
**Straight from the Horse's Mouth:
A Case Study on the Adult Male Fans of My Little Pony**

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Introduction

The internet has provided a place for all walks of life to connect with like-minded individuals and discuss their interests. As its prevalence increases over time, there are more and more subcultures developing, because people with similar likes and dislikes are able to connect with each other. There are some groups that would have probably never have found each other if it was not for online message boards, such as the group of predominantly adult men who love *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*. These toys and television shows have been around in a number of iterations since the early 1980s, but it is only since 2010 that a brand new demographic has emerged. Born from the internet, this ever-growing subculture has deemed themselves "bronies." It would be simple to write these men off as just socially awkward misfits who never leave their basement, but it is of more interest to take a deeper look into how this fan base came into being. And, of course, the ultimate question: *why* so many adult males are drawn to a cartoon produced for young girls. It is also relevant for this discussion to acknowledge how this group is generally seen by outsiders, why the bronies are seen in a primarily negative way, and how the group themselves react and deal with this judgmental notion. If it is not enough to have to deal with society seeing you in a particular way, there is also an internal battle that makes for a schism within the fan base (or, as it is commonly known online, a fandom).

Every subculture makes for an interesting discussion about the feelings of belonging in society, but it is the bronies who truly epitomize the search for acceptance. This message is marked through the conception of the group as well as the ongoing feuds had with outsiders as well as with their own. Through this information we can see why adult males are willing to deal with hatred and fight for their fellow bronies; because, friendship is magic.

All About My Little Pony

My Little Pony has been around for more than three decades. It also predates the emergence of bronies by 29 years. When speaking about the franchise of My Little Pony, there are two paths one can discuss: one being the toys and the other the show. For the purposes here, only the show will be discussed in detail. The ponies were born in 1981 when Hasbro first developed the line of pint-sized pony toys to capture the young female market that their Transformers and G.I. Joe action figures missed out on. It was not long before the brand made its way onto television. Their first on-screen appearance was in 1984, when a stand-alone TV special was produced (Tyson & Carver, 2013). These specials were such a huge hit among young girls that a full-blown series was created just two years

later. The first series, now referred to as “generation one,” was entitled *My Little Pony 'n Friends* and ran for only one year. This first series was still marketed to small girls for the purposes of selling the toys, but the stories and characters were more in the action or fantasy genre that could be enjoyed by either gender (Tyson & Carver, 2013).

There was a large time gap between generation one and two of the *My Little Pony* [MLP] franchise. The second did not begin until 1992. There was a major transformation between *My Little Pony 'n Friends* and the new *My Little Pony Tales*. The original fans of the ponies had grown up, and the show looked like it wanted to follow. The story lines followed a “slice of life” setting for their new preteen fans (Tyson & Carver, 2013). The next generation however marked a return to the 3 to 7 year old demographic. The next iteration was simply called *My Little Pony* and started in 2003. Finally came generation four, the one that sparked this unusual fan base. *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* began in 2010 when Lauren Faust got the inspiration to reboot this childhood favorite of hers. She wanted to see the characters she imagined as a child on the screen with heartfelt story lines that were educational and enjoyable (Tyson & Carver, 2013). This generation of MLP was more than just a commercial for the toys.

It was not long after the premiere in 2010 that certain corners of the internet began to get wind of this new and unexpected cartoon favorite. It all started on the “comics & cartoons” [/co/] board of 4chan (www.4chan.org) (Tyson & Carver, 2013). 4chan is an anonymous message and image board where there are specific boards for a number of interests. The buzz about *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* began almost immediately after the first airing of episode one. Those who watched it made multiple threads about how surprisingly good the show was. There was an immediate backlash of those who thought even the notion was ridiculous. The combination of hype around the show and the constant arguing made more and more /co/ users eager to watch it for themselves. This only fueled the conversation around it more. Those who loved it posted about it more often, and those who hated it would antagonize the fans.

These pony threads soon made their way onto other boards on 4chan, most notably the infamous “random” board, also known as /b/. And this community did not react well to the influx of content on their board being pony related. For the most part, the over-saturation of this one topic was the thing that fueled their hatred the most. By early 2011, the discussion about the show was so prominent, but nothing of value was ever being discussed. The threads would almost immediately devolve into name-calling and general pony hating. This issue got so out of hand, that on February 26, 2011 a full on ban was placed on pony material (Tyson & Carver, 2013). Any individual to start a thread with anything MLP related would immediately be banned from the site. This action can be attributed to forcing the bronies to branch out over other sites to talk about their new favorite show.

