, Raewyn. *Masculinities* (Los Angeles: University of California Press 1995); Nagel, Joane “Nation” *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities* Michael Kimmel, Jeff Hearn, Raewyn Connell eds. (London: Sage, 2005) Lemish, Dafna. *Children and Television: A Global Perspective* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing 2007)

is also extended in the world, merged in organized social relations. To understand masculinity historically we must study changes in those social relations.<sup>89</sup>

This historical examination of masculinity creates an understanding of how society constructs and reinforces concepts of gender through the repetition of social practices. By establishing these guidelines, any violations of socially acceptable gender practices are often met with various forms of reprisal, which can occur through institutional sanctions or familial disapproval.

Hegemonic masculinity establishes the groundwork that explains how a dominant masculinity operates and maintains itself within a society. This in turn, helps clarify how society cultivates ideal representations of masculinity. However, there is a common misconception that hegemonic masculinity is the dominant and most prevalent masculinity:

Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men.<sup>90</sup>

Since Connell and Messerschmidt posit that hegemonic masculinity cultivates a gender hierarchy. This hierarchy promotes concepts of domination/subjugation, placing different masculinities on a scale that places hyper-masculinity in a position of privilege, while dismissing “lesser” masculinities as “effeminate” in a subjugated position. It does not, as Eric Anderson warns, represent an “archetype.” It is, rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable.”<sup>91</sup> It is important

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<sup>89</sup> Connell, Raewyn. *Masculinities*, 29

<sup>90</sup> Connell, R. W. and Messerschmidt, James. “Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept,” 832

<sup>91</sup> Anderson, Eric. “Orthodox and Inclusive Masculinity: Competing Masculinities Among Heterosexual Men in a Feminized Terrain. *Sociological Perspectives*. 48 (3) 337-355, 2005, 339

to understanding this hierarchical order cannot create an ideal dominance because the concept of idealization is slippery, but it can privilege certain attributes over others.

Hegemonic masculinity operates through a series of contestations against other variations of masculinity. This challenge of masculinity is a continual process because there is no feasible way an individual can be manly every moment of every day.<sup>92</sup> This privileging occurs in the process Kimmel believes is intrinsic to hegemonic masculinity. It is described as “typically homophobic and misogynistic, and is necessarily heterosexual. Maintaining a hegemonic masculinity is contingent on the rejection and degradation of subordinate masculinities.”<sup>93</sup>

Vandello et al. state that, “manhood is widely viewed as both elusive, in that manhood status is not a developmental certainty, and tenuous, in that even once achieved, it is not guaranteed and can be lost.”<sup>94</sup> Connell and Messerschmidt put forward that hegemonic masculinity, “embodie[s] the currently most honored way of being a man, it require[s] all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men.”<sup>95</sup> Part of the residual effect of this constant conflict is the determination whether or not certain activities fall within the criteria of “masculine.” Most studies look at this process of hierarchical dispute often during adolescence and early adulthood when individuals are trying to establish their identity. This is the period of life that Jeffery Arnett terms as “emerging adulthood,” when young people are still navigating through life to discover who they

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<sup>92</sup> Pascoe, *Dude, You're A Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School*, 8

<sup>93</sup> Hall, Jeffery and Betty LaFrance. “That’s Gay: Sexual Prejudice, Gender Identity, Norms, and Homophobic Communication,” *Communication Quarterly*. 60 (1) 35-58, 2012, 38

<sup>94</sup> Vandello, Joseph Bosson, Jennifer., Cohen, Dov Burnaford, Rochelle, Weaver, Jonathan. “Precarious Manhood” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 95 (6) 1325-1339, 2008, 1326

<sup>95</sup> Connell, Raewyn and Messerschmidt, James. Masculinities. “Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept,” 832

are supposed to be.<sup>96</sup> During this time of self-discovery, individuals face numerous points of pressure stemming from social expectations in place by peers, family, and institutions.

Individuals must find a balance between what they feel comfortable with against the demands society imposes on them to accommodate their gender expectations. Cheri Jo Pascoe describes the enforcement of these expectations of masculinity reaches the apex during adolescence when, “Boys persuaded their peers and themselves of their masculine identity by repudiating ‘the specter of failed masculinity’ in other boys and the femininity of allegedly gay boys and of all girls.”<sup>97</sup> The concept of failed masculinity refers to those males who show physical or emotional weakness in direct conflict with the gender expectations of “being a man.” In order to conform to the social expectations of their gender role during this time in their life, young men may perform in ways that appear to adopt the socially dominant masculinity. Connell and Messerschmidt expound upon this apparition of masculinity:

Thus, hegemonic masculinities can be constructed that do not correspond closely to the lives of any actual men. Yet these models do, express widespread ideals, fantasies, and desires. They provide models of relations with women and solutions to problems of gender relations. Furthermore, they articulate loosely with the practical constitution of masculinities as ways of living in everyday local circumstances. To the extent that they do this, they contribute to the hegemony in the society-wide gender order as a whole.<sup>98</sup>

For western society, this dominant masculinity incorporates rugged individuality with an aggressive mentality to dominate and control one’s body and emotions as stoic and indifferent while eliminating any potential signs of weakness such as empathy and sorrow. If there are any attempts at diverging from this mindset, there is the potential for backlash resulting in

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<sup>96</sup> Arnett, Jeffery Jensen, “Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development from the Late Teens Through the Twenties,” *American Psychological Association* 55 (5)469-480, 2000, 470

<sup>97</sup> Gardiner, Judith. “Masculinity’s Interior: Men, Transmen, and Theories of Masculinity” *Journal of Men’s Studies*. 21 (2) 112-126, 2013, 115

<sup>98</sup> Connell, R. W. and Messerschmidt, James. “Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept,” 838

harassment and bullying because such deviance shows a socially perceived lack of motivation to conform to acceptable gender norms.

With these social pressures in mind, Bronies going against the dominant discourse regarding masculine ideals may find themselves in a potentially difficult situation if they decide to tell close friends or family members. Beverly Fagot and Richard Hagan conducted a study regarding positive and negative reactions of parents to young children's gendered activities. In their results, it was discovered that, "The father generally seems less in favor of their sons being involved in a (traditionally defined) feminine activity than the mothers."<sup>99</sup> In this context, fathers discourage or reprimand their young sons for playing with toys regarded as typical girl's toys or playing games that are commonly deemed "girl's games" since these choices show deviance from the normative perceptions of masculinity. Regardless of the sex of the authority figure, an individual growing up in an environment featuring negative reactions for violating normative gender practices may be hesitant to display any behavior that fails to meet gender expectations.

When considering how social norms establish themselves through families and institutions how can an individual navigate the boundaries of these expectations if their behavior does not conform? Butler asks, "How then, can one think through the matter of bodies as a kind of materialization governed by regulatory norms in order to ascertain workings of heterosexual hegemony... produce a domain of abjected bodies, a field of deformation, which

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<sup>99</sup> Fagot, B. I. and Hagan, R. "Observations of Parent's Reactions to Sex-Stereotyped Behaviors. *Child Development*. 62 617-628, 1991, 623

in failing to qualify as the fully human, fortifies those regulatory norms?”<sup>100</sup> This materialization Butler refers to is the constitutive whole of an individual. A person’s gender often, but not always, identifies their physical attributes and performative actions which may or not conform to normative gender practices. This manifestation of the body can contest the norms which govern expectations of gendered bodies. This contestation can begin early in life when those in authority (caregivers or institutional figures) begin curtailing children from engaging in activities that do not coincide with commonly held gender practices, which encourages dominant gender norms to prevail. These restrictions allow prevailing masculine discourses to permeate through various social institutions such as schools, sports clubs, and families. In terms of the Brony fandom, this form of social enforcement might compel many individuals to remain silent for fear that open expressions of pony related activities may appear as a violation of the expectations of their gender.

Within this hierarchical structure, potential repercussions could befall those individuals who fall short of the expectations. Anderson stresses that because of hegemonic masculinity, “individuals are not free to construct simply any version of identity that they desire; identity construction is influenced and constrained by a number of micro and macro social processes.”<sup>101</sup> Trevon Logan pieces together some of the key identifiers that culminate into what he calls a “monolithic hegemonic masculinity” which include characteristics such as “drive, ambition, self reliance, aggressiveness, and physical strength, as well as bodily traits and practices specific to the hegemonically masculine ‘sexual arena’ as physical appearance and

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<sup>100</sup> Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 16

<sup>101</sup> Anderson, Eric. “Orthodox and Inclusive Masculinity, 348

sexual behaviors.”<sup>102</sup> Individuals who falter in any one of these areas of masculinity may feel the need to overcompensate other traits in order to make up for a perceived loss. Anderson imagines, “one would expect most who transgress masculine defined boundaries to preserve, if not inflate, their position by adopting as many tenets of orthodox masculinity as possible. These identity management techniques might include: being homophobic, devaluing femininity, increasing masculine bravado, and claiming masculine space within the larger feminized arena.”<sup>103</sup> In other words, those who feel that they fail to meet gender expectations will attempt to overcompensate for what they lack. Also note how these behaviors attempt to subjugate artifacts of effeminacy, which are two of the larger arguments non-Bronies have against members of the fandom. Additionally, Bronies may try some of these techniques to convince others that even though they “enjoy a show for little girls” they are still just as manly despite having this “lapse” in their masculinity.

With these attempts at overcompensation for perceived failures, how does the identity of dominant masculinity maintain itself? Messerschmidt reports that, “hegemonic masculinity need not be the commonest and/or the most powerful pattern of masculinity in a particular setting and that any formulation of the concept as simply constituting an assemblage of ‘masculine’ character traits should be thoroughly transcended.”<sup>104</sup> This allows masculinity the flexibility and adaptability in various spaces and contexts, even in places where it may be the minority view. Yet, the question still remains, where are these character traits of (including, but not limited to) stoicism and physical dominance learned?

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<sup>102</sup> Messerschmidt, James. “Engendering Gendered Knowledge, 62

<sup>103</sup> Anderson, Eric. “Orthodox and Inclusive Masculinity, 339

<sup>104</sup> Messerschmidt, James. “Engendering Gendered Knowledge, 59

As stated earlier, some of these normative characteristics of masculinity stem from social institutions; others are the result of social reinforcement through our communication (including digital) networks and mass media. The projection of standards and ideologies through mass media is pervasively saturating television airwaves and Internet bandwidths, in my estimation, while highly exaggerating and idealizing depictions of what it means to be masculine in Western society. Bye declares, “the links between hegemonic forms of masculinity and the relationship between nature and body revolve around bravery, fearlessness, toughness, physical fitness, and the ability to disregard discomfort and pain.”<sup>105</sup> James Mahalik et al. emphasize: “masculine norms are communicated to males when they observe that other males tend not to wear pink, when they are told that ‘big boys don’t cry,’ and when they observe that male movie stars and sports heroes are tough and respond with violence when challenged.”<sup>106</sup> The so-called ideal of the strong, stoic male in the media will represent the dutiful citizen who remains silent, yet who will also stand up and fight when there is a call to action. Mahalik et al. believe that young men “are told that to be good citizens and good human beings, they should be nonviolent and respectful of women; but they are also told that to be masculine means to ‘kick butt’ and ‘wear the pants in the family.’”<sup>107</sup> It is this contradiction of terms that make masculinity so contestable, because engaging in nonviolence

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<sup>105</sup> Bye, Linda. “‘How to be a Rural Man’: Young Men’s Performances and Negotiations of Rural Masculinities” *Journal of Rural Studies*. 25: 278-288 2009, 280

<sup>106</sup> Mahalik, James. Locke, Benjamin Ludlow, Larry Diemer, Matthew Scott, Ryan Gottfried, Michael. and Freitas, Gary “Development of the Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory. *Psychology of Men and Masculinity*. 4 (1) 3-25, 2003, 3

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 5



is often viewed as a sign of weakness, yet young men are also instructed to “stand their ground” and fight when the situation arises.<sup>108</sup>

The end result of these contradictions not only makes the conception of masculinity easily malleable, it makes allowances for flexibility in the context of time and space. Maureen Hogan and Timothy Pursell believe that “empirically existing hegemonic masculinities exist at local, regional, and global levels; that hegemonic masculinities are formed through unequal and hierarchical relationship between masculinities and femininities (even though femininities may be constructed in and through male bodies).”<sup>109</sup> They further this argument by suggesting that the localized masculinities have the potential to replace monolithic ideals of masculinity with a multiple and diverse sense of what masculinity can be. Their contention is “tension between multiple, local masculinities that emerge from a time and place nexus and the mythical hegemonic one, which assumes a monoculture.”<sup>110</sup> To explain how these multiple masculinities operate they cite Bye’s study of rural hunting culture competing against larger prevailing conceptions of masculinity. In her study, Bye supposes, “it may be the case that the larger threat to rural masculinity is not femininity, but urbanity.”<sup>111</sup> On top of this, Connell and Messerschmidt propose that localized versions of masculinity “can be used to promote self-respect in the face of discredit, for instance, from racist denigration.”<sup>112</sup> This localization, both

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<sup>108</sup> Kimmel, Michael. *Guyland* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 56

<sup>109</sup> Hogan, Maureen. and Timothy Pursell,. “The ‘Real Alaskan’: Nostalgia and Rural Masculinity in the ‘Last Frontier.’” *Men and Masculinities* 11.1 63-85, 2008, 68

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 67

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 68

<sup>112</sup> Connell, Raewyn and James Messerschmidt,. *Masculinities*. “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” 842

geographically and culturally, create incarnations of masculinity that can confront prevailing notions of dominant masculinity.

Masculinity has been shown to be both malleable and adaptable in order to establish a hierarchy within established structures. This adaptability is a way to challenge dominant forms of masculinity. Connell argues that, "One cannot be masculine in a particular way without affecting the conditions in which that form of masculinity arose: whether to reproduce them, intensify them, or subvert them."<sup>113</sup> Connell and Messerschmidt consider that such subversions of dominating masculinities have the potential to create "specific masculine practices [being] appropriated into other masculinities, creating a hybrid."<sup>114</sup> These hybrid functions of masculinity could then fashion their own ideals within their localized culture. This hybridization of masculinity is best illustrated by Eric Anderson with the case study of male cheerleaders. He highlights how male cheerleaders appropriate their manliness through the lifting and tossing of young women into the air and performing gymnastics. Even though they participate in a traditionally feminine activity, they attribute the physical strength of lifting up fellow cheerleaders and rapid acrobatic movements to masculine skills.<sup>115</sup> Connell states that "social science has increasingly recognized a collective dimension to masculinity."<sup>116</sup> Through this recognition of collective identities, masculinity then has the ability to become flexible and prioritize certain characteristics over others given the context of the situation.

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<sup>113</sup> Connell, Raewyn "The Big Picture: Masculinities in Recent World History" *Theory and Society* 22 (5) 597-623, 1993, 602

<sup>114</sup> Connell, Raewyn and James Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," 845

<sup>115</sup> Anderson, Eric. "Orthodox and Inclusive Masculinity, 342

<sup>116</sup> Connell, Raewyn, 2005. *Masculinities*, 107

This localized fluidity and reappropriation allows the wiggle room to create new spaces of discourse to contend against the idealized forms of masculinity. This space has the power to disrupt the monolithic ideals of Western masculinity. Hogan and Pursell propose that, over time, masculinities will continue to transform as they have done so historically. They postulate, “[masculinities] are fluid: relationally, dialogically, and dynamically constructed through discourses and activities. Change in the political economy as well as social movements [has] destabilize[d] what it means to be masculine over the decades.”<sup>117</sup> As a result, these changes will make it difficult to create a centralized embodiment of “real” masculinity. This diversity within masculinity led Hogan and Pursell to suppose that “the majority of men may show little correspondence with the cultural ideals of masculinity. It may be in fact that hegemony needs fantasy figures to embody its particular variety of masculinity.”<sup>118</sup> These fantastic embodiments provide the exemplars of what it means to be masculine, but rarely do any individuals ever meet the expectations set forth by them. The exaggerated expectations are partially how they stay fantastical, as they exemplify the impossible ideal.

### **Self Disclosure**

One way Bronies avoid potential harassment is by limiting the number of people they tell about their fan activities. This decision to disclose information is based on the amount of trust an individual has in others. This disclosure can come in verbal or nonverbal forms through conversations online or in real life. Sandra Petronio asserts, “revealing private information is never a straightforward decision. We are constantly in a balancing act. We try to weigh the

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<sup>117</sup> Maureen Hogan and Timothy Pursell. “The ‘Real Alaskan,’ 66

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 66

demands of the situation with our needs and those around us.”<sup>119</sup> A portion of the issue stems from the internal conflict many fans face between the anxiety of withholding information and the potential embarrassment of sharing the information.

Despite this internal struggle, there are a range of benefits for individuals who disclose information such as self-expression, catharsis, and relationship development.<sup>120</sup> On the opposite side of these potential rewards are lurking liabilities. Leslie Baxter and Barbara Montgomery identify four risks to the at the moment of disclosure: “rejection by the listener, reduction of one's autonomy and personal integrity, loss of control or self-efficacy, and the possibility of hurting or embarrassing the listener.”<sup>121</sup> These can be serious consequences for Bronies who choose to tell others about their fandom. Their confidant may not fully understand the situation and, in return, reject them on the basis of the information. The moment of confession becomes very pivotal for some fans because they fear the reprisal will damage their relationships with others. Valerian Derlega reinforces this sentiment by listing some of the rationales for nondisclosure which include, “fear of rejection, privacy, self-blame/self concept concerns, communication difficulties, protecting the other person, and having a superficial relationship with the target person.”<sup>122</sup> The act of communicating one’s inner feelings and desires is a difficult task and requires an individual to take a number of these factors into account when deciding to share knowledge with another individual.

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<sup>119</sup> Petronio, Sandra. *Boundaries of Privacy: Dialectics of Disclosure* (Albany: State University of New York Press 2002), 1

<sup>120</sup> Omarzu, Julia. “A Disclosure Decision Model: Determining How and When Someone Will Self-Disclose” *Personality and Psychology Review*, 4 (2) 174-185, 2000, 177

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 177

<sup>122</sup> Valerian, Derlega, Barbara Winsted, Alicia Matthews, and Abby Braitman, “Why Does Someone Reveal Highly Personal Information?: Attributions for and Against Self Disclosure in Close Relationships.” *Communication Research Reports*. 25:2, 115-130, 116

*The Cambridge Handbook of Personal Relationships* divides these considerations into four separate factors. It suggests that disclosure will or will not occur based on reasoning reflecting a “self focused” or “other focused” rationale. If an individual decides to disclose information to others on the basis of self focus it is for their own benefit above the concerns of the other. “The self-focused reasons for self disclosures deal with psychological and tangible benefits to the discloser and include catharsis, self clarification, and seeking support. Other-focused reasons for self disclosure include duty to inform or educate.”<sup>123</sup> The other-focused side of self disclosure places emphasis on the person who is about to receive this new information. The informant is allowing the other person access to information which may only be known to a select few or nobody at all. Both forms of self disclosure suppose that the sharing of information will create a closer connection between the individuals and benefit the relationship by building trust through that disclosure.

While self disclosure is beneficial for both parties, the decision of nondisclosure comes with its own specific benefits. In a similar fashion to self disclosure, there are both self focused and other focused rationales for not sharing information. Both of these justifications base themselves on the premise that disclosing information to others is far too risky. “The self-focused reasons for nondisclosure deal with psychological and physical costs based on divulging personal information and include fear of rejection and the possible loss of privacy. Other-focused reasons for nondisclosure include the perception that the other person cannot or will not be helpful and protecting the relationship partner from being hurt or upset.”<sup>124</sup> Regardless

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<sup>123</sup> “Self Disclosure in Personal Relationships.” In *Cambridge Handbook of Personal Relationships*, eds. Anita L. Vangelisti and Daniel Perlman. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006)

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*,

of the focus of nondisclosure, both types place emphasis on the anticipation of negative consequences that the shared information will do damage to the relationship.

Petronio suggests that there are multiple levels of risk involving individuals looking to disclose information including the notion of high risk moments. For her, high risk moments of disclosure present themselves as moments of internal crisis prior to the divulging of information. She asserts, “high risk episodes often revolve around encounters that may cause shame, threat, or severe embarrassment. An example of a high-risk incident is seen when individuals define something as a ‘secret’.”<sup>125</sup> However, there is a definitional issue with this framework because Bok argues that the term secret often carries a negative connotation.<sup>126</sup> She attempts to position the term in a neutral area by claiming that secrets by definition are intentionally concealed by an individual, despite the positive or negative consequences if the information were revealed.<sup>127</sup> Whether the focal point of the secret will result in negative or positive effects, the importance of the concept lies in the fact that the data withheld is done so in a conscious and intentional manner.

Yet Bok explains that secrets are, “often negatively defined and viewed as primarily immature, guilty, conspiratorial, or downright pathological.”<sup>128</sup> Bok further explains that secrecy is oftentimes a conflict of power between individuals or groups.<sup>129</sup> The ability to use or withhold information for one’s own purposes is a key point in how secrets retain their influence. Divulging confidential information to others creates a potential for loss of power or prestige.

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<sup>125</sup> Petronio, Sandra. *Boundaries of Privacy*, 67

<sup>126</sup> Bok, Sissela. *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (New York: Pantheon 1982), 8

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 9

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 19

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 19

Petronia echoes similar sentiments when she explains, “People keep secret information because there is a fear of the real or imagined repercussions the hidden information would bring with exposure.”<sup>130</sup> There are real consequences to the actions of a spy releasing top secret information about one country’s plans to another country just as there are costs to someone who reveals private information about a person to the public.

This power negotiation is part of the balancing act that an individual must navigate when deciding to unveil certain aspects of their life to others. There are liabilities to disclosing that must be taken into account. Petronio argues that security is a focal point in our disclosure practices with others. She states, “Security risks represent instances where people cautiously disclose because telling might shift power away from them, jeopardize their personal safety, or jeopardize the safety of others.”<sup>131</sup> The potential dangers of disclosing information to others can result in such instances and we will see these moments illustrated through various incidents of Bronies revealing information to others.

Remaining silent about *My Little Pony* around peers and family members can reduce potential exposure and keep reprisal to a minimum. As stated earlier, silence is one of the ways in which a secret is maintained through a conscious effort to keep certain information hidden from others. Keeping fan activities clandestine from others in order to uphold a reputation or protect others from embarrassment may sound absurd or even shallow when put in context, but we must understand that many Bronies must still contend with the pervasive notions of masculinity dominating their surroundings. If the public perception about Bronies in the region

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<sup>130</sup> Petronio, Sandra. *Boundaries of Privacy*, 68

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 69

is not favorable for fans or if they do not have the support of friends, family, or other fans it makes the decision all the more difficult..

As a result, many fans may not disclose for a number of the reasons. This veiled existence does mean the possibility of retaliation is stifled but how does this silence affect the general acceptance of the Bronies to the public? When tracing self disclosure with repression and the concept of the homosexual closet a semblance of how a safe space like “the stable” (the Brony version of the closet) forms and perpetuates. This is not to say that Bronies are homosexual but, as we shall see, there are a number of parallels in the Brony fandom and the homosexual community in terms of how certain members of each group either maintain their secrecy or divulge their lifestyles to others.

Part of the conflict with disclosure practices revolves around the information that individuals are willing to keep or share with others. We have already seen the internal struggle that Bronies contend with and the potential consequences that may surface if they choose to disclose. Now we are going to look at how their disclosure decisions affect others. Eve Sedgwick’s seminal work regarding the homosexual closet helps to build on our discussion about secrets and the rationales behind an individual’s decision for disclosing or withholding information. Sedgwick believes part of the strategic importance of the closet comes from the dialectical struggle of knowledge/ignorance within a society. This idea implies that unless there is an open dialogue about a particular topic of knowledge, the possibility for falsehoods will emerge. Without the candid discourse, fictions grow from the general ignorance through the circulations of second hand information by individuals who may not have direct access to the



information they are discussing. In a way it becomes a social form of the telephone game where information is altered as it circulates down the line further distorting it as the information travels down the line. More often than not, circulation of inaccurate information about individuals or groups is negative and marginalizes them from the rest of society.

The act of silence is one tactic available that allows individuals to escape possible marginalization. For Sedgwick, this silence comes in the form of the closet for members of the homosexual community to protect themselves from perceived risks of embarrassment, loss of status, or harassment. As a result, the closet becomes a political space for individuals because information they choose to withhold can affect those around them. However, there is a dangerous residual effect from withholding this knowledge from others. It is at this point, Sedgwick suggests that the closet serves a two-fold purpose of power and restriction that produces “ignorance as potent and as multiple a thing as knowledge.”<sup>132</sup> While this concealment of knowledge does provide a safe haven for the individual, it also creates restrictions because of heavy self-monitoring is required to prevent unintended disclosure. The need to conceal knowledge on the basis of preserving a particular identity feeds into the myths that surround the withheld knowledge. Thus these myths can develop into larger, socially held fictions that encapsulate an entire false reality about particular people and groups.

Steven Seidman, Chet Meeks, and Francine Traschen believe, “such practices aim to avoid the risks of unintended exposure they also create a ‘protected’ space that permits

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<sup>132</sup> Sedgwick, Eve., *Epistemology of the Closet* (University of California Press: Los Angeles, 1990), 4

individuals to fashion a gay self that facilitates the making of gay social worlds.”<sup>133</sup> Within the confines of the Brony stable, an individual’s fan activity can flourish because this space provides a place where fans can find pleasure without shame or negative reactions. Nonetheless, this act of self-monitoring comes with a heavy price. When a fan remains secretive about the activities they engage in, myths cultivated by ignorance can abound. In some ways, the cultivation of this protected space requires more and more effort as it is built by those who seek refuge in that space. The cost, both physically and emotionally, of keeping this space safe will take a toll on those who utilize it.

Sedgwick explains, “Inarguably, there is a satisfaction in dwelling on the degree to which the power of our enemies over us is implicated, not in their command of knowledge, but precisely their ignorance. The effect is a real one, but it carries dangers with it as well.”<sup>134</sup> Yet, as these myths circulate they also create a social suppression that forces homosexuals to create a closet in order to retreat from the potential harm. Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen believe, “enforcing this social division involved the exclusion of homosexuality from public life. A series of repressive strategies – from censorship to civic disenfranchisement and violence – were deployed. A heterosexist order maintained by a logic of repression created the social practices that have come to be called the closet.”<sup>135</sup> This systematic suppression of a deemed deviant activity leads many individuals to repress feelings and emotions in order to avoid hostilities. Bronies can and will face many of the same issues if a majority of them wish to continue using

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<sup>133</sup> Seidman, Steven, Chet Meeks, and Francine Traschen, “Beyond the Closet? The Changing Social Meaning of Homosexuality in the United States.” *Sexualities*. 2: 9-34, 1999, 10

<sup>134</sup> Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 7

<sup>135</sup> Seidman, Steven. Chet Meeks, and Francine Traschen, “Beyond the Closet?”, 18-19

the stable as a refuge from the negative notions of what the fandom means to others because they are fearful of revealing their own fan identity.

This systematic suppression cannot completely shut out or restrain those subjects which it seeks to eliminate. As a result, it is possible that the marginalization or restriction of an activity may compel an individual towards participation because of the taboo treatment it receives. Judith Butler describes this repression as part of the “heterosexual melancholy” in which a repressed desire is generated by existing discourses expressing that such inclinations are taboo and in turn creating curiosity. This results in creating a taboo discourse that Butler believes, “carves out the discursive space for the self-conscious and linguistically elaborated experience called ‘repressive desire.’”<sup>136</sup> The stigma attached to taboo activities allows for the creation of these protected spaces and remain hidden from the general discourse because of their deviant position. This occurs because deviance usually exists on the fringes of society which the public discourse can repress, but cannot fully eliminate. Therefore, spaces will continue to exist in various forms whether physical or otherwise where acceptance of these traits is welcome. As Petronio puts it, “Stigma risks are another type of risk we that we may take into account when we judge whether to reveal or conceal private information. These risks are specific to the individual’s inner self or self identity. By disclosing, we might perceive that others could discredit us.”<sup>137</sup> We must remember that these disclosure practices are contextual. There are no easy answers to which course of action is the right one. The individual must weigh the pros and cons of all these factors when making their disclosure decision.

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<sup>136</sup> Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble* (Routledge: New York, 1999), 83

<sup>137</sup> Petronio., 70

## Chapter III

### Methodology

#### Exploratory Research

An exploratory research project was conducted at a *My Little Pony* convention in Omaha, Nebraska called Pon3Con in September of 2012. The goal of this project was to conduct interviews with convention goers who were willing to discuss a number of aspects about the Brony fandom: what the show means to them, were they open about being a fan of *My Little Pony*, and if these fans have experience with any forms of harassment online or in person for being a fan of the show.

The results of this project were the template into the creation of my first survey instrument specifically to look at the Brony fandom. The responses by the interviewees in Omaha tailored the questions of the first survey instrument. This survey included specific questions regarding demographics, fan activities, self disclosure practices, and opinions on media views about the fandom. After completion, the instrument was distributed online through a QR code on business cards handed out at larger *My Little Pony* conventions such as BronyCon 2013. This first survey garnered 594 participants for the project. However, a number of factors limited the effectiveness of this instrument.

In the first run of the survey there were very few fans who identified as themselves as private Bronies. This made it very difficult to reach any kind of statistical significance that would

support the research hypotheses posed. The conclusion drawn was that very few Bronies who identify themselves as private would attend a huge public event like *BronyCon* for fear of being caught or “outed” at the event. The lessons learned from this first survey were implemented in the revised survey instrument that would be used in the final project. Additionally, an alternate distribution method to reach the most possible participants would be to diffuse the survey online through a number of popular Brony websites as well as setting up a Facebook page and Twitter account for the project. This would allow participants to have greater access to the survey and allow them to direct any questions or concerns to the researcher. A number of questions from the first survey, particularly in the fan activities and self disclosure sections, were modified to create a clearer picture about how fans conduct themselves around others. The inclusion of questions regarding who Bronies disclose their fandom to, if they still identified themselves as private Bronies, what tactics did they use to keep their fandom a secret from others. This is especially important if the fan was going to attend a large convention or purchase merchandise relating to the show.

The final version of the survey was officially launched during a panel given at a Brony convention called *BabsCon* 2014 in San Francisco. Similar to the first survey, the revised survey was initially distributed through business cards with QR codes linking to the instrument. The survey was also distributed on fliers displaying the QR code to give the participants easy access to the survey on mobile devices at the event. The decision behind this method of delivery was to prevent participants from the inconvenience of typing a long URL or copy and paste a hypertext link. These paper links were placed in potential high-traffic areas of the convention

center such as concession tables and escalator landings to provide the largest possible visibility to potential participants.

Then, three days later, the survey began circulation through a number of Brony/*My Little Pony* news websites and forums including *EquestriaDaily*, *DerpyHoovesNews*, and *PonyChan*. Prior to the survey's launch, I sent a number of correspondence emails to all of the website administrators regarding my intentions with the project. This method of distribution was chosen in order to reach participants who may not have the means (or the ambition) to attend a convention, but still contribute to the project.

A small selection of "pre-testers" from a meetup group (fan run *My Little Pony* club) in the Lehigh Valley region of Pennsylvania was given early access to the survey as a means of verifying the stability of the survey project's encoding. Their responses gave the instrument some user interface testing to ensure all of the questions would follow to the appropriate subsequent questions in the skip logic elements contained in the survey. Early participants were instructed to readily report any problems they encountered with the survey. These early participants were selected based on the rapport that I have with the group in addition to the size and the diversity within the meetup group could potentially verify if the instrument was running smoothly and correctly. All participants were willing volunteers, although the additional incentive of a drawing for a small prize (a small plush pony of the participant's choice) fashioned by me was also instituted to potentially increase participation in the survey.

## **Data Collection and Participants**

The survey was constructed through the *Qualtrics* survey builder and approved by the University of North Dakota's Institutional Review Board (IRB-201306-384) on April 10, 2014. The survey's themes are broken down into three sections. The first segment asks for standard demographic information such as age, perceived gender, sexual orientation, place of residence, level of education, and veteran status. The second segment asks participants questions about their participation within the fandom. This set of questions ask participants how they first encountered the program, how they rate certain characters, which show elements they prefer the most, and what fan practices they engage in besides watching the show. This section also covers self disclosure issues and practices of the private and public Brony as well as issues of treatment or harassment because they identify as Bronies. The third segment of the survey asks participants to read and respond to selected (some positive, some negative) media quotes about Bronies on a five point ordinal Likert Scale with the option to respond to the quotes more in depth through textual responses if they choose.

In total, the survey consists of 49 questions. All respondents took the same survey but certain questions contain a function known as skip logic. It is a functionality implemented into the survey that redirects a participant to different sections of the survey if a particular response is selected. For example, one question asks if participants have ever served in the military. If the response is "yes," the participant is then asked additional questions regarding their military service as well as the current status of their enlistment. Upon completing that response, the participant is given a follow up question regarding the media's representation about Bronies in

relation to military service. Upon completion of this question, the participant is then rerouted back to the remaining demographic questions. This was instituted to tailor the questions to the appropriate audiences and to reduce uncertainty and confusion as well skip over questions that do not pertain to particular respondents.

The participants in this study identified themselves as Bronies or Brony supporters (mostly parents of younger fans who were ineligible to take the survey). Participants in the study hailed from across the globe including the United States, Canada, Germany, Russia, Italy, France, Taiwan, Nicaragua, Australia, New Zealand, and Peru. Of the sample size ( $n=1263$ ), 992 participants were between the ages of 18 – 29 ( $n= 845$  males, 113 females, 34 transgender, other, or not sure). The majority of this group lived in the United States (68%) and had some level of college education (34%).

The qualitative data in this survey will employ the use of thick description to analyze the tendencies of the participating population. This data documents the experiences of the survey participants and how they manage their fandom activities in the context of their own lives. It generalizes certain tendencies within the Brony population, but these trends are not wholly indicative of the entire fandom. This is due, in part, to the textual responses of each participant. Their involvement in the fandom is particular to their own case and may not be commonly or consistently understood by other Bronies. As with any group under study, not all Bronies will participate at a similar level in the fandom. As a result, some Bronies will not confront the same issues that other fans face in their own lives.



## Stages of Research

Floyd Fowler suggests that the survey is one of the most accessible and most easily analyzable methods of data collection.<sup>138</sup> As mentioned before, Patrick Edwards and Marsha Redden and Coderbrony [pseudo.] both implemented surveys to get a generalizable understanding of the specific population they were researching.<sup>139</sup> Both data sets manage to get sample sizes well into the tens of thousands, an impressive collection of participants willing to respond to an online survey.

While these sample sizes are large, they still had to manage their surveys to reduce bias and validity errors. Both of these issues, Fowler suggests, are reduced by following the five principles of question design, including: consistent administration, consistent understanding of the question, well defined parameters of a question that gives the researcher consistently understood answers, questions are easily understood, and willing participants.<sup>140</sup> If the researcher follows these five principles, confusions and distortions to the survey will diminish. That is not to say that they are eliminated because a willing participant can also “troll” or sabotage a survey by providing outrageous answers to questions in the survey instrument, but this is can be hard to decipher at times.

The rationale behind the selection and utilization of an online survey relates to my data collection. Location is crucial to my work, and given that I currently live in the Midwest where populations are sparse and disparate, gaining access to fans “in real life” is not entirely cost

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<sup>138</sup> Fowler, Floyd. *Survey Research Methods* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2009), 1

<sup>139</sup> Edwards, Patrick and Marsha Redden, *Brony Study*; CoderBrony Herdcensus

<sup>140</sup> Fowler, Floyd. *Survey Research Methods* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2009), 87

effective due to the issue of distance. Availability plays an important role in this decision because of the secretive nature of the demographics I am looking to research. Fowler suggests that, “over the Internet, the costs per return potentially are the lowest” of all modes of survey distribution available.<sup>141</sup> Scouring the Internet for secretive fans is a little easier than travelling village to village to find *My Little Pony* with fliers and more cost effective than attending every fan convention in the country.

Edwards and Redden and Coderbrony also utilized this form of survey distribution in their research projects. The returns on their distribution appear to be very cost effective in terms of their respective sample sizes. Edwards and Redden noted in their data analysis of over twenty thousand participants that more than fifty percent of these fans kept their fandom to themselves or to a very select group of people.<sup>142</sup> Bearing this in mind, it can be hard to find members of the fandom unless concerted efforts are made to attend fan conventions or local meetup groups, build rapport with potential participants, just for the opportunity to interview them.

Fowler discusses the need for surveys as way to cost effectively collect data within a sample population.<sup>143</sup> Therefore, traveling to fan conventions and meetups is not nearly as effective as an electronic survey. For the purposes of this research and the resources available, this method appears to be the best approach. The rationale for the electronic survey implementation is because most fans who discover *My Little Pony* encounter it primarily

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<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 77

<sup>142</sup> Edwards, Patrick and Marsha Redden, *Brony Study*

<sup>143</sup> Fowler, Floyd. *Survey Research Methods*, 2

through electronic means such as *YouTube*, *4Chan*, and *icanhascheeseburger*.<sup>144</sup> This suggests the majority of the fan population is computer literate and therefore more accessible through digital means.<sup>145</sup>

Additionally, this method of survey delivery persuades many secretive fans to at least discuss the show online more than in person because there is the veil of anonymity on the Internet. This notion of anonymity relates to what Dianne Currier and Pramond Nayar suggest as the idea of disembodiment.<sup>146</sup> They suggest there is a displacement of physical bodies and the subject's mind is the primary identity online. The notion behind this theory helps illustrate that the Internet is a space where physical boundaries vanish. However, there is a danger to this dissolution. It is imperative to remember that this displacement of the physical body also erases unique identities. Lisa Nakamura argues that electronic representations online displace race (and gender) from the medium which is a form of identity erasure.<sup>147</sup> It is important to remember that the identities of Bronies still remain whether or not identity markers exhibit themselves.

There are advantages and limitations to implementing a survey. Making physical appearances at conventions can be a good thing. It allows for researchers to meet the people and put faces on the group that they are researching. Conducting interviews at these locations are constructive and they do lend to a thicker description of the phenomenon a researcher is

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<sup>144</sup> Watercutter, Angela. "My Little Pony Corrals Unlikely Fanboys Known as 'Bronies'"

<sup>145</sup> Bristol Press [pseud.]. "Bristol Bronies: The Men Who Love *My Little Pony*" *Bristol Post* April 9, 2014 Accessed from <http://www.bristolpost.co.uk/Bristol-Bronies-men-love-Little-Pony/story-20931726-detail/story.html>

<sup>146</sup> Currier, Diane "Assembling Bodies in Cyberspace: Technologies, Bodies, and Sexual Difference." *The New Media and Cybercultures Anthology*. Ed. Pramond Nayar (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 257 Nayar, Pramond *An Introduction to New Media and Cybercultures* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 77

<sup>147</sup> Nakamura, Lisa. *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*. (London: Routledge, 2002), 145

investigating. More often than not, potential participants often view surveys as a nuisance due to their formal and rigid questions. This can lead to low a response rate that may hurt the overall quality of the sample. There is also the danger of distrust on the part of the potential participant because they feel that the information they are giving could be used against them.

There are ways to counteract the low response rate pitfall of the survey instrument. Don Dillman, Jolene Smith, and Leah Christian make the suggestions of advance notice and creating associations with groups to help lend credibility to the survey.<sup>148</sup> By providing advance notice to a potential sample population through emails or forums the researcher give participants a “heads up” that a researcher is looking to do study on their population. If potential participants are wary, they may ask questions of the researchers if they have discrepancies or choose to not volunteer their information. This was implemented in the distribution of the final survey instrument. Coordinated conversations between the researcher and the website moderators were handled through email to establish credibility of the research prior to posting links to the survey on their websites.

This issue transitions to another point of contention with potential participants and researcher credibility: associations with credible people or institutions. If a survey has affiliations with a leading figure or website dedicated to a particular population, it can lend credibility to the survey. In the case of this project, I contacted administrators of *My Little Pony* fan hubs like *Equestriadaily*, *Derpy Hooves News*, and *Ponychan* to help build rapport with the participants. These websites would publish a brief article about my research that explains a

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<sup>148</sup> Dillman, Don, Jolene Smyth, and Leah Christian. *Internet, Mail, and Mixed-Mode Surveys: The Tailored Design Method*, (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 2009), 23

number of the goals that I had for the project. The potential for this move was to draw in a larger sample if I had the endorsement of the website. By establishing these clear associations between a fan website and researcher to potential participants, the likelihood of gaining the interest of fans that you are trying to reach will increase.

In addition, social media tools such as Twitter and Facebook do have their advantages in that they can provide an open space for dialogue between the participants and the researcher and provide hyperlinks to the survey. However, if the instrument does not have the associated credibility of a larger, Internet fan-affiliated (or academic) institution, it may not reach nearly the same amount of people due to lack of audience reach. If the survey instrument does have connections to social media sites, they must make all associations (academic, institutional, and fandom) clear for potential participants so that they can feel confident that their responses will not be used against them in an unethical manner.

The design of the survey instrument can lend to the credibility of the researcher. The organization of the survey can contribute to the accessibility of the instrument. The UND Brony survey put this aesthetic point into consideration during the layout process. Dillman, Smith, and Christian attest that a well designed and visually pleasing survey can aid the participant in properly answering the questions and lessen question fatigue.<sup>149</sup> The instrument for this project attempts to accomplish this by providing illustrations of characters from *My Little Pony* accompanying every question asked. This was to keep participants from being constantly bombarded with text, and to demonstrate that the researcher has some knowledge in the participant's interests. One of the larger obstacles a survey faces is the issue of keeping the

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<sup>149</sup> Dillman, Don, Jolene Smyth, and Leah Christian. *Internet, Mail, and Mixed-Mode Surveys* 104;

participant willing and interest levels high due to the number of questions involved. By doing this, the researcher is producing a twofold function. They are exhibiting knowledge of the show by featuring characters that are popular from the show and they reducing the potential for fatigue on the part of the participant by not presenting the questions in a “wall of text” that may appear overwhelming for the respondent to answer.

Additionally, the three part structure of the survey also lends to the aesthetic layout of the instrument. These three sections: demographics, fan activities, and media perceptions are laid out in a way that allows for transitions between the sections that are not jarring and lend themselves to something that appear more conversational than the conventional question/answer formats of many surveys. The rationale behind this implementation was to create natural transitions between each block of questions. The survey first attempts to get to know about the “person”, then learns about the “fan” and their activities. This follows Fowler’s seven principles of good survey design which include: consistent implementation, consistent understanding of questions, well trained interviewer, asking for firsthand knowledge, asking one question at a time, visually easy to follow survey design, and willing participants.<sup>150</sup>

Finally, there is the notion of incentive for survey participation. Whyte, Weiss, and Dewalt and Dewalt, all suggest that compensation for participation has many benefits but that this method of gaining participants can also get quickly expensive.<sup>151</sup> Therefore it is best to know the audience that you are working with and what incentives offer more motivation over

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<sup>150</sup> Fowler, Floyd. *Improving Survey Questions* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Press, 1995)

<sup>151</sup> Weiss Robert. *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. (New York: Free Press, 1994); Whyte, William. (1984) *Learning from the Field: A Guide from Experience*. (London: Sage, 1984) Dewalt, Kathleen. and Dewalt Billie. *Participant Observation: A guide for Fieldworkers*. (New York: AltaMira, 2002)

other forms. Sometimes, financial compensation is a popular option, but for the purpose of this survey it is important to give participants an opportunity to potentially earn something that they may not normally be able to receive. For this project, instituting a drawing for a handmade plush pony was chosen to incentivize potential participants in lieu of money. In the Brony community, handmade plush versions of the pony characters are highly sought after pieces of fan memorabilia. As a result, the prices to acquire one of these handmade figures are expensive.<sup>152</sup> Fortunately, this researcher is capable of using a sewing machine and creating a reasonable pony plush at only the cost of time and material. This gives participants the ability to obtain a pony plush of their choice without having to spend money to get one.

An issue that arises with an instrument such as the UND Brony survey is the problem of sampling bias. In terms of this study, there is the concern that only one side of the story will be obtained from fans. While distributing the survey at fan conventions, a large number of parents of minors were present at these events. I requested that parents and guardians of these younger fans also participate in the survey. The rationale behind this suggestion of parental involvement was to hopefully get an understanding of how they view the fandom and what it might mean for their children. While the number of Brony parents may be relatively small in comparison to the rest of the sample, it can provide some valuable insight and counterbalance to the views of the adult fans who do not have children of their own. If the preceding issues of delivery method, aesthetics, sample bias, and participation incentivizes are

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<sup>152</sup> Some of the most famous *My Little Pony* plush makers such as *White Dove Creations* regularly charge commission fees ranging from \$400 to \$1000 or more depending on what details are included. <http://whitedove-creations.tumblr.com/post/33531899161/commissions-prices>. The inclusion of a handmade plush made sense due to their expense.

addressed in this manner, most of the issues of the survey's bias, error rates, response rates will diminish.

## **Participant Observation**

Participant observation was the original method that got the project to progress and later develop into. This method is effective because of how it assisted the tailoring of the survey instrument into the final project. It also allows for a deeper understanding behind the phenomenon of Bronies through the direct engagement between researcher and fans at *My Little Pony* themed events. This project did begin as a series of interviews with fans of *My Little Pony* at a Brony convention in Omaha, Nebraska in 2012. The insights from those series of interviews occurring at the site helps create a better sense of the questions that were later used in the survey instrument. These survey questions would adjust during interviews with Bronies at other fan conventions and meetups across the country.

Weiss explains that the interview is a solid method of research that can give an observer a thick description of events and also allows for the generation of follow up questions.<sup>153</sup> Robert Weiss, Kathleen Dewalt and Billie Dewalt lay out similar techniques for interview questions.<sup>154</sup> The interview questions should be as objective as possible, eliminating leading or judgmental questions for the participant. In this project, the interviews follow what is known as an "interview guide" or were initiated by informal conversations at conventions and local

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<sup>153</sup> Weiss Robert. *Learning from Strangers*

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., ; Dewalt, Kathleen. and Dewalt Billie. *Participant Observation: A guide for Fieldworkers*



meetups. Kathleen Dewalt and Billie Dewalt maintain that the interview guide, “increase[s] the likelihood that all topics will be covered in each interview in more or less the same way.”<sup>155</sup> This format generates the richest information about the fandom, but it also requires the researcher to sift through the content discussed or contend with issues in transcription. The benefit to this format is the ability to learn certain aspects about the fandom that the researcher may not be familiar with and also solidify some of the hypotheses that the researcher is looking to investigate. However, the accumulation of data in this process can be incredibly daunting and sitting down to analyze the conversations with participants are tedious and require a great deal of time and energy.

To help alleviate some of the issues that come along with interviewing Fowler and Dillman, Smith and Christian suggest that the construction of question should be easily understood and accessible to the participants that the researcher interviews.<sup>156</sup> Fowler believes that all good questions for interviews follow five principles: questions are consistently understood by participants, the questions are consistently administered by the interviewer, interviewers should make questions easily accessible to interviewers, participants are willing to partake, and respondents should have equal access to the knowledge that is being asked of them (i.e. firsthand knowledge of an event).<sup>157</sup> All of the questions in the interview guide were asked of all interviewees, however, some of the follow up questions were more spontaneous than others because not all of the participants had the same life experiences in terms of fandom activities or negative reactions to their fandom.

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<sup>155</sup> Dewalt, Kathleen. and Dewalt Billie. *Participant Observation: A guide for Fieldworkers*, 122

<sup>156</sup> Dillman, Don, Jolene Smyth, and Leah Christian. *Internet, Mail, and Mixed-Mode Surveys*, 81; Fowler, Floyd. *Survey Research Methods*, 91

<sup>157</sup> Fowler, Floyd. *Improving Survey Questions*, 4

Another crucial aspect to being a competent and ethical interviewer is doing as much background research as possible about the group or subculture that the researcher is investigating when preparing for the field work. Proper preparation will help in reducing what Dewalt and Dewalt call “culture shock.”<sup>158</sup> The benefits of learning as much as possible about a specific group will prove profitable for the researcher. However, no amount of background work of reading articles and watching videos about Bronies can actually prepare an observer for the emersion into the Brony fan culture until he or she finally reaches the field site and engages with the participants. Sometimes, we do not realize the immensity of a project until we immerse ourselves into the field work.

When putting all of these issues of interviews into consideration, it becomes important to determine whether or not the researcher is going to go into the field as an overt or covert observer. Both observation positions come with their benefits and detractions and the researcher should define their role prior to going out to their respective research site. William Whyte believes that this is a crucial aspect to any interviewing research. He feels that it is one thing to strike up a conversation with an individual but if questions arise that the interviewee feels is none of the researcher’s business, then communication could quickly shut down unless they participant knows that there is a distinctive motive behind the line of questioning.<sup>159</sup>

For this project, I maintain an overt position about my research intentions. This overt approach to my observations lends to my credibility and professional affiliation with the university. Potential participants can feel at ease knowing that the information they are

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<sup>158</sup> Dewalt, Kathleen. and Dewalt Billie. *Participant Observation*,

<sup>159</sup> Whyte, William. (1984) *Learning from the Field*,

providing to the research will remain confidential, lowering the risk of being unintentional exposure if their desire is to remain private about being a Brony. According to Dewalt and Dewalt many participants are looking to share information willingly if given the chance and they feel secure with researcher.<sup>160</sup> Achieving this level of comfort and rapport with participants is of the utmost importance, although many of the individuals I interviewed during the exploratory phase of this project were not only willing, but enthusiastic about sharing their experiences as a Brony in their interviews because it was a way for them to get their story out to others who may not understand what the fandom means to them.

While all of these aspects of the participant observer lead to deep and immersive understanding of the culture or phenomenon, there is the danger of losing reflexivity. Weiss warns, if the researcher cannot step back and observe what is happening for what it is rather than how they feel about it there is a danger of “going native.”<sup>161</sup> If the researcher reaches this point where objectivity is dismissed and the objectives of the group have too greatly influenced the researcher then all of the data will become biased and invalid because all objectivity is lost.

### **Mixed Methods Approach**

The direction taken in this project follows a mixed methods approach of collecting data about members of the Brony fandom and their proclivities. This approach allows for quantitative measurements as well as qualitative insights to fan tendencies that combines the strengths of these two methods and provides supports to their weakness. Not only is the aim of this project to learn about what fan practices Bronies engage in, but also I want to understand

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<sup>160</sup> Dewalt, Kathleen. and Dewalt Billie. *Participant Observation*,

<sup>161</sup> Weiss Robert. *Learning from Strangers*

why they act in the manner that they do in the fandom. In my estimation, this has been a major shortcoming of the previous Brony surveys. These prior investigations create a fascinating picture of the general identity of the Brony, but they do not examine how or why the picture is constructed the way that it is. Furthermore, the concept of masculinity or the flexibility of masculinity in the Brony fandom is not investigated. Self disclosure is mentioned but only in limited forms that do not extrapolate many of the rationales that may exist.

Rather than having the project utilize strictly qualitative or quantitative methods, a combination of the two will strengthen the overall argument by using statistical data to reinforce the theoretical interpretations of the Brony phenomenon. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie contend that mixed methods are “the class of research where the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts, or language into a single study.”<sup>162</sup> While there are concerns that the inclusion of a survey puts this project in the direction of generalizable results and a positivist epistemology, there is a larger element of critical cultural research within this project. The reason this approach was chosen is because it attempts to bolster both quantitative and qualitative aspects of research in one effort that could potentially create a more comprehensive understanding of what the Brony fandom means for masculinity studies. Creswell and Plano Clark claim, “the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches, in combination, provides a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone.”<sup>163</sup> Mixed method approaches to research come in a variety of designs. The exact name of the method design utilized in this project is

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<sup>162</sup> Johnson, R. B. and Anthony Onwuegbuzie. “Mixed Methods Research: A Research Paradigm Whose Time has Come” *Educational Researcher* 33.7 (2004): 14-26, 17

<sup>163</sup> Creswell, John, W. and Vicki P. Clark. *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2011), 5

called a convergent mixed method approach. This mixed method design attempts to triangulate data during the analysis phase of the research. Morse believes that this version of mixed methods allows the researcher “to obtain different but complementary data on the same topic.”<sup>164</sup>

This survey accomplishes this convergent method with the utilization of quantitative and qualitative questions that follow up on previous questions of the survey. As explained earlier, there are distinct advantages and disadvantages to these types of questions. Quantitative questions can provide clear and concise scales based on the responses given. They provide good numerical data that can suggest generalizable results. To reach further validity, these instruments can be tested and repeated at any point in the future. The drawback to this method is that quantifiable data only provides static and fixed information to the questions that are asked by the researcher and the types of answers that are given by the participant.

Oftentimes, difficulties can arise because participants may not easily fit into the binaries or check boxes provided by the researcher’s survey instrument. This complex facet could very well be the case in terms of the flexible nature of masculinity mentioned earlier. Where quantitative questions manage to capture the numerical data, qualitative follow up questions can put personality and an identity into these answers. Instead of dealing with strictly either/or responses, qualitative answers allow the researcher to look at all the shades of gray in between both ends of the spectrum.

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<sup>164</sup>Morse, Janice. “Approaches to Qualitative-Quantitative Methodological Triangulation”, *Nursing Research* 40.1 (1991): 120-123, 122

One potential drawback to this method is the possible disparity between the results between the quantitative and qualitative results. Creswell and Plano Clark state that, “contradictions may provide new insights to the topic, but these differences can be difficult to resolve and may require the collection of additional data.”<sup>165</sup> Despite some of the drawbacks of this approach, it allows for immediate triangulation and allows for “synthesizing complementary quantitative and qualitative results to develop a more complete understanding of a phenomenon.”<sup>166</sup> The end result will be a more comprehensive look at the Brony fandom and how they negotiate both masculinity and self disclosure.

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<sup>165</sup> Creswell, John, W. and Vicki P. Clark. *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 80

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 80

## **Chapter IV**

### **Analysis**

Five separate areas of analysis dealing with various facets of the Brony fandom are contained in this chapter. The first three sections explore areas of conflict between Bronies and traditional masculinity. Each segment explores how fans choose to handle situations that are adverse to their fandom. First, an examination of quantitative data relating to the demographics and potential influential factors of self disclosure practices of Bronies will take place. Secondly, issues of harassment towards Bronies as told by the fans will look at the methods society attempts to corral the fandom for their transgressions against gender norms. In response to these attacks of character, some fans will not disclose their fandom to others. The third segment investigates how Bronies might utilize self monitoring techniques such as the Stable in order to avoid harassment. The second and third segments will also incorporate testimonies from respondents regarding their experiences with Brony related harassment and entail instances when challenges to their masculinity are broached in social exchanges. The remaining portions of the chapter will consider how conceptions of traditional masculinity are changing through the performance of Bronies in the military and the construction of concordant masculinity. The fourth section discusses how Bronies contend with issues of masculinity while serving in the armed forces. How does a Brony balance the cuteness of ponies with the hyper-masculine occupation of military enlistment? Finally, the fifth section will conclude with an analysis of

concordant masculinity and how the Brony fandom is structuring this new framework through inclusiveness and friendship.

### **Quantitative Analysis**

Quantitative data in this project provide two primary functions in this study.

Demographic markers and quantifiable correlations for self disclosure are the intrinsic variables this project will analyze. In addition to the descriptive statistics the survey provides, four hypotheses looking at potential factors of fan behavior are evaluated. The first two hypotheses search for associations between self disclosure, age, and gender. Additionally, the third and fourth hypotheses examine social interaction components of Bronies by comparing the variables of self disclosure, harassment, and fan activities between each other.

According to the demographic figures within the sample, the large majority of fans (84%) were in the age range of 18 - 29 years of age with the remainder of fans falling between 30 - 59 years of age (Figure 1). Even though the age demographic skews toward the younger end of the spectrum, there were two fans in the age bracket of 60+ who identify as a Brony. The majority of participants (68%) were from the United States, but there was a strong international presence. Fans from around the globe took part in the survey, representing countries such as: Canada, Peru, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, England, Iceland, Australia, Russia, South Korea, Bulgaria, South Africa, Taiwan, and Germany.