The dejected bronies of 4chan soon founded sites such as “Ponychan” and “Equestria Daily” to fill the void 4chan left. Not only were these board-less

bronies founding their own sites to talk about their show, they went to many other mainstream sites to share their fan-made creations. Uploaded videos on YouTube would circulate around attracting more future bronies to check out the show for the first time and get them hooked. It was not until almost a year later that 4chan realized the prevalence of the fan base, and welcomed the bronies back to their site by creating a special board just for them /mlp/ (Tyson & Carver, 2013).

Research Interest

Even though subcultures in general have been extensively studied there are lessons to be learned from each one specifically. The bronies are of particular interest because they are so recent and were fully conceived in the fascinating environment of the internet. The first goal of this research is to simply shed light on this new and relatively unstudied subculture. It is to explain what and who bronies are by understanding their short but interesting history. Second, and of most interest, is the question of why this group of individuals is drawn to the franchise of My Little Pony. It is hypothesized that bronies, just like any subculture, are attracted to it for the sense of community and belonging.

The sense that a collection of like-minded individuals creates a feeling of community, even online, is not a new one. In fact, sociologists as early 1987 have been having this discussion. Howard Rheingold put forward the idea that, "words on a screen are quite capable of...creating a community from a collection of strangers" (1987). This simple statement has blossomed into a fascinating area of research, which studies specific online communities. For example, J. Patrick Williams focused both on an online forum dedicated to a "straight-edge" lifestyle and the massively multiplayer online game World of Warcraft. He states, "[d]igital communities...have, from the start, been framed as consequences of intentional social interaction. From this perspective, it is not the community into which a person is born that shapes her outlook on life, but rather her outlook on life that shapes the communities in which she is likely to participate" (2009, p.4). This study of brony culture is grounded in this idea that these individuals are seeking out a community in which to share their passion.

The bronies once again make for an interesting group because they are outwardly rejecting societal norms based on both gender and age. This has a huge impact on how they are seen by outsiders. It is another goal to understand how the group is perceived, but more importantly, to understand how the bronies themselves deal with these perceptions. It is hypothesized that general society has negative feelings toward this group, and this results in many individuals hiding their true feelings toward the fandom. This hypothesis is grounded within a plethora of gender norm studies, such as Kunkel and Nielsen's study of gender and informal social control. This study concentrated on "'residual' deviance, that is, violations of those unwritten, unarticulated but taken for granted rules, that govern the mass of society in everyday life" (Kunkel &

Nielsen, 1998, p.340). One of their more relevant conclusions reads as follows, “[t]here is evidence that male norm violators are censured more than female norm violators in terms of negativity, strength of reaction, laughter, and homophobia...” (Kunkel & Nielsen, 1998, p.350). These societal reactions are expected to be seen in reference to adult males enjoying a television show perceived to be for young girls.

As mentioned above, it is not just outsiders that bronies are in conflict with. There are two groups of bronies: those who derive sexual pleasure from the characters and those who do not. The last goal of this research is to examine this internal schism and understand the conflict it brings.

Methods

When this research began, I had underestimated the prevalence of this group. It started by simply seeing them mentioned on message boards around the internet. When I began to look deeper, I was surprised to see how outspoken they truly were. This research began on the anonymous message board of 4chan, more specifically the board dedicated to My Little Pony fans, known as /mlp/. The first few visits were just to get a feel for the general themes of the daily threads—to understand what the fans talked about on a daily basis. These included threads such as the “Nightly Twilight Thread,” which discussed a new comic that featured this specific pony heavily as well as discussing “what kind of television/movies do you feel that Twilight would enjoy watching the most” (retrieved from 4chan.org/mlp on March 19, 2014). Another being a role-playing thread in which the poster plays as a pony in the fictional land of Equestria (4chan.org/mlp, March 19, 2014).

After it was determined that the threads on these message boards were incredibly diverse and changed daily, it was necessary to narrow the search down to a key few themes. Still exclusively using 4chan, I narrowed down the search for threads discussing why these individuals loved the show so much. The search was also expanded to threads that discussed how fans are treated by outsiders. I purely waited for these conversations to be started by others, never prompting my own discussion. Due to this fact, it was not required to register as a user on any of these sites. I merely navigated through them as a guest and read through discussions that had already begun.

Through previous knowledge as well as discussion on 4chan, I was aware that there were other message boards available for bronies to utilize. By simply googling the term “brony,” the MLPForums came to my attention (www.mlpforums.com). This site served to be a wealth of information for the question of ‘why?’ There is a specific board, the “Welcoming Plaza,” where new members can introduce themselves to the community. There is a layout for these posts directly asking the poster how they came to become a fan, how they found the site, and to give a brief biography of themselves. This site is not inherently anonymous like 4chan, but users come up with usernames and often use pictures of ponies to represent themselves. This site also provided much more discussion

about topics such as gender, what they like about the show, and reactions they often have to deal with from friends and family.

Lastly, I found myself on Reddit (www.reddit.com). Similarly to 4chan, Reddit has a specific board for MLP fans, called a sub-reddit. By simply searching the term “brony” on the site, over 26,000 results are given. These posts range from discussing the community, to the reactions of outsiders, to an “ask me anything” (AMA) with an editor from the documentary *Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony*. Like MLPForums, Reddit is not entirely anonymous, but uses chosen usernames to hide any poster’s true identity.

The use of forums are important for this research in order to get the story straight from the followers. It is important to understand the fandom from the fan’s perspective, not an outsider deciding what it means to them. It is also of value to note that since this particular group was born from the internet, it only makes sense to study them in the same way. Related to this idea was the decision to conduct a discourse, rather than content, analysis on the information collected. I believe that it is necessary to the discussion to include the context in which this language is used. For example, there is a distinct difference between a seven year-old girl having these discussions and an adult male. The context of age and gender add a lot to the research.

To fill in some of the missing details, I knew of a few documentaries centering on the MLP fandom. The first, *Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony* followed a few fans in their experiences at “BronyCon,” which is the biggest My Little Pony convention held every year. This documentary provided more information on the brony’s reasoning for liking the show, as well as having to deal with some negative backlash from outsiders. Second, it only took a simply search of “brony” on YouTube to come across the first part of a three part documentary entitled *The Brony Chronicles*. This invaluable video documents the entire history of both the My Little Pony franchise as well as how the bronies came into existence.

Lastly, I wanted to round out this research by including some recent news items tackling the issues of bronies. Again, a simple Google search returned thousands of results, and there were three popular news stories that caught my attention to include in this research. This type of material provides information on how the rest of the world perceives this group.

After over 30 internet threads were retrieved, two documentaries watched, and three popular news stories found, the coding needed to be decided on. There was so much information from all of these sources it was daunting to decide on just a few key themes to focus on. In the end, four themes were chosen to filter all the data through. The first was information pertaining to why these individuals were drawn to the show and/or the fandom. Every screen-capped thread and interview from the documentaries were searched for an explicit explanation of why. This information was fairly easy to find within the sources. Most individuals would explicitly state something along the lines of,

“the reason I watch this show is because...” Next was the issue of how society perceives them. This was done in two ways. First was by the use of the news stories explaining current events such as MLP fans being bullied at school to an extreme extent. The content of these stories were used as well as how they were written. For example, the language used within the articles stated a lot about how the author felt about the story being written. Another factor in these news stories (found online) was the comment section. How others responded, to the stories of severe bullying, was just as interesting. The same coding methods were used here as within the actual article. The tone of the comment section was easier to deduce, through the use of phrases such as, “these kids deserved it.” The second component of this theme is the stories of the actual fans. There were many threads on the message boards about how they had to essentially sit their parents and/or friends down and “break it to them” that they were fans. The stories of their reactions were also coded for this theme.

Related to the theme of perceptions is how the bronies chose to deal with these reactions. Most of the same material, as the second theme, was used. The popular news stories included a few paragraphs about the community’s outreaching support for the bullied kids. The discussions about “coming out” to their friends and families also had either a reaction from the poster himself, or had information within any replies. Themes searched for included individuals who understood and sympathized with a negative reaction, and those who seemed to have a bitter reaction.