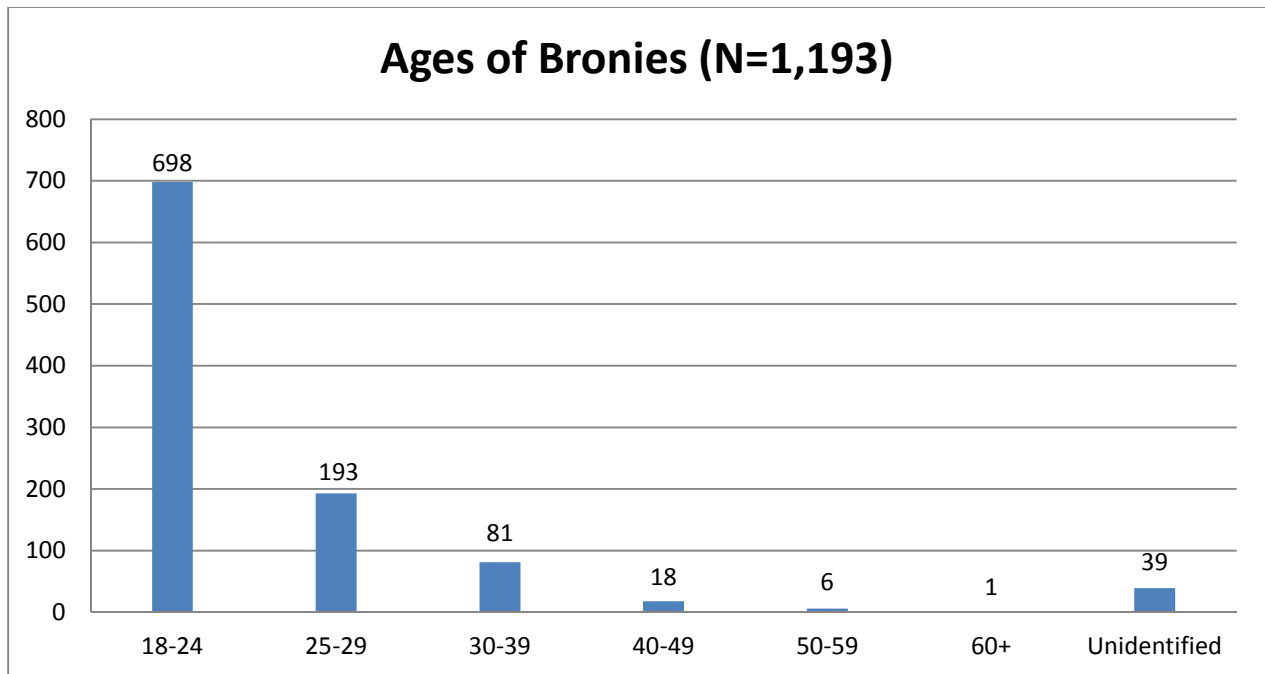
Additional demographic information illustrates that the majority of the fans in this survey classifies as male just as articles written about the fandom suggest. Within the survey, the bulk of the sample identifies as males (83%), followed by females (12%), and transgender



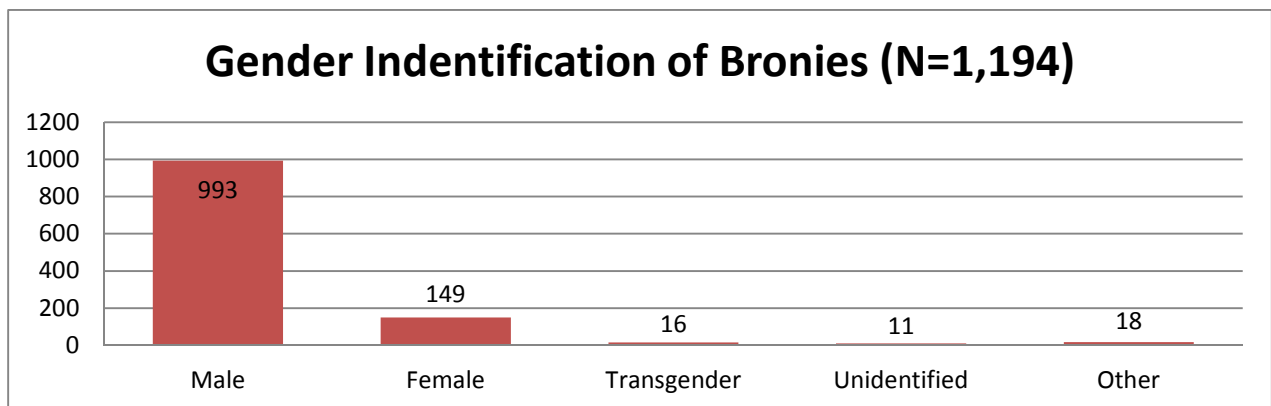
(1%) supporting the notion that the largest portion of adult fans is male (Figure 2). In response to the accusations that many Bronies are homosexual the participants in the survey primarily identify themselves as Heterosexuals (72%), followed by Bisexual (14%), Asexual (6%), and Homosexual (3%) refuting accusations that the vast majority of Bronies are homosexual as some reports by mainstream media outlets suggest (Figure 3). The racial composition of the sample is comprised of fans who classify themselves as White (72%) followed by Asian (16%) and Hispanic (4%) while other races or unidentified race markers compile into the remainder (8%).<sup>167</sup> Members of the Brony fandom that took part in this survey are also college educated, possessing some level of college instruction. Brony participants are more often than not are still enrolled in school either part time or full time (56%) with some fans who continuing on to earn graduate degrees (5%) (Figure 4).

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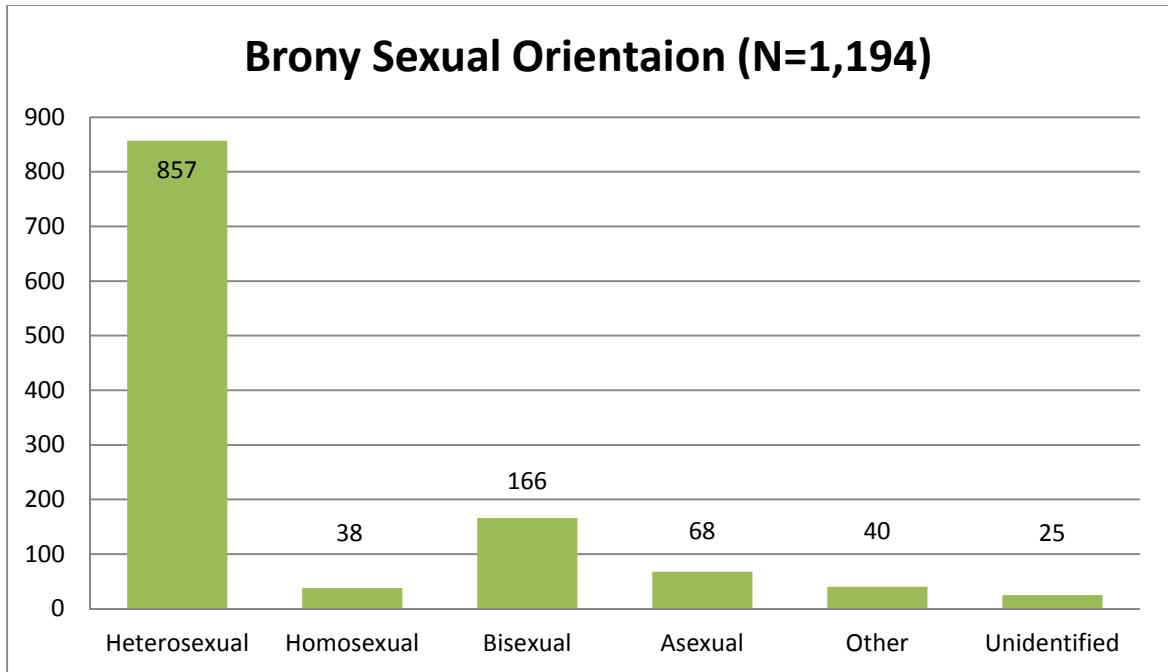
<sup>167</sup> A version of the survey was translated into Chinese which is not calculated into the statistical figures due to the lack of respondents.



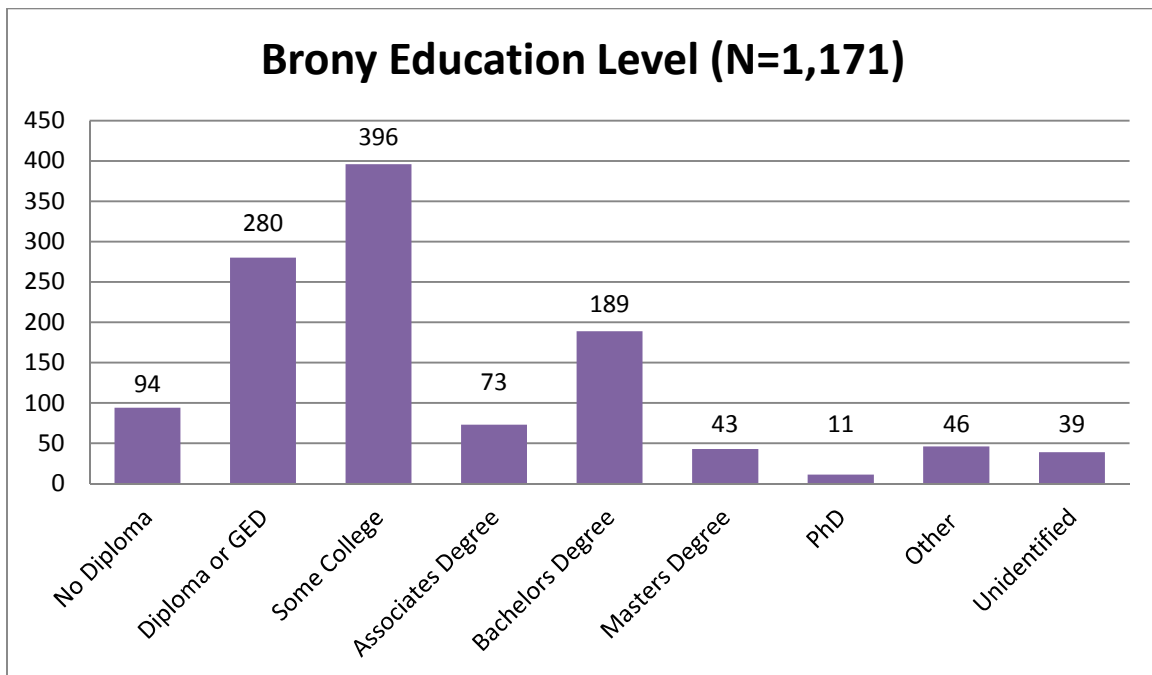
**Figure 1. Ages of Bronies**



**Figure 2. Gender Identification of Bronies**

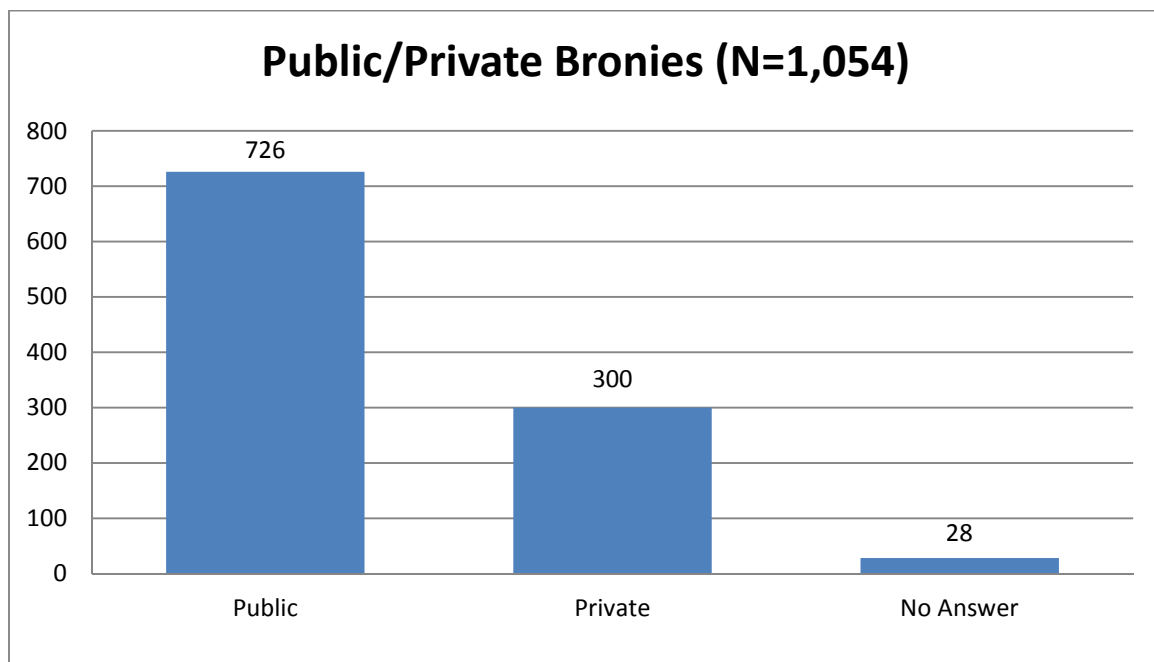


**Figure 3. Brony Sexual Orientation**

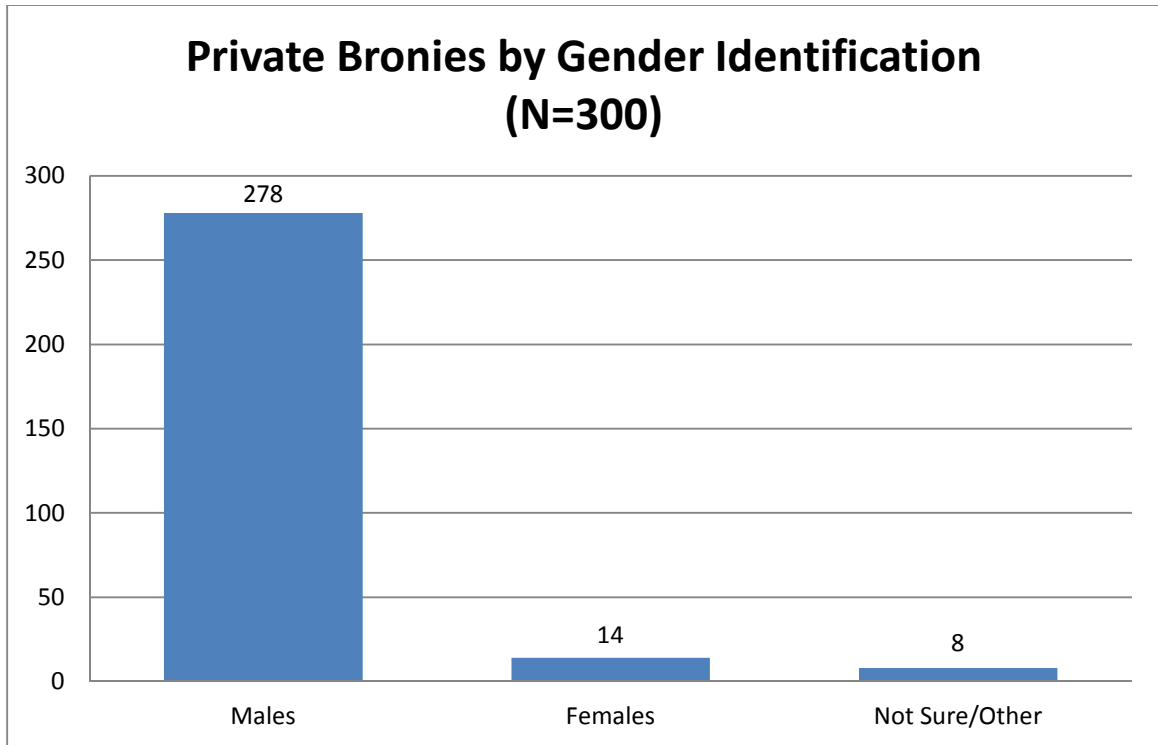


**Figure 4. Brony Education Level**

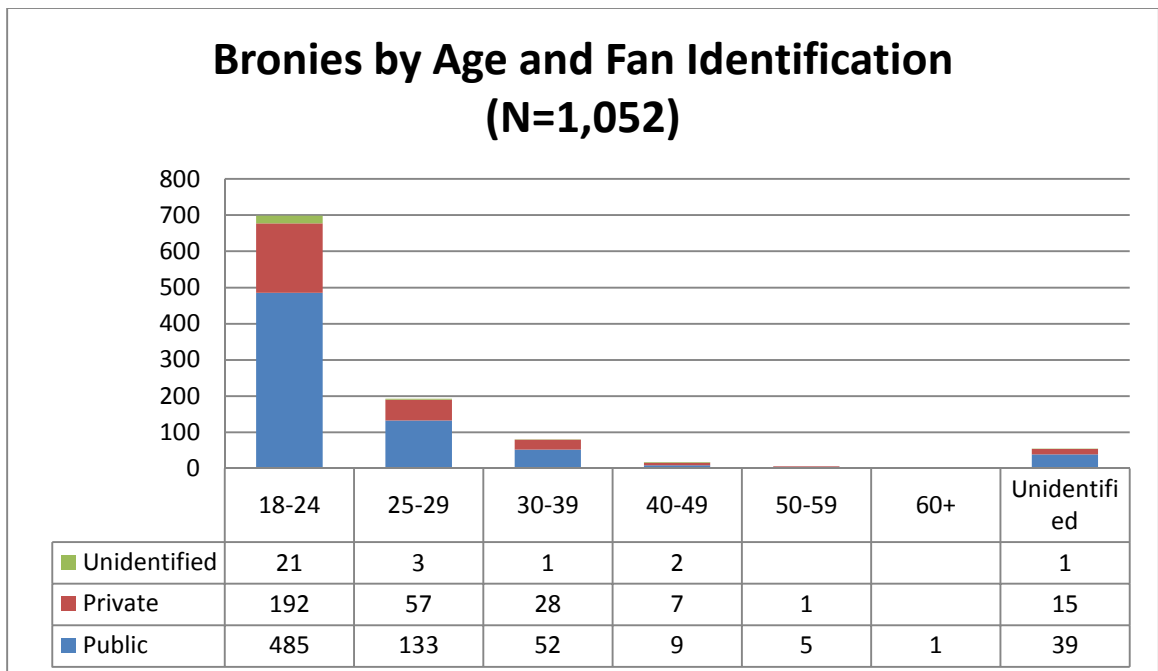
In regards to self disclosure, the survey reveals that 726 participants identify as “Public” Bronies, meaning they are comfortable talking about *My Little Pony* or displaying related merchandise on their person or around the home. However, another 300 participants designate themselves as “private” fans who either seldom reveal or do not tell anyone that they are a fan of the show, leaving 28 participants not preferring to answer the question (Figure 5). Of those “private” participants, 278 identify as male against 14 who identify as female (Figure 6). A further breakdown of the private Brony subsection it is reveals that 249 fans between the ages of 18 and 29 identify as private, skewing the age demographic of private Bronies closer to the younger end of the age spectrum (Figure 7).



**Figure 5. Public/Private Bronies**



**Figure 6. Private Bronies by Gender Identification**



**Figure 7. Bronies by Age and Fan Identification**

This project will put forward four hypotheses regarding a Brony's self disclosure practices and fan participation via information provided by the data set and the frameworks regarding how masculinity is monitored. These four suppositions suggest younger male fans have a greater propensity to keep their pony related activities a secret from others on the premise that exposure will result in some form of harassment. These hypotheses will be analyzed through calculations for correlation in the form of Chi-squares tests to see if there is any significance between variables.

H1: Male Bronies are less likely to disclose than female Bronies about their fan activities.

H2: Younger Bronies are less likely to disclose their fandom than older Bronies about their fan activities.

H3: Public Bronies are more likely to receive harassment than private Bronies.

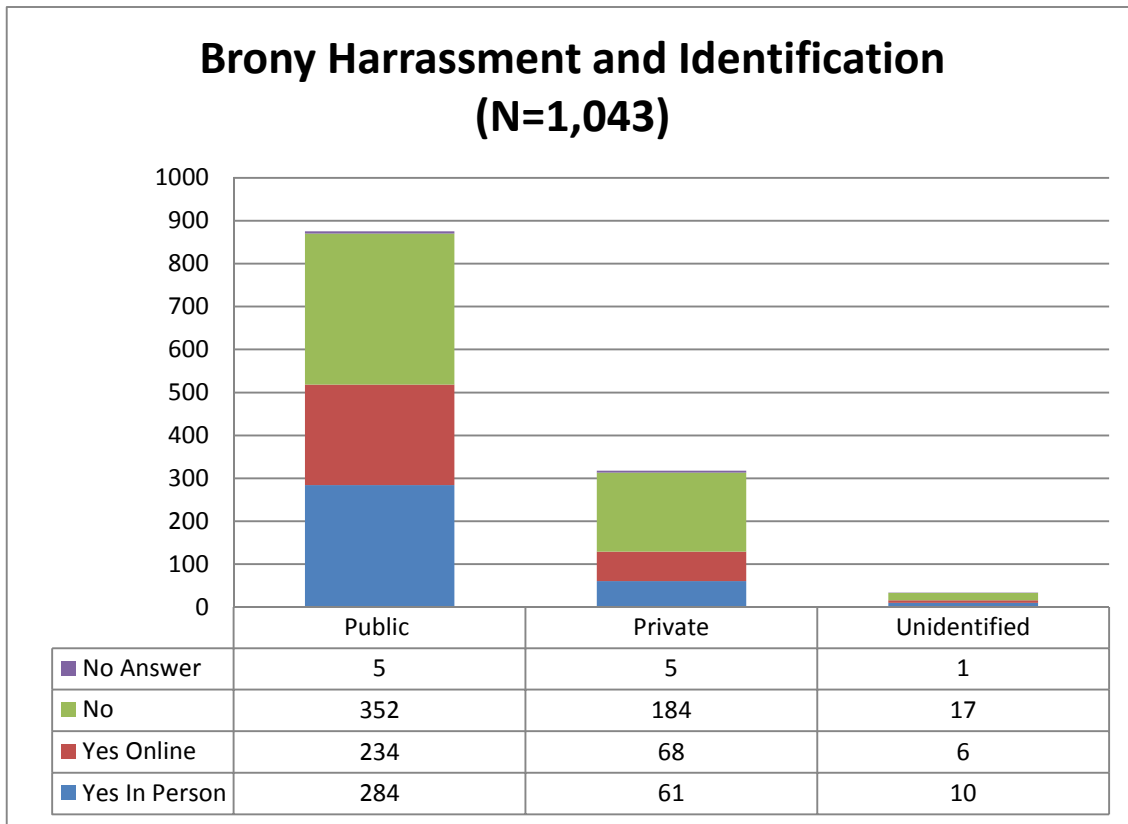
H4: Private Bronies are more likely to not attend My Little Pony themed social events (conventions or meetups).

The first two tests for association were Chi-square tests looking to determine if age and gender play a significant role in a Brony's decision to be public about the fandom to other individuals within their immediate social circles. The first Chi-square test for association focuses on Brony self disclosure practices and gender. There was no statistically significant association between gender and Brony self disclosure,  $\chi^2(1) = 1.53$ ,  $p = .146$ . This test for association supports the null hypothesis that gender is not a relevant factor influencing the self disclosure

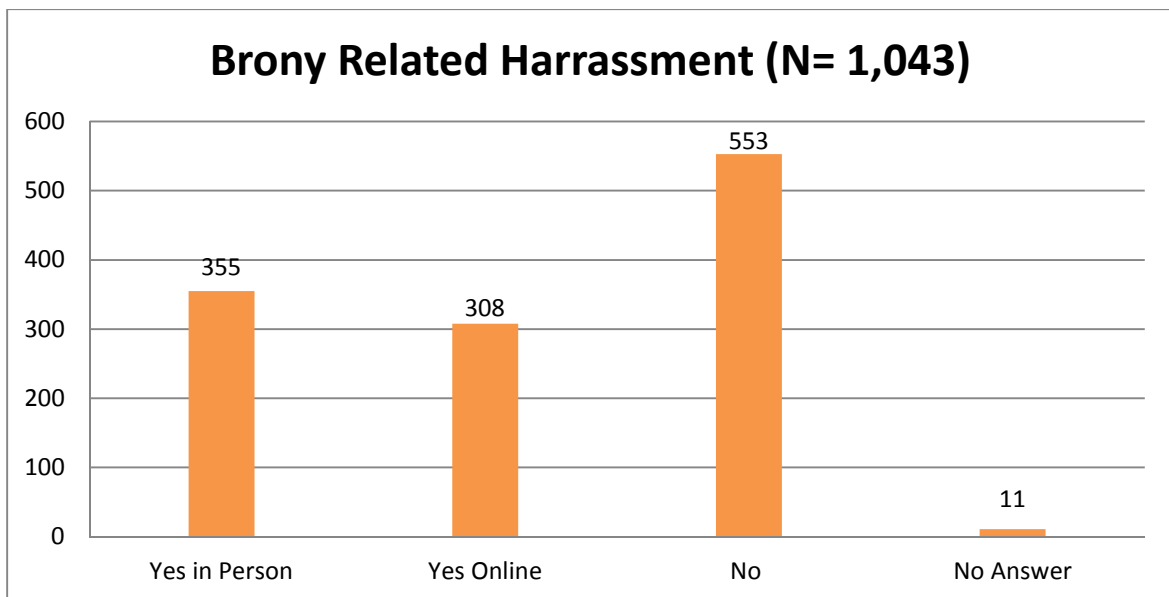
practices of fans despite the vast majority of fans who do identify themselves as private Bronies are males.

A second Chi-square test was run using the variables of age and Brony self-disclosure. Again, no statistical significance could not be found in the cross tabulation of these two variables,  $\chi^2(1) = 11.12$ ,  $p = .085$ . In terms of self disclosure practices, no evidence supporting associations between age and gender determine whether or not a Brony will be public about their participation in the fandom. The second hypothesis found not to have any statistical significance in this study. Again, despite the number of participants who identify themselves as private fans were primarily in the younger age demographic, no statistical significance suggests age was a determining factor in whether or not a fan would remain secretive about their pony related practices.

For the next pair of hypotheses an analysis of how many fans experience harassment online or in public was conducted. Within the total sample that identify as a Brony, 47.7% report experiencing some form of harassment stemming from their enjoyment of *My Little Pony* at some point in time (Figure 8). Examining that particular subsection of fans in terms of harassment shows that 69.7% experience harassment in person and 61.2% experience harassment online. Furthermore, 35.3% of the participant population encountering harassment has experience with mistreatment both online and in person for their pony related activities.



**Figure 8. Brony Harrassment and Identification**



**Figure 9. Brony Related Harrassment**



Correlations between incidents of harassment and whether Bronies have attended a local pony meetup with fellow fans are examined in the second pair of hypotheses. After conducting a Chi-square test for association looking at self-disclosure practices and events of harassment resulted in statistically significant associations. There was statistical significance found between self-disclosure and teasing in the third hypothesis,  $\chi^2(1) = 20.66$ ,  $p = .001$ . Additionally, public Bronies exposure to teasing was greater than the number of incidents involving private Bronies. While the data suggests private Bronies receive less teasing and harassment, they still feel the negative emotional effects of harassment when they hear other individuals talk about Bronies negatively or hear about another Brony's negative experiences. Just under half (44%) of all the participants report they experience Brony related mistreatment in some form or another. These events range from slight teasing from friends to being told to "grow up" by family members which will be further discussed in the qualitative analysis of the project.

The final Chi-square test for association was between the variables of Brony meetup attendance and Brony self disclosure. The statistical significance found in association with these two variables,  $\chi^2(1) = 11.66$ ,  $p = .001$  gives support to the fourth hypothesis in terms of fan practices. Fans who identify as private less frequently attend meetups for one reason or another than those fans who are public. Participants in the study claim that there is either no meetup group within a reasonable driving distance of their home or that they are apprehensive about attending such a meeting. Within this group, 53% state that they were either reluctant to attend a group meeting or had little interest in being a part of a meetup group. Reasons for their

hesitation include lack of time or resources to travel to meetings or that they were uncomfortable being in such a social situation.

Comparatively, the numbers in this sample are lower than the data from the State of the Herd data set (2013) which claims that 72.9% had never attended a Brony meetup. However, none of the data collected in that study ascertains why these individuals never attend a meetup. Primarily, their data set supports the notion that, “Bronies were more of an online phenomenon.”<sup>168</sup> While this may be true of the greater population within the fan base, the Herd report does not calculate justifications as to why they are also known to be social by creating conventions for the sole purpose of celebrating *My Little Pony* as well.

Finally, an analysis of the “private” fans unveils some out of the ordinary results. After a participant identifies as a private Brony, a follow up question asks if they have disclosed to anyone that they participate in any pony related activities. The responses include, nobody, online, family member, and close friend. Of those who answered this question, 28 participants report not telling anyone, while 75 participants report only telling others about being a fan online in forum spaces or chat rooms. Another portion of this subsection reports disclosing to more than one of the answers provided in the survey. In fact, 76 participants claim to have told people, both online and in person, but still identify as secretive fans. This contrast in the definition of private behavior requires further examination by looking at their textual responses as to why they remain secretive of their fan practices.

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<sup>168</sup> Coderbrony [pseud.]. “State of the Herd Report”

## Discussion

Results from the hypotheses in comparison to the data collection represent an enigma. Data from the survey would suggest there would be statistically significant associations between the variables chosen for the four hypotheses. However, there were no strong correlations between the variables of gender and self disclosure or age and self disclosure. This might suggest, statistically speaking, that these variables do not influence the self disclosure of Bronies despite the fact that their participation in the fandom does not congeal with dominant notions of masculinity. Yet, the third and fourth hypotheses did find strong statistical support for Bronies who are public with their fandom are more likely to receive some form of harassment for breaching the borders of masculinity performance. Additionally, it provides statistical significance suggesting private Bronies have greater inclinations to remain secretive about their activities by not attending local meetups or pony conventions.