Lastly, and most difficulty, is the issue of the fans who derive sexual pleasure from the show and characters. It was a tough decision if and how to include this issue in the research. However, after reading countless discussions about it, it is evident that this is a conflict within the fandom that cannot be ignored. This issue is not about why certain individuals get these feelings from this show, but rather the division it causes within the community, between those who do and those who do not. There are multiple threads about this issue and the rift it has created. Included in this coding were threads discussing acceptance of this behavior, most often on the 4chan site, and threads on the other sites criticizing the behavior. All of these discussions obviously and specifically referenced the act of sexualizing My Little Pony.

Results

1. Why?

The simple question of ‘why this group has such a strong attraction to this show’ can be broken down into two categories. First, is more of an issue of how these individuals got introduced to the show/franchise. It seems implausible that someone would simply stumble upon a show meant for young girls. The recurring answers also gave insight into the group itself. Many fans became aware of the show purely through the hype on the internet or initially saw some fan-made content related to the show. In the Malaquais (2013) documentary, an

interviewee stated that a friend of his told him “the internet is raving about it and you have to watch it.” Similarly, Alex in the documentary said he was first introduced through fan made videos on YouTube. In a “survey time” thread on 4chan (retrieved March 27, 2014), a poster responded to the question of “what draws you to the fandom?” by simply stating “the internet hype.”

On MLPForums, many reported finding the show and the specific site through simply googling. A few others found the fandom through other forms of media. For example, one poster found it through a podcast entitled “Internet Box” (mlpforums, March 24, 2014). Another stated he stumbled upon it “after it seemingly took over my Wii U forum” (mlpforums, March 24, 2014).

One different response came from a new member of MLPForums. He described being introduced to the show by first judging it negatively: “I prejudged the whole thing, so it started with a Google search of ‘psychological reasons for the existence of bronies” (mlpforums, March 24, 2014). Once the poster was introduced, he was hooked.

Another common response to the question of why these individuals began to watch the show is that a friend introduced them to it. One member of the MLPForums said “a buddy of mine from the Corps showed me a video titled ‘My Little Serenity’” (which is a fan-made mash-up of My Little Pony and Firefly) (mlpforums, March 24, 2014). Another stated “I was skeptical, [a] friend made me watch, I became interested, [and] then I loved it” (mlpforums, March 24, 2014).

Lastly, a heartbreaking story from a 4chan user stated that his little sister loved the show, introduced him to it, but sadly passed away not long after. He still watches the show in her memory (4chan.org/mlp, March 19, 2014).

The stories about how these immense fans first began watching the show exemplify the power of the internet within this fandom. Many found it through fan-made content shared through social sites, such as YouTube, via friends. This represents the idea that the fandom could only exist in this time period with the use of the internet.

The second category engulfed in the question of ‘why?’ is what was it about the show that they loved so much and made them seek out this community. The main themes pulled from the online message boards were that the fans loved the animation and voice acting, the characters, writing and plot of the show, and the values and lessons found in each episode. The fans who are drawn to the show, based on the animation, say that it is so good that it makes the watcher really feel what it going on; when the characters emote, the fans care and are invested (Tyson & Carver, 2013). This is also exemplified in the many hidden references to other media and fandoms the creators place in the show; the creators put in effort so the audience is involved (Tyson & Carver, 2013).

The fans enjoy that the characters have real depth: “Twilight Sparkle actually has a good backstory” (reddit.com/r/mylittlepony, April 2, 2014). A different poster stated, “I really connect with the amazing characters” (mlpforums, March 24, 2014). Jeffrey, a bronie interviewed in the Malaquais (2013) documentary,

stated that he connected to the ongoing theme of facing personified evils, because some days we all feel that way.

A less mentioned, but still interesting, theme found was the individuals who connected with the lessons and values presented in the show. One newcomer to the MLPForums mentioned "the lessons are also very practical, and very different than other shows" (mlpforums, March 24, 2014). One other individual on 4chan mentioned that he works in a daycare at an Islamic Center: "The values presented in this show, such as friendship, kindness, peace, and tolerance, concur with the central tenants of Islam and its the children's favorite show...I just wanted to express how My Little Pony has touched the lives within my community" (4chan.org/mlp, March 19, 2014).