When reviewing participants claiming they disclose to nobody or strictly online, their textual responses range from introverted lifestyle to “career implications.” The majority of those who disclose to a few people refer to embarrassment as a primary reason for not telling others about their fan activities. Of those participants willing to give rationales for being secretive state they fear potential reactions they will receive for openly claiming to be a Brony. Feeling embarrassed about being a Brony or the anticipation of experiencing harassment because they are a fan of the show contributes to their hesitation. Several of these same individuals (all of them who identify as male) claim that if coworkers were aware of their Brony identity it would create a negative work environment or potentially lose out on job promotions.

Private fans also have a tendency to conceal their activities (as well as merchandise, if they own any) when they go to fan activities such as conventions or meetups by saying they are going to different activities than the one they are attending or physically hide any *My Little Pony* merchandise if they are expecting guests in their homes.

A couple points of note require further research at a future date. The first of these is in regards to what private means to members of the fandom. Keeping something a secret means that very few people are aware of certain information, however, there is a contingent of the participants who do not consider the term private in the same regards as the project intended. For the purpose of this study, the notion of private fans was for individuals not comfortable discussing or showing any interest in the show for the purpose of maintaining a particular identity. Yet, this instrument has found a derivative of private fans who are comfortable with being a Brony, but do not actively go out of their way to let others know that they are fans of the show. This subsection of private Bronies who are generally okay with disclosing their fandom to others, but feel it is inappropriate to talk about the subject unless someone else prompts a conversation or others identify as fellow fans. Their rationale for not displaying their affection for the characters or openly talking about ponies stems from feeling such actions will lead to awkward moments for everyone involved. Other fans in this category claim that the hassle of constantly justifying their actions to non-fans is not worth the effort.

No matter which side of the privacy spectrum these secretive fans reside, there seems to be a common thread running through all of them. The practices of concealment, whether heavily or thinly veiled, appear to trace back to the notion of failing to perform their gender.

Secretive fans attempt to maintain gender appropriate performances by limiting conversations with others about it or avoiding the subject altogether. Others cite that they are embarrassed about being a fan, as if they are faltering in their gender because they enjoy a show that is marketed toward young girls. They attempt to maintain heteronormative practices of their gender by hiding their merchandise or lying about their activities to friends who they fear will not understand.

Bronies who do not disclose to others or very few are fearful of the same potential negative reactions that nearly half of the fan population within this sample experience. Potential loss of reputation is a consequence that some secretive fans are not willing to risk. While this decision does minimize the risk of being “outed” as a fan, they must realize by maintaining their silence they further risk propagating the myths about Bronies and their activities by not discussing why they find the show enjoyable. In a similar fashion, those secretive fans willing to talk about the show are mitigating the rumors about Bronies, but only in situations that they deem appropriate to steer clear of the uncomfortable situation because of how society perceives gender.

Secondly, the data set from this survey is immense and the time required to analyze it all would take more time than this project permits. There are questions within the survey which need analyzing, including possible statistical analyses of merchandise purchases by public and private fans, types of fan related activities Bronies engage in, and narrowing focus on the demographics of minority fans and their identity management. Further modifications to the survey instrument may be required to look at other dynamics happening within the fandom.

Some possibilities include questions regarding living situations, yearly income, and participation in other fandoms (including family members, and friends). There is also the possibility of including minors in future studies to look at how preteen and adolescents manage their gender identity since peers are some of the most influential people in their lives.

Bronies are a growing fandom that face challenges by heteronormative conceptions of gender and must navigate how they will disclose to others, if at all. The harassment that many fans encounter may not have any direct correlations with age or gender, but that does not hinder even some secretive fans from letting others know that they enjoy colorful ponies who talk about friendship. However, there still exists a large subsection within the fandom that feel they are violating some sort of socially accepted gender norm. If these secretive fans want to see an end to this negativity towards the fandom they are going to have to risk disclosing themselves to others and share the magic of friendship by discussing their fandom with others.

While only half of the hypotheses found statistical significance in the project, new questions are surfacing in regards as to how secretive fans view themselves and what being a “private” Brony means for them. Further research is needed to determine not only the political implications individuals face when disclosing their fan activities to others, but how fans delineate the terms “private” or “public” within the fandom since it appears that there is no definitive understanding. Looking at the quantitative data within the survey does illuminate facets of the fandom by providing a general picture of who a Brony is and some of their fan activities, however, those figures do not give a voice to the fans in the survey. In the following section, Bronies coping with issues of identity, harassment, and self disclosure are discussed.

## Brony Harassment

Representations in the media and public opinion toward Bronies do not put the fandom in a positive light. Negative perceptions of the fandom can lead to mistreatment by others or even from a fan's own family. If family members could react negatively to this knowledge, how would friends, acquaintances, and strangers respond? Negative reactions from others in this section range from "mild teasing" to threats and acts of physical harm. Responses for this question fall under the three following themes: confusion, accusations, verbal and physical violence. By exploring the negative reactions of nonfans, illustrations of gender policing will surface depicting how masculinity is understood in society.

Outsider confusion, the most common negative reaction within the data set reflects concerns of gender conflict when individuals learn about Bronies. Reactions in this category entail the question of the grown men liking a little girl's show, which reflect society's general understanding of masculinity and the stereotyping of Bronies. Included in the definition of outsider confusion are negative responses in the way of strange looks, allegations of weird behavior, or accusations of immaturity. This confusion stems from the dominant notions of gender roles and what classify as appropriate behaviors for young males. Sometimes these responses can be "cute" misunderstandings such as one respondent recounting a moment with a younger family member, "My niece telling me that I was a metrosexual" because he watched *My Little Pony* (I can only imagine how that conversation played out). However, this sort of statement does attest how deeply seeded constructions of masculinity are rooted in society and how pervasive notions of masculinity are when even young children will dispute a person's

sexuality, despite not fully comprehending what it means. Oftentimes these moments of confusion are ways in which other members of society subtly try to keep masculinity in its idealized form. Chris Haywood and Mairtin Mac an Ghaill suggest that this done by way of defining one person's concept of masculinity over another's:

These definitions create boundaries which serve to delineate what appropriate maleness should be within this social arena. Transgression of these boundaries activates techniques of normalization, ranging from labeling through to physical violence, that ultimately act to maintain differences embedded in the ascendant definitions of masculinity.<sup>169</sup>

Members of society use this method as a means of absconding blame on their personal understandings of gender practices and placing blame on the binary failure squarely on the fan. Implementation of this strategy situates the onus on the individual breaching the gender binary for not knowing the socially accepted gender practices.

Many of the responses that fall under this section revolve around the idea that My Little Pony is a "show for little girls" and therefore men of any age should not watch it. Of the 46 responses in this section, eleven participants specifically state that they were told that the show was specifically for little girls. Therefore, because the show was targeted to a different demographic than their own, the enjoyment of ponies was not an acceptable practice for young men. Rationales like this illustrate how society legitimizes the oddity of male involvement in the show and reinforces the gender binary. Respondents describe the strange looks they receive after individuals discover they are a Brony, followed by allegations of bizarre behavior arise, including statements such as, "It's mostly people telling me I'm strange and not

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<sup>169</sup> Haywood, Chris, and Mairtin Mac an Ghaill. *Men and Masculinities* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2003), 70



understanding how I can like something about the show,” or “Ew, that show [is] for little girls! It’s weird that YOU are watching it.” Describing Bronies as weird does illustrate a lack of understanding on the part of outsiders because they do not question the appeal of the show, but challenges the maturity of fans who happen to enjoy ponies. Similar to Foucault’s knowledge/ignorance dialectic, this line of reasoning bases accusations on accounts of hearsay and tradition rather than dialogue. Because they do not think outside their own perceptions of what is “for girls” or “for boys,” these accusing individuals automatically find fault with fans without inquiry about the show’s importance and bestowing generalized statements of weird behavior upon them.

Other instances of kind of mistrust and confusion toward Bronies can even occur in situations of community engagement. One fan recalls, “I was doing community service [and] some girls that were working with me asked what shows I watched. I told them all I really watch is *My Little Pony* and then they continued to remind me how that was really weird, how I’m too old for it and all that.” Indictments against a Brony because of age and gender are a common theme to fan backlash. Kurt Schlichter wrote a scathing article about Bronies and their potential impact on masculinity, claiming that the actions of fans are shameful:

All the while, as these pathetic sissies giggle like school girls over magic unicorns that spray rainbows from their horns...if they had the capacity for shame, this disgusting obsession would be a secret they guard almost as closely as a Harvard faculty member might guard the fact that he’s a registered Republican. As sickening as it is, we can’t just ban grown men from acting like idiots because we disapprove of their lifestyle choices...put aside childish things to contribute to society instead of feeding at the

trough and then sitting on their expansive backsides as they eagerly clap like seals at the antics of colorful cartoon steeds.<sup>170</sup>

Schlicter's accusations attempt to emasculate the fandom by describing them as "sissies" and "idiots." Additionally, he describes Bronies as "perma-virgins," attacking the sexual prowess of Bronies for their inability to find intimacy with another individual because they are so engrossed in ponies.<sup>171</sup> His vitriol demonstrates Lynne Segal's binary of gender in which, "'pure' masculinity cannot be asserted except in relation to what is defined to its opposite. It depends on upon the perpetual renunciation of 'femininity.'"<sup>172</sup> Schlicter's argument builds a case for his version of proper masculinity by wholly dismissing the masculinity of men who associate with ponies as occupying a feminine space as a means to reaffirm traditional notions of gender.

One fan recalls a similar event happening to him in his hometown. "When I wore a shirt depicting the characters of the show at a public plaza people gave me glances of confusion and others gave me looks of disgust. A few people, who were around the age[s] of 15-18, even walked up to me [insulting] my decision to like the show and wear a shirt about it in public." A Brony from Massachusetts explains how similar insults are hurled upon him whenever he goes out into public wearing show related clothing. "I've been called weird and gotten laughed at by a few people for wearing my Rainbow Dash & Pinkie Pie shirts to school." Such episodes demonstrate how peers use social pressures on fans to conform to gender practices through the use of insults and ridicule as a method of shoring up the binary gender performances young men are supposed to follow.

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<sup>170</sup> Schlicter, Kurt "Terrifying New Trend: Grown Men Who Dig 'My Little Pony?'" *Breitbart* April 25, 2012

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>172</sup> Segal, Lynne. *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 114

In similar cases, C. P. Haywood discusses how this practice of hurtful labeling is used to define concepts of masculinity and influence the “micropolitical decisions” we make during routine social interactions.<sup>173</sup> Haywood asserts, “These terms were usually spoken outside of the classroom in a public arena such as the student common room. In doing so, male students consolidated their masculine identities by making alternative/contradictory masculinities problematic. Terms of abuse were insensitive and repeatedly distanced ‘other’ student.”<sup>174</sup> By placing distance between themselves and Bronies, non fans are in a constant state of border patrol with the boundaries of masculinity. Degradation through teasing and insults of alternative forms of masculinity shores up their own conceptualizations of masculinity. The teasing and ridicule that these fans receive help demonstrate the kind of understanding many have for gender in general. Having insults hurled at a person for failing to perform masculinity in a form that appeases society is part of the rationale for these attacks. Moments like these where attacks are based on an appearance which defies traditional gender norms gives credence to binary norms, but also illustrates how many feel threatened by breaches of acceptable practices.

Butler addresses this phenomenon as the “casting” of gender in a materialistic sense. She emphasizes that gender is crystallized by the repetitive actions of the body and thusly give the concept sustainability.<sup>175</sup> She imposes that these practices create domains of gender that alternatively create a negative practice which are not inherently a part of the gendered domain,

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<sup>173</sup> West and Zimmerman “Doing Gender” *The Social Construction of Gender*, 14

<sup>174</sup> Cited in Haywood, Chris, and Mairtin Mac an Ghaill. *Men and Masculinities*, 73

<sup>175</sup> Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter*, 2

becoming abject.<sup>176</sup> Such casting creates the subject known as man or woman and their domains are a result of acceptable parameters conceived within society. Any infringements upon these domains will likely lead to retaliation on those who breach those borders.

Failing to find support within an individual's own family or close circle of friends can be more defeating for a Brony than taking harassment from random strangers out in public. The home is where people feel the most comfortable and safe and where a person can be at ease and conduct themselves in whatever manner they please. Yet for some fans, this is an impossibility for a number of reasons. There is the possibility that they are still living with their parents or have roommates and privacy is limited. As a result of these living situations, some fans must contend with the possibility of dealing with the same arguments with family and friends in their private life as they would out in public which a number of fans share in the survey. As we have seen in many instances in this project, "Gender conceptions and role behavior are the products of a broad network of social influences operating both familially and in the many societal systems encountered in everyday life."<sup>177</sup> Peers and family may or may not be conscious of their gender regulatory practices, but they are in some form shape our own concepts of gender.

One fan recalls an incident where a friend of his told him to keep silent about liking *My Little Pony* prior to social function with some other friends. "My friend instructed me not to mention *My Little Pony* to any of his friends at a party since he felt it would be awkward." The significance of this preemptive action is telling about how some individuals monitor their

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<sup>176</sup> *Ibid*, 3

<sup>177</sup> Bussey, Kay. and Bandura, Albert. "Social Cognitive Theory of Gender Development and Differentiation", 676

gender, but another's as well. By mentioning *My Little Pony* in a room full of people it would create an uncomfortable situation for the other guests to handle? Is this friend looking out for both their masculinities given the situation they are both about to enter. Bussey and Bandura believe that gender regulation "include self-monitoring of gender-linked conduct, judgment of conduct in relation to personal standards, and environmental circumstances, and self-reactive influence."<sup>178</sup> Whose interests is this friend trying to protect? Does the non fan fear for the safety of his Brony friend because someone might confront him about being weird or does he feel that admonishing him prior to the situation will safeguard his own reputation through association? Connell and Messerschmidt suggest this situation is a regulatory practice many males believe are the right course of action in keeping their masculinity secure. "Coordination and regulation occur in the live social practice of collectivities, institutions, and whole societies." <sup>179</sup>

Admonishment from a friend is hurtful enough, but what if the warnings come from a loved one? These are the individuals we trust with our deepest feelings and depend on them to be there for us when we need them the most.<sup>180</sup> Will they still accept the person for who they are, no matter what interests they have so long as they are not hurting anyone, or will they react negatively in such a way that disparages the person for even telling them? In one incident involving family members and concealment of fan activities came from a young Canadian fan after traveling to the United States for a *My Little Pony* convention in Los Angeles. His parents inquired about his experience, unaware that he traveled to the convention. He recounts how

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<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 690

<sup>179</sup> Connell, R. W. and Messerschmidt, James. "Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept", 841

<sup>180</sup> Petronio, Sandra. *Boundaries of Privacy: Dialectics of Disclosure*, 185

his parents reacted to this news with dismay and disapproval. His parents were so alarmed at the fact that he traveled internationally for a *My Little Pony* convention that they suggested he never share his experience with other people:

I tried to explain to my parents coming home from *Equestria L.A.* (a *My Little Pony* themed convention in Los Angeles) about the convention and they only just gave me dirty looks and they told me that I should never tell anybody about this. My dad was okay to it all, but my mother refused to believe in the idea of the show or me ever watching it.

Reminiscent of the prior incident, these family members react negatively to this young person's experiences with fellow Bronies and protest the notion of adult men enjoying a children's show, imploring their son to keep it a secret from others. Fagot and Hagan's work notes the father would be more disapproving of the son engaging in atypical gender behavior.<sup>181</sup> Instead, it is the mother who emphasizes the objection to the show rather than the father. It appears that the parents of this fan are looking out for their son's interests, but how much interest are they showing by explaining to him that he must deny the events of his international trip?

A more extreme example of the disapproving reactions from family members comes from a young fan living in California. His father disapproves of him watching the show, but further questions his son's masculinity. He states, "[My father thinks] I won't find a girlfriend because of being a Brony" and at one point in the conversation his father says, "fathers put sons in military school for things like this." The father questions his son's masculinity through his leisure practices, but also threatens him with enrollment into a military boarding school. Blatantly questioning your own son's sexuality in the process is a damaging response to the situation. As previously discussed, part of dominant masculinity encourages the use of physical

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<sup>181</sup> Fagot, B. I. and Hagan, R. "Observations of Parent's Reactions to Sex-Stereotyped Behaviors", 624

mastery within relationships, oftentimes with members of the opposite sex. Yet in this example, the father is questioning this aspect of his son's sexuality, or lack thereof, because he enjoys ponies is somehow a surrendering of his "manliness," abdicating him from masculinity. Coercive methods like this follow a similar vein to homophobia that Segal explains, "keeps all men in line while oppressing gay men; in its contempt for the "feminine" in men it simultaneously expresses contempt for women."<sup>182</sup>

One young man from Michigan states that, "My stepfather caught me watching the show once, and treated me like I was mentally ill (thankfully, he's mentioned it to no one else)... I'm still afraid of social stigma for being public about my appreciation for the show." Bussey and Bandura would suggest that this is a standard practice for fathers reacting more negatively to their son's gender infractions.<sup>183</sup> For many people, it is hard to see men occupy a feminized space and still see them as masculine. After discovering the Brony fandom, many people have questions regarding the sexuality of the fandom such as the following *Yahoo Answers* post from a concerned parent of a fan:

Well I just created my account, so I can ask this. Yesterday I came home from work early, and I walked up to my 15 year old sons [sic] room. When I opened it, I saw him with headphones watching "My little pony". He didn't notice me, so I just acted like nothing happened. Could he be gay, or just likes the show?

Update: Please explain what a "brony" is. Are they a gay group of men? Or sonthing [sic] else?<sup>184</sup>

Learning that his adolescent son is watching a cartoon about ponies, this parent draws the conclusion that his child is gay. His assumptions demonstrate how members of society regard

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<sup>182</sup> Segal, Lynne *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men*, 158

<sup>183</sup> Bussey, Kay. and Bandura, Albert. "Social Cognitive Theory of Gender Development and Differentiation," 689

<sup>184</sup> Caught my son watching "My Little Pony" Nov. 5 2012

<https://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20121105084821AAPE0AM>

masculine space because enjoying ponies relegates young men into a feminine position. Thankfully, there were a number of people who answer his question by explaining the fandom to him. Questions of sexuality are the largest section of replies in the survey. Within this category, 28 participants were accused of being gay for liking *My Little Pony* and another 17 participants were called “faggots.” Insults invoking the term “fag” include modifications to the term with an equine influence, thus coining the term “ponyfag” which create sexual linkages between fans and the show assumed by nonfans.

Oftentimes, the term faggot relates to feelings of homophobia and serves as an epithet primarily against male homosexuals. However, in most adolescent and young adult culture, the term does not carry the semiotic weight as in other male oriented arenas. Pascoe describes that the term is not particularly assigned to a homosexual male as it has in years past. Instead, the term carries a differing gender connotation given during a moment in time when there is the appearance of failure in representing masculine ideals. Pascoe claims, “Becoming a fag has as much to do with failing at the masculine tasks of competence, heterosexual prowess, and strength or in any way revealing weakness or femininity as it does with sexual identity.”<sup>185</sup> Statements of fag have little to do with a fan’s sexual identity *per se*, but serve as a tag for effeminacy for their perceived failure of living up to masculine ideals. During her research on adolescent masculinity, Pascoe notes that the rationale behind the fag identity bestowed on boys is for transgressions of manhood by showing emotions, failing at physical activities, or not displaying competency around female students. The term becomes the lowest possible thing that a young man can be called, especially in the presence of his peers.

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<sup>185</sup> Pascoe, C. J. *Dude, You’re a Fag*, 54



The fluidity of the fag identity is what makes the specter of the fag such a powerful disciplinary mechanism. It is fluid enough that boys police their behaviors out of fear of having the fag identity permanently adhere and definitive enough so that boys recognize a fag behavior and strive to avoid it.<sup>186</sup>

One male calling another male faggot has become the grandest insult, regardless of the basis, the term is entrenched with attributes not befitting of dominant masculinity. Additionally, Davide Leverenz purports that the word 'faggot' has nothing to do with homosexual experience or even with fears of homosexuals although it still alludes to the notion that any semblance of weakness is inherently feminine.<sup>187</sup> The power of this label contains a dual meaning that is not necessarily always a sexual one, but it does call the identified person's gender position into question. "The fag epithet, when hurled at other boys, may or may not have explicit sexual meanings, but it always has gendered meanings."<sup>188</sup> Attaching the label marginalizes an individual's agency and credentials in the eyes of others. Ken Corbett speaks of how the term is disempowering because it removes any trace of masculinity once the transgression occurs. "The ubiquity of the word faggot speaks to the reach of its discrediting capacity."<sup>189</sup> It has become an almost universal term for the loss of one's masculinity that it almost speaks of how fragile an individual's grasp on the position can vanish.

Repressed desires are present in the unconscious and are constantly a threat to the stability of gender identification, denying its unity, subverting its need for security. In addition, conscious ideas of masculine or feminine are not fixed, since they vary according to the contextual usage. Conflict always exists, then, between the subject's need for the appearance of wholeness and the imprecision of terminology.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 54

<sup>187</sup> Kimmel, Michael. *Masculinity as Homophobia* 1994, 147

<sup>188</sup> Pascoe, C. J. *Dude, You're a Fag*, 82

<sup>189</sup> Corbett, Ken. "Faggot =Loser" *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 2.1 3-28, 4

<sup>190</sup> Scott, Joan W. *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 39

Numerous nonfans see the Brony fandom as something detrimental and creating video responses reprimanding them for violating the rules of masculinity. Oftentimes, these videos infer or invoke the fag theme during their rants. A search of, “I hate Bronies” on YouTube returns a myriad (almost 45,000 results) of videos consisting of vitriolic reactions rather than constructive inquiries about the fandom. Typically, these videos comprise of individuals in front of web camera discussing how they felt about the fandom in a number of negative ways and making accusations about the fandom. A number of these videos would first question why any guy might have an interest in ponies, eventually leading to an angry rant or diatribe about how “wrong” these fans are.

While suggesting that there is something fundamentally wrong with Bronies, other reaction videos take these rants a step further. One such video poses similar questions to the previous video, but his argument is overshadowed by his seemingly hyperbolic shouting and disgust to the fandom. At one point in his diatribe he also imitates Bronies with an effeminate voice boasting about how wonderful their fandom is and how everyone should enjoy it and near the end of his rant, he angrily advocates for the elimination of fans through execution squads because of their disturbing behavior, concluding with a decree “anybody who is a Brony is no longer an adult... have fun with that fucking faggot.”<sup>191</sup> His true anger reveals itself in the final moments where he denigrates Bronies as immature, effeminate individuals, reinforcing gender binaries that affect masculinity into a toxic mix of misogyny and physical domination.

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<sup>191</sup> MyHatingSpaghetti, [pseudo.]. “[Archive] I Fucking Hate Bronies!!” *YouTube* 7:58 April 17, 2013 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Xe0dros7BQ>

One final video drives the point of how gender and sex are ingrained in society when a young boy (roughly 10 years old) compares the fandom with gay subculture, illustrating how constructions of gender have been modeled for him. Bussey and Bandura suggest, "A great deal of gender-linked information is exemplified by models in one's immediate environment such as parents and peers, and significant persons in social, educational, and occupational contexts."<sup>192</sup> His experiences with social relationships inform his perspective on gender performance, reifying the binary when he states, "I know that it's not straight, not normal for a male to watch My Little Pony."<sup>193</sup>

Accusations of homosexuality by friends, family, and complete strangers are one layer of allegations fans contend with, however, there are insinuations of zoophilia. Linking Bronies sexual practices with animals is an argument circulating against the fandom. One young man from Illinois recounts a coworker becoming visibly angry at the allusion to *My Little Pony*, "Any time [someone] would mention MLP [My Little Pony] within his hearing range, he would drop whatever it was that he was doing and try to 'prove a point;' that all bronies were "sexually crazed satanic Furies." For clarification, Furies are fans of anthropomorphic animals. Sometimes these fans dress up in complete animal attire at conventions. The Furry fandom was around long before the Brony community; in fact a number of Bronies are also Furies. Fans in this community will often go to conventions in full pony suits. Hatred toward Furies is on par with the Bronies. Oftentimes, attacks on Furies focus on similar issues of sexual deviancy supposedly occurring during conventions as portrayed in an episode of the crime drama CSI, in

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<sup>192</sup> Bussey, Kay. and Bandura, Albert. "Social Cognitive Theory of Gender Development and Differentiation.", 685

<sup>193</sup> Ultimate God Gogeta. Why I Hate Bronies and My Little Pony. *YouTube* 2:35 October 3, 2014  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c2PAVjV4OnA>

which investigators learn about the “Yiffing” (sexual fetish of individual in fur suits).<sup>194</sup> While this is a very small percentage of the fan population, it does come up as a common argument against Furies especially after the episode was broadcast.

Comments relating to bestiality made toward Bronies occur in a number of responses. Participants report epithets of “horse-fuckers” or “ponyfags” for liking *My Little Pony*. One Brony from Denmark recalls an incident when he brought a friend into his home and an altercation took place after spotting ponies in the apartment.

I brought someone home to see my apartment. There they found a piece of pony merchandise and immediately started ridiculing me. I told them to leave when they started accusing me of being a sexual deviant and they kept being spiteful even as they left. [I] have not seen or heard from them since.

Other fans report that allegations of “masturbating to gay horses” or performing other sexual acts. One Brony from California recollects of an incident in which a “Friend [offered] to paint a horse pink so that I can “get intimate” with it.” Another mid-20s Brony from Maryland was accused of having a fetish for “pony porn.” Some of these responses closely coincide with the more vitriolic fag identity; however, they demonstrate how masculinity, in terms of maturity and heteronormativity, becomes contentious when the fandom disrupts contemporary understandings of gender norms.

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<sup>194</sup> Stahl, Jerry, writer. “Fur and Loathing” In *Crime Scene Investigation*. Columbia Broadcasting System. October 30, 2003.

The Dominant forms of masculinity become ubiquitous through repetitive condemnations on the prospect of failure, resulting in the notion of an emasculated apparition that traditional concepts of masculinity use to reinforce gender boundaries. Beyond those boundaries of gender normative masculinity is the “constitutive outside” Butler describes as facets of marginalized identity deemed unappealing within a society.<sup>195</sup>

Kimmel asserts, “as young men we are constantly riding those gender boundaries, checking the fences we have constructed on the perimeter, making sure that nothing even remotely feminine might show through.”<sup>196</sup> Bronies will experience these ruptures along the perimeters of gender with negative results, relegating them to abject positions by friends and family because of their infringements. Several instances occur with a number of participants, including one Brony from Utah stating, “some of my friends thought it was gay so they said stuff like you don’t have a man card anymore.” Another mid-20’s male from Minnesota recounts that, “my sister found out and started yelling at me, calling me gay and childish and [saying that the show] is dumb.” Another Brony cited a conversation in which someone outside of the fandom stated, “Adult males watching a cartoon made for 3 year old girls might be the problem. [Okay], I give in. You freaks like a 3 year old girls show. Enjoy it.” Examples like this illustrate common themes of effeminizing and dehumanizing Bronies by placing fans in the categories of “freaks” and “little girls” or “taking away their man card.” Practices like this point out the abject position of the Brony identity through dismissal, securing the boundaries of gender. Bussey and Bandura see this patrolling of gender as a continual process in which:

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<sup>195</sup> Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 3

<sup>196</sup> Kimmel, Michael. *Masculinity as Homophobia*, 148

Peers are both the product as well as the contributing producers of gender differentiation. Children learn at a very early age what gets socially linked to gender as well as the values and conditional outcome dependencies about the gendered conduct that is considered proper or inappropriate for their gender.<sup>197</sup>

One respondent provides a story of gender repudiation that involving her unborn son. She was a young mother-to-be from Texas, requesting a *My Little Pony* themed baby shower for her expected child resulted in a number of negative responses. She recounts, “I wanted a *My Little Pony* baby shower and people said I was going to raise my son gay and that it was a ‘girls only’ theme.” Her husband, who also participated in the survey, attests to this incident, “My wife was attacked online for her desire to have a *MLP:FIM* themed baby shower for our forthcoming baby boy.” Rationales from individuals protesting the shower theme suggest the child, in some prenatal fashion, will become gay from the presence of seemingly feminine things.