Another major theme explaining the bronies' love for the show is the creativity and community it brings out in them. Yoav, an individual interviewed in the Malaquais (2013) documentary, found his inspiration to create music through the show. He now uploads remixes of songs from the show and is well known within the community. Almost all of the personal descriptions found on these sites mentioned the individual was creative, loved to draw, and/or create music. Many posters in the aforementioned "survey time" thread on 4chan mentioned the creative aspect of both the show and how that inspires fans: "I love the music, the art, and all that", "the content produced is pretty amazing," and "I still enjoy a lot of the content produced by the fans" were just some of the responses to the question of what draws them into the fandom (4chan.org/mlp, March 27, 2014).

Many others referred to the fact that they were not very social in the real world, but the community of bronies has brought it out in them. Lyle, in the Bronies documentary, touched upon the fact that he was quite sad and lonely before the show, but after he was introduced, it opened up a huge community that was very accepting (Malaquais, 2013). A poster on the MLPForum also stated that he is "really shy [in real life], but I love chatting with people on the internet" (mlpforums, March 24, 2014). Another divulged, "I am not greatly experienced socially but am working on that" (mlpforums, March 24, 2014). These once isolated individuals now have found a community where they can be themselves. Many posters in a thread on 4chan explaining what they like about the fandom made comments such as: "bronies are really nice and accepting people...bronies are a good choice if you want to join a community" and "the brony community...in general is nicer than the average bunch" (4chan.org/mlp, March 25, 2014). A lengthy post, by a well-known individual, on the Reddit board stated that much of their community goes un-harassed because they "preach, practice, and... live by love and tolerance" (reddit.com/r/mylittlepony, March 24, 2014).

There were two distinctive posters on the MLPForum and the sub-Reddit that deserve to be mentioned. They both bring up the fact that liking this show goes against gender norms, but that is what they like about it. The poster in the MLPForum stated that the show is "rebellion, to an extent, its kind of a slap to

conformity of what I should and shouldn't like as a guy" which he says provides "a break from the pressures of life...I can let go of what is expected of me" (mlpforums, March 24, 2014). Likewise, the editor of the Bronies documentary who did an "ask me anything" on Reddit also mentioned that "My Little Pony is helping men reconnect with [an empathetic and sensitive] side. I want people to recognize that, and value it" (reddit.com/r/mylittlepony, April 2, 2014).

Overall, there can be various reasons why an individual enjoys the show *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*. But, if anything is clear from this data it is that every fan is truly genuine about their love for the show and they are drawn to it for truly positive reasons.

2. Outsider's Perceptions

The views held by society about bronies are by no surprise primarily negative. Most of the main arguments against this group are summed up well in the Bronies documentary. A number of non-fans were asked randomly on the street what they thought of this fandom. Many thought all of the fans were either: homosexual, flamboyant and not-manly, pedophiles, creeps, and sexually deviant, or socially awkward (Malaquais, 2013). Many of these same themes were represented in the online message boards as well. A poster in the MLPForums stated that many of his friends have prosecuted and alienated him for watching the show, because he happens to have many "manly" traits and being a fan of the show does not fit in with that description (mlpforums, March 24, 2014). A brony on Reddit described the situation when he told his friend he was a fan, and his response was: "Are you coming out of the closet or something?" (reddit.com/r/mylittlepony, April 2, 2014). Even some of the fans themselves subscribe to this viewpoint, one individual on Reddit mentioned that he "feels extremely emasculated by enjoying [it]" (reddit.com/r/mylittlepony, April 2, 2014).

Many fans held negative views of the community before joining it themselves. One poster on Reddit described himself as "an avid brony hater" before he actually watched the show, and a commenter on the thread also mentioned that he "thought bronies were weird" (reddit.com/r/mylittlepony, April 2, 2014).

It is also apparent that the haters of this community deem it socially acceptable to torment and sometimes outwardly harass the fans. On a 4chan thread, there were multiple comments demeaning the fans of the show, saying things such as: "May I recommend Barney for you? It would suit someone with your intellectual ability" and "don't you...realize you're the laughing stock of every person on the planet?" (4chan.org/mlp, March 23, 2014). This issue is taken to a greater level when Alex, an interviewee for the Bronies documentary, described a situation he found himself in when a group of men surrounded his car with tire irons and baseball bats in hand when they saw his car had My Little Pony decals on the back window. They proceeded to smash his car window in, and one of them even threatened him with a shotgun in hand (Malaquais, 2013).

This issue can also be seen to a great extent in the younger fans of the show. There have been two recent incidents that have hit popular media. One is of an 11 year-old boy, named Michael, who is in the hospital recuperating from a suicide attempt. He described months of ongoing bullying because his classmates found out he was a fan of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (Larson, 2014). At first, the boy was not embarrassed for liking the show, and that is what ultimately made his life miserable: "He happily owns and would wear Pinkie Pie-themed t-shirts, bracelets and dog tags to school. After awhile, classmates started to notice. He talked to his mom on a number of occasions about people telling him he was 'gay' for liking the show" (Larson, 2014).

A less severe case of bullying of bronies in schools can be seen in the popular story of Grayson. He was not only bullied at school for bringing a My Little Pony lunch bag, but the administration seemingly took the side of the bullies. Grayson has been bullied "because other students think his favorite TV show is for girls" (Bowman, 2014). He has been called names and physically abused by his classmates. When the school officials found out about this ongoing problem, instead of dealing with the tormentors, they simply told Grayson to leave his bag at home because that was the cause of the problem (Bowman, 2014). The message this school is sending is clear: the boy is wrong for liking what he does and should not outwardly showcase it. To be blunt, they are saying it was his fault for triggering this harassment. This same sentiment can be seen in the comment section of the online article, commenters left remarks such as: "I am with the school's decision to prohibit boys from wearing MLP bags" and "the kid was stupid enough for bringing such a silly thing with him to school which is notorious for bullies".

It was no surprise that the majority of society looks upon this group of people in a negative way. It was sadly expected that these fans would be labeled "gay," "creeps," "sexual deviants," and "socially awkward." However, it was the outward acceptance to harass these individuals that was surprising. It seems to be socially acceptable to torment members of this community without any repercussions.

3. Reactions to Perceptions

It is clear what society thinks of bronies. But of most interest is how these individuals deal with these primarily negative assumptions about their character. The most common reaction found on the online message boards was to simply keep their fandom to themselves. Many described themselves as "closet bronies." One fan says: "I'd have to keep this a secret from my family because I wouldn't be able to predict how they would react to this...Whenever my mom was about to enter my room I would quickly close everything pony related and bring up a window that's not suggestive" (mlpforums, March 24, 2014). The original poster also makes similar comments in response to someone suggesting he stops hiding it: "I just can't risk telling [my mother] about something...what if she's going to hate me for it?...And don't get me started on what would happen

if my classmates found out about this...the remaining 2 years of high school would be hell" (mlpforums, March 24, 2014).

The same act is also described at times as "hiding your power level." In a 4chan thread, discussing the news story about Grayson and the issue of bringing his lunch bag to school, there were comments such as "Rule #1 of this fandom: ALWAYS keep your power level hidden unless you're with a close, likeminded group" and "It serves him right to be treated like someone who revealed their power level" (4chan.org/mlp, March 21, 2014). This "power level" describes making it known to others that you are a fan by doing things such as wearing a t-shirt or carrying a MLP bag.

On the other side of the spectrum are those community members who choose to support those undergoing judgement and there is also a sense of a "kill them with kindness" mentality. For example, a thread which begins as someone stating they dislike the show and do not understand why it is so popular with grown men is met with a replier that simply explains why he enjoys the show and points the original poster in the direction of other boards that may be able to explain it better. The replier ends his comment by saying "you should be able to find any feedback you're looking for there. Thanks for your understanding" (mlpforums, March 24, 2014). Another fan talks of his experience on another board that was not friendly to bronies. He simply states that "I think it's better to converse with those who appreciate the fandom and the show" (mlpforums, March 24, 2014).

This mentality can even be seen through the creator of the show, Lauren Faust, who is featured in the Bronies documentary. She states that even though it is our first reaction to assume there is something wrong with the fans, we need to "allow men to be gentle and sensitive and to care about one another and not call them weak for caring" (Malaquais, 2013). This sense of community and standing up for one another is again epitomized by both cases featured in popular media. Both articles featuring stories about Grayson and Michael also included the fact that the community was standing behind them. In Grayson's case, there was an outpouring of support on multiple social media sites for the boy. On Twitter, there were comments such as, "We should punish bullies, not punish those who are bullied #StandWithGrayson #AntiBullying" and "The sooner you learn not to care what others think about you the better your life will be. Wear that pony with pride! #StandWithGrayson" (Bowman, 2014). And in Michael's case, the fans put their money where the mouth is and started collecting for the hospitalized boy and his family to help with hospital bills (Larson, 2014). As of early February, they had collected \$48,000.