Allegations against these parents for wanting a pony themed shower are indicative of how Bussey and Bandura understand constructions of gender through their own regulations of the concept. By reprimanding these expectant parents, they are providing the social influence for the regulation of an unborn child’s gender:

Consider the pervasive social forces that are brought to bear on the development of gender orientation from the very beginning of life. Parents do not suspend influencing gender orientations until children can identify themselves as girls and boys. On the contrary, parents begin the task at the very outset of development. They do so by the way by their social reactions around activities.<sup>198</sup>

Color plays an integral part into the arguments against the Brony fandom and *My Little Pony*. The six protagonists color combinations occupy soft colors such as yellow/pink, pink/fuchsia, purple/violet/fuchsia, white/violet/mauve, and sky blue/rainbow. Gender associations with

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<sup>197</sup> Bussey, Kay. and Bandura, Albert. “Social Cognitive Theory of Gender Development and Differentiation,” 700

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 695

color are nothing new. Colors often do go through changes throughout the course of history. The colors purple, pink, and blue all share similar stories of changes and modifications. Most of contemporary understandings of these colors are the result of changes stemming from the return of soldiers after World War 2.<sup>199</sup> Population growth after the war and the developments of residential areas such as Levittown, Pennsylvania influenced department stores such as Macy's to develop bedroom suites for newborn children with pink designated for girls and blue designated for boys. This trend of color association became a popular movement and quickly spread to other facets of the marketplace such as toys, fabric, and other house wares.<sup>200</sup>

This incident is not the first time that themes or aesthetic choices create backlash against a community in recent years. Part of what makes gender norms so powerful in society is their pervasiveness and seemingly invisible grip on the structures of power and influence. Therefore, when changes occur, contentions with these preconceived notions of color and gender appropriateness, retaliation can and often does arise from individuals who see the alterations as some devious method of pushing across some "hidden" agenda. A recent example occurred in August of 2015, when the department store chain Target decided to eliminate the colors of pink and blue from their store shelving in the toy department, bedding, and home entertainment.<sup>201</sup> However, this aesthetic move of color replacement and renaming of departments enraged a number of customers following the decision, citing a "politically

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<sup>199</sup> Del Guidice, Marco. "The Twentieth Century Reversal of Pink-Blue Gender Coding: A Scientific Urban Legend" *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 2012 41 (6) 1321-1323, 1323

<sup>200</sup> Target "What's in Store: Moving Away from Gender Based Signs" *A Bullseye View* August 7, 2015 <https://corporate.target.com/article/2015/08/gender-based-signs-corporate>

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*,

correct” agenda. Arguments against Target’s decision to change their signage are reminiscent of the arguments made against Bronies in that color associations often conflict with masculinity.

Gender practice implications affect everyone around us and examples provided by participants illustrate how traditional masculinity maintains its position through these interactions. Occurrences like these exemplify what happens when there are disruptions between traditional understandings of masculinity and masculinity performance. Rifts along the borders of performance create the dissonance that leads to the kind of harassment that some Bronies experience, resulting in a number of fans looking for ways to balance their enjoyment of ponies without infringing on expectations of traditional masculinity.

## **The Stable**

In terms of harassment, the fag identity has two effects on Bronies. First, the term dismantles a fan’s masculinity through a perception of failure. Second, the term relegates the fandom into the homosexual community for occupying a feminine space. A residual effect of this denigration could lead to many fans hesitating to talk about ponies in public for fear of supposedly failing at the standards of traditional masculinity. Bussey and Bandura indicate that gender-linked behavior is rigorously socially tested and informs the social constructions of gender.<sup>202</sup> Reactions from others as during gender performance will either reinforce or tear down our conceptions. If the performance is under attack, the tendency is to hide our true feelings in order to avoid further damage. Such defensive measures can compel individuals to

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<sup>202</sup> Bussey, Kay. and Bandura, Albert. “Social Cognitive Theory of Gender Development and Differentiation,” 685



conceal their identity through the creation of a façade to pass the critical eye of others in public.

Self disclosure practices surfacing in the wake of the fandom from this fear, in many ways, begins to mirror practices of the homosexual community. Trends occurring within the community include confessionals called, “Dad, I am a Brony” videos.<sup>203</sup> The general theme of these videos captures the moment a fan tells a friend or family member about the fandom, while recording their reaction. In many ways, this depiction of the situation mirrors the moment that an individual might come out of the closet and tell their parents of their lifestyle choice. However, these videos are problematic because they portray a moment of shame they have brought to the family. Their shame is a self perceived failure that reinforces the assumptions of masculinity. Even in the moment of “confession” these fans are implying that they feel remorse for enjoying *My Little Pony*, feeling uncomfortable when facing the moment of explanation with others about their hobby. Stemming from expectations of approval or disdain from parents and peers when performing, we seek praise if expectations are congruent or reprimand if there is a failure to performances of gender.<sup>204</sup> Alternatively, many young men learn these performances through the performance of others because “peers are a kind of gender police, constantly threatening to unmask us as feminine, as sissies.”<sup>205</sup> The specter of failure is the motivating factor keeping many young men’s masculinity in check. Ultimately, anxiety over the damaging label of “sissy” feels irreparable.<sup>206</sup> Such threats and feelings of

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<sup>203</sup> airlessarchives. [pseudo.]. “[Archive] Dad, I’m a Brony”

<sup>204</sup> Bussey, Kay. and Bandura, Albert. “Social Cognitive Theory of Gender Development and Differentiation,” 683

<sup>205</sup> Kimmel, Michael. *Masculinity as Homophobia*, 148

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 147

shame can force a number of individuals to hide their true feelings and keep aspects of their identity a secret.

Looking at fans who chose not to disclose, their responses range from living an introverted lifestyle to “career implications.” Participants state they are fearful of the negative reactions resulting from their disclosure and point to issues of shame or embarrassment as primary reasons for not telling others about their fan activities. Several individuals (all of whom identify as male) claim that if coworkers knew that they were Bronies it would create a negative work environment. Similarly, private respondents also show a tendency to conceal their activities (as well as merchandise, if they own any) when they go to conventions or physically hide *My Little Pony* merchandise from other. Contrariwise, there are private Bronies who are comfortable disclosing, but feel there are appropriate times to broach the subject. Oftentimes, these fans feel inappropriate Brony conversations will lead to awkward moments for everyone and constantly justifying their actions to non-fans is not worth their time and effort.

Within this section is a look at private fans and what kind of tactics they employ to keep their fandom a secret from others. Examining the responses given by the participants, illuminates dynamics occurring within the fandom and how self disclosure affects relationships with others. Chris Peters wrote an article on Bronies in Omaha, Nebraska, including a young man by the name of Chris Bachelder and his experiences as a Brony in the Midwest. “In his case, Bachelder said, open support of “My Little Pony” may have cost him a friendship. (My

friend is) always going to have a lesser opinion of me because of it.”<sup>207</sup> Another Omaha Brony by the name of Kyle Sass recalls a similar incident in which he feels support would not be a favorable option:

[He]tells some of his friends about the show, but he doesn't have collectables and doesn't attend meetings or conventions. In fact, his parents don't even know that he's a Brony. It's not that I'm ashamed and that I won't tell my parents. It's that I don't care to tell them, Sass said.<sup>208</sup>

Bachelder recounts a friend losing respect for him because of his fandom. In his friend's eyes, Bachelder loses his position in masculinity by being open about this fact. Kyle, on the other hand, has told others about the show, primarily his friends, yet he does not express interest in telling his family members about his activities. Fans admit they have a hard time confronting parents about their activities, however, many fans feel more comfortable telling their friends because they be more sympathetic. Such admissions follow closely to notions of “inherited identities” and “target identities.”<sup>209</sup> Inherited identity stems from the social construction of gender from within the family and as children grow, they develop an understanding through the traditions of their parents about gender. Target identity implements similar tactics, but focuses the construction of identity through the norms of the target group. In the case of Bronies, young men remain private to avoid conflict with parents, friends, and coworkers, in order to social identity.

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<sup>207</sup> Peters, Chris “‘Bronies’ (Dudes who Like ‘My Little Pony’) have a Strong Community in Nebraska” *Omaha.com* March 19 2013 [http://www.omaha.com/living/bronies-dudes-who-like-my-little-pony-have-strong-community/article\\_50643808-4237-5fd2-8c89-23818a8587cf.html](http://www.omaha.com/living/bronies-dudes-who-like-my-little-pony-have-strong-community/article_50643808-4237-5fd2-8c89-23818a8587cf.html)

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>209</sup> Chimot, Caroline and Louveau, Catherine. Becoming a Man While Playing a Female Sport: The Construction of Masculine Identity in Boys Doing Rhythmic Gymnastics.” *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 45.4 (2010):436-456, 441

Stephen Johnson interviewed Bronies from the University of Missouri. One member of the group, Brady Gall, explains how some fans remain secretive for fear of negative reactions. “‘A lot of people are secretive about it,’ Gall says. ‘I didn’t think that was a good place to be. He says his mom still thinks it’s weird. His reaction: ‘OK, Mom. You’re not alone.’”<sup>210</sup> Gall does not see advantages to the costs of self monitoring for the sake of keeping a particular identity intact in front of others and shrugs off criticisms from family. Others who are open about their fondness for ponies realize that this is a potential consequence, yet they understand that not everyone will condone their behavior. A second Brony club member named Jake Watkins recalls his own issues with friends and family members:

...his mom isn’t fond of his Bronyhood either, but he doesn’t bother explaining himself anymore. Some of his friends accept it even if they don’t understand it. A few actually watch the show with him even if they aren’t fans themselves, and some absolutely hate it. Among their reactions: ‘It’s girly as hell,’ or ‘If you watch it, you’re gay.’<sup>211</sup>

Objections by friends and family stating that being a Brony is “weird,” “girly,” or “gay” reinforce the notion that Bronies somehow violate unwritten rules of manliness. Negative reactions by nonfans illustrate the subtle power that gender norms play a role in the lives of people on a daily basis and how other members of society will try to maintain the borders of gender through their actions.

Interviews like these point out how social construction presses young men into believing enjoying a cartoon show about friendly ponies is somehow inherently wrong. Yet, this is something ingrained early in the lives of children. Bussey and Bandura allege:

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<sup>210</sup> Johnson, Stephen. “My Little Pony Reaches Unexpected Demographic” *Vox* June 20, 2013 Retrieved from <http://www.voxmagazine.com/stories/2013/06/20/what-brony/>

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*

Children develop the stereotypic conceptions of gender from what they see and hear around them. Once they achieve gender consistency- the belief that their own gender is fixed and irreversible- they positively value their gender identity and seek to behave in ways that are congruent with that conception.<sup>212</sup>

Ailen Arreaza illustrates this point in a *Creative Loafing* article in which his son overhears that *My Little Pony* is made for girls and feels that he can no longer watch the show, resulting in a dialogue about gender norms and how judgments on an individual's media consumption can affect gender perceptions:

Recently, I was telling a group of friends about the show and casually said something about it being marketed at girls. Lucas heard my comment and frowned. 'It's for girls? Does that mean I can't watch it?' he asked. 'Of course you can watch it,' I said. 'Some girls really like it, but boys can like it, too.' Our conversation got me thinking about the double standard we have when it comes to gender stereotypes. Why is it more socially acceptable for girls to watch shows targeted at males than for boys to enjoy a cartoon like *My Little Pony*?<sup>213</sup>

Arreaza's son is already attempting to conform to gender norms, even when those comments are passively describing an object as typically feminine or masculine. Lucas already feels resentment or remorse because he now feels that he will no longer be allowed to enjoy the show because of an inferred infringement, which can have lasting effects on a child's concept of gender through binary enforcement.

Some participants cite feelings of embarrassment about being a fan, as if they are faltering in their gender and attempt to maintain heteronormativity by hiding their merchandise or lying about their activities. Losing respect in the eyes of their peers is one of the potential repercussions fans may fear the most. Fans with this apprehension are "stabled"

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<sup>212</sup> Bussey, Kay. and Bandura, Albert. "Social Cognitive Theory of Gender Development and Differentiation." *Psychological Review* 106.4 (1999): 676-713, 677

<sup>213</sup> Arreaza, Ailen. "My Little Brony: I Will Tolerate the Crap Outta You." *Creative Loafing*. May 8, 2013 <http://clclt.com/charlotte/my-little-brony-i-will-tolerate-the-crap-outta-you/Content?oid=3084746>

Bronies, they may not be willing or able to disclose their pony related activities and go to extraordinary lengths to keep their Brony identity a secret. Originally conceived by the fandom shortly after the fandom began to grow, the concept of the stable is a measure Bronies may use to avoid potential harassment.<sup>214</sup> Analyzing how stabled Bronies manage their identity around others will provide insights into what they perceive are the biggest risks about being a Brony. Nearly half (47%) of the participants claim to experience harassment in some form, this gives many private Bronies a reason to maintain their silence. Private fans weigh the risks and benefits before deciding the potential losses are too costly. Avoiding potential backlash for appearing “gay” or effeminate is enough for them to keep silent. However, this decision to remain quiet presents its own set of problems. While the choice to stay mute about being a Brony does minimize the risk of being “outed” as a fan, there are damaging consequences. One effect is they further risk propagating the myths about Bronies.<sup>215</sup> If secretive fans were willing to break their self imposed silence, they would aid in the mitigation of the rumors concerning Bronies. However, self disclosure is often highly contextual and circumstances may not permit fans to be open as they would like. Factors could range from age, economic, and regional limitations that hinder a fan from telling others. Finding the appropriate time to let others know may be as difficult as it is to share the information with them.

The following is a selection of self monitoring practices that private Bronies in the sample will resort to in order to maintain their secret. Oftentimes, fans will resort to hiding or “stashing” their pony merchandise out of the sight of others for fear of reprisal. Others will

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<sup>214</sup> What Even, [pseudo.]. “Coming Out of the Stable”

<sup>215</sup> Sedgwick, Eve. “Epistemology of the Closet,” 4

fabricate stories in order to conceal their true intentions when they go to local meetups or attend pony conventions. The lengths these fans will go to maintain their secrecy through these self monitoring practices is worth the cost of not appearing less masculine or avoiding ridicule in their eyes. First, some fans will physically hide their ponies from others, such as stashing away any merchandise or related material that might reference *My Little Pony*. One Canadian fan admits to hiding his comic books and toys from family members and only watches the show in private conceding, “When I visit my parents on the weekend, I do not browse any pony related websites on my laptop.” Others will plan out how they will or will not display their merchandise around their home as a California Brony claims:

When my dad's at work, you'll find some merch layin around or mlp decorating my pc like wallpapers and such, but 10 minutes before he's home, the place is cleaned so that nobody could tell anything was there. And if there is anything else laying out, I claim that it's my sisters stuff (she's also a brony).

In the event of exposure, he has a contingency plan involving a sibling to cover his tracks. Other instances of pony stashing includes a Wisconsin Brony in his forties admitting, “I keep my ponys [sic] out of sight and I clear my internet histoy [sic] and change my desktop wallpaper.” Another fan from Minnesota explains how his methods involve physically rearranging his home when he knows that company will be coming over, “I own some merchandise that I have sitting out at my house, but when I know people are going to be visiting, I hide it away.” A young male fan from North Carolina refuses to buy pony memorabilia, however other Brony friends will buy merchandise for him. Even so, the ponies he owns are hidden away from others, “I don't tend to directly buy pony merchandise, but the items I do have (from online Secret Santas and the

like) generally stay in a closed box tucked away in an area that would be inconvenient for others to access.”

Rearranging one’s home, hiding merchandise, and clearing Internet browsing histories seems like a small price to circumvent any risk of exposure. Another fan from Wisconsin admits that he limits his pony consumption as he explains, “No conventions, only purchases. Have purchased merchandise online and had it sent through mail. I made sure to be the person getting the mail at my apartment every day until it arrived.” Some fans work very hard to maintain a low profile and exert a lot of energy to maintain masculine appearances. One young fan from South Carolina explains the level of effort he employs out of apprehensiveness toward unintentional exposure:

Whenever wearing anything with ponies on it, I tend to put other clothes over it, and tell people that I am visiting friends when going to a meetup without mentioning that it has anything to do with My Little Pony, I also try and keep others out of my room which has very conspicuous Pony toys in it.

Commitments to stay private have to be a time consuming task and the lengths some fans will go to keep their merchandise hidden are impressive. However, not purchasing or storing away merchandise is one avenue of minimizing exposure. Attending meetups and going to conventions are another issue private fans must deal with if they wish to feel a part of the community, so how do they bypass exposure in this instance?

Oftentimes, private fans will go to similar extents to keep their activities a secret to everyone. Many will fabricate stories, concealing their true intentions from others like one young man from California who explains how he keeps his identity a secret with the aid of a confidant when he goes to conventions, “I hide my pony merchandise in my closet and attend



conventions with a close friend and fellow brony [sic].” Oftentimes, fans will infer their activities by mentioning that they will be seeing friends when in reality they are attending group activities. A fan in his mid twenties admits, “when going to meetups I just say im [sic] hanging out with friends” or as one young man from the state of Washington writes how he covered his trip to a pony convention, “Time taken off work is labeled as ‘Visiting friends.’” A Massachusetts Brony writes, “I told my friends and family I was going to a weekend long music festival when I was actually attending bronycon.”

By creating fabrications regarding their whereabouts or hiding their merchandise, private Bronies secure their identity as a fan. However, the cost of keeping their secret through self monitoring does require more energy, such as a young fan from North Carolina comments, “I mentioned that I was going to Baltimore for a weekend but did not tell any people that I was going to BronyCon” or a Brony from Pennsylvania mentioning, “I went to Bronycon '14 on Saturday. I went as far as getting a gift card from the bank so that the charge wouldn't appear on my statement.” A Nevada Brony in his thirties admits, “Any merch I own is well hidden, and when I attended a meetup once, I did not tell anyone where I was going for the day.”

The work and effort required to keep up the appearance of disinterest in *My Little Pony* while internally worrying about how exposure may affect their relationships with others. Their fear of being seen as effeminate or gay grips them so much they are willing to maintain a secret life. The fear of gender infringement carries such a steep penalty for some fans that they are willing to do a lot of extra work in maintaining their masculinity. Finally, one young fan from North Carolina gave a full listing, in detail, of how he heavily self monitors his fan practices. His

concern over the threat of exposure looms over him so much that he has created a network of tedious measures that he believes will reduce the risk to an absolute minimum:

Feign disinterest when the show comes up in conversation, hide all pony related things when people come over to my apartment, make sure to only get pony merchandise in digital form or from Amazon Prime to ensure the packaging doesn't give anything away, share only instrumental songs when showing people music I listen to, only browse my computer files from a terminal when in a public place to prevent people from seeing pony-related image icons, always use an incognito browsing window when in public to avoid pony-related terms from being auto-filled.

Bronies are a growing fandom that faces challenges by heteronormative conceptions of gender and must navigate how they will disclose to others, if at all. The harassment many fans encounter may not have any direct correlations with age or gender as the quantitative data suggest, but it does not dismiss the fact that a lot of fans experience harassment directly related to their association with the fandom or that many fans will never divulge that they are a Brony to anyone for fear of repercussion. However, there are examples throughout this project that provide rationale for private Bronies to remain silent. In much the same way that the fag identity degrades members of the fandom or the repeated labels of immature and childish behavior, accusations against members of the fandom may coerce Bronies into finding a safe haven in the stable. The risk of exposure and potential ridicule they receive is enough to warrant the need to protect their masculinity.

There exists a large subsection within the fandom that feels they are violating some sort of socially accepted gender norm. If secretive fans want to mitigate this negativity towards the fandom they are going to have to risk disclosing themselves to others. While no quantitative data found significance in the correlations of gender, age and self disclosure, there is a new question regarding how secretive fans understand the term "private." Within the subsection of

private fans, there are 27% ( $n=82$ ) who indicate disclosing both online and in person about their fan activities. There are numerous possibilities to how this misunderstanding of terminology arose. The label of private Brony was limited to mean someone who did not tell anybody or a limited number of individuals about their activities in the *My Little Pony* fandom. The expectation was that if they identify as private Bronies, they may have disclosed to a close friend or family member in the strictest of confidence. It appears that a number of fans take the term private Brony to mean something not intended nor anticipated in this project. However, their interpretation of the term does make sense. Their definition of a private Brony includes not projecting their fandom upon others. They may not be afraid to share their fandom with others, but feel it is not appropriate to talk about ponies constantly. Other fans cite that they are introverted or shy and do not feel comfortable or obligated to share their interests. They claim having no problem if people know that they are a Brony, but feel that is not a fan's prerogative to let others know about Bronies unless they are specifically asked about it.

Further research is needed to determine not only the political implications individuals face when disclosing their fan activities to others, but how fans delineate the terms "private" or "public" within the fandom since it appears that there is no definitive understanding even within the group. No matter which side of the privacy scale that these "private" fans exist, there seems to be a common thread running through all of them. All of these practices of concealment, whether heavily or thinly veiled, appear to trace back to feelings of embarrassment or shame for failing to perform their gender. Limiting conversations or hiding their ponies away from others to avoid the subject are measures used by fans to maintain gender appropriate appearance. Regardless, the conversation for expanding the theory of

gender performance must include ample room for ponies and young men to allow them the ability to coexist without the threat of losing their masculinity.

## **Military Bronies**

Within the fandom is a subsection of fans collectively known as Military Bronies, a large contingent of individuals with over ten thousand people liking their page on Facebook.<sup>216</sup> The survey identified 66 military Bronies, of that number, only six classify themselves as private Bronies, presenting a juxtaposition of magic and machine guns. Here is a group of individuals, primarily males (52 males, 13 females, 1 transgender) who have or currently serve in a military force. Common perceptions of the military make it difficult to believe that ponies and soldiers would intermingle. Military service squarely positions itself within the ideals of hypermasculinity, prioritizing physical strength and domination above all else. However, many Bronies who are active and veteran service members conclude that there is very little difference between military values and the message of *My Little Pony*. An analysis of how masculinity is constructed in military spaces is needed, followed by comparisons between military beliefs and the themes within *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* will reveal how closely these two value systems closely align with each other.

Military service often draws similarities from traditional masculinities because it merits traits that compliment the dominant form's value system. Because both ideas appear so intertwined with each other, there appears to be very little difference between the meaning of masculinity in both military and civilian circles. John Fox and Bob Pease suggest certain traits

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<sup>216</sup> Facebook, Inc. "Military Bronies." Accessed February 29 2016.  
<https://www.facebook.com/militarybronies/?fref=ts>

are valued over others in the military and this mentality is reflected in civilian perceptions. “In the same way that particular contexts emphasize some of the conversations in which a person participates, military training, culture, and practices are said to exaggerate certain masculine features.”<sup>217</sup> Emphasis on training and behavior results in representations about the military accentuating these attitudes as Duncan Shields describes how the military’s conceptualization of masculinity heavily influences society’s understandings as well:

These narratives of masculinity and their association with stoicism, power, aggression, and violence have been readily translated into messages in popular culture that reinforce and further idealize military depictions of masculinity for nonmilitary populations, and for coming generations of new soldiers.<sup>218</sup>

By glorifying particular messages of masculinity as templates for the behavior of young men, the depictions of masculinity that the military projects to the civilian community is replete with images of courage, perseverance and individual achievement. Masculine ideals represented through soldiers can serve as inspiration for men and this is ingrained from a very early age through objects of child’s play with toy soldiers and media sources portraying soldiers in action. Soldiers are heralded as fighting for freedom and overcoming obstacles to accomplish their mission, willing to fight and sacrifice to defend the honor of their nation, all of which are admirable characteristics for young men. Kyle Kountour suggests this portrayal of soldiers and masculinity encapsulates all of the ideals of a nation:

The soldier is placed on a pedestal of honor, heroism, and sacrifice, and he must carry this out not only because it is expected of him in terms of martial and masculine

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<sup>217</sup> Fox, John and Pease, Bob. “Military Deployment, Masculinity and Trauma: Reviewing the Connections.” *Journal of Men’s Studies*. 20 (1) 2012 16-31, 21

<sup>218</sup> Shields, Duncan. “Military Masculinity, Movies, and the *DSM*: Narratives of Institutionally (En)Gendered Trauma.” *Psychology of Men and Masculinity*. 17 (1) 64-73, 65

discipline; he is also in many respects the nation's symbolic avatar, fighting not only for the nation per se, but whatever it is the nation stands for.<sup>219</sup>

Soldiers become the embodiment of the ideal man who not only confronts the threat facing their country, but also is incapable of showing any moments of weakness. Claire Duncanson illustrates the correlation between masculinity in the civilian world and the military, "they argue that the problems stem from a particular form of military masculinity, hegemonic within western armed forces, associated with practices of strength, toughness and aggressive heterosexuality."<sup>220</sup> Understanding representations of masculinity became the standard to which many a young men try to ascertain requires a quick overview of how society recognizes certain aspects of the military as the model for masculine performance.

Patrice Keats attests connections between military conflict and masculinity are one way in which theses gender performances reify each other, "because of war's association with masculinity, military culture serves as an opportunity to create idealized or exaggerated male caricatures in order to cement the associations between combat behaviors and the prototypical norms of masculinity."<sup>221</sup> Legitimacy is granted toward those notions of extreme masculinity as part of military culture which deems these behaviors as natural. As Gill Green et al. explain, expectations of military service create the ideals of masculinity through their institutional standards. "The culture has developed to support this is characterized as being overtly

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<sup>219</sup> Kontour, Kyle. "The Governmentality of Battlefield Space: Efficiency, Proficiency, and Masculine Performativity." *Bulletin of Science, Technology and Society*. 32 (2) 353-360, 354

<sup>220</sup> Duncanson, Claire. "Forces for Good?: Narratives of Military Masculinity in Peacekeeping Operations.", 64

<sup>221</sup> Keats, Patrice. "Soldiers Working Internationally: Impacts of Masculinity, Military Culture, and Operational Stress on Cross-Cultural Adaptation." *International Journal for the Advancement of Counseling*. 32 (1) 290-303, 295

masculinized and parts of the military have been depicted as institutions that personify hegemonic masculinity.”<sup>222</sup>

Much of society’s understandings about hypermasculine culture within the military stems from basic training, where a soldier’s life is epitomized by harsh training that pushes them physically and mentally to fall in line with military codes of conduct and military culture. Shaun Burns and James Mahalik point out, “during military training men are socialized to conform to masculine norms such as self-reliance and emotional stoicism, and punished for deviating from these norms.”<sup>223</sup> Individuals are molded into ideal soldiers forsaking weakness and striving toward obtaining a warrior spirit. In this phase of military training, the emphasis of converting civilians into troops conforming to military standards is paramount as Green et al. maintain, “The soldier identity forged during training is focused on the production of an efficient fighting force and involves the acquisition of traits that characterize hegemonic masculinity, such as physical toughness and [at times] aggression.”<sup>224</sup> Goals during this phase include imbuing men and women with the ability to meet the physical demands of soldiering which does include moments of extreme mental and physical stress.

While the basic training phase is the most taxing experience of a soldier’s career while serving stateside, it does not mean once they leave the drill instructors behind there is a reprieve from the pressure to maintain their military masculinity. Some military units push

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<sup>222</sup> Green, Gill, Emslie, Carol, O’Neill, Hunt, Kate. and Walker, Steven. “Exploring the ambiguities of Masculinity in Accounts of Emotional Distress in the Military Among Young Ex-Serviceman.” *Social Science and Medicine*. 71 (1) 2010 1480-1488, 1480

<sup>223</sup> Burns, Shaun and Mahalik, James. “Suicide and Dominant Masculinity Among Current and Former United States Military Servicemen.” *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*. 42 (5) 2011 347-353, 348

<sup>224</sup> Green, Gill, Emslie, Carol, O’Neill, Hunt, Kate. and Walker, Steven. “Exploring the ambiguities of Masculinity in Accounts of Emotional Distress in the Military Among Young Ex-Serviceman.” 1485

these values harder as John Fox and Bob Pease explain the culture of combat units include, “key features of traditional ideas of masculinity are promoted, tested, and celebrated, including the domination of one’s body and the external world, stoicism, a neglect of physical health, limited emotional expression, and a preference for the company of men.”<sup>225</sup> Constant testing of one’s masculinity makes military masculinity all the more toxic for young men as they must constantly prove themselves through the risky behavior they engage in. As Fox and Pease explain:

Moreover, like any social identity, military identity is always an achievement, something dependent upon conformity to others’ expectations and their acknowledgement. The centrality of performance testing in the military, and the need to ‘measure up’ heightens this dependence. It also heightens the vulnerability to and influence of shame.<sup>226</sup>

Regularly and routinely reinforcing one’s masculine identity for fear of contempt in the eyes of their peers is a driving force in how military masculinity maintains itself. Much in the same way that masculinity operates in the civilian world, masculinity requires continual verification to remain secure. These moments of reification could include moments of physical aggression, substance abuse, and other high risk behaviors.