The tactic of "kill them with kindness" can be seen in the post by a well-known personality on Reddit. He speaks about how the community has defied the "neighsayers" by being "so overwhelmingly ...nice, you convert them to bronies" (reddit.com/r/mylittlepony, March 24, 2014). As mentioned before, he says as a community "you preach, practice, and...live by love and tolerance."

4. The Internal Schism

For a community that preaches tolerance and love for all, there is one group of people that do not extend this courtesy, and it happens to be a subsection of bronies themselves. There is a (seemingly) minority of fans who also derive sexual pleasure from the characters and/or show. This research is not meant to judge anyone on their preferences, so this issue is only included in order to explore the rift that it causes within the fandom. These individuals, often called "clopplers," primarily are only found on the 4chan MLP board because they are disliked on every other message board. For example, in a thread about why they like the show, one commenter stated that "we're just here for the porn" (4chan.org/mlp, March 23, 2014). In the "survey time" thread there was a question asking if the respondent "clop[ped] to ponies". Many simply just answered the question with a "yes," but some were more exuberant about their replies. One reply answered with another question: "where do you think you are?" There were a few replies that seemed over the top, such as: "I make fun of people for being attracted to humans!" and in another thread specifically about sexual attraction "they're pure perfection. Superior to humans in every way possible" (4chan.org/mlp, March 21 & 27, 2014). A very unique reply read, "It's NOT weird for me to masturbate to ponies since I AM a pony myself (just temporarily in a human body)" (4chan.org/mlp, March 21, 2014).

The community outside 4chan is not as accepting of this type of sexuality. For one, they believe it is just a vocal minority giving the fandom a bad name. The AMA on Reddit with an editor from the Bronies documentary commented on it and stated that "Bronies are 90% geared towards wholesome, strongly uplifting pursuits, but as with any fandom there are factions within that might challenge that notion"; "Is it a major part of the fandom to the point where it influences the vast majority of people who belong to it? I would say no." (reddit.com/r/mylittlepony, April 2, 2014).

Some other individuals on the MLPForum had stronger opinions on the subject. One poster says that when he was introduced to this sort of content he "freaked out...simply the fact that I was following a fandom with people like that made me think I was crazy...it's just the community is not what I was expecting it to be like" (mlpforums, March 24, 2014). The commenters on this particular thread were also disapproving of the act: "People create, write, and draw those things mainly to get attention" and another comforts the original poster by saying "you're safe from the crazies here...and I hope to continue not seeing those types of things. It sickens me" (mlpforums, March 24, 2014).

It is fascinating that a community that has been negatively perceived by society as a whole would be so quick to turn and put those judgments on others, especially those who enjoy the same show. It may be because the general assumption of these bronies is that they are "pedophiles," "creeps," and "sexual deviants," so the more wholesome section wants to further themselves from this as much as possible.

Discussion/Conclusion

Overall, this research was meant as a crash course in bronies, to introduce the community to those who had no idea this subculture existed. It was also meant to explore some questions that everyone would want to know the answer to. Why they are into the show in the first place, how they are looked upon by others, and how they deal with those perceptions. And yes, some of them do derive sexual pleasure from it, but it is a small percentage. This research utilized the material available and answered those burning questions. Personally, I was interested to find out that most fans understand that they are breaking gender norms and some even like the community for that reason. I was also shocked to uncover the internal battle between “cloppers” and “non-cloppers.” I would have never imagined a group who is persecuted by the rest of society would so easily turn on their own.

This research only scratches the surface of the information available on the bronies. Since this group was conceived on the internet, there are countless sites and message boards dedicated to this topic specifically. This type of research could easily be improved on by increasing the variety of message boards used and the number of posts studied. There are also a number of conventions that take place in the real world that would be a fascinating addition to this type of research. It would be invaluable to actually speak to some of the fans and even to be present to experience the sense of community at these gatherings.

All in all, I learned a lot about this community that I originally had negative preconceived notions about. Just like much of society, I pictured this fandom to be filled with overweight, sexually deviant, middle-aged men. However, with more and more research, I was pleasantly surprised to find these individuals for the most part to be genuinely good-hearted individuals who just wanted some simple entertainment in their lives.

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