While much is made about the toxic culture of military hypermasculinity, there is another side of military culture that does not receive the same amount of attention from the civilian world. As Claire Duncanson suggests, civilians often only see the more robust and rugged aspects, “many accounts of military training demonstrate how gender informs this process, as all things ‘feminine’ are disparaged, and ‘manhood’ is equated with toughness

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<sup>225</sup> Fox, John and Pease, Bob. “Military Deployment, Masculinity and Trauma: Reviewing the Connections.”, 21

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, 22



under fire.”<sup>227</sup> Although this narrative of masculinity in the military does persist, there is also the facet of military culture which places emphasis on teamwork, loyalty, and other values the military attempts to supplant in their soldiers beside physical proficiency and armed mastery.

The assertion here is that in order to accomplish the mission a unit must maintain a high level of cohesion and respect, which cohesion could be understood as friendship or reliance on others. Learning to depend on others is essential within military service because a proficient unit is able to operate well when all sections of the team are capable of working in harmony. Military Bronies will often cite the comparison between the Elements of Harmony and the United States Army acronym of values known as LDRSHIP.<sup>228</sup> The term is a form of shorthand for the military branch’s values of Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage which the United States Army proclaims:

Many people know what the words Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage mean. But how often do you see someone actually live up to them? Soldiers learn these values in detail during Basic Combat Training (BCT), from then on they live them every day in everything they do — whether they’re on the job or off. In short, the Seven Core Army Values listed below are what being a Soldier is all about<sup>229</sup>

While the United States Army core values are not unique to that military branch (the United States Navy, Air Force and Marines all have similar core values), military Bronies use this particular set of values in comparison to the Elements of Harmony (loyalty, kindness, honesty, laughter, generosity, and magic). Kevin Martin points out, “military Bronies are quick to defend their love for *My Little Pony* and point out the positive lessons taught by the show. With a bit of

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<sup>227</sup> Duncanson, Claire. “Forces for Good?: Narratives of Military Masculinity in Peacekeeping Operations.”, 65

<sup>228</sup> United States Army “The Army Values” Accessed February 2, 2016 from <http://www.army.mil/values/>

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*

creativity, one can easily see similarity between the two.”<sup>230</sup> The Elements of Harmony consist of the personalities inherent in each of the six protagonists of the show as represented by their cutie marks. There are some correlations and direct similarities such as loyalty. Other equivalents include honesty paralleling with integrity, selfless service corresponding with generosity, and kindness connecting with respect.

Developing bonds between soldiers is often described as a brotherhood, quickly realizing they must be able to get along with their fellow unit members. Handling interpersonal relationships properly and working cohesively within groups is one of the keys to military success. Soldiers come from all walks of life to volunteer in the service of their country, yet despite differences, the military is able to accomplish missions. Individual soldiers may not be able to agree on particular issues, but they will unify in their attempt to achieve victory. This bond is necessary as Keats writes:

Strong interpersonal relationships are seen as essential to a member’s initiation in the esprit de corps; training rewards group cooperation and performance because this is essential to combat effectiveness. For a soldier, fear of losing the group often outweighs the aversion to violence of the fear of death, because the group provides safety, security, belonging, and status. Soldiers are highly dependent on each other.<sup>231</sup>

Bonds like this are what builds a soldier’s morale and helps them to be an effective member of a unit. While there is emphasis on physical strength in the military, the need to work together cohesively toward common goals is contrary to the rugged individualism inherent in most dominant forms of masculinity.

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<sup>230</sup> Martin, Kevin “Masculinity, Marines, and My Little Pony.” *The Society Pages* October 20, 2015 <http://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2015/10/20/masculinity-marines-and-my-little-pony/>

<sup>231</sup> Keats, Patrice. “Soldiers Working Internationally: Impacts of Masculinity, Military Culture, and Operational Stress on Cross-Cultural Adaptation.”

Yet, because of how society understands the narrative representation of the military, the existence of multiple masculinities in a profession that pushes men and women to such mental and physical duress is impossible. Green et al. explain that popular perceptions of the military only fosters the brawny aspects of service without realizing that there is more to the military than fighting battles and being physically fit.

What is of interest in this study is in the way in which hegemonic masculinity in the military incorporates aggression, violence, and macho behaviors on the one hand and a caring, sharing ethos based on strong interdependent bonds on the other. This latter aspect is less often reported in the literature and may be more apparent among soldiers than other occupations or groups due to the unique nature of armed service.<sup>232</sup>

Associations between dominant traits and the military are often hard to separate and arguments exist claiming that military culture is imbued with this toxic level of hypermasculinity leaves no room for alternative masculinities or femininity in these spaces. Rationales like this are a point of contention in terms of integrating female soldiers in combat units. Leora Rosen, Kathryn Knudson, and Peggy Fancher point out that, “one of the arguments against gender integration in the military centers around the premise that male bonding is the cornerstone of small unit cohesion, and that the presence of women undermines this bonding, thus decreasing cohesion and ultimately, readiness.”<sup>233</sup> Yet, if soldiers are taught from the outset about Army core values along with teamwork and unit cohesion where could breakdowns in cohesion occur?

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<sup>232</sup> Green, Gill, Emslie, Carol, O’Neill, Hunt, Kate. and Walker, Steven. “Exploring the ambiguities of Masculinity in Accounts of Emotional Distress in the Military Among Young Ex-Serviceman.”, 1485

<sup>233</sup> Rosen, Leora., Knudson, Kathryn., and Fancher, Peggy. “Cohesion and the Culture of Hypermasculinity in U.S. Army Units.” *Armed Forces and Society*. 29 (3) 325-351, 351

Military Bronies are in a unique position that places them in two distinct spheres. First, they are soldiers volunteering their time and lives to defend their country. Second, they are members of a fandom that values friendship and community building by providing support for one another through the magic of colorful ponies. Some individuals, like as Kurt Schlichter, believe these two spheres are incapable of intersecting in any way. Schlichter wrote an article discussing the Brony fandom by making comparisons with the fandom to the United States military. His disdain for the fandom depicts his belief that masculinity is in crisis. His argument is illustrates how he sees Bronies and soldiers as wholly separate by delineating them and then prioritizing one over the other:

All the while, as these pathetic sissies giggle like school girls over magic unicorns that spray rainbows from their horns, real men – and women – who have put aside the temptation to retreat into a frivolous fantasy world are tromping through the wilds of Afghanistan. Such young adults, some younger (in years) than the “bronies,” are protecting all of us – including these pathetic weirdos.

Yeah, some will say it’s unfair to compare a bunch of harmless fem-boys who stopped maturing at age seven with the heroic men and women facing death or dismemberment on all our behalves every day. People who say that are wrong. These perma-virgins ought to be ashamed of themselves, but if they had the capacity for shame, this disgusting obsession would be a secret they guard almost as closely as a Harvard faculty member might guard the fact that he’s a registered Republican.

As sickening as it is, we can’t just ban grown men from acting like idiots because we disapprove of their lifestyle choices – after all, we aren’t progressives. It’s still a free country – coincidentally due entirely to the efforts of men and women who put aside childish things to contribute to society instead of feeding at the trough and then sitting on their expansive backsides as they eagerly clap like seals at the antics of colorful cartoon steeds.<sup>234</sup>

Schlichter describes the fandom only in dismissive terms while praising the sacrifice made by soldiers fighting overseas. He strategically excludes the two spheres from each other as he

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<sup>234</sup> Schlichter, Kurt “Terrifying New Trend: Grown Men Who Dig “My Little Pony?””

effeminizes the fans by calling them all “sissies” and references the maturity of fans by suggesting they are wasting time while others make the choice to defend the nation. He also attacks the fandom’s apparent lack of sexual virility by suggesting that they are “perma-virgins” incapable of finding intimate relationships. He finally suggests that fans should feel shame for even being involved in such a fandom because they are surrendering their masculinity.

By placing these two positions in a binary, Schlicter is inferring there is no way these two things could ever intersect. Yet, there is overlap between these two seemingly separate groups as military Bronies are a large subsection of the fandom who reflect the values of the friendship and serve their country. Claire Gordon writes about a luncheon during BronyCon 2012 where military service members and veterans (myself included) are treated, while three of the convention’s guests, Tara Strong, (voice of Twilight Sparkle) John DeLancie, (voice of Discord) and Lauren Faust (show creator) make an appearance to say hello and thank the troops for their service:

Members of our nation's armed forces appear to be some of the most enthusiastic acolytes of the Hub Network show. A Facebook page for military bronies has over 8,650 likes. A sergeant at Fort Carson in Colorado told The Gazette newspaper in Colorado Springs that there were around nine bronies at his base as of a few months ago, himself included. Last year's BronyCon Summer 2012 even offered a special lunch for service members, reports Military Times, and when the voice actress behind magical pony Twilight Sparkle paid a visit, the men erupted into her signature song ‘twilightlicious.’ ‘Even though it's a show designed for little girls, the theme of friendship and honor and integrity and the moral center has relevance to them,’ Loesch said. ‘That's pretty special.’<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> Gordon, Claire “American Military Bonds over ‘My Little Pony’” *AOL Jobs* August 2 2013 <http://jobs.aol.com/articles/2013/08/02/american-military-my-little-pony-bronies/?ncid=webmail21>

This section of the fandom has the distinction of being recognized at almost all Brony conventions for their military service and their presence at these events alters people's perceptions about Bronies.

Similar to previous sections of this project, there are a number of service members who were not comfortable at first letting others know that they were watching *My Little Pony*. Molly Lambert describes one incident in which a number of military Bronies were afraid to openly admit their enjoyment of the show with fellow soldiers:

One especially poignant moment shows a meet-up of military Bronies, who all confess to thinking they were the only Brony in the armed forces and being afraid to poll their fellow soldiers to see if anyone else stanned [sic] for Pinkie Pie.<sup>236</sup>

Similar in the way that a number of private Bronies conduct themselves, military fans feel pressure to keep their activities a secret. Their apprehension stems from the notion that failure to portray a particular image of masculinity will result in harsh repercussions as Burns and Mahalik reveal, "Kurpius and Lucart demonstrated that active duty male personnel were more likely than civilian men to embrace antifeminist beliefs and to value masculine toughness and dominance."<sup>237</sup> Just as civilian private Bronies contend with the pressures of maintaining a certain image in front of friends and family, military Bronies grapple with a more pervasive perception from battle buddies and officers. In order to maintain appearances they may keep their merchandise hidden or publicly dismiss the show all for the sake of not looking weak or effeminate.

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<sup>236</sup> Lambert, Molly "The Internet is Magic: Exploring the Wonderful World of My Little Pony Fandom in Bronies" *Grantland* November 12 2013 <http://grantland.com/hollywood-prospectus/the-internet-is-magic-exploring-the-wonderful-world-of-my-little-pony-fandom-in-bronies/>

<sup>237</sup> Burns, Shaun and Mahalik, James. "Suicide and Dominant Masculinity Among Current and Former United States Military Servicemen.", 348

For some military Bronies, this mistreatment even extends into their professional lives.

As Kevin Martin reports some officers will refuse to deal with the issue or engage in dialog with the soldier who is public in their fandom:

Male Military Bronies at times suffer from the kind of stigma and bullying reserved for feminine men and, because they are also often assumed to be gay, homophobia. One Brony, for example, discussed how his platoon sergeant refuses to inspect his room because it is plastered with My Little Pony paraphernalia that the sergeant does not want to see or be near.<sup>238</sup>

Barracks inspections are an important aspect of military readiness because it helps the unit ensure that the health and welfare of their soldiers is in good shape. The purpose of such inspections is to assure that all military equipment is in satisfactory condition which includes wall lockers, beds, and bathroom facilities.<sup>239</sup> The rationale behind a noncommissioned officer's refusal to inspect a barracks room is incomprehensible because of their own personal bias. Such actions by the officer could result in negative consequences on their own record if the soldier is not meeting standards.

One question in the survey asks military service members and veterans if they would agree or disagree with Schlichter's statements regarding the differences between Bronies and the military. Participant responses indicate a strong negative response to his words. Some remarks were crass, "That armchair General can kiss my pasty white ass." Others articulate their thoughts in a manner reflecting a number of the Army values and sticking to the message of friendship that ponies present. Testimonies to what ponies mean to them and their time of

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<sup>238</sup> Martin, Kevin "Masculinity, Marines, and My Little Pony." *The Society Pages* October 20, 2015 <http://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2015/10/20/masculinity-marines-and-my-little-pony/>

<sup>239</sup> United States. "First Sergeant's Barracks Program 2020 Handbook: A Guide to Property Management and Operations of Army Barracks" Washington, DC: Headquarters, Dept. of the Army April 26 2014, 30

enlistment is both encouraging and enlightening regarding how military members embrace the show and engage in it beyond viewing it in their leisure time. As one service member states:

Uniformed opinions are often times made based off of the vocal minority, as opposed to the silent majority. If Kurt Schlichter had actually taken the time to research the brony fandom, he would of [sic] found that there is a surprising number of military bronies that have served in Afghanistan, Iraq, or both (such as myself). I wonder how the knowledge that combat veterans are also among the brony fandom would affect his opinion on the matter.

This soldier does the raise the question of how much gender plays a role in perceptions about these two seemingly independent lifestyles. Even as Schlichter voices his opinion, he does not substantiate his claims with any evidence. One soldier admits that he made attempts to dialogue with Schlichter about the fandom and the military, "I called out Schlichter on Twitter after that statement came out. His response was polite. Some of his friends, not so much."

Representation of United States soldiers in an underlying issue for Schlichter and, for him, the soldier represents an ideal that is worthy of praise because of their sacrifice for serving the country. Bronies, as Schlichter sees them, represent a weakening culture that retreats into fantasy worlds replete with rainbows and unicorns. The failure on Schlichter's part is how he cannot see how the two communities could intersect as one sailor illustrates how one aspect of a service member's life does not encompass everything about them. He explains:

The military is an entity driven entirely by image - that is it's use after all, to project an image of power. That image has nothing to do with the personal beliefs, lifestyles, or off-duty hobbies of the members of the armed forces... I served in submarines, the USS Pennsylvania to be exact, and every time we left port we became the third most powerful country in the world - I also played role-playing games every other night while underway where I was a wizard... Do [not have an] impact on my duty what so ever. Ponies will be much the same...



There are multiple facets to any individual who serves in the military. Just as the military has a representation of power and might, there is more to a service member's life than shining boots and rifle proficiency. Soldiers have other interests besides drill and ceremony, they have hobbies and responsibilities which may not easily congeal with perceptions of the military. This sailor illustrates the point by describing what he and fellow shipmates do in their off time, which includes games of *Dungeons and Dragons* while submerged in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

Drawing delineations between on and off duty hours is one way service members can rationalize their interest in the show. Service members who voice their opinions on the matter suggest My *Little Pony* is a support for their morale as they occupy hostile areas and are looking to ease the tension after a patrol. As one soldier puts it:

The only thing I can say about this is that if given more info on the young men and women that are serving overseas, and the hobbies they have developed, I.e. MLP, he might change his opinion. I have met a great deal of Military Bronys [sic] and they have told me that they had MLP as a source of support while deployed. So developing an opinion without little to no info was very ignorant on his part.

Part of the support a soldier receives comes from something familiar and welcoming. While the juxtaposition of cute and colorful ponies against the realities of a war zone are interesting, this phenomenon has historically happened before as another service member reflects about their time on deployment and the history of cartoon characters in war:

I've deployed to both Iraq and Afghanistan; my last deployment (Afghanistan) I was outside the wire six days a week on average, and was quite happily watching ponies whenever I was at a FOB [forward operations base] with internet access. Mr. Schlichter is welcome to his opinion, and I thank him for his service, but I wonder if, on reflection, he would really find Bronies more reprehensible than, say, the service members who happily painted Disney cartoons as nose art on their WWII-era war machines.

This soldier's statement carries merit as there were a number of World War 2 military planes adorned with images of Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck ready for battle.<sup>240</sup> Even in the Brony fandom there exists a large a cache of military inspired *My Little Pony* art located on websites like *DeviantArt* portraying ponies military garb and an Air Force squadron adopting a redesigned *My Little Pony* logo as their unit patch.<sup>241</sup>

Other soldiers defend their position as a Brony by expressing the need for people to have a need to get away from the stresses of life. They feel as though there is a distinction between the service they provide and activities they engage in during duty hours:

Even if the main interest in MLP was escapism, all media is essentially escapism, whether it's the rich rapper, the football star, or the action movie hero. Everyone to some extent lives vicariously through the entertainment they consume. At least this show let's [sic] the audience escape to a world where integrity, loyalty, and kindness is exalted, rather than violence, cynicism, and overt sexuality.

Part of what this soldier sees in Schlichter's argument is the interpretation of the off duty hours activities. Engaging in a media text like *My Little Pony* does not take away from the job they do. It is simply a portion of their life that only appears contradictory because it competes with the image of a military soldier presented in mainstream media and this soldier feels the message ponies provide is a positive one that promotes the same core values as the military does.

Military Bronies see the correlation between ponies and the values they learn during their enlistment. They look past the divisions that separate individuals and purport to protect people regardless of who they are. They see the show as a moment of comfort and they

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<sup>240</sup> Bowden, Ray "Nose Art Themes" *USAAF Nose Art Research Project* February 29 2016 Accessed from <http://www.usaaf-noseart.co.uk/theme.php?theme=7#.VtS8s30rION>

<sup>241</sup> Watercutter, Angela. "Yes, There is an Air Force Class Flying with My Little Pony Patches." *Wired* August 5, 2013 Accessed from <http://www.wired.com/2013/08/air-force-my-little-pony/>

understand that not everyone may agree with what Bronies represent, but they know that their service allows people the freedom to express themselves as they please.

There is no greater privilege than being able to serve the people of the United States of America. I serve with the idea to protect the freedoms of the people of this country. Though I strongly disagree with the comment made, [sic] I can't deny his opinion altogether. The only thing I can say about this is that if given more info on the young men and women that are serving overseas, and the hobbies they have developed, i.e. MLP, he might change his opinion. I have met a great deal of Military Bronys [sic] and they have told me that they had MLP as a source of support while deployed.

Morale is vital for soldiers and having an interest that keeps a service member's spirit high while on deployment is essential. Stress relief is important and no one can maintain a constant aggressive masculinity over long periods of time. Recognizing there is a need to decompress, *My Little Pony* is a way that accomplishes this task and it should not make them appear any weaker in the eyes of their fellow unit members. As one military veteran describes it:

MLP was not a thing when I served. From my time on Reddit, I've seen plenty of pictures and stories of combat troops taking MLP toys with them overseas, and using the show as an escape from the day-to-day monotony and sudden moments of terror that is their daily life. I personally have pulled up an episode or two after a particularly bad call or shift as a firefighter (post-military). I can definitely see how it can help bring someone a little light and levity following stressful, sometimes frightening and dangerous experiences.

After particularly intense moments of duress a soldier needs the time to unwind and these instances should not be viewed as moments of weakness, but rather a cool down period after dealing with heated exchanges. Moments of escape from the stresses of daily life is necessary and this need is even greater in occupations involving acute moments of tension. It is a primary reason the military stresses morale boosters are important. Keeping this in mind, soldiers who enjoy *My Little Pony* should not be degraded because their media consumption choices seemingly contradict grand narratives of masculinity in the military. One soldier summarizes the

entire argument against Schlichter's opinion illustrating the need to see beyond the binary perceptions of masculinity in the military.

Simply because I can shoot a rifle or transport wounded through any conditions doesn't mean I can't enjoy a cartoon in my off-time. Not only that, this sort of thing has been going on forever. A majority of people have quirky and socially awkward hobbies or likes. The only thing different about Bronies is that the subject has a more widespread appeal, and the "coming out" of some of these people has created a sense of comfort and pride in acknowledging said quirk. This is no different than any other innocent quirk besides being a source of strength for many instead of shame. Simply knowing that they're not alone in being open about it allows this, and allows for a lot closer of a bond between others in the fandom, and allows for a lot more connections to be made. On the topic of him being a poor service member, we serve our country to protect everyone and every ideal in it. It's why an oath to the Constitution is made instead of to a social standard or ideal. Some people are atheist, some are religious. We serve to protect them and their ideals. Some people are white, black, Asian; we serve to protect them and their ideals. Some people like My Little Pony, some men don't, and we serve to protect them and their ideals. The men and women in Afghanistan, and in military bases here and around the world aren't doing what they do for a specific ideal or group of people, they do it for America, the great soup of ideals and people that it is. If this man is in the service, he has a lot to learn about what he does, and what and who he's doing it for.

Looking at the testimonials soldiers provide demonstrates just how askew the image of masculinity in the military appears to the rest of society. While the armed forces are almost synonymous with hypermasculinity, military Bronies do not see any issues with soldiers watching a feminized show. This collection of testimonies attests to the notion that as the military evolves, so too must the concepts of masculinity within the institution. There is a greater tolerance, if not understanding of the possibility for multiple types of masculinity to occur within the military.

Soldiers realize military service is more than the aggressive aspects promoting hypermasculinity. They understand military service includes cooperation, teamwork, and protecting a nation teeming with diverse people and cultures. They learn through the course of

their military careers what those core values mean and link those values with the Elements of Harmony. Watercutter describes the changing perception of masculinity can allow for multiple interpretations rather than a unilateral approach of a dominant form:

Perhaps the existence of Bronies proves we've evolved enough that guys can feel comfortable enough to like whatever they like, even cartoon ponies. And indeed, there are plenty of badass Bronies out there. 'Just because I happen to enjoy My Little Pony Friendship is Magic and try to live by the tenants of friendship and respect towards all people does not mean I don't still possess the ability and willpower to fire or, if necessary, step in front of a bullet,' Navy Lt. Jeremy Sevey once told me in an interview.<sup>242</sup>

Soldiers understand that even though they consume a media text contradicting the common perceptions of the military masculinity and engage in fan activities relating to ponies, their activities are not a detriment to their primary duty of serving their country.

For some individuals, like Ken 'Derpy' Catlin who describes the fellowship of Bronies giving him a better comprehension of what his service to the country and the message of friendship that the ponies deliver:

You, the Bronies, have taught me that there are things and people worth protecting; things bigger and more important than myself. All because I decided to watch some 'gay' little show about 6 ponies. Again, as I have said before, I cannot thank you, the MLP team, or the ponies themselves enough for what they have done for me, and this world.<sup>243</sup>

An individual learning about more about himself through a different presentation of the same core values the military tries to instill from the beginning of enlistment is encouraging. His change in perception shows how impressions of ponies and the military can change through experience and understanding.

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<sup>242</sup> Watercutter, Angela "Bronies are Redefining Fandom – and American Manhood" *Wired* March 11 2014 <http://www.wired.com/2014/03/bronies-online-fandom/>

<sup>243</sup> Winter, Jana. "Warhorse: The Military's My Little Pony Fan Club" *Fox News* July, 18 2012 <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2012/07/18/military-my-little-pony-fan-club/>

The juxtaposition of ponies and military service members to perceptions of masculinity illustrate how two seemingly separate roles can coexist with similar goals. Military Bronies are challenging current conceptions of masculinity by superimposing unicorns with M1 Abrams tanks. They represent a complex connection the military has with masculinity which has multiple interpretations of what it means to be a soldier. On the one hand, these service members are performing their duty as soldiers while acting aggressively out on the battlefield. While on the other, these same soldiers are following their core values of integrity, loyalty, and selfless service which can be easily understood as counterparts to the core values of *My little Pony*. Military Bronies see their military values repackaged in a pony presentation and this alteration of military values illustrates how masculinity is fraught with contradictions. When lines of similarity are drawn between two seemingly contrary activities like Bronies and military service, it illuminates how vague and difficult masculinity is to manage.

### **Concordant Masculinity**

Throughout this analysis is the notion that Bronies are challenging commonly held perceptions about masculinity. Previous sections highlight how Bronies conduct themselves around others, even in environments where conceptions of hypermasculinity are considered the norm such as the military Bronies. However, this section is where the analysis begins to take a critical turn by addressing the current state of masculinity studies. Hegemonic masculinity serves as the primary framework of this academic field and its key characteristic of allowing alternative masculinities to persist so long as they can rationalize their actions as masculine, otherwise they are subordinated. This segment of analysis will put forward the idea that there is

another potential masculinity occurring within the Brony fandom, which does not follow similar patterns of masculine construction. An examination of how masculinity changes through contextual circumstances is required, followed by an investigation of Eric Anderson's inclusive masculinity. Finally, this will culminate in a new framework for the concept of concordant masculinity which describes how this gender construct is capable of changing the current understandings of the concept.

Hegemonic masculinity creates a system of hierarchal categories of masculinity which prioritizes certain traits over others by dismissing alternatives as abject.<sup>244</sup> Attributes given privilege receive greater emphasis and promoted as an ideal. However, there are instances when those ideals are unattainable and must go through an alteration in order to justify its masculinity. Sometimes the circumstances of a situation do not permit dominant notions of masculinity to persist. In these instances, dominant forms of masculinity must be able to conform to the prevailing conditions of a situation. Linda Bye sees this as a component that allows for change in gender constructs because ideal representations cannot be met. "Identity politics can be investigated as social and political struggles over identity and place, and as the mobilization of strategic identities in order to reconstruct or change hegemonic discourses of, for instance, rural masculinity."<sup>245</sup> For men in rural areas where resources are scarce, they may need to alter their conceptions of masculinity in order to maintain that identity.

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<sup>244</sup> Connell, Raewyn and Messerschmidt, James Masculinities. "Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept" *Gender and Society* 2005 19:6 829-859, 846

<sup>245</sup> Bye, Linda. "'How to be a Rural Man': Young Men's Performances and Negotiations of Rural Masculinities" *Journal of Rural Studies*. 25: 278-288 2009, 280

At this point, current conceptions of masculinity reach an impasse. Allowing alternative interpretations of masculinity to take precedence over traditional forms out of contextual necessity do not easily fit into hegemonic masculinity's framework, but these substitutions still follow familiar patterns of the theory through identity rationalization. Bye sees how this transformation happens in places where available resources do not allow for contemporary forms of masculinity such as in rural areas, "in many aspects, the formation of rural masculinities may appear to be very rigid, but research has shown that rural masculinity is changing, and that men can be men in different ways."<sup>246</sup> Bye's work illuminates an area of masculinity often overlooked and begins to illustrate the issues confronting gender in the postmodern era.

Traditional masculinity studies emphasize the male identity as a tenuous standard that is in constant danger. Previous studies support this notion, but Bye's work begins to show how the masculine identity can be altered in such a way that even when there is a threat of looking feminine, circumvention is possible without losing respect. This can occur through the development of alternate forms of acceptable masculinity that do not wholly follow all aspects of traditional masculinity, but can justify the alteration to sustain a masculine identity. For Bye, this occurs in those areas where the need to change exceed the resources available to maintain a current notion of masculinity, rural areas in particular. "The focus is on understanding how rural young men experience and work with identities in a rural community and how they

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<sup>246</sup> Bye, Linda "'How To Be A Rural Man': Young Men's Performances and Negotiations of Rural Masculinities," 280



mobilize strategic identities in order to reconstruct and transform local discourses of rural masculinity.”<sup>247</sup>

Bye’s work with rural masculinity looks at how this interpretation of gender is in crisis because localized concepts of dominant masculinity are not capable of being met due to constraints such as financial, social, or physical limitations. She first suggests that masculinity requires constant reification which can result in tensions between the expectations and the realities of gender practices.

If manhood is viewed as elusive and tenuous, two implications are that [a] challenges to men’s manhood will provoke anxiety and threat-related emotions among men and (b) men will often feel compelled to demonstrate their manhood through action, particularly when it has been challenged.<sup>248</sup>

If conditions for a certain aspect of dominant masculinity cannot be met within a region a quandary emerges from this lack which can allow for certain concessions. As Vandello et al. indicate, masculinity is regularly in distress and require performances that diffuse the situation, “First, manhood is viewed as both elusive and tenuous, and, second manhood requires social proof.”<sup>249</sup> Compromise begins to develop when the social proof is lacking, allowing for certain concessions to be made that still satisfy preexisting conditions within traditional masculinity.

An example of this arrangement in Bye’s work is in young men’s occupations.<sup>250</sup> With the disappearance of industry in rural areas some men go into the healthcare sector as caregivers, a position that is typically not considered masculine because these vocations were

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<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 280

<sup>248</sup> Vandello, J. A et al. “Precarious Manhood” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 95.6 (2008): 1325-1339, 1327

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, 1326

<sup>250</sup> Bye, Linda. “‘How to be a Rural Man’: Young Men’s Performances and Negotiations of Rural Masculinities”

usually reserved for women. However, the concession to this circumstance is that the young men partaking in these jobs are still working within the community they grew up. Migration of young people to larger city centers where employment is more readily available is part of the issue facing rural regions because; industries that fostered growth in the area are declining or gone. If the young men of a region decide to stay and take an occupation that is considered feminine, their gender transgression is overlooked. Deciding to stay in the local area demonstrates loyalty to the community which allows them to remain masculine in the eyes of the locals. This serves as a social proof for these young men because the compromise allows them to remain masculine, even if their chosen profession is often regarded as a feminine vocation. Bye's work illustrates how rural masculinities become flexible and fluid by allowing seeming contradictions to exist in regions where many might consider such a thing an impossibility.

However, identity justifications through social proofs are a point of contestation that this project wants to alter. Note the need for compromise in Bye's flexible and fluid in her rural masculinities which still occupy the hegemonic masculinity framework. Numerous compromises listed in her work include hunting, snowmobiling, and practical knowledge illustrate the need for social proof to maintain an identity.<sup>251</sup> Additionally, all of these social proofs find middle ground in the community through performative acts to maintain their masculinity. Eric Anderson explains this rationalization is inherent in the gender infringements, "Men who occupy feminized space are quick to defend their transgressions as consistent within normative boundaries of orthodox masculinity, maintaining that they have not transgressed masculine

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<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*, 282-284

acceptability, rather that the space has been inappropriately gendered.”<sup>252</sup> Does the possibility exist that men can occupy feminine spaces without the need to reappropriate the space or claim that same space is incorrectly defined?

The Brony fandom departs from this compromise occurring in regional forms of masculinity. Within the fandom, masculinity does not necessitate an accommodation to retain aspects of its performance, nor does this version of masculinity need to colonize areas of femininity or rationalize its participation through compromises. This form of masculinity is inclusive in how it is accepting of various forms of gender without creating hierarchies or marginalizing certain behaviors. It does not define the masculine as not feminine and allows for the intermingling of the two concepts without the creation of binary coding.

A close approximation to the Brony version of masculinity is known as “inclusive masculinity” developed by Eric Anderson. This type of masculinity does not follow the same presumptions as dominant forms of masculinity. Anderson describes how his inclusive masculinity operates in male cheerleading, a perceived feminine sport by looking at two separate approaches male cheerleading squads justify their participation.

The second category of masculine performance is labeled as *inclusive* [emphasis is original]. The men in this group view orthodox masculinity [read as traditional or dominant masculinity] as undesirable and do not aspire to many of its tenets. Particularly important to the study of men in feminized terrain, this research shows that inclusive masculinity is based less on homophobia and antifemininity than orthodox masculinity. Men in this group willingly embrace the feminized underpinnings of their sport.<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> Anderson, Eric “Orthodox and Inclusive Masculinity: Competing Masculinities Among Heterosexual Men in a Feminized Terrain.” *Sociological Perspectives* 48.3 (2005):337-355, 339

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, 338

Anderson indicates that inclusive masculinity freely espouses more feminine aspects of gender and does not require justification for their involvement in that feminine space. More importantly, these individuals do not prioritize the need to follow or conform to dominant forms of masculinity. Anderson suggests that young men who belong in the category of inclusive masculinity are less likely to worry about prescribed gender norms, "Men who subscribed to inclusive masculinity were far less concerned with the expression of femininity among other men."<sup>254</sup>

If inclusive masculinity does not attempt to pursue after the ideals of traditional masculinity, then is it possible for this type of masculinity to be categorized along with other gender constructs? Ross Haefner suggests that inclusive masculinity "co-occurs" with hegemonic masculinity as they interact with each other through performances which establish masculine identity in various localized forms.<sup>255</sup> Hegemonic masculinity allows for concessions and compromise when considering contextual issues concerning male gender, but inclusive masculinity does not look to justify actions incongruent with traditional masculinity. It openly embraces and acknowledges the feminine without attempting to reclaim it as masculine. Anderson argues that inclusive masculinity cannot adhere to the same guidelines as other masculinities because this form of gender identity does not perform in the same manner:

It would be inappropriate to describe the men belonging to the inclusive group as maintaining a subordinate form of masculinity. These men construct a hierarchy that esteems inclusivity and stigmatizes orthodox masculinity, it would be hard to say that they are subordinate. Furthermore, Connel describes subordinate masculinity as existing *only* in relationship to a dominant *institutionalized* form of masculinity, and in the

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<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, 347

<sup>255</sup> Haefner, Ross. "Transitioning to a New Manhood: Subcultures as Sites of Inclusive Masculinities," 135

Inclusive Cheerleading Association, it is inclusive masculinity that is institutionalized, not orthodox masculinity [emphasis in original].<sup>256</sup>

As Anderson sees it, inclusive masculinity cannot fall into the hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity because it works outside the structures that privilege dominant forms of masculinity. This new gender framework is an antithesis to the dominant structures of masculinity because it grants aspects of subordinate masculinities without the need to justify their inclusion and dismisses more toxic aspects of traditional masculinity.

Additionally, this inclusive form of masculinity does not feel threatened from appearing different or feel shame for performing in a way that is contradictory to prescribed gender norms. Anderson describes his interviews with members of a male cheerleading squad who ascribe to this form of masculinity tend to follow a more progressive outlook on sexual orientation and gender as opposed to traditional forms of masculinity which dismiss alternatives to the binary.

Those who subscribed to inclusive masculinity were shown to behave in effeminate ways without experiencing social stigma. This group largely chose not to value whether people perceived them as gay or straight, masculine or feminine. In this respect, they were less (or not at all) defensive about their heterosexuality, and they regularly stated support for homosexuality. Because these men had a culturally positive association with homosexuality, homophobia ceased to be a tool of masculine marginalization. Conversely homophobic expression was stigmatized among men in this group. In fact, the inclusive form of masculinity proposed by this group was the near-antithesis of orthodox masculinity.<sup>257</sup>

Inclusive masculinity allows young men to engage in feminine spaces or portray feminine characteristics without fear of losing their masculinity. This is due, in part, to the notion that

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<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, 348

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 351

these individuals do not place the same importance on gender performance as hegemonic masculinity tends to do through the creation of hierarchies. Inclusive masculinity allows for greater gender fluidity due to its equitable view of gender identity. Haefner proposes, this rendition of masculinity allows for more dynamic interpretations of gender against the common binary notions pervading in society. "Inclusive masculinity suggests not only that men are developing more progressive attitudes toward queer people but they develop more egalitarian relationships with women and their straight male peers."<sup>258</sup>

However, there are points of contention with inclusive masculinity's framework that require attention. While Anderson's concepts are reflective of a progressive notion of gender fluidity, it does draw criticism from feminist scholars. These critiques pose that inclusive masculinity is only accessible to the privileged and symptomatic of postfeminism.<sup>259</sup> Rachel O'Neill critiques the framework claiming that the progressive attitude of inclusive masculinity may be an illusion leading to more inconspicuous forms of male domination. O'Neill's accusation stems from Anderson's insistence that society has lessened levels of "homohysteria" or homosexual panic prevalent in the 1980's and his framework is primarily based on the premise that "homophobia is masculinity."<sup>260</sup> She suggests this move follows a postfeminist maneuver that claims social progress eliminates older theory and if homophobia is vanishing in society, these earlier frameworks need replacing. This is akin to Angela McRobbie's contentions on postfeminism, "drawing on a vocabulary that includes words like 'empowerment' and

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<sup>258</sup> Haefner, Ross. "Transitioning to a New Manhood: Subcultures as Sites of Inclusive Masculinities," 131

<sup>259</sup> O'Neill, Rachel "Whither Critical Masculinity Studies? Notes on Inclusive Masculinity Theory, Postfeminism, and Sexual Politics." *Men and Masculinities* 18: 100-120, 104

<sup>260</sup> Ibid., 111

‘choice’, these elements are then converted into a much more individualistic discourse...so as to ensure that a new women’s movement will not re-emerge.”<sup>261</sup> In a similar fashion, O’Neill is arguing that inclusive masculinity is guilty of similar tactics by making claims that absences of homophobia in new permutations of masculinity somehow eliminate older gender theories like hegemonic masculinity or that power structures of gender have completely vanished.

Additionally, Elizabeth Nagel suggests inclusive masculinity is only accessible through privilege by questioning the position of the participants in Anderson’s studies.<sup>262</sup> She asserts the idea that only select men are capable of utilizing inclusive masculinity because of their status, arguing that Anderson’s participants (members of a college cheerleading team, Greek fraternity, and rugby team) have access to this form of masculinity because of their status. Furthermore, the appearance of social progress with these participants also suggests the necessity of hegemonic masculinity frameworks is no longer needed. For O’Neill, inclusive masculinity is a postfeminist machination which takes antihomophobic mentalities into account, but ignores gender relations like access to women’s bodies, which is still prevalent in many young men’s lives in Anderson’s studies.<sup>263</sup> Criticisms against inclusive masculinity indicate the framework gives illusions of social progress, but do not take greater contextual issues into consideration by giving men with privilege a pass on traditional masculine transgressions.

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<sup>261</sup> McRobbie, Angela *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, and Social Change*. London: Sage 2009, 1

<sup>262</sup> Nagel, Elizabeth. “Review of Inclusive Masculinity.” *Journal of Men’s Studies* 18: 109-110

<sup>263</sup> O’Neill, Rachel “Whither Critical Masculinity Studies? Notes on Inclusive Masculinity Theory, Postfeminism, and Sexual Politics.” *Men and Masculinities* 18: 100-120, 112

How does concordant masculinity fit in this scheme of changing masculinity without falling into all of the same criticisms of inclusive masculinity? A number of the features within concordant masculinity mirror Anderson's framework, however, there are aspects which differ in scope and redress some of inclusive masculinity's shortcomings. Analyzing how members of the fandom conduct themselves and media coverage of the community will begin to bring those features to light.

First, this fandom has a number of significant impacts on traditional conceptualizations of masculinity. Haefner advocates, subcultures have been havens for subversive masculinities, sites of genderplay, and gendered resistance."<sup>264</sup> Mobilizing strategic identities plays a big role in how Bronies begin to reconfigure masculinity because their existence is disruptive to gender roles. Watercutter notes how Bronies openly confront traditional forms of masculinity through their involvement in *My Little Pony*:

This is the quality that differentiates Bronies from almost every other fandom: Their very existence breaks down stereotypes. Socialized gender norms (not to mention marketing) dictates that boys are supposed to like things like trucks, while girls are supposed to like princesses and pink stuff. Bronies obliterate that ideal.<sup>265</sup>

Involvement in the fandom has many implications for current dominant notions of masculinity which go beyond a bunch of men playing with pretty ponies. After Target's decision to remove gender labels from shelves, websites like *Equestria Daily* cite the department store's decision is one way the fandom is changing preconceived conceptions of gender.<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> Haefner, Ross. "Transitioning to a New Manhood: Subcultures as Sites of Inclusive Masculinities,"130

<sup>265</sup> Watercutter, Angela "Bronies are Redefining Fandom – and American Manhood"

<sup>266</sup> ABagOVicodin [pseudo.] "Editorial: What Does Target's New Shelving Policy Say About The Fandom?" *EquestriaDaily* August 16 2015 <http://www.equestriadaily.com/2015/08/editorial-what-does-targets-new.html>



Many Bronies admit their fan participation knowingly breaches the borders of masculinity norms and understand the complications their fandom brings to current conceptions of gender. Mikko Hautakangas explains how these fans reorganize their identity in ways that traditional masculinity would deem taboo. However, this fandom illustrates an important evolution in how masculinity is perceived by society.

Bronies recognize their fandom as a violation of gender norms, and becoming a Brony is described as a process of having to rework one's masculine identity, incorporating aspects that used to be absent or repressed. This is simultaneously a challenge and an opportunity: the points that are underlined as deviation from the norm are also the points that make the fandom valuable, since they are depicted as resources that are lacking from mainstream masculinity.<sup>267</sup>

Altering dominant concepts of masculinity and gender practices is the focal point of this project. However, an argument surfaces that contends Bronies are looking to upset gender dynamics through a form of ironic enjoyment, suggesting fans are not sincere because they are only looking to create a disturbance for controversy's sake. Gavia Baker-Whitelaw dismisses this assertion, claiming the fandom is actually changing perceptions of gender:

As well as being a gleefully uncynical show about universal themes such as, yes, friendship, there's something truly counterculture about being a fan. The two poles of "acceptable" interests for teenage boys can be represented by videogames and sports, both of which can be interpreted as play-fighting. *My Little Pony* is the complete opposite of this, telling stories about tolerance and acceptance in a candy-coloured world full of cheerful cartoon animals. Really, it provides an entertainment alternative that is so utterly out-there it can't be seen as anything *but* rebelling against the norm.<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> Hautakangas, Mikko. "It's OK to Be Joyful? My Little Pony and Brony Masculinity." *Journal of Popular Television* 3(1) 2012 111-118, 113

<sup>268</sup> Baker-Whitelaw, Gavia "A Parent's Guide to Bronies" *Daily Dot* February 11 2013  
<http://www.dailydot.com/lol/bronies-parents-guide-my-little-pony/>

Baker-Whitelaw proposes that even if the fandom was an ironic trend; the sincerity in the way Bronies participate in it suggests something else entirely. If Bronies were only engaging in the media text with the intent of irony, then why would they actively immerse themselves and practice the tenets of friendship that the show's message purports?

Secondly, concordant masculinity allows young men to engage in socially constructed norms of femininity without the need to rationalize their behavior or reappropriate feminized practices as masculine. So how do Bronies accomplish this maneuver within the fandom? Haefner proposes this turn is possible within subcultures as a moment in an individual's life that shuns away restricting gender binaries or pigeonholing particular activities into specific gender domains and allowing for greater gender fluidity.

Rather than succumbing to the 'crisis of masculinity,' some young men are seizing the moment to explore new masculinities less bound to traditional patriarchal norms. As spaces that encourage cultural resistance and oppositional identities, youth subcultures may foster inclusive masculinities, less accepting of sexism and homophobia.<sup>269</sup>

By creating a new identity in a subculture like the Brony fandom, many young men no longer concern themselves with the trappings of traditional masculinity. Instead, they are using their formative years as a time of evaluation in the same way that Arnett suggests in "emerging adulthood" in which young people are trying to understand who they are and what they want to be. Arnett and Haefner differ in how this search for identity is conducted. The former implies that there is a moment of exigency young men contend with while struggling to understand who they are and how they fit in the world. The latter proposes that inclusive masculinity in a subculture allows for experimentation and exploration without the same complications which

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<sup>269</sup> Haefner, Ross. "Transitioning to a New Manhood: Subcultures as Sites of Inclusive Masculinities," 128

may arise in the case of an individual in emerging adulthood. The impetus in the decision making process does not have the same impact as those in Arnett's argument because Haefner infers that identity formation in subcultures can occur with the help of others in the community, rather than solitary struggle.

Haefner also interprets inclusive masculinity in subcultures allow for identity exploration. He notes the importance of communities that foster identity construction because they give young people the space to experiment with their identity and challenge traditional gender norms:

While impossible to generalize across the diverse array of subculture, let alone specific scenes, subcultures have provided space for young men to challenge hegemonic relationships. In fact, participants in some scenes actively *fight* sexism and misogyny and vociferously support more inclusive masculinities. Generations of young, subcultural men have transitioned to adulthood, amid at least some exposure to antisexist, queer-positive ideas, creating fissures in which inclusive masculinities, and more inclusive relationships, might blossom. [emphasis original]<sup>270</sup>

In the case of Bronies, concordant masculinity allows young men to express themselves and share their feelings in a space which does pass judgment on the basis of gender, race, sex, or religion. Haefner even explicitly points out how the Brony fandom accomplishes this in their fandom, "Bronies' motto is 'love and tolerance', a nod to the show's values but also a refutation of the relentless, denigrating criticism they receive for their gender transgressions."<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 135

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, 133

Messages of love and tolerance within the Brony community are indicative of how much of an influence concordant masculinity has within the fandom. The mantra means more to this fandom as it puts this sentiment into practice by doing its best to make sure that anybody and everybody feels welcome within the community. Gabriela Garcia explains how the organizers of BronyCon, the largest convention for fans of *My Little Pony* institutes policies that cultivate these feelings of inclusion:

What was less expected was the thorough display of radical inclusiveness throughout the convention. Bathrooms, for instance, were relabeled as gender neutral facilities... BronyCon organizers facilitated identity needs from the outset, allowing Bronies to assign preferred names to their nametags upon purchasing their tickets. And the convention center's singular public elevator—a notable flaw in the building's design—was reserved to ensure access for those with additional needs. It was beyond considerate; it was compassionate.<sup>272</sup>

Event planners went to extraordinary lengths to ensure that no particular identities were intentionally dismissed. Moments like this illustrate what concordant masculinity and the Brony fandom is capable of by looking for ways to ensure individuals who do not fit within ideal identities will feel welcome when they may be otherwise shunned.

This movement toward inclusivity has even begun to be recognized in larger media outlets like the *Denver Post* as Hugh Johnson documents his interactions with fans after watching the documentary *Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony*:

At the core of the Brony story is a culture of acceptance, happiness and friendship. It's a culture of inclusivity where men and women can have fun without a judgmental atmosphere. It's a culture that forced me to take a step away from my caricatured view of manhood: the prideful, desensitized male who unfailingly attracts women with his body spray. As a man, I can appreciate the virtues of unity and friendship, and while I learned those values on the football field, I don't see why it matters where any man or

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<sup>272</sup> Garcia, Gabriela. "Ponying Up Radical Inclusion" *Hopes and Fears* August 11 2015  
<http://www.hopesandfears.com/hopes/culture/happenings/216155-pony-up-radical-inclusion-at-brony-con>

woman learns them. I'm not a Brony because ponies still aren't my thing, but I do support positive change. My Little Pony is redefining manhood and that deserves a brohoof.<sup>273</sup>

For Johnson, the message of inclusivity is relatable to him through his experiences on the football field. He sees that the fandom is a positive community which does not exclude individuals, nor does it privilege the toxic facets of masculinity. Additionally, he does not see anything wrong with the messages of love and friendship that the show presents just because they are manifested in a manner more playful than his football experience.

How does this all fit within current understandings of gender and masculinity? As Butler suggests, gender is a fluid identity which cannot be easily compartmentalized into simple boxes for people to check off. Furthermore, gender fluidity permits people to alter themselves according the demands of the situation as it arises. Bussey and Bandura explain how context allows these changes to occur in everyday life:

A gender schema is not a monolithic entity. Children do not categorize themselves as 'I am girl' or 'I am a boy' and act in accordance to that schema invariantly across situations and activity domains. Rather they vary in their gender conduct depending on a variety of circumstances. Variability is present at the adult level as well. A woman may be a hard-driving manager in the workplace but a traditionalist in the functions performed in the home.<sup>274</sup>

Variability allows individuals to bend the seemingly immovable conceptions of binary gender roles. A person cannot be of a singular identity at all times and there is shifting in roles during the course of a day. This process makes it possible for a soldier to march in drill and ceremony in the morning and watch rainbow colored equines at night without worrying about losing their masculinity. The variability of concordant masculinity begins to nullify the idea that

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<sup>273</sup> Johnson, Hugh "Of Bronies and Men: Rethinking Manliness" *Denver Post* March 19 2014  
<http://blogs.denverpost.com/nerd/2014/03/19/bronies-men-rethinking-manliness/1673/#more-1673>

<sup>274</sup> Bussey, Kay. and Bandura, Albert. "Social Cognitive Theory of Gender Development and Differentiation.", 679

involvement in an feminine space automatically marginalizes men for straying from masculine practices.

These are the strengths of concordant masculinity. The emergence of the Brony fandom and the messages of love and tolerance emanating from the community are carving out this new type of masculinity. Concordant masculinity allows males to engage in traditional feminine spaces and roles without reappropriating that space, a move often implemented by the hegemonic structure of masculinity. Concordant masculinity breaks away from hegemonic masculinity in a similar way as inclusive masculinity which openly confronts standard gender norms for young men without the need to colonize or take over spaces for its own purposes. Concordant masculinity is characterized by features of community building such as friendship, open feelings, compromise, and teamwork. It steers away from the stoic emotions, physical domination, exclusionary practices, and individualistic traits often associated with traditional forms of masculinity. One example of the fandom achieves this is through a charity organization founded by Bronies called Bronies for Good which “is committed to fostering the growth of caring, socially conscious individuals through the organization of service events worldwide and encouraging individual, group, and social involvement.”<sup>275</sup>

Often these traits are viewed as feminine in nature because they are a binary contrast to masculine expectations, yet Bronies have found a way to see beyond this dichotomy and embrace a system of universal values that builds relationships rather than tearing them down. Concordant masculinity allows members to express themselves while still welcoming others for who they are, despite differences. While alternative views may exist, they do not marginalize or

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<sup>275</sup> “About Us,” *Bronies for Good* Accessed April 22, 2016, <http://broniesforgood.org/about-us/>

exclude individuals from the community. Instead, members view each other as equals and settle disagreements with hugs rather than harsh words or physical force.

Concordant masculinity can be rough and tumble like the military Bronies while still embracing camaraderie. It allows for the joys of making new friends in a setting of rainbow colors and collaboration due in part to the allowance of variability in gender fluidity. This new construction of masculinity may not be the solution to the massive issues of gender norms and performativity still prevalent in society, but it does allow for the progression toward a more malleable understanding of masculinity which does not need to include all of the trappings of toxic masculinity or the colonizing influence of rural masculinity.

Furthermore, concordant masculinity can bridge some of the critical gaps of postfeminism because it does not fall into the same traps O'Neill's suggests of Anderson. Concordant masculinity does not justify itself through the erosion of homophobia as Anderson propounds inclusive masculinity does. Concordant masculinity does suggest that there is progress within constructions of masculinity, but not at the cost of other foundational theories of masculinity studies, it is built through relations within a community that seeks to foster better relationships with all people. Secondly, concordant masculinity does not come from a space of privilege, such as the participants in Anderson's studies. While the Brony community does appear to come from a place of privilege, (white, middle class, heterosexual, and some college education) there is still the notion that this community is accessible through digital means like the Internet. Additionally, Bronies are willing to use outreach to help others, even involvement in charity work. Haefner reminds us that, "subcultures are relatively diffuse

groupings having a sense of shared identity and distinctive, nonnormative ideas, practices, and objects, along with marginalization from and/or resistance to perceived conventional society."<sup>276</sup> Unlike Anderson's participants, the fandom does not necessarily need to occupy a physical space to be a part of the community or achieve a certain status (take part in athletic tryouts or go through a rite of passage in a fraternity) in order to participate, all that is needed to become a fan is an appreciation for ponies.

There are no prerequisites in the Brony fandom and the inclusive environment of the community allows anyone to have access. However, concordant masculinity still cannot account for other issues of postfeminism, including dismissals of gendered power structures, like Luke, who was still looking to reify his masculinity during the convention. More time is required to analyze fans like him in order to understand some of the finer underpinnings of this fandom and if concordant masculinity can account for individuals who are still trying to balance their identity with expectations of gender. Members of the fandom, like Luke, illustrate that gender binaries still exist in the fandom because they may claim to be a part of the framework, but are actively imposing their masculinity on women while claiming inclusivity. Additionally, the framework requires consideration to feminine issues within the fandom. Bronies are remarkable in this case because they willingly engaging in feminine terrain, but what of the women who have been fans of previous generations or currently in the fandom? The notoriety of male fans does, in some aspects, push women out into the fringes of the fandom. These are all issues which will require further research as this framework develops.

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<sup>276</sup> Haefner, Ross. "Transitioning to a New Manhood: Subcultures as Sites of Inclusive Masculinities,"130-131



Minimally, exposure to the themes prevalent in the Brony fandom and concordant masculinity can influence young men to be more sympathetic to masculinity issues, as Haefner states, “generations of young, subcultural men have transitioned to adulthood, amid at least some exposure to antisexist, queer-positive ideas, creating fissures in which inclusive masculinities, and more inclusive relationships might blossom.”<sup>277</sup> Haefner’s suggests subcultural spaces are sites of progressive antihomophobic, antimisogynistic ideals and have historically given those concepts room to flourish. Various subcultures, particularly in the realm of music, create alternative forms of masculinity in genres like gothic, post-punk, and emo music scenes. The culture surrounding these genres does allow for what Marjore Garber calls “a space of possibility” in which gender performances can cross borders.<sup>278</sup> Artists in rock music have pushed conceptions of masculinity since the early days of the genre which has allowed for the slow evolution from gender binaries.<sup>279</sup> Taylor Houston contends that this evolution has led to an environment in the indie rock scene that allows men “to express rather than suppress their affection and emotions toward other men and support their construction of alternative masculinities.”<sup>280</sup> However, the construction of these alternative masculinities is emanating from cultures predominantly controlled by men. Even in subcultures such as the emo music scene, which feature men appropriating feminine and homosexual characteristics (crying and

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<sup>277</sup> Haefner, Ross. "Transitioning to a New Manhood: Subcultures as Sites of Inclusive Masculinities," 135

<sup>278</sup> Garber, Marjorie. *Vested Interests: Cross Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge 1992), 11

<sup>279</sup> Rhodes, Carl and Alison Pullen, "Commercial Gender: Fracturing Masculinity in the Case of OzRock." *Culture and Organization* 18 (1) 2012 33-49, 34

<sup>280</sup> Houston, Taylor M. "The Homosocial Construction of Alternative Masculinities: Men in Indie Rock Bands." *Journal of Men's Studies* 20 (2) 2012 158-175, 161

same-sex kissing), there is criticism that these alternatives only serve to reinforce hegemonic masculinity through domination of women and gay men.<sup>281</sup>

What differentiates Bronies from previous gender-ambiguous movements is in how this evolution is taking place in a cartoon show intended for young girls, while other sites that have contested hegemonic masculinity are predominantly male centered. As creator Lauren Faust explains in an interview regarding how the fandom is changing conceptions of gender, “They’re proud that they’re forward-thinking and modern enough to look past this misogynistic attitude.”<sup>282</sup> The concordant masculinity occurring in the Brony fandom is making a move toward inclusivity by eliminating some of the binary barriers separating gender through community building and friendship.

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<sup>281</sup> Ryalls, Emily. “Emo Angst, Masochism, and Masculinity in Crisis.” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 33 (2) 2013 83-97, 84

<sup>282</sup> Gould, Joe “Military ‘Bronies’ Love Their Rifles and Their My Little Pony.” *Army Times* July, 17 2012 <http://outsidethewire.armytimes.com/2012/07/17/ponies-carved-into-the-buttstock-service-members-embrace-my-little-pony/>

## Chapter V

### Conclusion

Bronies occupy a space easily misunderstood by individuals not familiar with the fandom as effeminate men relishing in a fantasy world of ponies. As Henry Jenkins suggests, most fandoms have negative connotations surrounding them because of their seemingly obsessive practices and rituals in relation to the media text.<sup>283</sup> Discovering young adult men enjoying a show targeted toward little girls is potentially unsettling to people looking at the fandom from the outside because they cannot fathom what the show could offer these fans.

As such, some Brony fan practices do not mesh well with traditional concepts of masculinity. Young men talking about friendship, cosplaying as ponies, and singing songs about smiling does not run parallel with many of the gender norms many young men and boys are taught from an early age. As Brenda Weber proclaims, “American masculinity has long been predicated on the values of the self-made man, the concept that manhood finds its greatest source and definition in self-determination, autonomy, and individualism.”<sup>284</sup> With that being said, the emergence of the Brony fandom shows conventional gender norms are not as stable as previously thought.

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<sup>283</sup> Jenkins, Henry. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*.

<sup>284</sup> Weber, Brenda. “What Makes the Man?: Television Makeovers, Made-Over Masculinity, and Male Body Image.” *International Journal of Men’s Health* 5.3 (2006): 287-306, 290

However, the Brony fandom attracts a number of antagonists who cannot understand why young men are interested in ponies and often question a fan's masculinity. Molly Lambert underscores some of the key issues the fandom is tackling in terms of understanding the gender performance of young men:

Bronies who are public about their fandom tend to be labeled gay by their peers, and the Bronies are very aware of everything that's wrong about that structure. One Brony is essentially gay-bashed at a gas station for wearing a T-shirt with the colorful magic ponies on it. The Bronies try to be understanding and empathetic, to listen to each other and be kind instead of brutish. It emphasizes how narrow the definition of true masculinity can be that anyone who deviates from tradition in any way risks being labeled as feminine or homosexual. In a climate in which alpha males are idealized beyond all measure, but the moral contradictions inherent in alpha maledom are more obvious than ever, Brony culture feels downright progressive. You don't have to like *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic* to empathize with them. They are every nerdy kid who has ever confessed to liking something they were not supposed to like because it marked them as gross, as weird, as different. While it's still very taboo for men to admit liking media that's been coded as female, women have almost no choice but to consume male-centric things, since they make up the bulk of media. Whatever the actual reason, Faust [Lauren Faust the show's creator] is clearly touched by the Brony outpouring of love for her creation, and it's hard not to be touched as well. Faust sums up the fandom's appeal: "These Bronies are taking these lessons to heart. We need to allow men to be sensitive and to care about one another, and not call them weak for caring."<sup>285</sup>

Lambert sees Bronies as a good fandom going through the growing pains of being different in a culture that still has issues with fan communities. While other previously marginalized fandoms (comic books and science fiction) are slowly moving toward the mainstream, Bronies are a nascent fanbase disrupting gender norms drawing ire from many members of society, which can lead to harassment.

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<sup>285</sup> Lambert, Molly "The Internet is Magic: Exploring the Wonderful World of My Little Pony Fandom in Bronies" *Grantland* November 12 2013 <http://grantland.com/hollywood-prospectus/the-internet-is-magic-exploring-the-wonderful-world-of-my-little-pony-fandom-in-bronies/>

The gender policing occurring from outside the fandom sees Bronies as a threat to dominant forms of masculinity, hence the mistreatment and shaming of fans happening online and in public, making many fans to be apprehensive about disclosing to others about enjoying *My Little Pony* as much as they do. Kelly Vlahos sees how outsiders may interpret the Brony fandom as a threat towards masculinity, but explains that their appearance is not a danger to society.

Let's get this out of the way first: Bronies are not gay. One might be hard-pressed, sure, when seeing college-age guys wearing pink wigs and furry faux tails walking into a convention center—as this writer saw, outside what turned out to be BronyCon 2013 in Baltimore, an event that drew over 12,000 people—not to look for some LGBT connection. But the vast majority of them are indeed heterosexual, according to scientific studies of the fandom.<sup>286</sup>

For the uninitiated, the existence of this fandom does appear as a community of effeminate or homosexual men trying to escape into a pretty fantasy world. However, the majority of fans identifies as heterosexual and are media consumers who discovered a text they enjoy that just so happens to appear feminine.

With this in mind, there are still a number of Bronies who are not yet comfortable openly identifying themselves as fans of the show in public. They may still feel the sting of shame for violating the unspoken rules of masculinity by indulging in something deemed inherently feminine. In their defense, this is a rather hard identity concept to breach after being raised to perform their gender in a specific way as Bussey and Bandura purport “compared with girls, boys monitor their behavior on the gender dimension more closely because, as already

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<sup>286</sup> Vlahos, Kelly “Rise of the Bronies” *American Conservative* January 3 2014  
<http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/rise-of-the-bronies/>

noted, they are more likely to be reproached for conduct that deviates from their gender.”<sup>287</sup>

The anxiety of marginalization is enough for many of these individuals to keep their activities a secret. The lengths some fans will go to maintain that secrecy demonstrates how important portraying a masculine identity in front of family and peers is to them. As Chimot and Louveau indicate, “Masculine socialization consists mainly of avoiding, at all costs, being likened to a girl or woman.”<sup>288</sup> Men enjoying cartoon ponies defies traditional gender performance because many fans openly enjoy the show without fear or shame.

Patterns of gender begin to take hold as normative practices and these practices reinforce themselves through the everyday performance individuals engage in. This creates patterns of gender performativity and distinctions between masculinity and femininity. Connell and Messerschmidt proclaim, “Gender is always relational, and patterns of masculinity are socially defined in contradistinction from some model [whether real or imaginary] of femininity.”<sup>289</sup> Distinctions between genders serves as a mechanism to shore up masculinity as a competitive, individualistic, and emotionally stoic stance traditional forms of masculinity promote.

The primary reason traditional forms of masculinity are in positions of privilege is through discourse and action in societal institutions. Granting particular behaviors and attributes a position of power makes them more desirable and acclamation towards performances congruent to those characteristics help retain their potency. Yet, these positions

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<sup>287</sup> Bussey, Kay. and Bandura, Albert. “Social Cognitive Theory of Gender Development and Differentiation.”, 690

<sup>288</sup> Chimot, Caroline and Louveau, Catherine. Becoming a Man While Playing a Female Sport: The Construction of Masculine Identity in Boys Doing Rhythmic Gymnastics.” *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 45.4 (2010):436-456, 443

<sup>289</sup> Connell, R. W. and Messerschmidt, James. “Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept” 848

are tenuous and subject to change. As Connell and Messerschmidt contend, “‘masculinity’ represents not a certain type of man, but rather a way that men position themselves through discursive practices.”<sup>290</sup> For an alteration in masculine perceptions to occur requires a shift in how the concept is understood and accepted.

Previous research illustrates instances in which masculinity undergoes changes through negotiation in order to maintain some semblance to traditional forms. Hogan and Pursell suggest there are localized versions of masculinity malleable to the context of the situation.<sup>291</sup> Their research would suggest that a Brony’s masculinity is localizable and flexible, but this concept falls under different circumstances, considering the fact that a fan community is not as tangible as a rural community because it is not restricted to a physical region. This also follows similar concepts Pascoe offers which state, “masculinity is not universal, but local, age limited, and institutional and that other definitions of masculinity may be found in different locales and different times.”<sup>292</sup> Haywood and Mac an Ghaill feel it is important to recognize that “we are suggesting that masculinities embody multiple social categories. An important question... is to see how the interconnections between social locations and social categories create the conditions.”<sup>293</sup> These conditions move beyond regional, and, in some instances, even physical locations. This research is essential to understanding masculinity and how it is negotiated, but there are facets distinctive to Bronies that differ from the concepts these scholars see happening in masculinity.

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<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, 841

<sup>291</sup> Hogan, Maureen. and Pursell, Timothy. “The ‘Real Alaskan,

<sup>292</sup> Pascoe, C.J. *Dude, You’re a Fag*, 14

<sup>293</sup> Haywood, Chris, and Mairtin Mac an Ghaill. *Men and Masculinities*, 70

However, society at large does not understand the dynamic nature of gender construction, restricting their knowledge to binary gender roles. The initial shock many people have after learning about such a fandom existing indicates there is still much work to be done in educating the public about how gender functions. One way to do this is by looking at how *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* has altered the perceptions of many young men into getting excited over rainbow colored ponies.

When examining children's media tailored to little girls, programs focus on themes of shopping, dating, and relationships and are often referred to as shallow entertainment.<sup>294</sup> Lauren Faust (the creative mind behind the Friendship is Magic line of ponies) calls these themes "saccharine" due to their sweet nature and lack of conflict. She explains that her focus on the pony franchise was to change the perceptions of the "girl's cartoon" from something vapid into a series based on well defined characters and storylines about relational issues. Prior to her departure from the production team, she mentions one of her objectives while recreating the pony franchise, "Together I think we helped prove that 'for girls' does not have to automatically equal 'lame.'"<sup>295</sup> Faust was already confronting her own issues with gender norms in terms of girl's entertainment much in the same way that Bronies are facing masculine expectations. Faust found a way to make ponies more exciting and inadvertently captured an unexpected audience in the process. Even more surprisingly, the Brony fandom is not some passing Internet fad either. Hasbro has taken notice, recently announcing a new merchandise line in the *My Little Pony* franchise known as *Guardians of Harmony* which is labeled as "action

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<sup>294</sup> TV Tropes. "Girl Show Ghetto." March 1, 2016 Accessed from <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/GirlShowGhetto>

<sup>295</sup> Watercutter, Angela. "My Little Pony Corrals Unlikely Fanboys Known as 'Bronies.'" *Wired* June 9, 2011



and adventure-based toys.”<sup>296</sup> These ponies carry swords, spears, cannons, as well as a Spike the Dragon action figure capable of spitting fire. Promotional materials feature both a boy and girl enjoying the product line, a sight that may not have been previously feasible in pony history.

Moving from toy makers to toy stores, conceptions of masculinity are not only changing, but gender binaries so many individuals have been conditioned to understand are eroding. Along with the retail store Target, Toys R Us stores in the United Kingdom recently installed policies of removing pink and blue from the displays. Loveday explains that this move was a result after meeting with the group *Let Toys Be Toys* which promotes more universal play:

[Toys R Us] will draw up a set of principles for in-store signage, meaning that, in the long-term, explicit references to gender will be removed and images will show boys and girls enjoying the same toys. TRU also promised to start by looking at the way toys are represented in its upcoming Christmas catalogue.<sup>297</sup>

Steps like these made by both Target and Toys R Us demonstrate how traditional notions of gender are slowly moving toward fluidity. The performance of gender, even with images of play is beginning to become more inclusive rather than the gender divisive past where boys played with footballs and girls played with dolls.

Despite these progressive policies by corporations the general public may not comprehend the dynamics of gender and many Bronies are aware that their fan activities may attract negative repercussions from peers or family members for violating common conceptions of masculinity. In order to avoid potential backlash, some fans will keep their Brony identity a

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<sup>296</sup> Hasbro. “My Little Pony Breaks Ground with the Guardians of Harmony.” *Hasbro Pulse* February 12, 2016 Accessed from [http://pulse.hasbro.com/en-us/news/article?article=mlp\\_new\\_ground\\_with\\_the\\_guardian](http://pulse.hasbro.com/en-us/news/article?article=mlp_new_ground_with_the_guardian)

<sup>297</sup> Loveday, Samantha “Toys R Us to Drop ‘Boys’ and ‘Girls’ Labeling” *Toy News* September 4 2013 <http://www.toynews-online.biz/news/read/toys-r-us-to-drop-boys-and-girls-labelling/040859>

secret and they do represent a large contingency within the fanbase. Within the fandom, “stabled” Bronies tend to heavily self monitor their actions in order to appear masculine according to the demands of their social situation, resulting in some fans only having the opportunity to enjoy *My Little Pony* in online spaces.

Meanwhile, other Bronies are more comfortable challenging gender norms and find solidarity in local meetups or fan conventions where their masculine identity is seldom questioned. Public Bronies illustrate a rethinking of masculine identity, but it is imperative that whatever alternative is undertaken, masculinity cannot fall into the same trappings of identity construction and power relations with femininity as before. Gail Bederman acknowledges that gender has a habit of rationalizing and making certain attributes appear natural:

Manhood – or ‘masculinity,’ as it is commonly termed today – is a continual, dynamic process. Through that process, men claim certain kinds of authority, based upon their particular types of bodies. At any time in history, many contradictory about manhood are available to explain what men are, how they ought to behave, and what sorts of powers and authorities they may claim, as men. Part of the way gender functions is to hide these contradictions and to camouflage the fact that gender is dynamic and always changing. Instead, gender is constructed as a fact of nature, and manhood is assumed to be an unchanging, transhistorical essence, consisting of fixed, naturally occurring traits.<sup>298</sup>

Disrupting the gender binary through the Brony fandom illustrates how gender identity is more dynamic. Additionally, concordant masculinity is taking this argument for the fluidity of gender as Butler proposed in her seminal work and suggests an alternative through a framework of masculinity that does not employ reappropriation tactics implemented in other forms of masculinity. This fandom is among the first popular movements in which a large number of

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<sup>298</sup> Bederman, Gail. *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 7

males embrace something generally considered feminine without attempting to reappropriate it into something masculine altogether or implement it as any sort of ironic statement about gender norms. Many fans genuinely enjoy *My Little Pony* for the story, characters, and animation. Bronies do not see themselves as some sort of ironic trend and defend their appreciation of the show.

The Brony fandom exposes some gaps that traditional understandings of masculinity cannot take into account. Connell and Messerschmidt establish through hegemonic masculinity the development of hierarchy within the constructs of gender formations. Their framework provides the negotiations regarding the desirable masculine traits for a given society, thereby creating representations of a dominant gender construct. However, it is not the sole creator of masculine identity. “The concept of hegemonic masculinity is not intended as a catchall nor as a prime cause; it is a means of grasping a certain dynamic within the social process.”<sup>299</sup> Those attributes associated with traditional forms of masculinity only become powerful through negotiation and positioning against other forms of masculinity through context, but how can hegemonic masculinity rationalize masculine identities that do not place similar emphasis on those attributes?

Concordant masculinity follows the dynamic nature of localized masculinities by condoning gender taboos when they would be previously condemned. Connell and Messerschmidt suggest accommodations, “made it possible for certain heterosexual men to appropriate ‘bits and pieces’ of gay men’s styles and practices and construct a new hybrid configuration of gender practice. Such an appropriation blurs gender difference but does not

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<sup>299</sup> Connell, R. W. and Messerschmidt, James. “Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept” 841

undermine patriarchy.”<sup>300</sup> However, concordant masculinity is subverting patriarchy in its own way by embracing everyone and building a community on the foundation of friendship where everyone can contribute regardless of socioeconomic status. An environment of inclusion in a fandom that promotes generosity, kindness, and laughter illustrates a more universal notion that goes beyond concepts of masculinity or even gender binaries. It is a sign of progress in recognizing diversity and being accepting of those differences. The cartoon itself was initially intended for an audience of young girls and has found a way to appeal to young men. Jonathan Seligman sees this appeal as a change in how the younger members of society understand gender and masculinity in particular.

These conventions are constantly in flux, dependent on the culture we live in. Manhood is constantly evolving. Thus, to say that *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* is unmanly is... invalid of a statement. The fact that men thoroughly enjoy the show proves that the show is just as much applicable to girls as it is adult males.<sup>301</sup>

Concordant masculinity, through the Brony fandom, is making strides to assure this alternative to gender norms is more encompassing and embracing of diverse identities. It allows individuals to be more open about who they are without fear of consequence and seems to only marginalize the discourse that encourages harassment and hatred.

Bronies are at the forefront of a popular movement that is changing society's perceptions of gender and masculinity. It is a fandom continuing to grow even after five seasons of the television show and merchandising that continues to diversify itself beyond the original brushable ponies the franchise became famous for. These young men have become a

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<sup>300</sup> Connell, R. W. and Messerschmidt, James. "Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept" *Gender and Society* 19:6 (2005), 845

<sup>301</sup> Seligman, Jonathan "Bronies: What is Happening to Manhood?" *Never What You Think* October 16 2013 <http://www.neverwhatyouthink.com/bronies-what-is-happening-to-manhood/>

part of the first wave of an alternative masculinity that does not disparage, nor attempt to colonize and dominate to legitimize itself. They are making the concept of gender more fluid than ever by showing that men can be masculine, even while being a part of traditional feminine spaces without trying to justify their actions for the sake of maintaining appearances. Kate Drabinski encapsulates the crux of this project's argument in her article that it requires a lengthy quote.

But why should these attributes belong to only one gender? Why should women be the only ones who are allowed to be gentle, kind, loyal, and generous with their friends? BronyCon allows men to express themselves in ways mainstream culture deems pure faggotry, the very worst thing one can say about a man. Bronies are challenging ideals of masculinity and, like Applejack tending her orchard, are breaking new ground and encouraging new ways of being to grow there. And Bronies are everywhere, even in that most masculine of places: the military. It is perhaps this very challenge to the basic gender norms that structure so much of our daily lives-how we talk to each other, what we think we can be, what roles we imagine we will play in our relationships, what we do for fun, what we buy at the drugstore and grocery, the list goes on and on-that makes Bronyism so threatening and so potentially powerful in individual lives, and in a culture so deeply hooked on the drug of gender normativity.<sup>302</sup>

Throughout this entire project, there is a thread of logic that moves from the binary perceptions of traditional gender norms into a wider and a more fluid understanding of gender constructs by examining how Bronies openly challenge perceptions of masculinity despite harassment or avoid persecution by remaining secretive to maintain appearances of gender norms. Additionally, the contrasting and contradictory nature of masculinity in a hypermasculine domain like the military, which supports many of the same themes as the ponies serves to highlight the dynamic nature of masculinity. Finally, the openness of this

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<sup>302</sup> Drabinski, Kate "Deep Inside the Perfectly Normal World of Grown Men Who Love My Little Pony" *City Paper* August 7 2013 <http://www.citypaper.com/news/features/2013/bcp-cms-1-1532075-migrated-story-cp-20130807-featu-20130807-story.html>

fandom has led to the creation of a new masculine framework in concordant masculinity that is friendlier, less exclusionary, without colonizing parts of the femininity.

Six little pastel ponies, each representing an element of friendship have managed to not only enthrall young girls into a storied toy franchise, but captivate a large number of young men into embracing gender practices seemingly contradictory to their prescribed norms. The message of the show is finding harmony with each other, communicating feelings, and looking for compromises. Not only do Bronies hear these messages, they go out and practice these same ideas in their own lives. The fandom will continue to go through the growing pains that all communities do and face a number of challenges from the status quo of gender norms. If the Bronies can continue moving forward with their message of love and tolerance as they have since the beginning, this could be the popular boost inclusive masculinity needs to blur the rigid lines of gender norms of society and it is all thanks to the power of friendship.

## APPENDICES

## Appendix A: IRB-UND



**UND.edu**

**Institutional Review Board  
c/o Research Development  
and Compliance**  
Twamley Hall, Room 106  
264 Centennial Drive Stop 7134  
Grand Forks, ND 58202-7134  
Phone: 701.777.4279  
Fax: 701.777.6708

May 5, 2014

Samuel Miller  
2101 University Ave. Apt. B  
Grand Forks, ND 58203

Dear Mr. Miller:

RE: Review of Project Entitled "My Little Brony: Sociocultural Analysis of Gender and Identity in the "My Little Pony" Fandom" (IRB-201306-384)

In order for Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval of the above-named project to be continued, the project must be reviewed at least annually. Please fill out the enclosed form and submit it to the IRB (Twamley Hall, Room 106, Campus Stop 7134). This form must be completed and returned to the IRB office before May 26, 2014 in order for IRB approval to be continued. A review is required even if the project has been completed.

Please contact Janet Elshaug, the IRB Administrative Secretary, at (701) 777-4279 if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Michelle L. Bowles", is written over a horizontal line.

Michelle L. Bowles, M.P.A., CIP  
Institutional Review Board Coordinator

MLB/jle

Enclosure: Research Project Review and Progress Report Form



## Appendix B: UND Brony Study Survey

2/24/2016

Qualtrics Survey Software

English ▼

### Default Question Block

Dear Participant,

You have been invited to participate in a project conducted by a PhD student from the University Of North Dakota Communication Department. For this project I am conducting a survey that will look at the demographics and communication practices regarding fans of the television program "My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic" and their experiences within the fandom.

This research is under the direction of Dr. Timothy J. Pasch Ph.D. The information gathered from this survey will be used for academic research and possible peer-reviewed publication. In order to protect your privacy, all information obtained from these questions will be treated confidentially. If you are cited in the research your name will be protected by a pseudonym for purposes of anonymity. You are free to withdraw your participation at any time should you become uncomfortable answering any of the questions in the survey.

If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to contact me at [samuel.c.miller@my.und.edu](mailto:samuel.c.miller@my.und.edu) or Dr. Timothy J. Pasch Ph.D, at [timothy.pasch@email.und.edu](mailto:timothy.pasch@email.und.edu). Thank you for your help. Your information will be vital in this research.

Because of IRB considerations and restrictions all participants must be at least 18 years of age in order to participate. Please respond to all questions honestly and sincerely.



*The images contained in this survey are protected by Section 107 of U.S. Title 17 under the clause of fair use. Section 107 contains a list of the various purposes for which the reproduction of a particular work may be considered fair, such as criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching, scholarship, and research. In this instance the images are used for scholarly research purposes and not commercial purposes.*

- ☐ I consent
- ☐ I do not consent



2. What is your age?

- ☐ 18-24
- ☐ 25-29
- ☐ 30-39
- ☐ 40-49
- ☐ 50-59
- ☐ 60+
- ☐ Prefer not to answer



How do you define your gender?

☐ Male

☐ Female

☐ Transgender

☐ Not Sure

☐ Other

☐ Prefer not to answer



How do you identify your race?

- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Hispanic
- ☐ Black
- ☐ Native American
- ☐ Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
- ☐ White
- ☐ Other
- ☐ Prefer not to answer



How do you sexually orient yourself?

☐ Asexual

☐ Heterosexual

☐ Homosexual

☐ Bisexual

☐ Other

☐ Prefer not to answer



What is your relationship status?

- ☐ Single
- ☐ In a relationship
- ☐ Married
- ☐ Divorced
- ☐ Widowed
- ☐ Other
- ☐ Prefer not to answer



Are you currently enrolled in school?

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes, full time
- ☐ Yes, part time
- ☐ Prefer not to answer



What is your highest level of education?

- ☐ Less than a high school degree.
- ☐ High School Diploma or GED equivalent
- ☐ Some college
- ☐ Associates Degree
- ☐ Bachelor Degree
- ☐ Master's Degree
- ☐ PhD.
- ☐ Other
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

Are you currently enlisted in an armed service or are a veteran?





- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

If you are a veteran or current service member, please specify status and branch.



Status

☐ Branch

☐ Prefer not to answer

As a service member, do you agree with this statement? Kurt Schlichter of Big Hollywood states "... these pathetic sissies giggle like school girls over magic unicorns that spray rainbows from their horns, real men – and women – who have put aside the temptation to retreat into a frivolous fantasy world are tromping through the wilds of Afghanistan. Such young adults, some younger (in years) than the 'bronies,' are protecting all of us – including these pathetic weirdos. "



	I strongly disagree with this statement.	I disagree with this statement.	I am neutral/ have no opinion about this statement.	I agree with this statement.	I strongly agree with this statement.	Prefer not to answer.
Please rate.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Do you wish to leave a comment about the previous statement?



☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Prefer not to answer



Where are you from?

<https://und.qualtrics.com/ControlPanel/Ajax.php?action=GetSurveyPrintPreview>

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- ☐ United States
- ☐ Outside the United States
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

You have indicated that you are from the United States, which state are you from?



- ☐ Which state?
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

You indicated that you are from outside the United States, which country are you from?



☐ Specify

☐ Prefer not to answer

6. How did you discover My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic?



☐ Through a Friend

☐ Television

- ☐ News Story
- ☐ Browsing Internet
- ☐ Other please specify
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

5. When did you start watching My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic?



- ☐ Season One
- ☐ Between Seasons One and two
- ☐ Season Two
- ☐ Between Seasons Two and Three
- ☐ Season Three
- ☐ Between Seasons Three and Four
- ☐ Season Four
- ☐ Prefer not to answer.

Do you consider yourself a Brony (a fan of My Little Pony outside of the target demographic of young girls between the age of 6-12 years old)?



- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

If you consider yourself a Brony, are you a public (openly share your appreciation of My Little Pony with others) or private Brony (hide your appreciation about My Little Pony from others)?



- ☐ Public
- ☐ Private
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

Since you have selected private, you have not been open about being a Brony because...





- ☐ Afraid of harrassment
- ☐ Afraid of family reaction
- ☐ Afraid of losing friends
- ☐ Other
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

As a private Brony , have you told anybody that you are a Brony (Online or in person)?



- ☐ No, I have not told anybody.

- ☐ Yes, I have told some friends online.
- ☐ Yes, I have told a parent or relative.
- ☐ Yes, I have told a close friend.
- ☐ Prefer not to answer.

As a private Brony, if you have ever attended a meetup, convention, or purchased pony merchandise did you keep it a secret from your friends or family?



- ☐ No, I have not participated in these activities so I would not need to keep it a secret from friends or family.
- ☐ Yes, I have been secretive about these activities with friends and family.
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

Do you wish to give examples about how you conceal these activities from family and friends?



- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Prefer not to answer.

Have you ever been teased or harassed for liking My Little Pony (Online or in person)?



- ☐ Yes in Person
- ☐ Yes Online
- ☐ No
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

Since you stated that you have been harassed or teased for liking My Little Pony, do you wish to explain the incident or incidents?



- ☐ Please explain
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

Do you know of anybody personally who was harassed or bullied for liking My Little Pony (Online or in person)?



- ☐ Yes in Person
- ☐ Yes Online
- ☐ No
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

Since you stated yes, do you wish to explain the incident or incidents that occurred?



- ☐ Please explain
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

Do you agree with this statement? According to Momfia, "[Bronies] are a step away from some kind of child molestation."



	I strongly disagree with this statement.	I disagree with this statement.	I am neutral/ have no opinion about this statement.	I agree with this statement.	I strongly agree with this statement.	Prefer not answer
Please rate.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Do you wish to leave a comment about the previous statement?



☐ Yes

- ☐ No
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

Do you agree with this statement? According to Dave Glover of Fox News in St. Louis, [Bronies are] "a disturbing trend of men.... who want to file for disability so they can watch My Little Pony."



	I strongly disagree with this statement	I disagree with this statement	I am neutral/have no opinion about this statement	I agree with this statement	I strongly agree with this statement	Prefer not to answer.
Please rate.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Do you wish to leave a comment about the previous statement?



☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Prefer not to answer.

Do you agree with this statement? According to Kurt Schlichter of Big Hollywood, "These perma-virgins [Bronies] ought to be ashamed of themselves, but if they had the capacity for shame, this disgusting obsession would be a secret they guard almost as closely as a Harvard faculty member might guard the fact that he's a registered Republican."



	I strongly disagree with this statement	I disagree with this statement	I am neutral/have no opinion about this statement	I agree with this statement	I strongly agree with this statement	Prefer not to answer.
Please rate.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Do you wish to leave a comment about the previous statement?

<https://und.qualtrics.com/ControlPanel/Ajax.php?action=GetSurveyPrintPreview>

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☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Prefer not to answer

Do you agree with this statement? According to USA Today, "There is no division of pink girls over here, and blue boys over here. Its message is friendship and positive attitudes and equality, not sexism and stereotyped attitudes. It succeeds because it's delivered with humor, a universal language not specific to any specific gender."





	I strongly disagree with this statement.	I disagree with this statement.	I am neutral/I have no opinion about this statement.	I agree with this statement.	I strongly agree with this statement.	Prefer not to answer.
Please rate.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Do you wish to leave a comment about the previous statement?



☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Prefer not to answer.

Do you agree with this statement? According to USA Today, "It's [My Little Pony] building friendships among a diverse group of people that otherwise might have just sat on either side of the Internet, flinging insults at each other."



	I strongly disagree with this statement.	I disagree with this statement.	I am neutral/I have no opinion about this statement.	I agree with this statement.	I strongly agree with this statement.	Prefer not to answer.
Please rate...	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Do you wish to leave a comment about the previous statement?



☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Prefer not to answer

Do you agree with this statement? According to T.L. Stanley of the L.A. Times, "Unlike tattooed goth kids who think it's hilarious to adopt sweet pop culture icons like Care Bears and Strawberry Shortcake, bronies insist they're not being ironic."



	I strongly disagree with this statement	I disagree with this statement	I am neutral/ have no opinion about this statement	I agree with this statement	I strongly agree with this statement	Prefer no to answer
Please rate	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Do you wish to leave a comment about the previous statement?



Yes

☐ No

☐ Prefer not to answer.

How do you rank these aspects of My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic?



	It is not very important to me.	It is not important to me.	It is somewhat important to me.	It is important to me	It is very important to me.	Prefer not to answer.
The Animation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The Voice Acting	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The Story/Plot	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The Characters	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The Music	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



How do you feel about each character of the Mane Six?

	I really dislike this pony.	I dislike this pony	I am neutral about this pony.	I like this pony	I really like this pony.	Prefer not to answer.
Twilight Sparkle	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Rarity	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Applejack	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Pinkie Pie	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Fluttershy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Rainbow Dash	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Who are your top three favorite secondary or background characters?



First Favorite Secondary Pony

Second Favorite Secondary Pony

Third Favorite Secondary Pony





Have you ever attended a Brony meetup?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Prefer not to answer



Why have you not been able to attend a meetup?

- ☐ Nearest group is too far away
- ☐ I am too shy
- ☐ I have no interest in attending in a meetup.
- ☐ Other
- ☐ I prefer not to answer.

Besides watching the show, what other fan activities do you engage in?



- ☐ Role Playing
- ☐ Writing Fan Fiction
- ☐ Creating Fan Art (Drawing, Plushies, PMV's etc.)
- ☐

## Attend Conventions

- ☐ Purchase Pony Related Merchandise (Fan or Official)
- ☐ Create Pony Music
- ☐ Other
- ☐ Prefer not to answer



## What kinds of pony related merchandise do you own?

- ☐ Official Brushable Ponies
- ☐ Official Pony Plushies
- ☐ Official Pony Posters/Prints
- ☐ My Little Pony Clothing or Accessories
- ☐ My Little Pony Blindbags
- ☐ Fan Made Pony Plushies
- ☐ Fan Made Pony Posters/Prints
- ☐ Custom Made Ponies (Blindbag or Brushable)
- ☐ Other Fan Made Pony Art
- ☐ Prefer not to answer



Have you ever donated to a Brony run charity?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

In order to qualify for the prize drawing we will need contact information. This information will remain confidential and all email addresses will be deleted after the data has been analyzed.



Name

Email Address

Thank you for taking this survey. All information gathered will remain confidential and anonymous. If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to contact me at [samuel.c.miller@my.und.edu](mailto:samuel.c.miller@my.und.edu) or Dr. Timothy J. Pasch Ph.D [timothy.pasch@email.und.edu](mailto:timothy.pasch@email.und.edu). Thank you for your help. Your information will be vital in this research.

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